

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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 Howard Theater (amendment)
other names _____

2. Location

street & number 620 T Street, NW ☐ not for publication
city or town Washington, D.C. ☐ vicinity
state District of Columbia Code DC county _____ code 001 zip code 20005

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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 Date

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 certifying official/Title 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

Date of Action

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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	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	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
1

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION/CULTURE/Theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION/CULTURE/Theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

20th CENTURY REVIVALS/Beaux Arts

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Steel, brick and stucco

roof Concrete

other

Narrative Description

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

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Description Summary:

The Howard Theater at 620 T Street, N.W. is a freestanding, double-height, stucco-clad theater building constructed in 1910. The theater, designed by architect Edward J. Storck, was located in the heart of what was historically Washington, D.C.'s pre-eminent African American community. Though much altered, the building still retains an imposing presence on a narrow stretch of T Street and dominates the collection of small-scaled, 19th-century commercial and residential buildings clustered around the corner of 7th and T Streets. The façade, altered from its original Beaux Arts design, is covered with a thick coat of stucco and features a second-generation marquee and sign identifying the theater as the Howard. The main body of the theater auditorium, behind the stucco façade, is a steel and concrete structure, clad in brick. It rises a full two stories in height to accommodate the second floor balcony level on the interior and was originally covered with a concrete roof which has since partially failed. The building has a rectangular footprint measuring 80 feet wide and 126 feet deep and containing approximately 15,000 square feet. The brick side walls of the building extend the depth of the lot and front on two minor streets, Wiltberger Street and Wiltberger Alley (west). Historically these walls offered plentiful ingress and egress routes that proved strategic for moving crowds during the Howard's heyday as the city's most popular African American entertainment venue.

The Howard has undergone extensive alterations since 1910. In 1931, it was extensively renovated, leaving little of the original interior finishes intact. It was altered again in 1941 and in 1974. The Howard currently stands in deteriorated condition, but remains structurally sound and is on the cusp of a major renovation.

General Description:

Site:

The Howard Theater is located at the north end of Square 441, between 6th and 7th and S and T Streets, N.W., just south of U Street and at the edge of the original city limits. The theater is a freestanding structure that faces T Street and is flanked by two minor streets, Wiltberger Street and Wiltberger Alley. Generally, it is located in a mixed-use residential and commercial neighborhood, where the commercial buildings line the 7th Street and U Street corridors and the residential buildings occupy the majority of the other grid streets. More specifically, it occupies a block that was historically home to a major bread baking industry, with bakery buildings dominating Wiltberger Street and S Street to the south. Although now vacant, these industrial bakery buildings still stand, and along with the Howard, give this particular block its unique character.

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Exterior:

The front façade of the Howard Theater, stripped of its original 1910 ornamentation and covered in a thick stucco finish, is a denuded remnant of its former self.¹ Divided into three principal parts including a central bay and end wings separated by pilasters, the façade historically featured a large, arched opening on center with smaller doors in both end wings and an array of window openings at each story. A segmental arched opening with a balcony off of it was located above the main entry door below, while an ornate frieze extended across the entire façade at the cornice level. A parapet wall above the cornice culminated on center with a Dutch gable upon which rose a statue of Apollo playing an instrument. The 1910 theater, known only from a single historic photograph, was designed in the Beaux Arts tradition and has been described alternately as Italian Renaissance and Spanish Baroque in style.

Today, the façade has been stripped of its ornamentation, including the cornice, statuary, and door surrounds, while all of the window openings and side doors have been filled in and the entire façade has been clad with a thick coat of stucco. The entrance, slightly recessed and filled with a bank of metal doors, is located on the center of the façade and is topped by a flat metal marquee, erected in 1926, and suspended by metal cables attached to the front facade. Above the entrance is a vertically hung sign bearing the name of the Howard and likely erected in 1926 at the same time as the marquee.

