

Star Theater (Gem Theater)
1615-17 East Eighteenth Street
City of Kansas City
Jackson County
Missouri

HABS No. MO-1924

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
STAR THEATER (Gem Theater)

HABS NO. MO-1924

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: 1615-17 East 18th Street, City of Kansas City, Jackson County, Missouri

Date of Construction: 1912 (remodeled 1923, 1945)

Architect: George Carman

Present Owner: Black Economic Union of Greater Kansas City
1601 East 18th Street, Suite 300
Kansas City, Missouri

Present Use: Vacant.

Significance: The Star Theater (Gem Theater) is significant as one of the first and most enduring movie theaters constructed in Kansas City, Missouri, for an African-American clientele. The Star was built in 1912 in the 18th and Vine commercial district, an area that developed to serve Kansas City's African-American community at a time when many "white" businesses and services were closed to black patrons. Like the surrounding neighborhood, the theater thrived during the hey day of jazz clubs and dance halls in the decades prior to World War II. A major remodeling in 1923 reflected the increased prosperity of the surrounding community. The simple, one story, brick and stucco theater was transformed into the most ornate building in the area with the addition of a baroque, white terra-cotta front. Upon completion, a local newspaper touted it as "A Work of Art and Triumph of Engineering." Streamlined and Moderne elements were added to the theater following the war, as architectural fashions shifted from historically inspired designs to images of the Modern Age. While the entertainment district began to fade just prior to World War II, the theater survived. When the Star Theater (Gem Theater) closed its doors in 1960, it had endured longer than any other movie theater constructed for Kansas City's African-American community.

Historian: Elizabeth Rosin, Historic Preservation Management
Division, City Planning and Development Department,
City of Kansas City, Missouri, July 1994

I. PHYSICAL CONTEXT OF SITE AND ENVIRONS

The Star Theater (Gem Theater) is located on the south side of East 18th Street, midway between Vine Street and Highland Avenue on the east side of Kansas City. The theater is contained within a three block area listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the "18th and Vine National Register Historic District." The district is bounded roughly by Paseo Boulevard on the west, 18th Street on the north, Woodland Avenue on the east, and 19th Street on the south. The extant buildings along 18th Street are typically unadorned, two and three story brick commercial blocks constructed between ca. 1885 and 1930. A notable exception in these surroundings is the ornate facade of the Star Theater (Gem Theater). To the east and west of the theater are three story, brick commercial/office blocks. Now interspersed with vacant lots, the demolition of numerous buildings along the north side of 18th Street has weakened the streetscape. A few historic residential properties are extant in the vicinity. These are mostly one and two story frame dwellings. New residential infill, in the form of frame townhouses, is being constructed nearby, along 19th Street.

The Paseo, a parkway designed in 1893 as an original component of the city's parks and boulevards system, forms the western edge of the 18th and Vine area. Approximately one mile to the north of 18th Street, the Paseo connects to Interstate 35. The commercial and governmental center of Kansas City is located approximately one-half mile to the west.

II. HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

African-Americans and the Development of Kansas City

African-Americans played an integral role in the development of the State of Missouri and the City of Kansas City. As early as the eighteenth century European explorers and fur traders were accompanied by African-Americans on their travels West. The Lewis and Clark Expedition that explored the Missouri River in 1804 included a trusted guide of African descent named York (Walker 1993:5). Early settlers in Western Missouri were a mix of French traders and fur trappers, Native Americans (predominately Osage), and African-Americans, both free and enslaved. These groups formed diverse communities along the Missouri River (Walker 1993:8).

In 1820, Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state under the Missouri Compromise. The Compromise established that all states made from the lands of the Louisiana Purchase that lay north of Missouri's southern border would be free states. At the time most African-Americans came to Missouri as slaves with settlers from the South. The western half of Missouri served mainly as a place to re-supply for further travel West, and trading posts along the Missouri River sprang up in the early nineteenth century along the Santa Fe Trail. The Trail facilitated the growth of towns such as Booneville and Independence in the 1820s and later the Town of Westport (Brown and Dorsett 1978:5). Westport, located four miles south of the junction of the Missouri and Kansas rivers, was laid out by a group of speculators in 1834 and served as both a supply post and way station for westward travelers. Some travelers stayed in the area, establishing farms and homesteads along the river (Walker 1993:16).

The Town of Kansas was organized in 1838 with the sale of lands at the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas rivers. For several years this area was at the center of the growing Westward movement and served as the riverboat landing for the Town of Westport. Fueled by the voluminous traffic along the Santa Fe, and later Oregon and California trails, the town grew quickly, containing warehouses, mills, and groceries by the 1850s (Brown and Dorsett 1978:8).

The Town of Kansas was recognized by the Jackson County Court in 1850, and in 1853 the City of Kansas was chartered by the State Legislature (Brown and Dorsett 1978:9). While it soon became a center for commerce between the East and the West, Kansas City remained a frontier settlement until the Civil War. It had a reputation for being a rough and unattractive town with unpaved streets and saloons (Brown and Dorsett 1978:23).

As access to distant markets improved, more farms were established in the vicinity of Kansas City. The majority of immigrants were from Southern states, especially the border states of Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee (Walker 1993:41). Many of the Southern farmers brought slaves with them, and by 1850 almost 3,000 slaves lived in Jackson County. Some worked on farms in the rural areas of the County, harvesting and tending corn, wheat or tobacco crops. Most were jacks of all trades, serving as maids, handymen, servants, drivers, and the like. Slaves were often hired out, providing a source of additional income for their owners. (Walker 1993:16-17).

The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 increased tension between Kansas City and the surrounding free territories of Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska. There was great animosity between the pro-slavery forces in Missouri and the free soilers of Kansas, and skirmishes occurred between the opposing sides along the state line (Brown and Dorsett 1978:20). Pro-slavery Missourians were suspicious of Kansas abolitionists such as John Brown, who helped many Missouri slaves escape to freedom via the Underground Railroad.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, 8,400 of Missouri's African-Americans, both free and slave, took up arms for the Union (Walker 1993:25). Kansas City was the site of intense strife, culminating in the Battle of Westport in 1864, the largest battle of the Civil War fought west of the Mississippi. Because Missouri was a Northern border state, Missouri's slaves did not receive their freedom with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Two years later, a proclamation from the governor gave Missouri's slaves nominal freedom (Walker 1993:26).

