

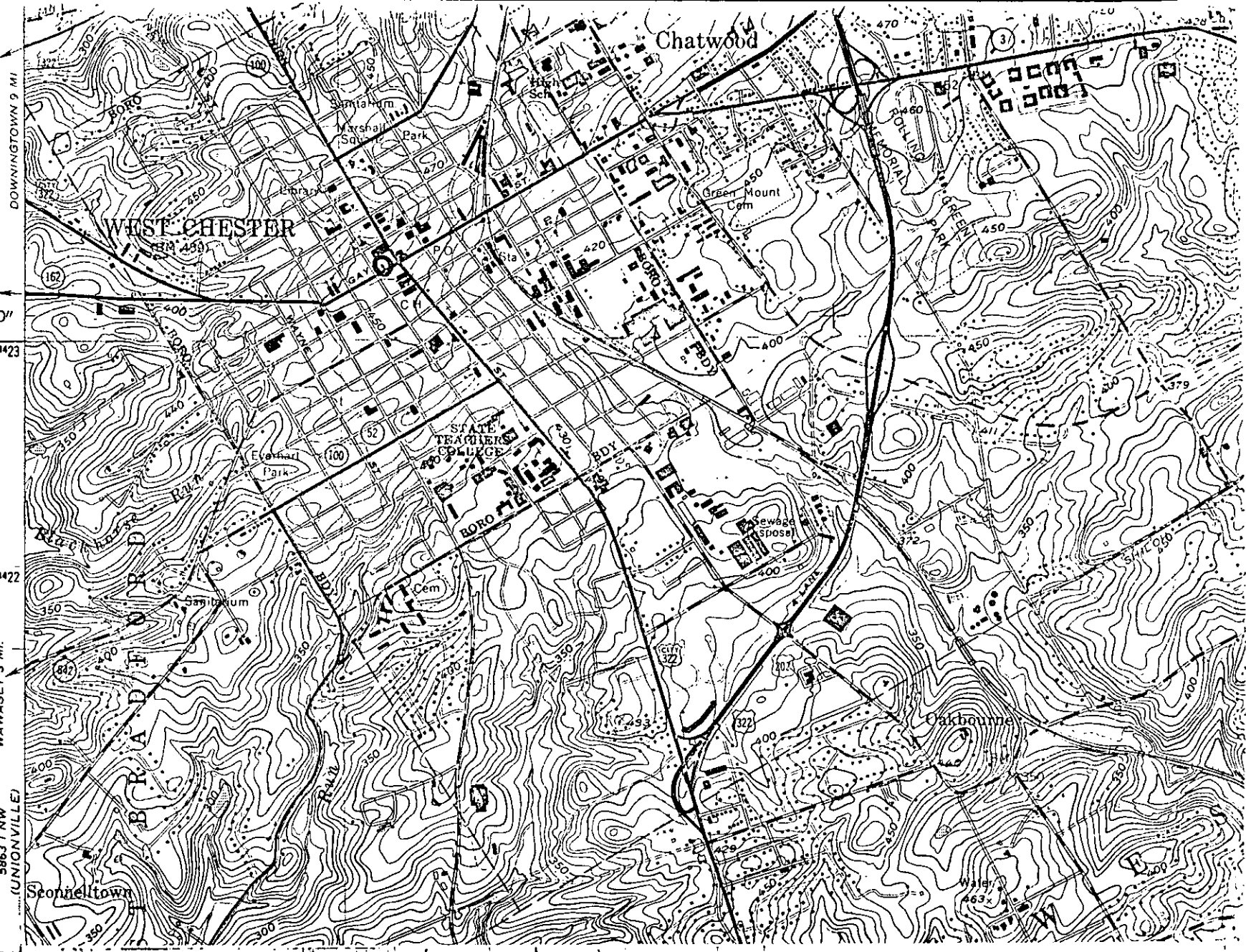
Warner Theater
Chester County
Zone 18 E448

Warner
Theater

MARSHALLTON 3 M
COPEVILLE 1.7 MI.

UNIONVILLE 7.5 MI.
WAWASET 3 MI.

5863 I NW
(UNIONVILLE)



DOWNTOWN 9 MI

57°30"
423

422

Scottelton

Oakbourne

Walley
463

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

 NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
 INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

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33

 SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
 TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS
1 NAME

HISTORIC

The Warner Theater

AND/OR COMMON

The High Street Theater

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

120 North High Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

West Chester

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF

16th

STATE

Pennsylvania

CODE

42

COUNTY

Chester

CODE

029

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

 DISTRICT BUILDING(S) STRUCTURE SITE OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

