

The Gaiety Theatre: **A Historic Boston Landmark**

Submitted to

The Boston Landmarks Commission

By

The Gaiety Theatre Friends

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Our Appreciation

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The Gaiety Theatre:

A Historic Boston Landmark

Foreword

The Friends of The Gaiety Theatre have reviewed the Study Report prepared by the staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission on The Gaiety Theatre. We welcome the new information about The Gaiety that the Study Report has brought to light. Those new facts plus the others revealed from research by both The Friends and various technical experts, confirm our belief that The Gaiety Theatre is unquestionably worthy of designation as an historic landmark.

The Study Report cites four criteria for landmark designation. Only one needs to be met to qualify for landmark designation. The Gaiety Theatre meets three and is eligible for the fourth.

The Friends of The Gaiety supplied the Commission staff with much new information on The Gaiety that had recently been discovered. Some of that information has been included in the Study Report; but many key facts have been ignored, dismissed, or distorted. Indeed, we find that the Study Report to be riddled with errors, unfounded assumptions, glaring omissions, and unsupported conclusions.

Consequently, The Friends of The Gaiety Theatre are issuing this report, **The Gaiety Theatre: A Historic Boston Landmark**, to provide a more balanced view without regard to political or commercial pressures.

To ensure that the information provided here is accurate, The Friends of The Gaiety engaged several experts – some *pro bono*, and some for a fee – to conduct tests, and review research.

On several occasions, the Friends, as well as the experts independently contacted the present owner of The Gaiety seeking access to the building in order to study its fabric. In every case – despite promises made by the present owner to the Boston Landmarks Commission during the Demolition Delay Hearing on September 24, 2002 – access was denied. Others who have visited The Gaiety have reported that they were not allowed to make photographs of the interior.

It is the Friends' belief that by denying access to preservation advocates and prohibiting photography, the present owner has tried to prevent the intactness of the theatre from becoming known. Several individuals who visited The Gaiety in October 2002, on the last occasion when entry was granted to preservation advocates, have attested to the

relative intactness of the auditorium, despite what appears to have been inadequate maintenance for many years.

Designating The Gaiety as a landmark will not impede re-development of the block where it is located. Indeed, as restored cultural resource, The Gaiety Theatre will bring new life to lower Washington Street and encourage new development.

Furthermore, the proposed Residences at Kensington Place cannot be built as planned. The project lacks sufficient square footage required to build to the height it seeks. Also, it has not as yet obtained several required approvals needed before the permitting process can begin; before obtaining some of these approvals, there likely will be protracted litigation.

The Gaiety Theatre are not opposed to new development at the site that includes The Gaiety. Indeed, we would welcome new real estate development, provided that is responsive to the concerns of Chinatown and other adjoining neighborhoods, conforms to existing planning guidelines and zoning regulations, and includes the auditorium of The Gaiety Theatre.

As stated in the Structural Review commissioned by the Friends from LeMessurier Consultants, it is possible to erect a building that rises above and behind The Gaiety Theatre without destroying its valuable auditorium. Our attempts to meet with the present owner to explore such an approach have been rebuffed. Saving The Gaiety does not mean that new development in the best interests of Boston cannot take place on this site.

This report includes the following:

Statements of Support for The Gaiety Theatre **page 8.**
issued by the Boston Landmarks Commission

The Boston Landmarks Commission has previously stated that The Gaiety Theatre is a structure of importance.

Meeting the Criteria for Landmark Designation **page 10.**

Using both new and long-available information, the report details the many ways in which The Gaiety meets three of the four criteria used to assess landmark eligibility. The Gaiety is also eligible for the fourth. Meeting only one criterion is needed for a landmark designation.

Why Kensington Place Cannot Be Built as Planned **page 17.**

The Gaiety Theatre should be judged on its own merits, without regard to considerations imposed by the proposed Kensington Place development. Owing to several major regulatory obstacles, Kensington Place cannot be built as planned.

New Information on The Gaiety **page 19.**
A compilation of the recent research conducted by The Friends and others.
Included is a new three-page report by acoustician Dr. David Griesinger.

Acoustics	page 19.
Architectural Innovations	page 26.
Structural Innovations	page 29.
Fire Codes and Safety	page 31.
Social History	page 35.
African-American History at The Gaiety	
A Palace for the Working Class	

Point by Point Rebuttal **page 42.**
The most egregious errors of the Study Report are addressed.

Appendix **page 85.**

Several important documents have been assembled in recent weeks that support designating The Gaiety Theatre as a landmark. They are appended here. They include:

- A. Statements of Support from the Boston Landmarks Commission
- B. Acoustics Report and Experts Bios
- C. Architectural Innovations: Experts' Reports
- D. Structural Innovations: Experts' Reports and Bios
- E. African-American History at The Gaiety
- F. *The Puritan Muse*, an excerpt
- G. Press Accounts
- H. Letters of Support
- I. Gaiety Ephemera
- J. Architectural Plans
- K. Photographs
- L. Chronology of Boston Theatres



Gaiety Theatre Friends

The Friends of The Gaiety Theatre evolved after one of its members noticed a small item in a newspaper in September 2002 announcing that The Gaiety Theatre was about to be demolished.

Since that time, a growing number of people have been drawn to the effort of saving this grand old theatre, the last intact turn-of-the-century vaudeville/burlesque house in Boston. They share the belief that for a city that prides itself on its historic past and its love of culture to destroy The Gaiety Theatre would be a tragic mistake.

Many of those who have joined with the Friends have written letters to Mayor Thomas M. Menino asking him to prevent the destruction of The Gaiety. Several are part of Boston's large music community, including members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. They note that musicians in Boston are desperate for quality performance places. The three existing concert halls – Symphony Hall, Jordan Hall, and Sanders Theatre – are booked to capacity. Another concert hall is needed. Recent acoustical tests of The Gaiety show that it could fill that need, especially for chamber music, small operas, world music, new vaudeville, and jazz.

Members of Boston's Asian Community, long in need of a cultural center, have stated in recent public meetings with the Boston Redevelopment Authority that The Gaiety would provide a long-promised cultural center. The Gaiety Theatre is important not simply for its profoundly historic past, but also for its usefulness to future Bostonians as an exceptionally fine performance place for generations to come.

The Friends welcome the Feasibility Study conducted by the present owner on restoration of The Gaiety and see it as the first step in bringing The Gaiety back into use. Nonetheless, the \$25 million cost cited seems seriously exaggerated and appears to have been based on several inaccurate assumptions. Two experts consulted separately by the Friends have stated that the cost of restoration would be closer to \$12 million.

Once a landmark designation has been accorded by the Boston Landmarks Commission, the Friends will commence a capital campaign to purchase, restore, and endow The Gaiety Theatre.

The Friends of The Gaiety Theatre
April 8, 2003

Advisory Council

A number of distinguished persons concerned about the lack of sufficient quality venues for the performing arts in Boston, as well as the need to preserve Boston's last remaining example of a theatre created for popular entertainment, have come forward to serve as members of an Advisory Council for the Friends of The Gaiety. They include:

Julie Harris, Co-Chair
Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Co-Chair

Dr. Leo Beranek, acoustical engineer, founder Bolt, Beranek and Newman
Raffi R. Berberian, developer and preservationist
William Cavanaugh, Fellow Acoustical Society of America
David Colfer, Manager, Spingold Theatre, former manager Colonial Theater
Dr. Adelaide Cromwell, historian of African-American culture
Frank Cullen, founder, American Vaudeville Museum
Ryan Fleur, Executive Director, Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston
Dr. David Griesinger, acoustical engineer
Isaiah Jackson, Music Director, Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston
Jane Holtz Kay, preservationist and author
Mark Morgan, Artistic Director, New England Light Opera
Roger Prouty, professor of history, U. Mass. Boston
John Sears, former Commissioner, MDC
S. Parkman Shaw, Jr., former Chairman, Beacon Hill Architectural Commission
Gunther Schuller, composer, conductor, author, former President, N. E. C.
Peter Vanderwalker, historical photographer

In addition, more than 90 letters have been received by Mayor Menino to date (April 5) in favor of preserving The Gaiety. Only eight have written against saving the theatre.



Boston Landmarks Commission on The Gaiety Theatre

On two previous occasions, the Boston Landmarks Commission has attested to the historical and architectural significance of The Gaiety Theatre.

Boston Landmarks Commission Building Information Form, No. TH-CBD 499 June, 1979

The Publix/Gaiety is notable as one of fourteen Boston theatres by leading American theatre architect Clarence Blackall, as a good example of Blackall's eclectic interiors and technological innovations, and as a relatively intact example of one of the city's early burlesque playhouses.

The theatre, which seated 1,700, was structurally advanced in its use of a single girder, called 'one of the largest steel girders ever used in a building in this city,' to support the balcony, thus eliminating the need for support columns. Newspaper articles also noted the speed (five months) in which the building was completed. The baroque interior featured a marble-walled vestibule (since remodeled) a balcony-mezzanine plan with two tiers of boxes, and a red, gold and magenta color scheme.

Boston Landmarks Commission Theatre Information Form THCBD499a September, 1979

Amount of interior alteration: minor (except lobby)
Original use: vaudeville and burlesque [This contradicts statements in the Study Report which contends that it was only for burlesque.]

STYLE AND GENERAL DESCRIPTION:

The Publix [Gaiety] is a good example of the early 20th century baroque theatre interior designed for live performances with good spaces and sight lines, an intimate feeling, and good detailing. The theatre is somewhat similar in size and style to the Colonial and Saxon [Majestic], but less elaborately adorned, and presently in fair to poor condition. The vestibule and lobbies have been totally remodeled, but the auditorium is virtually intact and could be restored to its original glory.

Among the notable features of the auditorium are the elaborately carved proscenium arch, ribbed ceiling with stenciled designs, rococo plaster work around the boxes, brass railings, and the tiers of boxes, which are supported on square piers which terminate in carved and painted female busts at the second balcony level.

EVALUATION:

A) Exterior Significance

Intact example of early 20th century commercial style building of utilitarian nature.

B) Interior Significance

Good example of Blackall's eclecticism, of sufficient character and integrity to consider refurbishing if circumstances warrant.

