

ALABAMA THEATRE  
1811 Third Avenue, North  
Birmingham  
Jefferson County  
Alabama

HABS No. AL-982

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*37-BIRM, 37-*

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ALABAMA THEATRE

HABS No. AL-982

- Location: 1811 Third Avenue, North, between Eighteenth and Nineteenth streets, Jefferson County, Birmingham, Alabama.
- Present Owner: Birmingham Landmarks, Inc., a private non-profit organization.
- Present Use: Theatre for both film and the performing arts.
- Significance: The Alabama Theatre, designed by Chicago architects Graven & Mayger, was erected in 1927 by Paramount's Publix Theatre chain as its flagship theatre for the southeastern region of the United States, and is among the finest theatres of the period in the southeast. The theatre is a composite of Spanish Renaissance and Baroque details; as seen in the exterior details, it appears to have been modeled after a Spanish villa.<sup>1</sup> The interior of the theater, however, includes elements of a variety of styles, as was typical of the whimsical nature of Movie Palaces built during the pre-Depression hey-day. Illustrative of this is the tremendous variety of architectural elements found throughout the theatre, and in the different styled lounges: the ladies Adamesque and Chinese tearoom lounges, and the gentlemen's (Tudor) College and Hunting rooms. Originally seating 2,500, it accommodated both live theatre, and movieplays accompanied by the Wurlitzer Organ.
- The Alabama Theatre was the crown jewel of the Birmingham Theatre district (a National Register district). At one time, these streets were lined with large theaters featuring everything from vaudeville to performing arts, nickelodeons to large first-run movie palaces. Hugh marquees lit the streets at night and billboards advertised the current attractions. The "Alabama" is the only theater still operating today; only one other still stands.<sup>2</sup>
- Historian: Terra Klugh, HABS, Summer 1996.

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<sup>1</sup>John Musgrove, Sir Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture (London: Butterworth's, 1987), 832, 495.

<sup>2</sup> Across the street is the Lyric Theater. Although also owned by Birmingham Landmarks, Inc. it is vacant and in a deteriorated state, waiting the funds necessary to its restoration.

## PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1927. The original proposed drawings were dated October 28, 1926. However, factors such as the unavailability of needed property, and a change in ownership resulted in revisions to the plans, dated April 9, 1927 the same day construction began. The theatre opened December 26, 1927.

2. Architects: Graven & Mayger, Chicago.<sup>3</sup> Little is known of architects Anker S. Graven and Arthur Guy Mayger, who began their careers in the well-known architectural firm Rapp & Rapp, Cornelius W. Rapp and George L. Rapp, principals. The firm was among the famous theatre designers of its day, including designs for such greats as the Tivoli and Chicago theaters, and the Paramount Theatre in New York, the latter upon which Mayger is known to have assisted. In the mid-1920s Graven & Mayger formed their own firm, specializing in theatre design and continued to work in the opulent style made popular by Rapp & Rapp.

A.G. Larson, educated at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was sent by the Graven & Mayger Firm to supervise the construction of the Alabama.<sup>4</sup> Larson was responsible for changes in the theatre such as the addition of the fire wall between the Loveman's Department Store and the Alabama Theatre. As he explained, "I thought it possible that adjoining buildings could some day catch on fire, so I personally supervised laying of the brick. Mortar had to be applied thoroughly, so no smoke or fire could ever spread through."<sup>5</sup> Fortunately he did, because in 1934 a fire consumed Loveman's and it was the fire wall that saved the Alabama. Presumably the changes were made to the elevations were Larson's as well. Original sketches show the Alabama having two stories and not the three that were built. (Revised drawings for these have not been found).

The Alabama is among the few of Graven & Mayger's theatres still remaining; significantly, it is one of the more extravagant pre-Depression theatres in the southeast. Other theatres attributed to Graven and Mayger include the Minnesota in Minneapolis, the Hollywood and Fisher in Detroit, the Palace in Rochester, New York, and Paramount's Tennessee Theatre in Knoxville. The styles varied from the highly stylized Mayan design of the Fisher Theatre to the Moorish design of the

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<sup>3</sup>The Graven & Mayger architectural firm was originally located at 307 N. Michigan Street in Chicago.

<sup>4</sup>Birmingham News-Age Herald, 25 December 1927.

<sup>5</sup>Birmingham News, 17 April 1927.

Tennessee.<sup>6</sup> The Tennessee Theatre, opened October 1928, most resembles the layout and design of the Alabama.<sup>7</sup>

The Thompson-Starrett Company, general contractors for the Alabama Theatre, was responsible for many prominent buildings throughout the United States. Their work ranges from World War II related construction for the U.S. Government to helping construct the Rockefeller estate, Kykuit. Other projects for Paramount include their Theatre in New York.

3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses: Birmingham Enterprises, a group of interested local businessmen decided to sponsor the theater project. However, they were unable to raise the funds required to build. Birmingham Enterprises conveyed the proposed theatre plans to the Publix Theatre Corporation, a subsidiary of Paramount. Created in 1926, Publix became the largest cinema chain of its time with theatres throughout the United States. In Birmingham, Publix owned the Strand and Galax theatres in Birmingham prior to the Alabama. Although Paramount owned and controlled the theater, Birmingham Enterprises retained management of it.

Chain of ownership:

1927: Publix bought plans; built theater.

1932, September 17: Publix sold the Alabama Theatre to R.B. Wilby of Atlanta, GA, and H.F. Kinsey of Charlotte, NC.<sup>8</sup>

1972: The Wilby-Kinsey Corporation sold to ABC Southeastern Theatres.

1978: ABC Southeastern Theatres, Inc. sold to Plitt Southern Theatre Inc.

1981: Plitt Southern Theatre Inc. sold to Cobb Theatres.

1984: Cobb Theatres sold to Costa and Head Land Company.

1987: Costa and Head Land Co. sold to Birmingham Landmark Inc.

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<sup>6</sup>"The Fisher Theatre," The American Architect , 20 February 1929, 269-76; and David Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1987),116.

<sup>7</sup>Cecil Whitmire, Interview with author, September 3, 1996.

<sup>8</sup>"Publix House Sold," Birmingham News-Age Herald, 6 September 1932. Publix sold to R. B. Wilby, Atlanta and H.F. Kinsey, Charlotte, NC, that will be effective September 17. Other theaters purchased by Wilby-Kinsey were the Paramount in Atlanta, Nashville, Tennessee, Bristol, Charlottesville, Lynchburg, Newport News.

1981-86: The theatre operated continuously as a motion picture house from its opening until it closed for a brief period beginning in 1981. It reopened in April of 1986 and is currently being used as a movie house and performance arts theatre. It is utilized by local as well as national performers and musicians.

4. Building, contractor, suppliers: A.G. Larson represented Graven & Mayger's firm as the architect in charge of construction. The general contractor was Thompson-Starrett Company of New York; and the superintendent on site was C.F. Hutchings. The following is a list of subcontractors and suppliers:<sup>9</sup>

Excavation and foundations: Smallman-Brice Construction Co., Birmingham  
Structural Steel: Ingalls Iron Works Co., Birmingham  
Ventilating: George F. Wheelock Co., Birmingham  
Roofing and sheet metal: Hann Roofing & Heating Co., Birmingham  
Painting: J.E. Andrews Painting and Decorating Co., Birmingham  
Brick: Stephenson Brick Company, Birmingham (exterior face brick, chosen over the celebrated Greendale brick of Ohio)  
Sand and tile: Jefferson Brick Co., Birmingham  
Portland Cement: Lehigh Cement Co., Birmingham  
Magnolia cement: Southern Cement Co., Birmingham  
Lumber: Barnett Lumber Co., Birmingham  
Mirrors: Birmingham Paint & Glass Co., Birmingham  
Plastering: P.L. Gomez Co., Atlanta  
Ornamental Iron: Cole Iron Works, Atlanta  
Marble: Godfrey Marble Company, Atlanta  
Ceramic Tile and Terrazzo: Interstate Tile Company, Atlanta  
Refrigeration System: Brunswick-Kroeschell Company, Chicago  
Fire Doors: Meschell-Edwards Co., Covington, KY or Cincinnati, Ohio  
Doors: Kolemeyn Doors Company, Birmingham  
Lighting fixtures: Warren Company of Chicago (cost over \$35,000)  
General electric work: performed by the Harry Alexander Company of New York and Washington  
Vacuum Cleaning system: Haralson Sales Co.  
Tile: Truscan Steel Co.  
Millwork: Enochs Lumber & Manufacturing Co., Jackson, Miss.  
Terra Cotta: Corning Terra Cotta Co., NY  
Decorating: Interstate Decorating Co., Rockford, Ill.  
Electric [Alabama] Signs: Lu-Mi-Nus Signs Inc., Chicago

5. Original plans and construction: Graven & Mayger originally intended the to Alabama to extend the entire block. The lobby was to be aligned with the front of the building, rather than perpendicular, as was built. The architects changed their

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<sup>9</sup>Birmingham News-Age Herald, 25 December 1927.

plans when the owners of the corner building refused to relinquish their property to the theater project. The *Birmingham News* reported on August 19, 1926 that the Alabama would be three stories high with a basement and would cover the lot extending from Third Avenue to Second Alley and from Loveman, Joseph & Loeb building to Eighteenth street, except for the 50' lot at the corner of Third Avenue and Eighteenth Street. The owners of the 50-foot lot had a long lease on their office space and were not willing to give it up.

