

**NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT  
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)  
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE**

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**1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE** (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)

Street address: **228-36 South 52nd Street**

Postal code: **19139-4003**

Councilmanic District: **3**

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**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: **The Locust Theatre**

Current/Common Name: **The Bushfire Theatre of the Performing Arts**

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**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Building

Structure

Site

Object

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**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Occupancy:

occupied

vacant

under construction

unknown

Current use: **Theater**

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**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

**See attached.**

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**6. DESCRIPTION**

**See attached.**

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**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

**See attached.**

Period of Significance (from year to year): from **1914** to **present**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1914, 1922**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **Stuckert & Sloan, Hoffman-Henon Company**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: **Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company**

Original owner: **George Felt (of the Felt Amusement Company.)**

Other significant persons: **Maurice Felt, Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger, William Freihofer.**

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

**See attached.**

**9. NOMINATOR**

Organization **N/A**

Date **Dec 26, 2017**

Name with Title **Noah Yoder**

Email **nkyoder@gmail.com**

Street Address **164 N. 3rd Street Apt. 3F**

Telephone **740-506-4227**

City, State, and Postal Code **19106-1876**

Nominator  is  is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: 12/26/2017

Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: 4/17/2018

Date of Notice Issuance: 5/14/2018

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts

Address: 228-36 S. 52nd Street

City: Philadelphia

State: PA

Postal Code: 19139

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: 6/20/2018

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: 11/9/2018

Date of Final Action: 11/9/2018

Designated

Rejected

## **5. Boundary Description**

All that certain lot or piece of ground with the buildings and improvements thereon erected, Situated at the Northwest corner of 52nd and Locust Streets, in the 60th Ward of the City of Philadelphia. Containing in front or breadth on the said 52nd Street ninety feet three inches and extending of that width in length or depth westwardly, the southernmost line along the North side of Locust Street, seventy feet (fig 1).<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Aerial photograph of the parcel, showing the boundary in red. Source: Philadelphia Water Department.

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<sup>1</sup> “Deed of Sale from John C. Boyle to Alfred Simpkins,” (Philadelphia, PA), May 23, 1985, no. 42059685, book 155, 536.

## **6. Building Description**

The Locust Theatre building is located at 228-36 South 52nd Street in the Cobbs Creek neighborhood of West Philadelphia. It is a part of the 52nd street “strip,” a prominent commercial district that serves several West Philadelphia neighborhoods. The building is currently known as “The Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts,” but in this nomination will be referred to by its original name, “The Locust Theatre.”

The one-story building was built in the Beaux-Arts classical style and features a hipped roof, a cornice, and a parapet (fig 2). The facade features granite and tan brick components, but is primarily defined by its extensive use of terra cotta ornament glazed to resemble stone (fig 3). The three public-facing sides of the building are divided into a chamfered entry elevation and seven bays articulated from one another by rusticated Piers. The south-facing elevation features three bays, while the east-facing elevation features four (fig 4).

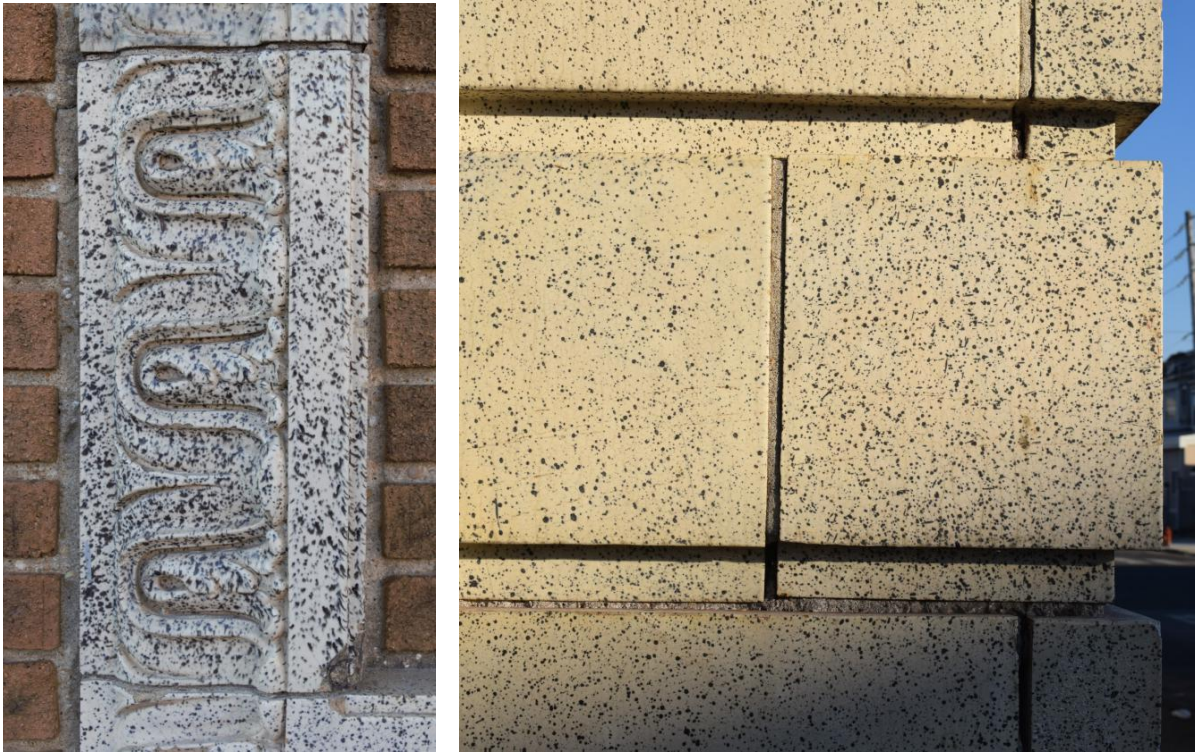


**Figure 2.** The Locust Theatre building, now called the Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts.<sup>2</sup>

All seven bays are composed of either a granite base or stairs mounted by a brick field containing either a set of doors or a poster case (fig 4). The brick fields are traced by a terra cotta waterleaf banding crested by a rosette (fig 5). Just under the entablature on each bay is a set of three square windows divided by ornate mullions (fig 5, 6). The piers are composed of a stone base beneath a field of rusticated terra cotta masonry, topped with a terra cotta cartouche featuring a lyre motif (fig 7). Each pier projects through the cornice, terminating in a plinth decorated with a rosette and garlands, and crested by scrollwork that once held a globe light (fig 7).

<sup>2</sup> All photographs by author, December 2017, unless otherwise noted.





