

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

MAY 30 1975

DATE ENTERED

JUN 30 1975

**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

Paramount Theatre

AND/OR COMMON

The Paramount Arts Center

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

1304 Winchester Avenue

___ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Ashland

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Seventh

STATE

Kentucky

___ VICINITY OF

CODE

021

COUNTY

Boyd

CODE

019

3 CLASSIFICATION**CATEGORY**
 ___DISTRICT
 BUILDING(S)
 ___STRUCTURE
 ___SITE
 ___OBJECT
OWNERSHIP
 ___PUBLIC
 PRIVATE
 ___BOTH
PUBLIC ACQUISITION
 ___IN PROCESS
 ___BEING CONSIDERED
STATUS
 OCCUPIED
 ___UNOCCUPIED
 ___WORK IN PROGRESS
ACCESSIBLE
 YES: RESTRICTED
 ___YES: UNRESTRICTED
 ___NO
PRESENT USE
 ___AGRICULTURE
 ___COMMERCIAL
 EDUCATIONAL
 ENTERTAINMENT
 ___GOVERNMENT
 ___INDUSTRIAL
 ___MILITARY
 ___MUSEUM
 ___PARK
 ___PRIVATE RESIDENCE
 ___RELIGIOUS
 ___SCIENTIFIC
 ___TRANSPORTATION
 ___OTHER:
4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Paramount Arts Center

STREET & NUMBER

1304 Winchester Avenue

CITY, TOWN

Ashland

___ VICINITY OF

STATE

Kentucky

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION
 COURTHOUSE,
 REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Boyd County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Catlettsburg

STATE

Kentucky

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Survey of Historic Sites in Kentucky (Supplement)

DATE

1974

___ FEDERAL STATE ___ COUNTY ___ LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Kentucky Heritage Commission

CITY, TOWN

Frankfort

STATE

Kentucky

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		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Paramount Theatre is advantageously located on Winchester Avenue at 13th, in the center of downtown Ashland. Winchester is the main east-west thoroughfare, parallel to the Ohio River; 13th runs north-south and links with both the bridge across the River and with the main route running southwest to Lexington. The theatre has thus shared the vicissitudes of "Downtown."

The exterior of the theater is severe and monumental, almost like a security vault for the lavish decor within. The upper portion of the facade, above the open street-level with its entrance to the theater and shopfronts (now much altered), is not only completely closed, but has shallow "buttresses" running up the buff-colored brick surface. Vertical striations on the straight coping suggest crenellations. Panels at the lower sides of the central four bays are subtly diapered. Ribbed masonry panels near the tops of the buttresses provide the only other relief on the surface. The large marquee and vertical signboard, dotted with electric lights in Neo-Baroque scrolls, are all the more dramatic against such an austere setting.

The interior of the auditorium is a splendid example of late Art Deco or Moderne, in its most cubist phase. Even the extensive floral motifs are stylized into geometric bands and treated like surface ornament. The interior is dominated by the unusually wide proscenium arch, presumably wide enough to allow for the innovative screening techniques for which the theatre was designed. The ceiling is almost flat, with a slight peak running down the center and stepped panels at the ends of the proscenium, which speed the descent toward the sides. Exits set in slanted corner bays flank the stage. The auditorium is actually almost twice as long as it is wide. However, after passing through the asymmetrically placed lobby into the foyer, one proceeds up one of four half-flights of stairs and arrives virtually at the center of the length of the hall, with the proscenium therefore relatively close before one. The shallowly-curved balcony is reached up another half-flight toward the rear.

Most of the verticals in the auditorium are reeded, evoking the effect of classical columns. The ceiling has large panels framed by floral bands and half-diamond borders pointing inward. An octagonal panel filled with linear arabesque is framed with a dark band from which spikes radiate toward the corners. Wavy parallel bands divide the four quadrants.

Somewhat in contrast to the angularity and restraint of the remainder of the decor are several panels on the side walls of the auditorium, painted in strong outline on what appears to be tooled leather. Figures from commedia dell'arte such as Pierrot and Columbine (photo 4), in would-be 18th-century costume, evoke the bittersweet world of the Rococo.

The climax of the whole composition, of course, is the proscenium arch. The overall effect is of an eagle with spread wings on a Northwest American Indian totem. On closer inspection, however, this motif, which fits conveniently under the slant of the ceiling and the downward steps of the longitudinal beams, proves to be essentially floral. In the center is a large

(continued)

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES

1931

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Paramount Theatre building is a rare example of theater design from the "golden age" of motion pictures, being one of three theaters built in the United States strictly for the showing of a particular type of wide film, without facilities for live performances. Although the architect and engineers are unknown -- perhaps anonymous designers in the professional service of the sponsors, Paramount Publix Corporation--the structure, layout, and embellishment of the building are a successful achievement in late Art Deco or Moderne theater design. The whole seems particularly suited to a community of considerable wealth, which suffered during the depths of the Depression in the early 1930s, but also maintained a restrained and businesslike demeanor.