After the Civil War Kansas City boomed. Railroad connections to the East and West were achieved with the completion of the Hannibal Bridge across the Missouri River in 1869. As accessibility to raw materials and distant markets improved, industry began to develop in the West Bottoms area of the city, with livestock trade, grain trade and processing as the main industries. The construction of the stockyards in 1870 facilitated the meat packing industry. Mills and warehouses were also found in the West Bottoms (Brown and Dorsett 1978:33,35).

While freedom and an expanding Kansas City economy suggested a bright future for Kansas City's African-Americans, the white community did not accept the newly freed slaves as equals. There were no efforts to educate them or to increase their economic status. Many ex-slaves kept their old positions working for former owners at low pay, often under poor conditions (Walker 1993:27). Others worked in industries in the West Bottoms or as porters, barbers, waiters, laundresses, seamstresses, and housekeepers. Many families were forced to live under one roof in buildings without running water. The rampant poverty of the African-American community reinforced the white community's suspicion and contributed to segregation of the races (Brown and Dorsett 1978:184; Hilferty 1994:6).

The population of African-Americans in the Kansas City area increased in the years following the Civil War. In 1870 there were 3,770 African-Americans in Kansas City; this number more than tripled to 13,895 in 1890 as Southern slaves traveled west and north after the war looking for greater opportunities in industrial centers (Walker 1993:32). Many of these "Exodusters" settled in Kansas City (Walker 1993:29). Although they were welcomed by the black community, the newcomers were thought of suspiciously by the white community. "Black codes" instigated throughout the country were aimed at keeping ex-slaves in subordinate roles. Missouri adopted such legislation in 1866, mandating separate but equal education for African-Americans. Jim Crow laws kept ex-slaves socially and economically isolated from the white community (Walker 1993:32,38).

African-Americans in the 1870s settled into three areas of Kansas City: the West Bottoms, along the state line; Strugglers Camp, near the Missouri river landing; and the Exposition Ground, south of 15th Street between Charlotte and Virginia streets. These were generally rough, depressed areas where residents often lived in impermanent tents and shacks (Walker 1993:33). The West Bottoms was inhabited by both blacks and recent Irish immigrants who

worked as unskilled laborers in the nearby factories. There was some intermarriage between the blacks and Irish, and they formed an integrated community (Brown and Dorsett 1978:42).

As industry expanded in the West Bottoms during the 1880s and 90s, residents, including African-Americans, were squeezed out of the area. Jim Crow laws and the white community's apprehension forced the displaced African-Americans to relocate to segregated sections of the city, including the Belvidere area at Troost and Independence avenues and Hick's Hollow at Prospect Boulevard and Independence Avenue. The Bowery also developed at this time in the area south of 12th Street around the intersection of 18th and Vine (Thomason 1989a:E-2). It was in these settlements that African-Americans began to develop vibrant, independent communities.

The expansion of the West Bottoms as an industrial area corresponded with a major boom in the population and prosperity of the white community in greater Kansas City. This era became known as Kansas City's "Gilded Age." New white residential communities developed with clear demarcations from African-American communities. The City itself expanded with twenty-seven additions platted in 1880, compared with only ten between 1873 and 1876 (Brown and Dorsett 1978:53). Commercial buildings were constructed, and the Kansas City banking and real estate community settled in what would become the Central Business District along Main Street.

As the African-American community developed in the segregated areas of the city, black churches, such as Allen Chapel A.M.E., St. John's A.M.E. and St. Luke's A.M.E., provided for the needs of their parishioners. Lincoln School, the first African-American school in the city, was established in 1867 in a church at 10th and McGee Streets. It later became the first African-American high school in the city. Educational opportunities, however, were not comparable to those available for the white community. Although segregation was supposed to be separate but equal, the Kansas City School Board did not support African-American education (Walker 1993:35).

Throughout Kansas City, and in many forms, African-Americans were routinely segregated from the white community. Cemeteries that were "white" would not inter blacks. Some white doctors refused to treat African-Americans, and hospitals often had only a few beds available for African-Americans (Hilferty 1994:9). Jobs became scarce because many positions that formerly were held by African-Americans, such as waiters and barbers, were filled by whites (Brown and Dorsett 1978:97).

18th and Vine

The 18th and Vine area developed in response to the discriminatory practices of the white community. By the late nineteenth century, the Bowery, as the area was then known, was

mainly residential in character with some commercial development along 18th Street. An 1886 atlas shows the southeast and southwest corners of the 18th and Vine intersection densely built. Several buildings are shown on each lot, most extending to the 18th Street property line, and nearly all are of frame construction (Hopkins 1886). This probably represented the nucleus of the growing commercial sector of businesses, such as pharmacies and grocery stores, that served the local community. These businesses were owned mainly by whites, but unlike the white businesses in white communities, these stores employed and were often managed by African-Americans (Thomason 1989a:E-10).

The blocks south of 18th Street to the railroad tracks appear to be residential, with only one building per lot set back from the street (Hopkins 1886). The homes built during this period were modest single and multi-family dwellings, with folk Victorian designs and minimal decorative detailing (Thomason 1989b:7-2). Residents were mostly lower and middle-class laborers who worked in the manufacturing facilities in the West Bottoms or as maids and janitors around the city.

By 1891, the 1700 and 1800 blocks of East 18th Street were densely built, with numerous brick as well as frame buildings (Hopkins 1891). The commercial buildings constructed during this period were typically of brick construction with large glass storefronts and decorative brick corbelling or pressed metal at the cornice (Thomason 1989b:7-2). Other parts of the area, including the 1900 blocks of Vine, Flora, and Highland, are less densely built, with single buildings on each lot (Hopkins 1891). Most of these are frame buildings, interspersed with a few brick buildings. Again, these were mostly residences, with the brick buildings indicating multi-family dwellings.

