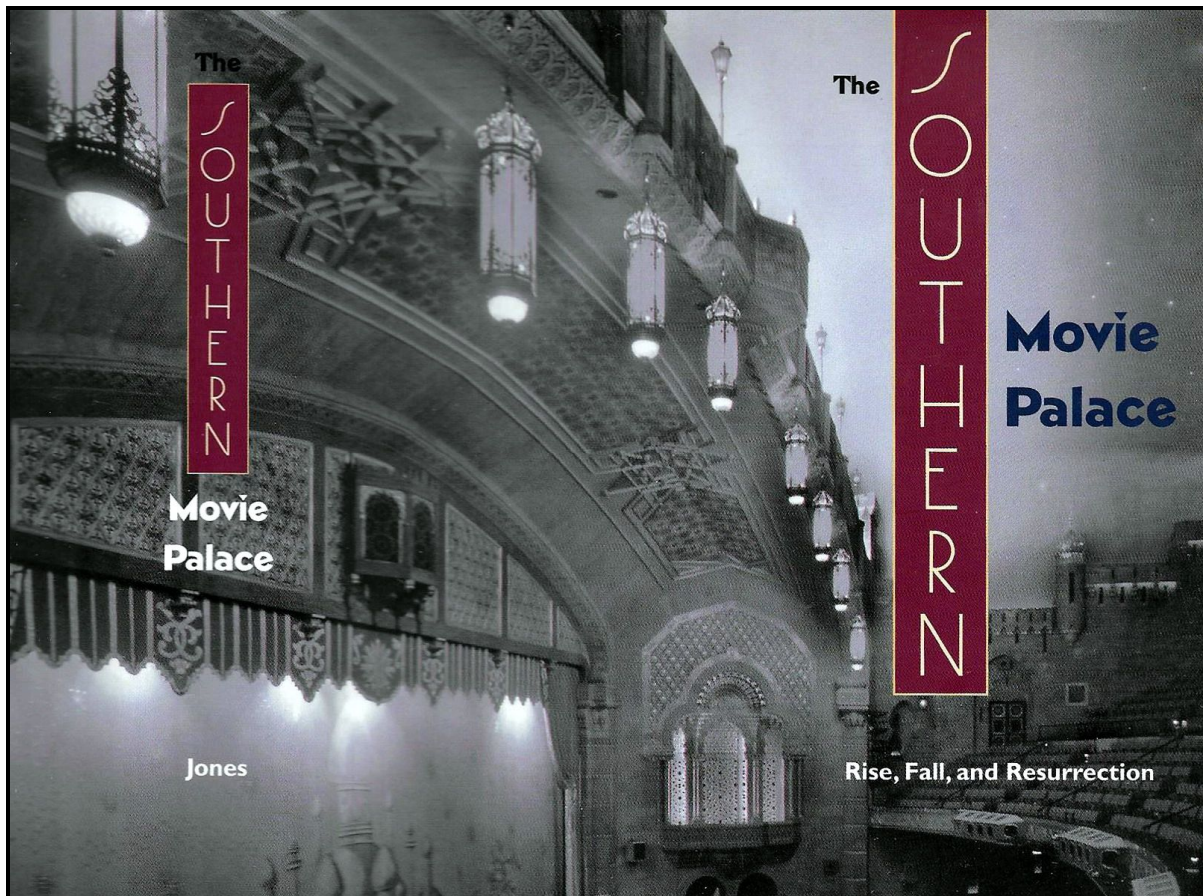


# Air Conditioning American Movie Theatres 1917-Present Day

## Theatres Restored

### SOUTHERN GULF STATES



2003

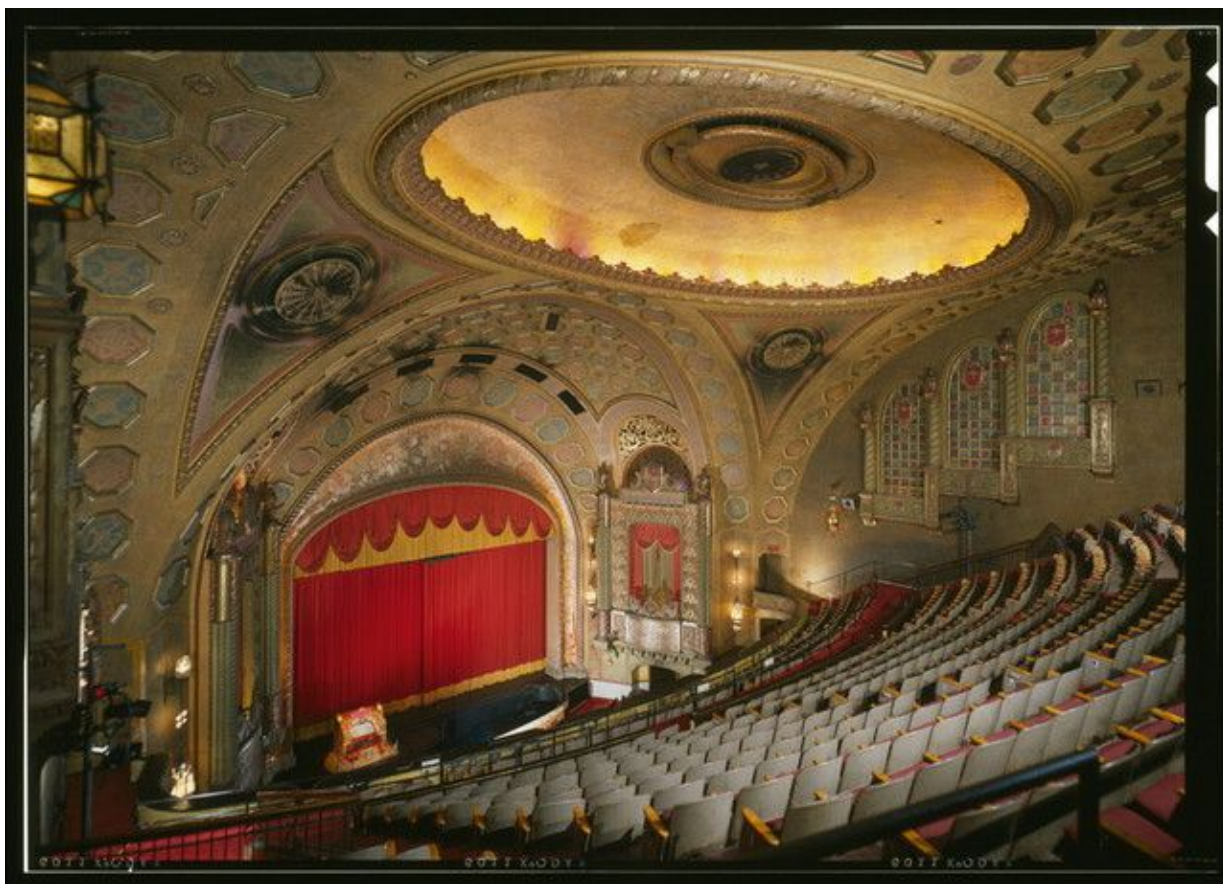
***Southern Movie Palace* describes the *Rise, Fall and Resurrection* of a selection of Movie Theatres in the Southern States of America. This ebook includes a selection of short notes on their air conditioning (where available) taken from the book. The book itself describes the restoration (if any) of the following:**

Alabama Theatre, Birmingham, Alabama  
Carolina Theatre, Durham, North Carolina  
Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia  
Orpheum Theatre, Memphis, Tennessee  
Saenger Theatre, Biloxi,  
Tampa Theatre, Tampa, Florida

**Air Conditioning American Movie Theatres  
1917-Present Day**

# *Alabama Theatre*

**BIRMINGHAM, MISSOURI**



**Date Built: 1927**

**Seating Capacity: 2200**

**Owner: Paramount-Publix**

**Architect: Rapp & Rapp**

**Air Conditioning/Refrigeration originally by  
Brunswick-Kroeschell**

## Air Conditioning & Refrigeration

Between 1987 and 1998 Whitmire raised \$4.5 million for the purpose of installing new air-conditioning, new heat, new carpet, and a new roof. What is incredible about the donation of that sum of money (in a city of fewer than a million people) is that it went to projects that did not change the aesthetic appearance of the theater. It was not until 1998 and another half million dollars in donations that the aesthetic restoration took place. I asked him how he managed to raise so much cash for the purpose of restoring an old building. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'm a salesman. A lot of people say I'm still selling the Alabama Theatre; it's an easy sell. So I say, 'The Alabama Theatre needs your help. Will you dig down, and in a lot of cases, dig down deep, and give us the money we need?'" When I asked him if he ever gets tired of raising money, he replied, "Certainly. It's like kissing up to the world!" But he contends that people do not turn the other way when they see him coming because the theater is proof that he has spent the money well. Whitmire explained how he goes about raising money for the theater:

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***Carolina Theatre***

**DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA**



**Date Built: 1928**

**Seating Capacity: 1816**

**Owner: Paramount-Publix**

**Original Air Conditioning possibly Carrier**

**Fully restored 1994**

## Air Conditioning & Refrigeration

metal, the Carolina Theatre, for example, would at various times charge an admission price of ten tin cans per person. War bonds sold at the theater also helped maintain business and profits. But after the war the attendance at the Carolina Theatre, as at other big theaters around the country, declined. In 1948 a new air-conditioning system was installed at the Carolina Theatre in the hope that it would draw more people to the theater; however, there were far too many other economic and cultural factors affecting the declining popularity of the Carolina Theatre for the air-conditioning system to make a drastic difference in ticket sales.

