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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

SEP 25 1989

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Hancock House; Alpha House

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 300 Sussex Street

not for publication

city, town Bluefield

vicinity

state West Virginia

code WV

county Mercer

code 055

zip code 24701

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

| Contributing | Noncontributing |
|--------------|------------------|
| <u>1</u> | _____ buildings |
| <u>2</u> | _____ sites |
| <u>3</u> | _____ structures |
| | _____ objects |
| | <u>0</u> Total |

Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register -0-

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official [Signature]

Date 9/15/89

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official _____

Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:) _____

Casper D. Shull

1-17-90

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Domestic -- Residence
Social -- Fraternal Meetings;
Multiple Dwelling

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Social -- Meeting Hall

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th and Early 20th Century American
Movements
American Four-Square

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone: sandstone (rockface)
walls wood: weatherboard
roof metal: standing seam
other interior walnut, fireplace tiles

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

No photographs or architectural renderings of the Hancock Mansion are known to have survived during the first 55 years (1907-1962) when the house was residence to C.B. Hancock and later to the Ramage family. Surely the architect/builder (M.H. Pettigo) drew detailed plans for the fine house he agreed to construct, but the preliminary though extensive search and inquiry has not produced any graphic representation of the early appearance of the residence. Mrs. Eugenia Hancock (cited in #9 Major Bibliographical References), talked by phone with the only surviving son of C.B. Hancock; he provided useful ancillary information: having been raised in the home he knew that on the property there was once a barn, 5-horse stable, 3-car garage and carriage house. Even the remnants of these are no longer extant, but the concrete basin, once a small fish pond, remains as does the cold storage bunker behind the mansion.

It is clear that the integrity of the exterior and interior of the building is unchanged and uncorrupted. The original foundation stone and siding are in generally excellent condition, as is the handsome porte cochere at the main side entrance.

The Alpha House is one of Bluefield's most significant examples of the American Four-Square, an early 20th-century house type identified by its square, or rectilinear, massing and expansive hipped roof. A large, frame structure, Alpha House exhibits many refinements and transitional qualities such as the front-facing triangular gable containing a Palladian window, and a massive, very deep porch encircling the house on the front and side elevations. The porches' high stone foundation, Ionic columns, wooden balustrade, and stone column pedestals are very important Classical features. Together with the porte cochere, they provide the house with its dominant exterior character. Another style element, the Colonial Revival, is identified in the high, interior red brick chimney stacks which are embellished with vertical recessed panels and prominent caps.

The walls in each of the fourteen (14) rooms are of imported European plaster; much of the immaculate walnut interior doors and facings/fireplace mantels were likewise imported from Europe. All flooring is oak of unknown origin. The only interior pine is in the kitchen doors and kitchen shelving. The grand entrance is flanked by two large windows, each with an upper section of original, leaded stained glass. Ten-foot walnut sliding, paneled doors lead from both the entrance hall (and a room that was likely the family dining room) to the formal living room.

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There are eight (8) working fireplaces throughout the house. Each is distinctively faced with Italian tile of a different color. All tiles are in original condition.

The park-like grounds of Alpha Phi Alpha are no longer in pristine condition, but can be (and will be) restored. Several large trees and some smaller ones were damaged by storms, and have been cut down. Most trees and shrubs remain healthy and handsome as in past years.

Today there is a crack in three (3) interior walls, and some ceiling damage in two upstairs bedrooms. The cracks are likely because of age or settling of the home; the ceiling damage is the result of a roof leak, since repaired.

During the years of non use there was some minor window breaking by vandals: all lower level windows are now plywood covered to discourage other such damage. Illegal entry was once gained through a broken window, and several pieces of furniture (some antique) were removed from the building. No further entry has been gained during the past year.

Finally, there may be a need to re-survey the property because: 1) there is a discrepancy in the exact acreage cited here (14.54) and at the time of dedication (16), both different from the original (25-acre) reference in the Mercer County Historical Society publication; and 2) some of the more senior members of the fraternity believe a "squatter" may have appropriated a marginal plot on which another house now stands.

