# 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: 5538-50 Baltimore Avenue

Postal code: 19143-3106

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**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: Ambassador Theatre

Current/Common Name: Ambassador Theatre

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**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

☑ Building ☐ Structure ☐ Site ☐ Object

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**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Condition: ☐ excellent ☑ good ☐ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☑ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: Print Shop

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**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

*Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.*

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**6. DESCRIPTION**

*Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.*

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**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

*Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.*

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1921 to 1959

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1921

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Harvey C. Hodgens

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: F. A. Havens, Co.; Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company

Original owner: Samuel and George Felt

Other significant persons: Maurice and Fred Felt; Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

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

- [x] (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,
- [x] (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
- [x] (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

*Please attach a bibliography.*

**9. NOMINATOR**

Organization University City Historical Society Date June 9, 2026

Name with Title Matt Goldberg Email matt.h.goldberg@gmail.com

Street Address 801 S 48th St Telephone 203-628-6263

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19143

Nominator [ ] is [x] is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: 6/9/2026

[x] Correct-Complete [ ] Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 6/18/2026

Date of Notice Issuance: 6/18/2026

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: James J Kennedy Jr.

Address: 5538-50 Baltimore Ave.

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19143

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: July 22, 2026

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: October 9, 2026

Date of Final Action: October 9, 2026

[x] Designated [ ] Rejected

# <u>The Ambassador Theatre</u>
## *5538-50 Baltimore Avenue*

**Nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places**
**June 2026**

## 5. Boundary Description

The boundary for the proposed designation follows the property boundary of 5538-50 Baltimore Avenue:

Beginning at a point on the Southeasterly side of Baltimore Avenue (80-feet-wide) at the distance of 341 feet, 2 ⅝ inches Southwestwardly from the Westerly side of 55th Street (70-feet-wide); thence extending Southeastwardly at right angles to Baltimore Avenue passing partly through a 13-inch party wall one hundred feet to the Northwesterly side of a certain five-feet-wide alley extending Northeastwardly into 55th Street and Southwestwardly into 57th Street (70-feet-wide); thence along said alley South 74 degrees, 15 minutes, 33 seconds West 82 feet, 3 inches to a point in the line of a stone retaining wall; thence extending along face of said wall North 57 degrees, 51 minutes, 45 seconds West 41 feet, 4 ½ inches to a point; thence Northwestwardly at right angles to Baltimore Avenue 69 feet, 3 ¾ inches to the Southeastwardly side of Baltimore Avenue; thence extending along said Baltimore Avenue North 74 degrees, 15 minute, 33 seconds East 110 feet to the point and place of beginning.

The property is known as Parcel No. 025S170210, Office of Property Assessment Account No. 884466245.

Figure 1: Aerial Image of the Parcel Boundary. *City of Philadelphia Property App.*

## 6. Physical Description

The Ambassador Theatre is a one-story brick building, inclusive of a mezzanine level, measuring approximately 100 ft. wide x 102 ft. deep. The primary elevation faces Baltimore Avenue and is expressed in a Classical Revival style with decorative terracotta. The theatre rises 26 ft., atop a 15-ft.-deep basement with a stone foundation, and takes up most of the parcel. Nearly square in plan, the building's side walls taper toward the rear elevation indicating its original function. A steel frame supports concrete floors and 18 in. exterior walls of brick that are laid in a common bond.[1] A small, rectangular volume projects to the southeast, which was built as a gas heating room. The flat roof is covered in rolled asphalt and an exterior brick chimney rises above the junction of the heating room and auditorium. The facade (north) elevation is three-volume, with a central section recessed by four feet atop a parged ground-level course. The facade is constructed of textured buff brick while the side (east and west) elevations feature smooth red brick.

Three terracotta display boards decorate the facade's east and west volumes and are surrounded by carved limestone. The side boards are topped by festoons below a swan's neck pediment centering an urn. Each central board is framed by Ionic columns and capped by a rosette centering a festoon along with a pointed pediment. Above the pediments are semi-circular arched stained-glass windows, spelling "Ambassador," with a central Vitruvian scroll keystone capping each stepped lintel. A molded stringcourse extends across the facade that is decorated by dentils and rosettes. Above this stringcourse, inclusive of the two pediments, the facade is decorated in white terracotta closely resembling the limestone below.

Decorating the mezzanine-level of the facade's central volume are three urns set within arched recesses formed of terracotta panels. The facade is topped by a parapet including an ornate molded cornice composed of modillions and dentils above a frieze of repeating festoons and rosettes. The central main entrance, originally leading to a vestibule, has been infilled with stucco-clad siding and is accessed by two rolling metal doors capped by a pent roof. Red brick has also been used to patch small sections of the facade surrounding this modern roofline.

The side (east and west) and rear (south) elevations are clad in red brick laid in a running bond and lack ornamentation. Dual alleyways buffer the building on each side, which are bordered by chain link metal fencing. The east elevation is adjoined to the Kennedy Printing building at 5534 Baltimore Avenue via two stucco-clad walkways. Dual, flush metal doors with a concrete lintel provide a side entrance to this elevation of the theatre. The west elevation is pierced by a similar, single door as well as a boarded window opening at the mezzanine level.

The building is oriented to the north, buffered by approximately 12 feet of concrete sidewalk from Baltimore Avenue. Mature trees border the theatre's rear, adjacent to rowhomes along Angora Terrace to the southeast. Proximate to the west, Sherwood Park sits at the intersection of Baltimore Avenue, South 56th Street, and Washington Avenue, in this mixed-use neighborhood of Angora.

[1] "Application for Erection of New Buildings" (Building Permit, Philadelphia, PA, 1921), permit no. 3435.

As of 2013, remaining interior historic fabric included two iron fan grates, the original fireproof door to the projection room, several decorative wall reliefs, and the screen's curtain.[2]

Figure 2: Aerial Image of the Subject Property. *City of Philadelphia Atlas*.

Figure 3: Aerial Image of the Subject Property, rear view. *City of Philadelphia Atlas*.

[2] Everts, "Murder, Disco & Democrats on Baltimore Ave.," *Hidden City*.

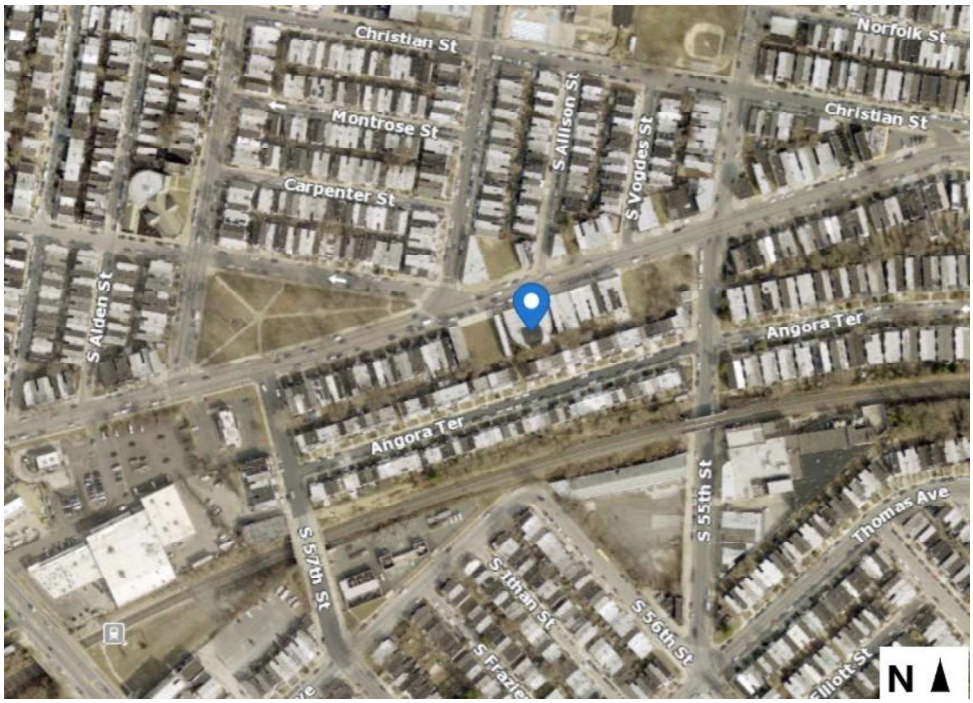


Figure 4: 2025 Aerial Image of the Subject Property. *City of Philadelphia OpenMaps*.

