

Addendum

Nomination of the former Aldine Theatre at 1826 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia Historical Commission

Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia
July 27, 2020

Recently, the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia submitted a nomination to add the former Aldine Theatre at 1826 Chestnut Street to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. While that nomination referred to the significance of the Aldine Theatre and other movie palaces within the cultural landscape of early-twentieth-century Philadelphia, it did not include information related to the significance of this site in the history of the struggle for civil rights, which Prof. Kenneth Finkel brought to the Preservation Alliance's attention in a blog post published on July 21, 2020.¹ Because this information is a compelling aspect of the property's history and should be memorialized as part of the designation, the Preservation Alliance submits the following addendum.

Until the mid-1920s, movie palaces in northern cities like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia were racially segregated, just like most hotels, restaurants, and clubs. Theatre owners might sell tickets to black customers in order to comply with state equal rights legislation, but they still found ways to prevent black customers from entry and there was no enforcement of the laws unless blacks protested. To avoid embarrassment or confrontation, most members of the black community in Philadelphia attended neighborhood theaters or black-owned theaters, such as the Dunbar Theatre (opened in 1920) at Broad and Lombard.

Some black Philadelphians, however, resisted the discriminatory practices of entertainment venues by taking legal action. In March of 1924, Edward T. Green purchased two tickets from the Aldine Theatre to see *The Ten Commandments*. When Green and his companion, Josephine Williams, arrived a week later to see the film, Charles Starkosh, the manager of the Aldine, denied them entry. Starkosh said that there had been a mistake; Green's tickets were "two stubs from an old date." Green sued Starkosh, but the jury found in April 1925 that Starkosh was not guilty of violating Pennsylvania's 1887 Equal Rights Law. A second trial involving the Aldine turned out differently. In April of 1924, Starkosh had prevented a group of black school teachers from entering the theater to see *The Ten Commandments* because they had arrived "too late." The jury ruled in favor of this respectable, educated group of teachers and held Starkosh on a \$500 bail for violation of the Equal Rights Law. After the ruling, the owners of the Aldine publicly apologized for their manager's actions and desegregated the theater. Mostly because of boycotts, protests, and voting mobilization within Philadelphia's black community, as well as this kind of legislative action, the state passed a new Equal Rights Law in 1935 with upgraded enforcement mandates.²

¹ Ken Finkel, "Culture War at 19th & Chestnut Streets," The Philly History Blog: Discoveries from the City Archives, July 21, 2020, <https://blog.phillyhistory.org/index.php/2020/07/culture-war-at-19th-and-chestnut-streets/>.

² For descriptions of the two incidents, see Kenneth Mack, "Rethinking Civil Rights Lawyering and Politics in the Era Before Brown," *Yale Law Journal* 115, no. 2 (January 1, 2005), <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yj/vol115/iss2/1>; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 139–40; David A.

The civil rights lawyer who led the campaign to desegregate the Aldine Theatre--and then the entire Stanley Theatre chain, the Horn and Hardart automats, and many other public venues across the city--was named Raymond Pace Alexander (Figure 1). The son of a former Virginia slave, Alexander was born in 1897 and grew up in Philadelphia, attended Central High School, was the second black student to graduate from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, and went on to receive a law degree from Harvard University. Often overshadowed by Dr. Martin Luther King and the post-World War II movement for civil rights in the South, Alexander was part of an older, post-World War I generation of highly-educated "New Negroes" in the north who remained committed to racial uplift while challenging *de facto* segregation. Alexander may have taken on the Aldine cases because of his own experience with segregated theaters as a college student.³ Amazingly, once Alexander had established his successful law practice, his office was directly across the street from the Aldine Theatre at 1900 Chestnut (Figure 2; now a Target store). Warner Brothers had bought the corner site in the late 1920s in order to build another movie palace in the new Chestnut Street theater district, but then decided to abandon its plans when the worst of the Depression hit. In 1935, Alexander bought the site and erected a building. It was for several decades a monument to racial justice and integration in Philadelphia.

Canton, *Raymond Pace Alexander: A New Negro Lawyer Fights for Civil Rights in Philadelphia* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 25.

³ Canton describes the following incident in his biography of Alexander: "In December 1918, Sadie [later Alexander's wife and law partner] asked her classmate Raymond Pace Alexander to escort her and two friends visiting from Cornell University to the movie theater. Raymond and the other man purchased four tickets to the Schubert Theatre in downtown Philadelphia [now The Merriam Theatre at 250 S. Broad Street]. When the four students arrived at the theater, the young men presented their tickets to the theater's manager, but he prohibited them from entering, saying that there had been a mistake and some other people had purchased their tickets for the same seats. Furious, 'Alex began excitedly talking in Spanish,' and the other three 'chimed in with French phrases.' After witnessing their foreign language proficiency, the theater manager said, 'Why, they are not Niggers!' and allowed them to enter the theater. Once inside, they looked over to the seats they had purchased and noticed that they were empty. After the incident, Raymond Pace Alexander and Sadie Tanner Mossell vowed if we ever become lawyers, we are going to break this thing--segregation and discrimination. And, yes--we are going to open up those restaurants, too. You just wait! Just wait!' This incident exemplifies just one of the many racial barriers that African American in northern cities encountered during the first two decades of the twentieth century." *Raymond Pace Alexander*, vii.



Figure 1. Raymond Pace Alexander. Image from David A. Canton, *Raymond Pace Alexander: A New Negro Lawyer Fights for Civil Rights in Philadelphia*.

Alexander Building — In The Heart Of Philly



Figure 2. An image of the Alexander building at 1900 Chestnut Street, across from the Aldine Theater. Image from Alexander's Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity magazine, *The Sphinx*, Vol. 26, Issue 3, p. 39.