



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 *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. 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 entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Fort Theater  
Other names/site number BF05-176

2. Location

Street & number 2205 Central Avenue Not for publication   
City or town Kearney Vicinity   
State Nebraska Code NE County Buffalo Code 019 Zip code 68847

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Michael J. Aul May 24, 2006  
Signature of certifying official Date  
Director, Nebraska State Historical Society  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. 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): \_\_\_\_\_

Edson H. Beall 7.12.06  
ham  
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

**Fort Theater**

Name of Property

**Buffalo County, Nebraska**

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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	
1		Buildings
		Sites
		Structures
		Objects
1		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**

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

HEALTH CARE/medical business/office  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Late 19th & 20th Century Revivals: Classical Revival  
Modern Movement: Moderne  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation Concrete  
Walls Brick  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Roof Membrane, covered in tar  
Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Fort Theater**  
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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.

**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 a grave.
- D** A cemetery.
- E** A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** A commemorative property.
- G** Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

**Period of Significance**

1914-1956

**Significant Dates**

1914

1940

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

**Cultural Affiliation**

**Architect/Builder**

1914 – A. B. Lake

1940 – Edward J. Sessinghaus

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**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 for additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property Less than one

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

Table with 6 columns: Zone, Easting, Northing, Zone, Easting, Northing. Rows 1 and 2 contain numerical data.

[ ] See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jill Dolberg/Historic Buildings Survey Coordinator
organization Nebraska State Historical Society date March 8, 2006
street & number 1420 P Street/P.O. Box 82554 telephone 402/471-4773
city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68501-2554

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

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.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

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

Property Owner

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

name/title Walter D. Martin, D.M.D.
street & number 2205 Central Avenue telephone (308) 237-5853
city or town Kearney state Nebraska zip code 68847

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined 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, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the 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 chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

**Fort Theater**

Name of Property

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The Fort Theater is located in Kearney, Buffalo County, Nebraska, which is 133 miles west of Lincoln along Interstate 80. The population of Kearney was 28,640 in 2004.<sup>1</sup> Kearney has a well-developed and active Central Business District (CBD) along five blocks of Central Avenue between Railway and 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The Fort Theater sits on the east side of Central Avenue, between East 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and East 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. The streets in the CBD are all brick, and the streets are lined with trees that provide shade to pedestrians.

The Fort Theater is located in a two story, rectangular-shaped, blond brick commercial building. The building has a flat roof, and a concrete foundation. The façade contains two paired sets of glass doors with elegantly curved brass handles, centrally located under the marquee. The storefronts under the marquee have been altered from their original 1914 appearance with the addition of sleek pink marble panels and two curved windows the provide a small amount of display space with velvet curtains inside. Old movie projectors are displayed in these windows. In addition, glassed spaces for the display of movie posters break up the marble face of the storefront, with movie-themed dental advertisements in place of movie posters. Single glass and wood doors are located on either side of the display windows, and provide entrance into offices. The door on the south led to theater offices, while the door on the north led to what was once a rented office, but now is a space that houses expanded restroom facilities.

The upper story of the Classical Revival main façade is constructed of blond brick, with many decorative details. The central portion of the elevation contains the windows into the storage room upstairs, and the decorative brick above them hints at a pediment, with the brick between the windows implying pilasters. Decorative brickwork on either side of the temple motif implies a colonnade of columns in sets of six, contained within belt courses of brick above and below. The cornice is also corbelled brick. A modern (1940) marquee juts out from the main façade over the entrance, with a horizontal roof-like structure bearing a signboard. A vertical portion swoops up over the roofline, and spells out the word FORT. Neon tubing highlights the entire marquee, in the past drawing attention to the coming attractions, but now spelling out "Fort Dentistry."

