

NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
Office of Archives and History
Department of Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Sunset Theater

Asheboro, Randolph County, RD0560, Listed 4/20/2011

Nomination by M. Ruth Little

Photographs by M. Ruth Little, December 2010



Overall view



Façade detail

**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 any 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 Sunset Theater

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 232, 234, 236 Sunset Avenue not for publication N/A

city or town Asheboro vicinity N/A

state North Carolina code NC county Randolph code 151 zip code 27204

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
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 commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<u> </u> entered in the National Register	_____	_____
<u> </u> See continuation sheet.		
<u> </u> determined eligible for the National Register	_____	_____
<u> </u> See continuation sheet.		
<u> </u> determined not eligible for the National Register	_____	_____
<u> </u> removed from the National Register	_____	_____
<u> </u> other (explain): _____	_____	_____

Sunset Theater
Name of Property

Randolph County, North Carolina
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

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

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

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Recreation and Culture Sub: Theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Recreation and Culture Sub: Theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick

roof membrane

walls brick

concrete

other wood

cast-iron

Narrative Description

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

Sunset Theater
Name of Property

Randolph County, North Carolina
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)

A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

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

A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

B removed from its original location.

C a birthplace or a grave.

D a cemetery.

E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

F a commemorative property.

G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

architecture

Period of Significance

1929-1930

Significant Dates

1930

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Holleyman, William C. Jr., architect
Benton & Benton, architects
Trodden, S. E., contractor

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)

- 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

Name of repository: _____

Sunset Theater
Name of Property

Randolph County, North Carolina
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10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property less than 1 acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing
1 17 3951760 607040
2 _____

Zone Easting Northing
3 _____
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 M. Ruth Little

organization Longleaf Historic Resources date December 2010

street & number 2312 Bedford Avenue telephone 919.412.7804

city or town Raleigh state N.C. zip code 27607

12. 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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Asheboro/ Parks and Recreation Department

street & number 146 N. Church Street P O Box 1106 telephone 336-626-1201

city or town Asheboro state NC zip code 27204

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 listings. 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 the 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 Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Section 7 Page 1

Sunset Theater

Randolph County, North Carolina

Section 7: Materials: metal (pent roof)

Description

The Sunset Theater stands at 232, 234, and 236 Sunset Avenue in the heart of Asheboro's commercial district, on the north side of Sunset Avenue just east of its intersection with North Church Street. Directly across the street is the 1930s U. S. Post Office, now occupied by the Asheboro Cultural & Recreation Services Division, and the Asheboro Municipal Building one block to the rear. One- and two-story brick commercial buildings line both sides of the 200 block of Sunset Avenue, one of the principal commercial streets in Asheboro. On the theater's west side is a lot containing a small mid-twentieth-century building that is now Hop's BBQ. A wide sidewalk runs between Sunset Avenue and the theater.

The two-story, parapet roof load-bearing brick building faces south, its 50 x 100 foot footprint covering the entire parcel. Constructed from 1929 to 1930 of concrete, brick, and tiles, the theater reflects the Spanish Colonial Revival style, with stuccoed walls and a pent roof of metal imitating Spanish tile. All of the decorative features that express its design are intact on the main façade. The façade is stuccoed in a rusticated pattern, with scattered smooth areas resembling stones. In early photographs the stucco appears to have a dark tint that brings out the random stone pattern. It is now painted a uniform cream color. At the street level, the center recessed bay contains a ticket window flanked by plate-glass and metal doors. The outer bays contain storefronts set within stuccoed pilasters with flat Spanish-style brackets, rendered in silhouette. A lobby and a large open auditorium seating 412 occupy the remainder of the street level.

Across the center of the façade is a large frieze consisting of six stuccoed relief panels containing decorative shields with spiral borders; the second from left and second from right panels have the profiled head of a conquistador, wearing a helmet, facing towards the center of the façade. Stuccoed pilasters divide the upper façade into six bays. Each pilaster is topped by flat corbelled Spanish-style stuccoed brackets. Six tall, narrow eight-pane metal casement windows with decorative stuccoed surrounds with molded lintels and center oval shields occupy the upper façade bays.

Crowning the upper façade is a pent roof supported by seven massive wooden corbelled brackets of Spanish design. Sheets of metal impressed to appear like clay tiles cover the roof. The roof has exposed rafter tails. Each bay beneath the pent contains a six-pane metal casement window.

