



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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. Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).

1. Name of Property

historic name Wright Opera House Block Complex

other names/site number Alma Opera House Block

2. Location

street & number 101-113 East Superior Street and 408 North State Street

<input type="checkbox"/>	not for publication
<input type="checkbox"/>	vicinity

city or town Alma

state Michigan code MI county Gratiot code _____ zip code 48801

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this x 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 x meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national / x statewide / x local

Brian D. Muey 2/22/13
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Michigan State Historic Preservation Officer
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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 not eligible for the National Register
- other (explain: _____)
- determined eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register

Patricia Andrews 6/26/2013
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- private
- public - Local
- public - State
- public - Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box.)

- building(s)
- 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	0	Total

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE/department store, specialty store

SOCIAL/meeting hall

RECREATION & CULTURE/auditorium

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Vacant

COMMERCE/art gallery

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: Stone, concrete

walls: Brick

roof: Synthetics

other: _____

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Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

The Wright Opera House Block Complex is comprised of the Wright Opera House Block and its adjoining Lancashire Building addition, and an associated boiler house/store building. Built in 1880 for an important Michigan lumberman, Ammi W. Wright, the Wright Opera House Block was one of the first major brick building constructions in Alma and sited on the most prominent corner in town. It is a massive, three-story, cream-brick, Italianate commercial structure with five retail bays and highly decorative brick window hoods and cornice. An opera house, later renovated to serve as the Masonic Temple, occupies the two upper stories at one end of the building. A fire caused major damage to the opera house part of the building in 2010. The 1899 Lancashire Building, a two-story two-storefront long building historically viewed as an addition to the Wright Opera House Block because of the single ownership and internal connection, stands next door to the east of the 1880 section. A one-story, brick building that originally served partly as a boiler house is located behind the Opera House Block directly to the north facing the side street, State Street.

Narrative Description

Wright Opera House Block

Exterior

The Opera House Block is the central, primary feature of this complex of historically and physically linked buildings. It is a three-story, cream brick Italianate commercial building constructed in 1880. It has five retail bays across the south-facing front and is a huge building for Alma even by today's standards, as its dimensions are approximately 110 feet in length on Superior and 85 feet in depth along the State Street facade.

The exterior is divided into sections by slightly raised piers and capped by an elaborate brick cornice. The opera house space at the southwest corner is two stories high and can be delineated on the exterior from the larger windows at that space capped by oval windows. An arched area at the roofline over the corner opera space highlights the corner of Superior and State and there is also a smaller, slightly raised cornice arch over the upstairs entrance in the middle of the façade facing Superior. A round opening under the cornice at the corner facing Superior once housed a clock.

The upper-story windows were originally of wood, one-over-one, double-hung design. Most are boarded up or missing now due to deterioration and a fire in the former opera house space. The opera house space in the second and third stories at the southwest corner included massive windows and above them oval accent windows; today the openings exist, but much of the operable window portions are gone or damaged. The arched opera house window hoods are of raised brick with a prominent keystone detail. The windows in the office and residential spaces of the second and third floors have low segmental-arch and round-arch heads, respectively. The sills are simple limestone slabs at the second story of the non-opera spaces and everywhere else a limestone sill and underneath a dentil pattern created of cream bricks.

The rear of the Opera House Block facing the alley to the north is much more utilitarian in feel. It is also of cream brick, but with none of the elaborate detailing at the cornice or windows. The windows were originally double-hung wood, but are missing or boarded up today. Double wooden door openings exist at the second and third stories, but some are reduced in size and all are boarded up. Metal fire escapes from the early twentieth century are still in place but in poor condition. The second and third-floor office and residential spaces east of the opera house area retain clearly demarcated stories and smaller scale windows.

Overall the exterior brick is in good condition and the decorative cornice and window sill and hood elements appear intact. Although the operable windows are in extremely poor to missing condition, they will be recreated to closely resemble the original. The storefronts have been altered over the years, but with the rehabilitation will be returned to closer to the appearance and proportion of the original storefronts.

Interior

The first floor is comprised of five retail spaces that have been altered and used in various configurations over the life of the building. The main entrance to the upper floors is located near the center of the long Superior Street façade and there is a secondary entrance along State Street at the back end of the west façade. The historic stairways remain in place and

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will be restored and used at least in part in the rehabilitation. The storefront piers and proportions remain intact today and will be maintained in the rehabilitation. The first floor spaces today include a former café at the southwest corner, and at the east end an art gallery exists with dropped acoustical tile ceilings and drywall walls.

Except for the fire-damaged opera house, the upper floor interiors retain a high degree of historic fabric including wood window trim, baseboards, wood floors, and plastered walls. The condition is surprisingly good for the many decades' lack of use – wood floors have buckled here and there, but the window trim remains and much of the interior wood finish. All the window sashes will likely need replacement, but most historic window trim is in good condition and will be retained and restored.

The interior layout on the upper floors is mainly intact in its historic configuration. The opera house, later used as the city's Masonic Temple, occupied the two upper stories in the western two-fifths of the building. A fire in 2010 resulted in the collapse of the floor into the former café space below and damage to the halls, walls and ceiling, though the ceiling and roof remain in place. The opera house space reportedly could seat 600 people and at one time it had a simple wooden stage and open seating area. The ceiling had some painted panel detail with a center medallion and presumably a chandelier. The opera space will be reconstructed and used as a commons area for the building's Alma College residents and remain a large open area. The ceiling will be recreated in close to its original design with a large chandelier or light fixture in its center.

