

Royal Wanganui Opera House



Location: 69 St Hill Street, Whanganui
Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga List Number: 169

Physical Description: This large, two storied timber framed Opera house, has a rectangular plan with three main elements: a narrow street frontage comprising the entry and circulation spaces; the auditorium is directly behind the entry and the fly tower and back stage area. The main elements of style are concentrated in the street elevation. The main entry is under a central pedimented projecting bay with a porte cochere supported on Doric columns, the roof of which is an open balcony with Classical balustrading. Side doors are either side of the main entry near the east and west corners, each with its own entablature and cornice supported by columns match the main entry. The first floor is divided into bays with flat pilasters, with windows in each bay with ornate architraves and keystones. The tall parapet above the wide, dentilled, cornice largely hides the simple gabled auditorium roof from street level.

Other known names: Paramount Municipal Picture Theatre, Royal Wanganui Opera House, Wanganui Municipal Opera House

Current Use: Opera House

Register Item Number:

56

Building Type:

- Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Recreation
- Institutional
- Agriculture
- Other

Significance:

- Archaeological
- Architectural
- Historic
- Scientific
- Technological
- Cultural

Thematic Context

- Early Settlement
- Residential
- Industry
- Agricultural
- Commerce
- Transport
- Civic/Admin
- Health
- Education
- Religion
- Recreation
- Community
- Memorials
- Military

Built Heritage Inventory



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Former Uses: Opera House, Cinema/Movie Theatre, Play Theatre

Heritage Status: Heritage NZPT List **District Plan Class:** Class A

(Cat. 1)

Architectural Style: Free Classical **Date of Construction:** 1899/1900

Materials: Painted timber rusticated weatherboards, coverboards, columns and joinery, corrugated steel roofing.

Registered owner: Wanganui City Council

Legal Description: Pt Res 8 TN of Wanganui – Pt 16A/450 – Opera House

History: The Wanganui Opera House was built at a time when there was an upsurge of theatrical entertainment in Victorian New Zealand.¹ The Wanganui Borough Council decided that Queen Victoria's record reign should be marked with the construction of the Opera House². Discussions about the opera house began in 1897 and in the following year a national competition was held to find a suitable design.³ It was the first municipal venture of its kind in New Zealand.⁴

George C. Stevenson, a Wellington architect, won the design competition.⁵ Nicholas Meuli, a well known building contractor in Wellington, was the successful tenderer for construction of the building and it was completed in five months for a total cost of £2,600.⁶ The foundation stone was laid by the mayor Alexander Hatrick on 13th July 1899.⁷ Stevenson died before the foundation stone was laid and supervision of the contract was undertaken by James Tawse, a retired building contractor who gave his services "gratuitously".⁸ The Opera House was officially opened on 9th February 1900 by the Premier Rt Hon R. J. Seddon.⁹ The total cost of the building was £5,200.¹⁰

¹ New Zealand Historic Places Trust (NZHPT) Heritage Registration Entry No. 169 Wanganui Opera House. From NZHPT Website: <http://www.nzhistoric.org.nz>.

² NZHPT Buildings File.

³ NZHPT Registration Entry.

⁴ NZHPT Buildings File.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ NZHPT Registration Entry. Wanganui City Council, n.d. *Historic Places, Wanganui*. Prepared by the Town Planning Department, Wanganui City Council.

⁹ NZHPT Buildings File. The foundation stone is inscribed with details of the ceremony.

¹⁰ Wanganui City Council, n.d.

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WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

The building was designed in keeping with the neighbouring Council Chamber building.¹¹ It was lit by a combination of gas and electricity provided by a 16 h.p. Crossley engine, but the supply was problematic and it was eventually replaced by an external supply from the tramway system.¹² Other changes included the addition of a porch over the main entrance sometime before 1910 and the construction of a storage annex in 1938.¹³

The opening show was "Sporting Life", followed the Pollaed Opera Company in "The Geisha" and "The Bell of New York."¹⁴ Alterations in the 1920s allowed the theatre to show films on a regular basis.¹⁵ Silent movies were shown until 1929.¹⁶

The building was closed for several months in 1937 while repairs were undertaken following a fire in the sweet stall.¹⁷

In 1988, the cost of running the Opera House was considered too great by council and it was offered to the community.¹⁸ In 1989 the 'Friends of the Opera House' was formed and undertook restoration and refurbishment works.¹⁹ During the 1990s the number of seats was reduced to 830, the stage was replaced and exit doors were added to the sides of the building.²⁰ Another annex was added for set construction and catering.²¹

During the centenary celebrations for the building in 1999/2000, a Royal Charter was given to the Opera House, and the name was changed to the Royal Wanganui Opera House.²²

Architect/Designer: George C. Stevenson (architect), Nicholas Meuli (builder)

¹¹ NZHPT Registration Entry.

¹² Ibid. NZHPT Buildings File

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ NZHPT Registration Entry.

¹⁶ NZHPT Buildings File.

¹⁷ NZHPT Registration Entry

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Built Heritage Inventory



WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

History of changes:

- 1899/1900 Original construction.
- 1900s Addition of entrance porch.
- 1913 Removal of staircase from stage to fly door.
- 1920 Conversion to movie theatre.
- 1921 Modification of seating to accommodate grand procession of Edward, Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII).
- 1924 Fire damages interior; new annexe built.
- 1937 Fire in sweet stall.
- 1978 Fire in annexe.
- 1990 Refurbishment of orchestra pit.
- 1991/2 Alteration to seating (reduced from 1000 to 830 seats)
- 1993 Stage reconstructed.
- 1999 Extension to annexe.

Date Period: The building was designed in 1899 and there have been a number of alterations over time.

Rarity / Special Features: The Opera House is the first municipal venture of the kind in New Zealand and is one of seven such buildings registered with the NZHPT (although the Odeon in Christchurch has now been demolished). It is considered to be one of only two surviving Victorian theatres in New Zealand, with the other in Nelson. Its acoustics are considered excellent.

Representativeness: The building is designed in an appropriate style for theatre and opera, and, although small and without modern facilities for opera, it continues to be used a theatre and opera house.

Integrity: From a cursory visual assessment, the building appears to be in reasonable condition.

Context/Group Value: the building is in close proximity to a number of other significant Wanganui heritage buildings including the Golden Gates, the Ward Observatory, and the Clock Tower in Cooks Gardens, and two commercial clubs.

Diversity (Form and Features): The building has been designed in a Victorian style as is appropriate to celebrate the reign of Queen Victoria. Unlike other opera houses in New Zealand, the Wanganui building was constructed in timber.

Fragility / Vulnerability: as a timber building, it is vulnerable to fire.

Summary of Significance:

Archaeological Qualities

Having been constructed prior to 1900, the area on which the building was constructed is considered an archaeological site.

Architectural Qualities

As a Classical building, it reflects a common design style of the period and its adaptation to a relatively uncommon building type in New Zealand. The modifications to the building are similar to those made in other similar buildings, where new forms of entertainment and technology were introduced, such as silent and then talking films.

As with the other Victorian theatre, the Theatre Royal in Nelson, the Wanganui Opera house is constructed in timber, possibly chosen for the availability of wood, its comparative cheapness and speed of construction.

The building was designed by Wellington Architect George Stevenson who won the architectural competition run to select the architect for the Opera house. He died before the foundation stone was laid.

Historic Qualities

The history of the building reflects the original upsurge of interest in theatrical entertainment in late Victorian times and also the modification of such buildings over time to show films and other forms of entertainment. As with other historic theatres in New Zealand, a local voluntary group became concerned at the possible future of the building and fund raised to take over the running and conservation of the building. Its survival is due to the efforts of the Friends of the Opera House with whom the building is now associated.

Built Heritage Inventory



WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

Scientific Qualities

The building has some scientific interest in the history of lighting sources in the building as well as the use of timber technology to construct the building.

Technical Qualities

The adaptability of timber can be seen in the Classical detailing usually formed from stone, brick or render.

Cultural Qualities

The building is a cultural and building icon of Wanganui and its survival is due to the concerns and interest of local citizens who fund raised and restored the building for an indefinite future. Its continued survival allows visitors and locals alike to experience and enjoy one of the oldest theatres in New Zealand.

Reference Source:

New Zealand Historic Places Trust (NZHPT) Heritage Registration Entry No. 169 Wanganui Opera House. From NZHPT Website: <http://www.nzhistoric.org.nz>.

NZHPT Buildings File.

Wanganui City Council, n.d. *Historic Places, Wanganui*. Prepared by the Town Planning Department, Wanganui City Council.

Penny Robinson, *A Grand Victorian Lady, The Life and Times of the Wanganui Municipal Opera House, 1899-1999*, Wanganui, 1999

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Associated Pictures:



Opera House, Wanganui ©Alexander Turnbull Library Ref no.1/1-016520.

Date of Survey: 2012

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