

VLR 10/11/02  
NRHP 4/12/03

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 National Theater

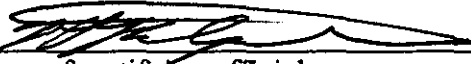
other names/site number The Towne Theater, VDHR #127-178-1

2. Location

street & number 700-710 East Broad Street not for publication N/A  
city or town Richmond vicinity N/A  
state Virginia code VA county (in city) \_\_\_\_\_ code 760  
zip code 23219

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 of certifying official

2/22/05  
Date

Director, 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

=====  
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

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

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

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6. Function or Use

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Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RECREATION AND CULTURE Sub: theater  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: VACANT/NOT IN USE Sub: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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7. Description

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Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Italian Renaissance  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE  
BRICK  
roof TERRA COTTA: Tile  
walls STONE: Granite  
BRICK  
TERRA COTTA  
other METAL: Tin

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/LEISURE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance 1922-1983  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates 1923  
1968  
1983

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)  
N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder Claude K. Howell  
Ferruccio Legnaioli

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

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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(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: Historic Richmond Foundation, 4 East Main Street, Suite 1-C, Richmond, VA 23219

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

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

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	<u>18</u>	<u>284,806.72</u>	<u>4,157,564.32</u>	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 Justin W. Gunther, Intern

organization Historic Richmond Foundation date February 8, 2002

street & number 4 East Main Street, Suite 1-C telephone 804/643-7407

city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23219

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)

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Property Owner

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

name Historic Richmond Foundation

street & number 4 East Main Street, Suite 1-C telephone 804-643-7407

city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23219

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**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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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

National Theater  
name of property  
Richmond, VA  
county and state

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### Summary Description

The National Theater is located at the northeast corner of East Broad and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets in downtown Richmond, Virginia. Governmental office buildings, retail stores, restaurants, and parking decks surround the National in its urban setting. The east and north sides of the theater face other buildings and are not constructed of remarkable materials. The street sides are built of sandstone-colored brick with terra cotta detailing, creating an elegant building in the Italian Renaissance style. The National fronts south onto East Broad and has a three-part plan with a four-story central section flanked by two-story wings. The central section is topped by a tile roof, and its impressive bracketed cornice shades an elaborate plaster frieze. The wings have terra cotta coping and flat, gravel roofs. The first, second, and third stories of the building have office space that was originally rented to retailers, talent agencies, theater companies, and others. The fourth story of the National is composed mainly of the projection room, and the basement formerly housed a billiard parlor. The lobby and 1,300-seat auditorium possess elaborate Adamesque plasterwork, and oval domes in both create a spatial interior. The interior plasterwork was painted over with gray paint during a 1968 remodeling; however, it is largely undamaged and is currently being restored. Overall, the National is in good shape and its integrity is largely intact.

### Description

The National Theater has a three-part plan with a four-story central part flanked by two-story wings. The south, or Broad Street, façade is the architectural front of the building and is the most elaborately decorated. The central part is 85' wide, and the wings are 22' wide. The detailing is constructed of glazed terra cotta, and the walls of sandstone-colored brick are laid in a stretcher bond. The only real stone on the exterior is a plinth of polished granite.

The first floor of the wings is retail space with entryways and display windows. They have metal doors and window frames that are not original, likely being installed during the 1968 remodeling. Large windows with decorative iron railings dominate the second story of the wings. These are wooden tripartite windows, and each consists of a large central pane flanked by one-over-one, single-hung windows. Terra cotta, glazed to look like stone, surrounds these tripartite windows. Above them are central paterae and window heads also of terra cotta. The wings have flat roofs, although a coping of green terra cotta runs along the roofline of the wings. This was incorporated to create a tie between the wings and the cut roof of the central section of the theater. At some point in the 1960-70s, the second story of the west wing was covered with aluminum siding. The windows of the wing were closed up with concrete blocks, the iron railing removed, and much of the decorative terra cotta destroyed. In 1997, the siding was taken off, new windows were installed, and the lost terra cotta was replaced with a composite material of fiberglass reinforced gypsum cement.<sup>1</sup>



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**Description (continued)**

The central part of the theater is four stories and is topped with a green tile roof. The original architectural drawings for the theater specify green Ludowici clay tiles for the roof. This roof only covers the front of the theater, or the lobby and offices. Although not visible from the ground, the auditorium is covered by a gabled roof made watertight with a rubber membrane. This roof is a 1993 replacement of the original flat roof.<sup>2</sup>

The first story of the central part has five bays of doorways. The middle bay is 29' wide and has four sets of full glass, metal double doors with transom lights above. These doors serve as the main entrances to the theater lobby and auditorium and are 1968 replacements of the 1923 wooden double doors. The ticket booth window was also relocated in 1968. Originally, the ticket booth was centered in the middle bay with two sets of full glass double doors flanking each side. During the remodeling, the booth was placed on the far west side of this middle bay. Since the building follows classical symmetry, the bays to the east and west of the middle bay are identical and serve the same functions. The bays beside the middle bay are retail space (16' wide) and have display windows and full glass doors. The end bays are each 12' wide and have a set of full glass, double doors with transom lights above and simple, broad architraves of terra cotta. These two sets of doorways open into stairwells that provide access to the basement billiard room and the upper stories of the theater. The east end bay has newer doors of metal, but the west end bay has the original wooden double doors and doorframe with engaged, fluted columns.

The second and third stories of the central part have seven bays with five bays of windows at the center of the façade. The windows of the second story are French, full-length casement windows with transoms above. Each wooden casement window has two fifteen-pane sashes. The transoms have two sashes of six lights each, separated by a mullion. The casement windows furthest east and west have been replaced with one-over-one, single-hung wooden windows. The hoods of the second-story windows also serve as ornamental balconies for the one-over-one, single-hung, wooden windows of the third story. The balconies have engaged pedestals with finials and wrought-iron railings. Paterae are located in the spandrels between the second- and third-story windows as well as in the two end bays that lack windows. These paterae line up with those of the wings. The window surrounds and heads of the central section are terra cotta glazed to look like stone. A decorative belt course made of terra cotta also wraps around the second story of the building, including the wings.

