

INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY/DISTRICT
MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST
INTERNAL NR-ELIGIBILITY REVIEW FORM

Property/District Name: Olney Theater Complex Survey Number: MO M: 23-153

Project: Accessibility Ramp for the Actors' Residence Agency: cdbg/MO Co

Site visit by MHT Staff: no yes Name _____ Date _____

Eligibility recommended _____ Eligibility not recommended

Criteria: A B C D Considerations: A B C D E F G None

Justification for decision: (Use continuation sheet if necessary and attach map)

The Olney Theater complex consists of an eleven acre tract with two buildings located on the north side of the intersection of Sandy Spring Road (Rt. 108) and Dr. Bird Road. The actor's residence was the original building on the property, constructed as a private residence in 1898. A local wealthy entrepreneur (Highs Dairy Stores), C.Y. Stephens purchased the parcel in 1940. Although community events began on site in the late 1930s, Stephens developed the parcel into the Olney Theater. The theater was constructed in 1941 but dramatic productions did not begin until after World War II, in 1947. The adjacent dwelling provided temporary housing for the traveling actors/actresses. Substantial new construction has occurred during the last thirty years as well. These alterations have greatly expanded the buildings and reduce their historic integrity. The County believed that the complex was eligible under criterion B for its association with famous performers of the period. The majority of the complex's period of significance and its association with the actors is less than fifty years old. The complex does not demonstrate exceptional significance. This office does not believe that the famous actors association with the property provides a sufficient time period to be significant. In my opinion, the Olney Theater complex is not eligible for the National Register.

Documentation on the property/district is presented in: attached with this form

Prepared by: Stevens. T. Brown, MO Co.

L. Bowlin April 24, 1995
Reviewer, Office of Preservation Services Date

NR program concurrence: yes no not applicable
Alanda Adams 9-28-95
Reviewer, NR program Date

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MARYLAND COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN DATA - HISTORIC CONTEXT

I. Geographic Region:

- Eastern Shore (all Eastern Shore counties, and Cecil)
- Western Shore (Anne Arundel, Calvert, Charles, Prince George's and St. Mary's)
- Piedmont (Baltimore City, Baltimore, Carroll, Frederick, Harford, Howard, Montgomery)
- Western Maryland (Allegany, Garrett and Washington)

II. Chronological/Developmental Periods:

- Paleo-Indian 10000-7500 B.C.
- Early Archaic 7500-6000 B.C.
- Middle Archaic 6000-4000 B.C.
- Late Archaic 4000-2000 B.C.
- Early Woodland 2000-500 B.C.
- Middle Woodland 500 B.C. - A.D. 900
- Late Woodland/Archaic A.D. 900-1600
- Contact and Settlement A.D. 1570-1750
- Rural Agrarian Intensification A.D. 1680-1815
- Agricultural-Industrial Transition A.D. 1815-1870
- Industrial/Urban Dominance A.D. 1870-1930
- Modern Period A.D. 1930-Present
- Unknown Period (prehistoric historic)

III. Prehistoric Period Themes:

- Subsistence
- Settlement
- Political
- Demographic
- Religion
- Technology
- Environmental Adaptation

IV. Historic Period Themes:

- Agriculture
- Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Community Planning
- Economic (Commercial and Industrial)
- Government/Law
- Military
- Religion
- Social/Educational/Cultural
- Transportation

V. Resource Type:

Category: Buildings

Historic Environment: rural

Historic Function(s) and Use(s): first use = domestic/single dwelling second use = cultural/local theater

Known Design Source: _____

RESEARCH SYNOPSIS : OLNEY THEATER

February 28, 1995

The actual building under examination is currently called the "Actors' Residence" of the Olney Theatre. It was originally a Victorian three story frame farmhouse built by Henry Davis between 1897 and 1898, when he and his wife, Elizabeth, moved in (Annals III, p 54). He died in 1898 and his widow occupied the house until her death in 1925. During 1921 or so the wrap around porch was added. At that time, the deed was transferred to her niece, Ethel Mackay (Annals IV, p 479). In 1936 the Old Davis property which was, by then, known as "Woodlawn Lodge" , was sold to Steven Cohrave and Arthur Parker from Washington, who had plans to build a summer theater and dramatic school. The community was concerned and "...looked on with apprehension and bated breath. Let us hope it is not the entering wedge to end our serene and rural character." Sometime prior to 1938 the "Pavilion" was built next door to the house for use for community functions such as dances and as a general gathering place. The "Actors' Residence" may also at some point have been used as a restaurant called "Charlie Forest Inn". In 1940 the 11 acre tract containing these buildings was purchased by C. Y. Stephens, the owner of High's Dairy which evolved into the chain of convenience stores that are now very common. He enclosed the Actors' Residence porch and built the theater itself over the

foundation of the pavilion in 1941.

The theater officially opened in 1941 or 1942 and presented its first production. The rationing of gasoline brought about by World War II, forced its almost immediate closure. It reopened in 1946 as a stop on the "straw hat circuit" and has presented shows every year since then up to the present. In 1947 Mr. Stephens, who lived in Laurel, Maryland with his eight children, sent his cook to stay at the facility to prepare meals for the staff and entertainers during the open season. Initially most of the performances were put on by touring groups from New York. It was a primary professional theater in the area and the only Washington theater that never practiced racial discrimination. It attracted some comparatively famous performers since the summer heat made Broadway performances less well attended and typically less professional in scope. There were times that the accommodations of the Actors' Residence were inadequate to house the entertainers and some local houses took in boarders as needed to fill the demand. The famous actors found Olney Theatre to be unlike many of their stops on the circuit due to its remote and isolated location. This portion of the county was still "dry" and alcohol was not available without venturing reasonably far. Mr. Stephens did what he could to make the accommodations more inviting and in 1949 actually built a small swimming pool behind the Actors' Residence. This was used by the staff primarily in the day, but there are reports of some fairly wild cavortings during the nights.

