

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

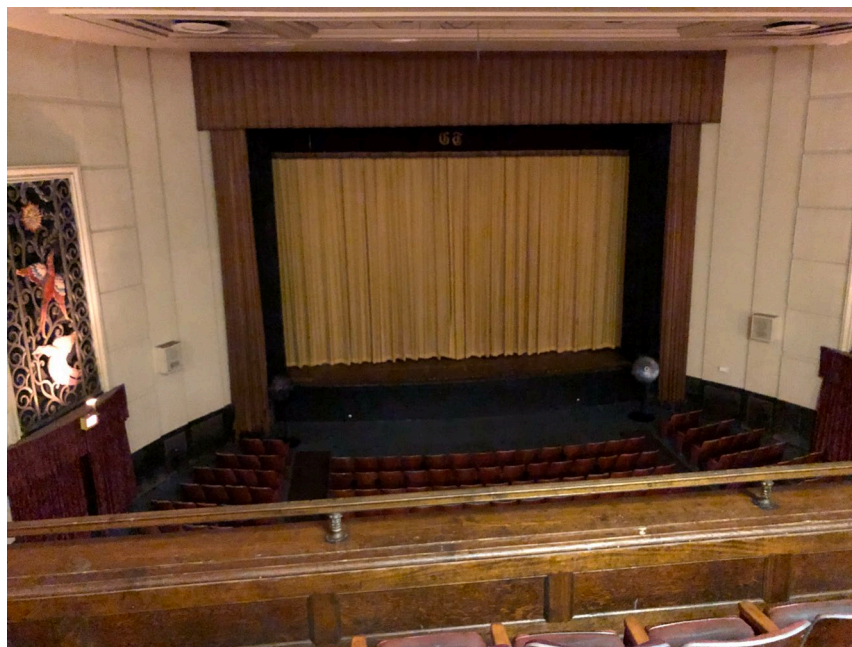
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Gem Theatre

Kannapolis, Cabarrus County, CA0262, Listed 08/26/2019
Nomination by Mary Ruffin Hanbury, Hanbury Preservation Consulting
Photographs by Mary Ruffin Hanbury, August 2018 and June 2018



Northwest facade



Stage

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Gem Theatre

Other names/site number: N/A

Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A

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

2. Location

Street & number: 111 West 1st Street

City or town: Kannapolis State: NC County: Cabarrus

Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: N/A

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this x nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property x meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national statewide x local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

x A B x C D

<p>Signature of certifying official/Title:</p> <p><u>North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources</u></p> <p>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>	<p>Date</p>
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<p>In my opinion, the property <u> </u> meets <u> </u> does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>Signature of commenting official:</p>	<p>Date</p>
<p>Title :</p>	<p>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

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Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

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

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Deco

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property:

foundation: BRICK

walls: BRICK, TERRA COTTA

roof: SYNTHETICS: rubber

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Gem Theatre is a purpose-built, single screen movie theater, with a glazed terra cotta facade. Originally constructed in 1936, it suffered a fire in 1942. The auditorium area was rebuilt in 1948. However both building campaigns used the Art Deco style and the building reads as a cohesive stylistic whole. Its Art Deco exterior features streamlined detailing and stylized floral motifs. The marquee and the vertical blade have neon lettering and the marquee is lined with exposed incandescent bulbs. The recessed entrance contains a freestanding ticket booth. The interior has lower and upper lobbies, auditorium and balcony seating. Ornament is generally spare and stylized in the original 1936 northern portion of the building. A pair of large ornamental screens in the main auditorium featuring carved and painted birds dates to the 1948 rehabilitation. The theater has a proscenium stage with a fly area above. Retail and office spaces flank the entrance on the first floor and are set north of the lobby on the second. The retail spaces have been altered, the bathrooms have recent fixtures, and the concession stand has been changed. Despite the changes, the integrity of the resource as a whole is high.

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The Gem Theatre stands on the south side of West 1st Street in the commercial district of downtown Kannapolis. The block on which it is located has a series of commercial and retail establishments that share a common interior parking and service courtyard in the center of the block. The theater is in close proximity to the former site of the Cannon Mills.

Originally constructed in 1936, the theater caught fire in 1942. The northern section of the theater survived, and the auditorium was re-built in 1948. Charlotte architect Marion R. Marsh designed the original theater and Charles C. Benton and Sons of Wilson designed the new auditorium. Though designed and built in two phases with two architects, the Art Deco style is consistent throughout.

