

PH0000132

Form 10-300  
(July 1969)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

### NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE: Alabama	
COUNTY: DeKalb	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER 70-4.01.000 <b>5</b>	DATE 4/28/70

**1. NAME**

COMMON:

AND/OR HISTORIC:  
THE FORT PAYNE OPERA HOUSE

**2. LOCATION**

STREET AND NUMBER:  
510 Gault Avenue North

CITY OR TOWN:  
Fort Payne

STATE Alabama	CODE 01	COUNTY: DeKalb	CODE 049
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**3. CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
<input type="checkbox"/> District <input type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Object <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Building <input type="checkbox"/> Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Object	<input type="checkbox"/> Public <input type="checkbox"/> Private <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Both	<input type="checkbox"/> In Process <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Being Considered	<input type="checkbox"/> Occupied <input type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress	Yes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restricted <input type="checkbox"/> Unrestricted <input type="checkbox"/> No

PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

<input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural	<input type="checkbox"/> Government	<input type="checkbox"/> Park	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation	<input type="checkbox"/> Comments
<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> Industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> Private Residence	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify)	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Educational	<input type="checkbox"/> Military	<input type="checkbox"/> Religious	_____	_____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Entertainment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Museum	<input type="checkbox"/> Scientific	_____	_____

**4. OWNER OF PROPERTY**

OWNER'S NAME:  
Landmarks of DeKalb County, Inc.

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:  
Fort Payne

STATE:  
Alabama

CODE:  
01

**5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.:  
DeKalb County Courthouse

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:  
Fort Payne

STATE:  
Alabama

CODE:  
01

**6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE OF SURVEY:  
None

DATE OF SURVEY:  Federal  State  County  Local

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:

STREET AND NUMBER:

CITY OR TOWN:

STATE:

CODE:

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

STATE: Alabama
COUNTY: DeKalb
ENTRY NUMBER
DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION	(Check One)					
	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> Ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> Unexposed
	(Check One)			(Check One)		
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Altered	<input type="checkbox"/> Unaltered	<input type="checkbox"/> Moved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Original Site		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

PRESENT:

The opera house itself is at the center of a row of connected buildings. The lower levels on either side are now being used as stores, while the upper levels are apartments.

The exterior walls of the opera house are brick. The distance from the main floor to the ceiling is 48 feet. The ceiling is of heavy oak construction. It is supported by large metal rods which extend up into the roof construction, also of heavy oak. A sturdy gable roof covers the building. The lobby has a concrete floor, and the main floor is wood laid on 8" x 14" joists. There are two balconies, one above the other, constructed of heavy wood. The large stage is almost five feet above the main floor and measures 32' x 48'. The facade of the building features three vertical pairs of windows in the upper level. The lower level is divided into six equal spaces. The two middle spaces contain double doors and the two spaces on either side are treated with a rough cobblestone effect with a small window in each space. The spaces are separated by vertical supports of ornamental iron. The balance of the front is covered with stucco and broken glass. The only remnants left intact inside are the two balconies, the box office, and two stairways leading to the second floor in the north and south wings of the building.

ORIGINAL:

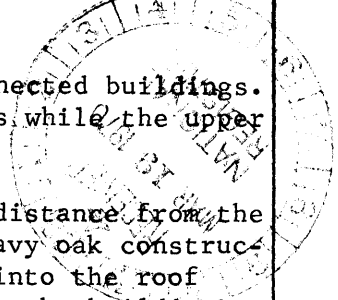
All of the opera house facilities were originally on the second floor. It was reached by means of a stairway on either end of the building. The lower portion was used as a hardware store. During the early renovations, the dividing floor was taken out, creating one large room.

The 1889 opera house seated about 300 people on its main floor, 200 in the first balcony, and 100 in the second balcony, which was reserved for its Negro patronage. The stage was located at the west end of the auditorium, having a roll-drop curtain about 45 feet wide and 25 feet high with a scene of the Bay of Tosca painted on it. There were three different painted backdrops which were shifted by hand: an inside room, a New York street scene, and a green woodland scene.

There was almost a two foot slope from the rear of the first floor to the stage, making visibility of the stage very good from any point in the auditorium.

The walls of the boxes on either side of the stage were light blue with gold stars the size of silver dollars scattered over them. The carpets of the box floors were a dark red velvet. There were six chairs in each box of the same type as those in the pit or main auditorium. The chairs were not upholstered, but each had an armrest, and the flexible seats had a hat rest underneath.

The floors were not carpeted; nor were there any carpet runners down the aisles. After the electricity was cut off in the town, in 1894, the



SEE INSTRUCTIONS

**SIGNIFICANCE**

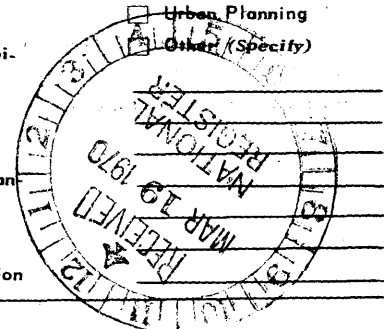
PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- Pre-Columbian       16th Century       18th Century       20th Century  
 15th Century       17th Century       19th Century

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known) 1888-89

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal     | <input type="checkbox"/> Education        | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Political | <input type="checkbox"/> Urban Planning  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prehistoric    | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering      | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion/Philosophy  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historic       | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry         | <input type="checkbox"/> Science              |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture    | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention        | <input type="checkbox"/> Sculpture            |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture   | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape        | <input type="checkbox"/> Social/Humanitarian  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art            | <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture     | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Theater   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce       | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature       | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications | <input type="checkbox"/> Military         |   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Music |   |  |



STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Fort Payne Opera House is a boom-town theatre. In 1889, the Fort Payne Coal and Iron Company was organized on the assumption that coal and iron deposits in the area could turn this village into a thriving manufacturing city. Immediately the town began booming, with investments coming from as far away as New England. Promotors called Fort Payne the "little Chicago of the South". The DeKalb Hotel, with 180 rooms, was constructed, the opera house was built, and a railroad was laid up the mountain.