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In terms of maintaining the historic integrity of the facility, the city is responsible for the upkeep of the building, and only a few antiques in the building need care. However, Martin noted that the building's plaster work has been a source of frustration, because the excess moisture of summer humidity attacks plaster. Two years ago, after a consultation with an air-conditioning company, he decided to reduce the humidity in the auditorium in the summer by heating the air (which dries it) as it came into the building and then cooling the heated air. Martin said that the decision to reduce the humidity in the building in the summer months has "pretty much stemmed the tide on the problem with the plaster." But it also meant a 40 percent increase in the theater's gas bill. Martin explains, "Here's the rub. We're doing that. If I were just a businessman, I wouldn't. If I were just a businessman and an entrepreneur, I would say, 'Wait a minute. The problem belongs to the city. It's their building, and it's their air-handling unit. They need to spend the \$86,000 and fix it, so we don't have to spend it operationally.' I increased my business costs to protect the building. There's a conflict that Pepper Fluke doesn't recognize, but it's a conflict that I face."

**Air Conditioning American Movie Theatres  
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***Fox Theatre***

**ATLANTA, GEORGIA**



**Date Built: 1929**

**Seating Capacity: 4956**

**Owner: Fox**

**Original Air Conditioning possibly by Carrier**

**Restoration ongoing**

## Air Conditioning & Refrigeration

Joe Patten, one of the founding members of Atlanta Landmarks, explained that as negotiations between Southern Bell and Atlanta Landmarks proceeded, Southern Bell became quite cooperative. "Southern Bell didn't like the attitude people were taking—'Save the Fox' written on their telephone bills—it wasn't going over well with the community. Everything was in our favor for saving the Fox," Patten told me as we sat in his 3,000-square-foot apartment that sprawls over a five-level labyrinth above the stage door of the Fox Theatre. "The television people and the newspaper people—there were people from New York and California. Movie actors—Helen Hayes was involved. There was a lot of turmoil that Southern Bell wanted to get out from under. They turned out to be one of our best friends after it was all over with. The president of Atlanta Landmarks is a retired executive vice president of Southern Bell."

As I interviewed Patten in his meticulous, beautifully appointed apartment inside the Fox Theatre, where he has lived for the last twenty-two years, I could not help but be in awe of (and a little bit distracted by) his many family heirlooms and antiques. Surely, I thought, this home would be the absolute envy of Atlanta; though most people, I suspect, have no idea that this apartment even exists. During the interview, Patten, who sports a "Fox" belt buckle nearly the size of a block of cheese, quite modestly explained to me his deep involvement with the theater, which started nearly forty years ago with his interest in restoring the theater's pipe organ. Patten's technical abilities and tenacity enabled him to fix, rebuild, and maintain the organ, the electrical systems, the plumbing, the air-conditioning, and the heating. He was instrumental in forming Atlanta Landmarks, and obviously it was his passion and vision that, in part, saved the Fox Theatre from destruction.



On display at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia in 1999  
The Carrier 300 TR centrifugal chiller installed in 1946 for the air conditioning



