UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

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The Atlas Building is a three-story brick structure located on Sixteenth Street, a main thoroughfare in the city of Cheyenne which forms a connecting east-west link in the presently unfinished Interstate Highway 80. The Atlas is located in what has historically been the heart of Cheyenne's downtown business district, and is still surrounded by commercial activity.

The Atlas Building faces north and is located on lots five and six of block 417. The frontage of the lots on sixteenth street is 48 feet and the depth of the lots from street front to alley is 132 feet, thus providing 6336 square feet of space for the basement and for each of the first two floors. Over the north half of the building is a third story which was also a part of the Strand Hotel, and there is also a third story extension over the rear or stage area of the theater. But there is no third story for the central portion of the building, resulting in less useable floor space on the third story than one might expect in viewing the front of the building from the north.

The foundation of the building is constructed of concrete and stone, the building proper is of common brick, and the roofing consists of tin and tar paper. In recent times there has been an addition to the front of the building in the form of a metal and glass marquee. The basic material utilized in interior construction is pine. Excluding the basement, floors are of pine and partitions are of wood lath and plaster. As one might expect, in confrontation with a nineteenth century business block, windows are located on the entrance wall facing the street. Twenty-four plain glass windows, twelve on each of the second and third stories, line the front wall. A portion of the wall containing four windows on each side of each story protrudes outward forming a typical bay-window design. The bays, the cornice work, the decorative moldings, and an emblem---"A.D. Atlas 1887"--which is located in a customary central-upper position, together demonstrate an architectural effort beyond a mere functional one, indicating further the trend at this time toward construction of permanent buildings. Below the two bays and against the front of the building is the marquee and below the latter are entrances to the building. There are two front entrances because the west half of the main floor contains the Wigwam Shop, an extendings dealing in gifts and souvenirs. The east half of the ground level and the entire back half of the building is utilized by the Cheyenne Lither heatre Players for summer melodrama productions. DEC 14 1972

The east portion, which once was a soda and confectionery parlor today serves as a theater lobby for the melodrama productions. Evidence of Carlier theater days is displayed in the decorative, molded tin ceiling from which are hung large, ornately-carved light fixtures. Recent remodeling of this room consists of new carpeting and paneling, a popcorn machine, and a small bar where beer is served. On the second and third stories of the building, and directly over both the Wigwam Shop and the theater lobby are a score of facant rooms which once constituted the Strand Hotel.

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE			Varinto

Cheyenne in the 1880's was a city whose residents were beginning to construct buildings which were meant to be permanent. Many of these, constructed of stone or brick, were private homes. However, in that same decade there were many others, private and public, built in Cheyenne and at the nearby military post Fort D. A. Russell. For example, the years 1886-87 witnessed the construction of such buildings as the Wyoming State Capitol, the Union Pacific Depot, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, and the Atlas Building. The Capitol Building provided a home for the territorial, and later state government. The Union Pacific Depot was a necessity as well as a symbol of an industry which to a large extent had been responsible for the establishment of Cheyenne. St. Mark's Episcopal Church is an early expression of the spiritual growth which took place in that far western frontier city. The Atlas Building, originally built to accommodate business offices, was later adapted to serve another basic need of a growing urban area, the need for public entertainment.

In the early 1900's Cheyenne did not lack theaters and, as a matter of fact, did not lack them even in the days of its earliest settlement period. During the more than forty years which elapsed between the original settlement of Cheyenne and the opening of the Atlas Theatre the town witnessed numerous theaters and variety halls. The Capitol Avenue Theatre was built in 1905, three years prior to the construction of the Atlas, and was probably more impressive than the Atlas. Nevertheless, at that time there apparently was room in Cheyenne for another facility, one which could provide low-cost amusement, and thus the Atlas was built. Just prior to the opening of the Atlas Theatre and enterprises on February 16, 1908, the Cheyenne Daily Leader noted that,

Americans are pleasure-loving people and at the present stage of development the city which can not supply amusements at a reasonable rate is severely handicapped in its growth. The people have grown too independent to reside in a place where they can not find amusement or where they can not afford amusement.

One must reach back to at least 1887 in order to trace the origins of the Atlas Building. Although the "Atlas Block" was known by that name as

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## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

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Statement of Physical Appearance - 2

For the most part, the rear half of the Atlas Building containing the theater is unchanged in its design, and in its interior decoration there has been very little change since the days of the Strand Theatre. The balcony, with its leather-upholstered seats, remains basically unchanged, but in the parquet individual seats have been removed and replaced by wooden tables and benches to accommodate those in the melodrama audience who during the performances may wish to eat popcorn from bowls and drink beer served in pitchers. seats on either side of the stage have been removed and replaced with spotlights. Located on a conspicuous platform not quite beneath the west bank of spotlights is a piano which is used for the melodrama. Interior theater decorations are what may be described today as somewhat garish and sufficiently colorful to catch the eye even under dim lighting conditions. The painted, asbestos stage curtain which dates from the days of the original Atlas Theater continues to be used for the melodrama, although a second and more recent curtain is situated behind the first. Immediately below the stage are dressing rooms for the cast, while the rest of the space contained in the basement is used for storage.



