



*Brandon M. Scott*  
Mayor

**COMMISSION FOR  
HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL  
PRESERVATION**

*Harry Spikes, Chairman*

**STAFF REPORT**



*Chris Ryer*  
Director

**October 11, 2022**

**REQUEST:** Designate as a Baltimore Landmark

**ADDRESS:** 616 N. Gilmor St.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Approval of designation as a Baltimore City Landmark, recommend changing the name to “Harlem Theatre” and the address to “614 N. Gilmor Street”

**STAFF:** Lauren Schiszik

**PETITIONER(S):** Councilmember John Bullock

**OWNER:** AJOR Real Estate Group, Inc.

**SITE/HISTORIC DISTRICT**

General Area: This property is located on the west side of the 600 block of North Gilmor Street, in the Harlem Park neighborhood (Maps 1 & 2, Images 1-5). Immediately across street to the east is the namesake park of the community, Harlem Park. This block is bound by Edmondson Avenue to the south, Harlem Avenue to the north, and Mount Street to the west. Vincent Street, an alley street, runs north to south through the block. The 600 block of N. Gilmor Street is comprised mainly of three-story Italianate brick rowhouses, some of which have been covered with formstone. There has been some demolition on the block, resulting in two empty lots on the south end of the block, but overall, this block is largely intact.

Site Conditions/Architectural Description: The Harlem Theater, originally constructed as a church, has a commanding presence on N. Gilmor Street, facing Harlem Park. Three stories tall, the 60’ wide façade is faced with rusticated granite blocks and marble trim (Image 6 & 7). Designed in the Romanesque style, the five-bay wide façade is a study in projections and recesses, with the middle three bays projecting slightly between heavy columns, the side bays recessed. Each bay features arched doorways at the base; the central bay has been replaced with a modern storefront. In the central bay, formstone covers the walls, marking where the large marquee had been installed. In the upper stories, the bays feature long arched window openings, surmounted by light-grey marble lintels; originally these opening held stained glass windows. Today, there are smaller windows punched into the openings at regular intervals, and the rest of the window openings are infilled and painted with an ornate gold trellis pattern. Over the middle bays, the building rises with dentilled parapet wall, which was originally topped with a cross, now removed. A photo of the building, circa 1910, shows the handsome stone façade that exists today, though the lower central portion of the façade was altered when

it became a theater (Image 8). The cross at the top of the building was visible, as well as the arched entrances in the middle bay, surmounted by a balustrade – all features that were removed in the conversion to the theater (Image 9 & 10). On the south and north brick elevations of the building, the outlines of large arched windows are visible, Gothic windows for the church that were bricked up when it became a theater (Image 4 & 5). The rear of the building is a two-story stone building with a flat roof, its window openings infilled with brick (Image 11).

## **BACKGROUND**

- The owner of the property requested landmark designation in December 2019, but due to staffing limitations, landmark designations were on hold.
- Councilmember Bullock introduced the landmark designation bill in September 2022.

## **PROPOSAL & PROCEDURES**

The proposal is to designate this property as a Baltimore City Landmark.

## **APPLICATION OF GUIDELINES**

For requests to designate properties as Baltimore City Landmarks, CHAP staff applies the guidelines for the designation of properties as Baltimore City Landmarks, which considers the quality of significance in Baltimore history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, public interiors, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and

1. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history; or
2. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in Baltimore's past; or
3. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represents the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
4. That have yielded or may be likely to yield information important in Baltimore prehistory or history.

