

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received JUL 10 1986

date entered 8/13/86

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic Rahway Theatre

and or common

**2. Location**

street & number 1601 Irving Street

~~NA~~ not for publication

city, town Rahway

vicinity of

state New Jersey

code 034

county Union

code 039

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	NA	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name Rahway Landmarks, Inc.

street & number P.O. Box 755D

city, town Rahway

vicinity of

state NJ 07201

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Union County Court House

street & number No. Broad Street

city, town Elizabeth

state NJ 07201

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Union County Historic Sites Inventory has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date Summer, 1982  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Office of New Jersey Heritage, CN 404

city, town Trenton

state NJ 08625

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## 7. Description

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**Condition**

excellent  
 good  
 fair

deteriorated  
 ruins  
 unexposed

**Check one**

unaltered  
 altered

**Check one**

original site  
 moved date \_\_\_\_\_

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**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

The Old Rahway Theatre at 1601 Irving Street, Rahway, New Jersey, was designed in a Classical Revival style by the noted New York architect, David M. Oltarsch, and built in 1927-1928. The virtually fireproof structure of brick, steel frame, and poured in place concrete is sited at the most prominent intersection of Main, Irving, and Hamilton Streets and Central Avenue. The main facade fronting directly on Irving Street is primarily of red brick and is architecturally highlighted with multi-colored brick and accented with matte glazed terra cotta ornamentation. Elements of the original marquise remain hidden beneath a "modern" covering.

The Irving Street facade incorporates: the central theatre entrance beneath a marquise; paired street level commercial spaces flanking the entrance, each with original flat stock copper moldings and trim; and an ornamented upper-level brick theatre facade. The recessed entry to the vestibule is through three pairs of glass and steel doors which are flanked by a "modern" glassed ticket booth and by a glassed display case. The original exterior doors of brass and glass are stored in the theatre and will be restored and reused. The major portion of the original marquise remains intact beneath a "modern" marquise covering. The illuminated projecting vertical signboard with the word "Rahway" and perimeter lighting that harmonized with the remaining marquise, has been removed. The ornamented upper area of the facade, which is divided into five unequal bays, architectonically completes the lower tripartite area and unifies the entire facade. The facade is of a red face brick laid up in running bond with lovely ochre colored tile accents. The center bay features a tiled projecting double cornice supported by four brick pilasters with tile Doric capitals.

A horizontal belting course of matte glazed ochre colored terra cotta tile with lower leading edge cavetto molding continues around onto the North (Main Street) facade. Large plaques of sculpted tile with floral rosettes separate the two cornices and this motif is used as a decorative device throughout the facade. The center bay further features a compound broken triumphal arch motif composed of radial tile voussoirs, tile imposts with cartouche, and a tile bracketed keystone. The two flanking bays are articulated with recessed bands of multi-colored bricks laid in a checkerboard pattern with corner plaques of sculpted tile with floral rosettes. This pattern repeats within itself and encloses four lattice pattern grilles, two per bay. The outermost facade bays repeat the bands of multi-colored brick within their respective proportions. The bay at the corner of Irving and Main is skewed to mirror the corner commercial entry below. The remaining facades are strictly utilitarian and are of brick laid up in a running bond with minor tile articulation but do manage to achieve an austere dignity. The theatre's desk roof is concealed behind a two step shouldered parapet consisting of red brick, tile coping stones, circular tile plaques, and free-standing terra cotta urns with flame finials.

The interior of the Rahway Theatre boasts of magnificent embellished spaces, the original seven rank Wurlitzer pipe organ, and, above and around all of this, master decorative plasterwork designed and executed by artisans. The vast

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auditorium is virtually unaltered and the lobby, with its attendant areas have, beneath wallboard and paint added at later dates, most of the original highly artistic plaster decoration intact.

The entrance to the interior lobby is through a sloped floor vestibule that has its original plaster ceiling and walls intact. The ceiling with its central lighting fixture (a chandelier now gone) has a delicately designed five part plaster cornice molding, that consists of cable, dentil, guilloche, anthemion, and egg and dart moldings - all of which are repeated throughout the other interior spaces in differing proportions.

