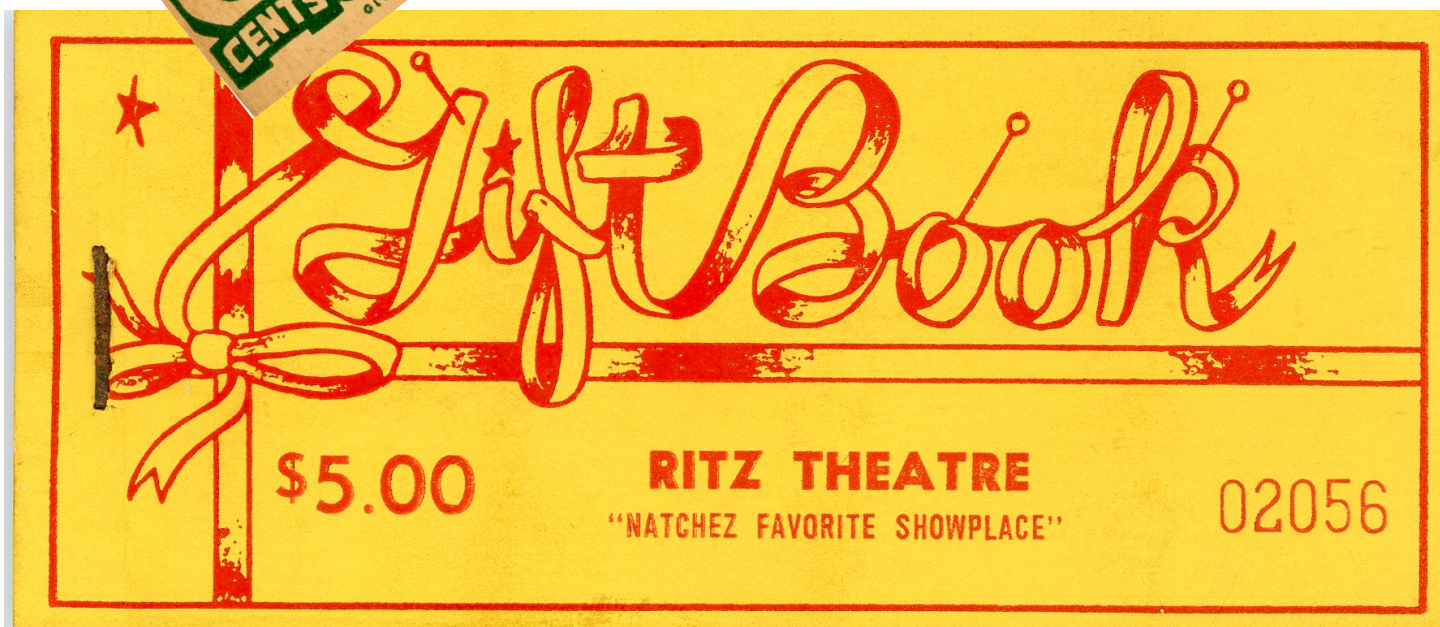


THE RITZ THEATRE





The Ritz, c. 1935-40, Cowboy Star Ken Maynard on Poster



The Ritz, c. 1947

RITZ

PHONE 133

TODAY AND THURSDAY

Matinee 6c-11c-17c
Night 6c-11c-20c



MURDER
BY AN
ARISTOCRAT

By Margaret G. Herrington

LYLE TALBOT • MARGUERITE
CHURCHILL • CLAIRE DODD

Copyright © 1946. All Rights Reserved. Screenplay by Joseph
L. Mankiewicz. Produced by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Picture Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz

PLUS:

"BOOM, BOOM," Comedy
"CHERCHEZ LA FEMME,"
Short

THIS COUPON
WITH 1 PAID
ADMISSION
WILL ADMIT 2
TO THE
RITZ THEATRE
TAX MUST BE PAID ON
THE FREE ADMISSION)

Coming—
"GREEN PASTURES"



Front cover of the newly enacted Downtown Master Plan

The Ritz Theatre is designated as the centerpiece of an arts district planned for the 100 block of North Commerce Street.