 PUBLIC PRIVATE BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

 IN PROCESS BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

 OCCUPIED UNOCCUPIED WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

 YES: RESTRICTED YES: UNRESTRICTED NO

PRESENT USE

 AGRICULTURE COMMERCIAL EDUCATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT GOVERNMENT INDUSTRIAL MILITARY MUSEUM PARK PRIVATE RESIDENCE RELIGIOUS SCIENTIFIC TRANSPORTATION OTHER:**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Mr. Henry Greenberg and Mr. Gary Smith

STREET & NUMBER

120 North High Street

CITY, TOWN

West Chester

VICINITY OF

STATE

Pennsylvania

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Recorder of Deeds, Chester County Courthouse,

STREET & NUMBER

North High Street

CITY, TOWN

West Chester,

STATE

Pennsylvania

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Pennsylvania Inventory of Historic Places

DATE

July 25, 1979

 FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

CITY, TOWN

Harrisburg

STATE

Pennsylvania

CONDITION

 EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR DETERIORATED RUINS UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

 UNALTERED ALTERED

CHECK ONE

 ORIGINAL SITE MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Warner Theater Building is a composite one, two, and three-story structure which incorporates a motion picture theater, restaurant, and series of small stores. The basic structural system is a steel frame with reinforced concrete foundations and hollow tile exterior walls faced with red brick and cast stone.

The principal facade of the building faces east on High Street and is composed of a range of seven stores, one-story in height and articulated by cast stone spandrels with shallowed impressed relief. The theater entrance separates the first and second stores (from the south) and consists of a two-story foyer with three-story tower supporting the illuminated "Warner" sign and marquee. A broad stairway leads from the foyer to the balcony lobby. The foyer also opens on the west to the first floor lobby.

The auditorium is approximately 83 feet wide and 120 feet long with a sloping floor, a balcony and a ceiling height of approximately 35 feet. The original seating capacity was 1650, 1300 on the main floor and 350 on the balcony. This capacity has been reduced by modifications on the first floor involving expansion of the stage area. A narrow stairway leads from the balcony lobby to the projection booth above. The basement (under the auditorium) contains the original heating, ventilating and refrigeration (air conditioning) systems.

The interior design of the Warner Theater reflects the height of the Art Deco movement and is exceptionally well preserved. The auditorium is resplendent in blue, gold, red and silver, with the original carpeting in the balcony displaying a fine example of earth colors used in a Deco geometric pattern. The tray ceiling carries a Renaissance motif using similar geometric patterns. Thus, the classical element in the theatre has been totally abstracted, as in the fluted pilasters flanking the proscenium, which (with a base or dome), achieve this effect.

The themes and motifs which are developed in the theatre show many influences. The key motif across the balcony gives evidence of a Greek influence, while one can also see a Finnish influence in the abstraction of branches. The chevron design intaglio in the plaster in the lobby, also found in the border on the balcony, suggests a Mayan influence. The wheel and cross designs in the massive gilded organ grill seem Oriental. The dogwood designs of the frosted lamps suggest the Medieval. The French influence, too, is represented in the giant frescos in the lobby which tell tales of the circus and Prince Charming. But it is the wide, leafy papyrus and lotus designs on the walls in both the auditorium and the lobby which reflect Rapp and Rapp's interest in the Egyptian, and give the entire interior an Egyptian flavor. (It is interesting to note that King Tut's tomb was opened in 1925.) The designers worked with inexpensive material and created new forms; plaster was shaped, sized, painted and sculpted. The huge panels in the auditorium were molded from plaster into romantic draping approximating heavy rich velvet. The use of metallic paints gave a satiny finish to the plaster.

It was the era of the neon tube, and the Warner's ceiling lamps are outspoken in their

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intention to function simply as illumination. The glass main shade and difusor side curtains became, in their abstract form, sculpture, creating both light and, through color, a sense of mood. Wall lighting plays an integral part in the design; as the lamps sweep from the back of the auditorium to the stage, they leave a glistening trail, catching the glint of the gold and silver leaf and drawing the eyes and minds of the audience to the point of concentration, the stage.

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" 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 1930

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Rapp and Rapp for Warner Brothers

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

On November 14, 1930, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, Warner Brothers opened their newest motion-picture palace. Described in the opening night program as a triumph of modern theatre architecture, it became the pride of the city of West Chester.

When Warner Brothers decided to build a theatre in this small conservative Quaker community, they first hired William H. Lee as architect. American Theatres of Today published his plans for the proposed theatre.¹ But the final design of the Warner was by the Chicago firm of C. W. and George Rapp. Rapp and Rapp was a firm specializing in the most opulent movie houses of the day. While most of their theatres were in Chicago, they had designed two New York theatres several years before. The Paramount in Manhattan, now demolished, was built in 1926, and the Paramount in Brooklyn, which is today just a shell used as a gymnasium by Fordham University, in 1928.

The era of the movie palace came at a time when the country was adapting itself to the machine age as well as struggling to pull itself out of the Great Depression. Inside the movie palaces people found an escape from the reality of mounting debts and despair. The music, laughter, illusions and fantasies answered the needs of a harried public.

