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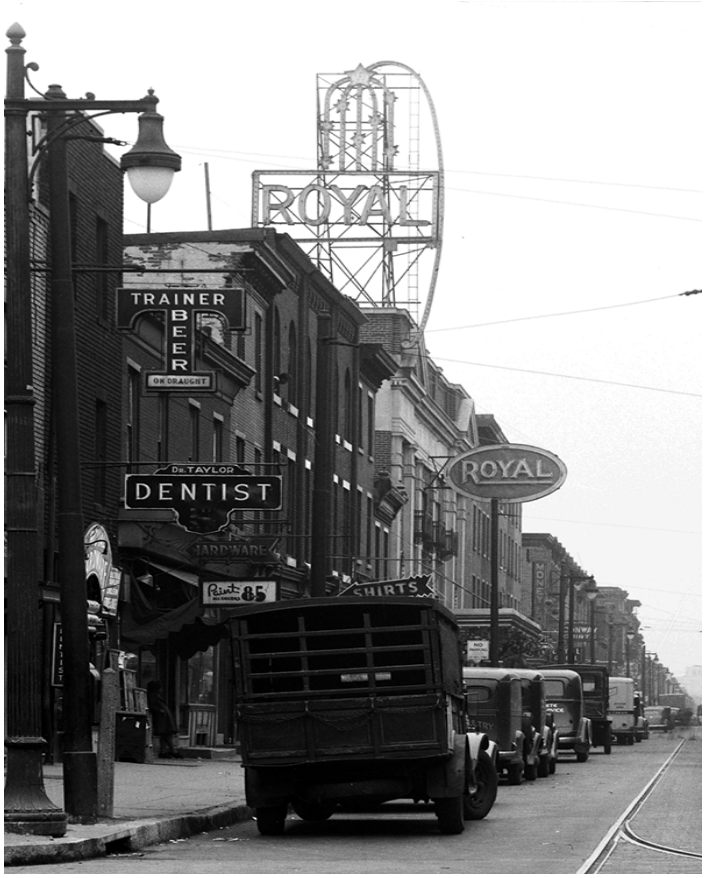
Historic Preservation Services

A Brief History Of The Royal Theater

PHILADELPHIA, PA



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On its opening in May of 1920, the Royal Theatre became a center of cultural expression – in film, theatre, music and dance – for Philadelphia's large and growing African American community. Advertising itself as "America's Finest Colored Photoplay House," the Royal was a place where black Philadelphians could freely enjoy entertainment created specifically for them. The Royal became notable not only as a venue for famous black performers and the screening of black-directed films, but also as a place of African-American empowerment. In an era when African Americans were rarely able to access forms of live entertainment available to whites, the Royal was a place where black Philadelphians could take ownership of their leisure time. Although the theatre thrived for fifty years, the proposed Crosstown Expressway, a highway that would have run straight down South Street, quickly precipitated the decline of the Royal, which finally closed in 1970. The theatre, despite its long abandonment, remains a symbol of black cultural life in Philadelphia and the thriving black community which once existed on South Street.

The Royal Theatre was built by Abraham Wax, president of Keamco, Inc., owner and operator of five theaters in Philadelphia and Atlantic City. To design the new building, Wax hired architect Frank E. Hahn (1879-1962), whom historian George Thomas notes is "among the many virtually unknown early 20th century Philadelphia architects whose work is consistently of interest."[1] Over the first decades of the twentieth century, Hahn designed a range of small to mid-sized projects throughout Philadelphia such as private residences, commercial buildings, apartments, institutional buildings and other small neighborhood theatres. For the Royal Theatre, Hahn created a two-story, five-bay wide Classical Revival composition with three large central arches (see Figure 1). The building was constructed with a steel frame and clad in red brick with limestone trimmings, including the two-story pilasters, a denticulated cornice and the pediments over the end bays. The building originally featured a large rectangular marquee projecting from the center three bays, but this was later replaced by a modern version, which also has been removed (see Figures 2-4). Noted theatre architect William Harold Lee designed the interior of the 1200-seat theatre, although little of his work remains today apart from remnants of a decorative plaster ceiling (see Figures 5 & 6). In addition to the Royal, another of Hahn's larger works includes the Young Men's Hebrew Association at Broad and Pine Streets, which was designed in a similar Classical Revival style and still stands today.