The historic stairs will be retained from both State and Superior Streets with some alterations as required for fire safety building codes. Historic baseboards, window trim, and wainscot remains in many areas and will be retained and restored in the rehabilitation.

Lancashire Building

The Lancashire Building is a two-story, brick addition directly abutting the Wright Opera House Block on the east along Superior Street. Built for Ammi Wright's son-in-law, Henry Lancashire, in 1899, it initially housed a hardware store on the main floor. Most recently the building housed a jewelry store, insurance offices, an electronic store and a clothing store in its main retail bays. The upper floor had small office spaces and contained in part a barber and a dentist in the building's early years. In the 1950s the opening of Church's Jewelry Store on the first floor of the Lancashire caused a sensation in Alma. A photo of the opening shows shoppers lined up around the block to see the store.

At the time of construction the Lancashire Building section of the block had a two-story, brick exterior with two retail bays divided symmetrically by a central second-story entry leading to a staircase. At the second floor were three pairs of double-hung, wood rectangular windows, each set into a shallow brick recess in the façade. At the roofline was a pressed-metal cornice. The added section of the block abutted and connected via a second-story hallway to the original Opera House Block to its west and faced an alley to the east. To the north is another alley. The interior first floor had pressed-metal ceilings, wood floors, and plaster walls.

Today's main façade retains the old massing and footprint, but the present front dates from a reconstruction in 2005. The two storefront bays are in the original configuration flanking the original center entry and staircase to the upper floor. The interior has been substantially altered in the mid-twentieth century and shows mostly 1950s finishes as it housed Church's Jewelry from the 1950s until the 2000s. Portions of the pressed-metal ceiling exist above dropped ceilings in various conditions from ruinous to fair.

The Lancashire Building will be part of the rehabilitation project for the Wright Opera House Block and, as part of the project the front façade will be reconstructed to closer to its original appearance based upon historic exterior photos.

Boiler House

A small one-story brick building that in part served as a boiler house for the Wright Opera House Complex faces west on State Street directly to the rear and across an alley from the Opera House and Lancashire buildings. There is reference to a "steam plant" in a newspaper notice of 1900 and the footprint of the boiler house shows up on the 1902 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map – the 1902 Sanborn shows only the rear portion of the present building well back from State Street. By 1924 a front section was added that housed a local gas company office.

Today the secondary and rear facades to the north, south, and east have bricked-in segmental arch windows and the main façade has been sheathed with a c. 1970s white brick storefront, with a triangular awning. Originally (as evidenced from a

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portion of the building visible in a historic photo) it was a simple, typical early twentieth-century one-story design with rectangular footprint and flat roof with a simple square brick parapet. The large storefront windows were capped with rectangular transoms. The storefront also had canvas awnings.

Alterations occurred over the years to the main façade including the 1970s brick main façade and closed-in segmental arch windows on the sides. In the latter half of the twentieth century tenants included a dentist, an optometrist, and most recently a tanning bed salon. Today, the interior of the boiler house includes some intact pressed-metal ceilings, new interior drywall walls, and carpet.

The building will form part of the rehabilitation of the Wright Opera House Block Complex. It is planned that the exterior will be returned to close to its original brick appearance. The rehabilitation will also include reconstruction of a simple brick arch that once spanned the alley between the boiler building and the Opera House Block. Historic interior elements will be retained if possible.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation of the entire Wright Opera House Block Complex began during 2012. The entire complex will be rehabilitated to serve mixed uses, including commercial at the street level and rental housing upstairs in the entire Opera House Block, including the Lancashire Building. The former opera house space will serve as a commons area for residents. The developer has been working with Alma College, which has been seeking a greater presence in Alma's downtown, and the upper floors will likely serve Alma College students. The former Boiler Building will house a commercial or office use. The plan is for work on the Opera House Block to be completed in time for residential occupancy in September 2013. The exterior work will include historically appropriate storefronts and windows in the Opera House Block, and restoration of the original façades of the Lancashire and Boiler Buildings.

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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.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- 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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- Architecture
- Commerce
- Social History
- Entertainment/Recreation

Period of Significance

1879 -1961

Significant Dates

- 1879 Beginning of Construction
- 1880 Completion of Opera House Block
- 1894 and 1897 Remodeling of the Opera House
- 1899 Lancashire Building Section Built
- 1919 beginning of Masonic Temple Use
- 1961 Masonic Temple Use Ends

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Ammi Willard Wright

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

George S. Young
George S. Young Construction Company

Criteria Considerations

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

Property is:

- 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.

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Period of Significance (justification)

Beginning of construction of Opera House Block, oldest part of the complex, to 1962, the fifty-year cutoff for significance under the criteria, the building continuing to house significant commercial uses long after that time.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

The Wright Opera House Block Complex meets National Register criterion A under Commerce as one of Alma's largest commercial buildings from the Opera House Block's completion in 1880 down to recent years. Built to contain five store spaces along Superior, the city's main street, and expanded in 1899 with the Lancashire Building, containing two more store spaces, the combined and interconnected building, entirely under the ownership of Dr. J. H. Lancashire by 1900, functioned as the city's largest commercial block. The building also meets criterion A under Entertainment/Recreation and Social History for containing a two-story "opera house" that served as a major public gathering place in Alma from 1880 into the early twentieth century and then, renovated, served as the city's Masonic Temple from 1919 until 1961. The complex meets criterion B for its direct associations with Ammi W. Wright, the city's leading businessman and citizen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who financed the Opera House Block's 1879-80 construction and had his office and store there in the building's early days. The 1880 original section of the Opera House Block is also significant under criterion C, Architecture, as Alma's first large brick commercial block and as the city's key Italianate commercial building both for its size and elaborate brick detailing.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least one paragraph for each area of significance.)