The building has a full, brick-walled basement. A gas-fired hot water (radiator) system was installed some time prior to 1962; it adequately heats the entire building. The electrical wiring is essentially original, (even to the push button wall switches and overhead fixtures), but a larger, more functional breaker box, some wiring and a few toggle switches have been added by the current owners. Strategically positioned flood lighting is on the exterior perimeter.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Ethnic Heritage: Black
Architecture
Commerce

Period of Significance

1907-1972

Significant Dates

1907; 1962

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

Charles Benjamin Hancock

Architect/Builder

M.H. Pettigo

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Hancock House-Alpha House is significant because it represents one of the finest architectural expressions in the Bluefield area of the American Four-Square style. It is equally significant for its direct association with Charles Benjamin Hancock, a wealthy businessman and developer of the region, who in 1907 commissioned the mansion. Hancock House-Alpha House moreover has achieved significance within the past 50 years because of the exceptionally important role it has played in the ethnic heritage and civic causes of black Americans in southern West Virginia.

From the 1907 date of its construction, this eight-bedroom, eight-fireplace fourteen-room mansion was used by Charles Benjamin Hancock and his wife, Ora, as home for themselves and their ten (10) children. Hancock (1868-1943) was a millionaire industrialist at this time, and his home on the then 25-acre site was one of the most impressive homes in the young (1889) city.

Charles Hancock was one of the commercial and industrial pioneers and came to Mercer County during the 1890's. Self-educated principally by daily readings of the New York Times, he amassed a fortune by developing Bluefield Hardware Company, the region's largest wholesale hardware and mine supply outlet. Later he organized the Bluefield Furniture Company, between the world wars one of the South's larger, more prosperous wholesale furniture concerns. He also "owned substantial interests in Kingsport Hardware, Tennessee, and in several coal properties." (Mercer County History). For twenty-five years he was a stockbroker. The businesses he founded are still successfully operating.

After C.B. Hancock died during the WW II years, with one son killed in the service and the other children grown and away with their own families, Mrs. Hancock sold the home to a Mr. & Mrs. Del Ramage who resided in it until it was again sold to its present owners, the Alpha Phi Alpha Foundation, Bluefield, WV.

The northside of the city, during the earliest days of the Hancock and Ramage residences, was the fashionable area of white home owners and their black, domestic workers. During and after World War II, with the expansion of the coal mining and railroading industries, black residents increasingly moved into the area--and that neighborhood is now predominantly black.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Mercer County History, Mercer County Historical Soc., Inc., 1985, p.265.
Mercer County Deed Book, 65, p.122.
Mercer County Deed Book, 69, p.44.
Sphinx (Official Journal of AOA, Inc.,) 12/63, pp.28, back pages, back cover

Interviews, Mrs. Eugenia Hancock (widow of original owner's son).
2515 Cliffmont
Bluefield, WV 24701

See continuation sheet

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 # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University College
 Other

Specify repository:

Craft (Bluefield) Library; AOA
Chapter files, scrapbook

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 14.54 acres

UTM References

A 17 480590 4125380
Zone Easting Northing
C 17 480340 4125180

B 17 480580 4125180
Zone Easting Northing
D 17 480340 4125390

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Registration proposed for 14.54-acre plot of land w/mansion identified as "Lots 15, 17, 18, & pt.lot 19, Sec. 65; a 14+Ac tract N. of said lots, and a 2' wide alley N. of lots 15-19, incl. sect. 65 & a 15' wide alley off W. side of lot 15, sect. 65." Tract is directly North of old Hancock School (now privately owned and in other use). The site is further described on the deed to the property:

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

In the above Description is verbatim from the Deed of Trust, Mercer County, Trust Deed Book 381, page 288.

Verbatim from official "Map showing property of Housing Corporation (Alpha Zeta Lambda Chapter, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity)...Scale 1"-60' May 28, 1962, Elmer C. Barton, Reg. Prof. Eng." The boundary thus includes the parcel that has historically been associated with Hancock-Alpha House.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Marvin W. Rogers, Ed.D., President
organization Alpha Zeta Lambda Chapter, AOA Fraternity, Inc date April 6, 1989
street & number 417 N. Powell telephone _____
city or town Bluefield state WV zip code 24701

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The home sits on a high but level elevation and is now as then in prominent view from across the railroad tracks as far away as the city's major east-west artery, Bluefield Avenue (see photo). Finally, it might be noted, that the sandstone blocks in the city's only Catholic Church, were quarried from the Hancock acreage where now sits the building which is the focus of this petition.

