

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Maxbilt Theatre

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Location

street & number 932 Main Street ☐ not for publication

city or town Fleischmanns ☐ vicinity

state New York code NY county Delaware code 025 zip code 12430

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Rendus A. Ruppert DSHPD  
Signature of certifying official/Title

10/14/14  
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Signature of certifying official/Title \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

☐ entered in the National Register.  
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the  
National Register.  
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the  
National Register.

☐ removed from the National  
Register.

☐ other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

**Maxbilt Theatre**

Name of Property

**Delaware County, New York**

County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

☐ private

☒ public-local

☐ public-State

☐ public-Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

☒ building(s)

☐ district

☐ site

☐ structure

☐ object

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

No style

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Stone, concrete

walls Brick, stucco

\_\_\_\_\_

roof unknown

other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Maxbilt Theatre**

Name of Property

**Delaware County, New York**

County and State

**8 Statement of Significance****Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria considerations**

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

recreation  
architecture**Period of Significance**1929-c1960**Significant Dates**1929**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

na**Cultural Affiliation**na**Architect/Builder**unknown**9. Major Bibliographical References****Bibliography**

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey  
# \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering  
Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data**

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:

**Maxbilt Theatre**

Name of Property

**Delaware County, New York**

County and State

**10. Geographical Data****Acreage of property** Less than one acre**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 533780 4667225  
Zone Easting Northing  
2

3  
Zone Easting Northing  
4

☐ See continuation sheet**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**name/title Kathleen LaFrank, National Register Coordinatororganization New York State Historic Preservation Office date August 2014street & number Peebles Island State Park, Box 189 telephone 518-237-8643 x 3261city or town Waterford state New York zip code 12188**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets****Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Village of Fleischmanns

street &amp; number \_\_\_\_\_ telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_ zip code \_\_\_\_\_

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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The Maxbilt Theatre is located on the south side of Main Street, in Fleischmanns, Delaware County, just east of Bridge Street. Fleischmanns sits in the southeast corner of Delaware County, near the Ulster and Greene County lines. This area of Delaware and Ulster counties is within the Catskill Mountain region of the state and its landscape is characterized by a combination of steep mountain slopes and narrow river and stream valleys, which provided settings for numerous resort villages such as Fleischmanns. The village is sited on both sides of NY 28, a major transportation route running northwest to southeast through the county, connecting the larger cities of Kingston, on the Hudson River, with Oneonta, on the Susquehanna River. The tributaries and rivers that run through the village and surrounding areas are the headwaters of the Delaware River. The Bush Kill, one of numerous small tributaries of the Delaware River, passes through the southern edge of the village, paralleling Main Street (Old NY 28), one of the village's two primary thoroughfares. Main Street, the village's central business district, contains commercial, civic, religious and some residential buildings reflecting the town's history as a resort and summer colony in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the buildings along Main Street are still intact and there is potential for an historic district.

The Maxbilt Theatre was constructed in 1929 on the site of the New Mountain Casino, built in 1910 and destroyed by fire. The theater occupies a village lot, roughly 75 feet by 200 feet, surrounded by small- to medium-scale commercial and residential buildings. The Maxbilt is 65' wide and 185' deep to accommodate the large theater. It is constructed of brick, concrete block, and stucco and sits on a poured concrete and stone foundation. The building is two stories tall and is composed of three sections: a five-bay by three-bay main block, (housing the lobby, storefronts, projector rooms and apartments above), a large auditorium (housing the theater), and a one-story, rectangular concrete block rear section.

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### Exterior

The front section of the building, constructed with a poured concrete foundation, has a two-story brick façade. The lower story is four bays wide and the theater marquee spans the second bay, directly above the theater lobby. The entrance is flanked by one storefront to the east and two to the west, each filling the first floor and the front section of the building to a depth matching the theater lobby, save for small men's and women's bathrooms directly behind each commercial space, connected to the theater. The marquee dates to approximately 1931. The marquee is square and topped by curved pediments on the front and sides. Just above it, suspended from iron rods connected directly to the façade, is an approximately 12' high vertical sign advertising the theater. The entrance to the theater, a set of two double wooden doors, is recessed and sheltered by the marquee. The recessed theater entrance, roughly 18' x 15', has paneling to showcase feature films and two sets of glass double doors. The inlay tile floor, original to the 1929 construction, features "The Maxbilt" written in a Gothic script. The storefronts consist of large glass panels with frosted glass transoms; the store to the east is larger than the two to the west, which are separated by a brick pier. There are tiled entrance floors to each store.

