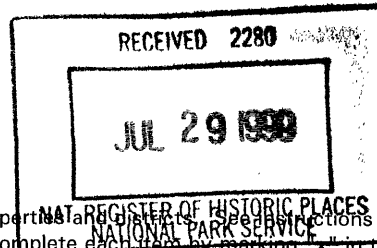


**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**



1048

**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 Metropolitan Opera House  
other names/site number 32GF1268

**2. Location**

street & number 116 South Third Street N/A  not for publication  
city or town Grand Forks N/A  vicinity  
state North Dakota code ND county Grand Forks code 035 zip code 58201

**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.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Samuel J. Wegner 07/24/99  
Samuel J. Wegner Date  
State Historic Preservation Officer (North Dakota)

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 commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ 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): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper Ronda McClelland Date of Action 8/27/99

Metropolitan Opera House  
Name of Property

Grand Forks, ND  
County and State

### 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

<u>1</u>	<u>                    </u>	buildings
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	sites
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	structures
<u>                    </u>	<u>                    </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	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)

DOMESTIC/Multiple Dwelling  
COMMERCE/TRADE/Café/Bar  
SOCIAL/Meeting Hall, Civic  
RECREATION AND CULTURE/theatre,  
music facility

#### Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

### 7. Description

#### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Richardsonian Romanesque

#### Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK

walls BRICK

roof ASPHALT

other SANDSTONE

#### Narrative Description

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

**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.)

**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 # \_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

**Period of Significance**

1890-1949

**Significant Dates**

1890

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Dunnell, Warren B.

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Grand Forks Historic Preservation Commission  
Chester Fritz Library Special Collections

Metropolitan Opera House  
Name of Property

Grand Forks, ND  
County and State

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## 10. Geographical Data

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**Acreage of Property** Less than 1 acre

### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	14	6 4 7 3 1 0	5 3 0 9 5 0 0	3		
	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing

2				4		
	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing

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.)

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## 11. Form Prepared By

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name/title Cynthia Mala

organization Grand Forks Historic Preservation Commission date December 12, 1997

street & number 1405 First Avenue North telephone (701) 772-8756

city or town Grand Forks state ND zip code 58203

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### Additional Documentation

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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)

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### Property Owner

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

name Tecco, Inc., Patti Eider, President

street & number 2814 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue South telephone (701) 775-0476 or 746-9584

city or town Grand Forks state ND zip code 58201

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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. 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.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

## DESCRIPTION

Grand Forks, North Dakota, is located on the west side of the Red River of the North at the junction of the Red Lake River. The downtown was platted to parallel the river rather than being placed on a north-south axis. The Metropolitan Opera House is located within the commercial core of downtown at 116 South Third Street. The main entrance faces northeast, about a block and a half from the banks of the Red River. Historic Burlington Northern Railroad tracks are adjacent to the Opera House on the northeast side and daily freight trains still pass through downtown Grand Forks.

In the fall of 1889, the brick foundation was laid and measures 20" thick. Construction was completed November 10, 1890. The three-story Opera House, a rectangular structure that measures 75' x 152' is constructed of Portage brownstone and Roman brick. Roman bricks are twice as long as regular bricks, and measure 2 x 4 x 12". The 650,000 yellowish tan bricks used in the construction of the building were fired at the Erskine Brick Company in Crookston, Minnesota. The mortar mixture is red, matching the brownstone trim. The research was inconclusive as to whether the southern portion of the building is constructed of metal frame or structural brick. The roof is built-up asphalt on arched trusses over the original auditorium area, and flat over the apartment area.

The original design of the Opera House included a theater auditorium with stage and orchestra pit. In front was a large foyer with ticket booth that boasted a speaker system to the back stage and fly loft. There were dressing rooms on the north side of the second floor. The lobby area had a small confectionery's store that included a separate ladies lounge and gentlemen's smoking area where guests had refreshments, relaxed, and visited during intermissions. The front of the Opera House was designed for businesses. When the Metropolitan opened, the Scandinavian-American Bank, The Plains Dealer (Grand Forks' first daily newspaper), and the Barnes and Ness Hardware store were in operation. Hall's Dance School was housed on the third floor of the building.

The architectural classification of the Metropolitan Opera House is late Victorian in the Richardsonian Romanesque style. Warren B. Dunnell from Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the architect who designed the Metropolitan Opera House. It is believed to be the only theater Mr. Dunnell designed.