In 1953, Mr. Stephens asked the Reverend Gilbert V. Hartke, O.P., head of the drama department at the Catholic University of America, to take over the administration of the theater. Mr. Stephens wanted to start a playhouse that would not only entertain the community, but that would also provide an opportunity for the training of acting students. He did so, and the theater opened that season under the management of Players, Inc. with a performance of Bernard Shaw's Man and Superman. This entity ultimately came to be known as the Olney Theatre Corporation, a 501 (C)(3).

The Actors' Residence served as temporary accommodations for the actors, many of whom were at the time, or since have become, famous. There are currently five bedrooms on the second floor and three on the top floor. The first floor is currently used as administrative offices, kitchen, and general gathering area. Among those who played at the theater were Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy, Lillian Gish, Helen Hayes, Carol Channing, Nancy Davis Reagan, Ian McKellen, Olivia de Havilland, Tallulah Bankhead, Jose Ferrer, John Carradine, Burl Ives, Paulette Goddard, E. G. Marshall, and Kitty Carlisle to mention only a few. Willard Scott, who was to become the much renowned weatherman, had a part during the 1948 or 1949 season in which he had no lines but was a spear carrier. Impressive persons not only performed, but some attended as well including presidents Truman and Roosevelt.

During the off-season the building has been used for a myriad of purposes including wedding receptions, mystery nights

(community fund raisers), and as a regular stop on tours of the County's important houses. In the winter of 1988 the Actors' Residence was used as a designers' showcase open to the public for a month to show antiques. Each room was decorated in a different style and named after one of the famous performers that had stayed there. More than 5,000 visitors toured the building during the month it was open.

There are several interesting anecdotes relating to the building. It has been said that around 1949 Tallulah Bankhead was part of the group occupying the house. Her hours and raucous behavior were disruptive to some of the other members of the cast who complained about it. The problem was diplomatically solved by hurriedly refurbishing the unused small cottage on the property which had previously been used as a gas station. She was then invited to move into the "Star Cottage" which she promptly did. There are further rumors of her nocturnal wanderings about on Route 108, which was at the time a dirt road, clad in less than conventional attire.

Helen Hayes daughter, Mary MacArthur, once performed as an ingenue in a romantic play in which the script called for the young man to suggest that they go outside, to which her reply would be to ask why. He would then answer "to look at the moon". On one particular evening the performance was disrupted by a little dog that had gotten loose and entered the stage, perhaps through the artificial fireplace in the scenery at just this intimate romantic moment. Someone corralled the dog and the

performance continued. The man asked Mary to go outside and she asked why. He reportedly replied on this evening; " To kill the Goddamned Dog". Since the mood had been shattered already he used the opportunity to turn an embarrassment into a good joke enjoyed by all.

There is another story told by a number of people about mysterious and unexplained events occurring in Room #3 when it is unoccupied. Various persons claim to have heard furniture moving around when no one is in the room as well as well as singing and piano playing on the porch and lights inexplicably turning off and on with no identifiable cause. One of the local newspapers quoted a workman as saying, "It was back in '86. The guy was doing some plastering on the upper floors of the building. He was there one night and never came back. All he said was, 'You should have told me what was going on in that house. You should have told me about the ghosts.'"

Adjacent to the structure described above is the theater itself which was totally renovated in 1991/2 and had an additional scene shop added creating a total space of 4900 square feet. Directly in front of the Actors' Residence Route 108 which is currently undergoing major reconstruction and will, when completed, change the two lane road into a major four lane highway.

The Actors' Residence building has undergone dramatic and repeated alterations. It does, however, retain some of its original unique architectural elements. The building still has a

standing seam metal roof, though in need of paint, which is for the most part intact. An arched open portico is still in place on the second floor, though it has suffered visually from the installation of a third story fire escape stairway partially obstructing it as well as from the installation of large HVAC ductwork inside it. There is still one of the original round windows on the third floor rear of the building. There are a handful of examples of the distinguishing features remaining, but the comprehensive modifications to the building as well as the site have violated the integrity of the structure to render it ineligible for consideration for the Register on the merit of the structure alone. The significance under Category B of the Eligibility Criteria, however, makes a strong case for consideration for inclusion in the National Register.

- enclosures: Montgomery County Historical Atlas
 Photographs
 Determination of no adverse effect (by Mont. Co)
 Site Plan
 Plan and Elevation of proposed ramp

Stevens T. Brown
 STB/pas:olhist

#23



OLNEY THEATER MO CO. M: 23-153

MAIN ENTRANCE

2/95



OLNEY THEATER COMPLEX / ACTORS' RESIDENCE

MO. CO.

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OLNEY THEATER COMPLEX

Mi 23-153

ACTORS' RESIDENCE

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MO CO.

#4



OLNEY THEATER COMPLEX

MO CO

M:23-153

ACTORS' RESIDENCE

2/95

#9



OLNEY THEATER COMPLEX MO CO M: 23-153

MODERN CONSTRUCTION

2/95

#5



OLNEY THEATER COMPLEX MO CO. M: 23-153

NEW CONSTRUCTION ONTO THEATER

2/95

OLNEY THEATRE



#23-98
(outside)

NAME OLNEY THEATRE (M:23-153)

LOCATION Rt 108 OLNEY, Md

FACADE S

PHOTO TAKEN 8/14/75 MDWYER