

**The Commission for Historical and
Architectural Preservation**

**Landmark Designation Staff Report
June 14, 2016**



The Ambassador Theatre

4604 Liberty Heights Ave.
Baltimore, Maryland



COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION

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Summary

Located in the northwestern neighborhood of Howard Park, the Art Deco- style Ambassador Theatre was one of the most modern theaters in the city when it opened in 1935. The theater was designed by prominent Baltimore architect John J. Zink for Durkee Enterprises, the largest neighborhood movie theater company in the city. The Ambassador is considered to be one of Zink's most exuberant designs. When it opened, Frank Durkee called the Ambassador "the realization of an ideal, a crowning achievement." It was modern, luxurious, and technologically advanced. The theater is significant for its role in the development of Northwest Baltimore and theater design, and serves as an excellent example of Art Deco architecture.

Property History

The Ambassador Theatre is located on Liberty Heights Avenue in the northwestern neighborhood of Howard Park. This neighborhood was developed in the early 20th century as a streetcar suburb. The Art Deco-style Ambassador Theatre opened in 1935 in the busy commercial area known as Gwynn Oak Junction.

Building permits for the theater were submitted in 1933, which led to a "nasty political situation," and a two year battle ensued in City Council and the courts.¹ The owners of the Gwynn Theater, built in 1933 just across the street at 4609 Liberty Heights Avenue, fought the construction of the Ambassador, which they saw as competition. The Ambassador was owned by Durkee Enterprises, the largest neighborhood theater company. The Rome circuit, the second-largest neighborhood theater company, had a half-ownership interest in the Gwynn Theater.²

Nearby residents also protested the new theater, citing the crowded conditions that already existed because of the existing theater.³ One couple filed suit, citing that the construction of the theater violated zoning law.⁴ But other neighbors supported it, claiming that it was much needed by the surrounding 1,500 residents, and that it would supply jobs for 1,000 men during its construction, and 14 permanent jobs.⁵ After a year of deliberations, the City Council approved a bill that allowed for the construction of the theater.⁶

The Forest Park Theater Company (which was owned by Durkee Enterprises) acquired title to the property in February 1935.⁷ Once the injunction suit by the Gwynn Amusement Company was dismissed in May 1935, construction began on the theater almost immediately.⁸ The construction firm E. Eyring and Sons built the theater. The competition between the Ambassador and Gwynn theaters was negated when the Durkee and Rome companies merged later that year.⁹

The Ambassador Theatre opened on September 18, 1935, with ceremonies that featured Governor Harry Nice and Mayor Howard Jackson. Frank Durkee stated at the opening that the Ambassador "is the realization of an ideal, a crowning achievement, for no city in the world has a more modern, more luxurious, or more perfectly conceived theatre."¹⁰

Durkee was certainly lavish in his praise of his newest theater, but he wasn't exaggerating very much. According to movie theater historian Robert Kirk Headley, Jr., the Ambassador was the first truly modern movie house in Baltimore.¹¹ The sightlines, acoustics, technical advancements, interior, and comforts were all superb, and the theater even included a nursery for children.

Movie attendance reached a new high in the 1940s, particularly during World War II.¹² In part, this could be because theaters showed news reels about the war prior to the advent of television. Movie theaters helped finance the war effort by selling war bonds. The Ambassador Theatre participated in this effort, and sold over \$52,000 of war bonds and stamps between June and September in 1942. In addition, each day, the theater honored a local serviceman.¹³

The 1950s saw a huge decline in the movie theater industry in Baltimore (and the nation), due to the rising popularity of television and drive-in theaters.¹⁴ The Ambassador Theatre was the site of a labor strike in 1954, when the Local 181 of the Independent Projectionists union picketed the Ambassador as part of a larger protest that Durkee enterprises did not recognize the union and had fired several union members.¹⁵