When one initially views the Metropolitan Opera House, you can readily see the Richardsonian Romanesque elements. "As interpreted by (architect Henry Hobson) Richardson in the 1870s and 1880s, the Romanesque become a different, and uniquely American style. Still present were the round arches framing window and door openings, but gone were vertical silhouettes and smooth stone facings. Richardson's buildings were more horizontal and rough in texture. Heaviness and an ever-present characteristic of the style--emphasis not only by the stone construction but also by deep window reveals,

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**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 Page 2

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

**DESCRIPTION (continued)**

cavernous door openings and, occasionally, bands of windows. These openings were often further defined by a contrasting color or texture of stone or by short, robust columns.... Especially after Richardson's premature death in 1886, admiring architects adopted his style for schools, post offices, and commercial and federal buildings across the country."<sup>1</sup>

Dunnell substituted brick for the usual stone, but the contrasting rusticated brownstone trim of the Opera House clearly emphasizes as typified in the style. Most striking is the semi-circular arched main entrance in rusticated brownstone and the rusticated trim which emphasizes the central bay. Additional Richardsonian Romanesque features are the eight ornate brownstone column caps at the top of the first floor, its massive presence, simple form, the twelve rounded arch windows at the second floor, and the ten smaller and two larger brownstone rounded trim arches above the windows on the east front elevation. Original brick and brownstone horizontal banding is present at the cornice, alternating one course of brick with one course of brownstone. While this last feature is not typical of the style, it adds to the horizontal nature of the building, which is an element of the style.

There are a total of eight exit doors around the building. Windows are 1:1 double-hung wood sash with an added storm unit for thermo-barrier.

Three-fourths of the front facade is divided vertically into three bays and horizontally into four segments and is set within the two large pilasters. At the ground level, a rusticated arch opening composed of portage brownstone emphasized the center section between the two pilasters. This arched opening has a recessed door surrounded by windows. The ground level, north bay section has three large windows set between two small brick columns. The south bay has two doors with windows above and a large window as the third panel, also set between two small brick columns.

Rusticated stone sets off the four medium-size windows on the second floor central bay. The north and south bays on second floor each have three arched windows. The third floor center bay section has two small windows decorated with the rusticated stone arches. The north section bay has four small windows with five rusticated arches decorating the top of the windows. The south section bay has five windows with the decorative arches. Both north and south bays have four small brick columns between the windows. The fourth section of the facade on the south side of the building has large glass windows on the ground floor and four windows each on second and third floor.

The facility functioned as an opera house between 1890 and 1910. Between 1910 and 1940 it served as a vaudeville house, a movie theater (called "The Met") and the home of

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<sup>1</sup>John C. Polleliers, S. Allen Chambers, Jr, and Nancy B. Schwartz, What Style Is It? Washington, DC, Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1983, pp. 62-63. See also: Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780, A Guide to the Styles, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992, p.133.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

## DESCRIPTION (continued)

stock companies and local entertainment. In 1940 the fly loft was torn down, the proscenium arch and stage removed, and the remaining structure was transformed into a bar, café, bowling alley, and apartments. The entertainment center was known as the Uptown Recreation Center.<sup>2</sup>

At an unknown date, possibly during the 1940 renovation, a two-story rectangular bay window was removed from the upper two stories of the southern portion. The central brick and brownstone parapets and round, flat pilaster caps were also removed. Sixteen courses of glass block, 13 courses of brick, and two small display windows, and two wooden doors infill the first floor display areas of the building. The 13 courses of brick are similar but do not exactly match the original horizontal banding at the cornice. The central entrance has been infilled behind the brownstone arch, with metal panels, aluminum framing, plate glass, and a plate glass door.

The large original Barnes and Nuss hardware space has remained much the same, with an open quality, support columns, and 12' ceilings. The central hall between the original hardware store and bank remains dimensionally the same though its ticket booth is no longer present. The large interior doors to the Opera House are gone; the doorway provides access to the former theatre space and former bowling lanes. The original bank space remains much the same, though a staircase was added for convenience at an unknown time. Original staircases lead to the upper two floors. The apartments on the second and third floors retained several original features including the wood floors and partitions. Rounded arch doorways were installed, presumably during the 1940s renovations. Cupboards and appliances are also of 1940s vintage, and include built-ins such as ironing boards, spice cupboards, and dining tables and benches. The apartment doors look older and may be original.