The only significant architectural feature missing from the façade is the entrance canopy. Above the entrance, an area of disturbed plaster and a set of three decorative metal rings in the façade indicate its location. Shown in a documentary photograph from the late 1930s, the flat copper canopy had a dentil cornice punctuated by rondels and a row of light bulbs along the underside. By this time a metal marquee that held the names of films and actors and actresses had been added on top of the original canopy. It contained a sunburst bearing the name "Sunset" in neon lights on the front and smaller sunbursts on the sides. About 1950 this was replaced by a larger marquee that extended completely across the façade, concealing the decorative shield and conquistador frieze.

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Sunset Theater

Randolph County, North Carolina

The name "Sunset" in metal letters outlined by light bulbs rose from the angled sides of the marquee. Across the front and side facets was the display area for current movies. This marquee was removed about 2005 when the City of Asheboro acquired the theater.

The west elevation consists of a solid red brick wall, laid in one-to-five bond, with no openings. It contains a sign, "Hop's Bar-B-Q," spelled out in red metal lettering to advertise the adjacent restaurant. The east wall abuts a two-story brick commercial building of late 1920s vintage. The rear elevation contains four doors at street level: at the corners are double metal exit doors for the theater on either side of the stage, a metal double door accesses the stage, and a paneled single wood door opens to a wooden stair descending to a basement boiler room beneath the stage. A louvered metal vent for the HVAC system is located at the west corner of the center rear elevation. The flat roof, originally of tar-and-gravel, is covered with a recently-installed membrane.

The only exterior alterations to the theater are at the street level of the facade. The original central ticket booth and flanking recessed doors were replaced by deeply recessed metal plate-glass doors in the mid-twentieth century and by the current, less-recessed metal and glass doors about 2005. The canopy is gone, and the flanking storefronts have been remodeled in the late twentieth century. The west side storefront consists of a wood and glass door and a plate-glass display window with a brick dado below. To the right of the central window is an angled, recessed exit for the theater balcony. To the east, the storefront has a center plate-glass door flanked by plate-glass display windows. The original glass transoms above both storefronts are now concealed by plywood.

The theater interior retains all of its original rich Spanish Colonial Revival-style features that continue the design of the main façade. The central lobby is an intimate space with rusticated stucco walls. A pair of single wooden doors with six horizontal glass panes, flanked by six-pane sidelights, opens at the rear to the theater interior. Pilasters with decorative corbelled plaster capitals flank the doors. Along the east wall, running south, is a decorative stair to the mezzanine, with a cast-iron railing of ornate classical design. A door in the west rear lobby wall originally led to the adjoining barbershop, but it has been removed. A chandelier that does not appear to be original hangs from the sloped, smooth plaster ceiling.

Most of the interior space is devoted to the auditorium, which seats approximately 412 patrons. Seating is arranged in three sections--nine seats wide in the center and five seats wide along the aisles. A waist-height partition at the rear of the auditorium, in the center, deflected traffic to the two aisles. On the inside, the wall has a flat-paneled wainscot. The wall was extended to the ceiling at a later date and is covered on the lobby side with painted plywood paneling. The original seats remain in place in the balcony, accessed from the mezzanine. The cast-metal seats have upholstered wooden seats and backs. The outside panel at the end of each row has a decorative sunburst motif with original red, green, and gold paint.

The auditorium walls have a faux wainscot created by scoring the stucco to resemble stone blocks. Above this, the stucco walls have a textured swirl pattern. Two pairs of faux windows sit high on each side wall. The walls are of solid brick construction, so that the windows are merely a stage set. Each pair consists of two round-arched multi-pane windows set on a modillioned sill, with a center spiral-fluted Corinthian pilaster. Above each

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double-door exit that flanks the stage is a faux balcony consisting of three flat panels decorated with a shield and urns, flanked by pilasters and surmounted by a round-arched pediment decorated with a shield, urns, and floral motifs. A pair of plaster rondels containing reliefs of helmeted conquistadors, as on the façade, flanks each "balcony." Vents for the original air conditioning system are located in the faux windows of the faux balconies.

The ceiling area in front of the stage contains a sloped roof with exposed ceiling beams created out of plaster. The proscenium is a simple molded surround with a decorative paneled lintel with rondels in the center and at the ends. The original shallow wood-floored stage extends to the proscenium. The stage was extended, with plywood flooring, to accommodate live performances, probably in the 1950s.

