

Places in Peril

Alabama's Most Endangered Sites for 2009

**Alabama Historical Commission
Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation**

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Lyric Theatre and Office Building in Birmingham named as a *Place in Peril*

In observance of National Historic Preservation Month, the Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) and the Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation (ATHP) announce Alabama's most endangered places for 2009.

Since 1994, the AHC and the ATHP have joined forces to sponsor *Places in Peril*, a program designed to highlight some of Alabama's most significant endangered historic sites. This year's list includes 10 sites.

"*Places in Peril* is a valuable tool in directing public attention to the many cultural resources in Alabama under threat from neglect or demolition," said Frank White, executive director of the AHC.

David Schneider, executive director of the ATHP states, "This list reminds us that much remains to be done to help Alabamians recognize that our historic places are essential assets for community revitalization. They also represent one of the greenest approaches to providing places in which to live and work."

Named as one of this year's *Places in Peril* is the **Lyric Theatre and Office Building**.

When it was constructed in 1914, the Lyric Theatre was the largest theatre in Birmingham. The biggest names in Vaudeville performed here, including Buster Keaton, Sophie Tucker, Will Rodgers, Mae West and the Marx brothers. The building displayed classical elements on the exterior, and wowed its audience with an amazing interior, replete with hand-painted murals and decorations. However, after closing its

doors in 1958, the Lyric suffered from years of neglect. A leaking roof has caused much water damage, especially to the ceiling and the upper balcony walls. Although the city of Birmingham provided a grant in 2004, substantial funding is still needed to repair the damage and restore the entire building to its former grandeur.

Once named the “King of Vaudeville” in Birmingham, the Lyric is today the oldest surviving theater in a city that at one time had over sixty theatres, opera houses, nickelodeons and silent movie houses. “The theatre and the adjoining Lyric office building, which was constructed in 1913, were constructed by Jake Wells of the Wells Amusement Company and New York architect, C.K. Howell, was responsible for the design,” states Melanie Betz of the AHC.

A step inside the theater reveals an ornate space including a white Alabama marble lobby and monumental staircase, and a large proscenium mural, “Allegory of the Muses,” painted by Harry Hayden Hawkins, a Birmingham designer who studied under the famous artist, John Singer Sargent. Plaster mythological figures also adorn the boxed seats and are seen in various forms throughout the theatre. The original painted stage curtain also remains intact with the word “Asbestos” (to presumably assure the audience that the curtain was “fireproof”) inscribed across the center. At one time, the stage was equipped with a water tank for water shows.

Today, the dedicated owners of the Lyric (who are also the owners of the Alabama Theater) want to develop it into a fine arts theatre. They are looking for funding to do a phased project that may get the theater up and running in order to generate additional revenue. The owners, and others in Birmingham, recognize the significance of the Lyric and are determined to see it preserved.

The 10 sites listed as *Places in Peril* for 2009 are:

- . **Grove Court Apartments**, Montgomery, Montgomery County
- . **The Lyric Theatre and Office Building**, Birmingham, Jefferson County
- . **Wadley Depot**, Wadley, Randolph County
- . **Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church and Community Day School**, Hamburg, Wilcox Co.
- . **Allen & Jemison Building**, Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa County
- . **Historic Schools of Birmingham**, Birmingham, Jefferson County
- . **Prewitt Plantation Slave Cemetery**, Northport vic., Tuscaloosa County
- . **Uniontown Historic District**, Uniontown, Perry County
- . **Town of Hobson City**, Hobson City, Calhoun County
- . **Ogletree-Wright-Ivy House**, Auburn, Lee County

Still Endangered Landmarks

Two nationally significant historic sites have previously been listed as “Places in Peril” but are “Still in Peril”.

- . **Barton Academy**, Mobile (PIP 2005)
- . **Old Tallassee Mill**, Tallassee (PIP 1994; 2001)

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