**Figure 3.** Two close ups of the Locust's white and black speckled terra cotta, meant to resemble stone.



**Figure 4.** The west and south facing facades of the Locust, featuring seven bays separated by rusticated piers.

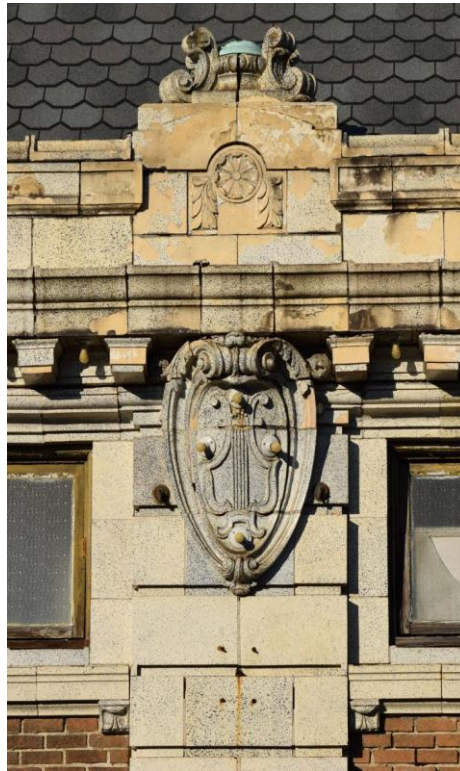




**Figure 5.** A detail of one of the Locust's bays featuring the waterleaf banding and row of windows common to all seven bays.



**Figure 6.**  
An example of the Locust's decorative mullions.



**Figure 7.** The top of one of the Locust's piers, featuring a cartouche with a lyre pattern and a decorative plinth that once held a globe light. Note the light bulbs still embedded in the cartouche and between the corbels.

The masonry of the chamfered front of the Locust Theatre is entirely terra cotta. Two rusticated piers support a broad entablature (fig 8). Between the piers is a row of three arched windows with alternating Doric pilasters (fig 9). The entablature includes a decorative frieze emblazoned with “THE LOCUST,” and is terminated by cartouches at either end (fig 10). These cartouches are adorned with garlands and once anchored chains supporting the Theatre’s original marquee (fig 11). Egg-and-dart molding runs along the top of the frieze where corbels support a cornice, which is in turn capped by a parapet and a great central cartouche. This cartouche is ornamented with garlands and scrollwork, as well as a mascaroon and scallop shell motif. Two classical figures flank the cartouche, the left holding a harp, and the right holding a lyre (fig 12, 13). Regrettably, the two figures have been removed from the waist up. Below the chamfered elevation’s terra cotta facade is a contemporary stick built entry, the most recent of many permutations of the Locust’s marquee (fig. 2, 14, 15).



**Figure 8.** The Locust’s chamfered front entry done entirely in terra cotta.

As with the marquee, the Locust Theatre’s original design included several grandiose elements that have been altered or removed in the Theatre’s long history. The interior was lined with crystal sconces and silk panels, and had a seating capacity of 700.<sup>3</sup> At night, the exterior of the building was lit by globe lights that topped each rusticated pier, along with numerous light bulbs embedded in the Theatre’s facade. Though these globes have been removed, the nonfunctioning light bulbs can still be seen on the Locust’s many cartouches and its cornice (fig 7). The arched windows above the main entry and those lining the underside of the cornice were originally decorated in heavily worked stained glass, but are now boarded or replaced.<sup>4</sup> Despite these losses, the majority of the Locust Theatre’s

<sup>3</sup> Irvin R. Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z: A Comprehensive, Descriptive Record of 813 Theatres Constructed Since 1724*, (Greenwood Press, 1986), 155.

<sup>4</sup> Glazer, *Theatres*, 155.



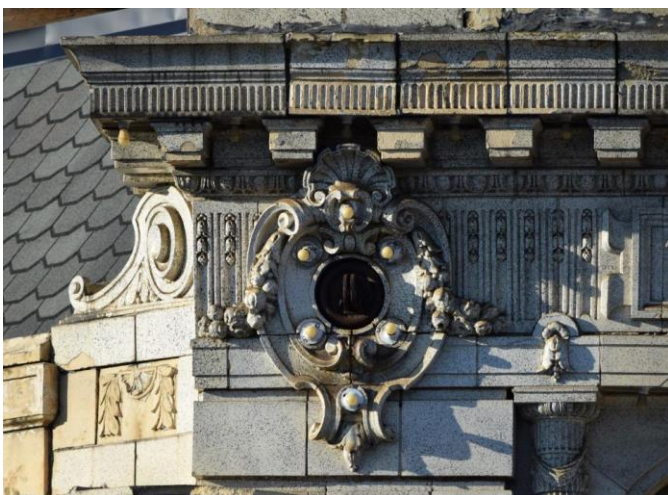
historical fabric remains intact, and the Theatre is easily capable of conveying its architectural significance.



**Figure 9.** The arched windows of the Locust's chamfered entry facade, flanked by Doric pilasters and studded with light bulbs.



**Figure 10.** The Locust's entablature.

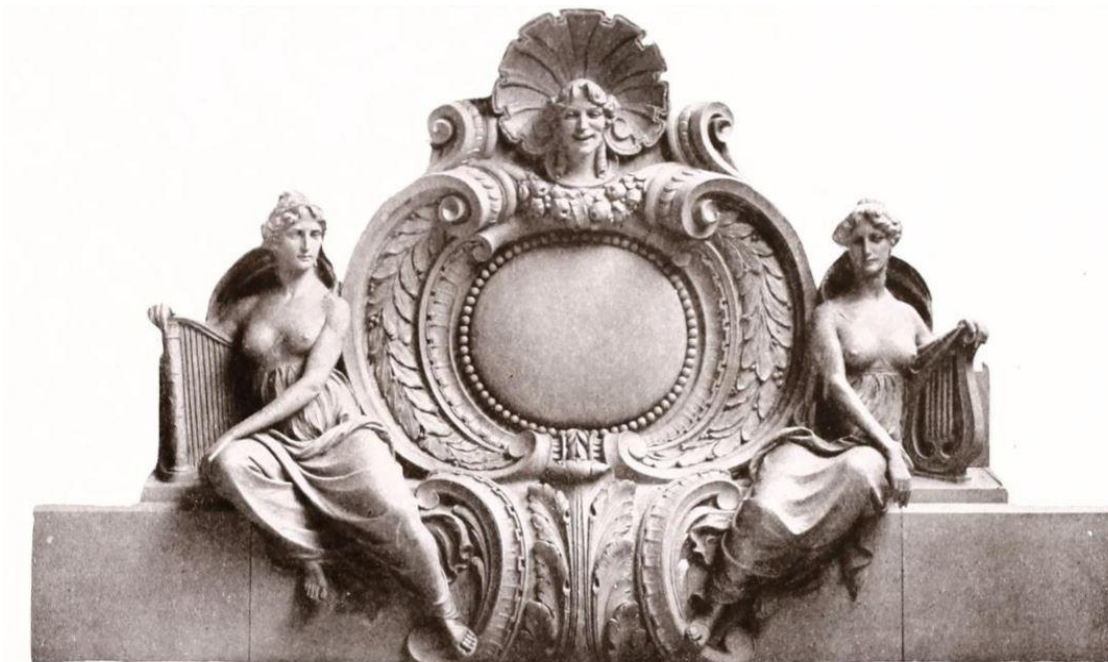


**Figure 11.** One of the Locust entablature's cartouches, originally the anchor point for a chain which supported the Theatre's original marquee.





**Figure 12.** Detail of the Locust's central cartouche as it appears today with the flanking figures incomplete. Compare with Figure 13.



