

VLR-12/4/96 NRHP-2/27/97

NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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 for individual properties and 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 any 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 from 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 Commodore Theatre

other names/site number VDHR File No. 124-0101

2. Location

street & number 421 High Street not for publication N/A
city or town Portsmouth vicinity _____
state Virginia code VA county City of Portsmouth code 124 zip code 23704

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally ___ statewide X locally. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] 1/28/97
Signature of certifying official Date
Virginia Department of Historic Resources
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 commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

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4. National Park Service Certification
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I, hereby certify that this property is:

- ___ 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): _____

Signature of Keeper Date of Action

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5. Classification
=====

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- _x_ private
___ public-local
___ public-State
___ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- _x_ building(s)
___ district
___ site
___ structure
___ object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register ___0___

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

N/A

=====
6. Function or Use
=====

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RECREATION AND CULTURE Sub: THEATER

Blank lines for entering historic functions.

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RECREATION AND CULTURE Sub: THEATER

Blank lines for entering current functions.

=====
7. Description
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Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT

Art Deco

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brick

roof Other

walls Brick, Limestone

other Glass

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

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8. Statement of Significance

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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.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a 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.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance 1945 _____

Significant Dates 1945 _____

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A _____

Cultural Affiliation N/A _____

Architect/Builder Zink, John J. _____

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

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9. Major Bibliographical References
=====

(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: _____

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10. Geographical Data
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Acreeage of Property less than one

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing
1 18 383880 4077140 3 _____
2 _____ 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 Mary Ruffin Viles/Calder Loth

organization Virginia Department of Historic Resources date 9 October 1996

street & number 612 Court Street telephone (757) 396-6707

city or town Portsmouth state VA zip code 23704
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Additional Documentation
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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)

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Property Owner
=====

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

name Commodore Associates Partnership Attn Fred Schoenfeld

street & number P. O. Box 220 telephone (757) 393-4383

city or town Portsmouth state Va zip code 23705
=====

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 the 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 Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Section 7 Page 1

Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

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SUMMARY

Portsmouth's Commodore Theatre was constructed in 1945 as a 1,000-plus seat motion-picture theater. The theater is on High Street, Portsmouth's main historic commercial artery, and is in close proximity to the Olde Towne Historic District, the Norfolk County Courthouse, and Trinity Church, all on the National Register. The building is an excellent example of the streamline Art Deco style, and is in a good state of preservation, retaining a high degree of architectural integrity. The facade preserves its original marquee, ticket booth, and glass doors. With the exception of the original seating, nearly all of the interior appointments survive. A dominant element of the auditorium is the pair of restored murals on the side walls representing the progress of America and the commerce and industry of Hampton Roads. The theater was restored in the late 1980s. Most of the original fabric was retained and/or restored, with the exception of the first floor seating which has been converted to dinner theater style seating with groupings of tables and chairs.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Commodore Theater is located at 421 High Street on Portsmouth's historic main commercial artery, near the intersection of High and Court Streets, known locally as "The Four Corners." The theater is next door to the landmark Trinity Episcopal Church and across the street from the former Norfolk County Courthouse. The theater is on the edge of the Portsmouth's Olde Towne Historic District, but not actually included in it. Although it differs stylistically from its immediate neighbors, the theater harmonizes with the neighborhood in scale and materials.

The facade of the Commodore Theater is the only elevation having architectural treatment. Arising from the front edge of the lot, the two-story front is a bold but refined expression of the Art Deco style. The upper level is a plain mass of yellow pressed brick decorated with horizontal stripes of brown brick. This mass is interrupted by a central pavilion of curved-top vertical pylons of Indiana limestone. The center portion of the pavilion is broken by slender piers separating narrow decorative strips of glass block. The block is backlit with blue fluorescent fixtures.

The lower level of the facade is composed of Indiana limestone ashlar veneer

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

with a base of black marble. The fittings of the six stainless steel poster cases along the facade are reproductions of originals. Sheltering the entrance is the original marquee. On the top of the marquee are the original sheet-metal letters spelling out the word "COMMODORE" on the front and in smaller letters on each side. The letters were originally highlighted with neon tubing; which has been remade. The fascia of the marquee was originally filled with translucent white-glass panels back-lit with neon tubing. The marquee originally used a Beverlite-Adler Co. system of letters made of cast aluminum. New plastic letters of identical appearance have been purchased from this California company. The underside of the marquee is a dazzling composition of radiating panels of stainless steel interrupted by ribs punctuated with scores of lights which may have been equipped with a "chaser," so that they blinked sequentially. Directly beneath the rear of the marquee is a coming attractions panel which preserves its original white glass panels. The panels are back-lit with a chaser light.

The area below the marquee is recessed approximately three feet from the sidewalk. The flankers of the recess retain the original poster cases. In the upper portion of each case is written "A Wilder Theatre," indicating the theater's original owner.

