

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium

other names/site number Robinson Center, PU4546

2. Location

street & number 414 W. Markham

not for publication

city or town Little Rock

vicinity

state Arkansas

code AR

county Pulaski

code 119

zip code 72201

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this 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 for in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant

nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Colleen Malochus

12/11/06

Signature of certifying official/Title

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 for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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 the Keeper

Date of Action

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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- 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 the Keeper

Date of Action

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- Ownership options: private, public-local, public-State, public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- Category options: building(s), district, site, structure, object

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in count.)

Table with columns: Contributing, Noncontributing, buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total. Values: 1, 1

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

An Ambition to Be Preferred: New Deal Recovery Efforts and Architecture in Arkansas, 1933-1943

Number of Contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Art Deco

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE, walls BRICK, roof OTHER

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Name of Property

County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- Criteria A, B, C, D with checkboxes and descriptions.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- Criteria A through G with checkboxes and descriptions.

Levels of Significance (local, state, national)

state

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

SOCIAL HISTORY

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1939-1957

Significant Dates

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked)

Cultural Affiliation (Complete if Criterion D is marked)

Architect/Builder

Stern, Wittenberg & Delony

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Documentation checkboxes: preliminary determination, previously listed, landmark, survey, engineering.

Primary location of additional data:

- Location checkboxes: State Historic Preservation Office, Other State Agency, Federal Agency, Local Government, University, Other.

Name of repository:

Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial
Auditorium
Name of Property

Pulaski County, Arkansas
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Age of Property less than one

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 15 566416 3845274
Zone Easting Northing
2 _____

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing
4 _____

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Joanna Hall, National Register Historian
organization Arkansas Historic Preservation Program date 08/04/06
street & number 1500 Tower Building 323 Center Street telephone (501) 324-9789
city or town Little Rock state AR zip code 72201

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location
- A Sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Little Rock
street & number 400 W Markham Street telephone _____
city or town Little Rock state AR zip code 72201

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listing. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20303.



National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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SUMMARY

The Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium, designed in 1939 by Eugene Stern and the Wittenberg & Delony firm, is located at the northeast corner of West Markham and Broadway streets in downtown Little Rock, Arkansas. The main entrance of the building faces south on West Markham Street, while the north, or rear elevation fronts the Arkansas River. The auditorium is composed of brick walls, supported by a continuous concrete foundation and covered in a tar or built up, gable roof. The building varies a little from its rectangular form in the projection of the three quarter portico at the south façade and in the addition on the east elevation. In 1973, this addition was constructed when the auditorium was converted from a civic center to a convention center, with an adjoining hotel. The largest auditorium in the state, the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium is an excellent example of the Art Deco style for Little Rock and Arkansas.

LABORATION

Located in the Old Statehouse plaza, the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium is down the street from the Old Statehouse. In the same plaza stand the Little Rock City Hall, the Pulaski County Courthouse, and the Capitol Hotel. In addition, the Riverfront Park runs to the north of the plaza, inviting tourists to enjoy the view of the Arkansas River. Due to its central location and easy access to downtown Little Rock, the auditorium is a major attraction and landmark for the city of Little Rock. The original building continues to house the auditorium, while the addition houses the new convention center.

The auditorium is composed of common bond, buff brick walls and rests upon a continuous concrete foundation. It has stationary aluminum framed, recessed windows that replace the original windows. The classical influence of the building is represented in the three-quarter portico at the main entrance on the south elevation. In addition, brick patterns of concentric squares on the north façade and recessed features with Greek masks on the west façade, enhance the building's stylistic rendition of the classical design; while the auditorium's tar/built up roof, recessed windows and doors with aluminum frames, terrazzo flooring, and massive form distinguish its modern features that characterize the Art Deco style.

