

Douglas, Nebraska
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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Not For Publication:		Vicinity:	
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[illegible]

Signature of certifying official/Title	Date
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	Date

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In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title:

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ entered in the National Register
___ determined eligible for the National Register
___ determined not eligible for the National Register
___ removed from the National Register
___ other (explain):

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private	X
Public – Local	
Public – State	
Public – Federal	

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)	X
District	
Site	
Structure	
Object	

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2		Buildings
		Sites
		Structures
		Objects
2		Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 2

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

—

—

—

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL/clubhouse

—

—

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

BUNGALOW / CRAFTSMAN

Materials

(enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: _

Foundation - BRICK,

First Level Walls - BRICK

Second Level Walls – STUCCO

Roof - ASPHALT

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

Encompassing approximately 3,200 square feet, the house was completed in 1914 in the front-gabled Craftsman Bungalow style. Situated on a generously sized lot, the property includes a garage of complementary design, accessed via the alley between Center and Walnut Streets. The house was conceived not only as the residence of David P. Abbott and his wife, Fannie, but also as a venue for Abbott's parlor performances and as a laboratory for the development of his illusions and experiments. Its interior is unusually spacious, thoughtfully designed to accommodate both performances and visiting guests. Except for updates to the kitchen and bathrooms, the house remains largely intact and has been well preserved. Furthermore, the surrounding neighborhood has experienced few significant alterations. The property therefore retains historic integrity, encompassing its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Narrative Description

Setting

The House of Mystery faces south toward Center Street in a residential neighborhood largely composed of homes built during the 1910s. It occupies the third lot west of the intersection of Center and South 33rd Streets. The property measures approximately 75 feet wide and 130 feet deep, with an alley along the rear providing access to the garage. The terrain is mostly

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level, except for a ten-foot strip along the southern edge that rises about three feet above the Center Street sidewalk. Concrete steps connect the public sidewalk to the front walkway leading to the main entrance.

The house was constructed on Lot 17 of Block 2 in the Fieldcrest Addition, a parcel 50 feet wide and 133 feet deep. The neighboring residence to the east was constructed on Lots 18 and 19. In 1915, the western half of Lot 18 was incorporated into the House of Mystery's property, expanding it to its present 75-foot width. As a result, the rectangular house sits close to the west property line, leaving a generous side yard to the east. A single-car garage occupies the northwest corner of the lot, facing east and designed to complement the house's architectural style. Much of the backyard has been paved with concrete to create a driveway and additional parking space.

House

Exterior

The House of Mystery is a Craftsman bungalow of the front-gabled subtype. It is one-and-one-half stories in height with a simple rectangular footprint measuring approximately 36 feet in width by 60 feet in depth, inclusive of the porch. The building has a raised basement which is constructed of clay tile, while the first floor is wood-frame construction; both levels are clad in a brick veneer laid in a common bond pattern with a soldier belt course marking the first-floor line. The upper story is finished in stucco with faux half-timbering.

All windows are double-hung and feature limestone sills at the first level. The roof is covered with asphalt shingles and has a moderately pitched gable that is prominently expressed on the front (south) façade. Characteristic of the Craftsman style, the roof includes deep eaves with exposed rafter tails, wide bargeboards, and knee braces. The brick is reddish brown in color, the stucco is painted cream, and the wood features are finished in dark brown.

South Façade

The front façade presents a balanced, symmetrical composition, with the first level articulated into three equal bays defined by substantial brick columns. The porch occupies the center and east bay and is sheltered beneath the overhang of the upper story. The west bay is enclosed with windows to create an entrance foyer with a substantial three-quarter entrance door facing east. Concrete steps descend from the porch to the sidewalk at the center bay, flanked by stepped brick cheek walls capped with limestone and aligned with the two central columns.

Centered on the exterior wall of the middle bay is a large double-hung window fitted with a twelve-light storm sash. Above the columns, a horizontal wood trim board subtly tapers from the center outward toward the eaves, reinforcing the façade's symmetry. The gable is divided into evenly spaced stucco panels by eleven vertical faux half-timbers. At the center of the gable, four large double-hung windows are grouped together, with the half-timbers forming the mullions between them, creating a strong focal point and an interplay of structure and ornament.

East Façade

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A prominent upper-story dormer dominates the east façade, echoing the design language of the front gable. It is adorned with four double-hung windows, faux half-timbering, and stucco, continuing the established Craftsman aesthetic. Knee braces are strategically positioned at both the dormer's center and its corners, adding structural emphasis and visual interest. The brickwork of the first level is punctuated by four generously sized double-hung windows, complemented by four basement windows below, though these are not vertically aligned.

North Façade

The design of the front gable is repeated in the north façade. A small brick vestibule with an exterior door, small window and shed roof projects from the west side of the north façade. Adjacent to the vestibule is a wood enclosure to an exterior basement stair. This structure has a nearly flat roof and was added sometime after the original date of construction. At the first level are two large double-hung windows and a smaller window above the stair enclosure. A concrete stoop with a metal wrought iron railing is outside the vestibule. Unusually shallow steps connect the stoop to a concrete sidewalk.

West Façade

The west façade mirrors the composition of the east, though with notable variations. The dormer is broader here to accommodate the upper-level bathroom, featuring the original four grouped double-hung windows alongside a fifth single window of matching size. The first floor is punctuated by five additional windows, complemented by a pair of windows at the foyer, while the basement contains four windows, collectively creating a balanced yet slightly varied arrangement across the elevation.

Interior

The House of Mystery greets visitors with an inviting entrance foyer. The space is distinguished by intricate mosaic floor tiles, a molded plaster ceiling cove, and a full-light entrance door adorned with hammered bronze hardware. A single pendant light fixture, the globe of which dates to the 1970s, hangs from the ceiling, while double French doors on the north wall lead seamlessly into the parlor.

The first-floor parlor, library, and dining room are remarkably spacious for a bungalow, boasting ten-foot ceilings and seven-foot-high windows that fill the rooms with abundant natural light. The parlor extends across the full width of the house, anchored by a tiled gas fireplace with an elegant oak mantel centered on the west wall. A wide cased colonnade on the north wall opens into the library, incorporating built-in bookcases with leaded glass doors. The library, nearly square in plan, features a second colonnade on its north wall that articulates the dining room, creating an interconnected L-shaped sequence of rooms. Together, these spaces provide an expansive, graceful setting for entertaining and for David Abbott's celebrated parlor performances. The rooms are richly appointed with quarter-sawn oak woodwork and flooring, including oak ceiling coves and wide baseboards. All doors on the first floor are solid oak veneer slabs, with the dining room door to the butler's pantry featuring pivot hinges and four divided lights in

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its upper portion. Original opalescent glass bowl light fixtures suspended from brass chains remain, underscoring the house's early twentieth-century character.

The private and service areas occupy the northwest quadrant of the first floor. A "laboratory" for the creation of his illusions—which was used as a bedroom by subsequent occupants of the house—is accessed through the library and retains original wall sconces alongside a later pendant light. The room includes a functional walk-in closet and a second, larger closet with original built-in cabinetry, which housed the props and equipment for his experiments. An updated bathroom adjoins these spaces. Beyond the dining room lies the butler's pantry and kitchen; while the pantry retains its original cabinetry, the kitchen was modernized in the mid-twentieth century. The rear entry to the house is through the kitchen.

A door from the dining room opens to an enclosed, L-shaped stairway ascending to the upper floor. The stair is fitted with a simple pine balustrade composed of square balusters and newel posts. At the top, the stair opens into a hall illuminated by three large double-hung windows, with doors providing access to storage spaces beneath the eaves. A fourth window lights the east storage area. The stair treads and hallway floors are carpeted, and a panel wainscoting, likely added in the 1970s, lines the walls.

The upper floor comprises three generously proportioned bedrooms and a full bathroom. A long hallway, centered beneath the roof gable, leads to the primary bedroom at the south end. This principal room features four large windows overlooking Center Street and retains its original ceiling fixture and wall sconces. Midway along the hall, doors open to the secondary bedrooms, tucked under the gabled dormers. The west dormer is slightly wider to accommodate a bathroom. Each secondary bedroom features four windows, with closets nestled beneath the sloping eaves. The ceiling height is nine feet, however, the bedrooms exhibit a relatively narrow band of angled ceiling where the gabled roof intersects the wall. The bathroom has been modernized and no original fixtures remain.

A steep basement stair descends from a door in the kitchen. The basement, constructed of clay tile with a concrete floor, remains unfinished but structurally sound, supported by twelve brick columns and pilasters that support two longitudinal beams. The space contains bathroom fixtures, a canning closet, and a north-facing exterior stair. The forced air furnace and ductwork are left exposed.

Garage

A single-car garage, measuring approximately 16 by 20 feet, occupies the northwest corner of the property. The overhead door is positioned on the east façade, while a pedestrian door and window punctuate the south wall. The garage's stucco exterior, accented with faux half-timbering in the gables, harmonizes with the architectural character of the house. Its moderately pitched roof features exposed rafter tails, prominent bargeboards, and decorative knee braces, echoing the Craftsman detailing of the main residence.

Integrity

The House of Mystery retains a remarkable degree of historic integrity. The only notable exterior alteration is the enclosure of the rear exterior stair; otherwise, the building remains

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largely unchanged and has been well maintained, standing in excellent condition. While additional paving has been introduced at the rear of the property, the overall site has seen minimal alteration since it was the residence of David P. Abbott. The building has occupied its original **location** since its completion in 1914, preserving both its physical and historical context.

Designed in the style of a Craftsman bungalow, the exterior continues to display its original architectural features, including its distinctive use of brick, stone, stucco, and wood. The surrounding **setting** has also remained largely intact, with contemporaneous houses still standing and only minor changes along Center Street between South 32nd and South 35th Streets. The primary **materials**, both inside and out, have been carefully maintained, allowing the exceptional quality of the original masonry, carpentry, and other **workmanship** to remain clearly evident.

Owing to the preservation of its location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship, the House of Mystery also retains integrity of **feeling** and **association**. It continues to convey its historic character as a Craftsman bungalow, as well as its unique identity as the home, stage, and laboratory of parlor magician David P. Abbott

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

X	A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
X	B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
X	C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
	D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

	A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
	B. Removed from its original location
	C. A birthplace or grave
	D. A cemetery
	E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
	F. A commemorative property
	G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

PERFORMING ARTS

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1914-1934

Significant Dates

1914

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Abbott, David Phelps (1863-1935)

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Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Kvenild, Birger J.