The symmetrical lobby with its tripartite barrel vaulted plaster ceiling and surrounding plaster walls is a gem of highly ornate but restrained Pompeian classical design and detailing. The unifying design element is a glorious plasterwork frieze of grouped draped figures in mezzo relief representing the Muses of the Arts finished in Classical colors - a light tan and a warm terra cotta. The frieze is made part of a continuous entablature symbolically supporting the vaulted ceiling by an adjacent cornice molding of anthemion and a talon molding of pellet design. The continuous vaulted ceiling acts as a structural support for the mezzanine of auditorium seating above. The enclosing north and south lobby walls continue the frieze and further contain lavish plaster medallions. The vaulted plaster ceiling with its coating of "modern" paint is divided into three unequal bays by a bas-relief groin molding consisting of a vase motif surrounded with garlands, cornucopia, and stylized winged dragons. Each bay once contained a central hanging chandelier. Access to the auditorium, mezzanine seating area, mens and womens toilet rooms, and adjacent storage areas and alcoves is all through arched openings symmetrically located in the lobby. Some of these arches have been infilled. A "modern" snack bar has been added to the lobby. The original lobby contained "retiring rooms" for men and women in arched alcoves beneath the forward mezzanine seating area. These arches sprung from polychrome twisted columns.

The ceremonial procession of spaces continues and climatically ends with ramps sloped up towards the auditorium. These ramped spaces contain plaster ceilings with delicate bas-relief egg and dart moldings in a leaf motif. These plaster ceilings continue once inside the auditorium by joining the balcony fascias decorated in relief plasterwork of paired opposing sphinx with tendrilled tails.

Once in the auditorium, one is unprepared for the vast soaring beauty of the entire single auditorium space. This breathtaking space conforms to the classic

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formal tradition of enclosing a vast volume with one single continuous ceiling and wall surface. This feat is achieved by a central coved octagonal ceiling drum symbolically supported on corner squinches, all of which is structurally expressed and decorated by sumptuously detailed plasterwork of moldings, medallions, rosettes, plaques, and festoons. This space is the work of masters - both designers and artisans.

The stage (east) wall consists of an elliptical arch proscenium flanked by balcony boxes containing the pipe organ lofts. The proscenium arch itself is endlessly swathed in bas-relief plaster ornamentation. The voussoirs of the arch are highlighted with a repeating urn, pedestal, and cornucopia motif festooned with garlands and rosettes. Interspersed are opened books (symbolizing knowledge) and winged nudes. The archivolt is an extremely bold plasterwork egg and dart molding while the intradoes are bordered with a cabled molding. The intradoes themselves have similar decoration with the inclusion of musical instruments, all of which spring from two dark black faux marble plinths. The center of the Proscenium is marked with a plasterwork cartouche surmounted with a Gorgon head and inscribed with now faded gilt initials - R.T. Both the original asbestos fire curtain and swagged velour draperies remain intact, but are in deteriorated condition. The fire curtain contains a lower continuous border of anthemion and the words ASBESTOS stenciled in an Art Deco letterstyle directly onto the fabric. The elegant dark crimson grand balloon drape has a fringed lower border and four gathers with tassels.

The two magnificent balcony boxes are curved projections supported by scrolled swagged consoles, and their auditoria faces are divided into three unequal bays embellished with striking plasterwork friezes representing the Arts. These polychrome friezes of ribboned dancers in buff, mahogany, and terra cotta brown colors, recall and enlarge the motif found in the lobby. The lower face of the arch spandrels above contains a lavish plaster organ grillwork of rows of repeating pierced rosettes. These registers are bordered by fluted piers with Corinthian capitals from which spring the elegantly detailed voussoirs. The arches, which are the apsidal squinches for the drum ceiling are embellished with glazed polychrome reliefs and have the original swagged velour draperies intact, which match the proscenium grand drape.

The auditorium ceiling itself is all plaster on lathe supported from the structural steel frame above by paired angle irons. The center coved area, which is a vault in section and an elongated octagon in plan, contains a concealed perimeter light trough and a center medallion from which once hung a nine by thirteen foot chandelier. The center medallion is a pierced metal grillwork of

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expanding radial circles which also allows hot air to escape the auditorium. Around this medallion are two very ornate relief plasterwork motifs with central urns and roses done in colors of muted reds and greens on a tan background. Surrounding the center "drum" area, the ceiling is divided symmetrical by a beamed ceiling which is sweepingly coated in plaster decorations of urns, lyres, garlands, books, and musical instruments done in faux wood colors of buff, brown, mahogany, and copper green. Crossings are marked with rosettes and mid-points are marked with plaques in bas-relief.

The main decorative feature of the auditorium ceiling is a large plaster bas-relief medallion adjacent to and incorporated with the design of the proscenium arch. This medallion consists of a multi-colored circular band of draped female figures linked hand to hand, front to back in a symbolic dance around a smaller medallion of elongated rosettes, all of which is united by perimeter bands of egg and dart molding. The same molding continues and unifies this medallion with the proscenium arch and the two balcony boxes. The dancers are painted in pastel tones of blue, rose, brown, and green on a cream-colored background.

