

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 8, 1994; Designation List 257
LP-1841

REGENT THEATER (now First Corinthian Baptist Church),
1906-1916 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard (aka 200-212 West 116th Street),
Manhattan. Built 1912-13; architect Thomas W. Lamb.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1831, Lot 33.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Regent Theater (now First Corinthian Baptist Church) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of ten speakers testified in favor of the proposed designation; eight of those speakers were in favor of this as well as other items on the calendar at the hearing, but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Three speakers declined to take a position regarding this proposed designation until such time as that work continues. The Reverend Thomas McKinzie, representing the First Corinthian Baptist Church, subsequently stated that the church would support the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Regent Theater is one of New York City's most significant surviving early motion picture theater buildings. Constructed in 1912-13, during the period that the motion picture business made the transition from showing short silent movies in nickelodeons to offering "photoplays" in larger, specially built theaters with numerous amenities for their patrons, the Regent was designed by the noted and prolific theater specialist Thomas W. Lamb. It is one of only a few theaters of Lamb's early career remaining in New York City. An elegant architectural design, the Regent was built to elevate the presentation of movies and was one of the first luxurious movie theaters in New York City. The theater was controlled by the real estate interests of the Little family, prominent printers, for nearly forty years. Located in Harlem at the corner of two thoroughfares which were popular for entertainment venues, the Regent was operated as a movie and vaudeville house for some fifty years -- as an innovative setting for movie presentations (for a short time under the management of Samuel L. Rothapfel (later "Roxy" Rothafel)), as the B.S. Moss Regent Theater from 1915 to 1928, and finally as the RKO Regent Theater. Its distinctive, eclectic design, executed in polychrome terra cotta on the front portion of the building, incorporates Italian and northern European Renaissance and Mannerist motifs, particularly the diaper-patterned wall surfaces, ground-story arcade, upper loggias, and prominent central stepped frontispiece. The terra cotta, manufactured by the South Amboy Terra Cotta Company, is notable in its detailing and subtle shades. For thirty years the Regent Theater building, still a striking and very visible presence, has served as the home of the First Corinthian Baptist Church, an African-American congregation formed in Harlem in 1939.

Harlem: History and Development¹

The village of Harlem in northern Manhattan, originally known as Nieuw Haarlem (after the Dutch city of Haarlem), was established by the Dutch governor Peter Stuyvesant in 1658. Harlem remained a small village with outlying farms and estates (owned by some of New York's early wealthy families) until after the Civil War. As the population of New York City swelled after the war, however, mounting pressures for housing pushed the development of neighborhoods further northward. Major development was spurred by the opening of transit lines connecting the community with the rest of the city to the south. The earliest railroad line to run through Harlem was the New York & Harlem Railroad, which started grade-level service along what is now Park Avenue in 1837. More significant to the development history of Harlem was the advent of three elevated railroad lines (along Second, Third, and Eighth Avenues) in 1878-80, which made the commute to downtown relatively convenient. As Harlem became more closely linked to built-up parts of the metropolis, it generated intensive activity from real estate speculators and builders, beginning in the 1870s into the 1910s, resulting in the construction of hundreds of rowhouses, tenements and flats, and luxury apartment houses. The western section of Harlem, although developed slightly later, became a prosperous and fashionable neighborhood with many elegant homes. A subway route to Harlem, opened in 1904, ignited another round of speculative development. Accompanying the residential construction were buildings for various religious, educational, and cultural institutions, as well as commercial concerns, including theaters featuring popular entertainment.

Entertainment in Harlem: 1877-1910s²

Beginning in the later nineteenth century, Harlem became one of the major centers for entertainment in New York City, a situation which lasted well into the twentieth century. As early as 1877-79, the short-lived Pandy's Gayety Theater at 2315 Third Avenue offered drama and variety. In 1885 the "Theatre Comique" opened in a former skating rink on East 125th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues, and operated as the Harlem Theater in 1890-93. Harlem's first major theater was the Harlem Opera House (1889, J.B. McElfatrick & Sons, 207 West 125th Street, demolished), built by Oscar Hammerstein I, an inventor, cigar manufacturer, and real estate speculator in Harlem (and later Times Square impresario); intended to serve Harlem's wealthy elite, the Opera House presented opera,

drama, and concerts. Hammerstein also built the Columbus Theater (1890, J.B. McElfatrick & Sons), 112-118 East 125th Street, for similar entertainment. Both theaters, two of New York's largest at the time, were financial failures; after Hammerstein lost title, the Opera House became a popular vaudeville theater, while the Columbus was a successful venue for minstrel, vaudeville, and variety shows.

In the early twentieth century, theaters featuring legitimate, vaudeville, burlesque, variety, and motion picture entertainment proliferated in Harlem, particularly along 116th and 125th Streets as well as Seventh Avenue (now Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard).³ These theaters catered to a diverse population composed of large numbers of foreign immigrants, including Russian Jews, Germans, Italians, and Irish. The Regent Theater (1912-13, Thomas W. Lamb), one of these early Harlem theaters, was one of the first motion picture theaters in New York City designed to elevate the presentation of the movies above the conditions found in the nickelodeons of the era.

