

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in October 2000

BIOGRAPH THEATER

2433-43 N. LINCOLN AVE.

DATE: 1914

ARCHITECT: SAMUEL N. CROWEN

The Biograph Theater is one of Chicago's oldest remaining neighborhood movie houses. On July 22, 1934, it gained national recognition for the real-life drama of the killing of the country's "Most Wanted" criminal, John Dillinger. The notoriety of Dillinger's reputation as the country's most famous bank robber, combined with the intrigue of his betrayal by the "Lady in Red" and the spectacle of the shoot-out in front of the theater, have made a lasting imprint on the American consciousness that continues to draw curiosity-seekers to this handsomely detailed movie theater.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION

In 1912, Charles Erickson bought a 125-foot-wide lot on Lincoln Avenue, northwest of its intersection with Fullerton and Halsted streets. Most of the structures on the street dated from the 1890s or first decade of the 1900s and were three- and four-story buildings with stores at the ground floor and apartments above.

In April 1914, Erickson's wife, Lena, entered into a 20-year lease with the Lubliner & Trinz movie chain by which she (and presumably her husband) agreed to build a theater of "not less than 999 seats" that the movie group would operate and lease at a cost of \$833.33 per month. The theater was named the "Biograph," a common name for movie houses of the era.

Construction of the combined theater-and-stores structure began in May and the theater opened in late-September 1914. It was designed by Samuel N. Crowen, an architect known for his downtown office building designs in the 1900s-1920s, the most prominent of which is the 36-story Willoughby Tower at 8 S. Michigan Ave. (1929).

The Biograph Theater is two-stories high and is finished with red pressed brick and white-glazed terra cotta on its principal (Lincoln Avenue) facade. A doorway at the southern end of the building originally led to the upstairs loft space. Next to this, the 30-foot-wide theater entrance is recessed from the street, centered on a free-standing ticket booth (approximately 3 feet x 5 feet).

Storefronts fill the remainder of the ground floor, while a large open-space on the second floor was probably used as an assembly or dance hall.

A canopy marquee, installed in 1933, projects over the sidewalk, marking the theater entrance. Constructed of sheet metal, the marquee has a simple scroll-like profile which is outlined with small lights. The sign retains most of its original features, although the lettering has been changed. The current “Biograph” Art Deco-style typeface differs from the lettering style seen in photographs of the building in the 1930s. In addition to the marquee, there also was a large vertical sign with the theater name over the entrance. This sign was probably removed in the 1950s.

The building facade features a generous amount of windows. At street level the storefronts have large display windows. Above are a series of ten arcaded openings with multi-paned windows (originally, each of these openings was filled with three narrow, center-pivot windows). A Palladian-style window composition—a large rounded arch flanked by two lower, squared-off openings—is located on the second floor above the marquee. Other Classical decoration includes terra-cotta molding separating the first and second floors and the terra-cotta pilasters between the second-floor windows.

The theater auditorium, occupying the rear two-thirds of the building with the screen on the north wall, has minimal detailing. It is largely intact, although the number of seats has been reduced from 1,000 to 666. The lobby, which forms a right angle with the auditorium, is the same width as the entrance. With the exception of the cove lighting inside the front entrance, none of the lobby’s historic decorative elements survives.

The theater building was remodeled in the 1930s and again in the 1980s. In the 1930s, the present marquee and ticket booth were added and the entrance was modernized with Art Deco detailing, including streamlined metal sign cases and a new typeface for the theater signage. A terrazzo floor (now possibly covered by carpet) and cove lighting (still existing just inside the front entrance) were installed in the lobby.

In 1983, two smaller theaters, the Roxy and the Ritz, were constructed on the second floor of the building and the windows were painted black. A ticket booth was also installed in the storefront immediately north of the theater entrance (the 1930s-era free-standing ticket booth, though no longer functional, still remains). The construction of the current aluminum-and-glass storefront five feet in front of the original entrance extends the length of the lobby. The original iron-framed, ground-floor storefronts were also replaced, with aluminum and glass in a manner consistent with the openness of the original design.