The mezzanine, which occupies the upper lobby area, is illuminated by four upper façade windows. The ceiling has a sloped roof with exposed ceiling beams rendered in plaster. The decorative metal stair railing that leads to the mezzanine extends across the mezzanine wall, overlooking the lobby below. A pier with a decorative corbelled capital supports the ceiling at each end of the opening overlooking the lobby. In the east wall of the mezzanine, one round-arched door opens to the hall leading to the balcony. Two round-arched doors open to a small room that may have been the original theater office. A very small storage room is located to the left of the balcony entrance. In the west wall of the mezzanine, a round-arched opening leads to a hall to the balcony. A two-paneled wood door opens to the men's bathroom. At the end of the hall, behind the men's room is the ladies' bathroom. (Originally both of these rooms are believed to have served the ladies; the men's bathroom was originally located in the basement beneath the barbershop.)

The balcony provided seating for African American patrons. Their entrance to the theater represented an unusual arrangement of borrowed space in the commercial building on the east side, at 230 Sunset Avenue, apparently built in the late 1920s. The rear African-American door was located in the second story of this adjacent building, and accessed a narrow hall and staircase leading to a sliding metal door in the east wall of the balcony. The exterior door has been bricked up and the hall has been removed. The only physical evidence of this separate entrance for black patrons is the metal door in the balcony wall, since the corridor in the adjacent building is obliterated. It seems that the separate black entrance to the theater was an afterthought, created after completion of the theater.

The balcony contains original seating (mentioned earlier), wood floors, paneled walls separating the seating from the mezzanine entrances, and a cast-iron railing along the front edge of the balcony. A group of small windows are grouped in the rear wall leading to the projection booth, accessed by a short stair at the rear of the balcony. The small projection room is illuminated by six-pane casement windows hidden beneath the façade's pent roof. A bathroom is partitioned into one side of the room.

Two small original basements exist: one beneath the barbershop and one beneath the stage. The barbershop basement is accessed by a wood stair along the rear wall of the barbershop. The basement beneath the stage, accessed by a door in the rear elevation, consists of four small rooms and originally housed the furnace.

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The small sixteen by thirty-foot commercial spaces flanking the entrance are original. The west space was designed for the Sunset Barbershop. Beneath the shop is a basement of the same size that contains a shower, two toilets, and as a storage area. The east space was occupied for many years by the Little Castle Grill. Both spaces are finished simply with plaster walls, and in each a staircase intrudes from the theater space. The stair to the mezzanine intrudes on the east space; the stair providing a front exit from the balcony on the west space. Sections of paneled wainscot survive in the restaurant space but not in the barbershop space.

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Sunset Theater

Randolph County, North Carolina

Section 8: Statement of Significance

The ornate Spanish Colonial Revival-style Sunset Theater, which has served as the city's principal movie theater since 1930, stands little-changed at 232 to 236 Sunset Avenue in the commercial district of Asheboro. The six-bay-wide stucco façade features a wide center frieze of plaster relief panels containing shields and conquistador heads. Tall casement windows and pilasters with decorative capitals march across the upper façade, with a faux terra cotta tiled-pent roof supported by massive corbelled wood brackets at the top. The theater's design meets National Register Criterion C for its local architectural significance as a well-preserved example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style popular across the United States for cinema houses from the 1920s to the 1940s. Its original barbershop and grill, located in small commercial spaces flanking the entrance, are intact examples of another distinctive aspect of many historic theaters, the inclusion of restaurants and other service establishments within the theater building itself. While dozens of historic theaters survive in North Carolina, most display Classical Revival facades, making the Sunset Theater one of only two examples of the Spanish Colonial Revival style known to survive. The period of significance, from 1929 to 1930, covers the construction period.