Emergence of the Movie Theater⁴

The earliest known use of a motion picture projection device for an American audience occurred in 1896. Vaudeville immediately began showing short motion pictures as a novelty at the end of programs, and "movies" were also shown in such popular gathering places as arcades and circuses. By 1905 "nickelodeons" (so-called because of the five-cent admission charge) showing silent movies began to open in converted storefronts, and over the next decade the movies became a very popular and inexpensive form of entertainment for the masses.

The rapidly growing motion picture industry found itself under attack around 1909-10 from various quarters: by guardians of morals advocating censorship and age restrictions, by owners of legitimate and vaudeville theaters concerned about competition, and by municipal authorities worried about the health and safety conditions of the numerous small movie theaters. A number of large cities, including New York, passed legislation to regulate the construction and operation of movie theaters. New York's ordinance, enacted in 1913 after four years of discussion, prohibited (among its specifications) stages and galleries in smaller theaters. In order for movie theaters to remain profitable while meeting the legal requirements, owners realized that their theaters would have to be larger in size with more seating. Beginning around 1910-11, larger, more luxurious movie theaters, following the

architectural model of legitimate and vaudeville theaters and concert halls, were built in several American cities. The Columbia Theater (1911) in Detroit and the Regent Theater in New York were two early examples. At the same time the development of the first American feature-length narrative films, or "photoplays," further transformed the motion picture and theater business and this popular entertainment was promoted as respectable enough for families and for the middle classes.⁵ By 1915 there were twelve movie theaters, including the Regent, along 116th Street alone, between First and Eighth Avenues.⁶

The Regent has sometimes been cited as the first American "movie palace."⁷ While this characterization depends upon the definition of "movie palace" (epitomized by those large and lavishly extravagant movie theaters of the late 1910s and 1920s), the Regent was one of the first luxurious movie theaters in New York City and shared the features commonly associated with the major transitional movie theaters of this early period, including size, architectural design by a theater architect and similarity to a legitimate theater, and the intention to cater to a "higher class" of patron. Most movie theater owners of the early 1910s, including the owners of the Regent, decided to include a stage, thus giving them more options should the theater not be successful showing only movies -- most "movie theaters" of the day were actually used for a combination of movies and vaudeville or variety entertainment. Prior to World War I, seldom were theaters built exclusively for the movies. More luxurious movie theaters like the Regent provided such amenities as a comfortable and ornate decor, ushers and attendants, and musical accompaniment (including pipe organs⁸ and orchestras), and presented quality films.

The Regent Theater⁹

In June, 1912, the St. Nicholas-Seventh Avenue Theatre Company purchased a lot in Harlem from financier-philanthropist Adolph Lewisohn for \$100. Just south of Kilpatrick Square,¹⁰ the lot was located at the southwest corner of the intersection of Seventh and St. Nicholas Avenues and West 116th Street, diagonally opposite from the Graham Court Apartments (1899-1901, Clinton & Russell),¹¹ one of the city's grandest courtyard apartment houses. This company, under the direction of Robert S. Marvin, of New York, and Charles J. Kuhlmann, James McEvoy, Jr.,¹² and William H. Hudgins, of Baltimore, had been formed that April for the purpose

of acquiring and operating "theatres, halls and other places of amusements" for the presentation of "theatrical plays, vaudeville acts, concerts, operas, moving picture films or other motion pictures, athletic contests, and any other form of entertainment and amusement."¹³ After an election of the board of directors in 1913, Robert S. Marvin and Arthur W. Little headed the company. Construction of the Regent Theater, to the design of theater architect Thomas W. Lamb, occurred between August, 1912, and April, 1913.¹⁴ An article published in *The Moving Picture News*, just after the theater's opening, noted that it had

*something more than the ordinary amount of interest attached to the history of its origination in the fact that one of its originators was the late Mr. J.J. Little, of the well-known J.J. Little printing establishment, and that the primary motive for its origination was the elevation of the moving picture theatre and its entertainment.*¹⁵

Joseph James Little (1873-1913) was the English-born president of the printing firm J.J. Little & Company, which had been founded in 1867. Among his civic and real estate activities, he had served as a Congressman in 1891-93, as chairman of the Board of Education's Commission on Buildings in 1891, as president of the Board of Education of Greater New York City, and as president of Demorest & Little, a realty company formed in 1902. Arthur West Little (1873-1943), his son, joined J.J. Little & Company in 1891, later becoming chairman of the board of J.J. Little & Ives Company, and served as a director of the Estate of Joseph Little Inc. and Demorest & Little. Robert S. Marvin was the son of Harry Norton Marvin.¹⁶ The elder Marvin (c. 1863-1940) was, until his retirement in 1912, an important figure in the American motion picture business; he was one of the founders (1895) and a president of the American Mutoscope Company (later the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, and in 1899 the American Biograph Company), which manufactured some of the earliest machines for projecting moving pictures and became the foremost American motion picture company at the turn of the century. Harry Marvin was later president of the Motion Picture Patents Company, which combined the resources of Biograph with those of Thomas A. Edison.