The proposed drawings by the Chicago architectural firm Graven & Mayger are dated October 28, 1926, but revised April 9, 1927. The original design shows a two story theatre, not the three-story structure that exists today. The drawings dated October 28, 1926, excluding the elevations and sign, have been retained on the site and are in the possession of the current owners. Unfortunately, the inspection drawings and detailed system drawings remain elusive.

6. Alterations and additions: The theater is remarkably intact, although elements differ from the 1927 building. When the theater opened in 1927, food and drink were not allowed inside. The first concession stand was placed at the corner of the Eighteenth Street facade and the alley. Theater goers bought peanuts and popcorn here, but not drinks. The concession stand had a cast iron window frame and an outside entrance only. The concessionary later became a rear entrance, with wood doors matching those of the stage entrance. During the 1940s, another concession stand was installed in a vestibule to the right of the ticket booth, a position typical of theater designs of that era. It was strategically placed to attract the general public by offering refreshments to patrons and passersby alike. More recently, an area used for phone booths at the balcony level was readapted for use as a concession area for special events.

The sign was remodeled and replaced in 1957.<sup>10</sup> Erected in May 1960, a new marquee replaced the old-fashioned screw-in light bulbs with new neon-tube lighting.<sup>11</sup> Initially, the 1927 building has an Alabama sign on the Eighteenth street facade to match the front. Other changes to the front facade include the modern commercial glass and metal frame doors which were added in 1987, displacing the original 1927 "golden" doors at the Third Avenue entrance.<sup>12</sup> The ticket booth entrance was enclosed in 1987. Brass railings lined up in front of the ticket booth to channel the crowds, and in the grand lobby directed people into the auditorium. Subsequently removed, these railings were reused along the stairway to the basement lounge.

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<sup>10</sup>Birmingham Post-Herald, 25 October 1957.

<sup>11</sup>Birmingham Post-Herald, 12 May 1960.

<sup>12</sup>The "golden" doors were painted gold stucco to give a golden appearance. These were removed in the early 1930s.

In 1972, the interests of modernization generated a few more alterations. Acoustical material replaced the stage draperies. The main floor seats were replaced with modern seats which allowed for more leg room. This exchange reduced the seating capacity from 2,500 to 2,210, as did the addition space required by the new sound and light boards in the rear of the auditorium. New red carpet replaced the old in the auditorium, foyer, and mezzanine.<sup>13</sup>

## B. Historical Context

### **The Design of the 1920s Movie Palaces**

The 1920s movie palaces were constructed during a transition period from vaudeville stage production to silent films, prior to the introduction of talkies, or films accompanied by sound. Thus, when designing these theatres, the architects had to consider many elements beyond the stylistic. Even though the film industry was becoming a popular venue, theatres were still being built with full stages to allow for vaudeville shows in case the films did not draw a large enough audience. Theatre owners were reluctant to invest large sums of money into their buildings; frequent advancements in film technology could quickly make them obsolete. For example, changing the screen size to accommodate projector advancement could change the sight lines, making the theatre inadequate for viewing movies. Theatres built for nickelodeon production and vaudeville shows generally began as small one-story structures. These evolved into elaborate two and three-tier structures that allowed for stage and movie production. These theatres were constructed to include the latest technological advancements in air conditioning and heating, projection, lighting and stage equipment. Changing stylistic preferences were also a concern, for elaborate decorations beckon the public inside the theater.

Theater design was based on many components. First, the size of the theatre was determined by such factors as the population of the city, the type of entertainment to be featured, and the money available for construction. Once the appropriate size was determined and a site located, the next consideration was the type of theatre plan needed. Theatre plans fall into five categories of plans: the simplest being the first floor type, consisting only of orchestra floor; the bleacher type, where the depth of the auditorium requires a steep grade to insure proper sight lines; the stadium, a variation of the bleacher type, with raised seats; the single balcony, and the balcony-mezzanine. The last was the largest and, therefore, the most desired plan type because it allowed maximum seating capacity without losing desirable site lines. On theatre sizes, building designer Eugene Clute explains that theatres with mezzanines and vomitories helped "increase the seating capacity of the balcony by

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<sup>13</sup>Birmingham News, 21 November 1971 and 7 January 1972.

removing the trunk line of the circulation from the back of the balcony."<sup>14</sup> The average size theatre of the 1920s accommodated from eighteen to twenty-five hundred seats. Larger theatres ranged from twenty-five hundred to six thousand seats.

Special consideration went into the layout, primarily to visibility within the auditorium. Theatre designers of the 1920s, Sexton and Betts, suggest when developing theatre plans it is important to consider the following when referencing lines:

All dimensions on the plan, back of or in front of the stage, are given in their relation to the "curtain line"(line of the asbestos curtain). Dimensions to the right and left of the stage are figured from the center line of the proscenium arch, which is also the center line of the auditorium, and is drawn at right angles to the curtain line. Vertical dimensions are figured in their relation to the elevation of the stage floor, which is taken as zero. The plan is developed only after these three lines have been locate.<sup>15</sup>

An important requirement in determining the design of the theatre included choosing the size of the stage, the placement of the orchestra and provisions for the organ. The size of stage was determined by the type of entertainment presented. There were three general stage types used. The first two types were generally utilized for nickelodeons and small theatres that did not require space for the production of live performances, and includes 5' to 10' deep platform or the slightly deeper 15' to 18' stage which allowed for solo performances. The third type was the fully equipped 25' to 35' deep theater stage used in vaudeville and movie palaces. Most of the theatrical stages were constructed with trap doors for performers to enter and exit. This size allowed for adequate performance space and for the lighting and rigging equipment located to the side of the stage. While a seemingly tremendous amount of space is allotted to the auditorium, lobbies and lounges, and stage equipment, the architect had to consider workshop space for the stage carpenter and electrician and storage areas for sets and props. Adequate dressing room space would also have to be incorporated into the space on either side of the stage.<sup>16</sup>

Another consideration in theater planning was the addition of the organ and the orchestra platform, each with a separate lift. A large pipe organ was considered "essential" in the 1920s to accompany the silent films. Organ chambers were

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<sup>14</sup>Eugene Clute, The Practical Requirements of Modern Buildings (New York: Pencil Points Press, Inc., 1928), 141.

<sup>15</sup>R.W. Sexton and B.F. Betts, eds., American Theatres of Today , vol.1 (New York: Architectural Publishing Co., 1927), 6.

<sup>16</sup>Lee Simonson, "Some A,B,C's of Theatre Architecture," Architectural Record, May 1930, 450-52.

usually located adjacent to the proscenium and resembled box seats. Behind these facades were the organ pipes. The chambers were built to be soundproof and located about 12' above the floor; the organ blower located in the basement away from the auditorium. The arrangement of the two are described in Sexton and Betts's American Theatres of Today (1928):

The use of the orchestra pit elevator is favored where a concert orchestra is featured. The entire floor of the orchestra pit is raised and lowered from the basement to the stage floor level under the control of the musical leader. An intermediate level below the sight lines of the audience is used when the orchestra accompanies the screen showing. The organ console may be on this or a separate elevator. The separate elevator gives greater flexibility for varying the program by organ solo numbers. The operation of these elevators is automatic and they are electrically controlled.<sup>17</sup>

The projection booth was another important consideration in the design of the theatre. Because the projection booth was essential to the service of the theatre, much preparation went into determining its location, layout and equipment. It was usually placed in the rear of the theatre, depending on the depth of the balcony. When the balcony's pitch was too steep to place the projection booth above it, the booth was located in the front and center of the balcony. This avoided a long projection from machine to screen and excessive projection angle. The projection angle should not exceed twenty degrees, otherwise the picture on the screen will look distorted.

Non-technical, but nonetheless important aspects of a theatre's design, was the front facade and entrance to the theatre. The facade was the primary marketing tactic, elaborately decorated in revival styles--often from exotic countries--to draw a crowd. The movie palace eclipsed other structures along the city street with their illuminating signs and marquees. On the largest sign is usually stated the name of the theatre. A 1925 theatre design article explained that the "electric signs that were at one time designed by tinsmiths are now carefully studied as a part of the architectural composition, and are now anchored to the buildings with due consideration for architectural fitness."<sup>18</sup> The somewhat smaller marquee--displaying the title of the show of the day--also served as a canopy for the patrons, sheltering them as they waited to buy a ticket. The 1920's theatres were the first to install elaborately decorated ticket booths strategically placed in the center of the street entrance and often open to it.<sup>19</sup> The elaborately ornamented booth attracted crowds, but prevent those without a ticket from entering the theatre.