Staff has determined that the Harlem Theater meets two of the four designation criteria:

1. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history; or
3. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction

The Harlem Theatre has served as a community anchor in Harlem Park for the majority of its existence. Originally a Romanesque-style church designed by Frank E. Davis for the congregation Harlem Park Methodist Episcopal Church in 1902, the history of this building is

reflective of the neighborhood's history. Originally, it was the spiritual home of many White residents of the neighborhood for several decades. Following the neighborhood's rapid transition in the 1920s to a Black neighborhood, the church was transformed by architect Theodore Wells Pietsch into an opulent first-run movie theater for Black Baltimoreans. Along with being a movie theater, it was also a venue for theater and concerts, and was an important center of community that operated for four decades, closing its door after desegregation. The Harlem Theatre is the sole surviving first-run theater that was built for Black Baltimoreans. In the 1970s, it became a house of worship again, for the Harlem Park Community Baptist Church.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD COMMENTS**

The property is not located within a CHAP district; therefore, comments from an Architectural Review Committee are not applicable. However, CHAP notified Baltimore Heritage Inc., Baltimore National Heritage Area, the Harlem Park Neighborhood Council Inc., No Boundaries Coalition, and the Family Survivor Network Inc.

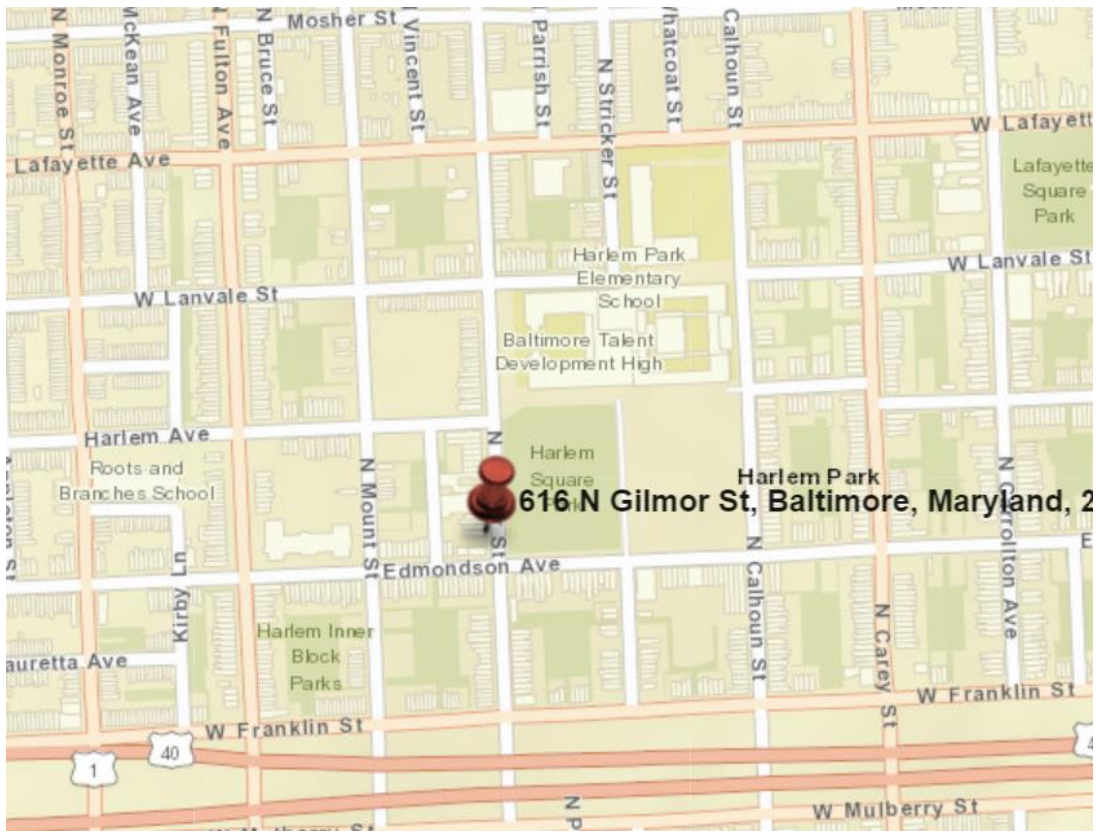
## **RECOMMENDATION**

**Staff recommends a finding of approval for the designation of this property as a Potential Landmark, because it meets criteria 1 and 3 of CHAP's criteria for designation. Staff further recommends changing the name to the "Harlem Theatre" to reflect the spelling used historically, and to update the address to "614 N. Gilmore Street" to reflect the current legal address.**