The fourth story of the central section of the theater appears as the frieze on the exterior. Windows penetrate the frieze in its five central bays. The middle and end windows are casement windows, each having two six-light sashes. The middle casement window is sheet metal, whereas the end ones are wooden. The other two windows are quatrefoil windows of sheet metal. Each quatrefoil window has nine lights, and the middle light swings up and open on hinges. The windows of the middle three bays are metal for fire protection because they light the projection room and its adjoining chambers. All of the fourth-story windows have lights of wire glass. The terra cotta ornamentation of the frieze consists of full-size, unclothed, classical male figures. Swags of flowers and fruit are draped over their shoulders. One of these figures is playing the lyre while another is unfurling a reel of film, which is entwined in the

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**Description (continued)**

garlands. The frieze is shadowed by the deeply projecting cornice supported on brackets. Significant rusting and deterioration of the tin cornice and brackets is visible.

The west façade fronts 7<sup>th</sup> Street and is the two-story west wing of the theater. Approximately 138' long, the façade has nine bays. The two southernmost bays at the street corner maintain the decoration of the front façade. The French windows and terra cotta ornamentation on the theater's front are also present on the second story of these bays. The first story of these bays is taken up by retail space. A slight setback occurs at the northern end of these two bays, marking the terminus of the formal façade of the National. The remaining seven bays of the wing lack the decorative terra cotta of the first two bays and are principally sandstone-colored brick. On the first floor, brick pilasters divide the seven bays, creating 12-foot wide segments. Numbering these bays one to seven from north to south, the first-floor bays 3, 5, and 6 are retail space. They have doors and shop windows with space above these for either transoms or signage. The retail space in Bay 3 has a metal door, bay 5 has a wooden half-glass door, and bay 6 has a full-glass metal door. Bay 3 also has a metal door for a narrow storage room. Bays 4 and 7 have doorways on the first floor that serve the theater. Bay 4 has two sets of wooden, horizontal panel double doors with a transom of nine panes above. These doors are exits from the auditorium. The large wooden, horizontal panel double doors of bay 7 give access to backstage. Bays 1 and 2 are just brick and have no openings. On the second story, all seven bays have one-over-one, single-hung wooden windows. The window in bay 7 has been boarded up.

The north and east facades have parging over structural clay tiles and no character-defining features. The north façade abuts a parking deck. Unlike the west wing, the east wing of the National does not extend the entire depth of the building. Therefore, the theater only touches its neighboring building the depth of the wing, or approximately 53'. This creates a side alley along the east side of the building to the north of the wing. The east façade of the building has an attached metal staircase with landings to accept exits from the auditorium's balcony. Two sets of doorways at the ground level are also exits from the auditorium. All the doors on this side of the theater are metal, two-panel double doors. Visitors leaving the auditorium through these exits would have walked north through the side alley to the back of the theater.

The steel marquee on the front façade marks the principal entrance to the building's interior. Cables tied to the main façade support the marquee. This marquee only covers the middle bay of the first story, or the four sets of double doors to the lobby, and was erected in the mid 1990s. The original 1923 marquee spanned the entire length of the theater's central section. In addition to the original marquee, two additional marquees preceded the 1990s one. Like the present-day marquee, they only covered the lobby doors. However, they were much taller than the original and current marquees, having large illuminated panels for removable lettering. A rectangular marquee installed in 1950 was replaced with a triangular marquee in 1968.<sup>3</sup>

Once inside the outer lobby, or vestibule (22' x 14'), visitors are encountered by four additional sets of full glass double doors that open into the inner lobby. Display cases on the east and the ticket booth counter on the west line the

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**Description (continued)**

walls of the outer lobby. A drop ceiling of fiberboard with fluorescent lighting replaced the foyer's plaster ceiling in 1968; nevertheless, some of the cornice molding still survives above it. The marble floor of the outer lobby is also new as of the 1960s remodeling.

The opulent inner lobby of the theater measures 39' x 21' and is elaborately decorated with Adamesque plasterwork. Urns, flowing vines, floral motifs, and beaded swags originally painted in white, yellow, and Wedgwood blue abound on both the ceiling and wall panels. Engaged columns and wainscoting of marble veneer also embellish the walls. The east and west walls of the foyer have three bays. The central bays have marble staircases that ascend to the second story of the lobby. The south bays, or those closest to the outer lobby, have doors that open into utility closets. The north bays, those closest to the auditorium, are hallways to the restrooms and side aisles of the auditorium. Doorways to the men's restroom and Aisle 1 are on the south and north walls of the west hallway, respectively. Doorways to the ladies' restroom and Aisle 4 are on the south and north walls of the east hallway, respectively. The restrooms were extensively remodeled from their initial appearance in 1968 and are unremarkable. (Only bathrooms with original fixtures and tiling will be described in detail.) A concession stand of laminated pressed wood was added to the lobby at some point after the 1960s. Located against the center of the north wall of the lobby, doorways on either side of the concession stand lead into the auditorium. Aisle 2 is accessed through the doorway to the west of the stand, and Aisle 3 through the one to the east. The floor of the lobby is currently carpet and linoleum tile. The most impressive element of the lobby is the oval opening in the ceiling. A band with a repeating motif of three nude children wrapped in garlands of film surrounds the inside of the opening. This opening looks up into the second story of the lobby with its illuminated oval dome.

The lobby was originally separated from the auditorium by only a half-wall partition of marble veneer with curtains above. The light and noise from the street led to the installation of plate glass on top of the partition to the ceiling. This glass was later painted to eliminate light penetration. Curtains were installed over the glass behind the concession stand as well. This partition with plate glass became the north wall of the lobby as described above. The exact dates of these changes are unknown.

The second story of the lobby is a large three-part room with an overall length of 82'. The wall panels of the room are adorned with Adamesque plasterwork complimentary to the first floor, and the floors are carpeted. The stairs from the first floor of the lobby reach landings and take ninety-degree turns to ascend into the east and west sections of the second story of the lobby. These sections also give access to the balcony through doorways at the corners of their northern walls. From the east and west sections of the lobby, one is drawn to the central section of the room to admire an oval dome and balustrade. The marble balustrade surrounds the oval opening to the lobby below. In the ceiling, above this balustrade and the opening, is an illuminated oval dome. A doorway at the middle of the north wall provides access to the balcony. At the southeast corner of the central section on the east wall is a doorway for a men's restroom. A matching doorway on the opposing wall leads to a closet. A small flight of steps on the south side of this central section leads up to landing that overlooks the room. The landing has a mirror on its south wall and a marble

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**Description (continued)**

balustrade that matches the ones guarding the stairwells and the oval opening. Doorways on the east and west walls of the landing lead to the manager's offices and the ladies' retiring room, respectively. The central ceiling panel of the landing has a barrel vault decorated with urns and swags. The ladies' retiring room is missing its door. For the most part, the remaining doors of the second story of the lobby maintain their original knobs, locking hardware, and butt hinges and are wooden, two-panel, and with painted graining.

