

History of the Former Strand Theatre (aka The International Order of the Odd Fellows Hall, 516 Northampton St., Easton, Pa.

(Text from the application for Part 1, Historic Preservation Certification; approval was granted on 12/12/07 as contributing to the historic significance of the Easton Historic District.

Description of physical appearance: The International Order of Odd Fellows Hall stands near the western end of Eastons downtown commercial district, amidst small shops and commercial buildings that characterize its main street. The building directly fronts the street with a central entrance leading into the original lobby that served both the theater and the Odd Fellows Hall and meeting rooms above. The façade is clad in terra cotta with pilaster-like strips along the edges accented with circular and oval raised panels. They carry a frieze-like band with projecting cornice across the top of the building. At the base of the left pilaster is a plaque with the date of 1914. The shallow pediment above the cornice originally carried the I.O.O. F. insignia of the Odd Fellows organization. The three bays of the upper two stories are infilled with large one over one sash with fixed transoms above. The first story is oversized in height and is spanned by a broad cornice that separates the commercial spaces from the fraternal organization quarters above. On either side are shops with elements of the original shop windows overlaid with modern shop windows systems.

The central portal is framed by Roman fasces and capped by a laurel band behind which is evidence of plaster moldings of an earlier era. This leads into the lobby which formerly contained the ticket booth but is now occupied by an added doorway into the basement meeting rooms of the VFW post. On axis with the entrance is the original movie hall for the Strand Theater (1915-1939), a broad room that runs the full width of the building. It retains elements of its original classical ornament but the proscenium and other elements of the theater have been removed after the closing of the theater (1939) and its reuse as a Veterans of Foreign Wars clubhouse. The lobby also provides access to a handsome stair with iron newels and railings that rises to the Odd Fellows meeting rooms on the upper levels. These rooms are generously sized and retain most of the elements of their interior trim including plaster cornices, doors, and raised platforms for meetings as well as robing rooms and closets for the members. Most of the original trim and detail remains intact despite a multiplicity of uses including the studios of radio station WEST which remained in the building from 1936 until 1963. The rear and side walls are of unadorned brick with evidence of infilled openings and other alterations that have no impact on the main building. At some time around World War II a modern fire stair was constructed in a brick enclosure on the west side of the property. It projects from the rear wall in a different brick that appears to relate to a one story rear addition that now contains toilets and related services on the first floor. The side elevation, visible above the smaller adjacent buildings is of darker red brick. At a later date, windows were cinder-blocked closed but their openings remain while the upper level of the rear brick was coated with stucco as an expedient alternative to pointing. Despite these minor alterations, the building retains a remarkable degree of its original character and survives with sufficient integrity to contribute to its historic district.

Date of Construction: 1914 Source of Date: cornerstone

Date of Alteration: c. 1940, 2007

Statement of significance: The International Order of Odd Fellows Hall at 516 Northampton Street in Easton, is important in three dimensions, as a handsome early twentieth century building, as the home of a chapter of an important fraternal organization, and as a movie theater from the end of the silent film era that was a part of the city's downtown development. The aspect that has the greatest current impact is the building with its handsome early twentieth century modern classical façade. The main façade elements are the cast terra cotta pilasters that frame the façade. These are ornamented with abstract geometric elements instead of the usual flutes and reeds of most classical ornament. The upper stories are infilled with banks of windows that give the building a strongly ordered appearance. Other elements included the frame of fasces and the arched crown of laurel banding that borders the main portal into the lobby are derived from classical details but are used in an unusual fashion that may well have been driven by the available terra cotta molds. On the interior, details relate to the classical vocabulary with large pilasters capped by Corinthian capitals in the theater portion.

The second significant aspect of the building was its historical purpose as an Odd Fellows Hall. The Odd Fellows had an important role in creating group solidarity among northern Europeans, typically those of English ancestry. They came over from Great Britain in the early 19th century to Baltimore and then expanded across most of the United States by mid-century, providing group insurance and care largely within the industrial classes. By the end of the century many towns including Easton had several Odd Fellows organizations. These paralleled Masons, Red Men, Iron Men, and other groups, most of which were aimed at men who were part of the aspirational classes of middle income urbanites. The use of the first floor as commercial space permitted a much larger and more ambitious building and is characteristic of many lodge buildings in the early twentieth century. The Strand movie theater that occupied the first story of the building had a third role as a significant part of the downtown business district which at its height in the early twentieth century contained a rich mixture of amusements including at least three movie theaters, hotels, banks, drug stores and the general array of commercial establishments. Along Northampton Street were several other theaters including the State Theater a block to the east in a redesigned bank building. Before World War II, the Strand Theater was forced to close. After the war, the building found a new lease on life as a VFW post, a use that remains today in the basement with its own doorway in the main lobby.