

Gaiety Theater

Study Report



Boston Landmarks Commission
Environment Department
City of Boston

Report on the Potential Designation of

GAIETY THEATER

659-665 Washington Street, Boston, Massachusetts

as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended

Approved by: _____
Ellen J. Lipsey, Executive Director Date

Approved by: _____
Susan D. Pranger, Vice-Chair Date

Acknowledgments:

The Staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission wishes to acknowledge the gracious assistance of the Gaiety Theatre Friends in providing information and Kensington Investments in providing access and information.

Credits:

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Photography: Boston Landmarks Commission
Gaiety Theatre Friends
Kensington Investments

Contents	Page
1. Location of Property	1
2. Description	4
3. Significance	17
4. Economic Status	33
5. Planning Context	34
6. Alternative Approaches	38
7. Recommendations	40
8. Bibliography	41
Appendix	44

1.0 LOCATION OF PROPERTY

1.1 Address:

659-665 Washington Street, Boston, Massachusetts

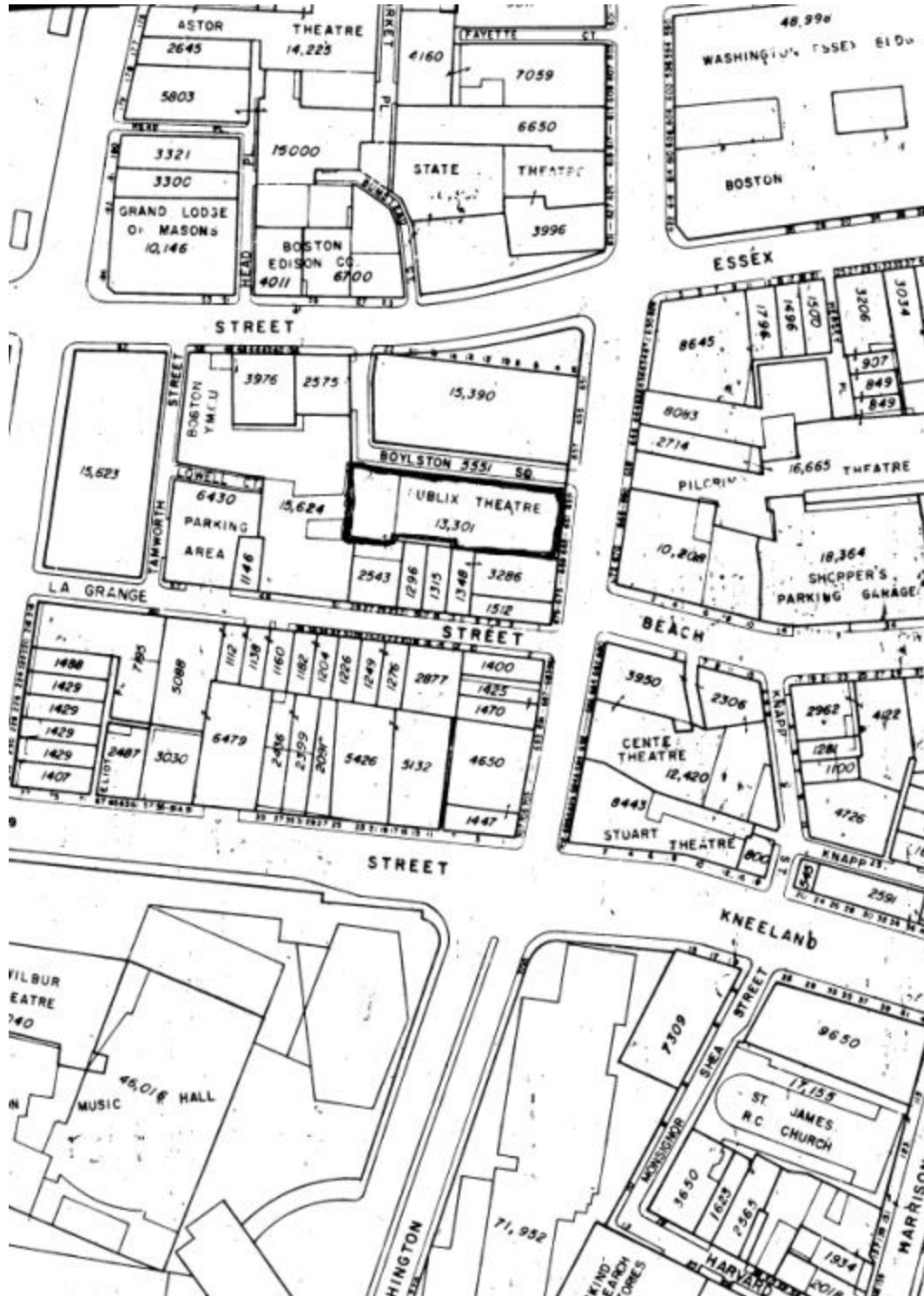
Assessor's parcel number:

Ward 3, Parcel 4896

1.2 Area in Which Property is Located:

The Gaiety Theater is located in the Theater District section of downtown Boston. The site, consisting of a total of 13,301 square feet, is located in the east central portion of the block bounded by Washington Street, LaGrange Street, Tamworth Street, and Boylston Street.

1.3 Maps Showing Location



Boston Redevelopment Authority topographic map showing the Gaiety Theater (outlined)



The Gaiety Theater (circled, lower left) in the context of downtown Boston

2.0 DESCRIPTION

2.1 Type and Use

659-665 Washington Street was built in 1908 as a multi-purpose building combining stores, offices and the Gaiety Theater. The theater was built to accommodate traveling burlesque productions and was used over the years for a variety of entertainment purposes also including vaudeville, musical revues, early silent movies, striptease, and second-run and Chinese movies. The storefronts have been used over the years for a men's clothing shop, restaurants, a night club, and an adult bookstore. Small businesses rented the offices, including a tailor, jeweler, music teacher, embroidery shop owner, hat trimmer, dentist and optometrist. The building has been largely vacant since 1986, when it was purchased by Kensington Investment Company to hold for development. In 1988, a zoning variance was granted to allow a retail food store and food storage. A meat market/grocery store serving the Asian community operated here for about a decade, until 1998, and since then the building has been completely vacant. The theater has not been used since circa 1980.

2.2 Physical Description

Exterior

The Gaiety Theater is located at 659-665 Washington Street in the Chinatown/Midtown Cultural District, within a six-story commercial building constructed in 1908. The footprint of the building is nearly rectangular and occupies 13,301 square feet. It has 65 feet of frontage on Washington Street, extends back 200 feet on each side, and is 81 feet tall. Directly to the north is the Boylston Building (China Trade Building), a Boston Landmark, separated from the Gaiety Building by a 22-foot-wide passageway called Boylston Square. To the south, the building adjoins a much-altered two-story brick commercial building that was originally four stories and had a gable roof, the shape of which is still visible on the red brick party wall. Across Washington Street is a large vacant parcel currently used as a parking lot.

The five-bay steel-frame building is of pier and spandrel construction, with a flat roof. The storefront level has been totally altered, although one original but badly rusted cast iron pilaster is visible where subsequent layers have been pulled away. The entire first floor elevation, including the former theater entrance in the center and storefronts on either side, is now covered by old signage and deteriorating remnants from a succession of insensitive remodelings. Plate glass windows are boarded up or covered by metal security grates.

The second floor retains the original cast iron facing over brick. The cast iron is rusted and in poor condition. Above are four stories faced with buff brick. Brick patterning and simple inlaid designs in marble and stone decorate the horizontal spandrels, which are recessed behind the vertical piers. The term "Tapestry Brick" is used to describe both this type of early 20th century brick and this style of brickwork and geometric patterning. The first 16 feet of the north (Boylston Square) facade is a return similar to the Washington Street elevation, with cast iron storefront paneling -- in similar condition as Washington

Street -- at levels one and two. The rest of the Boylston Square facade is red brick with brownstone lintels and no ornamentation.

On the Washington Street elevation, the central bay is emphasized in several ways. It is slightly wider, with triple rather than double one-over-one window sash. The cast iron entablature over the center bay is imprinted with the words "GAIETY THEATRE"[sic] flanked on each side by a projecting cast iron head of a Gaiety Girl. Originally, an iron and glass marquee projected from the center bay. This marquee, which was surmounted by an electric name sign with the head of a Gaiety Girl, was removed for safety reasons in 1946. The central spandrel between the third and fourth floors is ornamented with a raised cartouche in addition to the geometric patterning. At the roofline, the parapet is slightly higher above the center bay and is accented by additional patterning.

Functionally, 659-665 Washington Street is divided into commercial, office, and theater spaces. On either side of the theater entrance is a large storefront, about 70 feet in depth, above which are offices that look out onto Washington Street and are separated from the theater by a brick firewall. The entrance to the offices, located at the south end of the main facade, is now boarded up. Inside is a narrow lobby with an elevator and stairway. Where wooden trim remains in the hallways and offices, it is simple and utilitarian. The original plan of each floor has been altered with the removal of all partitions.

Interior

The Gaiety entrance and ticket booth originally stood back from the sidewalk in the center of a square open vestibule. Doors behind the booth led into a 15-foot wide concourse referred to on plans as the "entrance foyer." The concourse ramped up gradually to the level of the auditorium, which is at the middle and rear of the building. Today, there is nothing left of the theater entrance detailing. The vestibule is now enclosed. In 1949, the original ticket booth was removed and the vestibule and foyer completely remodeled and redecorated. Nothing remains of the marble dado panels, pilasters, tessellated floor, woodwork, lighting fixtures and glass and wood French doors shown in the original architectural drawings or described in newspaper accounts.

The theater auditorium, which originally seated 1700, is rectangular. It is constructed of fireproof masonry walls with steel and reinforced concrete framing and is planned so that every seat in the orchestra and balconies has an unobstructed view of the stage. The elimination of support columns in the orchestra section was made possible by supporting the first balcony on cantilevers and a 54"-deep steel plate girder, spanning 56 feet from the north to the south wall. A similar girder is used to support the steeper gallery, or second balcony.

