

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE



HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
APPLICATION FOR HISTORIC LANDMARK OR HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION

New Designation

Amendment of a previous designation X

Please summarize any amendment(s) This historic landmark amendment, with a period of significance of 1910 - 1970, provides additional research and documentation that supports Howard Theatre's importance to civil rights activism and entertainment.

Property Name: Howard Theatre

If any part of the interior is being nominated, it must be specifically identified and described in the narrative statements.

Address: 620 T Street NW

Square and lot number(s) Square: 441 Lot: 90

Affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission: 1B

Date of Construction: 1910 Date of major alteration(s): N/A

Architect(s): Edward Storck Architectural style(s): 20th Century Revival/Beaux Arts

Original use: RECREATION/CULTURE/Theater Present use: RECREATION/CULTURE/Theater

Property owner: District of Columbia

Legal address of property owner: 441 4th Street NW, Washington, DC 20001

NAME OF APPLICANT(S): DC Preservation League

If the applicant is an organization, it must submit evidence that among its purposes is the promotion of historic preservation in the District of Columbia. A copy of its charter, articles of incorporation, or by-laws, setting forth such purpose, will satisfy this requirement.

Address/Telephone of applicant(s): 1328 Florida Avenue NW, 2nd Floor, Washington, DC 20009;
(202) 783-5144

Name and title of authorized representative: Rebecca Miller, Executive Director

Signature of applicant representative:  Date: 4/16/2026

Name and telephone of author of application: DC Preservation League, (202) 783-5144

Date received 4/18/2026
H.P.O. staff KPW Case #26-06

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. 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.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Howard Theatre (additional documentation)

Other names/site number: _____

Name of related multiple property listing:

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 620 T Street, NW

City or town: Washington State: DC County: _____

Not For Publication: Vicinity:

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 at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B ___C ___D

<p>_____ Signature of certifying official/Title:</p> <p>_____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>	<p>_____ Date</p>
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In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title :	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ entered in the National Register
- ___ determined eligible for the National Register
- ___ 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
-

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Site

Structure

Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

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

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

20th Century Revival/Beaux Arts

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Concrete, brick, stucco

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Howard Theatre was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. The Period of Significance is cited in the form as the twentieth century, with areas of significance being Music, Theater, and Other (not specified). In 2008, the 1974 nomination was amended to provide a more thorough historic context and to update the narrative description ahead of a major rehabilitation project scheduled to commence the following year. The description presented in this amendment reflects the building's appearance following the rehabilitation project, which was completed in 2012.

The Howard Theatre at 620 T Street, NW is a freestanding brick building constructed in 1910 to serve as a vaudeville, musical, live show theater for African Americans. The theater, designed by white architect Edward J. Storck, for the white-owned National Amusement Company, is located in the heart of what was historically Washington, DC's pre-eminent African American community. The building has been altered at various points during the twentieth century and sat vacant for more than thirty years before being restored and re-opened after a National Park Service-approved historic rehabilitation as a concert and events venue in 2012. The building is rectangular in plan and features two masses: the northern three-quarters of the building is three-

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and-one-half-stories in height and is capped by a front gabled roof (the theatre building), while the southern quarter of the building (the stagehouse) is four stories in height and capped by a flat roof that houses the building's mechanical equipment. The primary façade is seven bays wide, its original white glazed brick faced in stucco, and features a prominent central entrance. A vertical marquee sign reading "HOWARD" spans the building's second and third stories and is attached to the east end of the façade. The remaining elevations are clad in brick and devoid of fenestration. The building's interior, which had been destroyed following the collapse of the roof, has been completely modernized. The three-story theater space occupies most of the building. The stagehouse serves the back-of-house functions, while the northern quarter features front-of-house public circulation and gathering spaces.

Narrative Description

Site

The Howard Theatre is located at 620 T Street, NW on Record Lot 90 at the north end of Square 441 and is situated on a rectangular 0.27-acre lot along the south side of T St, NW in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, DC. The property is bound by T St, NW to the north, Wiltberger St, NW to the east, a parking lot and 641 S St, NW to the south, and Wiltberger Alley to the west. Generally, it is located in a mixed-use residential and commercial area. The theater is fronted by a large sidewalk, roughly the width of T St, NW itself, which then narrows and wraps around to the east side of the building along Wiltberger St, NW and the west side along Wiltberger Alley, ending at the southwest corner of the Howard Theatre where it meets an exterior egress stair. To the rear of the building lies the parking lot between the Howard and 641 S St, NW. The parking lot and both Wiltberger Alley and Wiltberger St, NW are paved.

Exterior

Fully restored in 2010-2012 to match its original appearance, the north (primary) façade rises three- and one-half stories. Stucco covers the heavily damaged original white glazed brick of the facade, and is detailed with a mixed Beaux-Arts, Neoclassical, and Italian Renaissance styles.

The façade, which is seven bays wide, is organized into three sections by prominent pilasters. The outer bays feature a single window opening on the first, second, and third stories, each with a cast stone sill and a Glass Fiber Reinforced Polymer (GFRP) painted jack arched keystone lintel. The openings on the first story are larger than those at the second and third stories and feature a pair of ten-light wood casement windows. The windows within the second and third story openings are squatter, paired eight-light, operable, wood casement windows. The second and sixth bays, made up by the wider pilasters, feature fixed double paneled doors topped with a two-lite transom. Both openings are highlighted with a flat hood topped by a blind arched transom. The third and fifth bays, which are located to either side of the central bay, feature two openings on the first and third stories and a single, central, blind opening framed by a projecting GFRP surround at the second story. The outer opening on the first story features a pair of ten-light casement windows with a cast stone sill and a GFRP painted jack arched keystone lintel.

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The inner opening features a single rectangular poster case with a GRFP surround. The window openings on the third story feature squatter, paired eight-light, operable, wood casement windows each with a cast stone sill and a GFRP painted jack arched keystone lintel.

The central bay features the primary entrance, shielded by a decorative portico. The entrance consists of two sets of contemporary bronze and glass double doors surmounted by four bronze and glazed transom windows and a larger single bronze and glazed transom window. The portico is supported by two Corinthian columns and features an arched opening infilled with decorative ironwork and a sign reading "HOWARD THEATRE" that is further accentuated with a reed and tie border. The outer corners of the portico each have a decorative torchiere. A large, decorative, fixed, multi-light, wood, segmental arched window is located above the portico. The window opening features a stone sill and a decorative GRFP surround interrupted by a keystone with a GFRP oval medallion.

An ornate frieze runs across the façade at the cornice level, and is supported by decorative brackets located on the pilasters that rise from the outer ends of the central portico. The cornice is interrupted by a central three-part, multi-light, fixed, wood window opening at the attic story with a cast stone sill and GFRP surround. A seashell medallion serves as a quasi-keystone for the window opening. A parapet wall above the cornice is topped with a Dutch gable, crowned by a statue playing a trumpet. Four small flag staffs are located atop the parapet. A non-original vertical marquee sign reading "HOWARD" is affixed to the east end of the façade.

The east, south, and west elevations of the building are clad in American bond brick. The east elevation of the Howard Theatre faces onto Wiltberger St, NW. The first story of the east elevation of the theatre building features a single door opening with a contemporary single-leaf metal door topped by a single contemporary downlit sconce at the north end of the wall and contemporary double metal doors topped by a steel lintel beneath a single contemporary downlit sconce. Between the doors are four evenly spaced door openings that have been bricked in. Only the middle two retain their stone sills and triple arched brick headers; the outer two openings have been altered and distorted. Only a single opening is located on the second story at the southern end of the elevation. It has been bricked in and now features a smaller vent. The third story features sixteen regularly spaced blind window openings that sit atop a brick stringcourse. The elevation is topped with a corbelled brick cornice.