Historical Background

The Sunset Theater occupies a fond place in the hearts of the many residents of Asheboro, North Carolina, who recall the glory days of the movie palace from the 1930s to the 1960s.¹ An article announcing its construction in 1929 and announcing its completion in 1930 occupied the front pages of the local newspaper, *The Courier*.² Local businessman Kirby Cox of Asheboro, North Carolina, broke ground on the Sunset Theater about June 17, 1929. Local contractor S. E. Trogdon supervised construction of the brick, concrete and tile Spanish Colonial Revival-style theater. Nine months later, on March 6, 1930, the theater had its formal opening with the premiere of the "talking" movie, "The Big Party," starring Sue Carol, Dixie Lee, Whispering Jack Smith, and Richard Keene. Later in the month the "Lone Star Ranger," billed as "Zane Grey's first all talking picture," was shown. The new theater was announced to be one of the first in the state designed especially for "talking" pictures. J. F. White, Jr., operator of Asheboro's existing Capitol Theater, obtained the lease to operate the theater before it was even constructed.³ Two different architects are given credit for the design in contemporary newspaper articles: William C. Holleyman Jr. of Greensboro, N.C., is mentioned as the architect in the June 1929 article, and Benton & Benton of Wilson, N.C., as architects in the February 1930 article. Possibly Holleyman served as supervising architect for the design drawn by Benton & Benton.

Whenever possible, local craftsman and North Carolina building supply houses were used for the new theater.

¹ The general history owes a debt to several reports prepared by two staff persons for the Asheboro and Randolph County planning departments: Justin Luck, Sunset Theater Local Landmark Designation Report, 2010; Randle E. Brim, "The History of the Sunset Theatre," 2010. Copies in nomination file.

² "Ground is Broken for New Theatre Structure In City," *The Courier*, Asheboro, N.C., June 20, 1929; "Sunset Theatre Will Open Latter Part of Next Week," *The Courier*, Feb. 27, 1930.

³ "Ground is Broken for New Theatre Structure In City."

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Sunset Theater

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Home Building, Inc. of Asheboro supplied the lumber; the Glenola brick works of Randolph County, the brick; and the Hughes Morris Hardware Company of Asheboro, the hardware, paint, and other materials.⁴ On March 6, 1930, opening day for the new theater, a full page of *The Courier* contained congratulations advertisements for the new building by over a dozen local businesses. The Bank of Randolph, in Asheboro “extends congratulations to the handsome new theater.” Acme Hosiery Mills, Inc. thanks “Mr. Cox and Mr. White for giving Asheboro a Theater in keeping with the march of progress.” Nance Chevrolet Co, Inc. tells readers to attend the new Sunset Theater and then “take a look at the remarkable values we are offering in Used Cars....”

Originally the theater had a copper canopy outlined with electric lights sheltering the entrance bay. A commercial marquee for posting movie and actor names, topped with a neon sunburst bearing the theater name, was added above this canopy in the later 1930s.⁵

Designed to seat about 500 people, the theater was equipped with steam heat and a “modern cooling system” that blew cooled air from two large vent boxes at the rear and one to the right of the stage. Deeply upholstered stadium-type seats were installed on the main floor and in the balcony. The ladies were provided with a “rest room” and a separate bathroom. The men’s lounge was located in the adjacent barber shop basement.

J. F. White Jr., president of the White Amusement Company and operator of the town’s one existing theater, the Capitol Theater, leased the new movie house from owner Kirby Cox. White promoted the new theater by organizing benefit showings, such as “The Cock-Eyed World,” a movie about two soldiers, to a local military company who attended in full uniform and formation on April 18, 1930.⁶ In 1931 MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) Studios organized a world tour for their trademark roaring lion, Leo. On January 19, 1931, Leo was paraded through the streets of Asheboro and performed from his cage on the stage at the Sunset Theater.⁷ When the First Baptist Church burned in 1933, White allowed church members to worship in the theater until their new church was completed. In addition to worship services, some of the members held their wedding ceremonies in the theater.⁸

Small commercial spaces, sixteen feet wide and thirty feet deep, flank the theater entrance and are enclosed within the theater building. The left (west) side store was designed for the Sunset Barber Shop, with access to showers in the basement. Its first proprietor was Raymond Allred. The space to the right (east) originally housed a restaurant, known for most of the theater’s boom years as the Little Castle Grill, operated from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s by Hal Johnson Sr. and his brother Vernon. Both stores had separate street entrances.⁹

⁴ “Sunset Theatre Will Open Latter Part of Next Week.”

⁵ See 1930s documentary photograph of the Sunset Theater, Randolph County Historical Landmark Preservation Commission, copy in file.

⁶ “Local Guardsmen To Be Guests Friday Eve Sunset Theatre,” *The Courier*, Asheboro, N.C., April 17, 1930.

⁷ “Famous Movie Lion to Arrive In City Saturday, Jan. 10th,” *The Courier*, Asheboro, N.C., Jan. 8, 1931.