The city of Ashland is located on the Ohio River at the junction of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. The city was laid out in 1854 after prosperity had been assured by means of routing of the new Lexington & Big Sandy Railroad through the modest, previously-existing settlement. The town, named for the home of Henry Clay in Lexington, was from the first an outlet for northeastern Kentucky produce and industry, originally pig-iron. Soon industry located in Ashland itself and the city prospered in the late 19th century as Eastern Kentucky's immense natural resources were opened up to modern technology. After World War I, moreover the location of Arco (the American Rolling Mill Company) launched the city on a great boom. The establishment in 1924 of the locally-based Ashland Oil & Refining Company--today the second-largest employer in the area--contributed to the wave of prosperity. "Ashland's population, which had been less than 15,000 in 1920, jumped to 29,000 in a little more than five years. Hastily built-up suburbs were annexed by the city, new schools were built, and, to top it all, Ashland High School's Tomcat basketball team of 1928 won the national high school championship by defeating Canton, Illinois, 15 to 10." ("A History of Ashland," 1954)

After the "Roaring Twenties," Ashland's growth was dampened by the Depression of the '30s, and the city's population showed little increase from 1930 to 1940. The Depression years were enlivened, however, by the erection of the Paramount Theatre just as the decline began. Its success was perhaps partially assured by the destruction by fire of the old Opera House on January 29, 1931, just seven months before the opening of the new movie palace on September 5, 1931.

Although the spectacular boom in Ashland in the '20s may have made still more painful the contrast of the succeeding decade before the Second World War, the city in fact suffered less than many other communities. Nevertheless, it was in the context of this contrast that the

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Paramount Theatre

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

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Although combining elements evocative of the American Indian, Baroque, Rococo, and Neo-classical, the overall effect is true to the period of the late '20s and early '30s. The surface shimmers, but there is a rigorous underlying structure and order that may ultimately owe a debt to such austere models of the Moderne movement as Van de Velde's and Perret's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris of 1910-13.

There are a number of Art deco details throughout the theater building, some of them built in and others part of an integrated scheme of furnishings, such as the extremely handsome matched dressing table-shelf and stool (photo 10; the mirror, although sharing a similar design vocabulary, does not seem to belong to the same set). A good deal of imagination was employed in the use of related design motifs and materials: particularly in the pierced metal chandelier in the outer lobby (photo 5), with its stars and crescent moons, and the frosted glass bowls of the chandelier in the inner lobby (photo 8), which evokes, rather than imitates, the floral elements so vigorously flattened in the radiator grill of the outer lobby (photo 6). The classical egg-and-dart motif is subtly outlined on the iron newel post of the outer lobby (photo 7); the American Indian theme is suggested in its most obvious yet effectively simple form in the metal arrow that sustains the light fixture on the ceiling of the lounge (photo 11). (The water fountain on the wall of the inner lobby, photo 9, seems a standardized feature not in keeping with the remainder of the decor, if indeed it is original.)

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Paramount Theatre

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Paramount Theatre must have gained its truly paramount role in the life of the community.

The excitement attending the opening, as well as several of the technical features that made the building and projection process itself innovative, are conveyed in a series of short articles published in the Ashland Daily Independent on September 3, 1931, under the full-width front-page headline, "New Paramount Theatre Opens Next Saturday." Under the smaller headline, "Opening of Paramount Is In Keeping With City's Progress," Henry L. Davidson, District Manager for the Paramount Publix Corporation, sponsors of the theater, announced that "In presenting the new Paramount to the people of Ashland and vicinity next Saturday we feel that we have accomplished a mission in keeping with the spirit of progressiveness shown in the state."

The visual attributes of the theater were acclaimed in an article entitled, "People of Tri-State Section to View Ashland's Elaborate New Palace at 13th and Winchester": "If it's beauty you want in your theatre, here it is. In days gone by, residents showed their out-of-town guests their post office, city hall and other public buildings, but now it is their theatres. Since the advent of the super-show house, the moving palace has taken the place of all other public buildings in the estimation of the residents."

Less egregious, perhaps, but equally significant for the initial success of the theater were the technical achievements that backed up its glamorous appointments. Another article announced: "New Paramount One of The First Theatres Built Especially For The Presentation of 'Talkies'." Furthermore, readers were informed: "Projection Booth in The New Theatre of The Latest Type." Finally, not only were the physical and technical aspects of the experience considered, but also the service: "Trained Ushers Ready to Serve."