Front/South Elevation

The front elevation faces south onto West Markham Street and is separated into three sections from the ground level to the roof. At the ground level, the foundation of the auditorium is composed of concrete block, and is decorated with a dentil molding, a few inches from the top of the foundation. The middle section of the foundation is fronted by the staircase, which leads up to building from West Markham Street. The first flight of stairs extends in length to both ends of the auditorium, while the second flight of stairs is much shorter and is slanted towards the entrance of the building. Parallel to the slant in the staircase stand two metal hand rails which run from the top of the second flight to the bottom of that same flight. The hand rails are flanked by a group of four concrete steps. The landing below and above the second flight of stairs is covered in a red rubber platform.

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The second section of the building, the exterior wall of the lobby, is set back from the foundation. The façade is constructed of common bond, buff brick. A stone belt-course is located three quarters of the way up the wall. A few feet above the course, there is a notched cornice. The middle section of the south façade is interrupted by the main entrance of the building.

Drawing attention to the entrance, a stone portico, that covers three-quarters of the façade, projects from the façade. Flanked by the staircase, the portico is supported by six fluted, Doric columns. The rectangular entablature above the columns bears the inscription of the auditorium's name, "JOSEPH TAYLOR ROBINSON MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM." The portico's cornice is decorated with a modillion. The portico is covered in a flat parapet roof. Filling in the vertical space on the wall behind the columns of the portico, are three central aluminum frame glass doors flanked by a stationary glass window on each side. These recessed openings are set back from the stone, which interrupts the brick composition of the south side. A horizontal stone band separates these openings from a series of five stationary glass windows, capped with a dentil cornice, beneath the portico ceiling.

The third section of the façade, the auditorium roof, is gabled with a parapet that projects over the top of the portico. Similar to the rest of the building, the roof is made of tar/built-up.

Side/West Elevation

The west façade, which faces the Broadway Bridge in downtown Little Rock, is fronted by a circular parking lot, used for unloading. The elevation is divided into three sections from the ground floor to the roof. The foundation at this side, currently houses the galleries of the Robinson Center. Although it is composed of concrete, the foundation is interrupted by several openings. A few feet past the northwest corner, begins a series of aluminum-frame, recessed doors, which serve as a side entrance to the gallery. Covering these doors, a concrete skirt extends past the foundation. The skirt stops several feet from the southwest corner of the building. Beneath this end of the skirt, sits a standard stationary window capped with a glass block transom. At the southwest corner of the building, the foundation is interrupted by three stationary standard windows. Above the windows, the foundation bears the inscription the "ROBINSON CENTER." A dentil molding runs continuously along the top of the foundation.

The current foundation differs some from its original appearance. In 1939 the side entrances were defined by separate awnings over each door. The current skirt was constructed sometime after the auditorium's completion. In addition, the inscription on the southwest corner read "LITTLE ROCK CONVENTION CENTER" prior to an architectural survey completed in 1992.¹

¹ Joseph Taylor Robinson Auditorium Survey form found in the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

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The second portion of the west façade, the exterior wall of the auditorium, is set back from the foundation. Similar to the rest of the building, the wall is made of common bond, buff brick, with a notched cornice below the roof. At the northwest corner, a brick wing entrance projects a few feet past the wall, and wraps around to the north elevation. This wing serves as a power and utility unit for the auditorium, which was built circa 1956 according to the article, "The Joseph T. Robinson Auditorium Roomy Center of Music Drama and Wrestling Matches" printed in the *Arkansas Democrat Magazine* on June 17, 1956.² The northwest section of the elevation towers over the rest of the façade, and is decorated with three stone belt-courses: the bottom course runs across the entire west elevation; whereas, the top two run across the northwest tower.

In addition to the stone courses, the major features of this elevation are two recessed false doors. These features are spaced evenly and located centrally on the west facade. Each of these is framed with a brick cornice and modillion molding. The top of each feature is decorated by sculpted, tragic Greek thespian masks. This sculpture is set inside the false doors, on a square stone frame. Two stone string-courses extend from the sculpture to the frame on each side to enhance the design.

