

**Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission**

**Landmark Designation Report**  
**November 7, 2008**



**The Civic Theater**

**533 Baronne Street, including 530 O'Keefe Street  
The Civic Theater  
533 Baronne Street, including 530 O'Keefe Street**

**Landmark Designation Report  
November 7, 2008**

**Architectural Rating:** Blue  
**Construction Date:** 1906  
**Architect:** Sam Stone

**Site Description**

Square 259, Front Baronne between lots C & B, thru O'Keefe between lots K & G, H. Front Lafayette between Lots G, B, A SALW 521, 527-31, 537-39  
RTA # 2001-0279 (2007-2011) 521,527-31,537-39 RTA# 2001-0279 (2007-2011)

**Municipal District:** 1  
**Assessment District:** 3  
**Zoning:** CBD-1  
**Owner:** Civic Penthouse, LLC

**Nomination Information**

**Date Nominated:** October 7, 1997  
**Recommended by:** George Schmidt

The nomination of this property was based upon its social history, its architectural history and that it is a work of a notable master. City Ordinance No. 6699 MCS defines Landmark or Landmark site as: A building(s) (landmark) and/or its lot of record or any part thereof or vacant sites (landmark site), wheresoever located in the Central Business District of the City of New Orleans subject to the jurisdiction of the Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which said landmark and/or landmark site meets at least one of the following criteria: 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 the Property

The land that 533 Baronne Street sits on was assembled by the Equitable Real Estate Company, LTS in 1904 and 1905. The Civic Theater, originally know as the Shubert, was built in 1906 as a playhouse by the Shubert Company and is shown on the 1908 Sanborn Insurance Map (see figure 1). It is recessed behind two warehouse buildings and is accessible through a glass covered arcade (see figures 1 and 3). The premier performance at the theater was a play entitled "Sam Houston." In 1908, the theater became the Lafayette, a "B" movie house and "a glorified nickelodeon," that was billed as "the largest movie picture theater in the world." The glass arcade was featured in a 1911 article promoting its erection (see figure 2).

The theater remained the Lafayette until the early 1940s, when it became the Star. The Star was a venue for both movies and live theater. In 1947, the building and its lots were appraised at \$52,500 when it was sold to Joy Strand Building Inc. The building was then sold to Poche enterprises in 1948 for \$120,000 along with 10' front along Lafayette Street. The theater was soon renamed the Poche. The plan

for the Poche was to bring in the finest attractions of the legitimate stage, musical and ballet (see figure 4). However the theater failed to be a profitable enterprise and the board of directors decided to make the theater a non-profit

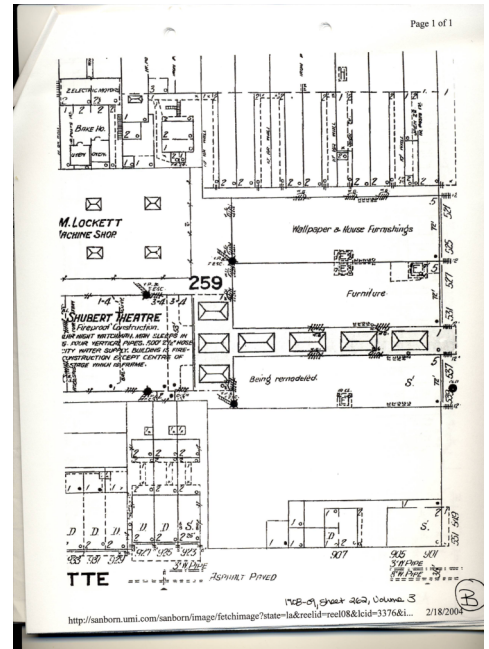


Figure 1. 1908 Sanborn Map illustrating the theater.

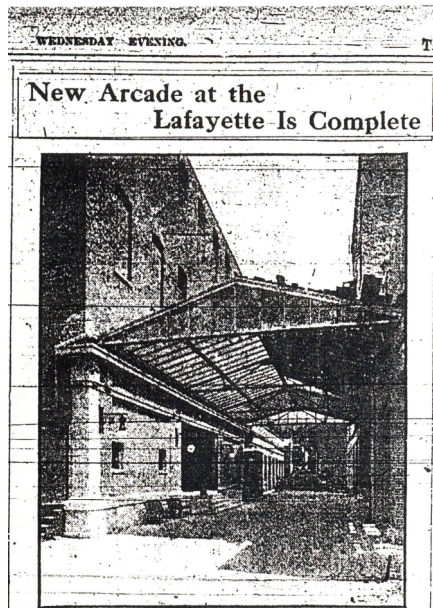


Figure 2. 1911 Times Picayune Article featuring the glass arcade of the theater.