There was a small but growing number of professional African-Americans, including lawyers, doctors, teachers and shop owners in Kansas City during this period. They were few in number, making up less than one percent of Kansas City's professional population (Walker 1993:36). Out of this class of professionals came the leaders of the 18th and Vine community.

By the turn of the twentieth century, 18th and Vine had become a "City within a City" (Hilferty 1994:11). African-Americans needed go no further than 18th and Vine to find all the necessities for day-to-day living. By the 1920s, with a booming African-American population, commercial enterprises dominated the 1500 to 1800 blocks of East 18th Street. Drugstores, groceries, a bakery, a florist shop and a millinery occupied shops along this thoroughfare. These businesses, many owned or operated by blacks, catered to the African-American community.

Business was so good in the 1920s that over a dozen residential structures were razed in the vicinity of 18th and Vine to make way for more commercial structures (Thomason 1989a:

E-6). The three story Lincoln Building was built in 1921 at the southeast corner of 18th and Vine. It had businesses on the first floor, offices for professionals on the second floor, and a dance hall on the third floor. For the growing number of African-American middle class professionals, the Lincoln Building was a prominent office address. The commercial buildings constructed at 18th and Vine after 1920 were slightly more ornate than the earlier commercial blocks. Tapestry brickwork was quite common as were large plate glass store fronts, and recessed entrances (Thomason 1989b:7-2). These later, slightly more elaborate commercial blocks represented changes in architectural fashions as well as the increased prosperity of the community.

Much of the social life of African-Americans in the 18th and Vine vicinity centered around local churches. The St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church on Highland Avenue and the Jamison Temple C.M.E. Church at 1813-15 Paseo provided for the spiritual as well as social needs of their parishioners. Pastors would often preach on social reform or for support of local businesses (Hilferty 1994:9). Churches often provided clothing, medical care and schooling for residents. (Sandefur and Rubach 1994:42)

Entertainment was an integral part of the 18th and Vine community. Parade Park, just north of 18th and Vine, provided a setting for community events, including baseball, boxing, concerts and parades. It was a popular location to congregate after Sunday morning church services (Walker 1993:90). Early African-American baseball teams such as the Jenkin's Son's Team and the All Nations Team played in Parade Park. In 1920, the National Negro League was formed. The hometown Kansas City Monarchs, whose offices were at 18th and Vine, won the Negro World Series in 1925 and were a continual source of pride for both the 18th and Vine and the greater Kansas City African-American communities. Social clubs also flourished in the area. Professional and civic clubs, recreational clubs and fraternities became means to express newfound standing in the African-American community. Places such as the Paseo Y.M.C.A. provided a sense of belonging as well as a recreational outlet (Hilferty 1994:13).

In the early twentieth century, jazz music developed in the black communities of the nation's urban centers. The arrival of jazz in Kansas City is often dated to the founding of the American Federation of Musicians Association Local No. 627 in 1917. The Union was founded to provide for black musicians by guaranteeing wages and performance standards. As Kansas City Jazz came into its own in the 1920s, its sound could be heard emanating around the clock from the dance halls and night clubs, such as the Subway Club, the Blue Room and the Eblon Theater. The Pendergast political machine overlooked violations of prohibition, facilitating a "wide open" reputation in Kansas City. In part because of this, 18th and Vine remained a vital community throughout the Depression years while Kansas City Jazz was at its height of popularity. Musicians, such as "Count" Basie, Bennie Moten, Jay McShann and Charlie "Bird" Parker, drew musicians to the area and helped make the

Kansas City sound nationally known (Hilferty 1994:13; Mischuk 1978:8-1,2; Walker 1993:86).

After World War II, the 18th and Vine community began to decline. Many of the jazz musicians who had made Kansas City popular moved on to bigger cities in search of greater opportunities. When the Pendergrast administration was voted out of power in 1939, in response to vote fraud and growing crime in Kansas City, nightclubs closed (Thomason 1989a:E-16). Compulsory segregation of blacks and whites, the force that helped the community prosper, weakened in the 1950s and 60s, and African-Americans began to once again reside throughout Jackson County. The area around 18th and Vine became more industrial, and the 1800 and 1900 blocks of East 18th Street were razed for urban renewal projects (Thomason 1989a:E-17).

Movie Theaters Serving the 18th and Vine Community

The first films presented in Kansas City were three silent films shown at the Coates Opera House in 1897. The following year the Orpheum Theater at 9th and May began showing films between vaudeville acts. The first regular showing of films began in 1901 at Carl Mensing's Mutoscope Parlor located at 720 Main (DeAngelo and Flynn 1990:137).

Movie theaters originally served both black and white patrons equally. Although segregated, the seats were essentially the same. But as segregation became more entrenched in the early twentieth century, African-Americans were often forced to watch the picture shows from undesirable balcony seats (Brown and Dorsett 1978:97). A company called the Shriner and Powleson Amusement Company opened the first movie theater aimed at a black audience in 1908 (Sandefur and Rubach 1994:63). Called the Edisonian, it was located at 1501 East 18th St. The owners, both white, were Guy M. Shriner and John C. Powleson.

In subsequent years other movie houses operating for an African-American clientele opened. The Star Theater was constructed at 1615 East 18th St. in 1912. Also operating in the 18th and Vine vicinity that same year were the Edisonian, the Lincoln (1329 East 18th St.), the Russell (2011 East 18th St.), the Vine Street (2205 Vine St.), and the White City (1012 East 17th St.) theaters. These six cinemas represented nearly ten percent of the movie theaters listed in the 1912 City Directory (Gate City Directory Co. 1912). Among the theaters operating nearby over the next decade were: the Criterion (ca. 1913) at 18th and Highland; the Lyric (ca. 1913) at 18th and Tracy; the Dixie Theater (1918) at 24th and Vine; the New Centre Theater (1919) at 15th and Troost; and the Highland Gardens (1922) at 18th and Highland. The Gardens was an outdoor theater that began showing films, and in 1924 the New Rialto Theater was built on its site. Also in 1924 the Eblon was built at 1822 Vine St.