There are several openings in this section. There are two small stationary windows at the northwest corner of the building. Three sets of aluminum double doors are centered on the façade above the foundation and interspersed among the false doors. The door, between the recessed features, is covered by a brick frame that projects past the façade. A set of stairs leads from this door down to the skirt over the foundation.

The third portion of the building has two roof lines as the northwest corner of the building stands taller than the rest of the building. The roof on the taller section is flat with a parapet, while the shorter portion has a gabled roof.

Rear/North Elevation

The north façade of the building faces the Arkansas River. In keeping with the rest of the building, the elevation is divided into three sections from the ground level to the top. Similar to the west façade, the concrete foundation is interrupted by doors used at the entry level for loading.

The second portion of the building, the exterior wall of the auditorium, is made of common bond, buff brick. The wall is set back from the foundation and decorated with stone belt-courses: four horizontal courses divide the façade into five sections; five smaller stone string courses, evenly spaced, run vertically between the foundation and the bottom course.

² Wayne Cranford, "The Joseph T. Robinson Auditorium Roomy Center of Music Drama and Wrestling Matches," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Democrat Magazine*, June 17, 1956 article found in the files of the Richard C. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies Little Rock, AR.

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The north façade is characterized by a series of concentric squares, in rows of five by five centered between the bottom and second courses of the building. The second belt-course, above the squares, is interrupted by five series of three bricks which are centered above each concentric square design. These bricks imitate a window sill for the five false windows that sit above the course. Similar to the west façade, these features are recessed with a brick frame and intricate molding.

The elevation is obscured by the wall of the utility wing on the northwest corner. In addition, there is a road bridge, which obscures the view of the façade from the river. The bridge extends past the north elevation and starts at the west exit off the Broadway Bridge and ends at the hotel entrance to the east addition of the building. This bridge is supported by four metal piers and a metal railing.

The third portion of this building is a tar/built-up roof, flat with a parapet that supersedes the other facades in height.

Side/East Elevation

This façade has experienced the most change to its appearance. In, 1973, the Convention center was built adjacent to this façade. The original wall of the auditorium is composed of common bond, buff brick resting upon a continuous, concrete block foundation. Similar to the other facades of the building, the wall is designed with a stone belt-course. Above the course, runs a notched cornice, which sits beneath the tar/built-up, gabled roof.

The east façade connects to the new convention center and adjoining hotel. Constructed out of concrete block, the convention center covers 75 percent of the façade, leaving some of the original building exposed. From the south east corner on West Markham Street, a distinction between the old and new building is clearly identified by the contrasting color, material, and design. The irregular-shaped plan of the convention center defines a clear change from the original plan of the auditorium. This addition is set further back from the southwest corner, so that it does not interfere with the view of the entrance on the south façade.

INTEGRITY

Although the renovation in 1973 altered the building's original appearance, with the replacement of windows and the addition on the east façade, the overall integrity of the auditorium is good. The current windows, which replaced the originals, still maintain the size of the original openings.

The addition of the convention center on the east side does not obstruct the sidewalk view of the original façade. Furthermore, the irregular plan and different materials of the addition mark a change. The view from West Markham Street permits the distinction of the addition and an understanding of the original form and appearance of the auditorium.



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SUMMARY

The Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium is being nominated to the National Register of Historic places with **statewide significance** under **Criterion A** for its significance as one of the few federally-funded Public Works Administration projects in Little Rock and in Arkansas, and for its associations with the entertainment and recreation of the city and state. Funded by the Public Works Administration as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal Campaign, the project inspired a sense of civic duty and pride among citizens who faced the hardships of the Depression. The Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium is also being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion C** as an excellent example of the Art Deco style with ornate details of classical design. The Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium is also being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under "An Ambition to Be Preferred: New Deal Recovery Efforts and Architecture in Arkansas 1933-1943."

