

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name American Theater

other names/site number Liberty Theater (preferred)

2. Location

street & number 50 East Main Street not for publication

city or town Walla Walla vicinity

state Washington code WA county Walla Walla code 071 zip code 99362

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Mary Reynolds 3/11/93
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation

State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper entered in the National Register

Delores Byan

Date of Action

4/29/93

Liberty Theater
Name of Property

Walla Walla Co., WA
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|
| <u>1</u> | | buildings |
| | | sites |
| | | structures |
| | | objects |
| <u>1</u> | <u>0</u> | Total |

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

Movie Theaters in WA State

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation and Culture: Theater

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce: Department Store

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th and Early 20th Century
American movements: Craftsman and
Moderne

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete
walls Brick
terra cotta
roof ceramic tile
other glass
metal

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Entertainment/Recreation

Period of Significance

1917 - 1942

Significant Dates

1917; 1928; 1939

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Osterman, Henry and Siebert, Victor (1917)

Moe, Bjarne (1939)

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 1Liberty Theater

Walla Walla, Walla Walla Co., WA

The Liberty Theater is a 1917 commercial property consisting of a lobby, auditorium, and small retail space. It is a rectangular structure occupying two city lots and fronts the south side of E. Main Street within the historic downtown commercial core of Walla Walla. The three story brick building abuts adjacent two-story properties and is distinguished within the block and the commercial core as a whole by its height and the irregular planes of its upper stories as well as by its fanciful facade. The exterior conveys much of the original stylings designed by the Walla Walla firm of Osterman and Siebert. It is an unusual expression of Craftsman style in terra cotta medium. Evidence of the 1939 renovation designed by Seattle architect Bjarne Moe include the off-set first floor entrance and Moderne characteristics applied to the property's interior. A substantial rehabilitation completed in 1991 restored the small retail space, converted the auditorium for retail use, renovated the theater management offices for retail management, and updated the snack stand in the lobby to serve espresso. Originally a 778 seat theater, the property retains many significant character defining features and meets the classification of the palace-era property type identified in the Movie Theaters of Washington MPD.

Exterior of the Property: The Craftsman styled facade dominates the street elevation. The first floor facade is reconstructed based on historic photos of the property when it was named the American. It is symmetrical in appearance. The main entrance is to the right of center and consists of two sets of double-doors. A small commercial space containing a bead shop is located to the left of center.

Above the first floor are two and one-half stories divided into two horizontal sections--the building and the roof. The roof is a mix of gable and flat forms. Visible from the street is the steep pitch side gable covered in tile. The roof terminates in a shallow boxed cornice with terra cotta consoles. Not visible from the street is the flat composition and hot tar roof spanning the area from the gable peak to the rear of the property. The building section is sheathed in a rectangular expanse of terra cotta; the major portion is recessed between two battered projecting piers capped by from facing gavels. The fenestration is symmetrical. The roof contains two small hipped gables with square glass block windows. The wide central portion of the facade features three one over one stained glass windows beneath a bracketed tile awning with a terra cotta flowerbox-like sill at their base. Above the awning is a terra cotta framed space that once contained the original theater name American. On either side are square stained glass windows with terra cotta labels shaped into grape bunches and brick, vertical joint lugsills.

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Liberty Theater

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Each of the projecting battered piers contains two windows, one above the other. The lower windows are six over six lights centered within the gable with simple sashes and brick, vertical joint lugsills. The front facing gables capping the battered piers convey the Craftsman influence. The gables are steeply pitched, flared on the ends, and adorned with carved and decorated bargeboards. Brick is employed to suggest half-timbering. The roof peak is capped by decorated and curved terra cotta cresting. Additional decorative features are mythical and patriotic. Baccus-like masks are applied above the uppermost window in each battered pier, lion heads are located beneath each of the awning brackets, and grape bunches serve as decorative labels for two windows. The terra cotta eagles are prominently perched on projections on each pier.

The first floor exterior features all new materials applied in the 1991 renovation. Removed was the deteriorated and determined dangerous Moderne designed marquee and non-historic sheathing. The renovation included replicating terra cotta piers that once appeared on the first floor as well as replicating a flat marquee above the center.