The north end of the east elevation of the stagehouse features a door opening with a stone sill and a triple arched brick header infilled with a recessed contemporary metal door. Three squatter window openings with triple arched brick headers are at the basement level, above which are three full-height window openings, each with a stone sill and triple arched brick headers. All six of these window openings have been infilled with brick. A contemporary opening topped with a steel lintel and infilled with metal was added between the center and north openings. A downlit sconce sits atop the lintel and is aligned with the stone windowsills. Contemporary piping is located at the southern corner of the building and wraps the building to continue to the south elevation. The upper stories of the stagehouse are devoid of fenestration.

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On the first story, there are eleven blind openings, nine of which retain their stone sills. At the northeast corner, there is a contemporary door opening with a single-leaf metal door topped by a single contemporary sconce. At the southeast end of the elevation, there is a door opening with a double-leaf metal door topped by a metal lintel. Directly to the south lies another door opening with an original stone sill that is slightly above street level and is infilled with a recessed single-leaf metal door. To the south again, the elevation features another door opening with a metal door topped by a metal lintel. This door is set between two infilled window openings. The second story features one blind opening and one metal vent. At the third story, sixteen regularly spaced blind window openings sit atop a brick stringcourse, with a corbelled brick cornice above.

The south elevation rises four stories in height and faces onto a parking lot and 641 S St, NW. The first story features a central, single-leaf flush contemporary metal door that is above-grade and is accessed via a set of contemporary steel stairs and a set of contemporary taller, flush, double metal doors that open onto a small, elevated loading dock that is accessible via a set of metal stairs located west of center. Three other window openings in the first story have been infilled with bricks, though they retain their original stone sills and triple arched brick headers. Contemporary lighting, wiring, and security features serve as a pseudo band-course above the first story. The upper stories of the elevation are unfenestrated. A simple brick cornice runs almost the entire width of the elevation, terminating at the small parapet at the building's southwest corner. There are several areas on the elevation where the brick has been repaired and replaced.

The west elevation of the building faces onto Wiltberger Alley. Similar to the east elevation, the first story of the theatre building features two single metal doors at the north and south end of the elevation. A single down-lit sconce is centered above both door openings. A contemporary metal vent is located above the northern door and light. Four evenly spaced door openings with stone sills and triple arched brick headers have been infilled. The second story does not have any fenestration, and the third story features sixteen evenly spaced blind window openings atop a brick sill course. The elevation is topped with a corbelled brick cornice. The first story of the stagehouse features four infilled window openings topped with triple arched brick headers. There are several areas on the elevation where the brick has been repaired and replaced. The second and third story feature a single metal door above which is a security light that leads to a landing of the exterior egress stair, which obscures the first, second, and third stories of the stagehouse.

Interior

The interior was fully renovated between 2010-2012. While the original plan and configuration of the primary theater spaces (auditorium, proscenium, stage, lobby, and balcony) were retained, the other spaces throughout the theater were reconfigured to meet operational requirements.

The majority of the interior is occupied by a three-story theatre that is centralized within the building. The northern quarter of the interior is occupied by front-of-house spaces, while the southern quarter of the interior (the area within the stagehouse) is occupied by back-of-house spaces.

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The primary entrance of the Howard Theatre is centrally located off T Street. The two sets of double-glazed doors lead into a vestibule. The ticket box is located at the western end of the vestibule. A single elevator wrapped by a staircase that leads to the basement occupies the eastern end of the vestibule. Directly across from the entrance, another bank of glazed doors leads to a small hallway that terminates with a set of wooden double-doors at its east and west ends. The ceilings of the entry vestibule and hallway are curved at its southern side. There is a second set of wooden double-doors, creating two vestibules prior to entering the theater. Within the theatre, two sets of stairs provide access from the first floor to the second floor at the northeast and northwest corners. A large, central bar occupies the northern end of the theatre at both the first and second floors. On the first floor, booth seating extends from the bar area and continues down the east and west sides of the open floor space, terminating near the foot of the stage. A sunken auditorium floor is absent of fixed furniture, save for a sound booth that is located just south of the bar area. The sunken auditorium is accessed through four sets of stairs – two leading from the bar and two from the side booth areas.

The stage and associated back-of-house spaces (dressing room, wings, storage rooms) occupy the southern portion of the theatre. Two two-story canted walls off the stage originally featured eight boxes: two on each side of the first and second floors. The projecting boxes at the first story were removed at an unknown date and now feature arched window openings that are concealed with curtains. The second story features two rounded projections that correspond to the historic balconies and is topped by a single, large, rounded blind openings. A projection screen is set within the opening. The canted walls are clad with contemporary wood panels. The paneling continues up and over the stage, thereby visually connecting the two canted walls.

The second floor of the theatre features cascade balcony seating that extends toward the stage, wrapping to the east and west walls and terminating at the same point as the seating on the first floor. A staircase on the west side of the stage leads down to restrooms, while a parallel staircase on the east side leads to a small hallway that connects the balcony with a secondary egress stair.

The third and fourth floors of the stagehouse each feature a single storage room. The catwalk over the theatre is accessed from the storage room on the third floor.

The basement contains back-of-house space, including the kitchen, green rooms, and storage rooms. A secondary lobby with a coat check and public bathrooms are located in the northeast section of the basement.

One interior egress staircase provides access from the basement to the roof. Adorning the walls of this interior egress staircase, which is located in the southeast corner of the building, is a mural of signed portraits of every performer that has played at the Howard since its reopening. The artist, Demont Pinder, continues to expand the mural with each new performer. There is also a wall of signatures from significant performers and patrons that is protected by plexiglass that is located offstage to the east on the first floor.

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The interior of the Howard Theatre features contemporary finishes in material and appearance. Though altered several times over the twentieth century, the building's roof collapsed leaving the theater interior exposed to the elements. As a result, no historic fabric remained when the Howard Theatre underwent its most recent renovation and reopening. The lobby features honed and polished tile on the north, east, and west walls, as well as tile flooring. The south wall features doors to the auditorium that possess a glass central horizontal section and opaque top and bottom sections. To the east of the doors, the lobby features another door surrounded by a display case, all clad with contemporary wood panels.

The auditorium features references to aspects of the original treatment and character such as the original balcony structure, the restored Corinthian capitals on the columns that support the balcony structure, the central ceiling dome, the proscenium opening, the arched openings between the balcony and boxes on either side of the proscenium, and the boxes themselves. Surfaces that are angled toward the proscenium feature contemporary wood paneling, and a combination of drywall and modern acoustic systems are used on the east, west, and north walls of the auditorium. The first floor of the auditorium features LVT plank flooring. Flooring at the second-floor bar area consists of tile, while the balcony seating is outfitted with carpeting. Back of house spaces feature a range of carpeting, LVT, and concrete flooring materials.

