

**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

For HCRS use only

received JUL 28 1981

date entered AUG 27 1981

1. Name

historic Cresco Opera House

and/or common Cresco Theater

2. Location

street & number 115 Second Avenue West _____ not for publication

city, town Cresco _____ vicinity of _____ congressional district 3

state Iowa code 19 county Howard code 089

3. Classification

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

4. Owner of Property

name City of Cresco

street & number City Hall

city, town Cresco _____ vicinity of _____ state Iowa

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Recorder's Office

street & number Howard County Courthouse

city, town Cresco _____ state Iowa

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Iowa Opera House Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1979 _____ federal state _____ county _____ local

depository for survey records Division of Historic Preservation

city, town Iowa City _____ state Iowa

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

For over half a century, the Cresco Opera House has been both the tallest building and the chief center for culture and entertainment in this small northeastern Iowa town. Joseph H. Howe, a local engineer, designed this three-story structure, and local builder Martin Johnson supervised its construction in 1914. Architecturally, the exterior of the opera house exhibits the influence of the Prairie School so popular at that time in the midwest. The contrasting brick bands along the roof parapet and around the windows, the narrow brick piers with recessed panels on the front facade, and the arched entrance-way in the manner of Louis Sullivan are typical of this mode. The edifice's brick walls rest on stone foundations over a partially raised full basement. Originally, windows were of the two-over-two wood sash variety, but a 1941 remodeling replaced all but those on the third story with glass block ones. The opera house is capped with a tar and gravel covered flat roof.

Howe did not continue his experiment with the innovative Prairie School in planning the building's interior. The interior plan was based on the Blackstone Theater in Chicago, a neoclassical edifice still standing in that city. Rococo decoration is utilized throughout the theater portion and elaborate frieze work, plaster mouldings, and fancy chandeliers are featured. Somewhat less elaborate was the basement which contained an assembly hall for various community functions, dressing rooms, and rest rooms.

Except for the alteration of the windows and the addition of a modernistic marquee in 1941, alterations to the opera house were minimal. To a large extent, however, little was done to maintain the interior, and by 1977 it had become deteriorated and shabby. In 1978-79 the local citizenry raised money and renovated the interior in an effort to restore it. Although the number of seats were reduced from 725 to 500, the box seats, which had been removed, were rebuilt, the orchestra pit and stage were restored, the chandeliers were rehung, and the plaster relief mouldings and the rococo in general were repaired and repainted.

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 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/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1914–Present **Builder/Architect** Martin Johnson–Builder, Joseph Howe–Architect

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Cresco Opera House is a local manifestation of one of the most significant phases in the social and cultural development of the small towns of Iowa and the Midwest. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the "opera house," according to social historian Lewis Atherton, "symbolized the varied programs, both intellectual and amusing, which pleased Midwesterners. Most of the entertainment by necessity attempted to meet prevailing standards of taste, but always a combination of ambitious professional entertainers and culturally inspired local citizens stood ready to promote 'higher' artistic and intellectual standards." Efforts to bring organized culture and entertainment to Cresco can be traced back to 1875, nearly 40 years before the erection of the Cresco Opera House.

Cresco's first known theater, "Lyric Hall," opened its doors in 1875 and served as a center for dances, church socials, talent shows, visiting drama and musical groups, and was the site for the first movies in the early 1900's. This facility remained in use until 1912 when it was declared a fire hazard and demolished. Also, around the turn-of-the-century, Cresco had two other theaters, known respectively as the "Family" and the "Cozy." In addition to these, the citizens had access to a remodeled livery stable which was used for balls and other forms of entertainment. By 1913, however, the "Lyric" was gone and the other facilities were considered substandard. As a result, a feeling developed among the citizenry that Cresco like every progressive community should have an opera house befitting it.

Early in 1914, the Cresco Commercial Club at the urging of Frank Long, a Cresco native and Chicago based producer of plays and road shows, took the lead in launching a fund raising drive for an opera house. On January 16, 1914, the Cresco Opera House Company was organized and authorized to raise \$25,000 for the new facility. Within six days the company raised \$18,000, and the rest of the capital was subscribed shortly afterwards. Although construction was completed before the end of the year, the opera house did not officially open until 1915. On February 18 of that year, the grand opening took place as a cast of 70 performed the musical "High Jinks." All 725 seats were filled, tickets sold for as much as \$100, and receipts totaled \$6,084.

In addition to theatrical performances, the new facility was equipped to show movies, and it had all the latest machinery including an electric projector. Its basement area contained a community hall used for dances, parties, and other social functions. Although the opera house company retained ownership of the facility, they leased it to M.W. Appleby who operated it on this basis until 1927. That year the company dissolved and sold the building to an individual. For the next 50 years, the facility had several owners before the city purchased it in 1978.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

10. Geographical Data **ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED**

Acreege of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Mason City, Iowa

UTM NOT VERIFIED

Quadrangle scale 1:250,000

UMT References

A

1	5	5	7	0	1	5	0	4	8	0	0	2	1	1	0
Zone				Easting				Northing							

B

Zone				Easting				Northing							

C

Zone				Easting				Northing							

D

Zone				Easting				Northing							

E

Zone				Easting				Northing							

F

Zone				Easting				Northing							

G

Zone				Easting				Northing							

H

Zone				Easting				Northing							

Verbal boundary description and justification

Lot 5, Block 4, Park Addition and North 3 feet of Lot 1, Block 16, in original Plat of Cresco.

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

state code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Ralph J. Christian, Architectural Historian

organization Division of Historic Preservation date July 17, 1981

street & number 26 East Market Street telephone 319-353-6949/353-4186

city or town Iowa City state Iowa

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 Adrian H. Anderson

title State Historic Preservation Officer date 7/17/81

For HCRS use only

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

Entered in the National Register date 8/27/81

for
factory
Alma Byers
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: _____ date _____

Chief of Registration

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Continuation sheet

Item number 9

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atherton, Lewis, Main Street on the Middle Border (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 142.

Cresco Times Plain Dealer, March 28, 1979.

"The Cresco, Opened to the Public Service Thursday, February the 18th 1915,"
copy in Division of Historic Preservation Files.