HISTORY

The Biograph Theater and the death of John Dillinger, one of the United States' most notorious criminals, are inextricably linked in history. During 1933-34, in the depths of the Great Depression, the news of John Dillinger's bank robberies, jail breaks, and other criminal escapades captured the American public's attention as if it were a weekly radio show. The circumstances of his death only added to the public's appetite for this real life drama.

John Herbert Dillinger was born in 1903 in Indianapolis where he had a routine childhood. He quit school before finishing eighth grade and went to work in a veneer mill. When John was a teenager, he and his family moved to Mooresville, Ind., 20 miles southwest of Indianapolis, where he distinguished himself as the leading pitcher on the local baseball team.

In 1924, the 20-year-old Dillinger and a partner were foiled in their attempt to rob a grocery store. The accomplice pleaded not guilty and received a two-year prison sentence, while Dillinger, on the advice of his father, pleaded guilty and was given a nine-year sentence. The disparity in sentencing, combined with the contacts Dillinger made in prison, left him an embittered and wiser criminal.

Within a month of his parole in May 1933, Dillinger had robbed one bank in Ohio and attempted the robbery of the Marshall Field's textile plant in Monticello, Ind. Over the course of the next year, Dillinger and his gang, which included such nefarious individuals as "Baby Face" Nelson and "Pretty Boy" Floyd, terrorized the Midwest, killing ten men and wounding seven others, robbing at least a dozen banks and three police arsenals, and engineering three jail breaks.

One of Dillinger's most famous exploits was his escape from an "escape proof" jail in Crown Point, Ind. On March 3, 1934, Dillinger forced a guard to open his cell using a mock gun carved from wood and blackened with bootblack. Helping himself to the jail's arsenal, Dillinger then used machine guns to lock up as many as 30 guards before fleeing. In June, the FBI certified Dillinger's rise to infamy when it made him "Public Enemy No. 1" and offered a \$10,000 reward for his capture.

Historians have stated that the guile and daring displayed by Dillinger in his 13-month crime spree—combined with the general population's downtrodden mood during the Great Depression and a growing distrust of banks—gave Dillinger the status of a folk hero to many. News of his robberies was followed closely by radio and newspapers and frequently received banner headlines.

During the spring of 1934, local and state police efforts to capture John Dillinger were augmented by the intervention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under the leadership of its young director J. Edgar Hoover. The FBI's efforts were overseen in Chicago by a 30-year-old agent, Melvin Purvis. During March and April, the FBI laid traps to catch Dillinger in St. Paul, Minn., and at a resort lodge near Rhinelander, Wis., but Dillinger escaped both attempts.

In late May, Dillinger moved to Chicago where he underwent plastic surgery. For nearly two months, this disguise worked.

Through his girlfriend, Polly Hamilton, Dillinger became acquainted with Anna Sage, who ran a North Side house of prostitution. Sage, a Rumanian immigrant who was under threat of deportation for her disorderly conduct, approached Purvis with an offer to help the FBI capture Dillinger in return for their support in her deportation case.

On the afternoon of July 22, Sage informed Purvis that Dillinger planned to take her and Polly Hamilton to a movie that evening, but that the theater had not yet been chosen. Crime historian Richard Lindberg describes the thinking of agent Purvis on the movie selection:

The choice boiled down to *Little Miss Marker* at the Marbro Theater or *Manhattan Melodrama*, a “gang-and-gun” drama starring Clark Gable, William Powell, and Myrna Loy at the Biograph. The latter was more to Dillinger’s taste.

“I felt that the clue I got early last evening to the effect that he would attend the picture show depicting the life of a man that ended in the electric chair would be a good one,” Purvis recounted, with a mirthful twinge of self-satisfaction.

