

AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATERS IN GEORGIA: PRESERVING AN ENTERTAINMENT  
LEGACY

by

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(Under the Direction of John C. Waters)

ABSTRACT

Many African American theaters built in the early twentieth century have been destroyed. This thesis looks at four African American theaters in Georgia that have been preserved or are in the process of being preserved. It looks at the history of the theaters and at how preservationists took, or are taking, the initiative to restore these entertainment palaces. The restoration of these theaters played a major part in the redevelopment of their cities' downtown areas. Recommendations for historic theater preservation are provided.

INDEX WORDS: African American, Theater, Theater History, Georgia, Morton Theatre, Douglass Theatre, Liberty Theatre, Albany Theatre, Preservation, Restoration.

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by

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You've taken my blues and gone-  
You sing 'em on Broadway  
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,  
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies  
And you fixed 'em  
So they don't sound like me.  
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.  
You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*  
And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*  
And in everything but what's about me-  
But someday somebody'll  
Stand up and talk about me,  
And write about me-  
Black and beautiful-  
And sing about me,  
And put on plays about me!  
I reckon it'll be me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

Hughes, "Note on Commercial Theatre"

## **I. Introduction**

African American theaters that were built in the early twentieth century play an important part to our cultural history, and they need to be preserved to help understand and appreciate our colorful theatrical past. This thesis looks at the history of African American theaters, primarily in Georgia, and looks at how they were restored. This work should serve as a guideline to preserve theaters all over the United States. Theater by definition is a gathering together of a group of people to witness a planned performance. “It is one of the major modes of diversion of modern civilization. It is materially nonproductive, its values being entirely spiritual and cultural.”<sup>1</sup>

The reason I chose this topic is because I always had an interest in entertainment and an interest in history. So the Harlem Renaissance, which happened in the 1920s, is defined as “a moment in history in which black intellectuals and artists struggled with the tendency to define black existence from a white perspective,”<sup>2</sup> and it became one of my favorite periods in history. From looking at this time period, I saw a lot of writing about what was going on in Harlem, and I always wondered what was going on in other parts of the country. During my graduate orientation here at the University of Georgia, I heard about the Morton Theatre and I thought that entertainment would be a great focus for a thesis.

Theaters represent a part of our nation’s cultural history. It is important that research on theaters like this should be done because it supports the preservation of theaters like the

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Plum “Rose McClendon and the Black Units of the Federal Theatre Project: A Lost Contribution,” *Theatre Survey* 33, no. 2 (November 1992): 145.

Hippodrome Theater (a white theater) built in 1914 by architect Thomas Lamb, located in Baltimore, Maryland, and recently restored.<sup>3</sup> Others like the Gaiety Theatre (a black theater in Boston) built in 1908 by Clarence Blackall, may be demolished for construction of an apartment building.<sup>4</sup> Another example, the 93-year-old Tappan Zee Playhouse, in the village, of Nyack, New York, will soon be destroyed to build a food market and ten apartments for volunteer fire fighters.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1900 and 1955, hundreds of vaudeville and movie theaters offered segregated programming for blacks in the South. Now, according to the National Register of Historic Places and the League of Historic American Theatres, less than twenty of these theaters survive as restored institutions. A new project, “Hear Me Talking to You,” has been developed to collect oral histories and reminiscences of former performers, employees, patrons, and family members from theaters all over the South for the use in better interpreting such theaters in a regional context, both individually and as a group.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis begins by looking at modern theaters in an effort to give readers an understanding of what was happening in theaters around the country in the early twentieth century. This background information helps readers understand how these theaters operated and contributed to the culture of that time. Next, the thesis provides background information about what is going on with African American theaters during the same time period, including a comparison between the white theaters and the black theaters. The third section provides an overview of all African American theaters in Georgia, then, looks at three theaters mentioned in

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Foster, National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Baltimore’s restored Hippodrome Theater Debuts Tonight”; available from [http://www.nationaltrust.org/Magazine/archives/arc\\_news/021004p.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org/Magazine/archives/arc_news/021004p.htm); Internet; accessed 10 February 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Foster, National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Boston Theater Denied Landmark Status”; available from [http://www.nationaltrust.org/magazine/archives/arc\\_news/042803p.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org/magazine/archives/arc_news/042803p.htm); Internet; accessed 28 April 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Foster, National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Dilapidated 1911 Theater to be Razed”; available from [http://www.nationaltrust.org/magazine/archives/arc\\_news/021904p.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org/magazine/archives/arc_news/021904p.htm); Internet; accessed 19 February 2004.

<sup>6</sup> “Project Description: Using Oral History to Augment Interpretation of African American Theatres in the South.”

a *Reflections* article entitled “African American Theatres in Georgia,”<sup>7</sup> that were built primarily for African American entertainment. In addition, this third section looks at an interesting theater that was built for whites but catered to blacks, currently owned by a black businessman/community leader. This theater was also featured in a *Reflections*’ article, entitled “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre.”<sup>8</sup> Next, the history of each theater is examined along with a discussion of how they were, or are being, restored. Then they are compared in the last and final section. Finally there are recommendations on how to restore a theater and a list of other areas of potential research.

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<sup>7</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

<sup>8</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 1.

## II. General History of Theaters in America

Vaudeville had many types of entertainment in its heyday, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were assorted songs, dances, dramatic episodes, blackouts, trained animals, acrobats, bell ringers, jugglers, magicians, ventriloquists, mind-readers, musicians, and clowns. In fact, any feat or phenomenon of man or beast (not excluding elephants) which could be put on a stage and which was calculated to have sufficient audience appeal through uniqueness, novelty, skill, virtuosity, renown, or notoriety, was showcased as a part of vaudeville. Vaudeville performers would wear bright costumes which, along with the entire stage setting, combined to center attention on the performers. The lighting was conventional, and there was no illusion of time or place.<sup>9</sup> The thing that made vaudeville so popular was that it had the capacity to commercialize any form of entertainment. It could do it with a working-class song or with a grand opera. Vaudeville was trying to provide some form of entertainment for everybody at each show. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, a publication in 1895, talked about how the middle classes were going to theaters to move freely between a variety of entertainment venues and formats.<sup>10</sup>

There were two to five shows a day at these vaudeville theaters and about eight to fifteen acts per performance. Each act would be ten to fifteen minutes long. When acts changed they were quick and covered by music from the pit orchestra, and verbal patter by the master of

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<sup>9</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Hodin, "The Disavowal of Ethnicity: Legitimate Theatre and the Social Construction of Literary Value in Turn-of-the-Century America," *Theater Journal* 52, no. 2 (May 2000): 211, 213.

ceremonies.<sup>11</sup> The real estate speculator had dictated the typical American theater plan, at the beginning of the twentieth century. If a theater was successful it could yield a landlord profits greater than any other form of real estate investment. The producer of a play was known as the tenant, and this person agreed to pay forty percent of his gross box office receipts as rent. Tenants would be displaced quickly if they did not have a hit. A hit show averaged a take of anywhere from \$20,000 to \$30,000 a week, or more, and the show would run for a year or longer.<sup>12</sup> Admission prices for these theaters were considered moderate.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 1 The Fox Theater in Atlanta, Georgia. Early twentieth century. Photograph from [www.foxtheatre.org](http://www.foxtheatre.org)

During the early twentieth century, theaters were on small plots whose cost, both in site value and taxes, was driven higher by competition for desirable locations in congested urban centers. Theaters were designed to get maximum returns from inflated land values, and this was done at the expense of their tenants. The theaters represented a maximum of extravagance on

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<sup>11</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Lee Simonson, "Theatre Planning," in *Architecture for the New Theatre*, ed. Edith J. R. Isaacs (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc, 1935), 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 3.

inessentials, façade, trimmings, ornament, and gilt gewgaws of all sorts, intended to impress temporary tenants and compensate them for unsound planning. With theaters being placed on small lots, the stage space was reduced to a minimum and was too shallow to set scenery. The landlord wanted stages to be shifted or lighted with a minimum waste of time and labor. The theater owner was selling site value, and his calculations were based totally on getting the maximum number of seats and a minimum stage on the smallest piece of expensive real estate that would hold his theater.<sup>14</sup> All that theater owners were concerned with was profit. So the theater had to be large enough to pay operating costs with the ticket price, and small enough so facial expression could be seen by the audience. In addition, these theaters had to be equipped for fast changes of simple scenes.<sup>15</sup>

Some theater owners merged together to coordinate nationally touring theatrical productions, and they were called the Theatrical Syndicate. In the article, “The Disavowal of Ethnicity: Legitimate Theatre and the Social Construction of Literary Value in Turn-of-the-Century American,” Mark Hodin had this to say about the Theatrical Syndicate:

“Though the agreement under which the group would function was spelled out behind closed doors in 1896, by the first decade of the twentieth century the (Theatrical) Syndicate was following the example of other emergent corporations and defending its monopolistic practices openly in public. ‘The Theatrical Syndicate has brought order out of chaos, legitimate profit out of ruinous rivalry,’ asserted the Syndicate’s Marc Klaw in *Cosmopolitan* in 1904, ‘Under its operations the actor has received a higher salary than ever was his, the producing manager has been assured a better percentage on his investment, and the local manager has won the success which comes from the booking of accepted metropolitan favorites.’”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Simonson, “Theatre Planning,” in *Architecture for the New Theatre*, ed. Edith J. R. Isaacs (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc, 1935), 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Burriss-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 3

<sup>16</sup> Mark Hodin, “The Disavowal of Ethnicity: Legitimate Theatre and the Social Construction of Literary Value in Turn-of-the-Century America,” *Theater Journal* 52, no. 2 (May 2000): 217.

Audiences were uncomfortable being in these theaters. The aisles were narrow, the sight lines to see the stage were bad, and the lobby space was so inadequate that during an intermission of a play people usually found themselves on the street. There were some attempts at improving the theaters either architecturally or mechanically, but they were met by the invariable answer of the landlord who said, "If the tenants did not like it, they could go elsewhere."<sup>17</sup> Audience members had to be taught how to behave during a show. They were instructed by ushers and if need be by police officers.<sup>18</sup> There were some people who would rather go to a Vaudeville theater than any other type of entertainment even though it was uncomfortable. "Vaudeville addicts had attendance habits more thoroughly ingrained than any other audience."<sup>19</sup> Not only did patrons come to the theater to enjoy a show but also they would receive a program that was bursting with suggestions as to how they could consume more goods and services. They had advertisements ranging from cosmetics and corsets to the happy life in restaurants and cabarets. By 1915, there were full-page color advertisements of cigarettes and even advertisements for loan offices.<sup>20</sup>

In 1964, Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, in their book, *Theatres and Auditoriums*, said that the commercial theater offered more discomfort per dollar of admission than any other theatre. They went on to say:

"From about 30 per cent of the seats, it is impossible to see the whole show. Seats are cramped; the atmosphere is stifling in the house, foul in the jammed public rooms. Acoustical conditions are generally bad, varying with the size of the audience. "The stage is as small and ill-equipped as it can be and still find a play willing to use it. It is unsuited to economical handling of more than single set shows. Multi-set shows often call for extreme ingenuity to get them into the stage house and shift them

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<sup>17</sup> Lee Simonson, "Theatre Planning," in *Architecture for the New Theatre*, ed. Edith J. R. Isaacs (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc, 1935), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 207.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 205-206.



when they are there. Lighting equipment and all stage machinery except simple rigging must be brought in with the show. Dressing rooms are stacked about with no thought of the actors' comfort."<sup>21</sup>

These conditions raised issues of safety, and the biggest threat was that of fire. The worst theater fire was the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago in 1906 in which hundreds of people lost their life. The thing that made the Iroquois Theatre tragedy so memorable was the fact that the building itself was less than a decade old at the time and had been constructed according to the most approved methods of the time. "The gains in space which the use of structural steel brought about had decreased the danger of direct burns from the flames themselves but had introduced two more lethal dangers: the generation of hot air in a confined space such as the flyloft with a capability of asphyxiating an entire balcony full of persons before they could leave their seats, and the hysteria of the audience as it becomes a blind mob seeking egress and crushing those who fall before it. In the Iroquois Theatre fire, the crowds had funneled into a blind alley with terrific loss of life. Although that theater had been designed to be emptied in five minutes, firemen reported a steady stream of people leaving the building for fifteen minutes after the initial outbreak of the fire." Some theaters like Keith's New Theatre in Boston (1894) and Proctor's Pleasure Palace in New York (late 1800s to early 1900s) took special precautions to keep the crowd safe. Proctor's Pleasure Palace had two large vents over the hanging loft for the release of smoke, and had fifty exits. Keith's New Theatre's stage could be drenched with water within ten seconds of an alarm.<sup>22</sup>

It was also because of structural steel that many people in the audience could not see a lot of the show. From the initial trials of engineers from Germany and England in the 1870s and

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<sup>21</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 199-200.

1880s, builders had learned to produce theaters in which the stage was comfortably visible from nearly every portion of the house and in which the acoustics were remarkably improved.

Architects from America seem to have gone a step further than their British or German fellows in the projection of the upper tiers into the auditorium, conveniently close to the stage. For example, the balcony in Keith's New Theatre was about forty-four feet away from the stage and the gallery was only a few feet more, while the Lessing Theatre in Berlin (ca. 1888) was sixty-two feet away from the stage.<sup>23</sup>

In his book, *American Vaudeville as Ritual*, Albert F McLean, Jr. wrote this about the difference:

“Perhaps the Americans were fortunate in not having the traditional ‘pit’ to influence their designs; perhaps they built larger balconies because of the increased number of medium-priced seats they would provide; but whatever the reason, the gain in terms of immediacy and clarity would appear to have been considerable. Unfortunately the size of the balconies seems to have precluded the bold use of cantilever girders to support the upper tiers, and thus iron posts dotted the auditoriums and obstructed sight from a few seats in even the best of the palaces. Further efficiency was promoted, however by the narrowness of many American theaters, excepting of course those which had been converted from the old-time opera houses, for one finds most of the vaudeville theaters with proscenium widths of less than forty feet. The reduced opening naturally served to channel sound from the stage and direct it forward into the house, and the elimination of excess beams and supports inside the dome tended to give sound an easier passage to the audience. Another advantage of the general narrowness of the vaudeville houses was that it encouraged experimentation with seating arrangements. In the parquet, especially, the judicious combinations of straight, parallel rows in front and semi-circular rows toward the rear, and the gentle incline of the floor in order to give the maximum of vision, show that McElfatrick and Sons, at least, were sensitive to the problems of hearing and seeing.”<sup>24</sup>

Theater owners were not concerned about the tenants or the crowds that came to see and hear a show. The producer wanted a theater that could attract an audience, and also he wanted

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<sup>23</sup> Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 200-201.

<sup>24</sup> Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 201-202.

facilities for preparing a show, good conditions for the performance, sufficient production organization and machinery. In all of this, they wanted a fair showing at a low cost. The audience also had needs. They wanted a maximum of comfort, a minimum of distractions, and complete safety.<sup>25</sup> Later on air conditioning was added to make the summer theater going experience more comfortable. Ventilation had been improved, and redecorations had been undertaken. Despite these improvements, the difficulties inherent in the original structures still remained.<sup>26</sup>

Theaters also had multiple uses. They could be used for church services, town meetings, and all types of assemblages. If a theater was limited architecturally, it reduced its potential income and shortened its useful life. To provide for multiple uses of theaters, planning must have been based on an analysis of attendance and performance requirements of each type of production to be housed.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually this type of theater did collapse along with every other form of speculative real estate that was based on inflated land values and high rentals. This happened around the time of the Great Depression, but the deflation was not primarily due to the depression. Most of the money during that time went to movies. With the commercial theaters being so overbuilt, even a sudden return of prosperity and boom times could hardly fill the theaters that were already constructed.<sup>28</sup> One reason that people went to movies is that motion pictures were easier to

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<sup>25</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 17.