Between the first and second floors is brick corbelling that was originally topped with a signboard. This is currently covered with a metallic panel that runs the length of the building, flanking the marquee. The second floor of the façade is five bays wide and features pairs of windows on either end and three evenly spaced single windows between. There is additional brick corbelling at the top of the building, which terminates at metal coping. There is some damage to the façade of the building, which is in need of repointing, particularly to maintain the support of the marquee.

The basement extends from the street below the storefronts with a brick and stone foundation; the basement then continues with a sloping ceiling following the angle of the floor of the theater until it diminishes to a crawl

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space. There are basement entrances flanking the highest portion of the basement (at the start of the theater floor slope) with newly installed heating facilities for the west parcel.

The second portion of the building is the long, rectangular auditorium, which is constructed of concrete block and brick covered with stucco. The roof of the entire structure is roughly level from the top of the second story block along Main Street with a slight slope extending back to the theater stage, essentially paralleling the grade of the sloped theater floor. There is some significant water damage with one large hole along the western edge of the theater, directly above the middle wall emergency exit. The third portion of the building is a one-story addition at the rear of the building used for expanded storage; it also has a small bathroom.

### Interior

The division of spaces appears to be original. The first floor is divided into lobby, theater, and commercial spaces. Each of the commercial spaces is generally open, though there are remnants of past subdivisions, shelving, etc. Tile ceilings in these spaces have been partially removed, revealing pressed metal in two of the three spaces. The black and white mosaic tile from the theater entrance continues a hound's-tooth-style pattern through the entirety of the lobby entrance. There are spaces on the entrance walls for movie posters and a small office for ticket booth materials. The original ticket booth is currently stored in the lobby; it would have been placed outside before films and performances. The painted walls inside the lobby likely do not maintain the original 1929 color scheme. There are two sets of solid double doors that open from the lobby directly into the back of the theater. The second floor projector room is accessed from a stair at the west side of the theater lobby entrance. There are also rest rooms for men and women in the lobby.

The theater itself is a rectangular space, sloping from rear to front, with two main aisles (approximately 4.5' wide) that extend to the base of the theater stage. A single transverse aisle, approximately 6' wide, bisects all

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the seats between emergency exits on the east and west sides of the theater. These aisles were created when the replacement seats were installed in the early 1950s. Seats were originally accessible only from aisles along the two sides. Almost every space in the theater is covered with original decoration, mostly in the Art Deco style. This includes painted and stenciled surfaces, bas reliefs, light fixtures, and fabric panels. The overall theme is executed using shades of pink, red, turquoise, blue, green, and silver. The ceiling is painted pink with a wide red stripe outlined with blue down the center; three blue strips run down each side.

The stage features a segmental-arched proscenium, roughly 3' wide, which frames the entirety of the theater stage. The arch is decorated with a bas relief of stucco and metallic paint. On either side of the arch contrasting radiating motifs with metallic stars and compass roses. Emergency exits flanking the stage are topped with "Exit" signs and retain original velvet drapes. The side walls are divided by piers, which are painted pink with silver trim and have Doric capitals. Each capital is topped by a second capital, which is part of a coved cornice running around the full extent of the theater. Each pier holds an original electric sconce with frosted glass panels and a stylized metallic ring holding the glass paneling and electric work. Spaces between the piers are filled by large fabric panels with stylized designs in blue and brown that simulate wallpaper. These are interrupted by velvet drapes, some with water damage. The seats, which were obtained from another theater, feature a steel relief pattern and relatively new upholstery. The projection booth, located on the second floor of the front portion of the building, houses three projection ports, still open, visible high in the north wall of the auditorium, below which sits the concession stand, at the rear of the theater. The stand appears to be a more contemporary addition to the theater with relatively modern glass lighting and popcorn making machine (the original machine is in storage).