C) Significance, Architectural History

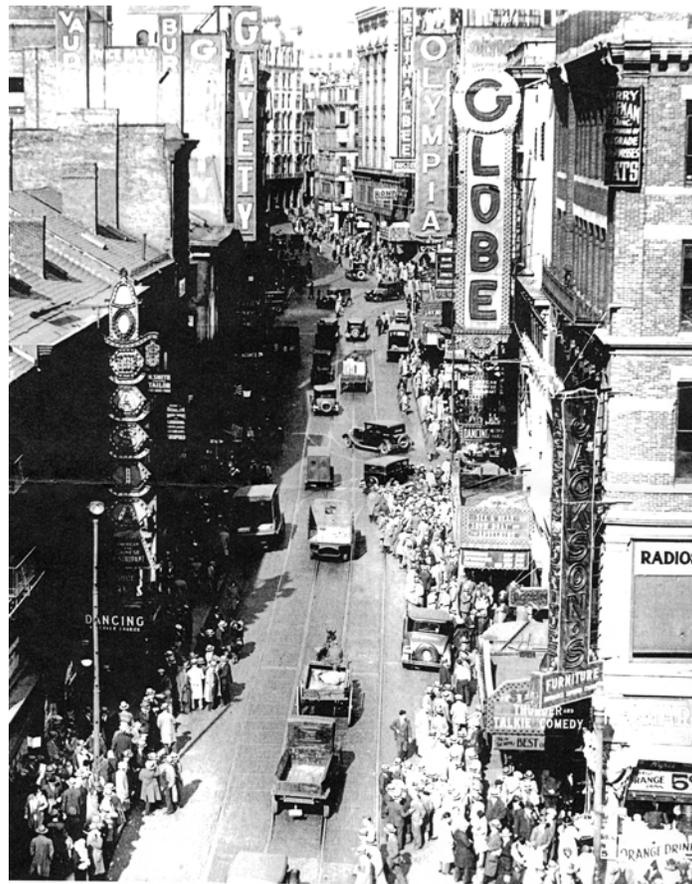
First of Blackall's theatres to use a large steel girder to support the balcony, eliminating the need for columns. One of Blackall's 14 Boston theatres, of which six [now five] survive in theatre area and three are of greater significance.

D) Significance, Theatre History

Early burlesque playhouse.

PRESERVATION RECOMMENDATION:

Recommended for future consideration as possible National Register Listing.



The Gaiety at the heart of the Boston Rialto

Criteria For Landmark Designation

In order to obtain landmark designation, a property must meet one of the four criteria specified in Section 4 of Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended. The Gaiety Theatre meets three of them, and is eligible for the fourth.

A. “as a property on the National Register of Historic Places”

The Gaiety Theatre is not as yet listed on the National Register for Historic Places. However, as noted in the Study Report (p.40, 6.1: E. National Register Listing), “the Massachusetts Historical Commission has determined that The Gaiety Theatre is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.”

The Boston Landmarks Commission is the nominating agency for historic places in Boston. In 1979, The Boston Landmarks Commission issued a Projects Completion Report entitled Theatre Area Preservation Survey. The Gaiety Theatre was recommended for future consideration for individual National Register listing.

The significance of the theatre has grown, because since 1979 several of the inventoried theatres that might have competed with The Gaiety in importance are now lost.

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 Gaiety is the last remaining example of the turn-of-the-century burlesque/vaudeville theatre of which there used to be many in downtown Boston. The Gaiety was built for the enjoyment of working men and women who sought the simpler and readily accessible form of entertainment they offered.

As such, The Gaiety brought together Bostonians from many neighborhoods and many ethnic backgrounds to share a few hours of laughter that drew heavily from exploring the old cultures whence they had come, and the new American culture that they were creating. Also, The Gaiety is the last remaining venue where all-black and integrated shows could play to Boston audiences of all races and ethnicities in an era when Jim Crow laws prevented such possibilities elsewhere.

Many such working class theatres once dotted the City, but two major clusters were on lower Washington Street and in the Scollay Square neighborhood. Scollay Square was swept away with the construction of Government Center in the early 1960s. The lower Washington Street Cluster has vanished only within the past decade. Only The Gaiety remains. (Despite assertions in the Study Report, the Globe Theatre is not, and cannot be considered, a theatre any more, owing to extensive reconstruction for its present use as a supermarket and restaurant. Previous reconstruction destroyed its original fabric, unlike The Gaiety which remains structurally intact.)

The structures that informed the lives of working class Bostonians of a century ago are as important to preserve as those that served the elite.

C. “as a structure associated significantly with the lives of outstanding historic personages.”

Many historic personages are part of The Gaiety story, in its construction, its performances, and its operations.



Clarence Blackall

Clarence Blackall designed 22 theatres for Boston, not including those he renovated. All have been destroyed except for The Gaiety and four others, one of which, the Modern, survives as little more than a façade. As is described elsewhere in this report, Blackall made a profound impact on the architecture of Boston, notably through new engineering techniques such as steel framing. The Gaiety is a prime example of his innovative design approach, notably in the daring clear spans of its balconies.

Blackall’s design borrows heavily from visionary architect, Louis Sullivan. Blackall designed the first steel-framed building in Boston. The synergy between these two men is palpable. The Gaiety stands as a living embodiment of their combined creative genius.

Ben Dawson, Blackall's great-grandson has recently written the following to Mayor Menino:

The Gaiety Theatre was designed and built by my great-grandfather, Clarence H. Blackall. It is an outstanding theater due to its acoustics, beauty, and multi-cultural history. Blackall was working with Wallace Sabine, the Harvard acoustician, at the time, and it is almost certain that Sabine designed The Gaiety Theatre's acoustics. I remember my grandmother talking about how theater acoustics were pretty much hit-and-miss until Sabine and Symphony Hall, and that her father (Blackall) occasionally missed until he started working with Sabine.

I think it would be a shame, almost a crime, to destroy one of the few remaining Sabine and Blackall theaters, especially one with outstanding acoustics and a rich history.



Wallace Clement Sabine

The remnants of felt-covered horse-hair panels can still be found on the interior walls of The Gaiety. Three noted acoustical engineers – Dr. Leo Beranek, William Cavanaugh, and Dr. David Griesinger – say that these panels point to the involvement of Wallace Clement Sabine in the acoustical design and/or remediation of The Gaiety. The panels are identical to those used by Sabine in his acoustical design for Harvard's Paine Hall. A lack of documentary evidence makes it impossible to date Sabine's activities at The Gaiety. But within three years of The Gaiety's construction, Sabine and Blackall were working closely on a New York theatre. If Sabine's work at The Gaiety, as some have suggested, occurred after the theatre opened, it would be even more significant as the earliest surviving example of a Sabine remediation.

Because Sabine died relatively young, the number of buildings in which he worked is small. Consequently, each one is extremely important to understanding the gestation of his theories that are the basis for acoustical science.



E. M. Loew

For more than 40 years, The Gaiety was the flagship theatre of the E. M. Loew Corporation. Loew housed some of the offices of his sprawling theatre empire in The Gaiety Office Building.

Loew, who was born in the Austro-Hungarian city of Czernowitz, arrived in the United States in 1911 at age 13. Alone and penniless he worked at various jobs before opening his first cinema at the age of 18. He eventually became the largest theatre owner in New England, with 70 movie theatres and 17 drive-ins. His were the first drive-ins east of the Mississippi River. He also owned the Bay State Raceway in Foxboro, a chain of hotels, and with Lou Walters, the Latin Quarter night clubs which operated in Boston, New York and Miami, managing them all from The Gaiety office building.

On purchasing The Gaiety in 1931, Loew renamed it The New Gayety. In 1945, to celebrate the downfall of the Nazi terror in which many of his childhood friends and members of his extended family perished, he renamed it The Victory. Loew and his wife, Sonja, helped to bring to Boston many refugees fleeing the holocaust. He then gave them employment in his theaters. In 1949, he renamed The Gaiety yet again, this time E. M. Loew's Publix.

For several decades, his sister, Bertha, managed The Publix, and became something of a Washington Street fixture as she greeted moviegoers from the box office window. This was typical of Loew's approach. His empire was a family business, and all key positions were held by relatives.

E. M. Loew's niece, Brenda Loew remembers him this way:

E. M. was important. And colorful. His life was treated like a Horatio Alger story the way the Boston press covered him on his way up. He owned many movie theatres and drive-ins in and around in Boston, and up and down the east coast, as well as other venues and properties including the Latin Quarter (E. M. owned it.

Lou Walters managed it. To this day Barbara Walters blames E. M. for her father's death since E. M. decided to close the place down, and Walters never rebounded from it.)

E. M. traveled from Boston to NYC on the train every weekend with the payroll checks. He tried to buy the Red Sox in the '60's from the Yawkey family. He generously gave money to many philanthropies. Personally, he loved to ride horses, smoke cigars. He purchased his home on Brush Hill Road and built the first Jewish shul in Milton at a time when No Jews Were Allowed.



Florence Mills

African-American Performing Artists

Legions of African-American performers appeared at The Gaiety during the 1920's, bringing elements of The Harlem Renaissance to Boston. The names of many of these performers are unfamiliar now, but in their day they were headliners who could be counted on to fill The Gaiety's 1,700 seats.

The Gaiety was one of only two Boston theatres that regularly presented African-American performers. (The other, the Casino, was destroyed to make way for City Hall Plaza.) Unlike some theatres that they played elsewhere, The Gaiety allowed these artists the opportunity to perform before racially-mixed audiences.

The Gaiety regularly presented African-American artists of the caliber of: Ford Lee "Buck" Washington and John W. "Bubbles" Sublett; John Bubbles was considered to be the most innovative tap dancer of his day, eclipsing Fred Astaire and Bill Robinson in technique. Singers Julia Moody and Florence Mills. Comedians Joe Byrd and Billy Higgins. The husband and wife blues and comedy team Butterbeans and Susie. Singer/Songwriter Lt. J. Tim Brymn, and many others. Many of these artists made 78 RPM recordings, a number of which have been reissued on CDs.

These names represent a handful of the hundreds of African Americans who have been documented as playing The Gaiety Theatre from 1915 to 1930. In addition, in interviews with elderly residents of Boston's Black community, with former employees of The Gaiety, and with E. M. Loew's nephew, Kenneth Loew, memories have been elicited of Gaiety performances by Josephine Baker, a very young Sammy Davis, Jr., Moms Mabley, and Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham. As yet, it has not been possible to document these independently.

A more complete list of African-American performers at The Gaiety is included in the Appendix.