D) SUB-AREA PLANS

ARTS DISTRICT: RITZ THEATRE

Although the building itself dates back to 1869, it was not adapted into the Ritz Theatre until 1935. The first floor occupied roughly 6,385 square feet that included an entrance loggia, a shallow lobby flanked by restrooms, and a theater with a stage. There was also an upper story concession area, projection room, and balcony. The theatre originally had 700 seats, but was later expanded to 800 seats. The theatre ended operations during the 1960s and was vacant for many years. The building was damaged by a tornado in 1998 and the roof collapsed in 2000. In 2002, it was acquired by two local residents who then donated it to the Historic Natchez Foundation (HNF). HNF stabilized and restored the facade in 2008 at a cost of \$130,000, and is willing to give the property to anyone with a viable plan and demonstrated ability to preserve and restore it.

The Ritz Theatre: Then & Now



At left is the Ritz at its peak of popularity circa 1947. It features an Art Deco white facade and a distinctive marquee sign typical of the era. While the color scheme has changed, it is now boarded up at the ground level.



At present, the Ritz Theatre is a shell surrounded by four walls. There is no roof and the interior is in ruins.



Recommendations

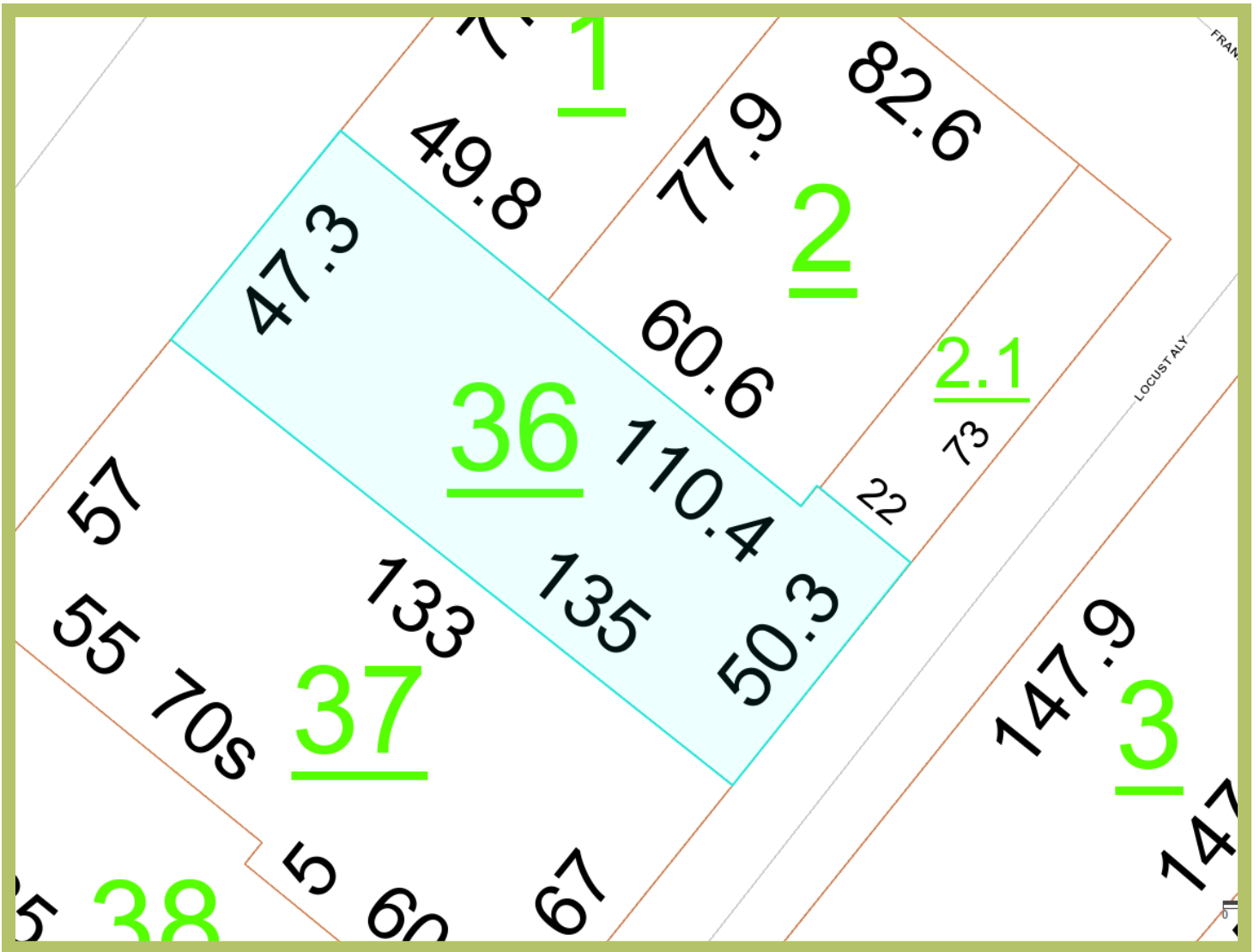
According to materials developed by HNF, "The Ritz qualifies for both state and federal historic rehabilitation tax credits, and a developer can recoup up to 45% of the construction costs in tax credits." Among the various incentives are the state and federal historic rehabilitation tax credits and the City's tax abatement program for the rehabilitation of Downtown commercial buildings. Two primary options are redevelopment as a performing arts venue or as a movie theatre. The latter would be less expensive, and experts have suggested the following improvements:

1. Reduce the theatre size and consider creating one large and one small theater space
2. Reduce the theatre depth to create an open courtyard for dining, drinking, and movies
3. Install a kitchen for a limited menu for dining during shows
4. Serve beer, wine, and possibly mixed drinks with movies
5. Create a large balcony space and "kiddie area" for children
6. Create a full-depth stage for limited performing arts

Although the ideal scenario would be for a private developer to rehabilitate this property, a public-driven process is more likely. See page 112 of the Implementation section for specific details.

2018 Downtown Natchez Plan

The Ritz Theatre is designated as the centerpiece of an arts district along the 100 block of N. Commerce St.



The Ritz Theatre

Parcel Number 41-111E-36

0.14 acre

The exterior walls of The Ritz, which are two stories in height, originally enclosed approximately 6,385 square feet of first-story space that included an entrance loggia; shallow entrance corridor flanked by restrooms, and a theater with 700 theater seats. As created in 1935 and later expanded, the building also featured an upper-story area that included a concession area, projection room, and balcony.

History of The Ritz Theatre

The Ritz Theatre was built in 1935 for Louis Fry of Natchez and Laz Abraham of Port Gibson. The contractor was Thomas Graves. The architect is identified in a newspaper article only as “one of the leading architectural firms of New Orleans.” Fry and Abraham purchased the property in September 1935, and The Ritz held its grand opening on Monday, December 30th of the same year.

When Louis Fry and Laz Abraham acquired the site of The Ritz, they purchased a two-story, brick commercial building that was originally a portion of the commercial complex known as the Gastrell Block, which was built in 1869 and included also the series of storefronts on the south side of Franklin Street between North Commerce and Locust Alley. The building had formerly been occupied by two stores—Woolworth’s and Field’s. Woolworth’s was a chain variety store and Field’s was a retail clothing and dry goods store.

Fry and Abraham gutted the original building and created a motion picture theater that opened in December 1935 and was soon sold to the Natchez Amusement Enterprise Corporation in September 1936. Included in the sale were “Approximately seven hundred (700) theatre chairs...Theatre curtains and screens and nine (9) gas heaters.”

In 1940, The Ritz was sold to the Saenger Realty Corporation, an offshoot of the Saenger Amusement Company, founded in 1911 by brothers Abe and Julian Saenger of Shreveport. During the peak of its expansion, the Saenger Amusement Company was involved in more than 320 movie theaters in twelve southern states, as well as Cuba, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, and Costa Rica. A photographs dating from 1935 to 1940 documents that the building originally had a marquee that was a modest canopy with a few strips of neon. Later, probably ca. 1945, the façade was remodeled by the addition of a trapezoidal marquee with “RITZ” emblazoned in neon lights up the entire height of the façade. In 1950, Paramount Gulf Theatres, successor to the Saenger Realty Company, sold The Ritz to Jerry Oberlin, who subsequently sold it to Irving Oberlin in 1953. The Ritz was a favored theater for children’s movies and live shows on Saturday. The Ritz ceased to operate as a movie theater in the 1960s and was used only for storage during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

About 2000, the entire roof structure of The Ritz collapsed. When neighboring property owners began to complain about the condition of the building and its threat to adjacent historic properties, the City of Natchez began to demand that the Oberlin family stabilize and clean out the property or demolish it. In December 2002, David Paradise and Burk Baker succeeded in purchasing The Ritz from Stanley Oberlin and immediately donated it to the Historic Natchez Foundation.