The Eblon was a black-owned theater. The two-story, five-bay brick building was designed by a black architect and constructed by black workmen (Piland 1981). Architecturally, the Eblon was more elaborate than many of the buildings in the area. It featured an arched parapet with stone coping, blind arches with stone keystones over the first story windows, and a projecting shed roof over the central three windows of the second story. Vaudeville acts, as well as motion pictures could be seen at the Eblon, and it became a famous jazz club in the 1930s (Thomason 1989a:E-15).

While numerous movie houses operated in the 18th and Vine vicinity, few if any had the longevity of the Star. First opened in 1912, the Star (renamed the Gem shortly thereafter) showed movies for Kansas City's African-American community until 1960. The theater underwent a major renovation in 1923 that transformed the building from a simple one story theater with a stucco exterior into a two story landmark with a baroque, white terra-cotta front. The renovation included the addition of a balcony that expanded the seating capacity of the theater to 1,238. No other building in the neighborhood was as ornate as the Star Theater (Gem Theater), and no other theater could accommodate as many patrons. The building was refurbished again in the 1940s with the addition of a bold streamlined, neon marquee, centered in the building's main facade, and sleek, structural glass and chromium banding to the exterior of the first story and the lobby.

III. THE STAR THEATER (GEM THEATER): SITE HISTORY

Following the Civil War, expanding industry and a growing population led to rampant land speculation in Kansas City. One participant was William Toms who purchased large amounts of land in the late 1860s. On September 30, 1868, William Toms Addition was platted. This plat encompassed four blocks in an area known first as the Bowery and later as 18th and Vine. Toms and his wife, Amanda, sold much of their land holdings between August 1868 and March 1870. Historic atlases and City Directories reveal how the land was used. However, the ownership of the Star Theater (Gem Theater) lot is unclear due to a gap in the deed record between the purchase of the land by William Toms in 1868 and the construction of the Star in 1911.

There was one structure on the future Star Theater property in 1886 (Hopkins 1886). The structure is shown to be a frame building, set back from the street. The foot print, frame construction, and set back suggest that the building may have been a residence. However, no information is available to prove or refute that suggestion.

By the late 1880s a coal yard occupied the parcel. Beginning in 1889, the partnership of Silas T. Parker and James T. Robinson had offices at 1617 East 18th St. (Hoye Directory Co. 1889-90). Although the type of business is not specified in the directory for that year, the

subsequent edition lists Robinson and Parker under "Coal (Dealers)" at 1619 East 18th St. (Hoye Directory Co. 1890). The 1891 Hopkins Map shows only one building on the property (Hopkins 1891). The footprint is the same as that shown in 1886, but the north quarter of the building is designated as being brick or stone while the back three-quarters are frame. It is unclear whether or not it is the same building previously shown. Parker and Robinson operated a coal dealership on the parcel until 1892; however, there is no deed record for the purchase or lease of the lot.

The coal yard on the Star Theater (Gem Theater) property continued operation. Between 1892 and 1895 Fleming T. Meador operated a coal yard at 1617 East 18th St., originally under the name F.T. Meador and Sons (Hoye Directory Co. 1892;1895). Jas. R. Hammond, Jr., ran the coal yard for nearly a decade following Meador, and from 1904 through 1908 Robert Thomson assumed operation of the facility. The deed record indicates no transaction for purchase or lease of the property by any of these men.

Physical changes were made to the coal yard during its final decade of operation. The Sanborn Map from 1896 labels the lot "Feed & Coal Yard" and shows six structures on the property. A one-story main structure stands in the northeast corner and is probably the same structure shown in the 1886 and 1891 atlases (Hopkins 1886; Hopkins 1891). It is identified as having a shingle roof with a fire wall six inches above the roof. This structure appears to have three separate sections. A smaller section on the north is brick with a metal cornice, window and either a tar shingle roof or a composition roof. A smaller, one story addition attached to the south side of the main structure has a shingle roof. Behind this addition and touching the eastern boundary of the lot is a large, one story, frame stable with a shingle roof. Directly to the west of the main building is a small, one story, frame building labeled "scales". West of the scales building is a one story, frame structure with a tar shingle roof and square footprint. There is a large stable, twelve feet high, in the southwest corner of the lot as well as another small outbuilding (Sanborn-Perris Map Co. 1896). Both the 1900 and 1907 atlases show only one building on the property (Tuttle and Pike 1900; 1907). However, the lot continued to operate as a coal yard and, as subsequent maps reveal, probably retained its outbuildings.

The 1909 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map does not identify the property as a coal and feed yard, but many of the structures shown on the 1896 map are still present (Sanborn Map Co. 1909). The main structure still stands, but without the small addition on the south end. Rather, there is a larger addition on the south side that abuts the eastern property line. The northern addition is not denoted as brick, but is still described as having a metal cornice and a composition roof. The building labeled "scales" is not shown. Both the stables and the other outbuilding that stood in the southwest corner of the lot are gone. Instead, a small rectangular stable abuts the eastern side of a large stable that straddles the property line between the coal yard and the lot to the east.

At some point prior to November 1911, Hugo A. Brecklein, a Kansas City druggist, acquired title to the property (Hoye Directory Co. 1900). On November 11, 1911, Brecklein granted a lease for the property to Gustav W. Flick (Jackson County Deeds 1450:185). Little is known about Flick. He first appears in the 1912 City Directory as the proprietor of the Star Theater (Gate City Directory Co. 1912). Later entries indicate his profession as contractor. He does not appear in the Kansas City directories after 1916 (Gate City Directory Co. 1913; 1916).

Two months after the lease agreement with Flick, Brecklein received a permit for the construction of a "picture show" at 1617 East 18th St. The permit approved the construction of a 50' x 96', one story, brick structure with a tar and gravel roof. The cost of construction was estimated at \$6,000 (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #10436). The following day, a party wall agreement was recorded between Brecklein and Emma J. Meyer, owner of the lot immediately to the east (Jackson County Deeds 1396:318).