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***Orpheum Theatre***

**MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE**



**Date Built: 1928**

**Seating Capacity: 2600**

**Owner: Paramount-Publix**

**Architect: Rapp & Rapp**

**Air Conditioning: Unknown**

**Renovated 1894-1890s**

**Air Conditioning American Movie Theatres  
1917-Present Day**

***Biloxi Theatre***

**BIRMINGHAM, MISSOURI**



**Date Built: 1929**

**Seating Capacity: 1245**

**Owner: Saenger Chain**

**Architect: Rapp & Rapp**

**Air Conditioning: Unknown**

**Partly restored**

**Air Conditioning American Movie Theatres  
1917-Present Day**

# *Tampa Theatre*

**TAMPA, FLORIDA**



**Date Built: 1926**

**Seating Capacity: 1446**

**Owner: Paramount-Publix**

**Architect: John Eberson**

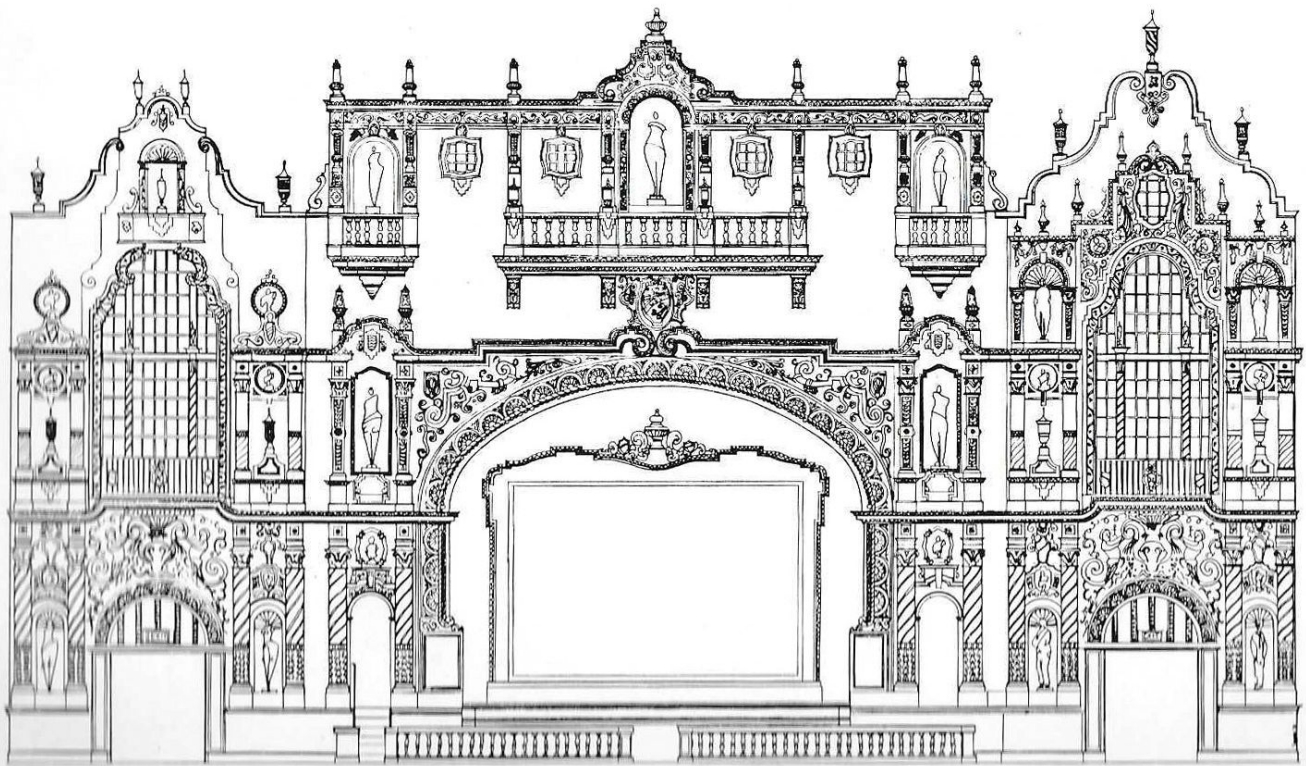
**Air Conditioning/Refrigeration originally by Carrier**

**Reopened 1977 as part of an office/theatre/retail complex**

# MOVIE PALACES

RENAISSANCE AND REUSE

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1982

Diagram showing proscenium and sidewalls of the Tampa Theatre, Tampa, Florida.

## Air Conditioning & Refrigeration

In order to attract middle-class patrons, then, movie palace owners and managers consciously differentiated their theaters from working-class venues by eliminating working-class signifiers, foregrounding symbols of the elite, and enforcing appropriate middle-class behavior—all while simultaneously expounding upon their theaters' democratic aims. Since working-class theaters were characterized by foul-smelling and unhealthful conditions, movie palaces distinguished themselves from such venues by installing air-conditioning systems. Such systems were advertised as solutions that provided odorless, sanitary conditions. The Tampa Theatre's opening night program, for example, dedicated a half-page description to its "Air Cooling and Dehumidifying System." The description boasted that the system "not only keeps new and fresh air in constant circulation but removes all foul air and odors instantly." While the air-conditioning system did cool the air in a city characterized by semitropical heat and humidity, it also helped to eliminate any traces of working-class odor, circulating only the apparently less offensive smells of the middle class.

## Air Conditioning & Refrigeration

The Tampa Theatre, the premier theater in the city, never had a separate balcony, stairway, and entrance for African American patrons. No blacks, except for a maid and a porter, were permitted inside the theater until Tampa's Biracial Committee encouraged Florida State Theatres officials to integrate their movie theaters. Roweena Brady, an African American teacher, activist, and lifetime Tampa resident, lived five blocks from the Tampa Theatre when she was growing up in the late 1930s and 1940s. She remembered the exterior of the Tampa Theatre, but explained that she never considered going inside, because she knew she was not welcome. "You just didn't go to the Tampa Theatre," Brady recalled. "We never said, 'Mom, can we go down to the Tampa Theatre?' We never said, 'Is it OK to go to the movies there this afternoon?'" Although Brady was aware that she was not welcome at the theater, it was not entirely removed from her consciousness. "We would go downtown, and we would pass by this place called the 'Tampa Theatre.' The best part of passing by the theater was that cool air that came out of it. It was air-conditioned," Brady said. "We wondered why in the world we couldn't have a show like that. It was so cool. We didn't know how it was inside because we were never allowed to go in, but we always felt that cool air."