In the 1960s, the Ambassador became one of the first neighborhood theaters to show first-run films.¹⁶ Until the mid-20th century, only a few large downtown theaters had the rights to show first-run films. This exclusivity ensured customers. The majority of theatres in Baltimore were second- or third-run theatres, showing films a certain number of weeks after their release at more modest prices in smaller neighborhood theatres.¹⁷

The theater closed in 1968, and was sold to Ulysses and Anne Dickens and David and Gloria Richeson.¹⁸ Ulysses Dickens and David Richeson operated Park Terrace Caterers. They operated a dance hall and catering business in the building for several years.¹⁹ This use was vehemently opposed by the neighborhood, with the Howard Park Civic Association calling the dance hall "a danger to the community."²⁰ Co-owner David Richeson later went on to become the founder of two popular nightclubs downtown, Gatsby's and the Ritz.²¹

The past thirty years has seen various uses for the former theater. In the 1980s, it was a roller-skating rink. It later served as a cosmetology school and became a church in 2001 when it was purchased by Zion Walls Power of God Ministries, Inc.²²

In 2006, the building was purchased by Larry Gaston Enterprises.²³ The property was offered at auction in 2009, but the property did not receive bids that met the owner's expectations and there was no sale.²⁴ The property has been vacant since at least 2009, perhaps earlier. The theater suffered a fire in 2012, which was described by the owner as "minimal." With the new Shoprite grocery store across the street, the community has expressed hope that the Ambassador Theatre can complement the new construction.²⁵

The Ambassador Theatre is not listed on any historic registers, but it is likely eligible for inclusion on the Federal and State historic registers.

Contextual History

Howard Park is one of several late 19th/early 20th century streetcar suburbs located in what is now Northwest Baltimore. It began developing in Baltimore County prior to annexation into the city. Gwynn Oak Junction, where the Ambassador Theatre is located, was established by Nicholas Smith and William Schwartz as a streetcar junction in 1894 for the Walbrook, Gwynn Oak, and Powhattan Railroad Company.²⁶ These two men created the streetcar suburb of Howard Park, following a pattern of land speculation and development that was common at the turn of the 20th century across the U.S. The streetcar lines were the first step in the development of the “ideal” suburbs.²⁷ Smith and Schwartz purchased 389 acres along Liberty Road in 1894, and quickly created the streetcar company and established Gwynn Oak Park. The streetcar line was running by the time Gwynn Oak Park opened on May 15, 1895.²⁸ They then began selling land, the development of which moved slowly in the first decade of the 20th century. The action that sparked the greatest development was the annexation by Baltimore City in 1918, which brought amenities such as sewer, water, gas, electricity, and paved streets.²⁹

By the early 1930s, residential and commercial development was booming in Northwest Baltimore along the Liberty Heights corridor. A 1937 newspaper article about the high demand for housing in Ashburton and Liberty Heights stated that Gwynn Oak Junction had “two large motion picture theaters which draw large crowds at night.” The article also noted the high density of shops, the lack of vacancies, the plentiful parking, and the rapidly increasing population in the neighborhood, which was driving the commercial boom.³⁰

The Ambassador Theatre was a community hub in Howard Park through its 33- year existence.³¹ Michael Olesker, a journalist who grew up in Northwest Baltimore, stated that the Ambassador Theatre was the heart of Gwynn Oak Junction in the 1950s.³² Baltimore filmmaker Barry Levinson, who also grew up in the neighborhood, remembers seeing the film “On The Waterfront” in 1954 at the Ambassador – which he credits as a defining moment in his life.³³

The Ambassador Theatre was owned by F.H. Durkee Enterprise, headed by Frank Durkee. This was the largest chain of neighborhood theaters in Baltimore for over forty years. According to movie theater historian Robert Headley, what Durkee said was gospel in the local movie business. The circuit also owned theaters and drive-ins in other parts of Maryland. When Frank Durkee died in 1955, the company operated 23 theaters.³⁴

