

STATE THEATER
540 Franklin Avenue
Aliquippa
Beaver County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5957

HABS
PA
4-ALIQU,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Northeast Region
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

State Theater

HABS No. PA-5957

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PA
4-ALIQ,
1-

Location: 540 Franklin Avenue
Aliquippa
Beaver County
Pennsylvania

Present Owner: Motion Picture Factory
c/o Pius Uzimere
P.O. Box 391
McKees Rocks, Pa. 15136

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The State Theater is one of the last remaining moving picture theaters in Beaver County. Constructed in 1921 for 225,000.00 dollars, it represents a fine example of thematic architecture popular during the "golden years" for moving picture theaters. Because the front elevation, with its elegant use of terra cotta as a decorative feature, has remained unchanged and possesses a high degree of architectural integrity, the building is significant to its local and regional environments.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: August 1920 to December, 1921. Shortly after beginning construction late in the summer of 1920 a labor dispute began which delayed the completion of the building for six to eight months. It was dedicated on December 20, 1921 to the feature film of "The Affairs of Anatol," a Paramount picture.
2. Architect: The theater was designed by the firm of Carlisle & Sharrer located in the center of Pittsburgh approximately eighteen (18) miles up the Ohio River from the City of Aliquippa.

The firm was established by Edward J. Carlisle around 1900 in the eastern suburbs of Pittsburgh, and for the next eight (8) to ten (10) years designed buildings in the Braddock area, an eastern suburb of Pittsburgh. Sometime in 1910 he joined with another architect, Mr. Earl E. Sharrer to form the firm of Carlisle & Sharrer. It was at this time that a new office was established in the City of Pittsburgh in the Jenkins Arcade building.

Records show that they designed between fifteen (15) and seventeen (17) commercial/institutional buildings with the City of Aliquippa between 1913 and 1926. Many of the major retail structures along Aliquippa's main street were constructed under the close supervision of Carlisle & Sharrer. It was during this time that they designed schools, apartment buildings, churches and retail/office structures for the surrounding communities of Monaca, Beaver Falls, Beaver, and Elwood City out to the exclusion of other Pittsburgh neighborhoods. The only other theater this firm designed was the Kopple Picture Theatre located in Beaver County, date unknown. The last recorded building designed by this firm was in 1939.

3. Original and subsequent owners: We know from the December 20, 1921 the Woodlawn News dedication article that the original owner was Ed Harvey who was one of the moving picture pioneers in Beaver County. In 1906 he opened the Grand theater in New Brighton, an adjacent river community in the County and in 1911 he opened the first theater in Aliquippa, also called the Grand. The current owner is the Motion Picture Factory of McKees Rocks, Pa.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Earl E. Shaffer of Aliquippa and New Brighton was the general contractor. The heating system was installed by Lyle G. Emery of New Castle. The electrical work and lighting system was installed by Klein Electric of Aliquippa. The interior decorating was completed by Bert Dinsmore of Aliquippa.
5. Original plans and construction: Located in the Carnegie Mellon University Architectural Archives (Martin Aurand, Director) are

eleven blueprints prepared by Carlisle & Sharrer. The drawings include basement, first floor, mezzanine and roof levels. Front, rear and side elevations in addition to a longitudinal building section. According to the Woodlawn News, December 20, 1921, page 1, the original cost of the structure was \$225,000.00.

The only photograph known to be in existence of the structure at the time of its dedication is the one that occurred on the front page of the Woodlawn News, December 20, 1921. Shortly thereafter, the Woodlawn News ceased publication and their records were not archived. There is no current record of this dedication, photograph or subsequent photographs.

The most comprehensive description of the building during the time of its construction is the December 20, 1921 Woodlawn News dedication article. Because the building is structurally unsound and could not be safely entered, this article was used as a basis for the physical description of the building's interior.

6. Alterations and additions: The building is structurally unsound and it is therefore unsafe to enter. Viewing the interior of the building from the exterior doorways reveal a substantial amount of damage as the result of the building being vacant since 1975. Large portions of the roof have collapsed thereby permitting water and snow to enter the building's interior.

During a recent conversation with Pete Loschiavo, who worked at the theater between 1958 and 1975, he noted that sometime during the mid 1960's the adjacent building (the Villa's Lounge) caught on fire and was completely destroyed. Apparently the State Theater suffered residual damage and it was at this time the current owner decided to "remodel" the entire interior of the building. According to Mr. Loschiavo, almost no original historic fabric remained after this "remodeling" project was completed.

In contrast to the building's interior, a careful study of the December 20, 1921 dedication photograph in the Woodlawn News and the current photographs clearly indicates that the exterior of the building has maintained a high degree of historic integrity. Even though the quality of the dedication photograph is very poor, one can easily compare the form, shape and use of materials illustrated in this photograph and the current facade. Exclusive of the doorways which have been covered with protective plywood, the front elevation today remains as it was originally constructed fifty-two (52) years ago. Although some vandalism has occurred, it has not detracted from the stately manner in which this building was originally designed and constructed.