Although Abraham Wax was white, the audience he targeted for the Royal was the African-American community centered along South Street in the 7th and 30th Wards. In 1920, this area contained by far the greatest concentration of African-American residents in the city, making it the center of black cultural and business life.[2] At a time when blacks were either not allowed into theaters or were forced to sit in less desirable balcony seats, the Royal was revolutionary in providing a safe environment where a black audience could enjoy music and films created for them by black musical performers and directors.[3] As a reflection of its clientele, the Royal was one the first theaters to have an all-black staff; this group of projectionists, ushers and other staff founded their own Colored Motion Picture Operators Union in 1936.[4]

Created as a venue for musical and theatrical entertainment in addition to the screening of motion pictures, the Royal Theater hosted numerous influential African-American performers and showed films

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[1] National Register of Historic Places, Royal Theatre, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, National Register #80003619.

[2] Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920.

[3] Irvin R. Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1986): 204.

[4] *Opportunity, A Journal of Negro Life* 14 (January 1936): 94.

by several famous black directors over the course of its history. Between 1920 and 1970 the Royal offered live entertainment by such varied performers as Bessie Smith (1894-1937), considered one of the greatest blues singers of her era; Cab Calloway (1907-1994), a jazz singer and bandleader who was a regular at Harlem's Cotton Club; and actresses Pearl Bailey (1918-1990) and Della Reese (b. 1931). On at least one occasion, Count Basie, the famous jazz pianist, also performed at the Royal, on an evening of November of 1944.[5]

In its early years, the Royal also screened numerous silent films by director Oscar Micheaux, generally regarded as the first African-American filmmaker.[6] In 1927, the Royal was the first American theater to show *The House Behind the Cedars*, Micheaux's highly controversial exploration of a romantic relationship between a black man and a mixed-race woman who, by all outward appearances, was white.[7] Silent films such as those by Micheaux were often accompanied by live music. In 1928, Fats Waller, an influential African-American pianist, organist, singer and composer, took up a short-term job at the Royal, playing organ music composed for whichever film was playing at the time.[8]

Over the next three decades the Royal continued to screen films of vital importance to African Americans' sense of self and community. In 1942, the theatre premiered *In This Our Life*, one of the first films to depict African Americans in a "decent" way, overturning the "buffoon archetype," which had become ubiquitous in motion pictures. In 1944, the Royal also screened *The Negro Soldier*, director Frank Capra's look at the contributions of African Americans. As Javier Garcia writes in his study, "Re-remembering the Royal," the theatre "was at the forefront of visual representations of the African American community."[9]

In its later years, the Royal adapted to changing tastes in entertainment by showing boxing matches, including the fight between Sugar Ray Robinson and Roy Turpin in September of 1951. As reported by the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the theatre was at capacity that day, forcing management to install speakers outside where large crowds stood to listen to the highly anticipated fight, blocking traffic on South Street.[10]

Despite remaining popular through the 1950s, the Royal experienced a period of decline over the next decade, resulting in the theater's closure in 1970. In 1963, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission proposed a new highway called the Crosstown Expressway, or I-695, as part of their Center City Plan. Like the Vine Street Expressway, which spanned the full distance between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers, the Crosstown would have transformed the entire stretch of South Street into a sunken highway to connect I-95 and I-76 south of Center City. The idea of the expressway had existed since the 1940s, spurring residents and businesses to abandon South Street even then, but after 1963 the commercial corridor on both sides of Broad Street experienced widespread disinvestment. With the almost sure

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[5] *The Billboard* (11 Nov 1944): 16.
[6] Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines and Charles Musser, *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Indiana University Press, 2001): 253-257.
[7] Charlene Regester, "Oscar Micheaux the Entrepreneur: Financing *The House Behind the Cedars*," in *Journal of Film and Video* 49 (Spring-Summer 1997): 24.
[8] Alyn Shipton, *Fats Waller, The Cheerful Little Earful* (New York: Continuum, 2002): 50.
[9] Garcia, 34.
[10] "Eager Throng in Vain Attempt to Enter Royal," *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 15, 1951, 1-2.

prospect of a highway that would destroy their neighborhood, residents and business owners along South Street, most of whom were Black, attempted to sell their properties.[11]

With residents fleeing and property values declining, the management had no choice but to close the Royal Theatre in 1968. Although the theater was briefly revived in 1969 by the Young Afro Americans, a "'community minded coalition' of South Philadelphia street gangs" who hoped to fund a renovation, the theatre closed for good in 1970.[12] Local property investor Michael Singer purchased the Royal in 1975 but, due to deferred maintenance under his ownership, the building suffered greatly. The *Philadelphia City Paper* described how Singer allowed the building to become a "hollowed-out shadow of the place it had once been. Trees were growing out of its brick masonry. Its proud marquee had long been removed as a public hazard. All of the theater's richly ornamental interior plaster had been ravaged by moisture, decayed and fallen from the ceiling and the walls" (see figures 7-8).[13]