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<sup>17</sup>Sexton and Betts, vol. 1, 25.

<sup>18</sup>Kenneth Franzheim, "Present Tendencies in the Design of the Theater Facades," The Architectural Forum, June 1925, 365.

<sup>19</sup>Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters, 20.

In designing the exterior and interior of the movie palace, comfort and decorative ornament played an important role. Crucial to the plan was the careful layout of the lobby, lounges and restrooms. In most of the grand theaters there was a large lounge area with restrooms on the basement floor, easily accessible from the main lobby area. The other area designated for this purpose was found under the balcony, so that the patron could reach it easily from the balcony or mezzanine. It was crucial to the theater design that this area be large enough to allow for comfortable standing room, because it is here the crowds had to wait to enter the auditorium. As explained by one architect of the period:

In reality the lobby must be a place of real interest, a place where the waiting throng may be transformed from the usual pushing complaining mob into a throng of joyous and contented people...In other words the lobby should be so designed and so equipped that the fascination resulting from it will keep the patron's mind off the fact that he is waiting.<sup>20</sup>

Overwhelming the patron's comfort level inside the building, theater owners believed the opulent architectural setting drew the crowds. Thus, the architect was inclined to create a facade for the theater building that was inviting to the public; the romance of its decor allowed the theater to sell itself. Psychology played a role in the design of the entrance and lobby areas of the theatre. The grand lobby was always richly decorated with exotic styles, large chandeliers and inviting furniture, introducing the patrons to an elegance they were not accustomed to at home.

As mentioned, architectural details, located throughout the palace, were also intended to keep the patron from getting bored while they waited; decoration usually engaged the patron. To some this served as an art history lesson; details were taken from prominent European structures, some as old as the fifteenth century. A 1928 interview with theatre architect Thomas Lamb describes the radical changes that were taking place in theatre palaces in the late 1920s. Lamb stated, "architecture has become so important that the interiors of the theatres now are really educational for all those who are interested in this art, in decorative painting, modeling, etc."<sup>21</sup> Architects had to make sure that they did not miss an element of any of the prescribed motifs for fear of being criticized by art and architectural professionals.

Throughout the theatre, spaces such as smoking rooms and lounges served as vignettes expressing architectural periods. The palaces were built to reflect a rich surrounding, accessible to all. The elaborate details of historic and exotic styles brought the theatre to life. However, some architects thought the decorative elements of the theatres were taken to the point of gaudiness by the use of more

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<sup>20</sup>E.C.A. Bullock, "Theater Entrances and Lobbies," Architectural Forum, June 1925, 369.

<sup>21</sup>"An Interview with Thomas Lamb," Motion Picture News, 30 June 1928, 4.

that one style and extensive interior ornamentation. Many of the architect's design inspirations came directly from architectural style books, which "contained measured patterns for the ornamental elements of every age and culture."<sup>22</sup> The result was an eclecticism seen in few other building types. Designers combined religious, royal and theatrical imagery with architectural elements taken from churches, castles, public buildings, and other theatres. These themes were reflected throughout the theatres, sometimes down to the pattern in the carpet. Outside of theatre design, architects of this period used these same style books for their designs of libraries, railway stations, government offices, and private homes, though not in combinations as seen in movie palaces. Artistic license was often taken by the architects in interpreting pattern book designs, at time with humorous results, such as the coat-of arms featuring a chicken head that appears in the Alabama.

The ornament was made from materials, such as terra cotta and plaster, that were easily molded to the precise pattern desired. These building materials were developed and used first on the smaller theatres in the 1910s. A Cinema Journal article notes that "there were several companies and decorator supply houses in the business of revamping the fronts and providing terra cotta decorations for buildings to be used as movie theatres."<sup>23</sup> These materials were "more permanent" than the early used pressed tin and sheet metal; "terra cotta, in particular, was durable, inexpensive, easy to clean, easy to model and particularly suitable for the movie theatre facade...it was also good for decorating large plain surfaces with no or few windows characteristic to the movie theatre."<sup>24</sup> Although large theaters from this period, like the Alabama, were constructed using structural I-beams, ornament masked the modern building technology. For example, the ornamental plaster ceiling, in reality a thin shell, was suspended from the theater's steel framework.

In the 1920s, approaches to overall interior design fell into two types: the "Atmospheric," that simulated the out-of-doors, and the "Exotics," depicting scenes from strange and faraway places. Austrian-born architect John Ebersson, developed the "atmospheric," a style associated with the firm of Rapp & Rapp, who designed in this style. Rather than the usual ornamental plaster ceilings, the principle intention of this mode was to create an "open air illusion" through the use of ceilings painted as a blue sky with clouds, or a nighttime sky illuminated by stars.<sup>25</sup> The walls, in turn, were painted to create a feeling of being part of a set, such as a

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<sup>22</sup>David Naylor, American Picture Palaces (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981), 23.

<sup>23</sup>Charlotte Herzog, "The Movie Palace and the Theatrical Sources of Its Architectural Style," Cinema Journal, Spring 1981, 30.

<sup>24</sup>Herzog, 32.

<sup>25</sup>Naylor, American Picture Palaces, 68.

romantic Italian garden or a Spanish or Mediterranean castle. The result was a fantasyland. Designs in this manner distracted the patron from the world outside the theatre, to ease his escape from everyday life. John Eberson summed up his intentions by stating:

We visualize and dream a magnificent amphitheatre under a glorious moonlit sky in an Italian garden, in a Persian court, in a Spanish patio, or in a mystic Egyptian temple-yard, all canopied by a soft moonlit sky.<sup>26</sup>

The second type of theatre was the "Exotics", or the "super" as it was referred to in the 1920s. It featured the most current architectural trends, which generally consisted of elaborate revival styles; Egyptian and Chinese being two most prominently used. As stated in a leading architectural journal in 1927:

Many theatre designers, including Rapp and Rapp and Sexton and Betts, argued that the movie theatre of the 1920s represented the cultural expression of changing American social values. Having risen to prominence following the "war to make the world safe for democracy" and having flourished in multiethnic cities, this most popular of the popular arts provided a place for democratization in a setting of distinct class differences: imperial palaces.[commented a leading architectural journal of 1927]<sup>27</sup>

Both "Atmospheric" and "Exotic" interiors added to the imagery depicted within the films being shown. They set a mood that hopefully lingered after the patron left the theatre!

Auditorium lighting was also used to create a mood by emphasizing certain details of the theatre or by changing to correspond with the action depicted in the films. A 1925 Architectural Forum article I.J. Lichter describes three types of lighting appropriate for an auditorium. First is direct lighting, by means of chandeliers or wall sconces and lanterns. Indirect lighting, the second type, is used by placing lights behind cornices and other ornamental elements. The last is a combination of these two lighting types.

A method which grows more popular each year, is to conceal "strip" reflectors in recesses around the bottom of the main dome, to have illuminated panels in the main ceiling, and in the balcony soffit, sometimes together with direct lighting brackets in the side walls. Very often this same concealed "strip" lighting is used around the proscenium arch....<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Dennis Sharp, The Picture Palace (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1969), 74.

<sup>27</sup>Maggie Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 88.

<sup>28</sup>I.J. Lichter, "The Question of Lighting," Architectural Forum, June 1925, 389.

New ideas in 1928 included the three-color houses, primarily blue, red, and white lights used indirectly in the main ceiling dome, balcony soffit and in the organ grills. Using these colors, lighting could go through the spectrum from the lightest blue, through purple, to the brightest red. Each color of light was individually controlled from the stage light board.

The 1920s theatres were also known for their amenities and special services. These included doormen and ushers and such amenities as nurseries, lounges, smoking rooms, along with the overall plush atmosphere. Even the restrooms are elaborately decorated. Thomas Lamb, famous movie palace architect, describes the improvements in these facilities: "These public rooms are designed in special periods of architecture, and the furnishings, which years ago were bought on a budget system for the lowest amount possible, now are being selected most carefully to suit the style in which the rooms are designed."<sup>29</sup>

### **Building Technology and Systems of the 1920s.**

In The Practical Requirements of Modern Buildings, author Eugene Clute states that with regard to theatres "the architect must keep in mind constantly the following: fire protection, steel construction, circulation, sight lines, acoustics, ventilation, and stage operation, to say nothing of a number of other matters."<sup>30</sup> The technological aspects of the theatres of the 1920s included a number of newly developed systems. The period of the construction of the movie palace, coincided with international advancements in building technology. The adaption of new architectural styles that reflected the changing technology.

Building codes regulated a significant percentage of the architect's design. In Sexton and Betts's American Theatres of Today (1927), they noted that building codes and laws regulated the width of the aisles and exit courts; the space between the aisles; and the dimensions of the balcony steps; and the pitch of the balcony.<sup>31</sup> A separate set of rules governed fire protection. The fire codes regulated the layout of the exits; an asbestos curtain to separate the stage from the auditorium; types of fire protection doors; and codes for projection booth safety.