The Historic Natchez Foundation has invested approximately \$130,000 in cleaning out the building, structurally stabilizing it, and partially restoring the neon lighting to the marquee. **The foundation will give the building to a party or parties that can provide a viable plan and demonstrate proof of ability to preserve and develop the historic theater.**

Ritz Theatre Development and Costs

The Ritz Theatre today consists of four walls with a deteriorated, but largely intact, historically significant façade with trapezoidal marquee. The exterior walls of The Ritz, which are two stories in height, originally enclosed approximately 6,385 square feet of first-story space that included an entrance loggia; shallow entrance lobby flanked by restrooms, and a theater with stage. The building also featured an upper story concession area, projection room, and balcony. The theater had 700 theater seats with an R in the end panels. The Saenger Amusement Corporation enlarged the balcony and added more theater chairs with an S in the end panel to create seating for about 800.

Providing cost estimates to complete the rehabilitation of The Ritz is impossible without a detailed development plan. What is a certainty is that the construction cost of rehabilitating The Ritz will be similar to the cost of constructing a new theater facility of like size, function, and party-wall design. However, rehabilitating The Ritz will be more financially attractive to potential developers than new construction. **The Ritz qualifies for both state and federal historic rehabilitation tax credits, and a developer can recoup up to 45% of the construction costs in tax credits.** The tax credits can be shared among partners or possibly sold to generate income for the development.

The federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits provide a 20% tax credit and the State of Mississippi offers a 25% historic rehabilitation tax credit. An application process is required to make sure that the work on the building meets the federal *Standards for Rehabilitation*. The Historic Natchez Foundation will donate its time and proven expertise in preparing the tax credit applications. **The City of Natchez also offers tax abatement for the rehabilitation of commercial property in the commercially zoned areas of downtown. Taxes can be frozen at their before-rehabilitation value for up to 7 years if a developer invests at least \$90,000 on a rehabilitation.**

The Historic Natchez Foundation's willingness to donate the property to a potential developer is also a plus over new construction, because almost every dollar spent will be subject to the rehabilitation tax credits, which are not available for costs related to property acquisition. The building is available at no cost to a developer who can provide a viable plan for the rehabilitation of the Ritz and demonstrate proof of ability to preserve and restore the façade and complete the project.

The ultimate use of the Ritz is the major factor in estimating rehabilitation costs. Using the Ritz for a retail business would be the least expensive use to develop. Rehabilitation for use as a restaurant and bar would cost more due to requirements for a commercial kitchen. A movie theater is a much less expensive project than a performing arts facility.

Continued on next page

Ritz Theatre — Performing Arts Theater

The rehabilitation of The Ritz as a performing arts theater would be the most expensive approach for rehabilitation, but the one with the most community benefit. The rehabilitation of The Ritz to serve as a performing arts theater is complex and includes special design issues:

- (1) Full depth stage with wings
- (2) Fly tower and rigging for theatrical sets
- (3) Back stage dressing and other rooms
- (4) Orchestra pit
- (5) Pre-function space
- (6) Expensive sound and lighting systems

Wing space is limited so a fly tower would probably be essential for theatrical productions. Since the rear elevation of The Ritz fronts a service alley, the addition of a fly tower would not be a design issue. It would hardly be visible.

An orchestra pit would not be an issue since a former owner excavated for a basement bowling alley facility that was never completed.

A greatly enlarged lobby could create a pre-function space and adjacent buildings offer the possibility of being developed in conjunction with the Ritz to provide ancillary space.

As a performing arts theater, the Ritz offers a (1) great downtown location, within walking distance of the Convention Center and three hotels, (2) a historic neon marquee for advertising purposes, and (3) low maintenance after rehabilitation. Adjacent buildings could provide the ancillary space for dressing rooms, offices, pre-function space, wings, storage, and work space to build sets. Theater consultants from Ashland, Oregon, known as “theater city,” suggested a plan for The Ritz that incorporated the “Gastrell Block” to the north, two theater spaces (one a “theater in the round”), as well as a cabaret to be entered from Franklin or North Commerce Street.