Interior of the Property: The lobby is a shallow space running the width of the theater. The entry is offset through two double doors to the right. To the left of the entry, a wide staircase leading to the balcony abuts the front facade, rising along that inner wall and turning with the encounter with the side wall of the theater. The stair rail with shaped wood hand rail consists of geometric cut glass etched panels and glass tubing held in place by bronze ornamental rosettes. 1 A non-contributing snack stand is located to the right of the entry and provided controlled access to the ticketbooth. The space beneath the stairs and to the left of the inner foyer entrance contains the electrical room, access to the basement and street, and the small retail space. The back wall of the lobby is wood paneled cut through at plate rail level with a geometric trim employing pieces of ebony. The floor is sloped up toward the auditorium entrance. The entrance into the auditorium is centered along the back wall and curves out into the lobby. Three sets of double doors are set into the curve. The doors are wood framed single lights with etched glass panels. Three of the original etched panels have been replaced with clear glass.

Originally, the doors opened onto a semicircular inner foyer which provided access to the left and right aisles at the rear of the main auditorium. The common wall between the inner foyer and auditorium was removed in the 1991 renovation. The lobby doors now open directly onto the auditorium.

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Liberty Theater

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The shape of the auditorium is rectangular with a coved ceiling. The stage area is elevated and thrusts out beyond the proscenium. On either side of and level with the stage are doors for access to backstage and alley and above the doors are louvered recesses--formerly the pipe organ lofts--where ventilation equipment is located. The balcony overhangs approximately one third of the auditorium. The plaster ceiling and its ornate trim date from Osterman's 1917 design. A shallow dome edged with a decorative plaster wreath is centered in the ceiling. A flattened inverted cone lighting fixture is suspended from the center of the dome. Distinguishing the ceiling from the walls is a stepped and dentiled cornice. The ceiling above the balcony is coved but lacking detail. An ornamented plaster rib separates the two. Above the proscenium is a simulated banner, a detailing from the 1917 design. The 1928 rehab removed the eagle with outstretched wings. The decorative treatment on either side of the proscenium was removed in recent years to accommodate a larger screen mounted outside rather than within the stage.

The mezzanine level at the top of the stairs is an irregular space which provides access to the balcony, bathrooms, and management offices. The utilitarian management offices consist of two rooms and a half bath located directly above the main entrance. The tiled bathroom facilities and fixtures are unchanged from the 1939 rehab. The ladies facilities also provide a lounge, its "ceiling is in a paneled effect. . . . One entire length of the room directly opposite the door, is given over to a central, three-way full length mirror, flanked on either side by identical built-in powder tables, mirrored above. . . . The wood finish . . . is paldao with gumwood trim. Tubular lighting effects [are located] at either side of the mirror." 2

The projection booth is accessed from the topmost portion of the balcony. Some of the technological innovations installed in the 1939 rehab still remain such as the central control panel, the automatic film rewinder, acoustical ceiling, and glass brick windows. 3

Special design treatments from the 1939 rehab which strongly convey the Moderne influence and accommodate multi-theater management have been retained. The lighting plan includes recessed, spot, and decorative tubular. The indirect lighting provided throughout the theater contributes the sweeping lines associated to Moderne influences. The fixtures are geometric, often suspended within a curved or arched recess and solid on the bottom to facilitate upward reflection and create indirect light. 4 The lobby features indirect ceiling lighting; arched channels from which half cylinder fixtures are suspended cut a path across

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the ceiling from main entrance to the auditorium entrance. Access from the mezzanine through a curving hallway to the balcony is similarly lighted. The main auditorium indirect lighting is provided from half sphere fixtures suspended within shallow ceiling domes. Additional decorative lighting is provided by the pair of geometric sconces located within the main auditorium on the side walls near the proscenium. The exit light fixtures are stragically placed, their original etched glass exit signs which pick up the light were lost over the years however the 1991 renovation replicated the missing glass. 5 Spots indicate the usherette stations in the lobby and crucial traffic points. Additional design treatments that are retained from the 1939 rehab are the curving exit stairs on either sided of the proscenium--retained under the flooring installed in 1991--and in certain areas of the theater the red and gold patterned carpet designed by Seattle decorator Carl Berg.

