

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM

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1. Name of Property

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historic name: Saenger Theater

other name/site number: JE0550

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2. Location

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street & number: SE Corner of W. Second Ave. & Pine St.

not for publication: N/A

city/town: Pine Bluff

vicinity: N/A

state: AR

county: Jefferson

code: AR 069

zip code: 71611

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3. Classification

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Ownership of Property: Private

Category of Property: Building

Number of Resources within Property:

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>      </u>	buildings
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>	sites
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>	structures
<u>      </u>	<u>      </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: N/A

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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**4. State/Federal Agency Certification**  
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As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. \_\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

Cathryn A. Slate \_\_\_\_\_ 2-8-95  
Signature of certifying official Date

Arkansas Historic Preservation Program  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria. \_\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

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**5. National Park Service Certification**  
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I, hereby certify that this property is:

- \_\_\_\_\_ entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.
- \_\_\_\_\_ determined eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_  
National Register \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.
- \_\_\_\_\_ determined not eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_  
National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper Date  
of Action

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**6. Function or Use**  
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Historic: Recreation and Culture Sub: Theater  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Current : Work in Progress Sub: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**7. Description**  
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Architectural Classification:

Classical Revival  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Other Description: N/A

Materials: foundation Concrete roof Ceramic Tile  
walls Brick other Limestone

Describe present and historic physical appearance. X See continuation sheet.

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**8. Statement of Significance**  
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Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: local.

Applicable National Register Criteria: C

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): N/A

Areas of Significance: Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period(s) of Significance: 1924 - 1937

Significant Dates: 1924, 1929, 1937

Significant Person(s): N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Weil, Emile  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.  
X See continuation sheet.

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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See continuation sheet.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: Heckatoo Heritage Foundation

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**10. Geographical Data**

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Acreage of Property: Less than one

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing    Zone Easting Northing

A	<u>15</u>	<u>591740</u>	<u>3787700</u>	B	___	___	___
C	___	___	___	D	___	___	___

Verbal Boundary Description: \_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

The west 72 feet of Lot 1, Block 34, Old Town Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Boundary Justification: \_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

This boundary includes all of the property historically associated with this resource that retains its integrity.

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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Name/Title: Patrick Zollner, Architectural Historian

Organization: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program Date: February 7, 1995

Street & Number: 323 Center, 1600 Tower Bldg. Telephone: (501) 324-9880

City or Town: Little Rock State: AR ZIP: 72201

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**Summary**

Located on the southeast corner of West Second Avenue and Pine Street in Pine Bluff, the Saenger Theater is a 67 feet by 148 feet movie theater that is approximately four stories in height. Designed by Emile Weil and completed in 1924, the theater features a front facade styled in a Classical/Colonial Revival motif and a highly ornate interior that has been described as of the Florentine style. The interior was redecorated in 1937 and has been reseeded to some degree five times since 1924. The Saenger Theater was used until 1975 and is currently unoccupied except for special occasions. It is now owned by the Heckatoo Heritage Foundation which is trying to restore the theater. There are no outbuildings associated with this resource.

**Elaboration**

Located on the southeast corner of West Second Avenue and Pine Street in Pine Bluff, the Saenger Theater is a 67 feet by 148 feet, brick-constructed movie theater that is approximately four stories in height with a taller fly tower at the rear of the building. The structure rests upon a continuous poured concrete foundation and is covered by a flat-decked hipped roof with the sloped portion covered by red clay or ceramic tiles. The front, or northern, elevation contains one central eyebrow dormer that serves as a louvered vent, while the side elevations have three of these dormers.

The Saenger Theater was designed by Emile Weil of New Orleans who was the company's regular architect. The Little Rock firm of Stewart and McGehee submitted the low bid of \$162,000, which did not include electrical work, seating, stage equipment, painting, and decorating. Total cost of completing the structure was estimated at \$180,000. When completed in 1924, the theater could seat 1532 people including four boxes seating 32 patrons.

The front, or northern, elevation is the only styled elevation and reflects the use of Classical Revival components. The first story, however, is indicative of the 1929 Art Deco-style revisions and consists of a central ticket office flanked by triple-leaf, half-moon glazed doors. The doors immediately adjacent to the ticket office, which is currently boarded over, have the half-moon facing the office, while the outer pairs have the half moons oriented toward each other. To the west is a brick wall with a large window opening that is now filled in with wood. Almost all of the wall to the east of the entrance consists of a full-length opening from floor to ceiling that is covered by a wood partition with a single-leaf door. The first story is protected by a flat metal canopy that is supported by eight iron rods.