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

(Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The historic home of author and parlor magician David Phelps Abbott, located on 3316 Center Street in Omaha, Nebraska and referred to colloquially as “The House of Mystery,” is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its local significance in the areas of performing arts and architecture. The House of Mystery meets criterion A of the National Register Criteria for Evaluation at the local level as a performance space for Abbott as well as a prime travel destination for both professional magicians and magic hobbyists to learn from David P. Abbott and the intentional design of his home; under criterion B as the building that represents the most culturally significant achievements and aspirations of David P. Abbott, an amateur magician, author and developer of magic tricks who influenced professional Vaudeville and modern magicians; and under criterion C as a well-preserved local example of a Craftsman Bungalow which was designed by a master with adaptations for Abbott to accommodate parlor magic shows and seances. The period of significance starts in 1914 when the home was built until Abbott’s death in 1934, spanning his nearly 20 years of use as both his residence and performance stage.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Introduction

David P. Abbott’s “House of Mystery” is significant for its intentional design as both a residence and a performance space for Abbott and his wife, Fannie. Designed by architect Birger J. Kvenild and completed in 1914, the home was purposefully planned to accommodate the practice and presentation of parlor magic. The House of Mystery was the catalyst for creating complicated seance material to perform and teach, resulting in perhaps the most well-known tricks of the Vaudeville era, some of which continue to be practiced today. Designed in the popular Craftsman Bungalow architectural style, the house was constructed of brick and stucco and features wide barge boards, exterior knee braces and a generous front porch. The interior is notable for its impeccable condition with spacious rooms, white oak trim, a tiled fireplace and leaded glass bookcases.

The House of Mystery made a significant contribution to the 1930’s Vaudeville entertainment sphere on a local level. Vaudeville became particularly popular in the United States starting in the 1880s and continued to gain popularity roughly through the 1930s. David P. Abbott was a businessman and loan lender in Omaha, Nebraska when he designed and commissioned the

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House of Mystery with particular components that were used to rig and enhance parlor performances during private seances. By this time, Abbott had already made a name for himself within the Vaudeville movement, and thus his home would become a lucrative destination for professionals and hobbyists alike to travel, experience, and learn from him and the home's enhancements. Among these visitors were some of the world's most famous magicians, such as Harry Houdini, Ching Ling Foo, and Theodore "Okito" Bamberg, who would use the new-found knowledge to better understand and further their own. Abbott would go on to immortalize his designs and tricks through photographs and detailed descriptions of seances and performance materials, allowing future generations to learn from his years of study and experience. The House of Mystery itself contributed greatly to the success of Vaudeville-era magicians and became a prominent addition to the development of this performance subculture.

Finally, as a representation of the life, achievements, and endeavors of David P. Abbott, the House of Mystery is of particular note. Preceding the construction of the House of Mystery in 1914, Abbott (1893) was a loan lender and magic hobbyist who spent several years travelling to perform and learn from local magicians and spiritualists from which he would begin to build his own notoriety. It was during this time that he would write the first edition of perhaps his most famous work, *Behind the Scenes with Mediums*, which detailed some of the interactions between himself and self-proclaimed "Spirit Mediums" alongside exposés of their methods as played-up parlor tricks. By the time Abbott had moved to Omaha, Nebraska in 1905, the renown gained from his writings, research and performance combined with the success of his loan-lending business allowed him to design and construct the House of Mystery to be used as his own residence and private performance venue. It was here that he would go on to have many more poignant performances and pen one of the most important books in the world of magic.

Criterion C: Architecture - A Bungalow Built for Séances

The House of Mystery in Omaha, Nebraska is closely tied to the life and work of David P. Abbott, a financier and magician who devoted his life to understanding the work of spiritual mediums, developing magic illusions and performing seances in a parlor setting. In 1914, his work culminated with the construction of his home, a not notable local example of Craftsman bungalow architecture designed by Omaha architect Birger J. Kvenild. The home, dubbed by Abbott as the House of Mystery, was uniquely adapted to serve as a venue for Abbott's elaborate parlor magic performances. Its unusually large interior spaces, hidden mechanical features, and carefully designed layout enabled Abbott to stage illusions and séances. Today, the house stands as an exceptional and well-preserved example of both Craftsman design and the creative integration of architecture and performance.

The Location

David P. Abbott arrived in Omaha in the early 1900s after he and two partners founded the Peoples Loan Company in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1901.¹ His brother, George F. Abbott, joined the firm shortly thereafter, establishing the company in Omaha. David Abbott and his wife's first known residence was at 2637 Parker Avenue in 1905 and by 1906 they had moved to the corner

¹ "Local Brevities," *The Evening Bee*, January 18, 1901.

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of St. Mary's Avenue and S. 26th Street.² There are two known addresses for the Abbotts on this corner – 2568 St. Mary's Avenue and 559 S 26th Street.³ Based on the Sanborn map for 1918, this may have been the same house addressed from different intersecting streets. During their eight years of residence in this location, Abbott wrote extensively on spiritual phenomena, contributing articles to *Open Court* magazine and authoring *Behind the Scenes with Mediums* (1907) and *The Marvelous Creations of Joseffy* (1909). The original houses at this location have since been demolished, and the site has been redeveloped.

In 1913, Fannie Abbott, David Abbott's wife, purchased a lot in the Fieldcrest Addition, and two years later she acquired the western half of the adjoining lot.⁴ Located roughly two miles southwest of downtown, Fieldcrest sits between the prestigious Omaha Field Club and Hanscom Park in a neighborhood now listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the Field Club Historic District. Hanscom Park, donated to the City of Omaha in 1872 by developers Andrew J. Hanscom and James Megeath, occupies 57 acres deemed too hilly for residential construction.⁵ The Omaha Field Club, founded in 1900, offered an array of recreational amenities, including an 18-hole golf course, bowling alleys, clay tennis courts, and a baseball field with a grandstand. Early real estate advertising for the area promotes it as the "Field Club District," highlighting its desirability, proximity to these amenities, and convenient access to the 32nd Avenue streetcar line.

The Fieldcrest Addition was platted in 1912 and developed by the Norris and Norris Realty Company.⁶ Bounded by Hickory Street, Center Street (formerly Lincoln Avenue), and 33rd and 35th Streets, the 40-lot subdivision was divided into two blocks by Walnut Street, with rear alleys serving each lot. Parcels measure approximately 50 by 133 feet with lots adjacent to 33rd Street being slightly wider. Between 1912 and 1922, forty houses were constructed, with a forty-first added in 1941 after subdivision of the southeast corner lot. Norris and Norris built at least 28 of the original homes, including the House of Mystery.⁷ Of the residences in Fieldcrest, 27 are Craftsman bungalows or two-story Craftsman-style houses. Only one of the subdivision's residences was designed by an architect: the House of Mystery.

The Architect - Birger J. Kvenild

David P. Abbott commissioned Omaha architect Birger J. Kvenild to design the House of Mystery in 1913. A Norwegian immigrant who arrived in the United States in 1905 and settled in Omaha eight years later, Kvenild built his own two-story Craftsman residence in 1914. The House of Mystery is the earliest known commissioned work he completed in Omaha. Kvenild became a naturalized citizen in 1916, the same year he was elected as secretary of the Omaha City Planning board.⁸ During his time in this position, he proposed creating a riverfront "con-tour" drive, the landscaping of the south corner of Johnson Lake for recreation, and the widening of 24th Street.

² Omaha Print Co., *McAvoy's Omaha City Directory*, 1905; Omaha Directory Co., *Omaha City Directory*, 1906.

³ Omaha Directory Co., *Omaha City Directory*, 1910.

⁴ Douglas County Assessor, Deed Book 317, page 173 and Deed Book 393, page 65

⁵ Dirr, Melissa and Ebers, Jill. "Field Club Historic District." National Register of Historic Places Form, 2020.

⁶ Douglas County Engineer, Fieldcrest Addition plat map.

⁷ City of Omaha Planning Department historic preservation database.

⁸ "Kvenild, Omaha, Named Secretary of City Planners," *Evening World Herald*, May 18, 1916.

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Kvenild was admitted to the American Institute of Architects in 1918 and maintained his professional office from his home.⁹ Between 1913 and 1938 he designed 57 buildings, the majority of them single-family residences in the Dundee neighborhood in Omaha. Six of his designs completed before 1919 reflect the Craftsman style. From 1919 to 1925, he worked primarily in the Georgian and Renaissance Revival styles. From 1925 through 1938, his designs were almost exclusively influenced by English Tudor Revival architecture. Among the latter is the Henry B. Neef House at 2884 Iowa Street in Omaha, which is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Forty-nine Kvenild-designed houses contribute to the National Register historic districts. In the Country Club Historic District are four Tudor Revival residences; the Fair Acres Historic District has a Tudor Revival and French Eclectic residence; and the Dundee Historic District has 18 Tudor Revival, 11 Colonial Revival, three Renaissance Revival, three Craftsman, two American Foursquare, and once each of Prairie and Neo-Classical Revival residences. The Field Club Historic District, in which the House of Mystery is located, has one Colonial Revival residence and one Craftsman in addition to the House of Mystery.¹⁰

The Craftsman Bungalow

Kvenild designed the House of Mystery in the style of a Craftsman bungalow. In the United States, the bungalow emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a response to evolving lifestyles and changing ideas about domestic living. Increasing mobility and rising urban density encouraged many city residents to seek a simpler way of life and a closer connection to nature. Inspired by the low-profile, handcrafted dwellings of India, early American bungalows initially developed as modest, single-story vacation retreats for affluent households.¹¹

Nationwide and locally, the popularity of the bungalow as a primary domestic residence was driven by the expansion of electric streetcar systems in the early 1900s which accelerated suburban growth, making residential living in natural settings outside crowded urban cores more accessible to middle-class families. As these suburbs expanded, the bungalow became a preferred housing type, offering affordability, efficiency, and comfort well suited to young homebuyers and an expanding middle class that valued domestic convenience and proximity to nature.¹² From approximately 1905 to 1930, the bungalow was among the most popular domestic styles for smaller homes in the United States.¹³

As the bungalow developed in the early twentieth century, it became closely associated with the Arts and Crafts movement (circa 1900–1930), which emerged in response to the formal Victorian lifestyle, industrial production, and the ornate and elaborate detailing of Victorian architecture. Advocates of this movement emphasized simplicity, craftsmanship, functionality, and a stronger visual and physical connection to the natural environment. Typically, one to one-and-a-half stories in height, bungalows featured low-pitched gabled roofs, broad overhanging eaves, prominent front porches supported by square columns, and open floor plans, creating efficient layouts and an inviting, informal character that suited contemporary domestic ideals.

