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United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name New Opera House
other names/site number MacLay Opera House; NeHBS #NH01-45; OHBIN #11-29-02

2. Location

street & number 921 Central Ave.
city, town Auburn
state Nebraska code NE county Nemaha code 127 zip code 68305

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: [x] private, [ ] public-local, [ ] public-State, [ ] public-Federal
Category of Property: [x] building(s), [ ] district, [ ] site, [ ] structure, [ ] object
Number of Resources within Property: Contributing 1, Noncontributing 0

Name of related multiple property listing: Opera House Buildings in Nebraska 1867-1917
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this [x] 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 [x] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet.
Signature of certifying official: James A. Harrison, Director, Nebraska State Historical Society
Date: May 16, 1988

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. [ ] See continuation sheet.
Signature of commenting or other official
Date
State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:
[x] 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: Beth Poland
Date of Action: 9/28/88

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

## 6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Recreation & Culture: Theatre;  
music facility

Social: Meeting hall

Commerce/Trade: Specialty store

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Vacant/Not in use  
Commerce/Trade: Specialty store

## 7. Description

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: Two-part commercial block

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Unknown  
walls Brick

roof OTHER: Pitch and gravel

other Stone trim, including masks of  
classical-style figures

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The New Opera House is located at 921 Central Avenue, near what is now the busiest intersection in Auburn, the junction of Highways 73-75 and Highway 36. In 1890, at the time the opera house was constructed, the area was known as the North Side, north of the town's main retail section. The North Side was chosen as the site for the New Opera House partly because it had suffered serious damage from a fire in the spring of 1890, and partly because it was in another part of town than the Daugherty Opera House, which predated it. The New Opera House, erected at a reported cost of \$20,000, was built and operated by the Auburn Building and Improvement Association, which had incorporated in 1890 for "improvement of the city of Auburn, by the construction of an opera house--erection and maintenance and such other improvements as may be deemed necessary" (Small Towns Institute 58).

The facade of the New Opera House is typical of Nebraska opera houses built in the 1890s. For a town the size of Auburn, with a more limited income base than larger cities, the facade is quite elaborate. It includes two large arched windows at the center front of the facade, each brick arch crowned with a classical-style mask (see photo #2). Stone border rows are strategically placed along the facade, the most dominant one placed on a level immediately above the lower banks of windows on either side of the central arched ones. The upper third of the facade includes latticed brickwork; decorative stone carved in the shape of leaves; stonework flush with the building that gives the impression of a balcony rail, although no balcony exists; and two highly decorative pediments centered above the outer thirds of the facade, which proclaim "18" and "90". It has a pitch and gravel roof. The Two-Part Commercial Block structure measures 100 feet wide by 110 feet long. Access to the second-floor auditorium is via a six-foot-wide stairway at the southwest corner of the building immediately west of the New Opera House. The box office was a 10 foot by 10 foot room in the southwest corner of the auditorium, immediately inside the main entrance doors.

The auditorium is 55 feet long from the edge of the proscenium arch to the front of the foyer, by 50 feet wide. The foyer, located entirely beneath the balcony, extends 22 feet behind the auditorium proper. Access to the balcony is via an attractive stairway at the center of the foyer, which divides halfway up, allowing patrons to enter the balcony to either the right or the left. The edge of the tiered balcony is delineated by a wainscoted "knee-knocker" railing. Three pillars support the ceiling, extending in a row down the center of the auditorium. Pillars also support the foyer and the balcony. The ceiling and walls reflect some water damage.

See continuation sheet

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)  
Performing Arts  
Entertainment/Recreation  
Social History  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance  
1890-1917  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates  
1890  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation  
N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person  
N/A

Architect/Builder  
Dorrum, William (builder)

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The New Opera House is significant for its association with and in reference to the historic context "Aesthetic Systems: Itinerant and Local Performing Arts in Nebraska" and the property type of "Opera House Buildings in Nebraska, 1867 to 1917." Under Criterion A, this opera house is significant in the areas of the performing arts; entertainment/recreation; and social history, on a state level, as a well preserved example of an opera house building in Nebraska. The building retains a high degree of historical integrity, possessing the physical and associative characteristics to make it an eligible member of its property type.