In spite of the abandonment of the elaborate project equipment shortly after the opening, the Paramount Theatre remained the center of Ashland's entertainment (except for sports) until well into the 1960s, when suburban development threatened its continued existence. Since 1970 a group of public-spirited citizens has sought the resurrection of the building as a cultural center, no longer limited to the movies. Plans are underway for discreet modification of the auditorium, with restoration of the lower facade, lobby, and foyer, in order to permit diversified uses and to allow the structure to become again the focal point of community life that it once was.

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The Paramount Theatre in Ashland is, as far as is known, the outstanding example of the Art Deco or Moderne architectural style in Kentucky. It is believed that very few buildings were designed and/or constructed in Kentucky during that period and fashion, partly as a result of a general lack of prosperity and also because of the limited opportunities for the urban development that might lend itself to such a sophisticated approach to design (it should be noted that the Paramount Theatre was apparently designed from the Hollywood offices of the Paramount Publix Corporation, not in Kentucky). Little was built in any advanced or "modern" style in Kentucky between the First and Second World Wars; most domestic and institutional architecture was definitely "traditional" in character, and even the few examples of a less historic-minded approach to design were highly tentative and modest, as is witnessed by the 1940 issue of Pencil Points on the occasion of the meeting of the American Institute of Architects in Louisville, Kentucky, when local architects put forward their best foot--shod primarily in 18th-century buckled shoes. Perhaps the conservative nature of the exterior of the Paramount Theatre in Ashland is a reflection of this reticence, at least on the visible street facade, although it makes all the more dramatic the contrast of the chic and thoroughly realized interior, which is probably one of the best-preserved of its type in the country.

Also of significance--possibly at the national level--is the technological innovation of the projection process for which the theatre was originally designed. This process, of which only three are believed to have been installed in the country, was described at some length in the Ashland Daily Independent (September 3, 1931) at the occasion of the opening of the theatre:

New Paramount One of the First Theatres Built Especially for the Presentation of "Talkies"

In the new Paramount opening next Saturday evening, Ashland boasts one of the first theatres in the United States built especially for talking pictures. When plans for the new theatre were drawn up, sound experts were called into consultation. A mass of acoustical data gathered from all parts of the world since the first sound picture was shown over forty years ago, was carefully examined, obscure [sic] problems in the transference of sound waves were plotted and solved. The results of this painstaking research are embodied within the walls of the new Paramount.

From any seat in the house, the voice of one's favorite movie star will come with a new clarity. Distinct reproduction is finally achieved and the results

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are astonishing. All echos and distortion due to structural causes are eliminated and in addition each bit of furniture is planned to aid in the performance.

Projection Booth in the New Theatre of the Latest Type

As is to be expected every new year brings new improvements in the mechanical field. Such is the case of the equipment in the new Paramount Theatre's projection booth. A few illustrations are as follows. Whereas only a few years ago film was measured by hand in order to determine the length of shows, now we find an automatic film footage meter which rewinds and measures film simultaneously. It is an ingenious machine which stops automatically when the end of the film has been measured.

Another highly interesting feature is the automatic curtain control. This arrangement enables the operators to control curtain closing at the end of the performance, by merely pressing a button which automatically closes and opens the draw curtains as desired. This feature is to be found in only a very few theatres in the United States.

A combination switch in the booth makes it possible for the operators to make many colored light combinations on the screen. These effects greatly enhance and add to the enjoyment of the program.

Finally, the local significance of the theatre cannot be overemphasized: it has been the central (non-athletic) institution of the community for many years, and bids fair to become so again, if the sympathetic adaptation now under way can be fully implemented.

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AND/OR COMMON

The Paramount Arts Center

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___ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Ashland

___ VICINITY OF

Seventh

STATE

CODE

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021

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6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

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1974

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SURVEY RECORDS

Kentucky Heritage Commission

CITY, TOWN

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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 _____
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Somewhat in contrast to the angularity and restraint of the remainder of the decor are several panels on the side walls of the auditorium, painted in strong outline on what appears to be tooled leather. Figures from commedia dell'arte such as Pierrot and Columbine (photo 4), in would-be 18th-century costume, evoke the bittersweet world of the Rococo.

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<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
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Paramount Theatre

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Paramount Theatre must have gained its truly paramount role in the life of the community.

The excitement attending the opening, as well as several of the technical features that made the building and projection process itself innovative, are conveyed in a series of short articles published in the Ashland Daily Independent on September 3, 1931, under the full-width front-page headline, "New Paramount Theatre Opens Next Saturday." Under the smaller headline, "Opening of Paramount Is In Keeping With City's Progress," Henry L. Davidson, District Manager for the Paramount Publix Corporation, sponsors of the theater, announced that "In presenting the new Paramount to the people of Ashland and vicinity next Saturday we feel that we have accomplished a mission in keeping with the spirit of progressiveness shown in the state."