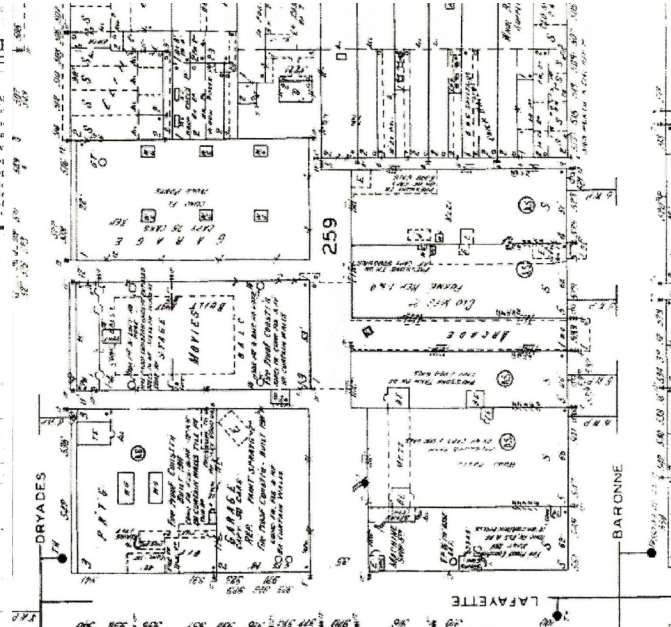


Figure 3. 1940 Sanborn Map illustrating the theater.

organization in 1951. A contest was held to find a new name for the theater, with the mandate that it had to have five letters to fit the existing sign; "Civic" won. The Civic Theater vowed to be a legitimate theater for the City of New Orleans, a mission it fulfilled over the next twenty years. In the late fifties and early sixties the theater hosted large road show presentations including Ben Hur and West Side Story (see figure 5).

In 1974, Joseph Canizaro of Canco, Inc. purchased the building. It was then home to various cultural activities and in the late seventies was turned into the "Civic Disco". The building has been virtually vacant since the disco closed

The current owner plans to rehabilitate the building using historic preservation tax credits to create apartments. Both the façade of the theater and the arcade were donated in the form of an easement to the Preservation Resource Center to protect the historic exterior.

**Criterion 1: Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community**

The Civic Theater is the oldest remaining theater structure in New Orleans. Most of the Civic Theater's contemporary competitors, such as Tulane-Crescent and the St. Charles theaters, have been demolished. As a venue for both live and film performances from 1911 through the 1970s, the theater represents a time when theater entertainment played a pivotal role in the lives of New Orleans. As such, the Civic Theater represents the cultural history of the New Orleans community.

Originally opened as a Shubert Theater, New Orleans audiences were able to go to the theater to see the legendary show business personalities including Samuel S. Shubert, Jacob J. Shubert, and Lee Shubert. The equally impressive Cecil B.

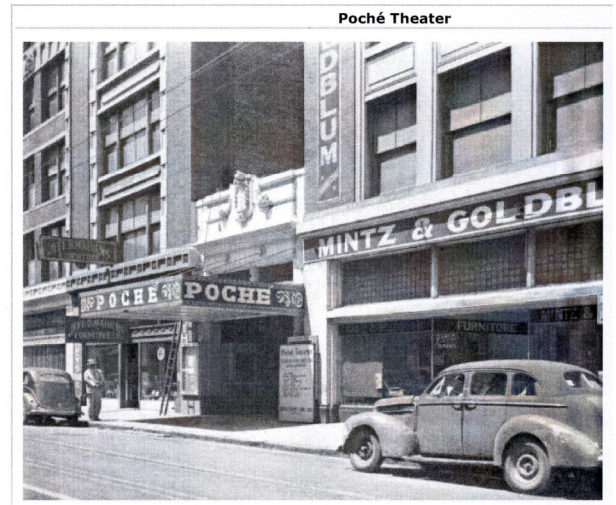


Figure 4: Photo of the theater entrance when it was the Poche with Mintz and Goldblum Furniture and Jeff D. Matthews Furniture stores on either side. *Courtesy of the Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.*



Figure 5: Photo of the theater as the Civic featuring West Side Story on the Marquis. *Courtesy of the Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.*

DeMille directed and starred in an opera production at the Shubert. The theater was graced by the performances of many past theater greats including May West, Mary Martin, Helen Hayes, Beverly Sills and Tyrone Powers.