Entering the foyer through the paired doors, an enclosed opening reveals the location of the original ticket window, which used to open into the office on the south. A pair of doors identical to the outside doors leads into the main lobby of the theater, which houses the receptionist's counter in place of a concessions counter. The ceiling in the lobby has scalloped and curved details in the plaster, accented in lavender paint. Three doorways with moldings with curved corners and velvet curtains, lead to the dental rooms, a small lab, and the waiting room, which features a movie theater popcorn popper and beverages. The remainder of the theater lies behind the dental offices.

Approximately 33% of the original theater space has been converted into dental space. The ceiling of the dental offices is only partial height, from the perspective from the theater space. The rest of the theater is intact, with the exception of a few changes to make the office possible. The floor used to slope toward the screen, and had to be leveled for the offices. Instead of a gradual slope, the floor was leveled in three different sections. The portion closest to the screen is still quite low, while the space behind is a few steps up, and the dental offices yet a few more steps up. The original seating is gone. However, the screen is intact, along with its curtains. The walls curve toward the stage, and a sloped walkway with a handrail remains on the north side of the theater space. The walls are accented with belt courses in the plaster, lending a horizontal emphasis to the theater, and reinforcing its interior art modern style. Doorways on either side of the screen

<sup>1</sup> Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Population, Released August 11, 2005.

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open to hallways that led theater patrons to the alley after the show. The ceiling of the theater space has more curved and scalloped elements.

A door from the lobby reveals a narrow stair that leads to the second story. Upon climbing to the top, a large room for storage lies closest to the west side of the building. The original projection room remains intact with four projection windows and bolts in the floor that held projectors in place at one time. Slats of wood would close off the windows to prevent excess light from the projection room distracting viewers and facilitate the switching of reels of film. The windows overlook the ceiling of the dental offices, and the upper quarter of the screen can still be seen over the top of the offices. An additional room could have stored movies, and a simple bathroom was supplied for the comfort of the projectionist.

All in all, the theater exhibits excellent historic integrity, considering it is now a dental office. Changes to the theater include leveling the sloped floor into three flat levels and the removal of the original seating. The original ticket window has also been blocked in, however, the impression of it remains in the wall of the foyer. The construction of the dental offices themselves in essence represent the building of a box within the theater space, and its presence could quite easily be reversed at some future date if necessary. In all other respects, the integrity of the theater remains intact. Its façade remains the same from its 1940 reconstruction, including the marquee, beautiful wood, glass and brass doors, and curved windows. The foyer and lobby remain much as they have always been, the screen is intact, and many of the theater accoutrements remain. There is no mistaking this theater for anything else.

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The theater building now known as the Fort Theater was originally built in 1914 by F.G. Keens.<sup>2</sup> When it opened, it was named the Empress, and was considered to rival any moving picture theater in the state at the time. It was built on two full lots, measuring fifty feet by 130 feet. The exterior was constructed of light pressed brick and the façade was outlined in electric lights in the evening. The walls of the lobby were paneled in white Italian marble to a height of seven feet, with plaster above. The ceiling of the theater space had large beams that were supported by columns with capitals. A large stage could show movies on the largest screen in town, but could also accommodate a vaudeville troupe. The building had a seating capacity of over 880, and admission was either five or ten cents. The last four rows were of upholstered seats and cordoned off from the average movie attendee. This area was called the loge, and cost an extra five cents. A six-piece orchestra furnished live music each night.<sup>3</sup>

The Empress was lost to fire on January 18, 1940. The fire seemed to have started in the basement, under the stage during a show. Several fire fighters were in attendance at the show and were able to help guide the evacuation, resulting in no loss of life.<sup>4</sup> The fire gutted the Empress, but left the main façade of the building intact. Losses to the theater furnishings and equipment were estimated to surpass \$30,000.