Alma, Michigan, History

In the years before the lower peninsula of Michigan was inhabited by white settlers, the land was wooded and inhabited periodically by the semi-nomadic Ojibwa tribe. In 1853 four white land and lumber prospectors led by Ralph Ely came to the Alma area using a wagon trail from Ionia to Hubbardston and then forging their own trail. They immediately built the first building (now gone) in Alma – a twelve by fourteen foot cabin – located just west of what is now State Street.

Ely came to Michigan, as so many other early settlers did, from New York state. Before coming to Alma he traveled the states of the then West and settled in Indiana where he married Mary Halstead. In 1846 they came to Michigan and lived in Ionia County before moving on to Alma to take advantage of the cheap land prices offered by the federal government of fifty cents per acre for what was considered marginal land in Gratiot County. By 1856 there were several other families and log houses built, and Ely's brothers came with their four families to settle in the area. Ely constructed a grist mill in 1857 and eventually a general store – both became critical elements of pioneer town life. Ralph Ely became the first postmaster in 1857 and the post office was conducted in his general store.

After a plank road connecting Alma to St. Louis and Saginaw was built in the 1860s, Alma relied upon lumbering and farming for its economic support. Alma was incorporated as a village in January 1872. Prior to this time, nearby St. Louis, Michigan was the major community of Gratiot County. St. Louis acquired a reputation – and prosperity – as a spa because of its magnetic mineral spring waters.

In 1875 Alma obtained its first railroad connection through the ambitiously named Chicago, Saginaw & Canada Railroad. Soon afterwards, in the late 1870s successful Saginaw lumberman Ammi Willard Wright first entered into business in Alma. Wright was familiar with the region from his days as a lumber speculator. He moved to Alma sometime around 1885.

Ammi Willard Wright

Born in 1822, Ammi Willard Wright was the seventh of ten children born to Nathan and Mary Wright of Vermont. As a young man in Vermont he worked on a farm and in the draying business and managed a hotel. He married Harriet Barton

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in 1848 and moved to Boston to manage another hotel. During their time in Boston the Wrights' first child, Ammi Barton Wright, was born in 1849.

Wright had already shown an enterprising spirit by switching positions and moving frequently in his young life. News from his brother William and two sisters who lived in Detroit inspired A. W. Wright to move to Michigan in 1850. When they arrived in Detroit, his business partnership plans were dashed when his partner died; Wright was forced to make alternative plans for his livelihood. He with his family moved to the Saginaw Valley to engage in lumbering. The Saginaw Valley was home to more than three million acres of fine timber and had rivers that could transport the logs to sawmills. In the early 1850s the industry was in its infancy there, but within a few years the Saginaw Valley with its sawmill cities of Saginaw and Bay City became a leading producer of lumber and wood products in Michigan.

Wright established a farm and lumbering operations in Saginaw. He weathered the economic downturn of 1857, and in 1859 joined with two partners, Harry Miller and Valorous A. Paine, to purchase Saginaw's "Big Mill" from receivership. This allowed Wright to mill his own lumber, increasing his profit. The mill burned in 1865, but Wright rebuilt it with the help of his younger brother, William Hale Wright. Wright soon added a planing mill to the operation. In subsequent years Wright, working with a variety of partners over the years, engaged in lumbering and sawmill operations in Otsego, Roscommon, Gladwin, and Clare counties, along with Saginaw. In addition to lumbering and saw and planing mills (and related salt block) operations, Wright prospered by selling off his lumbered-over lands to new settlers and invested in the construction of plank roads and railroads in the region. In 1871 he and others formed the First National Bank in Saginaw and also the Saginaw Barrel Company. Wright on his own or with various partners also owned several large general stores in Saginaw.

As a wife of a prominent lumberman, Harriet Wright was establishing herself as a social force in Saginaw and managing their home. By 1868 the Wrights had given birth to five children – Ammi Barton, Sarah Caroline, Arthur Paine, Sarah Hale, and George Nathan – but tragically Sarah Caroline and Arthur Paine died as toddlers and Ammi Barton died from typhoid fever at age twenty-one in 1870.

In 1879 Harriet Wright's health began to fail, and finding no improvement from local doctors the Wrights moved to Saratoga Springs, New York, so that she could take advantage of the famous "medicinal" spring water baths. Wright commuted for long periods between Michigan and New York. He opened a lumberyard in Saratoga Springs. In 1884 Harriet Wright died leaving her husband Ammi, fifteen-year old George, and newly married Sarah without a wife and mother.

Ammi Wright married the family seamstress, Anna Case, in 1885 and around that same period moved full-time to Alma. His lumbering and sawmill interests, culminating in his A. W. Wright Lumber Co., established in 1882, proved highly successful and made him a very wealthy man by this time. He used his lumber-industry-acquired wealth to become a large investor in a broad range of commercial, industrial, and banking enterprises and railroads in the region and beyond. These included banks in Detroit and New York, timber and mining properties in Minnesota (eventually sold to James J. Hill and his associates), and timber and ranch lands in the South. Wright's business investments in Alma began before his move there but expanded dramatically in the years following the move. In addition to the store and the 1879-80 Wright Opera House Block (see below), A. W. Wright owned or was the prime mover behind the following Alma enterprises: Alma Roller Mills, 1881; Wright House hotel, 1883; First State Bank of Alma, 1883; Alma Springs Sanitarium, 1885; Alma Sugar Co. beet sugar plant, 1899; Alma Manufacturing Co. gasoline engine plant (in 1911 it began building trucks), 1903; and Central Michigan Produce Co. (dairy products, poultry, and eggs), 1905. He was also interested in developing the region's agricultural potential, and in the region around Alma established a reported dozen to twenty large farms that, serving to showcase up-to-date farming methods, were eventually sold off as highly successful investments.