The theater is a two-story, Art Deco building with a terra-cotta facade. The east, west and south, elevations are clad in American bond brick. The brick exterior walls of the balcony area, projection booth, and the fly extend above the terra cotta facade but are set back considerably. On the east and west elevations, the second story bays north of the fly are marked by recessed brick panels with corbelling at the eaves. The east elevation has three sets of exterior doors, one at grade and two accessed by exterior metal fire stairs. The south elevation has one set of double-leaf exterior doors slightly above grade. West of these doors is a one-story, one-bay brick rear addition ca. 1950. Near its south end, the west elevation has a two-story, flat-roofed brick addition ca. 1950 with an exterior door on its west elevation. Additional first floor entrances on the west elevation are south and north of the addition. An exterior fire stair provides access to two additional upper level exterior entrances.

Though the facade (north elevation) reads as symmetrical with a tall, three-bay central section flanked by four shorter bays to the east and west, there is an additional, narrow, fifth bay at the far west side of the facade. This far west bay has a street-level exterior door providing access to interior stairs that service the second story offices at the north side of the building. The central section houses the theater entrance marked by a marquee and a blade. The flanking sections house first floor retail.

The facade is clad in cream-colored, glazed architectural terra-cotta. The design of its ornament has a vertical thrust that offsets the horizontal emphasis of the row of eleven original, metal, three-part, pivot windows on the second floor and the overall width of the building. Projecting vertical ribs divide each bay and similar ribs topped with a green and tan stylized stem and leaf ornament divide the sections of the facade. The stylized stem and leaf ornament is repeated above the far western door and below each of the second story windows in the flanking sections. Above all of the windows are vertically ribbed terracotta panels. The central section's higher bays have extended ribbed terracotta panels above the windows. Above the stem and leaf ornaments flanking the central section are stylized terra cotta volutes.

The original 1936 marquee extends from the center section of the facade. It is edged with exposed incandescent bulbs along its underside. All three sides of the marquee have channels for removable lettering and it is banded in neon with the word "THEATRE" on the east and west sides. The blade above has the word "GEM" rendered in neon on the east and west sides with

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contrasting neon decoration above and below that references the ribbing and volutes of the terra cotta.

The recessed entrance has a terrazzo floor in a checkerboard pattern leading to three sets of double-leaf doors, each with paired diagonal interior pushbars over semicircular panels which replaced glazing at an unknown date. The doors lead to a vestibule. The exterior door pattern is repeated on the interior doors. Within the recessed entrance is a free-standing ticket kiosk. Octagonal in footprint, the kiosk has a terra cotta base with glazing in wood framing above. A small, wooden, two-panel door at the south provides access to the interior. The roof of the kiosk is outlined with exposed incandescent bulbs. The movie poster display cases are not original and appear to date from the 1950s.

The double-leaf exterior doors lead to the vestibule and lobby. The lobby's ceiling is banded in Art Deco trim though it is unclear if this dates from 1936 or 1948. The concession stand was built in the early 1990s, replacing a Formica counter, which in turn replaced an earlier stand. The stand is centered on the lobby's south wall and mimics the paneling in the wall separating the lobby from the auditorium. Entrances to the auditorium are on either side of the concession stand. The partition between the lobby and the auditorium had been a partial height wall. The void has been filled with glazing and curtains for sound and light control. The lobby retains metal bell sconces. Dogleg stairs with sinuous aluminum rails ascend to the east and west along the north wall of the lobby, leading to an upper lobby.

The upper lobby has restrooms and offices along its north wall. The wall is curved at the restroom entrances. This lobby has trim similar to that in the lower lobby and does retain some historic doors similar to those at the first floor entrance and vestibule. The restrooms have new fixtures but retain original, or early, stall partitions and tile flooring. Most of the office spaces are unused or used for storage and consequently have suffered some neglect. They retain much of their interior wooden two-panel, and one-panel, one-light doors, door casings, baseboard, and exterior metal pivot windows with wooden stools and aprons. Flooring is square tile, perhaps linoleum.

South of the upper lobby is the balcony. The lobby entrances to the balcony open to a landing with a seating section below to the south, and seating and a projection booth above to the north. Save for the landing which is level, the balcony floor is raked. There is a metal railing with a diamond pattern on the north and south sides of the landing and a wooden rail on metal foliated supports along the low, wood paneled, south balcony wall. The date of the balcony seating is unknown. The projection booth retains much of its original and subsequent projection machinery. It also contains a small lavatory for the projectionist.

The main auditorium faces a raised proscenium stage with curtains and screen. Seating on the main level of the auditorium is raked. Seating is arranged with a wide center section flanked by narrower sections to the east and west. Aisles divide the sections and run along the east and west sides of the space. The date of the seating is unknown. Flooring is concrete.