## Photographs

*Taken by Matt Goldberg on March 21 and May 3, 2026*

Figure 5: View of the Ambassador Theatre in the context of Baltimore Avenue.

Figure 6: Perspective view of the Ambassador Theatre's facade and west elevation.

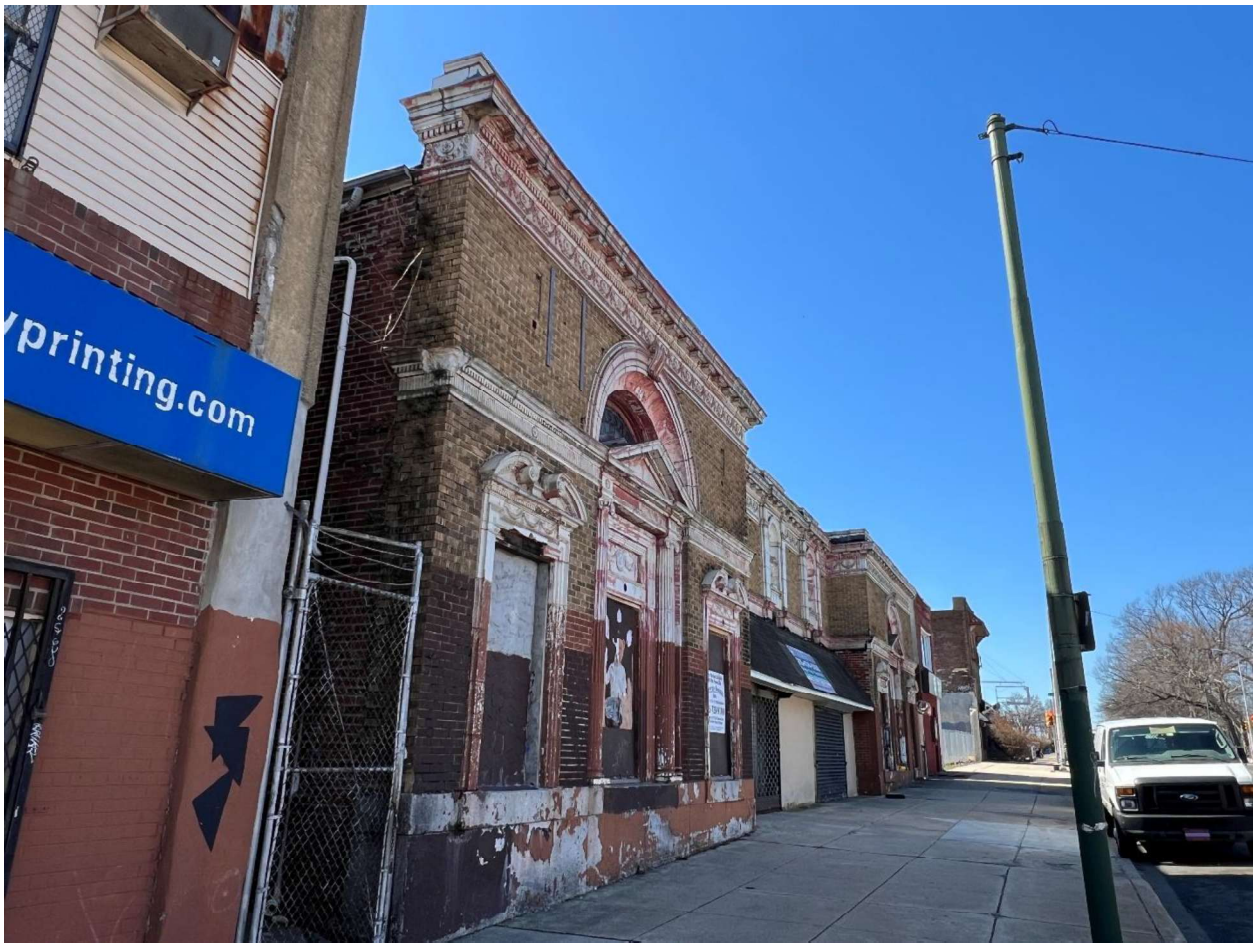


Figure 7: Perspective view of the Ambassador Theatre's facade and east elevation.

Figure 8: View across the facade of the Ambassador Theatre.

Figure 9: View of the facade's east volume.

Figure 10: Detail view of the west volume's arched window, calling out the subtle difference in appearance between the terracotta and limestone ornamentation, divided by the stringcourse.

Figure 11: View of the facade's central volume.

Figure 12: View of the facade's central volume.

Figure 13: View across the facade of the Ambassador Theatre.

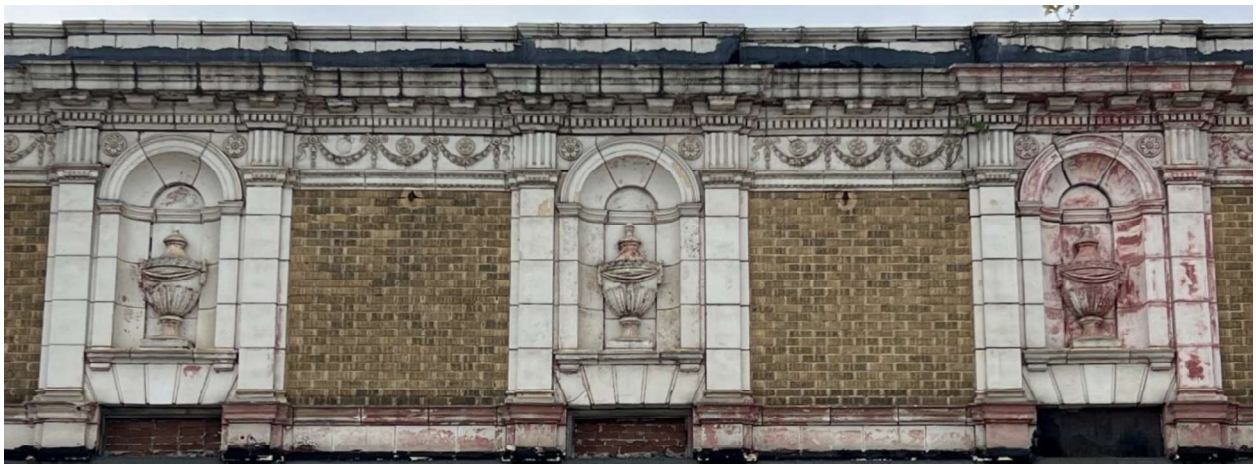

Figure 14: Detail view of the urns of the facade's central volume.