Purvis put agents at both theaters, and told them to look for Sage who said she would be wearing a red—or as Sage later described it, a dark orange—dress. Spotting Dillinger entering the Biograph with Sage and Hamilton, Purvis stationed his agents, as well as those of the Chicago and East Chicago, Ind., police departments, around the entire block.

When the movie let out at 10:45 p.m., Dillinger and his friends started walking south, passing Purvis who was in front of the bar next to the theater. Purvis later recalled:

He gave me a piercing look. Just after he went by and was outside the building due south, a National Tea company store, I raised my hand and gave the prearranged signal.

Reports state that at the alley just south of the food store Dillinger reached for a gun inside of his pants pocket. Before he could use it, however, the FBI and police fired five shots, two of them hitting Dillinger. He collapsed in the alley and died en route to the hospital.

Within a year of Dillinger’s death, the majority of his gang was either imprisoned or dead and the gangster era that the American public had endured throughout the 1920s and early ’30s was coming to its end. (The FBI later reneged on its promise to assist Sage and she was deported in 1936.)

Meanwhile, the FBI’s pursuit of Dillinger had established its crime-fighting reputation and significantly raised its recognition with the American public. With his appointment as director in 1924, J. Edgar Hoover had undertaken an intensive reorganization of the FBI to establish more scientific crime-detection methods and to raise the professionalism of agents. Hoover transformed the agency from a low-profile investigative bureaucracy to a “superpolice” force. During the early

1930s, the widespread interest of the American public in gangsters gave Hoover the opportunity to promote the expertise of the FBI in bringing these criminals to justice. In fact, Dillinger's interstate rampage helped fuel the passage of federal legislation that expanded the FBI's jurisdiction for crimes that previously could be handled only by local police forces. By 1936, the FBI had helped bring about the arrest or death of all of the country's major gangsters—or at least those identified on its "Most Wanted" lists.

Still, Dillinger's demise at the Biograph Theater only added to the legendary reputation that people had already ascribed to him. Within an hour of his death hundreds of people had gathered at the Biograph, many dipping their handkerchiefs in the gangster's blood where he fell. Thousands thronged the morgue in a "ghoulish parade" that, according to biographer G. Russell Girardin, "included prosperous professionals and business men, society matrons, politicians, police officials, housewives, meek-mannered clerks, painted and perfumed nightclub "cuties," idlers of the street, giggling high-school girls—all seeking a vicarious thrill."

The dramatic character of John Dillinger's life and death has kept the gangster in the public consciousness, inspiring a spate of 1930s films and numerous pulp fiction editions. For years, the management of the Biograph Theater featured a seat they claimed Dillinger sat in the evening of his death, although in 1967 theater owner Jack Cooney was forthright in his admission: "Naturally, we don't have any idea what seat he sat in." To this day, the theater retains its prominence on tours as the scene of the final curtain for its most notorious patron.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Biograph Theater be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 2: Significant Historic Event

Its location as a site of a significant historic event which may or may not have taken place within or involved the use of any existing improvements.

- The death of John Dillinger as he exited the Biograph Theater on July 22, 1934, ended a thirteen-month crime spree that both menaced and captivated the nation. It is one of the most well-known events in U.S. criminal history.
- The Federal Bureau of Investigation's role in Dillinger's killing bolstered the agency's crime-fighting reputation and was a major turning point in its evolution into a professional federal police force.

Criterion 3: Significant Person

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The word "significant" has a different meaning in the case of John Dillinger, whose contribution to American culture relates to his criminal notoriety. Dillinger was such a well-known infamous figure in American culture in the 1930s that even the Federal Bureau of Investigation itself notes on its Web site that: "Of all the lurid desperadoes, one man, John Herbert Dillinger, came to evoke the Gangster Era, and stirred mass emotion to a degree rarely seen in this country."