Centered below the marquee is an outstanding Art Deco ticket booth. The top of the booth is decorated with elegantly detailed cast-aluminum Art-Deco panels. The present bent-glass windows are reproductions of the originals. Below the windows is a strip of pink glass panels. The ticket trough in the strip is original. The booth's dado is composed of stainless steel panels etched with Art Deco striping framing a large "C" in each panel. The floor surface of the recess is paved with patterned terrazzo which extends into the entrance vestibule.

The theatre remarkably preserves the four sets of original glass double doors. Each door is a plain single sheet of Herculite safety glass, three-quarters of an inch thick and weighing over 200 pounds. All the doors have a narrow brass hinge strip at top and bottom, as well as a brass bar handle. The original floor-set door closers by the Rixom Co. are intact and still in use.

On each side wall of the vestibule are two original poster cases. The space is paneled to door-height level in plain bleached walnut veneer. Three sets of plain walnut veneer double doors are opposite the exterior doors. The center set of doors has its original copper-plated metal handles. The handle design is in the form of an "S" section of rope with an anchor backplate. The

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

vestibule's terrazzo floor is an abstract Art Deco design composed of stripes and circles.

The vestibule doors open into the low theater lobby with its shallow, segmental ceiling. The lobby's south wall is covered with a pleated cloth covering installed in the restoration. The Commodore was built at a time when food was not allowed in theaters. Thus had no concession stand. A concession stand was installed on the south wall in 1951, but was removed in the restoration. Still in place on the south wall are two original Art Deco plaster figures representing comedy and tragedy. They were cast with wiring set into the plaster so they could be backlit. The present ceiling lights were installed in the restoration but the brass exit lights are original. Other original features include the polychromed chair rail and cornice. The Art Deco-style carpeting is new.

At either end of the lobby are three steps leading up into a passageway connecting to the auditorium entrances and the restrooms. At the top of each set of steps is a small alcove originally fitted with seats to serve as a waiting area. In the west passageway is the original wooden ticket taker's stand, a suave Art Deco design with the profile of a skyscraper.

The ladies' room at the end of the east passageway preserves its original lounge with terrazzo floor. Most of the bathroom fixtures are original, including pink and black wall tiles; pink, black, and white floor tiles; marble stalls and plumbing fixtures. The men's room at the opposite end of the lobby also preserves its original plumbing fixtures, but the tile work is modern. The men's room originally had a smoking lounge, but this space was converted into a food preparation area during the restoration. The original theater office, located to the west of the former smoking lounge, has been converted into a kitchen.

The Commodore's auditorium was originally designed to seat approximately 1,000 theater-goers. Despite its conversion to a dinner theater, the room preserves its basic architectural integrity and is a dramatic space. Instead of a gently sloping floor, the auditorium floor is now divided into a series of shallow terraces on which dining tables and chairs are placed. The balcony area is fitted with auditorium seating, but the seats themselves are new.

The present hung ceiling is a few inches below the original ceiling. The trough lighting on either side of the ceiling is original, as are the vertical scalloped bands on the outside edges of the lighting troughs. The painted

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

friezes of stylized tendrils beyond the scalloped bands are original.

Dominating the side walls of the auditorium are large Art Deco murals. The east mural is a depiction of the commerce and industry of Hampton Roads featuring factories, a warehouse, a ship, an airplane, a train, a truck, as well as forests for wood products. At the top of the mural is a stylized American coat-of-arms with the motto "Intelligent Force Which Makes Vision A Reality." The west mural is a depiction of the progress of the United States, featuring figures of American history leaving three sailing ships and ascending a monumental stair to a futuristic city. The motto of this mural is "The Vision of a New World." The original murals had deteriorated beyond repair and were reproduced by Virginia Beach artist James Nelson Johnson of the firm Wall Illusions.

Above the exit doors flanking the stage are panels of original painted decoration consisting of stylized tendrils trailing up the wall surface. The exit doors themselves are plain wood veneer doors similar to the vestibule doors. The Art Deco chandeliers above the doors are modern as is the marbleizing on the bowed surfaces on either side of the exits. The chair rail strip, however, is original and extends around three sides of the room. Another important original decorative element is the painted frieze on the balcony front. The design is of repeated gold stylized Art Deco military eagles alternating with anchors and connected by blue tendrils all set off by a brick red background.

The theater was built with a modified fly-loft and could accommodate vaudeville and minstrel shows, but was not equipped to handle big stage productions. Interestingly, the theater was air conditioned from the beginning, fitted with an early Carrier system. The theater retains in storage one of three original Standard Simplex carbon-arc projectors. The projectors, dating from the 1930's, were used equipment when they were installed in the Commodore in 1945.

The theater was restored between 1987 and 1989. Restoration was based on existing materials, documentary sources, and information from former patrons. With the exception of the new first floor seating, most of the original fabric was retained, and, when necessary, restored. The restoration has enhanced the existing historic fabric and has not endangered the theater's integrity.