⁹ [http://www.e-nebraskahistory.org/index.php?title=Birger_J._Kvenild_\(1879-1953\),_Architect](http://www.e-nebraskahistory.org/index.php?title=Birger_J._Kvenild_(1879-1953),_Architect)

¹⁰ City of Omaha Planning Department historic preservation database.

¹¹ King, Anthony D., *The Bungalow: The production of a global culture* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 128-1932.

¹² King, *The Bungalow*, 139-142.

¹³ McAllester, Virginia & Lee, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (Alfred A Knoph, 2006) 454.

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Among the most influential architects of the Arts and Crafts movement in the United States were brothers Charles Sumner Greene and Henry Mather Greene of Pasadena, California. Their work helped define and popularize the “California” bungalow, characterized by exposed structural elements, integrated cabinetry, and extensive use of natural materials such as wood and stone. Their designs exemplified a deliberate balance between form and function, elevating everyday domestic architecture through thoughtful design and craftsmanship.¹⁴

Gustav Stickley, a furniture maker, designer, architect, and publisher, also emerged as a leading figure in the American Arts and Crafts movement. Inspired by British Arts and Crafts pioneers William Morris and John Ruskin, Stickley’s design philosophy emphasized simplicity, structural honesty, and high-quality materials. His ideas extended beyond furniture and architecture to encompass an entire lifestyle, which he promoted through his magazine *The Craftsman*, first published in 1901. The publication regularly featured architectural plans for “Craftsman” bungalows designed to harmonize with the natural landscape and foster healthy, meaningful living.¹⁵

Local newspapers contributed to the popularity of the bungalow in Omaha. The first documented reference to the California bungalow appears in the *Omaha Daily Bee* in 1906, describing a single-story, rambling residence designed to function without live-in servants and to depart from traditional expectations of domestic living.¹⁶ In June of 1907, an envoy of “Omaha boosters” traveled to the Pacific coast. They observed in Spokane, Washington that, “...the cute little modern bungalows occupied the pretty residence districts and were of an attractive style of architecture.”¹⁷ *The Omaha Daily Bee* noted the “Bungalow Craze in Omaha” in which E.A. Ehmann, a young architect who had lived in Florida where bungalows were plentiful, teamed up with architect J.H. Craddock to popularize the bungalow in Omaha.¹⁸ Although multiple bungalow plans were published in local papers in 1907, the first to fully reflect the Craftsman aesthetic was designed by architect Henry D. Frankfurt of the Omaha firm Hastings and Hayden.¹⁹ There was increasing demand for “the neat, trim looking, thoroughly modern, one-story, five-room cottage or bungalow type,” but such homes were scarce in 1907. Newspaper coverage on the bungalow continued throughout 1908, and by 1909 the bungalow craze had firmly taken hold in Omaha.

¹⁴ Lancaster, Clay, *The American Bungalow* (Abbeville Press, 1985) 115-137.

¹⁵ King, *The Bungalow*, 134.

¹⁶ “Woman Solved a Problem,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 04, 2025

¹⁷ “Demand Grows for Neat Modern 5-Room Cottages,” *Omaha World Herald*, July 21, 1907

¹⁸ “Bungalow Craze in Omaha,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, August 28, 1907

¹⁹ “A Fine Bungalow for \$3,000,” *The Omaha Daily News*, August 04, 1907.

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Figure 01: Craftsman bungalow designed by Henry D. Frankfurt.²⁰

The House of Mystery stands as an exceptional local example of a Craftsman bungalow of the front-gable-roof subtype, exhibiting numerous hallmarks of the style and in an exceptional state of preservation. Its exterior features prominent triangular knee braces that appear to support the roof eaves, while the open rafter tails and broad bargeboards emphasize the bungalow's handcrafted character. The exterior palette of materials—brick, stucco, wood, and limestone—further reinforces the Craftsman commitment to natural materials and artisanal construction.

During the period of the house's construction, the Tudor Revival style also enjoyed wide popularity, and the two traditions often influenced one another. This cross-pollination is evident in the House of Mystery's stucco-clad gables with decorative half-timbering, a signature Tudor Revival motif.

Inside, the first floor is richly appointed with quartersawn white-oak millwork. Two sets of colonnades, composed of square columns rising from leaded-glass bookcases, articulate the major rooms through large cased openings. In the dining room, a continuous trim band supports a bracketed plate rail, beneath which vertical stiles alternate with plaster panels. At the west end of the parlor, a tiled gas fireplace is flanked by paired windows, creating a warm and balanced focal point. Taken together, these features and materials embody the distinctive character and enduring appeal of the Craftsman bungalow.

²⁰ *The Omaha Daily News*, August 04, 1907.

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Figure 02: 1920 photo of the House of Mystery at 3316 Center Street.²¹

A Stage for Magic

There are notable departures from typical bungalow plans that were intentionally incorporated to support the development and performance of Abbott's parlor magic. Bungalows are generally compact and spatially efficient; however, the House of Mystery features three unusually generous public rooms—a parlor, dining room, and library—articulated by built-in bookcases and colonnades. In most bungalow layouts, the parlor and dining room are directly adjacent, and when a third public space is present, it is typically a modest den, music room, or sun room separated from the main living areas by French doors. In contrast, the House of Mystery's parlor measures an expansive 18 by 34 feet with a 10-foot ceiling, providing ample space to accommodate approximately 30 guests. The 10-foot ceilings were necessary for Abbott to rig and perform his "Floating Ball" trick which required eyelets in the ceiling and woodwork through which thread was strung. The library, positioned between the parlor and dining room, functioned as a backstage area during Abbott's séances. Furthermore, the house was wired with two-levels of electrical lighting in the parlor. The low lighting level helped to conceal the threads used in this trick. Abbott's laboratory, which later served as a bedroom, includes both a large clothing closet and a second, distinctive closet fitted with built-in cabinetry and glass doors, where Abbott stored his props. In the journal *Genii*, *The Conjuror's Magazine*, Teller, of Penn and Teller fame, describes the house as follows:

The only visible abnormality of the house was an oversized front parlor. Little did his guests know that microphones were hidden in the gas fireplace and false

²¹ Bostwick, Louis (1868-1943) and Frohardt, Homer (1885-1972). The Durham Museum.

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heating register, that loud speakers and electromagnets were concealed in chairs and behind the upright piano, and that electrical plates were lurking under the carpets ready to make contact with prong terminals on the legs of the furniture. Nearly everything that seemed normal hid a trick.²²

Abbott authored a book which was published posthumously—*David P. Abbott's Book of Mysteries*—in which he describes his magic tricks in detail and how he staged the performance of the tricks in his parlor. Illustrated with dozens of photographs of the interior, the house features prominently in the book not only because it is where the illustrative photographs were taken, but because the design of the house facilitated the performance of known tricks and development of new ones. The book also discusses the props, furniture and technology that Abbott installed and how they were used in his illusions. For example, fellow magician Harry Kellar had gifted to Abbott a large Japanese three-leaf screen which he had custom made. Abbott folded the screen to form a triangle and placed it between the built-in bookcases that divided the library and parlor. The space formed by the screen is where Abbott stowed the props he used in his performance. He frequently used the east end of the parlor as his performance stage, but sometimes his performances were staged at the center of the room. Black drapes were used to cover the windows and control the light. Further lighting control was obtained through the wiring of the parlor lights with two levels of illumination. Abbott had silk curtains dyed and painted with scenes of the night sky to use as backdrops. The color and pattern of the backdrops helped to conceal the threads that were used in his “Floating Ball” trick. Hooks and eyelets in the ceiling and woodwork secured the threads that were used in the “Floating Ball” trick.²³ Although the adaptations to the décor and magical devices have been mostly lost, a single eyelet remains on the west column of the colonnade between the parlor and library as a testament to Abbott’s subtle ingenuity and adaptation of his home.

²² Teller, “Inside the House of Mystery; A Detective Story,” *Genii: The Conjurers’ Magazine*, August 2004, 59-60.

²³ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery: The Magic Science of David P. Abbott*, (Miracle Factory, 2005) 2:431-451

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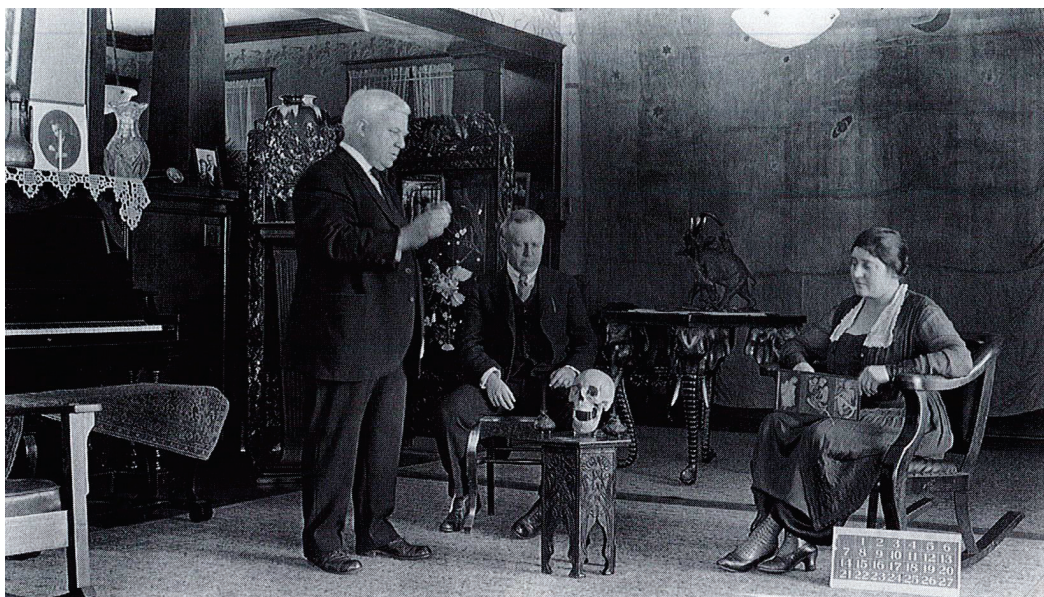


Figure 03: Photo showing the arrangement of the Japanese screen and silk curtains at the east end of the parlor.²⁴

Criterion A: A Culture of Magic and Mysticism

The growing local and national interest in performing arts was integral to the success of the House of Mystery. This building was constructed during the time of the American Vaudeville circuit, an entertainment movement that consisted of a variety of performance practices, including magic and spiritualism. The House of Mystery, built in large part as a venue for Abbott to perform parlor magic, became a locally accessible space to foster the growing level of interest in the Vaudeville subculture.