The Gaiety also presented numerous integrated acts and shows in the 1920's at a time when, except for the Casino, no other Boston theatre would book them. Bostonians of that era seeking out the artists who were making that new music called jazz, found it at The Gaiety and the Casino. Only The Gaiety remains to tell that part of the Boston story.



Dave "Snuffy the Cab Man" Marion

Vaudeville Greats

As research continues, the list of well known vaudeville performers grows. Unlike most of The Gaiety's African-American artists whose opportunities were limited by racial discrimination, many of The Gaiety's other performers went on to star in the Ziegfeld Follies and participated in the early days of radio and television. As such, they became household names in America. The Gaiety is where Boston saw them early in their careers. They include Fanny Brice, Phil Silvers, Bert Lahr, and Bobby Clark & Paul McCullough, one of the great musical comedy and revue comedy teams of the era. Remembered performances by Milton Berle and Red Skelton have not as yet been documented.

D. “as a property representative of elements of architectural design embodying distinctive characteristics of a type inherently valuable for a 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 Theatre is the last intact Boston theatre that was specifically built for vaudeville and burlesque. It was also the first theatre that embodied the stringent fire codes written by Blackall at the City’s request a year before. It is also the first theatre in Boston to use the structural engineering and design features described below.

Period:

In its day, The Gaiety was one of numerous Boston theatres that provided low-cost live entertainment. Now it is the only one left. Consequently, The Gaiety is the only building in Boston which bears witness to an important stage in American social and theatrical history.

Gone are The Old Howard, The Casino, The Washington Street Olympia (Pilgrim), The Stuart, The Scollay Square Olympia, The Park (State), and so on. While a few architectural elements of the Globe (Selwyn) Theatre have survived, it can no longer be considered as an intact theatre. Only The Gaiety remains.

Style:

The Gaiety Theatre represents the first use of Louis Sullivan’s pioneering style of telescoping proscenium arches outside of Chicago. Blackall was educated in Chicago where he came in contact with and embraced Sullivan’s revolutionary methods of steel-frame construction. According to Sullivan expert and biographer, Dr. Joseph Siry, Blackall appropriated populist ideas that informed Sullivan’s Auditorium Theatre in creating The Gaiety for Boston’s working classes.

Blackall represents a significant link between Boston and the architectural laboratory that Chicago had become. In constructing the first steel-framed building in Boston, Blackall became very much the personification of a major turning point in Boston’s architectural history.

Method of Construction:

Massive 54’ girders permitted 17-row balconies to be supported without columns. This innovation was not surpassed until 1923. The use of fire-proofed structural steel went far beyond any previous theatre.

Notable work of an architect, and a designer, and a builder:

In creating The Gaiety, Blackall served not only as its architect, but also as its designer, and even as its builder.

Architect:

Though commissioned to serve audiences who could afford only low-priced tickets, Blackall’s skillful planning, engineering and construction supervision resulted in an

elegant environment at relatively low construction cost, owing to the speed with which the theatre was erected and the simplification of decorative elements. The Gaiety's imposing volume, its 20 boxes, and its lavish use of applied ornament created a sumptuous, striking and comfortable temple of culture.

Designer:

As part of his homage to Sullivan, Blackall in The Gaiety experimented with telescoping elliptical arches and with bold geometric decoration. His designs presage Art Deco. With virtually the entire ceiling and most of the wall intact, the entire decorative scheme remains preserved under layers of paint. Little speculation would be required for restoration. Indeed, nearly complete plans are available to guide that restoration.

Builder:

Blackall not only designed his buildings, he was actively involved in their construction. Indeed, he had to be, given how frequently he was experimenting – as with The Gaiety's balconies – with new construction techniques.

Why Kensington Place Cannot be Built as Planned

The proposed Residences at Kensington Place project does not conform to The Boston Zoning Code. Its developer, the Kensington Investment Company, Inc., is seeking exemption from the site's zoning, which limits height to 155 feet, and requires the restoration or replacement of the Gaiety Theater.

Kensington intends to apply for designation as a Planned Development Area (PDA), which confers blanket zoning exemption, in order to build a 290-foot tower and demolish the Gaiety. Because PDA zoning provisions were intended to facilitate planning for large areas, a proposed PDA site must encompass a full acre. Kensington presently owns only about an half acre of land.

The project is designed to occupy three-quarters of an acre. Two privately-owned adjacent properties are assumed as part of the site in the design proposal. Should private purchase negotiations fail, the BRA has agreed to exercise eminent domain on Kensington's behalf. This seizure is legally questionable for numerous reasons.

Even if these two parcels are taken by eminent domain, the site will fall short of the size required to qualify as a PDA. Kensington has presented no lawful solution to the problem of insufficient site acreage. Kensington's attempts to include the China Trade Center in the "site," or the public ways of Washington and LaGrange Streets, are unlawful, as the entire qualifying site must be within the control of the PDA developer(s).

Even with a full acre, a PDA designation is not automatically guaranteed, but requires a public review process. Since the proposed project violates decades of community-based planning for both the Midtown Cultural District and the Urban Renewal Area, a zoning exemption of this kind will be strongly opposed at the Zoning Commission.

Opponents of landmarking The Gaiety, and the powerful Boston Redevelopment Authority overseeing the project review, are primarily concerned with economic issues, chiefly the redevelopment of what is still represented, by the proponent, as a "blighted" area. The exploding level of capital investment in this locale in the past decade has brought the adjacent land values to over \$25 million per acre at modestly zoned densities; hence, any claim of "blight" in order to destroy historic fabric is unfounded.

A landmark designation for The Gaiety will not stand in the way of economic development. On the contrary, a decision to save the theater will elicit alternative designs that conform with the detailed and thoughtful plans established for this unique area of Boston. Assuredly, the city will in the long run receive more economic benefit by saving the resources that make Boston a unique destination for the local, regional and international visitor economy than it will by destroying forever a piece of, and a place for, art and culture, to put up an apartment tower.

As to Boston's urgent need for housing, cited by Kensington, there are many opportunities to build housing units that would actually be more affordable than Kensington Place. One example is the long-vacant Hayward Place parcel across Washington Street, now owned by the BRA itself. A recent competition brought forth seven worthy housing proposals; the City/BRA awarded the land to the 8th (but not the highest) bidder, who proposed office use. If the City is truly committed to addressing a housing shortage, the Hayward site offers 350 units (plus a small park), conforming with all regulations, requiring no demolition at all.

If, despite the compelling evidence for preservation, the landmark designation is denied, the BLC should ensure that the theatre is not destroyed until all required construction permits are issued, to avoid the use of a freshly vacant lot as a compelling argument for approval of an unlawful project.



New Information on The Gaiety

A vast amount of new information has come to light as a result both of recent research and studies conducted by experts in acoustics, engineering and theatre marketing.

Acoustics

In October 2002, Dr. David Griesinger accompanied a group of the Friends of The Gaiety on a two-hour visit to the theatre. It is the only access that he or they have had, despite repeated requests to the present owner. During that visit, Dr. Griesinger conducted a series of tests using a trumpet, a violin, a vocalist, and recording equipment.

From those tests, Dr. Griesinger concluded that The Gaiety's acoustics have the potential of being among the best in the city. Furthermore, based on the presence of several felt-covered horse-hair panels on the theatre's walls, Dr. Griesinger was led to the belief that Wallace Clement Sabine was involved in the acoustics of the theatre.

Sabine was a Harvard professor of physics who devised the theories that led to the creation of the science of acoustics. His acoustic design for Symphony Hall in 1901 brought him to prominence.

Sabine is known to have been working closely with the architect of The Gaiety Theatre, Clarence Blackall, by 1911 when Blackall consulted him on the construction on the New Theatre in New York City. As noted in the Study Report, a New York Times article on the New Theatre described Sabine as "the leading American authority on acoustics." That article was published on a March 22, 1911. Two years later, Blackall consulted Sabine on the design of the Scollay Square Theatre. In 1914, they worked together again on the Modern Theatre.

The Study Report quotes an article by Blackall published in 1908, the same year he built The Gaiety, in which he points out the difficulties of predicting acoustical properties. Sabine would have agreed completely.

In the official centennial history of Symphony Hall, [The Making of Symphony Hall Boston](#), by Richard Poate Stebbins, Sabine is reported to have been devastated when his theories on the resonance of Symphony Hall when filled proved to be wrong by 20%. The science of acoustics was still in its infancy. Sabine had more theories than proof. He needed theatres in which he could experiment.

Dr. Emily Thompson, a historian of technology and architecture, and a Senior Fellow at the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology at MIT, has been researching the Sabine-Blackall connection at the request of the Greater Boston Chapter of the Acoustical Society of America. She writes:

In 1905, Sabine was engaged to design an auditorium for the University of Illinois, with construction occurring in 1906-07. Upon completion, however, the

acoustics of this auditorium proved very bad, and the University enlisted one of its own physicists, Floyd Watson, to study its sound, circa 1908.

According to Dr. Thompson's research, Blackall says that it was he who suggested to the university president that Watson be enlisted, much as Sabine had previously been enlisted at Harvard. Hence, Blackall clearly was thinking well of Sabine's work by 1908, the same time as the construction of The Gaiety.

In his memoirs, entitled Seed Time and Harvest: Memories of Life, which he wrote between the years 1936 and 1940, Blackall stated:

Ever since Dean Sabine's knowledge was available I have consulted with him on every hall of audience, and every banking room or manufactory where quiet is desired, and today we always treat our buildings acoustically and are reasonably sure of the results.

Acoustics then and now is largely a matter of trial and error. Dr. Griesinger, in fact, has recently been engaged to help solve acoustical problems in the newly constructed New Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. The Gaiety involved a very innovative method of construction and balcony design. It was designed for vaudeville, which makes a huge range of acoustical demands, from spoken word, to vocal soloists, to choral singing, to orchestral music, some of which was probably raucous. It is entirely likely that as the theatre was put to use, acoustic problems became apparent.

Dr. Emily Thompson has written:

When Clarence Blackall was planning and building The Gaiety Theatre in 1908, he seems to have been aware of Sabine's work on acoustics, but he was apparently not aware of the significance of that work and there is no documentary evidence that he consulted with Sabine on his design.

Right around this same time, however, the acoustical debacle of the University of Illinois Auditorium seems to have led Blackall to learn more about Sabine's work. By March 1911 a connection between the two men can be shown, in the New York Times article on the New Theatre.