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- Built in 1914, the Biograph Theater is an excellent example—and one of the best surviving designs—of the first generation of buildings specifically built in Chicago for viewing motion pictures. The city's other surviving early movie theaters include the: Bryn Mawr (1125 W. Bryn Mawr Ave, 1914); Lake Shore (3175 N. Broadway, 1912); Calo (5404 N. Clark St., 1915); and Village (1546 N. Clark St., 1915). (Of these, however, only the Village remains an operating movie house.) According to Richard Sklenar, the executive director of the Theater Historical Society of America, these early theaters are "as important to understanding the evolution of the movie theater as the more spectacular, but later Chicago and Uptown theaters" (from 1921 and 1925, respectively).

- Perhaps due to its notoriety, the Biograph Theater is extremely intact, possessing many of the distinguishing characteristics of the earliest movie houses, including a: simple storefront-width lobby; recessed entrance; free-standing ticket booth; and canopy marquee.
- The classical detailing and high degree of masonry craftsmanship seen on the facade of the Biograph Theater—including a Palladian-style window grouping on the second floor above the theater entrance; terra-cotta molding separating the first and second floors; and the terra-cotta pilasters between the second-floor windows—typifies these first-generation movie houses whose architectural style gave legitimacy and respectability to the fledgling motion picture industry. Its architect, Samuel Crowen, was known for his classically detailed designs.

Integrity Criterion

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The Biograph Theater retains a large portion of the features that distinguish it as an early theater-with-stores complex. The exterior theater entrance retains its original configurations and dimensions. Changes to the recessed entrance in the early 1930s were relatively minor and, in light of their association with John Dillinger's death, have taken on their own period significance.

The original ground-floor storefronts were remodeled in 1983, but the changes were carried out in a manner consistent with the original design, employing large display windows. The upper-floor windows are still in place, but have been painted over to darken the twin movie theaters that were built in the former dance hall space in 1983.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Biograph Theater, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- all exterior building elevations, rooflines, and theater marquee.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CITY OF CHICAGO

Richard M. Daley, Mayor

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James Peters, Deputy Commissioner for Landmarks

Staff

Timothy Barton, project coordinator

Special thanks to Richard Sklenar, executive director of the Theater Historical Society of America (Elmhurst, Ill).

Illustrations

Terry Tatum, DPD: pp. 9, 12

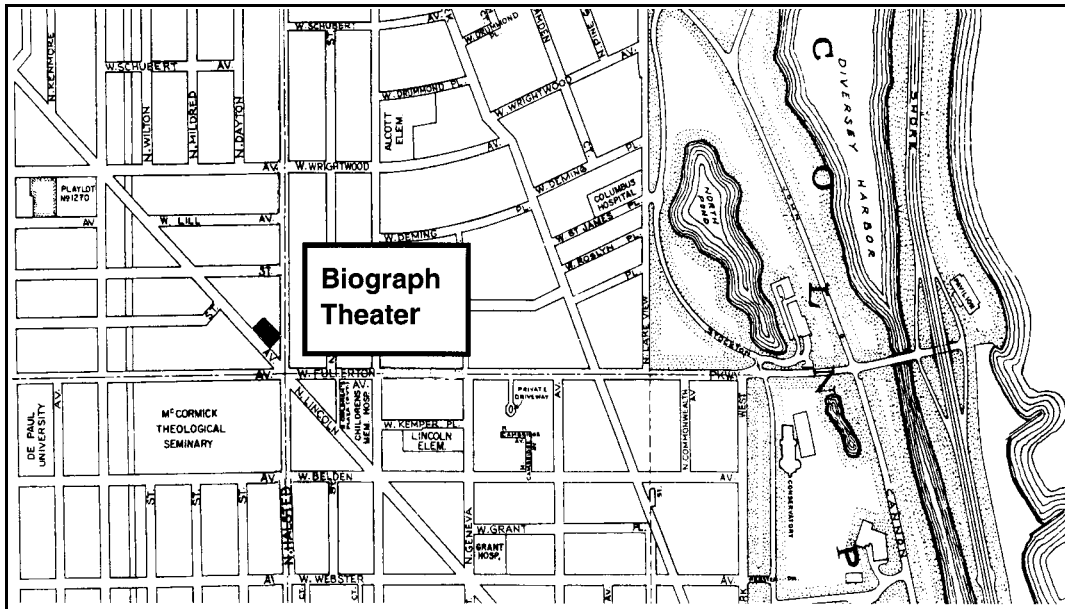
from *Dillinger, the Untold Story* (1994): p. 10

