

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

FINAL

11-5

# 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 an 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 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House

other names/site number Grand Opera House, 029-029-51058

## 2. Location

street & number 321-325 Second Street  not for publication

city or town Aurora  vicinity

state Indiana code IN county Dearborn code 029 zip code 47001

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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 \_\_\_\_\_  
Indiana Department of Natural Resources  
State of 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 the property is:

<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	Signature of the Keeper _____	Date of Action _____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other, (explain): _____	_____	_____

Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Name of Property

Dearborn Co., IN  
County and State

**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**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE: specialty store  
COMMERCE/TRADE: professional  
RECREATION AND CULTURE: theatre  
SOCIAL: meeting hall

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

WORK IN PROGRESS

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

Italianate

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE: limestone  
walls BRICK  
METAL: cast iron  
roof ASBESTOS  
other METAL: tin

**Narrative Description**

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

Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Name of Property

Dearborn Co., IN  
County and State

### 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 patterns of our history.
- B** Property is 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.)

### 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 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 # \_\_\_\_\_

#### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

#### Period of Significance

1878-c.1900

#### Significant Dates

1878

#### Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

#### Cultural Affiliation

N/A

#### Architect/Builder

Lindsay, Thomas

#### Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Indiana Historic Sites and Structures Inventory



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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Built in 1878, the Leive, Parks, and Stapp Opera House is located in the downtown area of the Ohio River town of Aurora. This Italiante style structure was one of the earliest three story buildings on Second Street, which was the main commercial street in Aurora. Constructed of brick, the building has a frontage of 53 feet and a depth of 104 feet.

The front or north facade (photo 1) is divided by four pilasters into three vertical sections: the central bay with entrance flanked by storefronts and (above) fenestration. The first floor pilasters are part of the cast iron storefront manufactured by Rankin and Co. of Cincinnati. The pilasters have plain bases, fluted shafts, and corinthian-like capitals. The capital in turn supports a large fluted bracket with fleur-de-lys ornamentation. The pilasters located toward either side of the facade are intact; the central pilasters are obscured by more recent wood siding. The flanking storefronts and the Carrara glass transom panel date from various remodelings done in the 1930s and later. Each storefront has its own recessed entrance with double leaf, fully glazed doors. Above each storefront are ribbed glass transom windows, then a horizontal Carrara glass panel. The central bay was originally the entrance to the stairs leading to the upper floors. A heavy cast iron lintel caps the storefronts. Centered is a decorative pediment over the stair entrance, made of pressed tin. It rests on consoles within the lintel, and extends into the second floor and has decorative acroteria and incising in the tympanum.

The second and third floors have seven bays each. Four pilasters, continuing those of the storefront, divide these floors vertically into three sections: a central one bay section with three bays of fenestration flanking each side. The pilasters are of pressed tin above the first floor. On the second floor, the corner pilasters are treated as fluted pilasters while the central ones are rusticated masonry strips. Second floor windows are segmental arched and have double hung one-over-one sash. On both the second and third floors each window has pressed tin pedimented hoods supported on consoles, and having incised ornamentation. A metal string course with small corbels marking the lower corners of each opening marks both floors as well. The upper windows are taller than those of the second floor, and are rectangular rather

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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than segmental arched. The pilasters are rusticated strips at the third floor level.

An elaborate pressed tin entablature crowns the main facade. Heavy brackets mark the corners and central bays over the four pilasters. Smaller scroll brackets divide the entablature to either side of the center. These have chevron guttae-like details just below the entablature. Smaller still are the modillion-like brackets in between the larger brackets. A blind lunette breaks the entablature in the center, capped by an overhanging cross gable or open pediment. The semicircular lunette has raised letters reading: "LEIVE, PARKS and STAPP/OPERA/HOUSE". Chevron molding lines the arch of the lunette. The entablature has side facing brackets and returns for several feet on each side elevation.

A moderately pitched combination hip and gable roof covered in diamond patterned asbestos shingles covers the structure. The hip roof is visible to the front while the rear elevation presents a gable end to view.