This opera house is significant in the area of performing arts for bringing a variety of entertainment to the community of Auburn. As a facility for the performing arts, it offered productions such as musical concerts; dialect comedies; classics like *East Lynne*, *A Royal Slave*, *The Wolf*, and *Lena Rivers*; touring stock companies; comic and grand opera; Shakespeare; performers of the caliber of Wood and Ward and John Dillon; minstrel shows; comedians; and home talent. (See following table of Representative Entertainments 1894-1917.)

This opera house is significant in the area of entertainment/recreation, since it provided a place where the whole community could gather to attend dances, lectures, and other genteel activities. (See following table of Representative Entertainments 1894-1917.)

This opera house is significant in the area of social history, because it gave Auburn a neutral, nonaffiliated location for political meetings. (See following table of Representative Entertainments 1894-1917.) In the days before radio, television, and sound movies, activities at the opera house were anticipated for days or weeks ahead of time. It provided a place for people to get together to have a good time and forget their troubles over crops, weather, taxes, the railroads, and the generally hard life of settling the Great Plains.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

*Auburn Post*. 8 Oct. 1891 - 1 Nov. 1894 and 30 Oct. 1896 - 4 Dec. 1903.  
*Auburn and Southeastern Nebraska*. Lincoln: Center for Great Plains Studies, U of Nebraska.  
Hemmingsen, Mrs. R.W. Personal interview. Auburn: 29 Nov. 1986.  
Hemmingsen, R. W. Letters to the author. Auburn: Jul. and 25 Aug. 1987.  
Moody, Mrs. Vern. Letters to the author. Auburn: 6 Oct. 1986 and 25 Aug. 1987.  
*Nemaha County Herald*. 3 Jan. 1890 - 24 Nov. 1893.  
Nemaha County Register of Deeds. New Opera house public records. 5 Aug. 1987.  
*Nemaha Republican*. 7 Oct. 1904 - 29 Nov. 1917.  
New Opera House. Auburn site visit. 29 Nov. 1986.  
Stoddard, Hugh P., Esther Pohlman, Ruth Boellstorff, and Evalyn Christy. "An Informal History of Nemaha County, 1854-1967." Unpublished ts.; Nebraska State Historical Society Library, 1967.

See continuation sheet

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 # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

D. Layne Ehlers (see below)

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property less than one [1] acre

UTM References

A 11 5 2 5 9 1 0 0 4 4 7 4 9 8 5  
 Zone Easting Northing

C \_\_\_\_\_

B \_\_\_\_\_  
 Zone Easting Northing

D \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

This property is described as Lots 11 and 12, Block 20 of the Howe and Nixon addition to Auburn, Nemaha County, Nebraska.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire town lots that have been historically associated with this property.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title D. Layne Ehlers, Principal Investigator

organization OHBIN Study date April, 1988

street & number 2302 South 11th telephone [402] 435-6946

city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68502

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Function or Use : Historic Functions

Health Care: Medical business/office

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The wooden proscenium arch, which features two carved bas-relief pillars on each side (see photo #4), measures 20 feet wide by approximately 12 feet high. Ample wings, 15 feet wide, are on each side of the proscenium opening, with a small wooden dressing room (9 feet long by 5 feet, 6 inches wide) in the back corner on each side. Access to the backstage area is through a narrow door on each side of the proscenium wall, near the outside walls of the auditorium. The low stage, less than three feet above the floor, is wainscoted below the stage floor level, a decoration which continues along the entire proscenium wall. The stage measures 19 feet from the curtain line to the back wall. A three-foot apron curves outward from the arch, containing a footlight trough. A trap door is located upstage left. Some of the original opera chairs from this opera house are now located in the Brownville Village [Summer] Theatre in Brownville, Nebraska, about ten miles east of Auburn. The Brownville Historical Society also possesses a painted scenic curtain from this opera house.

The structural and historical integrity of the building and theatre has been preserved, despite evidence of water damage.

The double-store building originally exhibited cast iron storefronts with recessed entries and transom windows. Alterations to the storefronts were made in later years, and consisted of new plate glass doors and plate glass windows. The original recessed entry configuration on both storefronts and the large stone wall pilasters framing and dividing the storefronts remain intact. The space originally housed a dry goods store and drug store, and currently serves as a clothing store. The opera house space is vacant.

