

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Bucklen Theatre

AND/OR COMMON

Elkhart Opera House

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

Corner of South Main St., & Harrison St.

CITY, TOWN

Elkhart

VICINITY OF

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

3rd

STATE

Indiana

CODE

018

COUNTY

Elkhart

CODE

039

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

**CATEGORY**

\_\_DISTRICT

☒ BUILDING(S)

\_\_STRUCTURE

\_\_SITE

\_\_OBJECT

**OWNERSHIP**

\_\_PUBLIC

☒ PRIVATE

\_\_BOTH

**PUBLIC ACQUISITION**

\_\_IN PROCESS

\_\_BEING CONSIDERED

**STATUS**

\_\_OCCUPIED

\_\_UNOCCUPIED

\_\_WORK IN PROGRESS

**ACCESSIBLE**

☒ YES: RESTRICTED

\_\_YES: UNRESTRICTED

\_\_NO

**PRESENT USE**

\_\_AGRICULTURE

☒ COMMERCIAL

\_\_EDUCATIONAL

\_\_ENTERTAINMENT

\_\_GOVERNMENT

\_\_INDUSTRIAL

\_\_MILITARY

\_\_MUSEUM

\_\_PARK

\_\_PRIVATE RESIDENCE

\_\_RELIGIOUS

\_\_SCIENTIFIC

\_\_TRANSPORTATION

\_\_OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Harrison A. Church\*

STREET & NUMBER

1077 Greenleaf Blvd.

CITY, TOWN

Elkhart

VICINITY OF

STATE

Indiana

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Elkhart County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

Courthouse Square

CITY, TOWN

Elkhart

STATE

Indiana

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

DATE

\_\_FEDERAL \_\_STATE \_\_COUNTY \_\_LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

## 7 DESCRIPTION

### CONDITION

☐ EXCELLENT  
☐ GOOD  
☒ FAIR

☐ DETERIORATED  
☐ RUINS  
☐ UNEXPOSED

### CHECK ONE

☐ UNALTERED  
☒ ALTERED

### CHECK ONE

☒ ORIGINAL SITE  
☐ MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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#### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Bucklen Theatre is located on the northwest corner of South Main Street and Harrison Street in the central business district of Elkhart. The lot, which measures eighty-two and one-half feet (82 1/2 ft.) by one hundred sixty-five feet (165 ft.), was originally virgin forest.

The three story brick (red) structure faces Main Street. The upper right cornice of the front facade is missing. The false front gave the front facade a symetrical appearance when first constructed; the right cornice was later removed for safety reasons.

The front elevation is divided into five bays with a slight recession in the second and fourth. These two bays are also different in that there are only two windows on the upper floors whereas there are three windows on the remaining bays. The street level is comprised of several small retail shops with large glass windows and entrances. The corner shop was the original "Opera Drug Store", and the name is still cut out of stone above the large plate glass window. As on the street level, the windows on the second level are trimmed with limestone. These windows are tall rectangulars extending almost from floor to ceiling. Third floor windows are arched at the top; the window arches project into the detailed metal cornice work that separates the briel facade from the mansard roof. The corner of the roof is adorned with two dormer windows (one facing Main St. & one facing Harrison St.), projecting from the slightly higher mansard.

The entrance to the theatre, which is positioned in the central bay, is set off by stonework pediment directly over head. This pediment is divided by two large windows with a windowdress of stonework. Directly above the entrance on the third level stands the Greek Statue "Melpomene," this is a nine foot statue that represents one of the muses of Greek Mythology. Holding a mask in one hand and a sword in the other the figure represents "tragedy". The central bay is capped with an ornate cornice situated on a squared-off parapet. Also situated in this parapet are three small circular windows with the words "Opera House" inscribed above.

The Harrison Street facade is similar to the Main Street facade except there is no change in projection between the bays. There are two windows on each level per bay (of which there are eight bays); with the exception of the corner bay that borders on the front side. This bay has again three windows on each level. Two unique characteristics on this facade are two exterior metal fire escapes that cut diagonally across the face of the structure.

At one time, in the basement of the theatre, rooms were rented out to small shops such as barber shops, shoe repair shops, and laundries. These shops were illuminated by gas-lights and access to them was through an entrance in the sidewalk next to the structure.

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The interior of the structure features a large proscenium arch with a "parquet horse-shoe" balcony. The seating capacity of the theatre is 1200 persons. The proscenium arch has been closed off, and a false ceiling installed at the balcony height with a false floor over the main floor seating area. All of the seats have been dismantled. The interior was once described as "cosmopolitan in accouterments". The scenery came from St. Louis, the gas fixtures from Brooklyn, the chairs from Chicago, the wall panels were gilded, rocco and brocade. There was more than a mile of gas piping throughout the building; footlights were gas jets. The front curtain featured a picture of the "Old Beardsley Mill" on the river. Second and third floors along Harrison St. consisted of large hotel rooms where traveling troupes and guests stayed when they performed at the Bucklen.

In 1911, the theatre was remodeled at a cost of \$32,000. At this time, the U.S. Senator J.W. Kern made a brief address on the occasion. Six times the theatre suffered minor fire damage; none of the fires resulted in damage in excess of \$1,500.

With the exception of a few commercial entities at the street level; the theatre proper remains idle. The original composition of the theatre has not been lost; no major structural changes have taken place during its existence. The Bucklen Theatre is a very dominant and architecturally significant structure of Elkhart and deserves the recognition it once had.