The Ambassador Theatre was designed by prominent Baltimore architect John J. Zink, who was a theater architect *par excellence*, according to Robert Headley.³⁵ Zink designed over 100 theaters in Maryland, Washington, D.C., Virginia and Delaware, twelve of which were in Baltimore City. As a young man, Zink studied at the Maryland Institute College of Art, worked for the Baltimore architecture firm Wyatt & Nolting, and worked with prominent New York theater architect Thomas Lamb.³⁶ He was a member of the American Institute of Architects, and was the Vice President of the Baltimore chapter of the AIA.³⁷ He is best known for his Art Deco-style theaters, but he also designed in the

Colonial and Classical Revival styles.³⁸ Two of his theaters are Baltimore City Landmarks: the Patterson and the Senator, which is also a Public Interior Landmark. Other jurisdictions recognize his works as local landmarks as well.

The Ambassador is one of the best examples of an Art Deco- style theater in Baltimore City, and is one of Zink's finest theater designs. In *Baltimore Deco*, Sheryl Cucchiella describes the significance and function of Art Deco architecture in theaters, which "tended to draw the viewer inside through the overall design and the use of flashy finish materials...These sculptural, geometric buildings were designed for the pleasure, escape, and enjoyment of the movie-going public."³⁹

While the Senator Theater is today considered Zink's finest Baltimore theater, the Ambassador held that title in its heyday. It was larger, earlier, and was the most technologically advanced theater in Baltimore when it opened. The Ambassador is considered to be one of Zink's most "successful and exuberant designs," according to Robert Headley.⁴⁰ Many former patrons of the Ambassador Theatre felt that it was superior to the Senator.⁴¹ While the building has suffered from fires and a lack of maintenance, today it still retains the exterior character-defining features that make it architecturally significant. The Ambassador Theatre originally had a more ornate interior than the Senator, but it has not survived.⁴²

Architectural Description

The Ambassador Theatre is a free-standing two- story movie theater, constructed mid-block in the 4600 block of Liberty Heights Ave. An alley located behind the theater allows for rear egress. The building is of brick construction, with steel supports. The façade of the building is constructed with buff brick with bands of black brick, Vitriolite, and ornamental stone. The building is three bays wide, with an entrance in the center bay. This entrance does not appear to retain any historic integrity, having been altered over the years and recently suffering from a fire. The entrance is currently boarded up with plywood. Above the center bay is a large horizontal marquee that projects over the sidewalk by more than ten feet. Covered by a metal horizontal marquee from the 1950s until 2015, the original Vitriolite marquee is currently exposed. The two outer bays feature three poster frames, horizontal brick banding, octagonal stone details, and are missing horizontal bands of Vitriolite. Although two stories in height overall, the façade of the building is one story tall at the sidewalk, and steps up and back in a series of recesses above the entrance. These steps have been covered with metal. The vertical AMBASSADOR marquee is located to left of the entrance, rising higher than the building itself. The two outer bays of the building feature two semi-circular projections (which held stairways to a nursery and a projection room, respectively) on the second story, as well as decorative horizontal banding.⁴³ The rest of the building is constructed with a red brick. This design is consistent with other Art Deco and Art Deco theater architecture in Baltimore during the 1930s.

Originally, the theatre had a canopy that led from the street to the building entrance, similar to that at a fancy hotel. It also utilized multiple colors of neon lighting in the marquees, vertical elements, ticket box, and lighting on the building itself, with amber beacons atop the marquee tower, and lights that shown blue, red, green and amber on the recesses of the step-back portion of the building.⁴⁴

Staff Recommendation

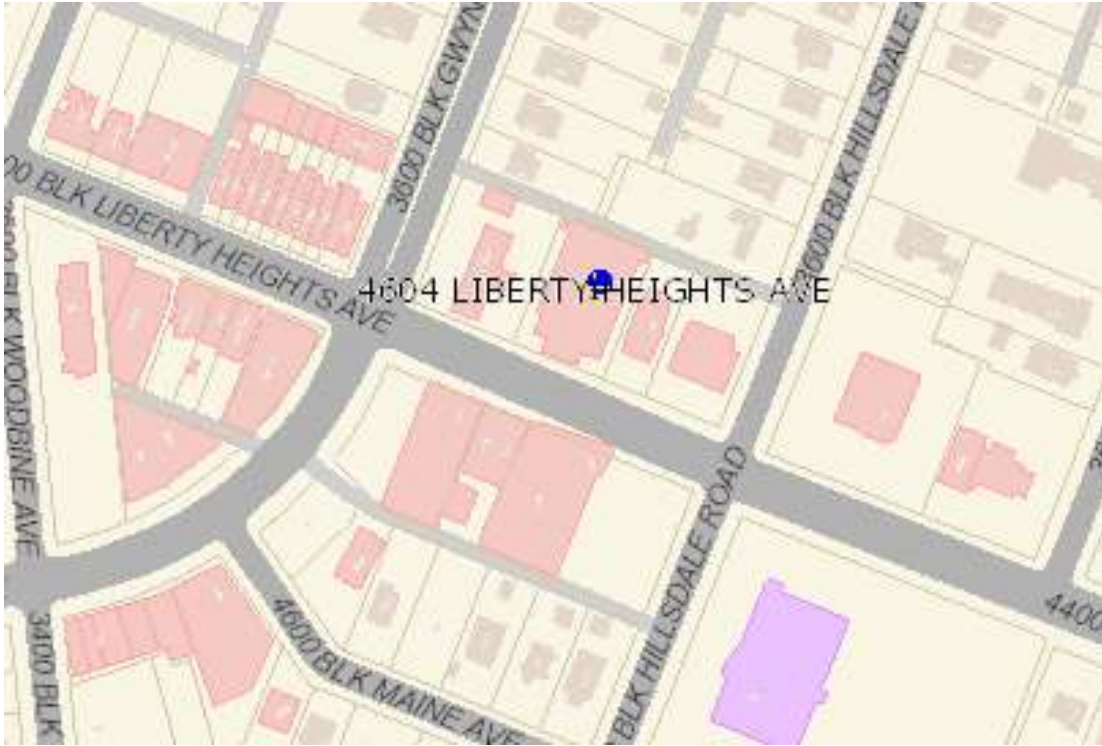
The Ambassador Theatre qualifies for landmark designation meeting the following standards:

B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:

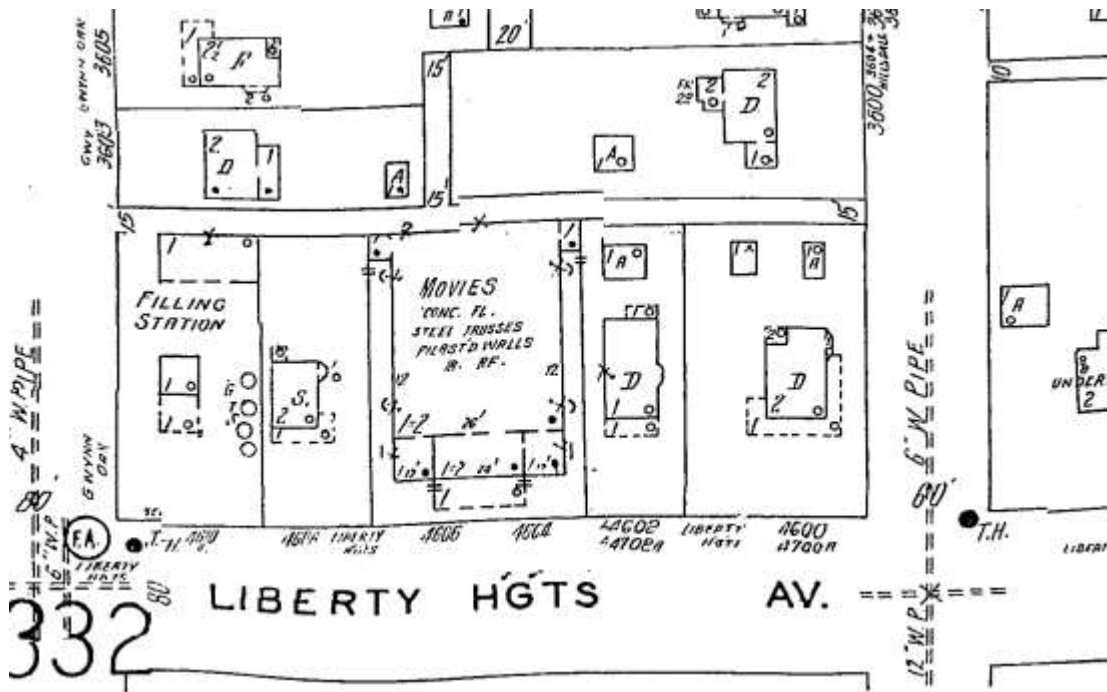
1. is associated with events that have made significant contributions to the broad patterns of Baltimore history
3. embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represents the work of a master, or that possesses high artistic values, or that represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction

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Locator Map



Historic Map



1951 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, with the Ambassador Theatre marked in red. (Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps 1914-1951, Vol. 9, 1951, Sheet 1370)

Historic Images



"The Ambassador Theatre" BGE Print and Negative Collection, BGE.8990, taken in 1935. (BGE Collection of the Baltimore Museum of Industry)



Ambassador Theatre, circa 1956. (Courtesy of Frank Durkee III, provided by Amy Davis)

Photos



Façade of the Ambassador Theatre in November 2013.



Detail of Cornice in November 2013.



Detail of marquee in November 2013.



Façade, June 2016.



Façade, June 2016.



Side elevation, June 2016.



Side, showing deterioration of roof, June 2016.

¹ “MOVIE BILL STORM CENTER IN COUNCIL: Measure Said To Have Caused ...”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); Jan 9, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 22

² “MOVIE BILL STORM CENTER IN COUNCIL: Measure Said To Have Caused ...”; “MOVIE THEATER BILL ADVANCED BY 10-9 VOTE: Measure Pits Neighborhood ...”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); Jan 15, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 24

³ “Against A Movie Theater--From The Point Of View Of A Home Owner”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); Jan 12, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 10

⁴ “Mrs. Leser Urges Votes For Museum Bond Issue”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); May 7, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 4

⁵ John L. Charlton, “The Argument For A Movie Theater--From The Point Of View Of Promoting Industry”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); Jan 12, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 10

⁶ “LIBERTY HEIGHTS MOVIE BILL PASSED: Measure Granting Permit For New ...”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); Jan 22, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 15

⁷ “REAL ESTATE DEALS AND BUILDING NEWS: Construction Here Last Month Smaller In Volume”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); Feb 2, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 19

⁸ “Mrs. Mary A. Dillon Given Absolute Divorce”, *The Sun* (1837-1987); May 30, 1935; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 9

⁹ Robert K. Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Co. 2006), pg.112, 296.

¹⁰ Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg.195.

¹¹ Robert Kirk Headley, Jr. *Exit: A History of Movies in Baltimore* (Baltimore: Robert Kirk Headley, Jr., 1974), pg. 43.

¹² Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg.147.

¹³ *Ibid*, pg.133.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg.148.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg.149.

¹⁶ Edward Gunts “Ambassador: No Sale: Auction Fails to Hit Owner’s Price for Howard Park Theater That’s Akin to the Senator” *The Baltimore Sun* [Baltimore, Md] 10 July 2009: n/a; Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg.160.

¹⁷ Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg.133.