The west elevation of the opera house fronts onto an alley. On the first floor there are five oculus windows with brick header surrounds. Three of these have been bricked in over the years, the two remaining contain vertical metal bars. A wide, short, metal cargo door was installed later near the southwest corner. An original door opening with stone lintel is located nearer to the southwest corner. The second floor contains eight double hung, wood sash, two-over-two windows. At the southwest corner are two smaller windows, one located on top of the other. This allows natural light into the second floor and a half story or mezzanine level at the rear of the building that was built between the second floor and the elevated portion of the stage. This internal space was used for dressing rooms. All windows have stone lintels and sills. Directly above some of the stone lintels appear rows of vertical headers. The third floor contained eight two-over-two double hung windows. The sixth opening from the northwest corner has been changed to a door and an iron fire escape added to the second and third floors. The window nearest the southwest corner is slightly smaller and illuminates the stage area. Two rectangular-shaped internal chimneys are evident on this elevation. There are pressed tin box gutters, plus two corner

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

---

downspouts.

The south or rear elevation also fronts onto an alley which borders one of the historic community open spaces, today used for parking. City blocks in downtown Aurora are intersected by two alleys north-south and two alleys east-west; thus dividing the block into ninths with the center remaining open for public use.

This south elevation is a gable end, with pressed tin cornice molding (photo 5). The first floor contains, from the southwest corner, three two-over-two windows in the left half and a door and one two-over-two window in the right half. Originally, all of these openings had large hinged metal security shutters. All openings line up vertically, as well as horizontally, and have stone sills and lintels. There is a covered window well to the basement. The second floor and mezzanine dressing area has, from the southwest corner, three two-over-two windows, a space or void above the first floor door, and a window. The third floor has a window to light the stage area near the southwest and southeast corner. A diamond shaped vent made of brick headers (eleven rows) is located near the gable apex. Several tie rod stars are clustered in the southwest corner. There are two internal chimneys located on this facade and downspouts at each corner.

On the east elevation, the first floor abuts the business building next door for the entire length of the building. The second floor has, from the southeast corner, two small two-over-two windows, one on top of the other for the second floor and the mezzanine, and three larger two-over-two windows. The neighboring building to the east rises to two stories at this point. The third floor repeats the openings of the west facade, having seven openings. The window nearest the southeast corner which lights the backstage area is slightly smaller and the one nearest the northeast corner has had a large cargo door cut into the bottom. Four internal chimneys, one square and three rectangular shaped, are present. Three of these chimneys service the commercial building next door which leads one to believe that the front portion of that building possibly predates the Lieve, Parks and Stapp Opera House.

The interior of the Opera House has been changed numerous times through the years to meet the needs of its occupants. The basement

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 Page 4 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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is a six foot high crawl space divided into two sections by a central stone wall. The first floor has always been devoted to retail space and contains recessed entrances allowing for additional window displays on the street. The first floor was historically divided into two store spaces, but in 1938, an opening was made in the brick party wall, allowing access between the two spaces. A freight elevator was added at that time on the west wall near the southwest corner of the building. The first floor pressed tin ceiling is intact.

Entering the stair located in the center of the street facade, there is an eight foot wide stairway with mahogany handrails on either side and evidence of a central railing which is now missing. There is a five foot high wainscot to the top of the stairs and several internal windows above the stairs to allow natural light into the interior. At the top of the stairs there is a wide hallway with several doors opening to either side running to the rear of the building (the hall narrows midway back and can be shut off by a door). Another hall at the top of the stairs proceeds to the left. Following the left hall, one turns left again after a short distance and another flight of stairs leads up to the third floor auditorium.