On either side of the auditorium are reinforced concrete boxes cantilevered out over a series of horizontal beams running east to west. There are a total of 20 boxes, 10 per side, arranged three on the first two levels and four on the upper level. The boxes are rounded in the manner of 19th century Baroque theaters and are ornamented with simple plaster crosshatch patterns. The boxes nearest the proscenium arch have suffered extensive water damage to the plaster, and the interior steel framing rods are now visible. The tiers of cantilevered boxes are separated by square vertical posts that terminate just above the upper boxes and were originally topped with plaster heads of Gaiety Girls. Each girl wore

an ornate plaster crown and had three electric bulbs coming out of her head. All of the Gaiety Girl heads have been removed, although at least one has survived to show the original appearance.

At the front of the auditorium, the proscenium arch has suffered extensive damage from leaking rainwater falling onto the stage. The lower half of the decorative plaster arch is completely gone or badly damaged, leaving the steel framework exposed. At the top center of the proscenium arch is a plaster motif of a Gaiety Girl. The rest of the arch is ornamented with two alternating plasterwork motifs. One motif might be described as a square cartouche and the other as an elongated acanthus leaf. Within the larger arch is a smaller arch, closer to the stage, which has a plasterwork design combining geometric and natural forms. The original drop curtain, with its painted scene of Lake Maggiore, is no longer extant. The graceful shape of the proscenium arch is echoed in a series of repeating arches that extend from the stage back to the rear of the second balcony.

Most of the auditorium has been painted over uniformly white, obscuring the original magenta color scheme and stenciling. At the back of the orchestra section, in the area reserved for standees, the simple wooden dado has also been painted flat white. Seats in the orchestra and first balcony were removed in the 1980s after the theater was closed. At least one seat remains in a storage area to show the appearance. The original brass railings have been removed from the balconies and boxes. The orchestra pit has been filled in. There were originally rows of electric lights under the front of both balconies. The string of bulb bases is still extant but in very poor condition.

Part of the first balcony has been enclosed to create a movie projection booth. Within this booth are old movie projectors and film reels. Building department records do not indicate a date when this booth was built but it may have been about 1931, when the theater was taken over by E. M. Loew and used for combined movies and live entertainment.

Stenciled ornamentation of yellow leaves on a dark green background, used here and elsewhere in the theater, may also date from the early 1930s or from a redecoration in 1939, when the theater returned briefly to burlesque revues. The green and yellow stenciling is not the same style as the earliest stencil decoration, which has larger, more amorphous forms and a different color palette. Traces of the earlier stenciling can be found on the arch above the second balcony. Because this upper seating area was closed in 1932, it retains what appear to be original finishes. The original rows of wooden seats remain here, each with a wire band on the underside to hold a man's hat.

The basement rooms are now filled with several feet of standing water, which has caused considerable damage. According to newspaper accounts and plans, the basement was used for a lounging and smoking room, lavatories for men and women, and dressing rooms and facilities for performers. The main lounging room was relatively plain and has a simple brick fireplace. Beneath the stage was a large room for scenery and storage.

Photographs



Main façade of the Gaiety Theater on Washington Street



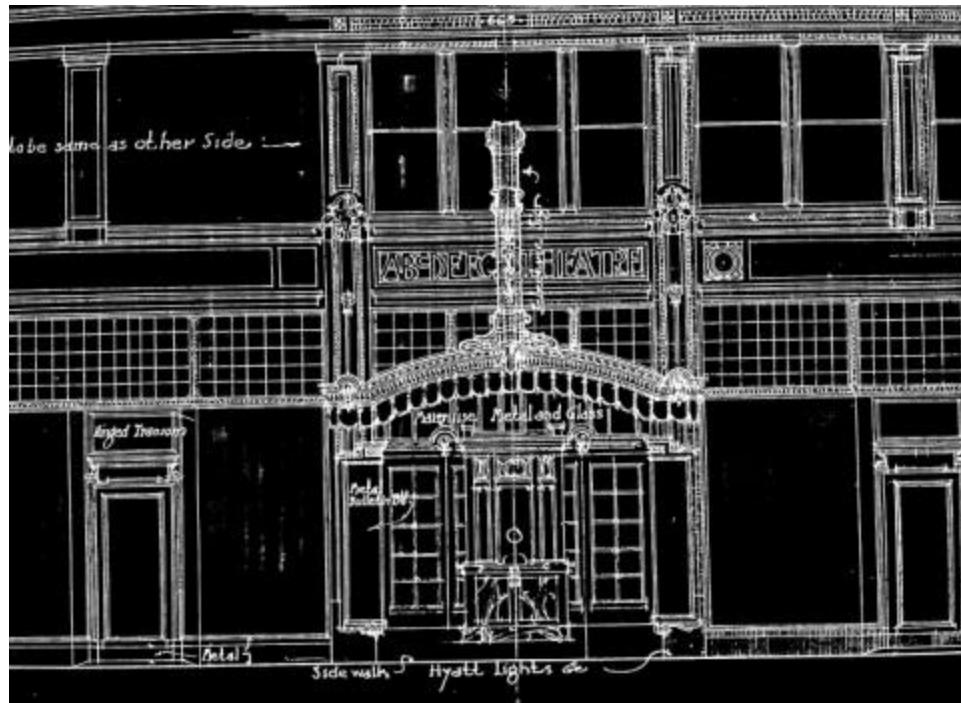
The front façade of the building, with the words “Gaiety Theatre”[sic] over the entryway



Close-up of the lettering on the Washington Street façade



Original Blackall rendering of the Gaiety Theater



Original Blackall drawing of the entrance to the Gaiety Theater



Historic streetscape of Washington Street showing the Gaiety Theater as a Publix theater



Theater foyer



One of the commercial spaces that flank the entryway



“House” as seen from the stage



The stage as seen from the first balcony



The stage as seen from the second balcony



Detail of the boxes on either side of the stage



Detail of the proscenium arch showing the deterioration of the plaster (right)



Office space above the theater



Basement of the building, with several feet of standing water



Detail of the matting added (left) to improve acoustics, probably 1930s or 1940s



Projection booth



Gaiety Girl relief, first balcony

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE

3.1 Historic Significance

Summary

The Gaiety is the one remaining of two Boston theaters built for and operated as part of the Eastern Wheel of the Columbia Amusement Company. This well-organized early 20th century entertainment circuit aimed to provide inexpensive, so-called "clean" burlesque that would appeal beyond the traditional working-class male audience. Hundreds of its shows played at the Gaiety from the theater opening in 1908 through 1927, when the organization folded.

Columbia's musical comedies, melodramas, and revues have been characterized as a shrewdly concocted amalgam of talent, sex and exploitation.¹ They varied widely in quality and originality. Some talented writers and producers did work in burlesque and often starred in their own shows. Their names are not widely recognized today, but they were well known at the time and are receiving increasing attention from historians exploring the field of popular culture. Burlesque also served as a training ground for vaudeville and legitimate musical comedy. While it is possible that some famous post-World War II radio, film or television comedians may have performed earlier in their careers at the Gaiety Theater, this has not been documented.

The Gaiety management did not play a seminal role in shaping the content of shows or the direction of burlesque as an entertainment form. Boston was not a "try out" town, as it was for legitimate theater. Unlike B.F. Keith, the "father of vaudeville," who developed and nurtured his brand of variety in Boston, the Eastern/Columbia Wheel was run out of New York City. Its flagship Columbia Theater was located on Broadway. The Gaiety in Boston was simply a spoke in "The Wheel."

Although vaudeville acts were a traditional part of burlesque shows, the Gaiety was a burlesque rather than a vaudeville theater. It does not exemplify organized vaudeville's long-time strategy of building lavish theaters and attracting bourgeois audiences, nor was it part of an organized vaudeville circuit. With the exception of the Globe Theater, other Boston theaters associated with burlesque are no longer extant.

The historical significance section is divided into five parts:

- A. Theatre in Boston: 1790-1908
- B. Vaudeville in Boston
- C. Burlesque: Background
- D. The Gaiety Theater: A History
- E. Other Burlesque Theaters in Boston

A. Theater in Boston: 1790-1908

Beginning in the 1790s with construction of Bulfinch's Federal Street Theatre (also called the Boston Theatre), Boston has had a continuous theater presence. The conservatism of

¹ Zeidman, Irving, *The American Burlesque Show*, 76.

early 19th century audiences led one operator to open the "Boston Museum" (1841), which, in addition to assorted wax figures and animal specimens, contained a "lecture hall" where performances were held. The Howard Athenaeum opened a few years later, in 1845. The present Gaiety Theater stands on the site of two previous theaters with educational-sounding names. The earliest, the Boylston Museum, was replaced by the Lyceum Theater, known by the turn of the century as a venue for vaudeville and burlesque. None of Boston's 19th century theaters remain. The oldest surviving Boston theaters are the Colonial (1900), Globe (1903), and Majestic (1903).

Theater activity tended to be concentrated at the edge of the Boston Common just outside the central business district. The early 20th century was the heyday of theater in Boston. Population growth, immigration and urbanization, increased leisure time and increased prosperity were all factors in the flowering of all types of entertainment. In November 1908, the month the Gaiety opened, there were 20 theaters listing attractions in the *Boston Sunday Herald*, with such diverse offerings as plays, vaudeville, burlesque, comic performance, novelties, melodrama, travelogues, Turkish dancers, and "follies of the day." In the theatrical season of 1910-11, ten theaters devoted to drama presented 58 attractions new to Boston, which played for a total of 381 weeks.² But already, theater producers were noting the growing popularity of motion picture houses. The automobile, radio and later television also contributed to the gradual decline of live entertainment.