With no plans to develop the site, in 1992 Singer sought a permit to demolish the Royal. The surrounding community rose to the building's defense, hoping rather that the theater would feature prominently along a revived South Street corridor. Neighbors and preservationists stalled Singer's demolition plans and in 1997, the city sued Singer for allowing the building to fall into disrepair. In 1998, the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia convinced Singer to sell the theater and adjacent properties to them for $350,000. The PAGP became temporary steward of the building until a permanent owner and developer could be found, placing an easement on the building to protect its facade. Although PAGP finally sold the theater to Kenny Gamble's Universal Community Homes in 2000, the building remains vacant fifteen years later. Still, the presence of the Royal Theatre façade on South Street endures as a powerful symbol of Philadelphia's thriving African American cultural life. As a result of its significance in this community, the Royal was listed individually on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

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[11] Marcus Anthony Hunter, *Black Citymakers: How* The Philadelphia Negro *Changed Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 115-116.
[12] Garcia, 35.
[13] Noel Weyrich, "Royally Screwed," *Philadelphia City Paper* (October 5-12, 2000).

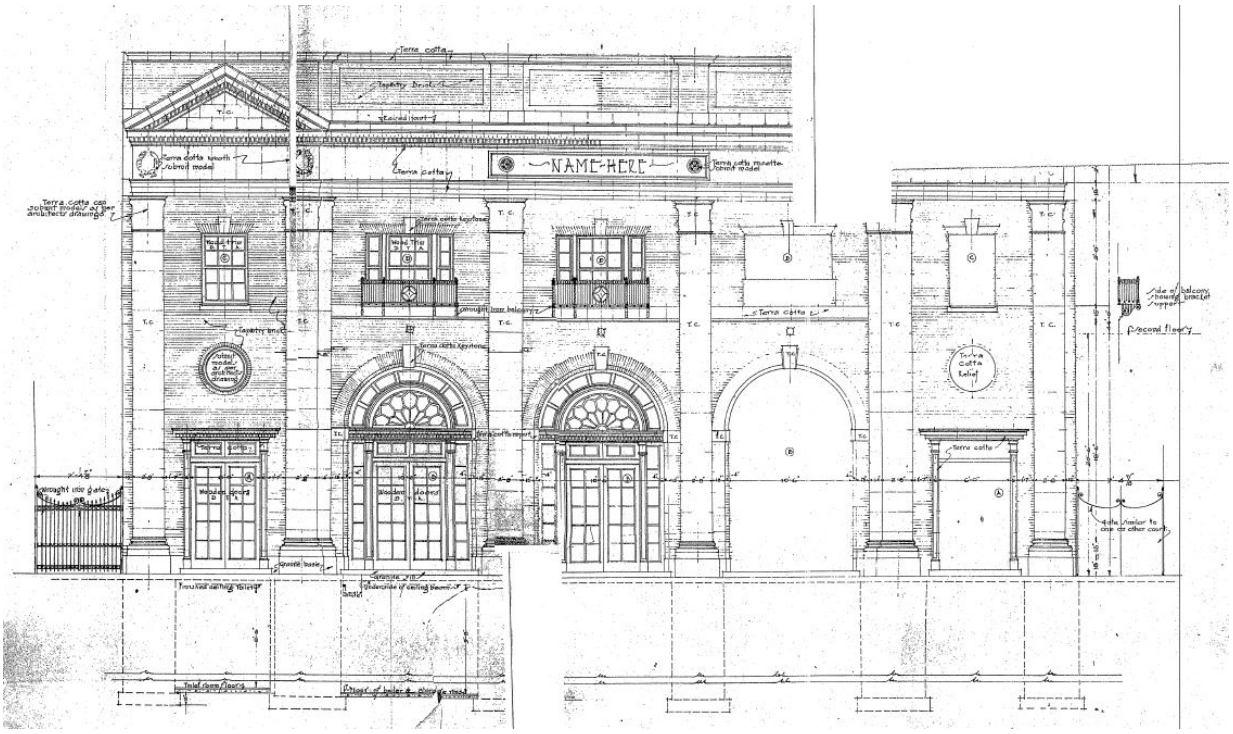

Figure 1 – Original Front Elevation Drawing by Frank E. Hahn, 1919

Figure 4 – Looking west on South Street from 15th Street, c. 1937
The original marquee and roof signage are visible.