<sup>27</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres and Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1964), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Lee Simonson, "Theatre Planning," in *Architecture for the New Theatre*, ed. Edith J. R. Isaacs (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc, 1935), 20-21.

manage than live entertainment, they were cheaper to use, and they yielded more immediate profit.<sup>29</sup>

Movies were not a new thing, but they had been around for a while. Some theaters owners started looking ahead and incorporating movies into vaudeville theaters. For example in 1908, one of the first and most ambitious schemes for building large capacity theaters for vaudeville and motion pictures was developed by Sig Lubin, a motion picture producer/distributor from Philadelphia. In April 1908, Mr. Lubin purchased a piece of property at 926 Market Street in Philadelphia for a reported \$250,000. On the property he built an eight hundred-seat theater for vaudeville and film, and it cost him \$132,000. This place was called the Palace of Delight, and was usually referred to as the Palace. It opened the first week of September 1908. The Palace gave four shows a day, and used six “first-class” vaudeville acts everyday and charged ten cents. Sig Lubin expanded his theater operation throughout the country. That same year he opened theaters in Richmond, Norfolk, and Cincinnati. By June 1909, Lubin controlled fifteen theaters.<sup>30</sup>

Movie houses did not totally stray away from vaudeville theaters. The motion picture exhibition situation, which emerged in the 1910s, clearly owed much to the example set by vaudeville. The pretentious exteriors and lavish interiors of the new motion pictures palaces closely resembled those of high-class vaudeville theaters. Even in houses, like the Regency and the Strand in New York, where vaudeville programs were not presented, there was evidence of

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 232.

vaudeville's influence: "the format of the feature film theatre program can be seen as derivation of the organizing principle of vaudeville, a series of autonomous, disconnected acts."<sup>31</sup>

The demand for new live action theaters did not stop but came from new sources. These new sources were universities, colleges, schools and high schools, community centers, and local "art" theaters. They were known as non-commercial theaters. Their needs were growing and programs continued to expand, as the field of the commercial theater grew more and more restricted. With these new theaters, the requirements were the opposite of the commercial theaters. The biggest difference was that the producer was not a temporary tenant but a permanent one. Some examples of the new theaters are the Yale University Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, The Iowa University Theatre in Iowa City, Iowa, and the Cleveland Play House.<sup>32</sup>

The new theaters had to be flexible enough to be easily converted for concerts, choruses, moving pictures, public lectures, regional conventions, commencement exercises, and traveling or local art exhibitions. Many of these theaters tapped into a territory of several thousand square miles on a radius of an hour or an hour and a half's automobile drive. This required that the building be related to parkways, landscape approaches or large parking spaces.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 320-321.

<sup>32</sup> Lee Simonson, "Theatre Planning," in *Architecture for the New Theatre*, ed. Edith J. R. Isaacs (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc, 1935), 21-22, 47, 59, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Lee Simonson, "Theatre Planning," in *Architecture for the New Theatre*, ed. Edith J. R. Isaacs (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc, 1935), 23.

### III. History of African American Theaters

Early African American theaters were similar to theaters for Caucasian audiences in many ways. They were also built as real estate investments, so the theaters were uncomfortable for audiences and performers. Also issues of safety were a problem with these theaters. Finally many theaters were shut down because they could not compete against low cost movies. When these commercial theaters were closed, noncommercial theaters emerged. The biggest difference that many of the black performers and theater owners had to face was the issue of racism.

There were very few black-managed playhouses that existed before 1900, but by 1910 the Indianapolis *Freedman* recorded that there were fifty-three theaters owned by blacks in the United States, with the large majority (forty-two) of them in the south.<sup>34</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff in their article entitled, “‘They Cert’ly sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” said, “By 1910 almost every black community in every city in the South had a little vaudeville theater. It was nothing more than black commercial entertainment for black audiences.”<sup>35</sup> By 1921, approximately three hundred theaters catered to blacks and only thirty-one percent of them were owned and managed by blacks. In 1931, one hundred sixty two theaters were owned and managed by blacks, and fifty-six percent of them were dedicated to vaudeville.<sup>36</sup> These included, The Lyric Theater, in New

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 412.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 14.

Orleans,<sup>37</sup> The Airdome Theater, in Jacksonville, Florida, The Olio Theater, in Louisville, Kentucky, The Elite Theater, in Selma, Alabama, The Railto, Church's Auditorium, and Tick's Tivoli, in Memphis, Tennessee, and the New Lincoln Theater, in Galveston, Texas.<sup>38</sup> Some theaters that were located in the north were: the Lincoln Theater, established by a woman by the name of Maria Downs in 1909,<sup>39</sup> the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem,<sup>40</sup> the Pekin Theatre in Chicago, the first major black-run theater in the North,<sup>41</sup> the Booker Washington Theater in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Crown Garden Theater in Indianapolis, Indiana.<sup>42</sup>

In their heyday, black vaudeville theaters were very important to the communities in which they were located. The only gathering places that African Americans had in their communities were churches, ballrooms, and vaudeville theaters. They could not go to the opera houses where whites went, but they could go see a vaudeville act.<sup>43</sup> Some of African American theaters were located close to one another. In Memphis, Tennessee, the Royal Theater, the Gem Theater, and the Amuse U were operating within a half block of one another. Chicago, Illinois was known as "the capital of the independent African American entertainment world." It had a section known as the State Street Theater District and was dubbed "Broadway in Dahomey."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Glenn Collins "Re-creating Black Vaudeville, Without Removing the Warts," *New York Times*, 26 June 1990, sec. C, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 413, 416, 418, 426.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Rena Fraden "A National Negro Theater that Never was: Making it Real: Uphill All the Way," *American Visions* 9, no. 5 (Oct.-Nov. 1994): 30.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 14.

<sup>42</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 439, 442.

<sup>43</sup> Glenn Collins "Re-creating Black Vaudeville, Without Removing the Warts," *New York Times*, 26 June 1990, sec. C, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 427, 443.

There was a lot of racism directed towards black stars and to combat the treatment of racism many of them took things into their own hands. They were led by a gentleman named Sherman Houston Dudley, and they organized “black-owned theaters into circuits to facilitate the presentation on black acts for black audiences and to circumvent white theater circuits.” The first circuit was organized in 1911 and it was called S. H. Dudley’s Theatrical Enterprise, but generally referred to as the Dudley circuit or Dudley time. Eight theaters were in this circuit that spread from Philadelphia to Newport News, Virginia. Five years later, the circuit had nineteen houses, and had top acts like the Whitman Sisters and J. Leubrie Hill’s Darktown Follies.<sup>45</sup>

There was a circuit formed further down south called the Tri-State Circuit. It was the first attempt to establish a black theater chain or vaudeville-booking agency in the South. A man named Fred Barrasso started the Tri-State Circuit. The Savoy Theater in Memphis, Tennessee, the American Theater in Jackson, Mississippi, Amuse Theater in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and the Royal Palm Theater in Greenville, Mississippi were part of the Tri-State Circuit. This circuit predated the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) by more than a decade.<sup>46</sup>

In the late 1910s there was another circuit that was formed in the south, called the Southern Consolidated Circuit, and it was controlled by Dudley and a white man from Pensacola, Florida whose name was E.L. Cummings. There were many reports that there were disagreements between Dudley and Cummings so there had to be a complete reorganization with colored theater booking and this led to the formation of TOBA. Dudley and two white men, Sam Reevin and Martin Klein, were officers of TOBA. The president of TOBA was a white theater owner in Chattanooga named Milton Starr. Starr noted that TOBA was “owned, controlled and

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 434.



operated by theatre owners” and any theater owner could join by purchasing three shares of capital stock at a par value of \$100. The business meetings were conducted on a one man-one vote basis, no matter how many shares a person owned.<sup>47</sup>

Many of these theaters were part of TOBA, which began in the early 1900s and lasted until the Great Depression.<sup>48</sup> Since there was an extraordinary increase in the number of black theaters from 1910 to 1920, black show people faced similar problems as white entertainers experienced. Everybody wanted steady work, but booking an act in several theaters in a row, so as to avoid excessive traveling distances week to week, was probably the most vexing problem. Very few performers wanted to play in what they deemed second-class houses, but owners, managers, and performers seldom agreed on the acts that were most deserving of time in good houses or where an act would best be received. White managers considered all black acts second-class until they were proven otherwise. All of the major black stars complained about unfair booking from time to time, and only a few acts had played the big time like theaters on the Keith, Orpheum, Western, and Shubert circuits before the 1920s. Even though TOBA was owned and managed by whites, it let artists like Bert Williams and Bill (Bojangles) Robinson (See figure 2) hone their style. TOBA peaked in the 1920s when the circuit had more than forty theaters.<sup>49</sup> It did provide opportunities for employment when jobs were scarce and when travel for blacks in a segregated America was perilous, but TOBA was hard on the performers, who paraphrased the organization’s acronym, calling it Tough on Black Asses.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 17, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Felicia R. Lee “An Encore for Black Vaudeville: A new Revue Finds Dignity in a Derided Art Form,” *New York Times*, 10 February 1999, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Felicia R. Lee “An Encore for Black Vaudeville: A new Revue Finds Dignity in a Derided Art Form,” *New York Times*, 10 February 1999, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> R. Newman “The Lincoln Theatre,” *American Visions* 6, no. 4, (August 1991), in *EBSCO Host Research Databases* [database on-line], GALILEO; Accessed August 12, 2003.



Fig. 2 Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, a vaudeville performer. Photograph from [www.mcps.k12.md.us](http://www.mcps.k12.md.us)

Not all the theaters in Georgia dealt with TOBA. From TOBA’s correspondence, the only theaters to book acts regularly from the main office in Chattanooga through the 1920s were the Club 81 Theatre and “91” in Atlanta and the Douglass Theatre in Macon.<sup>51</sup>

The reason why TOBA declined is not as well documented as its rise. It is believed that it had something to do with the decline of vaudeville and vaudeville theaters.<sup>52</sup>

The performers worked seven days a week and did four to five shows a day. The average pay was thirty dollars, but sometimes they did not get paid because the owner said that they did not make enough money from ticket sales.<sup>53</sup>

Black performers had it rough during the heydays of vaudeville. Some theater owners were violent towards them. Public accommodations were segregated. Also many times performers had to make concessions such as paying their own travel expenses. Many of the

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 21.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 33.

<sup>53</sup> Glenn Collins “Re-creating Black Vaudeville, Without Removing the Warts,” *New York Times*, 26 June 1990, sec. C, p. 15.

southern towns that had theaters where blacks could play had curfews. Mel Walkins, who is the author of *On the Real Side*, said this in a *New York Times* article:

“That circuit (TOBA) was run almost like a theatrical plantation. There are stories about performers who wanted to quit a show. When they’d go to the train station to buy a ticket, they’d find out that a theater manager had put out the word that they were not allowed to leave town. They just said, ‘No, boy.’”<sup>54</sup>

Two of the more successful theaters on the TOBA Southern route, the Douglass Theatre in Macon, GA and the Belmont in Pensacola, also ran hotels adjacent to the theaters for the benefit of the black performers and their audiences. With many theaters not having a hotel beside them, many performers bought and furnished their own railroad cars.<sup>55</sup>

African American actors also had a hard time getting parts in plays that portrayed them in a positive light because black theatric plays were designed by whites. Blacks could not do love scenes and depicting a person with middle- or upper class social values was not allowed. In plays where there was a black character, it was either a white person or black person in blackface. Blackface was a makeup that performers would put on that made them dark. Actors would wear it to play a black character in their performance. “For African American intellectuals in the early part of the twentieth century (and for scholars throughout the century), the question was whether this kind of alienating cultural experience for blacks made it impossible to develop an alternative culture. Could an authentic black theater only exist apart from the popular and racist theatrical history, or was there something in that popular culture, racist though it was, that could be used again, authenticated, made to be genuine and genuinely

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<sup>54</sup> Felicia R. Lee “An Encore for Black Vaudeville: A new Revue Finds Dignity in a Derided Art Form,” *New York Times*, 10 February 1999, sec. E, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 24.

unique?”<sup>56</sup> Some African Americans, like Montgomery Gregory, wanted to form a national African American theatre, but many black actors continued to aspire for acceptance on Broadway through the plays of sympathetic white authors.<sup>57</sup>

Many blacks started their own theater performing companies. One example is Anita Bush who was a dancer and actress. In 1915, she formed her own company at the Lincoln Theater and the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, and her group, the Lafayette Players, lasted until 1932. They performed popular plays from Broadway that were retooled for a black audience. Theaters like the Pekin Theatre in Chicago and the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem proved black actors could act the plays that they were not allowed to perform on Broadway. This was so successful at the Pekin Theatre that white managers began opening up theaters that catered to blacks. Black shows, about thirty in all, were produced in black neighborhoods and on Broadway between 1890 and 1915.<sup>58</sup>

Then, black composers started to take ownership of their music. They had to “secure proper credit for their creative output, and retain legal control of opportunities for commercial exploitation and financial reward.” Robert Hoffman, who wrote “I’m Alabama Bound”, is a good example of why composers needed to keep ties to their music. It was being successfully sung by a white mainstream group called Rag Trio. In February 1910, at the Belmont Street Theater in Pensacola, a group called Watkins and Watkins said they wrote an act they entitled

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<sup>56</sup> Rena Fraden “A National Negro Theater That Never was: Making it Real: Uphill All the Way,” *American Visions* 9, no. 5 (Oct-Nov 1994): 27, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Jay Plum “Rose McClendon and the Black Units of the Federal Theatre Project: A Lost Contribution,” *Theatre Survey* 33, no. 2 (November 1992): 145.

<sup>58</sup> Rena Fraden “A National Negro Theater That Never was: Making it Real: Uphill All the Way,” *American Visions* 9, no. 5 (Oct-Nov 1994): 30.

“I’m Alabama Bound.”<sup>59</sup> White show business writers, composers, and bandleaders went to black theaters, like the Lincoln Theater in Harlem, to find new ideas and new tunes.<sup>60</sup>

Many composers played their music at these black theaters. George Centers and Robert Joplin, Scott Joplin’s brother, sang “I’ll be a Low down Dog” at the Lincoln Theater in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1908, and Joe Simms sang “Don’t Dog Me Around” at the Pythian Temple in New Orleans. The music they were playing was becoming so successful that some were able to play it in white theaters. H. Franklin “Baby” Seals, a piano player, was one of the first to play at a white theater. Many of the theaters had their own house musicians. For example, The Royal Theater, in North Memphis, had a house pianist by the name of Alice McQuillen, the Amuse U had the Amuse U Orchestra, and the Lincoln Theater in Chicago had the Lincoln Theater Orchestra.<sup>61</sup>

There was a concern for safety in these theaters like Caucasian theaters. One example is the Lyric Theater. This theater, located at Iberville and Burgundy Streets on the edge of the Storyville red-light district in the French Quarter of New Orleans, burned down in 1927. Just recently a play was made about it called “Further Mo’.” The play has the theater owner wanting to set fire to the theater to collect insurance money, but the show has to go on.<sup>62</sup>

The same forces that shut down white theaters were the forces that shut down the black ones: higher transportation costs and low-cost movies. Vaudeville acts and minstrel shows were starting to die out, because they were being replaced by movies as the most popular form of entertainment. With racism still existent, black theaters had “a lack of financial sponsorship for

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<sup>59</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 405, 407.

<sup>60</sup> R. Newman “The Lincoln Theatre,” *American Visions* 6, no. 4, (August 1991), in *EBSCO Host Research Databases* [database on-line], GALILEO; Accessed August 12, 2003.

<sup>61</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff “‘They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 413, 418, 427, 429.

<sup>62</sup> Glenn Collins “Re-creating Black Vaudeville, Without Removing the Warts,” *New York Times*, 26 June 1990, sec. C, p. 13.

black shows and second-class bookings. Finally, the deaths of many of the first-class black performers caused independent black theaters to suffer even more.<sup>63</sup>

Independent black filmmakers had been working since the beginning of the twentieth century to produce a variety of works that would appeal to black audiences. Since the early years of the silent film industry, vaudeville and motion pictures shared the stage. The advent of full-length sound films in the late twenties, which featured the latest music and dancing, drained all but the best vaudeville of its kinetic appeal. Also, the radio provided a good reason for people to stay home.”<sup>64</sup>

As with white theaters, when these commercial theaters went out of business, there was a rise in noncommercial theaters, like the Negro People’s Theatre in Harlem. These theaters made up the smallest opportunities for black performers. Even though producers often had to struggle to find an audience, they had “an intensely theoretical belief that through the theater an alternative culture could be created for all of their people.”<sup>65</sup>

One of those people was Rose McClendon, an actress nicknamed the “First Lady of the Negro Stage.” She had a vision of an African American theater in which African Americans could express themselves and empower the community. Broadway at this time was rejecting black actors, so many, like Rose McClendon, went to Harlem. They were hoping to promote black theatre within the black community itself. McClendon played an active role in the Harlem Experimental Theatre that wanted “to provide a meeting place for the young Negro actor, actress

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<sup>63</sup> Rena Fraden “A National Negro Theater That Never was: Making it Real: Uphill All the Way,” *American Visions* 9, no. 5 (Oct-Nov 1994): 30-32.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 33-34.