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There is a modest cornice in the auditorium. The east and west walls are draped with fabric for approximately 2/3 of the depth of the room, toward the north. Towards the south, the walls have a curved section with vertical accents flanking a central section of horizontal bands. Centered on these horizontal banded sections are fire exits above which are large carved screens featuring depictions of exotic birds flying along a floral vine framed in a sinuous wave, painted in bright colors. Across the ceiling at this point is a broad soffit with coffered sections housing round vents.

There is a generous fly space above the stage. The backstage area is relatively small with utilitarian fixtures and finishes. It has exposed masonry walls, wooden floors, a rope rigging system, and metal lighting grid above.

The first floor retail spaces have been largely renovated and lack integrity in terms of interior finishes and fixtures. They have suspended acoustical tile ceiling with drop-in lighting, drywall interior walls, and trim limited to baseboard and door and window casings. It is unclear as to whether original or historic finishes remain intact above the current ceiling. The exteriors originally had large, plate-glass display windows resting on a continuous facade base, with canted panes to a single-leaf entrance. Above the window and doors was a continuous strip of metal trim at the masonry opening. By 1948 the eastern store had changed the entrance to have two flush plate-glass windows flanking a wooden casing with paneled interior sides housing a single-leaf door with sidelights and a transom above. The western storefront was altered to match later, sometime between 1983 and 2000.

The theater was built in 1936. It suffered a serious fire in 1942. The facade, offices, projection booth and portions of the lobby were saved but the balcony, auditorium and stage were destroyed. Those areas were re-constructed in 1948. An expansion to the north of the projection area was added at this point as well. Changes were made to the screen and sound systems in 1953 with the addition of a fixed wide screen and stereophonic sound. In the 1960s the decorative gold and silver leafing from the 1940s was painted over and a new concession stand, replacing the 1948 stand was built. In 1986 Dolby Stereo was added. The current concession stand was built in the 1990s. The bathrooms were updated in 1997. All of these alterations except the concession stand, bathroom renovations, and Dolby sound are within the period of significance.

The Gem Theatre retains integrity of location as it remains on its original construction site. Its integrity of setting is slightly compromised by the demolition of the Cannon Mills, however it remains within the context of a small scale commercial and retail downtown area, thus retains a good integrity of setting. Its integrity of design, spanning both major building campaigns, is high. Changes in the retail storefronts, concession stand and restrooms are balanced by the retention of the overall form; terra cotta facade; ticket booth; significant interior trim, including bird screens; stairs; and railings. Likewise the retention of historic materials, notably the terra cotta and terrazzo gives it a high integrity of materials. Integrity of workmanship is also high. The theater still shows first run movies, consequently the integrity of feeling and association remain high.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

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

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ARCHITECTURE
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance

1936-1969

Significant Dates

1936

1942

1948

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Marsh, Marion R.

Benton, Charles C.

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Gem Theatre is significant at the local level under Criteria A and C in the areas of entertainment/recreation and architecture with a period of significance of 1936-1969. It is a fine example of the Art Deco style and it follows in the tradition of late period picture palace theaters. Its purpose-built, single screen "picture palace" status is dually significant as an architectural form and as a recreational resource supporting a specific mode and period of movie theater construction. The theater was built by Cannon Mills to provide recreational opportunities for millworkers. One of many amenities built in Kannapolis for Cannon Mills employees, it exemplifies the range of influence of a mill company town from employment to recreation. The period of significance begins in 1936 with the theatre's initial construction and ends in 1969, the fifty-year mark. Although it continued to operate under the same company ownership until 1974, the period after 1969 is not of exceptional significance. Therefore, the fifty-year mark is the most appropriate end date to the period of significance.

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Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Background

The Cannon Manufacturing Company was incorporated in 1887. By 1899 brothers James and David Cannon became the sole stockholders of the company. After David Cannon's death in 1904, James Cannon became the president of the company. He, and later his son Charles, set the course for a textile manufacturing empire that created the vertical integration of multiple steps of the textile process. The company, its subsidiaries and successors, revolutionized the textile industry by combining in one plant multiple steps for producing textiles including yarn production, weaving, bleaching and finishing.¹ The company became known for its towels and was aggressive in establishing and promoting their brand.