The concept of a single unified decorative scheme for the auditorium space also includes the side exit doorways and required fire hose cabinet enclosures. These two seemingly disparate utilitarian requirements are graced and dignified by their paired locations in plasterwork relief arches. The arches contain garland voussoirs surrounding round medallions of a diorama of a nude male seated on a bullshead throne and a standing draped female figure. These medallions, which repeat colors used similarly, are surrounded by foliage with tendrils symbolically held in place by opposing hieracoxphinx and which spring forth from the hands of an angel. The arched background is plasterwork glazed with buff and green. The fire hoses themselves are hung in back lighted glass door cabinets prominently displayed. Below these are decorative metalwork grilles in front of heating radiators. The exit doorways contain similar decoration with paired sphinx at the illuminated exit signs below a cornice molding and a bas-relief urn with flame finial. Both arches, and their symmetrical equals at the opposite exterior wall, are united by a frieze consisting of swagged vined garlands, urns, and rosettes.

The twenty-six foot deep stage with recessed footlights is raised above the front theatre seating, and a narrow lowered orchestra pit contains the original seven rank Wurlitzer pipe organ console and an orchestra leaders podium. The stage contains a twenty-eight line counterweighted fly system, and at stage right a dimmer lighting board controlling the house lights, the foot lights, four stage

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borders, and proscenium border lights. The orchestra pit allows direct access to the substage area. The floor of the auditorium (both the front seating area, which is on grade, and the mezzanine seating area, which is supported over the lobby) is poured in place concrete. The steps, tiered seating aisles, and perimeter below grade access tunnel arches, were poured monolithically with the floor itself. The seating spring cushions and upholstery are in deteriorated condition as is the carpeting and will have to be replaced. Ornate cast iron aisle ends of some of the grouped seats contain a cartouche with corbeil flanked by fluted balusters with female masques and a field with the raised initial - R. The forward auditorium seats are divided by four main aisles into sections: a center; two equal adjacent seating areas; and two equal end seating areas. Additional narrower aisles exist at both exit door walls, and two cross aisles further divide these seats. The tiered forward mezzanine seats are divided into seven sections by aisles while the rear mezzanine is divided into three sections by two aisles. A wide cross aisle at the extreme rear of the auditorium allows access to the projection booth.

The projection booth overhangs the auditorium and the floor of which forms a continuous low ceiling over the rear mezzanine seating area. The leading edge of this ceiling continues the beamed ceiling motif from the auditorium high ceiling and is embellished with urns, lyres, garlands, and plaques done in faux wood colors. The fascia of the projection booth is plaster raked to resemble rough texture stucco. This faux stucco finish appears throughout the theatre. The stairs directly connecting the mezzanine with the lobby, the lobby area itself, the areaways to the rear stage area, the lower portions of the forward mezzanine, the rear wall of the auditorium, the side walls of the rear mezzanine, and the ceiling overhanging the rear mezzanine all have this stucco finish. The rear ceiling is divided into three bays by leaf and dart moldings. Each bay is highlighted by a beautiful central grille which is a pierced metal ventilation register of expanding radial circles. This grille allows hot air to escape from the mezzanine area and is similar in design to the one at the center of the high coved ceiling. Each grille contains a central plasterwork medallion which is an eight pointed ridged starburst motif from which hangs a leaded glass chandelier. Each grille is banded by perimeter plasterwork guilloche moldings. Similar ventilation grilles exist above the two side rear mezzanine areas.

The "backstage" area consists of a sixty-foot tall skylighted stagehouse (flyloft) which is accessed by stairs and alcoves flanking each end of the proscenium (stage) area. The right hand stairs also access the five original dressing rooms which are enclosed in a one-story windowed structure, the balcony organ chamber, and a rear exit. The left hand stairs access the stage doors at

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the loading platform and the other balcony organ chamber. Additional interesting construction features include: a built-in spring-fed well for cooling; perimeter utility service tunnels which are accessed from the substage area; and a poured in place concrete loading dock which is an arched ceiling to the original boiler room and coal bin area below.