The Keens estate leased the business of running the theater to George Monroe, of Lincoln.<sup>5</sup> When the Empress burned, Keens' relatives were uninterested in building the theater anew, and sold the property to George Monroe and Don Monroe for the construction of a new theater.<sup>6</sup> Over the next eight months, a flurry of building activity ensured that the theater would be ready to open by late summer. The original façade of the building was intact and reusable, but the structure within had to be completely reconstructed. Instead of the white Italian marble and columns, the new theater would have an art moderne storefront and interior elements, as well as a new marquee. Architect Edward J. Sessinghaus, of Omaha, drew the plans for the new design.

One of the goals of the new theater was to provide perfect sight lines, which were ensured by creating a sloped floor that dipped and then came back up slightly, like a saucer. A person could view the screen from a perfect sitting position from anywhere in the theater. A newspaper article indicated that the seating would be the "new type of staggered seats used against the wall and in every alternate row in the center section on the aisle."<sup>7</sup> These staggered seats were almost twice the width of a standard theater chair, creating "love seats" and stepping the seating so that all could view the screen without neighboring heads blocking their view.

The new Fort Theater also was equipped with 2,000 feet of neon lights, both inside the theater and on the marquee. The Star Neon Company of Minden, Nebraska provided the neon. An additional innovation with the lights was a set of black lights that fluoresced on murals painted with special paint. The murals were painted by Joyce Ballantyne of Omaha, the daughter of Scott Ballantyne, who oversaw the installation of the seating, carpets and other interior features of the building. The Fort Theater also featured a state of the art projection and sound system, following the most modern specifications of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.<sup>8</sup> The equipment, murals and seats are no longer present, but neon lights still embellish the marquee of the theater.

<sup>2</sup> *Kearney Daily Hub*, 1 May 1914.

<sup>3</sup> *Kearney Daily Hub*, 21 September 1914.

<sup>4</sup> *Kearney Daily Hub*, 19 January 1940.

<sup>5</sup> *Kearney Daily Hub*, 19 January 1940.

<sup>6</sup> *Kearney Daily Hub*, 1 August 1940.

<sup>7</sup> *Kearney Daily Hub*, 1 August 1940.

<sup>8</sup> *Kearney Daily Hub*, 1 August 1940.

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The first movie shown on the new screen at the Fort Theater was *It's a Date* with Deanna Durbin on 2 August 1940. When the lights went down and the black lights came up, the murals on the sidewalls were greeted with thunderous applause. Many movie theater owners from other towns made the trip to Kearney for the opening night, including Mr. and Mrs. Frank Hollingsworth of the Pix Theater in Beatrice, and Bill Youngclaus of the Island Theater in Grand Island. In addition, Otto Siegel of Universal Pictures and Joe Jacobs of Columbia Pictures were present.

The Fort Theater continued to operate until the mid-1970s, by which time it had begun showing second-run movies. The theater sat vacant for a time, briefly housed a bar and grill, and eventually became Fort Theatre Dentistry. Movie memorabilia are displayed throughout the foyer, lobby, waiting room and operatories. The dental office embraces its building's history as an historic theater, and allows a church to use the remaining theater space in the evenings for youth group activities.

The Fort Theater is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A for its association with the history of entertainment in Kearney. The building served movie and vaudeville audiences from 1914 until the Empress burned in 1940, and served movie audiences thereafter when the Fort Theater rose out of the Empress's ashes in eight brief months. The building's period of significance begins in 1914 with its original construction, and ends in 1956. The theater exhibits excellent historic integrity, considering its change in use, with its major alterations confined to the loss of the seating and the leveling of the floor. The dental operatories were built within the theater space much like a box set within a larger box, and have little lasting impact on the theater should someone wish to reverse the changes in the future.



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**Bibliography**

*Kearney Daily Hub*, 1 May 1914 – 3 August 1940.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

Naylor, David. *Great American Movie Theaters*. Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987.

Olson, James C., and Ronald C. Naugle. *History of Nebraska, 3<sup>d</sup> Edition*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

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**Verbal Boundary Description:**

All of lot 128, Block 22, Original Kearney Plat.

**Boundary Justification:**

The boundaries include only the lot upon which the theater is located.