In April 1997 the entire city of Grand Forks was evacuated due to flooding of the Red River. All downtown properties were severely damaged or destroyed. The Metropolitan building was built with a flood release drain but it failed to keep up with the water as the basement and first floor flooded. The building survived the flood and simultaneous downtown fire, but it was among those that suffered extensive damage and has not been re-opened or re-occupied since April. Due to the three feet of water on the main floor, the bowling alley was removed along with most of the interior ground floor materials down to the subflooring.

When one views and enters the Metropolitan Opera House building one can feel and see the high level of historical integrity of the property. Although the property is flood-damaged, the original location, design, setting, materials, and exterior workmanship retain the historical integrity of the building. The present owner's goal is to build upon the many remaining original features of the building and have it become a "marvel" for another generation of Red River Valley residents.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tomasek, "The Metropolitan Opera House of Grand Forks, ND," unpublished paper written for Honors Humanities, University of North Dakota, 1971, p. 32.

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National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

**DESCRIPTION (continued)**

In 1890 the magnificent Metropolitan Opera House of Grand Forks, was considered the "marvel" of the Red River Valley.

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Applicable National Register Criteria eligibility for the Metropolitan Open House is Criteria A; property is associated with events that have made significant contributions to Grand Forks history. Its specific area of significance is Entertainment & Recreation. The group who financed the building intended for it to offer the best entertainment and social recreation in the region. The building met those needs for 107 years, closing only to the April flood of 1997. The period of significance is from 1890, its date of construction, to 1949, the cut-off date established by the National Register.

**History**

Grand Forks was named for its geographical location - where two rivers meet. The Red Lake River flows into the Red River of the North at Grand Forks. Sanford C. Cady, the first postmaster, is credited for naming the city. He used the English derivative of the French term Les Grandes Fourches.<sup>3</sup>

James J. Hill, known as the "empire builder" founded the Great Northern Railroad. Rail transportation was booming in the Grand Forks region in the late 1880s and early 1890s when Mr. Hill donated the land that provided the footprint for the Metropolitan Opera House. It was constructed next to the Great Northern railroad tracks. This location provided to be a wise decision as heavy sets and painted scenery pieces could easily be transferred into the Opera House from railroad cars. Newspaper articles also mention that after the long train rides, divas, actors and actresses appreciated the easy access to the dressing rooms and guest apartments, located to the back and on the second floor of the Opera House building.

In the 1890s Grand Forks was one of the most thriving towns of its size in the Northwest, both from a commercial and cultural standpoint. The city displayed a tremendous over-extended optimism with regard to service-oriented businesses, having four banks, three loan companies, two hospitals, two daily newspapers, three hostelryes, and four hotels.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Edson Bladow, Executive Editor, "They Came To Stay, Grand Forks, North Dakota Centennial 1874-1974," published June 1974, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Alan H. Adair, "History of the Metropolitan Theater in Grand Forks, ND Under Independent Management, 1890-1897," Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1970, p. 8.



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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (continued)**

Many of the "big-wigs" of the city at that time came from well-to-do families back east. Other key citizens were retired military men. Both groups were trying to make their own fortunes in the frontier boomtown. The city's businessmen were aggressive and highly optimistic, having already formed a chamber of commerce, businessmen's association, a fair association, a racing association and an immigration commission to encourage new settlers.<sup>5</sup>

By 1890 a number of theatrical companies were able to stop in Grand Forks because of the city's location on the railroad lines. However, there was not an adequate structure for housing these companies, since Grand Forks had no permanent theater building. While improvised quarters did exist, the stage facilities were extremely limited and large audiences could not be seated.<sup>6</sup>

Across the United States by the 1860s, opera houses were built and all progressive communities wanted one. Grand Forks was certainly no exception.

Thirty-eight of the City's founding fathers financed and supported the construction of the Metropolitan Opera House. They formed the "Grand Forks Opera House Company" which was incorporated July 22, 1889. Every effort was made to plan a theater of which all of Grand Forks, and the surrounding area, could be proud. Many preparations were made to assure that the Metropolitan would be a completely modern theater, comparable to any. Their goal was to erect the Metropolitan and to bring a high level of entertainment to the City. The Metropolitan was designed and built to provide the Red River Valley with the same cultural entertainment that was available to larger cities.