The 1991 renovation converted the main auditorium into a retail space with access into the adjacent retail building. Seating was removed and a floor was installed at stage level running the length of the auditorium. The deteriorated blue damask applied to the walls in the 1939 rehab was removed 6. An arched opening was created in the east wall of the auditorium. Partitions were installed for storage and dressing rooms beneath the balcony. Several rows of "Rockefeller Loges" dating from the 1939 rehab were retained in the balcony 7. A new wall was erected in the balcony spanning the width of the auditorium and decreasing the size of the balcony by one half. And, the management offices on the mezzanine level were renovated for retail office space. Flooring, wall installation, and the opening into the adjacent building are reversible.

1. Walla Walla Union Bulletin, 6 April 1939, p. 10, col. 1.
2. Ibid, p. 6, col. 3 & 4.
3. Ibid, p. 4, col. 1.
4. Ibid, p. 5, col. 1.
5. Ibid, p. 5, col. 2 & 3.
6. Ibid, p. 4, col. 2 & 3.
7. Ibid, p. 7, col. 1, p. 10, col. 7.

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Walla Walla, Walla Walla Co., WA

The Liberty Theater is a notable landmark among Walla Walla's downtown properties, visually prominent because of its location and distinctive style as well as significant due to its enduring association with entertainment. Located amid the historic core of Walla Walla, the Liberty is the sole remaining structure representative of the role the once numerous vaudeville and movie houses played in the cultural development of the city. Its design embodies the characteristics of the palace-era property type identified in the Movie Theaters of Washington MPD. Completed in 1917, it is an outstanding example of the work of locally prominent architect Henry Osterman and his partner Victor Siebert. Osterman designed a fanciful structure expressing Craftsman characteristics. The Moderne influence on the interior is the result of a significant rehabilitation of the structure which occurred in 1939. The design is the work of Seattle architect Bjarne Moe executed by O. D. Keen, a local general contractor. The rehabilitation also included equipment to facilitate multi-theater management and innovations in lighting, heating and ventilation, and seating. In later years, the theater lay vacant and deteriorated through neglect of routine maintenance and removal of projection equipment and screen. A 1991 renovation stabilized the structure--repairing and replacing deteriorated features--and converted it to retail use.

Historical Background: During the early 1900s, theaters for live and celluloid entertainment were numerous in Walla Walla. In 1917 the theater now known as the Liberty was completed. Named the American, it was touted in newspaper ads by its manager A. W. Eiler as a "playhouse that is second to none [in Walla Walla]. The most modern conveniences for comfort and safety of patrons." 1 Since the Iroquois fire in Chicago in 1904, across the nation fire prevention became a paramount consideration when constructing new theaters. In Walla Walla, the Keylor Grand (1905), the Liberty (1915) later named the Capitol, and the American (1917) later named the Liberty emphasized public safety, comfort, and healthy atmospheres in their advertisements. During the 1920s as film entertainment grew in popularity and "talkies" became a reality, theaters were remodelled to accommodate the equipment. In Walla Walla, the Keylor Grand remained the showplace for live talent. The remaining theaters shuffled their focus to film with live acts serving as supplemental fare. For the American Theater, the change took place in 1926-1928. 2 New owner Frederick Mercy, recognized theater management entrepreneur from Yakima, subjected the theater to its first major rehabilitation to further enhance the experience of "movies" and changed the name to the Liberty. 3

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Liberty Theater

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Area of Significance--Entertainment: The Liberty Theater is the sole remaining intact structure which represents the importance of film and live entertainment to the inhabitants of Walla Walla. Since its construction in 1917 until its closure in the 1980s, the theater has provided the community with a facility to experience a myriad of entertainment.

In 1940, of the three theaters in Walla Walla, the Liberty was the largest and best equipped. All owned and operated by the Mercy Corporation, the Liberty housed the staff and an elaborate intercom and telephone system for the coordinated management of all. Originally the theater was one of a number of theaters with similar offerings, a mix of live acts and silent movies. Competition for patrons is evident in the advertisements, the programs, and design of the structures. To draw its share of the crowd, the then named American provided an atmosphere of opulence, patriotism, and unique auditory experience from its might Wurlitzer played by accomplished theater pipe organist Carl Gensel and later Jack Wright. The theater sustained several major rehabilitations through the years to keep pace and in most instances set the pace for the competition to provide patrons with quality entertainment. In 1928, the first talkies in Walla Walla were featured at the newly named and remodeled Liberty. A significant rehabilitation in 1939 and the fanfare associated with the reopening highlight the significance of the structure to the community. 4 In addition, the rehabilitation provided Walla Walla with a theater incorporating the latest in technological innovations a majority of which resulted in enhancing the patron's enjoyment. Lighting techniques provided a surreal atmosphere, washing the walls, coved ceilings, and decorative features in a florescent glow of an indeterminate source. 5 Loge seating through with the generous "Rockefeller Loge" style in the front portion of the balcony insured the audience the most comfortable theater seating of the day. 6 Presentation techniques further enhanced the patron's experience. Mechanizing the sequence of dimming lights, opening and raising the curtains, and starting the film eliminated variable caused by different operators and allowed for a more complex transition, further heightening a movie-going experience. 7

