

MUNICIPAL MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM  
(Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium)  
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705 Elvis Presley Avenue  
Shreveport  
Caddo Parish  
Louisiana

HABS LA-56  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS  
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### MUNICIPAL MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM

HABS No: LA-56

Location: Municipal Memorial Auditorium is located at 705 Elvis Presley Avenue in Shreveport, Louisiana, at the intersection of Elvis Presley Avenue (formerly Grand Avenue) and Milam Street.

The coordinates for the Municipal Memorial Auditorium are 93.753193 W and 32.508075 N, and they were obtained in September 2012 with, it is assumed, NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Significance: Designed in 1928 and built in 1929, the Municipal Memorial Auditorium in Shreveport is considered to be the finest example of Art Deco architecture in the state of Louisiana. The principal designer of the building was architect Samuel G. Wiener, III, of Shreveport who is best known as Louisiana's premier orthodox modern architect. The Municipal Auditorium was Wiener's last major work before he immersed himself into the modern idiom. From the late 1940s until the late 1950s, the Auditorium hosted the nationally broadcast radio program, *Louisiana Hayride*, which was pivotal in launching the careers of Hank Williams, Kitty Wells, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley. Municipal Memorial Auditorium was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on 28 May 1991 and was designated a National Historic Landmark on 6 October 2008.

Description: The Municipal Memorial Auditorium is a five-story, civic complex located west of downtown Shreveport and east of an African-American C.B.D. (central business district) originally located on Texas Avenue. The 129,000 square foot rectangularly shaped monumental building sits on a trapezoidally shaped corner lot adjacent to Oakland Cemetery and Lakeside Baptist Church. The building contained a health unit (and later a morgue) in the basement, concession stands, dressing rooms, meeting rooms, exhibition spaces, a ballroom and the auditorium proper.

The building is constructed of brick over structural clay tile with reinforced concrete columns and floors. The reinforced concrete floor structure is exposed throughout the basement and used decoratively in the lobby and ballroom ceilings in the form of coffering. A series of deep steel trusses span the column-free auditorium volume. The brickwork of the façade is highly articulated with coursing variations and offsets in the vertical planes. The façade is further embellished with decorative accents of carved limestone, glazed terra-cotta, marble, and cast iron grilles. The principal facade is defined by five entrances to the lobby book-ended by colossally-scaled vertical brick pilasters that are occupied by exit stairwells. Each stairwell "pilaster" is topped with a carved limestone eagle in bas-relief over an inscription. The

inscription at the southernmost stairwell is “The work of righteousness shall be peace” – Isaiah 37:17 and at the northernmost stairwell is “The world must be made safe for democracy” – Woodrow Wilson. The five entrances are highly embellished with large limestone architraves sporting horizontal reveals surrounding each pair of double doors and double cast iron security grilles. Above each architrave is a carved limestone balcony accessible from the second-floor ballroom located over the main lobby. At each balcony off the ballroom is a pair of steel casement doors, sidelights and a large transom that completes the vertical composition that began at the first floor entrance doors. The entrance composition is capped with a large decorative frieze of limestone striations, elaborately detailed eight-point star arabesque panels of alternating designs and a decorative limestone coping. The side facades of the building are defined by four brick protrusions (two on each side) that contain the monumental stairs connecting the two principal levels of the auditorium as well as exits to the exterior. The rear of the building is also articulated and includes (four) colossally-scaled pilasters each topped with a dramatic scupper that discharges rainwater 15’ away from the building surface. Between the pilasters are panels of decorative brickwork over rolling steel slat doors that access the back of the stage. The sills of the rolling doors for stage prop installation are located approximately 10’-0” above grade due to the topography on the site. A cast iron bracket was placed over each door on which could be hung a pulley to assist in hoisting props vertically over the 10’-0” grade separation.

The interior is finished in plaster with expressed scalloped trowel marks and stained wood trim. Interior doors are of a stile and rail type with numerous small raised panels which were originally stained brown, red, and green. The interior is peppered with the American Legion logo which marks the main entrance into the auditorium proper as well as the cast iron end panels for each row of the original wood seating. The most impressive element of the interior is the original finished ceiling of exposed decorative beams and eight-point star shaped lighting fixtures. The impressive ceiling was covered up during a renovation of 1956 when the facility was air-conditioned (ironically by Sam G. Wiener’s own firm) and rediscovered during some renovation work in 1998.

A large proscenium arch separates the stage from the audience with a large counterweighted rigid asbestos fire curtain which can be activated from the stage by severing a rope. Asbestos fire curtains were also used to separate the motion picture projection booth at the top of the auditorium from the audience. Early motion picture film, as well as still picture film, was manufactured on a nitrate base, which was extremely flammable and dangerous. Nitrate based motion picture films were replaced by tri-acetate based films (also known as safety films) in 1948 which eliminated the need for the asbestos fire curtains though they still remain in the building.