The final cost of the building was approximately \$91,000. It was obviously quite a financial commitment for such a small city, considering that the census of 1890 lists the population of Grand Forks as only 4,979. The building was state-of-the-art for its day, and the size, seating, furnishings, and stage equipment were unsurpassed in any city between Minneapolis and Seattle.<sup>7</sup>

The building measured 75 feet by 152 feet, with the auditorium measuring 75 x 100 x 55 feet with seating for almost 900 people. The stage area was seventy-five feet wide by thirty-two feet in depth and was completely covered by a full fly loft with a gridiron at 67

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<sup>5</sup>Paul Tomasek, "The Metropolitan Opera House of Grand Forks, ND," unpublished paper written for Honors Humanities, University of North Dakota, 1971, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Adair, op.cit., p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>Dawn D. Drake, "Production Activity and Performers at the Metropolitan Theatre, Grand forks, ND 1898-1911" unpublished Master's thesis, University of North Dakota, 1993, p. 4.

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**Continuation Sheet**

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (continued)**

feet over the center stage. The main entrance to the theater was an 18 by 50-foot lobby fronted by bronze gates. The colors decorating the lobby were primarily blue and gold that coordinated with the gold and ivory of the Baroque-styled auditorium. Other design features included two curving balconies, upholstered chairs, and specially designed loge chairs.<sup>8</sup>

Back stage was the scenery loft with fly lines or ropes to handle borders, drops, and other equipment as well as the drop and act curtains. Beneath the stage in front was a music library and an orchestra room, and the property man occupied the same room. There were four dressing rooms on the main floor and two more and a chorus dressing room on the second floor. Speaking tubes connected with the box office, the fly gallery and the orchestra room.<sup>9</sup>

The stage lighting, as well as the lighting for the entire building, was a combination of gas and electric. The commission for the scenery and painting was given to Peter Clauson of Minneapolis, considered to be one of the finest scenic artists working in the upper Midwest at the time. The building was also capable of hosting scenery of any touring company traveling the country at that time.<sup>10</sup>

In an attempt to evaluate the cultural influence of the Metropolitan Opera House, it must be remembered that the theater was a primary source of entertainment to the citizens of a frontier area such as Grand Forks in the 1890s. Since no other competitive media existed during this period, the theater constituted a major form of cultural enlightenment of the time.<sup>11</sup>

Monday, November 10, 1890 is considered by many as Grand Forks' finest day for this date marked the opening of the Grand Forks Metropolitan Opera House. The management had searched diligently for a booking that would do justice to such an occasion. The attraction selected was the opera Martha starring Emma Abbott of the Emma Abbott Opera Company, considered to be the most important company of its kind on tour at that time. Special programs were printed listing each of the subscribers who paid fifty dollars or more for two tickets, thus the programs became the equivalent of a social register. The program

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<sup>8</sup>Drake, op.cit, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Grand Forks Herald, November 29, 1953, p. 10

<sup>10</sup>Drake, op.cit, pp.4-5.

<sup>11</sup>Alan H. Adair, "History of the Metropolitan Theatre in Grand Forks, ND, Under Independent Management, 1890-1897," unpublished Master's Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1970, p. 61.

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (continued)**

also contained the list of stockholders, board of directors, contractors of the building, as well as information regarding the performance.<sup>12</sup> Appendix B is a copy of the original playbill for Martha.

John Miller, the first governor of North Dakota, made the dedication speech before the performance started ... "The formal opening of this magnificent auditorium, which is this night dedicated to music and the Thespian art, puts behind us the primitiveness of the frontier, and brings us to a new period of enlarged and increased social advantages that are really metropolitan."<sup>13</sup>

Promptly at eight-fifteen the footlights flickered. Beneath the muraled dome, the electric sunburner dimmed until it resembled a galaxy of a thousand remote stars. One by one the incandescent lights and gas flames cradled in frosted crystal cups went out. Though the theater was packed to the roof when the footlights signaled again, the proverbial pin could have been heard falling from the dome. In the pit the orchestra smoothed the overture to a close. Gold hangings across the carved and gilded proscenium moved to loop and lift. Behind them the muraled curtain on which a beauteous maiden reclined against crusted gold tapestries in a flowered and languidly powered gondola, quivered. And in the wings, manager George Broadhurst, truly foreseeing the immediate future when Broadway's brightest stars and No.1 road companies would include this little frontier town on their Chicago-San Francisco-New Orleans circuit, mopped an astounded brow. But neither to the breathlessly still audience nor to the surrounding country was that curtain rising on Martha, the Metropolitan Opera House, or Grand Forks. It was rising on the Red River Valley. After twenty thousand years of exodus and migration, of trial and error, of tragedy and triumph, of isolation, of battle, of hidden abundance gradually revealed, the land through which Red River Runs North was ready to begin.<sup>14</sup>

Behind the scenes, a large group of people was involved with the presentations given at the Metropolitan. Some of these people were employed full time while others were paid for part time jobs. "Stage hands worked practically every night of the week and they were aided by high school and college youths who were glad to earn their quarter for working the flies or props, helping move scenery, or striking the set after a performance. Other part time help was also enlisted for running spotlights and other special

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<sup>12</sup>Paul Tomasek, "The Metropolitan Opera House of Grand Forks, ND," unpublished paper written for Honor Humanities, University of North Dakota, 1971, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>Grand Forks Herald, November 11, 1890, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Vera Kelsey, Red River Runs North! Harper & Bros., 1951, p. 275.