The Regent Theater, built with a single balcony and more than 1800 seats, opened on February 8, 1913, under the management of Claude H. Talley, and featured an eight-piece orchestra directed by Conrad S. Koschat, as well as an organist formerly with Wanamaker's and notable vocalists of the day.

The first film shown was *Pandora's Box*. Comments about the Regent implicitly compared it to the average nickelodeon of the day. *Harlem Magazine* raved about the new theater:

*Harlem's latest and handsomest entertainment house, marks an altogether new era in the moving picture world, as it is without doubt the largest and most completely equipped motion picture playhouse yet opened. For beauty and convenience it surpasses many of the Broadway theatres. It has been the intention of the Regent management to give New York Theatre goers something individually new in its form of entertainment, in a combination of the finest selection of photoplays that can be produced and music of a high and pleasing quality. . . . [Mr. Talley] has a high appreciation of the dignity and importance of the photoplay, and says, that only those of the highest class and entirely free from cheap sensationalism will be given.*¹⁷

The Moving Picture News considered what it called the "Spanish-Moorish style" theater "an exemplification of refined taste in arrangement, decoration, and the general tone of the entertainment furnished therein . . . In every respect this theatre's entertainment may be classed among the most refined and uplifting in New York City."¹⁸

After this promising beginning, the Regent Theater achieved further renown, less than a year after its opening, when Samuel Lionel Rothapfel (later "Roxy" Rothafel) was hired as director. Rothapfel (1892-1936) had previously managed a number of movie theaters in the Midwest, becoming known as "the greatest genius in the art of fitting the music to the picture"¹⁹ for his innovative scored musical accompaniments, and was hired at the Regent as his first job in New York City. He went on to great fame at, among others, the Strand, Capitol, and Roxy Theaters, as well as Radio City Music Hall. After some renovations of the interior, Rothapfel reopened the Regent around the beginning of December, 1913, showing the film *The Last Days of Pompeii* on a screen set within an artfully-composed stage setting, with an organ prelude, musical accompaniment, singers, and recitations by live actors. *The Motion Picture News* thought the performance "a remarkable incident in the history of the motion picture. . . . Rothapfel presented artistically an artistic picture . . . It served very clearly . . . to portend for the first time the theatrical future of the picture . . . it was little less than a revelation." This publication also reiterated its opinion of the quality of the theater itself, stating that "there is no finer theatre in New York in the point of construction," while praising "Mr. Rothapfel's skilful

[sic] attention to details."²⁰ Not to be outdone in praise, *Harlem Magazine* continued in the same vein:

*. . . the patrons of the house never tire of speaking of its comfort and the luxurious atmosphere created by the beauty of its . . . appointments. . . . A point worth emphasizing above others in a description of the conduct and management of the house... is that the most artistic and idealistic presentations of the photo plays selected, are insisted upon. In this regard the Regent Theatre is not excelled by any picture house in this country, and so far as is known, in the world. This has been true especially since Mr. Rothapfel became the director of the house. He is a veritable genius in the art of staging moving picture plays, and has . . . been dubbed "the Belasco" of the moving picture business.*²¹

Theater impresario David Belasco himself thought that *The Last Days of Pompeii* at the Regent was "one of the best things I have ever seen."²² Rothapfel, however, remained at the Regent for less than six months.

Thomas W. Lamb, Architect of the Regent Theater²³

The Regent enjoyed the distinction of being designed by one of America's great theater architects. Thomas W. Lamb (1871-1942), one of the best known of a small group of American theater specialists and one of the world's most prolific theater architects, designed over three hundred theater buildings in the United States and around the world, the majority of which were movie theaters. Born in Dundee, Scotland, Lamb moved with his family by 1883 to New York City, where his father worked as an engineer. Lamb opened an architectural office around 1892, prior to his having any particular architectural training; the first entry in his job book dates from 1895. He enrolled in general science at the Cooper Union in 1894 (his studies included mechanical drawing and acoustics), graduating in 1898, and worked for a time as a building inspector and plan examiner. Lamb's earliest known theater project was the 1904 alteration of the Gotham Theater at 165 East 125th Street (demolished). Theaters soon became his specialty, and he worked on a number of renovations as well as new theater projects. One of these was the conversion of the roof garden of the American Theater at Eighth Avenue and 42nd Street (demolished) into a second theater, for William Morris in 1908-09. The Nicoland Theater (1908, demolished), Westchester Avenue near 156th Street, the Bronx, is thought to have been one of the earliest movie theaters built in New York. In addition to the Regent Theater, notable early theater commissions by

Lamb also included the 2267-seat City Theater (1909-10, demolished) for William Fox, which housed both vaudeville and motion pictures (and was one of the first large theaters to show movies in New York City), 114 East 14th Street; and the National Theater/National Winter Garden Theater (1911-12, demolished), a Yiddish theater/vaudeville house, East Houston and Chrystie Streets.