Local architect George Carman was hired to design the picture show. Carman came to Kansas City in 1879 after establishing an architectural practice in Milwaukee in 1875. Prior to that Carman had studied architecture with A.M. Radcliff and Leroy S. Buffington in St. Paul, Minnesota. It is unclear why Carman, a Wisconsin native, moved to Kansas City. However, he reestablished his practice and became involved in local architectural organizations. He was active in establishing a State Architects Association and in 1905 served as president of the Kansas City Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Carman's work in Kansas City included a variety of residential and commercial designs executed between his arrival in 1879 and his death in 1928. The residences designed by Carman were typically Kansas City Shirtwaists with classical elements, such as columns and Palladian windows.¹ While the Star is Carman's only known theater design, his other commercial projects were similar solid, enduring designs that reflected architectural fashions. For instance, his 1903 plan for the Kansas City Journal featured a three story brick building with a prominent terra-cotta cornice, arched window openings in the top story, and an asymmetrical front elevation with a Romanesque arched entrance (Piland 1980).

The builder of the Star Theater, Patrick J. Morley, was an Irish immigrant who arrived in Kansas City in 1873 at the age of sixteen. He began work as a carpenter, and less than a decade later started his own general contracting business. In addition to residential and commercial buildings, Morley frequently worked for the Kansas City Board of Education.

¹Kansas City Shirtwaist refers to a variation of the Midwestern Foursquare house constructed in Kansas City between the 1890s and the 1920s. These houses feature two types of wall cladding, typically brick or stone on the first story and stucco, clapboards or shingles in the upper stories. The contrast between the wall materials creates a "shirtwaist" affect.

Morley conducted business until his death in 1933 at the age of seventy-seven (Kansas City Post:July, 2, 1922).

On March 15, 1913, Brecklein granted a lease for the Star Theater to Guy M. Shriner (Jackson County Deeds 1493:254). Since 1908 Shriner, a former salesman, had been proprietor of the first movie theater in Kansas City specifically operated for a black audience (Sandefur and Rubach 1994:65). Called the Edisonian, it was located at 1501 East 18th St. Shriner and John C. Powlesson were listed as the owners of the Edisonian in 1910, when it first appeared in the City Directory, and as partners in the Shriner and Powlesson Amusement Company (Gate City Directory Co. 1910).

Two days after Shriner leased the Star, on March 17, 1913, a building permit was issued for remodeling the "Star Theater and Picture Show" (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #54186). This was the first of many projects at the theater for which Shriner employed the services of general contractor Louis M. Rowland. Rowland also worked on the theater in April 1915 and May 1919 (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #528234; 66359). A permit for a canopy, erected by Rowland, was approved in late May 1919 (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #66529).

Shriner also received two permits for the construction of outbuildings. The first, in October 1915, was for the construction of a one story garage, measuring 10' x 18', and the second, in May 1922, was for a 25' x 36' storage building (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #59430; 74519). Neither of these outbuildings is extant, and it is unknown if they were constructed or where on the lot they were located.

Shortly after it opened, the Star was renamed the Gem by Shriner's wife, Dorothy (Sandefur and Rubach 1994:65). The first record of the theater bearing that name appears in the 1913 City Directory (Gate City Directory Co. 1913). At that time it was one of eighty-nine movie theaters in Kansas City, and one of four listed in the vicinity of 18th and Vine. The Gem operated strictly as a movie house, without stage or concessions. Few first run movies were shown, and admission was always bargain priced at ten cents.

An extant photograph (ca. 1920) shows the appearance of the theater's north (front) side after Shriner had made renovations. The theater had a simple gabled parapet. The brick party wall was visible on the east side, and brick chimney flues were visible on both the east and the west. The north wall of the theater was faced with light colored (probably tan) stucco with darker (probably brown) raised trim. Circular vents were located at either end of the north wall below the parapet. The name "GEM THEATER" was spelled out in raised letters between the vents. Horizontal bands demarcated the top of the first story, the level of the marquee and the tops and bottoms of windows in the outer bays. The raised bands also outlined the circular vents, five arched bays in the first story and arched window openings.

A rectangular canopy projected from the center three bays of the theater. Acanthus leaf cresting encircled the top of the canopy, and bare lightbulbs hung from the lower edge, illuminating the ticket booth and entrances. The arched one-over-one-light windows were located in the outer bays. Multi-light fanlights were visible above the canopy in the second and fourth bays. Centered below the canopy, a polygonal ticket booth projected from the wall of the theater. A row of dentils encircled the ticket booth below its windows. The date of the photo is uncertain, but the presence of the canopy indicates that the photograph could have been taken as early as 1919.

Brecklein sold the property to Shriner in March 1923 (Jackson County Deeds 2309:276). Following the sale, Shriner invested \$20,000 in an extensive remodeling of the theater (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #77010). Construction, which lasted from May through October, was undertaken by Louis Rowland and Grant Rebbe, movers. The work included the extension of the front wall four feet to the north, toward 18th Street, to facilitate a lobby, and the replacement of the stucco facade with a baroque-style, white terra-cotta front, custom made by the Western Terracotta Company. A new roof and walls were built around the old ones; the ceiling height was raised to twenty-nine feet, allowing for the addition of a balcony and expanding the seating capacity to 1,238. A new heating and cooling system was also installed (Kansas City Call:Jan 11, 1924; Uguccioni [1981]). In August the new look of the Gem Theater, "Kansas City's Greatest Colored Theatre," was reported to be "well on its way" (Kansas City Call: Aug 24, 1923). By September it was "nearing completion" and the exterior was described as:

hardly recognized by passersby on 18th Street. It has become externally the beauty spot of the 1600 block, with its ivory front rising above its immediate neighbors (Kansas City Call: September 21, 1923).

Surprisingly, all construction took place without interruption of the daily program. Upon completion the new Gem was touted as "A Work of Art and Triumph of Engineering" (Kansas City Call:January 11, 1924). With the exception of a theater in Washington, D.C., the remodeled Star (Gem) was considered the finest theater for an African-American audience in the United States (Ibid.).