For physical, as well as psychological, comfort it was important that these theatres have an excellent ventilation system: air conditioning and heating. Most late 1920s movie theatres incorporated the first modern air ventilation systems, one of two

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<sup>29</sup>"An interview with Thomas Lamb," Motion Picture News, 30 June 1928.

<sup>30</sup>Clute, 147.

<sup>31</sup>R.W. Sexton, American Theatres of Today, vol. 2 (New York: Architectural Publishing Co., 1930), 13.

types, into their plan. A 1930 article on theatre ventilation outlines the first type, the downward system.

The conditioned air is projected horizontally into the auditorium near the ceiling or through diffusers in the ceiling against a horizontal baffleplate and spread evenly over the whole upper area of the auditorium...moving down, air absorbs outer heat transmitted through the walls and the roof and the heat emitted by the occupants of the seats, and finally reaches the desired temperature and humidity before it strikes the seated persons.<sup>32</sup>

The air is then exhausted through outlets in the floor. This system, adopted for use at the Alabama Theatre, was the most used, probably due to its ability to maintain consistent temperatures. The other type of ventilation system introduces air at the floor, which in turn rises and is then drawn out through ceiling ducts.

Cooling systems were being used in conjunction with the theatre's overall ventilation system. An air conditioning system consisted of a refrigeration machine connected to a dehumidifier, motor driven fan, air supply ducts and return air ducts. In the process of cooling, fresh air mixed with the return air from the auditorium drawn out by a centrifugal fan. It mixture was then pulled through a dehumidifier where it was cooled and cleaned. If using the downward system, the air was then introduced back into the auditorium through ducts in the ceiling and balcony soffit, and then exited through vents in the floor to repeat the process. Fresh air was generally exchanged every three minutes.<sup>33</sup>

The heating process has been referred to as a "deheating problem."<sup>34</sup> Because heat is radiated from the patrons and the lights in the theatre, the ventilation system must remove the excess heat and moisture produced. Fresh air is then circulated throughout the auditorium to assure a constant temperature.

A system essential to the theatre's function is its stage equipment and lighting. It is important that the architect understand the workings of a stage, so that it is designed and constructed appropriately. In the late 1920s, most theatres converted their rigging system from the rope to the more modern counterweight system. One popular system was designed by Peter Clark and distributed under his name. It employed the most modern system of counterweights and drapes. Peter Clark describes the gridiron structure in a 1932 interview:

The gridiron, as constructed today, is a part of the structural framing of the building

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<sup>32</sup> Architectural Record, p. 93-94.

<sup>33</sup>Sexton and Betts, vol. 1, 36-37. This was also true at the Alabama Theatre.

<sup>34</sup>"Theatre Acoustics, Ventilating, and Lighting," Architectural Record, July 1930, 87-96.

and consists of structural channels and I-beams, with small channels laid flat and spaced on about 6 in. centers on the structural channels and I-beams, to form a working floor."<sup>35</sup>

The height of the gridiron is determined by the height of the proscenium--twice the height of the proscenium plus three feet. This allowed for the space necessary to conceal sets and lighting. The method of rigging required a line to be tied to the batten, or pipe, which is suspended from the grid. The line then runs through a loft block and then through the head block at the operating side of the stage. It is then secured at the locking rail. There is a loading platform at the grid level where weights are added to counterbalance the weight on the batten. The modern counterweight system allowed the stage hands, agrees Peter Clark, "to operate [lines] together and with a maximum of speed and minimum of effort."<sup>36</sup> The fly systems of this era were usually equipped with a combination of equipment to service vaudeville as well as movie theatre. The attached Peter Clark stage design was widely used in movie palaces, including the Alabama. Another attachment shows the usual lighting requirements for a larger stage with an average thirty foot stage. As the HABS drawing shows, an average theatre stage contained four light rods with a trough of footlights at the edge of the stage.

Developing construction technologies of the twentieth century were enlisted in theatre design as well. For example, the cantilevering system was perfected which made possible the removal of the earlier supporting piers required for balconies that obstructed the patron's view. Previously, balconies without supports were usually shallow, stacked only six rows high. The new structural system utilized steel beams which permitted a stronger building and cantilevered balconies at a steep slope, covering as much as half of the lower auditorium seating area. This allowed for a mezzanine-balcony type theatre which increased seating. Another significant structural feature of the movie palaces was its double shell construction. A thin plaster shell, which contains the ornamental plaster work and other details, is actually suspended inside the girded box of the auditorium frame creating a ceiling as well as incorporating architectural detail.<sup>37</sup>

#### **About the owners: The Paramount Corporation**

The mid 1920s was the most productive period for movie production companies. These companies produced and distributed films, and also moved into theater ownership, which, in turn, increased their visibility. By 1930, the major studios in control were Paramount-Publix, Fox-Loew, Warner Bros., and RKO. Between them

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<sup>35</sup>Peter Clark, "Behind the Scenes," Architectural Forum, September 1932, 267.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Naylor, American Picture Palaces, 23; George Rapp, "History of Cinema Architecture," In Living Architecture, edited by Arthur Woltersdorf (Chicago: A. Kroch, 1930), 58.

they owned approximately twenty-five hundred to three thousand theatres in the United States and Canada, each promoting its own productions. Movie historian Robert Sklar notes that, "for prestige purposes, all the big companies wanted their name on one of these theaters."<sup>38</sup> This was usually found on the marquee or in the form of a large vertical sign. The companies also controlled the films shown in their houses. For example, Paramount theatres only allowed their own movies to be shown in their theaters, such as the Alabama Theatre; other theatres in town would not be allowed access to their films.<sup>39</sup>

Paramount, headed by Adolf Zukor, was the most successful of the studio/theatre companies of the 1920s. It was considered the "biggest and the best" with over 1,100 theatres throughout the United States.<sup>40</sup> Zukor started his ascent when he merged his Famous Players Film Company and the Lasky Feature Play Company along with the addition of several smaller Paramount production subsidiaries to form the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. In 1924, he merged his company with a regional Chicago chain Balaban and Katz (B&K). These two companies transformed into what was known as the largest theatre circuit, the National Publix Corporation. Paramount-Publix houses were molded throughout the country, directed by Sam Katz out of a central office in New York. As historian, Maggie Valentine noted,

All advertising, promotions, prologues, design changes, architecture, and even the ushers' uniforms were determined by the central office and carried the Publix logo. As their ad in Variety said, 'You don't need to know what's playing at the Publix House. It's bound to be the best show in town.'<sup>41</sup>

Sklar recognized that the palaces were, however, often "white elephants" and that "movies alone could not bring in enough revenue to meet their heavy expenses."<sup>42</sup> Theatre owners kept revenue coming in by hiring live performers. Usual programs included vaudeville and variety acts along with a full orchestra to accompany the films; a reversion to the past decade, when movies began to take over vaudeville programs. Another financial obstacle for the theatre owners/movie studios was the introduction of sound. This required remodeling and equipment upgrades, which meant a loss in revenue if "talkies" were not successful. For a while, the "talkies" brought financial stability to movie palaces, because people were going to see new technology at work. With the boom in sales, theatre owners no longer needed to

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<sup>38</sup>ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Interview with Cecil Whitmire.

<sup>40</sup>Whitmire interview.

<sup>41</sup>Valentine, 72.

<sup>42</sup>Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 149.

rely on live performances and orchestras. The advancements eventually took their toll by the late 1930s, as evidenced by the number of large city theatres that went bankrupt due to the increase in production cost and the popularity of the neighborhood theatres. These smaller theatres were more convenient to the patrons; they did not have to come into the city to see a movie. To make up their losses, theatre companies took control of smaller companies consolidating into one large company. For example, Loew's took over two major studios producing subsidiary Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Warner Bros. acquired Stanley Company of America. By 1933, the Depression too took its toll on the movie industry. Paramount, along with Fox, went bankrupt because they were "overextended in debts and commitments, in Paramount's case through the acquisition of theatres."<sup>43</sup> Paramount was forced into selling off their theatres; most of the southeastern theatres were transferred over to the Wilby-Kinney corporation.

### **The Next Phase**

The theatres of the 1930s presented a stark contrast to those of the 1920s. The movie palaces of the 1920s attracted their patrons by allowing them to get a sense of how the wealthy lived through the use of elaborately ornamented buildings. By the 1930s, in a form follows function mode, architecture began to reflect the advanced technology utilized in movie production, which in turn became the draw. Theatres were streamlined in design, utilizing new building materials and technology. New building materials and technology consistently affected design for acoustics, sightlines, and efficient heating and cooling. At that time, exterior and interior design reflected this concern for functionality; both were streamlined, as dictated by the popular Art Deco style.