from *The Dillinger Dossier* (1983): p. 11 (top)

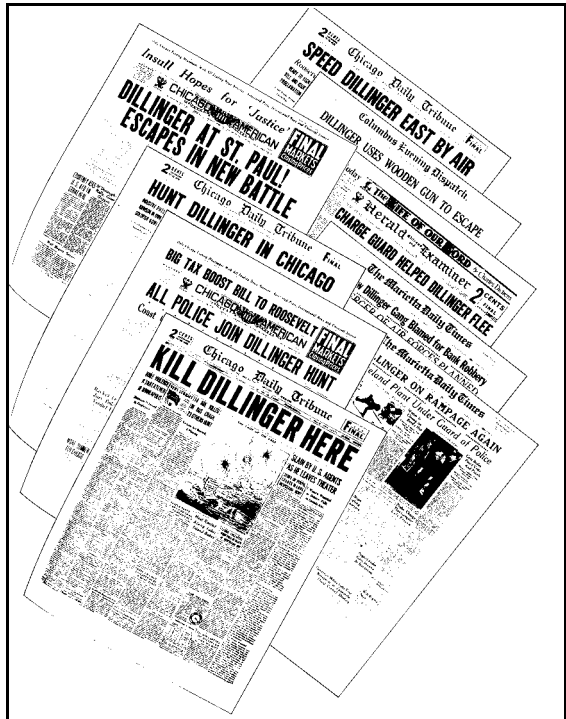
from *Chicago Daily News*, July 23, 1934: p. 11 (bot.)

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 33 N. LaSalle St., Room 1600, Chicago, IL 60602; phone (312-744-3200); TDD (312-744-2958); fax (312-744-9140); Web site, <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/landmarks>.