B. Historical Context:

The State Theater was built in the early 1920's, the haydays of moving

picture theaters. The town of Woodlawn, (hense, the Woodlawn News), later to become the City of Aliquippa in 1928, already had a moving picture theater developed by the same entrepreneur in 1911. However, the demand for this type of entertainment was so great that this small town was able to support an additional theater which had a seating capacity of 1450. Within the next few years, two more theaters were constructed within the City of Aliquippa; the Temple and Rialto. Contiguous with the City of Aliquippa was the small community known as West Aliquippa. It was during the 1920's that this community was the recipient of a picture theater appropriately called the West Aliquippa Theater. Any community containing five (5) picture theaters is noteworthy in itself. However, when one compares this number of theaters to the population, a new dimension is added to their significance.

According to the 1920 census, only 15,426 people lived within the Aliquippa region. The State Theater, with a seating capacity of almost 1,500 represents ten percent of the communities total population. When adding the seating capacity of the other four theaters, one begins to understand how important a role these structures played in the daily life of the people of the community.

Although the City of Aliquippa had the most amount of theaters in the County, Beaver Falls and Ambridge had four theaters each. Other communities such as Rochester, Ellwood City and New Brighton contained multiple theater buildings. During the 1920's every major community in Beaver County could claim at least one theater structure.

Today, the State Theater is one of the last remaining buildings representing the "golden era" of the moving picture industry. Although its interior has been drastically altered and the building is in poor condition because of neglect, its main facade remains unaltered and provides us with the opportunity to experience the "golden age" of moving picture theater architecture.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Built during the "golden age" of the moving picture industry, the State Theater is one of the few remaining examples in Beaver County of this type of building. Its scale, size and architectural detailing identifies it as a place where one came to be entertained. The detailing of these same architectural components, however, made the building "fit" into the existing streetscape of the city. It became a contributing factor in the development and quality of the City of Aliquippa's urban environment.
2. Condition of fabric: Its front elevation has remained virtually unchanged over the past 52 years and, therefore, is a clear documentation of how buildings of this type were designed and built.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The building is rectangular in shape with the front elevation 75 feet wide and the side elevation 150 feet long. The height of the front, three-story, elevation is almost 45 feet. The peak of the rear elevation is almost 35 feet above grade.
2. Foundations: The foundations are constructed on concrete masonry units. Brick is to grade, therefore, no foundation block can be seen above grade.
3. Walls: Only the front elevation has decorative features. The side and rear elevations are unadorned and are constructed of brick of no particular design or style. Header and stretcher brick courses occur as needed to produce a subtle series of "X" patterns which occur on both sides of the windows on the second and fourth bays of the five bay front facade. These "X" patterns are the result of interlacing somewhat darker brick into the overall field color of brick.

As the photographs clearly indicate, the front elevation contains a combination of non-projecting brown-red brick and highly decorative off-white terra cotta. Only the center portions of the first, second, fourth and fifth bays contain brick in addition to the bottom portion of the parapet wall above. The balance of this elevation is covered with terra cotta which defines the architectural style of the building and provides the basis of its pleasing appearance on the streetscape.

The entire first floor is covered with terra cotta panels fifteen (15) inches high. The belt course separation between the first and second floors, projecting approximately eight (8) inches from the facade below is comprised of two separate elements. The lower portion has a fanned-floral shape, while the top piece has quatrefoils set at a diagonal.

The center bay of the building is almost entirely covered with terra cotta. The second floor contains five window bays formed in the shape similar to Islamic/Gothic architecture. The top of the arches are concave and help form the bottom portion of a decorative terra cotta circle. The entire second floor middle bay is framed with terra cotta rope mold.

The third floor of this bay contains four, evenly spaced, one over one double hung rectangular windows.

4. Structural systems, framing: The exterior masonry walls are load bearing. The roof and floors are supported by steel beams and trusses. Floor joists are two (2) inch by twelve (12) inch and, where possible, span to other interior masonry load bearing walls. The space above the theater is spanned by long span steel web joists.

5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: The building contains no porches, stoops, balconies or bulkheads.
6. Chimneys: The building contains only one chimney located slightly off-center on the rear elevation. It is three (3) foot by four (4) foot in size and is constructed of brick. It contains no decorative features and rises six (6) feet above the roof surface.
7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The building doorways are in the center of each of the fire bays. The doorways on the first and fifth bay lead to the eight offices on the second floor and four apartments on the third floor. The doorways on the second and fourth bays are part of the commercial store fronts which flank the entrance to the theater which occupies the center third bay.