It is certainly possible, and even likely, that Blackall enlisted Sabine to "correct" the acoustics of The Gaiety. This might have occurred at some unidentified time after its opening, or perhaps even before its opening if he realized the acoustical difficulty of his hard-surfaced, fireproof design and enlisted Sabine sometime during its construction in 1908, after the planning was complete but before the hall opened in November. Sabine professed disdain elsewhere for using felt in a building under construction, so the presence of a felt-like substance in The Gaiety suggests he was brought in too late to be able to contribute to a more architecturally-integrated solution.

Blackall subsequently depended on Sabine's advice in his projects, and his failure to mention any other acoustical consultant also strengthens the case that Sabine was behind the acoustical modification of The Gaiety.

The presence of painted wall decorations beneath the panels supports Dr. Thompson's theory that the panels were installed after the theatre was otherwise completed.

The shoe-box shape of The Gaiety predisposes it to have good acoustics. Dr. Griesinger has stated that when he entered the theatre his first reaction was "This could be *wonderful*," based just on his observation of its shape and proportions. Yet even good proportions are only a start.

Subsequent investigations by Douglas H. Sturz, a senior consultant on architectural acoustics for the Cambridge-based Acentech, suggest that in the last rows of the theatre, the acoustics will not be as good as the front of the hall which he describes as having "many very favorable acoustical features." Mr. Sturz reports that he spent about an hour in The Gaiety in February. He used no testing equipment. His observations are based on "walking around and making noises." He was given access to the theatre by the present owner, who retained him as a consultant on a feasibility study for the restoration of The Gaiety.

Presuming Mr. Sturz is correct, then, the same problem would have existed when the theatre was first built. Consequently, corrective measures were needed then as now. Enter Sabine, who installed felt-covered horsehair panels identical to those he placed in Paine Hall at Harvard.

Dr. Thompson writes:

The Gaiety is an irreplaceable historic structure for its acoustical dimension. Unfortunately, [its] good fireproof construction - made of steel and concrete, not wood - often leads to bad acoustics and this appears to have been the case when The Gaiety first opened. Blackall apparently consulted with Harvard physicist Wallace Sabine to improve the sound of the space, which was accomplished with the sound-absorbing materials described by David Greisinger.

Sabine, of course, made Boston the center for the new science of architectural acoustics when he consulted on the design of Symphony Hall circa 1900, and by the time of The Gaiety's opening in 1908 he had a world-wide reputation. The Gaiety presents a unique opportunity to preserve an original acoustical correction of this era, and it reinforces Boston's place as the historic center of acoustical design, in America and around the world.

Owing to innovative construction methods, The Gaiety Theatre was built in a remarkable five months. Given that kind of timetable, it may have been possible for Sabine to conduct his work only after the workers were finished, and the acoustics of the theatre

could be measured in silence. Since it could not be known in advance what measures Sabine might recommend, all of the walls understandably would have been painted.

The simple fact remains that until documentation is found, it will be impossible to know for sure exactly when Sabine installed the panels in The Gaiety. An exhaustive search for documentation has been made.

A thorough review of the Sabine archives both at The Sabine Riverbank Studios in Geneva, Illinois, which hold Sabine's post-1909 papers, and the Sabine papers at Harvard University have yielded nothing to date. One intriguing, but inconclusive connection did come to light.

John Kopec catalogued the Sabine papers at Riverbank several years ago. He was intrigued when enquiries about The Gaiety mentioned that it was originally to be named the New Lyceum, in a nod to the theatre that had previously stood on the site. Mr. Kopec, in a letter to Mayor Menino has written:

Although I do not recall the name "Gaiety" theatre in my recollections of Sabine's documents, I do recall that somewhere, penciled as a border note, was the word "Lyceum." Professor Sabine, throughout many of his writings or reading materials, would suddenly write one-word border notes. Although often frustrating, they presented me challenges to find other sources. Now, his note "Lyceum" has reference able meaning for me.

Mr. Kopec went on to write the following:

Keep in mind that at the time [of the building of The Gaiety], there was only one acoustical consultant for theater – Wallace Clement Sabine. So, if Mr. Blackall used him for the Scollay Square Theatre, there is no question that he would have used Sabine's expertise for The Gaiety/Lyceum Theatre. In the Sabine biography, many Harvard dignitaries refer to Sabine as the only source on Architectural Acoustics, including Theatre design.

Thus it doesn't surprise me in the least that David Griesinger's data shows tremendous harmony between The Gaiety Theatre and Boston Symphony Hall. Plus, now you can compare Sabine's Scollay Square theatre results, and guess what? They all have Sabine's professional signature.

Dr. Leo Beranek is the dean of American acousticians and was a founder of the vanguard acoustical firm Bolt, Beranek and Newman (BBN). In a letter to Mayor Menino, Dr. Beranek wrote:

I am an acoustician, and I have been the official biographer of Wallace C. Sabine, who was the acoustical consultant to the Boston Symphony Hall, one of the three most highly-rated concert halls in the world (tops in the USA). Sabine regularly consulted with Clarence Blackall, the architect who designed The Gaiety Theatre.

The theatre has all the acoustical features that Symphony Hall possesses; it is shoe-boxed shaped, has an unusually high ceiling, proper spacing between the first and second balconies, and ample space above the second balcony for a feeling of spaciousness around the music.

The lack of billing records in the Sabine papers does not surprise William Cavanaugh. Mr. Cavanaugh, who worked for Dr. Beranek at BBN for many years before starting his own firm, has written the Foreword to a biographical study of Sabine and his nephew at Riverbank Studios. In a recent interview he stated that: “Sabine had a salary from Harvard. He billed very few clients. He viewed much of his work as experimental.”

Richard Poate Stebbins in The Making of Symphony Hall Boston states that Sabine “neither asked for, nor received any payment for his acoustical work, though it required a complete redesign of Symphony Hall by the architects who had been planning to construct a semi-circular amphitheatre.”

Mr. Cavanaugh notes that “When Blackall needed to talk to someone about acoustics, there was only one person who knew anything: Wallace Clement Sabine. When Sabine needed theatres to try out his theories, who was building all the theatres in Boston? Blackall.”

Sabine died at age 51 in 1919. He had fewer than 20 years to test his theories which are the basis for the science of acoustics. The number of buildings in which he experimented with those theories are few. “Any building in which Sabine was involved in important,” states Mr. Cavanaugh. The Gaiety Theatre is one of them.

* * * * *

The link between Wallace Sabine and The Gaiety Theatre was discovered by Dr. David Griesinger. Dr. Griesinger is a world expert on architectural acoustics and has been engaged as a consultant by the Berlin Staatsoper, the Bolshoi Opera, the Amsterdam Musiektheater, as well as opera houses in Copenhagen, Adelaide and elsewhere. He has published more than 50 scholarly papers on acoustics. He is the developer of the LARES system of sound enhancement that is used to improve the sound in theatres and concert halls. He is also the developer of “surround sound,” and his designs are used in the sound systems of Rolls Royce and BMW cars. He is based at Lexicon, a Bedford audio-equipment company where he holds the position of Chief Scientist.

Following his visit to The Gaiety in October, 2002, he wrote a brief report on his findings there, in which he noted, “if you want another good music theatre – one that would work for small operas, chamber music, orchestra and choral performance – The Gaiety would provide it.”

Recently, he has expanded his earlier report, and has included measurements of the tests he conducted in the theatre. Because of the central importance of Dr. Griesinger’s findings, this three-page report is printed here in full.

Acoustics at The Gaiety Theater

by Dr. David Griesinger
30 March, 2003

This note is based on observations made 11/06/02 during a brief site visit under adverse conditions to The Gaiety Theater on Washington Street. I am sending it to the Landmarks commission to confirm that I believe the theater has the potential to have excellent acoustics for a variety of musical events. I also wish to publicly disagree with some of the conclusions in the report of Douglas H. Sturz.

At the time of my visit The Gaiety was dark and stripped of draperies and all upholstered seating. The wooden seats in the second balcony were still in place. Sit tests by several large people found them quite comfortable – at least as good as the seats in Fenway Park. But they are not very sound absorbent. The stage house and orchestra pit were also empty, and in a working theater these areas are important sources of sound absorption.

I was able to measure the reverberation time at several frequencies. Figure 1 shows the results.

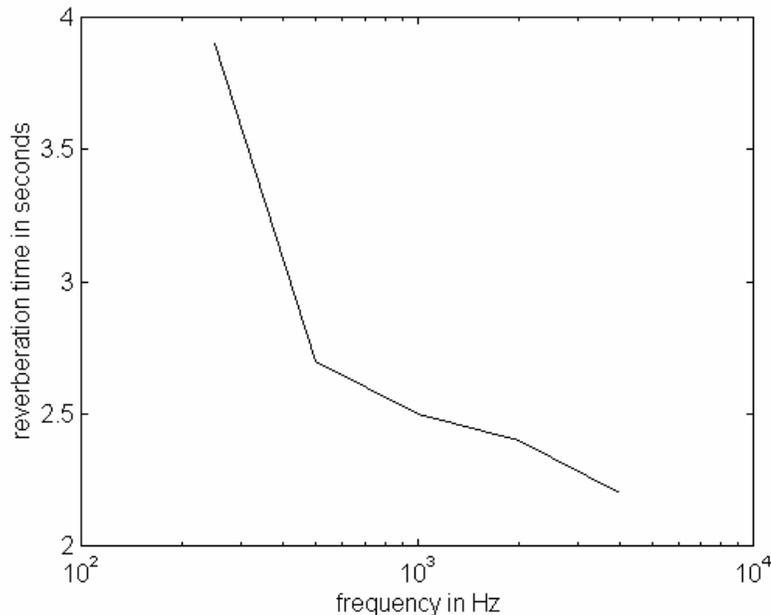


Figure 1: Reverberation time in The Gaiety Theatre in its current condition.

The measured reverberation time is quite interesting. Notice the steep rise in the reverberation time below 500Hz. When the theater is restored the overall reverberation will decrease a great deal, but the high value measured under current conditions shows that the theater will be capable of a very strong, rich sound at low frequencies. In this

aspect it will be superior to some of the local theaters used for music performances, such as Sanders Theater and Jordan Hall.

