

History of The Carver Theater

On Sept. 29, 1950, the Carver Theater opened to great fanfare. It was hailed as "America's first theater for colored patrons" and boasted a "spacious powder room and lounge with a maid in attendance at all times for the comfort of ladies." The first two showings starred John Wayne in "*The Sands of Iwo Jima*" and "*Unknown Island*"; these premiers were preceded by a Woody Woodpecker cartoon.



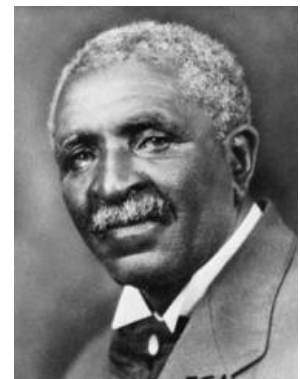
The Carver Theater was named after the famed Negro educator and one of the 20th century's greatest scientists, George Washington Carver. It was built specifically to cater for a Negro audience and was designed by Dallas based architect Jack Corgan. All seating was on a single floor.

In its heyday, the Carver Theater, located on Orleans Avenue in the Tremé neighborhood of New Orleans was a magnificent building serving a solitary function. The old structure has aged gracefully and is the centerpiece of a cultural renaissance that will stimulate economic development in the surrounding neighborhood. As a state of the art movie house, the Carver Theater has historical merit. It is located just ten blocks from the French Quarter, proximal to downtown New Orleans, and on the fringe of the Faubourg Tremé, the oldest community of free Blacks in the United States.

George Washington Carver's influence is still being felt today. Rising from slavery to become one of the world's most respected and honored men, he devoted his life to understanding nature and the many uses for the simplest of plant life. He is best known for developing crop-rotation methods for conserving nutrients in soil and discovering hundreds of new uses for crops such as the peanut. Carver's scientific discoveries included more than three hundred different products derived from the peanut, some 100 from sweet potatoes, about 75 from pecans, and many more including crop rotation.

After the shutdown of the movie screen in 1980, from 1992 until August 2005, The Historic Carver Theater was home to the Carver Medical Clinic, primarily serving the Lafitte Housing Development. The current owner, Dr. Eugene Oppman joined the clinic in 1987 and later purchased the facility in 1991; employing two general practitioners, a dentist, a pharmacist and an ophthalmologist.

Having sustained irreparable damage from six feet of flood water during hurricane Katrina, the medical clinic was permanently closed. Fortunately, building modification for the clinic was wood frame and



drywall, confined to the interior and was able to be removed completely. Exterior architectural details have been preserved, including the display windows which once held flashy movie posters screaming with images of the stars of that time.

After exploring several options, Dr. Oppman decided it was time to return the Historic Carver Theater to its proper place as a community entertainment venue. After demolishing the remnants of the clinic, a crew of hard working souls dedicated to revitalizing the community, completed basic cosmetic repairs and made the building "broom clean".

National Register of Historic Places

Source: Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The Carver Theater is a large brick veneer over concrete block cinema which opened in September 1950 as "an exclusively Negro" theater. It is located in a late nineteenth-early twentieth century neighborhood which was and is predominantly African-American. Directly across the street from the Carver is the Lafitte Housing Project (1941). The theater is a late but still convincing example of the Moderne style. Alterations have been confined principally to the interior. And, in any event, the Carver still easily conveys enough of its original appearance.

The building design has a very strong orientation to its prominent corner entrance at the intersection of Orleans Avenue and Johnson. The exterior uses superimposed masses and contrasting brick patterns to produce an energetic effect. The main side walls feature reddish brown brick laid with pronounced vertical grooves. These walls are partially superimposed on a taller corner section which features square beige brick panels on a brick background of the same color. The exterior culminates at the corner with a strongly vertical neon sign that extends well above the building. Originally crowned with a neon finial, the curving sign proclaims the theater's name. Immediately beneath the sign is a three-part faceted window that cuts the corner of the building. The corner entrance also retains its original marquee which has a slight geometrical build-up at the center. The roof is rather unusual, taking the form of a shallow vault.

Originally the theater had a free-standing ticket booth located on the exterior immediately below the middle of the marquee. Behind this were steps set at an angle leading to entrance doors (see attached diagram). The ticket booth has been incorporated into an enclosure which encompasses the stairs. (The stairs are still there; they are just no longer on the exterior.) A large "confectionary" was located on the Orleans Avenue elevation with its own door and a large window. The window has been covered and the door replaced. Above the confectionary are three relatively small windows which are original. Also surviving are a three-part window on the Orleans Avenue facade to display movie posters and a three-part corner display window below one end of the marquee. (Part of it is within the previously mentioned enclosure).

The Carver closed circa 1980 and since that time some of the interior has been converted to offices. The back one-third to one-half of the lobby has been subdivided for offices, and offices occupy about the first third of the 1,050 seat auditorium. As can be seen from the accompanying photo taken from the stage, the offices are quite small in comparison to the height of the auditorium. Also, almost all of the theater chairs have been removed. Despite these changes to the auditorium, it retains the bulk of its original character -- i.e., a large rectangular space with a stage on one end and a high vaulted ceiling.



As one walks down the steps to exit the theater, the terrazzo floor (original) has a geometrical design that leads one away from the building.

Assessment of Integrity:

While there have been various changes, as noted above, the Carver easily retains enough of its original character-defining features for someone who attended the grand opening to recognize the theater today. On the interior, the office partitions can be easily knocked down, which is the intention of the current owner.