The second floor of the front section of the building features three distinct residential or office areas and the projector room for the theater building. Each residential space has original tin ceilings, though some are

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deteriorated. Some ceiling and roof water damage extends from above the projector room entrance down to the theater, where water damage has affected one of the hanging panels of original fabric. Each office/apartment has one-over-one double-hung wood windows. There is some damage to the walls with peeling paint and detritus from previous owners; however, historic features such as hardwood floors, window trim and moldings generally survive.

Despite some deterioration, the Maxbilt Theatre is remarkably intact, retaining its original plan and finishes, especially its period decoration, to an outstanding degree. Those features that have been concealed or damaged can be easily restored.

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### Summary

The Maxbilt Theatre is significant as a distinctive and exceptionally intact example of a small regional theater built in the village of Fleischmanns during the heyday of the Catskills resort era. The theater was constructed in 1929 by Max Silberman, a Russian Jewish immigrant who arrived in Fleischmanns in 1912 and worked in a variety of enterprises before becoming one of the most prominent real estate developers in the region, buying and selling estates, hotels, commercial properties, and farms. Silberman acquired the site in 1929, shortly after an earlier property on the site, a casino, had burned. The new theater was specifically built to show movies, and its opening at the dawn of the “talkie” made it one of the early regional proponents of the new technology. Advertising in the *Catskill Mountain News*, the region’s major newspaper, from the time of the theater’s opening promoted the new sound system and state of the art film projection capabilities as rivaling those of larger cities, and the Maxbilt ran a full program of first run movies all season for many years. In addition to its movie capabilities, the Maxbilt was also equipped with a stage and accommodated theater, boxing matches, beauty pageants, and other local entertainments. The Maxbilt was an immediate success, capitalizing on a significant increase in tourism in Fleischmanns in the 1920s and 30s, remaining popular through the 1950s, after which the general decline of the resort economy led to its eventual demise. The Maxbilt Theatre is also significant as an intact example of a small-town commercial/theater building and for its exceptionally intact interior design. The modest, two-story, brick building features a recessed theater entrance and marquee flanked by glass storefronts. The upper story, which contains apartments, is marked by regularly spaced wood-frame windows within brick surrounds. Exterior decoration is limited to corbelled brickwork. This building is similar to others from the era in Fleischmanns and other small towns throughout the Catskills. However, the theater retains a completely intact interior design, featuring elaborate Art Deco style decorative painting, bas reliefs, light fixtures, and fabrics. Retaining an extremely high level of integrity, the building recalls the resort industry of Fleischmanns and the Catskills region.

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### Fleischmanns

The village of Fleischmanns is located in the town of Middletown, in southeastern Delaware County. Middletown, located in a mountainous area of the western Catskills, is generally characterized by steep, rocky hillsides traversed by numerous narrow river and stream valleys of the Delaware River and its tributaries. Originally part of Ulster County, Middletown was incorporated in 1789. It is one of the oldest towns in Delaware County and once encompassed most of the southern half of the county. The town falls within Great Lots 7, 8, 38, 39 and 40 of the Hardenburgh Patent, a large, early eighteenth century land grant (1708) that encompassed much of the land between the Rondout and the Delaware rivers. The earliest documented European settlers in the Middletown area were Dutch farmers who arrived c1763. During the Revolution, the town became a Tory stronghold and most of the early settlers were driven off. Many returned after the war, however, and permanent settlement was established by the early 1800s.

The village of Fleischmanns is located on the Bush Kill, one of the town's major streams. The Bush Kill runs east-west, connecting Fleischmanns and Arkville to the Delaware River near Margaretville. Settlers appeared in the village around 1800. A grist mill was established in 1802 and a distillery in 1804. Star Mills, a steam-powered sawmill, was built in 1829 and a carding mill in the same period. The village was known as Griffin's Corners until 1913, when it was renamed to honor Julius F. Fleischmann. The Griffin family included some of the village's early and important citizens. Matthew Griffin, a merchant and lawyer, was especially well known. Griffin ran a store and established Griffin's Corners Hotel c1848; the same year, he also helped to establish a village post office. He served as postmaster until 1879, when he was succeeded by his son, Dewitt Griffin.

