

The Local Landmark Designation Report: 1929 Sunset Theatre

SIGNIFICANCE:

The 1929 Sunset Theatre is located in the City of Asheboro, North Carolina, at 234 Sunset Avenue, Asheboro Township, Randolph County. It is the one remaining theatre house in Asheboro. Built in 1929, the Sunset Theatre was the first structure built in Asheboro for the sole purpose of showing movies. The additional historical significance is stated in *The Asheboro Courier* statements in 1929 and 1930. The Sunset Theatre was “one of the first in the State designed and constructed especially for ‘talking’ pictures.” When the structure was completed in 1930, *The Courier* concluded that the theatre was “the finest of its size in the State, and few, if any, cities in the State the size of Asheboro can boast of a finer play house.”

The Sunset Theatre is a part of the cultural and historical heritage of the City of Asheboro and Randolph County, and it rises to the Criteria for Significance and Aspects of Integrity considered necessary for Local Historical Landmark designation. The theatre structure is a direct connection to the city and county’s past medium of movie entertainment when the nation’s film industry began with “talking” movies in the late 1920’s. It represents a form of social life and style of entertainment that so many residents and former residents hold fondly.

ASPECTS OF INTEGRITY:

The Sunset Theatre was the first structure built in Asheboro for the sole purpose of showing movies. The Sunset Theatre structure sits at the same location where it was originally constructed in 1929. It has never been torn down nor replaced. Since its opening in 1930, it has always served either as a theatre or as an assembly meeting place either for entertainment or for worship services.

The façade or the theatre’s front structural appearance retains much of its original appearance and design. In fact, the now removed and much remembered long horizontal marquee that stretched across the width of the theatre was added around 1950. The 1929 Sunset Theatre did not have an extended marquee. Originally, the entrance was sheltered only by a small copper canopy. When the 1950’s marquee was removed by recent renovations, it exposed a horizontal continuum of six square cast stone friezes that had been previously and completely concealed. Two relief friezes depict the head and gear of an ancient helmeted soldier, maybe a Spanish soldier, a Conquistador. Four friezes show a type of a shield or armor. The theatre’s motif’s, both exterior and interior, reflect a

Spanish Colonial Revival style. This same Spanish soldier head and helmet is depicted in molded plaster reliefs above the two rear interior exit doors to the left and right of the stage area. This similar style and motif of a Spanish soldier and armor are also reflected in the El Capitan Theatre, located in San Francisco, California, which opened on June 29, 1928.

In 1985, local historian Lowell McKay Whatley described the architectural elements of the theatre, in his book *Architectural History of Randolph County*, as follows:

The Sunset is an example of a "Moorish Picture Palace," designed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style popular in southern California. The tile roof and long marquee now give the façade a strong horizontal orientation. The marquee was added ca. 1950. Originally the entrance was sheltered only by a small copper canopy. Engaged pilasters supporting the bracketed cornice added vertical emphasis to the design. The stucco façade boasts well-done details such as window surrounds and pilaster capitols. The massive wooden brackets under the eaves are quite attractive. The interior has undergone many changes. Only the upper lobby has preserved much of the Spanish trim and wrought iron.

Although the interior has undergone many changes, structurally the theatre retains its basic appearance, as it did when constructed, as a theatre with auditorium type seats. The original entrance foyer doors, the stair and hand rails, the upper banister, wrought iron, and the upper lobby are still preserved as it was constructed. The ornamental, woodwork, plaster and helmeted soldier relief above each of the interior rear exit doors retain their original appearance. The upper balcony area is still in tact. Many of the original auditorium type seats in the balcony appear to be retained.

BASIC DATA:

Name and Street Address: 234 Sunset Avenue, Asheboro, NC 27203

Name and Address of Property Owner: City of Asheboro
146 Church St., Asheboro, N.C. 27203

Date of Original Construction: 1929

Date of Formal Opening: March 6, 1930

PIN #: 7751724892

Description and Justification of Boundaries of Structure Proposed for Designation:

The 1929 Sunset Theatre building that is being proposed as a designated Randolph County Historical Landmark, located at 234 Sunset Avenue, Asheboro, N.C., 27203, sits on a piece of property, identified as Parcel Identification Number 7751724892. It sits on the north side of Sunset Avenue. The structure measures 50 feet in width, fronting on Sunset Avenue, and measures 100 feet in depth, and totals 5000 square feet in footprint size. The structure covers the entire parcel.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1929, local businessman Kirby Cox started construction on the Sunset Theatre. The Theatre opened on March 6, 1930, and was the first structure built in Asheboro for the sole purpose of showing movies. Although modest in size, Sunset Theatre was built in the Spanish style that was very popular in Hollywood at that time, with beamed ceilings, stucco walls and an awning with a Spanish tile roof. A marquee was added in the early 1930's. A second marquee replaced the first around 1950. The theatre continued as a first run facility until the early 1970's. It then turned into a second run theatre and was named "the Flick" for a short time before being renamed the Sunset Theatre.