During his lifetime until his death in 1912 his involvement and money touched virtually every aspect of life in Alma and he was known throughout Michigan. In his later years, in addition to his many investments that helped develop the city, Wright also made a number of gifts for church and school buildings and a park. In 1901 he donated Wright Hall, a women's dormitory, to Alma College, and in 1910 he donated the former, by now closed Alma Sanitarium building to serve as the Michigan Masonic Home after the former home in Grand Rapids burned. Wright died of a stroke at the age of eighty-nine in 1912. All businesses of Alma closed the day of his funeral and the Alma College students marched to the Wright home to pay final respects. Wright's estate was worth approximately ten million dollars at the time of his death.

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Wright Opera House Block

In 1875 Wright and his mercantile business partner James Dawson opened a branch of their Saginaw general store in Alma at the Hulbert House, a hotel on East Superior Street. A fire destroyed the building in 1876 and the store was relocated to another temporary site (eventually the store operated diagonally across the street from the site of the soon-to-be-built Opera House Block, but it may have moved once prior to that). In 1876 Wright and Dawson purchased a large lot at the northeast corner of State and Superior Streets where they proposed to build a large building. Ground was broken in July of 1876 for the new store, and it was reported in the *Gratiot Journal* that some of the material from the cellar excavation was used for Alma's new dam on the Pine River. In December 1, 1876 the *Gratiot Journal* reported that as soon as weather permitted in the spring, Wright & Dawson would commence work on their new store and push it to rapid completion. Yet again in February of 1877 it was reported that the partners would put up a brick store in the spring, and by March the paper indicated, "a large amount of stone is being drawn upon the ground for Wright & Dawson's new store." Despite these reports, no building took place for several years.

The delays may have resulted from several partnership changes over the next few years. On March 23, 1877 the paper reported that the partnership with Dawson was dissolved and Dawson would move to the South for his health. At this time E. F. Quinn of Alma, E. W. Morey of East Saginaw, and A. W. Wright formed a partnership under the Quinn & Morey name for the general store in Alma. Quinn managed the store with Wright and Morey as investors. The partnership continued until August of 1880 when Quinn and Morey sold out to Wright.

Wright soon brought his brother-in-law, George D. Barton, from Vermont into the store business in April of 1879. In August of that year, Wright came to inspect the business and decided to continue and expand his business interests in Alma (8-8-1879 *Gratiot Journal*). Construction began on the long delayed building that same month. The paper reported in September that the brick building would be much larger than originally planned – to accommodate five stores – and more Superior Street frontage was soon obtained.

By the fall of 1879 the cellar was dug, the stone foundation started, and the foundation for a bank vault in place. Twenty-five men were at work on the building and masons were making progress (10-31-1879 *Gratiot Journal*). The upper stories of the exterior were finished in January of 1880 and the interior work began. By May of 1880 businesses were moving into the new building. The tenants included the Barton & Company general store (in which Wright was a partner), the post office, the Coates & Ely Hardware, and the Turck, Winton & Co. Bank (Wright was not a stockholder). In June the post office moved in and on July 5, 1880, there was a grand opening celebration ball in the opera house itself (7-30-1880 *Gratiot Journal*). The building was completed at the cost of \$20,000, an expensive project for what was still a small country town.

The Opera House Block was the second brick building in downtown Alma. The first was the still standing small brick building on Superior to the east of the Lancashire Building built in 1875. The Opera House Block was on a much grander scale, housing stores and the social and entertainment space of the opera house. After the Opera House Block was constructed in 1880, the Wright House hotel across the street to the west followed in 1883 and the Church Block, another very large brick commercial block, in 1886.

In 1882 the general and hardware store was reorganized as Wright, Schneider, and Stutz. George Barton left to run a lumber mill and grain business in Alma. In June of the next year the Opera House Block was lighted by gas, the first time used in Alma (6-1-1883 *Gratiot Journal*). In 1894 the building contained a dry-goods store, two drug stores, a hardware store, and a grocery store. The upper floors contained the opera house and various offices.

The opera house occupied the two upper floors above the corner store and was initially called Barton's Hall. The Opera House itself became an important part of Alma's social life providing room for dramatic performances, political speakers, and other public events. During these early years of use there was a "Wright's Opera House Band" that performed there and at local events elsewhere. A handbill for ceremonies related to the 1886 cornerstone laying for the Central Michigan Normal School (now Alma College) listed the band as heading up a procession. The opera house was heavily used for about a decade but then fell into disuse – presumably because some newer hall provided more amenities. The hall was remodeled and reopened by Wright's son-in-law, Henry Lancashire, in 1894 (6-1-1894 *Alma Record*).