Figure 15: View of the facade's west volume.

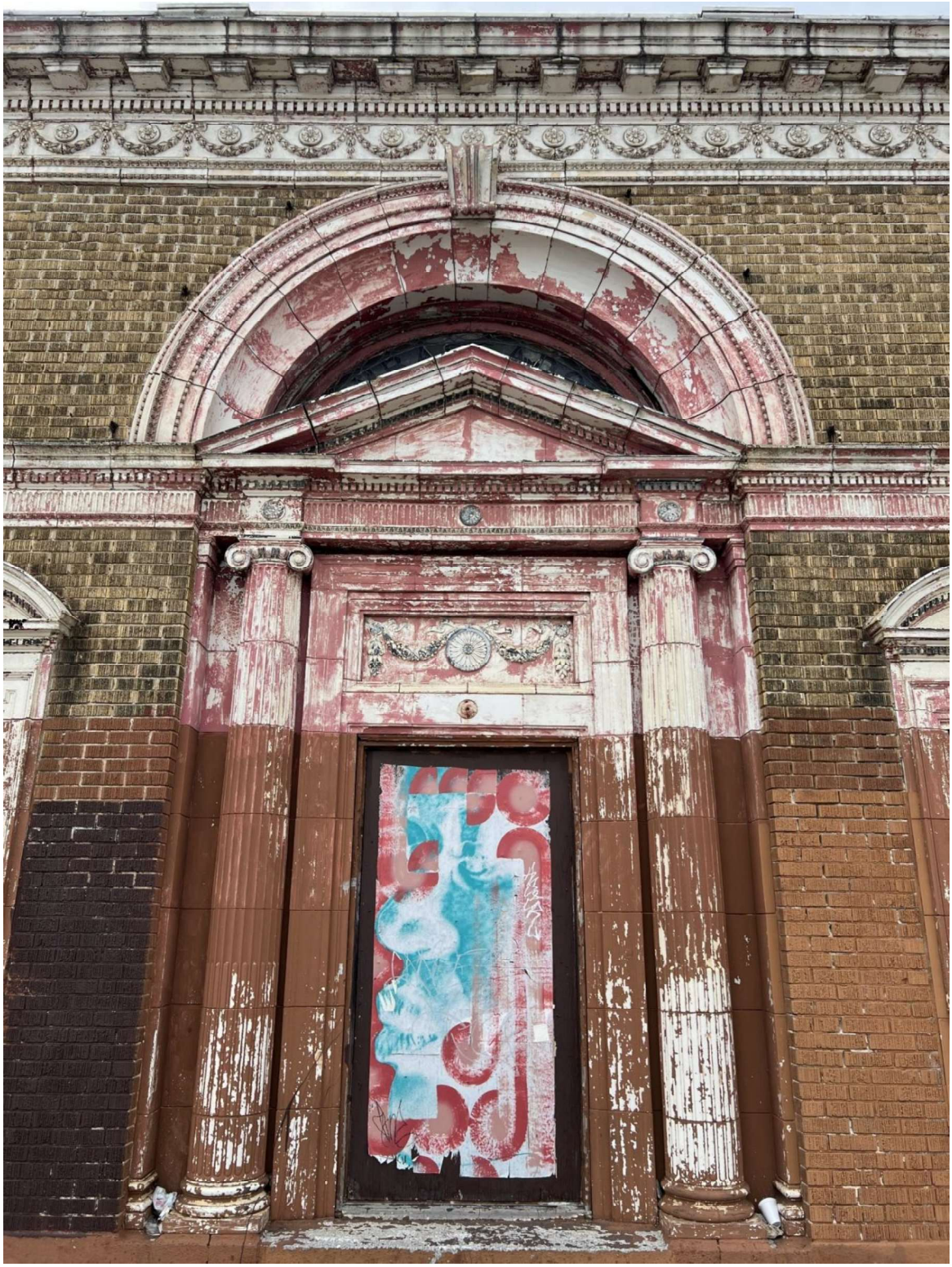

Figure 16: Detail view of the central display board of the facade's west volume.

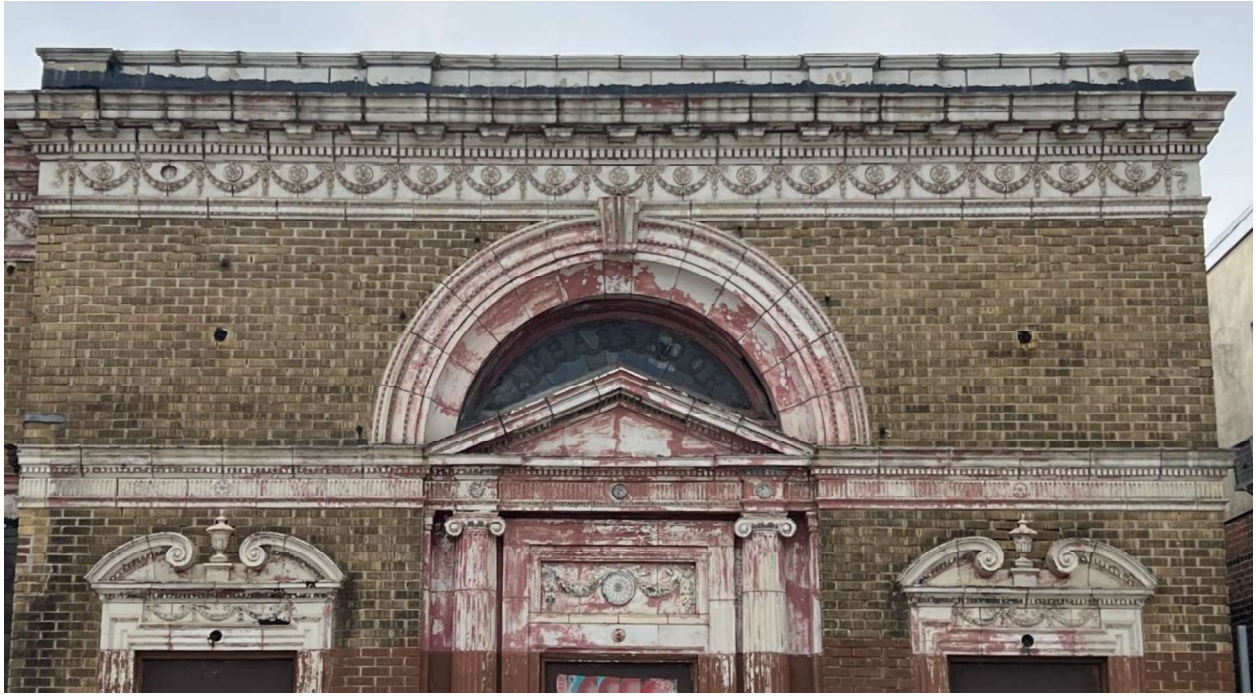

Figure 17: Detail view of the upper level of the facade's west volume.

Figure 18: Detail view of the ornamentation of the facade from a central display board.

Figure 19: View of the westernmost display board of the facade.