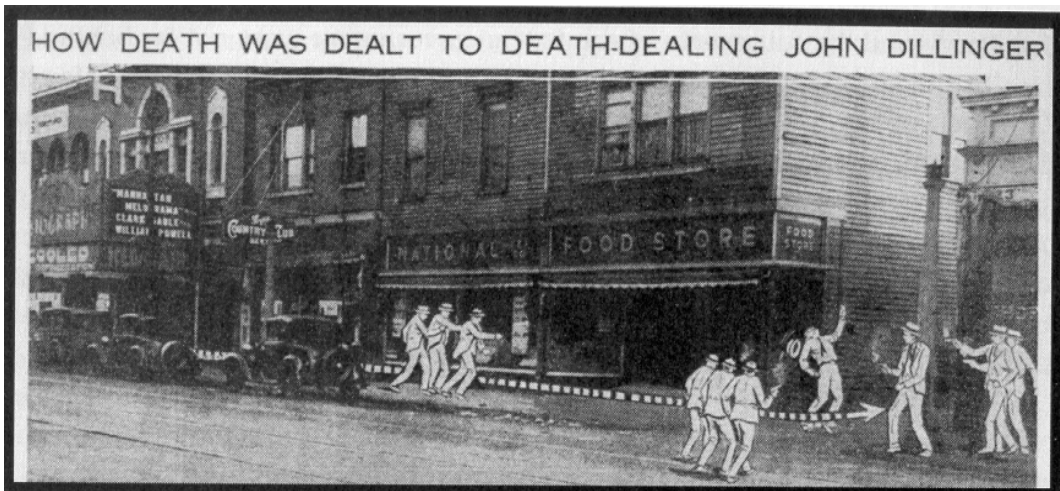
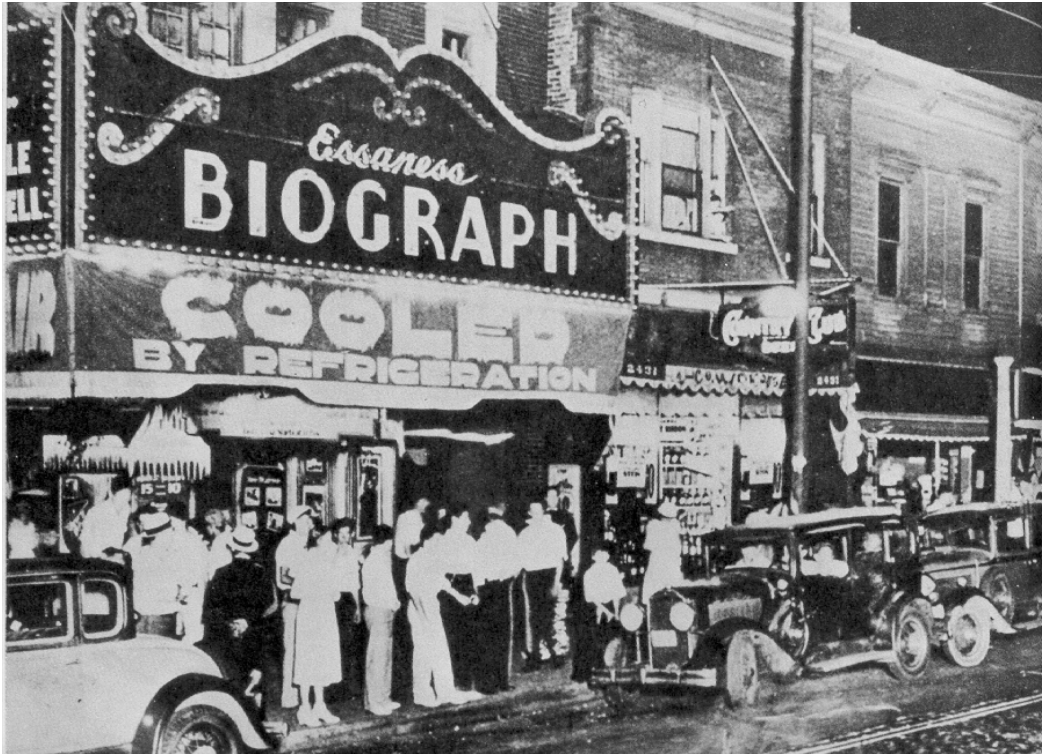
This Preliminary Summary of Information is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the Commission's final recommendation to City Council should be regarded as final.



With its picturesque marquee, the Biograph Theater is a striking presence in the Lincoln Park neighborhood (above). The building (top) is located on North Lincoln Avenue, near its “six-corner” intersection with Fullerton and Halsted and close to both Children’s Memorial Hospital and DePaul University.



John Dillinger's exploits as a gangster during the Depression years of 1933 and 1934 received widespread press coverage (top). Dillinger, who is shown at left holding both a real machine gun and mock wooden gun, was the F.B.I.'s "Public Enemy No. 1."



Dillinger's death at the hands of F.B.I. agents took place in an alley near the Biograph Theater, where he had just seen the gangster movie "Manhattan Melodrama." Above, a newspaper depiction of the event, which quickly brought thrill-seeking crowds to the theater (top).



The Biograph Theater is one of the oldest theaters in Chicago expressly built to show movies. Its facade is handsomely detailed with a Palladian-style window (top, seen above the metal marquee) and a row of round-arched windows set within contrasting red brick and white terra cotta (above).