The auditorium's main floor measures 81' x 67' at its longest and widest. The aisles of the auditorium are carpeted, but the remainder of the floor is concrete. The floor slopes down towards the front, or north, of the theater, and all the seating was removed in the early 1990s. Seating was shipped to Michigan's Country Road, Inc., the largest theater-seat restorer in the United States, for storage. Throughout the floor of the auditorium are round metal grates. These grates were located under the seats and were part of the original heating and cooling system. Exterior air entered the building through a large stack near the theater's northwest corner. The air was warmed by passing over radiator coils and cooled by passing over blocks of ice. Large fans in the ceiling of the auditorium pulled this air up through the grates on the auditorium's floor to heat or cool the interior.<sup>4</sup>

At the front of the auditorium against the stage is the shallow orchestra pit. It was touted as the largest in Virginia, seating up to twenty-four musicians. The pit was covered over in 1968, and its marble balustrade, matching those of the lobby, was removed. A plywood, makeshift partition currently divides the pit from the auditorium floor.

Both the east and west walls of the auditorium have six bays, separated by pilasters. Describing the bays from north to south, the first three bays are underneath the balcony. The wainscoting of the lobby is continued onto the walls of the auditorium; however, only the first bay has marble wainscoting. The remaining bays have wainscoting of plaster painted to resemble marble. Above the wainscoting in the first three bays are panels adorned with urns and swags. Panels on the pilasters are decorated with cameos. The second bay on the east wall differs from the west by having metal, two-panel, double doors that exit into the side alley. The fourth and fifth bays have cantilevered boxes to augment seating in the auditorium. Mirroring the slope of the floor, the boxes in the fourth bays are higher up the wall than those in the fifth bays. The boxes are decorated with a repeating motif of three nude, dancing children wrapped in garlands of film unfurling from reels. This motif was also used in the oval opening of the lobby. Below the boxes are doorways labeled with "Exit" signs. On the west wall, these doorways open into a short hallway that leads to two different stairwells. To the right, a curved stairwell ascends to the boxes and balcony. Underneath this stairwell is a small utility closet. The second stairwell, straight ahead, goes up to two sets of wooden, horizontal panel double doors that open onto Seventh Street. The stairs then continue to the boxes and balcony. The exit doorways on the east wall open into a hallway that has only one stairwell. To the left, an identical curved stairwell provides access to the boxes and balcony. The two sets of metal, two-panel, double doors on this side open directly from the hallway into a side alley. This hallway also provides backstage access from the auditorium.

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**Description (continued)**

The north side of the balcony extends to the northern end of the third bay. Above the level of the balcony and boxes, however, only the second through sixth bays continue from the first floor up to the ceiling. The first bays are not carried up from the first floor onto the walls above the balcony. Pilasters decorated with urns, half-nude maidens, panthers, Greek sphinxes, satyrs, and flowers divide the second through sixth bays. The pilasters are topped with capitals adorned with urns and a continuous entablature with a frieze of paterae, swags, and Greek sphinxes. Over the entablature and up to the ceiling are pilasters and panels with spacing aligning to the bays below. This plasterwork wraps around the sides of the auditorium and above the proscenium arch. Urns decorate these pilasters, and a procession of men playing flutes and maidens dancing and playing tambourines, drums, and lyres adorn the panels. The third, fourth, and fifth bays on both sides are arcades, and the arches are draped with curtains. The fourth and fifth bays have the boxes, and the second and third bays are on the walls of the balcony. On the west wall, the second bay has a mock doorway to balance a real exit with metal, two-panel, double doors on the east wall. The sixth bays have grated panels with some plasterwork that originally concealed organ pipes of the "thousand-throated organ" and a grand piano.

To the south of the second bay, the ceiling is higher than the main auditorium's ceiling. The ceiling steps up to maintain a spacious feel for the upper, or southern, part of the balcony. The southern wall of the balcony is also further back than the southern wall of the auditorium's first floor. The seating in the upper part of the balcony is actually over the lobby. The wall decoration in the upper part of the balcony is also much simplified from the remainder of the auditorium. Wall panels, three on the east and west walls and five on the south wall, are lightly embellished with urns and swags. The south wall is penetrated with openings for the projectors and spotlights as well.

To further describe the balcony, the face, or front, of the balcony matches the boxes. The same repeating motif of three nude children wrapped in film ornament it. The balcony has fifteen tiers, the fourth serving as an east-to-west aisle. Four additional north-to-south aisles provide access to the seating of the balcony. All the aisles are covered with carpet, and the remaining floor is covered with a type of linoleum/rubber tiling. The three entrances from the second story of the lobby enter the balcony onto the fourth tier. The entrances are at the center and east and west sides of the balcony. In addition to the exit door already mentioned in the east wall's second bay, exit doors exist on the east and west walls from the eleventh tier. The exit doors on the east wall of the balcony open onto metal stairs attached to the theater's exterior wall that lead to the side alley. The west wall exit on the eleventh tier opens into a hallway with a stairwell to the south and a bathroom to the north. The stairwell provides access to the offices and Broad Street and will be further described shortly.

The balcony layout described above is the result of the 1968 remodeling. The balcony seating was re-spaced to increase the 29" back-to-back dimension to a minimum of 35". Rather than demolishing the existing 1923 concrete risers and platforms, a new flooring system of fire-treated wood was framed over the original and covered with resilient tile.<sup>5</sup>

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**Description (continued)**

The ceiling of the auditorium is best described in three parts: the ceiling under the balcony, the main ceiling of the auditorium, and the ceiling above the upper part of the balcony. Under the balcony, the ceiling has two principal sections separated by an east-to-west beam. The part closest to the lobby is further divided into three sections. The central section has a barrel vault with three elaborately cast, round, metal vent fixtures that are evenly spaced. Half-nude, winged maidens standing on urns surround the vents. Their arms are extended to hold up swags. The side sections have recessed lights surrounded by eight, interconnected beaded swags. The section of the ceiling to the north of the beam and under the balcony has five recessed lights surrounded by swags alternating with four metal vents fixtures. A recessed, rectangular panel with an oval dome dominates the main ceiling of the auditorium. An elaborate band of decoration in the dome consists of putti and urns. Surrounding the dome is fan tracery, which conceals large exhaust fans. As previously explained, the ceiling above the upper part of the balcony is higher than the main ceiling of the auditorium. The ceiling is decorated with three panels and recessed lighting. The central panel has an intricate latticework grill to cover ventilation equipment.