The American Vaudeville Circuit (1880-1935)

The American Vaudeville circuit was perhaps the most popular form of entertainment from the 1880s to the early 1930s. Vaudeville, whose origins were often attributed to the French, was an entertainment movement that prioritized exhibiting varieties of performance acts during one stage show rather than one, cohesive act. Acrobatics, comedy, skits, and of course illusions were all heavily exhibited in Vaudeville, with each possessing its own unique subculture. Magic acts and spiritual seances were popular forms of Vaudeville entertainment that brought a new group of niche celebrities who shared secrets of the trade with one another.²⁵ The continued popularity of Vaudeville expanded interest in the House of Mystery in two major ways; it drew in an audience of relatively isolated Omaha residents to experience these performances on a local, comfortable scale, and it allowed David P. Abbott, owner and curator of the home to help build the performance art subculture throughout the wider Omaha area.

²⁴ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:434.

²⁵ Frank Cullen, "What Is Vaudeville? – the American Vaudeville Museum & UA Collections," Arizona.edu, 2023, <https://sites.arizona.edu/vaudeville/what-is-vaudeville-draft/>.

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The socio-religious movement of *Spiritualism*, defined by the belief in an individual's cognizance and ability to communicate from the afterlife, was embedded in Vaudeville culture. Though prominent spiritualist occurrences were reported as far back as the late 1840s, the rise of the Vaudeville circuit nurtured a surge of mainstream interest in Spiritualism, with several performances associated with spiritualists' spiritual acts.²⁶ Spiritualists within the Vaudeville circuit tended to be mediums, or those who were believed to have the ability to speak with the deceased as 'spirits,' or the remaining souls of the dead. Vaudeville mediums had several ways of conducting their craft, most of which included providing viewers or interested parties with information about the thoughts, feelings, and appearances of deceased individuals, such as the case of the infamous Bangs Sisters, a spiritualist duo who purported to be able to create portraits of the deceased. Though spirit mediums were often dedicated performance artists who garnered money and fame from their abilities and readings, the spiritualism in the wider culture was decidedly not performative, and genuine discourse surrounding the validity of individual mediumistic ability became pervasive throughout its popularity. Many mediums were heavily scrutinized even within the Vaudeville performance circuit, leading to a growing interest in the debunking of spiritualism towards the later stages of its popularity.

Blossoming from interest in spiritualism came magic, a broad category of performances that encompassed anything meant to subvert the expectations of a viewer through visual and physical effects. Magic includes performances that range from small visual illusions to full-fledged stage performances, all meant to make a viewer believe that they are experiencing something physically impossible, despite the tricks being done through physically testable means. Magic itself has maintained a history that far surpasses the spiritualism movement, but the Vaudeville era of magic can be traced back to vaudeville's aforementioned roots in the 1880s. Spiritualism and Magic possess a similar quality of appearing unnatural on the surface level, and have thus typically gone hand-in-hand within the Vaudeville circuit. Several magicians based their tricks on spiritual premises or attempted to mimic spiritualist occurrences for the sake of their performances. Many magicians were also spiritualists, and they made a very stark distinction between their illusory performances and what they believed to be genuine spiritual experiences. The connection between the two is the basis for many of David P. Abbott's later described endeavors as a spiritual skeptic and magician.

A Center for Vaudevillian Entertainment (Performing Arts)

The House of Mystery was a unique spot in Omaha to experience the Vaudeville scene. The parlor of the home, crafted specifically to entertain guests, hosted many guests both in and out of the entertainment sphere, including Orpheum performers, local social clubs, and other magicians. Abbott believed that the in-home parlor space was the most ideal place to view magic and dealt strictly in private seances towards the end of his life, though occasional guests would have the opportunity to perform alongside him in the House as well, such as the celebrity psychic, "Wonder Girl" Eugenie Dennis, who offered spiritual readings during her extended stay in Omaha.²⁷ Among its many private performances, the House hosted several famous names in the Vaudeville circuit to learn magic seances and to be entertained by Abbott's performances,

²⁶ Leonard, Maurice. *People from the Other Side*, (The History Press, 2008).

²⁷ "David P. Abbott's 'Mystery House,'" *Omaha World-Herald*.

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including Harry Houdini, Theodore “Okito” Bamberg, and Harry Kellar. The “Floating Ball” and “Talking Teakettle” were two of Abbott’s inventions commonly shown to visitors and taught to curious magicians. Notably, Harry Kellar wrote of Abbott’s “Talking Teakettle” as being “...the most marvelous, magical, and mysterious illusion ever invented,” and would go on to include it in his acts.²⁸ Howard Thurston, an Ohio-based magician who would later go on to work alongside Kellar, also praised Abbott’s work and the contributions that the House of Mystery made to the subculture of magic.²⁹

Abbott’s House of Mystery had a narrower scope for performances than other popular performance venues on the Vaudeville circuit. The Orpheum Theater and the Astro Theater (currently known as the Rose Blumpkin Performing Arts Center) were examples of two other premier destinations for viewing magic and other performances for a larger audience within the Omaha metropolitan area. These destinations hosted a variety of celebrities and performances that made the broader Vaudeville circuit available to locals that took interest in the subculture.³⁰ The House of Mystery, however, was a smaller, more intimate venue, being within Abbott’s home, and honed specifically to acts that prioritized magic and spiritualism among the wide variety of acts of the Vaudeville scene. In addition, Abbott’s House of Mystery was a venue that provided its entertainment for free, rather than at a price befitting a larger theater with a large audience, higher overhead, and a broader scope of performances.

Those who attended Abbott’s shows became the subjects his experiments in understanding seance material and spiritual performances. The most notable example of these spiritual guests was the previously mentioned “Wonder Girl,” Eugenie Dennis, whose methods he studied during his sponsorship of her.³¹ However, Abbott also regularly recreated occult seances as described in his books *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums* and *The Spirit Portrait Mystery*, often to showcase them to these curious guests, among others. This both allowed Abbott to learn everything that he could about his craft, and to teach other aspiring and professional magicians to do the same. Many of these experiments would later be detailed and drawn out in the manuscript for *David P. Abbott’s Book of Mysteries*.

While David P. Abbott was often the center of these experiments and performances, the House of Mystery itself was crucial in exhibiting their educational value. The House was designed and appointed in such a way that a variety of illusions could be tested and performed, and the inner workings of its adaptations were crucial in explaining how the tricks worked. An example of this comes from a 1923 visit by Chinese illusionist and regular performer in the Vaudeville circuit, Han Ping Chien. Chien visited the House of Mystery, alongside several of his co-performers, to experience “Balsamo, the Living Skull,” a spiritual illusion that seemingly moved on its own to answer “yes” or “no” questions from the observer. For educational purposes, Chien was allowed to feel around for wires or other common physical explanations for the mechanics of the illusion, of which he found none.³² In this example, the “Talking Skull” was neither spiritualism, nor ventriloquy, nor the workings of a radio.

²⁸ “David P. Abbott’s ‘Mystery House,’” *The Omaha World-Herald*.

²⁹ “Mr. Thurston Sees Magic,” *The Omaha World Herald*, June 9, 1932.

³⁰ David Calease, “Astro Theater (U.S. National Park Service),” Nps.gov, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/places/astro-theater.htm>.

³¹ “‘Wonder Girl’ Test to be Made in Omaha,” *The Omaha World-Herald*, January 8, 1922.

³² “David P. Abbott’s ‘Mystery House,’” *Omaha World-Herald*.

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While the secret was entrusted to Chien, it would only be explained in writing in Abbott's later released *Book of Mysteries* as using extensive electrical rigging and a secret assistant, hidden in the library, controlling the movements from an electrical operating station sitting in a private back room. While the trick was invented in 1907, seven years before the House's construction in 1914, it was perfected and performed in the House.³³ In the design of the House, Abbott ensured that there were spaces adjacent to the parlor from which Fannie Abbott could secretly assist with the performances.

Varied Interest in the House of Mystery

The House of Mystery was regularly attended by individuals with scientific interest in the inner workings of tricks regularly performed in the magic and occult subcultures of the Vaudeville circuit. Aside from the magicians who regularly travelled to learn how to perform Abbott's inventions, academic professionals visited the House to garner some expertise on tricks that had them stumped. In 1920, Professor Enrico Marselli and Physicist William Crookes had travelled to the House to inquire about Spirit Portraits, a trick that aimed to make audiences believe that portraits of real, deceased ancestors could be accurately drawn by a medium. Abbott not only gave his researched and tested explanation, but used the modifications within his home to show exactly how manufactured somatic effects could be used to trick an audience member into thinking that they may have had a spiritual experience.³⁴

Abbott and his House of Mystery provided a crucial research space for the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR,) a New York-based organization that attempted to investigate spiritualist experiences and other psychical phenomena through scientific explanation.³⁵ In a way, the house acted as a laboratory of sorts, offering interested professional parties a space to study and practice the various tricks that Abbott had come up with over the years. The Bang's Sister's "Spirit Portraits," Abbott's "Talking Teakettle", and the "Wonder Girl" were a few of many that came under the society's scrutiny, and the House of Mystery provided a space to work through these many points of interest. Though the House of Mystery did not itself function as a social club, it was occasionally used as a venue to provide supplemental entertainment for members of local social clubs and was of particular importance to the ASPR, the International Brotherhood of Magicians, and the American Society of Magicians.³⁶

Modern magic societies still consider the House of Mystery to be a significant building in the history of magic today. As previously mentioned, the House of Mystery contributed greatly to the work of its contemporary magicians, providing a space to learn and understand magic as the interest and science behind it began to grow. Then, near the end of his life, Abbott became one of the founding members of the Omaha Magic Society, which still exists within the city today. The Omaha Magic Society was founded as one of several other preexisting national magic societies, and its creation allowed the contributions of the House of Mystery to continue to grow and expand the interest in magic, both within the local sphere and as a whole. The modern

³³ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, "House of Mystery," 446.