A turnpike had been built connecting the village to Pine Hill in 1834, and the Delaware and Arkville Turnpike, chartered in 1840, was completed in 1849. However, it was the arrival of the Ulster and Delaware Railroad in

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the 1870s that had the largest effect on the village's future. The U&D originated in Kingston and traveled northwest through the Catskills to Oneonta. One of its largest stations was at Phoenicia (in nearby Ulster County), from whence the line ran to Pine Hill, Fleischmanns and Arkville, where it turned north towards Kelly's Corners, Halcottville and Grand Gorge. The railroad was intended to provide a route for coal from Pennsylvania to the Hudson; however, it proved perhaps more important in transporting fresh milk and other local products to urban markets. In this capacity, it allowed farmers to move into commercial production and rejuvenated the region's agricultural economy. Of equal significance, the railroad was perhaps the single most important factor in opening the Catskills to tourists and effecting the region's transition into one of the country's major resort regions. After the Fleischmanns station was completed in 1871, the area became a popular tourist destination. Fleischmanns initially attracted a number of very wealthy people who built larger, more elaborate summer homes in the hills above the village. However, as more vacationers arrived, different types of accommodations were developed to serve tourists from different classes and income levels: homes were enlarged to take in borders; bungalow colonies were developed, and hotels were built. The influx of summer visitors also sparked development in the village; farmers and merchants were busy meeting the summer demand and new businesses included restaurants, casinos, bowling alleys and other entertainment-related facilities. In the 1910s, Fleischmanns was thriving and prosperous, serving Catskills vacationers of every economic status, and, by the early 1920s, the village was one of the fastest growing resort communities in the Catskills. In its heyday Fleischmanns boasted more than one hundred hotels.

In c1883, Charles F. Fleischmann, a Hungarian immigrant who founded the Fleischmann Company (famous for its yeast and spirits), purchased property west of the village near the Fleischmanns Railroad Station. The Fleischmann estate was lavish, including a deer park, riding stable, heated pool, and trout pond. The Fleischmanns were followed by other well-known and/or wealthy vacationers, including New York Governor Herbert Lehman, the Liebman family (owners of Liebman Brewery), Anton Seidl, a conductor at the

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Metropolitan Opera, coloratura soprano Amelita Galli Curci, and Shakespearean actress Julia Marlowe. The village of Fleischmanns was also home to Gertrude Berg, popularly known as Molly Goldberg, of radio and television fame. Berg reportedly based much of her material on life in the village.

Other important summer visitors included Dr. Alexander Johnston Chalmers Skene (1837-1900) and his wife, Annette Wilhelmine Lillian Van der Wegen, a native of Brussels, Belgium. Dr. Skene was a Scottish immigrant who arrived in America at the age of nineteen. He became a surgeon and contributed to the theory, practice and teaching of gynecology. By the end of his career, Skene had founded the American Gynecological Society and opened his own sanatorium in Brooklyn. His county home at Highmount, above Fleischmanns, was designed to recall a Scottish castle. In 1901, Annette Skene helped to establish the Skene Memorial Library (National Register listed) in honor of her recently deceased husband.

The Fleischmann family began to take an active interest in village life shortly after its arrival. Julius F. Fleischmann, son of Charles, was the village's greatest benefactor. In 1914, the younger Fleischmann donated Fleischmanns Park, on the north side of Wagner Street, to the village. Among the Fleischmann family's interests was major league baseball, and the park attracted some major league players during training season. Among them was John Peter "Honus" Wagner, known as the Flying Dutchman, who was later inducted into the Hall of Fame. The park was given to the village with the stipulation that it always be used as a park and athletic grounds and never be sold or sublet.