My visit to The Gaiety occurred in a brief interval between two (of eventually three) trips to Moscow to work on a new theater built by the Bolshoi. The purpose of the New Bolshoi Theater was as a multi-purpose theater, where the majority of the performances were to be opera and ballet. A secondary use of the theater was for state speeches.

Although the New Bolshoi was built according to the latest theories of what constitute ideal acoustics for opera, the sound of the theater was not satisfactory, particularly when compared to the old Bolshoi Theater next door. The sound was loud, muddy, and over-reverberant. Recorded examples of the sound in this theater are included in the CD which accompanies this note.

It was with this experience strongly in mind that I visited The Gaiety. What I saw was an example of a theater where many, many aspects of the design were superior to the New Bolshoi. The Gaiety is a shoebox hall, with a seating capacity (with modern seating, and perhaps some reduction of seating deep in the first balcony) that is nearly ideal for the production of musical theater and chamber opera. The balconies are unusually open for a theater of this era, which promises a (relatively) high degree of envelopment.

The Gaiety is NOT Boston Symphony Hall. The Gaiety was designed for musical events that involve speech. Boston Symphony Hall was not designed for speech, and it is difficult to understand vocal soloists. The compromise between good speech acoustics and reverberant, enveloping, musical acoustics is tricky. In my experience, and the Bolshoi experience strongly supports this conclusion, good theater design will err on the side of low reverberation when the principle use of the theater involves opera or musical theater.

Thus I strongly disagree with Mr. Sturz on the “lack of reverberation” and the “lower than desired reverberation time”. In fact, foremost in my mind as I examined the theater was the question of how the theater would have overcome what I predicted would be an excess of reverberation. The volume per seat of The Gaiety is unusually high for such a theater. Compared to, for example, the Schubert or the Emerson, The Gaiety would be rather reverberant. Since the theater seems to have been highly successful as a Vaudeville theater, I suspected there must have been some acoustic treatment that would have lowered the reverberation time. So I went looking for it – and found some suggestive evidence.

In the rear of the first balcony are remnants of horsehair absorbent material, covered with acoustically transparent cloth. The thickness of the horsehair was approximately 0.5 inches, and the “transparent” cloth was painted over with several layers of paint. I had seen this type of acoustic treatment (including the over-painting) in several buildings that had been worked on by C. W. Sabine, and the presence of it in The Gaiety seemed strong evidence that he had worked on the theater at some time.

The absorbing material is installed within a coffer formed of molding material. The area of this coffer (which still is in existence) is large. It covers the whole of the side wall at the first balcony level and part of the second. This coffer appears to me to be original. There is no evidence that the absorbing material filled just part of it.

Although I am no more of a textile dating expert than the Landmarks study report authors are acoustical experts, I nevertheless feel qualified to state that the case for dating the horsehair panels to 1930 based on the fact that the fabric covering of the projection booth matches the decorative treatment covering the horsehair is specious. It could be that when the projection booth was installed, it was covered in fabric leftover from the circa 1909 acoustical treatments. Without extensive testing, no one can know.

Regardless of when and how (or by whom) this material was installed, the effect on the acoustics of the theater would be dramatic. The intelligibility of speech would be strongly increased, and the dramatic connection between performers and the audience would also be increased.

The thickness of the material is also highly interesting. In the other buildings I have seen where Sabine has worked the absorbing material was thicker. Sabine was aware that ½” of horsehair was not effective as an absorber below 1000Hz. The thickness of the material is consistent with Dr. Emily Thompson’s conclusion that the association between Sabine and Blackwell did not occur until after The Gaiety had opened. As a retrofit it would not be possible to use a thicker material.

However – and here is a bit of luck perhaps – the thickness is just about ideal to create a fabulous sound on opera and musical theater. I have worked in many opera houses, tinkering with the reverberation time as a function of frequency under the tutelage of some very well known music directors. In every case these conductors have chosen a low reverberation time above 1000Hz, and a relatively high (Boston Symphony Hall) reverberation at lower frequencies.

This type of reverberation curve is difficult to achieve in most current opera houses without resorting to some electronic help. But it is in this important aspect of sound that The Gaiety, for whatever reason, would shine. The high natural low frequency reverberation, combined with just the right amount of a thin absorbing material, could create a nearly ideal acoustic.

Architectural Innovations

Research in support of The Gaiety’s landmark designation has brought to light how much its architectural design embodies the style of Louis Sullivan. Until now, the clear link between The Gaiety and Sullivan’s Auditorium Theatre in Chicago (designed with Dankmar Adler) had not been recognized.

The Gaiety's architect Clarence Blackall had grown up in Chicago, studied at the University of Illinois, and set up his first architectural practice in Chicago. This was all at the time that the Chicago-based Sullivan was the leading American architect of his day.

In later years, after Blackall relocated to Boston, he built buildings in many different styles. His theatres ranged from the formal, Colonial Revival of the Wilbur to the rococo explosion of the Wang. Each one was different. With that in mind, it really comes as no surprise that for one of his theatres, Blackall would look to Sullivan for inspiration. As a young man in Chicago, Blackall had written effusively about The McVicker's Theatre, which Adler and Sullivan had designed.

The Gaiety and the Auditorium – Sullivan's last surviving theatre – share several architectural features. The succession of telescoping arches, the series of stepped boxes that connect the balconies to the stage, the broad balconies that feel unconstrained are all part of an effort to make the space they enclose feel grand and intimate at the same time.

Ornamentation in both theatres was provided both by a molded plaster only on the proscenium arch, and geometric patterns painted directly on to the succeeding arches. The wall and ceilings in between the arches were gilded. Photographs of The Gaiety published at the time of its opening display these vast fields of gilding, accented by bands of alternating diamonds and squares – almost identical to the Auditorium Theatre.

Joseph M. Siry, who is a professor of art history and American studies at Wesleyan University, is an expert on Louis Sullivan. He has recently published a book titled, *The Chicago Auditorium Building: Adler and Sullivan's Architecture and the City*. He has found that:

Plans and views of the original interior of The Gaiety Theatre after it opened in 1908 show a hall with proscenium-like arches the form segments of the ceiling as it rises out from the stage over the audience hall. Based on these images, I know of no theatre prior to 1908 that would be more likely inspirations for Blackall's interior design than those of Adler and Sullivan.

According to Sullivan biographer Robert Twombly, the populist ideals of the Midwest inform Sullivan's designs. Twombly quotes an essay on the Auditorium Theatre by architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler:

This great and simple space with expanding arches above, and expanding terraces – widening plateaus of seats – below, offering equal hospitality to all, regardless of location, or ticket price, in contrast to 'royal' or 'imperial' opera houses, represents a new kind of art, and art of democracy.

The Gaiety is imbued with these same ideals. With its innovative balcony construction, it offered excellent sightlines and a sense of proximity to the stage to all. Its pioneering use of reinforced concrete construction to reduce fire hazards, and its more than 40 exits are

in sharp contrast to many other theatres where few efforts were made to consider the comfort or safety of patrons buying cheaper seats in the balconies.

In an article in *The Brickbuilder* in October 1907, Blackall articulated these ideals even as he was then drawing them into the designs of The Gaiety. *The Brickbuilder* was sponsoring a competition on theatre building. As the Study Report puts it:

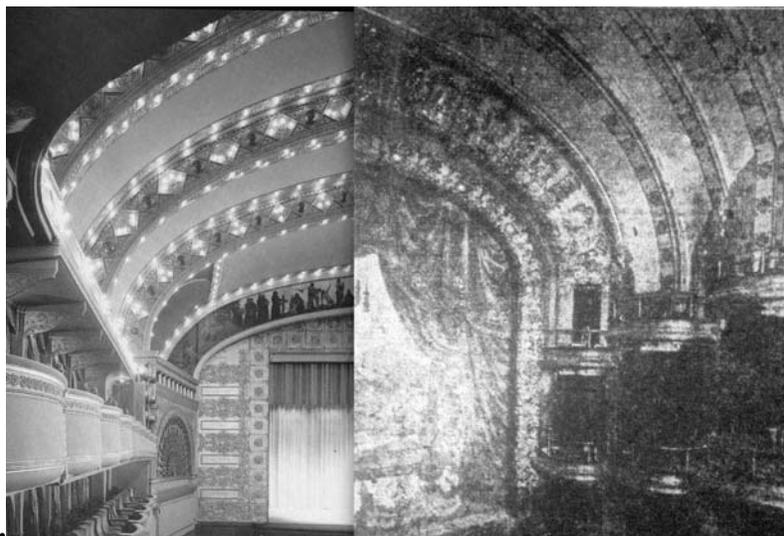
...contestants were advised to design a theatre “which will be essentially American in...feeling” following “American practice in practical requirements.” He urged those entering the design competition not to use a long horseshoe plan where spectators were looking at each other and not the stage, as “that is not the American way, nor is it common sense.” Contestants were reminded that the first requisite of a good auditorium is good sight lines, and that they should “not try for magnificence at the expense of straight forward common sense.”

Blackall, states the Study Report, “referred to this type of theatre as ‘American,’ a word he uses almost as a synonym for practical and democratic.”

Within months, Blackall was not only echoing Sullivan’s ideals in words, he giving them form in The Gaiety Theatre. He may have created more highly decorated theatres to meet the expectations of his clients, but The Gaiety stands as the fullest expression among his theatres of his abiding sense of social egalitarianism.

What is not known is whether Blackall imbued The Gaiety with these high-minded ideals because he knew that it was going to be enjoyed primarily by people from the working classes.

The Gaiety, by extension, is also a fitting memorial to Louis Sullivan, who was born only a few blocks away on Bennett Street, now lost beneath the Tufts New England Medical Center. Sullivan designed the world’s first steel-framed building.



Sullivan’s Auditorium and Blackall’s Gaiety

Structural Innovations

The construction of The Gaiety Theater is innovative in a number of ways.

Fireproofing

In response to the 1904 Iroquois Theater fire in Chicago, fireproofing had become the highest priority in theatre construction by the time The Gaiety was built in 1908.¹ It is noteworthy that in the numerous newspaper articles written about The Gaiety, the importance of its fire safety features was frequently cited as a crucial consideration for the public.

Particular mention was made of the fireproof construction consisting of reinforced concrete floors and roof deck, steel protected by masonry cladding, as well as the absence of wood except for the stage floor and minor trim. The 43 fire doors which were opened outward by newly patented devices led to egress on three sides of the building. This was clearly the first theatre built to the then new 1907² Boston fire codes authored by Gaiety architect Clarence Blackall.