**Figure 13.** The Locust's central cartouche as featured in Conkling-Armstrong's catalogue *Terra Cotta Details*. Source: Conkling-Armstrong, *Terra cotta details*.





**Figure 14.** A publicity stunt outside the Locust advertising the movie *Round Up* in 1920. The original marquee is visible in the background. Source: “Bushfire Theatre,” *Cinema Treasures*, accessed December 21, 2017. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3450/photos>.



**Figure 15.** The Locust Theatre in 1926. Source: “Bushfire Theatre,” *Cinema Treasures*, accessed December 21, 2017. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/3450/photos>.



## **7. Significance**

The Locust Theatre building at 228-36 S. 52nd Street on the corner of Locust and 52nd Streets meets the following criteria for designation as set forth in Section 14-2007(5) of the Philadelphia Code. The Theatre:

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past;
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen;
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; and
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.

**(a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past.**

and

**(j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.**

The Locust Theatre was built in 1914 as a small “moving picture theater” during the rise of neighborhood movie theaters at the beginning of the 20th century, as movies became an affordable form of entertainment. Though built by local theater chain the Felt Amusement Company, the Theatre was ultimately bought out by national chain owner Frederick Nixon-Nirdlinger, one of America’s most successful theater magnates. The Locust is emblematic of an era when national theater chains nearly monopolized the theater industry in America and controlled movie prices, showings, and schedules for entire regions.<sup>5</sup> The Locust is also associated with successful baker William Freihofer, and the Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts. Having entertained audiences for over a century, the Theatre exemplifies the development of the 52nd Street strip as a major cultural and commercial corridor of West Philadelphia.

### **Early Movie Theaters in Philadelphia**

In the late 19th century, Philadelphia’s entertainment industry was dominated by vaudeville houses, which provided entertainment to middle-class neighborhoods. These houses typically hosted shows by traveling theater troupes or individual performers, and the complexity of scheduling performances between multiple houses resulted in frequent double bookings and conspicuous vacancies that reduced their profitability.<sup>6</sup> The invention of moving pictures provided a solution to this loss of revenue by allowing vaudeville houses to show films between live shows, broadening their appeal to include the working class and pulling in more money.<sup>7</sup> Movies quickly became immensely profitable, and by 1910 their

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures, a History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.

affordability allowed them to rapidly surpass vaudeville as one of the nation's primary forms of public entertainment.<sup>8</sup>

At the peak of America's theater boom in the early 20th century, Philadelphia was a major hub of the entertainment industry. Two of the nation's largest theater chains, the Nixon & Zimmerman Company and the Stanley Corporation, were based out of Philadelphia and vied for control of theaters in the city and across the the U.S. The culture of one-upmanship between these and other companies propelled the construction of neighborhood theaters and facilitated the building of ever bigger and more lavish movie palaces throughout the city.

Neighborhood movie theaters were in such demand that hundreds were built in Philadelphia in the 25 years leading up to the Great Depression, and the rate of theater construction in Philadelphia was so rapid that the implementation of safety regulations could hardly keep pace.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the live theater venues that came before, neighborhood movie theaters were often squeezed into small lots with few modes of egress, and stored hundreds of rolls of flammable celluloid film.<sup>10</sup> Frequent mechanical explosions paired with dense crowds caused deadly theater fires across the nation.<sup>11</sup> In February 1914, less than a month before construction of the Locust was announced, Pennsylvania lawmakers met to implement a more stringent fire code for theaters.<sup>12</sup> In its first year, the Locust proudly advertised itself as fireproof, and featured six prominent exits on its public-facing facades and four more on its rear elevation (fig 4).<sup>13</sup>

It was common for the city's neighborhoods to have multiple movie theaters within walking distance, with some theaters positioned only a block or two apart. As a result, theaters often attempted to secure exclusive neighborhood rights to individual films or film studios in order to draw audiences.<sup>14</sup> Double features and variants in pricing also helped small theaters remain competitive. The working class drove the initial surge in movie theaters, with tickets costing as little as a nickel, but by the time the Locust was built in 1914, the theater industry had begun to take aim at the middle class by raising prices and building more lavish structures.<sup>15</sup> The Locust Theatre was part of this trend, with ticket prices set at ten and fifteen cents.<sup>16</sup>

### **The 52nd Street Strip**

The Locust Theatre is a relic of the meteoric rise of neighborhood movie theaters in Philadelphia, and has survived the gradual decline of America's theater industry over the latter half of the 20th century. Despite changing neighborhood demographics, the building has remained a venue for entertainment as a movie and legitimate theater for much of the 52nd Street corridor's history, outlasting every other theater on the strip.<sup>17</sup>

When the Locust was constructed in 1914, the surrounding area was a demographic mix of primarily Jewish and Black neighborhoods.<sup>18</sup> These neighborhoods had developed

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<sup>8</sup> "Moving Picture Business," *Gettysburg Compiler*, (Gettysburg, PA), June 16, 1909.

<sup>9</sup> Glazer, *Theatres*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> "Destructive Flames, Aided by Zero Temperature, Give Firemen Strenuous Battle in the Centre of City," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 19, 1912.

<sup>11</sup> "Considering Safety at Picture Shows," *Lebanon Daily News* (Lebanon, PA), February 26, 1914.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> "Review of Week in Real Estate, Sells Site For Theatre," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 14, 1914.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin B. Hampton, *History of The American Film Industry*, (Dover Publications, 1970), 252.

<sup>15</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> "Locust Theatre," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 16, 1916.

<sup>17</sup> "Legitimate Theater" is parlance for a live theater venue, used to differentiate live venues from movie theaters.

<sup>18</sup> "Haddington," *Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia*, last modified December 20, 2017.

<http://www.preservationalliance.com/explore-philadelphia/philadelphia-neighborhoods/haddington/>.

*The Locust Theatre*, 228-36 South 52nd Street, Nomination for the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places



only a decade prior when trolleys and elevated rail lines connected West Philadelphia with Center City.<sup>19</sup> 52nd Street quickly developed into a thriving commercial corridor and became the entertainment capital of West Philadelphia after five theaters were built there, including the Locust.<sup>20</sup>

The Locust Theatre's higher prices and status as a first-run theater from its opening through the 1920s indicate that it generally served the middle class residents of the area. During the Great Depression the Locust and other theaters began to play second run movies and double features to draw in audiences.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the Locust would have begun catering to the working class as well, most notably the Black population west of 52nd Street, which by 1940 was a major movie-going demographic of the area.<sup>22</sup>

From the 1940s through the 1960s, the demographics of the strip changed dramatically with the advent of white flight and redlining. Redlining was a racist policy wherein the federal government encouraged segregation by denying loans to Black people and guaranteeing loans to white people, effectively destroying the possibility of investment in Black communities.<sup>23</sup> By 1960, Black Philadelphians of modest to low income made up 80 percent of the area's residents.<sup>24</sup> The 52nd Street strip remained a stable commercial corridor throughout this demographic change, becoming a hub of Black culture that has long supported a number of Black-owned businesses.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the 1970s, the Locust Theatre maintained relevance in the community by frequently playing blaxploitation and international films prominently featuring Black characters (fig 16).<sup>26</sup> The blaxploitation genre included notable films like "Superfly" and "Sparkle," made primarily to entertain inner city Black audiences. While often criticized for reinforcing stereotypes, the genre also allowed Black political and social issues to be explored through cinema.