<sup>65</sup> Rena Fraden “A National Negro Theater That Never was: Making it Real: Uphill All the Way,” *American Visions* 9, no. 5 (Oct-Nov 1994): 32.

and playwright in the creation of an art that [was] representative of the race.” This gave a setting for amateurs to work with professional actors and learn from the experience.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jay Plum “Rose McClendon and the Black Units of the Federal Theatre Project: A Lost Contribution,” *Theatre Survey* 33, no. 2 (November 1992): 145-147.

## **IV. Georgia's Theaters**

### **A. Introduction**

In the years from 1910 to 1930, Georgia had more black-owned theaters than any other state; the only exception was Texas, with Atlanta having five and Savannah having four. The only exception was Texas.<sup>67</sup> The Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network (GAAHPN) has identified several African American theaters and/or clubs in the state of Georgia: Silver's Juke Joint in Cuthbert, Club 81 Theatre, the Casino, and the Royal Peacock in Atlanta; the Ritz theatre in Thomasville, the Morton Theatre in Athens, the Douglass Theatre in Macon, and the Liberty Theatre in Columbus. GAAHPN identified these theaters through the Chitlin Circuit project. The purpose of the Chitlin Circuit project was to identify performance venues for African Americans in the era of Jim Crow. Also they wanted to identify white entertainment venues that had segregated seating for African Americans. GAAHPN has also identified theaters in Bibb, Chatham, Clarke, Dougherty, Floyd, Fulton, Muscogee, Randolph, and Thomas Counties that no longer exist.<sup>68</sup>

GAAHPN believes that theaters are "some of the most significant community landmark historic properties associated with African American culture and history in Georgia." In the early 1970s, preservationists started research and rehabilitation projects to recognize these historic properties. This resulted in the forming of partnerships that led to the creation of GAAHPN. Working with the Historic Preservation Division, through grant and technical assistance programs, three African American theaters have been listed in the National Register of

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 14.

<sup>68</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.



Historic Places, and they are now functioning symbols of theater and community revitalization efforts.<sup>69</sup> These theaters are the Morton Theatre, the Douglass Theatre, and the Liberty Theatre.

TOBA charted the course for artists of the Chitlin Circuit, and the Chitlin Circuit's artists "mostly toured in Chicago, New York, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina."<sup>70</sup> With Jim Crow segregation ever present, African American artists could only perform at buildings or informal structures that provided a stage for them. These performers used vaudeville, comedy, and blues because they were the most popular art form during that period. It is very interesting to note that Georgia was a pivotal state in the formation of the Chitlin Circuit, because it helped start the careers of some very influential artists like Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey from Columbus (See Figure 3), Bessie Smith from Chattanooga, Tennessee,<sup>71</sup> Thomas Dorsey from Villa Rica,<sup>72</sup> and Fletcher Henderson from Cuthbert. The Chitlin Circuit allowed many performers to express, in live music and art to mainly black "audiences, many messages that were unacceptable to mainstream, white record companies."<sup>73</sup>



Fig. 3 Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, a singer from Columbus, Georgia. Photograph from [www.redhotjazz.com](http://www.redhotjazz.com)

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<sup>69</sup> "African American Theatres in Georgia," *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

<sup>70</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>71</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>72</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>73</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

Some of the places that were stops on the Chitlin Circuit were: Silver's Juke Joint which was in Cuthbert. At Silver's Juke Joint, the band played upstairs and food was served downstairs; the club's first name was Stergis. Club 81 Theatre, which was in Atlanta, opened in 1913. Charles and Tom Bailey operated it, and they owned two other theaters in Atlanta. Club 81 Theatre showcased Vaudeville, blues, and comedy acts. It is now the site of Georgia State University. The Royal Peacock is located on the Auburn Avenue Historic District. It was a nightclub and continues to operate as one. The Casino was also in Atlanta. It is located across the street from the Royal Peacock in "Sweet Auburn," a historic African-American neighborhood, and is now owned by Big Bethel AME Church. The Ritz Theatre, in Thomasville, GA was built in 1932 and was white owned. It was the only movie house, other than segregated sections in the white theaters, available for blacks. Located on Jackson Street, in the black business district, the theater deteriorated and was demolished in the 1970s after segregation ended. Finally Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey (See Figure 3) owned two theatres in Rome.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

## **B. Morton Theatre**

### **1) History**

The Morton Theatre, located in Athens, is in a four-story building known as the Morton Building. It was built by Monroe “Pink” Morton in 1910,<sup>75</sup> and is located on the southeast corner of the intersection of North Hill and West Washington Streets, which is known locally as “Hot Corner,”<sup>76</sup> Athens famed black commercial district.<sup>77</sup>



Fig. 4 The Morton Building in Athens, Georgia. After restoration. Photograph from [www.morthontheatre.com](http://www.morthontheatre.com)

Athens is a city that has a rich theatrical history. Robert Coles, a native of Athens, moved to New York, and in 1893 wrote the first all black American musical theater production. His work helped solidify the form that is now known as musical theatre, which is a combination of music, dance, comedy, and drama in a single production. Also the work was the first time that an entire production was produced and managed by blacks. Another important black Athenian

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<sup>75</sup> “The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism,” project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>76</sup> United States Department of the Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Morton Building.” 10/22/79.

<sup>77</sup> “The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism,” project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

was Hall Johnson, the son of a minister and a classically trained musician, who went on to become one of the first American professional choral writers and conductors (See Figure 5). The Hall Johnson Choir traveled all over the world and performed at the Morton Theatre.<sup>78</sup>



Fig. 5 Hall Johnson, black musician from Athens. Photograph from *Story Untold: Black Men and Women in Athens History* by Michael Thurmond

Monroe B. “Pink” Morton (See Figure 6) was a prominent African American contractor and businessman.<sup>79</sup> He was born in May 1853<sup>80</sup> and was the son of an African slave, Elizabeth Morton, and a prosperous white man, James B. White.<sup>81</sup> Growing up, Morton received very little formal education,<sup>82</sup> but it is possible that he benefited from the school set up by the Freedmen’s Bureau in Athens in 1868.<sup>83</sup> He started working when he was six years old as a hotel porter and then went into the contracting business.<sup>84</sup> His mother died in 1886 and around that time “Pink” Morton got married. He, his wife, his sister, and his children resided in a home that had once belonged to his mother at the corner of Prince and Milledge Avenues in a small, exclusive black

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<sup>78</sup> “Information is Sought about Morton Theatre,” *The Athens Observer*, 16 October 1980.

<sup>79</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

<sup>80</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 1.

<sup>82</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 1.

<sup>84</sup> “History of Black Newspapers Told,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 4 February 1979.

enclave close to mansions of prominent white Athenians.<sup>85</sup> He tried many different occupations before he became a building contractor. Some of his projects were: designing the Wilkes County Courthouse and assisting with the construction of the Anniston, Alabama, Government Building.<sup>86</sup>



Fig. 6 Monroe “Pink” Morton, owner and founder of the Morton Theatre. Photograph from *Story Untold: Black Men and Women in Athens History* by Michael Thurmond.

Morton was active politically with the Republican Party. He served as a state delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1896. Also, he was selected as a member of the committee charged with informing William Mckinley that he was nominated to be the Republican Party’s candidate for President of the United States of America. When Mckinley won the Presidency, Morton was appointed United States Postmaster of Athens,<sup>87</sup> serving for five years.<sup>88</sup> By 1914, “Pink” Morton became publisher and editor of the *Progressive Era*, which was a local black newspaper.<sup>89</sup> He returned to the business world as a financier and builder, and

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<sup>85</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 1.

<sup>86</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>87</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 1.

<sup>89</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Morton Building.” 10/22/79.

by the early teens he had acquired some two dozen houses in Athens. These buildings were mostly located in the northern part of Athens.<sup>90</sup>

In January 1909, “Pink” Morton bought the lot on which the Morton Building stands, and began construction later that year.<sup>91</sup> The reason that “Pink” Morton built the Morton building is unknown. Morton did not claim either an artistic bent or any performing skills. There are no documents testifying to Morton’s hopes for the new building, but it does seem clear that it was intended to provide a facility for blacks comparable to the Colonial Theater which was a white-only auditorium a few blocks away from the Morton. Some might suggest that he went forward with the project because other businesses would be located in it. From the beginning, the Morton was planned to house commercial offices. Probably one of the keys to the success of getting the Morton Building built without perceptible opposition was that it was not advertised as or originally called a “theater.” Early announcements called it the “colored opera house” or “Morton’s Opera House,” and although an opera house in 1910 was very similar to a theater, “many of the earliest performances seem to have been of high-class nature.”<sup>92</sup> The first concert at the Morton Theatre was May 18, 1910, and it was a classical concert by Alice Carter Simmons of the Oberlin, Ohio, Conservatory<sup>93</sup> attended by both black and white patrons. The Morton Theatre did have a special section in the balcony for white patrons during the Jim Crow era.<sup>94</sup>

The Morton Theatre only occupied a small portion of the space, with the remainder rented out to various businesses in order to fund theater projects. An interesting note about the

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<sup>90</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Morton Building.” 10/22/79.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 2-4.

<sup>93</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>94</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 5.

Morton is that it was the first theater built, owned and operated by an African American in the United States. In 1914, the Athens Daily Herald described the Morton Building as “the largest building of its kind owned exclusively by a colored man in the world.” So, it quickly became the cultural center for African Americans in Athens even though people from all races went there.<sup>95</sup> One of the most impressive things about the Morton Building is that it has an essentially symmetric front façade with simplified Beaux-Arts composition.<sup>96</sup> The Morton Theatre has a wooden floor that slopes down to the stage, and the ceiling in the theater is made of pressed tin. There is also a small orchestra pit and two theater boxes on either side of the stage.<sup>97</sup> The Morton Theatre had a seating capacity of about 800 with excellent sightlines, and a medium-sized stage of some 1250 square feet, and it had small dressing rooms at both the stage and balcony levels, so the Morton was adaptable for a variety of uses.<sup>98</sup>

In 1918, the Morton Building was renovated. They added pressed metal ceilings and changed the interior wall color from light blue to beige. Unfortunately in 1919, “Pink” Morton died at the age of sixty-six, but he was able to enjoy directing the lighting and stage of his beloved Morton Theatre.<sup>99</sup> After Morton’s death, the reins of control changed hands several times. Although the title for the Morton Building remained in the Morton Family for many decades, there were at least four different managers’ names appearing in the Athens city directories for the years 1920 and 1928. For example, a black broker by the name of James P.

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<sup>95</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>96</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Morton Building.” 10/22/79.

<sup>97</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 5.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 2.

<sup>99</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

Davis was the nominal manager in 1920. In 1923, the theater had its name changed to “The Rex” and H. P. Wright was the manager. The Rex/Morton closed for business briefly in 1926, and Charles T. Morton, the son of “Pink” Morton, in 1928, took over the establishment.<sup>100</sup>

Even with all the changeovers, and a lack of TOBA acts, the Morton remained the center for many civic gatherings and mass entertainments like church conferences and Charleston dance contests. For example, the Knox Institute spring commencement musical plays were held at the Morton through the late 1910s and 1920s.<sup>101</sup>



Fig. 7 Duke Ellington, jazz composer. Photograph from [www.classicmoviemusicals.com/](http://www.classicmoviemusicals.com/)

There was a second renovation in 1930 that transformed the upper level gallery into a projection booth.<sup>102</sup> Even though movies were played at the Morton Theatre many big stars like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington (See Figure 7), and Cab Calloway continued to play on the Morton stage.<sup>103</sup>

Even before the Morton was built, black musical theater, including ballad opera, burlesque, the minstrel show, an array of musical comedies, and traveling companies had already made a strong impact on American musical theater. One interesting note is that the Morton Theatre only enjoyed a brief link with the TOBA, “but it was from observing the acts in TOBA

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<sup>100</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 24.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 25.

<sup>102</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 34.



houses that many independent owner/managers planned their own bills.”<sup>104</sup> Many of the performance records of the Morton Building were not preserved so a lot that is known about the Morton is from oral history. Performances at the Morton included vaudeville acts, jazz singers, classical musicians and much more.<sup>105</sup> Some of the performers at the Morton Theatre were Black Patti’s Troubadours, who played there in 1912 and 1914. Shuffle Along, the most famous black musical of the early 1920’s was seen at the Morton before it was seen at the Colonial Theater in 1924. Also many large companies, whether they were minstrel or tabs, like Frane’s Negro Minstrels, the New York Follies, Shark’s (which was also known as Tolliver’s) Smart Set, and Edwards’ Manhattan Stock Company, were featured at the Morton in 1913 and 1914. Also the Musical Millers appeared there in 1916 and Laura Bailey’s Stock Company in April 1919. Many local performers were hired at the Morton. They were not paid like the big names because they generated less profit. There were artists like Atlantan Blind Willie McTell, Roy Dunn, Jones Brown, Curley Weaver, and Buddy Moss.<sup>106</sup>

The pit orchestra was large enough to accommodate about a half dozen players. Large bands that came to play at the Morton played on the main stage instead of the pit. Sometimes traveling minstrel shows would include musicians onstage, and these players were numbered among the most skillful in the business, since minstrels had been the principle training ground for black show orchestras up to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), ii, iii.

<sup>105</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 6, 9-10, 27-28.

<sup>107</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 27.

Other activities at the Morton were in August 1911, when the Young Men's Social Club gave their "first entertainment," and in April 1912, a concert by the glee club of Jeruel Academy was presented. Also, in April 1912, the Tuskegee Institute Band played music from German and Italian musicians. For these events segregated seating was provided for many whites who were there in attendance, and top tickets were sold for \$1.00 apiece, a fairly high rate at that time. The Morton Theatre was also used for school graduations by the Knox Institute. In late May or early June an operetta would be presented by the Elementary Department in the afternoon and a musical comedy would be presented by the High School Department on evenings before the graduation ceremony. The Morton Building's function as a civic center was firmly established in the first ten years. Even with all these activities going on, the Morton Theatre did get a reputation for offering X-rated entertainment as well. This hurried the decline of vaudeville theaters as a center for family amusement in the 1930s.<sup>108</sup>

Morton and his successors never did attempt to organize residential minstrel companies or tab shows such as Charles H. Douglass, in Macon, had done with his Florida Blossom Minstrel and Comedy Company, but "Pink" Morton did introduce motion pictures into the Morton Theatre around 1919. This helped to keep the theatre afloat because, as mentioned earlier, many theaters were lacking business because of the Depression and the rise of motion pictures.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 5, 32.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 10, 25, 33.

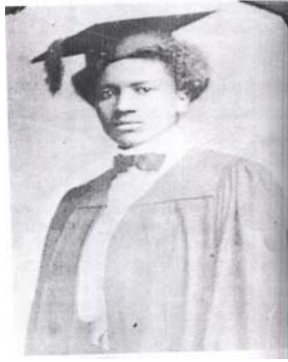


Fig. 8 Dr. Ida Mae Johnson, first black woman to be licensed in medicine in Georgia. Photograph from *Story Untold: Black Men and Women in Athens History* by Michael Thurmond.

The Morton Building featured storefronts on the ground level to accommodate African American businesses. This building is a great example of early twentieth century mixed-use commercial development. Some of the businesses that operated in the Morton building were a doctor's office,<sup>110</sup> a dentist's office, and a physician's office. One of the people to have an office in the building was Dr. Ida Mae Johnson. She was the first black woman to be licensed in medicine in the state of Georgia.<sup>111</sup> Also her son-in-law, Dr. Vernon Wimberly, had an office in the Morton Building. Another important person who had an office in the Morton Building was Dr. William H. Harris, who was perhaps the most prominent of the city's early black physicians. He was also "one of the founders of the Georgia State Medical Association of Colored Physicians, Dentists, and Druggists, and was elected third-vice-president of the association and chairman of the Committee on Construction and By-Laws at the organization's first meeting held in Augusta, Georgia, on December 19, 1893. He was later elected president of the medical section in 1911." Dr. Harris was also involved with the Republican Party, and prominent black citizens of Athens awarded him a silver cup in 1913. Also in 1913, the Georgia State Medical

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<sup>110</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>111</sup> "African American Theatres in Georgia," *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

Association held its eighteenth annual meeting in the Morton Theatre.<sup>112</sup> The first black-owned pharmacy in Athens was located in the Morton. Not only were medical practices housed in the Morton but also restaurants, beauty salons, pool halls,<sup>113</sup> barbers, undertakers, and insurance salesmen would occupy the three office floors of the Morton Building from time to time. The Samaritan Building, which was once adjacent to the Morton Building, but is now destroyed, and Union Hall also housed black businesses of every description.<sup>114</sup>

The last live act seen at the Morton Theatre was in 1944.<sup>115</sup> Faced with costly improvements to meet fire codes, the owner closed the Morton Theatre in 1954. The front of the building did continue to house businesses over the ensuing years while the theater remained empty.<sup>116</sup>

In 1973, the Morton family sold the building to Bond Properties Inc,<sup>117</sup> the remaining partner being John T. Bond. Even though it was in bad shape, the Morton Building continued to house a beauty salon, a bookstore, and a restaurant. The theater had been opened to the public on several occasions to get interest in restoring the building.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> United States Department of Interior, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Morton Building." 10/22/79.