**Eric L. Holcomb**  
**Executive Director**

**Maps and Photos**



Map 1: 614-618 N. Gilmore St., Baltimore City View



Map 2: 614-618 N. Gilmore St. outlined in blue, Baltimore City View





Image 1: Aerial view of 614-618 N. Gilmor St., Outlined in Blue, Connect Explorer, April 2022

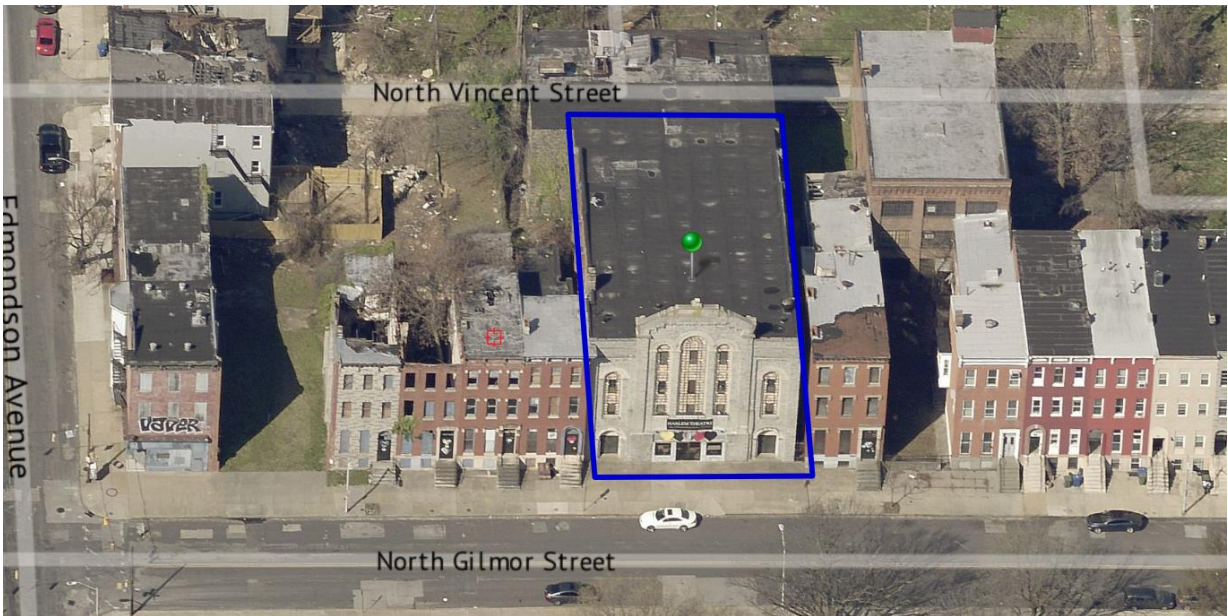


Image 2: Aerial view of 614-618 N. Gilmor St. from east, Outlined in Blue, Connect Explorer, April 2022





Image 3: Aerial view of 614-618 N. Gilmor St. from west, Outlined in Blue, Connect Explorer, April 2022