³⁴ "David Abbott's 'House of Mystery,'" *The Omaha World Herald*, November 28, 1920.

³⁵ KM Wehrstein, "William F. Barrett | Psi Encyclopedia," Spr.ac.uk, December 17, 2024, <https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/william-f-barrett>.

³⁶ "Mr. Thurston Sees Magic," *The Omaha World Herald*, June 9, 1932.

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Omaha Magic Society is responsible for renewed local interest in the property as a piece of their group's history.

Criterion B: David P. Abbott - Master of Magic, Spiritualism, and Illusion

The House of Mystery was the capstone of David P. Abbott's legacy as a magician and spiritualist. Magic had followed Abbott throughout his entire life, starting in his childhood with the earlier movements of the American Vaudeville Circuit and spread out from there. Eventually, this interest would include spiritualism and technical applications of performance practices in magic and spiritualist occurrences. Years of interest, study, and financial gain had culminated in Abbott's commissioned construction of the House of Mystery, which he used to perform and host seances, invent magic tricks and props, and share his wealth of knowledge with others involved with the magic and spiritualist subcultures.

Background on David P. Abbott and his House of Mystery

David Phelps Abbott was born September 22, 1863 in the town of Falls City, Nebraska Territory as the oldest of seven surviving children. His parents, George and Sarah Abbott, were farmers who'd settled along the Muddy Creek a year prior to rearing their eldest son. His family was rather well-known in their small town, particularly David P. Abbott's father, George Abbott, who was an active populist advocate and was heavily involved in local politics for the party. Notably, George Abbott was the head of the local "Pop Conference," a small committee that lobbied for populist candidates in local and national government.³⁷ David P. Abbott's mother, Sarah Abbott Daily, married George in Missouri in 1860, and was the daughter of a local judge. The Abbott family bore a small but noticeable impact on their local community throughout the years, a dynamic that would go on to impact David P. Abbott's own life growing up.³⁸

³⁷ "Abbott Manipulates the Pop Convention— Fusion and Fork the Watchwords," *The Falls City Journal*, October 6, 1983.

³⁸ "George A. Abbott Dies Suddenly," *The Falls City Journal*, January 22, 1915.

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Figure 04: Photo of David Phelps Abbott from the cover of *Sphinx* (October 1906)

It was during his childhood that David P. Abbott developed his interest and dedication to magic. Abbott had reportedly begun to create and practice his own illusions at the age of eight following an experience where he visited a travelling Vaudeville troupe with his family in Falls City where they resided. He immediately became interested in figuring out how the tricks worked. Afterwards, he and his younger sister, Ada, performed a trick for their parents in which David would place his sister in a trance, and Ada would correctly guess the number of seeds inside of an apple.³⁹ This burgeoning hobby stayed with him well throughout his childhood. In his adult years, Abbott partnered with his brother, George F. Abbott, in the profitable People's Loan Company which provided chattel loans at high interest rates. His partner on stage was his wife, Fannie E. Miller, whom he wedded in Beatrice, Nebraska in 1887. She regularly joined him travelling throughout the Midwest for seances and magic performances and is often credited with being the voice behind many of Abbott's auditory illusions.⁴⁰ The Abbotts chose not to have children and were known to be spendthrifts; thus, they had the time and means to devote to David's passion for magic.⁴¹

What truly jumpstarted David P. Abbott's notoriety before the House of Mystery was his knowledge around spirit mediums. As Abbott began his independent career, he would often travel around to surrounding villages and towns to exhibit his own performances. It was at this early stage in his career that he developed an interest in studying spirit mediums, prompting

³⁹"David P. Abbott, 70, Magician, Author, Inventor, Dies after Lingering Illness," *The Omaha Morning Bee-News*, June 14, 1934.

⁴⁰ David P. Abbott, Teller, and Todd Karr, *House of Mystery: The Magic Science of David P. Abbott*, vol. 1 (The Miracle Factory, 2005), 20.

⁴¹ Teller, "Inside the House of Mystery; A Detective Story," *Genii: The Conjurors' Magazine*, August 2004, 59.

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residents of his hometown to invite him to sit in on seances to share his expertise. In his essay titled "Some Mediumistic Phenomena," Abbott describes his burgeoning fame:

For two winters I had traveled some as a magician, so when the medium came to town, and began to perform his miracles, certain members of the community suggested having me witness one of his seances, thinking I would be able to discover whether his tests were genuine, or whether they were performed by the aid of trickery.⁴²

In 1905, when Abbott moved to Omaha, Nebraska, he started out relatively unknown, though he would release his famous *Behind the Scenes with Mediums* two years later. This piece, coupled with the notoriety he gained among smaller towns, helped generate increased interest in studies of stage magic and spiritualism among locals. By 1912, he'd effectively garnered enough of a local audience through research and performances to justify the design and construction of his House of Mystery, which was completed in 1914. The home would allow him a space to continue to expand his practice to a wider audience and further increase interest in magic as a craft.

Fame Through Spiritualism: *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums*

During his life, *Behind the Scenes with Mediums* was by far David P. Abbott's most well-known contemporary work, detailing meetings with purported "Spirit Mediums" who claimed that they had the ability to speak with the spirits of the dead. In 1907, David P. Abbott would release the first edition of *Behind the Scenes with Mediums* through the Open Court Publishing Co. of Chicago, Illinois. Abbott had major criticisms about their methods, exposing several of them to be parlor tricks disguised as speaking with spirits and educating readers on how to recognize deceitful practices within the hobby. After moving into the House of Mystery, Abbott would recreate and improve several of these tricks through modifications to his home and its furnishings while remaining honest about their mechanics. He would also continue to invite spirit mediums to his home in order to further study and replicate them, often writing of his findings in updated volumes of his book, magazine articles, or personal essays.

Spirituality was a significant part of David P. Abbott's work and he genuinely sought to understand if there was an afterlife. Abbott began meetings with mediums prior to writing the first edition of *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums* in 1907. In the very first of these passages, he describes meeting with a medium who claimed she could speak with spirits, and would accurately be able to guess the names and stories of several audience members, seemingly with no background. In truth, she had already learned things about her audience through gossip, attending parties, and public records, which she would write down to be used at carefully curated seances.⁴³ This method was very common, and Abbott would report seeing it time and time again, especially as he began to host his own in-home seances after the construction of the House of Mystery. Later, Abbott would meet the "Wonder Girl" Eugene Dennis, who he later sponsored in his home. She was one of the few spirit mediums that Abbott, though cautious of the validity of her abilities, did not find to be a fraud. Widely regarded as an expert on the topic, Abbott believed that the practices of spirit mediums were not distasteful so long as they weren't financially

⁴² David P. Abbott, "Some Mediumistic Phenomena," *The Open Court* 8, no. 594 (August 1905): 494–504.

⁴³ Abbott, David Phelps. 1907. *Behind the Scenes with the Mediums*. Open Court Publishing Co.

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or emotionally exploitative towards audience members, many of which were likely grieving those that they'd sought a medium to contact.⁴⁴

Both a Home and a Stage

The House of Mystery was constructed in particular as a parlor stage and inventors lab for David P. Abbott to perform and perfect his craft. His background as a magic hobbyist, financial professional, and author gave him the means to create something that was fully tailored to his needs as a performer. The house was built on 3316 Center Street in Omaha, Nebraska, as a bungalow with a downstairs area designed for entertaining and an upstairs area dedicated to living space. Abbott describes commissioning several modifications both before and after its construction to craft the ideal stage in his manuscript, posthumously titled *David P. Abbott's Book of Mysteries*. He requested silk screens and curtains placed at particular angles in the parlor and surrounding rooms to "...help to hide and mask certain things that are necessary for certain times."⁴⁵ Some of his props included furnishings that could hide certain rigging, a hidden transmitter that would relay real-time vocal messages from his wife, and several hooks and eyelets that were installed and used to hold threads for prop suspension.⁴⁶



Figure 05: The letterhead head for Abbott's House of Mystery with David P. Abbott and Fannie Abbott.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ "Eugene Dennis, 'Wonder Girl,' to Leave Sunday," The Omaha Daily Bee, February 16, 1922.

⁴⁵ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:420.

⁴⁶ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:431-451.

⁴⁷ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:416.

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Figure 06: Fannie Abbott behind the scenes using the dictograph.⁴⁸

Aside from the technical aspects of the House of Mystery that allowed David P. Abbott to successfully perform certain tricks, the parlor was decorated with the intent to create a mysterious, Vaudevillian ambiance for any audiences that he entertained. The decor also served as a distraction to draw discerning eyes away from obvious rigging or sleight of hand movements during performances. The guest room boasted several uniquely made pieces such as bronze elephant statues, a folding Japanese screen, spirit portraits, and handcrafted art pieces from Japan and India.⁴⁹ Many of these pieces were purely ornamental, though some were used as props in seances and spirit work. Of particular fascination to his guests was the “Vase with a Thousand Monkeys,” reportedly from India, which was a porcelain vase featuring painted images of monkeys running around a moonlit sky. This was used for one of many of Abbott’s seances in which he would tell his audience that the spirit of a 5,000-year-old Egyptian princess lived within the vase but could transfer to a handmade, paper mâché teakettle and talk from its spout.⁵⁰

Descriptions of David P. Abbott’s Center Street home became very important to magicians looking to improve their craft. Abbott himself wrote much of the description of his home and its appointments to be shared with others, accompanied by dozens of photographs that would later be compiled in *David P. Abbott’s Book of Mysteries*. When Abbott described his seances, he would mark these images to show where hidden rigs would be placed or where on the carpet one might wish to step to correctly perform the seance.⁵¹ He also stressed the importance of the performance aspect when it came to teaching seances. Abbott often started his performances by entering from his library, an area he had intentionally built into the design of the house. This space spilled into the parlor onto a long carpet through a silk curtain embroidered with images of outer space. The photographs accompanying these descriptions depicted blackout curtains used to manage lighting, a couch for guests in the southeast corner, carpets with marked positions, and decorative pieces hiding intentionally and inconspicuously placed vents, wiring, and floorboards.⁵² The interior architecture of the house as shown in the *Book of Mysteries* has not been altered, retaining all the original rooms, woodwork, light fixtures, cabinets, hardware, windows, and other built-in features. A stenciled boarder painted below the crown molding has been

⁴⁸ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:451.

