

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

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date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic *Comerford Theater*

and/or common *Paramount Theatre*

2. Location

street & number *71 Public Square*

___ not for publication

city, town *Wilkes-Barre*

___ vicinity of

congressional district *11*

state *Pennsylvania*

code *42*

county *Luzerne*

code *079*

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
___ district	___ public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	___ agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	___ private	___ unoccupied	___ commercial
___ structure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> both	___ work in progress	___ educational
___ site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment
___ object	___ in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	___ government
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial
		___ no	___ military
			___ museum
			___ park
			___ private residence
			___ religious
			___ scientific
			___ transportation
			___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name *John D. Smith*

City of Wilkes Barre Industrial Redevelopment Authority

street & number *71 Public Square*

69 Public Square

city, town *Wilkes Barre*

___ vicinity of

state *Pennsylvania*

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. *Luzerne County Courthouse*

street & number *North River Street*

city, town *Wilkes Barre*

state *18701*

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title *Historic Sites Survey*

has this property been determined eligible? ___ yes ___ no

date *1979*

___ federal state ___ county ___ local

depository for survey records *Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission*

city, town *Harrisburg*

state *Pennsylvania*

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

- Dimensions:** Front Facade - 46 Feet (14.02 Meters)
East Side - 292 Lineal Ft. (8900 Meters)
West Side - 365 Lineal Ft. (111.25 Meters)
Rear Facade - 95 Feet (28.95 Meters)
- Construction** Steel frame and brick masonry bearing walls (common bond)
- Overall Style:** Depression Moderne
- Front Facade:** Stylized Ziggurat composition of four bays, faced with glazed terra cotta tile; ground level is faced with green marble. Marquee is a cantilevered steel frame with chrome fretting. Entrance doors are six pair of bronze doors. Fenestration consists of four 10-lite steel sash windows above the marquee. Decoration consists of four lavender colored fluted reeds of corrugated steel. Two are on the central tower (approx 4' x 22") while secondary ones are located on each wing of polychrome faience with stylized chevron and leaf motif. The streamline tower is crested with polychrome faience and red tile. Cornice of wings are crested red tile.
- Rear Facade:** Stylized Ziggurat composition of three bays with subsidiary symmetric wings. Each bay contains one lavender colored fluted reed of corrugated steel divided by a 4-lite steel sash window. A plain double door is recessed beneath the central bay. Decoration consists of eight panels of the chevron and leaf motif, and red tile at the cornice. Each wing has an additional corrugated steel flute.
- Interior:** The vestibule, promenade and octagonal foyer are decorated in blue felt with decorative bronze and painted plaster walls. Additional decoration consists of fluted corner columns, sculpted plaster moldings of the chevron and leaf motif. The foyer is encircled by a bronze railing, paneling is of solid walnut. The basement includes a main lounge, rest rooms and nursery (all considerably altered after 1972 Hurricane Agnes Flood). Second floor mezzanine and powder room decorated in upholstered mohair frieze of blue, gold and red. Powder room is natural birch with copper, silver and blue damask. Auditorium and loge section finished in walnut with translucent marble panels, ornamental plaster and bronze. Upholstery has been altered from the original royal blue velour. The auditorium was originally equipped to handle 4 track magnetic sound
- Screen**
Dimensions: 28" high x 37" wide
- Alterations to the original theater can be considered minor.
- Removal of central bronze ticked booth under marquee in the 1940's.
 - Basement spaces have been used for storage - post 1972.
 - Lobby and auditorium carpet and material - post 1972 flood,
 - Concession stand in central octagonal foyer - post 1972,
 - Stage enlarged to cover orchestra pit - c. 1978

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates

Builder/Architect Penn - York Utilities, Inc, Scranton

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The modern American Movie Palace, as it evolved in the early Twentieth Century, rapidly became a fixture in the medium to large city. Important as a means of cheap entertainment, and immediately recognizable point of reference in the urban landscape and as the focus of the myth of Hollywood in other parts of the country removed from the West Coast, the Movie Palace was a major part of the movie ideology which made the American cinema more than a pastime. Other parts of that ideology involved star worship, the proliferation of an extensive fan literature and the ascendance of the West Coast as a cultural center capable of influencing the rest of America on a new and vast scale. This development reached its peak in the economic desolation caused by the Great Depression of the 1930's. Now significantly eroded by the phenomenon of television, the film industry obsessed America to a degree comparable only to that of professional sports today.

In this era a new kind of building developed, combining the grandeur and sense of culture of the opera house which the proletarian consciousness a true mass media requires (today seen in the sports arena). The architecture of the Movie Palace was *sui-generis* lavished with an abundance of eclectic ornament, making new reference to the historic styles as well as the latest Art Deco forms. To the casual pedestrian, the Movie Palace proclaimed the prosperity and importance of the film industry, particularly in a time of national depression and uncertainty. At its peak the grand and awesome promenade induced both rising anticipation and whispered reverence as the viewer entered a kind of secular temple to cinema.