Throughout its history, the theater also featured films and represents the history of the film culture in New Orleans. Since the dawn of the motion picture era over a century ago, millions of Americans flocked to downtown theaters for the latest films. Historic theaters were designed to transport audiences to fanciful, faraway places with their exuberant architectural styles that included Art Deco, Egyptian and Chinese motifs, bringing a unique dimension to the movie going experience. The Civic Theater's ornate Beaux Arts interior drew many New Orleanians to movies downtown. However, like many theaters across the United States, the Civic could not compete with multi-screen chain theaters that could show more movies to smaller audiences and who did not need a full house to make a profit. Historic movie theaters like the Civic Theater had higher operating costs than the newer multi-screen theaters and typically had to have hundreds or even thousands of seats per screen. When the theater was not full, it was hard to stay viable and so historic theaters across the country failed and continue to be threatened with demolition. The Civic Theater has survived against considerable odds. It represents a cultural and social history of the community as a major venue to see important performances for over 60 years.

**Criterion 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;**

The Civic Theater was touted as being "the most attractive building to be erected in New Orleans for some years... The Theater will be one of the most complete in the South, and absolutely fireproof throughout, the construction being of steel, brick, and concrete....greatly appreciated by the public is the absence of all columns that usually support the balcony and gallery and obstruct view, this being the first theater erected in the South without columns...The main entrance will be through an arcade from Baronne Street (Architecture, Art and its Allies, Vol.2, No.1, p. 9)." Notably, the technical design of the building is one of the main features that renders it unique and important. The building survived a fire in 1911 fire that was described in the newspaper article as, "the exterior

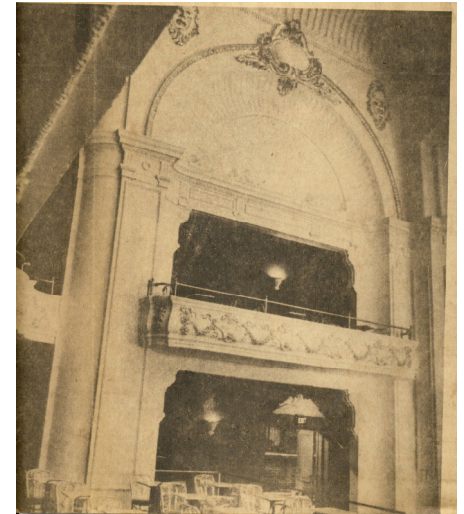
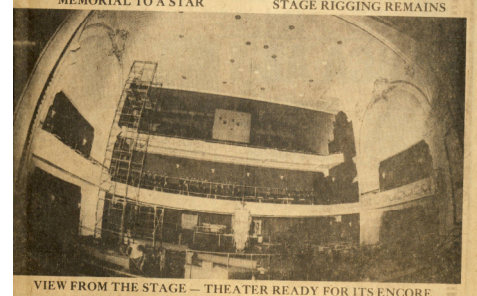


Figure 6 above and 7 below:  
Civic Theater interior  
photographs, Times Picayune ,  
November 1911.



and the arcade, including all buildings around it, have risen, phoenix like, from the ashes of a conflagration during the course of which the Lafayette showed its positive fireproof qualities. It withstood the flames from three corners (*The New Orleans Item*, October 23, 1911, p.7, c.2)."

The building is noted for its Beaux Arts style plaster ornamentation on the interior, which was common for large public buildings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (see figures 6-8). The auditorium contained a balcony, gallery as well as the orchestra floor. The stage was flanked by rectangular boxes on either side. In 1972, when the theater was leased as a disco, the interior renovation was explained as, "highlighting the

old theater's fine arts, instead of erasing them. The plaster details in white with gold leaf trim and the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Champaign circle" with its enviable look at

the stage are still there as are the handsome gold mirror in the foyer, the old dressing rooms dedicated to Tyrone Power and Mary Martin, the spectacular chandelier that was once the Big Daddy in the row of art deco fixtures that graced the lobby of the old Roosevelt Hotel." (*Times Picayune*, Sunday, November 1977)

The exterior of the Civic Theater is austere with little architectural embellishment (see figures 9-12). It is recessed behind two warehouse buildings and is accessible through a glass covered arcade. The exterior arcade is the last of its kind anywhere in New Orleans, and indeed few of these remain in the country. The façade features an embellished first floor façade made of white brick and terra cotta ornament of Greek keys on the cornice, with triglyphs surrounding laurels over the piers (see figure 10). Three brick stairs lead to the main entrance which is currently filled with opaque glass. Two small openings flank the main entrance. The second floor has seven arched window openings and the third floor has seven smaller arched window openings. The rear and side elevations are all red brick masonry and the third of the rear of



Figure 8: Civic Theater interior photographs, *Times Picayune*, November 1977.



Figure 9 above: Entrance to Theater through arcade on Baronne Street. September 9, 2008.