Throughout his career Lamb was known both for his designs for monumental movie theaters and for smaller neighborhood houses for the leading theater chains of the day, such as Loew's, Proctor's, Keith's, RKO, and Trans-Lux. The Regent Theater is one of only a few theater buildings designed by Lamb prior to World War I which is still extant, wholly or in part. Lamb's other remaining early theaters in New York include: the Washington (1910-11, with V. Hugo Koehler), 1801-1807 Amsterdam Avenue; the Eltinge (later Empire, 1911-12), 236-240 West 42nd Street; the Audubon Theater and Ballroom (1912, front facade partly extant), 3940-3960 Broadway; Loew's Boulevard (1912-13), 1032 Southern Boulevard, the Bronx; the Cort (1912-13), 138-146 West 48th Street;²⁴ Loew's Bedford (1913, altered), 1362-1372 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn; and the 81st Street (1913-14, auditorium demolished), 2248-2258 Broadway.

Lamb was commissioned for some of the most prominent and enormous movie theaters on Broadway in the vicinity of Times Square in the 1910s and '20s. These included the Strand (1914), the Rialto (1916), the Rivoli (1917), the Capitol (1918-19, the first American movie theater with over 5000 seats), and the Loew's State Theater Building (1921), now all demolished. The majority of Lamb's theater designs prior to 1930 were classically-inspired, with interiors often based on seventeenth-century Baroque or eighteenth-century English (Adamesque) or French (Louis XVI) sources. During the late 1920s and 1930s, his designs became more exotic. Two surviving movie palaces from this period are the Hollywood Theater (1929), 217-239 West 51st Street, which was later converted to use as a Broadway house called the Mark Hellinger,²⁵ and Loew's 175th Street (1930), 4140-4156 Broadway.

Although best known for his theaters, Lamb accepted other commissions and his *oeuvre* includes a variety of building types. Among the more notable of these buildings are the Pythian Temple (1926-27), 135-145 West 70th Street;²⁶ the Paramount Hotel (1927-28), 235-245 West 46th Street; and the second Madison Square Garden (1925-29, demolished), Eighth Avenue and West 49th Street.

Design of the Regent Theater Exterior

While contemporary literature praised the amenities and programs of the Regent Theater, the exterior design is equally significant. The Regent was built during the early 1910s when the motion picture business made the transition from nickelodeons to larger, specially built theaters. A nickelodeon, usually consisting of a long, narrow rectangular interior space, typically had a narrow facade dominated by an arched entrance and exuberantly ornamented by terra cotta or pressed metal and electric light bulbs. In contrast, the exterior design of the early larger movie theaters often was similar to that of the legitimate houses, due in part to the desire of owners to emphasize the increased respectability of this entertainment form. Legitimate, vaudeville and movie theaters of the era in New York City were usually designed by the same architects, often in stylistic variants of the neo-classical.²⁷ The movie theater facades were as broad as those of the legitimate houses, reflecting the size of the auditoriums, and in some of the movie theaters (including the Regent) the front section was a "commercial block" that contained stores on the ground story, while the auditorium was set back behind the commercial section.

Theaters were one of the building types in New York City to most commonly employ terra-cotta facades.²⁸ As stated by Susan Tunick, an expert on terra cotta, "the glamour and exotic fantasy world of the theater made it an ideal type of building to exploit the rich color and imagery so easily achieved in terra cotta."²⁹ As employed in the 1910s, the color palette of the terra cotta was usually quite subtle.

The eclectic design of the "commercial block" portion of the Regent Theater, consisting of the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard (Seventh Avenue) facade and a return on 116th Street, executed in terra cotta, is less neo-classical, and more "exotic," than many contemporary theaters. It incorporates Italian and northern European Renaissance and Mannerist motifs, particularly the diaper-patterned wall surfaces, the ground-story arcade, the upper loggias, and the prominent central stepped frontispiece. These motifs are continued in terra cotta on the brick-faced auditorium portion of the design. The polychrome terra cotta, manufactured by the South Amboy Terra Cotta Company,³⁰ is notable in its detailing and subtle shades. A brochure published after 1917 by the National Terra Cotta Society on American theaters, which included photographs of the Regent, described the terra cotta and its color palette:

The architectural terra cotta for the colonnade, first story, is of light cream matt finish; the ornament in arches, golden yellow; capitals, gold matt. Ornament in balconies, green enamel; terra cotta courses under cornice, green and golden yellow. The terra cotta in wall surface is a variegated bluish white fastened with a bronze spike at each corner.³¹

The exterior of the Regent Theater, combining a distinctive commercial facade in terra cotta and an auditorium, remains one of finest surviving early movie theater designs in New York City.