The visual attributes of the theater were acclaimed in an article entitled, "People of Tri-State Section to View Ashland's Elaborate New Palace at 13th and Winchester": "If it's beauty you want in your theatre, here it is. In days gone by, residents showed their out-of-town guests their post office, city hall and other public buildings, but now it is their theatres. Since the advent of the super-show house, the moving palace has taken the place of all other public buildings in the estimation of the residents."

Less egregious, perhaps, but equally significant for the initial success of the theater were the technical achievements that backed up its glamorous appointments. Another article announced: "New Paramount One of The First Theatres Built Especially For The Presentation of 'Talkies'." Furthermore, readers were informed: "Projection Booth in The New Theatre of The Latest Type." Finally, not only were the physical and technical aspects of the experience considered, but also the service: "Trained Ushers Ready to Serve."

In spite of the abandonment of the elaborate project equipment shortly after the opening, the Paramount Theatre remained the center of Ashland's entertainment (except for sports) until well into the 1960s, when suburban development threatened its continued existence. Since 1970 a group of public-spirited citizens has sought the resurrection of the building as a cultural center, no longer limited to the movies. Plans are underway for discreet modification of the auditorium, with restoration of the lower facade, lobby, and foyer, in order to permit diversified uses and to allow the structure to become again the focal point of community life that it once was.

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The Paramount Theatre in Ashland is, as far as is known, the outstanding example of the Art Deco or Moderne architectural style in Kentucky. It is believed that very few buildings were designed and/or constructed in Kentucky during that period and fashion, partly as a result of a general lack of prosperity and also because of the limited opportunities for the urban development that might lend itself to such a sophisticated approach to design (it should be noted that the Paramount Theatre was apparently designed from the Hollywood offices of the Paramount Publix Corporation, not in Kentucky). Little was built in any advanced or "modern" style in Kentucky between the First and Second World Wars; most domestic and institutional architecture was definitely "traditional" in character, and even the few examples of a less historic-minded approach to design were highly tentative and modest, as is witnessed by the 1940 issue of Pencil Points on the occasion of the meeting of the American Institute of Architects in Louisville, Kentucky, when local architects put forward their best foot--shod primarily in 18th-century buckled shoes. Perhaps the conservative nature of the exterior of the Paramount Theatre in Ashland is a reflection of this reticence, at least on the visible street facade, although it makes all the more dramatic the contrast of the chic and thoroughly realized interior, which is probably one of the best-preserved of its type in the country.

Also of significance--possibly at the national level--is the technological innovation of the projection process for which the theatre was originally designed. This process, of which only three are believed to have been installed in the country, was described at some length in the Ashland Daily Independent (September 3, 1931) at the occasion of the opening of the theatre:

New Paramount One of the First Theatres Built Especially for the Presentation of "Talkies"

In the new Paramount opening next Saturday evening, Ashland boasts one of the first theatres in the United States built especially for talking pictures. When plans for the new theatre were drawn up, sound experts were called into consultation. A mass of acoustical data gathered from all parts of the world since the first sound picture was shown over forty years ago, was carefully examined, obscure [sic] problems in the transference of sound waves were plotted and solved. The results of this painstaking research are embodied within the walls of the new Paramount.

From any seat in the house, the voice of one's favorite movie star will come with a new clarity. Distinct reproduction is finally achieved and the results

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are astonishing. All echos and distortion due to structural causes are eliminated and in addition each bit of furniture is planned to aid in the performance.

Projection Booth in the New Theatre of the Latest Type

As is to be expected every new year brings new improvements in the mechanical field. Such is the case of the equipment in the new Paramount Theatre's projection booth. A few illustrations are as follows. Whereas only a few years ago film was measured by hand in order to determine the length of shows, now we find an automatic film footage meter which rewinds and measures film simultaneously. It is an ingenious machine which stops automatically when the end of the film has been measured.

Another highly interesting feature is the automatic curtain control. This arrangement enables the operators to control curtain closing at the end of the performance, by merely pressing a button which automatically closes and opens the draw curtains as desired. This feature is to be found in only a very few theatres in the United States.

A combination switch in the booth makes it possible for the operators to make many colored light combinations on the screen. These effects greatly enhance and add to the enjoyment of the program.

Finally, the local significance of the theatre cannot be overemphasized: it has been the central (non-athletic) institution of the community for many years, and bids fair to become so again, if the sympathetic adaptation now under way can be fully implemented.