The second floor plan has been modified over the years by the addition of partitions, although the double loaded central corridor configuration would seem to be original, or from an early date. Woodwork is regular square wood trim; floors are plain wood; walls and ceilings are lath and plaster. The front window openings have tapered, plaster surrounds with segmental arches. Openings along the exterior side walls have rounded jambs and straight tops. Most doors are plain, four paneled doors, some with transoms. The first room along the east bank of rooms is larger than the others and possibly may have been used as a lodge or meeting hall. Rooms across the front and those in the west bank were offices. At the rear of the second floor level, ceiling height decreases to about 8 feet to accommodate the half story of dressing rooms for the theatre on the third floor. Two secondary staircases are found at the rear of the second floor. They may be additions. There are also indications that an additional staircase was located on the west wall of the large room where the hall narrows.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 & 8 Page 5 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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Although the third floor auditorium space remains an open, undivided space, it retains little of its original grandeur. Today, the auditorium is vast open space with a wooden basketball floor added in the 1920s. The rear or south wall features the stage and proscenium arch, which has angled jambs. The arch measures roughly 30 feet across and the backstage area is 20 feet deep. The opening and flanking bowed walls are of tongue and groove boards. Doors in the flanking walls lead backstage. The stage slopes forward slightly and near the front is space for the footlights. The backstage area has no fly space and scenery was pulled out on stagger ceiling racks. The back wall is partially plastered and has traces of paint, indicating that it served as part of the back drop. There is some debate as to whether the current stage configuration is original, or a later remodeling.

The stage and proscenium wall have four foot tall stained vertical board wainscot. This is continued on the exterior walls, which have window openings treated as on the second floor. The east wall has an interior chimney. On all sides but the rear, the lath and plaster ceiling is coved to follow the pitch of the roof, and is flat in the center area. Tie rods are visible. Locations of missing gas light fixtures in the ceiling are marked by capped pipes. Centered in the ceiling is the large reflector for the original 44-burner gas fixture. Under the lath and plaster, the roof structure consists of scissor trusses made of 8" X 12" yellow poplar, the tie rods form the lower chord of the truss. Between the trusses span 2" X 14" joists to which the lath is affixed.

The upper floors of the Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House were abandoned for many years. Lack of maintenance and heat has accelerated surface deterioration inside the building. The top two floors of the front facade were restored in the late 1980s. Roof leaks, missing windows, and masonry repairs were recent problems which have been addressed.

*Section 8-Statement of Significance*

Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House meets National Register criteria A and C. As one of Aurora's grandest examples of commercial Italianate architecture, and as a good example of

**United States Department of the Interior**  
**National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 6 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

---

typical 19th century theatre structure, the Opera House meets criterion C. In the field of entertainment, the Opera was locally important as the community's premier site for live performances and town gatherings until the 1878 was overshadowed by more modern facilities by about 1900.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 7 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., INNarrative Statement of Significance

The Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House is an outstanding example of a small midwestern town's theater building from the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century. This three story, multi-use, Italianate building, constructed by three young entrepreneurs, served the local community as well as travelers along the Ohio River for several decades. This nineteenth century opera house was the site of traveling theatrical performances, minstrel shows, and lectures, plus many local performances and community events, such as political meetings and high school graduations. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, the importance of the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House was overshadowed by newer, safer, and more modern theaters in Aurora.

The City of Aurora, located on the northern bank of the Ohio River and about thirty miles below Cincinnati, was founded by the "Aurora Association for Internal Improvements" in 1819, just three years following Indiana's acceptance into the Union as the sixteenth state. The Association was made up of men from three states, Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, and included one of Indiana's founders, Jesse L. Holman. Growth was slow until a bridge was built across Hogan Creek in 1836 and by 1840 the population was 490 people. By the 1850s census, a large population increase had occurred and there were 2,051 residents. In 1860 the population was 2,990 and in 1870 it was 3,304. During the decade in which the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House was built the population of Aurora increased by another one thousand to 4,435. This figure represents Aurora at the height of its growth and as of the 1990 census the population of the town had shrank to 3,832.

The 1885 history of Dearborn County gives five reasons for the growth of Aurora during the mid-19th century. The first being the construction of a bridge across Hogan Creek in 1836; second, the establishment of the T. & J. W. Gaff & Co. distillery and mills in 1843; third, the completion of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad through the Aurora in 1854, plus the extensive train shops located in nearby Cochran (today a part of Aurora); fourth, construction of the great Crescent Brewery in 1873; and finally, the establishment of the Aurora Iron Company, also in 1873, which eventually became the nail and iron works of O. P. Cobb & Co. At the time the Opera House was constructed in 1878, Aurora was a bustling city with many manufacturing establishments, such as the brewery and distillery, but also a

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 8 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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number of brick yards, ironworks, furniture factories, cooperages, and carriage works. In 1879, a year following the construction of the Opera House, Aurora was connected to Cincinnati by a telephone operating between the T. & J. W. Gaff & Co. and the H. W. Smith & Co.