<sup>113</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, "Classic Places: Morton Theatre's Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture," *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>114</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 3.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 34.

<sup>116</sup> Allison Floyd, "Morton Project Set Stage for Renewal," *Athens Banner-Herald*, 13 March 2004, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea\\_20040313067.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea_20040313067.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>117</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, "Classic Places: Morton Theatre's Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture," *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>118</sup> United States Department of Interior, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Morton Building." 10/22/79.

## 2) Restoration/Use Today

The Morton building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1979<sup>119</sup> for significance in architecture, local history, commerce, and theater. It was nominated by John T. Bond.<sup>120</sup> The Historic Preservation Division provided a \$27,432 Historic Preservation Fund grant to the Morton Theatre Corporation to assist in the rehabilitation of the Morton building in 1980.<sup>121</sup> A \$44,000 grant from the National Endowment for Arts through the Georgia Council for Arts and Humanities enabled the Clarke County Office of Cultural Affairs to contract with architect W. Lane Greene and Joseph Stell of the University of Georgia department of drama for designs for adaptation of the Morton Building.<sup>122</sup> Much of the building was in derelict condition and in great need of repair. The people of Athens-Clarke County approved a special purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST) in 1987 that included 1.8 million dollars to go to the restoration of the theater; it would have been lost if the money had not been provided to this project.<sup>123</sup>

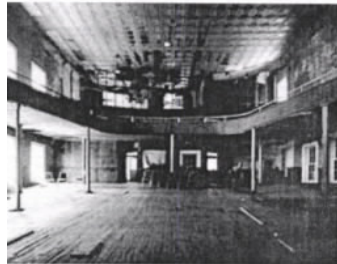


Fig. 9 Interior of the Morton Theatre before restoration work began. Photograph from Athens Banner-Herald.

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<sup>119</sup> “The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism,” project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>120</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Morton Building.” 10/22/79.

<sup>121</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

<sup>122</sup> “Morton Theater Talk,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 15 October 1980.

<sup>123</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

When the restoration process began, people involved with the project tried to get people in the community involved with the process by asking them about the history of the Morton Building. The *Athens Daily News* stated in October 1980, “The Morton Theatre’s past is, at present, a shadowy secret, with bits and pieces of information hinting at what it must have originally looked like when it was constructed 70 years ago. The types of performances and movies featured inside are also somewhat of a mystery.” W. Lane Greene, the project architect and Iain MacKintosh, of Theatre Projects Consultants worked on the project of restoring the Morton Building. They are both experts in eighteenth and nineteenth century theater restoration. During, the 1980s there were Saturday clean up parties.<sup>124</sup>

It was difficult to find historic facts about the Morton Building because they were unable to locate black newspapers, which would have contained lots of information about the black entertainment scene in Athens.<sup>125</sup> They were able to get help from an interview that Jill Read conducted with Kate McTell who was married to Blind Willie McTell.<sup>126</sup>

When the restoration work of the Morton building began in the early 1990s, workers tried to keep the true look of the original venue. They were trying as much as possible to keep it as a restoration and not a renovation, and they tried to keep little flaws. For example, the columns that are supporting the balcony do not all match, but they still stand today and were not replaced. Even with that, some people called for the replacement of things but the executive director of the Morton Theatre Corporation in an article entitled, “Morton Project Set Stage for Renewal,” said “But that’s not what this facility is about.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Valerie Ready, “Consultants Urge Investigation into Mysteries of Morton Theatre,” *Athens Daily News*, 7 October 1980, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> Conoly Hester, “History of Theater Becomes Important,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 13 October 1980.

<sup>126</sup> Jill Read, “Kate McTell Remembers: One Travelin’ Man and the Blues,” *The Athens Observer*, 29 January 1981.

<sup>127</sup> Allison Floyd, “Morton Project Set Stage for Renewal,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 13 March 2004, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea\\_20040313067.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea_20040313067.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

Even though they were trying to preserve everything, practicality does have to take over. For example “pipe stubs stick out of the wall where gas lamps once lit the theater, but electric lights dim for each show. And two simple wooden seats displayed in the lobby show visitors how uncomfortable they might have gotten during a two-hour show in the original theater, even if they can settle into soft upholstered seats today.”<sup>128</sup> (See Figure 9 and 10)

In 1991, the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government took ownership of the Morton Building. After that, they entered into a management agreement with the Morton Theatre Corporation in 1993, and this made it possible for the theater to reopen. So the building is owned by Athens-Clarke County, but is operated by the Morton Theatre Corporation.<sup>129</sup>

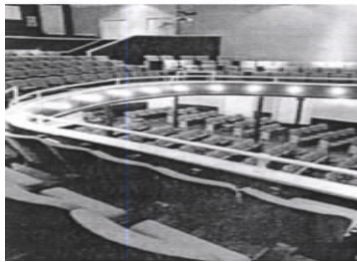


Fig. 10 Interior of the Morton Theatre after it was restored. Photograph from the Athens Banner-Herald.

The Morton Building reopened in 1994. It has presented plays, ballet recitals, dramatic reading, church services, and award ceremonies.<sup>130</sup> Today, the Morton Theatre is the only surviving, intact nineteenth and early twentieth century theater in Athens.<sup>131</sup> So, the restoration of the Morton Building has rejuvenated the corner that was once the hub of black-owned

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<sup>128</sup> Allison Floyd, “Morton Project Set Stage for Renewal,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 13 March 2004, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea\\_20040313067.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea_20040313067.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>129</sup> Tracy Coley Ingram, “Classic Places: Morton Theatre’s Roots Dig Deep into Athens Culture,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 29 November 2001, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath\\_1129010035.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/112901/ath_1129010035.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>130</sup> Allison Floyd, “Morton Project Set Stage for Renewal,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 13 March 2004, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea\\_20040313067.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea_20040313067.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>131</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 5.

business.<sup>132</sup> Other black businesses located on Hot Corner are Wilson’s Soul Food Restaurant and Styling Shop.<sup>133</sup> In March 2004, the people who operate and use the Morton Building quietly celebrated the tenth anniversary of the restoration of the facility. On average, the 544-seat Morton welcomes 45,000 visitors annually, and is used 250 days a year. The theater was born of segregation, and it still hosts several African American events and programs, such as the UGA Black Theatrical Ensemble and the Miss Black Athens-Clarke County Teen Pageant. The theater also hosts the University of Georgia theater performances.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Allison Floyd, “Morton Project Set Stage for Renewal,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 13 March 2004, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea\\_20040313067.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea_20040313067.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.

<sup>133</sup> “The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism,” project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>134</sup> Allison Floyd, “Morton Project Set Stage for Renewal,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, 13 March 2004, available from [http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea\\_20040313067.shtml](http://onlineathens.com/stories/031304/fea_20040313067.shtml); Internet; accessed 13 May 2004.



## C. Douglass Theater

### 1) History

Charles H. Douglass built the Douglass Theatre in Macon in 1921.<sup>135</sup> The theater was one of the few places that were built for blacks that showed vaudeville revues and movies during the days of racial segregation. It closed its doors in 1973 and the city bought the theater in 1978.<sup>136</sup>

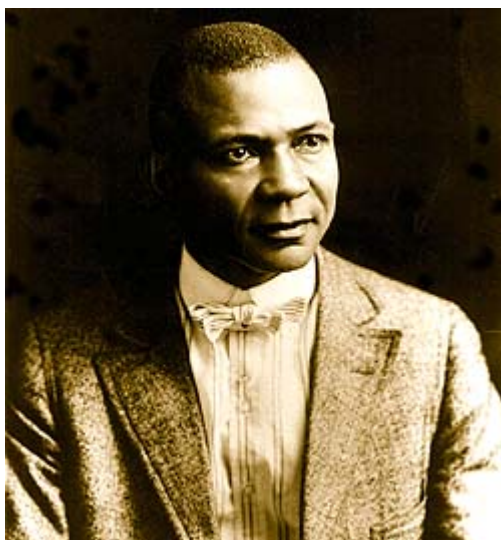


Fig. 11 Charles H. Douglass, owner and founder of the Douglass Theatre. Photograph from [www.douglasstheatre.org](http://www.douglasstheatre.org).

Charles H. Douglass was an African American entrepreneur.<sup>137</sup> He was born into the family of Charles Henry and Carrie Douglass on February 17, 1870. Douglass attended school and worked odd jobs. Within ten years of Douglass's birth, both his father and mother died, and

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<sup>135</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>136</sup> "Restored Historic Macon Theater Reopens with High-Tech Features," *Rome News Tribune*, 17 December 1997.

<sup>137</sup> "African American Theatres in Georgia," *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

that left him with the responsibility of supporting his two sisters through the rest of their school years. Douglass met his future wife, Fannie, during his employment as director of the Georgia Loan and Savings Company in 1901. She was assistant cashier. C.H. Douglass continued to work there until 1905. From 1904 to 1906, Douglass leased and operated the Ocmulgee Park Theater. Douglass was also involved with real estate. From 1904 to 1915, Douglass managed to acquire substantial real estate holdings. According to the tax returns of the city, Douglass' assessed taxable holdings grew from \$2,700 in 1905 to \$42,000 in 1915.<sup>138</sup> C.H. Douglass was responsible for the construction of several housing tracts and individual residences throughout the City of Macon, as well as a number office buildings and commercial structures along Broadway, many of which are now destroyed.<sup>139</sup> C.H. Douglass was involved with the theater scene very early. In 1907, he organized the Florida Blossom Minstrels and Comedy Company,<sup>140</sup> under the name of Douglass and Worthey.<sup>141</sup> He was very familiar with the Minstrel circuit of entertainers and he was able to supply his theater with musical and comedy acts. Also, he took advantage of the TOBA,<sup>142</sup> and became a director of TOBA and was well known in the regional theater circuit.<sup>143</sup> He sold his share of Florida Blossom Minstrels and Comedy Company to his partner, Pete Worthey in 1911.<sup>144</sup>

Charles H. Douglass was said to be a visionary and a realist. During the time of racism and segregation, Douglass saw the opportunity to serve the black population in Macon. In 1906, Douglass bought a building at 361 Broadway and opened the city's only hotel for blacks and it

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<sup>138</sup> James Toth, *Documentary History Douglass Theatre*, (Macon: City of Macon, 1981), 3.1.

<sup>139</sup> James Toth, *Documentary History Douglass Theatre*, (Macon: City of Macon, 1981), 4.2.

<sup>140</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., "A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre," 1996.

<sup>141</sup> James Toth, *Documentary History Douglass Theatre*, (Macon: City of Macon, 1981), 3.1.

<sup>142</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., "A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre," 1996.

<sup>143</sup> "Project Description: Using Oral History to Augment Interpretation of African American Theatres in the South."

<sup>144</sup> James Toth, *Documentary History Douglass Theatre*, (Macon: City of Macon, 1981), 3.1.

was called the Colonial Hotel.<sup>145</sup> The building was constructed for a man named Sam Weiselbaum c. 1896-1900. It was a three-story masonry building with a storefront on the first floor and arched 2/2 windows on the second and third floors. Augusto Combrevi, a specialty grocer, used the building until Douglass bought it.<sup>146</sup> In 1912, he added to this building and opened the city's first black theatre. By 1915, the Douglass Theatre offered 3 to 4 shows each afternoon, including 4 to 6 movie reels and 3 to 5 vaudeville acts. The Douglass Theatre could seat 350 people and featured a four-piece orchestra.<sup>147</sup>

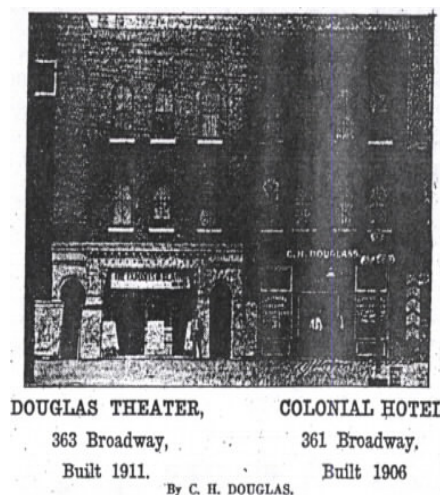


Fig. 12 The Douglass Theater and the Colonial Theater. 1910s. Photograph from Douglass Collection

In 1917, because the theatre was so successful, Douglass decided to open a second theater further down Broadway, but this venture was not successful, so he discontinued it after a few years. After this, Douglass decided to concentrate his efforts on creating a larger and finer theater that opened in 1921, immediately adjacent to the original facility. Reflecting the tastes of the period, the New Douglass Theatre, as it was known, was designed primarily as a movie

<sup>145</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., "A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre," 1996.

<sup>146</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., "An Architectural History Douglass Hotel (1907) and Original Douglass Theatre (1912) 361-363 Broadway," 1994.

<sup>147</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., "A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre," 1996.

theatre and used vaudeville acts and road shows to augment its film programming. From “physical evidence and written documentation, the theatre was visually impressive, with ornamental plaster moldings and scrollwork, barrel-vaulted ceilings, a balcony bordered by Nubian masks, and a gilded proscenium surround with a gold movie screen. By best estimates, the largest seating capacity was approximately 750-800 seats.”<sup>148</sup>

The Douglass Theatre was modeled after Macon’s Grand Opera House and featured a Classical Revival design. C.H. Douglass decided to build it after the Grand Opera House when he and his wife went there. They were ushered to the third floor balcony through an obscure entrance. A unique thing about the Douglass Theatre was its gold fiber screen. The screen was more expensive than normal white or even silver screens, but it was able to achieve “the effect of giving black and white films a warmer, sepia tone.” The stage measured approximately twenty-two by fifty-five feet and included a shallow semi-circular extension beyond the proscenium openings. The dressing rooms were below the stage and could be accessed by a staircase located in the stage wings. The balcony wrapped around the auditorium and occupied approximately one third as much space as the main floor.<sup>149</sup> (See Figure 13) While Douglass did dismantle the ornate interior of the original theatre, he retained the vaulted ceiling.<sup>150</sup>

To build the New Douglass Theatre, C.H. Douglass had to destroy some buildings. Construction of the building began in 1920, but the exact date of the theatre’s opening is not known. As of 1994, there were no newspapers found that announced the opening date. “Ledgers record theatre-related construction expenses, including completion of the roof, well into the spring months of 1921, and the city directory for that year does not list a theatre at either 357 (the

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<sup>148</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre,” 1996.

<sup>149</sup> “Historical Architectural Integrity (B) Architectural Changes.”

<sup>150</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc. “Architectural History Douglass Hotel (1907) and Original Douglass Theatre (1912) 361-363 Broadway,” 1994.

new location) or 363 Broadway (the original Douglass Theatre). It does, however, list the Douglass Office Building at 355 Broadway for the first time.”<sup>151</sup>

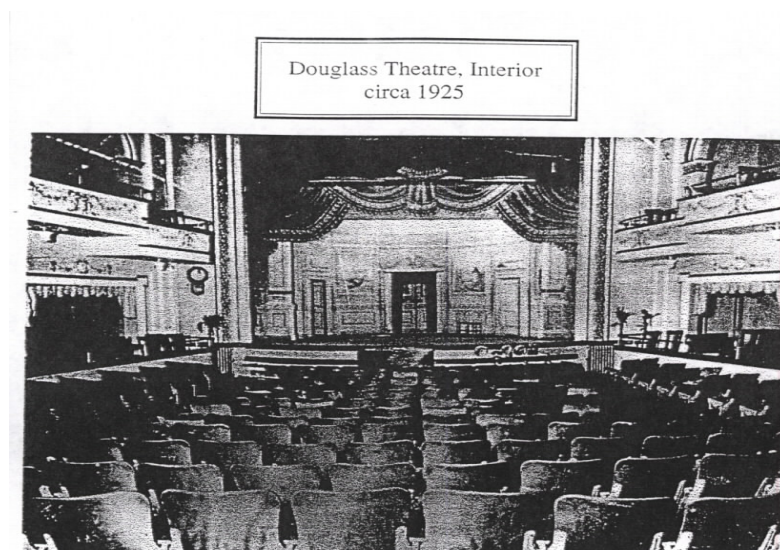


Fig. 13 Interior of the Douglass Theatre, circa 1925. Photograph from Douglass Collection.