Area of Significance--Architecture: The property is an unusual and fanciful example of Craftsman architecture applied to a theater. The design, unique among Washington Theaters, is the work of locally prominent architect Henry Osterman and his partner Victor Siebert. It also represents an example of Moderne interior stylistic treatment frequently applied to theaters in the late 1930s.

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Liberty Theater

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The architect for many of the prominent properties in developing Walla Walla was Henry Osterman. Formerly from Germany where he studied architecture in Dusseldorf, Osterman relocated to Walla Walla and by 1899 opened his own architectural firm. His partnership with former apprentice Victor Siebert began in 1913 and many historic properties still in use today attribute their design to Osterman or the firm. However, the Craftsman influence employed in the Liberty Theater differs considerably from the style of other commercial and public structures credited solely to Osterman—styles which generally connote Northern European characteristics.

Osterman designed a theater facade that provoked interest and intrigue and the promise of further surprises within. The Craftsman influence is expressed in the manipulation of the terra cotta medium which encases battered projecting piers, flared gable ends, a decorative windowbox, bargeboards, and brackets. The fanciful interpretation includes a suggestion of half-timbering with decorative brick. Osterman further embellished the terra cotta with mythical elements and symbols of patriotism to emphasize the playhouse function of the structure and the name and theme of the theater.

The 1939 Moderne influenced interior were the result of a design by Seattle architect Bjarne Moe. The curvilinear style is conveyed throughout the structure from the arrangement of space to the numerous appointments. The use of lighting and lighting fixtures also reinforces the style compelling the eye and form of the patron to follow the path of design.

The Liberty meets both the general movie theater registration requirements and the palace-era property type registration requirements outlined in the Movie Theaters of Washington MPD. The Liberty successfully conveys its historic character in both physical and associative ways as a structure built to stimulate patronage for the entertainment it housed. It retains integrity of location, setting, scale, massing, exterior cladding and trim. The specific characteristics which distinguish it as a palace-era property type are also maintained: a theater as part of a commercial complex, the design treatment of the theater as a whole—interior and exterior, its prominent facade, and its mix of styles applied to the design to provide a unique environment.

The interior retains integrity including configuration of space into lobby, auditorium, mezzanine, and balcony; the decorative applications to the proscenium and auditorium ceiling; and use of lobby and office spaces.

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Liberty Theater

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Alterations to the interior include impacts to seating, flooring, wall treatments, and use. Although not currently used as a theater, conversion to a retail facility is compatible. The public still utilizes the main entrance, passes by the snack stand which now dispenses espresso, and enters the auditorium from the rear.

1. Walla Walla Union Bulletin, 2 September 1917, p. 1, col. 1-7.
2. Ibid, 25 March 1928, p. 4, col. 1-7.
3. Ibid, 27 March 1928, p. 2, col. 7.
4. Ibid, 7 April 1939, p. 1, col. 3 & 4.
5. Ibid, 6 April 1939, p. 5, col. 1.
6. Ibid, 6 April 1939, p. 7, col. 1.
7. Ibid, 6 April 1939, p. 10, col. 4.

Bibliography:

Bennett, Robert A. A Town Built to be a City 1900-1919. Walla Walla, WA: Pioneer Press, 1980.

----- A Nice Place to Raise a Family 1920-1949. Walla Walla, WA: Pioneer Press, 1980-82.

Naylor, David. American Picture Palaces: the Architecture of Fantasy. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981.

Toll, Robert C. On With the Show: the First Century of Show Business in America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
Walla Walla Union Bulletin. 1917, 1928, 1939.

Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated property is described Lots 2-3, Block 1, Plat of Walla Walla, WA.

Boundary Justification: The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the American/Liberty Theater.