The History of Dearborn and Ohio Counties, Indiana (1885) gives the following description of the Leive Parks & Stapp Opera House, which it calls "The Grand Opera House",

This substantial and elegant building is located in the center of the city, on the southside of Second Street, in the middle of the square, between Main and Mechanic Streets. The building is constructed of brick, and is three stories high, and has a frontage of 53 feet, with a depth of 106 feet. The auditorium is on the second [third] floor, having a seating capacity of 950 persons; it is furnished with opera chairs, of a neat and comfortable pattern, arranged upon platforms of a graduated elevation, so that they will appear sloped from the rear of the hall, towards the stage. The aisle floors are covered with heavy matting. The stage has a front of about thirty feet, and a depth of twenty, and its appointments are comprehensive, and completely in harmony with the rest of the building. It is supplied with a complement of scenery necessary to meet the demands of a first class theater or opera, two elegant and cozy little proscenium boxes, one on either side, and is altogether exceedingly well arranged, and properly lighted. The scene painting and frescoing is beautiful in design, and skillfully executed by some of Cincinnati's best artists. It is lighted with gas -- a forty-four jet reflector in the center of the ceiling, together with the proscenium chandeliers and bracket lights, besides the ample foot lights and numerous burners on the stage, well supply the light. It is heated by two immense hot air furnaces. To the hall there is both a front and rear entrance, the former entrance being by means of a fire-proof stairway eight feet wide. The means of exit in case of an accident, or in any emergency, is certainly ample. The building is an ornament to the city, and stands as a monument to the enterprise of the builders. It was built in 1878, by Messrs. Leive, Parks & Stapp, and opened in the evening of November 28 (Thanksgiving evening) of that year, by a lecture delivered by 'Bob' Burdette, on the subject of 'Home.'" (p.352-353)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 9 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

Leive, Parks and Stapp were relatively young men when they undertook this aggressive construction project, possibly as a speculative venture. They officially acquired the land on August 2, 1878 (Deed Record Book #35, page 518) from William Wheeler of Ripley County, Indiana, for the sum of \$2,500. The lot "being the same lot formerly owned by G. A. Riggs on which a livery stable burned on said lot fronting Second Street of said City and adjoining a lot owned by George Giffin, each of said Grantees to have and hold one undivided third part of said Real Estate."

Small news stories are sprinkled throughout local newspapers during construction of the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House and soon after it opened. The Dearborn Independent, February 20, 1879, contained the following, "And still the work goes on! The proprietors of the Opera House are sparing no pains to make it complete in all its arrangements. They have recently added a handsome balustrade around the orchestra chairs, and trap doors and other needed conveniences for the stage are also included in the late improvements." The Dearborn Independent, March 13, 1879, reported that Messrs. Parks and Stapp were threatening to sue the City of Aurora for \$200, if the City did not pay for a crossing on Second Street and paving of the alley located on the west side of the building. The paper calls this "the most-fool hardy proceeding we have yet heard emulating from these high minded gentleman and would-be public benefactors" and suggest that the City had greater reason to sue them. Two weeks later in the March 27, 1879 edition of The Dearborn Independent, recounting an uncomfortable mishap with a theater seat provided this description, "... the beautiful drop-curtain and the fine frescoping in the hall, the flood of gas-light and the elegant costumes of the ladies all reminded him that here was a grand, good thing in Aurora, (this was his first attendance in the new hall)..."