A visit to what remains of the 1903 Globe Theater across Washington Street from The Gaiety offers a sharp comparison in fire-safety provisions. The Globe, built under codes adopted in 1885, has dangerously insufficient means of egress. The 1907 codes resulted in much greater public safety. As the first theater built to such standards, The Gaiety was singular in 1908, and takes on historic importance today.

Dr. Emily Thompson, a historian of technology and architecture, and a Senior Fellow at the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology at MIT, says of The Gaiety:

Its construction embodied new ideas about the necessity of fireproof construction in public buildings. Clarence Blackall was devoted to fire safety in architectural design throughout his life and career, and The Gaiety was heralded as "state of the art" fireproof construction when it opened. In an era when fire safety in public buildings remains a crucial issue and at times a tragic problem in need of solution, it is particularly important to understand, and to preserve, the longstanding architectural engagement with this problem.

Balconies

Another innovative structural feature is the construction of The Gaiety's balconies. Two things are remarkable about them. The first is that they are constructed using what until then were the largest steel beams ever employed in Boston. Only someone with Blackall's background in engineering, and his expertise in steel-frame construction could have done this.

The second is that because of the support of these long-span girders, Blackall achieved the most daring balcony projection of any Boston venue until the RKO Boston was

constructed nearly 20 years later. The Gaiety balconies require no support pillars, thus ensuring excellent sightlines from all seats. As far back as 1855, the shallow balconies of the Boston Music Hall had been built without columns. But no theatre balconies had ever been as deep, prior to The Gaiety.

The Study Report misrepresents and dismisses the significance of Blackall's engineering genius by comparing The Gaiety's balconies – which which measure 49 feet deep with 17 rows – to those of the Jordan Hall, built five years before. The Study Report claims erroneously that Jordan Hall preceeded The Gaiety in having balconies unsupported by columns. The multiple cantilever system of Jordan Hall's 22-foot deep, seven-row balconies are, in fact, supported by columns in the vestibule wall.

John A. Coote, a structural engineer with LeMessurier Consultants of Cambridge, notes in a letter that is included in the Appendix that:

The balcony at Jordan Hall is an unremarkable and modest design, consisting of cantilevered steel reuses supported on a row of columns situated at the rear of the Auditorium

The Blackall design for The Gaiety was much more structurally daring. The conventional columns were replaced by long span steel girders which spanned the whole width of the Auditorium. This allowed for very much deeper balconies to be constructed, while maintaining seating areas which are column-free.

In his article in *Brickbuilder*³, Blackall presents The Gaiety (nee New Lyceum) as the apotheosis of balcony engineering, which Blackall achieved by means of the largest girders attempted to date. The massive built up riveted I-beams measured 54" x 12" in section, and spanned 57 feet. They are buried in reinforced concrete for superior fire protection. Yet even with these huge beams, the balconies felt airy because the ceiling height of 60 feet permitted generous spaces to exist between and above these generous and grand seating areas.

The engineering firm of LeMessurier Consultants⁴ was recently retained by The Friends of The Gaiety Theatre to conduct a Structural Review of the theatre. Unfortunately, as the Review states, "this assessment of the structure is solely based on an examination of the drawings. The Gaiety Theatre Friends requested that we view the interior of the building, but access was denied by the current owner."

Peter Cheever of LeMessurier Consultants elaborates on Blackall's success in this Review, and confirms:

The main girders which support the balcony and gallery span about 57 feet, and the cantilevers which they carry are a maximum length of nearly 20 feet. Such a design represents a significant advance in the degree of confidence placed in the reliability of long-span steel construction, that was well justified by the results.

Later in the Review, the following observation is offered:

The potential exists for maintaining the existing building, and constructing a new building above which is structurally independent. Examples of such projects with which we are intimately familiar include: The Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary and the Shriners Hospital for Children, both in Boston, and the Citicorp Building in New York.

A copy of the complete Structural Review is included in the Appendix.

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1. The American Theater VII, June 1908, *Balcony Construction*
 2. The Boston Building Code 1907
 3. The American Theater VI, May, 1908, *Safety from Fire*
 4. Gaiety Theatre Structural Review, LeMessurier Consultants, March 2003

Fire Codes and Safety

The Gaiety was the first theatre built in Boston after the City adopted new building safety codes in 1907. The principal author of the codes relating to fire prevention and safety in theatres was Clarence Blackall. The following year in designing and constructing The Gaiety, Blackall used The Gaiety as a kind of demonstration project on how these new codes should be applied.

Blackall's new codes included several departures from the past, including, among others:

- o mandated separation from adjacent buildings
- o required external fire escapes from balconies
- o emergency exits on three sides of the theatre
- o outlawed winding stairs
- o codified aisle widths
- o codified seat spacing
- o no seat may be more than six seats away from an aisle
- o mandated many additional emergency exits

Blackall's codes were very specific as to the widths, heights and numbers of these improvements. Here is the 1885 Fire Code (as amended in 1896) upon which Blackall undertook his revisions. Blackall's major changes to the codes follow.

Summary of 1896 Boston Fire Codes for Theaters

1. Theaters over 800 seats must be *fire resisting* construction throughout.¹
2. The inspector shall designate minimum aisle widths.
3. The stage floor shall not be more than 5' above street level.
4. There must be at least two independent exits for every division or gallery.

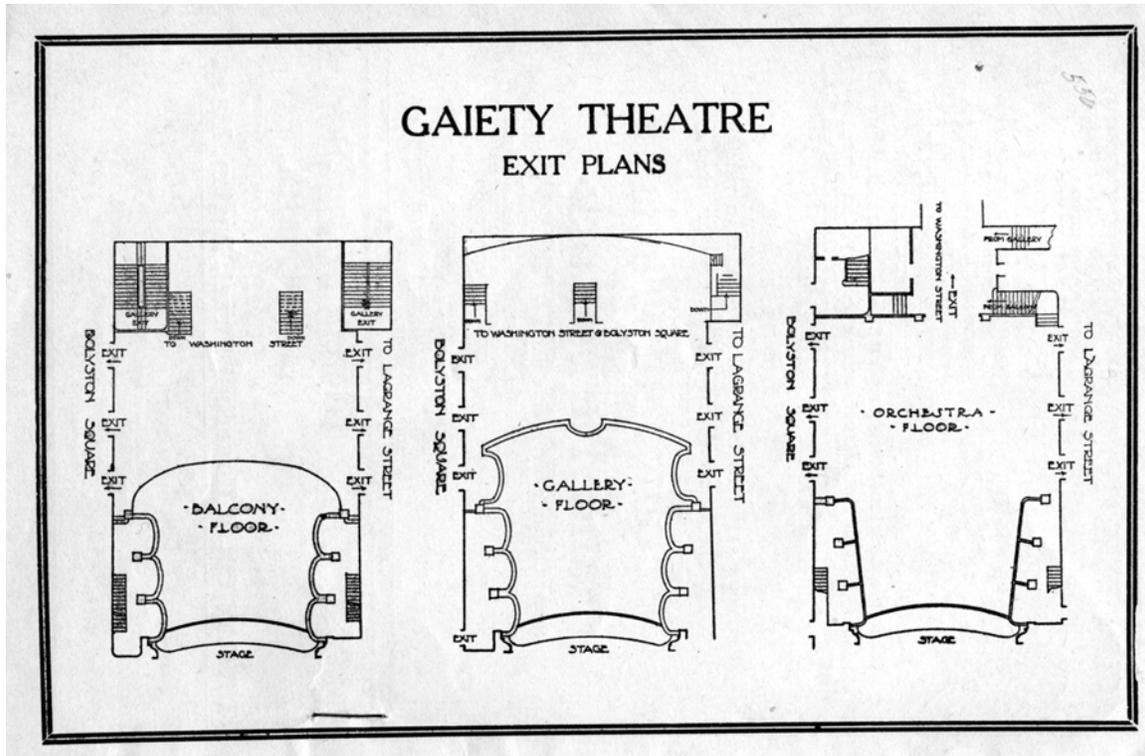
5. There shall be provided, *if practicable*, direct exits to a street, court or open passageway.²
6. There shall be 20" of exit width for each 100 people it will serve.
7. No exit shall be less than 5' wide.
8. The frontage open to the sky must be as wide as the widest part of the building.
9. Passageways from exits must be at least 30' wide.
10. Passageways may not lead through 2nd or 3rd class buildings.
11. All doors must open outward and not obstruct passageways.
12. Aisles must increase in width toward exits.
13. Minimum dimensions for stair—10" tread and 7" riser.
14. Winding stairs must not be narrower than 7" inside radius.
15. There must be a separate circuit for exitway lights.
16. There may be no exterior locks on exits.
17. An exit plan must be printed on every program.
18. There will be no obstructions or temporary chairs in aisles.
19. The wall between the auditorium and stage house must be at least 16" thick brick construction.
20. Two openings with metal doors and self closers are permitted.
21. An automatic fire curtain with a remote pull cord must be fitted.
22. Two 2" standpipes with various valves, hoses and water curtain are required.
23. Curtains and scenery should be covered with fireproof material if practical.
24. There will be 12" fire walls between stage and dressing rooms and scene shops
25. All employee rooms shall have two means of egress.
26. There shall be a roof vent sized 10% of the stage area with automatic and cord pull opening.
27. 50 cubic feet of fresh air shall be per minute for each gas light fixture.
28. There shall be no boiler, furnace or engine under the auditorium.

Additions to the Code for Theaters in 1907

1. Theaters over 800 seats shall be *fire proof* construction
2. Steel in stage and fly loft need not be fireproofed.
3. Every theater not on a corner shall have an open court on both sides and open to the sky without gates.
4. If passages are required through another building they must be at least 8' wide, 10' high and fireproof.
5. Stores in theater building must be separated by solid partitions.
6. The stage floor must be at least 1 1/8" thick.
7. Seat spacing must be at least 30" back to back.
8. No seat may be more than 6 seats away from an aisle.
9. There will be no more than 21" rise back to back in balconies.
10. Aisles must be at least 30" wide.
11. Aisles must increase in width 1" for every 5' of run.
12. Aisles must not rise more than 2" in 10" toward exits.
13. All divisions must have lobby capacity of 1 sq. ft. per person.
14. A common exit may be used for balconies and orchestra if there is no 90 degree turn from main axis.
15. All exits from galleries must be at least 4' in width.
16. In addition to normal exits of 20" per 100 people, there must be two 5' exits leading to exterior stairs.
17. Exterior stairs shall be at least 20" in width for each 100 people.