**Figure 16.** The Locust's *Philadelphia Inquirer* advertisement for *The Slams*, a 1973 blaxploitation film. Source: "The Slams," *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 26, 1973

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Theresa Stigale, "The Skinny-And Everything more-on 52nd Street," *Hidden City Philadelphia*, April 25, 2012, <https://hiddencityphila.org/2012/04/the-skinny-and-everything-more-on-52nd-street/>.

<sup>21</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> "Haddington" *Preservation Alliance*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Denise Crittendon, Who's Minding the store - Asians or African Americans?, *The Crisis*, no. 101, issue 7, 26. (1994).

<sup>26</sup> The Locust's movie selection in the 1970s was determined from an aggregate of advertisements posted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

In 1977 the Locust Theatre closed, like many other neighborhood theaters before it.<sup>27</sup> By this time, neighborhood theaters had lost out to more readily available forms of entertainment like television and the more profitable cinema multiplexes.<sup>28</sup> Fortunately, the Locust was closed for only two years before it reopened in 1980 as The Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts, featuring live entertainment and specializing in plays by Black playwrights. The Bushfire Theatre continues to entertain audiences in the Locust Theatre building, and has maintained the Theatre's status as a cultural landmark of the 52nd Street strip.

### Maurice Felt and The Felt Amusement Company

Construction of the Locust Theatre was a \$100,000 project of real estate developers George and Maurice Felt of the Felt Amusement Company, a family business that built and operated neighborhood movie theaters throughout Philadelphia (fig 17).<sup>29</sup> Though small in comparison to competing theater chains in the region, the company maintained enough capital to build the lavish Aldine Theatre on 19th and Chestnut Streets, which rivaled the size and opulence of movie palaces belonging to Philadelphia's larger theater chains (fig 18).<sup>30</sup> The Locust was part of the Felt's successful chain of neighborhood theaters in West Philadelphia where a majority of their theaters were located.<sup>31</sup>

By all accounts, the Locust was a success under the ownership of the Felt Amusement Company. The Theatre was known to show high quality silent films<sup>32</sup> and was equipped with a well-praised \$15,000 Kimball organ to accompany them.<sup>33</sup> The Locust also occasionally obtained exclusive West Philadelphia rights to first run showings of popular movies, including *The Fireman* starring Charlie Chaplin.<sup>34</sup> Although designed as a motion picture venue, the Locust Theatre also served as a meeting place for the West Philadelphia branch of the YMCA.<sup>35</sup> Neighborhood evangelistic lectures were regularly held there, with titles ranging from "Mobilizing Against King Alcohol"<sup>36</sup> to "Cannibalism and Christianity."<sup>37</sup> Despite the Theatre's success, the Felt Amusement Company sold the Locust Theatre to theater magnate Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger and Baker William Freihofer for just under \$100,000 in 1917, a mere three years after the building's construction.<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 17.** Local theater chain owner Maurice Felt (left) and his family. Source: "Divorcee Charged With Murder of Realtor; Held Without Bail," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 6, 1925.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas J. Keating, "Bushfire Gets Own Theater" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 22, 1979.

<sup>28</sup> Harold J. Wiegand, "Lights Out For Area Theaters," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 13, 1978.

<sup>29</sup> "'Aldine' Theatre for Jayne Mansion Site," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 12, 1921.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Local Movie Matters" *Evening Public Ledger*, (Philadelphia, PA), September 4, 1915.

<sup>33</sup> "Locust Theatre," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 16, 1916.

<sup>34</sup> "The Film Drama" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 11, 1916.

<sup>35</sup> Determined from an aggregate of advertisements in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

<sup>36</sup> "Y.M.C.A." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 5, 1917.

<sup>37</sup> "Talk on Cannibals" *Evening Public Ledger*, (Philadelphia, PA) December 4, 1915.

<sup>38</sup> "Locust Theatre Changes Hands" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 15, 1917.





**Figure 18.** The Aldine Theatre on 19th and Chestnut Streets. Part of the Felt Amusement Company’s chain of Philadelphia Theaters.<sup>39</sup>



Many members of the Felt family played a role in the Felt Amusement Company, but the operation was chiefly run by Maurice Felt, whose death made headlines when he was shot through the head in 1925. Felt, a married man, was blackmailed after an affair with “pretty divorcee” Lillian Emanuel, who allegedly proclaimed only three weeks prior: “He’s going to pay me the lump sum of money he promised me, or I’m going to knock him off” (fig 19).<sup>40</sup> After Felt was found dead in her apartment, it was revealed that Emanuel had also taken out a life insurance policy on Felt to the sum of \$25,000.<sup>41</sup> Emanuel was acquitted after a widely publicized trial in which she suffered two dramatic fainting spells. Felt’s death was attributed to “person or persons unknown.”<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 19.** Maurice Felt’s lover Lillian Emanuel, who was accused of blackmailing and murdering him in 1925. Source: “Emanuel Freed,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1925.

### Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger

Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger (fig 20) was the son of Samuel F. Nixon of the Nixon & Zimmerman Company, a key player in a theater syndicate that monopolized the American vaudeville business from 1896 to 1910.<sup>43</sup> The syndicate eventually dissolved, but Nixon & Zimmerman retained ownership of major theaters across Philadelphia, including the Academy of Music, the Park Theatre, and the Broad Street Theatre (fig 21).<sup>44</sup> Nixon-Nirdlinger began taking over his father’s work and managing theaters of his own in 1896. He gained rapid success in his own right, ultimately taking over management of Nixon &

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Lillian Emanuel, Wed Here, Refused Freedom When Brother of Maurice Felt Tells of Threat.”, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, October 6, 1925.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Lillian Emanuel Freed as Felt Inquest Jury Returns Open Verdict,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 20, 1925.

<sup>43</sup> Isaac Frederick Marcossou and Daniel Frohman, *Charles Frohman: Manager and Man*, (Harper & Brothers, 1916),186-187.

<sup>44</sup> “F. G. Nixon-Nirdlinger Slain By Shot At Home In France; Wife, Pageant Beauty, Held,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1931.