At the main entrance to the auditorium on Elvis Presley Avenue are two bronze statues: one of Elvis Presley (1935-1977) whose national exposure originated from the stage of the Auditorium and one of James Burton (b. 1939), a north Louisiana native and member of the *Louisiana Hayride* staff band. Burton is considered one of the iconic guitarists of country and rock roll and coincidentally backed up Elvis from 1969-1977. Both men are in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

History:

During the roaring 1920s, a number cities including, Memphis, Kansas City and Cleveland, built municipally owned auditoria as monuments to civic pride and to bolster the local economies. Shreveport followed suit with its own auditorium designed in 1928 and built with money from a booming economy resulting from the development of the Caddo oil and gas fields north of town. The Municipal Memorial Auditorium in Shreveport was designed by local architects, Samuel G. Wiener, III (1896-1977) for the firm of Jones, Roessle, Olschner, and Wiener together with associated architect Seymour van Os (1893-1974). The building was dedicated and opened to the public in 1929 as a memorial to those who “Served in the World War,” which after 1939 was known as World War I, and is considered to be the finest example of Art Deco architecture in the state of Louisiana – Art Deco being the decorative style that originated in Paris and flourished from the 1920s until the World War II era.

In 1927 shortly before the auditorium was designed, Samuel G. Wiener, III and his half-brother, William B. Wiener also an architect, took a trip to Venice and other European destinations to document the historic architecture of the region and to appreciate, first hand, the role of ornamentation in architecture. The sketches and hard-line drawings from this trip were published in the 1929 book, *Venetian Houses and Details*. This trip spawned a change in trajectory in Sam Wiener’s work from strict historicism to an approach employing greater abstraction, which is evident at the Municipal Memorial Auditorium project. Many of the decorative details used at the Municipal Auditorium were influenced by the details the brothers witnessed in Venice. This building also illustrates, as Dr. Karen Kingsley noted in her book *Buildings of Louisiana*, Wiener’s “fascination in the late 1920s with abstract massing and the decorative potential of brick, terra-cotta, and stone.” The Auditorium is the last major “historically traditional” project undertaken by Sam Wiener before his conversion to orthodox modernism which occurred after a second trip to Europe in 1931 where he and his half-brother (along with others) visited the Bauhaus and the 1931 Building Exposition.

During the World War II era, the auditorium building basement was used as a troop barracks and housed an early aircraft warning system – RADAR. The building’s reinforced concrete structure was ideally suited to serve as a fallout shelter during the days of the cold war.

Not only is the Auditorium known as an architectural gem based on its appearance, detailing and iconography, its greatest pedigree comes from the cultural significance of what occurred inside the building. The stage at the Municipal Memorial Auditorium was home of station KWKH's *Louisiana Hayride*, country music's most innovative and experimental radio show. The name *Louisiana Hayride* was taken from Harnett T. Kane's book of the same name which discussed the political scandals and corruption of 1939-1940. KWKH, along with and through a small network of radio stations throughout the country, broadcast the *Hayride* performances to a national audience between the years of 1948 and 1958 after which the affiliated network ceased to exist. Even though the *Hayride* continued until the late 1960s, weekly broadcasts from the Municipal Auditorium ended in 1960. The *Grand Ole Opry* was known for giving prominent country music stars the spotlight during the peak of their careers, whereas the *Hayride* was known by the moniker "Cradle of the Stars" due to the exposure given to performers who were virtual unknowns. The popular radio show provided the first national exposure to country music legends Hank Williams (introduced in 1948), Kitty Wells (also introduced in 1948), and Johnny Cash (introduced in 1955)... an impressive group to sure. However, the most historically significant event in *Hayride* history or Municipal Auditorium history for that matter, occurred at 7:00 pm, 16 October 1954 when a nineteen-year old truck driver from Memphis, Tennessee, named Elvis Presley took the stage. After that date, the world of music would never be the same... and it started on the stage of Municipal Memorial Auditorium in Shreveport, Louisiana. During emcee Franks Page's introduction of Elvis' second show on October 16th, he uttered the immortal words: "*Ladies and gentlemen, you've never heard of this young man before, but one day you will be able to tell your children and grandchildren that you heard musical history made tonight.*" The popular culture catch-phrase, "Elvis has left the building," was coined by *Hayride* announcer Horace "Hoss" Logan in December, 1956, to calm a restless crowd of teenagers who had just witnessed Elvis' performance complete with his iconic swiveling hips and mouth snarl. Elvis had indeed left the building as he wouldn't return to the Municipal during the remainder of his life thanks to the business influence of his renegade manager Colonel Tom Parker who had recently bought out Elvis' \$18/show contract for \$10,000. Author K. D. Hobgood said Elvis Presley's appearance on the *Hayride* is "considered the beginning of a new era, one tied with rock 'n' roll." The auditorium remains to this day as one of country music's most revered institutions for providing an introduction to many of their most cherished stars. Many of the diehard faithful Elvis fans still make annual pilgrimages to the Municipal Auditorium to see the spot where "it all began."

After the days of the *Hayride* at the Municipal had ended and the sixties began, the venue hosted a number of premier African-American musicians who wished to add a tour stop midway between Dallas and New Orleans. Performers that graced the stage at the Municipal Memorial Auditorium

during this period included notables such as The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Bobby “Blue” Bland and B. B. King. Even though the Muni, as it is referred to by locals, was not officially part of the “Chitlin’ Circuit,” a series of performance venues in the eastern and southern United States that were safe and acceptable for African-American performers during the tumultuous days of racial segregation, it hosted a number of “the Circuit’s” biggest names during the 1960s and 1970s.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the multi-function auditorium hosted a more diverse group of uses including theatrical productions, symphonic and ice skating performances, wrestling and boxing matches, and even circuses.

The Municipal Auditorium still hosts country artists, rhythm and blues groups, together with stand-up comedians such as Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Trey Songz, and Jerry Seinfeld.

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Sources: National Register Staff, Division of Historic Preservation, State of Louisiana. “National Historic Landmark nomination: Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium” National Park Service, 2007.

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