18. Interior emergency stairs from balconies only permitted if fireproof and separate from auditorium.
19. Lighted exit signs must be displayed during all performances.
20. No winding stairs allowed.

1. Note term “fireproof” substituted for “fire resisting.”
2. The term, “if practicable,” was deleted in 1907.



The best way to understand the importance of Blackall’s achievement in establishing these new fire codes is to compare The Gaiety to The Globe, designed just across Washington Street in 1903 by Arthur Vinal, observing the 1896 codes, only four years before Blackall’s new ones took effect.

The Globe had no exterior fire escapes from its balconies. It had only two pairs of 30” emergency doors to get all of the patrons out of the orchestra in the event of fire, apart from the main entrance, which took patrons out through a 16-foot wide vestibule.

Patrons in the first balcony had two choices: to descend either via the double, seven-foot wide staircase upon which they had entered, and then out through the vestibule with the orchestra patrons; or via one of two winding stairs that ran down through the boxes, and thence to the same the two pairs of 30” doors in the orchestra mentioned above.

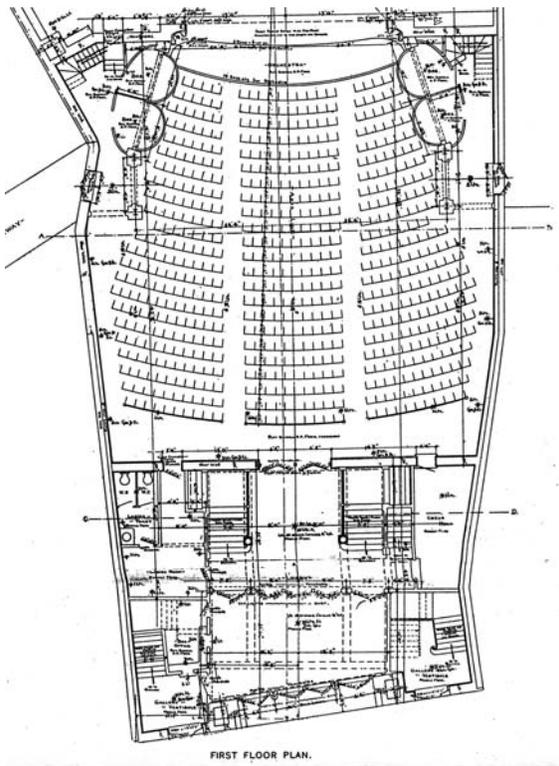
Patrons in the second balcony, or gallery, who had entered directly from Washington Street up one of two 5' 4"-wide staircases, had either to return down those stairs or to use the serpentine, winding stairs that ran through two levels of boxes, and thence to the afore-mentioned two 30" fire doors in the orchestra.

The hazards are obvious.

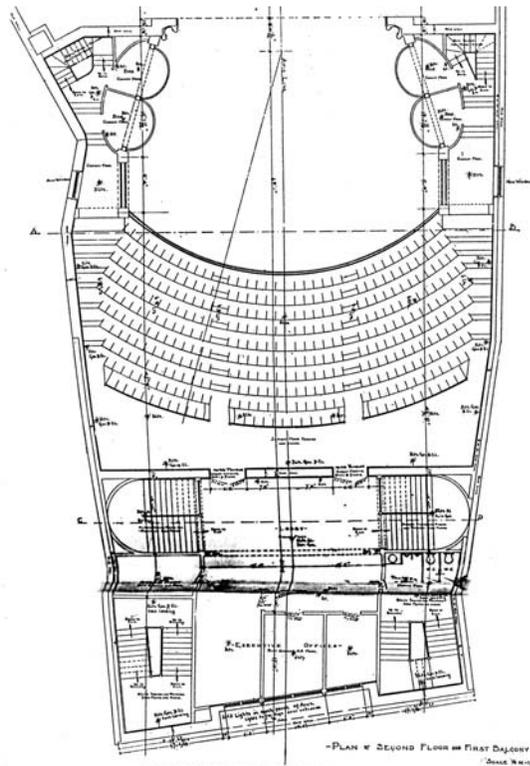
Total egress from The Gaiety, measured in the total width of emergency doors leading outside, is approximately 1,750 inches. That same measurement for the Globe is 624 inches. The Gaiety had 43 exits; the Globe had 10. The capacity of The Gaiety was 1,700 as compared to the Globe's 1,400. The Gaiety's 17-row balconies were 70% longer than those of the Globe.

The 1903 Globe Theater would be illegal under at least 10 of the provisions Blackall added to the 1907 codes.

Reference: *The Brickbuilder* volume 12 number 9
Boston Building Code of 1896
Boston Building Code of 1907



Globe Floor Plan: Only Two Emergency Exits



Globe Balcony Plan: No Emergency Exits

Social History

The Gaiety Theatre is both an important site in African-American cultural history, and a significant landmark in the history of Boston's working class and immigrant populations.

The Gaiety was one of but two theatres that presented significant numbers of African-American and integrated acts during the Jazz Age of the 1920's. The other, the Casino, was destroyed in the creation of City Hall Plaza. Consequently, only The Gaiety stands to bear witness to this piece of Boston cultural history.

Compared to the Colonial Theatre or the Wang Center, also designed by Clarence Blackall, The Gaiety is a humbler structure. It was designed to serve audiences whose means were limited. Nonetheless, Blackall endowed The Gaiety with three tiers of box seats, sightlines that were among the best in the city, and acoustics that have recently been found to be exceptional.

Boston once had more than a dozen working class playhouses like The Gaiety. Now, The Gaiety is the only one left. Vilna Shul, which is a very humble house of worship when compared to Trinity Church, has nonetheless received Landmark designation, in part because it is the only synagogue left standing in a part of Boston that once had many of them.

Saving Vilna Shul is important: it tells the story of an immigrant group at a particular moment in Boston's history. In the same way, saving The Gaiety is also important. It is the last remaining example of a type of building that was once important in the lives of the working families of Boston. It tells an important part of their story.

African-American History at The Gaiety Theatre

An examination of theatre advertisements placed in the Boston Sunday Globe has been conducted from 1908 to 1933. The purpose of this study was to develop both a profile of the kind of shows being presented at The Gaiety and a comparison with shows at other theatres so a context could be created for The Gaiety's offerings.

In the 1920s, a pattern began to appear revealing large numbers of African-American and integrated acts being presented at The Gaiety. To take the full dimension of this, every *Boston Sunday Globe* between 1923 and 1928 was scrutinized. As noted above, The Gaiety and the long-demolished Casino were the only Boston theatres that offered a significant number of African-American artists an opportunity to perform.

This era coincides with both the Harlem Renaissance and the expansion of the Theatre Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) vaudeville circuit at the time of its reorganization by S.H. Dudley, an African-American vaudeville comedian turned entrepreneur. T.O.B.A. booked touring shows featuring African-American performers into some 100 theaters across the South, the Southwest and the border states. Interestingly, several of these theatres were owned by African-American women, including blues singer Ma Rainey.

GAYETY

WASHINGTON ST. Near BOYLSTON TWICE DAILY ~ 2:10 & 8:10 P.M.

FRED CLARK'S BROADWAY SUCCESS!

ALL NEW EDITION

LET'S GO

WITH EDDIE HALL

GLORIFYING DANCE MUSIC FUN

ALL STAR CAST and 16 LITTLE SOMEBODIES

SEE THE GATE OF ROSES ~ THE MODERN EVE ~ THE BATH ~ THE HAREM ~ THE FEAST ~ THE BLACK BOTTOM DANCE ~ THE PONIES ON PARADE ~ THE SILHOUETTE DANCE.

GAYETY

WASHINGTON ST. Near BOYLSTON ST. COLUMBIA BURLESQUE TWICE DAILY ~ 2:10 & 8:10

ALL NEW SECOND EDITION ED. E. DALEY'S SUPER SENSATION!

RARIN' TO GO

75 FOLKS ~ 38 WHITES 37 BLACKS

THE GREATEST ARRAY OF WHITE AND COLORED ARTISTS EVER ASSEMBLED IN ONE SHOW

JONES AND JONES COLORED ARTISTS

EXTRA SHOW MID-NITE THURSDAY AT 11:30 P.M.

GAYETY

WASHINGTON ST. Near BOYLSTON ST. COLUMBIA BURLESQUE TWICE DAILY ~ 2:10 & 8:10

FIRST TIME IN BOSTON! The Musical Comedy Success

KOSHER KITTY KELLY

DIRECT FROM EIGHT MONTHS RUN ON BROADWAY

1000 LAUGHS - DANDY DANCES - A DOZEN SONG HITS and A CHORUS OF GLORIOUS GIRLS

IF YOU LAUGHED AT "ABIE'S IRISH ROSE" YOU WILL ROAR AT "KOSHER KITTY KELLY"

WORLD SERIES BASEBALL RETURNS

GAYETY

THEATRE COLUMBIA BURLESQUE TWICE DAILY ~ 2:10 & 8:10

HARRY STEPPE

The NATIONAL SPEED SHOW

DANCING AROUND

WITH BUCK and BUBBLES

AMERICA'S GREATEST COLORED STARS

100% PURE BURLESQUE

WORLD'S FASTEST DANCING CHORUS

GAYETY

WASHINGTON ST. Near BOYLSTON ST. COLUMBIA BURLESQUE TWICE DAILY ~ 2:10 & 8:10

JACK REID'S

"WHITE AND BLACK REVUE"

2 BIG SHOWS IN ONE

including the following clever entertainers

18 ~ KEWPIE DOLLS ~ 18

35 COLORED SPEED DEMONS headed by DRAKE and WALKER

18 OCTOORON BEAUTIES

GAYETY

WASH ST. Near BOYLSTON ST. TWICE DAILY ~ 2:10 & 8:10

WORLD'S GREATEST ALL-COLORED MUSICAL BURLESQUE

HOTTEST SHOW IN TOWN!