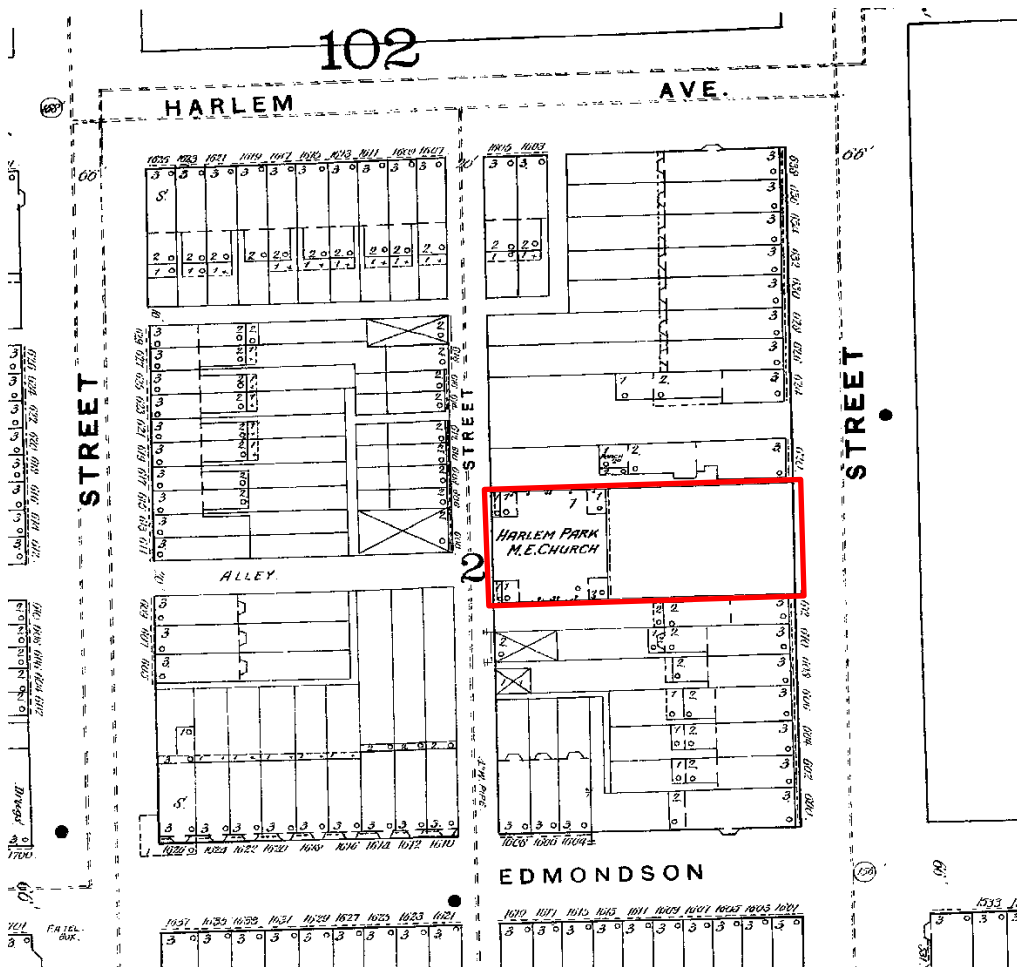


Image 4: Aerial view of 614-618 N. Gilmor St. from south, Connect Explorer, April 2022