LABORATION

New Deal Recovery Efforts 1933-1937

"We have labored diligently and earnestly with the single purpose of advancing the public welfare...It is my belief that when history writes its review of the legislation of this Congress it will be made clear that the laws enacted at this sessions were for the greatest good to the greatest number," proclaimed the US Senator from Arkansas, Joseph Taylor Robinson in a speech "What Congress Has Done" in defense of the New Deal.³ Senator Robinson, for whom the auditorium was named, made an excellent argument that despite the program's criticism, no one can deny the New Deal its good-will intention and purpose to advance the nation towards recovery. This progressive mindset behind the planning of the New Deal began to spread to cities and smaller communities as demonstrated in the civic improvement projects such as the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium in Little Rock, Arkansas.

After the stock market crash of 1929, the economic situation for Little Rock, Arkansas, was grim. The prospect of immediate recovery diminished as federal and charitable funds were exhausted. Under the Emergency Relief Act of 1933-1934, Arkansas received 2 % of the 5 million dollar emergency relief fund, set aside by Congress for the states.⁴ In addition the city was hit hard by unemployment. Furthermore, the growth rate for Little Rock was at 7.8%, the slowest rate since Reconstruction.⁵ However the citizens of Little Rock continued to work towards the recovery of the hardships brought on by the Depression, and as a result they not only restored the city of Little Rock, but also improved it to a better condition than it was in before.

³ Joseph Taylor Robinson, "What Congress Has Done," Public Speech, nationally broadcasted over the Washington Star, August 22, 1935, found in the files of the Joseph Taylor Robinson speeches 1933-1937 in the Special Collections at the University of Arkansas Library, Fayetteville, AR.

⁴ Progress Report of the Arkansas State Planning Board November 1936 in the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

⁵ F. Hampton Roy et al, *How We Lived: Little Rock As An American City*, (Little Rock, AR: August House, 1984), 205.



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Despite minimal funding for the state, Little Rock gained some attention from the federal government. Leading the rest of the state in federal funding, Pulaski County received \$400,000 a month for direct relief.⁶ By 1932 a new post office and federal building were constructed. In that same year, the federal government selected Little Rock as one of the twelve municipalities in the country that served as the headquarters for the Home Loan Bank.⁷ Little Rock had an additional advantage in U.S. legislation, as it had a strong voice in Congress at that time. Joseph Taylor Robinson, a native of Arkansas and former governor, was the minority and later the majority Democratic Party leader in the U.S. Senate. Robinson aided the city in securing the Home Loan Bank and in transferring the title of the Little Rock airport from the War Department to the local government.⁸ Furthermore, Robinson served the country as he was influential in the founding of New Deal Legislation such as the Federal Emergency and National Industrial Recovery Acts.⁹

In 1933, under the National Industrial Recovery Act, a part of the New Deal Legislation, the Public Works Administration (PWA) was founded. The chief objective of the PWA was not to serve as an emergency relief agency, but rather the purpose was to benefit the public through civic projects. The PWA also awarded aid to private corporations and municipalities for these public improvement projects. Municipalities were entitled to a PWA grant for 30% of the cost of labor and materials for these projects. Typically the municipality would propose the project to the PWA, and after it was approved, the municipality would raise the rest of the balance through issuing bonds. If the municipality was unable to sell bonds the PWA would purchase the bond at a low interest rate.¹⁰ This provided a lot of incentive for towns to jump on the opportunity to improve their communities. These projects not only created employment for local citizens, but they also boosted spirits, giving the municipalities a reason to look ahead for the future.

Within the next five years, many federal projects were not only established to increase employment, but also designed to improve the social welfare and civic center of Little Rock. The federal government aided in the discovery of a new water source, the purchase of the Arkansas Water Company, the establishment of the first fine arts museum, and the improvements to the animal cages at the Little Rock Zoo.¹¹ Among the largest of these federal projects was the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium was constructed.

⁶ Letha Mills and H.K. Stewart, *Greater Little Rock A Contemporary Portrait*, (Chatsworth, CA: Windsor Publications, 1990), 20.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Records pertaining to economic Depression and recovery, 1933-1937 in the Joseph Taylor Robinson correspondent files in the Special Collections at the University of Arkansas Library, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

⁹ Information on Joseph Taylor Robinson's Congressional Career in the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

¹⁰ Progress Report of the Arkansas State Planning Board November 1936 found in the files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.

¹¹ Lynda Langford, "The Works Project Administration in the Pulaski County District, 1935-1943," *The Pulaski County Historical Review*, vol. 35 (1987), 4.

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Construction of the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium

In 1937, Mayor R.E. Overman informed the City Council of ten major needs for Little Rock, including the construction of a municipal auditorium. In January of that year, the citizens of Little Rock voted 3:1 in favor of constructing a new municipal auditorium.¹² The ballot also included bond issues for additions to the Public Library and the creation of a new Negro Park Center at the state park. The Public Works Administration (PWA) would provide 45% of the total cost for the construction of the auditorium, which was estimated at \$650,000. Completed in 1939, this municipal project yielded the largest auditorium in the state with air conditioning and a maximum capacity of 3,000 people.¹³

Newspaper articles in the *Arkansas Gazette* demonstrate the confidence the city bestowed upon the project. An article titled "Bond Issues approved by Voters" that appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* on January 27, 1937, one day after the ballot passed, cites Mayor Overman for being pleased that "with PWA to fall back on as a possible bidder at 4% interest on par value bonds, we [the city] should have no trouble disposing of our bonds on the open market at no more than 4%."¹⁴ Another article from the day before "Three Bond Proposals Vote today" states that "several civic organizations conducted activity campaigns to educate the public on benefits from these improvements."¹⁵ One of these campaigns, an advertisement run by the Forward Little Rock Community in the *Arkansas Gazette* on the election day, exclaims "Little Rock is at a crossroads. One road, Opportunity Highway, leads towards a more progressive future with a Modern Municipal Auditorium... The Other road is civic neglect that no good citizen should travel."¹⁶ Not only did the city have faith in the advancement of the project, but also, it is clear that they associated feelings of optimism and civic duty with the project.

Construction of the auditorium began almost one year later, as financing for the project was completed. An article that ran in the *Arkansas Democrat* on Christmas Eve titled "Mayor turns dirt to start Auditorium, Mrs. Robinson looks on a brief but historic Ceremony" reports that the city had already received \$14,000 of a \$342,000 PWA grant.¹⁷ The ceremony began with a dedication of the project to the late US Senator Joseph Taylor Robinson, who suffered from a heart attack the previous July. Mrs. Robinson and several architects attended the ceremony as the AD Brown Contracting Company began excavation.

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Bond Issues approved by Voters," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, January 27, 1937.

¹⁵ "Three Bond Proposals to a Vote today" *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, January 26, 1937.

¹⁶ Little Rock Forward Committee "Vote Yes For Little Rock's Progress," newspaper ad, *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, January 26, 1937.

¹⁷ "Mayor turns dirt to start Auditorium Mrs. Robinson looks on a brief but historic Ceremony," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Democrat*, December 24, 1937.

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According to the article "Three Bond proposals to a Vote today," even before the completion of the building, rumors of its size spread throughout town as the local citizens anticipated the building would "require an entire block."¹⁸ Nearly two years after construction began on December 27, 1937, the building was completed on December 8, 1939. The newly finished auditorium housed a music hall with a theater, stage, and balcony, arena, convention and lecture halls, and several committee rooms. An article written in the *Arkansas Gazette* on December 10, 1939, titled "Appointments of the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium Create Beauty and Majesty within the Huge New Structure" describes the modernity of the structure. According to the article, the interior "Ceilings and Walls are treated with acoustical board set in panels between the pyramid columns having a sky-scraper effect."¹⁹ Moreover, the article illustrates the attentive care given to the design of the building especially in the advanced technology of the theater:

The stage opening is 35 feet high and 50 feet wide. The stage grid iron is 74 feet above the stage floor and is equipped with 35 sets of rigging. Electrical equipment includes two border lights, footlights, operated from a remote control a selective switchboard. . . Stairs at each side of the stage lead down into dressing rooms. Five dressing hours of 76,000 cubic feet an hour. A public address system also serves both halls, making it possible to use them separately or together.²⁰

At the time of its construction, the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium was considered one of the finest buildings in Arkansas. In the Works Progress Administration writer's project's *WPA Guide to the 1930s Arkansas*, the description praises the building for its massive form. "Walls rise sheer and windowless, their blankness relieved only by patterned brickwork and recesses decorated with Greek Masks."²¹ Characteristic of the Art Deco style, the architectural details in this description emphasize the building's large size and grandeur.

Introduced in Arkansas circa 1925, the Art Deco style was most commonly used for commercial buildings and was at the height of its popularity during the construction of the auditorium. This style of the building represents the city's progressive mindset behind the project. Upon its completion, this building with its modern style, advanced technology, and massive volume became the new attraction and landmark for the city of Little Rock and the state of Arkansas.

¹⁸"Three Bond Proposals to a Vote today," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, January 26, 1937.

¹⁹"Appointments of the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium Create Beauty and Majesty within the Huge New Structure," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, December 10, 1939.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹*The WPA Guide to 1930's Arkansas*, (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 1987), 120.

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The architects selected for the project were very reputable not only in Little Rock, but also in other parts of the state as well. The Wittenberg and Delony firm established in 1918 by George Wittenberg, a native of Little Rock, AR, and his partner Lawson Delony participated in the design of the Little Rock Public High School, the Federal Building and went on to construct the Union Center at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas.²² The associate architect, Eugene Stern, a native of Budapest, Hungary, completed his studies in architecture at the Mechanical Institute at the New York Beaux Arts in Atelier, NY. He moved to Arkansas and formed the architectural firm of Mann and Stern with George R. Mann, designer of the Arkansas capitol. In 1930 he moved away from that firm to establish his own, Eugene Stern, Inc. In addition to the auditorium, he designed the Albert Pike Hotel in Little Rock, the Arlington Hotel in Hot Springs, AR, the Simmons First National Bank Building of Pine Bluff, AR, and the Union County Courthouse in El Dorado, AR.²³ In the later part of his life, he was contracted by a Mexican capitalist, Senor Arturo San Juan of Mexico City to construct a natural hot springs resort outside of Mexico City, similar to his work in Hot Springs, AR.²⁴ Much like the design of the building, the designers themselves were extremely skilled and reputable reflecting the building's importance to the city.

Despite its grandeur, the construction of the auditorium experienced several setbacks. With the physical size of the building, the project was not a small endeavor. The total cost of the project exceeded the projected cost by \$200,000 resulting in a \$855,000 investment. In addition to the cost, heating and light fixtures became a problem for the massive structure, as the contractors needed additional funding for more extensive power utilities. According to the article "Appointments of the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium Create Beauty and Majesty within the Huge New Structure," in 1939 the auditorium "need[ed] much more work" and was only "substantially complete."²⁵ Moreover at that time the building was not open to the public. An article published in the *Arkansas Gazette* titled "Auditorium to be finished Friday" stated that the city passed a resolution prohibiting public use of the building until the building was accepted by the city.²⁶ However, Mayor Satterfield cited in the article notes that Leslie Wolfe, sports promoter for the city held a public permit and could use the building for athletic events.²⁷ The building was accepted by the city from the PWA on January 24, 1940.

²² "News about People," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, March 20, 1939.

²³ "Architect of Renown dies at age 76" *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, August 5, 1961.

²⁴ "Mr. Stern Carves Another Hot Springs," *Arkansas Gazette* vol 126 no. 128 found in the files of the Richard. C Butler Center for Arkansas Studies Little Rock, Arkansas.

²⁵ "Appointments of the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium Create Beauty and Majesty within the Huge New Structure," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, December 10, 1939

²⁶ "Auditorium to be finished Friday," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, December 6, 1939.

²⁷ Ibid.

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Before the opening of the music hall, the auditorium was first publicly used to host basketball games. An article that ran in the *Arkansas Gazette* on January 4, 1940, titled "Fast Games Expected for Auditorium" contends that "Greater Little Rock basketball fans will be afforded topnotch entertainment in the five double headers to be played at Joseph T. Robinson Memorial auditorium this season."²⁸ According to the article, the public schools "have suffered financial losses in the cage sport for several years. This is attributed to the lack of a suitable place to play." The article continues "it is hoped that the games to be played at the auditorium will attract large crowds and stimulate interest in the sport."²⁹ Even after the opening of the music hall on February 16, 1940, the auditorium continued to host basketball games.

The delay in the completion of the building was no longer a consideration on the music hall's opening night, when over 4,000 visitors entered the auditorium under the classical portico supported by six columns and found their way through the front lobby furnished with terrazzo flooring and marble wainscoting. The walls were composed of Silverdale stone, where at the top glass blocks extended to the ceiling. It was considered upon its dedication "the most modern type of theater construction in the country." It was the only auditorium in the south with air conditioning. Furthermore, the visitors were sure not to miss their show, as a chime was set in the lobby to ring before the show and after the intermission. The evening's formal performance of the San Francisco Opera Ballet and presentation of the Arkansas State Symphony Orchestra represented the importance of the building's opening.³⁰

Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium, Center of Entertainment and Recreation for the city of Little Rock and the state of Arkansas 1940-1956.

Before the auditorium's construction, music performances were held in the Little Rock High School's (now Central High School) auditorium. With the luxury and size of the Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium, Little Rock could attract much larger crowds of people within and from out of the state. The bulletin from the music hall opening night commends the "citizens [for] enough foresight to plan a building to meet demands of state and regional convention."³¹ The bulletin continues that it is "the intention of the auditorium to provide the maximum in varied programs so that the auditorium will become the center of entertainment and activity in Little Rock and Arkansas."³² Designed with a multi-purpose, the auditorium not only aided in the attraction to downtown Little Rock, but it also improved the activity and entertainment of the city and the state.

²⁸ "Fast Games Expected for Auditorium," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Gazette*, January 4, 1940.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ "Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium Music Hall Grand Opening," pamphlet. February 16, 1940 found in the files of the Richard C. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies Little Rock, AR.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

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In 1940, the City Council enacted an ordinance, which authorized a non-political commission directed by auditorium manager William T. Clemmons. The commission was established to run the business of the auditorium and to make sure that the auditorium lived up to its potential for providing the most entertainment. The auditorium held over 3,000 people, while the arena below held over 8,000. Due to the advanced sound acoustics, the auditorium could sponsor two different events at one time. Upon its completion in December 1939, the auditorium served as a cultural theater, ballet stage, concert hall, basketball arena, convention bureau, and lecture hall.³³

While the auditorium attracted out-of-town visitors, it also maintained its value as a popular community center. In the 1940's the auditorium held Saturday night dances for soldiers, viewings of Technicolor films, and various competitions such as ping pong, shuffleboard, bridge, checkers, and domino tournaments.³⁴

A playbill from 1940-1956 printed in the article "The Joseph T. Robinson Auditorium Roomy Center of Music Drama and Wrestling Matches" printed in the *Arkansas Democrat Magazine* on June 17, 1956, expresses the building's booming business in the 1940s. The auditorium ran shows such as *Oklahoma* and *South Pacific* and the citizens' favorite play *Blossomtime*.³⁵ It also presented performances from big names such as Gertrude Lawrence, Louis Armstrong, Katharine Hepburn, Tallulah Bankhead, Ella Fitzgerald, Ethel Berrymore, Nat King Cole, Mae West, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Gene Autry, Duke Ellington, Bob Hope, Eleanor Roosevelt, Guy Lombardo, and Agnes Moorhead. Several of these names were listed as appearing in more than one performance.