B. Vaudeville in Boston

Vaudeville and burlesque both grew out of the "variety" tradition and catered to an urban population which increased enormously during the half-century after the Civil War and formed the basis of a mass consumer market. Vaudeville, which has become known as the "theater of the people," is generally defined as stage entertainment consisting of various unrelated acts, anything from performing animals, acrobats, comedians, jugglers, and magicians, to song-and-dance men and black-face minstrels. The content could be anything performable on stage, so long as it was "morally unobjectionable" and would "satisfy middle-class notions of propriety and taste." ³ Vaudeville theaters also became an important outlet for the first motion pictures.

Boston's significance in the history of vaudeville stems from the contributions of Benjamin Franklin Keith (1846-1914), a New Hampshire boy who ran away from the family farm to join the circus and, in the early 1880s, began a career as a theater impresario with his opening of the Gaiety Theatre and Museum in Boston (no relation to the present Gaiety Theater). Keith is credited with initiating well-planned, respectable family variety presented in continuous performances--a revolutionary concept-- and all at popular prices. This winning combination led to the founding of a series of theaters and a booking office to control the hiring and firing of performers on what some would dub the "Sunday School Circuit." Much of his success is credited to his associate, Edward F. Albee, but it is generally agreed that Keith was responsible for initiating the rigid moral code. Patrons

² Young, Nicholas, "Theatrical Season Buried..." *Boston American*, c. July 1911 (Boston theaters clipping file, Harvard Theater Collection)

³ Allen, Robert C., *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, 186.

were expected to behave with decorum. Boston theaters built by Keith and/or Albee were famous for their cleanliness and "tasteful" ornate decoration.

Of the vaudeville theaters in Boston, only the Keith Memorial (now known as the Savoy or, more recently, the Opera House) remains. This theater is highly significant not only because of the lavish interior but equally because Albee built it as a national tribute to Keith. It is Boston's last and greatest vaudeville playhouse.

C. Burlesque: Background

Burlesque was another form of popular, inexpensive entertainment. This historically obscure phase of show business, often viewed as the lowest rung on the entertainment ladder, has been documented by Irving Zeidman in *The American Burlesque Show* (1967) and more recently by Robert C. Allen in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991).

In 18th and early 19th century America, traditional burlesque productions were travesties or satires. The modern burlesque, a broadly humorous theatrical entertainment of a more earthy character, began to develop in the late 19th century. The tried-and-true formula combined ethnic comics, variety acts and sketches with a chorus line of girls in tights, led by female stars known as soubrettes. Later more risqué belly dancers, known as "cooch" or "hootchy-kootchy" dancers, were added. While some variety acts played at both vaudeville and burlesque houses, the difference in underlying principles has been described as "one of night and day," with burlesque being "all the things vaudeville wanted no part of."⁴

By the turn of the century, two great rival burlesque circuits had developed. The Empire Circuit, also known as the Western Wheel, began in the Midwest and was officially incorporated in 1897.⁵ The Columbia, or Eastern Wheel, under the auspices of the Columbia Amusement Company, was established in 1900.⁶ Each established ties with theaters in major cities. Each had its own producers and its own personality. The Empire Circuit tested the limits of civic tolerance with its "hot" shows emphasizing the displayed female body and blue humor. Columbia's first president, Samuel A. Scribner, encouraged "refined" revues and musical comedies acceptable to women and middle-class men. Boston's Gaiety Theater was part of the Eastern/Columbia Wheel.

The "wheels" stabilized burlesque. The two circuits encompassed enough theaters for a full season's work for several thousand performers, stagehands, and ancillary personnel. Each company with a "franchise" on one of the wheels came out with a new show each season following a predictable three-part formula consisting of an opening production number, "olio" or medley of individual acts, and concluding afterpiece.⁷ With standardization and the stifling of competition, burlesque productions became more trite

⁴ Allen, 189.

⁵ Bordman, Gerald, *The Concise Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 72.

⁶ Some sources say 1902; however, Columbia's 25th anniversary was celebrated in February, 1925, according to show advertisements at that time

⁷ Allen, 234.

and repetitious. In general, the most talented and inventive comics and producers gravitated to the better paying and more opulent world of vaudeville and musical comedy.

Regardless of its creative shortcomings, burlesque was highly profitable. In the first decade of the 20th century, the number of burlesque theaters multiplied. Chicago's Star and Garter, which opened in 1908, has been described as " the [first] first class theatre ever built solely for burlesque productions," and soon major cities like Chicago, Boston and New York all had several venues.⁸

In 1913, the Western Wheel was taken over and absorbed by the Columbia Amusement Company, which for a time exercised a virtual monopoly over burlesque. After a period of unprecedented prosperity between about 1913 and 1920, its fortunes began to decline. Columbia dropped the mantle of respectability and when this did not work, tried novelties, integrated acts, vaudeville, and revivals--all to no avail.

After Columbia folded in 1927, the Mutual Burlesque Association filled the void. The "hot" Mutual shows were sold directly to theaters like the Gaiety. They included a low-paid cast, scant scenery, and minimum productions effects. The average cast included three comics, a straight man, and three principal soubrettes in scanty attire, with an occasional well-known male or female singer. In 1929, *Variety* commented on the poor quality of these shows, adding: "No Mutual manager or producer receives sufficient income from his Mutual Wheel route to produce even a good burlesque show."⁹ Mutual Burlesque folded in 1931.

Irving Zeidman concludes his burlesque history with the following summary:

*American burlesque has given a livelihood to thousands upon thousands of performers, musicians, stagehands, ushers, producers, candy butchers and censors. It has provided countless hours of unmitigated boredom, and many other hours of genuine pleasure. It has served as a proving ground for talent. It may have given some surcease to the lonely, the derelict, the sexually driven. Beyond that, one cannot and should not hope for more, or expect less.*¹⁰

D. The Gaiety Theater in Boston: Theatrical History

The construction of Boston's Gaiety Theater in 1908 and Waldron's Casino in 1909 was part of a larger-scale effort by the Eastern Wheel to upgrade the theaters where their traveling shows were performed. The Gaiety replaced the run-down Lyceum Theater, which had also been owned by the Boylston Market Association. The first manager, George R. Bacheller, and his assistant, Ralph L. Ripley, had both been connected with the Lyceum. Construction was completed in just five months.

Technical features and patron comfort were highly promoted in opening accounts of the theater, which was officially dedicated on November 23, 1908. The *Boston Sunday sub-*

⁸ Zeidman, 65.

⁹ Zeidman, 109.

¹⁰ Zeidman, 248.

headline called the Gaiety a "Model of Comfort, Complete in Stage Equipment and Accommodations of Every Kind--Well Lighted, Well Ventilated, and Up to Date in All Respects is This New Home of Vaudeville and Burlesque."¹¹ The theater was praised for its comfortable seats, each with a clear and unobstructed view. According to these accounts, the first balcony "is supported by one of the largest steel girders ever used in a building in this city." The Gaiety reportedly had "perfect ventilation of every part of this theatre." The switchboard was "a wonderful affair", with its 67 divisions and its chronometers to fix the time of acts, the raising of the first curtain, and the falling of the final curtain. The new theater was lauded as fireproof and safe, with abundant exits. Early advertisements for the Gaiety proclaimed it "Boston's Most Modern Playhouse."

On opening night, November 23, 1908, all 1700 seats were filled, with several hundred more standing patrons. The opening show was the *Trocadero Burlesquers*, produced by Charles H. Waldron, with the well-known Irish comic Frank Finney as author and star. The *Boston Globe* review is quoted here as an example of what audiences expected of a "clean" burlesque show:

This company is large, has a well-selected dancing chorus, and a number of active principals. Its scenery and costumes are above the average of merit for this style of performance, and on the whole it seems to meet perfectly the requirements of its place in the theatrical world. Its entertainment is divided into three parts. The first is called a political satire and is entitled "Sweeney's Finish" The usual Irish comedian, German ditto, peripatetic Chinese laundryman, tall-hatted politician, large-chested wife, larger-chested ditto of German, "broiler" in short skirts, dancers in tights and others make their entrance with startling rapidity, speak their lines in a high-pitched, sustained tone of rapid-fire conversation and get away in the same acrobatic fashion as they entered. Coherency of plot there is little, but the slap-stick comes in strong, and, to the credit of the company and the show, be it said that the utmost good nature prevails.

Following this was a vaudeville bit, the acts consisting of Tilly Cohen, singer, Elliot, Belair and Elliot, comedy acrobats, the Wilsons, colored singers, and Frank Fess, singing Jew. This was followed by a second part, in the form of a one-act playlet entitled "a 50 to 1 Shot" dealing, as the title indicated, with incidents of the race track. The concluding part of the program was termed a one-act pipe dream, entitled "The Isle of Nowhere," having something of a Chinese flavor. This, like the preceding parts of the program, went off with much snap. The audience was delighted with each and every part of the show and expressed its approval in repeated applause.¹²

Performances were held twice a day, at 2:15 and 8 p.m., at popular prices from 10 cents in the gallery to one dollar for the boxes. Within a few years, the Gaiety was also

¹¹ *Boston Sunday Globe*, 11/22/08.

¹² *Boston Globe*, 11/24/08.

advertising Sunday night shows with the "best vaudeville and Motion Pictures in Boston." In 1919, the spelling of the theater name was changed to "Gayety."

In a 1913 article in the *Boston American*, theater critic Nicholas Young contrasts the organizations presenting legitimate "two-dollar drama" with the Columbia Amusement Company's handsome theaters and well-balanced road attractions:

*The growth of the Eastern wheel has been phenomenal. From a group of small, badly arranged and obsolete theatres it has gradually cleaned up its own affairs until its circuit of houses is modern to a degree not even exceeded by the luxuriously appointed house where two-dollar attractions are presented.*¹³

Young goes on to describe how the Eastern Wheel put its rival circuit out of business:

Its progress in Boston merely reflects its progress in every city included in the Eastern wheel. Here we have the Gaiety and Casino Theatres--both new and structurally perfect playhouses. While the Eastern wheel has been growing stronger and more firmly established, not only in the matter of its real estate equipment, but also in its attractions, the Western wheel, for the most part, has been conspicuously idle.