The dome and other fixtures throughout the auditorium were originally illuminated with different colored lights. A November 12, 1923, newspaper article described the "lovely lighting effects" as "soft red lights melting into blue, then to lavender and lastly to a mellow cream." According to the article, the Durham Public Service Company of Durham, North Carolina, installed the lighting system, and "six different color combinations may be effected within the interior of the National. At all times during the presentation of a picture the auditorium will be lighted in color most appropriate to the scene and musical score."<sup>6</sup>

Backstage consists of the rigging equipment, a control room for the lighting, and dressing rooms. The dressing rooms are located on the east side of the theater and are separated from backstage by a wall partition. A hallway provides access to four dressing rooms. An exterior door also opens from this hallway to the side alley, providing direct access to the dressing rooms from outside. A spiral staircase leads to a hallway and four additional dressing rooms directly above. Each dressing room has a shelf, sink, and radiator. The spiral stairs also go down to the basement under the stage. The basement contains the boilers and also gives access to the orchestra pit. The control room is located on the west side of backstage. Although most of the original equipment and wiring has been removed and replaced, some of the original electrical boxes still remain. Massive, wooden, horizontal-panel, double doors on the west wall of backstage open onto Seventh Street. These provided access for theater companies to unload their props into the building. A flight of metal stairs to the west of the control room ascends against the north wall of backstage to the offices of the second story as well.

To reach the basement billiard hall and offices of the upper floors, one enters through glass double doors in the end bays of the central part of the Broad Street façade. These doors open into stairwells that occupy the southwest and southeast corners of the four-story, central part of the National. The stairwells go down into the billiard hall and up to the second, third, and fourth floors. From the second floor up, the stairs are metal with treads of concrete rather than marble.

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**Description (continued)**

The basement billiard hall is an expansive room with massive stone pillars that support the floor above. The stairs enter the room at its southeast and southwest corners. The room is the entire length of the central part of the theater, and the floor and walls are concrete. Bathrooms are located at the northwest and northeast corners of the room.

A maze of rooms exists on the National's second floor. At the top of the west stairwell is a long hallway, approximately 5'-6" wide, that runs south all the way to the back of the theater. The hallway and stair landing have terrazzo floors and skirting, plaster walls and ceiling, and wooden chair rail. Doorways into offices located in the west wing of the building flank the west wall of this hallway. Walking south, the first three doorways open into a large office space measuring 20'-6" x 52'. This space was originally three separate rooms. At the southeast corner of this room is a small bathroom with a sink and water closet. Past this large room, five additional doorways open into smaller offices. The first two are 20'-6" x 12'-6", and the next three are 16' x 14'-6". The doorways to all six offices have sidelights, transoms, and half-glass wooden doors with their original knobs and butt hinges. All six rooms are interconnected with doorways in their sidewalls. These doorways have two-panel, wooden doors with hardware identical to the hallway doors. The offices all have plaster walls and ceilings; wooden baseboards, chair rails, picture moldings, and window and door architraves; concrete floors covered by plank flooring with or without linoleum tile; push button light switches; and one-over-one, single hung, wooden windows. The large, first office differs in its windows by having a tripartite window in its south wall and two casement windows and a single hung window in its west wall. (The windows were described from the exterior.) Also originally present in each office was a porcelain sink, a single-bulb fixture above the sink, a radiator centered under the window, and two, single-bulb, hanging lamps. Different combinations of these elements survive in each office. The hallway terminates in another room that is separated from the sixth office by a partition wall that does not extend all the way to the ceiling. This room has a skylight that has been closed up and a doorway in its west wall that opens into the sixth office. A doorway in the north wall of the sixth office opens onto a metal staircase that descends to the floor of the backstage. A ladies' bathroom with a single water closet and sink is also accessed from the hallway, between the third and fourth office doorways. Roofing covers a second skylight halfway down the hallway.

Turning east at the top of the stairwell on the second floor leads to another hallway. This short hallway has a doorway to a bathroom on its north wall and a doorway to a nursery on its south wall. The nursery, 15' x 19', has lovely stenciled and painted wall murals of a boy and girl holding up a draping string hung with teddy bears, jack-in-the-boxes, drums, clowns, and dolls. The room has a concrete floor covered with carpet; plaster walls and ceiling; wooden baseboards, chair rails, picture moldings, and door and window architraves; and a wooden, half-glass door opening into the hallway. A one-over-one, single hung, wooden window on the nursery's south wall looks onto Broad Street and is a replacement of an original casement window. The original transom window survives.

The nursery connects to a ladies' retiring room, 10'-6" x 19', through a doorway on the room's east wall. Tea was originally served here every afternoon from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. A ladies' bathroom is reached through a doorway on the east wall near the room's southeast corner. A doorway on the east wall near the northeast corner opens into the

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**Description (continued)**

second story of the lobby. The room has a concrete floor covered with plank flooring and carpet; wooden baseboard, chair rail, picture molding, and door and window architraves; and plaster walls and ceilings. The retiring room and adjoining bathroom have wooden casement windows with transom lights above in their south walls.