The side walls of the theater extending along Wiltberger Street and Wiltberger Alley remain essentially intact to their original 1910 appearance. These unpainted brick walls rise from the concrete slab foundation to a corbelled brick cornice with a row of 16 regularly spaced blind window openings, set above a brick stringcourse at the upper level of the wall. Several door openings, now filled in, once opened along both sidewalls. These doors, noted in period press reports, allowed for easy ingress and egress for both performers and audiences. From a building permit issued the day of the building's opening in 1910, it is known that two, 7' x 9' signs made of galvanized metal and reading "Howard Theater/Vaudeville/Drama/Musical Comedy" hung on the side walls.

A taller brick tower-like section (the fly loft) extends to the rear of the lot from the main auditorium space. Four bays of segmental arched openings at the ground level and the first story of this flyloft are now bricked in on the sides. The rear elevation is a plain, unfenestrated brick wall rising to the roof of the tall fly loft.

¹ For a thorough description and analysis of the historic appearance of the Howard, both on the exterior and the interior, see Sumon Sorg and Elizabeth Hannold, "Howard Theater: Intensive Architectural Survey," D.C. Blacks in the Arts, 1987.

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Interior:

The interior of the theater, consisting principally of a stage, a large auditorium with box seating, and a balcony level that together seated approximately 1,200, has undergone extensive alterations over the years. Having been vacant for the past 20 years, it is currently in deteriorating condition. The interior still retains its major features, including the stage, auditorium, balcony, seating, and ornamental iron stairs, but no longer retains much in terms of the decorative or ornamental features from the 1910 original period of construction, the 1931 major renovation, or any of the later phases of redevelopment.

Originally, however, the interior of the Howard was sumptuously decorated. Nearly every surface was encrusted with sculptural decoration and small bas-relief cherubs stood guard over the balconies and stage. In 1931 when Sam Steifel of the Steiffel Brothers who owned a string of theaters in Philadelphia purchased the Howard, the theater underwent a major renovation. An article in the *Afro American* noted that the renovation included new seats, new sound equipment, and padded walls in a "black, green and gold color scheme." Certain remnants from this 1931 Art Deco re-design, including the curved metal light fixtures and glass block details, remained as late as 1987 when an intensive architectural report was prepared on the Howard.

The theater was originally entered through the grand central arched entryway which opened into a generous 15' x 30' lobby. On either side of the lobby were a ticket booth and office. Beyond these, at the outer corners of the building were broad, six-foot-wide stairs leading to the balcony. The auditorium, entered from the lobby, was a fan-shaped space, divided into three seating sections and sloped gently toward the stage. A sweeping horseshoe shaped balcony was supported by Corinthian columns and reached from the auditorium by metal stairs with ornamental metalwork and stone treads.

Today, the interior of the Howard is still reached through central entry doors which lead into a lobby with a concession stand to the left and a ticket booth to the right. The lobby features certain remnants of the 1931 period of renovation, including fluted pilasters, but most of the applied partitions and built-in furnishings are severely deteriorating and water damaged. The entry lobby leads into the auditorium space with the balcony level above reached by the original iron stairs. The steel columns with Corinthian capitals and the curving balcony are still structurally sound according to recent assessments, and the auditorium retains the majority of its seats (from the 1974 renovation) and the 1910-era stairs to the balcony, but is in a state of neglect beyond description.

Given the current physical condition of the Howard Theater, the building no longer retains integrity of materials, and workmanship. However, the building's historical and cultural

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significance far surpasses its physical condition, and the building’s integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association is enough to qualify it for listing in the National Register.

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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 pattern of our History.
- ☐ **B** Property 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 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)

Area of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
ETHNIC HERITAGE

Period of Significance

1910-1970

Significant Dates

1910; 1931

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Edward Storck

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 files (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

Name of repository:

D.C. Historic Preservation Office

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Summary Statement of Significance:

The Howard Theater at 620 T Street, N.W. is a freestanding, stucco-clad theater building constructed in 1910 within Washington D.C.'s then burgeoning African American U Street community.² Originally constructed as a playhouse for both variety shows and moving pictures catering to African American audiences, the Howard later came to be one of the nation's premier venues for black musicians and entertainers. The Howard is the oldest surviving theater in the country built expressly for black audiences during segregation when African Americans were barred from attending or performing at white theaters. Even more significantly, throughout its history, the Howard played a vital role in the development and promotion of black talent and, as such, is nationally significant for its cultural contributions to our country's African American heritage.