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Statement of Significance - 2

early as 1884 the Atlas Building itself was not built on that block until about 1887. Since county assessor records concerning the Atlas Building exist from 1930 to the present one can only somise that the 1887 date which is inscribed upon the face of the building is also the date of its construction. From 1887 to 1908 the top two floors of the building were utilized for office space by professional men while the bottom floor was a tea and confectionery shop.

On May 31, 1883 lots five and six of block 417, upon which the Atlas was built, were sold to Henry Hay and John B. Thomas by Francis E. Warren for one dollar and considerations. Nearly twenty-four years later, on March 2, 1907, Mr. Thomas sold the Atlas Building to Thomas Heaney for \$17,000.00. Since Warren himself had paid \$3,100.00 for the property in 1882, it may be assumed that over a span of twenty-five years the value of the property increased considerably. It may also be supposed that Mr. Heaney, the new owner of the property in 1907, felt that the fortune of Cheyenne was rising since he had an architect draw up plans for remodeling the Atlas Building into the Atlas Theatre. Only two years previously, in 1905, the Capitol Avenue Theatre had been built one city block away and Mr. Heaney owned a share of that property also. venture Heaney and Walter J. Bradley had bought out the stockholders of the Capitol Avenue Theatre. Among those from whom they purchased it were such Wyoming pioneers as Francis E. Warren, T. A. Cosgriff, Joseph M. Carey, and Similar to those pioneers, Heaney held many interests. George W. Hoyt. was a stonecutter by trade who, according to the Stonecutter's Journal, "enjoyed a varied and checkered career." Not only was he a stonecutter and the owner and proprietor of the Atlas Theatre, but he was the head of a Cheyenne mercantile establishment and owned real estate, possibly in several At one time also he had been nominated for state senator. states.

By August, 1907 architectural drawings were completed for a remodeling of the Atlas Building to provide several enterprises including a theater. The architect in charge of the work was William Dubois, a prominent citizen in both city and state. Remembered mainly as the architect of numerous Wyoming buildings, he was prominent in other aspects of Cheyenne society as well, including having served as a representative to both the Wyoming State House of Representatives (1903-1909) and the Wyoming State Senate (1909-1913).

The day before the opening of the Atlas Theater the <u>Daily Leader</u> noted that the theater had been pronounced to be, by members of the theatrical profession who examined it, the "prettiest showhouse west of the Missouri." The <u>Daily Leader</u> article went on to proudly describe the Atlas Theater and enterprises.

It is useless to attempt to describe the beauty of the Atlas Theater to the Cheyennese. They must visit the place before

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Statement of Significance |= 3

they can gain a comprehensive idea of the amusement house which Mr. Heaney has provided for them. As has heretofore been said it is like a glimpted of white and gold sparkling lights.

The "sparkling lights" mentioned were probably those located at the theater entranceway where scores of incandescent lights and sparkling mirrors melded with interior lights to provide a dazzling greeting for Atlas patrons. Within the building the main floor was divided into three parts: the theater, a penny arcade, and a soda and confectionery parlor.

It should be noted that the Atlas Building was not originally designed to accommodate the theater which was placed in the rear of the building. Yet, the theater provided a seating capacity of about 550. The architectural design by Dubois, a functional one, assigned two thirds of the seats to the parquet and the remainder to the balcony. The stage was probably sufficient to accommodate most traveling vaudeville acts at the time, and the theater house was probably large enough to provide adequate seating most of the time. On its opening night the Atlas had to compete with the Capitol Avenue Theatre which, despite a driving storm, drew a crowd of 1200 to the performance of "Madam Butterfly." Yet, despite the competition opening night for the Atlas was apparently a success as the Sullivan-Considine vaudeville performance attracted two capacity houses with standing room sold. That evening one could purchase a box seat at the Atlas for fifty cents and watch a program which consisted of a burlesque by the American Trio entitled "The Bell Boy", a comedy sketch with Grace Huntington and Henry Keenan entitled "Why He Reformed", and singing by Charlotte J. Tompkins and John Cassidy. Supplementing the program were motion pictures projected from a machine located in a fireproof room in the balcony.

In the lobby of the theater was a penny arcade wherein could be found various forms of amusement offered by Atlas Enterprises. The  $\underline{\text{Daily Leader}}$  claimed that one could spend hours in the arcade.

The arcade is as beautiful, in its way, as the theater and the refreshment room. Entering through portals paneled with mirrors, patrons are first attracted by two large distorting mirrors, which reflect their forms grotesquely and in an infinite variety of distortions. The amusements to be derived from these mirrors alone is well worth a visit to the arcade.

Passing the mirrorspatrons have before them long lines of penny-in-the-slot devices where they may spend as much time and change as is convenient and be entertained in new and novel ways

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Statement of Significance

every minute. There are adjoint for tune tellers, flashlight lifters, phonographs, musical instruments, lung testers, illustrated song machines, tag manufacturing machines, strength testers, weight recorders, electrical diagnosis devices, automatic salesmen, eccentric reflectors, picture machines, funny manikins that dive in real water, etc. There is a facination about the slot machines and having begun patrons are not satisfied until they have played every device in the house.