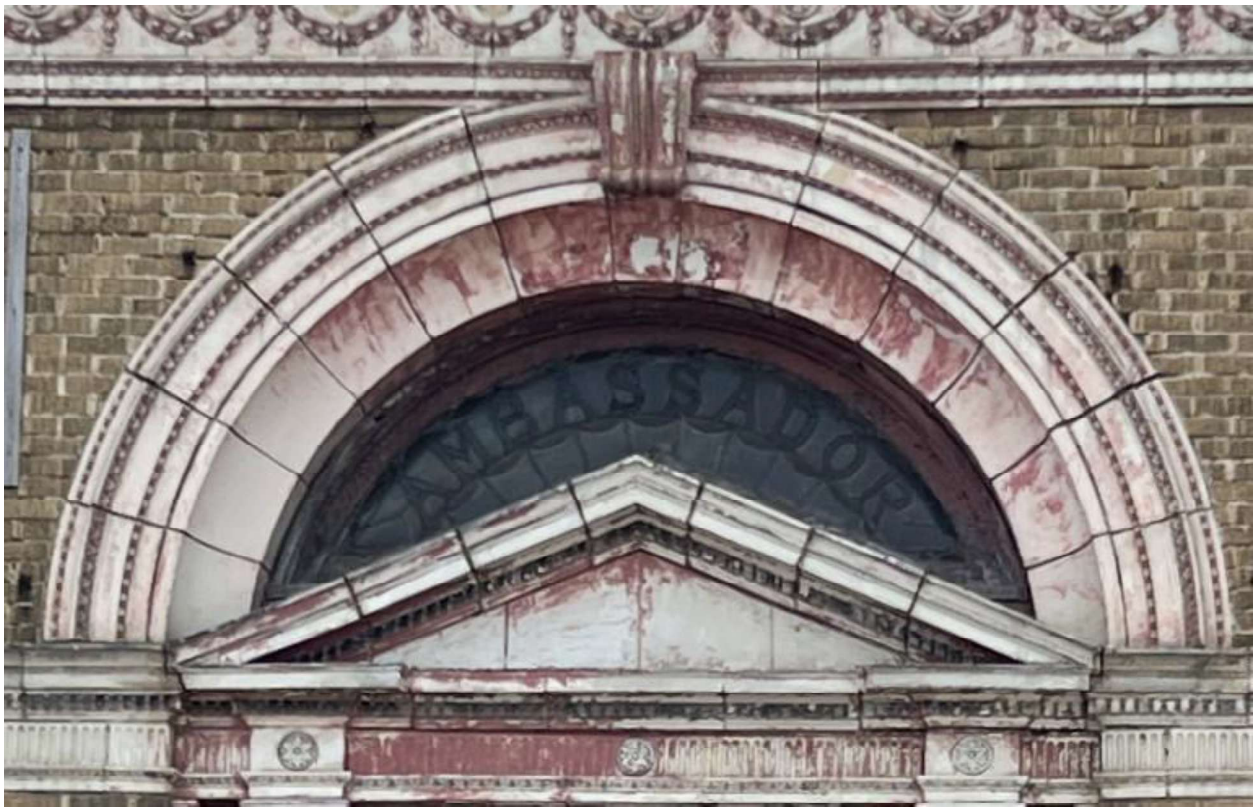


Figure 20: Detail view of one of two stained glass windows spelling “Ambassador.”

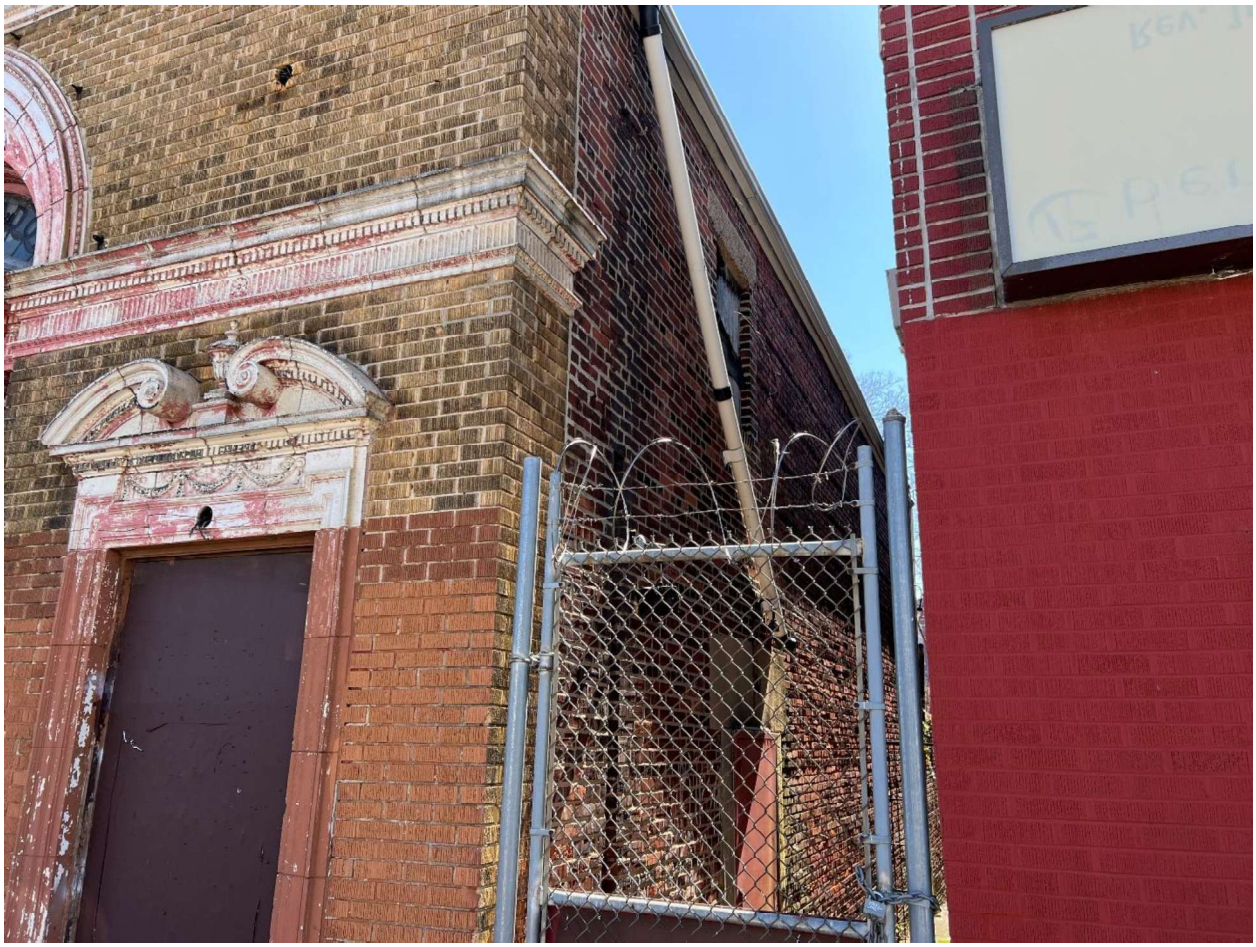

Figure 21: Perspective view of the Ambassador Theatre's facade and west elevation.

Figure 22: View of the Ambassador Theatre's west elevation.

Figure 23: View of the east elevation of the Ambassador Theatre and interconnections to the adjacent building.