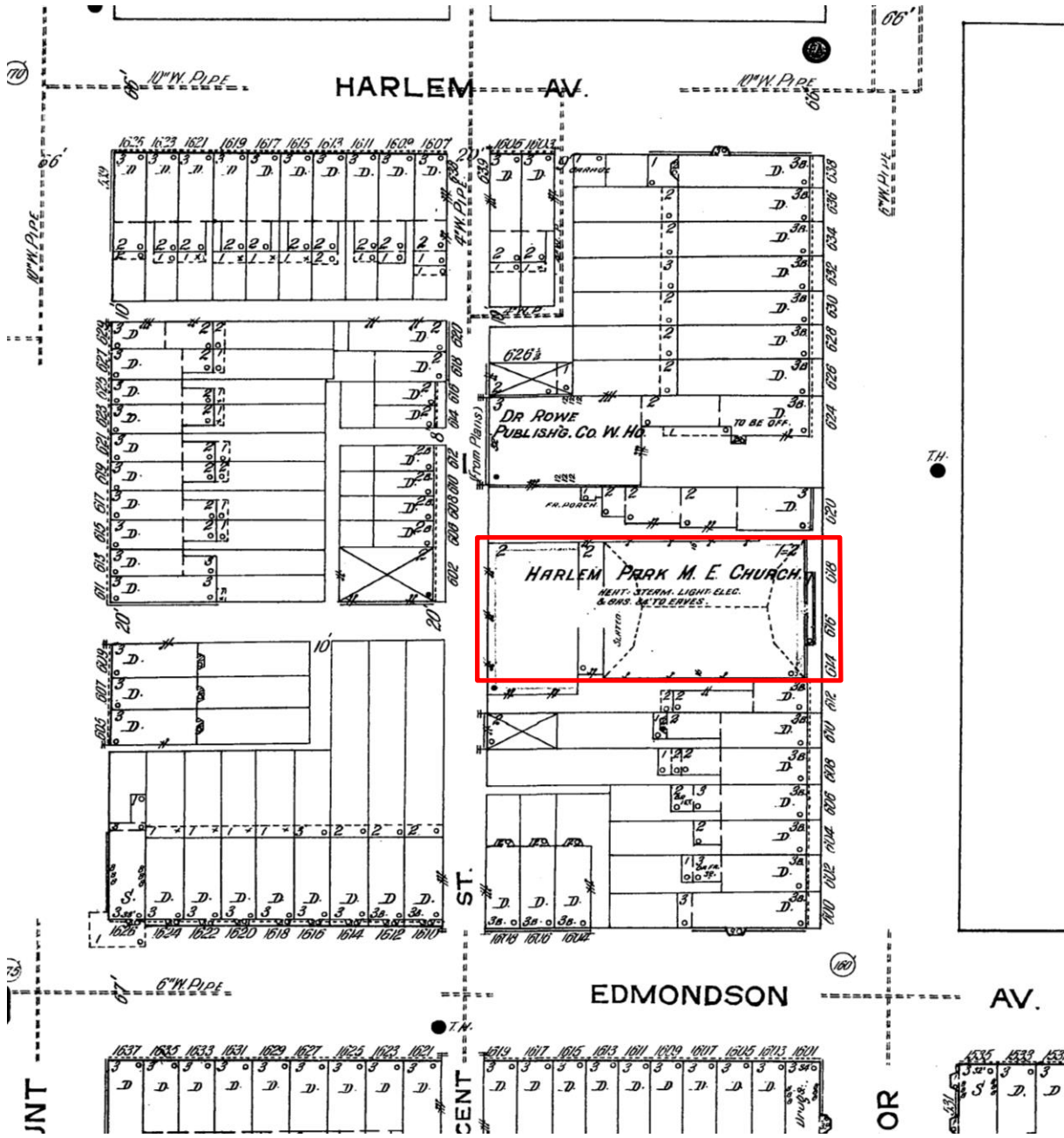




Image 5: Aerial view of 614-618 N. Gilmore St. from north, Connect Explorer, April 2022