It was described in great detail in the Kansas City Call:

The Spanish type white terracotta front to the theatre makes it easily the most imposing building on 18th Street. The two hammered, solid copper Spanish lanterns that hang high on the outside are three feet from tip to tip. They were made to specification by Bailey-Reynolds, who designed and made the other light fixtures in the lobby and on the interior. Terracotta for the white front is especially made for the Gem

building by the Western Terracotta Company who make all terracotta work to order. The lobby itself is a thing of beauty with its indirect lighting system and sky ceiling (Kansas City Call:Jan 11, 1924).

The same article detailed the interior:

Unquestionably the beauty of the interior of the theatre stamps it as the finest in the country. The walls and ceiling are done in a soft mottled brown, with an appropriate border at the ceiling line. Hand painted pictures of six famous screen stars are on both walls, three on a side. Two wrought copper chandeliers holding 18 lights illuminate the front part of the theatre. For those who purchase seats in the balcony there are wide curving oak stairways that lead upstairs. Lavatories with hot and cold running water are provided. Mulberry velour draperies around the screen and tricky door shades were hung by Robert Keith company (Ibid.).

A new ventilation system was also installed, providing for the utmost comfort in both the cold and hot months.

A Kewanee Ray Automatic heating system keeps the temperature in the theater 70 degrees when the weather outside is 10 below. Two rotary blowers and a centrifugal fan guarantee cool comfort in the summer. The blowers pull air in from a height of 57 feet, take it through the cooling and washing room and send it into the auditorium fresh and clean at a rate of 35 miles an hour. It is diffused from the ceiling and causes no draft whatsoever. With this equipment the air in the theatre can be completely changed every one-fourth minute. Ventilating and heating work, which includes 1700 feet of radiation, was installed by Williams and Bailey (Ibid.).

Also described in the Call article were the fire safety provisions.

Every provision has been made to handle and safeguard the patrons of the house in case of fire. Chances of fire are remote, inasmuch as the construction is entirely of steel, brick and concrete, but the management has done better than comply with the fire code. Wide aisles and exits a foot wider than those required by the code, have been provided (Ibid.).

Fire was of great concern to patrons. Theater fires across the country had cost numerous lives, and other Kansas City theaters had made special precautions in building design (DeAngelo and Flynn 1990:79).

The Gem continued to show mainly second-run films with the slogan "Pick of the Pictures, Properly Presented" (Kansas City Call:January 11, 1924). In July 1924, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was on the bill. Guy Shriner encouraged moviegoers to attend, stating in an ad, "Don't let the hot weather scare you or keep you from seeing this superb production. Our cooling system is perfect. The capacity of our three current air units is 105,000 cubic feet every minute. The Gem is really cool" (Kansas City Call:July 25, 1924).

Appearing later in the week was the "Great Marjah", a psychic who could answer questions about love, business and marriage. Shriner often had actors or other sideshows at the theater, such as Hopalong Cassidy or an African Santa. Church services also were occasionally held in the theater (Sandefur and Rubach 1994:67). In January of 1924, one week after completion of the remodeling, the St. Paul Presbyterian church conducted opening services for a two week revival at the Gem. Shriner donated the theater for the services. The movies, though, always remained the main event at the Gem.

The Star Theater (Gem Theater) was now the most prestigious building on the block. In 1930, it was described in the Kansas City American as one of the "high spots" on the 1600 block of East 18th Street, along with Countee Bros Undertakers and Moten and Hayes Music Shop (Kansas City American: May 22, 1930). That same year Guy Shriner's son, Jack, assumed management of the theater.

The theater was renovated again in the 1940s, remaining up to date with Modern fashions. A "V" type marquee was erected in January 1942 (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #12009A). The brightly painted, streamlined marquee was adorned with neon to draw additional attention to the building. In 1945, to complement the marquee, the front of the Gem was remodeled with buff and black colored structural glass, a new ticket booth and new doors. Interior alterations included the application of kelly green structural glass to the wall surfaces of the lobby (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #17458A). Judging by its style, the small office at the east end of the lobby was probably added at this time, as was the concession stand at the west end of the lobby. During this renovation all of the exterior and lobby openings were outlined with thin bands of striated chromium, enhancing the sleek, streamlined appearance presented by the marquee.

The last permit recorded for the theater approved the enlargement of the balcony in March 1947 (Kansas City, Missouri, Building Permit #21107A).

The Gem finally closed in 1960, a victim of changing times. In 1980 Jack Shriner sold the property to Faith Miracle Full Gospel, Inc., a church group that had been renting the theater for a number of years (Jackson County Deeds K1000:1844). The property has stood vacant since it was purchased by the Black Economic Union in 1984 (Jackson County Deeds K1280:1314).

In fall 1994 the rear two-thirds of the theater are scheduled for demolition to facilitate the construction of a state-of-the-art theater facility. The new theater design will incorporate the existing front facade and lobby area, retaining the historic Star Theater (Gem Theater) in the 18th Street streetscape.

IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE STAR THEATER (GEM THEATER)

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Star Theater (Gem Theater) is a rectangular, two story commercial block of load-bearing brick construction, resting on a limestone and concrete foundation. The south (rear), east and west walls are laid in common bond brick. Terra-cotta and structural glass, from remodelings in 1923 and 1945 respectively, sheath the north (front) wall. Parapetted walls on the north east and west, with barrel tile coping, step down toward the rear to surround the flat tar and gravel roof. A large marquee dominates the building's north side.

EXTERIOR DESCRIPTION

North Side (Front)

Facing 18th Street, the north side of the Star Theater (Gem Theater) has a dominant central bay with a shallow arched parapet. Smaller bays with stepped parapets project slightly from the main wall on either side. The terra-cotta ornament flows in bands across the front of the building, exaggerating the curve of the parapet. One row of molding follows the central cornice line, dipping lower in the side bays, while a second band is located above the second story openings and marquee. Classically derived elements, including egg-and-dart patterns, acanthus leaves and dentils, comprise the baroque ornament. Pairs of glyphs with triple guttae hang from the lower band of molding, framing the ornate window surrounds in the outer bays. Two additional openings in the second story are located in the central bay on either side of the marquee. The terra-cotta facing ends midway between the first and second stories, even with the bottom of the marquee.