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- ¹⁸ Forest Park Theatre Company, Deed to Ulysses G. Dickens et al. October 10, 1968, Baltimore City Superior Court, Liber RHB 2432, Folio 340.
- ¹⁹ Headley, *Exit: A History of Movies in Baltimore*, pg. 43.
- ²⁰ “Residents say dance hall ‘is danger to community’” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Nov 16, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), pg. 1
- ²¹ P. Tatum “FBI nabs Charles Butler, home for holiday season”, *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Jan 10, 1987; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), pg. 16; Bill Rhoden “Two generations of Baltimore nightlife”, *The Sun (1837-1987)*; Mar 10, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. B5
- ²² Stephanie Shapiro “Old theaters find new roles to play”, *The Sun (1837-1987)*; Apr 12, 1986; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 1D; Edward Gunts, “AMBASSADOR: NO SALE: AUCTION FAILS TO HIT OWNER'S PRICE FOR HOWARD PARK THEATER THAT'S AKIN TO THE SENATOR”, [The Baltimore Sun](#) [Baltimore, Md] 10 July 2009: n/a.; Ronald G. Thomas and Von D. Thomas and John R. Francomano, Confirmatory Deed to Zion Walls Power of God Ministries, Inc. November 22, 2002. Baltimore City Circuit Court (Land Records), Liber FMC 3524, Folio 293.
- ²³ Zion Walls Power of God Ministries, Inc. Deed to Larry Gaston Enterprises, LLC, January 4, 2006. Baltimore City Circuit Court (Land Records), Liber FMC 7641, Folio 711.
- ²⁴ “AMBASSADOR: NO SALE: AUCTION FAILS TO HIT OWNER'S PRICE FOR HOWARD PARK THEATER THAT'S AKIN TO THE SENATOR”
- ²⁵ Colin Campbell, “Ambassador fire kindles fresh hopes: ShopRite also spurs talk about revamping Howard Park theater” [The Baltimore Sun](#) [Baltimore, Md] 08 July 2012: A.10.
- ²⁶ Henry B Suter, *Howard Park: a fond and sometimes accurate history and description of a Northwest Baltimore community* (Baltimore: Howard Park Civic Association, 1971), pg. 2
- ²⁷ “Gwynn Oak Charms: Hills And Winding Roads Enchant In Ideal Suburb” *The Sun (1837-1987)*; May 20, 1923; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. RE1
- ²⁸ Suter, pg. 3
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 14
- ³⁰ William N. Watmough “Unit, Group Dwellings In Demand: Ashburton And Liberty Heights ...”, *The Sun (1837-1987)*; May 9, 1937; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. SC18
- ³¹ “I Remember When . . . I Was a Liberty Bell in a Parade” *The Sun (1837-1987)*; Jul 3, 1966; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. SM2
- ³² Michael Olesker, *Journeys to the Heart of Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pg. 164.
- ³³ Michael Sragow “The Film That Wowed Barry Levinson ; 'On the Waterfront' still stands out for the director from Baltimore; Film: [FINAL Edition]” [The Sun](#) [Baltimore, Md] 27 Apr 2003: 8F.
- ³⁴ Robert Kirk Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg.112.
- ³⁵ Robert Kirk Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg. 156.
- ³⁶ Robert Kirk Headley, Jr. *Exit: A History of Movies in Baltimore*, pg. 30
- ³⁷ “Gaudreau Heads State Society Of Architects”, *The Sun (1837-1987)*; May 11, 1940; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987), pg. 11
- ³⁸ Robert Kirk Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg. 156.
- ³⁹ S. Cucchiella, *Baltimore Deco*, (Baltimore: Maclay & Associates, Inc. 1984), pg. 34.
- ⁴⁰ Robert K. Headley, *Maryland's Motion Picture Theaters* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), pg. 38.
- ⁴¹ Jacques Kelly “Senator isn't only old theater deserving of attention and fix-up: [FINAL Edition]”. [The Sun](#) [Baltimore, Md] 14 July 2001: 8D.
- ⁴² “AMBASSADOR: NO SALE: AUCTION FAILS TO HIT OWNER'S PRICE FOR HOWARD PARK THEATER THAT'S AKIN TO THE SENATOR”
- ⁴³ Robert Kirk Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Baltimore: An Illustrated History and Directory of Theaters, 1895-2004*, pg. 196.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 196.