## 7. Statement of Significance

The 1921 Ambassador Theatre building at 5538-50 Baltimore Avenue embodies the history of Philadelphia cinemas, particularly the neighborhood movie palaces of the early twentieth century. Movie palaces were popular in Philadelphia and cities around the country at this time. These small theatres often featured Classical Revival architectural detailing that conveyed a sense of luxury. In contrast to Philadelphia's downtown cinemas, neighborhood theatres including movie palaces were built in outlying areas primarily to provide weeknight entertainment to the working class. The Ambassador Theatre was built by Brothers Samuel and George Felt of the Felt Amusement Company in 1921, which was also responsible for the Locust Theatre and Aldine Theatre in Philadelphia, and regional theatre magnate Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger assumed control of the property the following year. As a second-run cinema, The Ambassador Theatre represents the early to mid-twentieth-century entertainment market of West Philadelphia, where the booming industry sparked fierce competition. The building is also representative of the nationwide rise in cinema construction from small towns to urban centers across the country, as well as the growth of the film industry itself. Cinema was a particularly popular form of entertainment in Philadelphia, where two of the country's largest theatre chains originated, owned by Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger and the Mastbaum Brothers. The Ambassador Theatre retains a relatively high level of integrity in its overall massing and facade ornamentation, highlighted by detailing produced by the Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company of Philadelphia. In the 1990s, Kennedy Printing rehabilitated the building for use as a print shop, saving the theatre from the demolition that has plagued similar buildings throughout the city. The proposed period of significance is 1921 to 1959, from the building's construction to when the last screening was shown.

The property therefore meets the following criteria for listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places as established in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance §14-1004 (1): 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; j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.

### The Ambassador Theatre

Brothers Samuel and George Felt purchased the subject property and oversaw the construction of the Ambassador Theatre before assigning their cousins Maurice and Fred Felt to oversee the operation upon its completion.[3] Brothers Maurice and Fred Felt were real estate developers who managed several movie theatres throughout Philadelphia in the 1910s to 1920s. Maurice began his career working under theater magnate and studio owner Marcus Loew in New York City before

[3] "Fred Nixon-Nirdlinger Acquires Ambassador Theatre," *Atlantic City Gazette Review* (Atlantic City, New Jersey), June 12, 1922.

branching out to manage the Olympic Theatre on his own. Maurice came to Philadelphia to manage the Grand Theatre and eventually opened a chain of small theatres in West Philadelphia with his brother Fred under the Felt Amusement Company. In 1921, the Felts opened their grandest venue, the Aldine Theatre in Center City. In a reverse setup to the Ambassador Theatre, this property was managed by Samuel and George Felt. Both the Locust Theatre and Aldine Theatre, constructed by the Felt Amusement Company, are listed in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.[4][5]

In April of 1921, the building contract for the Ambassador Theatre was awarded to the F. A. Havens Company, a local builder. The proposed work included the construction of a one-story, 100 x 102 ft. building of brick, granite, terracotta, and steel at a cost of $65,000. The contract also called for an asbestos roof, cement and maple floors, ornamental ironwork, tin-clad doors, and a stone foundation.[6] The Ambassador was designed by Harvey C. Hodgens (1876-1954) while working out of an office in the Commercial Trust Building in Philadelphia.

Figure 24: Architectural sketch of the Ambassador Theatre. "How New Theatre Will Look," *Philadelphia Inquirer (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), April 17, 1921.*

[4] "Aldine Theatre for Jayne Mansion Site," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), April 12, 1921.
[5] "Realizing an Ambition of Many Years," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 30, 1921.
[6] "Ambassador Theatre," *Philadelphia Builders' Guide,* vol. 36 (1921): 238.

Figure 25: 1922 Nighttime photograph of the Ambassador Theatre, lit by Maza lightbulbs, showing the original rooftop sign. *Motion Picture News, Jan-Feb. 1922: 432.*

The Ambassador Theatre opened on October 1, 1921. A newspaper article describing the opening night notes the interior was characterized by "blue and gold murals, rich hangings, and subdued lighting."[7] *The Blot* was the first picture screened, accompanied by an organ played by John A. Queen. Spacious seats, along with heat and ventilation, provided a comfortable viewing experience.[8] Upon entering the theatre through mirrored doors, one would see a marble-clad vestibule and a grand staircase leading to the mezzanine level. A curved promenade abutted the oval auditorium, with damask-clad walls lit by a cove-lit domed ceiling.[9]

[7] "New Theatre Opens," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 4, 1921.
[8] *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 4, 1921.
[9] Irvin R. Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z* (Greenwood Press, 1986), 59.

Figure 26 c.1921 photograph of the Ambassador Theatre from a *1930 Catalog of the Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company*.

The Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company of Philadelphia produced the terracotta detailing on the Ambassador's facade. [10] This company provided architectural terracotta throughout the Northeast US, including work on notable Philadelphia buildings such as the Lit Brothers Store, Witherspoon Building, and the John Wanamaker Department Store.[11] Terracotta was also commonly used on neighborhood movie theatres throughout the country, as it provided an affordable option to builders looking to produce a lavish appearance. The versatile material gave architects the ability to apply the detailing in a variety of architectural styles.[12] The 1930 catalogue of Conkling-Armstrong boasts that architectural terracotta had become the preferred ornament for movie theatre detailing for its color and surface treatment possibilities. The company's local cinema work includes the Locust Theatre, Logan Theatre, and Stanley Theatre, likely among others.[13]

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[10] *Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company*, (Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company, 1930), 15.

[11] "Conkling Armstrong Terra Cotta Company," Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 2026, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display_projects.cfm?ArchitectId=6322DFCE-5151-4497-8CB3AAA41B49E789.

[12] Susan Tunick, "Architectural Terra Cotta: 1900-1990," The Studio Potter, accessed April 2026, https://studiopotter.org/architectural-terra-cotta-1900-1990.

[13] Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company, 15.