Integrity

The Howard Theatre retains sufficient integrity to continue to convey its historical significance. The Howard Theatre remains in its original **location**. While the building's **setting** has been compromised due to surrounding development, it does remain a prominent and dominating force along T Street, NW and continues to be separated from surrounding buildings by the surrounding alleys. The significant alterations undertaken to the building during its existence have resulted in a loss of integrity of interior **materials** and **workmanship**. **Although some of the exterior materials and workmanship remain** in place, including the original glazed white roman brick façade, although heavily damaged, which remains beneath the stucco surface, the integrity of exterior materials and workmanship has been diminished. Integrity of **design** has been restored following the 2010-2012 work that successfully returned the building's façade back to its original appearance with the exception of the stucco wall surface. While the interior of the building has been extensively altered, the building continues to operate as a theatre and events space, thereby preserving its **feeling** and **association** as a historic theatre on the U Street corridor.

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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 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.)

- 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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

ETHNIC HERITAGE (Black)

Period of Significance

1910-1970

Significant Dates

1910; 1931

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

African American

Architect/Builder

Edward Storck (architect)

Henry L. Maas (builder)

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Howard Theatre was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. The Period of Significance is cited in the form as the twentieth century, with areas of significance being Music, Theater, and Other (not specified). In 2008, the 1974 nomination was amended to provide a more thorough historic context and to update the narrative description ahead of a major rehabilitation project scheduled to commence the following year. The 2008 amendment argues significance at the national level under **National Register Criterion A**, with a Period of Significance of 1910-1970. The areas of significance cited are **Entertainment/Recreation** and **Ethnic Heritage** because the Howard Theatre, originally constructed as a playhouse for both variety shows and moving pictures catering to African American audiences, 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 Theatre 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. Significant dates acknowledged within the Period of Significance are 1910 and 1931; 1910 corresponds with the date of construction, while 1931 was the year that the theater reopened under manager Shep Allen after closing during the height of the Great Depression. Allen, who managed the Howard until its closure in 1970, brought the theater into the era of big band entertainment by booking the best in black musical talent. During his tenure, Allen evolved with the changes in musical tastes and trends, thus continuing to ensure the Howard Theatre's position as one of the country's most important entertainment venues for African Americans. This amendment reiterates the Howard Theatre's historic significance for the same reasons and for the same period of significance. This additional documentation, however, provides additional information on the Howard Theater, illustrating that its role in the Black community extended well beyond the themes of entertainment and recreation. The Howard Theater was also an important space for civil rights activism. Black Washingtonians identify the theater as a community gathering place that was open to all. The theater provided a safe and welcoming space where all people fighting discrimination and segregation convened. Between 1941 and 1954, the era identified as the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement that carried into the following decade, the Howard Theatre, under the leadership of manager Shep Allen, sponsored events that supported local activist groups like the DC branch of the NAACP. The theater helped to raise money for the purposes of mutual aid and broader community development. In the spirit of the management style of Andrew J. Thomas, manager of the Howard from 1911 to 1922, the Howard was run as if it was owned by the community during this period, fostering both artistic and political achievement in an era of history where Black people and other marginalized groups had to fight for basic human rights.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

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The Howard Theatre, which was designed as a local entertainment venue for Washington, DC's African American community, has also long served as a pivotal venue for the community, especially during the modern Civil Rights Movement, hosting numerous significant events that underscore its role in the fight for freedom and equality. The Howard Theatre at 620 T Street was constructed in 1910 at 7th and T Streets, which at the time was the heart of Washington, DC's burgeoning African American community centered along U Street, NW. The Howard was the first theater in the country built expressly for Black audiences. Andrew J. Thomas, an African American man who had previously managed the nearby Minnehaha Theater, located at Twelfth and U streets, NW, was the manager of the Howard for its first decade, bringing in attractions such as vaudeville, musicals, and road shows. 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. Thomas brought the Black community together by giving its members a place for both recreation and gathering, a precursor to the activism that would occur later in the twentieth century during the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In 1922, African-American actor, producer, and entrepreneur, Sherman Dudley, began leasing the theater.¹ Then Abe Lichtman, the white owner of a chain of movie houses that catered to African-Americans, took over control in 1926.² These traditions of community and cultural enrichment were furthered under the management of Shep Allen who, for owners Steiffel Brothers, managed the Howard beginning in 1931 after the theater was closed by Lichtman in 1929 due to the onset of the Great Depression. Allen recognized that music was a form of social protest; he ushered in a new era of programming that still featured established acts but placed more of an emphasis on introducing new Black talent through its amateur night contests, providing members of the community with a platform to share their voices. The theatre evolved into a space that was directly utilized by civil rights activists towards the mid-century, often the site of fundraising events that contributed to legal and mutual aid funds to be used by community members along with larger NAACP initiatives.

Historic Context

U Street Corridor

The Greater U Street Corridor is a Victorian-era neighborhood, developed largely between 1862 and 1900 as a response to the need for housing following the Civil War. As a reaction to segregation and the great migration, the corridor became a central point and cultural hub for African Americans. Both free African Americans and war refugees from the South contributed to the doubling of the African American population in the area. The U Street Corridor has been historically defined as the area roughly between Florida Avenue to the north, Seventh Street to the east, S Street to the South, and Sixteenth Street to the west. It has also been referred to as the Shaw/Cardozo neighborhood. Up until the twenty-first century, the U Street Corridor was

¹ Music 345: Race, Identify, and Representation in American Music. St. Olaf's College. Student Blogs and Library Exhibition Companion. <https://pages.stolaf.edu/americanmusic/2017/10/10/sherman-h-dudleys-theater-and-support-of-theater-owners-bookers-association/>

² Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center. Howard Theatre Program-The Howard Close Up: Henry P. Whitehead Collection. <https://transcription.si.edu/project/8880>.

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predominantly African American with a pervasive presence of Black culture and a self-sufficient economy.³

Howard University, a historically Black college and university, was founded in 1867 and became an attraction for Black students across the nation, bringing them to the U Street area. Howard University greatly contributed to the rise of the Black middle class in the District of Columbia, a group that was mostly concentrated within the corridor.⁴ The U Street Corridor was a setting for activism due to its proximity to Howard University and other Black cultural institutions. In the early 1940s, the Howard University chapter of the NAACP staged sit-ins at restaurants on U Street.⁵ The DC branch of the NAACP had its office at 1019 U Street NW in the late 1920s and 1930s. In the 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Black activist groups including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were headquartered in the vicinity of Fourteenth and U Streets in Northwest Washington, recognizing that there was still much work to be done.⁶

The intersection of Seventh and Florida specifically was a point of intersection among a variety of groups, including African Americans, Jewish merchants, Asian immigrants, and visitors from other area of the city looking to meet their consumer and recreational needs—making the area a focal point in an already diverse and culturally rich neighborhood. The Howard Theatre stood at the center of it all, aiding in the development of an already energetic music and art scene.⁷

Establishment and Early Programming

The Howard Theatre at 620 T Street was financed in 1910 at 7th and T Streets, NW by the Baltimore-based National Amusement Company.⁸ 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 for Black audiences, predating the Apollo Theater in Harlem which did not become a center of Black entertainment until the 1930s.⁹ When the Howard opened its doors on August

³ Maya Coleman, "Cultural Placemaking in Washington's U Street Corridor: A Catch 22," Master's Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, May 2020, 4-5.

⁴ Maya Coleman, "Cultural Placemaking in Washington's U Street Corridor: A Catch 22," Master's Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, May 2020, 4-5.

⁵ Cheryl Janifer LaRoche and Patsy Fletcher, "Thematic Framework for the History of Civil Rights in the National Capital Area," National Park Service, September 2021, 120.

⁶ Cheryl Janifer LaRoche and Patsy Fletcher, "Thematic Framework for the History of Civil Rights in the National Capital Area," National Park Service, September 2021, 150.