As to the future of Boston burlesque without the Western Wheel, Young speculated:

As the plans are now fixed, there will be but two houses devoted to organized burlesque in Boston next season, the Gaiety and the Casino. That leaves the fate of the Howard Athenaeum and the Grand Opera House somewhat in doubt. Of course, it is possible for either or both of these houses to present independent stock burlesque entertainment, if their lessees care to undertake it.

Young added that a rival circuit was unlikely because "the most experienced and successful burlesque promoters are already comfortably settled in the Eastern wheel."

In the years after 1913, some of Columbia's leading shows received lavish praise and practically achieved the eminence of musical comedy. These acclaimed shows, which are described in Irving Zeidman's *The American Burlesque Show*, would have played at the Gayety. They included Barney Gerard's *Follies of the Day*, described by Zeidman as an "outstanding show."¹⁴ The 1915 version was based on a "New Idea Satirizing Events of the Day--Entitled What Does the Public Want?" Producer Jean Bedini's revues were top moneymakers for many years. Bedini, a juggler and product of London music halls, was himself "the most consistently successful single male attraction on the wheel"¹⁵ He was also an associate and part discoverer of other show business greats and has been described as "one of Columbia's most successful operators and franchise holders [who] persisted as a burlesque straight man long after the end of the Wheel."¹⁶

¹³ *Boston American*, 3/23/13.

¹⁴ Zeidman, 86.

¹⁵ Zeidman, 99-101.

¹⁶ Zeidman, 70.

According to Zeidman, another clever and popular show that played at the Gaiety was *Girls De Looks*, starring Joseph K. Watson and William H. Cohan as Slotkin and Slitkin, lawyers. In addition to Barney Gerard and Jean Bedini, well-known producers whose shows played at the Gaiety were Max Spiegel, Harry Hastings, Frank Hunter, I. H. Herk, Joe Hurtig, and Jacobs and Jermon.

Perhaps the best-known burlesquers who performed at the Gaiety were the comedy team of Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough, one of the most famous comedy teams of their day. Their partnership started in 1905 and lasted 31 years, during which they performed in minstrel shows, circuses, vaudeville and burlesque and then moved on to musical comedy and revue. Clark, wearing painted-on glasses, played the likable scoundrel to McCullough's whimpering stooge. Clark later appeared alone in the Ziegfeld Follies and on Broadway.¹⁷

Also well-known were Tommy "Bozo" Snyder, considered one of the great pantomimists; and Molly Williams, for a time the number one soubrette, known for her saucy, wise-cracking manner. Other Gaiety attractions mentioned in burlesque histories are Irish comic Frank Finney, ingenue Gertrude Hayes, Dutch comic Sam Sidman, Jewish comic Max Fields, tramp comic Billy Arlington, and comedians Billy "Beef Trust" Watson, "Sliding Billy" Watson, and Steve Mills.¹⁸ Names of many of the shows and stars that played the Gaiety are included in the Appendix.

During the Jazz Age of the 1920s, the Gaiety and Casino regularly presented black and integrated productions that were circulating from city to city on the Columbia Wheel. The same shows played on different weeks at both theaters, which ran the same advertisements. Research into weekly theater advertisements from 1923 to 1928 for five Boston theaters indicates that the Gaiety and Casino each had a total of 36 black or integrated shows in these six years, compared to four at the Howard, three at the Tremont, and only one at the Colonial.¹⁹ Most of these shows played for one week. Examples include producer Jimmie Cooper's annual revue, at times entitled the *Big Black and White Show*, which advertised "more jazz" and "35 white stars and 35 colored artists" in 1924. The black comedy team of Buck and Bubbles appeared at the Gaiety in 1924. The "all-colored" musical burlesque show called *7-11* with Howard and Brown and Cook and Smith appeared at the Gaiety in 1925. In 1926 *Rarin' To Go* boasted "the greatest array of white and colored artists ever assembled in one show."

These productions provided important opportunities for talented black performers. However, burlesque histories suggest that the presentation of black and integrated productions should not be interpreted as enlightened race relations. Historian Irving Zeidman makes the following observation on integration as one of several unsuccessful strategies to save the Columbia Wheel in the years of declining audiences and profits:

¹⁷ Bordman, 93.

¹⁸ Zeidman, 99-103 and Corio, Ann, *This Was Burlesque*, 111.

¹⁹ Research by Lee Eiseman

Cartoon comedies, melodrama, clean burlesque, dirty burlesque, Negro aggregations, mixed black and white troupes, vaudeville--Columbia tried them all in the last dying years. To no avail. ²⁰

The Gaiety in Boston was a venue for whatever shows the Columbia organization chose to circulate. The Gaiety Theater management does not appear to have created shows for local presentation or for travel on the Eastern Wheel. In contrast, Charles H. Waldron, manager at Waldron's Casino in Scollay Square, produced an "annual revue of timely events" for the circuit. His 1908 *Trocadero Burlesquers*, became the *Boston Burlesquers* in 1918 and the *Bostonians* in 1924.²¹

After the breakup of the Columbia Amusement Company in the late 1920s, the Gaiety management booked the "hot" shows produced under the auspices of the Mutual Wheel. In 1931, the Gaiety came under the control of E. M. Loew, who was assembling a string of movie theaters throughout the Boston area. The name was changed to the "New Gayety." Shows in the 1930s combined vaudeville, strip tease and movies. The second balcony was closed in 1932.

In 1939, an article in the *Boston Herald* announced a return to the burlesque of the past: *The Gayety Theatre, which hasn't had a burlesque revue for nearly 10 years, reopened yesterday...with a hot and lively and up to the minute burlesque show. The theatre has been redecorated and on hand were pretty usherettes...*²²

The format of these shows involved a burlesque routine (all female), a comedy parade (all male), a dancing and singing chorus, two screen attractions and vaudeville acts, all in a continuous show running from 9:30 am to 11 p.m. This format lasted only a few years. After World War II, the "New Gayety" was used as a movie theater only. In 1949, the entrance and lobby were totally redecorated and the name was changed to the Publix.

Several authors have written about Boston theater history, and their work is helpful in putting the Gaiety in context with other Boston theaters. Douglass Shand Tucci in his 1977 article "The Boston Rialto: Playhouses, Concert Halls and Movie Palaces" mentions the Gaiety in passing, as "another Blackall design."²³ The name of the Gaiety scarcely appears in Eliot Norton's book on Boston theater *Broadway Down East*. Douglas King's unpublished manuscript on Boston theaters, a copy of which is located at the Harvard Theater Collection, includes information from newspaper articles at the time of the Gaiety opening, but little else.

E. Other Burlesque Theaters in Boston

Several other theaters in Boston were prominently associated with burlesque. As mentioned earlier, the Casino on Hanover Street near Scollay Square, designed by

²⁰ Zeidman, 96.

²¹ *Boston Globe*, 1/27/24.

²² *Boston Herald*, 8/15/39.

²³ Tucci, Douglas Shand, "The Boston Rialto: Playhouses, Concert Halls and Movie Palaces," A City Conservation League Walking Tour, 1977.

Clarence Blackall and operated by Charles H. Waldron, opened a year after the Gaiety and played many of the same shows.

The Old Howard, built as a legitimate playhouse known as the Howard Athenaeum, was the last of the old-time burlesque theaters to remain in operation. Because of its longevity, programming, and broad-based audiences, the Old Howard occupied a special place in Boston's entertainment history. Douglass Shand Tucci has described the Old Howard in this way: "...perhaps the most famous burlesque theatre in the world, it became the center of a seedy but picturesque theatrical Bohemia..."²⁴ The Old Howard was closed in 1953 and razed in 1962.

The Park Theater was built by the famous entertainer Lotta Crabtree and opened in 1879 with Lotta in the starring role. Many 19th century stars played the Park. In the 1930s, the theater, then Minsky's Park Burlesque, became famous for its brazenly "hot" style. According to the *Concise Oxford Companion to American Theater*, "The Minskys and their greatest star, Gypsy Rose Lee, exemplified burlesque at its modern apogee."²⁵

Besides the Gaiety, the other remaining Boston theater associated with burlesque is the Globe, which still stands almost directly across Washington Street from the Gaiety. The Globe was built by Weber and Fields, who at the turn of the century were the most successful producers of "clean" burlesque. As comedians, they were the most famous comedy team of their day and toured the country with their own stock productions, which were able to attract first-class talent. Their productions harked back to the travesties of previous generations. The Globe was designed by noted Boston architect Arthur Vinal and opened on Sept 14, 1903. The Weber and Fields partnership dissolved in 1904 but the theater continued to attract quality productions. In the early 1910s, the Globe was producing all-star vaudeville. Over the years, it was used for drama, musical comedy, vaudeville, burlesque, and films. Major stars who appeared there included James K. Hackett, Weber and Fields, Lillian Russell, Al Jolson, W.C. Fields, Abbott and Costello, and Gypsy Rose Lee. The auditorium of the Globe now houses a Chinese restaurant and a Chinese grocery store.

3.2 Architectural Significance

Summary

The Gaiety Theater is located within a six-story brick office building that is straightforward in design and detailing. The Gaiety's auditorium is a pleasant space with relatively modest decoration. While some of the details are handsome, such as the proscenium arch and the "Gaiety Girl" heads, ornamentation is largely confined to simple plasterwork or stenciling. The Gaiety's technological features are current for their time but not advanced. Claims that Wallace Sabine collaborated on the acoustics are unsubstantiated by documentation.

²⁴ Tucci, "The Boston Rialto"

²⁵ Bordman, 72.

The Gaiety also has lost most of its architectural integrity. The original marquee and ticket booth are gone. Nothing but the shell remains of the original vestibule and entrance foyer, which were completely stripped in a 1949 remodeling. So much has been removed that decorative treatments could only be approximated with a substantial amount of guess-work for the auditorium, foyer and vestibule. Lounges and smoking rooms in the basement are currently under several feet of standing water. Within the auditorium itself, the lower half of the proscenium arch is gone and boxes close to the stage have suffered heavy water damage. The original seats have been removed in the orchestra and first balcony. The orchestra pit has been filled in. Most of the auditorium has been painted white, replacing decorative finishes.