The Howard, along with other prestigious east coast theaters such as the Apollo in New York, the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia, and the Royal Theater in Baltimore, provided the stage during segregation upon which many of the most prominent African American entertainers in the age of jazz and blues made their debut. Of these theaters, three of them including the Howard, the Apollo, and the Uptown are all listed in the National Register of Historic Places (the Apollo is listed at the "national" level of significance); the Royal Theater in Baltimore was demolished in 1971. This nomination form, an amendment to the 1974 listing of the Howard Theater in the National Register, provides the necessary documentation to update the building's level of significance from "statewide" to "national."

The Howard Theater meets Criterion A of the National Register of Historic Places with Entertainment/Recreation and Ethnic Heritage as the areas of significance:

The Howard Theater building at 620 T Street, N.W. stands as a premier example of an early 20th-century theater building that originally offered both live variety shows and moving picture shows. The Howard Theater, which catered to an African-American audience at a time when segregation prevented blacks from patronizing "whites-only" enterprises, is the oldest surviving African American theater in the country.

During its heyday as a music venue extending for several decades from the 1930s to the 1960s, the Howard Theater provided a national stage for the development and promotion of black talent. The Howard nourished the segregated African American artistic community by hosting the greatest performers of the time, including Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Lena Horne, Billy Eckstein and Diana Ross and the Supremes,

² See the U Street Historic District National Register Nomination for a discussion of the significance of the U Street corridor on the city's African American heritage.

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to name a few. The Howard is recognized nationally for “discovering” and promoting many of the country’s finest musical talents.

The Howard Theater currently stands in an altered state from its original 1910 appearance and in deteriorating condition. However, the building retains integrity of location, setting, feeling, and association. Further, the overall sense of the building’s time and place is still evident. The Period of Significance extends from its date of construction in 1910 to the theater’s first closing in 1970.

Resource History and Historic Context:

The Howard Theater, the Vaudeville Theater, and the U Street Corridor:

The Howard Theater at 620 T Street was constructed in 1910 at 7th and T Streets, N.W. by the Baltimore-based National Amusement Company. It was located within the heart of the city’s burgeoning African American community centered along U Street and was the first theater in the country built expressly for black audiences.³ As designed by architect Edward J. Storck and constructed by builder Henry L. Maas, the Howard initially served as a variety hall featuring both vaudeville acts and moving pictures. The theater was constructed at a time when Vaudeville theater was at its height, and just as the moving picture industry was gaining in popularity. The Howard Theater was named after General Oliver Otis Howard, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau and principal founder and third president of Howard University.

Vaudeville theater was a theatrical form which consisted of a string of specialized acts which could include singing, dancing, comedy or short plays and musicals. It arose in the late 19th century and by 1900 there were over 2,000 vaudeville theaters in the U.S. and Canada. By the Depression, Vaudeville had moved beyond its prime, having been replaced by moving pictures, then talking pictures and radio.⁴ The Howard Theater opened on August 22, 1910 with an all-vaudeville program featuring a circus act of gymnasts and acrobats, a vocalist, a comedy team, minstrels, a musical comedy and a playlet.

Because Washington, D.C. was a segregated city with no theatrical venue for African Americans—blacks were excluded from the city’s theaters both as performers and patrons—the Howard’s opening was a much-anticipated even within the African American community. So, when the theater did open, it was already the pride of the city’s black community and was met with great enthusiasm and acclaim. The city’s leading African American newspaper, The

³ The Apollo Theater in Harlem was constructed in 1914 as a burlesque house and did not become a center of African American entertainment until the 1930s.

⁴ “Howard Theater, Intensive Architectural Survey,” Sumon Sorg and Elizabeth Hannold, 1987, p.4.