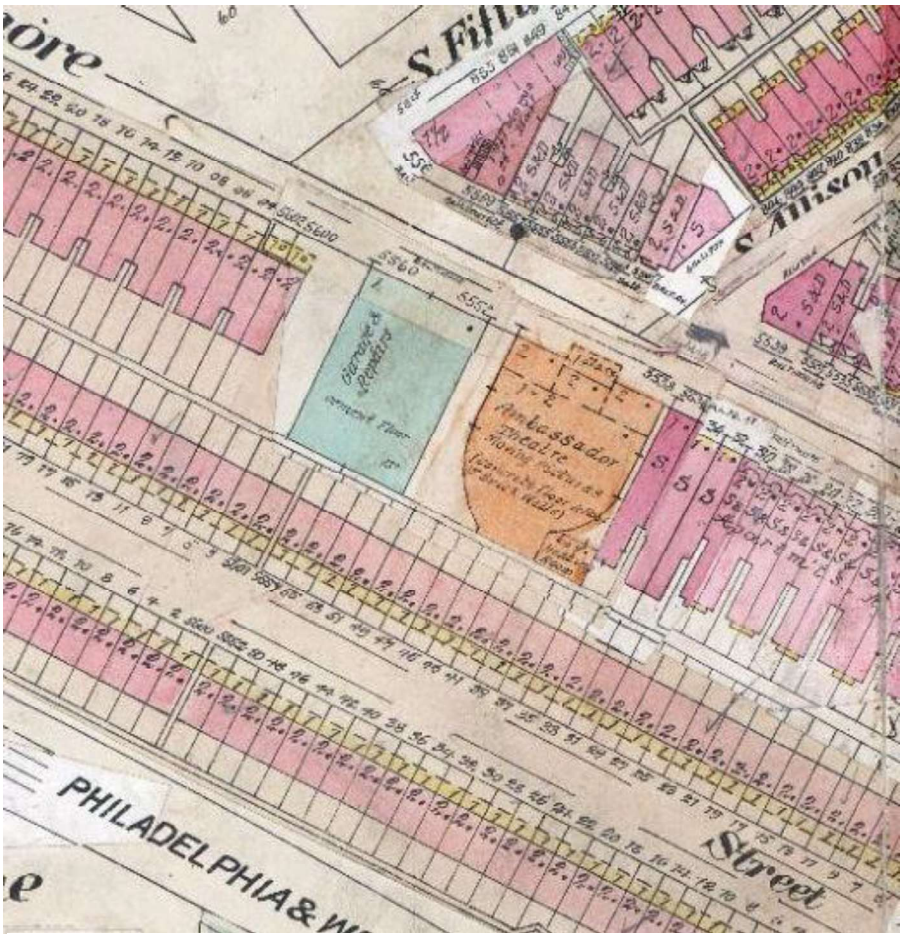


Figure 27: *Ernest Hexamer & Son, Insurance Maps of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Volume 34 1907; Revised to April 1924, Sheet 924L.*

This 1924 fire insurance map shows the Ambassador Theatre's original vestibule and glazed doors infilling the facade's recessed central volume. The surrounding neighborhood of Angora developed around the Callaghan Brothers textile mill in the nineteenth century. By the construction of the Ambassador Theatre, Baltimore Avenue had developed into a dense mixed-used corridor, primarily buffered by rowhomes on surrounding blocks.[14]

[14] Edward John Vinnacombe, "An Angora Story," West Philadelphia Community History Center, PennLibraries, 2020, https://westphillyhistory.archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/angora#:~:text=The%20Angora%20neighborhood%20in%20Philadelphia%20was%20founded,yard%20*%20Railroad%20siding%20*%20Support%20buildings.

In 1922, regional theatre magnate Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger assumed control of the Ambassador Theatre's operations although no formal sale was made. Three decades earlier, Philadelphian Nixon-Nirdlinger took over his father's business of theatre management which began in vaudeville. Nixon-Nirdlinger began buying theatres across the Mid-Atlantic as movies grew in popularity. In Philadelphia, this included the Park Theatre, Broad Street Theatre, and National Theatre among many more.[15] Maurice and Fred Felt had also sold the Locust and Belmont Theatres to Nixon-Nirdlinger, and had a personal relationship with the local theatre magnate, before the sale of the Ambassador Theatre.[16] The Locust became West Philadelphia's Paramount showcase and served as a second-run theater to the nearby Nixon Theater.[17] In 1928, the Ambassador Theatre was formally purchased by Nixon-Nirdlinger for $300,000, seemingly a boon for the Felt Amusement Company.[18] The theatre chain came to a tragic end in 1931, when Nixon-Nirdlinger was murdered by his wife, actress Charlotte Nash. The subsequent trial made national headlines, ultimately resulting in Charlotte's acquittal on the basis of self-defense. Nixon-Nirdlinger's estate was split among his three wives and five children.[19]

Figure 28: Portrait of Nixon-Nirdlinger. *Findagrave.com*.

[15] "F. G. Nixon-Nirdlinger Slain By Shot At Home In France; Wife, Pageant Beauty, Held," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1931.
[16] *Atlantic City Gazette Review*, June 12, 1922.
[17] Noah Yoder, "PRHP Nomination: The Locust Theatre, 228-36 South 52nd St," November 2018, 13-15.
[18] "Activities of Day in Real Estate," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 11, 1928.
[19] *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1931.

Building permits reveal little alterations were made to the Ambassador Theatre during its heyday. A rewind room was added in 1936, constructed of metal lath set in plaster walls, with an iron frame surrounding a tin entrance door. A 1,000 gallon fuel oil tank for heating was also buried on the property at this time.[20] The trustees of Nixon-Nirdlinger's estate sold the Ambassador Theatre to local real estate magnate James F. Hickey in 1943.[21] The building continued to operate as a second-run movie house through a lease agreement with local exhibitor Harry Perleman.[22] By the 1950s, the original rooftop sign had been replaced with the neon-clad marquee seen below:

Figure 29: 1956 photograph of the Ambassador Theatre. *Irvin R. Glazer Theater Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia*.

[20] "Application for Additions" (Building Permit, Philadelphia, PA, 1936), permit nos. 2174 and 4424.
[21] Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, Department of Records, Deed Book CJP 410: 527.
[22] "People," *Motion Picture Daily*, 1960, vol. 87, no. 33, 3.

After a brief run as the "Ambassador Art Theatre," the theatre closed in 1959 due to economic hardship. Its closing was emblematic of the movie palace's demise in the Postwar era of suburbanization.[23] The neon "Ambassador" sign was removed the following year. Later owners attempted to use the venue as a rock club and disco in the 1970s and 80s. This included the addition of a 25-ft thrust stage and the removal of seating. Only a handful of such shows were ever shown at the theatre in this era.[24]

Figure 30: c.1970 photograph of the Ambassador Theatre. *Irvin R. Glazer Theater Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia.*

In the 1950s, brothers John and Jim Kennedy started Kennedy Printing which specialized in political campaign material.[25] After outgrowing their space adjacent to the east of the Ambassador Theatre, at 5536 Baltimore Avenue, the print shop purchased the theatre via Sheriff's Sale in 1981.[26] Without this intervention, the Ambassador Theatre would have possibly deteriorated beyond repair and been demolished before the turn of the century. In the 1990s, the Kennedys rehabilitated the building to make it structurally sound. This resulted in the loss of some historic interior fabric, such as the sloped auditorium floor. This is also likely when the marquee was removed and replaced with the extant main entrance.[27]

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[23] "Ambassador Art Theatre," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 13, 1959.
[24] Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres,* 59
[25] Everts, "Murder, Disco & Democrats on Baltimore Ave.," *Hidden City*.
[26] Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, Department of Records, Deed Book 373, 422
[27] Everts, "Murder, Disco & Democrats on Baltimore Ave.," *Hidden City*.

Architectural Stye

The earliest silent motion pictures were introduced in the 1890s around the country. They were typically shown in Vaudeville theatres that had been repurposed for cinematic use. Screenings began to be shown in a variety of settings in the early twentieth century, including storefronts, open-air venues, fairgrounds, single-person booths, and nickelodeons.[28] The latter grew to prominence as the first purpose-built movie screening structures. These small, narrow buildings, holding less than 300 people, were cheaply constructed but conveyed a sense of luxury through classical architectural detailing. Nickleodeons attracted the masses through affordable pricing and flashy marquees while offering humble interior designs and little comfort.[29] As films rapidly increased in popularity in the 1910s, movie theatres began to reflect the growing investments being poured into this burgeoning industry. Many eminent playhouse architects, such as Thomas Lamb, John Eberson, and Joseph Urban, transitioned to movie theatre work.

These movie palace theatres developed a variety of styles, including Classical Revival, Atmospheric, and Exotic. The Classical Revival style, seen on the subject building, featured ornate detailing modeled after European opera houses and typically included grand lobbies, intricate plasterwork, monumental staircases, paintings, sculptures, and chandeliers set within an exterior facade of classical columns and cornices. The Atmospheric theatre also emerged as a unique subtype, characterized by a domed planetarium ceiling that was often accompanied by elaborate lighting effects. Although the Ambassador Theatre includes a domed ceiling, its overall detailing places the building in the Classical Revival category. Exotic movie palaces used a variety of architectural styles to place an audience abroad through influences of Baroque, Egyptian, Gothic, Mayan, Moorish, Mission, Renaissance, and more.[30]

The style of the Ambassador Theatre also finds its roots in the greater Classical Revival movement of the era, which used the symmetry, grandeur, and detailing of Ancient Greece and Rome. This style is differentiated from Beaux Arts by a relative lack of high style ornamentation and was popular across the country from roughly 1885 to 1930, following the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Classical Revival was often utilized for institutional buildings and banks in addition to theatres. Characteristic elements seen in the Ambassador Theatre include a symmetrical facade, classical columns, broken pediments, dentiled cornice, and decorative surrounds.[31]

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[28] Celeste Williams, "From Dream to Economy– Cinema Architecture in the Twentieth Century," Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, accessed April 2026, https://www.acsa-arch.org/proceedings/Annual%20Meeting%20Proceedings/ACSA.AM.95/ACSA.AM.95.72.pdf.

[29] "Behind the Curtain at the Nickelodeon: America's First Movie Theatre," Theatre Historical Society of America, accessed April 2026, https://historictheatres.org/behind-the-curtain-at-the-nickelodeon-americas-first-movie-theatre/.

[30] Williams, "From Dream to Economy."

[31] "Classical Revival Style 1895 – 1950," Pennsylvania Architectural Field Guide, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, August 26, 2015, https://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/architecture/styles/classical-revival.html.

The Classical Revival style was utilized in numerous neighborhood theatres, outside of Center City, throughout Philadelphia in the early twentieth century. Similar examples to the Ambassador Theatre include the Jefferson Theatre at 2217 North 29th Street, Admiral Theatre at 2806 North 5th Street, Wayne-Palace Theatre at 4613 Wayne Avenue, and the Empress Theatre on Main Street in Manayunk.[32] Common characteristics seen throughout these buildings are symmetrical facades broken into three segments and divided by columns, arched entrances, ornate cornices, and multi-light sash windows. These theatres often extend slightly outward or recess to draw attention to a grand main entrance. Also common were brick exterior walls, decorated with limestone and terracotta, as seen on the subject theatre.[33]

Movie Palaces

The first "movie palace" is often cited as the 1914 Mark Strand Theatre in New York City. This 3,000-seat venue boasted a second-story viewing balcony and grand rotunda meant for socializing. By 1916, there were roughly 21,000 movie palaces across the country. These theatres became centers of nightlife and fixtures of Main Street America that mimicked the downtown cores of major metropolitan cities. The growth of the movie palace coincided with the establishment of Hollywood's studio system, which would control movie distribution for decades to come. The studio-owned cinemas could price out independent venues until a 1948 Supreme Court decision banned the practice on antitrust grounds. During the Depression, fewer theatres were constructed but the existing buildings provided an affordable escape where one could relax in dark, air-conditioned rooms stocked with concessions. They also gave working class Americans a glimpse into the lives of the social elite and provided recent news flashes. The movie palace's eventual demise was largely influenced by the Postwar rise of the suburbs and the relocation of America's urban commercial centers away from downtowns.[34]

B.F. Keith's Bijou Theatre at 209 North 8th Street showed the first motion picture in Philadelphia. This 1889 vaudeville theatre was located among a Center City theatre district which grew to house numerous cinemas around the turn of the century. A staggering 136 nickelodeons opened in Center City between 1905 and 1917. Similarly, Philadelphia's earliest movie palaces were built in Center City. These more comfortable, larger spaces were capable of displaying longer films, which led to a boom of 275 theatres by 1932, including outlying neighborhoods. Hoffman-Henon Co. would become one of the country's leading movie palace architecture firms and was responsible for over 100 buildings around the US including 46 in Philadelphia.

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[32] Oscar Beisert, "PRHP Nomination: The Diamond Theatre, 2117-23 Germantown Ave.," November 2024, 18.

[33] Ted Maust, "PRHP Nomination: The Logan Theatre, 4732-42 N. Broad St., March 2025, 35.

[34] Williams, "From Dream to Economy"; Eschner, Kat. "Movie Palaces Let Everyday Americans Be Royalty," Smithsonian Magazine, April 12, 2017, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/movie-palaces-let-everyday-americans-be-royalty-180962824/.

After finding success in real estate, Brothers Stanley and Jules Mastbaum entered the cinema industry with a nickelodeon in 1905 at the intersection of 8th and Market Streets.[35] The Mastbaum's Motion Picture Company of America built numerous theatres in the region before Stanley's death in 1918. At this time, Jules took sole ownership and renamed the business the Stanley Company of America. By 1920, this was the largest movie theatre operator in the country. Philadelphia was an epicenter of the film industry at this time and was home to two of the country's largest theatre chains, owned by Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger and Stanley Mastbaum. The competition between these two franchises, and smaller operations including the Felt Amusement Company, resulted in the rapid development of theatres. The growth of Philadelphia's downtown movie palaces was short-lived, however, marked by the 1929 Mastbaum Memorial Theatre, seating 4,700 at 20th and Market Streets. The end of the silent film and rise of the "talkie" lessened the need for the elaborate architecture of the prior era. However, smaller theatres continued to be constructed in outlying areas.[36]

Smaller neighborhood theatres catered to the working class and provided weeknight entertainment. 52nd Street has long served as West Philadelphia's main commercial hub and housed a large share of the neighborhood's movie palaces.[37] Such theatres included two former vaudeville houses, the 1914 Locust Theatre and the 1910 Nixon Theatre, both along South 52nd Street.[38] Other movie palaces, within a roughly one-mile radius of the Ambassador Theatre included the Sherwood Theatre at 5411 Baltimore Avenue, the Byrd Theatre at 4720 Baltimore Avenue, the Cedar Theatre at South 60th Street and Cedar Avenue (also owned by Nixon-Nirdlinger), the Benn Theatre at 6322 Woodland Avenue, the Lenox Theatre at 5410 Chester Avenue, the Rivoli Theatre at South 52nd and Sansom Street, and the State Theatre at 105 South 52nd Street.[39]

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[35] "Museum History," Rodin Museum, accessed April 2026, https://rodinmuseum.org/collection/museum-history.
[36] "Museum History," Rodin Museum; Shawn Evans, "Historic Movie Theaters of Center City," PhillyHistory Blog, February 9, 2011, https://blog.phillyhistory.org/index.php/2011/02/historic-movie-theaters-of-center-city/.
[37] Shawn Evans, "Neighborhood Movie Theaters," PhillyHistory Blog, June 7, 2011, https://blog.phillyhistory.org/index.php/2011/06/neighborhood-movie-theaters/.
[38] "Movie Theaters in Philadelphia, PA," Cinema Treasures, accessed April 2026, https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/united-states/pennsylvania/philadelphia?status=demolished.
[39] "Movie Theaters in Philadelphia, PA," Cinema Treasures.

Figure 31: Rivoli Theatre, with the State Theatre in the background, *Cinema Treasures*.

Figure 32: State Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*.

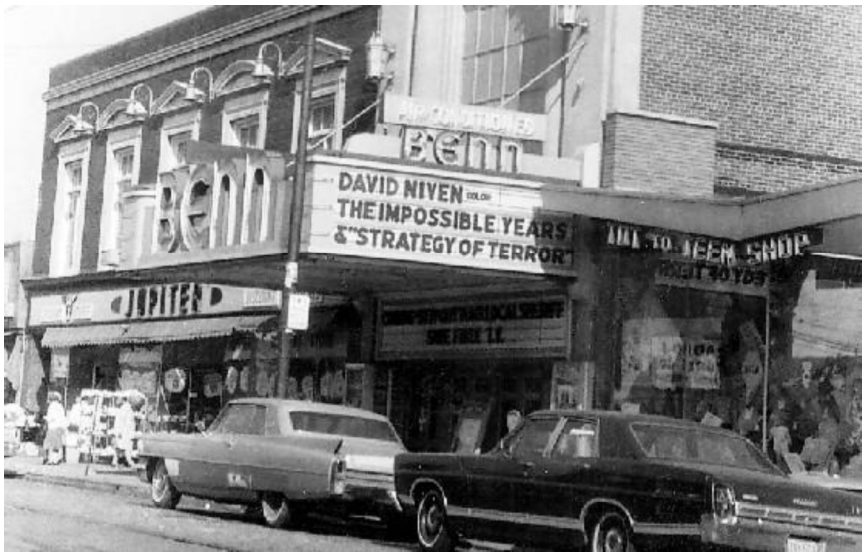


Figure 33: Benn Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*.

Figure 34*:* Sherwood Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*.

Figure 35: Lenox Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*.

Figure 36: Byrd Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*.

Theatres would often be located in close proximity and still manage to attract sufficient crowds due to the popularity of the growing entertainment industry. Business tactics included obtaining exclusive rights to certain movies or film studios and pricing tickets competitively. Other ways of

attracting audiences included Bingo, lotteries, and even dishware giveaways.[40] The Baltimore Theatre opened at 5026 Baltimore Avenue in 1913, only approximately one-half mile to the northeast of the Ambassador Theatre. This small, last-run theatre was active into the late 1930s.[41] Occasionally, this competition resulted in disputes which could only be settled with government intervention. In the 1934 case of the Ambassador Theatre vs. the Benn Theatre, approximately one mile to the south along Woodland Avenue, the local code board decided that the Benn Theatre be granted seven days of screening clearance ahead of the Ambassador Theatre. In effect, the Ambassador Theatre would have to wait three weeks after the first-run West Philadelphia cinemas had run the newest releases.[42]

After World War II, socioeconomic factors led to the decline of the movie palace. Newer cinemas were less opulent, as streamlined aesthetics reflected changing tastes and cost savings. The 1950s saw the rise of the drive-in, which was followed by the sterile, sprawling multiplexes of the 1970s which continue to dominate the landscape.[43] Once home to over 400 movie theatres built from the 1890s to 1960s, most of which were relatively small neighborhood cinemas, only 135 theatres remained in Philadelphia as of 2013.[44]

Harvey C. Hodgens

Harvey C. Hodgens, architect of the Ambassador Theatre, studied at the University of Pennsylvania and began his career in his hometown of Pittsburgh before coming to Philadelphia circa 1919. Hodgens was best known for designing theatres, with over 100 such buildings credited to his name, despite his work on both residences and a variety of commercial properties.[45] Hodgens' solo theatre designs included the 1920 Allen Theatre, as well as additions to the Avenue Theatre in 1919, and the German Theatre in 1920, all in Philadelphia. The 400-seat Allen Theatre remains standing with little integrity and currently functions as a church. This appears to be the only extant theatre designed exclusively by Hodgens apart from the Ambassador Theatre.[46] Hodgens worked with A.D. Hill from 1923 to 1942. The duo became associated with William Freihofer of the Freihofer Baking Co. following his entrance into the business of theater development, which led to an increase in work in the mid-1920s. Hodgens & Hill were the architects of at least 13 theatres in the City of Philadelphia and were arguably best known for the 1928 Tower Theatre in Upper Darby - a grand, three-story Classical Revival theatre with first-

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[40] Benjamin B. Hampton, *History of The American Film Industry*, (Dover Publications, 1970), 252.; Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres*, 32.
[41] Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres*, 64.
[42] "West Philly Complaints to Get Lot of Attention," *The Philadelphia Exhibitor*, 1934, vol. 16, October, 40.
[43] Williams, "From Dream to Economy"; "Movie Palaces," *The Twenties in America*, Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 2026, https://repository.si.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/243715c4-fa15-413d-a5a8-ff129f13b69c/content.
[44] Rachel Hildebrandt, "How to Spot a Theatre," Hidden City, May 14, 2013, https://hiddencityphila.org/2013/05/how-to-spot-a-theater/.
[45] "H.C. Hodgens, Architect, Dies," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 1, 1954.
[46] "Hodgens, Harvey Childs (1876 - ?)," Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project. The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 2026, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display_projects.cfm/25216.

floor commercial space. Although constructed with unique facades and varying in size, all of these buildings were of the Classical Revival style according to historic photographs. Perhaps the most similar example to the Ambassador Theatre is the 1928 Admiral Theatre at 2806 North 5th Street, which features similar massing, a tripartite facade, and semicircular arch detailing. The similarities between the theatres suggest that Hodgens & Hill repeated certain components in their many projects.

Figure 33: Undated photograph of the Admiral Theatre, Fairhill, Philadelphia. *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project*.

The Admiral and Tower theatres remain standing, although heavily modified, along with at least five other theatres designed by Hodgens & Hill, including the: Cambria Theatre at 2901 North 25th Street, Clearfield Theatre at 2512 Clearfield Street, Colney Theatre at 5621-5629 North 5th Street, Fern Rock Theatre at 6017 North 5th Street, and Roosevelt Theatre at 4739 Frankford Avenue.[47] None of these theatres exhibit the level of ornamentation nor maintain the exterior architectural integrity found at the Ambassador Theatre and have all been converted for various usages including a church, pharmacy, and grocery store.

[47] "Hodgens & Hill (fl. 1923 - 1942)," Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project. The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 2026, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm?ArchitectId=A0658.

The Ambassador Theatre building at 5538-50 Baltimore Avenue embodies the history of Philadelphia cinemas. The theatre was designed and built in 1921 by the locally prominent Felt Amusement Company and Harvey C. Hodgens. The theatre was absorbed into Frederick G. Nixon-Nirdlinger's West Philadelphia chain shortly after its construction, one of two cinema empires which began in Philadelphia. The property went on to serve the surrounding community along Baltimore Avenue for decades during the nationwide rise of the film industry. The Ambassador Theatre exemplifies the movie palace design, which were often built in neighborhoods away from city's downtown cores. These high-style buildings featured intricate ornamentation modeled after European opera houses and frequently displayed the Classical Revival style. The subject building exemplifies the symmetry and grandeur of this style, with stained-glass windows and limestone detailing highlighted by display board surrounds. The facade also prominently features terracotta festoons, pediments, urns, rosettes, and more detailing produced by the local Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company. As such, the Ambassador Theatre continues to exemplify the local, citywide, and national significance of the early twentieth century cinema industry through its ornamental architecture.

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