The ornament of the window surrounds enhances the building's baroque flavor. Acanthus leaf moldings frame cartouches atop the windows. Small floral strings trail down from the leaf moldings approximately one-third the length of the windows. Large scallop shells and leaves support the semicircular sills projecting from the face of the building. Three-pane jalousie windows, installed circa 1945 or 1947, fill the openings².

On the front of the theater, within the surrounds above the windows and at the tops of the side bays just below the parapet are small copper light fixtures. The latter are attached to the wall via terra-cotta florets.

In contrast to the baroque ornament and terra-cotta veneer of the upper portion, the first story has a distinctly Moderne flavor. Buff colored structural glass sheathes the wall, with a black glass border running along the base. Several pieces of the glass are missing at the west end. Large sign cases centered in the side bays are now boarded up with plywood. The ticket booth projects from the center of the wall below the marquee. Three wood doors, each with a single recessed panel, flank the ticket booth. A striated chromium strip defines the top of the ticket booth and doorways. Resting on a concrete foundation, the glass block base of the booth has been boarded up, although much of the block appears to remain intact. A curved wood shelf projects from the top of the base, and the ticket booth windows are boarded with plywood.

The Moderne feel of the first story is accentuated by the marquee, displaying the name "GEM," which dominates the front of the theater. Red arms with horizontal yellow strips extend from the wall in a semi-circle. At the center of the arms are two orange blocks with black stripes flanking a vertically curved aluminum section, which extends back toward the wall. Rising from the aluminum section is a tall, red vertical shaft with a rounded top. The top of the shaft is anchored to the wall by large yellow piece that extends from a red disc on the wall through the vertical shaft. In front of the vertical shaft the yellow piece curves into a fan shape. The word "GEM" is spelled down the length of the red shaft in stylized Deco capital letters. Neon tubes light the sign, accentuating its curved, streamlined form.

West and East Sides

No openings break the wall surface of the west side. On the east side, toward the north end of the building, are two bricked in, arched openings at grade, denoted by two courses of header bricks. A single chimney flue, located on this side of the building, is flush with the

²None of the building permits specifically mention work involving windows. However, of the dates for which permits are available, 1945 or 1947 would be the most fitting for the installation of jalousie windows.

wall toward the southeast corner. The flue is topped with a plain, ceramic chimney pot. Metal tie iron ends, emerging from the east and west sides toward the tops of the walls, indicate the spacing of large ceiling joists on the interior. A few of the tie irons are decorative star shapes although most are simple bolts.

South Side (Rear)

The rear (south) of the building has two large, symmetrically placed openings. The paired metal doors have iron strap hinges. Large plywood panels cover openings above the doorways. Two small, bricked-in window openings are located just above and inward from the plywood-covered openings. Centered in the wall is a large iron circle filled with a recessed brick surface. The circle corresponds to a large cooling fan on the interior of the theater. The window openings feature slightly projecting, header brick sills and sailor brick lintels. A hanging aluminum gutter covers the eaves. Just west of the iron circle a downspout extends to the ground. A coal chute is located at grade to the west of the east door. Low bullet-top iron posts are located at the lower corners of the wall.

INTERIOR DESCRIPTION

Lobby

Inside the theater, the front lobby continues the streamlined character of the first story exterior. Spanning nearly the width of the building, the walls of the narrow lobby are clad with dark kelly green structural glass. A white stripe of glass encircles the lobby approximately five feet above the floor. Approximately seven feet above the floor, a striated chromium band separates the green structural glass from buff-colored structural glass, which covers the remainder of the wall. Dark green plaster cove molding, earlier painted a shade of cream, forms a border between the top of the glass and the plastered cove ceiling. The ticket booth projects into the north side of the lobby. The side walls of the booth have been dismantled; however, the edges of the booth are outlined with striated chromium banding, and it retains a wood door with a single porthole window and iron knob. All of the remaining openings in the lobby are similarly outlined by striated chromium banding. Centered in the east wall of the lobby is a small, unfilled window opening, measuring approximately 2' square. Filling the west wall of the lobby is a large opening that may have served as a concession stand. The opening has two courses of glass block extant in the south side.

Two sets of three swinging doors provide access from the lobby to the hallway immediately to the south. The solid wood doors each have two vertical panes of dark amber-colored glass of unequal lengths. The doors are located at either end of the lobby directly opposite the

triple entrance doors. Above the inner doors are three openings, each measuring approximately 6' x 2'.

Hallway

Through the lobby doors into the hall, the theater reverts to a more traditional character. The hall floor is covered with red squares of linoleum with a black border and white/cream squares, forming diagonal stripes at regular intervals. The walls and ceiling are finished with pale yellow, fibrous, acoustic tiles designed to simulate the appearance of stone. All of the trim is painted dark brown and is finished with flat wood surrounds. Only the baseboards have quarter-round molding. Stairways lead to the balcony from the east and west ends of the hall. In the south wall, two trefoil arched doorways access the theater. Between the doors, three cubby holes with doors are located in the lower portion of the wall, while five openings are regularly spaced in the upper portion. Several marquee boards occupy the body of the wall between the doors. Electric wires indicate where fixtures have been removed from either side of the upper window openings and the center of the door jambs.

Doorways are located adjacent to the stairwells at each end of the hall. At the west end is a doorless room with a green linoleum floor and papered walls and ceiling. A small storage room, also without a door, is located under the stairs. Given the large size of the opening into the lobby and the extant glass block, it is probable that this room served as the concession stand for the theater during the 1940s. The room under the east end of the hall is smaller than the west room. This room, probably the theater office, has light colored wood paneling in two tones, separated in to upper and lower sections by a thin chromium band. The small window in the east wall looks out to the lobby. Below the window is a small streamlined shelf over a recessed opening. The proportion and placement of the shelf and opening suggest that this was intended to be a miniature, false mantel and fireplace. The top foot of wall space and the ceiling are covered with pegboard. Several small cubby holes are located next to a closet below the stair. The door leading from the hall into the east room is the same wood as the room's paneling with the light wood comprising the body of the door and the darker wood inset as a diagonal stripe. The door also has a single porthole window. The stylized appearance of the office suggests that it dates to the 1945 remodeling.