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Washington Bee, and Baltimore's *Afro-American Ledger*, reported on opening night at the Howard, noting that the evening had attracted over one thousand of Washington's elite, including several notable Washingtonians who thanked the builders "for what they had done for the colored Americans in erecting such a playhouse to the people."⁵ The *Washington Bee*, which followed the happenings at the Howard Theater throughout its history, described the building as "first class in every appointment" and as the "finest theater in the city."⁶ The *Bee* also noted, "Washington society was out in full force. Never before in the history of Washington have the people turned out in such mass for a social event...Judge Robert H. Terrell, of the Municipal Court, Auditor Ralph W. Tyler, and Hon. Henry Cummins, of Baltimore...delivered short and pointed addresses of welcome to the vast audience."⁷ The *Afro American Ledger* also commented that the Howard is "beautifully decorated" and "the finest theater in the country catering principally to colored people...All the colored shows that heretofore [sic] been compelled to play in third rate theaters or stay away from this city, will be seen this winter at the Howard."

Based upon the rave reviews the Howard received upon its opening, it is clear that the first-rate theater building was perceived as a highly visible status symbol for the city's black community.⁸ Indeed, throughout its first months in operation, the *Washington Bee* regularly advertised the events at the Howard Theater, highlighting the Howard as "the Theater for the People." From 1910 to the late 1920s, the theater attracted vaudeville acts, musicals, road shows, an occasional circus and stock company productions. The audience consisted principally of the "black bourgeoisie." However, when the theater was not presenting a show, the building was made available to community groups for local variety programs, testimonials, church and organizational meetings, and Sunday afternoon concerts.

Although the Howard catered to black audiences, the theater had been financed and built by Baltimore-based white businessmen who, according to the *Washington Bee* would not "allow the colored manager the opportunity to actually run the theater."⁹ W. H. Smith, an African American and the former manager of the Pekin Theater in Chicago, was the Howard's first manager upon its opening in 1910, but within three months the National Amusement Company replaced him with a white manager. Frustrated by this, the *Bee* announced that it would no longer advertise for the Howard until the theater company named an African American as manager. Andrew J. Thomas, a local African American who had purchased the Minnehaha Theater at 12th and U and turned it into the one of the city's most successful moving picture and

⁵ *The Afro American Ledger*, August 27, 1910 and *The Washington Bee*, August 27, 1910.

⁶ *The Washington Bee*, August 13, 1910.

⁷ *The Washington Bee*, August 27, 1910.

⁸ "Howard Theater, Intensive Architectural Survey," Sumon Sorg and Elizabeth Hannold, 1987, p. 3.

⁹ As quoted in Robert Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.*, p. 272-273.

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vaudeville theaters, challenged the owners to let him run the Howard. Andrew Thomas thus became the manager in August 1911, and, overcoming significant white skepticism, successfully managed the Howard in its critical early years, turning it into one of the city's leading theaters. During his first years as manager, Thomas drew large crowds to popular performances such as the musical "Darktown Follies," staged by J. Leubrie Hill and shown in New York before Thomas brought it to the Howard. The *Washington Post* reported on the 1916 event:

"J. Leubrie Hill's famous "Darktown Follies of 1916" will play a week's engagement at the Howard. This is the largest aggregation of colored singers, dancers, and comedians in America, comprising a company of 75. The many scenes are elaborately displayed..."¹⁰

One of Thomas' tactics for making the Howard successful was to garner the full support of the African American people, but without discriminating against whites. In 1913, the Howard took out a full-page ad in Sherman's City Directory with an image of the Howard Theater flanked by photographs of Thomas and house manager Rufus G. Byers, along with the claim, "Our Beautiful Playhouse: the Largest Colored Theater in the World."¹¹ As noted in the *Bee*, though, the Howard was not limited to blacks:

"The theater has been so well conducted and managed that today the very best element of the people of this city, white and colored, attend. There is no discrimination on account of color, the white citizen is as welcome to the theater as any other class of well behaved people, although the theater is under colored management in every particular."¹²

In 1913, the Howard held a week-long testimonial to Thomas that appears to have been inspired by the black community's genuine admiration and appreciation for him, rather than for any self-serving purpose.¹³ During this November 1913 week, nightly programs acknowledged Thomas' contributions to the cultural life of blacks in the city. The *Washington Bee* strongly supported Andrew Thomas, running several profiles on him, and noting that he was "eliminating Jim Crowism which confronts colored people today."¹⁴ The *Washington Bee* continued its unerring support for Thomas for several years. In 1916 the paper ran a testimonial noting, "the *Bee* is of the opinion that the citizens of Washington owe the manager of the Howard Theater a debt of gratitude...Who will be the first to inaugurate a substantial testimonial to him? He deserves it."¹⁵

¹⁰ *The Washington Post*, March 12, 1916, Metro, p.2.

