

**The Clabon Theater**  
**1019-31 N. Claiborne Avenue**

**Landmark Designation Report**

**Construction Date:** 1913  
**Architect:** Unknown

**Site Description:** Square 206, lot 8 forming the corner of  
North Claiborne Avenue and Ursulines  
Avenue

**Municipal District:** 2  
**Assessment District:** 8  
**Owner:** Liberty Bank and Trust  
**Date Nominated:** December 10, 2002

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural and historical significance. City Ordinance No. 5992 MCS defines a Landmark or Landmark site as: An unimproved parcel of ground (landmark site) or such parcel with improvements or such improvements without grounds (landmark), wheresoever located in the City of New Orleans, subject to the jurisdiction of the Historic District Landmarks Commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which said parcel or parcels, plus its improvements, if any, 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community; or 2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history; or 3) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type, specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship; or 4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

## History of building:

The Harlequin Theater was constructed in 1913 and was the second theater owned and operated by noted movie house operator Rene Brunet, Sr. When the Harlequin Theater opened in 1913 it was an "airdome theater" meaning it had no roof. Instead of a balcony reserved only for blacks, sections for blacks and whites were divided by picket fences. In 1918-19, the theater was enclosed. During the renovation a balcony was added for the use of black patrons. Years later, when the neighborhood became majority black the seating arrangements were switched and the balcony became all white. Later the theater became all black.

In 1921, when Rene Brunet, Sr. opened the Imperial Theater at 814 Hagan Ave., his brother Paul Brunet took over the operation of the Harlequin. The Harlequin was the first theater in the south to utilize an electrical seating system. The system was fully automated and indicated to patrons empty seats in the theater. The system was invented and installed by Wilfred L. Guerin of New Orleans.

In August, 1925 a bomb exploded in the ticket office of the theater but luckily, no one was in the theater at the time. Paul Brunet told police "that six months previously he had been forced to seek an injunction against the motion picture operator's union, who were picketing the theater, but did not suspect anyone from the union with being implicated in the explosion."

Later the theater was operated by Alex Schulman, at which time he changed the name to the Plaza Theater. United Theaters then took over the theater and changed its name once again. The new name was the Clabon, which held a grand opening on December 25, 1938, and boasted the latest in acoustical treatment and a new sound system. In 1966, Rene Brunet, Jr. purchased the building from United Theaters and operated the theater until 1981. He then sold the building to the Full Gospel Church of God in Christ, Rev. Charles Brown, pastor. The building has been empty since Hurricane Katrina.

The building features an Art Deco facade with a central section that has a long, narrow, Art Deco metal grille. The front facade is stucco. The parapet steps down from the center section to sinuous curves that then step up to terminate in corner pilasters. There is a slight masonry overhang that shields the first floor, which still retains three display cases for movie posters and two multiple-door entrances. These large entrances have

doors that are mostly glass, typical of a movie theater. The stylized facade wraps around the corner of the building on Ursulines Avenue for one bay.

**Landmark basis:**

**Criteria:**

- 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state or community.

Opened during the early years of the "golden age of movies" theaters like the Harlequin/Clabon exhibited a lavishness that soon became the hallmark of later movie palaces. The movie industry built thousands of smaller neighborhood theaters throughout the United States between 1913 and the 1950's when the new-fangled technology of television threatened to bring down the movie industry. Neighborhood theaters were sometimes part of shopping districts but were always neighborhood anchors. The HDLC finds that the Clabon Theater meets one of the four landmark categories in that it reflects the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state or community.

## History of Theaters

In 1891 the laboratories of Thomas Edison invented a peep show machine known as the Kinetoscope. The viewer peered through a magnifying lens at images illuminated with an electric light. The earliest films were short and could be viewed by only one person at a time.

The French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumiere developed a technique of projecting the film and in December 1895 held their first screening for a paying audience in Paris. The Lumiere machine was called the Cinematographe. Edison's laboratories quickly produced a similar machine and the first commercially exhibited movie in the United States was shown in New York in April 1896. The first theater in the United States dedicated exclusively to showing motion pictures was the Vitascope Hall, established on Canal Street, New Orleans, Louisiana on June 26, 1896. The theater was converted from a vacant store.

Vaudeville theaters were early venues for showing films with the program often combining film strips and vaudeville acts or plays. In 1905, Pittsburgh vaudeville magnate Harry Davis opened a purpose-built theater for movies, calling it a nickelodeon, combining the admission price with the Greek word for theater. Early theaters were often not very grand. They typically sat a few hundred people and had very little to no ornamentation. Some early theaters, however, were designed by top architects of the day at great expense.

As movies became big business, grand and extravagant theaters were built in cities across America. From 1913 through the 1920s, theaters became "movie palaces." Impressive lobbies with rich décor, statuary, art collections, massive chandeliers and palatial architecture were intended to give moviegoers the feeling of being royalty and an escape from the day-to-day world.

Going to see a movie was about more than just seeing a movie. It was also about fantasy. When you went to a movie you escaped the drab and mundane in your life and walked into a world that most people could not experience. Theaters were lavishly appointed affairs with crystal chandeliers, beautiful carpet and artwork. Doorman held doors for you, coat check girls took your coats, bath rooms had attendants. And that was just the lobby, once you entered the theater, the movie itself finished your fantasy trip.

Far more common were smaller community theaters but no matter what the size, movie theaters featured elaborate, exotic and modern

architectural details which not only helped transport patrons into the fantasy world of film but contributed to the whole movie-going experience. The advent of World War II and the rationing of gas made the neighborhood theaters even more important.

Neighborhood theaters were about more than watching movies. They were cultural institutions that served as anchors for neighborhoods. When you went "to the show" it wasn't for a quick 90 minute movie. There was a newsreel, a cartoon, some sort of musical event, maybe a giveaway and then two features. Because this was a neighborhood theater, you probably knew the person sitting next to you increasing your enjoyment of the time spent in the theater.

The movie going experience has changed. Now you must drive miles to a theater that has ten screens and will look exactly like every other theater in Houston, Atlanta or Chicago. Of the many small neighborhood theaters built in New Orleans, only these eight remain.