By January 1881, David Stapp sold his interest to Leive and others and Parks soon disposed of his portion as well. In 1888 a court battle, Winkley vs. Leive, began among the owners over tax liens and mortgages. At that time, half was owned by Leive, one quarter by Edson and Andrew Winkley, and the remaining quarter by Thomas O. Lindsay, the builder. To settle the case, the Dearborn County Circuit Court ordered that the building be sold for no less than two-thirds of its appraised value. On March 22, 1888, Frederick Probst, Edson S. Winkley and Andrew Winkley purchased the building "with all the furniture, scenery and fixtures in the Opera House building Situated thereon used for theatrical purposes for Twelve Thousand Five Hundred and forty five Dollars."

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 10 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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Eventually, controlling interest in the building was acquired by members of the Probst family and in 1918 total interest in the Opera House, rather than just partial interest, was sold to George Heck of Cincinnati, Ohio. At that time it was referred to "as the old 'Opera House Property' on Second Street."

In 1926, the heirs of Theodore Heck, Max and Ricka Peiser, Kenton County, Kentucky, sold the building to Sol Vigran, Aurora, who operated his department store, Vigran's, in the building. Vigran sold the building to Llewellyn Davies, a local attorney, in May 1947 who resold it to Vigran in January 1948. Vigran held the building until November 1951 when it was sold to Philip Meyer and then the Meyer Development Corporation, Cincinnati, Ohio. It was acquired by Ray and Aurora Schuck, Aurora, in the mid-1980s and sold to the current owners, Al and Nancy Shumway, in March 1992.

William Leive, watch-maker and dealer in jewelry, books, pianos and organs, was born in the Province of Hanover, Germany, on January 13, 1839. Mr. Leive came to Aurora in the spring of 1861 and began working for a Mr. Milburn, who taught him his trade. Leive began his own business in 1865 "and gradually worked up from nothing to his present truly [sic] enviable position in life," states the 1885 Dearborn County history. A character sketch of his son, William H. Leive, in the History of Dearborn County, Indiana (1915) states, "...he (William H. Leive) commenced to learn the watchmaker's trade in the old Opera House building, in 1889, and a few years before his father's death relieved him at the work bench, his father having previously taken him into partnership..." (p. 850-851). William Leive, Sr., apparently had his jewelry store at this location for a number of years. He died March 12, 1910 at his Aurora home.

John A. Parks was born August 18, 1850 and the son of Joseph G. Parks, a farmer in Hogan township, Dearborn County. All the 1885 Dearborn County history says concerning of John A. Parks is he "left the farm, read law, and was admitted to the bar in October, 1875. He has prospered in life, and secured a competency, which will enable him to pass his pilgrimage in ease and affluence" (p.864).

David H. Stapp, attorney at law, was born in Ripley County, Indiana on August 29, 1849, and graduated from Hanover College in 1872. He was admitted to practice in the Courts of Dearborn County in 1874. An 1885 biographical sketch states, "Mr. Stapp is a young man of public spirit and enterprise, and has been identified with the erection of several creditable buildings by

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 11 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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which the city has been greatly improved." He died August 2, 1917 in Chicago, Illinois.

Thomas O. Lindsay, attorney, real estate and insurance agent, was born in Rising Sun, Indiana, October 17, 1849. Lindsay entered into the carpentry trade in 1865 and eventually became an architect. "In 1870 he came to Aurora as a contractor and builder, and has built over 180 houses, including the Opera House, all of which stand as monuments to his skill and ability as an architect and builder," states the 1885 History of Dearborn and Ohio Counties (p. 814). He abandoned manual labor in 1881 and was admitted to the bar in 1882. It is unknown today what other Aurora buildings were designed and built by Lindsay.

