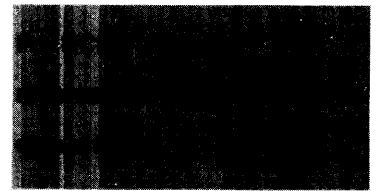


**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections



1. Name

historic Cotaco Opera House

and/or common Masonic Building

2. Location

street & number 115 Johnston Street, S.E. NA not for publication

city, town Decatur NA vicinity of congressional district 5

state Alabama code 01 county Morgan code 103

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	NA	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name see continuation sheet

street & number

city, town _____ vicinity of _____ state _____

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Morgan County Courthouse

street & number 302 Lee Street N.E.

city, town Decatur state Alabama

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Alabama Inventory has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1970-present federal state county local

depository for survey records Alabama Historical Commission

city, town Montgomery state Alabama

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Cotaco Opera House (c. 1890) is a three-story brick structure originally designed as a combination public auditorium and commercial building. The first-floor facade is very little altered with a center double-leaf entry with transom recessed under an arched opening. Flanking either side of the main entry are original single-leaf doors and display windows with original wood framing and paneled kickplates. Leaded transom windows above the display windows are probably not original. On either corner of the first floor is a narrow rectangular recessed panel. Above the first floor is a metal cornice. The second floor has five original 1/1 wood sash windows above a beltcourse which serves as a common sill for all the windows. The third floor also originally had five windows identical to those on the second floor (see xeroxed photo). These third-story windows, however, are gone and the openings are sealed with brick. The flat roofline is decorated with a projecting metal cornice with a parapet wall above.

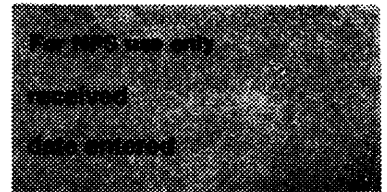
The side elevation has some original wood framed 1/1 sash windows. According to an early photograph (see xeroxed photo), the original window openings had arched tops. All of the arches have been squared off, some window openings have been completely sealed and still other window openings are recent additions. The middle portion of the side facade has also been altered with the addition of a new roof and some new brickwork.

The interior of the first floor has some original features including architraves, window surrounds and some flooring. Originally, the interior was divided into three separate functional areas. The front one-third of the building was three stories high. A center hall on the first floor just inside the entry was flanked on either side by commercial shops. The upper two floors served as office spaces.

The middle one-third of the building was only two stories high and housed the Opera House auditorium with a balcony. The rear one-third of the structure served as a stage with a loft above. During the 1920s the interior plan was altered. Additional office spaces were added and the auditorium space was completely renovated with an additional floor inserted making the former two-story space into a three-story structure. The third floor of this new construction was made into a Masonic meeting hall often used by the public for various functions. The rear stage and loft area of the building was also divided into three stories.

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**



Continuation sheet

Item number 4

Page 1

Owners of Cotaco Opera House:

1. Mr. & Mrs. Wally Inscho
Rt. 2, Box 367A
Decatur, Alabama 35603
2. Mr. Michael Edwin Twente
522 Oak Street N.E.
Decatur, Alabama 35601
3. Mr. Joseph T. Backe
2627 Park Street S.E.
Decatur, Alabama 35601
4. Mr. James G. Adams
643 Sherman St. S.E.
Decatur, Alabama 35601

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1890 **Builder/Architect** unknown

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Criteria A & C - Economics/Transportation/Social

The Cotaco Opera House (1890) is significant for its associations with the late 19th century economic boom of Decatur sparked by the arrival of two important railroad lines into the city (1886). The building is the only surviving structure from that period specifically designed to bolster the city's economic status by providing the growing population with Decatur's only social and entertainment center. Although the interior has been greatly altered, the exterior still exhibits one of the city's best facades from the late 19th century.

The Opera House was converted into a Masonic Hall in the 1920s and the interior was heavily renovated. The building continued to serve as Decatur's main social center for public meetings, dances, receptions, etc. until recent times. The 1920's interior is still intact.

9. Major Bibliographical References

William H. Jenkins and John Knox, The Story of Decatur, Alabama (Decatur: Decatur Printing Co., Inc., 1970)
 Thomas M. Owen, History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography, Vol. I (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1921)

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than one
 Quadrangle name Decatur Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A	<u>16</u>	<u>501290</u>	<u>3828790</u>	B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C				D			
E				F			
G				H			

Verbal boundary description and justification

Lots 13, 15 and 17, Block 51.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	NA	code	county	code
state		code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Tom Dolan, Architectural Historian

organization Alabama Historical Commission date October 1985

street & number 725 Monroe Street telephone 205 261-3184

city or town Montgomery state Alabama

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

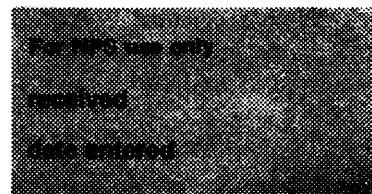
As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *F. Lawrence Oaks*

title State Historic Preservation Officer date March 25, 1986

For HCRS use only I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register	
<u><i>Amy Schlager</i></u>	date <u>4/29/86</u>
Keeper of the National Register	
Attest:	date
Chief of Registration	

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



**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

Continuation sheet

Item number 8

Page 1

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Following the Civil War, Decatur was a very small southern town struggling to overcome the devastation of the war and the economic panic shortly thereafter. In 1886 the city became the crossing point of the Louisville and Nashville and the Memphis and Charleston railroads that made both east-west and north-south connections.¹ In addition, Decatur's position on the Tennessee River, its pleasant building sites and its mineral possibilities all contributed to making it a prime area for industrial development. In the fall and winter of 1886, therefore, three prominent Alabama businessmen, E. C. Gordon, C. C. Harris and W. W. Littlejohn, bought up 5,600 acres of land in the Decatur area and formed the Decatur Land Improvement and Furnace Co.² The company began to advertise and sell land for commercial development based on the excellent transportation systems and possible mineral potential of the area. In the span of a single year 33 new business enterprises were established and the population increased from 1,200 to 5,000. One year later the population had again increased to between 7,000 and 8,000.³

Local enthusiasm surged and city government hurried to provide civic improvements to meet the increasing needs of the sudden population growth. Five hundred new houses and other buildings were erected in 1887. The Land Company provided engineers who laid out the new town with sewage and drainage systems, light plants, telephone service and street cars.

In 1889 there was no facility anywhere in the city for a theater or public meeting hall. The Cotaco Opera House Company was incorporated on September 16, 1889.⁴ This was, of course, during the height of the building boom, and the Opera House was seen as an additional drawing card for prospective new citizens and businesses. The Land Company provided the first four lots between Johnston Street and Second Avenue as the site for the new civic building. The public sale of stock raised \$55,000 for the construction of the new facility.⁵ Completed in 1890, the Opera House was the social center of the new community where musicals, vaudeville and, early in the 20th century, films could be seen.

During the 1920s, the building was purchased by the Rising Sun Masonic Lodge and converted from an entertainment center into a meeting hall. The original stage was removed and an additional floor built in the old auditorium space creating three floors from the original two stories. In addition to lodge functions, the new meeting hall area was used until the mid-20th century for various public and private functions including high school dances, receptions and public meetings.

¹William H. Jenkins and John Knox, The Story of Decatur, Alabama (Decatur: Decatur Printing Co., Inc., 1970), p. 144.

²Ibid., p. 145.

³Ibid., p. 154.

⁴Ibid., p. 153.

⁵Ibid.