Blackall's three finest Boston theaters, the Colonial (1900), Wilbur (1914), and Metropolitan/Wang (1925)--representing three decades of his work --have been preserved. The Wang and Wilbur are designated Boston Landmarks, the Colonial is pending designation. Each of these theaters exemplifies a different plan, decorative style, and original use; but in each case, the owners were willing to spend money for aesthetic effect. A fourth Blackall theater, the Modern, has exterior Landmark designation. Although it is one of Boston's first theaters built exclusively for movies, the first to have amplification for "talkies", and a known collaboration between Blackall and Sabine, the interior of the Modern has suffered extensive water damage.

Unlike the above theaters, the Gaiety was built in just five months, with no time or money to spare. Blackall himself wrote: "The Gaiety was an experiment in the use of cheaper materials for a good effect."²⁶ The Gaiety is not an outstanding example of the work of Boston architect Clarence H. Blackall. The Gaiety represents the kind of practical "modern" theater built at the height of the show business era. This type of theater improved patron comfort and provided back-stage facilities for syndicate productions. Building materials like steel and concrete made it possible to improve fire safety and eliminate view-obstructing support columns. Blackall built many of these no-nonsense theaters. They have not survived because they are no longer up-to-date production-wise, their architecture is uninspiring compared to other Boston theaters, and the audience for live productions has decreased substantially with the introduction of other forms of entertainment.

It has been argued that the simplicity and minimal decoration of the Gaiety reflect the fact that it was built for burlesque. The argument continues that, because burlesque was at the bottom of the entertainment ladder, burlesque theaters would of necessity be the simplest; therefore, this very feature helps to convey the atmosphere in which burlesque was performed. In fact, this type of "modern" theater was being built at the same time for legitimate theater and vaudeville as well. In the words of a well-known theater historian, the early 20th century was a period in Western theater design where "structural, mechanical and electrical engineering achieve ascendancy over architectural design."²⁷

²⁶ Boston Public Library Fine Arts Department files include a card with this comment, citing as a reference a "handwritten journal, pp.295-301." The journal has not been located.

²⁷ Izenour, George C., *Theatre Design*, Chapter 2.

This change in priorities reflects the impact of stricter building codes as well as financial limitations imposed by syndicates and/or theater owners in all entertainment sectors.

The architectural significance section is divided into five parts:

- A. Clarence Blackall, Architect: Biographical Summary
- B. Blackall's Theaters
- C. Fireproofing
- D. Framing and other Construction Features
- E. Acoustics

A. Clarence H. Blackall, Architect: Biographical Summary

Clarence Howard Blackall (1857-1942) was a prominent and prolific Boston architect who designed many theaters and large commercial buildings in the downtown area. He was born in Chicago and received his BA and Master of Architecture degrees from the University of Illinois in 1877 and 1880. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris between 1878 and 1880 and began his career as a draftsman in the office of Peabody and Stearns about 1882. In 1884 he became the first winner of the prestigious Rotch Traveling Scholarship, allowing him to spend several years traveling in Europe. He established his own independent office in Boston in 1889, practicing principally with James Clapp and Charles Whittemore. Blackall was involved in many professional organizations and served as a founder and first president of the Boston Architectural Club. He was a prolific writer and contributor to architectural publications, which helped him gain national distinction. In 1895, Blackall became editor of Boston-based architectural journal *The Brickbuilder*.

In his memoirs, Blackall wrote that he chose to concentrate in three areas, which he broke down into the following percentages: theaters (25%), office buildings (30%) and hotels (35%).²⁸ He is credited with bringing some of Chicago's innovative construction methods to Boston in the design of the Carter/Winthrop Building of 1893, considered this city's first steel-frame skyscraper. Some of his other major buildings include the White Building (1896), Little Building (1916), Copley Plaza Hotel (with H.J. Hardenbergh) and the Lenox and Essex Hotels. He is known for the Tremont Temple and two important synagogues: Temple Israel and Ohabei Shalom, both in Brookline.

B. Blackall's Theaters

Along with New York architect Thomas Lamb, Blackall was considered among the foremost theater architects in the country. His reputation was based not only on his handsome early theaters like the Bowdoin Square and the Colonial but also on his extensive writings on the subject in architectural publications

Between 1892 and 1925, Blackall designed some 22 Boston theaters, including movie theaters but excluding remodeling of earlier theaters (listed in the appendix). In addition to Boston theaters, he also designed the Lowell Memorial Auditorium (1922) and Auditorium of the University of Illinois (1906).

²⁸ Blackall, C.H., *Seed Time and Harvest: Memories of Life*, 472.

Blackall studied music as a child and was an enthusiastic concert- and theater-goer. This natural propensity, plus the fact that his first office was in the old Music Hall building, may have started his career as a theater designer. The 1892 Bowdoin Square Theater was Blackall's first large job of any kind. His next major commission, Tremont Temple (1894-96), was the home of the Baptist Church in Boston and contained a major auditorium. The Colonial Theater of 1900 demonstrates what Blackall could do with ample funds and the support of property owners and theater operators determined to make this a "thoroughly first class theater and office building." He brought in artists and craftsmen and personally supervised the choice of materials, all of the finest quality. Blackall published photographs of this lavishly decorated theater in 1901, in a series of articles in *The American Architect and Building News*. In his late 1930s memoirs, he wrote "I think I came closer to this building than any I have built..."²⁹

In 1907, Blackall and theater impresario Winthrop Ames traveled abroad to study theaters in anticipation of a collaborative project. In 45 days, they visited 105 theaters and concert halls throughout Europe.³⁰ One offshoot of the trip was Blackall's series of 11 articles on "The American Theater," published in *The Brickbuilder* between December, 1907 and October, 1908.

Because these articles correspond so closely in date to the Gaiety Theater, which was under construction from July to November 1908, Blackall's comments shed light on the evolution of his ideas about theaters, based on a comparison between Europe and the United States. In the first installment, he wrote that American theater presents "a problem in design and arrangement which is unique, in that it had grown out of business conditions, almost uninfluenced by sentiment or matters of pure art..."³¹ He explained that since most theaters in this country were not government-sponsored or endowed, they had to make money. He noted that office/theater combinations, as seen in the Colonial, Gaiety, and Casino, often made the economics work.

The series appears to have launched Blackall's career as a designer of functional, fireproof, comfortable, "modern" theaters with good sight lines and back-stage facilities which could be built at a reasonable cost and return a profit to investors. In his writings, Blackall referred to this type of theater as "American," a word he uses almost as a synonym for practical and democratic. In October 1907, when *The Brickbuilder* sponsored a competition on theater building, contestants were advised to design a theater "which will be essentially American in...feeling" following "American practice in practical requirements."³² He urged those entering the design competition not to use a long horseshoe plan, where spectators were looking at each other and not the stage, as "that is not the American way, nor is it common sense." Contestants were reminded that the first requisite for a good auditorium is good sight lines and that they should not "try for magnificence at the expense of straight forward common sense."³³

²⁹ Blackall, *Seed Time and Harvest*, 298-99.

³⁰ Blackall, *Seed Time and Harvest*, 406.

³¹ Blackall, C.H., "The American Theater-I," *The Brickbuilder*, Vol. 16, December, 1907, 216.

³² Blackall, C.H., *The Brickbuilder*, Vol.16, No. 10, October, 1907.

³³ Blackall, C.H., *The Brickbuilder*, Vol.16, No. 10, October, 1907.

Among Blackall's theaters falling squarely into this "common sense" category are the Gaiety, Casino, Plymouth, and National. What these theaters have in common is that ornamentation was secondary to functionality. It is important to point out that these were built for different entertainment forms: the Gaiety and Casino for burlesque, the Plymouth for legitimate theater, and the National for vaudeville. It is not correct to say that this less-ornate form of theater was used only for burlesque or only for theaters catering to a lower class audience.

Six years later, a 1914 newspaper article in the *Boston Transcript* on the opening of Blackall's Wilbur Theater suggests a growing backlash against all this "American" practicality in theaters. The reporter writes that "...they [Europeans] require it to be a building of architectural dignity and comeliness, an ornament to the city, a pleasure to the general eye, and not a mere shop for the sale of entertainment."³⁴ Certainly the longing for more artistry is represented not only in the Wilbur but also in Blackall's 1925 Metropolitan (now Wang) Theater, designed to be a "palace for the people." Boston theaters that have survived are those that are "a pleasure to the general eye."

C. Fireproof Construction

When the Gaiety opened in 1908, newspapers touted its fireproof construction and abundant fire exits all provided "with a patented device which throws open the doors at the slightest pressure."³⁵ An advertisement at opening said that the Gaiety was the "first playhouse to be completed and operated under the rigid building laws of 1907 and stands as one of the finest types of fireproof construction of any theatre extant."³⁶

While this may be correct, it does not make the Gaiety innovative in its construction, since fireproof construction was not new. The Boston building code of 1885 stated:

*Every building hereafter built or altered to be used as a theatre, for dramatic, operatic or other similar performances, involving the use of a fixed stage...shall be a brick building, and be of fire resisting construction throughout...."*³⁷ *There shall be provided, if practicable, for every theatre, direct exits from the main floor of the auditorium to a street, court or open passage way; and these exits shall be provided with such light doors or sashes, opening outward, and secured only on the inside, as may readily be forced open in case of fire or panic.*³⁸

By the time the Gaiety Theater was built, fireproof construction was commonplace.³⁹

Clarence Blackall established a reputation as an expert on fireproofing. His interest went hand in hand with his penchant for new technology and building materials and his position as editor of *The Brickbuilder*, which promoted construction with brick and terra cotta. *The Brickbuilder* published articles about major fires in London (1898), Baltimore (1904)

³⁴ *Boston Transcript*, 4/21/14.

³⁵ *Boston Globe*, 11/22/08.

³⁶ Advertisement included in Petition for Landmark Status.