¹¹ Sherman's Directory, 1913, p. 380.

¹² "Howard Theater," *The Washington Bee*, September 15, 1913.

¹³ See Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theater on the Black Community," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. LV, No. 4, October 1970, p.253-265.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Mr. Andrew J. Thomas," *The Washington Bee*, July 29, 1916.

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Throughout the 1920s, the Howard continued to offer dramatic plays, including those staged and opened at the Howard. In 1923, the play “Running Wild” opened at the Howard where it enjoyed “packed houses,” including “a large measure of white patronage, and if anything, the white patrons have been more enthusiastic than the regular colored clientele of the Howard over the show.” In its review of “Running Wild,” *The Washington Post* opined that the show “bids fair to become one of the season’s successes when it opens in New York.”¹⁶

As movies began to replace vaudeville acts as a primary form of entertainment, the Howard responded in-kind. In 1922, the Dudley-Murray United Theater Corporation leased the theater, intent upon bringing “big pictures” to the Howard. The corporation renovated the theater, apparently adding a “mammoth” organ, and re-opened it with Sherman Dudley as manager.¹⁷ Four years later, in 1926, local theater owner and promoter Abe Lichtman took over the Howard, reviving live entertainment, despite its “white elephant” status. Lichtman cleaned the theater up, installed a new marquee, and booked popular attractions. In particular, the Howard featured plays by the New York-based Lafayette Players and the local troupe, Howard University Players. Several out-of-town newspapers, including Baltimore’s *Afro American* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* carried reviews of the Howard’s shows. A comedy show, “The Queen of Syncopation” was, according to the *Courier*, “one of the best and most hilarious attractions seen in this house in many weeks.”¹⁸ The show, which “played to capacity houses,” indicates that the Howard was still enjoying success for its live entertainment at a time when movies were dominating the entertainment industry.

By the end of the decade and with the onset of the Depression, however, the Howard was failing to attract audiences. In 1929, Lichtman closed the theater, but continued to invest in it by installing sound equipment and leasing the theater space to local preacher, Elder Lightfoot Michaux for his revival meetings. Then, in 1931, the Steiffel Brothers, who operated a string of theaters in Philadelphia, including the Pearl Theater, purchased the Howard and began a major renovation of the building, transforming it from its original Beaux Arts design to reflect a more contemporary Art Deco aesthetic. Despite efforts on the part of preacher Michaux to block plans to re-open the theater and oust him from his pulpit, the Steiffel Brothers re-inaugurated the Howard on September 26, 1931. The re-opening of the Howard showcased renowned jazz great and hometown boy, Duke Ellington, establishing a new and significant chapter in the history of the Howard Theater.

¹⁶ “Colored Players Continue to Score at Howard Theater,” *The Washington Post*, August 27, 1923, p. 11.

¹⁷ Robert Headley, p. 272.

¹⁸ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 13, 1926, Section 2, p.21.

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The New Howard: the Age of Jazz and Big Bands

As reported in the press (both local and out-of-town), patrons waited nearly two hours in the pouring rain to pack the auditorium of the Howard and to greet Duke Ellington with “thunderous applause.”¹⁹ The *Pittsburgh Courier* noted, “Duke Ellington, former local boy, and now the recognized “King of Jazz,” was the opening attraction to a crowded house.”²⁰ Indeed, Ellington had grown up around U Street and, many years earlier, had made his debut in D.C. But, he had left the city for New York, where he found fame at the legendary Cotton Club in Harlem. Recognizing the cache of a Duke Ellington act, Shep Allen, the new manager of the Howard installed by the Steiffel Brothers, organized “Duke’s” return for the Howard’s re-opening, along with Bennie Moten and Cab Calloway.