Figure 2 – The Royal Theatre in 1971, shortly after closing.
(Temple University Archives)

Figure 3 – The Royal Theatre in 1979.
(George E. Thomas)

Figure 5 – The Interior of the Royal Theatre in 1979.
(George E. Thomas)

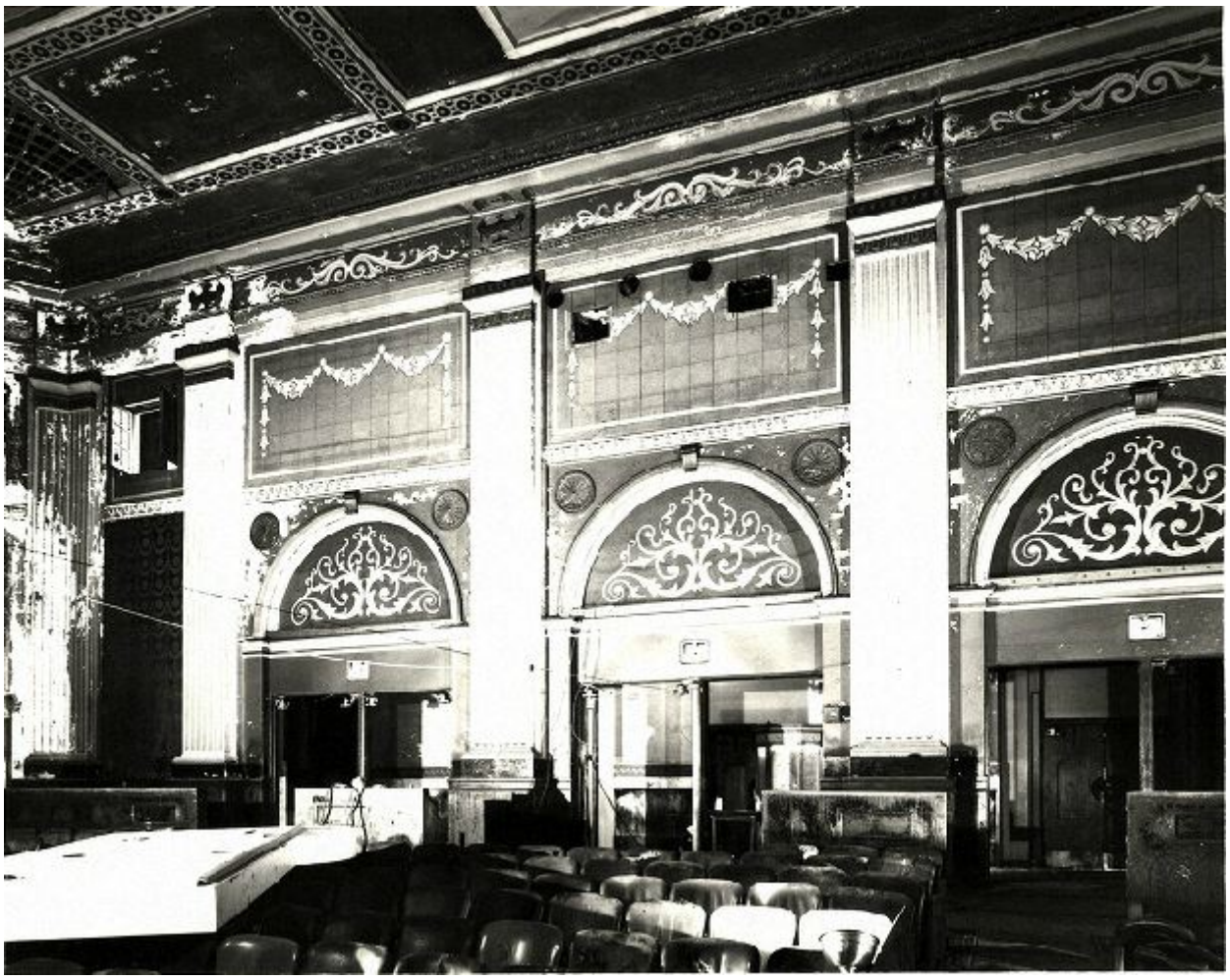

Figure 6 – The Interior of the Royal Theatre in 1979.
(George E. Thomas)

Figure 7 – The Interior of the Royal Theatre in 2014.
(Powers & Company)

Figure 8 – The Interior of the Royal Theatre in 2014.
(Powers & Company)