Zimmerman's Philadelphia holdings entirely.<sup>45</sup> In 1913 he issued a complaint to the US Department of Justice against his strongest regional competitor, Marcus Leow, alleging that Leow was maintaining a monopoly over the American vaudeville industry.<sup>46</sup> Leow ultimately forfeited his stock in Philadelphia's Metropolitan and Chestnut Street opera houses to his rival, briefly granting Nixon-Nirdlinger control over every major theater in the city.<sup>47</sup>

As cinema began to take hold as an inexpensive and popular alternative to live theater, Nixon-Nirdlinger began to build and buy up dozens of movie theaters across the region to keep pace with growing national theater chains such as the Stanley Corporation, which began building movie palaces in Center City.<sup>48</sup> The Locust Theatre was one of several venues purchased by Nixon-Nirdlinger to help corner the movie theater market near the 52nd Street strip. Under his management, the Locust had the distinction of being West Philadelphia's outlet for Paramount Pictures<sup>49</sup> and also began serving as a second-run theater to the larger Nixon Theater just a few blocks north.<sup>50</sup> Nixon-Nirdlinger eventually had the Theatre wired for sound and instigated a policy of two day showings for popular films.<sup>51</sup>

Nixon-Nirdlinger's theater empire fell apart when he was slain by his third wife, actress and former Miss St. Louis beauty champion, Charlotte Nash (fig 22). The two met during the 1923 Miss America pageant in which Nixon-Nirdlinger was a judge and Nash a contestant. Though she did not win the contest, Nixon-Nirdlinger vowed to make Nash a movie star, not only offering her a job, but funding her attendance at finishing school.<sup>52</sup> Despite a 34 year age gap, the two eventually entered into an ill-fated marriage in 1924. On their honeymoon, Nash had a chance encounter with Nixon-Nirdlinger's second wife and discovered that the theater magnate had not yet filed for divorce and both women were married to him simultaneously.<sup>53</sup> Nash was furious and fled home to St. Louis where Nixon-Nirdlinger could not follow due to a warrant for his arrest for failing to pay child support.<sup>54</sup> The two eventually reconciled, only to divorce two years later, and then remarry two years after that.<sup>55</sup>



**Figure 20.** Frederick G. Nixon Nirdlinger, a Philadelphia theater magnate who operated one of the most successful theater chains in American history. Source: "Manager Has Birthday," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 4, 1929.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Larry J. Hoefling, *Nils Thor Granlund: Show Business Entrepreneur and America's First Radio Star*, (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 39.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Hampton, *American Film Industry*, 252.

<sup>49</sup> "Nirdlinger Leases Locust Theatre," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 5, 1917.

<sup>50</sup> Glazer, *Theatres*, 155.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Lillian Vergara, "only \$15,000 For the Beauty Who Married Millions," *Albuquerque Journal*, July 28, 1940.

<sup>53</sup> "Nirdlinger Slain" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1931.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 21.** The Broad Street Theatre, one of Nixon & Zimmerman’s Philadelphia theaters. Note the Moorish Revival style.<sup>56</sup>

Nixon-Nirdlinger was notably obsessive and controlling of Nash. Beyond managing her career and education, he hired a private detective to track her movements out of constant fear of infidelity.<sup>57</sup> While living in Nice, France in 1931, Nixon-Nirdlinger, suspecting an affair, instigated a jealous argument that turned violent when he strangled and beat Nash, who drew a gun and fatally shot him through the head.<sup>58</sup> The incident and ensuing trial made headlines across America for months, and resulted in Nash’s acquittal on grounds of self-defense. The prosecution claimed Nash “was too beautiful to be bad.”<sup>59</sup> She eventually moved back to the United States, but found herself blacklisted from film and theater productions due to the scandal and was ultimately unable to maintain her acting career.<sup>60</sup>

After his death, Nixon-Nirdlinger’s theater empire dissolved, and his assets were divided between his three wives and five children. His legacy to Philadelphia’s theater scene was overshadowed by the enduring success of the Stanley Corporation, the largest theater operator in the nation.<sup>61</sup> Many of Nixon-Nirdlinger’s Philadelphia theaters have been demolished or altered beyond recognition, but the Locust Theatre retains a remarkable amount of original detail and stands testament to one of the America’s greatest theater empires.



**Figure 22.** Beauty queen and actress Charlotte Nash, who in 1931 killed her husband Nixon-Nirdlinger in self defense. Source: “Charlotte Nash, 17, is Miss St. Louis in 1923,” *exploregam.com*, accessed December 21, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> “Broad Street Theatre, Philadelphia” *Free Library of Philadelphia*, accessed December 21, 2017. <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/digital/item/pdcc00103>.

<sup>57</sup> Vergara, “\$15,000.”

<sup>58</sup> “Nirdlinger Slain” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1931.

<sup>59</sup> “Takes Jury Ten Minutes to Acquit US Beauty,” *The Central New Jersey Home News*, (New Brunswick, NJ) May 20, 1913.

<sup>60</sup> Vergara, “\$15,000.”

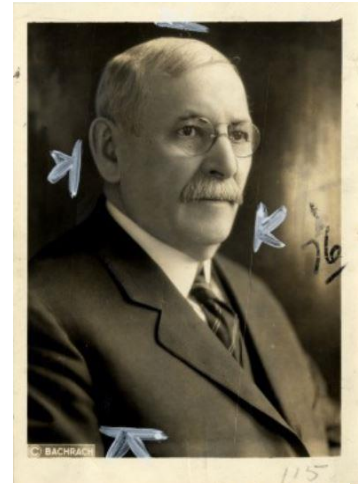
<sup>61</sup> Shawn Evans, “Historic Movie Theaters of Center City,” (2011), *Philly History Blog*, accessed December 21, 2017. <https://www.phillyhistory.org/blog/index.php/2011/02/historic-movie-theaters-of-center-city/>.

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## William Freihofer

William Freihofer, who shared ownership of the Locust Theatre with Nixon-Nirdlinger, was also the founder of the highly successful Freihofer Baking Company and an investor in West Philadelphia businesses (fig 23).<sup>62</sup> In 1894, Freihofer and his brother Charles began baking and distributing bread in Camden, and by 1900 they had moved their operation to North Philadelphia under the name of the Freihofer Vienna Baking Company.<sup>63</sup> Considered in the late 1920s to be “the nation’s greatest bakery system,” the Freihofer Baking Company was a pioneer in large-scale baking methods and motorized delivery service, and had branches in sixteen cities across the northeast United States.<sup>64</sup> In Philadelphia, the company distributed 50,000 loaves of bread a day with a motorized fleet of 759 trucks, providing uncommonly fast and quality service for the time.<sup>65</sup>

Besides baking, Freihofer dabbled in other businesses, including banking and theater. As the president and director of an ever-shifting array of banks based out of 52nd Street,<sup>66</sup> he was a significant figure along the strip throughout the 1920s and co-owned the Locust Theatre and the nearby Nixon Theater as well.<sup>67</sup> Freihofer was a friendly theater rival and business associate with Nixon-Nirdlinger, and operated his own local chain of movie theaters in Philadelphia.<sup>68</sup> He is known to have built the Roosevelt and New Frankford Theatres on Frankford Avenue<sup>69</sup> as well as a theater on North Broad.<sup>70</sup>



**Figure 23.** Noted Philadelphia baker William Freihofer, who was part owner of the Locust Theatre. Source: “William Freihofer,” *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*.

## The Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts

After Freihofer died in 1932, the Locust Theatre was sold on behalf of both his and the Nixon-Nirdlinger estates to Delaware County resident John C. Boyle.<sup>71</sup> Boyle’s company, the 52nd and Locust Theatre Corporation, operated the Locust from 1946<sup>72</sup> until his death in 1976.<sup>73</sup> The Locust Theatre laid vacant for two years before reopening as a legitimate theater called the Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts in 1980.<sup>74</sup> Alfred Simpkins, director of the Bushfire Theatre Company, purchased the Locust through the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority<sup>75</sup> and took on the huge task of repairing and retrofitting the badly

<sup>62</sup> *Deed of Sale from Henry and Hanna Felt to William Freihofer and Fred G. Nixon-Nirdlinger*, (Philadelphia, PA), September 13, 1917, City of Philadelphia Department of Records, City Archives.