There are other sources that agree with the above:

“The...Checking Register covers the theater expenses from April 2, 1920 to May 4, 1921, and accounts for many of the sources of construction materials for the theater. These sources include the Atlanta Terra Cotta Company, who probably manufactured the terra cotta pilaster capitals on the front façade while the Taylor Iron Works of Macon was the contractor who furnished the structural steel for the building at a cost of \$2,000. Of particular interest is an entry dated January 12, 1921 for a check issued to ‘J.R. McEachron Architect...\$25.00.’ This entry most probably indicates that the architect for the Douglass Theater was J. Reginald MacEachron of Atlanta...Since the Macon Roofing Company had completed roofing the Theater on May 5, 1921, it may be reasonable to assume that the structure was already for use by mid-July or early August.”<sup>152</sup>

Since the Douglass Theatre was part of TOBA, the managers were able to hear about what other theaters were doing. Memphis’s Beale Street Palace Theatre, which was part of TOBA, showcased the best jazz and blues bands in a weekly Friday night program that was

<sup>151</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc. “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>152</sup> James Toth, *Documentary History Douglass Theatre*, (Macon: City of Macon, 1981), 3.1.

called the Midnight Ramble. This program became so popular that the Club 81 Theatre in Atlanta adopted it. Also, the Douglass Theatre followed their lead and established their own Midnight Ramble which began at 12:01 on Sunday mornings. Then, the Douglass followed those two theatres by establishing “white only” nights. This allowed white citizens to see the leading black vaudeville stars and, by 1930, at least some of the Midnight Rambles at the Douglass were designated for whites only.<sup>153</sup>

With movies on the rise, vaudeville acts all over the country were in a decline and the role of live entertainers were more limited. The Douglass Theatre had a combination of three basic types of acts that were hired with remarkable consistency. Virtually all the acts there could be classified as “singles,” “doubles,” or “tab” shows, that is, acts with one person, two people, or a self-contained group.<sup>154</sup>

In 1925 and 1926, the Douglass Theatre regularly hired about \$300 worth of vaudeville each week. This combined single or double acts, or it brought in a tab show. The standard salary for a single act was \$45 or \$50, for double acts \$80 or \$90, and for tabs \$300. Since tabs were convenient and popular, it was a frequently featured attraction. On average, ticket prices in the early twenties ranged from \$.10 to \$.25 with a seating capacity of 350. Musicians were paid about \$30 per week in 1920, and this amounts to about a dollar an hour for playing time. Also with all the various expenses that Charles Douglass had, it surprises some people that he had an annual profit with his theater of around \$700 at mid-decade. Like other theaters, the Douglass Theatre orchestra declined with the rise of talking movies in the late twenties. The typical

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<sup>153</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre,” 1996.

<sup>154</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 26.

vaudeville band seemed to normally have included a piano player and whatever other musicians might be available, perhaps a violinist or clarinetist and a drummer.<sup>155</sup>

The Douglass Theatre was no different from theaters that were being hurt from the rise of the commercial radio and talking pictures. C.H. Douglass had to look for additional sources of revenue.<sup>156</sup> In mid 1927, Douglass leased his interest in the Douglass Theatre to Ben Stein of Valdosta, Georgia, a theater entrepreneur, for a period of fifteen years and for the sum of \$185,000. C.H. Douglass wanted to devote all of his time to the Middle Georgia Savings and Investment Company, but he still operated Colonial Hotel and a barbershop on Broadway.<sup>157</sup> Under Stein's ownership, musical performances were limited, boxing matches were introduced into the Douglass Theatre, and there was an increase in movie presentations. Stein also made cosmetic improvements. There are no records to document specific changes but from looking at the architecture one can tell there were changes. For example, there are Art Deco light fixtures that do not match the Classical Revival detailing. Business correspondence documents Stein's interest in acquiring a popcorn machine during this period, so concessions may have been introduced into the barrel vault area at the rear of the main floor of the auditorium. Some chairs were removed from this area, and there is significant staining by oils which may have come from a popcorn popper.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Thomas L. Riis, *Black Vaudeville, the TOBA, and the Morton Theatre: Recovering the History 1910-1930* (Thomas L. Riis, 1987), 26-27.

<sup>156</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., "Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway," 1994.

<sup>157</sup> "Douglass Leased By New Concern," *The Macon Telegraph*, 4 June 1927.

<sup>158</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., "Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway," 1994.

By May 1929, C.H. Douglass took possession of his theatre once again and led the operation through the Depression. In 1940, Douglass died of pneumonia,<sup>159</sup> at the age of 70<sup>160</sup> and left the theatre and his other real estate holdings to his wife and children.<sup>161</sup>

Later, there were more changes to the theater. In 1944, a cement floor was poured over the original wooden floor of the theater.<sup>162</sup> In 1953, there was a major installation of a Grinnall Sprinkling Company fire sprinkler system.<sup>163</sup> Also in 1953, box seats were removed due to a vent placement. This did not pose any real loss to income because by this time the theater was only showing movies, and the seats were inappropriate for such viewing. The original marquee was removed and a more contemporary sign with neon lighting was erected. The next alteration occurred in 1960, when new seats were installed on most of the main floor of the theater.<sup>164</sup>

In the early years, performers at the Douglass Theatre included The Two Sweets,<sup>165</sup> “comedians Butterbeans and Susie and blues legends “Ma” Rainey (See Figure 3) and Bessie Smith.” Jazz greats Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington (See Figure 7) played at the Douglass Theatre until the Macon City Auditorium offered their shows to white audiences in the 1940s.<sup>166</sup> Also in the 1940s, another black theater was built called the Roxy and it was located on Hazel Street. This new theater did take some business away from the Douglass, but the use of the theater remained consistent until 1958.<sup>167</sup> As desegregation made additional entertainment

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<sup>159</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>160</sup> “A Review of Historic Programming at the Douglass.”

<sup>161</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>162</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>163</sup> James Toth, *Documentary History Douglass Theatre*, (Macon: City of Macon, 1981), 3.1.

<sup>164</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>165</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff ““They Cert’ly Sound Good to Me’: Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville, and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues,” *American Music* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 441.

<sup>166</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

<sup>167</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre,” 1996.



facilities accessible, attendance at the Douglass Theatre decreased in the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>168</sup> In 1958, local disc jockey Hamp Swain introduced a Saturday morning live broadcast program and talent show called “The Teenage Party.” This program gave rise to such artists as Otis Redding, James Brown, Johnnie Jenkins, and Macon’s own Little Richard.<sup>169</sup>

During the 1920s, the theater was an important venue for early African-American films that were written and produced by blacks and black audiences as well<sup>170</sup>. The Douglass Theatre offered first run Hollywood releases to its audiences. It featured works by African American filmmakers: Oscar Micheaux, Jack Goldberg, and Norman Studios,<sup>171</sup> and the Douglass Theatre showed African American films like *Cabin in the Sky* and *Carmen*.

Family members used the offices, which are located on the front of the upper stories of the theatre, for business ventures. This included Lily Douglass Hatchett, the daughter of C.H. Douglass, who operated a beauty salon in the building for many years. By the mid 1960’s the offices became vacant.<sup>172</sup> The Douglass family ended direct control of the theater in 1973, when they leased the theater to another party. The lessee of the theater was unable to sustain the operation of the structure, and the Douglass finally closed its doors in 1973.<sup>173</sup>

## 2) Restoration/Use Today

The Douglass Theatre was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.<sup>174</sup> The City of Macon bought the building in 1978, and started making plans to restore it.<sup>175</sup> The Douglass was restored in January 11, 1997 after a \$2.3 million restoration.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> “Project Description: Using Oral History to Augment Interpretation of African American Theatres in the South.”

<sup>169</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre,” 1996.

<sup>170</sup> “Theatre History.”

<sup>171</sup> “Project Description ‘Using Oral History to Augment Interpretation of African American Theatres in the South.’”

<sup>172</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>173</sup> James Toth, *Documentary History Douglass Theatre*, (Macon: City of Macon, 1981), 3.1.

<sup>174</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

<sup>175</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre,” 1996.

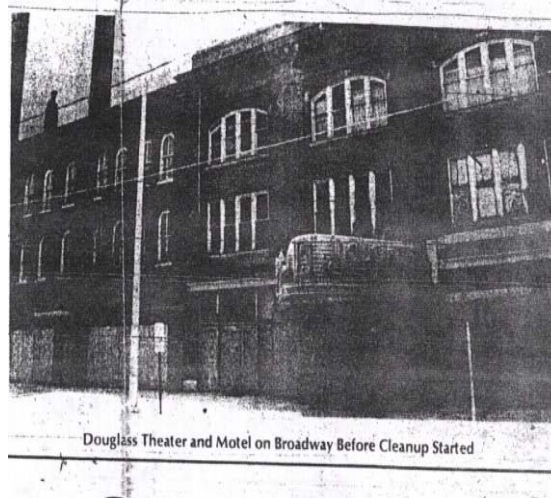


Fig.14 The Douglass Theatre and the Colonial Hotel before cleanup work. Photograph from *Macon Telegraph*.

The Historic Preservation Division provided Historic Preservation Fund grants in 1979 totaling \$40,000 to aid in the rehabilitation project.<sup>177</sup> Before the work began, there was some clean up work in 1980. They had to remove dead pigeons and a cat's carcass. Also they scraped up layers of dust, dirt and pigeon droppings, and feathers. Finally, workers had to repair a broken water line which had flooded the basement.<sup>178</sup> With the money from the Historic Preservation Division, stabilization work began in 1981 and lasted to 1982. The following is a list of the work that had to be done:

“Removal of remaining theatre seating; removal of false ceilings in the two barrel vaulted ceiling areas; removal of the 1944 concrete floor and original wood floor beneath; removal of existing mechanical systems and vents on stage; removal of deteriorated flat plaster from walls and ceiling, especially in the office areas; replacement of the stage floor, replacement of stage piers; reinforcement of second floor wooden mezzanines on stage; laying of a new concrete floor to match the original rake; limited repointing of masonry, especially at the roof parapets; repair of the roof and drainage systems; replacement of missing window elements and boarding over the apertures; replacement

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<sup>176</sup> Restored Historic Macon Theater Reopens with High-Tech Features,” *Rome News Tribune*, 17 December 1997.

<sup>177</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>178</sup> Pam Keene, “City Begins Cleanup of Douglass Theater,” *Macon Telegraph*, 30 May 1980.

of wooden alley doors with metal doors; construction of a new fire exit onto the alley; and structural inspection of balcony support system.”<sup>179</sup>

Also the marquee was removed.<sup>180</sup> The effort of restoring and replicating the Douglass Theatre has earned it a designation as a Landmark Museum by the Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources.<sup>181</sup> After this work was completed, city officials examined numerous proposals for re-use of the facility.<sup>182</sup>

Not until 1992 was a viable use recognized. The restoration of the Douglass Theatre was linked with the construction of the Georgia Music Hall of Fame less than two blocks away.<sup>183</sup> The Douglass Theatre made it possible for the state of Georgia to receive over \$13 million for the Music Hall of Fame and the Sports Hall. Planners and city officials saw it as a place to draw visitors and tourists. Since it is indoors, the annual visitation of 60,000 to 100,000 helped make downtown’s success less dependent on outdoor and seasonal events such as the Cherry Blossom Festival. So the Douglass Theatre restoration became part of the Downtown Development equation, which plans to increase the need for specialty shops, restaurants, and other entertainment venues downtown.



Fig. 15 The Douglass Theater after restoration. Photograph taken by writer.

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<sup>179</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>180</sup> “Historical Architectural Integrity (A) Assessment of Integrity Criteria.”

<sup>181</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “A Survey of Historic Programming at the Douglass Theatre,” 1996.

<sup>182</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

<sup>183</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc., “Architectural History the New Douglass Theatre (Circa 1921) 355-359 Broadway,” 1994.

Architect George Balian of Balian and Associates developed the plans that called for the restoration of the historic theatre itself. This included “the cast plaster Nubian masks, landscape frescoes, and chain stencil patterns.”<sup>184</sup> In 1994 a color analysis was done by Matthew John Mosca Historic Paint Research, which let the restorers know the color scheme in the interior of the theater.<sup>185</sup>

With the Douglass Theatre restored (See Figures 15 and 16), it has increased its seating capacity to 314 (another source says 332)<sup>186</sup> in the auditorium, a 1,500 square foot annex has been added for receptions, special events, and a gift shop. Also, the technology in the theater has been upgraded.<sup>187</sup> The Douglass Theatre is able to show large-format IMAX movies in addition to regular 35mm films, and it has a 30,000-watt sound system.<sup>188</sup> The theater was also equipped with high-resolution video, lasers, teleconferencing equipment, and special effect lighting.<sup>189</sup> The theater will be able to handle live plays and concerts.<sup>190</sup> Also the theater has an exhibition that highlights the history of the Douglass Theatre and the impact of African-Americans on musical, dramatic, and film heritage. The theater coordinates with existing dramatic arts programs for young people to offer a special intern program where students can learn the technical skills necessary to run a theater.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Address by Macon Mayor Tommy Olmstead Visit to the Douglass Theatre by Governor Zell Miller May 27, 1994.

<sup>185</sup> Letter from Matthew John Mosca to Julie Groce, 6 June 1994.

<sup>186</sup> Jack Warner, “Historic Black Theater in Macon Makes Elegant Comeback,” *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution* 12 January 1997.

<sup>187</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 4.

<sup>188</sup> “Restored Historic Macon Theater Reopens with High-Tech Features,” *Rome News Tribune*, 17 December 1997.

<sup>189</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc. “The New Douglass Theatre,” 1996.

<sup>190</sup> “Restored Historic Macon Theater Reopens with High-Tech Features,” *Rome News Tribune*, 17 December 1997.

<sup>191</sup> “Douglass Theatre Fact Sheet.”



Fig. 16 The Douglass Theatre in Macon, Georgia. After restoration. Photograph from [www.leftbankreview.com](http://www.leftbankreview.com)

In October 1995, the City of Macon and Friends of the Douglass Theatre Complex, Inc. announced that they had received a grant of \$39,988 from the Center for Preservation Training and Technology, of the National Park Service, to fund a study. The study is to collect oral histories and reminiscences of former performers, employees, and patrons of the Douglass and several other African-American theaters in the South. Julie C. Groce led the project. Some of the other people to work on the project were: Janice Sikes, an Atlanta research consultant and librarian at Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History; Fred Fussell, a Columbus museum consultant and well-known folklorist; and Dr. Rex Ellis, Director of Museum Services at the Smithsonian Institution and former Director of Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentations for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.<sup>192</sup>

Other things that helped the City of Macon in this study were materials found in the Douglass Theatre and saved by the Douglass family. These included contracts, prop sheets, playbills, tickets, correspondence, and ledger books. They were great aids in the planned

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<sup>192</sup> Friends of the Douglass Theatre Complex, Inc. "Douglass Theatre and the City of Macon Receive Oral History Grant," 20 October 1995.

interpretation of the theater. This helped the Douglass Theatre to have one of the most complete archival collections of any African American theater in the South.<sup>193</sup>

The Douglass Theatre reopened on January 11, 1997, and it offers services and programs unique to the Macon region.<sup>194</sup> The mission statement of the Douglass Theater is: “The mission of the Douglass Theatre shall be to provide the community a theatre for multi-cultural performances, films, and lectures, and to preserve the African-American artistic and social legacy of the Douglass through exhibits and educational programs.”<sup>195</sup> A final note, it was the site for the opening session of the 2002 State Historic Preservation Conference.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> “Project Description: Using Oral History to Augment Interpretation of African American Theatres in the South.”

<sup>194</sup> Historic Preservation Services, Inc. “The New Douglass Theatre,” 1996.

<sup>195</sup> “Douglass Theatre Fact Sheet.”

<sup>196</sup> “The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism,” project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

## D. Liberty Theatre

### 1) History

The Liberty Theatre was built in 1925 by Roy Martin, Sr., a white owner of the Martin Theatre Company chain. The theater provided entertainment and a cultural center for the black community in Columbus and soldiers from Fort Benning. The Liberty Theatre had 600 seats and a local band provided entertainment during the silent movie era.<sup>197</sup>



Fig. 17 The Liberty Theatre circa 1955. Photograph from Historic Columbus Foundation Newsletter.

The Liberty Theatre was the hub of African American entertainment for the area.<sup>198</sup> The theater was known as a “Carnegie Hall” for African-Americans from the Tri-City area, Columbus, Fort Benning, Georgia, and Phenix City, Alabama.<sup>199</sup> It was the first movie house erected for blacks in the Columbus area,<sup>200</sup> and its heyday was from 1925 to 1945. It was labeled

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<sup>197</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 5.

<sup>198</sup> Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>199</sup> “Historically Liberty Theater Opens its Door to the Public Again!” *Columbus Times*, 8, 15 January 1997.

<sup>200</sup> “Liberty Theatre Restoration Planned,” *Historic Columbus Foundation Newsletter* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3.

as the “most popular movie and playhouse for area blacks.”<sup>201</sup> The theater is located in a mixed commercial/residential area that was historically the black section of Columbus.<sup>202</sup>

Roy E. Martin (1885-1948) was a native of Harris County, which is close to Columbus. He purchased his first theater in 1912 and built his first new one in 1914, and they were both in Columbus. By 1928, he was the owner of nine theaters in Columbus and Phenix City, Alabama, in addition to the Liberty, and the chain rapidly spread to surrounding states. The site of the Liberty was residential until immediately before the project began, even though the land was purchased for the theater in 1920. Roy E. Martin chose T. Firth Lockwood (1894-1963) of Columbus to be the architect for the Liberty Theatre. From interviews, it also has been established that Jim Ingersoll and family of Phenix City, Alabama, did the grading and landscaping of the site.<sup>203</sup>

The Liberty Theatre is a brick building with a wooden-and-steel beam roof. One can tell from the interior that it was simply used as a theater. There are two sets of double doors that give access and egress to the lobby.<sup>204</sup> The theater contains a sixty by thirty foot stage equipped for live vaudeville theater and musical and dance performances. The Liberty Theatre contained a projection booth,<sup>205</sup> which is on the second floor<sup>206</sup> and retractable screen for showing movies.<sup>207</sup> Also, the theater has a balcony. The original and replacement electrical wiring, fixtures, fans,

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<sup>201</sup> Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>202</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>203</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>204</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>205</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.

<sup>206</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>207</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.



and plumbing are still in the theater.<sup>208</sup> It was the largest movie house in the city when it was built, and so the theater became a popular stopping place with traveling performers.<sup>209</sup> It did not hold the title very long. In April 1928, Mr. Martin opened the Royal Theatre in Columbus, and it could seat 2,800 people.<sup>210</sup> Also the Liberty was on the Atlanta-Savannah-Augusta music circuit.<sup>211</sup>

The motivation to build the Liberty is not certain. There are some that believed that the white citizens of Columbus who loved the performing arts felt strongly that blacks should have a place of their own. There were some others that believed that it was primarily a business opportunity for the fast-growing Martin Theater chain. “The local newspapers in 1924 show local emphasis on new recreation places and a need for entertainment for black soldiers (Fort Benning, a major Army base, being located nearby).”<sup>212</sup>

When the theater opened, there was no concession inside. Food was obtained from the adjacent café, which had a connection opening to the theater. Later on the concession was added inside.<sup>213</sup>

Many jazz and blues performers came to the Liberty Theatre like Columbus’s own Gertrude Pridgett “Ma” Rainey (the “Mother of the Blues,” See Figure 3), Lena Horne, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington (See Figure 7), Fats Waller, Marian Anderson,<sup>214</sup> Louis Armstrong,<sup>215</sup> comedian Steppin Fetchit, dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (See Figure 2), boxer Joe Lewis,

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<sup>208</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>209</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.

<sup>210</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>211</sup> Bobbi Miller, “Liberty Theater Restoration Planned,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 11 October 1987, Sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>212</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>213</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>214</sup> Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>215</sup> “Liberty Theatre Restoration Planned,” *Historic Columbus Foundation Newsletter* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3.

and baseball player Jackie Robinson.<sup>216</sup> On at least one occasion, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (See Figure 3) shared the stage with her protégé, Bessie Smith.<sup>217</sup> Not only did big names come to the Liberty, but local talent entertained there as well. An example was Ethel Spencer, the daughter of William H. Spencer, a local educator for whom Spencer High School was named.<sup>218</sup> The theater also had revues, minstrel shows, vaudeville acts, and other types of live entertainment. The Liberty also hosted dramatic readings and poetry readings.<sup>219</sup>

Whites could also visit the Liberty, especially when big names like Duke Ellington (See Figure 7) and Ella Fitzgerald came to town.<sup>220</sup> There were some seats that were reserved for white citizens to watch movies.<sup>221</sup> Whites got the best seats at these shows.<sup>222</sup>

In 1927, the cost for a movie at the Liberty and other local theaters was \$.05 for the balcony and \$.10 for the orchestra. Before the first talkies appeared after 1927, the Liberty had local musicians accompany silent films.<sup>223</sup> As a movie house, the Liberty would have long lines of people waiting to get in. In the 1950s, Royal Crown (RC) bottle caps could earn moviegoers

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<sup>216</sup> Second Annual African American Heritage Festival: To Save the Liberty Theatre, “History,” 9-11 August 1991.

<sup>217</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.

<sup>218</sup> Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, Sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>219</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>220</sup> Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, Sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>221</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>222</sup> Bobbi Miller, “Liberty Theater Restoration Planned,” *The Sunday Ledger-Enquirer*, 11 October 1987, Sec. A, p. 3.

<sup>223</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

free admission to the Saturday matinee.<sup>224</sup> It took five RC bottle caps to pay for admission.<sup>225</sup> The theater showed movies like *Ben Hur* and the *Ten Commandments*.<sup>226</sup>

In 1955 the façade had a facelift. A protruding marquee, an aqua ceramic tile, and red and white doors were added to the front of the building. Also, tin pieces were plastered atop the building's front.<sup>227</sup> There were alterations made to the lobby; windows were closed. There were no structural changes made to the theater itself, but the walls were hung with acoustical fabric. There is a 1950-period water-cooled air-conditioning system in place.<sup>228</sup> (See Figure 17 and 18)

The popularity of the theater dwindled in the 1960s and early 1970s. The reason for this is because blacks gained more opportunities for entertainment during integration.<sup>229</sup> In 1973, it closed and started to deteriorate.<sup>230</sup>

## 2) Restoration/Use Today

The building remained vacant for a couple of years.<sup>231</sup> Then Roy E. Martin, III donated the Liberty Theatre to the Golden Owlettes, a group of alumnae from the William H. Spencer High School, which is an African American school in Columbus, in 1980.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Josiah Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>225</sup> Constance Johnson, "Old 'Liberty' to Undergo Restoration," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 17 February 1983, sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>226</sup> Eileen Zaffiro, "Liberty Theater Clears Final Hurdles," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 24 August 1994, Sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>227</sup> Josiah Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>228</sup> United States Department of Interior, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater." May 1984.

<sup>229</sup> Josiah Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>230</sup> Josiah Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>231</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.

<sup>232</sup> "Josiah Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

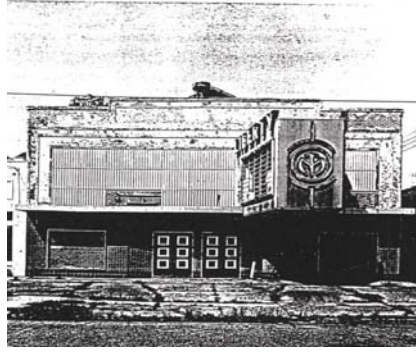


Fig. 18 The Liberty Theatre before restoration. Photograph from the nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places.

The Liberty Theatre was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in May 1984,<sup>233</sup> for the role it played during the peak of the jazz and blues era.<sup>234</sup> It was placed on the National Register because of the encouragement of Charlotte Frazier, executive director of the Owlettes, and Columbus historian Dr. Joseph B. Mahan.<sup>235</sup> The listing happened just months after the Georgia Trust for Historical Preservation deemed it historically significant. Even if the Liberty Theatre had not been listed on the National Register, restoration supporters still planned to preserve the Liberty. There was a fear that the building would be destroyed eventually by the urban renewal that was going on in the area.<sup>236</sup>

At the beginning of the restoration it was believed that the restoration cost would be low because the building was sound. Most of the money needed was to remove the 1955 facelift and restore the original one underneath. The rest of the money was to be used for a new roof and new heating, plumbing, and electrical systems. In addition, the Owlettes planned to “redo the

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<sup>233</sup> “Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>234</sup> United States Department of Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for the Liberty Theater.” May 1984.

<sup>235</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 5.

<sup>236</sup> Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

floor of the stage, dressing rooms, stage back drop, and some seats.”<sup>237</sup> Even though the Owlettes initiated the effort to save the Liberty Theatre, a group called Black Historic Sixth and Eighth Preservation Society backed them.<sup>238</sup>

In 1985, a windstorm came through Columbus and put things on hold for two years.<sup>239</sup> As a result of the storm, the roof began to leak. The roof was severely damaged and partially collapsed. Architect Rich Hingle of Neal and Associates began to develop plans to re-roof and stabilize the building. After the theater was re-roofed, boarded up, and cleared of debris, then they planned to begin work to the restore the façade and recreate a period interior.<sup>240</sup>



Fig. 19 The Liberty Theatre when restoration began. Photo from the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*.

To help fund this project, the Owlettes received a \$50,000 Community Development Block Grant. Also they were able to reach an agreement with Tuskegee Institute to use the renovated theater as a show place for drama, dance music, and other cultural programs. The proceeds from these programs are to be used to fund scholarships to Tuskegee University for Columbus students. Also it was agreed that the programs begin before the renovation with the

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<sup>237</sup> Josiah Sumbry, “‘Give Me Liberty’ Efforts Breathe Life into Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 1 July 1984, sec. E, p. 1.

<sup>238</sup> Constance Johnson, “Old ‘Liberty’ to Undergo Restoration,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 17 February 1983, sec A, p. 1.

<sup>239</sup> Liza Benham, “It’s Time to Take a Stand for Liberty’s Restoration,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 17 June 1987.

<sup>240</sup> “Liberty Theatre Restoration Planned,” *Historic Columbus Foundation Newsletter* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3.

first one to be staged at the Springer Opera House in October 1988.<sup>241</sup> Georgia State Rep. Calvin Smyre during this time was trying to get more people to support the project. This project was seen as a way to bring out-of-town tourist dollars into the area.<sup>242</sup>

In August 1987, the Liberty Theatre became a centerpiece for the Fifth and Sixth Avenue Area Redevelopment Plan.<sup>243</sup> The Fifth and Sixth Avenue Area, approximately 540 acres, was planned to be completed in five to eight years. According to a newspaper article in 1989, people would see improvements within three to four years.<sup>244</sup> Candeub, Fleissig, and Associates, Inc. prepared the plan for the Government of Columbus. The goals of the plan are “to preserve the historic resources of the area, to maintain the basically residential character of the neighborhood, to improve structural conditions, and to foster a more vigorous general climate for neighborhood businessmen.” It was said in the plan that “the Liberty Theatre restoration effort is designed to not only save a building but to revitalize and redevelop an area and to save a decaying community with a cultural history second to none.”<sup>245</sup>

On December 15, 1987, Neal and Associates had the restoration plans under review by the National Park Service. To come up with their plans, they looked at the original drawings prepared by J. Firth Lockwood for the construction of the building in 1923. The only variation for the original plan is that steel trusses were substituted for the original wooden trusses in the

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<sup>241</sup> “Liberty Theatre Restoration Planned,” *Historic Columbus Foundation Newsletter* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 3.

<sup>242</sup> Liza Benham, “It’s Time to Take a Stand for Liberty’s Restoration,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 17 June 1987.

<sup>243</sup> Liberty Theater Restoration Committee, “5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Avenue Planning Area for Liberty Theater-Black Cultural Redevelopment Area Plan Columbus, Georgia, Proposed Revisions,” August 1987.

<sup>244</sup> Ben Wright, “Liberty Theater’s Success Hinges on Development Plan,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 23 May 1989, Sec A, p. 1.

<sup>245</sup> Liberty Theater Restoration Committee, “5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Avenue Planning Area for Liberty Theater-Black Cultural Redevelopment Area Plan Columbus, Georgia, Proposed Revisions, August 1987.

roof and other changes that were required under contemporary fire codes and building regulations. These changes included wider aisles, fire doors, and a second stair to the balcony.<sup>246</sup>

Also in December 1987, the restoration of the Liberty Theatre received a \$10,000 grant from Georgia Governor Joe Frank Harris. The money was sought by, and awarded to, the Lower Chattahoochee Area Planning and Development Commission. The money helped to offset restoration expenses for the theater.<sup>247</sup>

The restoration project also received a \$125,000 loan from the city of Columbus. In 1988 the Liberty Theatre's roof was fixed and the building was used to store 500 seats from the old Royal (formally Three Arts) Theater that needed to be reupholstered. A list of all the things that needed to be done included:

“The floor will have to be redone. The lighting, heating, plumbing, and walls need complete renovation. The stage must be fixed, and though the frame is still there, it lacks the screen on which to project motion pictures. The projectors are still there, but they're the ones left in the theater when it closed in 1973.”

The Owlettes spearheaded a drive to create a place called Liberty Square, the area where the Liberty is located. This includes shotgun houses that were built in the 1920s, many of them owned by Edward Poindexter, who was making repairs to the houses. During this time, there were talks of having a Marilyn McCoo museum inside the theater. It was to have artifacts of some of the great black musicians who performed in the Liberty during the 20s, 30s, and 40s.<sup>248</sup>

In 1989, Phase II of the Liberty Theatre Restoration Project received a \$50,000 grant from the Knight Foundation of Akron, Ohio, the philanthropic arm of Knight-Ridder Inc. Phase II was to include the renovation of the inside of the theater, including much-needed electrical and

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<sup>246</sup> Lower Chattahoochee Area Planning and Development Commission, *Historic Preservation and Tourism Newsletter*, 15 December 1987.

<sup>247</sup> “Georgia Supports Liberty’s Cause,” *The Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 30 December 1987.

<sup>248</sup> Judy Sheppard, *Liberty Theater Keystone of Black Arts Heritage*, 21 October 1988.

plumbing improvements. At this time about \$100,000 was raised, and it included the Knight gift. They needed \$500,000.<sup>249</sup>

In 1990, the Liberty Theatre received a donation from the Black Entrepreneurs of Columbus for \$1,000.<sup>250</sup> Also the William H. Spencer Golden Owlettes sponsored the African American heritage Festival. The festival lasted for three days, August 17-19. It had many events like performances from the Mighty Clouds of Joy, Barry White, Miki Howard, local blues singer Precious Bryant, and the Jamaica Dance Theater of Atlanta. It also had photographs from Edwin Wilson and a basket weaver, Johnnie Reed.<sup>251</sup> This event was not successful. So the Owlettes planned to have an all day blues festival in June 1992. Funds were still needed and fundraising was difficult at the beginning of the Persian Gulf War.<sup>252</sup>

Restoration of the Liberty Theatre got a big boost when the City of Columbus and the Spencer Owlettes received a one million dollar Special Appreciation Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in conjunction with the Columbus Fifth and Sixth Avenue Redevelopment Plan in 1993.<sup>253</sup> The restoration of the Liberty was considered to be an important part of the Columbus Consolidated Government's Fifth and Sixth Avenue Redevelopment Plan. The theater and other buildings serve as a cornerstone for new development within the planning area.<sup>254</sup> The cost of the project was estimated to cost \$23 million in 1995; it was planned to fund the project with Community Block Grants, money from a one-percent sales tax and other federal grants. The plan included a \$17 million police and fire

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<sup>249</sup> Mick Walsh, "Liberty Theater Restoration Gets \$50,000 Shot in the Arm," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 14 April 1989.

<sup>250</sup> "Liberty Theater and Spencer House Receive Donations," *The Columbus Times*, February 1990.

<sup>251</sup> Sandra Okamoto, "African American Heritage Festival."

<sup>252</sup> "Richard Hyatt, "12-Year Fight Goes on to Save Historic Theater," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 24 February 1992.

<sup>253</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.

<sup>254</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.



headquarters.<sup>255</sup> U.S. Sen. Wyche Fowler Jr., D-GA was instrumental in getting the funds. President Bush signed the bill for them to receive the money.<sup>256</sup> The Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. was formed as a nonprofit sponsor because the HUD grant required it.<sup>257</sup> The Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Board of Directors main purpose was “to ensure the Liberty Theatre’s preservation and utilization to advance the cultural and educational environment of the region and to recognize the contributions of the artists who performed there.”<sup>258</sup> They have ownership of the building.<sup>259</sup>

A concern came up in 1994, that the area around the Liberty Theatre, which also has “the Muscogee County Jail, some small blighted homes, Tom’s Foods, a few bonding companies, beauty shops and a restaurant,” is prone to flooding. So flood proofing the building had to be studied.<sup>260</sup>

On June 21, 1995, there was a groundbreaking ceremony at 10 A.M. It was attended by people like Calvin Smyre, Columbus Mayor Bobby Peters, US Representative Sanford D. Bishop, and Spencer Owlettes president, Dorothy Wingo.<sup>261</sup>

In 1996, the restoration of the Liberty Theatre got another boost when a local donor gave \$250,000. It was from an anonymous charitable foundation to cover costs for “stage curtains and rigging, the auditorium sound system, and auditorium seats...sconces and trim, removal of old orchestra pit walls, replacement of a damaged sewer line, removal of unsuitable soils, upgrading a chair lift, work on existing brick joints and seals and an additional sewer tap fee. Those

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<sup>255</sup> Mark Holland, “Renovation Set to Begin on Historic Liberty Theater, *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 19 June 1995, Sec. B, p. 8.

