

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

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

1. Name

historic Lansdowne Theatre

and/or common N/A

2. Location

street & number 29 North Lansdowne Avenue N/A not for publication

city, town Lansdowne N/A vicinity of

state Pennsylvania code 042 county Delaware code 045

3. Classification

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

4. Owner of Property

name Jerry L. Raff, Esquire

street & number 1700 Walnut Street - Room 801

city, town Philadelphia N/A vicinity of state Pennsylvania

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Registrar of Deeds

street & number Delaware County Courthouse

city, town Media state Pennsylvania

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Delaware City Hist. Resources Survey has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date June, 1983  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Delaware County Planning Department

city, town Media state Pennsylvania

## 7. Description

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

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Decorated throughout in the Spanish Revival style, the Lansdowne Theatre contains a large 1400-seat auditorium behind street level shops and second floor offices. Primary building materials include brick bearing walls with a steel frame structure. Steel trusses bearing on columns indicated by the projecting brick piers provide a clear span the full theater width. At the street facade, stucco, stone, cast stone and terra cotta comprise the facing materials. Four fully glazed storefronts are recessed within the structural bays. At the second floor are grouped double-hung 1/1 metal sash windows underlined by a continuous stone sill course. Between the windows, engaged decorative columns visually support a highly ornamental terra cotta frieze. Red asphaltic roofing shingles cap the facade.

The building layout provides a large central theater entrance within the symmetrical facade. Slightly projecting corner towers anchor the overall horizontal composition. Accent quoining and ornate terra cotta window surrounds with wrought iron railings further differentiate the pyramidal-roofed towers.

The theater is entered through a procession of increasingly larger spaces. Behind the free-standing ticket booth, a sloped terrazzo floor leads to an enclosed vestibule. Original metal and frosted glass chandeliers, wood sign boards and leaded glass transom grilles remain intact. Within the vestibule, four sets of double doors provide an air-lock and traffic control. Additional signboards for movie "stills" and "coming attractions" decorate the two vestibule side walls. The larger foyer beyond features a vaulted ceiling painted "midnight blue" and studded with gold stars. Two free-standing columns support the archways defining the entrance to the grand lobby. A hip-sloped painted beam ceiling, arched tile fountains and piers with ornamental wrought iron all contribute to the ambience of a Spanish patio. Bathrooms at each end of the lounge are entered through plaster bracketed walkways.

The auditorium itself features plasterwork simulating stone, tile and carved wood to create highly ornamental surrounds at all openings. Wall fabrics in stages of disrepair provide decorative acoustical control. The vaulted ceiling has hand-painted Spanish motifs incorporated into intersecting vaults at corners and end walls, all designed to increase a sense of buoyancy. A 270-lamp chandelier suspended from a gold-painted plaster grille forms the center of the ceiling artwork. Concrete flooring is sloped down to the orchestra pit. Within the original seating layout, many chair sides remain, although replacement and damaged upholstery predominates. At the stage, a 50-foot wide opening is framed with simulated stone quoining. The backstage houses a truss frame for the 22-foot by 44-foot wide screen. Wings lead up to the organ chambers, visible from the auditorium as ornamental curtained balconies. A below-stage basement housing mechanical equipment is accessible via the orchestra pit.

The mixed-use facility suffers from severe deterioration of many interior finishes, due to generally insufficient maintenance, water penetration and some structural settlement. Within the auditorium, the wall-ceiling intersection along most of the south wall and approximately one-half of the north wall shows severe plaster damage. Water damage extends to several ornamental surrounds as well. Alterations have been limited to replacement of the facade marquee, renovations of shops and offices, and minor surface changes within the theater itself.

## 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/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1927 **Builder/Architect** William H. Lee

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

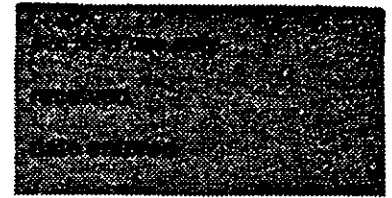
The Lansdowne Theater exemplifies architectural and historical significance under criterion C of the National Register program. Prominently located in the center of the Lansdowne business district, the theater's construction illustrates the preeminent periods of both Lansdowne in particular and suburban theaters in general. In the suburban Philadelphia region, of the nearly 50 theaters built in the 1920's and 1930's, the Lansdowne survives as one of the most architecturally intact. Designed by William H. Lee, the architect of over 200 theaters throughout the eastern United States, the Lansdowne portrays an exotic fantasy of early Spanish intrigue.