After purchase by Alpha Phi Alpha (1962), the function changed from family residence to that of multipurpose fraternity/social/cultural use. Its open house dedication, Sunday, September 29, 1963 was a splendid, gala event attended by hundreds from throughout the area and the United States. For a period, some bedrooms were used by undergraduate AOA fraternity brothers matriculating at Bluefield State College (1895) one of the state's two historically black colleges. The downstairs entertainment rooms and spacious, well-kept grounds were scenes of balls, parties, community group meetings, and picnics.

The history of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity goes back to December 4, 1906. It was founded at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York and spread throughout America to Germany, and to the British West Indies. There are many undergraduate and graduate chapters on college campuses throughout the country.

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity has traditionally promoted understanding, peace at home and abroad, and full participation of all men in the spiritual development of mankind. The fraternity's programs include the teaching and guidance of youth, fellowship, wholesome recreation, and community service. With these purposes in mind, Alpha Zeta Lambda Chapter members of Bluefield acquired the Hancock House as the center for its regional activities. Prominent U.S. members of the fraternity through the years include famous names such as Hubert Humphrey, Thurgood Marshall, Edward Brooke, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Duke Ellington. Duke Ellington, on December 12, 1966, appeared in concert in Bluefield; and later performed privately at the Alpha House where he was initiated into Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc.

Alpha House at Bluefield, at the time of its purchase, became the largest black-owned structure in the region. As a cultural mecca, Alpha House accommodated numerous fraternity members from across the United States who were participating in social events and programs at Bluefield State College and in southern West Virginia. Alpha House thus acquired considerable importance as the leading privately owned center providing exceptional service to the region's black community.

Today, even after recent years of minimal use and function, the original integrity of the building stands proud and strong, lovingly cared for and preserved by the local chapter's membership and housing foundation. All the bedrooms are furnished as though in use, and the lower social areas and furniture invite preservation and accommodation.

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No biographical data are yet available on the architect/builder, M.H. Pettigo, other than that he was an Italian-American who brought high art and skill to the area where he helped or built several other homes.

Alpha House is an exceptional example of the traditional American Four-Square, a popular early 20th-century house style that furnished opportunities to builders and architects to experiment with variations of traditional exterior ornament. These cubic houses provided a maximum of space, centrally accessed by 2-run stairs, beneath a high hipped roof that often supplemented the house's useable space at the attic level. Classical and Colonial elements accent this example, with a broad, columned porch, and high, paneled chimneys. Enhancing the building's character is the site location which is open and visible high above the city.

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The period of significance for the Hancock-Alpha House encompasses much of the twentieth century. The building, commissioned in 1907 by Charles Benjamin Hancock, a wealthy white businessman, possesses significance because of Hancock's association with important local commercial ventures. Another distinctive factor in the period of the house's significance relates to its purchase in 1962 by a black fraternal group, an event of exceptional local and state importance in a period of American history dominated by the struggle of blacks to achieve full social integration, equal opportunities, and civil rights.

The period of significance ends approximately in 1972, although the fraternity remains active. The ten-year period following purchase of the Hancock House in 1962 may be viewed as a transitional period in which the local cultural and social milieu paralleled national civil rights and black pride movements. Alpha Phi Alpha's mission, which is to promote peace, understanding, and participation of all men in the spiritual development of mankind, complemented the efforts of blacks in the Bluefield community in 1962-63 and the decade after, to achieve full social integration. Importantly the facility during this period served many community cultural purposes involving black and white participation. The building thus provided opportunities for the integration of local civic and city groups. For many blacks moreover the building is "important to the community's memory."