### Jewish Settlement in Fleischmanns

In southeastern Delaware County, particularly the area along the NY 28 corridor, there was also an influx of Jewish settlers who became farmers, operated hotels, or established businesses in service communities such as Fleischmanns. Jews began developing farms around Fleischmanns around the turn of the twentieth century. Israel Kaplan, one of the six men who founded Congregation Bnai Israel, was a Polish immigrant who

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established a farm in 1912. Like other farmers, Kaplan began to take in borders immediately and soon built the large Sunnyview Hotel, with more than sixty rooms. However, when the hotel burned in 1931, the family returned to full-time farming, reusing the surviving casino as a residence. Later, other hotel outbuildings were adapted for use as summer residences for members of this large extended family.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1920s and 30s, Jewish merchants operated more than twenty businesses in Fleischmanns; these included two grocery stores, two dairy stores, a milk store, a bakery, two greengrocers, two kosher butchers, two drug stores, several law offices and two newspapers. Some of the Jews who arrived in the twentieth century purchased large summer houses and operated them as small hotels or boarding houses. In one example, the *Catskill Mountain News* reported in 1915 that an M. Rosenthal had “made over the old Senator Fleischmann house and Julius Fleischmann Cottage.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Fleischmanns became not only a service community for farmers, resort operators and their patrons but a resort destination for middle-class Jews in its own right.

Fleischmanns’s first synagogue, Congregation Bnai Israel (National Register listed), was incorporated on 6 August 1918 by a group of farmers and merchants who had been meeting in each other’s homes (and occasionally in a local hotel) prior to establishment of a congregation. In September 1918, the congregation purchased land for a synagogue on the north side of Wagner Avenue. Wagner, a broad street at the southern edge of the village, had been developed with large summer cottages beginning c1904. The street was graded; trees were planted and an attractive streetscape was created, probably with help from the Fleischmann family, which was active in village development and beautification projects in that period.<sup>3</sup> In 1919, a large gala was held in the village to finance construction of the synagogue. This event, reported in the *Catskill Mountain News* as the best event ever in the memory of the inhabitants, hosted approximately 1,000 guests, with many turned

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<sup>1</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 13 August 1987.

<sup>2</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 8 January 1915.

<sup>3</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, undated clipping.

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away. Construction of the building by builders Crosby and Kelly began in May 1920 and the congregation adopted by-laws on 7 October 1920.

### Max Silberman

Max Silberman was born in 1886 to Russian Jews near the German border. At age thirteen he left Russia for New York with his parents and six siblings. In 1912 Silberman arrived in Fleischmanns after marrying and running a paint shop in New London, Connecticut. Upon arrival in Fleischmanns he worked at a local bakery and feed store. Multiple early notices in the *Catskill Mountain News* show Silberman buying and selling farm equipment, auctioning household estates, and buying and selling real estate. He said he would buy anything, and an add from 1919 describes him as “the man with the cash.”<sup>4</sup> Somewhat later in life, he seems to have been heavily involved in buying and selling horses. Over the years, his business and real estate enterprise grew to the point that he was called “the financial genius of the Catskills.”<sup>5</sup> Stories from various regional newspapers, including the *Catskill Mountain News*, *Cooperstown Otsego and Farmer*, *Monticello Republican* and *Stamford Mirror-Record*, document him buying and selling large estates, hotels, creameries, hardware and furniture businesses, and other enterprises. He record has been described as “truly a notable one and probably unequaled in any town of its size in the state in a like period.”<sup>6</sup> Sometime in the 1920s, Silberman encountered a significant business setback, with multiple notices of bankruptcies appearing. He was then forced to liquidate his holdings, returning him to a state of poverty. However, within five years he had recovered and was running a hotel on the east side of Fleischmanns. He was later voted president of Congregation Bnai Israel and a director of the Chamber of Commerce. In later years, the Silbermans are reported as having a home in New York City and a son who attended the prestigious Wharton School. His interests stretched as far as Otsego County, where, in 1946, he purchased and demolished the old Hartwick Seminary Building, built in 1815, the

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<sup>4</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 11 April 1919.

<sup>5</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 2 June 1922,

<sup>6</sup> “Remarkable Business Career of Max Silberman,” Fleischmanns Museum Exhibit.

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oldest theological seminary in New York State.<sup>7</sup> Silberman's grave in the Covesville Cemetery notes his date of death as June 20, 1954.