⁷ Blair A. Ruble, "Seventh Street, Black D.C.'s Music Mecca." *Washington History* 26, JAZZ IN WASHINGTON (Spring 2014): 1-3.

⁸ The theater has undergone extensive alterations since 1910, with campaigns occurring in 1931, 1941, and 1974. The 1931 renovation left little of the original interior finishes intact. The exterior was fully restored during the 2010-2012 renovation.

⁹ The 2008 amendment notes, "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." Ruble's 2014 article reiterates this claim: "The Howard could rightfully claim to be the premier African American theater in the country before the Apollo

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22, 1910, it was also the first theater in DC to serve Black people, who were forbidden from attending other local theaters, even just to stand in the balconies, in the early twentieth century. As designed by Baltimore 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 named after General Oliver Otis Howard, head of the Freedmen's Bureau and principal founder and third president of Howard University, a choice that acknowledged the theater's mission of supporting the Black community.

The first manager of the theater was W. H. Smith, an African American man and the former manager of the Pekin Theater in Chicago, widely regarded as one of the best theatrical managers in the country. Although the Howard catered to Black audiences, the theater had been financed and built by white Baltimore businessmen who, according to *The Washington Bee* would not "allow the colored manager the opportunity to actually run the theater."¹⁰ Within three months, the National Amusement Company replaced Smith with a white manager. Decrying this action, *The Bee* announced that it would no longer advertise for the Howard until the theater company named an African American as manager.¹¹

Andrew J. Thomas and Community Involvement

The outcry over the management issue must have resonated because African American Andrew J. Thomas became manager of the Howard in August 1911, formally leased the theater from 1916 and continued running it until 1922.¹²

Born in 1882, Thomas was a Washington, DC-native; upon graduating from Armstrong Manual Training School, one of the two Black high schools in the city, he started his career as a trombone player in the Columbian Orchestra before taking over the management of the Star Theatre in Southwest DC.¹³ He went on to manage the Minnehaha Theater, a movie house located at 1213 U Street, NW, shortly after its opening in 1910, before running the Howard Theatre with some assistance from his brother, Lieut. Vincent Thomas.¹⁴ While managing the Howard, Thomas, in partnership with African American Sherman H. Dudley of the Dudley Theater, took out a five-year lease in 1914 on the American Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue,

Theater emerged as a stage featuring black entertainers in 1934." National Register of Historic Places, *Howard Theater (amendment)*, Washington, District of Columbia, National Register #74002162; Blair A. Ruble, "Seventh Street, Black D.C.'s Music Mecca." *Washington History* 26, JAZZ IN WASHINGTON (Spring 2014): 4.

¹⁰ Robert Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.* (McFarland & Company, Inc.: Jefferson, NC and London, 1999): 272-273.

¹¹ Summarized from 2008 amendment. The 1974 nomination refers to the theater as "Howard Theatre," while the 2008 amendment uses the spelling "Howard Theater." This amendment has chosen to revert back to the original spelling, "Howard Theatre," as it is more historically accurate. National Register of Historic Places, *Howard Theater (amendment)*, Washington, District of Columbia, National Register #74002162.

¹² Thomas formally leased the Howard Theatre from the National Amusement Company from 1916-1922. In 1922, the National Amusement Company began leasing the theater to Dudley-Murray United Theatre Corporation. Chain of title information found at Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, Henry P. Whitehead Collection, Box 103, Folder 38.

¹³ "Originator of 'Supper Show' Buried in D.C.," *Washington Afro American*, July 19, 1941, 15.

¹⁴ "Grand Opening," *Evening Star*, April 23, 1911, 21.

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formerly known as the Lyceum or Kernan's actor, playwright, and entrepreneur opening the theater for the 1914-1915 season.¹⁵ As early as 1914, *The Bee* lauded Thomas' achievements, an indication that he had already left his mark on the patrons of the Howard and the greater U Street community: "There is no man in the theatrical business in this country who has done more for the pleasure and enjoyment of the people than Mr. Thomas."¹⁶

During his management, along with the assistance of House Manager Rufus G. Byers, Thomas sought out varied bookings including vaudeville, musicals, road shows, stock company productions, and even a circus or two, in order to fully showcase the depth of Black talent during a time when Black performers were not allowed on many stages.¹⁷ Some nationally known Black producers whose names appeared from time to time on the Howard Theatre Playbill advertisements were: The Tutt Brothers-Whitney and J. Homer, Irving C. Miller, and Sherman H. Dudley. Their productions brought in capacity crowds that helped the theater find success in its early days; however, Thomas endeavored to serve the community first and foremost, offering performances by local musicians and dramatic plays by groups like Alain Locke's Howard University Players, establishing a long-time relationship with the University.¹⁸ Thomas popularized the "supper show" to keep customers at the Howard between acts, combining his goals of running a successful business and bringing people together. The supper show was an institution characteristic of continuous vaudeville where an intermediary act played between the headlining shows, taking place around supper time.¹⁹

In addition to bringing a variety of talent to the U Street area, Thomas rented out the theater, normally free of cost, for community organizations to use including nearby church congregations and Black fraternal orders like the Independent Order of St. Luke and Odd Fellows, along with Howard University groups, Masons, and the Elks. He was also an active member of local politics along with President of the Boating Club, directly supporting the community he grew up within on both an individual and professional level. Thomas had a close relationship with Judge Robert H. Terrell and his wife Mary Church Terrell, a notable civil rights activist, serving on multiple charity committees with Judge Terrell and honoring the Judge at receptions and ceremonies.²⁰

¹⁵ "Lease on Old Lyceum," *Washington Post*, June 16, 1914, 2.

¹⁶ "Manager Thomas," *Washington Bee*, October 31, 1914, 5.

¹⁷ Byers went on to manage the Hiwatha and Foraker, two of the leading picture houses in the city.

¹⁸ Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theatre on the Black Community," *Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 4 (October 1970): 256-258.

¹⁹ "Familiar Greetings," *Evening Star*, September 16, 1906, 40.

²⁰ Judge Robert H. Terrell was an early supporter of the theater, having been one of the public figures to give a short address at its opening on August 22, 1910. "Judge Terrell is Given Honors at Reception," *Evening Star*, June 7, 1914, 15; "Charity Ball for Belgians," *Evening Star*, December 29, 1914. Critical to the fight for civil rights in DC was Mary Church Terrell, who played a significant role in civil rights activism in the city in the midcentury. In 1950, Terrell and several other Black activists challenged 1870s legislation barring segregation by attempting to dine at Thompson's Restaurant, a segregated cafeteria at Fourteenth Street, NW and New York Avenue, NW.²⁰ The group was turned away, although a white member of the group was able to stay and dine. From this moment, Terrell took on other direct-action tactics to achieve racial equality including applying for membership to the American Association of University Women, a segregated organization, picketing other public places in addition to