Kannapolis was developed by James W. Cannon on the site of a former cotton plantation beginning in 1907 with the development of two textile mills. The town was about 6 miles away from Concord where Cannon's earlier interests were located, but close to the railroad, and a good water supply, and within the service area for electrical power.² The original plans for the mill, a reservoir and initial mill housing was designed by Stuart W. Cramer.³ Cannon and his company laid out streets, constructed a lake, negotiated with the county for the operation of schools, donated land for churches, and organized a police department. The company owned the entire downtown commercial area. In addition to single family housing the company eventually built dormitories for single workers. It operated a day care for dependent children and opened a medical office for employees that at one point operated out of the Gem Theatre building. "Eventually, Kannapolis became the nation's largest unincorporated town, a distinction it retained until 1984. James Cannon was intimately involved in the details of the building of the new town."⁴

Criterion A Entertainment/Recreation: Company-Developed Employee Opportunities

In addition to building an extensive textile mill complex and mill housing, Cannon Mills developed a number of resources for the welfare and recreation of mill employees. This attempt to provide social and recreational outlets for workers was a common response in company towns after the strike and litigation in the company town of Pullman, Illinois outside Chicago in 1894. Cannon Mills and the Cannon family built a YMCA, organized a town band and sponsored a baseball team, the Kannapolis Towelers, active in the Carolina Textile League.

¹ Timothy W. Vanderburg, *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013) p. 9-11.

² Peter R. Kaplan, *The Historic Architecture of Cabarrus County North Carolina*. (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1981) p. 27.

³ IBID

⁴ Vanderburg, p.16; Kannapolis was incorporated in 1984

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There are various contemporary interpretations of the broad reach of company towns beyond employment to housing, education, and recreation. While some argue that these activities were progressive in meeting the social needs of the workforce population and their families, others cast it as paternalistic and controlling. Regardless of interpretation, it did serve to create a strong, cohesive sense of community while shaping both the culture and the landscape of the town.

Cannon Mills built four single-screen movie theaters operated under the banner of Towel City Theaters. The Gem Theatre opened in 1936, followed by The Palace in 1938, The Dixie in 1939, and The Swanee in 1940. The Dixie was closed in 1957 and demolished in 2006. The Palace, a segregated theater for African Americans, closed in 1969 and has been converted to a mortuary. The Swanee closed in 1971 and is now the city's Visitor's Center. Access to the Palace and the Swanee were limited at the time of the preparation of this nomination. Only the Gem continues to operate as a movie theater.

The Gem was built in response to a fire at the local YMCA, which had housed a theater. Coincidentally, the Gem itself suffered a significant fire in 1942. According to news report and photographs, the northern portion of the theater including the facade, offices and lobby were saved, and the auditorium was extensively damaged and rebuilt.⁵ The Gem was a movie theater but occasionally booked live acts as well.

Not only did Cannon Mills build the theater, they managed the operations and showed movies at times that accommodated shift schedules. When the theater re-opened in 1948 after a war-time delay, it was noted, "The Gem will start operating each afternoon in time for the Cannon Mills company's second shift employees to see the complete program before reporting for their jobs."⁶ The theater operations were transferred to a private company, Gem Theater, Inc., in the 1970s. In 1974 the ownership of the building itself passed to various successors of the Cannon Mills company until 2015 when the entire block passed to the City of Kannapolis.⁷

Though the mills complex was demolished in 2005-6 after bankruptcy of a successor corporation, the downtown area and buildings like the Gem continue to serve the community of Kannapolis and are a testament to the Cannon family and the company they built which shaped the entire city.⁸

⁵ Paul Caldwell. "Gem Fire Loss Estimated at \$150,000." *The Daily Independent*, February 22, 1942; and "Gem Theatre will Open on Monday." *The Daily Independent*, March 14, 1948; and "Gem to be Rebuilt into Larger and Finer Theatre." *The Daily Independent*, September 9, 1945; and "Decorator Rates Gem Carolina's Finest Theater." *The Daily Independent*, March 7, 1948; and "Fine New Gem Theatre to Open in Late Fall." *The Daily Independent*, July 13, 1947.

⁶ "Gem Theatre will Open on Monday." *The Daily Independent*, March 14, 1948.

⁷ Cabarrus County Deed Book 11615, p. 176.

⁸ Timothy W. Vanderburg W. *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013, p. 211.

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Criterion A Entertainment/Recreation: Early to Mid-Twentieth Century Picture Palace

The theater is also significant in the area of entertainment/recreation as a theater built in the waning years of the "picture palace" era. The picture palaces were developed in a period when cheap nickelodeons were rapidly being replaced with the opulent theaters that had amenities and architecture intended to create a luxurious experience at the movies. With the advent of television, movie attendance declined and investment in opulent single-screen theaters declined, ending the distinct period of the construction of movie palaces across the United States.

