The Temple Theater, which for decades served as a gathering spot for the city’s black community but later was the site of a deadly riot, is one step closer to gaining national historical status.

The State Review Commission for the National Register of Historic Places nominated the building Wednesday to be included on a list of local landmarks.

The national commission will decide within two months whether the building is added, said Donna Fricker, National Register coordinator.

Thelma Parham was one of several people who pushed for the building to be selected as the city’s second black historic site. The other site is McKinley High School.

"It's a very important building to black residents," Parham said Wednesday.

There were no ceremonies at the Temple Theater Wednesday, but that didn't stop its fans from telling stories about how they went to black-and-white movies and danced to Big Band music inside the tan four-story brick building at 1335 North Blvd.

"It was the heart of the black community, that's when Government Street and North and East Boulevard were all we had," said Earle Bradford, head of the Prince Hall Masons that currently own the Temple.

Years after the building's heyday, on Jan. 10, 1972, a riot between police and a small band of black Muslims traveling the country erupted on North Boulevard.

Five people — two sheriff's deputies and three Muslims — were killed and 31 people were injured in the fighting outside the Temple.

But the people who pushed for its inclusion on the historic list prefer to remember the Temple as the black community's social spot since the 1920s.

The building housed two facilities during its earlier days: the Temple Theater and the Temple Roof Garden.

The theater's ballroom drew its patrons from as far away as Scotlandville and the performers included such greats as Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Louie Armstrong, Cab Calloway and Sam Cooke.

"I'd come every time the groups I knew would come," said Camille W. Jacobs, a board member on the Foundation for Historical Louisiana who attended dances at the Temple during the 1950s and 40s.

"I don't remember the popular dances, but I'd just dance, maybe the fox trot ...," she said.

Parham recalled attending movies at the theater at least once a week and watching running series like "Zorro."

Earle L. Bradford, left; Thelma Parham, Charles Jones, Camille W. Jacobs and Robert Buffington stand in front of the Temple Theater building on North Boulevard.
For Robert Buffington, the Temple was something of a second home for him since he was 9 years old. "It was the only place for youngsters to go," he said.

He can remember when the building operated as a shelter for homeless people during World War II, a hall for school proms and a place to play basketball games.

"Before the city ordinances went into effect, 1,600 could pack into the hall, but after the ordinance 500 people could fit in," said Buffington, who over the years has helped maintain the building.

It was a place to practice the day’s more popular dances like the jitterbug and the two-step, said Charles Jones.

"Without this building, it would have been difficult for blacks to find clean entertainment. This was the only place to go," Jones said.

The Temple served as one of three theaters in Baton Rouge for blacks at the time. The others were the Grand and McKinley Theater.

The neo-classically designed building was erected in 1924 and owned by the Grand United Order of Oddfellows until 1945.

A site must be 50 years old to be included on the historic registers list, which would make the building eligible for federal grants and provide some protection from demolition.

Parham said recognition of the Temple is a big step for the community.

"There are not enough black-owned and operated buildings in existence over the past 50 years that have been placed on the national register," she said.