

KESTWICK THEATRE
1419 Keswick Avenue
Flourtown
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6038

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

KESWICK THEATRE

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Location: 291 Keswick Avenue, Glenside, Montgomery Co., Pennsylvania.

Significance: The Keswick Theatre is a noteworthy theater building, having the distinction of being designed in two different styles; a Tudor Revival exterior with an Adam-style interior. It is one of two theaters attributed to renowned Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer. The Keswick Theatre is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Description: The Keswick Theatre is a Tudor Revival building constructed of concrete and brick, covered with stucco. The structure consists of a three-story main block with a theatre front and a two-and one-half-story wing to the south. The entire building faces west onto Keswick Avenue. The first floor of the theatre's front facade is a modern entrance with metal glazed doors and a cantilevered marquee. "KESWICK" is spelled out twice in large metal letters across the top of the marquee. The second and third stories of the main block consist of a wide half-timbered, steep-pitched projecting gable with flanking Moorish-style octagonal towers. The towers are decorated with ornamental tiles and painted bricks, and capped with copper domes. The second floor of the gable contains multi-light casement windows while the third floor contains multi-light, arched-top double-hung windows. A large half-timbered gabled dormer with two leaded glass casement windows extends from the second story of the north wall.

Attached to the main block on the south is a two-and-one-half-story wing divided into six modern storefronts with a central entrance between. Behind this wing, not visible from the exterior, is the theater's auditorium. The wing is framed by two large projecting gables with a smaller projecting gable in the center. Each large gable is half-timbered and has ribbon windows with eight-over-twelve light double-hung sash on the second floor. The central entrance consists of double wood and glazed doors with a multi-light transom. A pent roof, currently covered with asphalt shingles, extends over the first floor. The second floor has single and paired windows with eight-over-twelve light double-hung sash. There are also two half-timbered gable dormers with eight-over-eight light double-hung sash. The roof of the main block and the south wing are covered with slate, however, there are some sections where asphalt shingles have replaced the slate.

The Keswick Theatre is ell-shaped in plan. The front section consists of a barrel-vaulted lobby (currently covered by a suspended ceiling). The main section, which forms a right angle to the lobby, contains the foyer and auditorium. In contrast to the Tudor Revival exterior, most of the interior spaces are

finished in the Adam style. The foyer features a the marble staircase on the west wall flanked by large marble-framed mirrors. The foyer also has a terrazzo floor, marble baseboard molding, scagliola wainscoting, ornate plaster molding on the frieze, cornice and ceiling, and elaborate columns and pilasters. Directly over the marble staircase is a landscape mural by Franz de Merlier, a Belgium-born artist who specialized in painting murals for hotels and theaters.

The Adam-style, 1576 seat auditorium features a stage with a decorative plaster arch and an organ. Ornate plaster grills with two, large marble columns to each side screen the organ chambers which flank and stage. The room is enhanced with plaster pilasters and moldings at the cornice, and a decorative ceiling with a central circle of art glass and lights framed in plaster moldings (these features are currently covered).

The theatre is also equipped with a ladies' lounge done in the Louis XV style (although most of the decoration has been removed). The ceilings of the foyer, second-floor lounge, ladies's lounge and dressing rooms are made of art glass and lighting set in decorative plaster frames (some has been removed).

Dimensions of the interior spaces are as follows: lobby - 58'x30'; foyer - 86'x24'; orchestra pit - 10'x 34'; stage - 30'x60', with a 40' fly-space.

History: The Keswick Theatre was designed by Horace Trumbauer and built by Turner Construction Company in 1928 at a cost of \$500,000. It was originally established as a Vaudeville theater and a movie house. Edwin N. Johnson, the first owner, envisioned it as a major attraction for the Glenside area, which he was attempting to develop as a commercial and cultural center. Johnson started a monthly journal, the Glenside Gazette, to publicize the theater and the Glenside area. He also frequently donated the space to various groups for charity functions. It became a neighborhood institution and gathering place for several generations of local residents.

When the Keswick opened in 1928, it had its own orchestra directed by John A. Brall. It also, like many theaters at that time, had a policy of racial segregation. Some of the stars who appeared at the Keswick in the early years included the Marx Brothers, Mae West, Stepin Fetchit and Fannie Brice. The theatre also showed films, so a night at the Keswick often consisted of a stage show, an orchestral program and a movie.

Horace Trumbauer received his architectural training with the

Philadelphia firm of George W. and William D. Hewitt, whom he joined in 1884 when he was sixteen years old. He established his own office in 1890 and completed a series of designs for the builders and developers Wendell & Smith. Trumbauer is best remembered for his country houses and projects that emphasized French seventeenth and eighteenth-century designs. He did, however, have a diverse practice in which he designed city houses, hotels, academic buildings, hospitals, religious buildings, institutional buildings, and commercial structures. Many of these projects were done in Georgian Revival and Tudor Revival styles. Trumbauer hired Julian Abele, the first black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Architecture, as his chief designer in 1902. Together they designed numerous buildings, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Trumbauer is known to have designed only one other theater; the Irvine Auditorium at the University of Pennsylvania in 1926. Trumbauer had little experience in theater design, and it has been proposed that Louis Magaziner, an accomplished theater designer and friend of Julian Abele, provided much assistance in the design of the Keswick Theatre.

In the early 1950s the theatre's interior was updated. Numerous walls were covered with paneling, a suspended ceiling was installed in the auditorium and lobby, the orchestra pit was covered, and drapes were added to conceal the organ grills and theater walls. The original stage was also removed in the 1950s after a fire. The foyer seems to have remained the most intact. On the exterior, the cantilevered marquee was installed ca. 1950, replacing a metal canopy awning.

Sources:

Bunting, Paul K. "National Register nomination form: Keswick Theater." March 1983. This form provided the date of the theater's construction, the dimensions of the interior spaces and information concerning the original owner and early performers.

Diapason. July 1, 1929. Advertisement for Aeolian Theatre Organs. Large photo of the interior of the Keswick Theatre.

Horace Trumbauer's original drawings for the Keswick Theater. The six sheets of drawings are labeled as follows: Horace Trumbauer, Architect; Work No. 2625, March 20, 1928; Theatre Building for Mr. Edwin N. Johnson, Wharton Avenue below Easton Road, Glenside, Pennsylvania. Blueprints of the original drawings are located at the Keswick Theatre.

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Morrison, Craig. Telephone interview with historian. June 1994.
Mr. Morrison provided the information about Louis
Magaziner's possible involvement with the design of the
Keswick Theater.

Tatman, Sandra L. and Roger W. Moss. Biographical Dictionary of
Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930. Boston: G.K. Hall &
Co., p. 799-807.

Historian: Janet G. Blutstein, HABS Historian, 1994.