³⁷ *1885 Massachusetts Acts, Chapter 374*, section 126

³⁸ *1885 Massachusetts Acts, Chapter 374*, section 127

³⁹ NPS Preservation Brief #15:2.

and San Francisco (1906) Blackall himself wrote about the 1904 Iroquois Theater fire in Chicago, where many lives were lost in part because exits were locked.⁴⁰

Clarence Blackall was instrumental in developing the 1907 standards, and all subsequent theaters built in Boston had to conform to the new code. In 1907, Blackall was appointed by the Mayor of Boston to a commission to prepare a new building code for the city. In his memoir he wrote: "I personally wrote a considerable portion of the law..."⁴¹ As a result of this work, the City of Boston enacted new and tougher standards and established a building department under the charge of a building commissioner.⁴² The new code contained 35 provisions specifically for theaters. They had to be of "fireproof construction throughout" except floorboards and steel work related to stage requirements. They had to have an open court or passageway on both sides, the theater curtain had to be fireproof, doors had to swing outward, and exit doors had to be clearly marked with signs.⁴³

D. Steel Frame Construction

In his May 1908 article in *The Brickbuilder* on theater balcony construction, Clarence Blackall includes two illustrations of how steel beams, girders, and cantilevers were to be used to support the balcony of the planned "new Lyceum Theater" in Boston, which was renamed the Gaiety before opening. The text discusses the advantage over reinforced concrete cantilevers and notes that there would be no visible columns.

Blackall's use of a particularly large steel girder to support the Gaiety balcony demonstrates his knowledge of engineering technology. The last two decades of the 19th century saw major advances in the use of metal columns, girders and trusses, executed in cast iron, wrought iron, and finally steel. By the turn of the century, the use of metal "had economically and safely solved the structural problems of roof span, [and] balcony cantilever" in theaters, according to 19th century architect-historian Edwin O. Sachs, author of *Modern Opera Houses and Theaters* (London, 1896-98).⁴⁴

Steel frame construction was used in Boston beginning in the early 1890s, when Blackall built the first steel-frame skyscraper. His Colonial Theater of 1900 used massive steel girders to hold up the office floors above the theater space.⁴⁵ Jordan Hall, constructed about 1903 by the architectural firm of Wheelwright and Haven for the New England Conservatory of Music, is an earlier example of a Boston theater where the first balcony is not supported by columns.

⁴⁰ *The Brickbuilder*, January, 1904, Vol. 13, No. 1

⁴¹ Blackall, *Seed Time and Harvest*, 355.

⁴² Blackall became well known in the area of fire prevention and building safety. He wrote a new building code for the City of Cambridge in 1908 and consulted on the subject in Salem and other cities. He was chairman of the Committee on Fire Prevention and Insurance for the Boston Chamber of Commerce and in 1911 was appointed to a city fire prevention commission that advocated even stricter fire safety measures.

⁴³ *The Building Law of the City of Boston, Being Chapter 550 of Acts of 1907, with Amendments to Date*, Sections 78-99.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Izenour, *Theatre Design*, Chapter 2, Section 2.12.

⁴⁵ Blackall, Clarence, "Colonial Theatre and Building," series of five articles in *American Architect and Building News*, Vol.71, April 13 - June 1, 1901.

E. Acoustics

It has been speculated that, in designing the Gaiety in 1908, Blackall consulted Wallace Clement Sabine (1868-1919), the Harvard professor who is considered the founder of modern acoustical engineering. Neither Blackall's nor Sabine's papers support this claim. Blackall's writings make it clear that in 1908 he was unconvinced of the value of Sabine's scientific approach. Their first documented collaboration was in 1911.

Wallace Sabine began his work on acoustics as a young assistant professor, when he was asked to fix the acoustics in a newly completed Harvard lecture hall. His experiments led to the formulation, in 1898, of an equation for reverberation time. That year, Sabine was invited to consult on the design of the new Boston Music Hall, which was built according to his suggestions. Completed in 1900 and now known as Symphony Hall, it is considered "The first music hall to be built with rationally preplanned acoustics"⁴⁶ The sabine, a unit of sound absorption, was later named in Sabine's honor.

Blackall's writings show his initial skepticism about Sabine's work. In a 1901-02 article on "Acoustics of Halls and Audiences," in *The Technograph*, a publication of the University of Illinois, Blackall attributed the success with Symphony Hall to the fact that it was based on a specific music hall in Europe, rather than to the "elaborate calculations of Sabine." He wrote that "in most cases where deliberate attempts have been made to scientifically solve in advance the acoustic properties of a house, the results have been more or less failures."⁴⁷ Instead, he offered empirical suggestions based on his own experience.

In his series of articles on theater design in *The Brickbuilder*, Blackall makes similarly dismissive remarks. The March 1908 issue contains the following comment:

*Acoustics is the one baffling problem which has so far set at naught scientific research. There has been some most excellent work done by investigators as Professor Sabine...who has analyzed results most convincingly...but when it comes to determining in advance what the acoustic properties of a given hall shall be, the only guide is experience....If there is today any workable theory for determining acoustic properties of a hall of audience, it has yet to be successfully applied in practice, and the most we can do is draw a few lessons from observed facts, and even these must be applied with fear and trembling....*⁴⁸

Blackall's argument for experience over scientific theory in acoustical design, made in 1908, makes it highly unlikely that he consulted Sabine on the Gaiety.

Sabine's own records do not support the claim that he collaborated on the Gaiety. His research notebooks and correspondence, located at the Harvard University Archives, include a list of consulting fees for the years 1908 to 1909. He had 13 clients throughout the country, including the new Boston Opera House but not the Gaiety.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Hunt, Frederick, Introduction to *Collected Papers on Acoustics*, by Wallace C. Sabine, ix.

⁴⁷ Blackall, C.H., "Acoustics of Halls and Audiences," *The Technograph*, No. 16, 1901-02, 11-12.

⁴⁸ Blackall, C.H., "American Theater IV, Sight Lines," *The Brickbuilder*, Vol. 17, No. 3, March, 1908.

⁴⁹ Notebook #8, Notebooks of Wallace C. Sabine, Harvard University Archives.

By 1911, Blackall had changed his mind about the usefulness of Sabine's scientific approach. A newspaper clipping found in Blackall's scrapbooks reported that Sabine was consulted regarding the New Theater, being planned in New York City about 1911 by Winthrop Ames using Blackall and New York architects Warren & Wetmore. The newspaper article says that Ames and the architects were consulting Sabine, "the leading American authority on acoustics."⁵⁰ This consultation may have been done at the urging of Ames, Blackall's former travel companion, who was looking to build an exceptionally fine performance space. At that point, either Blackall had become convinced of the efficacy of Sabine's work or his colleagues were insisting on the acoustical consultation.

Sabine is documented to have consulted on Blackall's 1913 Scollay Square Theater, located within the Scollay Square Building. Elevations and sound wave diagrams of the Scollay Square appear in Sabine's article "Theatre Acoustics," first published in *The American Architect* (1913) and later as a chapter in the book *Collected Papers on Acoustics* (1923).⁵¹ Sabine wrote that Blackall had adjusted his design for Scollay Square after Sabine conducted his tests. Sabine is also known to have been involved in supervising the acoustics of Blackall's Modern Theater, which opened in 1914. Newspaper articles specifically mention Sabine's involvement.⁵²

It has been stated recently that the presence of sound absorbing materials on the walls of the Gaiety is evidence of Sabine's involvement. Because the wall surface underneath this carpet-padding-type material are decorated (including perhaps two layers of finishes), it is clear that the padding was added later, as a corrective measure. The padding was likely installed as part of remodeling projects in the 1930s or 1940s, when the theater was converted for showing films, as its decorative overlay matches that of the projection booth.

The quality of the Gaiety's acoustics is difficult to determine given present conditions. The building is unheated and is missing most of the seats as well as other building elements that would affect the sound.

3.3 Relationship to Criteria for Landmark Designation

While the Gaiety Theater's story is informative of Boston's entertainment history, the theater does not meet the criteria for Landmark designation found in section four of Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975 as amended, under any of the following criteria:

⁵⁰ Undated clipping headlined "New Theatre's Acoustics/Founders Say Prof. Sabine of Harvard will be Consulted about New House," Clarence Blackall scrapbooks, newspaper clipping book, Boston Public Library. Unknown newspaper.

⁵¹ Sabine, Wallace, "Theatre Acoustics," *The American Architect*, Vol. CIV, 1913, Reprinted in Sabine's *Collected Papers on Acoustics* (Dover Edition, 1964), 188-191.

⁵² *Boston Herald*, 6/25/1914.

A. as a property on the National Register of Historic Places. The Gaiety Theater is not listed on the National Register. It would need to be listed as significant at the state or national level to qualify for Boston Landmark designation.

B. as a property identified prominently with an important aspect of the economic, social and political history of the city, the commonwealth, and the region. The Columbia Wheel was run out of New York City. Shows that played the Gaiety were produced in many different cities and the Gaiety was simply a venue. For Boston residents, the Gaiety was one of many theaters offering live entertainment in the 1910s and 1920s, much of it popularly priced. The Gaiety was one of a number of theaters offering burlesque in "clean" or "hot" forms. The Gaiety's heyday was short lived, lasting less than two decades.

C. as a structure associated significantly with the lives of outstanding historic personages. Performers who were well known in the world of burlesque played the Gaiety as one of many stops on the annual circuit. However, these performers are not "associated significantly" with this particular theater just because they performed there.

D. as a property representative of elements of architectural design embodying distinctive characteristics of a type inherently valuable for study of a period, style or method of construction or development, or a notable work of an architect, landscape architect, designer, or builder. The Gaiety is not exceptional in its type, style or method of construction and is not a notable work by architect Clarence Blackall. Documentation does not support the speculation that Wallace Sabine, the founder of modern acoustical engineering, collaborated with Blackall on the design of the Gaiety.

4.0 ECONOMIC STATUS

4.1 Current Assessed Value

According to the City of Boston Assessor's records, the property located at 659-665 Washington Street, Boston, has a total assessed value of \$1,622,000.00, with the land valued at \$992,400.00 and the building at \$629,600.00.