Significant Date: 1950

Architect: Jack Corgan (Dallas)

Criterion: A

Area of Significance: Entertainment/Recreation
Ethnic Heritage/Black

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Carver Theater is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A because it represents an important phenomenon in the entertainment history of New Orleans' large African-American population -- the development of theaters in the city's black neighborhoods. These entertainment meccas were of real and symbolic value in the segregated world of separate but typically unequal. Named for the famed black scientist and educator, George Washington Carver, the theater meets the Register's "exceptional significance" requirement for less than fifty year old properties because its construction in 1950 was a watershed in the development of first-rate, state-of-the-art theaters for blacks in New Orleans. (Note: Much of the information for this statement of significance came from an interview with long-time New Orleans theater owner and operator, Rene Brunet. Born in 1921, Mr. Brunet has been actively involved in the movie theater business in New Orleans from the 1930s through today.)

When the Carver opened on September 29, 1950, it was one of several black neighborhood theaters in New Orleans. Virtually all were built by white businessmen who saw an economic opportunity.

In short, wherever there was a black neighborhood in the city, some enterprising businessman built a theater. This was part of the overall phenomenon of neighborhood theaters, whether black or white. In addition to neighborhood cinemas, there were a handful of "first-run" major movie houses in the CBD. But obviously, an African-American would have preferred his welcoming neighborhood theater over the "colored" balcony of Loew's State on Canal Street, for example. As historians of segregation have observed, blacks daily had to deal with various indignities and humiliation -- from seats at the back of the bus, to separate drinking fountains, to separate theater entrances and seats in the balcony. By its very nature, segregation implied inferiority.

Particularly helpful in placing the Carver in its historic context is the reaction of New Orleans' black newspaper, *The Louisiana Weekly*, to the permanent closure of the Loew's State balcony to blacks in September 1950 (almost the same day the Carver opened). The headline of the September 30 issue reads "Loew's New Policy Closes Balcony to Negro Patrons." The article began: "Negro patrons won't have to bother about climbing three flights of stairs any more at the Loew's State Theater." The reporter went on to note that the theater in the past had been picketed in an effort to force management to hire "a Negro ticket taker at the Rampart street entrance to the colored balcony" and that the balcony's patrons had complained of "rickety stairways" and mice. Then in an October 7 editorial the paper observed that the theater management had "so long insulted our group with inferior accommodations and general indifference to the patron's comfort."

Imagine how those same patrons would have felt about New Orleans' new state-of-the-art theater, the Carver, built "exclusively for Negroes" at a cost of \$300,000, and opening the same week the Loew's balcony closure made front page news. When the Carver opened, it was one of several black neighborhood theaters scattered across the city. When asked if it was any different from the others, Rene Brunet responded with a resounding yes. To quote him, the Carver was "head and shoulders" above the rest. Quite simply, it was the "best 'colored' theater in New Orleans and perhaps the entire South" -- "as good or better than any white theater in town." In contrast to the older black theaters which had "tired" seats and out-of-date equipment, the Carver had the latest in everything -- state-of-the-art projection and sound equipment, air-conditioning, concessions, etc.

The Carver's early ads emphasized this theme as well as certain amenities offered at the theater. A large ad announcing the grand opening featured a picture of the theater with the claim "America's finest theater for colored patrons only." Amenities included a "beautiful concession stand" and "a spacious powder room and lounge with a maid in attendance at all times for the comfort of the ladies." Another grand opening ad proclaimed that "this new super de luxe theater will offer to its patrons," among other items, "100% protection in its modern completely fireproof building," "the latest in architectural designs and comfort," and "the finest and newest projection and sound equipment available."

The theater became known to a wider audience with its inclusion in a nationally distributed trade publication, 1950-51 *Theatre Catalog*. In a three-page illustrated article titled "A Modern All-Negro Theatre," the Carver was held up as an example to emulate in what the author considered an underdeveloped field -- providing first-class movie theaters for blacks. Beginning with the premise that the theater industry "has until recently failed to recognize the prominent position of this group [blacks] from a potential patronage viewpoint," the author encouraged theater entrepreneurs to "make a more concentrated effort to attract a greater portion of these amusement funds." "They can do so by convincing the Negro that his patronage is as welcome as anyone else's and by seeing to it that houses in colored neighborhoods are just as finely appointed as other surrounding modern houses. The Negro patron, too, is entitled to as much for the ticket he buys."

The remainder of the article described the Carver in considerable detail to show that it was "a noteworthy and commendable effort" in this regard. As the article subtitle noted, the Carver provided facilities of the "highest order." In addition to commenting upon its modernity and equipment, the article emphasized the overall quality of the theater's appointments and amenities: "A visitor entering the Carver can readily perceive how nearly \$300,000 was spent to construct and equip the building, for there is a note of luxurious elegance wherever one looks." "Marble partitions are to be found in each [bathroom], and a maid is always in attendance in the powder room." This "luxury" was contrasted with the "shabby and ill-kempt structures with poor pictures" one encountered too often in black theaters.

As the foregoing information amply demonstrates, when the Carver opened in September 1950, it was the “ultimate” all-black movie house. The neighborhood did not have a cinema at the time, and theater entrepreneur Jack A. Dicharry (who also owned the Lincoln) saw a good business opportunity. As the article in the 1950-51 Theatre Bulletin observed, many of the theater’s patrons were inhabitants of “an all-negro government housing project” located directly across the street. The project in question (Lafitte) contained about 1,000 units.

Today, the Carver is one of about six surviving black theaters in New Orleans. Regrettably, the Lincoln, the father of them all, has been demolished. None of the survivors are being used as cinemas. Two are churches and one is a pawn shop.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brunet, Rene. Phone interview on June 1, 1998. As noted in Part 8, Mr. Brunet is an authority on the old movie theaters of New Orleans, having been involved in the business since the 1930s.

“*A Modern All-Negro Theatre.*” 1950-51 Theatre Catalog. Copy in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

The Louisiana Weekly. September 23, September 30, October 7, 1950.

The Times Picayune, September 29, 1950.