On January 10, 1878, The Dearborn Independent noted in a glowing article that numerous building projects were occurring throughout the city; however, they do not mention the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House which would be completed by late November of that year. This article illustrates that the town was experiencing a building boom and there was great optimism for the future. "Never, perhaps, in the history of the city, has so much building been done in such a short time. Next season many more buildings will go up. The foundation for the Nutshell & Cunningham, and the Mabin Brothers' buildings, on Second Street, have been laid, and the erection of a large business house thereon, will begin early in the spring. We venture the assertion that no town of its size in this part of the country has made the advancement that our city has during the past year." In a similar article dated December 19, 1878, The Dearborn Independent noted, "...The unexampled number of new buildings put up here in 1877 and 1878 is of course due to the demands of the increase of our population, but it must not be forgotten however that this rapid growth is, mostly dependant on the Iron Works. The erection and successful opening of a first class amusement hall in the shape of the new Opera House has naturally followed the growth spoken of and appropriately caps the closing of a year eventful in our progress. Increase capacity of the old stores and the number of new ones started has made it just as cheap, and certainly much more convenient, for farmers, mechanics, and laboring men to buy their supplies right here, as to go to Cincinnati for them, as many formerly did."

The Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House building was constructed to house a number of different functions. The first floor was dedicated to commercial use, part of which was first

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 12 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

used by William Leive for his jewelry store. A notice in the January 23, 1879 edition of The Dearborn Independent stated that the McCreary & Niebaum dry goods store moved into the "boss" store room of the Opera House Building. The D. Burke Clothing Store was housed there in 1912. Later Vigran's Department Store was located in the building, followed by Goldsmith's. Possibly, in the beginning, there was only office space for professionals on the second floor and later it was converted into housing and storage for the first floor commercial enterprises. It is believed, but can not be verified from information available in city directories and the two county histories, that the large second floor room was used as a meeting room for one of the fraternal orders.

In the early years of the town, public assemblies and performances were most likely held in local churches, lodge halls, or small commercial halls, such as Schulze's Hall where Susan B. Anthony spoke just prior to the opening of the Opera House. By the late 1870s, when the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House was built, there was a boom in the economy and a growing sophistication within the city. The Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House was the first of several theaters built in Aurora. The Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House, also known as the Grand Opera House, was used until around the turn of the century for performances by traveling theatrical companies and local groups, such as the Second Grand Concert given by the Aurora Ladies' Orchestral Club on February 8, 1895; the Schipper's Orchestral Concert on May 11, 1894; and the Elocutionary Recital, The Artist's Dream and the Gibson Pictures presented November 24, 1898. The building was also used for graduation ceremonies of the Aurora High School in 1901, 1907, and probably many other years and was the site of events such as the convention of the Southern Indiana Teachers' Association meeting in March 1890.

From its opening in 1878 through the early twentieth century, local newspapers carried numerous notices of events occurring at the Opera House, such as performances, lectures, church services, reviews of shows, general interest news, and ticket information. "General admission 35 cents; reserved seats 50 cents. Diagram of hall at Leive & Bro.'s. jewelry store. Buy your tickets today if you wish to get a choice seat for either evening," stated an article entitled, "LINA TETTENBORN / At Grand Opera House Friday and Saturday Nights", in the January 23, 1879 edition of The Dearborn Independent.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 13 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

Less than a decade after it was built, the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House had its first major competitor. The Lyric Theater in the Odd Fellow's Temple Building, located one block west on Second Street, was completed in 1887. This theater was used only into the first decade of the twentieth century. Stage shows, early motion pictures or "photoplays", and commencement exercises in 1913 and 1915 were held at the Lyric. The three story Romanesque building which housed the Lyric is still standing; however, the second floor theater, which was used as a gym by the Lutheran school, is gone. The History of Dearborn County (1915) listed the Lyric as one of three theaters in Aurora. Early in the twentieth century the Grand Theater was built on Second Street, primarily for motion pictures; however, local theatrical performances and graduations, such as 1920, occurred in the building. Later, the Grand was turned into a roller skating rink and a youth canteen and it completely burnt in the 1950s. The third theater listed in 1915 was the Empire, which a few older Aurora citizens remember as a small nickelodeon. Its location is unknown. In the early 1920s the Palace was constructed as a movie theater and served the Aurora community until the building was gutted by fire in the 1970s. The shell of the building has been reused for commercial use. The Palace was the site of high school graduations throughout the 1920s.