### Maxbilt Theater

The pervious building on the site of the Maxbilt, the New Mountain Casino, was a larger, wood-frame building constructed in 1910. It had multiple shops on the first floor and, apparently, a second floor theater or hall, marked by an oversize Palladian window. The building also contained a soda fountain, bowling alley and office spaces. The casino partially burned, probably early in 1929. In March 1929, the *Otsego Farmer and Republican* reported that the partially burned theater, which had been purchased by Max Silberman, "was burning to some great extent during the latter part of the week." This was apparently a controlled burn to eliminate the remains of the building, termed an "eyesore." The article also reported that Silberman "will at once build a modern structure in place of the old casino and have it ready for summer." The proposed building, to cost \$60,000, would have space for a theater and small businesses.<sup>8</sup>

In June 1929, with the theater under construction, Silberman leased it to the Stanley Sobelson Corporation, which operated a chain of theaters in New York and New Jersey, for fifteen years, for \$80,000. The Sobelson Corp. planned to install the latest and best equipment in the building.<sup>9</sup> The theater opened with a famed boxing match sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce over the Fourth of July weekend, 1929. Contestants arrived from New York City, the Bronx and Staten Island to take part in a prize fight with thousands of spectators. A series of chamber-sponsored boxing matching matches continued on Friday nights over the summer. The movie business, however, was what the theater was built for. Built at the start of the "Talkie" film movement, it was

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<sup>7</sup> *Otsego Farmer and Republican*, 17 May 1946.

<sup>8</sup> *Otsego Farmer and Republican*, 15 March 1929.

<sup>9</sup> *Stamford Mirror-Record*, 6 June 1929.



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equipped with a variety of modern audio and visual equipment described as a “new wide range Western Electric Sound Equipment similar to that of the biggest theaters in the country.”<sup>10</sup> The Maxbilt began to run first run movies, with multiple shows a night on weekends and weekday matinees. Large ads appeared in the local paper every week promoting these attractions.

Despite the theater’s popularity, in 1929, the Fleischmann’s Board of Trustees voted to acquire the theater building for use as a new municipal hall.<sup>11</sup> Whether this was initiated by the village or by Silberman – the ultimate real estate speculator – is not known. However, when put to a vote, village residents defeated the proposal to spend \$90,000 on the building 105 to 5.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, the golden age of Hollywood, regular first run films were shown every weekend during the summer months and eventually year round. Lavish posters were printed and displayed throughout the town showing performances and times for the coming weekends with regular announcements and advertisements printed in the *Catskill Mountain News*, the most widely circulated regional newspaper. The theater appears to have changed management several times but seemed most often under the direction of the Interstate Motion Picture Theaters, Inc. At some point during the 1930s, the Sanford family of Margaretville began to manage the theater. The Sanfords were also an important local family, in part because they were publishers of the *Catskill Mountain News* (still in publication) and also because they ran the Galli-Curci theatre in the nearby village of Margaretville.

It is not known when and to whom Silberman sold the theater, but sometime around 1940, the theater came under the ownership of T. Whipple, president of the First National Bank. For the next decade it was known as

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<sup>10</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 11 September 1931.

<sup>11</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 28 July 1929.

<sup>12</sup> “Fleischmanns Will Not Buy Theater,” *Catskill Mountain News*, 30 August 1929.

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the Whipple Theatre and leased to others to run. In June 1940 the Whipple reportedly received new seats, a new marquee, new drapes, and new lights on the screen. Perhaps these changes coincided with Whipple's purchase.<sup>13</sup> On January 1, 1950, it was purchased by Sam Davis, who changed its name to the Onteora and reopened it on May 19, 1950. Davis served as the owner-manager, and the *Catskill Mountain News* reported that it had a "handsome neon sign."<sup>14</sup> A blogger named S. Davis, who may be the child of Sam Davis, recently reported that the marquee had been added prior to the family's acquisition, along with an electric running board with flashing lights. Davis reported that the family lived over the theater in the summer months and tried to keep it running weekends year-round; however, there wasn't sufficient winter business to justify it. Although the information can't be verified, Davis noted that alterations during this period of ownership included a new screen and new production equipment, as well as a second replacement of the seats, and their new configuration.<sup>15</sup> The candy counter was also relocated to the space inside the lobby doors during this period. Davis also stated that some of the upstairs spaces were originally used for vaudeville rehearsals and later for private parties; however, there was no sources given for this information.<sup>16</sup>

Among the local businesses occupying the ground floor commercial spaces was a ladies dress shop that opened in 1925.<sup>17</sup> The shop was run by Shirley Deutsch of the Bronx; Deutsch was the daughter of a woman who had owned the local Empire Hotel. The shop seemed to be a seasonal business, as a later newspaper reported it closing for the season in September. The Strand Beauty Parlor moved into one of the shops in September 1932, its ad promising "Five Expert Workers." Another hair-related business, "Nick," the Barber, opened a shop in

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<sup>13</sup> "Whipple Theatre Opens Tomorrow for Summer," *Catskill Mountain News*, 21 June 1940.