⁸ “Reminiscing On The Theater’s Place in Their Hearts,” *The Courier-Tribune*, Asheboro, N.C., April 18, 2010.

⁹ “Ground is Broken...;” *The Courier* Advertisement page, page 8, March 6, 1930; Asheboro Business Directories, 1937-1950s, Randolph Room, Randolph County Library.

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Sunset Theater

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From 1930 to 1968, W. P. (“Dick”) Stone served as the public face of the Sunset Theater. Stone worked as projectionist at the Capitol Theater and then moved to the Sunset Theater when it opened in 1930. In 1941 he became general manager. He was always seen at the theater in a dark suit with a necktie and a wide-brimmed hat. Townspeople remember that Stone maintained a respectful atmosphere during movie showings, and did not tolerate “hollerin’ and whoopin” or tossing popcorn over the balcony railing. Stone especially loved Disney films, and organized a nearly annual showing of “Gone with the Wind,” which featured an intermission that allowed people to go out to eat before finishing the film.¹⁰

According to Stone’s daughter, Emily Redding, her father made sure that movies were wholesome, family entertainment by carrying out his own censorship. He would splice out the parts which he considered objectionable, making for some hilarious segues in the movie. “You would see the couple headed for the bedroom door and the next thing you knew they were standing out in a pasture or something and you wondered what had happened.”¹¹ Stone’s efforts were appreciated by parents, who considered the Sunset Theater the family theater of Asheboro.

In the early 1950s the Sunset Theater underwent a major interior and exterior renovation. The original entrance canopy with its late 1930s marquee was replaced by a wide marquee that stretched across the facade. The main theater seats were replaced, modern air conditioning installed, and a new men’s bathroom apparently added in the balcony area. The new marquee concealed the decorative frieze along the main façade. Two of these frieze panels depicted a Spanish helmeted soldier; the other four depicted a shield. Such “conquistador” busts and helmets and armor also appear in molded plaster reliefs above the interior exits flanking the stage area.

The Sunset Theater closed in 1975 and reopened soon after under new management as “The Flick,” showing second-run movies. It ceased to operate as a theater in 1981. In 1983 Jeff Schwarz purchased the building from the K. D. Cox family and rented it out for various events, including concerts and church services. The George Washington Carver Community Enrichment Center bought the building in 2000 and operated it as a performing arts center. In 2005 the City of Asheboro purchased the facility and used city funds to stabilize it. The city also purchased the two-story commercial building on the east side at 230 Sunset Avenue in order to create a new entrance that will contain an auxiliary lobby and concession area, handicapped-accessible restrooms, and two multipurpose rooms for rehearsals and storage. A new marquee of similar appearance to the late 1930s marquee has been placed above the entrance of this adjacent building.¹²

Architecture Context: North Carolina Movie Theaters

The Sunset Theater, the only surviving historic theater in Asheboro, is a highly decorative and well-preserved example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style designed apparently by Benton & Benton, one of North Carolina’s

¹⁰ Bob Williams, “Memories Fill The Sunset,” *The Courier-Tribune*, Asheboro, N.C., August 21, 1985.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Justin Luck, *Sunset Theatre Local Landmark Designation Report*, June 2010.

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Sunset Theater

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most important architectural firms of the first half of the twentieth century. The theater meets National Register Criterion C for its local architectural significance. This ornate style, characterized by stucco walls, ornate relief ornament, heavy wood eave brackets, and terra cotta tile roofs, recalls Spanish architecture of the old Southwest and was favored in the 1920s and 1930s by movie palaces, especially in California. One of the most splendid theaters of this style, El Capitan, built in 1928 in San Francisco, featured a Baroque pedimented façade with extensive relief ornament. Only the façade remains standing; the auditorium was demolished in 1964.¹³ The style's close association with movie theaters may be due to the movie industry's home in Hollywood, a suburb of Los Angeles, where the Spanish Colonial Revival style was celebrated in early twentieth-century architecture. The style may have been somewhat too exotic for most theaters in North Carolina, an architecturally-conservative state.

Most theaters in North Carolina from the 1920s to 1940s display restrained facades of Classical Revival or Art Deco designs. The number of surviving theaters in the state from the early decades of motion pictures is unknown. The League of Historic American Theaters, a national professional network, lists about a dozen theaters built from the 1920s to the 1940s in North Carolina that have been restored and operate as entertainment venues.¹⁴ These are located in Tarboro, Pinehurst, Sanford, Durham, Greensboro, Charlotte, Burlington, Wilson, Shelby, and Elkin. Each is summarized in chronological order as follows. The Colonial Theater, Tarboro, is a Classical Revival-style building of red brick, built in 1919, and seats 450. The Carolina Theater, Pinehurst, designed in 1922 by Aymar Embury II of New York, is a hexagonal brick building with green tile roof for movies and live theater. The Temple Theater, 120 Carthage Street, Sanford, completed in 1925 as a vaudeville and cinema house, seats 333. Architect Eric G. Flannagan of Henderson designed it in his favored blend of the Colonial Revival and Art Deco styles. The Carolina Theater, 211 Roney Street, Durham, built in 1926 for vaudeville and live theater and converted to a movie palace in the 1930s, seats 1,016. Architects Milburn & Heister designed the theater with a festive Beaux Arts façade with Corinthian pilasters, an entablature with floral decoration, and lunettes with cornucopias of fruit and flowers. The Carolina Theater, Charlotte, a Spanish Colonial Revival-style building designed by C. C. Hook, was completed in 1927 and seats 1,450. The Carolina Theater, Greensboro, built in 1927, was designed by architect J. H. DeSibour of Washington D.C. in a Beaux Arts style with bright colored terra cotta, Ionic pilasters, frieze, capitals and acroteria. The Grand Theater, 128 E. Front St., Burlington (now Paramount Theater), a red brick Classical Revival-style building opened in 1929, seats 380. The Carolina Drake Theater, Wilson, designed in a restrained Art Deco style by Benton & Benton of Wilson, was built in 1930 and seats 600. The Rogers Theater, Shelby, an Art Deco theater designed by Charles C. Benton of Wilson and built in 1936, seats 600. The Reeves Theater, Elkin, a simple Art Deco-style theater, opened in 1941 and seats 389.

The only Spanish Colonial Revival-style theater listed above is Charlotte's Carolina Theater, a large facility built by the Paramount theater chain. Originally this movie palace interior featured the illusion of an open air Spanish

¹³ www.sfphotorama.com/el-capitan-theater-mission-street-mission-district/, accessed Dec. 10, 2010.

¹⁴ League of Historic American Theaters, www.lhat.org/, accessed Dec. 8, 2010.

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Sunset Theater

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patio created by a New York theater designer, however, it was gutted in the 1980s.¹⁵ Since the Sunset Theater retains both its stylish Spanish Colonial Revival-style stuccoed façade with relief frieze, bracketed pilasters, and bracketed faux-tile pent roof, and all of its original interior Spanish Colonial Revival-style stucco, plaster and cast-iron decorations, it is one of the best-preserved theaters of this style in North Carolina. It is not being proposed for the state level of significance because it is a fairly modest example of the style.

The Sunset Theater is also significant as one of three surviving North Carolina theaters designed by Charles C. Benton--the others being the Carolina Theater in Wilson and the Rogers Theater in Shelby. Benton, one of Wilson's most significant architects of the first half of the twentieth century, designed many commercial, governmental, religious and residential buildings throughout North Carolina. Benton designed Charleston, South Carolina's historic Riviera Theater in a grand Art Deco style in 1937-1939.¹⁶

¹⁵ www.carolinatheatre.us, accessed on Dec. 9, 2010.

¹⁶ Jonathan H. Poston, *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture*, Charleston, S.C.: Historic Charleston Foundation, 1997, 363. Poston incorrectly identifies the Benton & Benton firm as located in Fayetteville, N.C. It was located in Wilson, N.C.

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Sunset Theater
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Section 9: Bibliography

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Section 10: Boundaries

Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundary of the Sunset Theater is the 50 x 100 foot parcel shown by a heavy black line on the accompanying Randolph County tax map at a scale of 1 inch = 50 feet. The parcel number is #7751724892.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the entire lot historically associated with the Sunset Theater.

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**Section Photos Page 12
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Photographs:

All photos were taken by M. Ruth Little on December 2, 2010.

1. Front view, from south.
2. Three-quarter view, from southwest.
3. Upper façade detail, from southwest.
4. Rear view, from northeast.
5. View of auditorium.
6. View of west wall of auditorium
7. View of faux “balcony and window” above west rear exit doors.
8. View of mezzanine.
9. View of main lobby, with mezzanine stair in back.