To have such high-profile billing for the theater’s re-opening, was just the first of many strategic and successful ideas that Shep Allen brought to the Howard. Allen began his show business career as an usher at Chicago’s Mott Theater, then became manager of the old Panama Club, where he formed a trio known as the Panama Trio. The trio traveled around the West in the late 1910s, but by 1925, Allen had moved to Philadelphia to manage the Pearl Theater. When Stan Steiffel of the Steiffel Brothers purchased the Howard in 1931, he convinced Allen to move to Washington to manage it.²¹ Allen remained at the Howard for the next several decades, until the theater closed in 1970. During his tenure, Allen evolved with the changes in musical tastes and trends, thus continuing to ensure the Howard’s position as one of the country’s most important entertainment venues for African Americans.

During the 1930s, Allen brought the Howard into the era of big band entertainment by booking the best in black musical talent. Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Count Bassie, Jimmie Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, and Lionel Hampton to name a few, all played at the Howard. At times, the Howard would drop the movies that ran between the shows to hold more performances: Lionel Hampton’s band was known to play as many as eight shows in one day. As reported by Hampton, “It was a mecca for black entertainment. I remember when the crowds would be all the way around to the bakery on the next block trying to get in, on both sides of the avenue.”²²

While Allen sought to attract already well-known and prominent musicians to the Howard, he also introduced “amateur night contests,” based on those at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Like

¹⁹ “Hundreds Wait 2 Hours in Rain to see ‘Duke,’” and “Ellington Gets Royal Welcome at Premier New Howard Theater,” *The Afro American*, October 3, 1931.

²⁰ “Howard Theater Opens,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1931.

²¹ “Howard Theater’s Walking History Still Looks Ahead,” *Washington Star News*, August 16, 1974.

²² As quoted in “Live! 75 Years at the Howard,” *The Washington Post*, June 23, 1985.

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the Apollo, these amateur nights at the Howard resulted in the discovery of many new performers.²³ In fact, Shep Allen's success at discovering and launching new acts and attracting new names from all over the country earned him the nickname "*D.C.'s Dean of Show Biz*."²⁴ Although the Howard cannot claim to have discovered Duke Ellington, it was responsible for launching many other careers. Of particular note is the rise of Pearl Bailey, from a chorus girl in the Howard's "line" to one of the country's top female jazz vocalists. Born and raised in D.C., Bailey joined the chorus line in 1934, stayed on while taking vocal lessons, and made her first appearance as a Howard singer with the Sunset Royal Orchestra in 1942. Similarly, Billy Eckstein and Bill (Ink Spots) Kenny were winners of the Howard's amateur nights contests. "Moms" Mabely, a Washingtonian who became known as the first African American stand-up comedian opened at the Howard in 1941. Although several sources note that Ella Fitzgerald "won" one of the Howard's amateur nights contests, she actually made her debut at the Apollo Theater in November 1934.

The "Records of Performers of the District Theaters" which were kept officially for the first time beginning in 1940 indicate a rich variety of shows from the big bands and vocalists to comedians and song and dance acts, as well as the Supper Shows and Birthday Balls which attracted Washington's black elite in droves. Following "Moms" Mabely and Pearl Bailey in 1941 and 1942, Sarah Vaughn first played at the Howard in 1944; Lena Horne performed with Noble Sisle's orchestra in 1944; Dinah Washington sang with Lionel Hampton's group in 1945; comedian George Kirby entertained in 1948; and Sammy Davis, Jr. played with the Will Masten Trio in 1949. At the same time, the Howard hosted white performers and their acts, including Artie Shaw, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton and Louis Prima. As a diversion, Allen also brought in athletes such as Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson as stand-up comics and Sugar Ray Robinson as a song-and-dance man. Although "Negro" versions of Broadway plays were also staged, the Howard's staple during the 1940s continued to be jazz.

By the 1950s, the Howard was defined as the prime center for rhythm and blues and soul shows. It was, along with the Apollo Theater in New York, the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia, the Royal Theater in Baltimore, and the Regal Theater in Chicago, part of what was known as the "Chitlin' Circuit." This circuit described a collection of prestigious theaters in various cities where blacks could enjoy performances in the same formal atmosphere that whites enjoyed elsewhere. During this period, the variety shows at the Howard were replaced by one singing act after another, each one supported by the in-house Howard band. During the 1950s, the Howard introduced such names as Laverne Baker, Sreamin' Jay Hawkins, and Bo Diddley.