The Gem Theatre exhibits aspects of the movie theater as a distinct form, evolved from "live theaters", vaudeville houses, and nickelodeons. With the advent of film projection, audiences left free-standing picture viewers to sit and participate in a shared viewing experience. Aspects of traditional theater design such as a horseshoe-shaped house with tiered balconies, side boxes, and thrust stages evolved to provide unobstructed sightlines to a static screen display adding cantilevered balconies that increased seating capacity without the structural elements that obscured views, and began to implement staggered seating, and eventually sloping floors. The advent of feature length films at the turn of the twentieth century and talking pictures in 1927 created a product that drove the creation of specific forms to house it.

The era of the high-style movie "picture palace" ran from the end of World War I until the Great Depression. Pent up demand for entertainment, the excesses of the roaring twenties, and the rise of motion pictures as a big business all fueled the demand for exciting, extravagant theaters. These theaters were often designed in exotic styles ranging from the Beaux Arts to French Renaissance Revival, Gothic Revival, Moorish Revival, Egyptian Revival and others. These theaters are notable in their lush appointments in expensive materials such as marble; their impressive public spaces often adorned with intricate sculptural elements and painted frescos; and exciting audience areas some of which included atmospheric effects in the ceiling lighting. These exotic locales provided a full entertainment experience from arrival, production and departure that was accessible financially to the general public as single screen theaters began to be built across the country. "Theater builders'....purpose was to build a showplace with all the trappings of the rich, but accessible to all." ⁹

Many of the theaters built in the waning years of the picture palace era, like the Gem, were built in the Art Deco style. Movie theater historian David Naylor surmises, "Art Deco had been adopted as an economy measure of sorts, an attempt to maintain a richness of design without spending quite so much. The Art Deco theaters were more severe in their ornament and less expensive....The size and ornamental variety of the largest art deco palaces extended the spirit of the golden age in the Depression years, but the trends in theater design were clearly set for smallness and simplicity."¹⁰

⁹ David Naylor *American Picture Palaces--The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981), p.31.

¹⁰ IBID, p. 172.

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Anti-trust regulations in the 1940s addressing movie distribution and the rise of the television in the 1950s effectively ended an era of ebullient movie theater design and construction of which the Gem was a part.

Designed in the Art Deco style, the Gem is a departure from the industrial and vernacular architecture of the region and the later Colonial Revival commercial district. Its rich use of ornament, and its expensive and atypical materials elevated (and elevates) the movie-going experience in Kannapolis to a special event, providing a luxurious viewing environment to a largely working-class population.

Criterion C Architecture

The theater is significant for its Art Deco architecture, the marriage of work by two different architects in the 1930s and 40s. The Art Deco style, popular from 1925 through the 1940s was a departure from earlier classical and historical precedents, though it did not abandon symmetry and balance. It is noted for its use of abstract geometric forms, and vertical emphasis. It uses rich material. Decoration often has a vertical emphasis with fluting or reeding. Decorative forms are generally rendered in low relief and often it includes the application of a stylistic machine aesthetic to natural and organic forms.

Drawings salvaged from the former Cannon Mills engineering department show that the original theater was designed by Charlotte architect Marion R. Marsh in 1936. Marion R. Marsh (1893-1977) moved to Charlotte, North Carolina from Florida in 1916 and opened his own firm in 1922. Busy during the 1920s, he sought government funded work during the depression and worked for the War Production Board during WW2. In 1945 he formed a partnership with Tebee Hawkins which became the firm of Hawkins Kibler Associates. Marsh retired in 1964. Drawings and records of the firm, including work by Marsh are held in Special Collections, J. Murrey Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and are currently being catalogued.¹¹

Though his entire oeuvre has not been documented, we know that Marsh had experience with theater design and the Art Deco style. His 1941 Plaza Theater in Charlotte, which has been demolished, was more of a streamline Moderne style, more abstracted and discrete than the terra cotta exuberance of the Gem. Perhaps his only theater commission of the same quality is the Beaux Arts style Carolina Theater in Hickory of 1935. His 1930 Charlotte Coca Cola Bottling Plant is an earlier and fine example of Art Deco style, made of brick with stone accents.

The Gem Theatre suffered a fire in February of 1942. The auditorium was a total loss, however the north end of the building including the facade, offices, projection booth and part of the lobby were saved. News reports correctly predicted a delay in rebuilding the Gem due to war time

¹¹ "Marion R. Marsh" *North Carolina Architects and Builders*, <https://ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000535>

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shortages.¹² "Cannon Mills officials could not be reached for a statement last night, but it was believed that due to the shortage of building materials at the present no effort would be made to rebuild the theater in the near future."¹³ The lobby was used to distribute war ration books until the theater was rebuilt.