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**Continuation Sheet**

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (continued)**

effects that the show would require. The Metropolitan had its own orchestra made up of local men. This group would play for most of the shows requiring music, unless the company brought in its own orchestra, as was the case for Martha. The Opera House also kept its own music library."<sup>15</sup>

In the years after the leasing, the stage of the Metropolitan was graced by such personages as Minnie Fisk, Modjeska, Nazimova, DeWolfe Hopper, William Faversham, McKee Rankin, Otis Skinner, Nance O'Neil, David Warfield, and a host of others. Only then did the citizens of Grand Forks view a better segment of American theater of the time.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the years 1890-1940, the Metropolitan was the site of other special programs including lectures, recitals, vaudeville shows, political meetings, commencements, concerts, and spectacles. Spectaculars were productions with the emphasis being placed on scenic effects and technical devices. A few minstrel shows were also presented at the Metropolitan Opera House. All types of people attended presentations at the Metropolitan. Not everybody was from Grand Forks, however, and some groups traveled many miles to take in the shows. "If you had a girl, or some visitors dropped in - well, gosh, that's only place you could go."<sup>17</sup>

W.P. Davis in an editorial in the Grand Forks Herald stated, "Thereafter for years the Grand Forks theater (the Metropolitan) was the outstanding example in the entire northwest of the finest in design and equipment and on its stage appeared many of the best plays and most famous actors of the time,"<sup>18</sup>

The production activity and the quality of performers appearing at the Metropolitan Theater during the period of this study is unequaled today. It takes several buildings, several performing groups and several new formats (television and motion pictures) to even approximate the variety and the amount of activity offered to Grand Forks audiences at the

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<sup>15</sup>Paul Tomasek, "The Metropolitan Opera House of Grand Forks, ND," unpublished paper written for Honors Humanities, University of North Dakota, 1971, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup>Alan H. Adair, "History of the Metropolitan Theatre in Grand Forks, ND Under Independent Management, 1890-1898," unpublished Master's Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1970, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup>Tomasek, op. cit. pp. 22-23.

<sup>18</sup>*Grand Forks Herald*, May 20, 1940.

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**Continuation Sheet**

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (continued)**

turn-of-the-century. The very construction of the Metropolitan and its luck to survive serves as a large part of the foundation for the cultural heritage that belongs to Grand Forks some 103 years later.<sup>19</sup>

The Metropolitan Opera House was constructed to promote and enhance the social and cultural welfare of the community. It served as an opera theater for close to twenty years and then an additional thirty years as a vaudeville house, a movie theater (called the "Met") and the home of stock companies and local entertainment.

In 1958 the Grand Forks Herald featured the Metropolitan Opera House in an article and the paper's editor, W.P. Davis, who was a strong advocate and supporter of the theater said, "The Met continued for a number of years, and Mr. Davis had programs up to 1913 but enough has been shown to prove that Grand Forks with a population of about 14,000, less than half its present size, was a good show town without having to have all attractions sponsored by some organization. The entire city was sponsor to the Metropolitan."<sup>20</sup>

In 1997 it must be noted that the Metropolitan Opera House is one of two remaining properties in Grand Forks with the architectural classification, Richardsonian Romanesque. St. John's Block, 2 N. Third Street, is the other property. A third Romanesque style building, the Security Trust Building, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, was lost in the downtown fire during the flood.

Warren B. Dunnell of Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the architect who designed the Metropolitan Opera House. Warren Barnes Dunnell was born in Norway, Maine, on August 23, 1851, the son of Mark H. and Sarah A. Dunnell. His family moved to Winona, Minnesota in 1863 and to Owatonna in 1865. He entered the University of Minnesota in 1869 and later transferred to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he studied under Professor Ware. Early in his professional career he worked for the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department in Washington, D.C., before going to Paris to study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. After his return to the U.S., he served as Supervising Architect for the construction of U.S. government buildings in Memphis, Tennessee, and, in 1878, at Kansas City, Missouri. In 1880, Dunnell moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, and became a draftsman for Abraham M. Radcliffe. A year later, he opened an office in Minneapolis and for the next 29 years pursued his profession, mostly in private practice, in Minneapolis and eventually retired to Owatonna. Warren Barnes Dunnell died in Minneapolis on December 28, 1931 and is buried at Owatonna.