⁴⁹ “David Abbott’s ‘House of Mystery,’” *The Omaha World Herald*, November 28, 1920.

⁵⁰ “Marvel after Marvel Unrolls Itself at Special Necromancy Exhibition given by Orpheum Magician at Omahan’s Home,” *The Omaha Daily News*, December 29, 1918.

⁵¹ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:489-514.

⁵² Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:420.

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painted over. However, the props and décor that were integral to Abbott's illusions and the ambience of the performance space were dispersed at auction after the death of Fannie Abbott save a few items currently owned by Teller.

"Tricks" and Private Seances

After the House of Mystery was built in 1914, David P. Abbott pivoted from travel-based performances to exhibiting many of his seances in his home. Abbott's seances usually began late in the evening went until the early hours of the morning. Both nationwide travelers and locals from Omaha's metropolitan area had expressed great fascination with his seances, with several of them being advertised or reflected on in local newspapers. A journalist of the Omaha World-Herald writes:

Mr. Abbott can 'do' possibly a thousand or more things of magic— everything from slate-writing to the levitation of the princess of Karnac. He scorns the use of mechanical contrivances, such as stage performers' use, and when he performs his parlor magic, he selects what he terms the gems of the art and proceeds with his work with his audience seated all about him.⁵³

Abbott enjoyed treating his guests, and strongly believed that his performances should not make the audience feel as though they were "tricked," taking time at the end to explain that magic is not a feat of spirits or breaking the laws of physics, but a genuine art. Even with these private showings, he did not charge money and was only interested in teaching and entertaining through his hobby. Instead, he liked to ask audiences to attempt to explain the mechanics behind his performances before departure.⁵⁴

For David P. Abbott, part of exhibiting a successful seance included inventing and modifying illusions that were suited to the modifications he had made within his house. Today, Abbott is perhaps most famous for inventing the most successful version of the "Floating Ball" trick, which used a series of thin threads rigged to small metal hooks and loops installed around the parlor to lift a grapefruit-sized golden ball into the air to appear as if it were floating midair. The schematics of this rigging system were molded by the intentional design of the House; woodwork and light fixtures could be used to mount or hide mechanisms for the trick. The performance included elaborately crafted sleight-of-hand movements and dimmed lighting to hide the appearance of any string or hooks and further convince observers that the metal ball was not only midair, but that Abbott could manipulate it through the air without touching it.⁵⁵ After Abbott had passed away in 1934, the *Omaha Morning Bee-News* described it as one of three tricks that "won him fame" and was performed alongside smaller and simpler illusions at most of his private seances.⁵⁶ This "Floating Ball" trick is still considered by modern magicians to be one of the most difficult illusions to master.

Still well-regarded for his ability to expose and debunk spiritual encounters, David P. Abbott's "Talking Teakettle" became one of his most highly anticipated acts. During the "Talking Teakettle," Abbott would ask a guest to place their ear to a paper mâché teakettle and listen for a

⁵³ "David P. Abbott's 'Mystery House.'" *The Omaha World Herald*, November 18, 1923.

⁵⁴ "Marvel After Marvel," *The Omaha Daily News*.

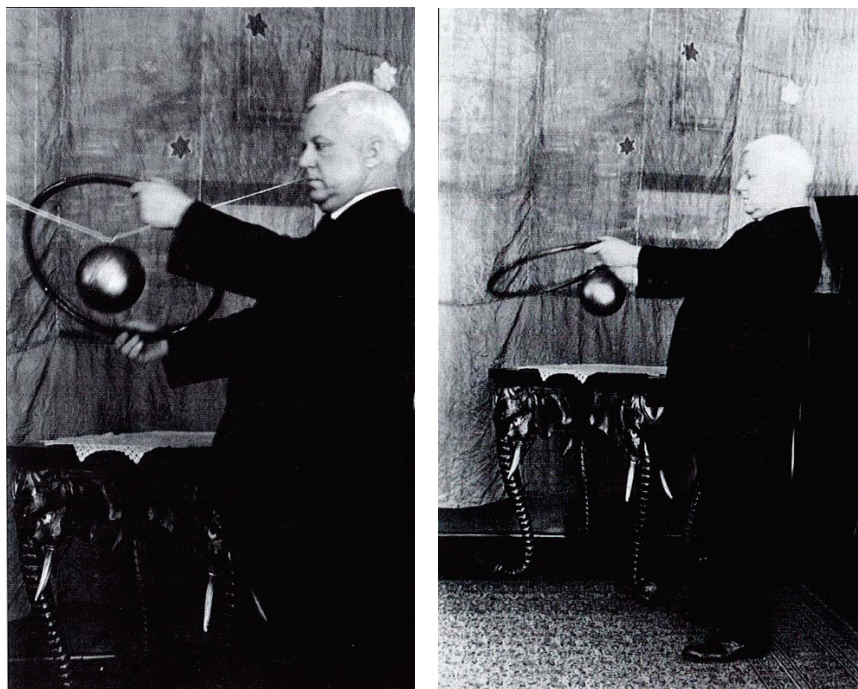
⁵⁵ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery*, 2:418-426.

⁵⁶ "David P. Abbott, 70," *The Omaha Morning Bee-News*.

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spirit inside. Abbott claimed the spirit was Pantora, an Egyptian queen who liked to chatter and joke with her guests. Afterwards, the kettle would be placed on a chair, and during this time the entire audience could hear her, ask questions, and receive answers.⁵⁷ This performance was actually a result of electrical rigging throughout the House of Mystery, in which a dictograph would be hidden inside the kettle and connected to the voice of Mrs. Fannie Abbott. Mrs. Abbott listened to the guests through the vents in a back room, which connected to the parlor. These tricks were performed before electricity was a common commodity in people's homes, so the mystery of it was still rather new. Of course, after a successful seance, Abbott would explain to his guests that there were no spirits involved in the performance, and reiterated his stance on the deceit of spirit mediums who would claim otherwise.



Figures 07 & 08: Illustrations of David P. Abbott demonstrating the “Floating Ball” trick.⁵⁸

Like Magic, the *Book of Mysteries* Appears

For more than twelve years before his death, Abbott expressed his intention to publish a manuscript illustrated with photographs documenting his methods and techniques. However, when he died in 1934 at the age of seventy, no such work had been published. Two years later, Abbott's wife, Fannie, also passed away, and the contents of the estate were dispersed at auction.

More than two decades after Abbott's possessions were scattered, Walter Graham—an Omaha magician and printer—began searching for the long-rumored manuscript after learning that a preliminary draft of the text still existed. Graham eventually located the preliminary draft and the photographs intended to illustrate the work; however, the photos were unnumbered and out of sequence, rendering them impossible to interpret on their own. Likewise, the manuscript,

⁵⁷ “Marvel After Marvel,” *The Omaha Daily News*.

⁵⁸ Abbott, Teller, and Karr, *House of Mystery: The Magic Science of David P. Abbott*, 2:495-295.

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with its numerous edits, proved indecipherable. In the spring of 1974, on a whim Graham contacted the then-owners of 3316 Center Street, Carl and Lenora Schrat, and discovered that they possessed the completed manuscript along with its photographs and other Abbott materials. Though Mrs. Schrat was reluctant to relinquish the legacy to her home, a year later she sold the manuscript to Graham so she would have the funds to invest in land in Oklahoma. However, she retained correspondence to Abbott from Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In 1977, Graham's company, Modern Litho, posthumously published 700 copies of *David P. Abbott's Book of Mysteries*.⁵⁹

Most magic books of the period were written for hobbyists and presented instruction in a condensed, shorthand style. In contrast, Abbott's *Book of Mysteries* offers thorough, step-by-step explanations of each effect, along with careful analysis of the psychology underlying the performances. Nothing is left to assumption: Abbott also provides detailed guidance for the construction of the necessary props, ensuring that every aspect of each trick is fully understood. Teller commented that "This is the most important book in magic...This has the most sophisticated magic secrets anywhere."⁶⁰

The Influence of David P. Abbott on Modern Magicians

Through the *Book of Mysteries*, David P. Abbott's influence extended to a young magician, Teller, who began performing with Penn Jillette in the early 1970s and is now the silent half of the renowned duo of magic, Penn & Teller. Todd Karr, a leading publisher of magic literature, was just eleven years old when *The Book of Mysteries* was published; captivated by its contents, he corresponded with Walter Graham.⁶¹ Teller acquired Abbott's original manuscript from Graham, and in 2005 he and Karr published *House of Mystery: The Magic Science of David P. Abbott*, a two-volume work that includes *Book of Mysteries* and *Behind the Scenes with Mediums* with annotations by Teller. The publication was previewed in 2004 by *Genii: The Conjurers' Magazine*—the longest-running independent publication devoted to magic—with a four-part feature of the upcoming publication.

In 2024, the House of Mystery was offered for sale by Carl and Lenora Schrat, prompting the Omaha Magical Society to notify Teller. In August of that year, he purchased the property and donated it to the Society, contingent upon its commitment to responsible stewardship. This arrangement was noted in *Genii*, and the house has since attracted visits from prominent professional magicians, including Lance Burton and Stephen Bargaatze. During a visit in August 2025, Teller indicated his intention to bequeath his collection of Abbott artifacts to the Society, including an original "Floating Ball" and the "Talking Teakettle".⁶² Along with the original manuscript, in 1969 these rare items were rescued by the Schrats from a bon fire following the estate auction of the preceding owner.