DARK TOWN SCANDALS

CLASSY CHORUS OF CREOLE CUTIES

WITH EDDIE HUNTER (STAR OF "4-11-44") GARLAND MAE HOWARD & BROWN (STARS OF "7-11") JULIA MOODY (STAR OF "LUCKY SAMBO")

Last Colored Show to play in Boston this year.

MIDNITE SHOW THURSDAY at 11:30 P.M.

Many African-American talents gathered in Harlem – writers, educators, painters, and theatre people, including many who regularly went off to work the T.O.B.A. and other circuits. From 1914 onward, though the onset of the Depression, they wrote plays, burlesques (travesties), musical comedies and revues, while directing, designing and performing in them.

It had long been known that these shows traveled to Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, DC. What scholars of vaudeville and popular culture had not understood was the importance of Boston's role in this northern circuit. By comparing the names of the shows and performers announced for the circuit in New York with those advertised for The Gaiety, it has become apparent that Boston was an important stop on the tour.

The excitement generated by these shows created by African-American artists fed the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, the shows carried the energy of the Harlem Renaissance with them as they traveled, including here to Boston.

Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Chair of Harvard University's Department of Afro-American Studies has noted in a letter to Mayor Menino that:

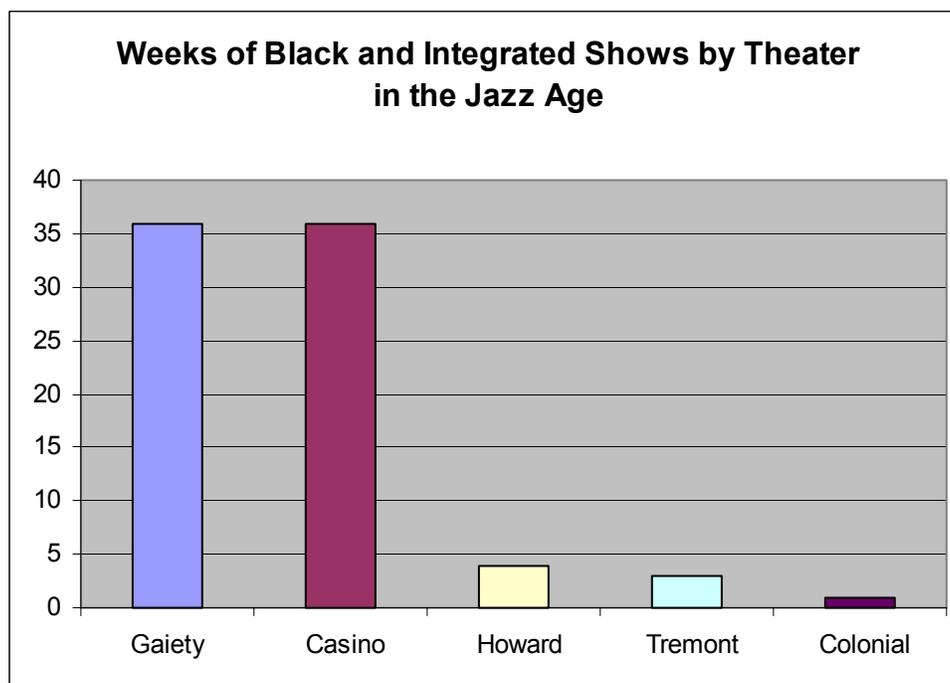
Altogether 25 [African-American] performers [at The Gaiety] have been identified as major artists who toured widely with the T.O.B.A. circuit, and were associated with the Harlem Renaissance. The emphasis in some of the advertisements of the integrated nature of the shows is particularly moving to me. It is not widely known that commercial success accrued to such enterprises at that time.

Dr. Gates is the Co-Chair, with the actor Julie Harris, of The Friends of The Gaiety Theatre Advisory Committee. In urging a Landmark designation he added:

A restored Gaiety Theatre could resonate as a unique link to a period on black history for which Americans should feel pride.

By 1930, such African-American shows had succumbed to the pressures of the Great Depression. But in an era of racial intolerance, theatres like The Gaiety offered black talent of all types a place to showcase their work, make their professional reputations, and earn a respectable living.

The graph that follows shows the number of weeks African-American and/or integrated shows were presented in Boston during the mid-1920's. The Gaiety and the Casino were preeminent.



Advertisements for these shows mention that on Sunday nights, the casts would present “Jubilee Music” and “Spirituals.”

Many of the African Americans who performed at The Gaiety were the headliners of their day. A few, such as Buck and Bubbles (Ford Lee “Buck” Washington and John W. “Bubbles” Sublett) went on to star in several films. George Gershwin wrote the role of Sportin’ Life in Porgy and Bess expressly for Bubbles who played it in the original cast. The husband and wife team of Butterbeans and Susie made numerous 78 rpm recordings (many of which have been reissued on CD), as did others such as Florence Mills, Julia Moody, and Lt. Tim Brymn. But the names of most of the other African-American artists who made The Gaiety their Boston home have faded from memory. That, however, diminishes neither their artistry, nor the impact they had on Gaiety audiences.

Indeed, these artists marked an important stage in American cultural history as they conveyed African-American cultural expressions to audiences in numerous cities around the country. In an era of intolerance, they helped Americans get to know one another across racial lines.

A Playhouse for The Working Class

The Gaiety is the last remaining example of the turn-of-the-century burlesque/vaudeville theatre of which there used to be many in downtown Boston.

Historian Douglas Shand Tucci describes The Gaiety this way in a 1968 monograph titled *The Puritan Muse*:

In December of 1908, for the first (and as it turned out, the only) time, in Boston theatrical history, a first class theatre was erected solely with Burlesque in mind. The New Gaiety Theatre was described by the Record as “a model of comfort, complete in stage equipment and accommodations of every kind – well-lighted...and up to date in all respects.

Its enormous marquee bathed lower Washington Street in brilliant light, and the interior was as tasteful and plush as any legitimate theatre to be found in the city. The proscenium was a stunning combination of soft gold medallions on a cream base and there were twelve elegantly designed private boxes on either side of the proscenium that connected with the two balconies.”

A number of high-style legitimate theatres were built in Boston during the early years of the twentieth Century of which several excellent examples such as the Colonial and Majestic remain and are beautifully maintained. However, these were high-style theatres that were attended by the "carriage trade." They generally featured well known actors and actresses in Broadway productions, either on second runs, or, in later years, as tryouts.

A parallel movement involved the large number of theatres built during this same period for burlesque/vaudeville. The Gaiety is the only one of these that remains. These theatres appealed to a very different audience: working men and women who sought the simpler and readily accessible form of entertainment they offered.

Many such theatres were dotted throughout the City, but the major clusters were on lower Washington Street and in the Scollay square neighborhood. The latter were swept away with the construction of Government Center in the early 1960s. The lower Washington Street Cluster has vanished only within the past decade. This is evident in the BRA topographical map reproduced on page 2 of the Study Report.

Of the five theatres shown on the map, The Gaiety is the only one that is extant today. Notably, it is the only one whose auditorium had not undergone significant alterations/renovations since its construction nearly one-hundred years ago.

A third group of historic theatres were the large movie palaces built in the 1920s, as represented in Boston by the Metropolitan/Wang Center (1925), the RKO Keith Boston (1925), and the Keith Memorial/Opera House (1928). These large theatres were built primarily to show motion pictures. Although they occasionally accommodated stage presentations, their limited backstage facilities restricted their usefulness for live theatre.

In the two of these three theatres that survive, this inadequacy has obligated the expenditure of considerable funds to make them suitable for live productions.

It is inappropriate to compare The Gaiety with the Colonial, and imply that there is no need to save The Gaiety as a more elaborate example of a Blackall theatre design exists in the Colonial. These theatres were designed for very different audiences and had very different social histories. Similarly, it would be inappropriate to allow demolition of Jacob Wirth's restaurant because we have a much better and more elaborate example of a 19th century Boston restaurant in Locke-Ober's. They are all landmarks, though for different reasons.

These theatres played an important role in the cultural life of a broad cross-section of Boston society. Long before any other institution in the United States, the vaudeville stages like The Gaiety were integrated. The Gaiety brought immigrant groups in contact with the customs of other groups. Ethnicity was a staple of vaudeville. Shows that played The Gaiety like *Kosher Kitty Kelly* were often the kindling moments of the melting pot process.

Frank Cullen, the founder of the American Vaudeville Museum has written extensively on vaudeville. Though the following observation pertains to vaudeville generally, it aptly describes what transpired in theatres like The Gaiety. And since The Gaiety is Boston's sole remaining example of a theatre that presented this form, its preservation is essential. He writes:

Fanny Brice, Ed Wynn, Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson were still Fannie, Isaiah, Israel and Asa, no matter how they spelled their new names, and their audiences knew that they weren't hiding their Jewishness but living the American dream. Jimmy Savo and Jimmy Durante never had to hide their Italo-American origins even when their countrymen were portrayed as anarchists and thugs. Bert Williams, Florence Mills, Bill Robinson and Ethel Waters couldn't hide their race had they wished too, and they became beloved by white audiences as well as black. Marie Dressler, Fritzi Scheff, Fred Astaire and Elsie Janis were "Germantown USA," and despite the horrors of the First World War, American audiences remained loyal to them. And Eddie Foy, Maggie Cline and George M. Cohan stitched shamrocks onto the American flag and everyone saluted it. All were welcomed as Americans and they prepared the way for others.

The Study Report describes the 1903 the Globe Theatre as "the other remaining Boston theatre associated with Burlesque." A visit to the Globe would reveal that while the exterior shell along with an altered façade remain, the interior features of the original Globe Theatre have been almost entirely obliterated. The orchestra, balconies, boxes and stage house are gone.

The Globe underwent significant renovation in 1929 when it was taken over by the New England Theatre Operating Company (Paramount Publix Theatres) as a movie house, though it later drifted back into burlesque. At that time, the two original balconies were

removed and replaced by a single new one. The extensive renovation included the stage house and an "impressive" new lobby. The idea was to transform it into a "deluxe," modern theatre.

A few years ago, the Globe Theatre was completely remodeled and converted into an Asian supermarket and restaurant. The supermarket occupies the entire ground level. A large Chinese restaurant has been constructed above it at the level of the balcony, running from the front of the theatre to what was the rear of the stage house. Of the original theatre, the upper half of the old proscenium arch has been retained in the restaurant, but nothing else.

Only The Gaiety remains as an intact example of an important era of Boston theatrical and social history.