Figure 10 below: Detail of terra cotta ornament on façade. September 9, 2008.



the building is a half of a story higher than the rest of the building with the main detailing being the corbelled brick cornice.

**Criterion 4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.**

Architect Sam Stone of the Stone Brothers firm designed the Civic Theater was Sam Stone (see figure 13). Stone Brothers Architects was a prominent firm in New Orleans and Sam Stone was well known for his technical expertise and accomplishments. Some of his other notable works include the Orpheum Theater, the Maritime (Hennen) Building (the first skyscraper in New Orleans), the Maison Blanche Building, the Sea Lion Pool of the Audubon Zoo, the natatorium and bath houses of Audubon Park (demolished), the Masonic Temple, the renovation of the French Market, the basement of the St. Charles Hotel (the first basement in New Orleans), and many other structures that have since been demolished.

Stone's career began in the 1890s with the architectural firm of Thomas Sully. Upon Sully's death, Sam Stone and Co. came into being. He was later joined by his sons, and became Stone Brothers. As, one of the premier architects in the city at the time he was noted as, "there were surely none who could rival Stone's impact on the public consciousness of this city." (New Orleans Magazine, January 1973, "New Orleans' Edwardian Stone Age") In addition to his architectural career, Stone was very active in the political life of New Orleans – he was appointed Commissioner of Public Property and then Commissioner of Public Safety; he was president of the State Board of Architectural Examiners, and was a



Figure 11: Front façade of theater. September 9, 2008



Figure 12: Rear and north elevations of the theater. September 9, 2008.

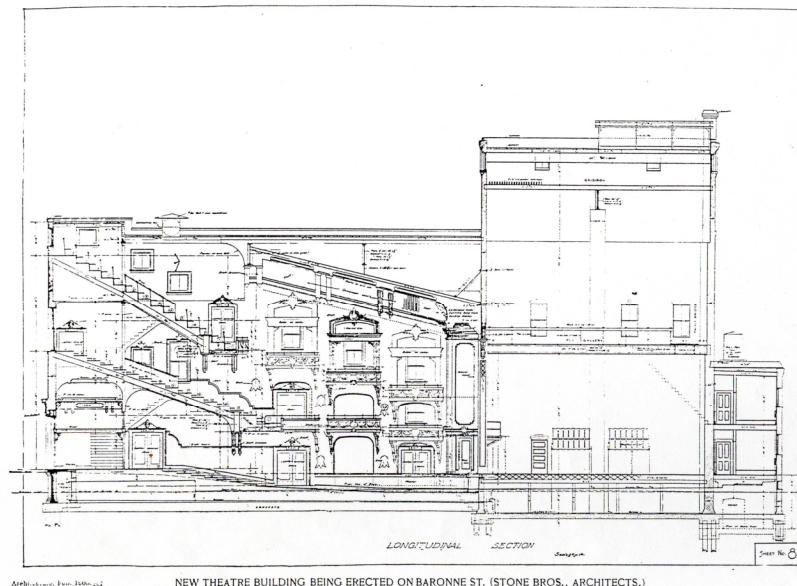


Figure 13: Drawing of Civic Theater by Sam Stone. Architecture February, 1906 volume 1, no.6 P. 8-F

member of the Board of Appeals of the Building Code. He was also a very prominent Mason, President of the Audubon Park Commission and one of the founders of Audubon Zoo. The Civic Theater is significant as it is the work of the noted master architect Sam Stone.

**Staff Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Civic Theater be designated as a landmark as it fulfills three of the four criteria required to establish significance. The theater is significant as it exemplifies the broad cultural and social history of New Orleans, embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship and is representative of the notable work of a master architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

Report prepared by:  
Nicole Hernandez  
Architectural Historian /CBD Plans Examiner  
Historic District Landmarks Commission  
1340 Poydras St., Suite 1152  
New Orleans, LA 70112

## **Bibliography**

"Historic American Movie Theaters" Online posting. 11 Most Endangered Places List of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. [www.nthp.org](http://www.nthp.org) 2001.

"New Arcade at the Lafayette Is Complete" The New Orleans Item 1911  
Late ed.

Brookhardt, Eric D. "New Orleans' Edwardian Stone Age" New Orleans Magazine January 1973

Schneider, Frank L. "The Civic Returns." Times Picayune 27 November 1977.

Stone Jr., Sam. "The Advisability of Erecting Fire-proof Structures in New Orleans" Architecture

Stone Bros., Architects "New Theater Building Being Erected on Baronne St." Architecture February, 1906 volume 1, no.6 P. 8-F.

Thomas, Greg. "Civic Theater to Star Again as Residences." Times Picayune 10 December 2004

Sanborn Insurance Maps 1908 and 1940