

LIBERTY THEATER
801 Fifth Avenue
New Kensington
Westmoreland County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-6181

HABS
PA
65-NEKEN,
4-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

LIBERTY THEATER

HABS NO. - PA-6181

Location: 801 Fifth Avenue, New Kensington, Westmoreland County,
Pennsylvania

II USGS Pittsburgh West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: 17.604890.4490560

Present Owner: Redevelopment Authority of New Kensington, 421 Tenth Street, New
Kensington, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania.

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Liberty Theater is one of four theaters in New Kensington and is
representative of one of two theaters in the community with a decorative
terra cotta facade. The building anchors the southern end of the business
district and is a contributing building to the potentially eligible New
Kensington Commercial Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: 1920-1921. The dates were determined from local newspaper articles and Sanborn Map Company maps. Prior to construction, plans were being reviewed by the Pennsylvania Theater Inspector in 1919. Construction began April 1, 1920 and the building opened to the public May 2, 1921.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original Owner: James B. Clark of Rowland & Clark Motion Picture Corporation of Pittsburgh, and A. Sourla of New Kensington. References to the Chain of Title to the land upon which the structure stands are in the office of the Recorder of Deeds, Westmoreland County Courthouse, Greensburg, Pennsylvania.
 - 1919 Deed, July 30, 1919, recorded in Volume 666, p. 414. A. Sourla to James B. Clark.
 - 1921 Deed, April 14, 1921, recorded in Volume 708, p. 358. James B. Clark to Liberty Theater Company.
 - 1924 Deed, January 24, 1924, recorded in Volume 765, p. 367. Liberty Theater Company to Samuel Haimovitz, et ux, and William Leibovitz, et ux.
 - 1929 Deed, April 8, 1929, recorded in Volume 884, p. 503. Samuel Hyman (Haimovitz), et ux, and William Leibovitz, et ux, to Milton K. Alter.
 - 1929 Deed, April 8, 1929, recorded in Volume 884, p. 505. Milton K. Alter to Samuel Hyman and William M. Leibovitz.
 - 1930 Deed, June 27, 1930, recorded in Volume 925, p. 406. Samuel Hyman, et ux, and William M. Leibovitz, et ux, to Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.
 - 1930 Deed, July 8, 1930, recorded in Volume 909, p. 166. Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc. to Warner Brothers Theaters, Inc.
 - 1965 Deed, February 25, 1965, recorded in Volume 1903, p. 929. Warner Theaters, Inc. formerly Warner Brothers Theaters, Inc. to George Rodnock and Stephen Rodnock, Jr.

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- 1981 Deed, February 24, 1981, recorded in Volume 2380, p. 1065. Stephen Rodnock Jr. and heirs of George Rodnock to August R. Moret.
- 1983 Deed, February 21, 1983, recorded in Volume 2490, p. 202. August R. Moret, et, ux, to the Redevelopment Authority of the City of New Kensington.

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Legal description of the property is as follows:

All those three certain lots, pieces or parcels of land situate in the Borough of New Kensington, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, being known and designated as Lots Nos. Forty-Six (46), Forty-Seven (47), and Forty-Eight (48) in Block No. Four (4) of the Burrell Improvement Company's Plan of Kensington, of record in the Recorder's Office of Westmoreland County in Plan Book, Vol. 1, page 10, said Lots together being bounded and described as follows, to-wit:- BEGINNING at a point at the Northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and Eighth Street in said Plan; thence extending along Fifth Avenue, in a Northerly direction, 60 feet to a point on line dividing Lots 48 and 49 in said Plan; thence extending along said dividing line and parallel with Eighth Street, in a Westerly direction, 120 feet to a point on line of Ivy Alley; thence extending along the line of Ivy Alley, in a Southerly direction, 60 feet to a point on Eighth Street; thence extending along the line of Eighth Street, in an easterly direction, 120 feet to a point, at the place of beginning. HAVING erected thereon a theater building. ...