²³ Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theater on the Black Community," p.259.

²⁴ Terry Catchpole, "Some of the Sounds of the Howard," *The Washingtonian*, 1967

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By the late 1950s and 1960s, the Howard saw a transformation of musical tastes, and with it, a change in clientele. According to Shep Allen in a 1967 interview, jazz at the Howard attracted an older, more sophisticated audience, while the rock 'n' roll and Motown sounds brought younger and more unruly crowds. Despite Allen's wistfulness about earlier days in this interview, he recognized what was good business for the Howard and thus continued to evolve with the musical times. The Howard continued to book top performers such as Gladys Knight and the Pips, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, James Brown, and the Temptations. But the Howard also bet on new acts, such as the Supremes who, in 1962, made their first stage appearance at the Howard, and by so doing, continued to boast of the number of artists who "started" at the Howard.

The Howard's Demise:

Though Washington remained a segregated city until the 1960s, the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, legally ended segregation and opened up opportunities for African Americans. As a result, the solidly middle-class African American residents surrounding the Howard began to leave the area for other neighborhoods now available to them. Similarly, African American musicians and artists were free to play at "white" clubs and on television, where they could earn more money. Although the Howard continued to attract celebrity performers and large audiences, the neighborhood around the Howard was deteriorating. Riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968 completely devastated the neighborhood, particularly right around 7th and U Streets and the Howard Theater. In 1969, one year after the riots, Shep Allen reported, "Sales have dropped at least forty percent since the riot."²⁵ In 1970 the Howard Theater closed, a victim of the changes in the surrounding neighborhood. In 1974, the Howard Theater was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Howard's Preservation/Revitalization Efforts:

Four years after the Howard was shuttered, a group of investors formed the Howard Theater Corporation, and with help from a Small Business Association (SBA) loan, purchased the building. In 1975, the foundation staged a gala re-opening, featuring Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, Melba Moore and others. Despite a strong showing, the theater quickly ran into financial problems and closed its doors just two weeks after opening night. In 1977, a community non-profit, the Howard Theater Foundation, assumed the SBA foreclosed loan and set about trying to fulfill its goal of re-vitalizing the Howard. The foundation managed to keep the Howard open in a "hand-to-mouth" fashion staging scattered go-go and rock-and-roll shows until the early 1980s.

²⁵ Shep Allen as quoted in Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "Cultural Impact of the Howard Theater on the Black Community," p. 262.

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However, lack of support eventually closed the theater for good. In 1986, the city stepped in and acquired the property's title from the Small Business Administration. For the past 20 years since the Howard has been vacant, the building has fallen into a deplorable deteriorated state. The building remains structurally sound, however, and plans for a major renovation are forthcoming. The city is currently in negotiations with the Howard Development Group, LLC which is proposing to lease the Howard Theater, and restore and operate the building as a mixed-use entertainment venue. Renovation plans anticipate taking advantage of federal tax credit programs that will ensure that the original configuration and character defining features of the building are appropriately restored.

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 12,000 square feet

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

1	1 8 Zone	3 2 4 7 9 9 Easting	4 3 0 9 3 2 9 Northing	3															
2					4														

☐ 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)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kim Prothro Williams, Architectural Historian
Organization D.C. Historic Preservation Office date January 2008
street & number 801 North Capitol Street telephone 202 442-8840
city or town Washington, D.C. state zip code 20002

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- X A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
X A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

- X Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional Items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

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

Name District of Columbia
street & number 1133 North Capitol Street, NE telephone
city or town Washington state D.C. zip code

Paperwork Reduction 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.

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Verbal Boundary Description:

The Howard Theater at 620 T Street, N.W. occupies Lot 90 in Square 441 in the northwest quadrant of the District of Columbia. The property is located mid-block between 6th and 7th Street and between S and T Streets. The theater is bounded by two minor streets, Wiltberger Street to the east and Wiltberger Alley (west) to the west. +

Boundary Justification:

The Howard Theater was the first building constructed on the site and retains the same footprint as it did when constructed in 1910.

+