

Downtown Ruston's Dixie Theatre was built in 1928, but assumed its present appearance in a 1937 remodeling. It is a brick building with a stuccoed facade. Because its styling is low-key, the term "no style" is being used in the architectural classification section of this form. Since 1943, the end of the period of significance, the theatre has been modified twice. Nonetheless, it still adequately conveys its historical appearance.

Originally constructed in 1928 as the New Astor Theatre and later known as the Rialto, the building was taken over by the Dixie Theatre Corporation of New Orleans in 1937. It then assumed its present name and received a major remodeling which changed the entire character of both the exterior and interior. Indeed, all that remains visible from the 1928 period are the theatre's side and rear walls and probably a chandelier.

The configuration of the 1928 building is not known precisely, but after the 1937 remodeling it was as follows: The theatre's three story facade had a deep entrance loggia at the shopfront level with a free-standing box office. The loggia also had a small glass enclosed booth for popcorn sales on the south side. A set of entrance doors at the rear of the loggia opened into the lobby, a wide but not very deep space containing two sets of stairs leading to the second story. Beyond the lobby was the auditorium which featured a second story gallery with a curving front. The front corners of the auditorium were cut at an angle so as to emphasize the proscenium and the stage. Above the stage was a raised fly gallery, a feature which gave the building a distinctive side elevation. One of the noteworthy features of the auditorium was an oversize Empire style crystal chandelier which hung from the center of the otherwise unadorned ceiling. Although it is impossible to know for certain, this chandelier probably dated from the 1928 period.

As was typical of the time, the Dixie was a racially segregated facility. The second story gallery was exclusively for black patrons. They reached the gallery by means of a separate entrance on the south end of the building which had its own entrance hall and staircase.

The building's three story facade towered above the surrounding single story commercial buildings. The first story was comparatively low and, by all indications, never had much in the way of architectural adornment. By contrast, the taller second and third stories were articulated with a stucco treatment which included two huge segmentally arched panels set within larger panels with keystone shaped caps. There was also a large teas relief eagle with wings spread. The facade culminated in a shaped parapet with a large central rounder.

Alterations:

Since the end of the historic period (1943), the Dixie has been renovated twice (1956 and 1968). The old entrance loggia is now enclosed and the shopfront level bricked over. All of the seating has been replaced and the walls of the auditorium have been covered with acoustical cloth. The stage has been reduced in size, raised somewhat, and a plywood paneled wall has been installed across the rear of the auditorium creating a passageway. Finally, the 1937 marquee has been replaced with a somewhat larger one.

Although these changes are unfortunate, the Dixie still retains the following historic features:

- (1) its overall massing with the distinctive fly gallery;
- (2) its conspicuous facade (minus the shopfront), which still towers above the surrounding buildings;
- (3) the separate entrance hall and staircase for blacks;

- (4) the shape and overall configuration of the auditorium as well as the auditorium's bagasse board ceiling and chandelier; and
- (5) its historic lobby. This space remains completely intact, including its Modernistic stair balustrades and lighting fixtures.

Given the above, there is no doubt that someone from the historic period (1937 to 1943) would recognize the Dixie Theatre today. Thus it retains its historic integrity for National Register purposes.

Significant dates	N/A
Architect/Builder	unknown
Criterion A	

The Dixie Theatre is of local significance in the area of entertainment/recreation because of its importance as an entertainment focal point in Ruston and vicinity. The period of significance spans from 1937, when the theatre assumed its present appearance, to 1943, the Register's fifty year cutoff. The Dixie continued in its role as an entertainment focal point past the fifty year cutoff.

It was the coming of television in the 1950s that began to displace theatres like the Dixie. 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. Prior to that time, theatres were major sources of entertainment. During the historic period, the Dixie was not only an entertainment mecca for the Lincoln Parish seat of Ruston, but also drew patrons from nearby communities such as Dubach and Choudrant. (Ruston was the only town in the parish of sufficient size to have a theatre.)

The Dixie was a true theatre with a fly gallery, and thus could play host to stage shows, magic shows and other forms of live entertainment. Two other theatres operated in Ruston during the historic period, but they were smaller, less pretentious and operated on an intermittent basis. Also, they were movie houses only, with no live performances. In any case, they do not survive, leaving the Dixie as the sole reminder of theatre going and the role it played in the lives of people in the Ruston area. Older residents remember it as the place to go. An employee from the historic period recalls that the Dixie "was the main attraction for the citizens of Ruston and was well attended." The Saturday night late show was "the big event of the week." This was especially important to students of nearby Louisiana Polytechnic Institute who were only allowed off campus on weekends. There were no movies on campus at the time, and thus the Dixie provided students with important entertainment opportunities. All in all, the theatre occupied an important niche in the lives of area citizens and hence merits Register listing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ruston Daily Leader, various dates, 1928-80, excerpts in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

Written statements from various individuals regarding the Dixie, National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

1956 photo of the Dixie.