⁵⁹ Teller, "Inside the House of Mystery; A Detective Story," *Genii: The Conjurers' Magazine*, August 2004, 56-68

⁶⁰ Omaha Magic Society, *David P. Abbott's Books – History & Evolution*, August, 2025.
<https://vimeo.com/1110051040/cd69d26ffb>

⁶¹ Teller, "Inside the House of Mystery; A Detective Story," *Genii: The Conjurers' Magazine*, August 2004, 65

⁶² Omaha Magic Society, *David P. Abbott's Books – History & Evolution*, August, 2025.
<https://vimeo.com/1110051040/cd69d26ffb>

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Figure 09: Teller and the Omaha Magic Society at the House of Mystery (August 2005)

The House of Mystery: An Enduring Legacy

David P. Abbott's continued contributions to the subculture of magic are in large part because of his construction and use of the House of Mystery. During his 20-year residency within his home, he used the House for private performances, to educate audiences, and mentor others in the magic community, solidifying his role as a pivotal figure in the advancement of modern conjuring. Abbott hosted some of the world's most remarkable magicians of his time at the House including Harry Houdini, Theodore "Okito" Bamberg, and Harry Kellar. Abbott also penned one of the most influential books in the magic subculture – *David P. Abbott's Book of Mystery* – in which the house was prominently featured in dozens of photographs illustrating Abbott's tricks and illusions. Today, the property stands as an enduring symbol of magical ingenuity and a point of pride for the Omaha Magical Society. It is the only extant property that can be reasonably associated with David P. Abbott and it was at the height of his career as a magician that he constructed, lived, and performed at the House of Mystery. Although Abbott's original props, furnishings, and magical devices were dispersed at auction, the house itself remains in excellent condition and the architecture has remained unchanged, except for the updated bathrooms and kitchen. Therefore, the House of Mystery retains the historic integrity necessary to convey the story of David Phelps Abbott—an innovative parlor magician whose work continues to shape the art and culture of conjuring.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

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Teller. "Inside the House of Mystery." *Genii: The Conjurers Magazine*, August 2004.

Winter, Robert, and Alexander Vertikoff. *Craftsman Style*. Harry N. Abrams Inc, 2004.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☒ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☒ Other
☐ Name of repository: Omaha Public Library

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: .2238

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

Datum if other than WGS84:

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 95.962569 W | Longitude: 42.241549 N |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☐ NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
|----------|----------|-----------|

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2. Zone: Easting: Northing:
3. Zone: Easting: Northing:
4. Zone: Easting: Northing:

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property.)

All of Lot 18 and 1/2 of Lot 17 of Block 2 of the Fieldcrest Addition

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

This includes all of the property historically associated with the House of Mystery

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Lexi Anderson & Shelley McCafferty
organization: City of Omaha
street & number: 1819 Farnam Street
city or town: Omaha state: NE zip code: 68183
e-mail: shelley.mccafferty@cityofomaha.org
telephone: 402-444-5150
date: August 6, 2025

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

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Maps: A USGS map or equivalent (7.5- or 15-minute series) indicating the property's location.

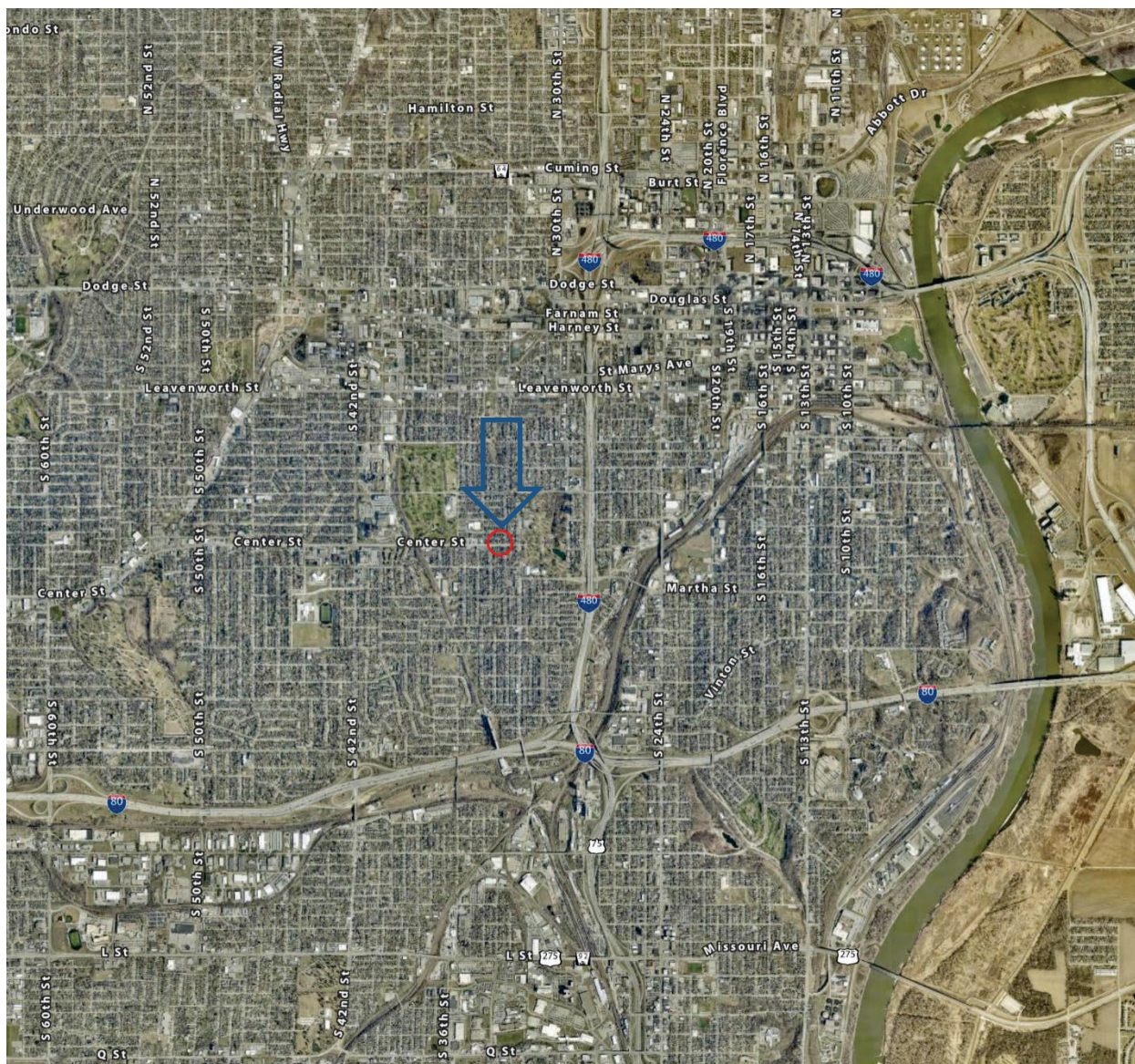


Figure 10: Partial map of Omaha with vicinity of House of Mystery indicated. Douglas-Omaha GIS, 2025.

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Figure 11: Map with House of Mystery indicated. Douglas-Omaha GIS, 2025.

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Figure 12: 1914 House of Mystery indicated. Baist, G.W., Baist, W.E. & Baist, H.V. (1918) *Baist's real estate atlas of surveys of Omaha, Nebraska*. Digital. Omaha Public Library. Omaha, NE.

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Figure 13: 1914 House of Mystery indicated. Sanborn Map Company. Insurance Maps of Omaha, Nebraska. New York: 1962 Volume 3. Digital. Omaha Planning Department. Omaha, NE.

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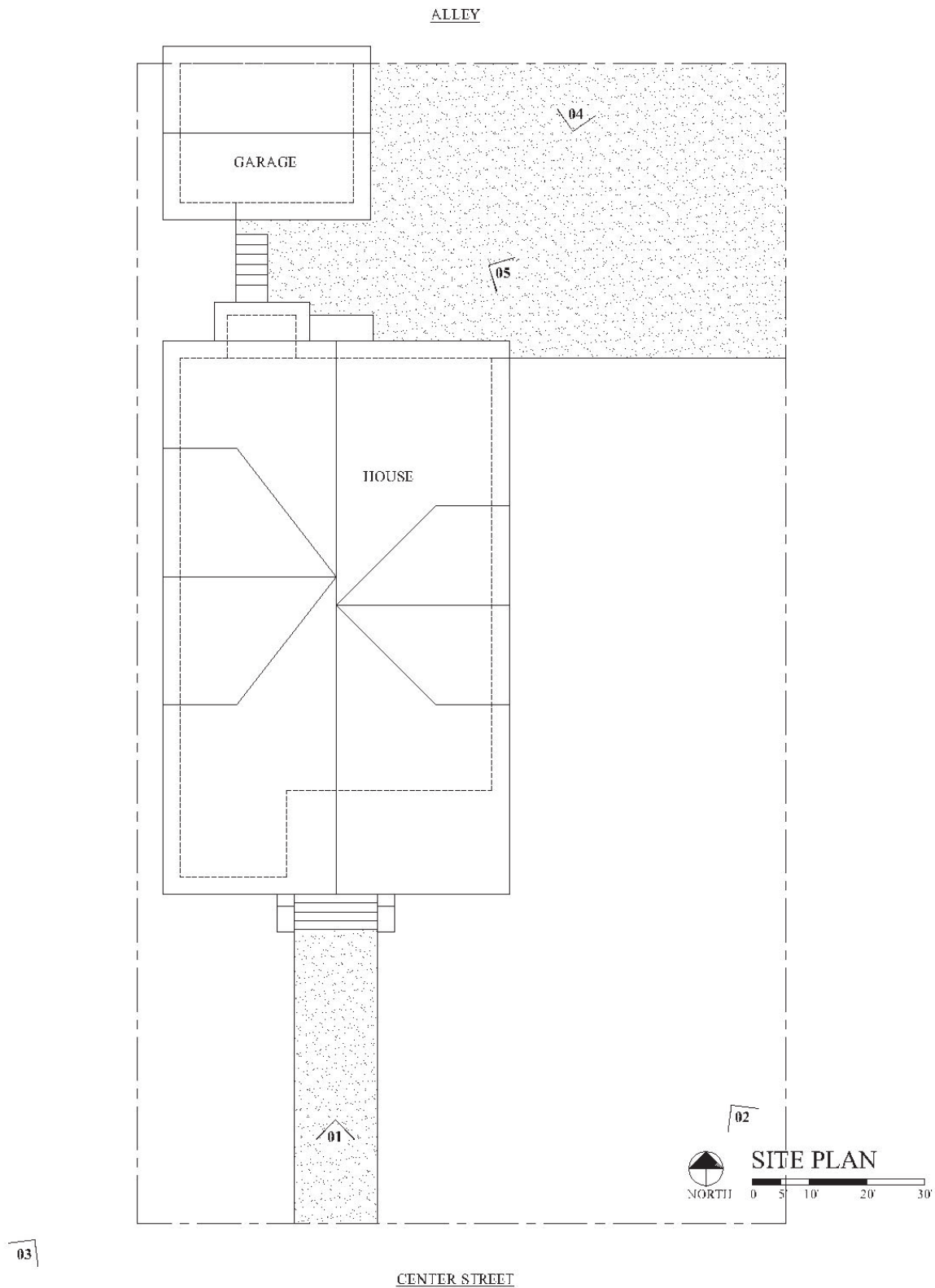


Figure 14: Sketch map of Site Plan of House of Mystery with photo key.