The Opera House auditorium was stripped of its seats in the early decades of the twentieth century, a gym floor laid, and the space was used by the Aurora High School basketball team as a gym from 1923 to 1935. Prior to the move to the Opera House, basketball was played in the basement of Aurora's Northside School, an Italianate building constructed in 1880. This basement area proved to be unsuitable for basketball because of its small size, low ceiling, and other obstacles. The 1920 Aurora High School year book, the Excelsior, stated the school had decided to have a basketball tournament for twelve teams in December of 1919. Invitations were sent out and "it was decided to hold the tournament in the Old Opera House, but the State Fire Marshall interfered and it was decided to hold the meet in the A. H. S. Gym." It is unknown why the teams were not allowed to play at the Opera House at this time, but the 1923 high school yearbook, the Auroran, states "Our school was lucky in securing the Athletic Hall over in town. Its large seating capacity greatly helped the attendance, which was always good." It is safe to assume from conversations with students from this period, that "Athletic Hall" was the third floor of the Opera House.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 14 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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During this period, the Aurora "Red Devils" played teams from surrounding communities, such as Milan, Patriot, Moores Hill, Brookville, Greensburg, and Lawrenceburg. Aurora also played out of state schools such as Addyston, Ohio, and Petersburg, Kentucky. The team continued to play basketball games at the Opera House until the new Aurora High School and Community Building was completed with federal assistance in 1935.

The Leive, Parks, & Stapp Opera House was the center of many of the social, educational, and commercial activities that occurred in Aurora in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Opera House has survived a number of Ohio River floods including those which occurred in 1882, 1883, and 1884. The Dearborn Independent, February 15, 1879, discussing the height of the water stated, it has risen "...to more than a foot [of water] on the floor of Leive Bros jewelry store, in the opera house building." The Aurora Opera House would be affected by many other floods during the years, the worst, of course, was during the Great Flood of 1937. The high water reached into the second floor of the Opera House.

In the twentieth century, the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House has seen a variety of uses on the first floor. The second floor was converted to apartments and the interior altered with numerous partitions. The third floor was gutted of everything except the stage prior to 1920 and the freight elevator, which serviced all three floors, was added near the southwest corner in 1938. By the mid-1970s the Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House building, once the crown jewel of downtown Aurora, stood abandoned and deteriorating. Current plans call for a complete exterior restoration of the building.

Today, there are no operating theaters in Aurora, live performances are given in the auditorium at a new high school building constructed in 1980 and located outside of town. Each theater built in Aurora was quickly replaced, in a decade or so, with a newer, safer structure. The Leive, Parks & Stapp Opera House is the oldest surviving theater building in Aurora and is an outstanding example of the opera houses built throughout the United States in the late nineteenth century.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 & 10 Page 15 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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The Dearborn Independent (Aurora, IN), 10 January 1878  
19 December 1878  
23 January 1879  
20 February 1879  
13 March 1879  
27 March 1879

Other

Civil Order Book #56, Dearborn County, Indiana, November 1887 - July 1888, Winkley vs. Leive, page 158.

Deed Record Books, Dearborn County Recorders Office, Dearborn County Courthouse.

Miscellaneous theater programs and Aurora High School commencement programs.

Section 10-Geographical Data-Verbal Boundary Description

In-lot 61, City of Aurora Original Plat

Boundary Justification- This is the historic property boundary

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number photos Page 16 Leive, Parks and Stapp Opera House  
Dearborn Co., IN

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Leive, Parks, and Stapp Opera House  
Aurora, IN  
Nancy Shumway  
February 10, 1993  
Nancy Shumway, 1005 Rustic Drive, Lawrenceburg, IN 47001

photo #1

Exterior - front facade. Direction: southeast

photo #2

Exterior - front facade detail. Direction: south

photo #3

Exterior - front facade detail. Direction: south

photo #4

Exterior - northwest corner. Direction: southeast

photo #5

Exterior - rear facade. Direction: northwest

photo #6

Interior - auditorium and stage. Direction: south

photo #7

Interior - auditorium. Direction: north

photo #8

Interior - auditorium. Direction: southwest

photo #9

Interior - second floor east side. Direction: south

photo #10

Interior - second floor west side. Direction: southwest

photo #11

Interior - second floor back hall with dropped half floor above. Direction: north