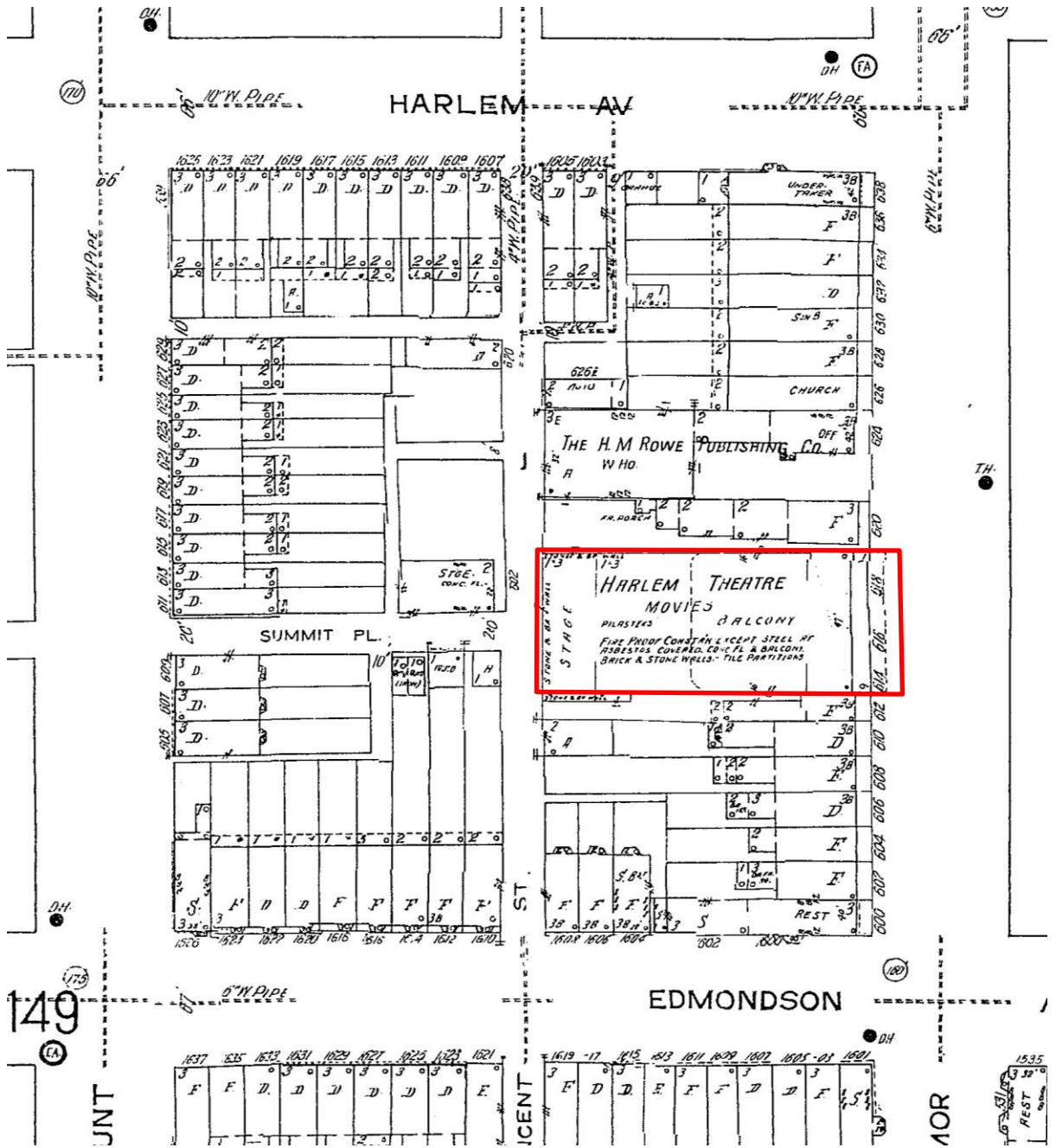


Map 3: 1890 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (Vol. 3, Sheet 93) with property outlined in red; depicting the original church.



Map 4: 1914-1915 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (Vol. 2, 1914, Sheet 150) with property outlined in red, depicting the church built in 1902-1908, and repaired in 1909.





Map 5: 1914-1953 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (Vol. 2, 1914, republished 1952, Sheet 150) with property outlined in red, depicting the adaptations to the building to serve as the Harlem Theatre.





Image 6: Façade of the Harlem Theatre, September 2022



Image 7: Façade of the Harlem Theatre, September 2022





Image 8: Harlem Park M.E. Church, circa 1910



Image 9: Harlem Park M.E. Church, circa 1910





Image 10: Harlem Theatre, (Not dated, A. Aubrey Bodine (1906-1970), Baltimore City Life Museum Collection, Maryland Historical Society, B1617-01)



Image 11: Rear portion of the building (west and south elevations), on Vincent Street.