The Warner Theatre in West Chester was built at the height of the Art Deco era, a time when art and technology were combined and contemporary materials were used in a new aestheticism. As Paul Frankel, an American designer, said in 1928, "Simple lines are modern. They are restful to the eye and dignify and tend to cover up the complexity of the machine age. If they do not completely do this, they at least divert our attention and allow us to feel ourselves master of the machine."² Movie palace architecture lent itself beautifully to the Art Deco style, for movie theatres were themselves new forms which had essentially no prototypes. There were design considerations, too, which were new to the architecture--air conditioning and acoustics (talkies had been introduced in 1927).

The Warner was billed as the "Showplace of Chester County." It had a seating capacity of 1630 and cost a half a million dollars. After its opening, the Saturday edition of the local newspaper carried the story: "With a blaze of glory, West Chester's new theatre opened its doors last evening. Long before the hour for opening, long lines of people assembled on High Street from Gay to Chestnut, four abreast. As the patron entered, the first exclamation was

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one of delight and astonishment as the beauties of the place were beheld. It was hard to realize that West Chester was in possession of a place of such magnitude and magnificence." ³ Opening night premiered a Warner Brothers film, "The Life of the Party," with Winnie Lightner, Irene Delroy, Jack Whiting and Charles Butterworth, a film which Variety later described as a "roughhouse comedy along gold-digger lines." Also featured was the personal appearance of the world's "biggest little star," Davey Lee.

Since that opening night, the Warner Theatre has remained architecturally intact, even though its ownership changed several times. Since the era of television, it has fallen on hard times like many other movie theatres. During the sixties, it had four grand evenings reminiscent of its early years, showing films of live performances of Tosca, Madame Butterfly, Boris Gudunov and Aida. Near-capacity crowds lined the pavement for several blocks, an unusual occurrence for a town the size of West Chester.

During the past two years, the Warner has also had the support of a community action group which has sponsored two evenings featuring classic films of the thirties and forties. Residents dressed in period clothing arrived in vintage motor cars to view "Casablanca" and "Forty-Second Street," and later, after champagne and hors d'oeuvres, danced to the music of a big band. But this has not been enough to keep the Warner alive. Now independently owned, the Warner could not compete with the bidding war of the chain-owned theatres and its owners have put it up for sale. According to reports in the community, interested buyers have included promoters of a roller-derby rink, a bakery, and a skateboard park.

These rumors led to an emergency meeting of the West Chester Borough Board of Historical Review, a commission serving under the Borough Council whose responsibility it is to identify and mark sites and buildings of historical and architectural merit. Featured at the meeting were James Kogel of the Theatre Historical Society and Robert Dustman, Executive Director of the Grand Opera House in Wilmington, Delaware.

Kogel, an expert in movie palace architecture, described the Warner as "the most significant movie palace in the Philadelphia area." He told residents that the Warner was one of only three Rapp and Rapp houses in Pennsylvania. The other two, Heinz Hall in Pittsburgh and the Warner Theatre in Erie, have both been saved through community effort. Dustman described how a handful of volunteers and a community development professional organized a 5.4 million dollar restoration of Wilmington's Grand Opera House as a center for the

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performing arts. After that board meeting, a group of West Chester residents met and formed the "Citizens To Save The Warner". They intend to acquire the building for the establishment of a Chester County performing arts center. They feel that it is not only culturally important to the town, but that it is economically vital as well for the Warner Theatre to remain a theatre.

- 1 R. W. Sexton, American Theatres of Today (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1930), vol.II.
- 2 Herbert Scherer quotes Paul Frankel, Arts Magazine, Summer, 1971, p.42.
- 3 Daily Local News, West Chester, Pennsylvania, Nov. 15, 1930, p.1.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

R. W. Sexton, American Theatres of Today (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1930), vol. 1.

Herbert Scherer quotes Paul Frankel, Arts Magazine, Summer, 1971, p.42.

Daily Local News, West Chester, Pennsylvania, Nov. 15, 1930, p.1.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY .588

QUADRANGLE NAME _____

QUADRANGLE SCALE _____

UTM REFERENCES

A | 18 | 448200 | 4423310

B | | | |

C | | | |

D | | | |

E | | | |

F | | | |

G | | | |

H | | | |

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Located on the northwest corner of the intersection of High and Chestnut Streets and described further in Deed Book Z-50, Page 276, etc. in the Recorder of Deeds Office of Chester County, Court House, West Chester, PA

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 Kate Eby, Chairman, West Chester Board of Historical Review
Wynne N. Milner

ORGANIZATION _____

DATE

May 1, 1979

STREET & NUMBER

210 S. Darlington Street

TELEPHONE

215-436-4436

CITY OR TOWN

West Chester,

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 National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE _____

TITLE _____

DATE _____

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE _____

ATTEST:

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE _____

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION