

The Prince Hall Masonic Temple (1924) is a four story brick Neo-Classical building with cast concrete accents. The building is located on a major thoroughfare in what was historically the central business district for black Baton Rougeans. Although there have been alterations to both the exterior and interior over the years, the Prince Hall Masonic Temple easily retains sufficient integrity to convey its historic role as an entertainment focal point.

The temple's restrained Neo-Classical facade is distinguished by pilasters and an entablature in cast concrete defining the three bays of the second and third floor. Above this composition are pilasters and a smaller cast concrete entablature accenting the fourth floor. The principal entablature features pronounced swags while the one above is ornamented with roundels and lions' heads.

Windows vary. Those on the second and third floor of the facade feature a large one over one flanked by narrow one over ones. Facade windows on the fourth floor are multi-paned. Remaining windows on the side elevations are two over two.

The multi-use nature of the building during the historic period is reflected on the interior. The first and second floors are largely taken up with a theatre space. Offices occupy the front of the second story and most of the third floor. (During the historic period, space was leased to a variety of entities, including insurance companies and a secretarial school.) At the rear of the third floor is a large meeting room. Most of the fourth floor is taken up by a large ballroom known at the time as the Temple Roof Garden.

Interior alterations have been largely confined to the theatre and ballroom. Hallways and almost all of the offices retain their historic appearance as does the unadorned third floor meeting room.

The Temple, as it was and is known, has been renovated various times over the years. Principal alterations are as follows:

(1) The shopfront level has been modernized. Historically it consisted of a fairly wide entrance hall to the theatre with a business and stair hall on the west side and a business to the east. This spatial arrangement survives, although grillwork doors have been placed at the opening of the theatre entrance hall.

(2) The theatre has been remodeled, including the removal of the theatre seats and leveling the previously sloping floor. The overall space survives as does the stage, the acoustical tile walls and wall sconces that appear to date from the 1930s.

(3) Originally the sides of the ballroom were almost completely taken up with large windows. Plywood paneling was added to the interior which covers the windows and the pilasters between them. The windows were bricked over on the exterior. Fortunately, however, the space survives, including a mezzanine gallery with its original stairs and balustrade. Also surviving is the ballroom's handsomely decorated ceiling. Encircling the room is a partial entablature featuring egg and dart molding, bead and reel molding, and the same pronounced swags that appear on the exterior. Beams with the same decorative features span the width of the room from pilaster to pilaster. Although the pilasters have been covered, as noted before, their capitals survive.

Assessment of Integrity:

Despite the above alterations, the Temple would be easily recognizable to anyone from the historic period, including interior spaces. While the remodeling of the theatre and ballroom its unfortunate, the overall spaces survive--i.e., have not been subdivided. Also, much of their original character survives, as noted above.

Significant dates	none
Architect/Builder	Wogan and Bernard, Architects Conner, Bryant and Bell, Contractors
Criterion A	

The Prince Hall Masonic Temple is locally significant in the area of entertainment/recreation because it housed two facilities, the Temple Theatre and the Temple Roof Garden, which were

entertainment focal points for black Baton Rougeans. The period of significance spans from 1924, the date of construction, to 1944, the fifty year cutoff. The theatre and ballroom continued to play important roles into the post-World War II era.

At one time or another during the historic period there were three theatres in Baton Rouge for the city's large black population: the Grand, which according to city directories closed c.1936; McKinley Theatre, which first appears in the 1936 city directory; and the Temple Theatre, which operated from the building's construction into the post-war era. Of these, only the Temple survives. Of course, in the pre-television era movie theatres were major sources of entertainment. The Temple attracted patrons from not only Baton Rouge, but nearby Scotlandville, where Southern University, a black institution, is located. According to individuals interviewed for this nomination, there was no theatre in Scotlandville during the historic period. In addition to movies, the Temple also hosted vaudeville acts.

The Temple's legendary claim to fame in Baton Rouge's black community is the Temple Roof Garden. Stories about dances held in the ballroom are legion. Apparently its heyday as the place to go was in the late 1930s and 1940s. It was particularly popular among youth clubs for dances. Interviewees recall hiring a band when they were flush, or when times were tight, paying someone to "spin" records. However, it was the "big name" bands brought to the Temple Roof Garden by the management that fill the memories of black Baton Rougeans, who reminisce about hundreds of people dancing the night away to the sounds of such well-known bands and entertainers as Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Louie Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and the like. An ad appearing in January 1938 proclaimed the Temple Roof Garden the "finest dancing hall South." A headline in the same issue of The Baton Rouge Post read "Harlem Play Girls Swing Before a Record Crowd." "It was a gay night for all on the beautiful Temple Roof Garden," wrote the reporter. Like the theatre, the ballroom drew its patrons from Baton Rouge and nearby Southern University. According to interviewees, there were no other comparable facilities in the city available to blacks during the historic period.

Bibliography

Baton Rouge City Directories.

Baton Rouge Post, December 25, 1937, January 8, 15, and 22, 1938.

Recorded interviews with Robert Buffington, Albert Charles O'Dell, Isadore Tansil and Thelma Parnham. These individuals were of high school and college age or older during the historic period. Mr. Buffington's older brother was the manager of the building.