4.2 Current Ownership

This property is owned by 665 Washington Street, LLP, c/o Kensington Investment Co., 347 Congress Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02210.

5.0 PLANNING CONTEXT

5.1 Background

Known as Orange Street on early maps, Washington Street was important in the early years of settlement as the only land route leading off what was then a peninsula. Nearby Tremont Street was in place by 1803, when Osgood Carleton drew his "Plan of Boston." Carleton's map shows no streets within the block bounded by the present Tremont, Boylston, Washington and Stuart Streets. By mid century, LaGrange Street had been cut through and brick row houses built on either side.

By the late 19th century, the area was taking on its present mixed-use character. On the site of the Gaiety Theater was the "World's Museum," later replaced by the Lyceum Theater. Within a block were the Hotel Boylston, Masonic Temple, Boston YMCU, Boylston Market, and two other theaters, the Tremont and Park. As is true today, the city's main retail district was located a few blocks to the north. South of Kneeland Street, block after block of brick row houses once stood on the site of the present Tufts New England Medical Center and Massachusetts Turnpike.

When the Gaiety was built in 1908, the area was well established as the city's main entertainment district. Ten other theaters were operating in the immediate vicinity, offering everything from serious drama to travelogues. Four more theaters were built by the early 1920s, including the Olympia directly across the street. Residential row housing south of Kneeland Street was still largely intact at the time of the 1938 atlas, which also shows the huge Metropolitan Theater on Tremont Street and new Stuart Theater at the corner of Washington and Kneeland Streets. Increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants were settling in the brick row houses east of Washington Street, where they established a cohesive Chinese community.

After World War II, Boston was one of many American cities that pursued urban renewal projects in an effort to turn around decaying city centers and run-down neighborhoods. By the 1960s, when Scollay Square had been razed to construct Government Center, the adult entertainment district it had hosted migrated to Lower Washington Street and became known as the Combat Zone. In the Gaiety Building, the men's clothing store that had occupied a storefront for decades was replaced by an adult book store and the New York Sandwich Shop by a liquor store. By 1975, a nightclub had replaced the liquor store and many of the upper floor offices were vacant. An X-rated cinema had opened up nearby on Washington Street.

In 1961 members of the Boston architectural community prepared *The Architects Plan*. Among other recommendations to revitalize the central part of Boston, the 1961 plan proposed the development of new towers from the Government Center area proceeding southerly along the Tremont and Washington Street corridors and then turning westerly below Boston Common to follow the Mass Turnpike. The 1961 plan first used the term "High Spine" for the procession of towers and "Hinge Block" for the block containing the Gaiety Theater, where the High Spine pivoted sharply west toward the Back Bay.

Many municipal plans that followed included the Hinge Block, estimated to be as many as 15 plans to date. Major ones included *The General Plan for the City* (1965), developed out of the 1960 zoning code, and the *Park Plaza Urban Renewal Plan* (1971). Zoning to formalize the adult entertainment district dates to 1974.

Created in 1975, partly as a reaction to urban renewal plans and projects, the Boston Landmarks Commission (BLC) focused on identifying and protecting central Boston's historic buildings as well as those in neighborhoods. Because the BLC's enabling statute precludes Landmark District designation downtown, the designation of individual Landmarks and the listing of buildings and districts on the National Register of Historic Places became primary activities of the commission.

The Theater District Survey, completed in 1978, and the Central Business District survey, completed in 1979, identified those buildings clearly eligible for local Landmark designation and for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

As part of the Theater District Survey, theaters were subjected to a more detailed evaluation to determine relative significance and eligibility for National Register and/or Landmark designation. This study included 18 theaters within the survey area and two outside the area. Based on the survey, six theaters were recommended for designation as Boston Landmarks: the Savoy/Keith Memorial, Saxon/Majestic, Colonial, Music Hall/Metropolitan/Wang, Paramount, and Wilbur.

Between 1977 and 2003, a total of 10 Theater District buildings have been designated as Boston Landmarks:

- Boylston Building (China Trade Building)
- Boston Young Men's Christian Union
- Hayden Building

all three of the above located within the Hinge Block, also

- Liberty Tree Building
- Paramount (exterior and interior)
- Wang Theater (Metropolitan) (interior)
- Wilbur Theater (exterior and interior)
- Keith Memorial Theater (Opera House) (exterior and interior)
- Emerson Majestic Theater (exterior and interior) and
- Modern Theater (exterior)

The Theater District Multiple Resource Nomination (1980) listed four districts with a total of 45 buildings:

- Liberty Tree District
- Beach Knapp District
- West Street District and
- Piano Row

The Theater District MRN also included 10 National Register listings for individual buildings including four theaters:

- Charles Playhouse/Fifth Universalist Church
- Shubert

Metropolitan and
Wilbur

The Washington Street Theater District -- including the Modern, Paramount, Keith Memorial/Opera House and four other buildings -- had achieved National Register status the prior year (1979).

The *Midtown Cultural District Plan* represented a comprehensive effort in the late 1980s to unite several of the City of Boston's objectives for growth in the area, including new and rehabilitated theaters, increased housing for Chinatown and the downtown areas, historic preservation, and transportation access. The plan called for renovation and reuse of the Keith Memorial/Opera House as well as neglected historic buildings in the Washington Street Theater District and the Liberty Tree District.

The *Midtown Cultural District Plan* concluded that preservation of the Gaiety Theater needed further study. The plan identified the Hinge Block at the center of the district and created a Hinge Block Special Study Area. Ultimately the plan resulted in Article 38, Midtown Cultural District Zoning, identifying three PDA's (Planned Development Areas) where increased density would be allowed. An amendment to Article 38 created PDA IV within the block where the Gaiety Theater is located. PDA's allow developers to mitigate additional height and density by offering other amenities that contribute to BRA and City of Boston planning goals.

5.2 Current Planning Issues

A subsidiary of the Kensington Investment Company, Inc. purchased the Gaiety Theater on October 28, 1986. The Gaiety is within their assembly of four buildings and a vacant parcel to create PDA IV (in Article 38 as amended). The Gaiety had ceased showing movies before the present owners acquired it, probably around 1980. The last tenant left the building in 1998, when an Asian seafood market and grocery store closed, following an order by the Boston Fire Department that would have necessitated a sprinkler system for the entire building.

The project for the Residences at Kensington Place as currently proposed results in a high-rise tower, low-rise townhouses along LaGrange Street, an elevated public courtyard, a widened Boylston Place with increased pedestrian amenities and access to the China Trade building, approximately 7,000 square feet of retail on the first floor and underground parking. A total of 336 units are proposed, 50 affordable (15%).

The Boston Landmarks Commission invoked demolition delay under Article 85 for all four of the buildings in the parcel in September 2002. The 90-day delay expired for the Gaiety Theater December 9, 2002. State Register consultation with the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) is ongoing, with the participation of the BLC. The project approvals schedule calls for MHC and the BLC to sign a Memorandum of Agreement in April that would spell out mitigation required for "adverse impacts" upon historic resources including the loss of the Gaiety Theater. A petition for designation of the Gaiety Theater as a Boston Landmark was accepted by the Boston Landmarks Commission on November 26, 2002 by a 5-to-4 vote.

The project review and approval process began in November 2001. The FPIR (Final Project Impact Report) is scheduled for filing in March 2003, to be accompanied with a 60-day comment period. The PDA Development Plan, to be submitted in March 2003 as well, will trigger a 45-day comment period. All approvals are anticipated by June 2003.

5.3 Current Zoning

The Gaiety Theater is located within PDA IV of the Midtown Cultural District. The allowed maximum height is 290 feet and the maximum FAR is 15.4.

6.0 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

6.1 Alternatives available to the Boston Landmarks Commission:

A. Individual Landmark Designation

Surveyed by the Boston Landmarks Commission in 1979 as part of the *Theatre Area Survey*, the Gaiety was not determined eligible for designation as a Boston Landmark. This more thorough study finds that the Gaiety Theater, while possessing a lively past, which contributes to the city's entertainment history, falls short of meeting any of the criteria, historic or architectural, required for designation as a Boston Landmark (see section 3.3).

B. Denial of Individual Landmark Designation

The commission retains the option of not designating the Gaiety Theater as a Landmark.

C. Preservation Restriction

Chapter 666 of the M.G.L. Acts of 1969, allows individuals to protect the architectural integrity of their property via a preservation restriction. Such agreements are recorded instruments (normally deeds) that run with the land for a specific term or in perpetuity, thereby binding not only the owner who conveyed the restriction, but also subsequent owners. While the commission could recommend that the owner consider a preservation restriction, the owner has completed the Landmarks Commission's 90-day demolition delay period and is anticipating final approvals for new construction in spring of 2003.

D. Preservation Plan

On March 3, 2003 the owner released a new feasibility study for the renovation of the Gaiety Theater. The conclusion states that reuse of the theater is possible and also lists major obstacles to reuse.

E. National Register Listing

The Massachusetts Historical Commission has determined that the Gaiety Theater is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. National Register listing provides recognition and may provide incentives for the rehabilitation of historic properties.

F. Memorandum of Agreement

Because the Gaiety Theater is listed in *The Inventory of Historical and Archaeological Assets of the Commonwealth*, the Secretary of Environmental Affairs' certificate dated January 25, 2003 requires the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) to execute a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the owner of the Gaiety Theater and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection to mitigate the loss of the building. Typically, mitigation measures include an interpretive element. The Boston Landmarks Commission will be a concurring party to the MOA. The commission retains the option of recommending that the MOA include a well-developed public interpretive component celebrating burlesque and the Gaiety Theater's contribution to the city's entertainment history.

6.2 Impact of Alternatives

A. Individual Landmark Designation

Landmark designation represents the City's highest honor and is therefore restricted to cultural resources of outstanding architectural and/or historical significance.