The windows on the top floor, which serve the apartments, are double-hung and rectangular in shape. Exclusive of the first and fifth bay, these windows are trimmed with a narrow piece of flat terra cotta. They sit directly below the highly decorative terra cotta cornice above.

The second floor windows change in appearance as they proceed from the center bay to the extremities of the facade. In general, they become less decorative as they progress to the edge of the building. Bays one and five are one over one double hung, while bays two and four are four over one with a terra cotta fan light resting in the center of a segmented arch above the wide projecting window cornice below.

The center bay windows on the second floor are double hung one over one with a fixed glass transom sash above. This decorative feature is one of the most outstanding architectural elements on this facade.

The windows on the first floor are comprised of fixed transoms above the doorways of bays one and five. This transom is carried over to the adjacent bays numbered two and four. The center bay has a large ornamental marquis which extends over the sidewalk six (6) feet. The main theater entrance doors are flanked with glass side lights.

8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The roof can be divided, almost equally, into three sections. The front portion is a flat, shed roof sloping to the center of the building. The center portion extends approximately ten (10) feet above the lowest part of the front roof. This section of the roof structure is much more gently

sloping when compared to the front roof. The back section of the building is covered with a slightly gabled roof with gutters along the side elevations.

A bituminous built-up material was used as the roofing material.

- b. Cornice, eaves: The front elevation has a highly decorative, projecting terra cotta cornice. Approximately three (3) feet high, this important architectural feature has five (5) separate components. Starting at the lowest portion there is a six (6) inch high continuous horizontal band of floral-leaf decoration. Directly above this feature is a twelve (12) inch high segment which contains elongated vertical bars terminating at a diamond pattern at the top.

The next feature of this cornice is a six (6) inch high dentil. Directly above this dentil is an eight (8) inch medallion which "holds up" a projecting horizontal coping band which forms the top of this cornice.

- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: This building does not contain any dormers, cupolas or towers.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The front portion of the building contains commercial stores on each side of the theater's main entrance. The center portion of this building's floor plan encompasses seating for 900 people. A balcony is directly above and has a capacity for 550 additional people. A stage, 50 feet wide and 15 feet deep, occupies the rear portion of the building along with numerous dressing rooms.
2. Stairways: This building has two sets of stairways. Located on opposite sides of the front elevation, an internal set of stairs provide direct access from the public sidewalk to the offices on the second floor and apartments on the third floor. Within the theater complex itself is a pair of unadorned stairs leading to the balcony level. A set of fire stairs help evacuate the occupants from the balcony and main floors directly to the outside on each side of the building.
3. Flooring: The aisles throughout the theater are laid with a composition known as "marbleoid" which helps deaden the sound. The offices on the second floor and apartments on the third floor are covered with carpet.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The woodwork and walls are enameled in tones of French gray and decorative cloth hangings in tones of tan and dark green velour.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways: There is no documentation regarding any unique characteristics for this item. The doors are made of solid oak.

6. Decorative features and trim: The architectural plans indicate that there is no documentation regarding any unique characteristics for this item.

7. Hardware: The architectural plans indicate that there is no documentation regarding any unique characteristics for this item.

8. Mechanical equipment: The heating system for this building is a gas fired boiler, forced hot air system. A fan is used throughout the year to provide ventilation during the winter months and as an elementary means of air-conditioning during the summer.

9. Original furnishings: The seats throughout the theater have a walnut finish on the main floor. The seats in the balcony, however, are upholstered.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: the building sets in the center of the commercial district of the City of Aliquippa. Typically, buildings in this area were constructed adjacent to each other without any side yards.

2. Historic landscape design: There are no landscape features associated with this building.

3. Out buildings: There are no landscape features associated with this building.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings: Approximately eleven (11) architectural drawings associated with this building are on file at the Carnegie Mellon University Architectural Archives, Pittsburgh, Pa. (412)268-8165.

B. Historic views: Attached are the appropriate photographs documenting the existing exterior condition of this building.

C. Interviews: On the evening of April 5, 1993, a telephone discussion was conducted with Mr. Pete Loschiavo (412)375-0831 of Aliquippa, Pa. Mr. Loschiavo was the projectionist at the State Theater between 1958 and 1975, the year that it closed.

D. Bibliography:

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Borough of Aliquippa
Bicentennial Report
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Flag Plaza, Pittsburgh, Pa. 1976
2. Chronology of Events Relating to Aliquippa History by Denver L. Walton, 1976.
3. Industrial History of Aliquippa by Denver L. Walton, 1976.
4. "Red Tape Keeping Aliquippa Theater Up" by Jim Thorner, Beaver County Times, 8/2/92.
5. "A ticket to the Past" by H. Robert Headland
The Sunday Times Magazine
Beaver County Times
July 8, 1990, pp. 8, 9, & 10.
6. "Depression's highlight: Films" by Joe Tronzo, Beaver County Times, 2/5/89.
7. "Beaver County's Old Time Movie Houses Put On Quite A Show" by Joe Tronzo, 4/8/90.
8. The Woodlawn News, Tuesday, December 20, 1921, "Modern Moving Picture House Opens Doors."