<sup>14</sup> Onteora Theatre Opens, *Catskill Mountain News*, 19 May 1950; Theatre Will Open Soon, *Catskill Mountain News*, 5 May 1950.

<sup>15</sup> "Fleischmanns Theatre to Open Friday Night," *Catskill Mountain News*, 29 May 1953.

<sup>16</sup> S. Davis, "Fleischmanns Theater in Fleischmanns, NY – Cinema Treasures." <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/2921>

<sup>17</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 12 July 1935.

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the Maxbilt in the same month.<sup>18</sup> Other businesses included a variety of shops, restaurants, and even government services, such as, at one time, a post office.

The Maxbilt Theatre was described as one of the “most modern structures of its kind in this part of New York state, and [as] second to none of its size and capacity in the Empire State.” The writer went on to pronounce it a “city theatre in the country” that is “beautifully decorated [with] an interlocking harmony of structural detail throughout the entire building.”<sup>19</sup> Its opening year was also a banner year for the resort community and the same issue of the *Stamford-Mirror Recorder* reported that many of the larger hotels were filled to capacity.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to movies, the Maxbilt hosted vaudeville shows and a variety of musical performances and other shows of regional theater. There were benefits as well, for the Elks and the Order of the Eastern Star, among others. As was considered appropriate at the time, there was even a benefit minstrel show, held at both the Maxbilt and the Galli-Curci on separate nights, to benefit the Fleischmanns and Margaretville fire companies.<sup>21</sup> But it was as a regular film house that the theater was most widely known and as one of the most modern cinemas in the Catskills. The location of this modern theater in Fleischmanns made it an important component of the village’s social and economic life.

### Architecture

The theater is typical of the small- to medium-scale theaters built in villages throughout New York State in the early twentieth century. Constructed of brick and modestly embellished with patterned brick work, the façade is distinctive for its recessed entrance and large plate glass windows. The retail entrances are identical, each occupying an end bay of the theater, with the marquee and recessed lobby entrance slightly off center. Few

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<sup>18</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 1 August 1930.

<sup>19</sup> “Fleischmanns’s Fine Playhouse,” *Stamford-Mirror Recorder*, 11 July 1929.

<sup>20</sup> *Stamford-Mirror Recorder*, 11 July 1929.

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significant exterior changes have been made, save for the removal and addition of various signage as the retail occupants changed.

The interior spatial divisions between the storefronts on the first floor and the apartment and office spaces above on the second floor have remained relatively unchanged. The projection room is also intact, with its three portals into the theater. Hardwood floors survive throughout the interior, including in the theater. Decorative pressed-metal ceilings still exist in two retail sections of the building. Within the theater itself, the original stage and proscenium arch survive, with curtain, as well as the sloped floor. In addition to spatial and functional divisions, the theater is especially distinguished by its virtually untouched original Art Deco style finishes, including painted and stenciled surfaces, fixtures and drapery. The painting, which covers almost all the walls and ceiling, is a unified pattern executed in blue, pink, red, blue turquoise, green and silver. Fabric panels between the painted surfaces are in a complementary pattern. Original drapes grace each exit door. Electric sconces hang on piers, each of which is also embellished with decorative painting. Although the seats have been replaced they are similar to the originals. The space is remarkable for its continuity and its integrity.

The form of the Maxbilt, while relatively unassuming on the façade, save for its marquee, is typical for the region. The theater bears some similarity to the Galli-Curci Theater (1922) in Margaretville, the Rivoli (1923) in South Fallsburg and the Rialto (1921) in Monticello, all National Register listed. However, its interior is more intact and distinctive, with original painting, exuberant metallic finishes, and modern looking lighting systems. The building retains a high level of integrity on both its exterior and interior. The interior retains the original division of spaces on both levels with many historic finishes, particularly in the theater space. The Maxbilt clearly illustrates its historical and architectural significance.