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Fred S. Danner, successor to C. E. Reighter. According to the 1929 Tarentum City Directory, Mr. Danner was a brick layer and had owned and operated a theater in Tarentum, Pennsylvania. Tarentum is an adjacent community to the north across the Allegheny River.
5. Original Plans and Construction: Original plans of the building do not exist. A sketch of the original front of the building was featured in the July 22, 1920 issue of the New Kensington Dispatch.

The Liberty Theater was equal to any theater in the Pittsburgh district. There were 1400 seats of cushion opera type. A huge pipe organ was also installed. The exterior of the building on the Fifth Avenue facade was constructed in terra cotta while the Eighth Street facade was constructed in white brick. The Fifth Avenue facade was lit by six huge urns, 12 feet off the ground.

6. Alterations and Additions: At an unknown date possibly in the 1930's, the front entrance on 5th Avenue was altered to become more streamlined, as was typical of the period. A new marquee, and new aluminum ticket windows were installed within the recessed entrance as well as carrara glass on the exterior.

The building was extensively remodeled in 1965-66 by George and Stephen Rodnock. It was at this time that the 12"x 12" ceramic tile and the four double aluminum doors were added to the interior of the entrance vestibule.

It is hard to determine any additional alterations to the interior due to its deteriorated condition.

B. Historical Content

The original owners, James B. Clark of the Rowland and Clark Motion Picture Corp. and A. Sourla of New Kensington, were very familiar with New Kensington and its theaters. Mr. Sourla had already owned the Star and Alhambra Theaters in New Kensington and Mr. Clark himself owned the Strand, Regent and Liberty theaters in Pittsburgh.

In July of 1919, the plans for the theater were being reviewed by the Theater Inspector in Harrisburg. After the plans were reviewed, bids were let out and were awarded in March of 1920 to Fred S. Danner. Construction was to begin April 1, 1920. After construction delays due to the acquisition of building materials, the Liberty Theater opened to a packed crowd. The new owners and their 200 invited guests arrived at 7:00 to be seated. Then tickets were sold to the remaining guests with some even standing in the rear. At 7:30, F. S. Moran introduced Clara Kimball Young, an actress, who spoke on the "progress (being) made in the motion picture industry". Miss Young was an actress, traveling through the United States to determine what sort of movies audiences wanted.

Burgess McGeary accepted the theater on behalf of the City of New Kensington. After his remarks, the lights were turned out, the audience saw Charles Ray in "The Old Swimmin' Hole". One of the finest attributes of the building was its ventilation system. Even with a packed house, the theater was comfortable to sit in.

The theater continued to be an integral part of the New Kensington Community until the early 1980's, when The Redevelopment Authority of New Kensington purchased the building with hopes to resell the building to interested parties. Several groups proposed to reuse the building as a dinner theater and performing arts center, however, their plans did not develop.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Liberty Theater is one of several terra cotta buildings constructed in the early twentieth century in New Kensington Pennsylvania. It is also one of two theaters in New Kensington constructed in terra cotta and still intact.
2. Condition of fabric: The Liberty Theater is in poor to deteriorated condition due to six (6) large holes in the roof adjacent to the northern facade (Eighth Street facade). As a result, moisture has penetrated the interior, causing roughly 85% of the plaster to become unkeyed and fall onto the seats, and pigeons have entered the building and begun roosting in the interior. The resulting moisture has caused the flooring, stairwells and mezzanine to become structurally unsound.