The east stairwell gives access to second-floor offices on this side of the building. The landing of the stairwell has a terrazzo floor and terrazzo skirting, plaster walls and ceiling, and wooden chair rail. Turning west at the top of the stairs leads to an anteroom, 10'-6" x 8', that connects to the theater manager's office. The manager's office measures 10' x 16' and has a safe in the west wall made by the Herring Hall Marvin Safe Company. South of the safe on the west wall is a doorway to the manager's bathroom, approximately 6'-6" x 7'. The north wall of the manager's office has a doorway near its northeast corner that leads into another anteroom, probably the secretary's office. This office, 5' x 7', opens into the second floor of the lobby through a doorway in its west wall. All four of these rooms have concrete floors covered by plank flooring with or without linoleum; wooden baseboards, chair rails, picture moldings, and door and window architraves; and plaster walls. The doors to the anterooms from the manager's office are wooden, half-glass doors with sidelights and transom lights that have been boarded up. The other doors of these rooms are wooden, two-panel doors, and all doors, for the most part, have their original hardware. Instead of a plaster ceiling, the offices of the manager and secretary have dropped ceilings of fiber board and fluorescent lighting. Like the nursery, the one-over-one, single hung, wooden window of the manager's office is a replacement of an original casement window. The manager's bathroom, however, maintains its wooden casement window and transom. The windows of the manager's office, manager's bathroom, ladies' bathroom, ladies' retiring room, and nursery appear as French windows on the National's Broad Street façade.

Two doorways on the west side of the east stairwell lead to more office/storage space. The southernmost doorway leads to a large office with a bathroom at its northeast corner. This room, 21' x 13'-6", is in the east wing of the theater and has a large, tripartite wooden window in its south wall. The bathroom has its original hexagonal, white tile floor; rectangular, white tile wainscoting; and porcelain fixtures. The other doorway goes into an alcove that leads to a large storage room, approximately 32' x 16'. The walls of this room are lined with shelves. The east wing terminates at the north end of this room, allowing for a side alley on the east side of the National between the theater and the neighboring building. The north wall of this storage room has two, one-over-one, single hung, sheet metal windows with lights reinforced with wire mesh. Both rooms have concrete floors covered by plank flooring and linoleum; wooden baseboards, chair rails, picture moldings, and door and window architraves; plaster walls and ceilings; and hanging florescent lights. Radiators heated these rooms and the others of the second floor already described.

The third floor has five more offices located along the south side of the building. These rooms are interconnected and are accessed by an east-to-west hallway that connects the two stairwells. The east stair landing is lit by a two-over-two, single hung, metal window with wire-glass lights. The west stair landing has a casement window; each sash has four lights of wire glass. The hallway is 5' wide and has a terrazzo floor and skirting, plaster walls and ceiling, and



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wooden chair rail. The doorways to the offices have half-glass doors with their original hardware, sidelights, and transom lights. The glass of the door to the office farthest west has black lettering that reads as follows: Modern Entertainment Services/Herb Stone. Although the exact period of this lettering is unknown, it provides evidence that agents, bookers, and other entrepreneurs used the National's offices. Each office has a one-over-one, single hung, wooden window in its south wall; plank flooring; wooden baseboards, chair rails, picture moldings, and door and window architraves; plaster walls and ceilings; and push button light switches. Originally, each office also had a corner sink; a wall-mounted, single-bulb light fixture over the sink; a radiator centered under the window; and a hanging light fixture in the ceiling's center. These elements survive in different combinations in each office. The end offices measure 13'-6" x 13'-6", and the three middle offices measure 13'-6" x 11'.

A short hallway running north off the west stair landing of the third floor has a bathroom and doorway to the balcony. The bathroom has its original hexagonal, white tile floor; rectangular, white tile wainscoting; and porcelain fixtures. The doorway to the balcony opens onto the eleventh tier and has two-panel, metal, double doors.

Additional storage rooms and the projection room are located on the fourth floor. The projection room is the central and largest room, measuring 33' in length. Seven small, rectangular openings of different sizes pierce the north wall of the projection room. Beams of light from the projectors and spotlights would have passed through these openings. Two original projector/spotlight stands, one with a scrapped limelight manufactured by the Chicago Cinema Products Company, still remain. A control panel for the lighting of the auditorium exists on the east wall. On the south wall, cater-corner to the lighting panel, are storage bins for film reels and a rare device for rewinding film. At the middle of the south wall is a casement window. The southeast corner of the projection room is enclosed to serve as a small storeroom, 12' x 8', and is lit by a quatrefoil window. A bathroom with a quatrefoil window, 5' x 7', and a narrow closet, 5' x 3', take up the southwest corner. The two-panel doors, door architraves, and windows of these rooms are sheet metal for fire protection. They have concrete floors; single-bulb ceiling fixtures; and plaster walls, ceilings, and skirting.

Hallways to the east and west of the projection room lead to the stairwells and have doorways for the remaining rooms of the fourth story. The floors of the hallways and rooms are concrete, and the walls, ceilings, and skirting are plaster. The two-panel doors, door architraves, and windows of the rooms are wood rather than sheet metal. The east hallway has a doorway on its south wall to a storage room, approximately 12' x 21'. Large AC/DC converters survive in this room, and a wooden casement window exists in its south wall. A doorway 7' above the floor on the north wall of the east hallway gives access to a system of catwalks. These catwalks lead to fan and motor rooms above the ceiling of the auditorium. A small bathroom is located on the north side of the west hallway, and a room labeled the "Art Room" and a narrow storage room are located on the south side. The "Art Room" and the narrow storage room measure 12' x 9' and 12' x 4', respectively. A casement window is present in the south wall of the "Art Room." The windows described for the fourth-story rooms are those of the building's frieze and were described with the exterior.

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Endnotes

1. James N. Whiting, interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, 17 June 2002.
2. See Note 1.
3. "Revitalized Richmond Theatre," *Virginia Record* (November 1968).
4. See Note 1.
5. See Note 3.
6. "Lovely Lighting Effects in New Theatre Building," *The News Leader*, 12 November 1923.

**Statement of Significance**

The National Theater, built in 1922 to 1923 by the First National Amusement Company, is an exceptional product of the picture palace era that boomed during the 1920s and 1930s. However, the National was not designed just to show movies. It accommodated theatrical, vaudeville, and musical comedy companies, as well as picture shows. Movies surpassed stage performances in popularity by the 1960s, so Neighborhood Theaters Inc., then the owners of the National, remodeled and renamed the theater in 1968 to serve as Richmond's premier movie house. The National became the Towne and was downtown Richmond's last open movie theater, operating until September 5, 1983. Meeting National Register Criterion A, the National, or the Towne, Theater is important in the context of Entertainment/Recreation. The building served the city of Richmond as an entertainment venue for sixty years. Architecturally, the National Theater is also significant. Claude K. Howell, the noted theater architect, designed the building. Its Italian Renaissance-style façade makes the National one of his most noteworthy buildings. Ferruccio Legnaioli sculpted the elaborate Adamesque plaster decoration of the interior. This Italian immigrant settled in Richmond and worked extensively throughout the city. The National Theater meets National Register Criterion C in the area of Architecture because of Howell and Legnaioli's involvement. Both were masters in their fields, and they created a building of high artistic merit.