In the 1930s, pattern books were put away, and architects streamlined designs for all types of buildings. The drama and romance of the 1920s had subsided--hardened by the realities of the Great Depression--and simple more linear forms became the model. This new philosophy fit into the technological times; and with the Depression economy still lingering, costs were greater reduced by eliminating the elaborate decorative details. Designed strictly for film production, these theatres "differed inherently from live theatre, promoting innovation technology, machinery, and entertainment, not drama and tradition. Advertising for this new form tended to identify the equipment and the building rather than the film titles or actors' names."<sup>44</sup> Decorative elements were further reduced as Art Deco ran its course, eventually leading up to the introduction of the International style; the most simplistic of the early twentieth century architectural forms. Writing in 1930, Sexton had the following to say about the new theatres:

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<sup>43</sup>Robert Sklar, 166.

<sup>44</sup>Valentine, 32.

....this modern theatre building should not be merely a copy of some ancient structure which was designed to serve an entirely different purpose in an age when social and political conditions were vastly different from what they are today. It is appropriate to copy a building only when similar conditions are to be satisfied."<sup>45</sup>

According to Sexton and Betts, as theatre design developed along with the advancements in movie technology, it was stated that "the plan and other phases of the design of motion picture theatre is entirely dependent upon the technicalities by which the film is projected on to the screen."<sup>46</sup> The design of the theatre buildings would more appropriately reflect the technology being utilized rather than merely being used for just aesthetic purposes.

### **Birmingham's Theatre District**

The first theatre in Birmingham was constructed as early as 1890, though, the district did not begin to flourish until 1900. Prior to the 1920s, Birmingham's theatre district went through many transitions. The first high-brow theatre was established in 1900 with the opening of the Jefferson Theatre (previously at 1710 Second Avenue). The Auditorium (once located at the northeast corner of 17th Street and Third Avenue), reopened under its new name, the Bijou, in 1902 as one of the early variety venues. The district expanded as movie technology advanced and the popularity of entertainment houses grew. By the late twenties the live theatres nationwide gave way to theatres which featured movies supported by vaudeville stage shows.

The earliest "refined" vaudeville house was the Majestic, which opened in 1906 (formerly at 1808 Third Avenue, North), falling victim to technical advancements in film by 1915. The Orpheum (then at the southwest corner of Third Avenue and 17th Street, North) was another theatre that opened as a vaudeville-film house in 1909. It was in the heyday of vaudeville that movie houses were starting to pop up. The 1914 opening of the Lyric Theatre, a high class vaudeville house, took patrons away from the Bijou. The Bijou was taken over by Loew's in 1917, to become a film house. The Lyric's cooling system, ineffective as it was, allowed performances to continue throughout the summer which made it a popular spot.

By 1915, vaudeville was the most popular form of entertainment in Birmingham, taking business away from the legitimate theatres and opera houses. Local historian Don Haarbauer notes that "Birmingham, with a population of over 140,000, had seen nine distinct theatres during the first decade and half of the twentieth century in addition to the more than twelve movie houses including vaudeville acts in their

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<sup>45</sup> Sexton, vol. 2, p.9.

<sup>46</sup>R.W. Sexton, American Theatres of Today, vol. 2, 1. Sexton also projected the future in saying that the public would start coming to the theatres for the actors/actresses on the screen and not as much for the building it which it was being shown.

presentation."<sup>47</sup> The decline in professional theatre caused many houses to close or convert into vaudeville or movie theatres; the Jefferson theater was the only legitimate theatre to remain so, through the various transitions of other theatres. O'Brien's Opera House, erected in the late 1800s, did not survive and was demolished in 1915.

The movies became increasingly popular after 1915, and by the 1920s the vaudeville houses were showing movies, too. One of the earliest movie houses was The Strand, which opened in 1914. The Majestic, mentioned earlier, was one of the earliest vaudeville theatres to introduce movies in conjunction with live performances. Three more theatres were built with the same idea, all constructed within two years of each other. These were the Ritz (1721 Second Avenue, North, now demolished), a vaudeville-movie house; the Empire (1927, 2012 Third Avenue, North), a vaudeville house; and the Alabama (1811 Third Avenue, N), an elaborate movie palace which incorporated vaudeville, still existing today. Other thriving theatres of the 1920s were The Temple (6th and 19th), which opened in 1925 as a vaudeville-movie house as part of the Loew's theatre chain; the Lyric (18th Street and Third Avenue), Pantages (then at Third Avenue and Seventeenth Streets); and the Jefferson (second between 17th and 18th streets). Other smaller theatres were the Trianon, the Galax, the Royal, and the Odeon; all once located on Second Street, between 17th and 21st streets.

The Ritz, built in 1926, was the first air-conditioned theatre in the city and in 1933 became the first theatre in Birmingham to show strictly talking pictures. The Lyric provided competition en par with the Ritz, but eventually failed due to its lack of effective air conditioning--a cooling-air system which functioned by blowing air over ice. Henceforth, the Lyric lost the mainstay of its operations, the Hoblitzelle vaudeville circuit, to the Ritz. The Lyric stayed open to feature musical-stock companies and movies, though, at a lower scale. After the Depression, it became a second-run movie house.

The Bijou "contained forty comfortable dressing rooms and seated 2000, making it sufficiently attractive to performers to warrant another redecoration in 1927 by the Pantages vaudeville circuit, which reopened it on October 31, 1927, as the Pantages."<sup>48</sup> It survived under this name for twelve years. In 1934, ownership of the Alabama and Pantages were both transferred to the Wilby-Kincey Corporation. Pantages lost out to the Temple in the 1940s and was renamed the Birmingham for the last try, reopening as a movie theatre in 1946. All of these changes speak to the vitality of the theater business during the early decades of its establishment.

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<sup>47</sup>Don Ward Haarbauer, A Critical History of the Non-Academic Theatre of Birmingham, Alabama (Ann Arbor: University of Microfilms International, 1981), 154.

<sup>48</sup>Haarbauer, 166.

Along with the many problems of running the theaters, deterioration of the city's downtown caused a decline in business in the theatres as well. With the onslaught of the Depression, and the success of the talkies, live entertainment became too expensive to run and therefore theatres eliminated vaudeville entirely by the 1940s. As a result, a few of the original all-live theatres were razed in the late 1930s and 1940s, such as the Trianon, the Jefferson Theatre (demolished in 1947) and Pantages. Some were able to survive by showing second and third-run movies or "girlie" movies. The Ritz became the home of the Cinerama (define in a footnote) films of the 1950s and 1960s. The Bijou was demolished in 1950.

Old photographs of this area from the early decades show the streetscapes crowded with huge marquees, giant billboards advertising the shows, and moving lights illuminating every architectural detail. Lining the streets were the large first-run movie houses like the Alabama and the Strand as well as the many smaller second- and third-run theatres. The Alabama Theatre is the only one that is still operating. The Lyric, the last of the Vaudeville houses, after a string of professional circuits and a few decades as a second and third-run movie theatre, finally closed in 1960. Its exterior walls have been stripped of all architectural decoration, though, it waits patiently in the hopes of future restoration. Many other theatres have been demolished or their facades radically reworked. Several buildings, originally theatres, are still used commercially, though their marquees, signs and ticket booths were replaced by modernized storefronts identified by more sedate signs. Standing as prime examples, the Majestic, now Haverty's Furniture; and the Rialto, now a clothing store.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Alabama Theatre**

Of the Birmingham theatres to survive the changing times, the Alabama Theatre stands alone. The most prominent and prestigious of them all, it still retains its opening day integrity. In the 1920s, Birmingham already had a sufficient theatre district with playhouses and vaudeville theatres, but at the end of the decade, the city added its crowning jewel, The Alabama, an elaborate movie house/stage theatre. Birmingham Enterprises, Inc. contracted with Graven and Mayger Architects in Chicago to design the Spanish/Moorish designed one-and-a-half-million dollar theatre, using New York's Paramount Theatre as the prototype. Construction was to begin late in 1926, but at the last moment, ownership changed. The plans were sold to Publix Theatres of Paramount Pictures. Because of a problem in obtaining additional property for the theatre, Graven and Mayger revised the plans delaying the construction start date until April of 1927. To make up for lost time, construction crews worked six or sometimes seven days a week. Nine months later the theatre was complete, just in time for its originally scheduled December 26, 1927 opening. The Alabama was the largest and most ornate movie palace in the

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<sup>49</sup>National Register Nomination for the Historic Commercial and Theatre District of Birmingham. National Park Service, Cultural Resource Division.

State, in fact it was named the "Showplace of the South," which has stayed with it ever since.

Christmas Day of 1927, the Birmingham News ran an article that announced and described in great detail the new Alabama Theatre:

No attempt has been made to confine the design to anyone particular period of Spanish architecture but rather to select the most pleasing motifs as well as those that would lend themselves most satisfactory to the modern adaption of the style. The infusion of numerous Moorish details is apparent throughout the entire house. The multi-foil arches, the richly modeled geometric plaster decoration, and the carpet like pattern so characteristic of the blind window of the Alhambra are everywhere evidence. Upon entering the ticket lobby from Third Avenue, North, you pass through the Hall of Mirrors, a high two-story, marble walled room the sides and ceilings of which are composed of a series of paneled mirrors. At the far end of the room a stairway leads to a spacious balcony, the rail of which supports two large elaborately wrought candelabra. Below this balcony a passage gives in to the grand lobby.

