

## Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Palace Theatre is a two-story, rectangular, party wall, building located on the main thoroughfare of Jonesboro, the seat of Jackson Parish. A Sanborn Fire Insurance Map depicting the community in 1924 proves the theatre existed at that time. However, details of its early appearance are unknown. In 1929 the building's ownership changed, and the new owner chose to update the brick building with a stucco façade featuring a combination of Art Deco and Spanish Colonial Revival styling. (See Part 8 for more information about this renovation.) Thus, 1929 will be used as the building's date for the purposes of this nomination. Even though the theatre has experienced remodeling since that date, the important features of its 1929 appearance, and its National Register eligibility, remain intact.

The façade exhibits two Hispanic features -- a stucco covering which suggests adobe (mud brick) construction and a stepped and curvilinear parapet. The latter combines concave and convex curves with geometric angles in the manner of colonial-era Spanish missions in California and Texas. Art Deco styling is seen in the geometry expressed below the parapet at the second story level. Here, three superimposed pilasters (one on each end and one in the center) divide the façade into two bays. These pilasters provide the building with a visual energy and emphasize its verticality. The central superimposed pilaster is flanked by vertical casement windows. A large, rectangular, deeply recessed panel also occupies each bay.

The façade's first and second stories are visually divided by the theatre's surviving canopy, which is supported by cables attached to the upper level. Below the canopy, the facade is composed of end bays flanking a recessed entrance *loggia* entered via a massive segmental arched opening. The *loggia* features a cove ceiling and a polygonal, Art Deco style ticket booth. The latter is subdivided into three parts, including a large plate glass window; a corbelled and stepped roof above the window; and below the window, a skirt resembling clapboards installed vertically. A door facing the street pierces each lower bay, and a window also pierces the right-side bay.

The floor plan of the theatre remains very much intact. The above-mentioned recessed entrance leads to a small, rectangular lobby containing a concession stand at its rear. A restroom is found on the lobby's left side and, on the right, a narrow staircase rises to the second floor balcony. A second restroom can be accessed from the landing of this "L"-shaped stair. Arched doorways flank the concession stand. These openings lead to the rectangular auditorium, which culminates in a full stage.

As was typical of the time, the Palace was a racially segregated facility. Although one source indicated that white customers occupied the front portion of the balcony, its rear was reserved exclusively for black patrons. They reached the area by means of the door in the façade's left bay, which leads to an internal ticket booth and staircase. In addition to seating, the balcony contains the projection room but has neither restrooms nor a concession stand. A small office occupies the façade's lower right bay.

Although the auditorium has been altered (see below), much of its original decorative scheme remains evident. Pilasters subdivide the walls and visually connect to beams spanning the ceiling. Heavy brackets mark the points where the pilasters and beams meet. Tall molded baseboards outline the surviving wooden floor. Finally, the theatre's original first floor and balcony seats survive. Those on the first floor feature geometric Art Deco motifs.

The Palace has experienced some remodeling since 1929, but no one now living in Jonesboro can remember for sure when these changes happened. The most visible change is the sheathing of the façade's lower portion (beneath the canopy) with square green Vitrolite (Carrara glass) panels, a number of which have been lost since their application. Other alterations include:

1. The installation of a modern-looking tile floor in the recessed entrance *loggia*, the installation of

fluorescent lights on the under side of the canopy, and the replacement of all the original exterior doors. The front entrance now consists of three sets of plate glass double doors and the rear entrances contain fireproof metal doors.

2. The covering of the auditorium's plaster walls and ceiling with bagasse board, which is subdivided by strips of wood in an attempt to resemble panels. Visually intrusive air-conditioning ducts also mar the auditorium's walls.
3. The remodeling of the concession stand.

Although these changes are regrettable, they do not lessen the theatre's National Register eligibility. Because the stucco-covered portion of the façade is painted almost the same shade of green as the Vitrolite panels, the latter's impact on the building's appearance is minimal. Furthermore, the theatre's combination of Spanish Colonial Revival and Art Deco details, upon which the architectural case is based, remains visually dominant. In fact, one's eyes are immediately drawn to the building's Hispanic parapet when walking or driving down the adjoining street. There is also no doubt that former and current Jonesboro residents of the appropriate age can easily recognize the structure when they visit the community's downtown. Thus, the theatre passes the litmus test for historical significance. As an architectural landmark within Jackson Parish, and as the long-time focus of entertainment in Jonesboro, the Palace Theatre is a legitimate candidate for National Register listing.

Significant Dates: 1929-1958 Entertainment/Recreation; 1929 Architecture  
Criterion: A; C  
Architect/Builder: Unknown

**ADVANCE ID 5.00**

### **State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

Jonesboro's Palace Theatre is locally significant in the area of entertainment/recreation under Criterion A: association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. Its historical significance lies in its status, as elaborated below, as the only professional entertainment venue in Jonesboro, the seat of Jackson Parish. The theatre is also significant in the area of architecture under Criterion C: design and construction. Its architectural significance rests upon its ranking as one of the parish's very limited number of architectural landmarks.