Landmark designation under Chapter 772 requires review of physical changes to the Specified Exterior and /or Specified Interior Features as described in the study report. This study report does not include any Specified Exterior or Interior Features to be designated or any Standards and Criteria for design review, since the Gaiety does not qualify for designation.

B. Denial of Individual Landmark Designation

Without Landmark designation, the City would be unable to offer protection for the building or guide future changes to the building under Chapter 772.

C. Preservation Restriction

As noted in Section 6.1, above, the owner is planning to demolish the building and therefore this is not a realistic option.

D. Preservation Plan

The feasibility study dated March 3, 2003 allows the owner to work with interested parties to investigate various adaptive use scenarios, analyze investment costs and rates of return, and reconsider all options for development of the property.

E. National Register

National Register listing provides an honorary designation and limited protection from federal, federally-licensed or federally-assisted activities. It also creates incentives for preservation, notably the federal investment tax credit for historic rehabilitation and grants through the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Listing on the National Register does not provide protection regarding projects that are privately funded.

E. Memorandum of Agreement

A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the owner of a building and the Massachusetts Historical Commission will specify measures to be taken to mitigate the loss of a building, as is planned for the Gaiety Theater. A well-defined, public interpretive element in the MOA, will make the history and architecture of the Gaiety Theater more accessible to the public than it has been since its heyday as a burlesque theater.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Gaiety Theater does not meet the criteria for Landmark designation as found in section four of Chapter 772, Acts of 1975, as amended, for reasons cited in Section 3.3 of this report.

To reprise the findings, while burlesque was an important form of entertainment in the United States in the early 20th century, the Gaiety Theater in Boston did not contribute in any special way to the development or accomplishments of burlesque. The Gaiety's shows did not originate in Boston and they were not unique to this theater. The building is not architecturally significant, in part because the exterior and interior designs are relatively unremarkable, and more importantly because the interior fabric has been severely compromised and the theater is no longer intact. Neither the building construction nor its acoustics are advanced for its times and the speculation that Wallace Sabine collaborated on the design is unfounded.

Therefore, the staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission recommends that the Gaiety Theater not be designated a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended.

As an alternative, the staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission recommends that execution of a Memorandum of Agreement between the developer and the Massachusetts Historical Commission, with the Boston Landmarks Commission as a concurring party, include a well-defined, well-developed and creative public interpretive element celebrating burlesque and the Gaiety Theater's contribution to the city's entertainment history.

An onsite exhibit should include historical information, plans and elevations, photographs and theater memorabilia. It should also include architectural fragments from the interior of the theater itself. These fragments could be among the following: 1) the one remaining bust of the Gaiety Girls that originally stood on the posts above the boxes; 2) a fragment from the proscenium arch, preferably including the central Gaiety Girl motif, with a detailed drawing of the same; 3) samples of the original colors and stenciling taken from the second balcony; 4) one of the original orchestra seats and one or more of the second balcony seats; 5) the exterior "Gaiety Theatre" sign band.

There is an additional opportunity for the owner to form an ongoing partnership with an appropriate theater history or theater performance group. The owner should be encouraged in the MOA to explore this option in order to help assure that the story of the Gaiety Theater is especially accessible to theater historians and theater performers.

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APPENDIX

The following list of productions has been drawn from newspapers and playbills in the Harvard Theater Collection and should be viewed in the context of the "Burlesque: Background" section, which describes the Columbia's rise and fall, the advent of the Mutual Burlesque Association in the early 1920s, and the gradual downslide from "clean" burlesque to striptease. Descriptive material is from the original playbills. Versions of many of these shows played year after year.

1908-1909: Charles Waldron's *Trocadero Burlesquers*, with Frank Finney (1908, opening show); Harry Hastings and Thomas Coyne *The Hastings Show*, also music and dancing, with Fitzgibbons-McCoy trio of instrumentalists and vocalists (1908).

1910-1915: Max Spiegel production *The College Girls* a classy musical frivolity (1910); B.M. Anderson enterprise *The New Star and Garter Show* in a musical satire entitled "The Flirting Widow" (1910); *Midnight Maidens* with Harry A. Emerson; P.S. Clark Amusement Company, *Clark's Runaway Girls* featuring The Burke Brothers (1912-13 season); Joe Hurtig presents Billy W. Watson, with his famous Funny Little Slide and the Girls from Happyland and the new burlesque sensation *The Flying Dutchman* (1912-13 season); *The Harry Hastings Show* (1913).

1915-1920: Jean Bedini's *Parisian Novelty Show*, with Clark and McCullough (1918); *Hip-Hip Hooray Girls*, with Ben Pierce and the 6 diving belles (1918); *Hello America* with vaudeville's best comedians Lewis and Dody (1918); Billy Watson and his Big Girl Show (1918); *Circus in Town* with comedian Sam Sidman (1918); Solly Ward and Roseland Girls (1918); Ben Welch and his Big Show (1918); Dave "Snuffy" Marion and his own company in the second edition of *World of Frolics* (1918); Comedian Al Reeves and his *Big Beauty Show* (1918); Max Spiegel's *Merry Rounders* with Abe Reynolds and Florence Mills (1918); *Fred Irwin's Big Show* (1918); Mollie Williams, Herself and her Greatest Show (1918); Jim Barton in *Box Car Bennie* (1918); Charles Waldron's Own *Boston Burlesquers*, with Frank Finney's Funny Folks (1918); Jacobs & Jermon Inc. *The Golden Crook* with Billy Arlington (1918, 1919); Barney Gerard's *Follies of the Day* the classiest show of them all (1919).

1920-1925: I.H. Herk, *The Beauty Trust in Nedra*; Joe Hurtig in the all new *The Bowery Burlesquers*, with Billy Foster and Frank Harcourt (1920); Jean Bedini's *Peak-A-Boo* with Clark & McCullough, a kaleidoscopic musical excitement of topics and events (1920); Barney Gerard presents Watson & Cohan and the *Girls-de-Looks* in the swiftest musical farce of the season (1920); Barney Gerard, has written his fourteenth annual *Follies of the Day* featuring "Bozo" Synder, Gertrude Hayes Jr. and Johnny Webber (this production stayed several weeks) (1922); *Broadway Brevities*, original New York Winter Garden Production with Lena Daley (1923); *Jimmy Cooper Himself and his Beauty Revue* (1923); Hurtig & Seamon's *Step On It* (1923); Harry M. Strouse, *The Talk of the Town*, a musical review...with Eddie Hall (1924); Columbia Burlesque Brandell & Travers offers Frank Hunter with *The Best Show in Town* featuring the Sunshine Girls, 10 acrobats and a chorus (1924).

1925-March, 1927: Charles (Tramp) McNally in *A Gay Old Time*, with Sid Gold and Joe Yule (1925); Billy Watson presenting the original version of *Krousemeyer's Alley* (1925); *Happy Moments*, with Lew White (1925); "All Colored Musical Burlesque" *Lucky Sambo* (1925); Lena Daley and her great show *Miss Tobasco* (1925); Harry Steppe's *OK* (1926); *Kosher Kitty Kelly* (1926); *Wine, Woman and Song* (1926); *Uncle Tom and Eva in Burlesque* (1927); *Kongo*, "The Greatest of all Sex Dramas" (1927).

April, 1927- 1928: Earl Carrolls' *White Cargo* "the original sex play" (1927); by arrangement with Sam Harris, Lewis Talbot presents *Rain*, "original Broadway production" (1927); Tommy Snyder in a musical play *Bozo* (written, directed and produced by Snyder) (1927); *Bringing Up Father in Politics*, A new Cartoon Musical Comedy Supreme, based on Geo McManus Cartoon, not a moving picture, with Beatrice Harlowe, Pete Curley, Jimmy Connors and Several Surprise Specialties (1927); *Girls of the USA* with (Red Hot) Norma Noel and George Carroll, a musical with a pre-war kick, in 10 scenes and 2 acts (1928); Max Fields in *Kuddling Kuties* New Faces, New Shows every week (1928).

1935-1940: *Over the Top* with Charles McNally and Annette Ross, *Oriental China Dolls*, with Sen Lee and Myrna Dean, *Bottoms Up* with Nadine Marsh, and *Stars and Strips*, Tanga, the Spanish Dance Sensation, *Too Hot for Paris* with Dorothy Henry, *The Merry Rounders* with Elenore Dale, *The Girl in the Milk Bath* with Dorothy Henry, and the 6'4" Lois DeFee *Queen of the Amazons*.

The following are the Boston theaters designed by Clarence Blackall, excluding theaters that he remodeled.

Bowdoin Square Theatre, One Bowdoin Sq. (1892)
Castle Square Theatre, 421 Tremont St. (1894)
Colonial, 100 Boylston St. (1900)
Unique Theatre, 700 Washington St, Roxbury (1907)
Pastime Theatre, 581 Washington St. (Feb., 1908) with Frank Chouteau Brown
Gaiety (later Publix), 659-677 Washington St. (November 1908)
Waldron's Casino, Hanover St. (April, 1909)
Beacon Theater, 51 Tremont St (1911)
Plymouth (later Gary), 125 Eliot St. (1911)
National Theatre, 535 Tremont Street, South End (1911)
Eagle Theatre (movie house), 2227 Washington St, Roxbury (1912)
Washington Street (Gordon's) Olympia (later Pilgrim), 650 Washington St. (1912)
Modern, 523 Washington St. (1913, constructed within older building)
Cort, Park Square (1913-14)
Scolly Square Theater (within the Scolly Square Building, 1913)
Wilbur, 250 Tremont St. (1914)
Park Square Theatre, Park Square (1916)
Broadway Theatre, South Boston (1921)
Criterion Theatre, 1122 Columbus Avenue, Roxbury (1921)
Jamaica Theatre, 413 Centre St, Jamaica Plain (1922)
Capitol Theatre, Tremont St, within Commonwealth Building) (1924)
Metropolitan (Music Hall, Wang), 252-270 Tremont St. (1925)⁵³

⁵³ Blackall, *Seed Time and Harvest*, 493.