<sup>63</sup> “William Freihofer,” *The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Digital History Projects*, accessed December 20, 2017. <https://digitalhistory.hsp.org/bnkr/person/william-freihofer>.

<sup>64</sup> “Quality and Service Place Freihofer Baking Company Products Into Thousands of Homes in Lehigh Valley,” *The Morning Call*, (Allentown, PA), May 19, 1928.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> “William Freihofer,” *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*.

<sup>67</sup> “Warner Buys Four Theatres for \$1,645,000,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 20, 1934.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> “New Theatre For Oak Lane,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 21, 1928.

<sup>71</sup> *Deed of Sale from Henry J. Alker Jr -Executor to John C. Boyle*, (Philadelphia, PA), November 12, 1946, City of Philadelphia Department of Records, City Archives.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> “John C. Boyle, Accountant, 78” *Delaware County Daily Times*, (Chester, PA) June 19, 1976.

<sup>74</sup> Glazer, *Theatres*, 155.

<sup>75</sup> “Deed of sale from John C. Boyle to Alfred Simpkins,” *PhilaDox Eweb*.

vandalized building to accommodate stage productions. Over the course of a year, Simpkins installed and covered 442 seats, removed the movie screen and installed a stage suitable for live theater.<sup>76</sup> The Company also removed an inappropriately scaled marquee and vertical neon sign that had been installed on the Theatre in the 1950s, and has faithfully maintained the historical integrity of the building (fig 24).<sup>77</sup>

The Bushfire Theatre Company was originally run out of Temple University and staged original plays by Black playwrights.<sup>78</sup> The Company has continued its mission with a resident ensemble of professional actors on 52nd Street and expanded beyond the Locust Theatre building to include workshops and residencies elsewhere on the block.<sup>79</sup> The Bushfire Theatre of the Performing Arts has been performing for over thirty years, keeping the spirit of the Locust Theatre alive as a cultural cornerstone of the strip.



**Figure 24.** The Locust Theatre in 1985, still sporting its 1950s marquee and neon sign. Source: “Bushfire” *Cinema Treasures*.

**(c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style.**  
**(d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen.**

and

**(e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation.**

Early movie theaters indiscriminately used opulent architecture in both rich and poor neighborhoods and drew from a wide array of architectural styles. Despite being outstanding examples of early 20th century architecture, most of Philadelphia’s over 400 movie theaters have been demolished or incautiously altered to accommodate new uses.<sup>80</sup> The Locust Theatre not only survives, but still retains much of its original terra cotta, Beaux-Arts classical detail and typifies the high architectural standard to which neighborhood movie theaters were held. The Theatre is clad in terra cotta ornament by the Conkling-Armstrong

<sup>76</sup> Keating, “Own Theater.”

<sup>77</sup> Glazer, *Theatres*, 155.

<sup>78</sup> Keating, “Own Theater.”

<sup>79</sup> “Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts History,” *Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts*, Accessed December 21, 2017, <http://www.bushfiretheatre.org/history>.

<sup>80</sup> Rachel Hildebrandt, “How to Spot a Theater,” (2013), *Hidden City Philadelphia*, accessed Dec 21, 2017. <https://hiddencityphila.org/2013/05/how-to-spot-a-theater/>.



Terra Cotta Company, and is the work of noted Philadelphia architectural firms Stuckert & Sloan, and later the Hoffman-Henon Company.

### **Beaux-Arts and Early Movie Theater Architecture.**

The Locust Theatre is a beautiful example of Beaux-Arts architecture, a prominent architectural style from the 1890s through 1930, and named for the French school of architecture, l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts.<sup>81</sup> It was introduced to the US by American architects who attended the school in the late nineteenth century, and gained widespread popularity after Beaux-Arts design was featured prominently in the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exhibition.<sup>82</sup>

Beaux-Arts was partly a revival movement which drew heavily from Imperial Roman, Italian Renaissance, and Baroque architectural styles to create buildings characterized by their symmetry, grandiosity and classical detailing.<sup>83</sup> Beyond its symmetrical Italian Renaissance form, the Locust bears several hallmarks of Beaux-Arts design, including a low-pitched roof, rusticated masonry, and a grand monumental entry facade; classical ornamentation abounds, and the Theatre boasts cartouches, sculptural figures and garlands common to the style (fig 8).

The revival element of Beaux-Arts architecture and its ornate tendencies made it an ideal style for theaters, which regularly utilized opulent or exotic architecture as a way to draw audiences. Early movie theaters were frequently fashioned after mosques, ancient Egyptian temples, and other structures that would otherwise be out of place on the streets of Philadelphia (fig 21).<sup>84</sup> It was common for neighborhood movie theaters to sport lavish and costly architecture in even the poorest areas of the city, and the extensive surface decoration of the Locust exemplifies the ornamentation typically invested in smaller neighborhood theaters.<sup>85</sup> Even when it was first built, the Locust Theatre would have stood out as a lavish, imposing landmark among the surrounding row homes.

### **Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company**

The elaborate terra cotta work that makes the Locust Theatre so visually distinctive is the work of the Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company, a crucial business in the construction industry of Philadelphia from 1895 to 1941. Touting their product as “[possessing] advantages over all other materials,”<sup>86</sup> Conkling-Armstrong was responsible for the ornamentation of a number of important buildings in the city, including the Witherspoon Building,<sup>87</sup> Curtis Publishing House,<sup>88</sup> and the Drexel Institute (fig 25).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> “Beaux Arts Style 1885 - 1930,” *Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission*, accessed December 21, 2017. <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/architecture/styles/beaux-arts.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Shawn Evans, “Neighborhood Movie Theaters,” (2011), Hidden City Philadelphia, accessed December 21, 2017. <https://www.phillyhistory.org/blog/index.php/2011/06/neighborhood-movie-theaters/>.

<sup>85</sup> Eliot Stein, “We Had Theatres Then” *The Village Voice*, (New York, NY), May 26, 1981.

<sup>86</sup> Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company, *Terra cotta details: Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Co., Philadelphia*, (Columbia University Printers, 1914), 1.

<sup>87</sup> “Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company Projects” *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, accessed December 21, 2017. [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display\\_projects.cfm#Projects](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display_projects.cfm#Projects).

<sup>88</sup> “Among Philadelphia Brickmakers” *The Clay Worker*, Vol 11, (1909), 411.

<sup>89</sup> “T.F. Armstrong Dies at Age of 84,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 9, 1953.



**Figure 25.** The elaborate entry of the Drexel Institute, done in Conkling-Armstrong terra cotta. Source: Author, 2017.