### Background

Located in north central Louisiana, Jackson Parish was created by an act of the Louisiana Legislature on February 27, 1845 from lands formerly belonging to Ouachita, Union and Claiborne parishes. At this time, the community of Vernon was designated as the parish seat. Despite the presence of forests then seen as a barrier to farming, by 1850, 5,566 persons called the parish's rolling hill country home. Most of these people were members of the Upland South culture. Cotton and corn served as the agricultural crops of importance. Around 1900 the South Arkansas Lumber Company purchased land near a rural community called Macedonia (now Jonesboro), located in the parish's southwest corner. The company then built a sawmill and a railroad line to serve it. Today, the associated pulp and paper industries remain an important component of Jackson Parish's economy. Citizens elected Jonesboro the parish seat in 1911. It remains the only town of any size -- population 3,914 in 2000. The parish's population was 15,397 in that year.

## Criterion A: Entertainment/Recreation

The Palace Theatre is locally significant in the area of entertainment/recreation because of its importance as the entertainment focal point for the residents of Jonesboro. The period of significance for this case spans from 1929, the year the theatre was remodeled to its current appearance, to 1958 the Register's fifty-year cutoff. The Palace continued in its role as an entertainment focal point past 1958.

Historical records concerning the Palace Theatre are scarce. However, several elderly citizens of Jonesboro and Jackson Parish have shared their memories of the theatre for the purposes of this nomination. These reminiscences, and a general knowledge of small town life during the historic period, make it possible to evaluate the theatre's important role in community life. As an extremely rural area, pre-theatre Jonesboro offered no entertainment or socializing options outside the home, church, and school and its related sports events. As local resident Lee Dell Francis explains, "The movie theatre was the only enjoyment around." Newspaperman Raymond Jeffress agrees. In a recent article about the Palace, he called it "our only source of entertainment in the early 30's, aside from sports events and games that we made up ourselves." Listening to radio programs (if one was fortunate enough to own a radio) and reading the local newspaper served as the only "professional" entertainment. The chance to read other material was slim, as the parish did not obtain a public library until after the end of the historic period. With little money for amusement and car ownership far from universal, residents generally did not drive to larger towns for entertainment. In addition, Ruston, the closest town with a theatre, was seventeen miles away over what were then poor gravel roads. Under these circumstances, the presence of a movie theatre was extremely important to the Jonesboro community.

Although the date of construction of the building that houses the Palace Theatre is uncertain, the 1924 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Jonesboro shows that a "Theatorium" operated at the site in October 1924. In 1929 owner William D. Jeffress sold that theatre to a Mr. Fuller (first name unclear) of Eldorado, Arkansas. Fuller owned several theatres in his home state. The new owner decided to remodel the theatre and add 100 additional seats. The Jackson Independent touted these developments on page one of its April 4, 1929 issue. "A new front with entrances similar to modern picture houses is being built" the paper bragged. "Many other changes will be made, and conveniences added."

Fuller appointed F. A. Funderbunk as manager of the remodeled theatre, whose films were popular and well attended. According to the 83-year-old Raymond Jeffress, a life-long Jonesboro resident who attended the theatre from about age 10 until he left for college in 1941, the facility was always at least half full. Jeffress confirms that, despite travel and financial difficulties, people from "all around" as well as local residents frequented the theatre. It showed the "entire range" of movies available at that time, so viewers had as good a selection of films as did residents of larger cities. Newspaper advertisements show that as many as three different movies might be presented during one week. To bring children into the theatre, on Saturdays the management ran westerns with stars such as Hopalong Cassidy, Tom Mix, and Lash Larue as well as serials ending in cliffhangers designed to bring patrons back the next week. According to Blanche Bishop Shows, "By 10 o'clock on Saturday morning, there was a line to get into the movie. Most of us kids stayed all day because we could see those movies over and over and over. There were always two movies on Saturday, double features if you please." In addition to feature films, the Palace also showed newsreels produced by the Pathe Company. These helped to inform local residents about significant but faraway world events. Former audience member Bobby R. Britnell remembers the newsreels as "seemingly ominous [and] very loud." Although the newsreels must have been fairly up-to-date, Jonesboro sometimes had to wait as long as a year after a hit film's release for it to arrive at the Palace.

Despite the theatre's popularity, the management apparently felt it needed more business. Like other theatre operators throughout the nation, they offered incentives and promotions to lure audiences into the

building. Jonesboro resident Juanita Busbice remembers cut glass dishes given to attendees on certain nights of the week. Several senior citizens remember a 1930s-era “Cutest Baby Contest” in which pictures of the entrants were projected on the theatre’s screen. Retired local newspaper editor T. L. Colvin, Sr. remembers a special stunt that filled the facility to capacity. Said Colvin,

. . . a movie entrepreneur came to town and had printed up in our printshop a handbill inviting everyone to come to the Palace Theatre. He hired me to distribute these circulars for him, by riding on the running board of his car and at each house I was to knock on the door, hand the person who answered the door one of the handbills and then hold the door open as wide [as] possible while he took their picture with a movie camera. He evidently had a method of developing this movie film because the theatre was full the next night with people who came to see themselves on the silver screen. Except for the extreme close-ups, I appeared in most shots handing out the advertisements.