Opened in June, 1927 to a dedication ceremony presided over by John J. McGuirk, president of the Stanley Company of America (the predecessor of Warner Brothers), the Lansdowne was acclaimed as "the best example of suburban theatre construction around Philadelphia".<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the silent movies versus "talkies" controversy, the Lansdowne clearly sided with those calling the new talking movie "...merely a novelty to be used sparingly."<sup>2</sup>

Great fanfare surrounded the unveiling of the Lansdowne's "modern orchestra pit in which will be situated the console of the new \$50,000 Kimball organ".<sup>3</sup> Symmetrical organ chambers with fluted corinthian columns, a wrought iron rail and decorative plasterwork flank the stage. Three months after the opening of the Lansdowne "The Exhibitor" proclaimed "It is absurd to talk of supplanting in public favor the magnificent orchestras and really fine organs in the average first-class theatre with the cold, rasping noisytone inventions".<sup>4</sup> Exactly one year later, the same editor wondered publicly whether the talkies were "...destined to revolutionize the present type of screen entertainment."<sup>5</sup> The Lansdowne Theatre's 3 manual/8 rank organ was to be the last installed in a suburban Philadelphia Theater. After a "dedication by one of the best known organists of the time, Leonard 'Melody Mac' MacLean in 1927"<sup>6</sup>, the organ was played daily, complementing silent and later, talking movies for a decade. For 25 years it sat silent until a 1962 restoration enabled it to become "the only theater organ that still is played everyday in the state of Pennsylvania".<sup>7</sup> James Paulin, Jr., the first black organist for New York's Radio City Music Hall provided the last publicized concert program on November 18, 1975, before the organ was removed by a private collector.

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Continuation sheet Lansdowne Theater

Item number 8

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As one of the few remaining intact theaters designed by prolific theater architect, William H. Lee, the Lansdowne represents the last vestiges of the symbolic American Picture Palace. An era replete with foreign exoticism, movie-star gazing and escapism to the Hollywood fantasy can be readily seen in the surviving architecture. The prominence of American mass culture was represented in small-town theaters, striving to compete with the extravagance of downtown Movie Palaces. In the Lansdowne, Lee imported the "Hollywood Moorish" style. Spanish motifs abound to create a stage set of the building itself. Lee's extensive travels through Europe provided him with exotic references to draw from at a time when American Theatre design was thriving with foreign intrigue. The well publicized archaeology at King Tutankhamen's Tomb in 1922 spurred a fascination with revival styles. Lee's "State Theater" in Allentown and his "Embassy" in Jenkintown followed similar Spanish motifs. The Frankford "Forum" shares with the Lansdowne a foyer colonnaded on two sides with fountains at each end, although its overall style owes more to the "Modern French" that was to influence his larger theaters. From his auspicious beginning as the "Rehabilitation Architect" for the c.1808 Walnut Street Theatre to major commissions at Temple University and smaller local colleges, Lee's career spanned fifty-eight years and over 200 theaters.

The Stanley Company of America, affiliated with Warner Brothers as a major builder of national theaters, brought William H. Lee to a site in Lansdowne that was to become the heart of the small business district. Built on the site of the demolished c.1891 Queen Anne style mansion known as "Blanchpierre", the theater was accessible from the Baltimore Avenue trolley, opened in c.1900. With its storefront shops and second floor offices, the theater building has served as a continuously active center of commerce. More than merely a theater, the Lansdowne is a significant artifact of American culture.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

see attached

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 66 .06 acres

Quadrangle name Lansdowne

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A 

1	8	4	7	6	7	3	0	4	4	2	0	8	0	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

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Zone		Easting				Northing								

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Verbal boundary description and justification

see attached

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

state N/A code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Steven Wiesenthal/Historical Architect

organization Reshetar Architects, Inc. date September 16, 1986

street & number 27 N. 3rd Street telephone (215) 592-9222

city or town Philadelphia 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 Dr. Larry E. Tise, State Historic Preservation Officer date

For NPS use only

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

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration



Philadelphia  
Country Club  
Martyrs Ch  
Athletic Field  
St. Elizabeths  
St. Josephs  
St. Ann  
St. Marys  
St. Francis  
St. Peter  
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St. Andrew  
St. Nicholas  
St. Raphael

Ardmore  
Cemetery  
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