<sup>256</sup> Ben Wright, “Liberty Gets Cash for Restoration,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 8 October 1992.

<sup>257</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 5.

<sup>258</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.

<sup>259</sup> Mark Holland, “Renovation Set to Begin on Historic Liberty Theater,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 19 June 1995, Sec. B, p. 1.

<sup>260</sup> Eileen Zaffiro, “Liberty Theater Clears Final Hurdles,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 24 August 1994. Sec. A, p. 1 & 8.

<sup>261</sup> Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Ground Breaking Ceremony, 21 June 1995.

improvements totaled \$171,000 leaving \$79,000 for other work.” Historic Columbus Foundation also gave \$5,000, and the Liberty Center Cultural Board donated \$20,000. The \$25,000 went toward exterior improvements on the theater and adjoining buildings.<sup>262</sup>

There were more set backs in 1996. Despite a chain of floods, organizers still hoped to offer Olympic visitors tours of the Liberty Theatre. On June 18, 1996, the Columbus Council approved spending an additional \$20,000 for unexpected roof work. Then, the sidewalks in front of the theater were badly cracked and buckled. Work was continuing on an addition behind the stage that would be used for props and dressing rooms. One of the problems was correcting a rainwater problem that had delayed the project six times. The theater is on a flood plain, and water quickly flows down ramps that slope into its new orchestra pit. To correct this problem, \$30,000 worth of piping and pumps were being installed at that time.<sup>263</sup>

The Liberty Theatre reopened in 1997<sup>264</sup> after a \$1.6 million renovation. The exterior was restored to its original brick. New drainage systems were put in to help prevent future damage to the flood-zone property.<sup>265</sup> A new sign was added in the front. Inside there are three hundred old-styled wooden theater chairs with green padding which are new additions.<sup>266</sup> The walls are mauve, and the carpet is a matching green and mauve floral.<sup>267</sup> “The balcony has been replaced to make room for a projection booth, sound system, and lighting.” Other additions were

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<sup>262</sup> Eileen Zaffiro, “Anonymous Donor Puts Up \$250,000 to Cover Liberty Theater Renovation,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 6 February 1996.

<sup>263</sup> Eileen Zaffiro, “Liberty Tours Canceled: Theater Supporters Still Hope for Big Debut,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 19 June 1996.

<sup>264</sup> “The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism,” project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>265</sup> “18 Sites Added to National Register,” *The Rambler* 24, no. 3 (April 1997): 4.

<sup>266</sup> Jaronda Little, “Curtain Raised on Refurbished Liberty Theatre,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 4 November 1996, Sec. B, p. 1.

<sup>267</sup> <sup>267</sup> Jaronda Little, “Liberty Theatre Reborn: Reopening is ‘Symbol of victory,’” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 10 January 1997, Sec A, p. 1.

a prop room, dressing rooms, and a backstage storage area.<sup>268</sup> The Liberty Theatre made plans to book plays and musical performances.<sup>269</sup>



Fig. 20 The Liberty Theatre in Columbus, Georgia. After restoration. Photograph from [www.columbusga.com](http://www.columbusga.com)

The grand opening of the Liberty Theatre took place on Thursday, January 8, 1997 at 2 P.M. The grand opening was followed by a tour of the newly renovated theater.<sup>270</sup> The ceremony was attended by civic leaders and about two hundred others.<sup>271</sup> On Saturday, January 6, 1997, from 6:30P.M. to 1:00A.M., the United Negro College Fund had their fund drive at the Liberty Theatre as part of the grand opening.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Jaronda Little, "Curtain Raised on Refurbished Liberty Theatre," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 4 November 1996, Sec. B, p. 1.

<sup>269</sup> "18 Sites Added to National Register," *The Rambler* 24, no. 3 (April 1997): 4.

<sup>270</sup> "Historically Liberty Theater Opens its Doors to the Public Again!" *Columbus Times*, 8, 15 January 1997.

<sup>271</sup> Jaronda Little, "Liberty Theatre Reborn: Reopening is 'Symbol of victory,'" *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 10 January 1997, Sec A, p. 1.

<sup>272</sup> "Historically Liberty Theater Opens its Doors to the Public Again!" *Columbus Times*, 8, 15 January 1997.



Fig. 21 The Liberty Theatre's Annex in 2004. Photograph taken by writer.

To help fund the operational cost, Liberty Theatre Cultural Center decided to have a membership drive. For example, for a donation of \$500, a person could have their name, the name of their business or organization, a memorial, the name of a loved one, or virtually any name of importance, engraved on a plate and mounted on one of the seats located in the theater.<sup>273</sup>

The groundbreaking ceremony for the annex to the Liberty Theatre was held on April 17, 2002 at 2 P.M. The annex is located in a renovated building next to the renovated theater. It is 8,297 square feet and houses “the theater’s offices, a conference room and a commercial kitchen as well as a conference room nearly equal to the size of the theater.” Challenge Grant Foundation and private donations funded the project. The theater’s conference room is used for wedding receptions, family reunions, and other functions.<sup>274</sup> On Tuesday, May 27, 2003, the Liberty Theatre Annex had its ribbon cutting, and it was attended by more than 150 people.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> *The Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Membership Drive brochure.*

<sup>274</sup> Meg Pirnie, “New Annex to Grace Liberty Theatre,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 17 April 2002, Sec. C, p. 1 & 3.

<sup>275</sup> Amanda Messer, “Liberty for All,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 28 May 2003.



Fig. 22 Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s House in 2004. Photograph taken by writer.

The Liberty Theatre is working with Carmike Cinemas to show movies, cartoons, and educational programs to young people on Saturdays.<sup>276</sup> The theater currently operates as a performing arts center for the Columbus community<sup>277</sup>

After the theater was open, there was a push to redevelop the area. “Ma” Rainey’s house was moved to the area (See Figure 22). Planners were making plans to have a youth center, pharmacy, day care center, and doctor’s office located in the area. City planners are working with the residents and business owners to find out what they want.<sup>278</sup> The city government has eliminated the rampant crime and some of the dilapidated buildings.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Jaronda Little, “Liberty Theatre Reborn: Reopening is ‘Symbol of victory,’” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 10 January 1997, Sec A, p. 1.

<sup>277</sup> “African American Theatres in Georgia,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 5.

<sup>278</sup> Lesley Brown, “Residents, City Discuss Revitalization Plan,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 28 May 1999, Sec. C, p. 1 & 3.

<sup>279</sup> Eileen Zaffiro, “In Pursuit of Liberty,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 11 October 1999, Sec. A, p. 1.

## E. Albany Theatre

### 1) History

The Albany Theatre, located in Albany, was a white theater.<sup>280</sup> The theater was built in 1927 as southwest Georgia's leading movie house and the major center for the performing arts. It had a seating capacity of about 2,000 in its auditorium, and it provided entertainment for Albany residents in Dougherty and surrounding counties. During the time of segregation, African Americans were admitted into the theater by a separate entrance, and they were allowed to view stage shows and movies from an area know as the "Crow's Nest." The "Crow's Nest" was a corner section in the upper balcony.<sup>281</sup> It had a "Colored Entrance" sign that hung until the 1990s. Blacks also had to purchase their tickets at the "Colored Only Ticket Counter."<sup>282</sup> The theater is 30,126 square feet.<sup>283</sup>



Fig. 23 The Albany Theatre in Albany, Georgia in 1927. Photograph from *Reflections*

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<sup>280</sup> "The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism," project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>281</sup> "Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre," *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 1.

<sup>282</sup> James R. Miller, "Albany Theatre/National Register Supplemental Information," 3, 4.

<sup>283</sup> James R. Miller, "Historic Property Information for National Register," 2.

Samuel Farkas, owner of the Albany Theatre, was a Jewish immigrant who became a prominent figure in Albany after the Civil War. He first established a livery stable and farm implement business on the site that would eventually be the location of the Albany Theatre.<sup>284</sup> Several businesses were torn down to accommodate the theater and many thousands of feet of piling were driven into the ground to give the building as strong a foundation as any in the city. Adolph Gortakowsky developed the theatre concept while he was leasing the land from Farkas for a 25-year period. At that time, the Gortakowsky brothers had been in the theater business for 17 years, and they operated a string of movie houses in other cities in Georgia. This list includes the Ryland in Americus, and the Strand in Valdosta.<sup>285</sup> After the Farkas estate received the plans for the theatre, they commissioned architect Roy A. Benjamin of Kemp, Bunch, and Jackson to design the theater. Benjamin built the Albany Theatre in the Classical Revival style, with steel beam construction, and this was the first building constructed with steel beams in the city.<sup>286</sup> A newspaper article said that “the Farkas estate had constructed and decorated it with the finest possible materials,” and the cost was \$300,000. “A.E. Ittner Co. was the construction firm while L. D’Englere of Jacksonville, Fla., was in charge of decorating.”<sup>287</sup> The Electric Services Company of Albany did the lighting in the theater.<sup>288</sup> Albany Sheet and Metal Works did all of the roofing and metal work.<sup>289</sup>

In its heyday, the Albany Theatre was called the “largest and finest amusement house in Georgia, south of Atlanta...the amusement center of Southwest Georgia.” On the opening night, September 12, 1927, four thousand people, twice as many as the theater could hold, went in to

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<sup>284</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 1.

<sup>285</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

<sup>286</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 1.

<sup>287</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

<sup>288</sup> “Lighting Effects of Albany Theater Make it Fairyland,” *The Albany Herald*.

<sup>289</sup> “Local Firm Did Metal Work on New Theater.”

see the new attraction. The theater could only seat eighteen hundred people. With so many patrons, people had to stand in the aisles to see the highlight of the evening's show, "The Magic Flame," starring Ronald Colman and Vilma Banky.<sup>290</sup> It was said about the opening that "In the front of the building a huge neon sign spelling 'Albany,' and composed of 1,348 alternately flashing lights of different colors, sent bright, varied-colored, hues upward to illuminate the evening sky."<sup>291</sup>

The Albany Theatre showed the first-run high class motion pictures, four shows daily, with admission cost for evening performances of fifty and fifteen cents. In the silent film era of the Albany Theatre, music was provided by the three-manual organ and a ten piece orchestra (Ralph Barnes, a violinist from Manchester, England was the director).<sup>292</sup> The exact date of the first audible film was not determined, however members of the Farkas family state that it was probably sometime in the 1930's.<sup>293</sup> The afternoon show opened at 1:30, and the evening performance was at 7:45.<sup>294</sup> The Albany Theatre was such an attraction that there was concern about making roads beautiful for people coming to Albany.<sup>295</sup>

The Albany Theatre was not the first movie house in Albany. The Rawlings Theatre was constructed in 1908, and in 1917, it burned down. Two years later, it was replaced by the Liberty on the same site. The Liberty is now known as the Broad Avenue Cinema, and it is now closed.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> "Will 'Showplace' be Left to Realists, Dreamers?"

<sup>291</sup> "Theater," *The Albany Sunday Herald*, 20 January 1985, Sec. A, p. 16.

<sup>292</sup> "Photo Play is Tiresome Bore Without Music," *The Albany Herald*.

<sup>293</sup> James R. Miller, "Albany Theatre/National Register Supplemental Information," 2.

<sup>294</sup> "Albany Theater Easily One of Most Beautiful Anywhere in Southeast."

<sup>295</sup> "Accessibility of Albany to Figure in Popularity of New Albany Theater," *The Albany Herald*, 10 September 1927.

<sup>296</sup> "Will 'Showplace' be Left to Realists, Dreamers?"



With iron-gray stucco as decorations, the front of the building was covered with limestone and granite. The cornerstones weigh about 1,000 pounds each.<sup>297</sup> The theater's auditorium exterior was originally constructed completely with brick veneer.<sup>298</sup> Arnold Stone, Brick, and Tile Company of Jacksonville, Fl furnished the stones.<sup>299</sup> As one walks through the arcade, there are "eight small stores including a cigar and tobacco shoppe, a stationery shop, a ladies boutique, a shoe store and a jewelry store."<sup>300</sup> The original blueprints show that the arcade section may have been an existing storefront that was extensively remodeled and linked to the theater's auditorium. The color scheme that was chosen throughout the house was mulberry and gold.<sup>301</sup> Rosenberg Brothers, which was at that time one of Albany's best known department stores, hung the draperies,<sup>302</sup> including thick velour mulberry drapes held back by golden encasements. There were brightly colored carpets and tiles covering the floors, and various shapes of reds, oranges, and greens intermingled on the walls.<sup>303</sup> The flooring was laid by the Macon Terrazo Mosaic Tile Company of Macon, Ga.<sup>304</sup>

The auditorium had a seating capacity of 1,100, and the balcony had seven hundred seats and a special section "for the negro patron." The seats in the theater were air-cushioned containing nine springs, and they were leather-upholstered. It was said there was "ample feet and leg room" for each person.<sup>305</sup> The theater was furnished by the Albany Housefurnishing Company.<sup>306</sup> The stage was also framed with the mulberry drapes and gold tiebacks, and it was not just a place for the silver screen. The stage was seventy-three feet long and thirty-eight feet

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<sup>297</sup> "Will 'Showplace' be Left to Realists, Dreamers?"

<sup>298</sup> James R. Miller, "Historic Property Information for National Register," 2.

<sup>299</sup> "Kre-Tex Stone Used in Building Albany Theater."

<sup>300</sup> "Will 'Showplace' be Left to Realists, Dreamers?"

<sup>301</sup> "Will 'Showplace' be Left to Realists, Dreamers?"

<sup>302</sup> "Draperies in New Theater a Delight to Artistic Eye."

<sup>303</sup> "Will 'Showplace' be Left to Realists, Dreamers?"

<sup>304</sup> "Macon Company Laid Floor in Theater Arcade," *The Albany Herald*, 10 September 1927.

<sup>305</sup> "Will 'Showplace' be Left to Realists, Dreamers?"

<sup>306</sup> "Albany Housefurnishing Company Supplied Albany Theater with Furniture," *The Albany Herald*.

deep. It had 150 footlights and each side had two sets of “strip lights.” (See Figures 24 and 25) and The orchestra pit was in front of the stage and was twenty-six by forty feet. There were ten individual dressing rooms, two chorus dressing rooms, showers, and other facilities for entertainers behind the stage. Throughout the theatre there were rest rooms, smoking rooms, and lounge rooms.<sup>307</sup>



Fig. 24 Interior of the Albany Theatre in 1927. Photograph from nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places

One of the most eye capturing elements of the theater was a richly detailed chandelier in the center of the auditorium. It is described as:

“A dome light, five and one-half feet in diameter, surrounded by thirty-six lights arranged in a circle, and ornamented by a beaded glass bracket hanging underneath, giving the lights a sparkling effect.

“On four sides of the main dome there are also suspended brackets, each holding sixteen lights, which shine against a background of old gold which the brackets have been painted.”<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

<sup>308</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

The ceiling medallion of plaster, is twenty-six feet in diameter, and is in the center of the auditorium. Four Adam fan medallions flank the central composite medallion, and they feature smaller scale chandeliers of similar design to the central fixture.<sup>309</sup>



Fig. 25 Interior of the Albany Theater in 1927. Photograph from the nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places.

Another special feature was a \$25,000 organ that had all sort of special effects. It was labeled as “a main attraction.” “It was a nine-pipe organ with percussions, drums, xylophones, chimes, cymbals, trumpets, violins, bells, tambourines, drums, and novelty effects such as ‘automobile horns, running feet, and crashes.’”<sup>310</sup> It was installed by a Mr. Perkins of New York.<sup>311</sup>

For safety, and to make the house “fireproof,” nine hundred automatic fire sprinklers were installed.<sup>312</sup>

On February 9, 1940, the Albany Herald read, “The King of Hi-De-Ho, Cab Calloway, and his orchestra with the Cotton Club Revue come to the Albany Tuesday for a one day

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<sup>309</sup> James R. Miller, “Historic Property Information for National Register,” 4.

<sup>310</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

<sup>311</sup> “Wonderful Organ at Albany Theater has 9 Sets of Pipes.”