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<sup>21</sup> *Catskill Mountain News*, 7 April 1933.

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“Barbershop at Maxbilt.” *Catskill Mountain News*, September 16 1932.

“Bathing Beauties at Maxbilt.” *Catskill Mountain News*, August 1 1930.

“Casino Burns Down.” *Catskill Mountain News*, October 12 1928.

“Casino Foreclosure Sale.” *Catskill Mountain News*, March 18 1927.

“Casino Theater.” *Catskill Mountain News*, July 13 1928.

*Catskill Mountain News*. 8 January 1915; 11 April 1919; 2 June 1922; 28 July, 1929; 1 August 1930;  
11 September 1931; 7 April, 1933; 12 July, 1935; 13 August 1987.

“Fleischmanns Will Not Buy Theatre.” *Catskill Mountain News*, August 30, 1929.

“The Girls at the Casino.” *Catskill Mountain News*, March 8 1912.

“Kleinman – Projectionist from Radio City Music Hall.” *Catskill Mountain News*, July 10 1936.

LaFrank, Kathleen. Congregation Bnai Israel Synagogue, Fleischmanns. National Register Nomination, 2002.  
\_\_\_\_\_. Galli-Curci Theater, Margaretville. National Register Nomination, 2005.

“Letter from Mayor regarding Dam Opening – Draining Lake Switzerland *Catskill Mountain News*. ” January 4,  
1938.

“Maxbilt Boxing Article.” *Catskill Mountain News*, July 26 1929.

“Maxbilt Boxing Bout Opening.” *Catskill Mountain News*, July 5 1929.

Maxbilt Theatre Advertisement, “Gala Theatre Opening” May 27 1932.

Maxbilt Theater Advertisement. “Theatre in Fleischmanns.” *Catskill Mountain News*, October 18 1929.

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“Minstrel Show.” *Catskill Mountain News*, April 7 1933.

“New Mountain Casino – Charlie Chaplin.” *Catskill Mountain News*, August 6 1915.

“New Mountain Casino – Electric Range Demonstration.” *Catskill Mountain News*, May 27, 1927.

“New Sound System.” *Catskill Mountain News*, May 22, 1936.

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*Otsego Farmer and Republican*. 15 March 1929; 17 May 1946.

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“Sam Davis, New Owner – Showing Titanic.” *Catskill Mountain News*, May 29 1953.

“Remarkable Business Career of Max Silberman.” Fleischmanns Museum of Memories, June, 2014.

*Stamford Mirror-Record*. 6 June 1929; 11 July 1929; 7 April 1933.

Theater Advertisement. New Management. *Catskill Mountain News*, June 3 1932.

“Theatre/Casino Fails.” *Catskill Mountain News*, January 14 1927.

“Theatre Will Open Soon.” *Catskill Mountain News*. 5 May 1950.

“Whipple Theatre Opens Tomorrow for Summer.” *Catskill Mountain News*, June 21. 1940.

“Winter Season, Paul Schneider, New Management, Coffeeshop.” *Catskill Mountain News*, November 3 1933.

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### Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the enclosed map.

### Boundary Justification

The boundary coincides with the original village parcel associated with this theater.

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Photographer: Greg Beechler  
200 West 79<sup>th</sup> Street  
Penthouse A  
New York, NY 10024

Date: 2014

Tiff Files: CD-R of .tiff files on file at  
National Park Service  
Washington, D.C.  
and  
New York State Historic Preservation Office  
Waterford, NY 12188

### Photo List

- 0001. Maxbilt Theatre looking southwest
- 0002. Maxbilt Theatre looking northeast
- 0003. Maxbilt Theatre, two northern storefronts
- 0004. Maxbilt Theatre, entrance to lobby with original tile
- 0005. Maxbilt Theatre, interior of theatre showing painted decoration
- 0006. Maxbilt Theatre, interior of theatre showing fabric panels
- 0007. Maxbilt Theatre, interior of theatre showing candy stand (moved from lobby)

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