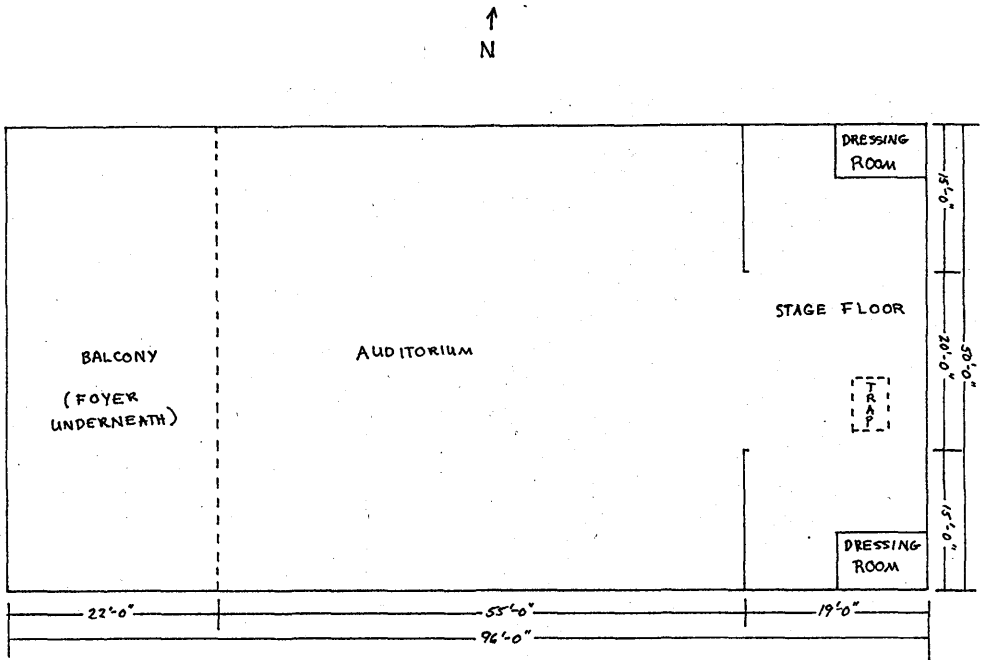
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Floor plan, New Opera House, Auburn



P. Leitner, Draftsman

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The period of significance is derived from the original construction date of the building, 1894, when the Auburn Building and Improvement Association was formed to "construct a nice opera house on the North Side" of town (Small Towns Institute 58). The period of significance continues through 1917, the year considered to signal the end of the opera house era in Nebraska, based on declining numbers of touring companies nationally and rising numbers of movie houses and automobiles. The local opening of the ground floor Auburn Auditorium in 1913 and the Ideal Theatre at about the same time took considerable business away from what was by then known as the Maclay Opera House.



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New Opera House, Auburn  
Representative Entertainments, 1894-1917

DATE            EVENT AND PERFORMERS

### Social History

Oct 1904    Speech by Congressman Elmer J. Burkett  
Oct 1906    Political speech by W. H. Thompson of Grand Island  
Nov 1906    Political Rally with Hon. George L. Sheldon and Senator Burkett

### Entertainment/Recreation

Oct 1894    Grand ball  
Nov 1894    Clayton D. Gilbert, impersonator  
Dec 1894    Literary and musical entertainment by Ladies of the Presbyterian Church  
Oct 1899    Kline's Lumiere Cinematographe  
Dec 1900    Lecture by Dr. Eugene May of Washington, D.C.  
Nov 1904    Lecture by Dr. Frank Roberson on Imperial India  
Nov 1905    Lecture by Rev. Phil Baird  
Oct 1908    Musical recital, pupils of Mrs. E. Guy Simpson  
Nov 1914    Ross Crane, Cartoonist entertainer

### Performing Arts

Oct 1895    *A Turkish Bath*  
*Little Red Riding Hood's Rescue*, home talent cantata  
Schubert Quintette of Chicago  
Nov 1896    John Dillon in *Wanted the Earth*  
Dec 1896    Pond-Berlin Comedy Co. with *The Fireman's Ward* and *Jerry, the Tramp*  
Oct 1897    *Gilhooley's Reception*  
Nov 1897    Beach & Bowers Minstrel Troupe  
Oct 1898    *The Gay Matinee Girl* with Mattie Vickers, Monroe & Hart  
Nov 1898    Andrews Opera co. with *The Mikado*  
Nov 1899    *A White Elephant* with the Pringle Comedy Co.  
Oct 1900    Schuberts  
Nov 1900    The Boston Stars  
*Quo Vadis*  
James T. McAlpin in *Hans Hansen*