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The block itself was remodeled in 1897, the work including renovations to the ground floor store spaces beneath it at the building's west end. The *Alma Record* of 11-19-1897 states, "J. H. Lancashire has let the contract to Saginaw parties to make extensive improvements on the opera house block. The floor of the double store will be lowered to a level with the walk and the front remodeled. This will be separated in two single stores, and the Mercantile will occupy the second from the corner.... The corner is to be torn out and an iron pillar put in, making an entrance to the corner. Electric lights and steam heat will be placed in the third story for the use of the secret societies. Mr. Wright's office will be moved temporarily to the empty room in the Adams block." This seems to indicate that one or more fraternal lodges either were already housed in the third story or that the owner hoped to entice them. The State Gazetteer of 1911 shows Schroeder's School of Music as a tenant of the Opera House Block, likely giving performances in the space as well as lessons on the second story. The Masons leased the opera house space in 1919 (they became established in Alma in 1889) and used it until 1961 when they moved to a building at the corner of State and Center in Alma.

Over the years the Opera House Block has housed Ammi Wright's office, the general store founded by Wright and his partners, the Masonic Temple, drug stores, a grocery, a men's clothing shop, bowling alley, funeral parlor, restaurants, a music school and barbers. In the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries tenants included electronic stores, shoe and clothing stores, insurance agencies, an ice cream shop, cafes, barbers, funeral directors, a billiard hall, beauty shops, a Secretary of State office, pizza parlors, doctors' offices, screen printers, florists, cell phone sales, travel agencies, a Western Union office, and a drapery shop. There was likely limited residential use on the upper floors as well, but no documentation for this use has been located. There are a number of bathrooms and what look like apartment spaces on the second and third floors today, but this area appears not to have been occupied since the early twentieth century.

The Opera House Block first floor spaces were used until the fire in 2010. Today in one undamaged area on the first floor an art gallery still uses retail space.

Lancashire Building Addition

The second part of the Opera House Block, the Lancashire Building addition, directly adjoins the Wright Opera House Block and, built in 1899, from the first had an interior connection with that building so that it was often seen as an extension of the Opera House Block. The *Alma Record* reported on March 2, 1899 that, "Workmen have commenced moving the wooden building off the lot east of the opera house block preparatory to the building of the new brick block which Dr. J. H. Lancashire will have erected this spring." In another section of the same edition the paper states, "The excavating for the block to be built by Dr. J. H. Lawrence adjoining the opera house on the east, was commenced on Monday of this week, H. F. Thompson having the contract for this part of the work. The contract for building the block has been let to G. S. Young and it is expected to have it ready for occupancy on or before July 1. The building will be 52 x 86 feet on the ground and two stories high, the lower story divided into two stores and the upper story into offices. A stairway between the two stores will form an entrance to the upper story and a hallway will connect with the one in the opera house block thereby making an entrance from either way. The designs for the block were furnished by a Detroit architect and will represent quite an investment, as well as an addition to the growth of the town." By April the foundations were readied for the brick work on the building.

The articles indicate that the Lancashire was designed to be connected (via hallway) to the existing Opera House Block and was constructed by George S. Young. G. S. Young settled in Alma in 1884 and his George S. Young Construction Company is credited with the construction of many leading late nineteenth and early twentieth-century buildings in the city. The Detroit architect referred to in the article is not otherwise identified. Originally the façade was of cream brick and at the second floor contained three sets of two double hung windows set in recessed brick. The top of the building was capped with a simple metal cornice and the storefronts were square proportioned with canvas awnings. A major façade reconstruction in 2005 removed the cornice, added new brick covering the old, and altered the fenestration to include only four windows at the second floor. During the upcoming rehabilitation the façade will be rehabilitated to match its original historic appearance.

An article on the Opera House Block in the *Saginaw Courier Herald* (11-25-1900) shows that the Lancashire Building was considered part of the Opera House Block from the first, with Lancashire & Co. the owner and manager of the entire block by then. The article states in part, "The first story is taken up with seven large, well-lighted and well-ventilated stores, while in the second story are a number of attractive office rooms.... As owner of the entire block, Lancashire & Co. have left nothing undone which would add to its general improvement and convenience."

Wright Opera House Block Complex
Name of Property

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Tenants over the years of the Lancashire Building part of the block have included the Alma State Bank, Maier Clothing, Church's Jewelers, the Cobbler Shoe Store, and Hansen's Barber Shop. Today the Lancashire houses a church and vacant space formerly occupied by the jewelry store.

Sarah Wright Lancashire and husband James Henry Lancashire

Ammi Wright had five children with his first wife Harriet, but only his daughter Sarah Wright Lancashire survived until adulthood. She was raised in a privileged fashion and enjoyed the benefit of her father's immense wealth. She spent her teen years in fashionable Saratoga Springs, New York, where she met her future husband, Dr. Henry Lancashire. The couple was married in 1883 and moved to Saginaw in 1886. They would only visit Alma until persuaded to move there by Ammi Wright in 1894. Wright deeded the Wright House hotel and the Opera House Block to the Lancshires and he built the couple and their children an enormous home designed by Sarah called "Saravilla" on State Street in 1895. Wright essentially set Henry Lancashire up in his business endeavors (per *Built on Pines*, the story exists that Wright thought if Lancashire practiced medicine he could be sued and lose everything, so he encouraged him to go into business with him instead).

Lancashire carried out two renovations to the Opera House Block in the 1890s. *The Alma Record* of 6-1-1894 stated that, "A. W. Wright's son-in-law has refitted the opera house out of his own pocket. It has been idle for several years. Decorations and curtain were painted by a well-known artist. It is to reopen with the comedy 'Jane.'" This remodeling of the opera house coincides roughly with the couple returning to Alma and may have been Lancashire's way to create a place for them to enjoy a more active social life in small town Alma. In 1897 he was responsible for extensive alterations to the Opera House Block (*Alma Record* 11-19-1897). Lancashire also served as a director of the Alma Sanitarium Wright had created.