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To demonstrate how much of an impact Thomas had on the local community during just a short time at the Howard Theatre, a week was set aside in November of 1913 for the presentation of nightly programs as testimonials to his contributions to the cultural life of the Black community as well as his help in providing a place for Blacks to enjoy their own, and others', theatrical productions. *The Bee* spotlighted Thomas' admirable work at this time, noting that he was "eliminating Jim Crowism which confronts colored people today" and publishing the programs of the nightly testimonials for Thomas. The program for Monday night, November 24, was entitled "Citizens of Washington," and included speeches by Judge Terrell, Harriet Gibbs Marshal, Mrs. A. M. Curtis, and Nannie H. Burroughs, who presented with students of her National Training School for Women and Girls, located in Northeast DC. The program for Tuesday night, November 25, was designated "Organization," representing "all Benevolent, Secret, Fraternal and Beneficial Organizations," including the Independent Order of Good Samaritans with Oscar D. Morris as its Grand Chief. On the following Thursday evening, the testimonial was sponsored by educational leaders in the community, including Roscoe C. Bruce, Assistant Superintendent of DC Schools, and Kelly Miller, a distinguished professor at Howard University. On Friday evening, the Elks and the Knights of Pythias performed; most of the evenings ended with vaudeville shows.²¹

Sherman Houston Dudley and Dudley's Amusements

In 1922, the Dudley-Murray United Theater Corporation leased the theater from the National Amusement Company, intent upon bringing "photoplays" to the Howard to replace the vaudeville acts that were slowly going out of style. The corporation reopened the theater after completing renovations with Sherman Dudley, Thomas' former partner at the American, as the manager. Dudley advertised the Howard as "Dudley's Amusements", as he was not only operating the theater he was supplying the entertainment through his theatrical company. Sherman Houston Dudley was an African American actor, playwright, and theater owner and operator. It is reported that he founded the Colored Actors' Union, headquartered in Washington, D.C., and served as its general manager and treasurer. In 1911 he had organized S.H Dudley Theatrical Enterprises and soon purchased five or six theaters in DC and Virginia. Within two years, he began the first theatrical touring company for African American actors and musicians. Starting with the theaters he owned in Washington and Virginia, by 1916, at least twenty-eight theaters in the East, South, and Midwest had joined the circuit. Dudley's company made it possible for African American entertainers to sign an eight-month contract for multiple theaters, providing them secure employment and exposure to African American audiences. By the 1920s the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) was created. An organization with a board of

Thompson's, and organizing sit-ins. Activists Mary McLeod Bethune and Rev. W. H. Jernigan joined Terrell's suit against Thompson's Restaurant and the group was able to escalate it to the level of the Supreme Court.²⁰ Additional local lawsuits during this period were combined with law suits outside of DC allowing them to become national litigation and affect widespread change. In 1954, the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling was issued by the US Supreme Court which found segregated public schools unconstitutional and overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine in effect since 1896.

²¹ Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theatre on the Black Community," *Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 4 (October 1970): 257-258.

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both white and Black theatre owners, it both booked and returned shareholder interests to theater managers and owners. It soon dominated the booking industry for Blacks, and Dudley merged S. H. Dudley Theatrical Enterprises with TOBA.

Abe Lichtman, Lichtman Theaters

Abe Lichtman, a white Jewish entrepreneur who owned numerous movie theaters catering to African Americans, purchased the Howard (as well as the local Lincoln and the Strand theaters) from National Amusement Company in 1926, ending Dudley's run of movies. Lichtman revived live entertainment for a short period before he closed the theater in 1929 due to the onset of the Great Depression and the failure to attract audiences.²²

Shep Allen and Post-Depression Reopening

The Steiffel Brothers, sons of Russian (Ukrainian) immigrants, purchased the Howard in 1931, endeavoring to revive the respected institution. The Steiffel company ran a number of African American-oriented theaters, including the Uptown Theatre in Philadelphia, which were part of the so-called "Chitlin Circuit". The "Chitlin Circuit" was the sobriquet given to the network of venues that was created by the Ferguson Brothers' Booking Agency, which by the 1930s had replaced TOBA and would become the largest Black-owned entertainment agency in the country. Sam Stieffel invited Stan Allen, manager of the Pearl Theater in Philadelphia, to manage the Howard. Allen had begun his show business career as an usher at Chicago's Mott Theater, then became manager of the old Panama Club, where he formed an act called the Panama Trio, consisting of Florence Mills, Cora Greene, and Bricktop. He went on tour with the trio in the late 1910s, but by 1925, Allen had moved to Philadelphia to manage the Steiffel Brothers' Pearl Theater. After relocating to Washington, DC, Allen would remain at the Howard for the next several decades, up until the theater closed in 1970.²³

Allen's philosophy on running the Howard harkened back to Thomas' tenure, believing that the Howard was a place that belonged to the local community. It was this shared quality that cemented the Howard as an essential component of the city's entertainment scene. More notably, the Howard became a routine feature in the Black community's daily life, as the two managers repeatedly demonstrated their understanding of Black Washington in all of its complexities through the talent they introduced and events they sponsored.²⁴ For the opening of the theatre on September 26, 1931, Allen organized for Duke Ellington's return to DC, as Ellington had grown up around U Street but had been performing in Harlem for the majority of his career. The high-profile billing, which also included notable artists Bennie Moten and Cab Calloway, thrust the Howard Theatre towards a new era of success while simultaneously honoring the city's distinct musical past. Allen brought the Howard into the era of big band entertainment, consistently

²² Summarized from 2008 amendment. National Register of Historic Places, *Howard Theater (amendment)*, Washington, District of Columbia, National Register #74002162.

²³ Jaqueline Trescott, "Howard Theater's Walking History Still Looks Ahead," *Washington Star-News*, August 16, 1974.

²⁴ Blair A. Ruble, "Seventh Street, Black D.C.'s Music Mecca." *Washington History* 26, JAZZ IN WASHINGTON (Spring 2014): 4.

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booking musicians that were nationally known, while balancing these types of marquis performances with amateur nights that launched many up-and-coming performers.²⁵

During his tenure, Allen evolved with the changes in musical tastes and trends, continuing to ensure the Howard's position as one of the country's most important entertainment venues for African Americans. This success was demonstrated by the theater's tendency to sell out so many times over, and to such a degree, that the police department converted T Street to one-way in front of the Howard after an especially rowdy night in 1934 when the Mills Brothers were performing.²⁶ Another innovation of his was to bring famous athletes like Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, and Sugar Ray Robinson to the theater to sing, dance, or do dramatic readings in random novelty shows—further promoting Black successes in careers beyond music and performance to its audience members.²⁷

One of Allen's most important contributions to the Howard was his radio program, which he started recording live from the theater in 1934 and resulted in him becoming the first Black announcer.²⁸ The radio show was half an hour long on Tuesdays and Saturdays, with the Saturday show occurring just before the live midnight show in order to promote the acts that were performing. In a 1966 oral history interview, Allen commented on how the radio show made music of the Howard more accessible: "We used to sell out and we were very, very lucky to have made that connection because it helped us so very much. It reached people that we couldn't have gotten in touch with in any sense."²⁹ The same could be said for other radio shows that came later in the 1940s and were also recorded at the theater like the Lionel Hampton show, which was lauded for the information it dispensed to Black listeners about financial literacy and local programs available.³⁰ Tomlinson Todd's popular show "Americans All", which was similarly viewed as a resource, was taken off the air in 1947 by its station managers for blasting reports of discriminatory practices in DC.³¹ These shows that were both hosted by and platformed Black voices became increasingly important as the fight for civil rights in Washington, DC intensified.

Civil Rights Movement in DC

²⁵ Shep Allen and Felix E. Grant, "Interview with Shep Allen / Interviewed by Felix Grant, ca. 1966," Washington, D.C.: WMAL, 1966.

²⁶ Shep Allen and Felix E. Grant, "Interview with Shep Allen / Interviewed by Felix Grant, ca. 1966," Washington, D.C.: WMAL, 1966.

²⁷ Jaqueline Trescott, "Howard Theater's Walking History Still Looks Ahead," Washington Star-News, August 16, 1974.

²⁸ Allen refers to himself as the "first Negro announcer in Washington, DC" in his oral history interview. Shep Allen and Felix E. Grant, "Interview with Shep Allen / Interviewed by Felix Grant, ca. 1966," Washington, D.C.: WMAL, 1966.

²⁹ Shep Allen and Felix E. Grant, "Interview with Shep Allen / Interviewed by Felix Grant, ca. 1966," Washington, D.C.: WMAL, 1966.

³⁰ Oscar Haynes, "Around the Dials," *Washington Afro-American*, May 1, 1948, 18.

³¹ "Todd's Broadcast Going Off" *Washington Afro-American*, September 20, 1947, 34.

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The “Thematic Framework for the History of Civil Rights in the National Capital Area,” published by the National Park Service in 2021, describes the period of 1941-1954 as the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement, a movement that carried into the following decade from 1954-1964. In the post-World War II era, the District of Columbia played an increasingly important role in the national fight against discrimination. Through organized interventions, direct-action tactics, sit-ins, and legal recourse, activists were able to lessen the chokehold that segregation had on schools, theaters, and restaurants in the first half of the century, their efforts culminating in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.³² This landmark piece of legislation, which followed the Civil Rights Act of 1957 that had established the U.S. Civil Rights Commission for the purpose of initiating lawsuits in regard to racial discrimination in voter registration, outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and all other public accommodations engaged in interstate commerce.³³

The fight for civil rights began in the District of Columbia early on in the 20th century. The DC branch office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also played a significant role in fighting for civil rights. The organization was established in 1909 by W. E. Du Bois and other founding members of the 1905 Niagara Movement. It was created by both Black and white intellectuals with the mission to fight for equal rights for Black Americans and its organizers maintained that aggressive action was required for Black people to attain their full citizenship rights.³⁴ The DC branch office of the NAACP was established in 1912 and was the largest and most influential of the fifty NAACP branches. The DC office was led by African American leadership from the beginning, such as Archibald A. Grimke, unlike the national organization. The DC office was headquartered at 1019 U Street NW in the late 1920s and 1930s, not far from the Howard Theatre and other Black cultural institutions that characterized the U Street Corridor.³⁵

For the next two decades, the NAACP focused its protests and legislative activities primarily on anti-lynching campaigns; its female members formed a lobbying group called the Anti-Lynching Crusaders. The group succeeded in getting the Dyer Anti-Lynching bill out of a Congressional subcommittee, and the bill passed the House of Representatives in 1922 before dying in a Senate filibuster.³⁶ In 1953, the NAACP initiated the “Fight for Freedom” campaign with the goal of abolishing segregation and discrimination by 1963, the centennial of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. The NAACP vowed to raise one million dollars annually for the

³² Cheryl Janifer LaRoche and Patsy Fletcher, “Thematic Framework for the History of Civil Rights in the National Capital Area,” National Park Service, September 2021, 118.

³³ Cheryl Janifer LaRoche and Patsy Fletcher, “Thematic Framework for the History of Civil Rights in the National Capital Area,” National Park Service, September 2021, 134; U S Civil Rights Policy Handbook, Volume 1, Strategic Information and Basic Laws Washington, D. C. USA: International Business Publications, USA, 2012, 20.

³⁴ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984): 12-13.

³⁵ Cheryl Janifer LaRoche and Patsy Fletcher, “Thematic Framework for the History of Civil Rights in the National Capital Area,” National Park Service, September 2021, 103.

³⁶ This was the first piece of anti-lynching legislation to do so. National Historic Landmarks Program, “Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites,” National Park Service, 2002, Rev. 2008, 11.

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whole decade to fund the campaign. Prominent cochairs of the movement included DC's own Duke Ellington, Marguerite Byrd, and Jackie Robinson. "Fight for Freedom" became an important motto for the movement.³⁷

In 1962, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin proposed a mass march on Washington, DC during the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, inviting civil rights, religious, and labor leaders to participate. On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people assembled at the Lincoln Memorial in a peaceful demonstration to draw attention to employment discrimination and to encourage the passing of the pending civil rights bill. As a climax to the demonstration, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.³⁸

In 1968 the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sparked devastating riots throughout the country, the tipping point of frustrations as racial injustices continued to take place despite the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Rioting in DC began in the heart of "Black Broadway" at the corner of 14th and U streets, with a brick thrown through the window of a People's Drug Store. Although the protests started with peaceful intentions, the damage caused by the rioting forced the closed of most of the Black businesses on U Street and many residents were forced to move from the area in the years following. The Redevelopment Land Agency estimated that the damaged property, exclusive of land and inventory, was valued at about \$13.3 million. More than 4,000 homes and 270 of the 320 businesses along 14th Street between Thomas Circle and Park Road were destroyed in the turbulence that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Rebuilding of existing establishments was bleak as business owners looking to rebuild on Fourteenth Street found it nearly impossible to get insurance or loans, particularly if they were Black.³⁹

Art as Activism at the Howard Theatre

In 1922, African American female author/poet/playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson began hosting a literary salon for Black artists, activists, and writers in her parlor at 1461 S Street, NW, referred to as the "Saturday Nighters" or the "S Street Salon."⁴⁰ These events are largely thought of as the match that ignited the intellectual and cultural revival of African-American art and scholarship in DC, taking place around the same time that the Harlem Renaissance was kicking off in New York City. Among those in attendance were New Negro literary artists and scholars the likes of Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Angela W. Grimke, William Waring Cuney, Richard Bruce Nugent, Alain Locke,

³⁷ "The Civil Rights Era," *NAACP: A Century in the Fight for Freedom*, Library of Congress, accessed February 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-civil-rights-era.html>.

³⁸ "The Civil Rights Era," *NAACP: A Century in the Fight for Freedom*, Library of Congress, accessed February 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-civil-rights-era.html>.

³⁹ Maya Coleman, "Cultural Placemaking in Washington's U Street Corridor: A Catch 22," Master's Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, May 2020.

⁴⁰ Georgia Douglas Johnson had a close relationship with W.E.B. Du Bois and the NAACP, as did many of the other Saturday Nighters, and much of her work was featured in Du Bois's publication *The Crisis*.

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W.E.B. Du Bois, May Miller, Jessie R. Fauset, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson.⁴¹ Many of the artists had close ties to the Howard Theatre, sharing their ideas there by presenting their work or as active audience members supporting other up and coming Black performers.⁴²

The Howard Theatre was often the site of fundraising events that contributed to legal and mutual aid funds to be used by community members along with larger NAACP initiatives. One of the earliest events of this kind occurred at the theater on July 27, 1919, in the wake of the recent riots. A mass meeting of “colored citizens” was called at the Howard Theatre to procure funds for the legal defense of “colored men” who were arrested during the riots. The *Washington Afro-American* reported that about one-thousand people were in attendance and a considerable amount of money was raised.⁴³

The following list represents events that were held at the Howard Theatre, demonstrating its function as a key space for activists in their fight for freedom during the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

NAACP Sponsors Production “Kind Lady” (May 9, 1941)

On May 9, 1941, the NAACP sponsored a production of “Kind Lady” at the Howard Theatre, starring the talented young baritone and dramatist Lawrence Whisonant. This event highlighted the theater’s commitment to promoting African American talent and supporting the NAACP’s mission.⁴⁴

Midnight Benefit Show for NAACP (February 1948)

In February 1948, the Howard Theatre hosted a gala midnight benefit show for the Washington Branch of the NAACP, which was broadcast on WINX. The show, emceed by popular disk jockey Harold Jackson, featured performances by Count Basie and his orchestra, Herbie Fields and his orchestra, vocalist Herb Jeffries, Bily Williams and his trio, and Sam Donahue and his orchestra. This event showcased the theatre’s ability to bring together top musical talents to support civil rights causes.⁴⁵

Benefit Show for Freedom Fund (December 20, 1954)

⁴¹ Hubert Harrison founded the New Negro Movement; the term “New Negro” originated in the scholarship of Black professor Alain Locke. In 1917, Harrison established the first organization (The Liberty League) and the first newspaper (*The Voice*) of the movement, energizing Harlem and beyond with its race-conscious and class-conscious demands for political equality, specifically an end to segregation and lynching.