The facility was shut down as a movie theatre in 1981. Area Developer Jeff Schwarz purchased the facility in 1983 and rented the building out for a variety of events including concerts and church services. In 2000, the George Washington Carver Community Enrichment Center purchased the facility. This group made an effort to run the facility as a performing arts center. The City of Asheboro purchased the facility in December of 2005. The facility is now operated by Asheboro Cultural & Recreation Services.

Since being taken over by Asheboro Parks and Recreation, several new programs have begun, such as "Friday Night Bluegrass," "Kids Summer Movie Series," and "October Thriller Thursday Movies." Other concert, performing arts, and movie events are consistently held. The theatre also serves as a host to governmental functions, such as the 2020 Land Development Plan Information Session held this past August. In fiscal year 2008-2009, nearly 20,000 patrons attended one of the theatre's many events.

The Sunset Theatre's rich history rekindles vivid memories for many area residents. As the local entertainment epicenter, it was the destination for a first date, a family night out, an anniversary celebration or other special occasion. Many local budding performers had their first acting experiences on this stage, with their families watching from the audience.

As the Sunset Theatre begins its ninth decade along with its transformation into a performing arts center, it is posed to become the vibrant centerpiece of the downtown's

revitalization effort. The city of Asheboro has invested more than \$1 million in seed money and is partnering with the local affiliate of the nonprofit North Carolina Community Foundation to make gifts to the project tax deductible. To complete the renovation and expansion of our historic Sunset Theatre, \$1.2 million in additional funds are needed.

The City funds were used to stabilize the building, replace the roof, acquire space for expansion and purchase a new marquee.

The “Historical Background” above, written by Justin Luck, City of Asheboro, N.C. “The History of The Sunset Theatre,” summarized by Randle E. Brim, is attached.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION NARRATIVE OF ALL RESOURCES ON THE SITE:

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The structure is primarily a one level building containing the large open auditorium on the main level, with two partial basement areas, an upper lobby area, and then the upper balcony area. There is a front basement area that originally housed the showers for the barber shop and the men’s lounging and smoking room and bathroom for the theatre’s male patrons. There is a rear basement area that contained the coal boiler and an adjacent coal room. The same structure was originally designed to contain a store front room on each side of the theatre’s admission entrance. Each of these store rooms measures 16 feet in width and 30 feet in depth and each is accessed by a single door fronting on Sunset Avenue. The store front on the left or the west side was built for a barber shop. The store front on the right or the east side was built for a small grill or a restaurant.

The immediate adjacent and attached structure on the east side of the theatre building is a contributing structure to the original 1929 theatre structure. It will provide a new entrance to accommodate a handicap-accessible entrance and handicapped bathrooms to comply with ADA standards. The new entrance at the adjacent structure will connect to the historic theatre via the interior east and west walls of the former Little Castle Grill. The new entrance will include a lobby, accessible restrooms, concession stand, a hallway leading to the theatre for the patrons, dressing rooms for actors, and a

new accessible hallway to the stage area. Above this new entrance, a new digital electronic marquee has been installed. It was designed to be similar in appearance to the 1930's marquee.

MAP AND PLANS

A Geographic Information System (GIS) air photograph map, (produced by the Randolph County Planning Department) of this property reflecting the structure and its relation to nearby streets and other buildings is included as part of this report. Detailed floor plans are maintained by the Asheboro Cultural & Recreation Services, the Asheboro Building Inspections Department, and the Randolph County Tax Department, records of which are available to the Randolph County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission.

PHOTOS

Submitted as part of this report are digital photographs, (including a compact disk) prepared and collected by the Randolph County Planning Department. The Asheboro Cultural & Recreation Services also provided some of these photographs. The photographs include images of the building's exterior and interior, both past and present.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH CERTIFICATION

Historical data used in this report has been reviewed in regular scheduled public meetings and unanimously approved by the Randolph County Historic Landmark Preservation Commission for public presentation and use in this report. A final record of Certification, after a local landmark public hearing, will be reflected in the official minutes of the Commission. Historical information included is as indicated or collected, and documented by staff person, Randle E. Brim, July 6, 2010.

NORTH CAROLINA
RANDOLPH COUNTY

Date

Hal Johnson, Chairman
Randolph County, HLPC