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<sup>19</sup>Dawn D. Drake, "Production Activity and Performers at the Metropolitan Theatre, Grand Forks, ND 1898-1911" unpublished Master's thesis, University of North Dakota, 1993, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup>Grand Forks Herald, November 24, 1958.

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (continued)

The Metropolitan Opera House is the only known commission by Warren Dunnell in North Dakota. No other theatres or opera houses are known to have been designed by Dunnell, making the Metropolitan Opera House at Grand Forks a unique commission by the architect. In a career which spanned over 40 years, Dunnell concentrated on institutional buildings, churches, hospitals and other public buildings, and appears have had a preference for the Richardsonian Romanesque style. Dunnell's known commissions are from Minnesota and include:

- Westminster Church, St. Paul, c. 1876; Oliver Presbyterian Church, 1888; First Baptist Church, Battle Lake, 1893; and a Methodist Episcopal Church, Owatonna;
- Douglas, Blaine, and Lowell schools, Minneapolis, c. 1890s;
- Red Wing Training School for Boys, Red Wing;
- Administration building and many of the resident cottages at the Minnesota Soldiers Home, near Minnehaha Falls, c. 1895;
- Hospitals for the Insane at St. Peter, Rochester, Fergus Falls, and Anoka;
- Washburn Building, Anoka;
- Schools for the Deaf & Blind, Fairbault;
- Minnesota State Public School and the Pillsbury Academy, Owatonna;
- Northwestern Telephone Exchange Building, Minneapolis, c. 1896.<sup>21</sup>

The Grand Forks Historic Preservation Commission believes the Metropolitan Opera House should be regarded as "THE historical text created by Grand Forks pioneer leaders to signify the city's social maturity; the Met is the epitome of Grand Forks' past... it is part of the heart and soul of the city; the founders of the city invested in the Opera House to make Grand Forks a show place for future development; and that the Metropolitan Opera House was the 'Aurora' of the 1890s."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Northwest Architectural Archives File, North Dakota State Historic Preservation Office, Archeology and Historic Preservation Division, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, *passim*, Henry F. Withey A.I.A. and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)*, Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc., 1970, p. 184.

<sup>22</sup>Meeting Minutes, Member Statements, December 2, 1997. The Aurora is a multi-purpose facility planned by the city to accommodate sports, concert, trade shows, and conventions.

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Metropolitan Opera House  
Grand Forks, ND

## PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Metropolitan Opera House, 116 South Third Street, Grand Forks
2. Grand Forks County, North Dakota
3. photographer, Frank Vyzralek
4. 2 July 1999
5. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
6. NE front elevation and NW side elevation, camera facing south.
7. Photograph No. 1.

1. Metropolitan Opera House, 116 South Third Street, Grand Forks
2. Grand Forks County, North Dakota
3. photographer, Frank Vyzralek
4. 2 July 1999
5. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
6. Detail on NE front elevation, above central entrance, camera facing SW.
7. Photograph No. 2

1. Metropolitan Opera House, 116 South Third Street, Grand Forks
2. Grand Forks County, North Dakota
3. photographer, Frank Vyzralek
4. 2 July 1999
5. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
6. NW side elevation along railroad tracks, camera facing south.
7. Photograph No. 3

1. Metropolitan Opera House, 116 South Third Street, Grand Forks
2. Grand Forks County, North Dakota
3. photographer, Frank Vyzralek
4. 2 July 1999
5. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
6. NW side elevation and SW back elevation, camera facing east.
7. Photograph No. 4

1. Metropolitan Opera House, 116 South Third Street, Grand Forks
2. Grand Forks County, North Dakota
3. photographer, Frank Vyzralek
4. 2 July 1999
5. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
6. SE side elevation, neighboring buildings lost to flood damage, camera facing NW.
7. Photograph No. 5



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## PHOTOGRAPHS (continued)

1. Metropolitan Opera House, 116 South Third Street, Grand Forks
2. Grand Forks County, North Dakota
3. photographer, Thomas B. Lude
4. 1907
5. State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck
6. Historic photo of NE front and NW side elevations, camera facing south.
7. Photograph No. 6