Ritz Theatre — Movie Theater

Developing the Ritz as a movie theater is less expensive than a performing arts facility. Professionals who have examined the buildings have made the following suggestions:

- (1) Reducing theater size and possibly creating one large and one small theater space
- (2) Reducing theater depth to create an open courtyard for dining, drinking, and movies
- (3) Installing a kitchen to serve a limited menu of food with movies
- (4) Serving beer, wine, and possibly mixed drinks with movies
- (5) Creating a large balcony space and kiddie area for birthday parties, etc.
- (6) Creating a full-depth stage for limited performing arts

Ritz Photo Album



Ritz Photo Album



Ritz Photo Album



Historic Natchez Foundation

Abbreviated Fact Sheet for Rehabilitation Tax Credits

	Mississippi State Credit	Federal Tax Credit
Private Residences	No	No
Income-producing buildings Residential rental or commercial	Yes	Yes
Listed in National Register Individually or in district	Yes	Yes
Amount of tax credit	25%	20%
Income-producing buildings Residential rental or commercial Minimum amount of investment	\$5,000 or 50% of the adjusted basis, whichever is greater	\$5,000 or 100% of the adjusted basis, whichever is greater
Compliance Period	0	5 years

Example: Federal and State Combined Tax Credits for Rehabilitation of Income-producing Property

Purchase price	\$125,000
Less value of lot	25,000
Adjusted basis	\$100,000
Project cost	\$100,000
Less 20% federal tax credit	\$ 20,000
Less 25% state tax credit	\$ 25,000
Project cost after tax credits	\$ 55,000

The rehabilitation tax credits represent a dollar for dollar reduction in taxes owed.

The approval process involves one application for both federal and state.

An application process is required for the approval of the tax credits and it requires before and after photographs. The rehabilitation work must follow the federal Standards for Rehabilitation. If taking both the federal and state credits, the applicant has only to submit the federal application, which is first reviewed by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and then forwarded by Archives and History to the National Park Service in Washington for federal review. Each agency will provide an approval letter with an assigned project number to be filed with the property owner's state and federal tax returns.

City of Natchez

Tax Abatement Program

The goal of the tax abatement program is to promote the revitalization and economic prosperity of commercial property in historic downtown Natchez. This program allows property owners who invest in renovations or new construction to receive a tax freeze on ad valorem taxes (except school taxes) for up to a period of seven years. The tax abatement ordinance became effective on December 1, 1999.

1. The area eligible for tax freezes are any commercially zoned areas in the Natchez on Top-of-the-Hill Historic District and Under-the-Hill Historic District.
2. The tax abatement only applies to real property and will be available for new construction as well as renovation.
3. Mississippi statute allows for the exemption of municipal property taxes under section 17-21-5 and 27-31-31.
4. The procedures for tax abatement are as follows:
 - a. The property owner shall file an application for tax abatement with the Department of Planning Zoning.
 - b. A Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) application must be filed for any exterior work to the building with the Department of Planning and Zoning.
 - c. Once the COA is approved then a Building Permit must be obtained from the Building Inspection Department.
 - d. After completion of the project detailed information on the project's costs will be filed with the City Clerk's office to determine the tax abatement term.
 - e. The City Clerk shall then present the application for Tax Abatement to the Mayor and Board of Board of Aldermen for approval.
 - f. The Mayor and Board of Aldermen shall consider the application and, if approved, the appraised value for the property shall be frozen for a period as set forth below.
5. The minimum investment must be \$20,000 with a requirement to spend 25% of the minimum investment on the public façade (s) of the building. The period of abatement is based on the amount of money spent on renovation or new construction. Acquisition costs are not eligible for tax abatement. The following investments will be eligible for the following periods of investment:

\$20,000 - \$29,999 will be eligible for 3 years
\$30,000 - \$44,999 will be eligible for 4 years
\$45,000 - \$64,000 will be eligible for 5 years
\$65,000 - \$89,999 will be eligible for 6 years
\$90,000 and up will be eligible for 7 years
6. After abatement period concludes, the property is taxed at the higher appraised rate.