⁴² No documentation could be found demonstrating that the Saturday Nighters meetings took place at the theater. “The Heart of a Black Woman: Georgia D. Johnson, Curator of D.C.’s Saturday Nighters Salon,” Black Broadway on U, accessed February 2025, <https://blackbroadwayonu.com/black-broadway-on-u-in-small-spaces/>.

⁴³ “Call Riots Here Big Conspiracy,” *Washington Post*, July 28, 1919, 5.

⁴⁴ “Howard Players to Present ‘Kind Lady,’” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 9, 1941, 9.

⁴⁵ “Midnight Benefit Show,” *Washington Afro-American*, February 21, 1948, 15.

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On December 20, 1954, the Howard Theatre held a benefit show for the Freedom Fund, sponsored by the District Branch of the NAACP. The event drew an audience of 1,100 people and featured nationally known artists such as Duke Ellington, Willie Bryant, Leonard Reed, and Ray Sneed Jr., along with local artists such as Van Perry's combo, June Norlon, Fat Piniere, the Chantaleers quartet, Tina Simmons, and the Flying Nesbitts. Sneed, a renowned interpretive dancer, performed a piece portraying the NAACP's role in racial progress, while Duke Ellington played seven piano selections live. The event provided an opportunity for thousands of musical fans and Washington area citizens to contribute to the local NAACP's goal of raising \$5,000 for the national "Fight for Freedom" fund. A highlight of the affair was a preview of an all-Black television film series featuring Duke Ellington, Dinah Washington, Bill Bailey, The Clovers, and Herb Jeffries, who took time off from their engagements to support the drive. The use of the Howard Theatre was generously donated by President Gerber of the District Theatres, and the event was the result of extended negotiations between Ben Frye, vice president of Studio Films of New York, and Eugene Davidson, president of the local NAACP.⁴⁶

Senator Humphrey Asks for Support (April 27, 1960)

On April 27, 1960, Senator Hubert Humphrey made a surprise stop at the Howard Theatre during his visit to Howard University. Humphrey, who served as a Senator for Minnesota from 1949-1964 and later became the thirty-eighth Vice President of the United States in 1965, was a key advocate for civil rights. He successfully pushed for the inclusion of a proposal to end racial segregation in the 1948 Democratic National Convention's party platform and was the lead author of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. At Howard University and the Howard Theatre, Humphrey spoke about his hopes for the upcoming Convention, emphasizing the need for a clear and understandable platform on civil rights and disarmament. He also asked for the support of those in attendance at the theater, noting the community's proud history of political engagement.⁴⁷

Theatre Stages "Blues for Mr. Charlie" (March-April 1966)

In March-April 1966, the Howard Theatre staged the play "Blues for Mr. Charlie," written by James Baldwin which addressed racial injustice in the South. The play was reviewed in an editorial that highlighted it as one of the "three excellent examples of what colored America has to say to the rest of the country" in the Washington area, alongside "In White America" at Grace Episcopal Church and "Three Days of Soul," a project of anti-poverty workers in the Cardozo area. The editorial praised the play for its stake and realistic portrayal of racial problems, emphasizing the urgent need for these raw truths to be heard to address the moral dilemma of race facing both Black and White Americans.⁴⁸

Conclusion

⁴⁶ "1,100 Attend NAACP Benefit," *Washington Afro-American*, December 28, 1954, 7.

⁴⁷ "Primary Campaign Near Final Stage," *Washington Afro-American*, April 30, 1960, 1-2.

⁴⁸ "Three Excellent Examples," *Washington Afro-American*, April 2, 1966, 5.

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The Howard Theatre was a stage for both entertainment *and* activism during its prime years of operation between 1910 and 1970. As the first theater in the country built for Black audiences, the managers' and community's commitment to celebrating Black entertainment, and the joy and prosperity that it yielded, in the face of segregation and disenfranchisement was its own powerful form of protest. In addition, the theater hosted many fundraising events towards the mid-century when the modern Civil Rights Movement was gaining traction in Washington, DC. These events directly contributed to legal and mutual aid funds for local activists coordinating with larger NAACP initiatives. Numerous oral histories, newspaper articles, and scholarly publications indicate that virtually all African Americans living in the city before the 1970s remember the Howard as an important place in their lives, representing the widespread impact it had on the U Street community and beyond.

The civil rights riots of 1968, coupled with the effects of desegregation, contributed to the theater's closing in 1970. In 1973, the Howard Theatre Foundation was organized to reopen the venue. It was this organization which successfully sought the building's listing as an individual landmark in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites and the National Register in 1974. The following year, the DC Government purchased the building for \$100,000. In April 1975, the controlling organization, the New Howard Theatre Corporation, reopened the theater with an event showcased by Black comedian Redd Foxx and singer Melba Moore. Subsequently, Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers were among the musical stars who performed at the theater in the 1970s. The theater closed again in 1980, the oldest venue that featured Black entertainers in the country.

In 2002, the DC Preservation League listed the Howard Theatre as one of its Most Endangered Places in the District. Concern for the theater's future, compounded by the total collapse of the roof, grew.

In 2006, the DC Government responded to public sentiment, seeking a developer to renovate and restore the theater into a multi-purpose entertainment venue. Ellis Development was selected to take on the project with the city's pledge of nearly \$12 million in District funds to assist the redevelopment. To manage the project, Ellis Development formed Howard Theatre Development Group LLC, and the nonprofit Howard Theatre Restoration Inc.

Beginning in 2008, Martinez + Johnson Architecture and Marshall Moya Design were responsible for the \$29 million restoration, architecture, and design of the theater. EHT Traceries served as the historic preservation consultants. Whiting Turner were the contractors. Completed with the assistance of the federal Historic Tax Credit Certification Program, the theater reopened April 9, 2012, as a music venue, just over one hundred years since its opening.¹

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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 # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.278 acres (12,096 square feet)

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

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- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 38.91530 | Longitude: -77.02111 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The Howard Theatre 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 on the south side of T Street, NW to the south of Seventh Street and is bound by two minor streets, Wiltberger Street to the east and Wiltberger Alley (west) to the west. A parking lot is located to the south.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries correspond to the property's legal boundaries.