## 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
___PREHISTORIC	___ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	___COMMUNITY PLANNING	___LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	___RELIGION	
___1400-1499	___ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	___CONSERVATION	___LAW	___SCIENCE	
___1500-1599	___AGRICULTURE	___ECONOMICS	___LITERATURE	___SCULPTURE	
___1600-1699	___ARCHITECTURE	___EDUCATION	___MILITARY	___SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
___1700-1799	___ART	___ENGINEERING	___MUSIC	X THEATER	
X ___1800-1899	___COMMERCE	___EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	___PHILOSOPHY	___TRANSPORTATION	
___1900-	___COMMUNICATIONS	___INDUSTRY	___POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	___OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		___INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES

1883

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

Mortimer L. Smith

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Bucklen Theatre is one of the best remaining examples of late nineteenth century theatre architecture in the Midwest and particularly in northern Indiana. Upon its completion, the theatre was considered to be one of the most substantially constructed buildings in the city of Elkhart; its estimated worth was over \$100,000. It was designed by a Detroit, Michigan architect by the name of Mortimer L. Smith. Details on the project were contracted on a week-by-week basis. Actual construction of the theatre began early in October of 1883 under the superintendancy of E.B. Saxton of Coldwater, Michigan, who at that time was paid a grand sum of \$4.50 per day.

Before the construction of the Bucklen Theatre, the property changed hands several times. Originally, the lot on which the structure rests sold for \$35.00 in 1844; three years later it sold for \$40.00. The earliest recognizable owners were Eli and Mary Hilton who in 1856 obtained the site for \$850.00, they erected and operated for many years a small tavern on the site. The unique feature about the site at this time is that it was not located in the "downtown" area and had to be reached by following a path through the woods. Upon Eli's death in 1870, Mary sold the east half of the lot to Peter Behler for a sum of \$4,000. Three years later, Mr. Behler sold his half to Mr. Bucklen for \$6,000. Eventually Mr. Bucklen bought the west half of the lot in 1882 from Mrs. Hilton for \$2,000. Mr Bucklen's investments of \$8,000 gave him controlling interest in the "Elkhart Opera House Company" which paid him \$15,000 in stock when the company bought the site in 1883.

The "Elkhart Opera House Company" was organized on July 31, 1883. Officers of the company were: H.E. Bucklen, president; Jacob Zook, vice-president; Norman Sage, treasurer; W.B. Vanderlip, secretary. William Gravit, Strafford Maon and Mr. Vanderlip composed the building committee. Stock certificate no. one for ten shares (\$500 value) was issued on October 16, 1883 to John K. Boss for partial payment of 100,000 bricks that were used in the structure. On January 14, 1884, five hundred shares of stock were issued to Mr. Bucklen. A total of 861 shares of stock were sold to sixty-two original owners; many of these were material dealers. Authorized capitalization of the company was set at \$50,000.

During the era of "live entertainment", the city of Elkhart and Bucklen Theatre benefited from the city's advantageous location on the Chicago-New York trunk line; Elkhart was the closest division point to Chicago. The theatre is located only two blocks north of the depot. Because of this situation, many Broadway shows bound for the "windy city" held tryouts at the Bucklen; several plays had their premier performances on the Bucklen stage.

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Opening night was on September 29, 1884 and consisted of a performance of "Over the Garden Wall" by a traveling troupe brought in by Mr. & Mrs. George S. Knight. The audience was so disappointed that the next afternoon the troupe performed "Otto"; the audience loved it. Entertainment ranged from classical European opera to stag night burlesque with choruses of can-can dancers from Chicago's "loop" entertaining with big city sophistication. Other entertainment included musical comedies, local talent amateur shows, high school class plays, and dramas.

About 1898 movies (then called "flickers") began to appear at the Bucklen. The first movie to be shown in the theatre was a short film taken on Atlantic City Boardwalk. In 1907, movies became serious competitors to the road shows. After World War I, movies along with increased transportation and production costs brought an end to regular "live" entertainment.

Some of the early stars who performed on the stage of the Bucklen were: Lillian Russell "darling of the nineties"; a bandleader, John Philip Sousa; Eva Tanguay, James K. Hackett, Nat G. Goodwin, and Charles Dillingham.

Herbert E. Bucklen was one of the most remarkable men in Elkhart's history. He was a business genius who started out as a drugstore clerk and died a multi-millionaire in 1917. His career began in 1875 in one of the first soda fountains in northern Indiana located in his father's drugstore. He operated a soda fountain at the 1876 Independence Centennial in Philadelphia. Bucklen studied doctors' prescriptions that came into his father's store and eventually formulated and patented four medicines. At night, Bucklen roamed the country side erecting signs that advertised his father's drugstore and his medicines; the results were worth the effort. In 1885, Bucklen left Elkhart for Chicago, where he established the Bucklen Laboratories, later sold to a St. Louis firm. Bucklen had investments in Chicago "loop" and Elkhart real estate; at the time of his death, he owned twenty-eight properties in Elkhart.

In 1920, the Bucklen estate sold the theatre to J.W. Fieldhouse. Mr. Fieldhouse died in 1938, leaving the theatre to Charles Fieldhouse and his two sisters. The structure is presently owned by Harrison A. Church, an Elkhart Attorney.



## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Files of "Elkhart City History No. 122 & No. 399a" Elkhart Public Library,  
Elkhart, Indiana.  
Newspaper article from the Elkhart Truth (Elkhart, Indiana) July 6, 1971.  
Newspaper article from the Elkhart Truth (Elkhart, Indiana) October 28, 1971.

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 0.31

UTM REFERENCES

A 16 585620 4614780  
ZONE EASTING NORTHING  
C         

B           
ZONE EASTING NORTHING  
D         

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

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

ORGANIZATION

The Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce

DATE

STREET & NUMBER

514 South Main Street

TELEPHONE

CITY OR TOWN

Elkhart

STATE

Indiana

## 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 National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER