

FINAL

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 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 Fowler Theatre
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 111 East 5th Street N/A not for publication
city or town Fowler N/A vicinity
state Indiana code IN county Benton code 007 zip code 47944

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 36CFR 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] 10.26.04
Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____
Indiana Department of Natural Resources
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 the 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 _____

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
- district
- site
- structure
- object
- landscape

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)

RECREATION/CULTURE: Theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION/CULTURE: Theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN: Art Deco

MODERN: Moderne

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls BRICK

METAL

roof ASPHALT

other

Narrative Description

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

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.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE _____

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION _____

Period of Significance

1940-1954 _____

Significant Dates

N/A _____

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A _____

Cultural Affiliation

N/A _____

Architect/Builder

Eugene, Alexander K. _____

9. Major Bibliographic 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 # _____

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of repository:

Benton Review, Fowler, Indiana _____

Fowler Theatre
Name of Property

Benton IN
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than 1 acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	16	472700	4496170	3			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
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 Amy J. Bott; Amy Walker
organization Prairie Preservation Guild, Ltd.; DHPA date 05-25-2004
street & number 608 E. 6th St. telephone 765/884-0708
city or town Fowler state IN zip code 47944

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

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

Photographs

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 Prairie Preservation Guild, Ltd--Karen Moyars, President
street & number P.O. Box 527 telephone 765/884-1902
city or town Fowler state IN zip code 47944

Paperwork Reduction Act 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 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 Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 Page 1

**Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana**

Description

The Fowler Theatre is located in the Town of Fowler (pop. 2,519) in rural Benton County in northwest Indiana. It occupies a site on East Fifth Street in the downtown business district. This balanced one-story building was designed by Chicago architect Alexander K. Eugene and completed in 1940. The Fowler is a brick masonry building on a concrete foundation topped with a flat asphalt roof. There is an overall streamlined horizontal emphasis to the theatre; it has an exterior in the Art Moderne style and an interior with both Art Moderne and Art Deco features.

The south-facing main façade is a single story along the sidewalk but has a second floor penthouse for the projection room. The front façade was originally covered with enameled steel plates with a darker blue below and lighter blue above separated by a red marquee and banding (see historic photo). The panels and banding were removed c.1995. Today only the fluted corner plates remain and the current exterior is red brick (photos 1, 2). However the form of this façade and many of the decorative elements remain to illustrate the Art Moderne feel. The recessed entrance bay is flanked by matching poster cases that were set back into the brick. The added shutters hide the size of the original opening but by looking through the slats, one can see the open space behind. The front walls curve inward toward the original ticket booth that is bordered by matching recessed entrance doors. The curving walls continue onto the ticket booth where all of the corners are rounded and the roof cascades down in three separate tiers. A set of three vertical metal bands are centered on the ticket booth roof. The top half of the booth is plexiglass that is chamfered at the corners. The bottom portion of the booth is covered by blue enameled plates and decorative horizontal banding just below the counter. On either side of the ticket booth there are Terrazzo floors leading into the theatre. The pattern has three bands overlaid with an arrow that directs patrons through the entrance doors and continues on the interior. These aluminum doors have oval glass windows and aluminum door handles that spell out "Fowler" and "Theatre" (photo 3).

Dominating the entire façade is a portion of the original marquee. The exterior metal supports and the lettering are still intact. The shadow of the remaining elements is visible on the sidewalk in photo 1. However, the marquee no longer provides shelter to patrons waiting in line for tickets. In the early to mid-1990s the underside of the marquee, once covered with over 800 lights, was removed.

The east and west facades are more of the same red brick. An alley runs along the east side of the theatre and a small access drive to the neighboring building abuts the west side. The only embellishment on these elevations is a series of five evenly spaced pilasters with concrete caps on either side (photos 5, 6).

The north façade faces an alley behind the theatre (photo 7). The rear of the building has a door at both ends of this elevation. The one to the east is a large steel door that is operable. The opening on the west end has been boarded up and is no longer used. A small window was placed above each doorway but both have been covered.

The interior of the Fowler Theatre is combination of Art Moderne and Art Deco details. Upon passing through the exterior doors there is a continuation of the terrazzo flooring from the exterior (photo 14).

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Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana

Description-continued

Carpet covers the remainder of this space. The lobby contains a late 1940s concession stand, restrooms, and entry doors to both the auditorium and the ticket booth. Like the exterior, all of the corners are curved, with the exception of those on the modern concession counter (photo 8). This addition impedes the view of the twin yellow and green neon cascades that are recessed between the auditorium doors and run from floor to ceiling. On either side of the concession stand are sets of doors leading into the auditorium. These recessed wood doors have round port-hole like windows in each panel and are topped by a convexly fluted plaster bulkhead (photo 9). Bands of stylized plaster chevrons and sunbursts cover another bulkhead that runs the entire depth of the lobby ceiling (photos 10, 11, 12). The bands are painted a metallic silver to mimic the look of metal. The bands run across the entire ceiling, down the south wall and stop just above the door into the ticket booth (photo 11).

Like the east and west walls of the exterior, these interior walls mimic one another. Just inside the exterior doors is a pair of original display cases, one on each wall (photo 13). They consist of plaster frames painted the same metallic silver as the ceiling decoration. The colonnettes have the same convex fluting as the bulkhead while the sill has incised banding. The oversized streamlined bulkhead also has the similar banding and contains recessed lighting. Around the corner from these display cases are the restrooms, men's on the west and women's on the east. Between the restrooms and the entry doors into the auditorium are round mirrors hung in recessed coves that conceal lighting behind them (photo 10). These are replacements of an original feature (the original mirrors were tinted blue).

The auditorium space is divided into three sections—a central row of eight seats and side aisles of four seats per row. The theatre can seat 196 patrons in c.1970s seats. There is more than ample leg room since every other row was removed. The floor, which gently slopes toward the stage, is concrete but the aisles are covered with carpet (photo 15). Above the seats on the side walls are a series of decorative elements (photo 16). The bottom row is a band of convexly fluted plaster similar to that above the auditorium doors in the lobby. Above this is a row of stylized forms based on an acroterion. As the floor slopes down, these bands step down at regular intervals. To make the transition from one level to the next, there are fluted rectangular forms that align with both rows (photo 17). Light fixtures are placed adjacent to these transitional forms—wood panels cut to mimic the shape of vertical fluorescent tubes with three metal radiating bands that contain recessed lighting. The movie screen is suspended above the stage and is flanked by a set of three horizontal bands. From the back of the auditorium they appear to be painted stripes but they are actually cut out areas with recessed lighting. Below these bands, in the rounded corners of the auditorium space, are two doorways. All of the doorways in the auditorium (two flanking the stage and two leading into the lobby) have backlit woodcut exit signs above bands of decorative plaster similar to those in the lobby and the side walls of the auditorium, only the bands contain stylized ears of corn.

The doorway to the west of the stage has been covered but the other one is still in use. It leads to the backstage area and to then to the exterior of the building. The stage area measures approximately 24x15 and is currently blocked from view by the movie screen. Engaged fluted columns form the sides of a subdued proscenium arch. The stage itself gently bows out into the auditorium space.

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Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana

Description-continued

The south wall of the auditorium contains the two entry doors into the lobby and a third door (near the southwest corner) that leads to the projection room on the mezzanine (photo 18). In the southeast corner is a small storage room. Another storage area is located between the doorways that lead into the lobby.

The projection room contains a reel-to-reel projector that is estimated to be 50 years old. A c1970s platter system has been installed as well. This equipment utilizes the same technology used today but the fact that it is still being used by the Fowler Theatre makes it unique. Additionally, the fire screens, metal shutters over the projector openings, are still intact.

Statement of Significance

The Fowler Theatre is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C. It is located in Benton County, one of the remaining counties in Indiana that has not yet been surveyed. The Fowler, designed by Chicago architect Alexander K. Eugene and constructed in 1940, is a notable example of an Art Moderne/Art Deco building and possesses remarkable integrity despite the removal of the exterior coated steel panels and, therefore, qualifies under Criterion C for its architecture. It is also eligible under Criterion A for its impact on entertainment/recreation in Benton County. It is the sole functioning theatre, historic or modern, in the county. The period of significance is 1940-1954.

Evolution of American Movie Theaters

Prior to 1905, most motion pictures did not have permanent homes. Instead they were shown in borrowed spaces including stage theaters, music halls, sideshow tents, and converted stores.¹ Nickelodeons, with their low prices to appeal to the masses, required very little in order to put on a show. "Often a sheet for the screen, ten to twelve rows of benches, a box for collecting admission and a curtain separating the 'lobby' from the screening room sufficed. Entrepreneurs reasoned that if motion pictures turned out to be a passing fancy, these makeshift theaters could easily be converted back into retail space."² These early motion pictures consisted of "flickering black-and-white images—generally 10-minute silent melodramas or comedies".³

Advances in film production in the 1910s resulted in photoplays—more developed narratives captured on celluloid.⁴ With these more sophisticated movies and in an effort to gain respectability, permanent theaters began to emerge. America's first movie palace opened in New York City in 1913.⁵ These buildings were not the opulent show houses of the 1920s but were large enough to house "hundreds or

¹ Sklar, Robert. *A World History of Film*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2002, 83.

² Halnon, Mary. *Some Enchanted Evenings: American Picture Palaces*, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/palace/early1.html> accessed 8/24/04.

³ Naylor, David. *American Movie Theaters*. Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1987, 15.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Halnon, accessed 8/24/04.

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Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana

Statement of Significance-continued

even thousands of patrons.”⁶ The shows in these new structures consisted of both vaudeville acts and motion pictures. This combination continued through the 1920s with movies eventually becoming more popular and eventually forcing the demise of live acts.

By the mid-1920s movies has made significant strides. Some early film exhibitors were successful enough to form film studios in Hollywood. Fox (1913), MGM (1924), Paramount (1912), RKO (1929), United Artists (1919), Universal (1912), and Warner Brothers (1923), were all established movie studios by the end of the decade. Technology allowed, for not only longer films and more complicated stories, but also for sound. The first “talkie” was *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. The industry in general had gained acceptability and such entertainment was enjoyed by all classes. In was in this environment that the movie palaces came to be. “As movie-going became an established practice across the country, patrons witnessed the birth of a distinctly modern and quintessentially American architectural creation: the motion picture palace.”⁷ These buildings portrayed a world of opulence and exoticism through the architecture, thereby attracting a crowd who not only wanted to be entertained by the movie but also have access to the fantasy and wealth such theaters exhibited. This was the way for the average (or below average) person to taste the good life, even if only for a short time. The building was as much of a drawing point as the show itself and it has been said that movie palaces were a “social safety valve in that the public can partake of the same luxuries as the rich, and use them to the same full extent.”⁸ Movie theaters were awash in decoration—the soaring lobbies, the elegant lounges, and the immensely lavish theaters. Interiors were a hodge-podge mix of exotic architectural features drawn from Egyptian, Asian, East Indian, Tudor, Mayan, and the more traditional Italian and Spanish Revivals. However, one architecture critic commented in 1928 that “No more pitiful degradation of an art has ever been presented than the prostitution of architecture that goes on daily in the construction of these huge buildings...taste and beauty abased to the lowest degree.”⁹

It is out of this opulent environment that the geometric forms and simplicity of the Art Deco style emerged in the late 1920s.¹⁰ “By the 1930s movie going was a ‘socially acceptable form of behavior and no longer needed an architectural defense,’ hence the ability of theater architects to dispense with classical, Old World references.”¹¹ Despite the effects of the Depression, movies were coming of age in the 1930s and Hollywood was producing high quality films.¹² RKO produced the first full-length color feature film (*Becky Sharp*) in 1935.¹³ This popularity lasted most of the decade but by 1941 World War II was in full swing and Americans did not have the time, resources or inclination to go to the movies.

⁶ Naylor, 15.

⁷ Naylor, 19.

⁸ Halnon, accessed 8/24/04.

⁹ Naylor, 23.

¹⁰ Naylor, 25.

¹¹ Halnon, accessed 8/24/04.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sklar, 196.

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**Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana**

Statement of Significance-continued

Following World War II the film industry experienced yet another resurgence and in 1946 Hollywood had its most successful year in history.¹⁴

It was about this time that the Fowler Theatre was constructed in northwestern Indiana. Many smaller towns did not have the population to support a large scale movie theater but the interest was there. The population of Fowler in 1940 was 1,903 residents and they were able to support a 425-seat movie theater.

Architectural Significance

The exterior of the building contains design elements typically associated with the Art Moderne style. The horizontal emphasis of the building is evident in that it is wider than it is tall. The flat roof and terra cotta coping also visually lowers the building as do the horizontal lines formed by the marquee and the banding around the ticket booth. Another traditional Art Moderne feature is the curvilinear elements. The curved corners of both the exterior walls and the ticket booth exemplify the streamlined feel. While the windows on the ticket booth are not curved, they are chamfered, so the visual impression is that the corners curve. The windows on the entrance doors also form an oval shape that downplays hard edges of the rectangular doors. With the exception of the marquee there is very little ornamentation on the exterior of the theatre. This simplicity of form follows the Art Moderne style, where metal panels were considered decoration.

Interiors are especially significant for theaters, since this is what was likely to impress patrons. The interior of the Fowler is remarkably intact. While the exterior of the theatre is in the Art Moderne style, the interior is a blend of Art Moderne and Art Deco. The lobby exhibits the same curvilinear detailing as the exterior—curved corners and walls and rounded edges and windows. It also has a horizontal emphasis that is noticeable on the interior as a result of the low bulkhead over the concession stand and the horizontal banding above the display cases and on the terrazzo floor. Other Art Moderne features include the round ornamental mirrors near the restrooms and the metallic finish of the decorative plaster meant to mimic stainless steel. The dominant Art Deco feature of the lobby is the decorative plasterwork on the ceiling. The paired bands have alternating stylized chevrons and sunburst patterns that run the entire depth of the lobby ceiling. Another Art Deco element is the reeding and fluting above the auditorium doors and around the display cases and the relatively simple trim around the entrance doors.

The auditorium continues many of the themes found in the lobby. Curved corners and the banding on either side of the movie screen demonstrate the Art Moderne style, as do the wall sconces with horizontal banding. One row of the decorative plaster banding includes stylized acroterion forms and is painted in the same metallic paint as the lobby ceiling.

¹⁴ Sklar, 278.

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**Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana**

Statement of Significance-continued

All of these architectural elements remain intact on both the exterior and interior of the Fowler Theatre. With so many intact design details associated with the Art Moderne and the Art Deco architectural periods, this building serves as an excellent example of these styles.

The Fowler Theatre is the only intact theater in Benton County that has continued to function as a theater. Other nearby communities also had theaters but the ones in Kentland, Oxford, and Boswell are long gone. The closest theaters are located in Attica, Indiana (35 miles south) and Lafayette, Indiana (30 miles southeast). The Devon Theatre in Attica, Indiana, is a 1938 Art Deco building that is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1993 as part of the Attica Downtown Historic District. The Art Deco building was designed by Attica architect Louis Johnson with seating for 650 patrons. The building has been restored and now has 360 seats with room for 100 additional chairs. It is covered in cream and red enameled steel plates and has the original marquee. The Devon has been in continuous use since it opened (with the exception of the seven month restoration) and shows first run movies seven days a week. Movie-goers come from a roughly 40-mile radius.

The closest historic theater is the Lafayette Theatre in Lafayette, Tippecanoe County. The Lafayette Theatre, located within the National Register listed Upper Main Street Historic District, is a 1938 Art Moderne building that is at least double the size of the Fowler Theatre. It has a vertically oriented façade that is covered in square limestone blocks and glass and stainless steel. It has a centrally located ticket booth flanked by single entrance doors. The interior has experienced some alterations. The seating has been removed and sections of plaster have given way. It was last used as a theater in 1990 and has housed a series of unsuccessful businesses since. In 2002 the Wabash Valley Trust for Historic Preservation and the New York LLC joined forces to save the theater from demolition. The Lafayette is currently undergoing both exterior and interior restoration and will eventually be a dinner/movie theater.

Dick Vlastos came to Fowler to manage the Dreamland Theater but his dream was to run his own theater. He hired Chicago architect Alexander Eugene to design the Fowler just down the street. It is unknown how long the Fowler Theatre continued to show movies. It housed an auction house for several years and then transferred to a private owner in the early 1990s who proceeded to remove the enameled steel panels and possibly interior seats and light fixtures while the theatre sat vacant. The owner was ready to remove the remnants of the marquee and add a shed roof to the front when a local resident who was working across the street ran over and made an offer. Then the Prairie Preservation Guild formed to save the theatre. They were able to raise the necessary money and obtained ownership of the theatre in July 2001. Six months later, December 2001, they began showing movies. Working solely with volunteers, the efforts of the Prairie Preservation Guild are succeeding. They show movies Friday-Sunday and have been able to book first-run movies on opening weekends. They continue to fund-raise and in summer 2004 the Fowler received a new roof. Future plans include the restoration of the enameled steel panels and the marquee.

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Continuation Sheet

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Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana

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Section number 10 & Photos Page 8

**Fowler Theatre
Benton County, Indiana**

Verbal Boundary Description

The East Forty-Two (42) feet off of Lot Three Hundred Thirty-Eight (338) in the Original Plat of the Town of Fowler, in the County of Benton and State of Indiana.

Verbal Boundary Justification

The boundary is the recorded legal description of the property.

Photographs

The following information applies to Photos: 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14

2. Benton County, Indiana
3. Photographer: Kay Tabert
4. Date of Photograph: June 1, 2004
5. Location of Original Negatives: Benton Review, 102 E. 5th St., Fowler, IN 47944

The following information applies to Photos: 2, 15, 16, 17, and 18

2. Benton County, Indiana
3. Photographer: Kyra Tabert
4. Date of Photograph: May 1, 2004
5. Location of original negatives: Benton Review, 102 E. 5th St., Fowler, IN 47944

Photo #1

Camera facing north, main façade

Photo #2

Camera facing north, main facade

Photo #3

Camera facing north, ticket booth

Photo #4

Camera facing north, ticket booth and marquee

Photo #5

Camera facing southwest, east exterior wall

3565 1/1 NW
EARL PARK

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

KENTLAND 13 MI.
EARL PARK 7 MI.

STATE OF
INDIANA DEPARTMENT
INDIANAPOLIS
3565 (WAL)

FOULER THEATER
FOULER, BEITHON CO,
INDIANA

W. 112700 449670

8 MI. TO ILLINOIS STATE LINE
0.3 MI. TO U.S. 41