Historical Background

Like all American cities, Richmond's theaters provide a place of entertainment for citizens. Richmond has been the entertainment capital of the Upper South for more than 200 years. The city has produced performers throughout its history. Elizabeth Arnold Poe and David Poe, Jr., the parents of Edgar Allan Poe, were both actors and performed at the Richmond Theater and other local performing spaces. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the renowned Richmond tap dancer, grew up performing on the streets of Richmond and became a legendary entertainment figure in the 1920s. Present-day actors Warren Beatty and Shirley MacLaine also spent their childhoods in Richmond during the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Richmond's rich theater heritage makes its historic theaters important components of the city's historical and cultural fabric.

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**Statement of Significance (continued)**

Richmond's theater history must begin by introducing the Richmond Theater. First constructed in 1806 at what is now 13<sup>th</sup> and Broad Streets, the Richmond Theater was the social center of the city. A festive audience of over 600 gathered at the Richmond Theater on December 26, 1811, for the season's last performance of the A. Placide Company. During preparations for the second act of a pantomime, "Raymond and Agnes: the Travelers Benighted, or The Bleeding Nun," a lantern ignited the stage scenery. Richmond Theatre was engulfed with flames, and the audience clamored for the exits. The editor of the *American Standard* was one of the first to escape, and he wrote, "No tongue can tell, no pen describe the woeful catastrophe. No person who was not there can form any idea of the unexampled scene of human distress." Most lost in the fire were women and children, and many were Richmond elite, like the newly elected Governor, George W. Smith. To commemorate the dead, Monumental Church, designed by Robert Mills, was constructed over the common grave from 1812 to 1814.<sup>2</sup> Monumental Church is a National Historic Landmark.

The city healed and erected a building called "The Theater" in 1818 on the southeast corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and Broad Streets. In 1838, "The Theater" was renovated and renamed the Marshall Theater, to honor John Marshall. The *Virginian* had been a theater aficionado and third Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. This theater remained the main venue for the city. It would be renamed once again as the Richmond Theater in 1860.<sup>3</sup> Other small theaters opened as well. Odd Fellows Hall, at the corner of Franklin and Mayo Streets, was a popular amusement hall from 1842 to 1858. Metropolitan Hall on East Franklin Street, opened for performances around 1860.

When the Civil War broke out, the theaters suffered from lack of business and were boarded up.<sup>4</sup> Richmond was then chosen as the capital of the Confederacy and the city's population grew tremendously. By autumn of 1861, the theaters reopened and were filled to capacity nearly every night. The Richmond Theater burned once again on the night of January 1, 1862, victim of a suspected arson. No one was hurt this time, and the theater company moved to the vacant Trinity Church at 1417 East Franklin Street and renamed it the Richmond Varieties. The burnt theater was also rebuilt, this time at 7<sup>th</sup> and Broad Streets, and renamed the New Richmond Theater. During the war years, the New Richmond Theater, Richmond Varieties, the Metropolitan, and the Richmond Lyceum prospered.<sup>5</sup>

Near the end of the Civil War, the city was evacuated on April 2, 1865. Fires consumed the majority of the city's buildings; however, most of the theaters were spared. As Richmond recovered to become the second largest city of the South, behind only New Orleans, its citizens supported a lively entertainment scene. The Richmond Theater attracted nationally known stage performers like Laura Keane, Charlotte Cushman, and others. Oscar Wilde, the English novelist and playwright, even spoke there in 1882 on house decoration.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-1880s, vaudeville gained in popularity. A half dozen small variety houses popped up, offering everything from animal acts and ventriloquists to chorus girls on swings. Barton's Grand Opera House at Broad and 8<sup>th</sup> Streets,

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the Pavilion Theater on Broad between First and Foushee Streets, the Casino Theater next to City Hall, Thompson's Musee Theater at 909 E. Broad Street, and the Broad Street Opera House were the popular vaudeville theaters.<sup>7</sup>

The Mozart Association, promoters of classical music and opera, opened the Mozart Academy of Music in January 1886. Located on 8<sup>th</sup> Street between Grace and Franklin, it soon became known as the Academy of Music Theater. The Richmond Theater was closed in 1892 and razed in 1896. The Academy of Music replaced the Richmond Theater as the city's largest and most prestigious for the next 40 years.<sup>8</sup>

At the turn of the century, a former baseball player turned theater executive began to shape Richmond's entertainment scene. Jake Wells and his partners Wilmer and Vincent turned vaudeville from being primarily for a male adult crowd into family entertainment. In 1905, Wells built a new Bijou Theater at 816-818 Broad Street, a large and elegant vaudeville theater. The original Bijou Theater stood at the northeast corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and Broad Streets and was acquired and renamed by Wells as the Colonial Theater. Wells turned the Colonial into a vaudeville house as well. His buildings were the anchors for Broad Street's Theater Row. As his theater empire expanded, Wells gained control of the booking and management at the Academy Theater and the Lyric Theater. Open-air theaters where variety shows were performed also became popular at the beginning of the 1900s. Wells purchased many of these including the Casino, located south of Cary on Beverly Street, and Idlewood Park, located at the end of the trolley line in New Reservoir Park.<sup>9</sup>

Amanda Thorpe started Richmond's first nickelodeon, or motion picture house, at 300 E. Broad Street in December 1907. It was called the Dixie Theater and was such a tremendous success that Jake Well's converted his Colonial Theater into a movie house. By 1909 some twenty small nickelodeons were operating in the city. The lucrativeness of movies allowed larger theaters to open. In 1911 the 1,220-seat Empire Theater at 118 W. Broad Street and the 1,200-seat Lyric Theater opened their doors.<sup>10</sup> These larger theaters paved the way for ones like the new Colonial Theater and the National Theater.