E. Sources of Information

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2. B. F. Jones Library
Aliquippa, Pa.
3. The Carnegie Library
the Pennsylvania Room
Pittsburgh, Pa.
4. Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation
Pittsburgh, Pa.
5. Western Pennsylvania Historical Society
Pittsburgh, Pa.

6. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
Harrisburg, Pa.
7. Ambridge Library
Ambridge, Pa.
8. The Architectural Archives
Carnegie Mellon University
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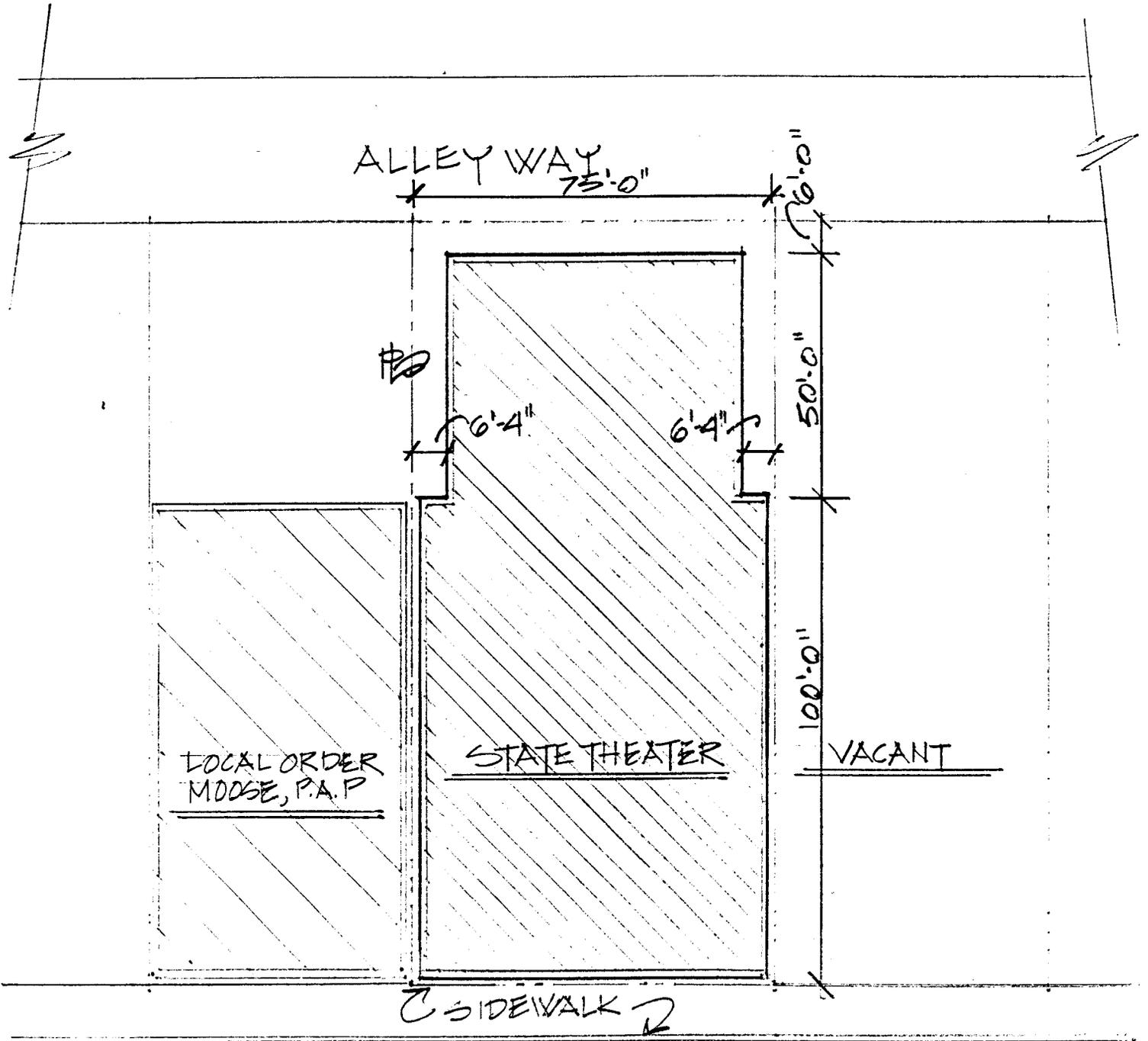
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The federal government is providing money for the demolition of this building through a \$60,000.00 Community Development Block Grant. This grant is being distributed by Beaver County's Community Development Program.

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FRANKLIN AVENUE



SITE PLAN

SCALE 1" = 30'-0"