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Representative Entertainments, 1894-1917

DATE EVENT AND PERFORMERS

## Performing Arts, cont'd.

Dec 1900 *Queen Esther* home talent cantata  
 Dec 1901 Miss Courtney Morgan in *East Lynne*  
 Oct 1904 Arlington's Comedians  
 Joseph De Grasse as *Hamlet*  
 Nov 1904 *Jeremiah Hopkins*  
 Wesleyan University Quartette from University Place, Nebraska  
 Frank James and Co. in *Fatal Scar*  
 Nov 1905 *A Royal Slave*  
*Uncle Josh Perkins*  
 Oct 1906 *Yon Yonson* with George Thompson  
*The Little Homestead*  
 Nov 1906 *Over Niagara Falls*  
*The Minister's Son*  
 The Cremora Ladies' Orchestra  
 Belle Whitman co.  
 May 1907 *A Daughter of the South*, Senior Class home talent play  
 Nov 1907 *Ole Olson in Spiritland* with Carl M. Dainton  
*Under the Mistletoe Bough*, home talent musical pantomime  
 Dec 1907 *Toyland*  
 Oct 1908 *Three Years in Arkansas*  
 Nov 1908 *The Cow-Puncher*  
 Wood & Ward in *Two Merry Tramps*  
 Dubinsky Brothers' *Pickings from Puck*  
 Dec 1908 *A Bachelor's Honeymoon* with James P. Green  
 Oct 1909 *The Old Clothes Man* with Herbert de Guerre and Florence Thompson  
 Nov 1909 *The Belle of Japan* with Miss Burdi Bartram  
 Jack Mahara's White Minstrels  
 Lee D. Ellsworth in *The New Humpty Dumpty, or The Yankee King*  
*The Little Homestead*  
 G of Q Minstrels, home talent benefit  
*Kidnapped for a Million*  
 The Lockes in *The Girl and the Gawk*  
 Oct 1911 *The Rosary*

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New Opera House, Auburn  
Representative Entertainments, 1894-1917

DATE EVENT AND PERFORMERS

Performing Arts, cont'd.

Nov 1911 *The Wizard of Wiseland*  
Mozart Concert Co.  
*The Punkin Husker*  
Oct 1912 *The Wolf*  
Nov 1912 Hilliard Wight as *Hamlet* with Miss Amber Wight  
Roney's Boys Concert Co.  
Oct 1913 *The Girl of Eagle Ranch*  
Nov 1913 *The Shepherd of the Hills*  
Dec 1913 *Lena Rivers*  
Oct 1914 *The Time, The Place, and The Girl*  
Dec 1914 Frank Lea Short co. in *The Romancers*  
Apr 1916 *The New Lady Bantock* by the Peru State Normal Dramatic Club  
May 1916 *The Blossoming of Mary Anne*, Senior Class home talent production

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Photographs

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The following information is the same for all Auburn photographs:

NAME OF PROPERTY: New Opera House  
CITY, COUNTY, STATE: Auburn, Nemaha, Nebraska  
NeHBS SITE No.: NH01-45  
OHBIN SITE No.: 11-29-02  
NAME OF PHOTOGRAPHER: Christian H. Ehlers

PHOTO NUMBER: Auburn #1  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-29-02 (8611/5:8)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Exterior view, looking southwest at the north (front) facade.

PHOTO NUMBER: Auburn #2  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-29-02 (8611/5:10)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Exterior view, looking south and up at the 'faces' above the windows on the north (front) facade.

PHOTO NUMBER: Auburn #3  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-29-02 (8611/4:30)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking north northeast from the balcony at the stage area.

PHOTO NUMBER: Auburn #4  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-29-02 (8611/5:2)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking southeast at the decorative column along the right side of the proscenium.

PHOTO NUMBER: Auburn #5  
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 11-29-02 (8611/4:32)  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society  
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking west southwest (from the stage) at the auditorium area.