The B.S. Moss Regent Theater and the RKO Regent Theater³²

Following Rothaphel's brief tenure, the Regent Theater was associated for almost fifty years with two other notable motion picture organizations. In February, 1915, the Regent, still owned by the St. Nicholas-Seventh Avenue Theatre Company, was leased to the Pansy Amusement Corporation, a theatrical and motion picture business formed in June, 1914, with Benjamin S. Moss as president. B.S. Moss (c. 1878-1951), raised in the Yorkville section of Manhattan, began his career as a theater operator through associations with William Fox and Marcus Loew. As a producer of silent films (c. 1914-18), Moss was a pioneer in the transition of the motion picture business in New York from nickelodeons to theaters. Moss organized the syndicate that built the Washington Theater in 1910 for showing movies, and he later presided over a chain of eight vaudeville and movie theaters which bore his name (including the Regent), as well as sixteen other theaters with which he had booking arrangements. Moss merged his theater interests with those of E.F. Albee in 1920 in the operation of the Keith & Proctor vaudeville theater chain; the new circuit was known as the "Keith-Moss-Proctor."

The Pansy Amusement Corporation renewed its lease on the theater in 1921. At the end of 1926 the St. Nicholas-Seventh Avenue Theater Company was dissolved; the Regent was subsequently owned by the Seventh and St. Nicholas Avenues Realty Corporation, with Arthur W. Little as president. B.S. Moss retired from vaudeville in 1928 when he sold his theater interests, which were incorporated within the newly created Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) Radio Pictures, Inc.³³

The Pansy Amusement Corporation (now a subsidiary of RKO) extended its lease on the Regent Theater in 1932 and 1937, still for movies and vaudeville, although television broadcasts were listed in the latter lease. Also in 1937, the theater was air-

conditioned; previously the theater had been occupied only seasonally. In 1950 the J.J. Little Realty Corporation (as the ownership company was then known) was dissolved. The Regent Theatre Corporation, a subsidiary of RKO-Keith-Orpheum Theatres, Inc., became the new owner of the theater. In 1953 the ownership and lessee entities were consolidated as the Pansy Amusement Corporation; Pansy was merged into RKO Theatres, Inc., in 1961.

First Corinthian Baptist Church³⁴

The Regent Theater was purchased from RKO Theatres, Inc., on March 31, 1964, by the First Corinthian Baptist Church.³⁵ This African-American congregation was formed in March, 1939, initially meeting in a rowhouse at 105 West 117th Street. The address of the church was subsequently listed as 236 West 116th Street, a two-story commercial structure. First Corinthian later purchased a five-story multiple dwelling at 2553 Eighth Avenue (Frederick Douglass Blvd.), near West 137th Street, in October, 1946; the church remained there until its move to the Regent. For thirty years, the theater building, still a striking and very visible presence, has served as the home of the First Corinthian Baptist congregation under the leadership of the Rev. Thomas McKinzie.

Description

The exterior of the Regent Theater consists of a three-story "commercial block" along Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard faced in polychrome terra cotta (manufactured by the South Amboy Terra Cotta Company in subtle shades of bluish white, cream, yellow, gold, and green) with an auditorium section faced in sienna ironspot Roman brick (laid in common bond) behind it to the west, extending along West 116th Street. The terra-cotta portion features a one-story arcade, incorporating storefronts, of seven bays on the boulevard; the terra-cotta facing continues around both corners of the building, for one bay on the otherwise plain brick facade on the alley to the south, and for two arcade bays on the northern facade on West 116th Street. The arcade consists of semi-circular arches and composite order half-round columns (paired at the corners). There were originally six stores in this portion of the building, each having a rectangular glass panel door, square transom, rectangular single-pane storefront window, and sign band/diamond-pane transom, surmounted by a paneled spandrel and round-arch transom with multiple panes following the arch. The central arch, wider and taller, contains the main entrance and is surmounted by an elaborate stepped frontispiece. The

entrance originally had three pairs of doors with stained glass transoms, set between columns, beneath a horizontal metal and glass canopy;³⁶ above the entrance is a large fanlight with a wrought-iron fan grille. Ground-story alterations include the removal (c. 1964) of the marquee; the removal of the two columns within the entrance arch; the encasing (in brick and sheet metal) of the entrance arch columns and the adjacent bay to the north³⁷ and the parging of the spandrel area where the canopy/marquee was located (the name of the church is placed here); the placing of a cross, a dove, and stained glass within the fanlight over the entrance; the installation of new aluminum and glass entrance doors and gates; the painting of some terra cotta; the installation of roll-down gates and signage; and the replacement of the storefronts, the replacement or covering of transom/sign bands, and the painting of the round-arch transoms.

The wall surfaces of the upper two stories are clad in a terra-cotta diaper pattern, in part created by bronze spike fasteners. Edging the terra cotta of these stories are rope colonnettes (paired at the corners). The central frontispiece is ornamented with scrolls, griffins, a shell sculpture niche, oculi, a broken pediment, and finials; the frontispiece has been modified by the addition of crosses to the finials; the painting of some of the terra cotta details; the placement of alpha and omega symbols in the oculi; the removal of the original female theatrical muse figure in the niche and its replacement with a figure of Christ (c. 1985); and the installation of a large sign in the form of a cross bearing the name of the church just to the north (c. 1967). Flanking the frontispiece, as well as on the north facade at the second story level, were paired windows; the windows have been replaced (with louvers to the south, and infill to the north and on 116th Street) and the bracketed balconies below them were removed in 1948 and replaced with corbeled panels. A vertical sign bearing the name of the theater hung at the north corner of the upper stories until c. 1964.³⁸

The third story has six-bay arcaded loggias with balustrades flanking the upper portion of the frontispiece on the main facade; the north (116th Street) side four-bay arcade has original brick infill (now painted). Set within the loggias are brick (now painted) wall arcades with pairs of French doors with curved glass panels and transoms (now painted). The

original pressed-metal cornice with brackets, pendants, and tile pent roof was removed c. 1985; this area was then parged with an arcaded relief (the name of the church is placed in the center). The original pressed-metal parapet survives, with a central panel flanked by a motif of sheaves and circles;³⁹ a cross has been placed at the 116th Street corner.