In 1920, Jake Wells demolished the original Colonial Theater on the 700 block of Broad and built a new 1,900-seat Colonial, which he claimed was the largest movie house south of Washington, D.C. The interior was elaborately decorated with marble and mahogany. On the other end of the block stood one of Amanda Thorpe's theaters, the Rex which had opened in 1909. A group of businessmen purchased the Rex Theater in 1922 and demolished it to construct the National Theater.<sup>11</sup>

Owners John Pryor and Frank Ferrandini formed the First National Amusement Company to construct the half-million dollar National Theater. Their company had financial ties to the nationwide group of film exhibitors in the First National circuit. For publicity, the National's backers posted signs at the construction site asking Richmonders to vote for types of entertainment they wanted the new theater to house. Citizens responded by voting for silent movies with a live orchestra. Nevertheless, the National was built for more than just movies. The adaptable stage and orchestra pit could accommodate theatrical, musical comedy, and vaudeville companies, as well as picture shows.

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November 11, 1923, was the National's opening night, and Governor Lee Trinkle, Mayor George Anslie, and more than 2,000 eager patrons jammed into the 1,300-seat auditorium to see the Thomas Ince film *Her Reputation*, starring May McAvoy. Admission to the theater was 40 cents, and the building's elegance attracted even the most conservative of patrons. The interior boasted a marble staircase and opulent decoration painted in gold, coral, and turquoise. In addition to the tiered seating of the main floor, the theater had a balcony and four boxes along the sides. The orchestra pit was the largest in Virginia, seating 24 musicians. There was a billiard parlor in the basement, restaurant and retail space on the ground floor, and theatrical booking offices on the second floor. The second floor also provided a nursery and ladies' retiring room. Tea was served here every afternoon from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. Theater critics have called the National Theater the closest thing Richmond has ever had to a Broadway-style playhouse.<sup>12</sup>

Richmonders' fascination and love of motion pictures led to the building of more theaters throughout the 1920s. Morton G. Thalhimer, the local department store owner, established Neighborhood Theaters Incorporated (NTI), which grew into a powerful local chain. His first theater was the Capitol Theater at 2525 W. Broad Street. The Capitol had the distinction of showing the first "talkies" in the city.<sup>13</sup> In 1926, the Richmond Shriners erected the 5,000-seat Mosque, now Richmond Landmark Theater, at Monroe Park as a multi-purpose entertainment facility.<sup>14</sup> Loew's Theaters/MGM film corporation opened Richmond's Loew's Theater in 1928. Nestled between Richmond's two largest department stores, Miller and Rhoads and Thalhimer's, on Grace Street, Loew's Theater, now the Carpenter Center for Performing Arts, was tremendously successful.<sup>15</sup> Richmonders Walter Coulter and Charles Somma built the Byrd Theater at 2905 W. Cary Street, in 1928, and this theater continues to be a favorite destination for moviegoers.<sup>16</sup>

The growth of the theater industry continued throughout the 1900s as the city's population grew. Wilmer and Vincent, Jake Wells' partners, took control of Wells's Richmond theater interests in 1924. Ferrandini and Pryor sold the National Theater to Wilmer and Vincent in 1925.<sup>17</sup> In 1944, Wilmer and Vincent, who were controlling the National, Colonial, Park, Carillon, and Lee Theaters merged with the Fabian Chain of New Jersey.<sup>18</sup>

Broad Seventh Corporation, a subsidiary of NTI, then purchased the National Theater in 1960 for \$277,000.<sup>19</sup> In December of 1964, THE Theater, Inc., a play production company formed by a Richmond couple, leased the National. Their season started with a play entitled "The Golden Apple," which the couple wrote and produced. This play was to be the first in a series of five plays. However, low attendance forced them to abandon their lease after "The Golden Apple."<sup>20</sup>

By 1966, NTI had acquired all of Theater Row--the National, Colonial, and State Theaters. The company felt that remodeling would improve the National's attendance, and architect William A. Briggs and interior designers Milton Glaser Associates were chosen to modernize the theater. According to Herman Ramsey, a NTI spokesman, the purpose of the remodeling was to convert the National into "a deluxe film theater which [could] be used for long-run, reserved-seat presentations supplemented by shorter-run films which would play on a continuous performance

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basis."<sup>21</sup> The National was closed on March 8, 1968, and reopened in June after \$150,000 was spent on the remodeling. The façade was steam cleaned and a new two-sided, stainless steel marquee was installed. The seating of the balcony was re-spaced, reducing the capacity from 1,332 to 1,096. Rather than restoring the plasterwork of the lobby and auditorium, the walls were coated with gray and red paint. The bathrooms were modernized, a new stereophonic sound system was installed, the orchestra pit was covered, and a new wide screen was hung. The National was even renamed. The theater became the Towne, a name submitted by Mrs. Elsie Robertson in a WRNL-radio contest.<sup>22</sup>

Suburban theaters began replacing downtown theaters in the 1970s and 1980s. Operating until September 5, 1983, the Towne Theater was the last open movie theater downtown. The Towne's last showing was of the movie "Hercules."<sup>23</sup>

Dr. Fred T. Shaia had purchased Theater Row from NTI in December 1981 for a sum of \$750,000. Of the three, Dr. Shaia kept only the Towne Theater open, leasing it back to NTI until 1983. After 1983, all three buildings simply remained closed and vacant. The Historic Richmond Foundation entered into a three-year leasing agreement with an option to buy with Dr. Shaia on November 14, 1988. In April 1991, the City of Richmond proposed to the State of Virginia to use the site of the Colonial and State Theaters for a new state agency building. The Historic Richmond Foundation (HRF) matched a sum put forth by the City of Richmond to purchase the theaters with the agreement that HRF would retain the National/Towne and the city would lease the site of the State and Colonial for a new Virginia Office of Social Services. The State Theater was demolished and the façade of the Colonial was incorporated into the new building.<sup>24</sup> Governor L. Douglas Wilder officially dedicated the Theater Row Office Building in May of 1993 as the new home for the Virginia Department of Social Services and the Virginia Credit Union.<sup>25</sup>

The National Theater is slowly, yet lovingly, being restored by James Whiting, a past president of Historic Richmond Foundation, and other volunteers. HRF is looking for an acceptable buyer to finish the restoration and reopen the theater.<sup>26</sup>

Architecture

The architect and principal artisan of the National Theater also contribute to the significance of this building. Claude K. Howell, the architect, and Ferruccio Legnaioli, the sculptor of the interior decoration, created a building of high artistic value. Both were exceptional figures in their perspective fields, and their involvement makes the National Theater a valuable Richmond landmark.