Most American cities had one. New York had several: the Strand, the old Rialto, the Roxy. Wilkes-Barre, whose social history is linked with its nearest urban neighbors, New York and Philadelphia, had its own series of showpiece theatres, each enjoying a brief reign before being surpassed in size, convenience and modernity. The Bijou, the Savoy and the Comerford Corporation's Capitol were, in turn, Wilkes-Barre's premier showplaces. When the Comerford Theatre, the current Paramount, was begun in 1937, it represented the pinnacle of Movie Place evolution for Wilkes-Barre, and, indeed, Luzerne County. As the largest, best equipped, most expensive and most modern movie theater of the pre-World War II era in Wilkes-Barre, the Paramount was the only one to survive the rise of television, and the razing, alteration or conversion of nearly a dozen theaters. As Wilkes-Barre's best and only surviving theater from this era, it is of supreme regional importance, and an irreplaceable subject of regional, social and architectural history.

The Deco-Moderne architecture of the Paramount is rare in the Wyoming Valley and its significance as the major architectural legacy of Depression-era Wilkes-Barre is related to the city's unique economic history and reliance on an anthracite with the increased prosperity of the hard coal industry. The peak tonnage was extracted in the mid-twenties after which demand began to falter as consumers converted home heating units to natural gas. Substandard wages and declining population have plagued the region since then. This economic stagnation both preceded and continued after the national depression. As late as 1970, the city of Wilkes-Barre was still showing signs of population decrease.

Local building activity was sharply curtailed in the late twenties and there had not been any significant surge in construction in the city of Wilkes-Barre until that sponsored under the aegis of the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Wilkes-Barre in the nineteen-sixties and seventies.

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(and, confusingly, Comerford's Capitol Theater, also on Public Square, was renamed the Comerford). As such it was operated continuously until the early nineteen seventies. Essentially unaltered, the Paramount remains the largest capacity unpartitioned theater in the Wyoming Valley. It has also functioned as a hall for major Rock Music stars making appearance in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Peter Frampton, Billy Joel, Harry Chapin, Kiss and Art Garfunkel are some of the better known performers who have been billed there.

1. The Paramount is the first Penn-York theater which a freon based airconditioning system and one of the first of the chain to use the so-called American system of air-conditioning with ducts and louvers mounted in the ceiling. This removed the outlets from their annoying positions in the aisles, and is now standard practice. The air-conditioning system was designed by Power Engineering Corporation, the oldest air-conditioning firm in Northeastern Pennsylvania and a firm which worked closely on many Penn-York projects. At the time, the air-conditioning of the Paramount was the most advance system in the area and remains mostly intact today. All fans and coils are still in use as are the condensers. The only major machinery which has been replaced are the compressors. The importance of the Paramount's air-conditioning increases in view of the attention given in its advertizing; in the media, on the marquee itself and, more tangibly, on the city sidewalk, where doors were intentionally left open to remind the pedestrian how cool the theater was kept. The early evolution of air-conditioning for comfort (as opposed to storage) is tied closely to theaters, and the the Paramount is a well preserved example of the flowering of that evolution into modern practice.
2. The theater has a high ratio of lobby floor space to auditorium floor space, particularly unusual outside the major metropolitan areas. Nearly 40% of the Paramount's total floor space is devoted to five different lobbies. An additional one, adjoining the main lounge, was designed as a nursery. Here a "trained nurse" supervised children too young or disinterested to attend the feature.. A pioneering feature locally, the nursery was a forerunner of current concern for day-care facilities, and contributed to the total of the array of conveniences provided by the Paramount - not only parking and entertainment, but baby sitter service as well.
3. Fifty seats in the center of the theater were equipped with hearing aids, providing the hard-of-hearing patron with the option of either bone or air conductors. In the era before widespread government provisions for the care of the indigent handicapped, this was more than a gratuitous feature. It also contributed to the Comerford Corporation's image as the paternalistic friend of the proletariat, much more important value in depression America. The hearing aid machinery, designed by Sonotone, has since been removed. With current interest in design to accomodate the handicapped, the Paramount remains an early innovator and a rare example of corporate philanthropy expressed in architectural design.
4. The sequential array of lobbies, divided by solid bronze doors, is a unique and dynamic arrancement of public space. Entry to the auditorium comes only after a long passage (140 feet) through the reception lobby, promenade, rotunda and auditorium foyer. Sequentially dimmed lighting, almose exclusively indirect, provides a gradual transition from the noise and lights of the city street to the quiet and darkness of the auditorium. The arrangement of internal space is of local importance in that it demonstrates a local architect creating a smaller version of the great spaces of metropolitan movie places while serving functionally to create feelings of anticipation and awe, part of the experience of the night at the movies.
5. The Paramount's rest rooms were equipped with Wilkes-Barre's first electric hand dryers. All mirrors are slightly rose-tinted to enhance the complexion. These then up-to-date features are an

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Resulting from the skewed pattern of construction, Wilkes-Barre's architecture possesses an atavistic array of historical style. Second empire, Victorian Gothic, Romanesque and Classical Revival structures are far more common in the city than the Deco-Moderne of the Paramount. While a few buildings display moderne features, such as streamlined corners, reed motifs and glazed tile, none are as well known as the Paramount; none are in as important location as the Paramount; none display the sheer number of moderne features which make the Paramount of interest in its entirety. Its ziggarut, stridently polychrome facades contribute to the architectural confection surrounding Wilkes-Barre's Public Square and significantly adds to the overall architectural character of the downtown area of a city known for its architecture.