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

**Specific dates** 1927–28      **Builder/Architect** David M. Oltarsh

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Rahway Theatre is historically significant in at least five ways:

1. It is a typical example of a so-called "picture palace," a type of structure representing a unique and short-lived social and architectural phenomenon of the 20th century. The vast majority of the picture palaces were constructed during the last few years of the 1920s, near the end of the vaudeville era and just prior to the start of the great economic depression. They were, therefore, in a struggle for survival from the outset. As commercial entities, they also contended with the immense popularity of radio broadcasting and, later, television. By the mid-1970s, despite intensive efforts to save the best of them, a large number of these elegant structures had either been demolished or converted to other uses. The Rahway is among the last in the State of New Jersey to have survived intact as a single-auditorium structure.
2. The Rahway functioned also as a bonafide vaudeville theatre during its first few years and therefore ranks as one of the last surviving theatres in that category as well. Until three years ago, it still had the main vaudeville backdrop suspended in its flyloft, and it has the five dressing rooms that characterize most vaudeville theatres (Vaudeville shows traditionally consisted of five acts).
3. The Rahway's ornate interior is an increasingly rare example of the virtually lost art of decorative plaster, a craft that reached its pinnacle in the era of the picture palace. There is today, only a handful of these uniquely crafted interiors surviving in New Jersey.
4. The engineer/architect who designed the Rahway Theatre, David M. Oltarsh, is credited with the design of a number of significant structures, most of them in New York City. Sometime prior to 1928, he had constructed three of New York's (then) tallest buildings: the 40-story Delmonico (or Ruppert) Building at 44th Street and 5th Avenue, the 41-story structure at 50 Broadway, and the 40-story building at Court and Montague Streets in Brooklyn. (The latter was, at the time, the tallest structure in Brooklyn Borough). According to the New York Historical Society, Oltarsh also designed (and/or engineered) the Hotel Taft in Manhattan, the Copley Plaza apartments in Brooklyn, and several other theatres. The Rahway Theatre, therefore, stands as an example of the work of a noteworthy architect.



# 9. Major Bibliographical References

Encore For A Worthy Performer, by Dan Costigan, 1984

Privately Printed.

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property 1/2 acre

Quadrangle name Perth Amboy

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A 

1	8	5	6	1	1	2	0	4	4	9	5	5	4	0
Zone			Easting				Northing							

B 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

C 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

D 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

E 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

F 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

G 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

H 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

Verbal boundary description and justification

See continuation sheet.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries NA

state code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Alan P. Hurley, Vice-President

organization Rahway Landmarks, Inc.

date March 1, 1985

street & number PO Box 755D

telephone 201-738-7769

city or town Rahway

state New Jersey 07065

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer signature

*Allen A. Semple*

title Assistant Commissioner for Natural Resources

date 6/24/86

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

*for Melvyn Byers*  
Keeper of the National Register

Entered in the  
National Register

date 8-13-86

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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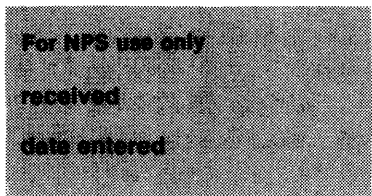
Item number 8

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5. The Rahway Theatre contains an authentic, workable Wurlitzer pipe organ originally installed to accompany silent films. These organs - generically called "theatre organs" or "cinema organs" - were a special breed of musical instrument intended as one-person substitutes for entire orchestras and including organist-actuated sound effects. Like the picture palaces that housed them, they were a short-lived phenomenon.

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Geographical Data

All those premises situated in the City of Rahway, County of Union, State of New Jersey, at the corner of Irving Street, and Central Avenue, known as the Rahway Theatre Building, more particularly described as follows:

BEGINNING at the corner formed by the intersection of the southerly line of Central Avenue with the easterly line of Irving Street; thence running (1) along said line of Central Avenue north seventy-one degrees three minutes thirty seconds east one hundred forty-four feet and four hundredths of a foot to a point; thence (2) south eighteen degrees fifty-five minutes east one hundred twenty-nine feet and forty-one one hundredths of a foot to a point; thence (3) south seventy degrees thirty-eight minutes thirty seconds west seventy-one feet to a point; thence (4) north nineteen degrees twenty-three minutes west twenty-three feet and twenty-three hundredths of a foot to a point; thence (5) south seventy-four degrees west eighty-seven feet and seventy-two hundredths of a foot to the said easterly line of Irving Street; thence (6) along the line of Irving Street north twelve degrees twenty-one minutes west ninety-three feet and eighty-six hundredths of a foot to an angle in said line of Irving Street; thence (7) still along said Irving Street north five degrees thirty-one minutes east nine feet and eighty-two hundredths of a foot to the southerly line of Central Avenue, the point and place of BEGINNING.

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Rahway # 2013  
Prepared by  
Department of Engineering and Planning