The auditorium portion of the building, to the west of the terra-cotta portion, has a wide facade on West 116th Street, executed in ironspot Roman brick with polychrome terra-cotta trim, consisting of the auditorium entrances/exits on the ground story and three large arches above, which are framed, below and above, by stringcourses. These motifs continue the design of the commercial block portion of the building. On the ground story, starting from the east, are: a single opening with a surround with colonnettes and a scroll pediment with an oculus; five pairs of doors surmounted by a panel with relief arches inset with pediments surmounted by rosettes; a pair of openings; two single openings; and a taller opening to the stage area. The large upper-story arches have oculi, lunettes, and doors (now painted red with crosses); the center arch has a terra-cotta diaper pattern similar to the boulevard facade. Brick areas within these arches have been painted. Covered iron fire escapes (originally with coverings that curved, within the arches) were replaced c. 1985 (it appears that only the original brackets remain). A bull's-eye window is to the east of the arches, and small rectangular windows are at the west end. Below the cornice line the brick has a diamond pattern. At the east end of the roof parapet is a section of brick wall with a double arch with oculi (a projecting cornice has been removed). The design of the roof parapet is a continuation of that on the terra-cotta portion of the building; a wide band of parging below the parapet corresponds to the location of the original cornice and pent roof.

The southern brick facade of the building has a sheet metal canopy, a fire escape, and gates.

Report prepared by
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NOTES

1. This section was adapted from: LPC, *Mount Morris Bank Building Designation Report* (LP-1839) (New York: City of New York, 1993), report prepared by Andrew S. Dolkart.
2. This section was adapted from: LPC, *Apollo Theater Designation Report* (LP-1299) (New York: City of New York, 1983), report prepared by Jay Shockley.
3. Among these were the Alhambra Theater (1905, J.B. McElpatrick & Sons), 2114 Seventh Avenue; the Lafayette Theater (1912, V. Hugo Koehler, subsequently re-faced), 2223-2237 Seventh Avenue); Hurtig & Seamon's New (Burlesque) Theater (later the Apollo Theater, 1913-14, George Keister, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark), 253 West 125th Street; and Loew's Victoria Theater (1917, Thomas W. Lamb), 235 West 125th Street.
4. This section was compiled from the following sources: "Aldermen Approve Film Theatre Bill," *New York Times*, July 2, 1913, 18; Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990); Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961); Eleanor Kerr, *The First Quarter Century of the Motion Picture Theatre* (New York: Potter & Co., 1930); Craig Morrison, "From Nickelodeon to Picture Palace and Back," *Design Quarterly* 93 (1974), 6-15; David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1981) and *Great American Movie Theaters* (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1987); *New York Times Index*; and P.R. Pereira, "The Development of the Moving Picture Theatre," *The American Architect* 106 (Sept. 23, 1914), 177-185.
5. The extent of the early growth of the business was indicated in Arthur S. Meloy, *Theatres and Motion Picture Houses* (New York: Architects' Supply & Publishing Co., 1916), 1: "Houses devoted to the legitimate plays and for combination vaudeville and pictures, will continue to be in demand, but the greatest demand at present is for the motion picture theatre. There are about 25,000 picture houses in this country alone, and representing an investment of about 175,000,000 of dollars, with an average daily attendance of about 6,000,000 of people. . . . The growth has been phenomenal and unprecedented."
6. "The Varied Tenancy of 116th Street," *Real Estate Record & Guide* 45 (Mar. 6, 1915), 369. Though a number of these theater buildings still exist, the only other impressive structure is the Mount Morris Theater (1911-12, Hoppin & Koen), 1421-1435 Fifth Avenue (aka 1 East 116th Street).
7. This characterization may have originated with Ben Hall, when he called the Regent "the first deluxe theater built expressly for showing movies in New York." See Hall, 30-31.
8. The Regent is sometimes cited as having New York's first movie pipe organ. See Hall, 31.
9. This section was compiled from the following sources: *The Brickbuilder* 23 (Feb. 1914 Suppl.), 53; "Herman Casler" [includes Harry Marvin], *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* 36 (New York: James T. White, 1950), 346; Hall; "Arthur West Little," *Who Was Who in America* 2 (Chicago: A.N. Marquis Co., 1950), 325, and *Who's Who in New York* (New York: Who's Who Co., 1914), 457; "Joseph James Little," *Who Was Who in America* 1 (Chicago: A.N. Marquis Co., 1943), 736, and *Who's Who In New York City and State* (New York: W.F. Brainard, 1911), 599; Harry N. Marvin obit., *New York Times*, Jan. 13, 1940, 15; Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990); NYC Dept. of Buildings, Plans, Permits and Dockets; New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances; New York County, Old Records Division, Surrogates Court, Certificates of Incorporation, Consolidation, and Dissolution; Jack Robinson, "A Stroll Through Harlem," *Marquee* 13 (1981); and Theatre Historical Society, 1980 Conclave Notes (New York City), 13.
10. The square has been renamed for Asa Philip Randolph, African-American editor of *The Messenger*, an international vice-president of the AFL/CIO, and a founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