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Above the entrance, the facade is dominated by three arched window bays, each containing double-leaf, twelve-pane French doors capped with a six-pane transom. A turned balustrade of stone or cast concrete extends across the base of the window bays. The semi-circular arches are outlined in brick and feature stone or cast concrete plinths and keystones. The inside of the arch is lined with another row of bricks and contains a brick-outlined circle in the center set in gray stucco. Within the circle, a musical instrument design is painted in white, while a winged angel depiction is painted within the arch on each side of the circle.

The facade to either side of the three windows is identically arranged and consists of a narrow four-over-four, double-hung window adjacent to the window bay and an exterior niche between the two brick pilaster shafts. The stone or cast concrete niche is outlined with brick and features a decorative urn. The niche is capped by a semicircular arch similar to those on the center windows. The next level above is defined by a cast concrete gargoyle head with a crown. The mouth is open as if in a mocking laugh, and garlands are draped at each side of the head. This level also contains a double-hinged, eight-pane casement window above each exterior niche. The fourth level reveals three double-hinged, eight-pane windows in the center of the facade and the four modified Corinthian pilaster capitals with a stylized "S" relief. Between the pilasters on each end is a marble disc tondo that reflects an enclosed relief portrait of a "classic" head.

A full-length simple entablature course of stone or cast concrete separates the final level, which is fenestrated by nine short double-hinged, six-pane casement windows. Eight stone/cast concrete diamond-shaped inserts divide the windows (individually, except for the outer two windows on each end). A more elaborate entablature with a dentil course effectively crowns this facade.

The west elevation consists of the original "colored" ticket window near the north end. The ticket window was closed and sealed in the 1960's but still features the ornate metal canopy roof that is suspended from two iron rods. Otherwise, the first story of this elevation contains three double-leaf exit doors and one loading door near the south end. Three additional sets of double-leaf doors are located at different levels of the exterior metal staircase, which remains minus the ground access section. The rear, or southern, elevation is not fenestrated, and the eastern elevation is largely obscured by the adjacent building. A matching exterior staircase and a few casement windows are visible on this elevation from the northeast corner of the theater, however, the theater and the adjacent structure share a party wall at the rear of the buildings.

Alterations to the exterior have been confined to the first-story and the marquee. Originally, French doors were located in the center of the facade and the ticket office was positioned to the west. In April, 1929, the front doors were removed and a ticket office was placed in the front center of the lobby, and the current Art Deco doors were installed on either side. Later, the

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former ticket office was remodeled into a concessions stand, and the brickwork may have been covered with ceramic tile at this time (now removed).

There have been only two known marquees on the theater. A 1932 photograph reveals a tall, upright marquee with removable letters that was placed on top of a flat canopy with the consequence of obscuring the majority of the three window bays. In 1940, Paul Jones, the manager of the Saenger Theater, announced that a new marquee would be built with an improved neon sign. This marquee remained on the theater until it was acquired by the current owners, who removed the marquee down to the original canopy.

Regarding the interior, the Saenger Theater is very similar to the 1927 Weil-designed Jefferson Theater in Beaumont, Texas. David Naylor in his *Great American Movie Theaters* described the Saenger as a "Florentine-style picture palace," and indeed the interior is highly decorative with a prodigious use of plaster ornament.

The interior was redecorated in 1937 by John Oehrlie, who may have been working for noted Arkansas decorator, Paul Heerwagen, at the time. Otherwise, the theater was reseeded about four times between 1924 and 1962. Around 1935, a row of seats in the rear of the balcony were removed to enlarge the sound equipment room and 15 seats were lost. In 1940, the lower floor seats were replaced with the "latest metal type spring cushion seats" which were placed two inches further apart, causing a further loss in seating capacity. In addition the boxes were sealed to accommodate the new air conditioning system. Another change occurred in 1962 when the Commonwealth Theater company, which leased the theater at the time, reseeded the theater and again placed the seats further apart (to the forever gratitude of tall people). As a result, the lower floor contained seats for 636 people, the dress circle, 72, the white balcony, 276, and the "colored balcony," 232, for a total of 1216 seats in the theater.

When the Commonwealth Company abandoned the Saenger Theater in 1975, the entire ground floor seating was removed. In the past year, the Heckatoo Heritage Foundation, which acquired the building in 1985, has replaced the seating with chairs taken from a North Little Rock theater. It must be noted, however, that a few of the original ornate cast-iron seats with a "S" centerpiece remain.

