

PH0352802

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

DATA SHEET

FOR NPS USE ONLY  
RECEIVED APR 28 1976  
DATE ENTERED JUL 19 1976

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

\*\* Saenger Theatre  
AND/OR COMMON

LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

118 South Palafox Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Pensacola

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF

First

STATE

Florida

CODE

12

COUNTY

Escambia

CODE

033

CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

DISTRICT

PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

AGRICULTURE

MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

UNOCCUPIED

COMMERCIAL

PARK

STRUCTURE

BOTH

WORK IN PROGRESS

EDUCATIONAL

PRIVATE RESIDENCE

SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

ENTERTAINMENT

RELIGIOUS

OBJECT

IN PROCESS

YES: RESTRICTED

GOVERNMENT

SCIENTIFIC

BEING CONSIDERED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

INDUSTRIAL

TRANSPORTATION

NO

MILITARY

OTHER: vacant;

OWNER OF PROPERTY

to be public performing arts center

NAME

City of Pensacola

STREET & NUMBER

P.O. Box 12910

CITY, TOWN

Pensacola

VICINITY OF

STATE

Florida

LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Escambia County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

South Palafox Street

CITY, TOWN

Pensacola

STATE

Florida

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

N/A

DATE

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Saenger Theatre located at 118 South Palafox Street is situated on all of Lot 172 and Lot 173 and the south 47 feet of the north 70 feet of Lot 174 in Block 25 of the Old City Tract in Pensacola (Escambia County Deed Book 140, p. 133). The theatre building is in the Spanish Baroque style. In 1924, the C. H. Turner Construction Company began work on the brick building, and the formal grand opening occurred on April 2, 1925 (Pensacola Journal, March 29, 1925, Saenger Theatre Section). Emile Weil, a well-known New Orleans architect who also designed the Saenger Theatres in Mobile, New Orleans and Shreveport, was the architect for this building (Collin B. Hamer, Jr. to Linda Ellsworth, April 17, 1975; Pensacola Journal, March 29, 1925, Saenger Theatre Section).

When the theatre opened, the local newspaper proclaimed the new Saenger to be "one of the four finest theaters in the South" (Pensacola Journal, March 29, 1925, Saenger Theatre Section). A special edition to the Pensacola Journal carried the following complete description of the new attraction:

The new Saenger theater is the largest of all the Saenger houses having main floor and one balcony seating arrangement with a total of 2,250 seats. Entrance to the theater proper is from a lobby on Palafox Street 24 feet wide and 90 feet long with a central entrance lobby nearly 40 feet high, with an attractive marquise covering the sidewalk as a protection to the public and a development for the electrical display which is most striking.

In the lobby the ticket booth is located centrally to permit the handling of the crowds in the most expeditious manner and with the large lobby frames fixed at definite spots, the displays prove most attractive and do not have the effect of a jumbled appearance so usual to many entrances. The floor is of Spanish tile designed in many colors and the wall tones and ceiling likewise carried out in period detail with marble wainscot, beam ceiling, ornamental plastering and abundant lighting effect.

From the lobby, which broadens at the three entrances to the inner foyer, congestion will be avoided and as one enters the main foyer there will be found on either side spacious grand stairways ascending to the Mezzanine promenade and lounge, and there will be direct exits at either side of the foyer leading to exterior, in fact there will be nineteen exits which should empty the building within three minutes.

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The main auditorium, under a gradual incline, is developed to insure an unobstructed and clear view of the stage from every seat and there are no columns on this floor between the outer rows of seats which type of construction is the latest in theatrical work.

On either side of the proscenium opening are two tiers of three boxes each, making a total of twelve boxes.

The promenade balcony is most spaciouly arranged for luxurious furnishings and is developed with railings over looking the entrance below to the auditorium as an added attraction, and with slight ramps the main seating of balcony is reached.

On this mezzanine, as well as on the main auditorium floor, are the managers' offices as well as the retiring and rest rooms for men and women.

The colored entrance is reached from Intendencia Street, and is entirely independent of all other entrances to the building, and a broad stairway leads up to the main seating provided for this patronage.

Above everything else in the design and treatment of this magnificent auditorium is the pure Spanish architecture highly modeled and ornament placed at proper and most desirable spot, forming, on the whole, a harmonious design with the elaboration at boxes and around proscenium openings.

With the riot of color against the plain toned wall surfaces and the mass of ornament emphasizes the effect, not alone as previously mentioned, but in the ventilating grilles of ceilings, and proscenium which will create a building that must be a pride to every native of Pensacola, as southern effects have prime consideration not only in design color but again in the complete ventilating system and cooling devices that the Saenger engineering forces have been able to design [sic].

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The electric fixtures are crystal and bronze, and with the subdued lighting effects the success of the whole is assured. (Pensacola Journal, March 29, 1925, Saenger Theater Section).

Additional articles in the supplement describe the "green velvet draperies with fringes of gold," "the green and plush velvet main curtain," "the Rosedale Imperial velvet Axminster carpet," and other aspects of the interior decoration.

The building, which cost about \$500,000 to construct (Pensacola Journal, March 29, 1925), has several other notable features. The contractor used materials from the old Pensacola Opera House when building the Saenger. The bricks for the lower part of the exterior were imported from England for the construction of the Pensacola Opera House in 1882. When the Opera House was demolished in 1917 the bricks and interior ornamental iron railing were saved. This railing which originally enclosed the dress circle was used around the lower balcony in the Saenger (Pensacola Journal, March 29, 1925). Also, the largest steel girder (70 feet long, 8 feet high, 1½ feet wide) used in a construction project in Florida until 1925 supports the balcony (1924 photograph in private collection of Mrs. W. R. Turner, Pensacola, Florida).

The building has undergone modest renovation work in the past fifty years. The south part of the frontage on Palafox Street has served as rental property and has been occupied by a dress shop and photographers (Polk's Pensacola City Directory, 1931-1962). The main entrance was changed in 1959 (Interview with Joseph Bowles). No major structural changes were made; a wood frame was constructed over the entry, but the original facade is still intact under this. The seats on the lower level of the interior have been replaced once, reducing the seating capacity slightly from its initial 2,250; however, the seats in the balcony are the originals. The balcony carpet also dates to the opening of the theatre. The box seats along the sides were removed about 1952 when Cinemascope was introduced in order to accommodate larger motion picture screens on the stage (Interview with Joseph Bowles).

Below the main level of the theatre are old dressing rooms for the chorus and stars who performed in the Saenger. An

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orchestra warm-up room is also on this level, and it leads directly to the orchestra pit. Located adjacent to the pit is the Robert Morton organ which was installed when the theatre opened and is still in excellent working condition.

# 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 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		

Architect: Emile Weil

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SPECIFIC DATES	1925	BUILDER/ARCHITECT	Builder: C. H. Turner Const. Co., Pensacola
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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Saenger Theatre in Pensacola gains its significance in two areas: its Spanish Baroque architectural style and its association with a theatre experience that has disappeared in the later twentieth century. The Saenger was originally designed to accommodate both motion pictures and live theatre performances. When it opened, the theatre, which was described as a "magnificent edifice . . . a shrine to art, music and drama" (Pensacola Journal, April 3, 1925, p. 1), employed a five-piece orchestra and an organist to accompany both film presentations and live theatrical productions. Their program regularly featured vaudeville acts, minstrel shows, musical revues, and plays, as well as the popular movies of the day. Over the years, vaudeville shows and live theatrical presentations were dropped from the theatre bill, and by the mid-1960's, as the population center moved away from the downtown area, the theatre began featuring low-budget and ethnic-oriented movies. The building still holds its original potential as a center for the performing arts, and the City of Pensacola is planning to restore it for that purpose.

The building reflects this impression of the "grand experience of the theatre" and the time period--the mid-1920's--when it was constructed through its opulent Spanish Baroque architecture. The interior is ornamented with elaborate plaster work and other decorative elements. The fact that so much of the original structure and interior decor remains enhances its value as a cultural and social artifact.



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Bowles, Joseph. Personal Interview (by Linda Ellsworth), May, 1975. Pensacola, Florida. Mr. Bowles is Manager, ABC Southeastern Theatres, Inc., Pensacola, Florida.

Escambia County. Deed Book 140, p. 133. Located in Escambia County Courthouse, Pensacola, Florida.

Hamer, Collin B., Jr., to Linda Ellsworth, April 17, 1975. Mr. Hamer is head of the Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library.

Ingalls Iron Works, Birmingham, Alabama. Blueprints, 1924. 24 sheets.

Pensacola Journal, March 29, 1925, Saenger Theatre section; April 3, 1925, p. 1.

Photograph (1924) in private collection of Mrs. W. R. Turner, Pensacola, Florida.

Polk's Pensacola City Directory, 1931, 1934, 1938, 1942, 1946, 1952, 1956, 1962. Jacksonville, Florida: R. L. Polk & Co., 1931, 1934, 1938, 1942. Richmond, Virginia: R. L. Polk & Co., 1946, 1952, 1956, 1962.