In his professional life Lancashire was a partner in Wright's Alma Manufacturing Company, constructed the Lancashire Building next to the Wright Opera House Block, managed the Opera House Block, and visited the East Coast frequently with his wife and family for summers and to attempt to attract businesses to Alma. After A. W. Wright's death the Lancshires left Alma and in 1912 bought a home on the Detroit River, but only stayed for one year and then relocated to New York City's Fifth Avenue. They moved again to 7 E. 75th Street and later to a large townhouse at 11 E 69th Street.

Even while living in Michigan the Lancshires had often summered in the east on the Atlantic shore. In 1914 they bought the Thomas Elliot estate at West Beach, Beverly Farms, Massachusetts. Within the next year Sarah Lancashire purchased the nearby Charles Head property, dubbed "Undercliff," with a fifty-five room Tudor mansion and acres of woods and gardens, an estate that they had previously rented; it became the family's seaside residence for the next several decades. Sarah renamed it "Graftonwood" after her father's birthplace of Grafton, Vermont. The estate required a staff of thirty during the summer season.

Henry Lancashire died of a stroke in 1936 at the age of 77 and Sarah died of old age at 84 in 1946. The massive wealth Ammi Wright amassed had largely been spent by the time of her death.

Boiler Building

The Boiler Building is mentioned in an article in the *Saginaw Courier Herald* of 11-25-1900 that states, "The Opera House Block ... represents one of the most modern business buildings in central Michigan. It is a larger, three-story and basement structure, built of white brick and stone, and is thoroughly equipped with every modern convenience. It has, in the rear, a large heating plant, which supplies steam to every department and is amply supplied with electric light apparatus...." The boiler building footprint shows up on the Sanborn Fire Insurance map in 1902; prior to that in the 1895 map a building with different footprint was shown. The earlier building was labeled "Wri Hotel," thus presumably related to the brick Wright Hotel once located across State Street (demolished 1956). In the 1902 Sanborn fire insurance map the rear portion of the present building shows as a boiler house and by 1925 a front office portion has been added. In historic images portions of the building can be seen. The front had large plate-glass windows and a dark brick façade and was connected at one point to the rear of the Opera House Block with a simple brick arch spanning the entrance to the alley separating the two buildings.

The current owners of the property plan to restore the main façade to close to its original appearance and recreate the brick arch over the alley.

Wright Opera House Block Complex
Name of Property

Gratiot, MI
County and State

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

9. Major Bibliographical References

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

American Biographical History of Eminent and Self-Made Men, Michigan Volume, Cincinnati: Western Biographical Publishing Company, 1878.

Gratiot Journal. 14 July 1876

Gratiot Journal. 28 July 1876

Gratiot Journal. 1 December 1876

Gratiot Journal. 2 March 1877

Gratiot Journal. 22 August 1879, p. 8.

Gratiot Journal. 19 September 1879.

Gratiot Journal. 10 October 1879

Gratiot Journal. 17 October 1879, "That New Block"

Gratiot Journal. 31 October 1879

Gratiot Journal. 7 November 1879, p. 1

Gratiot Journal. 28 November 1879, p. 1

Gratiot Journal. 2 January 1880, p. 8

Gratiot Journal. 9 January 1880, p. 1

Gratiot Journal. 16 January 1880

Gratiot Journal. 23 January 1880

Gratiot Journal. 2 April 1880, p. 1

Gratiot Journal. 30 April 1880

Gratiot Journal. 7 May 1880, p. 1

Gratiot Journal. 2 May 1880, p. 1

Gratiot Journal. 28 May 1880, p. 1

Gratiot Journal. 11 June 1880

Gratiot Journal. 30 July 1880, p. 1

Wright Opera House Block Complex
Name of Property

Gratiot, MI
County and State

Kilar, Jeremy W. Michigan's Lumbertowns: Lumbermen and Laborers in Saginaw, Bay City, and Muskegon, 1870-1905. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990.

Lewis, Kenneth E. West to Far Michigan: Settling the Lower Peninsula, 1815-1860. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002.

Gardner, Rev. T.C., and Hon John Moore, "The Michigan Lumber Interest, As Told by Sketches of its Leading Men: Ammi Willard Wright," Magazine of Western History, no date, photocopied portion, David McMacken Personal Collection.

McMacken, David. Built on Pines: The Story of Ammi Willard Wright, Alma, MI: Alma Public Library, 2003

McMacken, David, and Davenport, Louise, Down Twelve Decades: A Pictorial History of Alma, Michigan. Alma, MI: Alma Bicentennial Committee, 1976.

Men of Michigan: A Collection of the Portraits of Men Prominent in Business and Professional Life in Michigan. Detroit, M, 1904.

Michigan State Gazetteer and Business Directory, J.E. Scripps & R.L. Polk, Detroit: 1885, 1889, 1893, 1911.

Polk, R. L. Alma City Directory, Alma, Michigan, 1936, 1951, 1956, 1960, 1965, 1968, 1975, 1978, 1982, 1987, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2003, 2007.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Alma, Michigan, 1884, 1890, 1910, 1917, 1924, 1936, microfilm, Alma Public Library, Alma, Michigan.

"The Opera House Block," Saginaw Courier Herald, 25 November 1900.