Much later, the theatre sponsored a weekly talent show in which children sang, danced, played a musical instrument, or twirled their batons for the audience, with a silver dollar as the contest’s first prize.

The talent show was possible because the Palace was a true theatre with a stage and small back stage area that could support live shows. Juanita Busbice and Faye Robinson Powell tell of participating in special end-of-year dance recitals held on the Palace’s stage. Busbice also confirms that magicians and ventriloquists trying to break into show business occasionally performed there. Editor Colvin also remembers live stage shows. In his 1993 book, *The First Hundred Years: A Recollection of Times and Events of The Jackson Independent*, he asserts that “. . . stage shows were frequently brought to the Palace Theatre.”

In the above-mentioned reminiscence, Colvin confirms that the theatre was “the main source of entertainment for the people” of Jonesboro. “Movie-going at the Palace Theatre,” adds T. J. Hurst, another senior Jonesboro resident, “was something the whole family could enjoy.” And, in addition to providing entertainment, the Palace was virtually the only place in town where people could go to socialize. Parents sat in the back, and teens dated and courted there, while children sat “up front” with their friends. Because the theatre was one of the best places to find large numbers of people, the management allowed uniformed Red Cross members to solicit money for the war effort between features during World War II.

Although entrances and seating were segregated, Jonesboro’s black community also attended the theatre and experienced some of the same entertainment and social opportunities available to white residents. Explains Herbert Simmons Jr., who grew up in Jonesboro and attended the theatre during the 1950s, “. . . attending a movie at the Palace Theatre with a group of special friends was very exciting. Truly it was a social and cultural outlet which brought African Americans together from all over the parish.”

Competitors for the Palace eventually opened. A theatre in Hodge, a nearby lumber community, was the first. Then the Fox Theatre opened in Jonesboro in the mid 1940s. No information about the Hodge theatre’s length of operation is available. While the Fox closed in 1950 or 1951 and was later partially destroyed by fire, the Palace continued in operation despite several changes of ownership. However, new and more powerful competition was on the horizon. It was the coming of television in the 1950s that began to displace theatres like the Palace and eventually curtailed its service to Jonesboro. Indeed, it was revealed in studies at the time that theatre attendance and public library use declined markedly when television became established in a given community. The theatre managed to survive the new competition until 1966 and even re-opened in the early 1970s. However, the business did not last and was closed by the midyears of that decade. It opened again in 1982 but only operated for about a year. Later, the building briefly served as a church.

The now-closed Palace provides fond memories for the current senior citizens of Jonesboro. Explains T. J. Hurst, “. . . it’s part of my history – and nearly everyone else’s, too.” And Sylvia J. Pagan adds: “This old theatre holds the memories of so many of my generations child hood [sic.]. It is where we saw the world, as never before, and where we grew to adulthood, still able to enjoy the safe environment of a local neighborhood movie theatre.” Obviously, the continued operation of the Palace Theatre between 1929 and 1958 made a significant contribution to the quality of life in Jonesboro. As the town’s sole reminder of that contribution, and of theatre attendance in general, the Palace Theatre is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

### Criterion C: Architecture

The Palace Theatre is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is a rare architectural landmark in Jackson Parish, where these can be counted on one hand.

Over the years Jackson Parish has lost many of its historic structures. In fact, the parish’s Standing Structures Survey recorded only 158 historic buildings when it was completed in the 1980s, and a number of these (especially those in rural areas) have likely disappeared since that time. With one exception (the Simms-Ellis House mentioned below) the buildings that survive clearly reflect the two important influences in the parish’s history – the Upland South Culture and the lumber industry. Both of these are known for their plain, simple and straightforward frame buildings displaying little or no style. Double pen and central hall houses (some probably enclosed dogtrots), simple frame churches with pediment-like front gables, and barns and other outbuildings represent the Upland South Culture in the survey. Folk bungalows, pyramidal roof houses, and unstyled frame cottages represent the lumber industry.

Given Jackson Parish’s background and origins, it is not surprising that the survey found very little in the way of high-style buildings there. In fact, only six buildings, four of which are already listed on the National Register, deserve classification as landmarks. These include two Upland South churches (Brooklyn Church and Hickory Springs Methodist Episcopal Church), a Queen Anne Revival style cottage (the Wilder House) located in the Village of Chatham, and an unusual house combining the basic "I" house form with the vernacularized neo-classical tradition (Simms-Ellis House). The parish’s WPA-constructed, Art Deco style courthouse (not old enough to be included when the survey was completed and not yet listed on the Register) also deserves landmark status. With its combination of Art Deco and Spanish Colonial Revival styling reflecting the movie industry’s desire to create a fantasy world for its audience, the Palace is the final Jackson Parish building deserving of landmark status and Register listing.

### Note:

Today, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Simmons and Simmons’ son are the theatre’s owners. They plan to restore the building, possibly using the federal tax credit program to help finance the project. Eventually, they will donate the Palace to the Greater North Louisiana Community Development Corporation for use as a cultural center by residents of the Jonesboro area.

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