The predominant number of social organizations for blacks in Bluefield during the period of significance, 1907-72, centered about Bluefield State College, one of two of West Virginia's traditionally black colleges. While quarters for several other fraternities were located within or adjacent to the college campus, Alpha House was located a considerable distance from the campus. It is the college's oldest black Greek letter organization and became the first, and remains one of the few, black-owned fraternity houses in West Virginia. The building's imposing character and off campus location served to distinguish the fraternity's presence in the community.

Because the fraternity's national membership during the 1960s included many famous names, such as Martin Luther King, Edward Brooke, Duke Ellington, Hubert Humphrey, Adam Clayton Powell, W.E.B. Dubois, and Andrew Young, the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity at Bluefield retained during the period of significance a prestigious status. Of particular note is Sphinx, the official national organ of Alpha Phi Alpha, Inc., which was published at Bluefield, WV, between 1962 and 1965; its address was the Alpha House, 300 Sussex Street. Editor in chief of Sphinx was Rev. C. Anderson Davis, president of the West Virginia NAACP. In 1963 Davis and the state NAACP took the lead in organizing the centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation in West Virginia. Rev. Davis served as the committee's chairman.

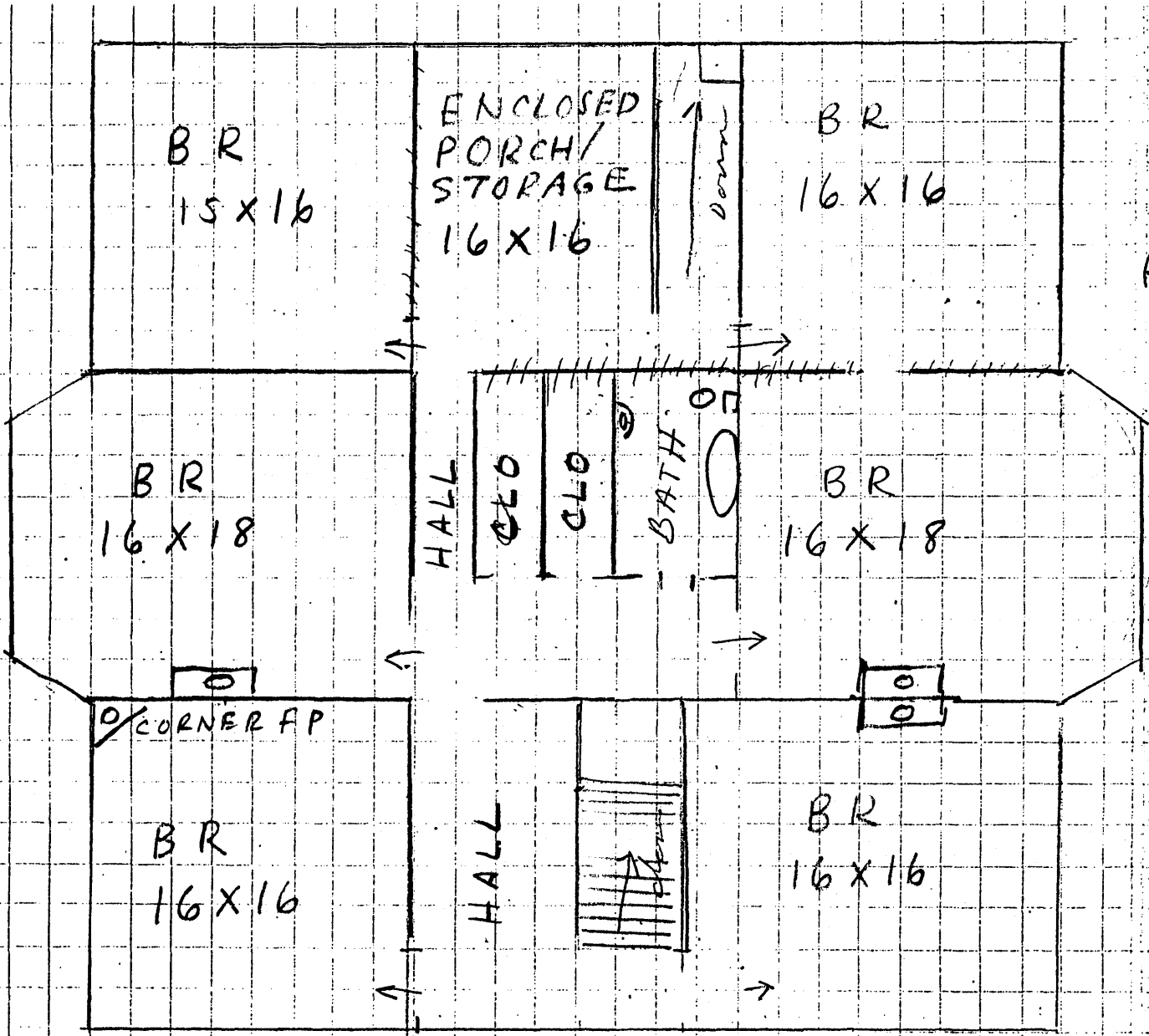
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"BEGINNING at the point of intersection of the eastern line of Sussex Street with the northern line of Hanover Street; thence along and with the eastern and northern line of Sussex Street with a curve to the left, radius 85 feet, a distance of 206.1 feet (former deed recites a distance of 205.7 feet) said distance being measured along the arc of said curve and to the point of tangent of said curve; thence continuing along and with the northern line of said Sussex Street, S. 26° 51' W. 54.0 feet to an angle in said Sussex Street; thence continuing along and with the northern line of Sussex Street, N. 79° 49' W. 197.0 feet to the point of intersection of the northern line of said Sussex Street with the eastern line of a 15 feet wide alley; thence along and with the eastern line of said 15 feet wide alley, N. 10° 11' E. passing the dead end