11. Graham Court is a designated New York City Landmark.
12. This was probably James McEvoy (1874-1941), a prominent lawyer, civic leader, and police commissioner in Baltimore; after practicing with the Baltimore firm of Willis & Homer from 1900 to 1916, he moved to New York City and joined Beekman, Menken & Griscom. (McEvoy's three direct progenitors, as well as his son, were also James McEvoy). *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* 30 (New York: James T. White, 1943), 378.
13. St. Nicholas-Seventh Avenue Theatre Co. Certificate of Incorporation.
14. New Building permit 191-1912.
15. "The Regent Theatre," *The Moving Picture News* 7 (Apr. 5, 1913), 11. Little arranged for the financing of the Regent with a Robert Warren.
16. Harry Marvin is frequently cited as "Henry Marvin."
17. "Regent Theatre a Big Success," *Harlem Magazine* (May, 1913), 23.
18. "The Regent Theatre."
19. "Motion Picture Theater Construction Dept.," *The Motion Picture News* 8 (Dec. 6, 1913), 28.
20. "A DeLuxe Presentation," *The Motion Picture News* 8 (Dec. 6, 1913), 16.
21. "Dramatization of Photo Plays," *Harlem Magazine* (Feb., 1914), 14.
22. "A DeLuxe Presentation."
23. This section was compiled from the following sources: Claudia C. Hart, "The New York Theatres of Thomas Lamb" (Columbia University Masters Thesis, 1983); Thomas W. Lamb Job Book and Index, Avery Library, Columbia University; Thomas W. Lamb obit., *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1942; LPC, Thomas W. Lamb files; and Hilary Russell, "An Architect's Progress: Thomas White Lamb," *Marquee* 21 (1989).
24. The Cort is a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark.
25. The Hellinger is a designated New York City Landmark and Interior Landmark and now houses the Times Square Church.
26. The Pythian Temple is in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District.
27. Examples include the Lyceum, Globe (later Lunt-Fontanne), Cort, and Longacre, all legitimate theaters, the Lafayette, a vaudeville house, and Loew's Victoria Theater, a motion picture/vaudeville theater. The Lyceum (1902-03, Herts & Tallant, 149-157 West 45th Street), the Globe (1909-10, Carrere & Hastings, 203-217 West 46th Street), and the Longacre (1912-13, Henry B. Herts, 220-228 West 48th Street) are designated New York City Landmarks.
28. In 1914, the year after the Regent opened, the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company and *The Brickbuilder* co-sponsored a competition for the design of a motion picture theater. The program called for a two-story theater with a third story for public assemblies or business purposes, a space which was captioned on some of the entries as a "dance hall." Small stores could be located in front flanking the theater's entrance. The street front had to be entirely of terra cotta; indeed, polychrome terra cotta was recommended. Of the 185 entries, four were awarded prizes and twenty-nine received "Mentions"; all of these were published. The purpose of the competition was twofold: to encourage the wider use of architectural terra cotta; and to offer designers the opportunity to demonstrate ingenuity in the development of, or the modification of, a given style. "The Program," "Report of the Jury of Award, Architectural Terra Cotta Competition, A Moving Picture Theatre," and Aymar Embury, II, "Architectural Treatment of the Moving Picture Theatre," *The Brickbuilder* 23, Supplement, (Feb.,

1914), 5, 6, and 37-39.

29. Susan Tunick, "Architectural Terra Cotta: Its Impact on New York," *Sites* 18 (1986), 24. Aside from the Regent, notable examples of contemporary theaters with terra-cotta facades include the Lyceum, the Folies Bergere (later Helen Hayes), the Audubon, the Longacre, the Eltinge, and Hurtig & Seamon's (later Apollo). The Folies Bergere (1910-11, Herts & Talant) was demolished.
30. The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company submitted a bid on the job to Fleischmann Brothers Company in May of 1912, for an estimated cost of \$10,294. The contract went to the South Amboy Terra Cotta Company, as documented on Estimate No. 22308 [New York Architectural Terra Cotta Co. records, Avery Library]. The South Amboy Terra Cotta Company was founded in 1903 in a leased (later purchased) clay manufactory in South Amboy, New Jersey, the former Swan Hill Pottery, one of the oldest on the East coast. South Amboy merged in 1928 with the New Jersey and Federal Terra Cotta Companies, forming the Federal Seaboard Terra Cotta Company. [*The Story of Terra Cotta*, Walter Geer (1920), as annotated by Susan Tunick, in *Sites*, 18 (1986)]. The Eltinge Theater (1911-12), also designed by Lamb, was executed in similar shades of terra cotta, by the South Amboy Terra Cotta Company, as documented in *The Brickbuilder*, 21 (1912), 65.
31. National Terra Cotta Society, *Architectural Terra Cotta Brochure Series: The Theatre 2* (New York: n.d. [post-1917]), 20.
32. This section was compiled from the following sources: B.S. Moss obit., *New York Times* and *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1951; NYC Dept. of Buildings; New York County, Office of the Register; New York County, Old Records Division; Anthony Slide, *The American Film Industry: A Historical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 49-50, 289-290; Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1940), 383; Liz-Anne Bawder, ed., *Oxford Companion to Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 595-596; and *Manhattan Address Telephone Directory* (New York: New York Telephone Co., 1929-1965).
33. RKO had its origins in the formation of the Film Booking Office of America (FBO) in 1922. Acquired by Joseph F. Kennedy in 1926, FBO was later joined with interests of David Sarnoff of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). In 1928 (the year after sound was introduced in American films), FBO merged with the Keith-Albee-Orpheum vaudeville circuit to form RKO Radio Pictures, a production and distribution company, which was for the next two decades one of the five major Hollywood studios. By 1930 RKO owned around 200 vaudeville houses which showed movies along with variety programs.
34. This section was compiled from the following sources: New York County, Office of the Register; New York County, Old Records Division; and *Protestant Church Directory* (New York: Protestant Council of New York, 1952-1959).
35. Deeds Liber 5278, p. 318; Mortgages Liber 6268, p. 260.
36. The original horizontal decorative metal canopy may be seen in contemporary photographs. This was altered in 1919 and 1940 (both also documented in photographs) as a marquee.
37. The encasing of the bay to the north of the entrance appears in a c. 1948 photograph.
38. The sign originally read "REGENT Theatre Pictures"; it later read "B.S. Moss Regent" and then "RKO REGENT".
39. During the B.S. Moss Regent Theater period, an armature was placed over the parapet, which carried electric light signs which read "B.S. Moss Regent Theatre" and "Vaudeville and Feature Films 10-15 25c".

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Regent Theater (now First Corinthian Baptist Church) has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Regent Theater is one of New York City's most significant surviving early motion picture theater buildings, constructed in 1912-13, during the period that the motion picture business made the transition from showing short silent movies in nickelodeons to offering "photoplays" in larger, specially built theaters with numerous amenities for their patrons; that it was designed by the noted and prolific theater specialist Thomas W. Lamb, and is one of only a few remaining theaters of Lamb's early career in New York City; that, as an elegant architectural design, it was built to elevate the presentation of movies and was one of the first luxurious movie theaters in New York City; that, prominently sited at the corner of two thoroughfares which were popular as entertainment venues in Harlem, it operated as a movie and vaudeville house for some fifty years -- as an innovative setting for movie presentations (for a short time under the management of Samuel L. Rothapfel (later "Roxy" Rothafel)), as the B.S. Moss Regent Theater from 1915 to 1928, and finally as the RKO Regent Theater; that its distinctive, eclectic design, executed in polychrome terra cotta on the front portion of the building, incorporates Italian and northern European Renaissance and Mannerist motifs, particularly the diaper-patterned wall surfaces, ground-story arcade, upper loggias, and prominent central stepped frontispiece; that its terra cotta, manufactured by the South Amboy Terra Cotta Company, is notable in its detailing and subtle shades; and that it has served for the last thirty years as the home of the First Corinthian Baptist Church, an African-American congregation formed in Harlem in 1939.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Regent Theater (now First Corinthian Baptist Church), 1906-1916 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard (aka 200-212 West 116th Street), Borough of Manhattan, and designates Manhattan Tax Map Block 1831, Lot 33, as its Landmark Site.



Regent Theater (now First Corinthian Baptist Church), 1906-1916 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd., Manhattan
Built 1912-13; architect Thomas W. Lamb
Photo credit: Shockley (1993)



Regent Theater (now First Corinthian Baptist Church), frontispiece

Photo credit: Shockley (1993)



Regent Theater (now First Corinthian Baptist Church), auditorium facade

Photo credit: Shockley (1993)



Regent Theater (1914)

Photo credit: National Terra Cotta Society, *Architectural Terra Cotta Brochure Series: The Theater 2*



Regent Theater entrance (1914)

Photo credit: National Terra Cotta Society, *Architectural Terra Cotta Brochure Series: The Theater 2*



B.S. Moss Regent Theater (c. 1915-19)

Photo credit: Byron Collection, Museum of the City of New York



B.S. Moss Regent Theater (1926)

Photo credit: Ben Hall Collection, Theatre Historical Society



RKO Regent Theater (1948)

Photo credit: Richard Alleman, *The Movie Lover's Guide to New York*