B. Description of the Exterior

1. Overall dimension: The overall dimension of the building is 60 feet by 120 feet. The building is three bays wide on the Fifth Avenue facade and eight bays wide on the Eighth Street facade, and stands approximately four stories in height.
2. Foundation: The building is brick masonry construction on concrete slab.
3. Walls: The Fifth Avenue facade is constructed of decorative white terra cotta on the second, third and fourth stories (everything above the marquee) with pink carrara glass along the entire first floor and wrapping around one bay on the Eighth Street facade. 12 x 12 ceramic tiles cover the entire inside of the entry vestibule. Several pieces of carrara glass are missing from the corner of the Eighth Street facade. At the base of the carrara glass is a small band of black carrara glass. A string course of aluminum separates the carrara glass from the terra cotta. There are six movie poster display areas, four on the Fifth Avenue facade and two on the Eighth Street facade. Above the entrance is a pre-1965 marquee.

The Eighth Street facade is constructed of white brick matching the color of the terra cotta. The bays are delineated by arches that are similar in height to the two arches on either side of the marquee on the front facade. In the string course above the arches, a decorative tiled square is located between each arch. Along the sidewalk is a four (4) foot watertable with a belt course immediately above. The bricks are laid in a common bond.

There are two pairs of double windows at the rear two bays of the Eighth Street facade that are located in the second, third and fourth stories. The third story windows are arched. The windows are all covered with wood and are impossible to determine the number of lights. There is severe cracking in several of the lintels.

The Ivy Alley facade is constructed of red brick in common bond with a header bond every sixth course. At the far left there is a set of double doors. Then towards the right is a double door and at the far right is a single door with a small window at the second story and an arched window at the fourth story. The other wall is a demising wall with the florist next door.

4. Structural systems, framing: The roof and floor are supported by steel beams with reinforced concrete. Bridging between the steel beams appears to be constructed of wood. The wood has been subject to water from the leaking roof and is deteriorated.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: The marquee on the front of the building is not original to the building and was installed prior to the 1965 alteration (see photograph of pre-1965 alterations on page 15). There are several holes in the underneath side of the marquee allowing pigeons to inhabit it.
6. Chimneys: There are no chimneys within the building.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and Doors: At the Fifth Avenue facade under the marquee, there are four pairs of double doors set in aluminum frames. A transom light exists over all four doors. There is also another pair of double doors in the arch to the right of the marquee. At the Eighth Street facade there are five pairs of double doors located in five of the arches. All of these doors are painted metal doors.
 - b. Windows and shutters: All of the openings except the two casement openings on the Fifth Avenue facade are covered with wood and it is impossible to determine the number of lights, hardware and trim.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape and covering: The roof is arched approximately 80% and then slopes towards Fifth Street. It is severely deteriorated due to six holes that are located near the Eighth Street facade.

- b. Cornice, eaves: The cornice is located on the Fifth Avenue facade and wraps around the Eighth Street facade for one bay. The cornice is supported by acanthus leaves with a dentil course below the acanthus leaves. Below the dentile course is a band of small acanthus leaves and a band of rectangular panels alternated with circles.

Below the cornice is a belt course of decorative terra cotta made of acanthus leaves and four petaled blossoms wound around an interlooping chain. On either side of the two front arches is a square inset with two interlocking squares with a blossom set within the central square. In the area around the arches and above the marquee, is a single blossom within a small diamond panel. The diamond panel is laid in a checkerboard pattern throughout this area.

9. Dormers, cupolas, tower: There is one large flybox over the stage area that extends one story above the height of the roof. On the Fifth Avenue and Eighth Street facades of the flybox, the exterior walls are constructed of white brick with four decorative corner blocks, similar to those on the Eighth Street facade, set in the four corners of each of the facades.

C. Description of the Interior

1. Floor Plans: The first floor includes a lobby with two stairways leading up to the mezzanine level. The stairwells are located to the immediate left and right of the front entry doors. Straight ahead are double doors leading into the theater seating area. Additional doors to the theater seating area are located in the immediate left and right corners of the central double doors.

Located above the lobby is a two story rotunda. The railing around the second floor rotunda is turned wrought iron painted gold. There is some evidence of molded plaster detailing on the ceilings.