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: Alma Public Library

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>16</u>	<u>689450</u>	<u>4805600</u>	3	_____	_____	_____
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	_____	_____	_____	4	_____	_____	_____

Wright Opera House Block Complex
Name of Property

Gratiot, MI
County and State

Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The Wright Opera House Block boundaries are south on Superior Street, west on State Street, north to the lot lines on the north side of the boiler house (408 N. State Street) and north on the back lot lines of the Lancashire Building, and east to the alley directly to the east of the Lancashire building.

Legal Description: Lots 7 and 8, Block 21, City of Alma, County of Gratiot, State of Michigan

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries encompass the entire property associated with the Wight Opera House Building Complex.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jennifer Metz
organization Past Perfect, Inc. date March 31, 2012
street & number 303 Briarwood SE telephone 616.581.4416
city or town E Grand Rapids, MI 49506 state MI zip code 49506
e-mail jennifermetz@pastperfectinc.com

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: Wright Opera House Block Complex

City or Vicinity: Alma

County: Gratiot State: MI

Photographer: Jennifer Metz

Wright Opera House Block Complex
Name of Property

Gratiot, MI
County and State

Date Photographed: March 2012

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

- 1 of 18: West façade (left) and south façade (right)
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0001.tif
- 2 of 18: South façade
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0002.tif
- 3 of 18: South façade
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0003.tif
- 4 of 18: South façade
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0004.tif
- 5 of 18: West façade
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0005.tif
- 6 of 18: Portion of west façade
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0006.tif
- 7 of 18: Portion of west façade
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0007.tif
- 8 of 18: North façade, including north façade of boiler building
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0008.tif
- 9 of 18: 2nd floor hallway, Opera House Block, camera facing west
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0009.tif
- 10 of 18: Opera House Block interior window/trim detail, camera facing north
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0010.tif
- 11 of 18: Looking into Opera House space, camera facing east
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0011.tif
- 12 of 18: 2nd-3rd-floor staircase, Opera House Block, camera facing south
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0012.tif
- 13 of 18: 2nd floor rear, Opera House Block, camera facing west
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0013.tif
- 14 of 18: South façade of Lancashire Building
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0014.tif
- 15 of 18: North (rear) façade, Lancashire Building
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0015.tif
- 16 of 18: Former jewelry store interior, 1st floor, Lancashire Building, camera facing west
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0016.tif
- 17 of 18: West front of Boiler Building
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0017.tif
- 18 of 18: East and north facades of Boiler Building, north façade of Opera House Block at left
MI_Gratiot County_Wright Opera House Block Complex_0018.tif

Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Wright Opera Block, LLC – c/o Kurt Wassenaar

street & number 258 Blue Springs Lane telephone 434.973.0662

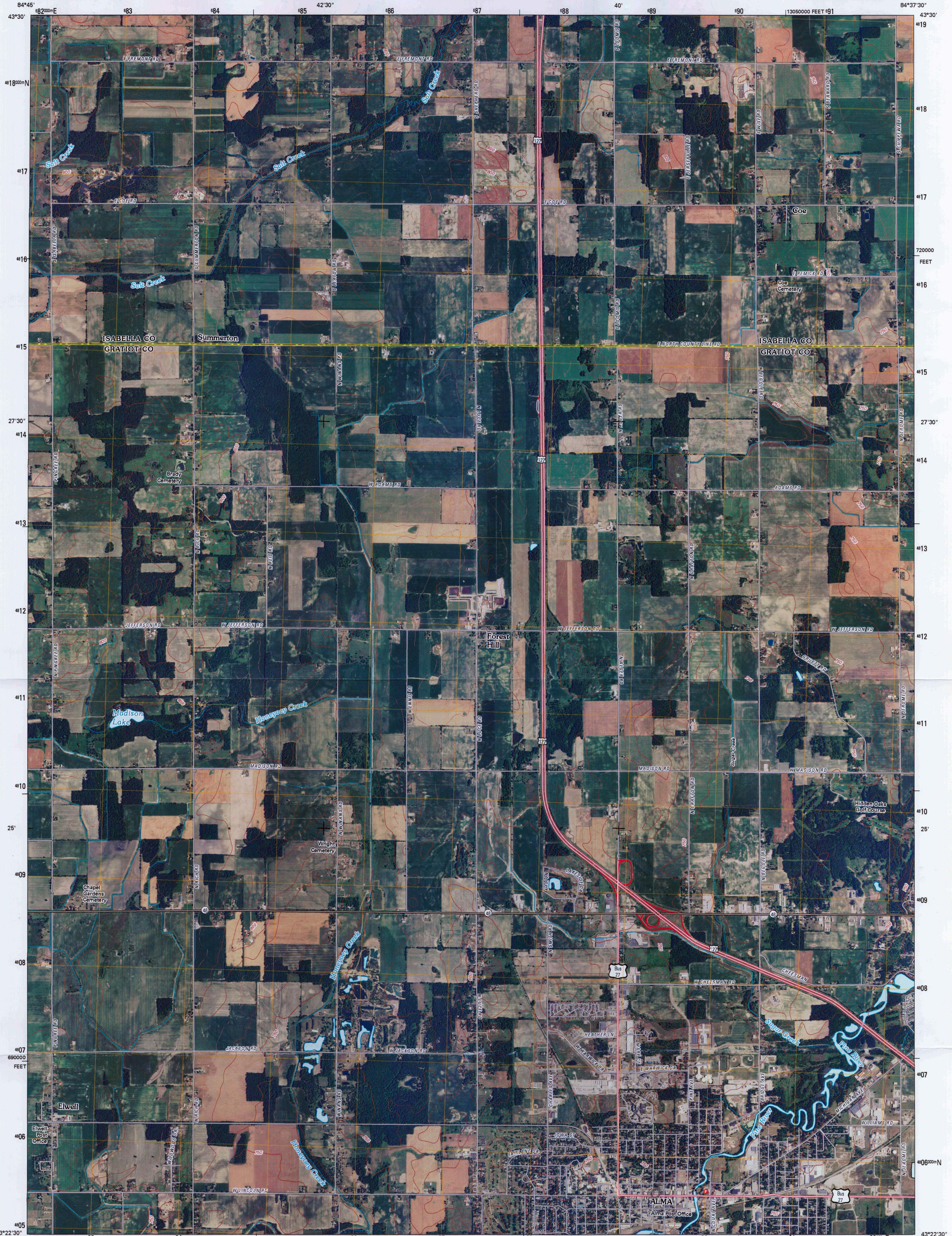
city or town Charlottesville state VA zip code 22903