Claude K. Howell specialized in the design of theaters throughout the South. Active from 1904-1940, theaters designed by Howell have been identified in Richmond, Lynchburg, and Danville, Virginia; Greensboro, North Carolina; Savannah, Thomasville, Americus, Atlanta, Augusta, and Athens, Georgia; and Charleston and Fort Moultrie, South Carolina. The National Theater, with its Italian Renaissance-style façade, is one of Howell's most notable buildings.<sup>27</sup> The Lucas Theater in Savannah, Georgia, was designed by Howell and built in 1921. A much

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smaller theater, the Lucas remarkably has the same general three-part Italian Renaissance-style façade as the National. Howell was likely drawing from and improving upon his Lucas Theater design for the National Theater.

Howell began his career as an architect in Richmond in 1904. Richmond architect William Leigh Carneal worked briefly with Howell in 1906. Carneal would go on to become one of Richmond's most prolific architects. From 1908 to 1912, Howell was associated with Francis W. Scarborough, a consulting engineer in Richmond. He also lived and worked in Savannah and Atlanta, Georgia, and Charlottesville, Winchester, Martinsville, and Pearisburg, Virginia, before disappearing from the architectural scene around 1940. Although Howell is best known for his theaters, the architect played a major role in the architectural development of Richmond's Monument Avenue. Responsible for ten residential buildings on Monument Avenue that follow no definite stylistic idiom, Howell demonstrated his ability to design in a variety of styles. As Driggs, Wilson, and Winthrop state in *Richmond's Monument Avenue*, "Howell's ability to jump from style to style and from townhouse to mansion attracted clients with different needs." Examples of his domestic architecture include the Johnson House of 1908 at 2023 Monument Avenue and the Allen House of 1910 at 1631 Monument Avenue. The Johnson House is one of the finest examples of the Arts and Crafts style in Richmond, and the Allen House with its bow front brought the Boston Federal style to the Avenue.<sup>28</sup>

Renowned local marble and plaster sculptor Ferruccio Legnaioli created the National Theater's marble staircase, its elegant Adamesque architectural decoration, and the large illuminated ceiling dome. Legnaioli was the business partner of Frank Ferrandini. Their shop was located at 1305 Haxall's Lane, and they advertised themselves as "manufacturers of architectural and decorative ornaments in plaster, composition, staff, and cement."<sup>29</sup> Ferrandini, along with John Pryor, also founded the First National Amusement Company, which built the National Theater.<sup>30</sup>

Legnaioli was one of Richmond's most prominent and talented artists. He was a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, Italy, and immigrated to the United States. Settling in Richmond, a city with few highly skilled artisans, Legnaioli was in great demand. He created the bronze statue of Columbus that stands in Byrd Park and the plasterwork decoration for the Lyric, Empire, Colonial, National, Capitol, and Byrd Theaters. Legnaioli crafted a tremendous number of plaster ceilings, tiled porches, and interior and exterior decorations in houses and business buildings throughout Richmond.<sup>31</sup>

Reporters covering the opening of the National Theater described the intricacy of Legnaioli's plasterwork in a *Times Dispatch* article. It read as follows:

Delicate, lilting frescoes adorn the interior of the National Theatre, tinted with pastel shades of yellow and green, classical, yet with more than a hint of modernity . . . The scope of the work is tremendous, for it covers practically the whole interior of the amusement house. But it is entirely composed of small blocks, each worked out with consummate skill and taste, and moulded separately . . . Following the plans of the architect, these sculptors made careful reproductions of each varying design, and from these originals took casts, or forms, in hardened glue. Into these was the plaster poured and exact replicas, nearly impossible to make by any other means, were thus secured. With the hardening of the relief, a

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special gloss tint was applied, outlining the figures or coloring them according to the decorative scheme, and all that remained was to place them in their proper position on the wall.<sup>32</sup>

Being designed by Claude K. Howell, having interior decoration sculpted by Ferruccio Legnaioli, and serving the city as a premier entertainment venue until 1983 make Richmond's National Theater a significant historic building.

Endnotes

1. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater* (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 2002), pp. 80, 132.
2. Harl LaPlace Jeffrey, "Richmond Theatre's Tragic Fire: Out of the Ashes to Monumental Church," *Olde Times*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (Winter 1987/88).
3. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 3.
4. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 5.
5. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, pp. 5-9.
6. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 10.
7. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 12.
8. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 16.
9. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, pp. 19-22.
10. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, pp. 24-29.
11. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 46.
12. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 47.
13. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 53.
14. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 57.
15. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, pp. 60-61.
16. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 62.
17. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 49.
18. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 81.
19. Terry Graham, "Three Richmond Theaters at Risk: A Look at the National, Colonial, and State," unpublished paper, 1991, p. 8.
20. See Note 19.
21. "National Theater To Be Remodeled," *Richmond News Leader*, 20 Feb. 1968.
22. "National Theater to Become The Towne, Reopen in June," *Richmond News Leader*, April 1968.
23. "Towne Theater to close Sept. 5," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 26 Aug. 1983.
24. Graham, "Three Richmond Theaters at Risk," p. 10-13.
25. Bill Wasson, "Theater Row building dedicated by Wilder," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 15 May 1993.
26. Will Jones, "National pride, Once-glittering showplace might be resurrected," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 23 April 2001.



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**Statement of Significance (continued)**

27. John E. Wells and Robert E. Dalton, *The Virginia Architects, 1835-1955* (Richmond: New South Architectural Press, 1997), pp. 207-209.
28. Sarah Shields Driggs, Richard Guy Wilson, and Robert P. Winthrop, *Richmond's Monument Avenue* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 177-180.
29. Drew St. J. Carneal, *Richmond's Fan District* (Richmond: The Council of Historic Richmond Foundation, 1996), p. 199.
30. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 47.
31. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, p. 48.
32. "Richmond Sculptor Decorative Artist," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* November 7, 1926; Betsy Powell Mullen, "Richmond's Renaissance Man Remembered; Efforts Made to Preserve Work of Artist Who Helped Give City Its Unique Look" *Richmond Times-Dispatch* July 23, 1994.

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**Verbal Boundary Description**

National Theater is part of the property parcel described by the City of Richmond with the City Map Reference  
Number N0000002026B and Map GPIN Number 01023492.

**Boundary Justification**

The boundaries were selected as the parcel described in the Verbal Boundary Description because it contains  
the building being nominated.