There are 19 rows of seats. The seating is separated from the orchestra pit by a wooden balustrade with 42 turned balusters. The proscenium is flanked by a pilaster with a bracket supporting the entablature. On either side of the proscenium is a balcony whose 4-center pointed arch is supported by Doric columns and has a decorative wrought iron balustrade.

The mezzanine was unable to be accessed due to its deteriorated condition and its structural integrity. However according to written documentation, there are two large restrooms, a projection room and additional theater seating.

2. Stairways: There are two stairways leading to the mezzanine. There is also a stairwell on each side of the proscenium leading to the balconies. These were unable to be accessed due to their structural integrity.
 3. Flooring: Unable to determine the flooring due to the amount of plaster that has fallen. There is evidence of carpeting in the theater area.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls were all plaster and are in various stages of disrepair due to water damage. There is evidence of a cornice approximately one foot from the ceiling supported by brackets. However this detail is very limited due to the extent of the water damage.
 5. Openings:
 1. Doorways and doors: It is hard to determine the number of doors and doorways due to the extent of the water damage within the structure.
 2. Windows: It is hard to determine the type of windows due to the extent of the water damage within the structure. However, on the Fifth Avenue facade at the base of each of the two arches, there is a casement window.
 6. Decorative features and trim: It is hard to determine the extent of the decorative features due to the water damage within the structure.
 7. Hardware: It is hard to determine the type of hardware due to the extent of the water damage within the structure.
 8. Mechanical equipment: It is hard to determine the type of mechanical equipment due to the extent of the water damage within the structure.
 9. Original furnishings: The existing seats are red cushioned seats and backs. The seat panels on the end of each aisle seat are inset bas relief (low relief) of two Greek or Roman women, one holding a lute, the other holding a symbol or a lyre. There are 19 rows of seats.

The curtains in behind the front doors are shears. It is hard to determine if there were any other curtains in the lobby.
- D. Site
1. Compass direction: The building is situated in a site occupying lots 46, 47, and 48 in Block 4 of the Burrell Improvement Company Plan.

The Fifth Avenue facade faces east and is located on the northwest corner of the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Eighth Street.

2. Landscaping: There is no historic landscaping associated with the property.
3. Outbuildings: There are no outbuildings associated with the property.

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PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings:

Floor plans and sections through the front and mezzanine were drawn and approved on 3-17-65 for the renovations that were undertaken on the front of the building that year. The architect was Edgar A. Kwalwasser of Kwalwasser Comandaros, 5869 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The firm is still in existence in Pittsburgh today.

The rough blue prints for the renovation are in the offices of the Redevelopment Authority of New Kensington, 421 Tenth Street, New Kensington, Pennsylvania.

B. Historic Views:

A 1920 proposed sketch of the building is in the July 22, 1920 issue of the New Kensington Dispatch.

A post card of the Liberty Theater is part of the slide collection, made as part of local history project, of the Steel Industry Heritage Corporation, 338 9th Street, 1st Floor, Homestead, Pennsylvania.

C. Interviews:

None.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Land Deeds

References to the Chain of Title to the land upon which the structure stands are in the office of the Recorder of Deeds, Westmoreland County Courthouse, Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

Maps

Sanborn Map Company, 11 Broadway, New York, New Kensington, 1921, sheet 4.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Federal Agency involved in the project is the Department of Housing and Urban Development through Community Development Block Grant funds. The funds will be used to demolish the building due to its deteriorated condition. Demolition is based on City Engineers Inspection Report, Liberty Theater, City of New Kensington, September 30, 1994. The report was prepared by Benchmark Engineering & Construction Co., Inc., P.O. Box 53, Laughlintown, Pennsylvania, 15655-0053. The HABS Report will satisfy conditions placed on the project according to the Memorandum of Agreement between the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Officer and the City of New Kensington on May 8, 1995.

Prepared by: Bonnie J. Wilkinson
Title: President, B. Wilkinson & Associates, Inc.
Affiliation: Consultant
Date: November 15, 1995.