Wright Opera House Block Complex
Name of Property

Gratiot, MI
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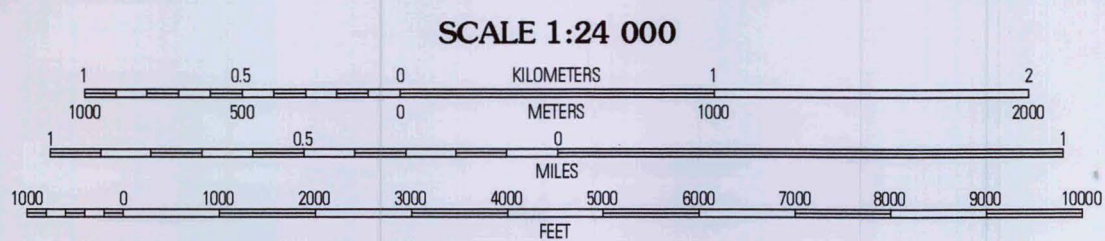
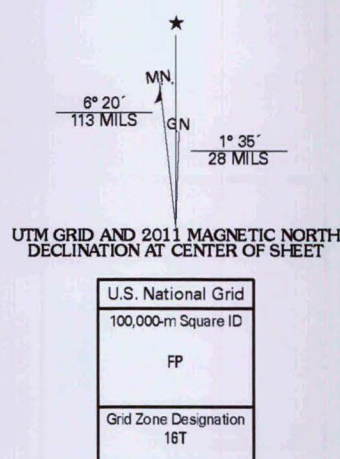
Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.



Produced by the United States Geological Survey
North American Datum of 1983 (NAD83)
World Geodetic System of 1984 (WGS84) Projection and
1 000-meter grid: Universal Transverse Mercator, Zone 16T
10 000-foot ticks: Michigan Coordinate System of 1983
(south zone)

Imagery.....NAP, July 2009
Roads.....©2006-2010 Tele Atlas
Names.....GNIS, 2010
Hydrography.....National Hydrography Dataset, 2009
Contours.....National Elevation Dataset, 1999
Boundaries.....Census, IBWC, IBC, USGS, 1972 - 2010

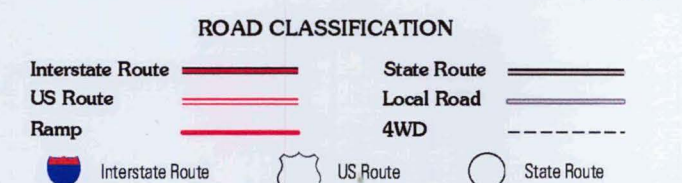


CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET
NORTH AMERICAN VERTICAL DATUM OF 1988
This map was produced to conform with version 0.5.10
of the USGS US Topo Product Standard.
A metadata file associated with this product is draft version 0.5.16



QUADRANGLE LOCATION

Mount Pleasant	Shepherd	Present Valley
Riverdale	Alma North	Saint Louis
Sumner	Alma South	Ithaca



Wright Opera House Bk Complex
Gratiot Co., MI
16 659450 4805600

ALMA NORTH, MI
2011

ADJOINING 7.5' QUADRANGLES



ONLY ONLY

NO LEFT TURN

NO RIGHT TURN



































UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Wright Opera house Block Complex

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: MICHIGAN, Gratiot

DATE RECEIVED: 5/10/13 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 6/07/13
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 6/24/13 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 6/26/13
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 13000443

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: Y PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 6/26/2013 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

RECOM./CRITERIA Accept A, B & C

REVIEWER Patrick Andrus DISCIPLINE Historian

TELEPHONE _____ DATE 6/26/2013

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.



STATE OF MICHIGAN

RICK SNYDER
GOVERNOR

MICHIGAN STATE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

SCOTT WOOSLEY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



February 14, 2013

Ms. Carol Shull, Interim Keeper
National Register of Historic Places
National Park Service
1201 Eye Street, NW, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Ms. Shull:

Enclosed is a national register nomination form for Wright Opera House Building Complex in Alma, Gratiot County, Michigan. This property is being submitted for listing in the national register. No written comments concerning this nomination were submitted to us prior to the submission of the nomination to you.

Questions concerning this nomination should be addressed to Robert O. Christensen, national register coordinator, by phone at 517/335-2719 or email at christensenr@michigan.gov.

Sincerely yours,

Brian D. Conway
State Historic Preservation Officer

State Historic Preservation Office

Michigan Library and Historical Center • 702 West Kalamazoo Street • P.O. Box 30740 Lansing, Michigan 48909-8240
michigan.gov/shpo • 517.373.1630 • FAX 517.335.0348 • TTY 800.382.4568