The plans for the Paramount Theater were drawn up by the Penn-York Utility Company, since disbanded an engineering/contracting firm based in Scranton. As builders for the Comerford chain, they designed and superintended the erection of theaters throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania and as far afield as Connecticut and Rhode Island. The Wilkes-Barre theater, intended as a showplace for the chain, incorporated innovations not found in other theaters of the chain. In this sense, it served as a prototype. While some of the original equipment has been removed, it is significant that some of the features such as the hearing-aid equipped seats were to remain unique in the area; while others, the electric hand-dryers, for example, were truly innovative, becoming standard equipment only years later. As a major structure designed by an important local firm, the Paramount is valuable historically for the number of innovative features designed into it"

Opened August 18, 1938 as the Comerford Theater, the current Paramount received considerable media coverage. Local Newspapers devoted several pages of coverage to the opening ceremonies while the Wilkes-Barre Record noted that the crowd gathered to see the new theater was the largest seen in the city's Public Square since the signing of the Armistice. Charles Loveland, the Mayor of Wilkes-Barre issued a proclamation declaring the week, "Comerford Week" and observed, "This magnificent theatre reflects the progress of this growing community..."

The dedication was filmed by two complete camera and recording crews from the MGM Studios. On hand for the ceremony was the local Alexander Band, itself the subject of the first feature, Alexander's Ragtime Band. The public excitement over the opening of the theatre was a mixture of local pride at the modern-appearing structure and interest for the (locally) radically different architectural style of a building given a prominent place in the heart of the City's business district, Wilkes-Barre's diamond shaped Public Square. A contemporary newspaper account waxes eloquent, suggesting the importance of the Paramount as a symbol of local wealth:

"The Comerford represents something more than money. It was conceived with higher ideals, build with nobler purposes. It is a theatrical man's gift to a community of his nativity, make beautiful for public enjoyment, a magnet to draw people together in the spirit of neighborliness. 1 -

Since M.E. Comerford, founder of the Comerford chain, was a native of Larksville, a township less than two miles from Wilkes-Barre, he was regarded as one of the city's "own". It was fitting and proper, at least in the public's eye, that the Wilkes-Barre theater should be the most luxurious of the chair, outdoing those in Scranton, Hazleton or other northeastern Pennsylvania towns. M.E. Comerford may well have felt this way himself, for the Wilkes-Barre Comerford incorporated innovations not found in others

In 1949, the munificent Comerford Corporation was the victim of an anti-trust suit and had to divest itself of a number of its theatres. On September 2, 1949, the Comerford became the Paramount

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excellent reflection of the value placed upon progress and scientific design in the moderne mode.

6. *The irregular trapezoidal shape of the building is a result of the Wilkes-Barre's unusual Public Square which is tilted 45 degrees with respect to the street grid. The Public Square facade is comparatively narrow and the ninety foot wide auditorium concentrates the bulk of the theater's floor space behind the wider Washington Street facade. The curiously massive rear facade is unique in the city: nearly one hundred feet of sheer fluted and decorated tile, interrupted only by an unfenestrated double door and three vertical windows.*

7. *The Paramount Theater is of more than regional interest in that it possesses most of the array of Deco-Moderne features from both the Streamline and Zig-zag modes. The former is represented in the curved marquee, rounded ground-level corners and streamlined tower; the latter is represented in the lavender flutes, chevron motif and vertical metal frets with which the interior is furnished. The Paramount Theater is of broad historic interest in that it captures American architecture in transition to the International Style. Streamlined, "efficient" surfaces; the reduction of surface ornament to a few small panels of surface faience; the functional use of space; all harken to the austerity and interest in efficiency of the International Style. Conversely, the creation of interior spaces meant to awe, the eclectic use of historical modes (neo-classic and Egyptian revival) for the rotunda furnishings and the stripped-down colorful facade suggesting Beaux-Arts columns with massive flutes; these indicate continuity with the mainstream of American architectural tradition since the nineteenth century. The work of a local firm building in the current depression vernacular, the Paramount captures a unique moment in the economy of Luzerne County and a unique moment in the history of architecture in America.*

References:

1. *Wilkes-Barre Record, Thursday, August 18, 1938*
2. *Robert Dickenson, P.E. and Clinton Ide, P.E. of Power Engineering Corporation*

9. Major Bibliographical References

10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property .54

Quadrangle name Wilkes-Barre, Pa

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carl J. Handman AIA and Michael J. Lewis

organization Historic Preservation Society of Luzerne County date June 16

street & number 15 South Franklin Street telephone 717-824-4463

city or town Wilkes-Barre state Pennsylvania

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Ed Weintraub

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

9. Major Bibliographical References

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Acreeage of nominated property .54

Quadrangle name Wilkes-Barre, Pa

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

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State Historic Preservation Officer signature



Ed Weintraub

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date 10/21/50

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Keeper of the National Register

date

APR 4:

date

Chief of Registration