Architect Charles Benton (1887/1888-1960) of Wilson was hired to design the rehabilitation of the theater and early reports and plans suggested a re-design of the facade to Williamsburg-inspired Colonial Revival style prevalent in the downtown area. Benton was known for his work in the Colonial Revival and Neoclassical styles¹⁴ so this commission that was to drastically alter the original facade to a more classically inspired design is not surprising.

However, the original facade was retained and Benton's work was limited to the auditorium, balcony, stage areas and some aspects of the lobbies. A 1948 news article noted "The building was planned for as nearly perfect projection and sound as possible. Architect C. C. Benton of Wilson in his plans called for an abundance of acoustic plaster."¹⁵ The glazing between the lobby and auditorium was added at this point and the stairs and upper lobby area reconfigured. The low wall behind the concession stand with its shield-shaped panels was designed by Benton who stayed in the Art Deco Mode for his contributions to the building including the curved walls in the upper lobby at the restrooms, the large panels of exotic birds over the fire exits in the auditorium and possibly some of the foliate trim in the lobbies.

Despite being the result of two different building campaigns and two different architects, the building is an outstanding local example of the Art Deco style with its flattened, vertical facade featuring stylized floral accents rendered in terra-cotta, its geometric trim, and its streamlined railings. According to the North Carolina state survey, the Gem is the finest example of Art Deco architecture in the county.¹⁶

¹² Drawings for the rehabilitation date from 1945 and 1946 though it is unclear when Benton and Sons was actually hired.

¹³ Paul Caldwell, "Gem Fire Loss Estimated at \$150,000," *The Daily Independent*, February 22, 1942.

¹⁴ "Charles C. Benton" *North Carolina Architects and Builders* <https://ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000420>

¹⁵ "Decorator Rates Gem Carolina's Finest Theater." *The Daily Independent*, March 7, 1948.

¹⁶ Peter R. Kaplan. *The Historic Architecture of Cabarrus County North Carolina*. Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1981.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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"Charles C. Benton" *North Carolina Architects and Builders*
<https://ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000420> accessed December 19, 2018.

"Decorator Rates Gem Carolina's Finest Theater." *The Daily Independent*, March 7, 1948.

"Fine New Gem Theatre to Open in Late Fall." *The Daily Independent*, July 13, 1974.

"Gem Theatre to Open Formally New Year's Eve." *Concord Tribune*, December 29, 1936.

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Kaplan, Peter R. *The Historic Architecture of Cabarrus County North Carolina*. Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1981.

"Marion R. Marsh" *North Carolina Architects and Builders*
<https://ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000535> accessed December 19, 2018.

Marsh, Marion R. "A Theater Building for Cannon Mills" seven sheets of drawings, scanned, collection of theater manager.

Mini History of Towel City, Theaters, Inc. anonymous typescript nd

Gem Theatre
Name of Property

Cabarrus, North Carolina
County and State

Naylor, David. *American Picture Palaces--The Architecture of Fantasy*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981.

"New Theatre to be opened in Towel City Tomorrow." *Concord Tribune*, December 30, 1936.

Paul, William. *When Movies Were Theater*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

"Plans Revealed for New Theater in Kannapolis." *The Daily Independent*, May 13, 1938.

Vanderburg, Timothy W. *Cannon Mills and Kannapolis: Persistent Paternalism in a Textile Town*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013.

Wineka, Mark. "Gem: Reminder of Golden Age of Theaters." *The Daily Independent* October 28, 1979.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): CA0262

Gem Theatre
Name of Property

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates (decimal degrees)

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 35.497996° Longitude: -80.624741°

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary of the Gem Theatre is shown as the solid line on the accompanying map entitled "Gem Theatre Boundary and Coordinates."

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary for the Gem Theatre is the building footprint and the encroachment area of the marquee and blade sign above the sidewalk. As the entire commercial downtown area of Kannapolis was developed by Cannon Mills and the downtown passed largely intact to the City of Kannapolis, there are no lot lines or subdivision of most of the downtown blocks. Thus the building footprint and encroachment constitute the boundary.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Mary Ruffin Hanbury
organization: Hanbury Preservation Consulting
street & number: PO Box 6049
city or town: Raleigh state: NC zip code: 27628
e-mail: maryruffin@hanburypreservation.com
telephone: 919 828 1905
date: January 15, 2019

Gem Theatre
Name of Property

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

The following information is common to all photographs:

Name of Property: Gem Theatre

City or Vicinity: Kannapolis

County: Cabarrus

State: North Carolina

Photo 1 of 10. Exterior, facade, camera facing southeast; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: August 2018

Photo 2 of 10. Exterior, facade, camera facing southwest; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: August 2018

Gem Theatre
Name of Property

Cabarrus, North Carolina
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Photo 3 of 10. Exterior, Facade detail, camera facing southwest; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: August 2018