The stairways have curved runs with a single landing near the balcony. Simple, flat chair rail moldings run along the exterior walls, while iron-pipe railings with ball ends are attached to the inner wall of each stairway. The wall area above the chair rails is the same fibrous tile material as the hallway. The inner walls and the outer walls below the chair rails are painted plaster.

Theater

The theater is a large open space with passages leading to a narrow stage area at the south end. Fibrous tiles cover the walls above flat chair rails, while the area between the chair rail and baseboard is painted plaster. Pilasters are spaced every 16' along the sidewalls. The rear floor area (approximately that portion located under the balcony) is covered with narrow tongue-in-groove floor boards while the front is bare concrete. Nail patterns and fiber remnants indicate that carpet once ran the length of the side aisles. The plaster ceiling is suspended from an iron and wood truss system on iron mesh. The large wood trusses correspond to the location of tie rods on the exterior walls. Approximately 3' in front of the stage the stubs of three metal posts protrude from the floor. Other material found in the theater indicates that the stubs originally supported a metal railing across the front of the theater.

The full height pilasters are capped with ornate plaster capitals. Box beams extending from the tops of the pilasters divide the ceiling, east to west, into three bays. Large, molded plaster medallions located in the center bays each contain five bare light bulbs. Single bulbs are found in small floral medallions in the outer bays. Although none are extant, ghosts of elongated wall sconces are visible on the pilasters. Six large light panels, approximately six feet in length, are located on each side wall. The hooded metal panels each held three lights.

Small remnants of two wall murals were visible below the balcony where the wall tiles had been removed. Both fragments appeared to be floral border designs originally painted a goldish color. Stencilling rings each of the ceiling bays in the north portion of the theater above the balcony. The red and blue stencils are a geometric-floral pattern flanked by dashed bands. While the stencil was only visible in one bay of ceiling sections, it is probable that the entire ceiling was once decorated in this same fashion.

At the south end of the theater, a narrow stage, approximately 4' high, projects about 8' from the rear wall. The bare brick rear wall shows no evidence of having been finished. A variety of electrical junction boxes flank the large cooling fan centered in the wall. At the east and west walls, parallel to the railing stubs in front of the stage, are two curtained ramps that lead back stage. The stage and ramps have the same narrow tongue-in-groove flooring as the north portion of the theater.

Although the movie screen is no longer extant, the proscenium remains standing. The plaster proscenium is painted with a scene that gives the image of looking from a gazebo or balcony. Faintly visible is a low railing with turned balusters flanking tall Doric columns. Trees and mountains are visible in the distance. A molded plaster border is banded with a floral design in muted tones of fuschia, cream, and teal green. Along the top and slightly in front of the proscenium is a narrow wood frame. Several spot lights, located behind the

frame and directed toward the stage, were shielded from the audience by a purple velvet swag. Remnants of the swag hang from the frame.

At the front corners of the stage are two sets of steps leading down to rest rooms, situated below the backstage ramps. The ladies' room is located on the east side, and the men's room is on the west side. Both lavatories have plaster walls and a small raised platform that originally supported a toilet. Remnants of a porcelain toilet and sink, as well as cast iron piping, were found in each rest room. A small storage room under the east ramp was accessed from the ladies' room. A similarly located door in the men's room provides access to the basement. On the west side of the theater, protruding from the wall leading to the men's room, is the broken end of a porcelain water fountain.

All of the theater's visible basement surfaces are concrete. At the time of the field visit, the stairs to the basement did not appear secure, and access was not attempted. According to Mr. Claude Page, 18th and Vine Planning Center, the basement is approximately 8' deep and extends approximately 20' north from the rear wall.

The balcony covers approximately one-third of the main theater hall. Iron poles, approximately 4" in diameter, support the extended upper level. Pegboard panels cover the original plaster and lath ceiling below the balcony. Many of the remaining seats are stored in this area as well. The rows of connected seats had wood seats and backs. Some of the seats have plywood inserts in the backs, suggesting that they may have been fabric covered. The outer seats of each row feature metal end pieces. 3' high plaster walls, approximately 15' long, flank the aisles leading in to the theater. The walls have wood tops that curve over the south ends. Simple, round metal fixtures, ca. the 1940s or later, are regularly spaced in the ceiling below the balcony.

The walls of the balcony have plaster (lower) and fibrous tile (upper) sections separated by a plain chair rail. The unfinished, tongue-in-groove floor inclines gently toward the front at a slope of 3" per 2'-6" tread.

The projection booth is centered in the north wall of the balcony. The booth is raised on metal poles and is accessed via a metal ladder attached to the wall and a small metal platform to the west of the booth. There are four small openings on the front of the booth for the projection of films.

Mechanical Systems

Forced air appears to have been the most recent HVAC system in the building. Exposed galvanized duct work is visible on top of the ticket booth and across the front of the

projection booth. Heating/cooling vents also fill large wall areas above the backstage ramps. Because the basement could not be accessed, the exact nature of the system could not be determined, nor was it possible to identify the remnants of any earlier heating systems.

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VI. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Star Theater (Gem Theater) was recorded in June 1994 by the Historic Preservation Management Division, City Planning and Development Department, City of Kansas City, Missouri, pursuant to the Memorandum of Agreement between the City of Kansas City, Missouri, the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office and the 18th and Vine Redevelopment Corporation for a federal undertaking utilizing Community Development

Block Grant funds. The recording team included Claude Page, Project Coordinator; Elizabeth Rosin, Architectural Historian; Kristina Van Vleck, Assistant Architectural Historian; Stephen J. Swalwell (Architectural Foto Graphics), Photographer; and Dennis Bradley and Aaron Dougherty, (Group One Architects), Architects.