The grand lobby is a high rectangular hall the long sides of which are divided by pilasters of rose tavenelle marble with verde antique dies and bases. A grand stairway leads up to the mezzanine and balcony foyers which form a passage way between the frames made by the marble piers. The lace-like ornament which resulted from the building activities of the Spanish silversmiths is seen in the pierced frieze which crowns the walls. It is interesting to note that the iron gates which separate the lobby from the auditorium proper and appear to be conventional geometric grilles are in reality the initial letters of the theatre combined in such a way as to form an effective pattern.<sup>50</sup>

As part of the prestigious Paramount chain, the Alabama's entertainment outshone all others. Stage shows came directly to Birmingham from the Paramount Theatre in New York, conducted under such producers as John Murray Anderson, Jack Partington, and Frank Cambria. These traveling shows made annual forty-eight week tours from the Paramount Theatre in New York to the Publix Theatre chains throughout the country. They featured five vaudeville acts and eighteen chorus girls accompanied by full stage settings, a stage mechanic, and the key players of an eighteen-piece orchestra. The remainder of the crew were permanent staff of the Alabama.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Birmingham News-Age Herald, 25 December 1927.

<sup>51</sup>Haarbauer, 161.

Graven and Mayger brought a conglomeration of styles to the Alabama's design.<sup>52</sup> While there are a variety of sources, its principal theme is of the Mudejar style--a Christian Islamic building style. These Spanish details can be found on the Eighteenth Street elevation in the shell decoration pattern and the use of brick and terra cotta. The front elevation shows similar Spanish characteristics but of a different time period. The twisted columns are Spanish Baroque, or of the Churrigueresque style (1680-1720). Most of the shields are castilian, also evidence of a Spanish origin.

Upon entering the theater, one finds the familiar Spanish-influenced shell patterned decoration on the upper walls of the grand lobby. The ornamentation of the lobby, though, is not restricted to Spain; there are hints of Roman, Celtic, French and Islamic patterns throughout. The multi-foil arches, descending from the tri-foil Arabic arches, are a thirteenth century French motif. Tudor patterns surround the mirrors in the bar area and another around the entrance to the mezzanine. Colonial revival elliptical domes, Chinese lanterns and dragon motifs are among the varying stylistic elements depicted in the auditorium.

As dictated by the architectural standards of the day, the Alabama used current high style decorations, plus it utilized all the latest technology and building standards, from its large seating capacity; the latest heating, air conditioning, and ventilation system; lighting effects, fireproof precautions. In fact, the Alabama was the first theatre in the state to effectively use air conditioning.

Along with its concerns for beauty and comfort, the Alabama was built with fire prevention in mind, replacing the wood construction of earlier theatres with concrete and steel I-beams. The seats and carpets are also of fireproof material. The had its own fire protection; mechanisms such as fusible links were installed so if fire broke-out on stage the asbestos curtain would fall. Similar precautions were taken in the projection booth. So efficient was the fireproof at the Alabama that when Loveman's department store (a four-story Art Deco building faced in white limestone) next door burned to the ground in 1934, the Alabama stood fast and none of the 1500 children seated in the Alabama for the Mickey Mouse Club were injured. Although, the Alabama was unharmed, the ventilation system was not shut off and therefore soot remains on the vents and surrounding walls where smoke was pulled in.

As stated, the layout of the stage lighting is a Peter Clark design, following the standard "average theatre" pattern.<sup>53</sup> The foot lighting trough has since been

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<sup>52</sup>Dayton Spence, phone Interview by author, 19 July 1996. Dayton Spence, a decorative expert, brought a lot of these definitions to the surface.

<sup>53</sup>See figure page no. ?

removed.<sup>54</sup> The lights in the house were controlled by a main switchboard located on stage, with the lighting intensity and varied color effects controlled by dimmers. The light pulls are colored by the light that is projected. The Frank Adams light board was large enough that up to four people could work the lights at the same time, as might be necessary for large productions.<sup>55</sup>

The Alabama Theatre was built with commercial space above the lobby of the Third Avenue entrance. It was standard practice to build shops and offices around the theatre, to supplement income and increase business trade in the area.<sup>56</sup> This space still remains, currently being used for rehearsal space, or rented for commercial use. The original facades of the commercial space have been slightly altered and awnings have been added above each entranceway.

The Wurlitzer pipe organ is in a category of its own. The Pulbix 1 Crawford Special Wurlitzer model at the Alabama is one of four that remain in their original houses. The others are in Paramount theatres in Denver, Colorado; Seattle, Washington; and Oakland, California. It was designed by renowned organist Jesse Crawford, commissioned specifically for Paramount Theatres. The size of the organ was usually determined by the size of the theatre; although according to this rule the Alabama should have had a smaller organ! Instead the massive set of pipes are compacted into two small organ chambers flanking the stage. The Alabama Theatre was designed specifically to meet the acoustical requirements of a Wurlitzer organ.<sup>57</sup>

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The architectural style of the Alabama is predominately of Spanish Mudejar influence; the Eighteenth Street facade seems to be a replica of La Casa De las Conchas (1475-83) in Spain. As was a tradition of Islamic Mudejar building, the Alabama uses brick as the principal building material, combined with

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<sup>54</sup>Peter Clark, stage design. This was verified by Alan Bates, the Alabama's Technical Director. See attached stage and lighting plan.

<sup>55</sup>Alan Bates, Interview by author, date?.

<sup>56</sup>Goldstein's Furs, 1924: Two-story commercial building of light brown brick; first floor accommodates several storefronts, now extensively altered. Second floor retains its original design, a system of bays between piers containing three and four arcaded windows each, resting on a molded brick string course. Parapet roofline with simple flat cornice resting on corbels. The structure contributes to the context of the Alabama, possibly influencing some design aspects. National Register Nomination. District.

<sup>57</sup>Whitmire interview.

intricate stucco decoration, such as the shells, to break up the reflecting sunlight and bring excitement to a otherwise bare wall. (The shells are used again for decoration on the interior, upper walls of the grand lobby.) Other Spanish-Moorish style characteristics are seen in the use of castile shields found on many prominent buildings in Spain and Portugal, and the spiral columns found on the Third Avenue elevation.<sup>58</sup> These can be traced to the first stage of the Churrigueresque style (1680-1720), an expression of Spanish Baroque, which is characterized by the use of 'Salomonica', a twisted or spiral column. The interior, however, includes elements of a wider variety of styles, an illustration of which is found in the variety of lounges: the Ladies Adamesque and Chinese Tea lounges; and the Gentlemen's (Tudor style) College and Hunting Room lounges. The blatant disregard for continuity of style was typical of the whimsical nature of movie palaces built during the pre-depression heyday. In contrast to the historical motifs used throughout the building, the most pronounced feature of the Alabama's facade is a monumentally-scaled lighted sign reading "ALABAMA."

2. Condition of fabric: The Alabama Theatre today is in remarkable good condition; it has survived despite the numerous threats it faced in the decades prior to its ownership and management by Birmingham Landmarks, Inc. The integrity of the architectural elements is good, and most of the original mechanical systems, if not running, are intact. These systems include the original AC, lighting and mechanical systems for backstage operations, projection equipment and the vast Wurlitzer organ. Structural elements such as the steel-beam framing and the under-side of the elliptical and other secondary domes are visible from a crawlspace adjacent to the projection room. There is an ongoing project to restore the theatre and its systems to its original state.

## B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The Alabama is an L-shaped structure with a front facade six bays across. The interior five levels includes: the basement, auditorium, mezzanine, lower and upper balconies. The principal public space, the auditorium, measures approximately 165' x 90'; with a front ell, including lobbies, measuring 65' in length and 50' in depth.

2. Foundation: The foundations are constructed of reinforced concrete.

3. Wall construction and decoration: The walls are constructed of concrete faced with brick laid in Flemish bond on the prominent facades located on Third Avenue and Eighteenth Street, and common bond on the other exterior walls. The walls are ornamented by terra cotta brick with a diamond pattern diaper work. The Eighteenth Street facade is decorated with similar diapering and scalloped shells.

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<sup>58</sup>John Musgrove, ed., Sir Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture (London: Butterworth's, 1987), 832, 495.