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Alyssa Stein, Historian, and Nicole Starego, Architectural Historian
organization: EHT Traceries, Inc.
street & number: 440 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
city or town: Washington state: DC zip code: 20001
e-mail: nicole.starego@traceries.com
telephone: (202) 393-1199
date: February 2025

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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Figure 1. Locator map at 1:24,000 scale with lot darkened (ESRI)

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Figure 2. Locator map at 1:10,000 scale with lot darkened (ESRI)

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Figure 3. Advertisement for Howard Theatre published in *Washington Post*, May 9, 1915
(*Washington Post*)

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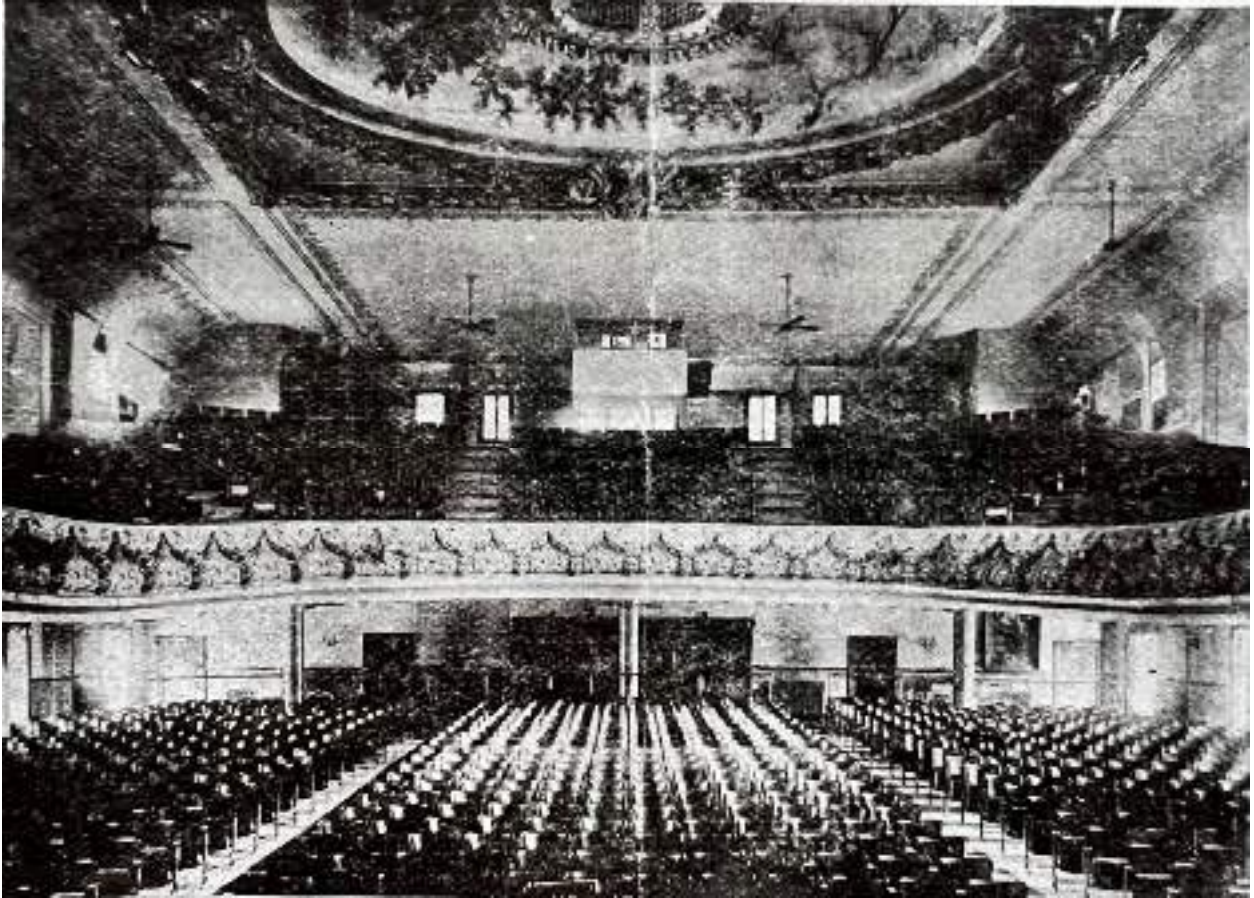


Figure 4. Interior of theater, c. 1915 (DC History Center)

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Figure 5. North Façade, c. 1930 (EHT Tracerics, Inc. Archives; Source unknown)

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Figure 6. Exterior of theatre and T Street streetscape, c. 1940s (DC History Center)

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Figure 7. Interior lobby, undated, likely c. 1940s (DC History Center)

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1066. Howard Theatre, T and Wiltberger
Street NW October 11, 1949

Figure 8. East elevation, 1949 (DC History Center)

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Figure 9. Customers line up at box office to buy tickets for Gladys Knight, 1969 (DC History Center)

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Figure 10. North and east elevations, 1978 (Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library)

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Howard Theatre

City or Vicinity: Washington

State: DC

Photographer: Dani Michelson, Nicole Starego, and Alyssa Stein, EHT Tracerics, Inc.

Date Photographed: January 14, 2025

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

Photo 1 of 20. North elevation, looking south.

Photo 2 of 20. East elevation, looking southwest.

Photo 3 of 20. South elevation, looking north.

Photo 4 of 20. West elevation, looking northeast.

Photo 5 of 20. South and west elevations, looking northeast.

Photo 6 of 20. East and south elevations, looking northwest.

Photo 7 of 20. North and west elevations, looking southeast.

Photo 8 of 20. Marquis, looking northwest.

Photo 9 of 20. East elevation, looking west.

Photo 10 of 20. South elevation, looking north.

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Photo 11 of 20. Front entrance, looking west.

Photo 12 of 20. Front entrance, looking south.

Photo 13 of 20. Auditorium, looking southwest.

Photo 14 of 20. Auditorium, looking south.

Photo 15 of 20. Auditorium, looking north.

Photo 16 of 20. Dressing Room, looking south.

Photo 17 of 20. Second floor bar, looking northwest.

Photo 18 of 20. Auditorium, looking west.

Photo 19 of 20. Mural, looking south.

Photo 20 of 20. Signature wall, looking east.

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Photo #1 DC_Howard Theatre_0001 North elevation, looking south



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Photo #2 DC_Howard Theatre_0002 East elevation, looking southwest



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Photo #3 DC_Howard Theatre_0003 South elevation, looking north



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Photo #4 DC_Howard Theatre_0004 West elevation, looking northeast



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Photo #5 DC_Howard Theatre_0005 South and west elevations, looking northeast



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Photo #6 DC_Howard Theatre_0006 East and south elevations, looking northwest.



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Photo #7 DC_Howard Theatre_0007 North and west elevations, looking southeast



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Photo #8 DC_Howard Theatre_0008 Marquis, looking northwest



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Photo #9 DC_Howard Theatre_0009 East elevation, looking west



Howard Theatre (Amendment)
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Photo #10 DC_Howard Theatre_0010 South elevation, looking north



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Photo #11 DC_Howard Theatre_0011 front entrance, looking west



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Photo #12 DC_Howard Theatre_0012 Front entrance, looking south



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Photo #13 DC_Howard Theatre_0013 Auditorium, looking southwest



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Photo #14 DC_Howard Theatre_0014 Auditorium, looking south



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Photo #15 DC_Howard Theatre_0015 Auditorium, looking north



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Photo #16 DC_Howard Theatre_0016 Dressing Room, looking south



Howard Theatre (Amendment)
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Photo #17 DC_Howard Theatre_0017 Second floor bar, looking northwest



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Photo #18 DC_Howard Theatre_0018 Auditorium, looking west



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Photo #19 DC_Howard Theatre_0019 Mural, looking south



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Photo #20 DC_Howard Theatre_0020 Signature wall, looking east



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Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations 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.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.