By the 1950s the article implies that the business was slowing down. The manager at the time the article was printed, Mr. Harvill remembered when the auditorium "ran three shows in the Music Hall from 1 p.m. to midnight. Then as the performer finished on the stage, he would go down stairs to do the same act for a second crowd in the Exhibition Hall." According to Mr. Harvill, the 1950s entertainment was a different time for the auditorium as there was an audience of only eight at the last matinee. Nevertheless, the article contends that the auditorium's popular performances were not at an end:

Elvis Presley is the most meteoric attraction the auditorium has had, and the Robinson family feels like he's partly theirs. Just last summer the young idol of teen-agers wiggled his way through a half-hour stint as part of a Western show. When he returned to Little Rock last month he packed them in for two straight shows on his own. Last summer, Presley was paid \$150.00 for his appearance in Little Rock. This year, in the same building he grossed nearly 9,000.³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lynda Langford, "The Works Project Administration in the Pulaski County District, 1935-1943," *The Pulaski County Historical Review*, vol. 35 (1987), 6.

³⁵ Wayne Cranford, "The Joseph T. Robinson Auditorium Roomy Center of Music Drama and Wrestling Matches," *Little Rock (AR) Arkansas Democrat Magazine*, June 17, 1956 article found in the files of the Richard C. Butler Center for Arkansas Studies Little Rock, AR.

³⁶ Ibid.

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Thus the 1950s was still an important time for the theater and entertainment for the city. In 1966, the auditorium became home to the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra. And in 1973 the building was renovated and converted from a civic center to a convention center, and its name was changed to the Robinson Center Music Hall. As part of the renovation, a public parking deck was built below the building, and an adjoining hotel was constructed to serve larger audiences. The auditorium still serves as a theater and stage today, attracting large audiences from around the state and hosting musical artists and comedians, such as Bonnie Raitt and Jerry Seinfeld.

In addition to hosting the activity and entertainment, it also served as a memorial for Joseph Taylor Robinson, an important political figure for the city, state, and country. Robinson, who played an important part in New Deal legislation, was awarded a great honor in the dedication of the building which reads "built by the citizens of Little Rock named for a great citizen of Arkansas."

Following the initiatives taken by the government in New Deal projects, local citizen groups formed in an effort to improve downtown Little Rock. After the auditorium was completed in 1939, the Arkansas Host historical society formed to promote tourism in the city. Louise Loughborough, a member of both the Arkansas Host historical society and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, the historical organization that preserved George Washington's historic home, initiated the first historic preservation effort in the city. She proposed the restoration of Little Rock's historic residential community, commonly referred to as the Arkansas Territorial Restoration, which is now the Historic Arkansas Museum. These projects began to stir a sense of civic pride and duty, among the citizens, recapturing the spirit of downtown.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places with **statewide significance** under **Criterion A** for its significance as one of the few federally-funded Public Works Administration projects in Little Rock and in Arkansas, and for its associations with the recreation and entertainment of the city and state. The auditorium also commemorates Joseph Taylor Robinson, in whose honor the auditorium is named, as he was an important political leader to the city, state, and nation. The Joseph Taylor Robinson Auditorium is also being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion C** as an excellent example of the Art Deco style. The classical details, sheer massive form, and recessed features are unique to this municipal building, as it is one of the few remaining examples of the Art Deco style in Arkansas.

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Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial
Auditorium

Name of Property

Pulaski County, Arkansas

County and State

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National Park Service

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Verbal Boundary Description

The Joseph Taylor Robinson Memorial Auditorium occupies lot 001 on the 100 block of the property owned by the city on W Markham Street.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries include the city lot as indicated in the legal description of the property.