Photo 4 of 10. Exterior, ticket kiosk, camera facing west; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: August 2018

Photo 5 of 10. Interior, lobby and vestibule, camera facing east; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: August 2018

Photo 6 of 10. Interior, lobby, camera facing southeast; Photographer: Mon Peng Yueh; Date Photographed: June 2018

Photo 7 of 10. Interior, stage from balcony, camera facing southwest; Photographer: Mon Peng Yueh; Date Photographed: June 2018

Photo 8 of 10. Interior, auditorium from stage, camera facing northeast; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: January 2019

Photo 9 of 10. Interior, second floor lobby, camera facing east; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: January 2019

Photo 10 of 10. Photographer: Date Photographed: Interior, second floor office spaces, camera facing southeast; Photographer: Mary Ruffin Hanbury; Date Photographed: August 2018

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).


Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

National Register Context Map

Gem Theatre

111 West 1st Street
Kannapolis, Cabarrus County, NC

Legend

 Gem Theatre




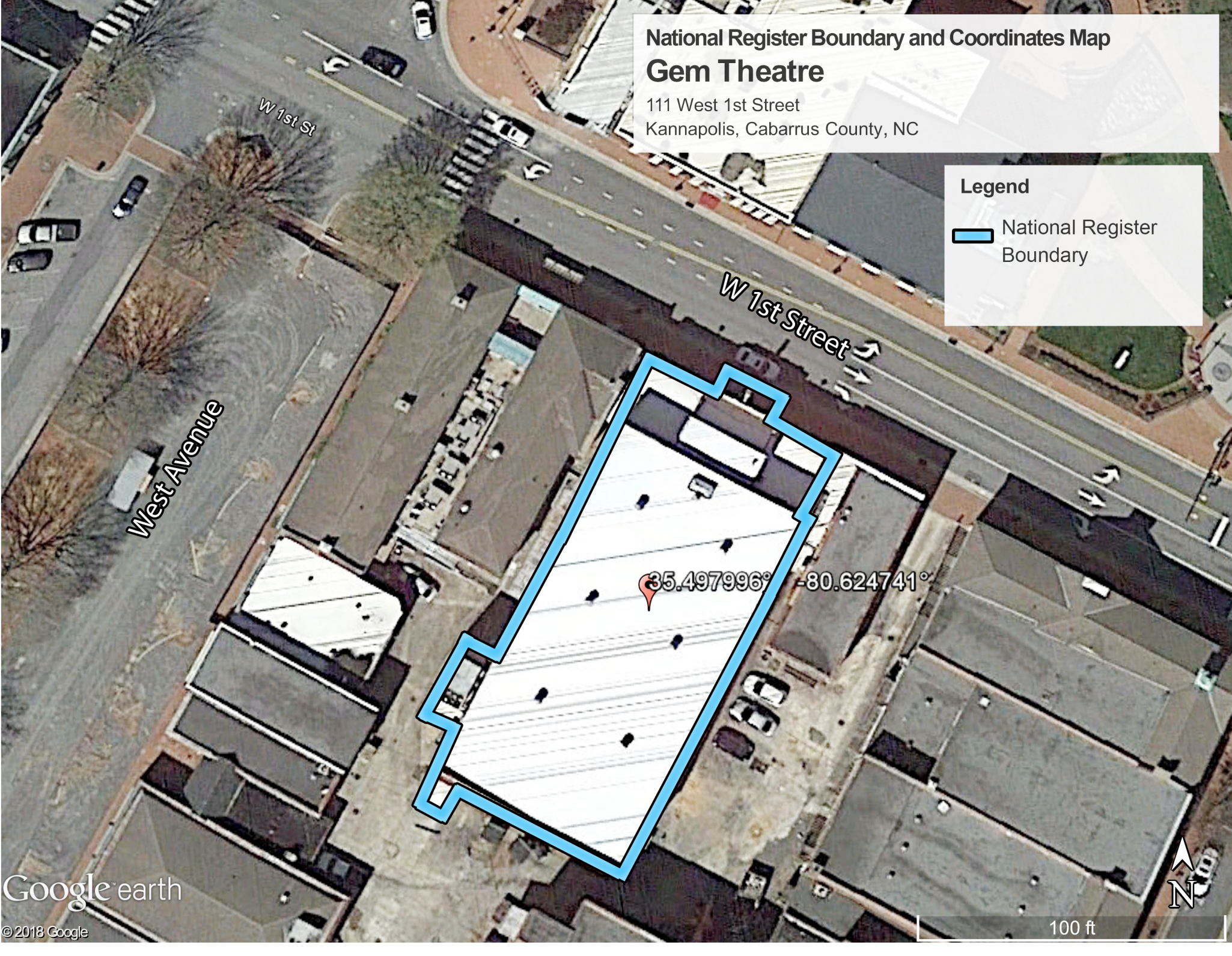
National Register Boundary and Coordinates Map