When the mineral-manufacturing complex failed to materialize, the boom suddenly ended and the newcomers left. The population figures for this period show the rapidity of changes. In 1888, one year before the boom began, there were 500 inhabitants of Fort Payne. By 1890, this figure had jumped to 2,698. Ten years later, it had shrunk to less than half this size, with only 1,078.

The opera house was first envisioned in 1888, along with other boom-time buildings, in the Fort Payne Coal and Iron Company's prospects, entitled Fort Payne, Alabama, Illustrated. The opera house was purchased in 1889 from the company by W. W. Rice, a New Englander. The building reportedly engaged many top-ranking performers, eminent lecturers, musicians, and readers, which appealed to the cultured tastes of its New England clientele.

The problem of heating the auditorium was a big drawback to using the building. It was always cold and damp; hence, it was seldom used when the weather was unfavorable.

After it was closed in 1893, the records show it changed hands nearly fifty times, often back and forth among the same people. Milford W. Howard, the only Populist ever elected to the House of Representatives from Alabama, was owner of the opera house soon after the turn of the century. This colorful lawyer wrote, directed, and acted in several plays there and later went to California where he made movies for several years. Active also as an author, he wrote If Christ Came to Congress, which he recalled after a change of heart, and Bishop of the Ozarks, which was made into a movie.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Berney, Saffold. Hand-Book of Alabama. Birmingham: Roberts & Son, 1892.  
The Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress, 1774-1949. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1950.  
The DeKalb County Abstract Company. Fort Payne, Alabama: 1889-1945  
 Jackson, Walter M. and Marie Bankhead Owen. History of Alabama for Junior High Schools. Montgomery: Dixie Book Company, 1938.  
 Moore, Albert B. History of Alabama. Tuscaloosa: Alabama Book Store, 1951.  
 Owen, Thomas M. History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography, Volume I. Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921.  
 Summersell, Dr. Charles G. Alabama History for Schools. Birmingham: Colonial Press, 1961.

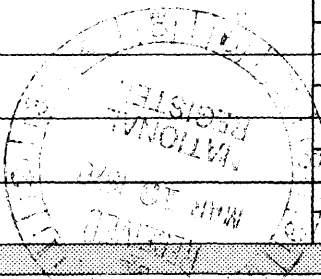
**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY			OR	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES		
CORNER	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE		LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	
	Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds		Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds	
NW	0 . "	0 . "		34 0 26 . 49 "	85 0 43 . 10 "	
NE	0 . "	0 . "				
SE	0 . "	0 . "				
SW	0 . "	0 . "				

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: **one-sixth acre**

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE: All in	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
Alabama	01	DeKalb	049
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE



**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

NAME AND TITLE: **W. Warner Floyd, Executive Director, Alabama Historical Commission**  
**Mrs. William M. Beck, Sr., Landmarks of DeKalb County, Inc.**

ORGANIZATION: **Alabama Historical Commission** DATE: **March 3, 1970**

STREET AND NUMBER: **305 South Lawrence Street**

CITY OR TOWN: **Montgomery** STATE: **Alabama** CODE: **01**

**12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION**      **NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION**

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

National  State  Local

Name: W. B. Howard Jr.  
 Title: Chairman, Alabama Historical Commission, SLO  
 Date: March 4, 1970

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

Ernest Allen Connally  
 Chief, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Date: APR 28 1970

ATTEST:  
William J. Tompkins  
 Keeper of The National Register  
 Date: APR 20 1970

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Continuation Sheet)

STATE Alabama	
COUNTY DeKalb	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE

(Number all entries)

7. Description (continued)

building was lighted by oil lamps which hung from the ceiling; small oil lamps with metal plate shaped shades were substituted for the footlights. The acoustics of the building were said to be unusually good. At the top of the south stairway was a small ticket office; back of this was the largest dressing room, heated by one small coal grate. Other dressing rooms were down from and back of the stage. Two were for the stars' use and had a star cut through the wooden door.

8. Significance (continued)

Another owner was S. T. Kimbell who bought it soon after Howard sold it. Kimbell did extensive remodeling, expecting to use the theatre as rehearsal headquarters for traveling stock companies, but only one company actually used the facilities.

In 1916, Mrs. Leona Thomason Davis purchased the building from J. P. Winn. She renovated it and started a silent motion picture theatre. Mrs. Davis operated the theatre until 1934, making a change-over in equipment when talking pictures came in during the 'twenties. After she closed the theatre, the building was used as a warehouse until 1969.

On June 12, 1969, the opera house opened its doors once again to the public as headquarters for DeKalb County's Alabama Sesquicentennial events.

In October, 1969, "Landmarks of DeKalb County, Inc." bought the building for \$10,000.