4. Structural system, framing: The structural system is reinforced concrete with a steel truss system to support the roof. From this is hung the extensive decorative plaster work found on the interior of the theatre.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: Third Street entrance has four sets of commercial-styled metal frame glass doors which lead into the ticket booth area, and then five sets of doors into the lobby area. The original faux "golden" doors were taken out in the 1930s; the current commercial doors were installed in 1987. The Eighteenth Street elevation has two sets of mahogany raised-panel doors. The middle set opens to the back stage loading dock and the other conceals the original concession stand booth, now used for storage. There are metal fire doors that exit into the alleyway on all floors. All the fire doors are original, except those that provide egress from the main lobby.

b. Windows: The original one-over-one light, cord-and-weight sash theatre windows light the three floors of office space above the lobby. Modern sash windows have replaced the originals in the office area behind the marquee.

6. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: There is a pitched roof over the domed interior of the theatre; the roof is flat over the stage and office spaces. It is constructed of built-up asphalt painted silver.

b. Cornice, eaves: There is a terra cotta-tile overhang on the Eighteenth street elevation.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: (See attached floor plans for details.)

a. Basement: The basement, or ground floor, has a public space below the foyer and grand lobby, flanked by service areas here and below the stage. The service areas are not connected, (though plans are underway to open a passageway beneath the auditorium floor for easier access). A staircase leads from the grand lobby directly into a the "Spanish Lounge." To one side is the women's lounge and restroom, better known as the Adams Room due to its Adamesque style ornamentation. On the opposite end is the Men's Lounge, or College Room, resembling a Tudor-style lodge with dark wood half-timbers against rough plastered, painted walls. In keeping with the style, the College Room is furnished with heavy wood benches. Directly behind the stairs are two original telephone booths, now used for storage.

The space under the grand lobby and foyer originally served as an ushers'

lounge and locker room (with a separate set of stairs that exit into the orchestra foyer), as well as manager's and other staff service rooms. These spaces are now utilized for storage and office space. Originally referred to as the "commercial basement," the area under the Hall of Mirrors and ticket booth is now used as a carpenter's workshop where most of the restoration work is currently taking place. A door in the storage area on the northeast wall once led into Loveman's Department store. Access to the other service areas is reached by way of stairs to either side of the stage. (see plans)

b. Orchestra floor: The Third Avenue doors open into the ticket lobby, and through another set of doors, into the first foyer, or Hall of Mirrors. A concession bar was recently added to the lobby. From the grand lobby there are several directions that can be taken. The grand stairway ascends to the mezzanine level; through a horseshoe arch are two sets of fire exit doors leading to the alley. The auditorium can be entered through wrought iron gates.

c. Mezzanine floor: The right side of the mezzanine can be entered, via the mezzanine foyer, from the Hall of Mirrors. A few steps lead down to the former location of a pair of telephone booth, reconfigured for use as a concession bar; an iron balustrade prevents passage through this area. The foyer on this level looks out over the Grand lobby. Glass and wooden doors open into the seating area.

d. Lower balcony (Peacock Alley): Located on the lower balcony level is a tunnel/hallway known as "Peacock Alley." Access into the seating area is provided from either side of the passageway. Niches which previously contained artwork are now bare; random pieces of elaborate furniture used to decorate the original 1927 interior still appear. Scalloped openings provide a view of the lobby below.

e. Upper balcony: Three sets of stairs ascend to the tunnel/hallway that provides access to the upper balcony. At one end is a women's lounge, or "Chinese Room," so named for its Oriental motif. At the other end is the men's lounge, or "Hunting Room," decorated in Medieval style, with paneled wainscoting and leather seating. The seating area is reached through the vomitory--the centrally located stairway that projected the crowd into the middle of the balcony--and by smaller flanking stairways.

f. Projection room: The projection room can only be reach by walking up the left side stairway of the upper balcony. From the projection booth, access is available to an attic space where the truss system and part of the upper ventilation system can be viewed. A catwalk extends around the domes, leading to the proscenium wall.

2. Stairways: Carpeted stairways lead from the lobby to the mezzanine, and to the

lower and upper balconies via tunnels/hallways. Three sets of stairs lead down to the basement; one to the lounge/restrooms and two service stairways. Due to the fire code, the staircases are broken by landings, rather than appearing in straight runs. There are five sets of stairways within the lower balcony, four sets leading through the middle and upper balcony. There are fire stairways to the right of the stage between the theatre and the adjoining building. The balustrades throughout the theatre are of decorative ironwork, with oak handrails.

3. Flooring: Terrazzo floors are found in the main lobby area, and in the downstairs lounge and flanking mens and women lounges. The adjoining bathroom floors are covered in ceramic tile. The flooring throughout the rest of the theatre is concrete, covered by a low pile red carpet. The floor in auditorium and on the mezzanine slopes downward to facilitate viewing of the stage/screen.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls and all the applied ornamental features are of plaster, including pattern-book decorations such as medallions, shields, and eagles. Also of plaster is the ornamental coffered ceiling and auditorium dome. The horseshoe-shaped arches located at the exits to each side of the stage, at the lobby-level fire exits and at the basement stairway are also of ornamental plaster. Many of the plaster walls and interior doorways have been received decorative gold paint. Decorative iron grille air vents appear on the walls and balcony soffits.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The typical interior door, appearing on the main and mezzanine floor entrances into the auditorium, consists of paired six-light wooden doors with a brass kick-plate and rod handles. As is typical of most doors in the theatre, all exit doors are constructed of fire-protective steel. The fire doors in the auditorium area have a decorative gold finish on the interior. There is a steel fire door separating the projection room from the auditorium.

6. Decorative features: Decorative features are found throughout the theater, representing a wide variety of styles, such as oriental dragons; French, English and Celtic coats-of-arms; marble water fountains; crystal chandeliers, ornamental glass light fixtures, and Chinese lanterns to name but a few. (See photographs for more details).

7. Hardware: Most of the original hardware still exists, consisting principally of rod handled door hardware.

8. Furnishings: As legend has it, Paramount Studios purchased a castle in Spain and divided its art objects among their three flagship theaters: the Alabama, and the

Paramount Theatres in New York and Los Angeles.<sup>59</sup> A 200-year-old, four-seater courting couch can still be found in the basement lounge between the Adam Room (ladies) and College Room (mens). Peacock Alley contained paintings and sculptures from the Spanish collection. The auditorium seating was replaced in the 1970s with more modern chairs, which allowed for more room between patrons, decreasing the overall seating capacity.

9. Mechanical equipment:

a. Electrical systems and lighting: The original stage lighting system is still intact, although much of it is not in use today. The theatre has transferred most of its electrical needs to an updated computer system, which takes up less space and is easier to utilize. The system was well documented, with original plans still available. Harry Alexander Inc. who installed the electrical system also supplied the electrical system to the White House. The original is a Frank Adams remote control lighting board system with fuse board in basement. The theatre owners were able to rebuild most of the original board by using parts from another theatre. A fuse box in the lobby controls electrics outside the auditorium.

b. Fly system: The original Peter Clark fly system still exists, although through general maintenance, cables and ropes have been replaced and updated over the years. The fly loft is constructed of steel I-beams laid in a grid pattern, which creates a sturdy platform for the utilization of the multiple line, a single purchase counterweight system used for "flying" or moving scenery. The single purchase system was the most modern and safe method, replacing the older method of rigging, the roped system. With the fly system, cables are attached onto the batten and run through the loft blocks which are, in turn, attached to the grid. The cables then pass through the head block and down to the locking rail. A loading bridge or platform at the top of the T-rails (that guide the weights) is used to add or take off counterweight blocks to balance the weight of the scenery or drop that is being hung from the batten.

c. Heating, air conditioning, and ventilation: When constructed, the theatre took advantage of the latest in engineering technology. The building still contains the original "down cast" ventilation system with a 40-horsepower blower, installed by the George F. Wheelock Company. The switch to turn on the blower works like a streetcar control, changing gears as the blower progresses speed. There is a damper on the roof that draws in the fresh air, which is then blown down through the air shafts. The air is transferred through the theater through grilles in the ceiling and balcony soffits, exhausting foul air through floor vents under the seats. This is performed

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<sup>59</sup>Birmingham News, 11 October 1980.

primarily by means of large fans and network of ducts, all which are concealed. It complete with an automatic temperature regulating system. The original 80 decibel air compressor for air conditioning still remains. There are three compressors at 80 tons each.

