



June 28, 2004

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL TO: [maria.burgwin@city.pittsburgh.pa.us](mailto:maria.burgwin@city.pittsburgh.pa.us).

Thomas Armstrong  
Chairman  
City of Pittsburgh Planning Commission  
200 Ross Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Dear Chairman Armstrong :

The Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh enthusiastically supports the nomination of the New Granada Theater (also known as the “Pythian Temple”) to be a City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark. On Wednesday, June 2, the Historic Review Commission voted unanimously to recommend the nomination to City Council. I will be unable to attend the June 29<sup>th</sup> hearing, but have conveyed my thoughts in this letter.

The Young Preservationists Association believes that the New Granada Theater is one of Pittsburgh’s most prized historic possessions. Designed in 1927 by a prominent local African American architect, Louis Bellinger—at a time when there were no more than 60 African American architects in the country—the New Granada Theater was originally built as the “Pythian Temple,” a local chapter of a national African-American fraternal organization of construction workers called the Knights of Pythias. The Pythian Temple was the headquarters for the local chapter as well as provide office and commercial space and recreational and entertainment facilities for the community.

In 1937, Pittsburgh architect Alfred M. Marks converted the building into a commercial theater. The new owner, Harry Hendel, closed the original Granada Theatre on Centre Avenue and moved two blocks to the Pythian structure. Because it was a different location for the Granada, the word “new” was added to its name and included an auditorium called the Savoy Ballroom, first opened in 1941.

Rising jazz stars began to play at the New Granada. Out-of-town artists stopped in on their way from Chicago to New York or vice versa, and locals like Stanley Turrentine, Lena Horne, and Earl “Fatha” Hines made regular appearances along with such legendary names as Duke Ellington (who was named the “King of Jazz” at the New Granada and played his first Pittsburgh performance at the New Granada), Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Eckstine, James Brown, the O’Jays, and Peaches & Herb.

There are far too few African American historic landmarks in Pittsburgh. Currently, there are only two City-designated historic landmarks in the entire City of Pittsburgh dedicated to African Americans, out of 68 total landmarks (a paltry 2.9%). The other two—the Centre Avenue YMCA and the John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church—are also located in the Hill. A fourth African American landmark, The Greater Faith Tabernacle Church of God in Christ in Homewood, was a designated landmark but it was demolished a few years ago due to grave structural problems. A before-and-after sequence is on page 3.

We strongly believe that African Americans deserve a more prominent place in Pittsburgh's strong heritage of historic preservation.

In recent years, the New Granada's deteriorated condition has been a central concern of the historic preservation community. The New Granada Theater was first identified as a significant African American historic landmark by the "African American Historic Sites Survey of Allegheny County," completed in 1992 (the study was later published by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1994). On August 10, 2000, the New Granada was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places by the PHMC. In 2002, Preservation Pennsylvania listed the New Granada on their "At Risk" list. Last year, the Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh listed the New Granada as number 5 on their "Top Ten Best Historic Preservation Opportunities for 2003."

Yet, the structure continues to sit, unprotected and unimproved. The restoration of this important structure begins with its designation as a City of Pittsburgh historic landmark. The historic designation of the New Granada Theater would add more certainty to the structure's future, rather than to continue its legacy as an endangered property.

On the next page, I have included a recent photo of the 18<sup>th</sup> & Vine Historic District in Kansas City. It's a stretch in a black neighborhood that has both restored historical landmarks and new construction. In addition to the restored Gem Theater, the district is home to the National Negro Baseball League museum and the National Jazz museum. There is also a barbecue place, a soul food place, a park, a jazz club, and a community center. These are a couple of blocks that have been done right. More importantly, it can serve as a model for Centre Avenue, with the New Granada Theater as the flagship historic property. I don't think it's beyond the realm of possibility to dream about such things for the Hill.

The Young Preservationists' goal is to ensure that Pittsburgh's rich tapestry of history is preserved and offer our support to the New Granada Theater's nomination. A restored New Granada Theater will signal new life and a new future for Pittsburgh's oldest and most historic neighborhood, the Hill District. Thank you in advance for your support of the historic designation of the New Granada Theater.

Sincerely,

Dan Holland  
Founder and Chair  
Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh  
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***What Was:***

The photo on the left is of the Greater Faith Tabernacle Church of God in Christ (c. 1940s), once a City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark. The photo on the right is the site today. Only two African American historic landmarks exist in the City.



Photo by Matthew J. Ruben, YPA Member, June 2004.

***What could be:*** Kansas City's historic district at 18th and Vine.