<sup>312</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

engagement at the Albany Theatre. Tickets are being put on sale today for both white and colored although the seats are not reserved.”<sup>313</sup> Black actor and singer, Ethel Waters performed at the theater as well.<sup>314</sup>

In 1941, a tornado caused extensive damage to the South sidewall of the auditorium. The repairs resulted in the face brick being “overcoated” with the stucco of Portland cement.<sup>315</sup>

In 1955 and 1956, Sidney Poitier came to Albany and starred in a movie called *Good-bye My Lady*. The movie was filmed in Albany and debuted at the Albany Theatre. Then in 1961, historians report that the blacks had to give up their balcony seating for whites. This led to the bus station sit-ins and contributed to the “Albany Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>316</sup>

Before the Albany Theatre was abandoned in the early 1970s, local dance recitals were held there. Later, the Albany Junior League held their annual follies there.<sup>317</sup> One source says the Albany Theatre closed its doors on July 6, 1980.<sup>318</sup> At the time of its closing, the theater was being leased by Martin Theatres. Calvin Brown, the district manager of Martin Theatre, said, “The reason (for the closing) was ‘economics.’ He said there are enough movie houses in Albany, among them the Martin Four, the Georgia Four, the Mall Twin, the State, and Slappee Drive-in, all run by Martin Theatres.” All of those theaters were air conditioned, and the Albany Theatre was “air-cooled.”<sup>319</sup> Also the theater had electric utilities, and it “was heated by coal driven heat for steam heating system with a cooling tower located on the roof to obtain a degree of cooling.”<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> James R. Miller, “Historic Property Information for National Register,” 8.

<sup>314</sup> James R. Miller, “Albany Theatre/ National Register Supplement Information,” 3.

<sup>315</sup> James R. Miller, “Historic Property Information for National Register,” 2.

<sup>316</sup> James R. Miller, “Historic Property Information for National Register,” 8, 9.

<sup>317</sup> “Is There a Future for Albany’s Little ‘Fox?’” *The Albany Journal*, 5 September 1997.

<sup>318</sup> “Theater,” *The Albany Sunday Herald*, 20 January 1985, Sec. A, p. 16

<sup>319</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

<sup>320</sup> James R. Miller, “Historic Property Information for National Register,” 5.

## 2) Restoration

It could be said that the restoration work began with Sam Farkas Jr., the great-grandson of the original Samuel Farkas. He had a dream of reopening the theater, and turning it into “a show palace.” He hoped to restore the theater as much as possible to its original appearance and condition. His dream was to fill the small store spaces in the arcade with a restaurant and boutiques. He wanted three-act plays once a month with “country and western stars, rock stars, soul groups, rhythm and blues bands, and comedians.”<sup>321</sup>

According to *Reflections*, the newsletter for GAAHPN, “The Albany Theatre will return to its glory as a premier performing arts center for the city through a public/private partnership initiated by a minority development firm. James R. Miller is the African American founder and president of Oglethorpe Development Group, incorporated in 1996.”<sup>322</sup> Oglethorpe was one of the first minority private developers to invest private dollars into the plan for the revitalization of Metropolitan Downtown Albany, Georgia. In light of a \$210 Million Dollar Albany Downtown Masterplan, Oglethorpe Development Group, Inc., was pleased to be recognized as having “a key part of the puzzle for the downtown redevelopment.” The Designated Governmental Developer, Albany Tomorrow Inc. recognized them.<sup>323</sup> Miller’s company purchased this historical theatre from the estate of Samuel Farkas,<sup>324</sup> on February 18, 1998.<sup>325</sup> When James R. Miller got the building, it was in stable condition because of its steel beams and concrete

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<sup>321</sup> “Will ‘Showplace’ be Left to Realists, Dreamers?”

<sup>322</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 1.

<sup>323</sup> Oglethorpe Development Group, Inc.’s “Corporate Overview.”

<sup>324</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 1.

<sup>325</sup> James R. Miller, “Historic Property Information for National Register,” 7.

construction. It had some water damage.<sup>326</sup> The plans are to put shops and a restaurant downstairs. The old Crow's nest section will be used as a VIP section.<sup>327</sup>

James R. Miller envisioned the Albany Theatre as a cornerstone for potential economic development in the City of Albany's plans for downtown revitalization. The Albany Downtown Riverfront master plan, which is managed by Albany Tomorrow, Inc., has identified the Albany Theatre as a key component of downtown development.<sup>328</sup>



Fig. 26 The Albany Theatre circa 1990s. Photograph from the nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places.

A real boost to the project was when Walter Taylor, the chairman and CEO of KBJ Architects, the successor to Roy A. Benjamin, found the original blueprints for the Albany Theatre in their archives just a few days before it was suppose to be destroyed. Taylor will provide oversight in the rehabilitation process along with Albany engineering and construction firms.<sup>329</sup>

By 1997, the theater was gutted out (See Figure 27). Almost everyday Stosh Milward, a promoter/developer, and his associates were readying the Albany Theatre “for regulatory

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<sup>326</sup> James R. Miller, “Historic Property Information for National Register,” 2.

<sup>327</sup> “The Chitlin Circuit: A Case Study of Cultural Heritage Tourism,” project presentation by the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network.

<sup>328</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 2.

<sup>329</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 1.

inspections and concentrating on the structural aspect of the theater.” Milward told *The Albany Journal* that investors would “not allow too much deviation from the original architecture. Save a little, throw away a little and replace a little-‘if that’s what it takes to recreate, then that’s what we’ll do.’”<sup>330</sup>



Fig. 27 Interior of the Albany Theatre, circa 1997. Photograph from the nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1998, the Friends of the Albany Theatre (FATH) was formed. FATH is a nonprofit organization that raises money for the rehabilitation cost that is required to bring the theater back to public use. In May 2000, FATH formed a partnership with Oglethorpe Development Group, and this partnership provides first rights to a long-term lease. Also the partnership with FATH will ensure eligibility for tax incentives.

So far, FATH has successfully implemented a corporate fundraising strategy. The board of directors for FATH has implemented a five-year “visible benefit” campaign for corporate donors. These benefits include lobby plaques, VIP marquee and seat dedications. Also Easter

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<sup>330</sup> “Is There a Future for Albany’s Little ‘Fox?’” *The Albany Journal*, 5 September 1997.

Seals-Southern Georgia produced a replica of the Albany Theatre as a holiday Christmas tree ornament to promote the theatre's place in the history of the City of Albany.<sup>331</sup>

The restoration of the Albany Theatre received a lot of support from members of government and citizens in the community. In 1999, Oglethorpe Development Group, Inc. received \$3 million in enterprise, tax-exempt bonds from the Albany Dougherty Inner City Authority, and \$1.5 million in taxable bonds. All of this together totals \$4.5 million to finance the restoration of the theater. Also the Albany Theatre has received a \$36,000 Community Development Block Grant from The Albany-Dougherty Historic Preservation Commission to repair the roof over the auditorium. "United States Senator Max Cleland, Congressman Sanford Bishop, and Lieutenant Governor Mark Taylor recognized the preservation potential of this project as a boon to the Albany community and the state of Georgia. These officials, the Board of Commissioners of Dougherty County, and the Albany Area Chamber of Commerce provided letters of support for the project. The Albany Theatre has received support from the historical theatre community including the Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. and the Springer Opera House of Columbus. Jomandi Productions of Atlanta has offered to bring tour productions to the Albany Theatre when the rehabilitation is completed."<sup>332</sup>

There are some changes that have happened to the property since James R. Miller owned the property. On August 7, 1998, the arcade roof was demolished. Then on December 16, 1998, the roof was replaced, and on March 21, 2000, the arcade was demolished on the north side.<sup>333</sup>

Oglethorpe Development Group contacted Charlotte Frazier, chair of the Georgia African American Historic Preservation Network, to get information about the process to nominate the property to the National Register. Frazier referred the Oglethorpe Development Group to the

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<sup>331</sup> "Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre," *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 2.

<sup>332</sup> "Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre," *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 2.

<sup>333</sup> James R. Miller, "Historic Property Information for National Register," 5



National Register Unit of the Historic Preservation Division, and a Historic Property Information Form was submitted to the Historic Preservation Division in May 2000. The Albany Theatre does meet the National Register criteria and will be nominated pending certification of completed rehabilitation work. The rehabilitation work to the Albany Theatre is a federal and state tax project, and the property has to be listed in the National Register within 30 months following the time that the tax credit is taken.<sup>334</sup>

The rehabilitation of the Albany Theatre will be implemented in two phases. Phase I is focusing on the 10,000 square feet of retail space. James Miller envisions in this space a lunch/dinner restaurant and a fast food venue on the first floor. This space was originally retail shops. Plans for the second floor include executive office suites, conference space, and a roof garden.<sup>335</sup> Phase I is still under construction. Phase II is to restore the auditorium. The plans are to have the former “colored” entrance to lead to VIP seating. “When completed, the Albany Theatre will be the largest in southwest Georgia, rivaling the Fox Theatre in Atlanta.” Oglethorpe Development Group, Inc., and FATH believe that this project, although the process is lengthy and challenging, is adding value to the Albany downtown redevelopment, and will stand as a symbol of a united diversified community.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 2.

<sup>335</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 2.

<sup>336</sup> “Public/Private Partnership Reclaims the Albany Theatre,” *Reflections* 1, no. 3 (May 2001): 2.

### **E. Comparison of the Four Theaters**

The Morton Building, the Douglass Theatre, the Liberty Theatre, and the Albany Theatre are very similar and are different. These theaters were operated like other theaters of their time. They were built to accommodate live performances and movies; this excludes the Morton because it was built only for live theater but later added movies. These theaters had to add movies because vaudeville theaters were no longer profitable.

As noted the Albany Theatre was the only theater that catered mainly to Caucasian audiences. The reason it is in this thesis is because it played a role in the African American theater going experience in Georgia. This shares another story from the other three theaters by showing that blacks were able to go to some white theaters. Also it is currently owned by an African American gentleman.

Two gentlemen who had vast holdings of real estate built the Morton and the Douglass Theatres, and people who were in the theater business built the Liberty Theatre and Albany Theatre. The Morton and the Douglass theaters were primarily real estate investments. They were trying to maximize profits thru ticket sales. It is important to notice that when these theaters were restored the seating number had to be reduced. The Morton could seat eight hundred people, and its seating capacity was brought down to 544, and the Douglass had 750-800 seats in it and when it reopened it had 314-332 seats. This can be said of the Liberty Theatre, which had six hundred seats and was reduced to three hundred seats. Currently the Albany Theatre is gutted out. The reason for the smaller seating capacity is fire code

requirements that are much more rigorous than those in place when the theaters were built. All of these theaters required new equipment to update them.

It is very interesting to note that all these theaters played a part in the redevelopment of an area. So the active players in restoring these theaters were not just looking at the theaters, but also looking at ways to make the whole area better. The restoration of the Morton Theatre helped to bring more businesses to the area, such as a restaurant and a coffee shop. Also the Morton Theatre is a place to go when people celebrate Hot Corner. With the Douglass Theatre restored, it has helped with tourism by providing indoor space for Macon's festivals. Also it is a great place to provide information about African American history and to get history about the performing arts in Macon. The Liberty Theatre's restoration has made that area of Columbus a tourist destination. Planners and city officials had to be consulted. The Morton, Douglass, and Liberty are currently owned by their local city governments. It was the governments in Athens and Macon that initiated the restoration of the Morton and the Douglass theatres even though it was the previous owners who had placed these buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. People in the community started the restoration process of the Liberty and the Albany.

Since city governments own the theaters it seems that now many of them now operate as non-commercial theaters. It is nonprofit groups operating the theaters, so they are not trying to gain a profit from their programs. Instead, the focus is upon providing a service to the community. Many people in the community are now using the theaters. For example when I went to the Liberty Theatre, I saw many people walking in and out of the theater. It seemed to me that a community meeting of some sort was going on inside.

When the Morton, Douglass, and Liberty Theatres were restored many blacks felt that this was a major victory for their community. The restoration of these theaters brought together

many people. Today these theaters provide programs for African Americans like plays, workshops, conferences, and concerts. All of these programs relay information about the African American experience. For example, I went to a play at the Morton Theatre. It was an African American play, and the play made me think that when the Morton opened this was probably what people watched even though the play was modern. Also, I went to a conference at the Douglass Theatre. It was a great conference helping people to realize that buildings like the Douglass Theatre and neighborhoods around Macon give people a sense of place.

| <b>Name</b>         | <b>Location</b> | <b>Original Owner</b> | <b>Construction Date</b> | <b>Restoration Date</b> | <b>Original Seating Size</b> | <b>New Seating Size</b> |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Morton Theatre   | Athens, GA      | Monroe "Pink" Morton  | 1910                     | 1994                    | 800                          | 544                     |
| 2. Douglass Theatre | Macon, GA       | Charles H. Douglass   | 1921                     | January 11, 1997        | 750-800                      | 314-332                 |
| 3. Liberty Theatre  | Columbus, GA    | Roy Martin, Sr.       | 1925                     | January 8, 1997         | 600                          | 300                     |
| 4. Albany Theatre   | Albany, GA      | Samuel Farkas         | 1927                     | Restoration in progress | 1,800                        | Gutted out              |

Fig. 28 A comparison of the four theaters.

## **V. Recommendations and Further Study**

If an individual, or an organization, wants to restore a theater the first thing they would need to do is document the historical and physical context. This was one of the first efforts of the people who began the restoration process on the theaters discussed in this thesis. The history can reveal a lot about a building. It will let a person know who played there, what role the theater played in the community, and will help people understand why the building should be preserved. Also the building can tell a researcher about the history of a place. The building will reveal things like additions and changes that might have occurred, but the documentation is not available.

Next, a person should identify what kind of civic roles the theatre could play in the city. The four theaters that were researched played a major part in their cities' redevelopment plan. This leads to the next point: a person should establish contact with city governments and city planners. The city can be a helpful tool. They can assist with funding the project, and they can help to improve the area. For example, they can encourage businesses to come to the area, like restaurants and shops, and improve public areas. People who go to the theater might want to get something to eat and do some shopping. Also hotels can be attracted to the area. For example, for the Cherry Blossom Festival in Macon, GA, the Douglass Theatre was going to have activities there and with a hotel nearby so people will not have far to walk to get to that venue. So with the hotel being so close by, many people would like to stay there. It also can attract educational institutions like museums and archives to the downtown. After visiting a historic theater, many people might want to obtain more information about the performing arts scene of

that city. A museum and archives would have more information than that provided at the theater. Finally, other tourist attractions can be brought to the area. For example the Gertrude “Ma” Rainey house was moved to a lot not too far from the Liberty Theatre. Collectively these businesses along with the theater will draw people to the area.

A person, or organization, has to be focused on the project. It was a hard battle for these four theaters. They had to contend with financial problems and natural disasters. Many things that were unexpected came up, but they stayed focused and now three of the theaters are functioning in their community while the other will be soon.

The community needs to be involved. It is very important that citizens who might have attended the theater in the past, or who might represent future patrons, know what is happening with the theater. They can be very helpful with providing information about the history of the place. They might be able to tell a person what was original and what was added on later. This can confirm what was found out while researching the written and structural history. One important note is if a person plans to do an early twentieth century theater they need to talk to people who remember it now. Often, these people are elderly and it would be a shame to let that knowledge go in the grave. For planning purposes, future patrons should be consulted when considering what amenities the restored theater can provide.

For further study, it is recommended that someone look at the theaters that have been destroyed and find out the reasons why they were destroyed. This can be helpful in preserving the theaters that were mentioned through out this thesis. Also of great interest for study would be a survey of African American theaters in other states. What other techniques were used to preserve them? What happened with these theaters might provide new approaches in other areas. Ultimately it may be possible to identify patterns of destruction as well as patterns of successful

restoration and rehabilitation which can provide guidance to community governments and citizens interested in the protection of theaters.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Live performance/movie theaters are an important part of the history of entertainment. They are physical settings of where performers practiced their art. For African Americans, they were the center of entertainment. Now, with the loss of so many theaters, those few remaining are important links to the legacy of people such as Monroe “Pink” Morton, Charles H. Douglass, Duke Ellington (See Figure 7), Cab Calloway, and Gertrude Pridgett “Ma” Rainey (See Figure 3). That legacy can live on through these buildings.

These show places can be used as community centers, museums dedicated to those who performed there, and they can be used as regular theaters. The important thing is that they do not sit empty and suffer demolition by neglect. This thesis records the history of Georgia’s African American theaters and how they are being restored. The host communities realized the importance of these places and decided to save these theaters. The fight is not over, so lets continue to save these palaces of entertainment.



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