The reuse of existing molds was a common cost-cutting service offered to architects by terra cotta manufacturers.<sup>90</sup> While this could be the case with some of the Locust's more standard surface decoration, the Locust Theatre's most show-stopping details were custom-made. This includes the cartouches capping each pier and much of the work on the chamfered entry elevation (fig 7,8). The Theatre's most unique attribute, the mascarón-topped cartouche flanked by two classical nudes, was sufficiently impressive to merit reproduction in Conkling-Armstrong's catalogue of terra cotta details (fig 13).<sup>91</sup>

Like the Locust, theaters across the US were graced with eye-catching terra cotta ornament. Neighborhood movie theaters were among the first lavish buildings made primarily for the middle and working class,<sup>92</sup> and terra cotta offered a cheap alternative to stone that could deliver otherwise expensive decoration at low cost.<sup>93</sup> Terra cotta also came in a wide variety of glazes and styles, allowing theater architects to experiment with whimsical or exotic designs, like Art Deco, which came to be associated with theater architecture.<sup>94</sup> The Locust Theatre is a remarkably intact example of Conkling-Armstrong's work and a testament to the the importance of terra cotta to the theater industry and the city of Philadelphia.

### **Stuckert & Sloan**

The Locust Theatre was designed by Stuckert & Sloan, an architecture firm specializing in restaurants and buildings for the dairy industry between 1910 and 1915.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Susan Tunick, "Architectural Terra Cotta: 1900-1990," *The Studio Potter*, accessed December 21, 2017. <https://studiopotter.org/architectural-terra-cotta-1900-1990>.

<sup>91</sup> Conkling-Armstrong, *Terra Cotta Details*, 32, Plate 14.

<sup>92</sup> Stein "Had Theatres."

<sup>93</sup> Tunick, "Architectural Terra Cotta"

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> "Stuckert and Sloan Biography," *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, accessed December 21, 2017. [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display.cfm/25245](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/25245).

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While Stuckert & Sloan did design several Gothic style churches and an Art Deco automat, their work was predominantly Beaux-Arts classicism (fig 26, 27).<sup>96</sup> Many of their buildings were distinctly corporate, including office buildings, factories, and several restaurants for the Horn & Hardart company, for whom they designed numerous buildings in Philadelphia and New York.<sup>97</sup>



**Figure 26.** An Art Deco automat designed by Stuckert & Sloan for the Horn & Hardart Company, 818 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia. Source: Author, 2017.



**Figure 27.** A Beaux-Arts storefront designed by Stuckert & Sloan, 134-36 S. Market Street (on S. 2<sup>nd</sup> near the corner of Market Street). Source: Author, 2017.

The firm is known to have designed at least five Philadelphia movie theaters, three of which are extant: the Logan, the Strand, and the Locust.<sup>98</sup> Stuckert & Sloan’s design for the Logan has been entirely replaced by an art deco facade, while the Strand is largely altered by a layer of formstone retaining only a few Beaux-Arts terra cotta elements (fig 28).<sup>99</sup> Despite some losses to the firm’s original design, the majority of the Locust’s exterior remains intact and appears much the same today as it did in its first decade. In addition to being the best surviving example of Stuckert & Sloan’s theater designs, the Locust Theatre is arguably their finest extant work in Philadelphia.

<sup>96</sup> “Stuckert and Sloan Projects,” *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, accessed December 21, 2017. [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display\\_projects.cfm/25245](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display_projects.cfm/25245).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> “Movie Theaters Designed by Stuckert & Sloan,” *Cinema Treasures*, accessed December 21, 2017. <http://cinematreasures.org/firms/1101?status=all>.

<sup>99</sup> “Strand Theatre,” *Cinema Treasures*, accessed December 21, 2017. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/43081/photos>.





**Figure 28.** The former Strand Theatre, now clad in formstone, 1200-02 W. Girard Avenue. Source: “Bushfire,” *Cinema Treasures*.

### Hoffman-Henon Company

By the 1920s, moviegoers had come to expect a lavish theater environment and vibrant illuminated signage on movie theaters. In 1922 the already luminous Locust Theatre was upgraded with additional globe lights, a lit vertical sign, and a new marquee to satisfy prevailing tastes (fig 29).<sup>100</sup> These and other new elements were designed by the prominent Hoffman-Henon Company, a prodigious designer of over 100 theaters, ranging from small neighborhood venues to grand Movie Palaces.<sup>101</sup> Responsible for around forty-six theaters in Philadelphia alone, the company’s most notable accomplishments were the lavish Boyd and Mastbaum Theatres (fig 30).<sup>102</sup>

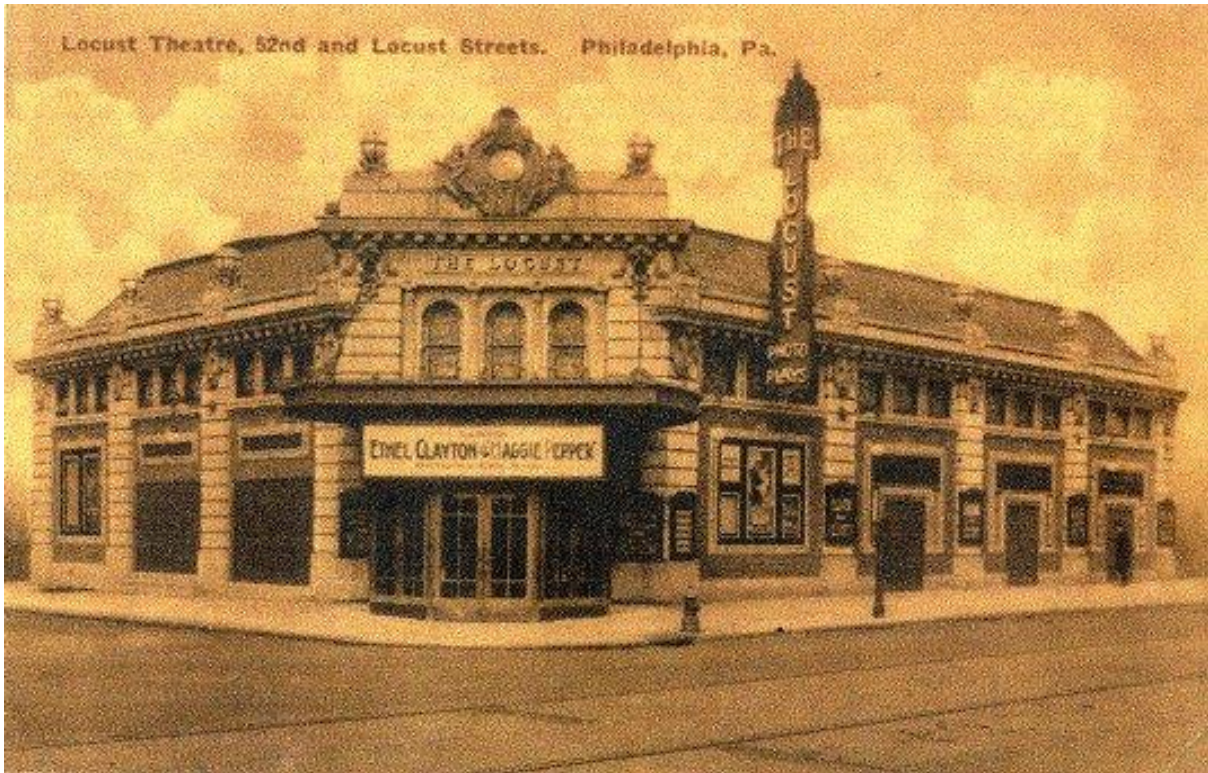
As one of Philadelphia’s most prominent theater owners, Nixon-Nirdlinger was familiar with Hoffman-Henon’s work and commissioned the company to design his Atlantic City home.<sup>103</sup> While it remains unknown if Hoffman-Henon was the principal designer for any of Nixon-Nirdlinger’s theaters, the company was responsible for a number of remodels to his theater holdings throughout the twenties.