The lobby and foyer area along with the dressing rooms, toilets, rest rooms are included in the general air-conditioning system. The projection room can be included in the general air-conditioning system but should have a separate exhaust system for the projection machines, to protect the film from contact with the dirt-laden air. The air conditioning and heating system found here, according to Sexton's American Theatres of Today, was the most modern system used in theatres of 1927. The theatre is cooled using 300 tons of air conditioning, exchanging air every three minutes.<sup>60</sup>

To heat the building, it was originally intended that a coal furnace be used; instead the theater was connected to city steam which was regulated through a radiator with steam coils. (There is a coal storage room behind AC room in basement along with a steam hot-water supply tank that supplied hot-water to dressing rooms and lounges.)

d. Vacuum cleaning: The theatre is equipped with a central vacuum cleaning system with 26 outlets piped to strategic locations. It is powered by a 50 HP motor, though, it is no longer in use.

e. Organ lift: The Wurlitzer organ is raised on a screw lift at 680rpm and 3 horsepower. (The orchestra pit was wired for a lift but was never completed due to timing constraints.) The organ is wired to twenty-two sets of pipes that control the sounds of a vast arrangement of instruments. Pipes range in size from 1/4" in diameter to 12" in diameter and 16' high. Instruments that can be recreated by the Wurlitzer are the drums, harps, xylophones, castanets, kettles, vibra-harp, bells, chimes, tom toms, wind, reed and string. The pipes can be heard from the balconies chambers located on either side of the stage.

f. Plumbing: There is a sump pump in basement that pumps the sewage up to street level into the city sewage system.

g. Electrical seating: As described in the December 15, 1927, Birmingham News, "scattered throughout the theatre" were twelve sending dials that resembled a telephone system, use to locate vacant seats. An attendant could signal to three receiving stations the number of seats he had in his section and the seat numbers would show up in the proper digit column on

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<sup>60</sup>Interview with Richard Parker; "Ventilation 'Down Draft' Type," Birmingham News, 27 December 1927.

the captain's board. The lamps on the board were similar to ones on a telephone switch board. The main receiving station was located in the main lobby with two other stations located at the entrance to the mezzanine and balcony lounges. From these positions an attendant could direct the patron to a desired seat. The article also stated the this system claimed to be an improvement from the one installed at the Paramount theatre in New York that used buttons instead of the dialing system. Switchboard and relay boxes are still intact but the conduits were taken out when the seats were replaced.

h. Telephone system: The original telephone switchboard is still intact, located on basement level, southeast corner. The original telephone booths can be found in the basement, first floor, and mezzanine level, though are currently being used for storage.

i. Projection system: The original projection system consisted of three projectors, none of which are currently being used, due to changes in film technology. It has been rumored that Cobb Theatre Company still has one of the original Alabama projectors.<sup>61</sup> The lamp house of the projector is generated by DC power with the film running on AC power. The carbon arc process, used in 1927, is still utilized at the Alabama. The DC power goes through the silver shoes of the negative fuse and is transferred to the carbon rod, the process of which ignites a flame. The burning of the rod creates the light that projects through the film. It takes about twenty minutes, the time it takes for an average reel of film to burn down. A water line is attached to the negative end to keep the shoes cool. The light is projected on a reflector which is focused by two knobs, one large scale and one for fine tuning.<sup>62</sup>

The current projection system contains two 70/35mm Norelco projectors, two 35mm Century projectors, and two 16mm projectors. The projectors are powered by carbon arc, which entails a rod of carbon, with DC power. The Alabama is the only theatre in the state to still show films at sixteen, thirty-five, and seventy millimeters.

9. Stage: The stage is of wood construction with a wet pipe sprinkler system serving it and unused dressing rooms. The flooring of the stage is made of its original pine and maple. There are trap doors in middle of stage, used during various performances. The screen is made of finest linen backed up with a network of honey-comb chambers which expand as the screen is stretched to reduce angular images on extreme sides of auditorium. The screen frame is 40' x 30' with actual

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<sup>61</sup>Richard Parker interview.

<sup>62</sup>Interview with Richard Parker; The Ashcraft Installation Instruction Operation Manual and Parts List, New York: C.S. Ashcraft Manufacturing Company, Inc.

picture size 22' x 28'.

D. Site: The Alabama is located on the corner block of Eighteenth and Third street, facing northwest onto Third Street. The building is L-shaped with the auditorium located behind a row of commercial buildings. The lobby entrance is located besides these buildings. When originally constructed, the theatre the center of an expansive theatre and commercial district. Now it is one of the few surviving and operating buildings in the area.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings: Copies of the extant original drawings, dated October 1926 (revised April 1927), are currently in the possession of Cecil Whitmire, President of Birmingham Landmarks, Inc. The original linen drawings are in the process of being archived.

B. Early views: Early views of the Alabama can be found at the Birmingham Public Library Archives along with various newspaper clippings also at the library.

C. Interviews: All interviews were conducted by the author, Terra Klugh, on-site at the Alabama Theater.

Cecil Whitmire, President, Birmingham Landmarks, Inc., September 5, 1996.

Richard Parker, Vice President, Birmingham Landmarks, Inc., September 4, 1996.

Alan Bates, Technical Director for the Alabama Theater, 10 June 1996.

Dayton Spence (phone interview), previous employee of Rambusch Decorating Co., NY, July 19, 1996.(Address: 655 S. Nanagosa Trail, Suttons Bay, Michigan 49682. ph: 616.271.4236)

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Chicago Public Library (312.542.7279)

Theatre Historical Society, 152 New York, Elmherst, IL (708.782.1800)

Chicago Historical Society; Scott LaFrance (312/642.4600)

American Institute of Architects, 222 Merchandise Mart Plaza, Chicago, IL (312/670.7770)

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the Alabama Theatre was undertaken in the summer of 1996 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, as part of long-range program to document historically significant architectural, engineering, and industrial heritage in the United States. The Alabama Theater recording project was cosponsored by HABS/HAER, E. Blaine Cliver, Chief and Paul Dolinsky, Chief HABS; and Birmingham Landmarks, In. Cecil Whitmire, President; and Richard Parker, Vice President. Special Thanks to Cecil Whitmire, Richard Parker, Alan Bates, Jeannie Hanks, Bragg Scroggins, and Lisa Parker. This field project was developed by Catherine C. Lavoie, HABS Historian, and Frederick J. Lindstrom, HABS Architect, and was executed under their direction. The field recording was conducted by supervisor, Professor John P. White (Texas Tech University); historian, Terra Klugh (Hollins College); and architecture technicians: Miles Brandon Battle (Howard University), Jennifer I. Wimmer (University of Virginia), and Roger Miller (Design Works, Alexandria, Virginia). The final editing of the drawings was completed by Michael Baptista (Catholic University of America). Large-format photography was undertaken by HABS photographer, Jack E. Boucher.

## APPENDIX I

### Glossary

**batten-** pipe or wood rail attached to two or more lift lines of a rigging system from which the scenery or lights are suspended from the grid.

**booms-**portable lighting towers, or vertical pipes on heavy bases for side lighting of stage from wings.

**Counterweight system-** A counterweight unit or set consists of pipe batten, three or more wire ropes, loft blocks for each rope, headlock, counterweight carriage, floor block or tension block, operating line, and rope lock. The pipe batten is hung horizontally on the wire ropes which are carried up to and over the loft blocks, across the gridiron, to and through the head block,, and down to the top of the counterweight carriage where they are fastened by chains or turnbuckles which are adjustable for leveling (trimming) batten. A purchase line runs from the top of the carriage up to and over the headblock, down through a rope lock, around a tension-block at the floor, and up to tie to the bottom of the carriage. counterweights are placed in the carriage at the loading platform.

**Counterweight arbor-** a metal cradle that holds the counterbalancing weights used to fly scenery.

**Flys (flyspace)-**the space above the stage occupied by sets of lines and hanging scenery.

**Fly gallery-** a steel or reinforced gallery extending along the sidewall of the stage some distance above the stage deck containing a pinrail to which the rigging ropes are brought and tied off.

**grand drape-**drapery at top of proscenium arch, sometimes fixed. Always downstage of house curtain.

**Gridiron-**A steel framework below the structural steel roof that serves as a working deck on which sheaves may be fastened either permanently or temporarily and through which ropes, either wire or hemp may be dropped for the suspension of scenery, lighting equipment, actors, and anything else which the performance may require to be suspended.

**head block-** the first pulley that the rope passes through, after leaving the flyman's hands. a multisheave block (one with two or more pulley wheels), used to change the direction of all the ropes or cables that support the batten.

**house curtain-**the prime masking between the auditorium and the stage. Hangs behind the proscenium opening. Opens to reveal the stage.

**Loading platform-**a steel gallery about 2'-6" wide hung between the gridiron and the head block I-beam below the level of the gridiron and the head block I-beams below the level of

the gridiron a distance which allows convenient loading of weights into carriages, i.e., level with the bottoms of the carriages when they are at the top of their run.

**loft block-** the pulley that the rope passes through directly above the load. It is usually on stage, and is associated with multi-line systems. A grooved pulley, mounted on top of the grid, used to change the direction in which a rope or cable travels.

**Manila rope-** is the strongest natural fiber rope derived from the leaves of the abaca plant. The fibers measure from three to eight feet in length.

**masking or teaser-**any piece of scenery or drapery used to cut off from view of the audience any part of the stage space that should not be seen by the spectators.

**Proscenium-**The wall that divides the stage from the auditorium. The opening through which the audience views the stage is called the proscenium arch.

**Pinrail-** The double rail that holds belaying pins on which fly lines are tied. The pinrail is located at the on stage edge of the fly floor on either or both sides of the stage.

**wing-**the offstage space to the right and left of the acting area. Entrances are made between wings, or exit "into wings"