of a 15 feet wide alley at a distance of 130 feet, a total distance of 145.0 feet to a point in the northern line of said mentioned 15 feet wide alley; thence along and with the northern line of said alley, N. 79° 49' W. 57.5 feet to an angle in said alley; thence continuing along and with the eastern line of said alley N. 42° 29' W. 651.3 feet to a point on the top of Stony Ridge; thence along and with the top of Stony Ridge the following 5 bearings and distances: N. 70° 00' E. 247.4 feet to a point; thence N. 53° 00' E. 198.0 feet to a point; thence N. 51° 00' E. 132.0 feet to a point: thence N. 88° 17' E. 130.1 feet to a point and thence N. 63° 00' E. 256.0 feet to a point; thence leaving said top of Stony Ridge and on a line of the extension of the western line of Madison Street, S. 23° 25' E. 781.0 feet to a point in the northern line of a 20 feet wide alley, said point being in the western line (extended) of Madison Street: thence along and with the northern line of said 20 feet wide alley, S. 66° 35' W. 280.0 feet to a point; thence crossing said 20 feet wide alley, S. 23° 25' E. 20.0 feet to a point in the southern line of said alley and at the northwest corner of Lot 22, Section 65; thence along and with the southern line of said alley, S. 66° 35' W. 80.0 feet to an angle in said alley; thence continuing along and with the southern line of said alley, S. 76° 18' W. 32.46 feet to a point and being the northwest corner of Lot 20-A, Section 65, as recently established: thence along and with the western line of said Lot 20-A, S. 23° 25' E. 145.47 feet to a point in the northern line of Hanover Street at the southwest corner of said Lot 20-A; thence along and with the northern line of Hanover Street, S. 66° 35' W. 20.4 feet to the point of BEGINNING, and containing 15.09 acres, and being the same property which was conveyed to Housing Foundation, Alpha Zeta Lambda Chapter, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity."¹

The historical context of the property is first noted: "The above parcel of land [Hancock site] is a part of the 24.3 acres and 101 perches tract which was deeded from John C. Higginbotham et.als. to Joseph I. Doran on July 20, 1887. The above tract of land was subdivided into lots shown on a map entitled 'Map of Bluefield, Mercer County, West Va., Scale 1" = 200', July 3, 1891, W. L. Marshall, Engineer."²



N
↑

HANCOCK-ALPHA
HOUSE
BLUETFIELD, W.VA.

FLOOR 2

2nd Floor