Gem Theatre

111 West 1st Street
Kannapolis, Cabarrus County, NC

Legend

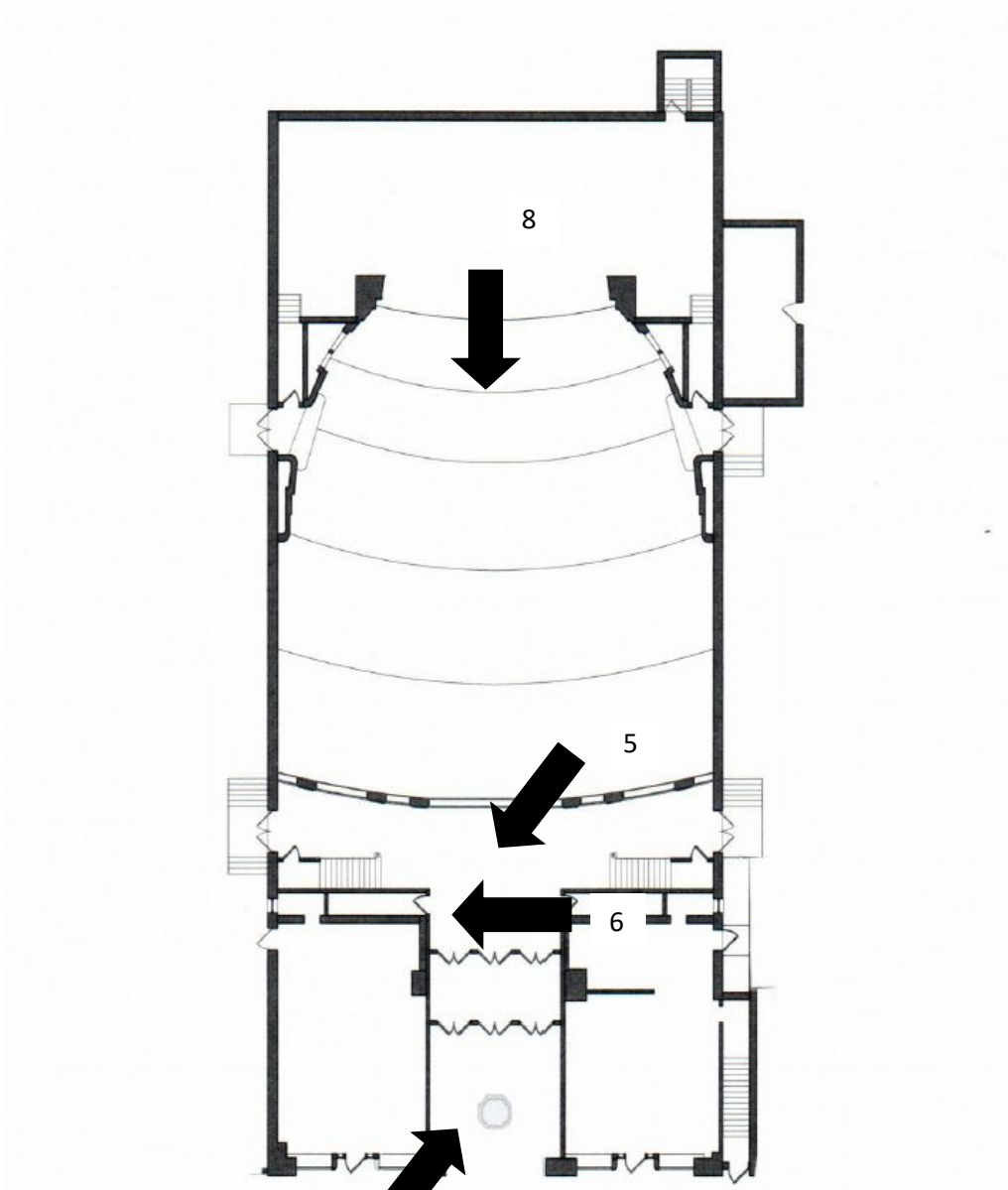
 National Register Boundary



Gem Theatre
111 West 1st Street
Kannapolis, Cabarrus County, North Carolina



first floor plan and photo key
not to scale



4

2

3

1

Gem Theatre
111 West 1st Street
Kannapolis, Cabarrus County, North Carolina



second floor plan and photo key
not to scale