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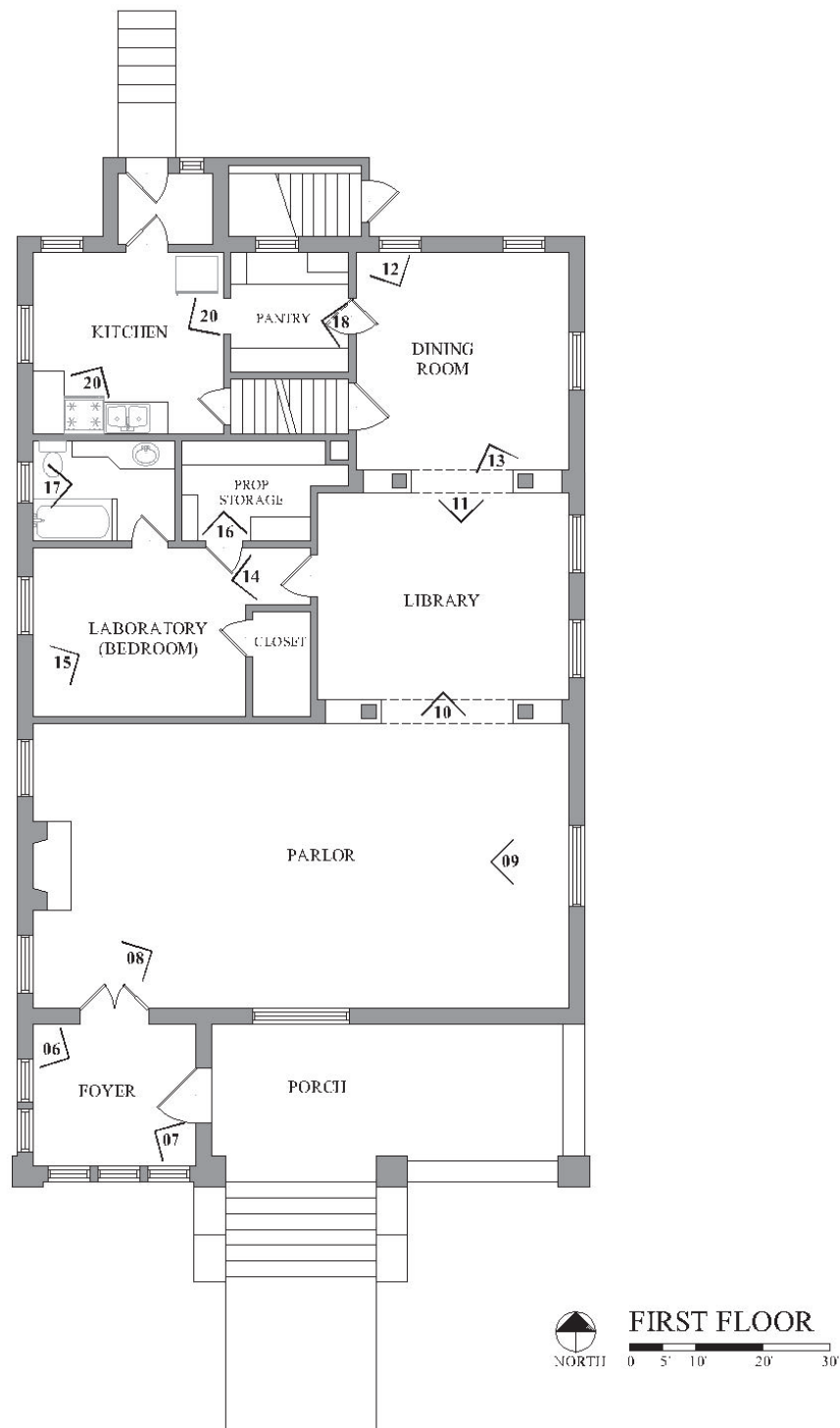


Figure 15: Sketch map of First Floor of House of Mystery with photo key.

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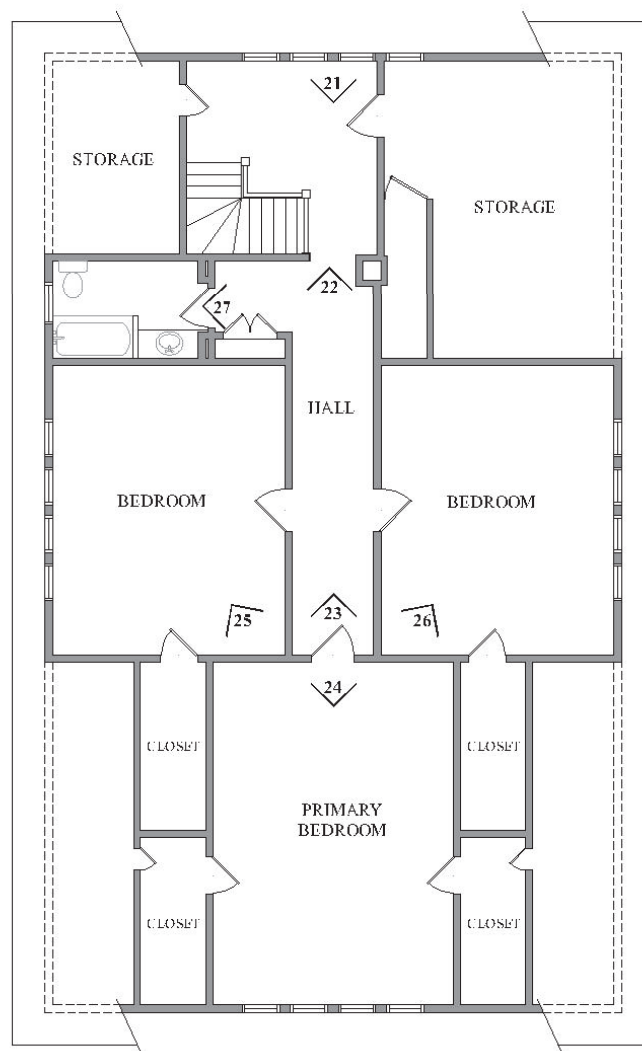


Figure 16: Sketch map of Second Floor of House of Mystery with photo key.

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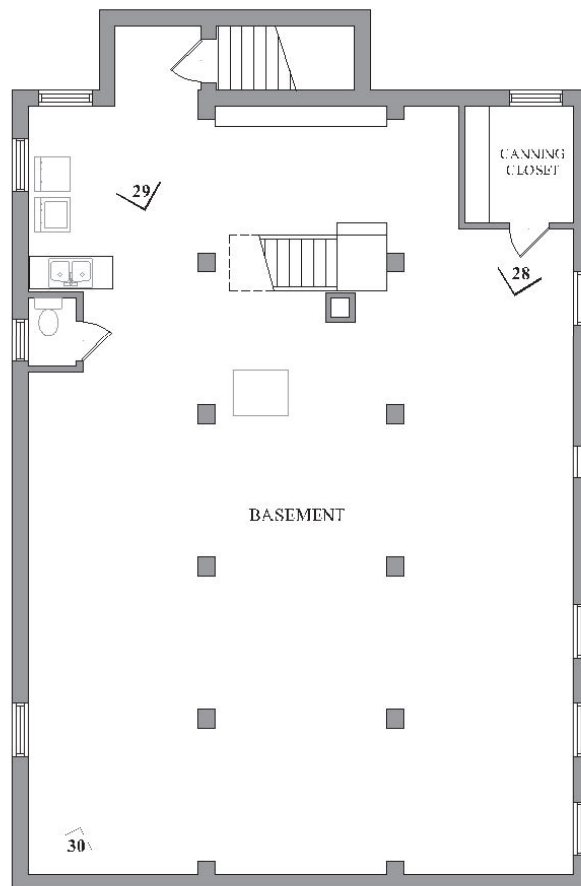


Figure 17: Sketch map of Basement of House of Mystery with photo key.

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Photo Log

Name of Property: House of Mystery

City or Vicinity: Omaha

County: Douglas State: NE

Photographer: Shelley McCafferty

Date Photographed: June 17 & July 31 2025

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

NE_House_of_Mystery_001	Photo of looking north at front of House
NE_House_of_Mystery_002	Photo looking northwest at side of House
NE_House_of_Mystery_003	Photo looking northeast at side of House
NE_House_of_Mystery_004	Photo looking south at rear of House
NE_House_of_Mystery_005	Photo looking northwest of Garage
NE_House_of_Mystery_006	Photo looking southeast at Foyer
NE_House_of_Mystery_007	Photo looking northwest at Foyer
NE_House_of_Mystery_008	Photo looking northeast at Parlor
NE_House_of_Mystery_009	Photo looking west at Parlor
NE_House_of_Mystery_010	Photo looking north at Library toward Dining Room
NE_House_of_Mystery_011	Photo looking north at Library towards Parlor
NE_House_of_Mystery_012	Photo looking southeast at Dining Room towards Library
NE_House_of_Mystery_013	Photo looking northwest at Dining Room
NE_House_of_Mystery_014	Photo looking northwest at Laboratory
NE_House_of_Mystery_015	Photo looking northeast at Laboratory
NE_House_of_Mystery_016	Photo looking north at Prop Storage
NE_House_of_Mystery_017	Photo looking east at Bathroom
NE_House_of_Mystery_018	Photo looking west at Pantry
NE_House_of_Mystery_019	Photo looking northwest at Kitchen
NE_House_of_Mystery_020	Photo looking northeast at Kitchen
NE_House_of_Mystery_021	Photo looking south at Hall
NE_House_of_Mystery_022	Photo looking north at Hall
NE_House_of_Mystery_023	Photo looking north at Hall
NE_House_of_Mystery_024	Photo looking south at Primary Bedroom
NE_House_of_Mystery_025	Photo looking northwest at West Bedroom
NE_House_of_Mystery_026	Photo looking northeast at East Bedroom
NE_House_of_Mystery_027	Photo looking west at Bathroom
NE_House_of_Mystery_028	Photo looking south at Basement

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NE_House_of_Mystery_029 Photo looking south at Basement

NE_House_of_Mystery_030 Photo looking north at Basement

Additional items:

(Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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Figure 01: Craftsman bungalow designed by Henry D. Frankfurt.

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Figure 07: Illustration of David P. Abbott demonstrating the "Floating Ball" trick.

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