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

SUMMARY

The Commodore Theatre, named for Commodore James Baron, was built by Portsmouth native William Stanley Wilder in 1945. Wilder owned and operated a chain of theaters in the Tidewater area from the 1920s until the 1940s. He hired a Baltimore architect, John Zink, to design what is arguably his finest theater, and what was ultimately his last. The Art Deco building retains much of its lush appointments including the marquee, stylized ticket booth, ticket taker's stand, and murals. Wilder believed in community theaters and the Commodore is the last remaining and operating movie house of a string of theaters which served Portsmouth's downtown. The theater degenerated to an x rated theater and closed in the 1970s. It was resurrected and restored in the 1980s and again serves to entertain area residents.

The property qualifies for the National Register in that it both possesses high artistic values in its Art Deco design (which extends to fixtures and appointments), and in that it is associated recreation and the proliferation of movie theaters which have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Commodore Theatre opened on November 14, 1945. It is named for Commodore James Barron, commander of the U. S. Frigate Chesapeake, when it was attacked by the British frigate Leopard in 1807. As a result Barron engaged in a dual with Stephen Decatur in 1820, the last "legal" duel in the United States. Barron is buried in Trinity churchyard, next to the theatre.

The theater was built by Portsmouth native, William Stanley "Bunkie" Wilder. Wilder hired Baltimore architect John J. Zink to design the building. Zink also designed the Uptown on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C. (1936) and the Senator in Baltimore (1937). Theater historian David Naylor comments that both theaters are built in a streamline style as is the Commodore.

Wilder's name is synonymous with the proliferation of movie theaters in the Hampton Roads area from the late 1920's to the mid 1940's. His Wilder chain of theaters included the **Newport** (Norfolk) which he built in 1928, the **Gates** (Portsmouth) which he purchased in 1929, the **Warwick** (Newport News) which he

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

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leased in 1932 and purchased in 1936, the Virginia (Portsmouth) which he bought in 1935 and the Colley (Norfolk), now known as the NARO which he built in 1936. Wilder also briefly operated the Grandin (Roanoke). He also participated in a joint venture with the USO, leasing the Center Theater (now the Harrison Opera House) for movies and vaudeville shows during World War II. Sailors and Soldiers were charged half price admission to the Center during this operation.

Wilder began his involvement with theaters at a young age working as a program boy at the Granby and Colonial theaters in Norfolk and an usher at the Orpheum in Portsmouth. He was a strong believer in the neighborhood movie house. Despite naysayers, he had a great success with his first theater, the Newport which was located in a residential area, not on the Granby Street "strip."

Wilder continued to have a close relationship with the local communities. His Pre Vue Theater, a 28 seat "theater" in a wing of the Colley was often used by community groups for screenings and meetings.

The Commodore was opened 14 November 1945 with great fanfare. Local dignitaries were in attendance and a live radio show was broadcast from the site. The opening movie was "She Wouldn't Say No" with Rosealind Russel. The opening night program included a welcome from William Wilder where he dedicates the theater to "the amusement of the people of my old home town, Portsmouth...If the people of Portsmouth derive enjoyment and pleasure from the Commodore to the extent I believe they will, then my ambition will have been fully realized."

In addition to the luxurious appointments, the theater's duct work was equipped with "bacteria-killing ultra-violet ray lamps" known as Sterilamps. The program asserts that the lamps, "an achievement of the research laboratories of Westinghouse Electric Corporation... (were) perfected during the war and only recently released for general purposes..." It continues, "theatergoers in Portsmouth are among the first in the nation to benefit by one of the greatest advances made in public health in decades... You may relax and enjoy COMMODORE presentations with the satisfaction of knowing that the air entering the theatre is 98.5% free of harmful bacteria."

Although not documented, it is widely believed that materials were made available for the construction of the Commodore despite grave wartime shortages. The Commodore's location in Portsmouth meant that it would provide entertainment to the many sailors stationed there, thus material allocation

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

was justified in that it served the morale recreation and welfare needs of the troops.

Despite the fanfare of its opening, the theater declined and became an X rated movie house before closing its doors in 1975. It was purchased in 1987 and lovingly restored by its current owner, Fred Schoenfeld. The theatre re-opened in December of 1989. It now stands as the only movie theater in operation along High Street in Portsmouth, an avenue once lined with theaters which provided enjoyment for sailors and residents as well.

1. Opening Program, Commodore Theatre 14 November 1945.
2. Opening Program, Commodore Theatre 14 November 1945.

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

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Interview with Fred Schoenfeld, current owner of the Commodore Theatre, 10
October 1996, by Mary Ruffin Viles, transcribed notes at Virginia Department
of Historic Resources, Portsmouth Regional Office.

Naylor, David. Great American Movie Theaters. Washington, D.C.:The
Preservation Press, 1987.

Opening Program, Commodore Theatre, 14 November 1945, from the collection of
Fred Schoenfeld.

"Wilder's New Commodore Will Open Tonight," Portsmouth Star 14 November 1945.

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Commodore Theatre
Portsmouth, Virginia

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Tax Map 13, Parcel 15, City of Portsmouth.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the theatre.