There are no outbuildings associated with the theater.

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Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 1**Summary**

The Saenger Theater in Pine Bluff is being nominated under Criterion C with local significance as the best example of a motion picture palace of its era in Pine Bluff.

**Elaboration**

The southeast corner of West Second Avenue and Pine Street has been the focal point of entertainment in Pine Bluff since 1912 when O.C. Hauber converted an old store building on the site into a movie theater, which he dubbed, naturally, "Hauber Theater." In May, 1920, Hauber sold the theater to the Bohlinger Amusement Company of New Orleans for \$40,000. The Bohlinger Company in turn sold the theater two months later to the Saenger Amusement Company also of New Orleans. This company, a subsidiary of Paramount, also owned the Best and Orpheo Theaters in Pine Bluff. The theater was later renamed "Saenger," and in October, 1922, the company announced plans to remodel the theater to accommodate stage performances in addition to movies at a cost of \$30,000. Unfortunately, the theater burned in November 1922 when a plumber left a lighted candle next to a leaky gas meter that he was testing.

In response to this development, the Saenger Company asked assistance from the wealthy Simmons estate and several business firms in Pine Bluff to build a modern theater that could provide the city with "high-class road attractions." Pine Bluff had not really had a facility equipped to accommodate live performances by the many traveling theatrical troupes since the Elk Theater burned in 1915. After a few months of negotiations, Saenger firm signed an agreement with the Simmons estate, and the Pine Bluff Chamber of Commerce agreed to sell 1,000 tickets at \$10 each for the opening performance. The architect's plans were published in the *Pine Bluff Commercial* on June 7, 1923.

At the time of construction, the new Saenger Theater was situated in the heart of the Pine Bluff business district. All six banks of the city were within one block, and the Citizens Bank Building (now known as the National Building) across the street to the west was the tallest structure in the city. Other 1920's downtown business in the vicinity of the Saenger Theater included department stores, dry goods shops, cotton buyers, wholesale grocery firms, produce dealers, drug stores, automobile dealers, mortuaries, jewelers, a candy shop, a shoe repair shop, real estate offices, a tobacco wholesaler, two newspaper plants, an ice plant, furniture stores, a plumbing shop, and a black barber shop catering to the white trade. The upper floors of many of these establishments provided offices for doctors, dentists, and lawyers. Public transportation to the theater from all neighborhoods of the city was provided by the West Second Street electric streetcar line.



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The mid-1920's were the pinnacle for the quintessentially American architectural genre, the motion picture palace. These structures were usually designed to imitate the palaces of the Old World; however, the nature of the film business added complexities never encountered before by architects. The Saenger Theater in Pine Bluff is a good example of the Saenger Amusement Company's high style theaters which were constructed throughout the country. It was designed by the architect, Emile Weil, who was the Saenger Amusement Company's regular architect. Weil was responsible for, among others, the Saenger Theater in Pensacola, Florida, the Saenger (Perot) Theater in Texarkana, Texas, and the flagship of the chain, the Saenger Theater on Canal Street in New Orleans.

Weil designed the Texarkana and Pine Bluff theaters in the same year, and both are designed in the Classical/Colonial Revival vein. Consequently, the two theaters share many exterior features including a clay tile hipped roof with eyebrow dormers, a projecting cornice with dentil course, and the use of pilasters. The Perot Theater, however, is substantially wider and differs by having six decorative Corinthian pilasters and three elaborate broken-pediment window groupings. In comparison, the Saenger Theater exhibits a more restrained exterior, but one that is still far more exuberant than the conventional commercial buildings that were constructed in Arkansas in the 1920's. The Saenger Theater is unquestionably the best example of a historic movie theater in Pine Bluff and, for its size, scale, and appointments, is rivalled in Arkansas by only the Rialto Theater in El Dorado (NR 8/21/86) and perhaps the Kempner Theater in Little Rock. As such, the Saenger Theater in Pine Bluff is being nominated under Criterion C with local significance.

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### Bibliography

Information submitted by James Leslie, June 1994.

Leslie, James W. "Entertainment Center Soon May Pass From Scene." *Pine Bluff Commercial*.  
April 30, 1975.

Naylor, David. *Great American Movie Theaters*. Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press,  
National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1987.

Saenger Theater  
Pine Bluff, Jefferson Co., Arkansas

UTM: 15/591740/3787700

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