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The third attraction on the main floor of the Atlas was the refreshment room consisting of a soda parlor and confectionery salesroom. Located adjacent to the arcade, it was accessible from the arcade, the theater and the street. Here people could relax and enjoy many types of hot drinks, ice cream, sherbets and sandwiches served by pretty young women wearing attractive uniforms. The <u>Daily Leader</u> reported:

Here is the largest and most costly soda fountain in the entire west. The fountain is massively, yet gracefully, beautiful, with its marble counter, nickled fixtures, great French plate mirror, weathered oak woodwork and softly shaded electric lights. A score of patrons may be served simultaneously at the fountain counter and many more will find accommodation at nearby tables.

Back of the soda fountain is the confectionery salesroom, the walls of which are panelled with French plate mirrors set in weathered oak. The confectionery display cases are of solid plate glass and of rarely graceful design. Throughout the room will be illuminated by electric lights under antique shades.

The fittings of the confectionery room are in keeping with the theater, the significance of which assertation you will understand when you have seen them both.

In the basement of the building was located a confectionery factory where candy was made by a staff of half a dozen persons. The candy, smoker's supplies, and souvenirs were sold both wholesale and retail.

The Atlas remained open until December, 1929. Two months later, in February, 1930, the theater opened again as the "Strand", under the control of the Publix Theatre chain which also purchased and remodeled the Capitol Avenue Theatre, renaming it the "Paramount". In an article in the Wyoming State Tribune for February 21, 1930 it was stated that nearly fifty thousand dollars had been spent on the Strand for improvements of every type and nature including new wall paneling, new flooring, deep-cushioned, leather-upholstered seats, carpets, draperies, a new screen, and projection facilities which

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Statement of Significance - NATIONAL REGISTER

included the latest Western Electric sound equipment. Movies presented during opening week at the trapp were Al Jolson's latest singing picture "Say it With Songs", followed by the Marx Brothers in an adaptation of the musical comedy "The Cocoanuts". The week was rounded out by "Fast Company" starring Jack Okie, and an adaptation of the S. S. Van Dine mystery, "The Green Murder Case" starring William Powell as Philo Vance. In a statement to the Tribune an official of Publix said that his company was going to present the same high-class entertainment in the new Strand as that presented in the Paramount, and that no expense had been spared to make the Strand a very pretty little theater.

Some research into the history of the Strand indicates that the theater may have closed by August of 1931, and that in later years it twice reopened and closed. Sometime during that period the Fox Theater chain displaced Publix as the lessee of both the Strand and Paramount but in 1955 Fox came under a U. S. Supreme Court order to divest itself of its theater monopoly. The Strand Building, including the upper floors which for sometime had been operated as the Strand Hotel, then reverted into the hands of the Bradley family which had been the lessor. From 1955 to 1961 the building was not used as a theater, and in the latter year the Atlas Building was the location of the Pink Pony night club. When the Pink Pony operation was abandoned in 1963 the building lay vacant until 1966 when a local theater group, the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players, provided an opportunity for the theater to again house an audience. On September 3, 1971 that organization took a further step toward the preservation of the Atlas Theatre Building when it purchased the Atlas property. Acquisition of the property accomplished two basic things; first, responsibility for the building devolved into the hands of an organization which may presently be in a position to be able to preserve it and possibly restore it more fully to its early twentieth century appearance; second, the building was put to use to provide a home for oldfashioned melodrama productions presented by the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players each summer. Today the melodrama is one of the highlights of summer activities in Cheyenne.

The Cheyenne Little Theatre Players itself is one of the oldest continuously operating amateur theater groups in the Rocky Mountain West. The group was founded in 1929 by several persons, among whom was the wife of Joseph C. O'Mahoney, a long-time Wyoming United States Senator. In 1930 Mrs. O'Mahoney was elected as the first president of the theater organization. Productions were presented in the Wyoming Consistory Building until 1953 when performances were moved to the Lincoln Theatre, and finally in 1968 the impressive and permanent Cheyenne Little Theatre was constructed. The mortgages on the latter building and the Atlas Building presently are being paid for by the charge of admissions to theatrical performances, including the summer melodrama, which are staged by the non-profit organization. Through the years

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members of the Little Theatre organization have often also been those interested in historic preservation. Among those interested persons are: Frederic Hutchison Porter, former Wyoming State Preservation Officer of the American Institute of Architects; Louise Hallowell, daughter of pioneer photographer Joseph E. Stimson, and historian for the Theatre Players organization; and Pat Hall, who currently is directing Wyoming's participation in the celebration of the nation's bi-centennial. Coincidentally, another member is William Dubois III, grandson of the architect who designed the Atlas Theatre, a history instructor, a past president of the Wyoming State Historical Society, and currently president of the Board of Directors of Cheyenne Little Theatre Players.

In summary, the interest which members of the Little Theatre group hold for theater is supplemented by their interest in historic preservation and a combination of those interests will hopefully be a happy one. Hopefully also it will be strong enough to achieve the preservation and restoration of not only one of the oldest buildings in Cheyenne, but a long-time home of Cheyenne theater.





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