<sup>100</sup> “Locust Theatre,” *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, accessed December 21, 2017. [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj\\_display.cfm/6511](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/pj_display.cfm/6511).

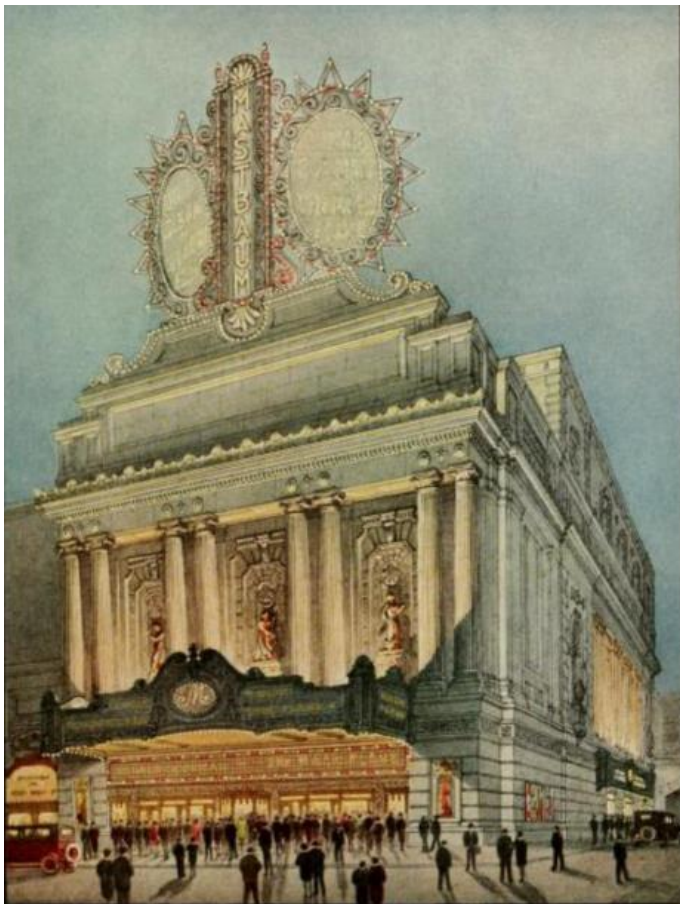
<sup>101</sup> Evans, “Theaters of Center City.”

<sup>102</sup> “Movie Theaters Designed by Hoffman-Henon Co.,” *Cinema Treasures*, accessed December 21, 2017. <http://cinematreasures.org/firms/30?status=all>.

<sup>103</sup> “Hoffman-Henon Co.,” *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, accessed December 21, 2017. [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display\\_projects.cfm#Projects](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display_projects.cfm#Projects).



**Figure 29.** A 1920s postcard featuring the Locust Theatre with a marquee and sign designed by Hoffman-Henon. “Bushfire,” *Cinema Treasures*.



**Figure 30.** A postcard of the Mastbaum Theatre, once one of the nation’s largest theaters, and one of Hoffman-Henon’s grandest designs. Source: “Mastbaum Theatre,” *Cinema Treasures*, accessed December 21, 2017. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/1207/photos>.



**Additional Photographs**



**Southeast corner. View from intersection of S 52<sup>nd</sup> and Locust Street. Source: Cyclomedia, July 2017.**



**South elevation along Locust Street. Source: Cyclomedia, July 2017.**

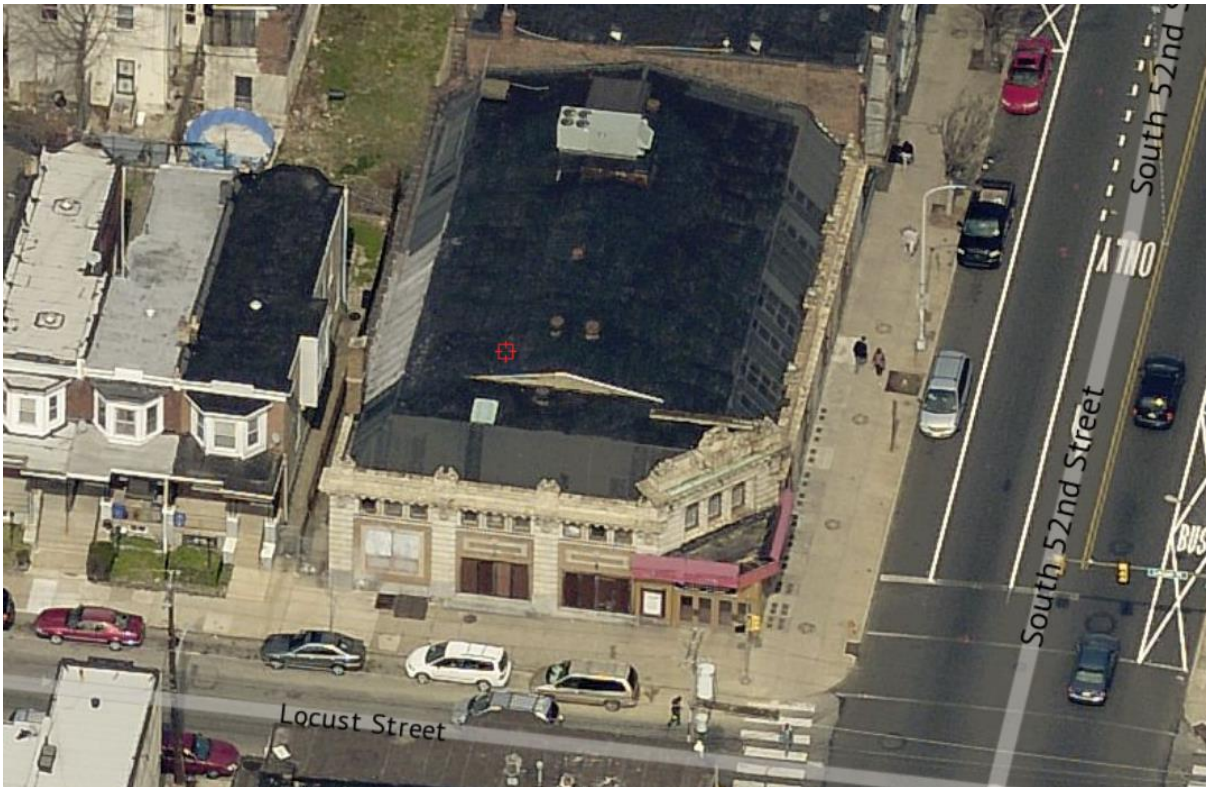


**East elevation along S 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. Source: Cyclomedia, July 2017.**





Southwest corner, partial view of west elevation from Locust Street. Source: Cyclomedia, July 2017.



Bird's eye view, looking north. Source: Pictometry, April 2017.

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