

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

VLR 3/20/8
NRHP 5/15/8

**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 Pitts Theatre
other names/site number State Theatre (DHR No. 204-5053)

2. Location

street & number 303-307 South Main Street not for publication N/A
city or town Culpeper vicinity N/A
state Virginia code 047 county Culpeper code 047 zip code 22701

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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.)

McAuley *4/11/08*
Signature of certifying official Date
Virginia Department of Historic Resources
State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

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

Signature of commenting official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

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 the 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 N/A

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/CULTURE Sub: theater
COMMERCE/TRADE specialty store

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: VACANT/NOT IN USE Sub: _____

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Deco

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
 roof SYNTHETICS: Rubber
 walls CONCRETE ; BRICK
 other _____

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

Pitts Theatre

Culpeper County, Virginia

=====
8. Statement of Significance
=====

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

- ___ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
___ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
__X 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

Period of Significance ___ 1937-1938 ___

Significant Dates ___ 1938 ___

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

Cultural Affiliation ___ N/A ___

Architect/Builder ___ Nicholas Roney—architect; Keith Fletcher--contractor ___

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 # _____

Pitts Theatre

Culpeper County, Virginia

Primary Location of Additional Data

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

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources

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10. Geographical Data
=====

Acreage of Property 0.29

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

Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	18	238594	4262400	2		3		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 Kimble A. David, Architectural Historian for Hanbury Evans Wright & Vlattas
organization _____ date 13 December 2007
street & number 120 Atlantic Street telephone 757-321-9660
city or town Norfolk state VA zip code 23510

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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)

=====
Property Owner
=====

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

name State Theater Foundation, Inc.
street & number P O Box 657 telephone 540-727-7979
city or town Culpeper state VA zip code 22701

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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.). A federal agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 36 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 National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, 1849 C St., NW, Washington, DC 20240.

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**Pitts Theatre
Culpeper County, Virginia**

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

Summary Description:

The Pitts Theatre was constructed in 1937-1938 and designed in the Art Deco style. The theatre exhibits a symmetrical three-bay façade comprised of a central theatre entrance flanked by storefront retail spaces. The façade has a stepped massing that recedes from the entrance and storefronts. There is a vertical sign mounted to the center of the façade above the marquee with streamlined details and the word "STATE" articulated with neon lights that band the vertical sign. The building is constructed of concrete block and five-course American-bond brick veneer. The façade has been stuccoed. The theatre entrance has a recessed vestibule, which is the main theatre entrance. Flanking the vestibule are single-leaf entrances that access the balcony. The storefronts are comprised of plate glass windows with canted recessed entrances. The interior of the theatre comprises a sophisticated circulation system, which enabled balcony patrons, which were initially African American, and white patrons to enter the theatre separately to separate spaces; the main balcony and auditorium, respectively. The white patrons accessed the theatre through the central lobby with beaver board mounted to the walls and linoleum tiled floors. The main auditorium has a balcony with a proscenium stage opposite the lobby. There are dressing rooms situated off the stage in an addition. An interior stair leads from the rear of the auditorium to the balcony planned for African Americans that has a separate lobby with lavatories. Additional lavatories are found at the rear of the auditorium. The projection room is situated above the balcony accessed by a ladder-stair from the balcony. A storefront addition was made to the north storefront retail.

Architectural Description:

The Pitts Theatre is situated on South Main Street in the Town of Culpeper mid-block between East Locust Street and East Stevens Street. The building is located on the east side of South Main Street and faces west. Low-rise commercial buildings of one to three stories dating to the first half of the 20th century characterize the area. The building extends to the middle of the block sited on a lot of 69 feet wide by 250-1/2 feet deep. There is a public parking lot located immediately to the south and commercial buildings situated to the north and east.

Begun in 1937 and completed in 1938, the Pitts Theatre was designed by architect, Nicholas Roney of Henrico County, Virginia. The theatre is designed in the Art Deco style, and exhibits a symmetrical façade and stepped massing. The contractor for the building was Keith Fletcher of Warrenton, Virginia. The building is constructed of concrete block and brick laid in five-course American bond. The façade elements are stuccoed. The building is approximately three stories in height.

The main street façade is one story in height with a stepped parapet and is symmetrical. A central theatre entrance with an open vestibule marks the façade. The vestibule is clad in weatherboard. There are motion picture frames mounted to the walls at the entrance. Five-panel wood single-leaf doors flank the open vestibule. The doors and open vestibule are situated under the marquee, which has canted corners with backlit signage announcing the production shown within the theatre. There are bands of light bulb outlets oriented diagonally on the underside of the marquee at the entrance. Mounted to the top of the marquee is a vertical

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sign with the word "STATE" placed vertically on the north and south sides. The letters are divided by neon lights. The vertical sign is attached to the building with three evenly spaced mounting elements. The vertical sign is further articulated with a stepped base that terminates in a curved element that extends to the top edge of the theatre marquee. The sign is affixed to the projecting massing of the façade on the second story. This building element houses the interior lavatories for the balcony, which served African American patrons initially, and has vertical massing with a stepped parapet and projecting central portion. The wall recedes toward the north and south edges of this building element. There are window openings with a vertical emphasis flanking the vertical sign within the vertical bays.

The main theatre space of the three-story height occupies the approximate two-thirds of the building at the east end. Mounted to the top of the second story lavatory and lobby space is the projection booth. The booth is expressed on the façade as a projecting element contributing to the overall feel of the building's façade. The façade comprises stepped massing that recedes from the street in proportioned blocks focused on the central bay of the building comprising the signage and prominent central entrance.

Storefront retail spaces flank the theatre entrances and have recessed single-leaf doors flanked by oversized plate glass storefront windows. The door on the south storefront is a replacement metal paneled door, and the wainscoting below the plate glass windows has been removed exposing the brick structural system. A single-light wood door is to the north. Single-light transoms surmount the doors. A one-story addition was made circa 1950 to the north wall of the north storefront retail spaces that continues the first-story façade. The addition is concrete block construction with a stuccoed façade. The roof is flat with a parapet. The entrance to the storefront addition is similar in character to the additional storefront retail spaces with a fixed window and single-leaf door.

The roofs of the building are flat with metal coping on the parapets and have been clad in a membrane.

Access to the basement under the auditorium is gained from the south elevation by a concrete stairwell that descends to a double-leaf wood door at the approximate center of the building. Additional single-leaf doors are situated on the north and south elevations to the parasceniums flanking the stage. A one-story concrete block addition with a flat roof is situated on the east elevation.

The open vestibule of the main theatre entrance gains access to two sets of double-leaf doors. The doors have large plate glass windows and streamlined metal hardware. These doors lead into the lobby of the theatre. The lobby is a rectangular space with a linoleum tile floor and a wood pulp flat interior wallboard called 'beaver board' applied to the walls. The remnant beaver board exhibits three distinct forms. The wainscoting has a block pattern simulating concrete block. Above the wood chair rail is a vertical-oriented beaver board with raised beads at regular intervals. Above this board is a diamond-patterned beaver board terminating at the ceiling. Currently the ceiling is suspended with acoustical tiles and florescent lights. The east end of the lobby has two double-leaf openings without doors leading to the rear of the auditorium. The ticket booth is comprised of a canted wall and door with a ticket window. This booth door is situated on the north wall of the lobby near the main entrance doors. It cants into the hallway to the north of the lobby. The doorway has single panels and a glass ticket window. It was meant to be used from the hallway and the auditorium. The ticket booth

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attendant, who stood within the recessed area created by the canted doorway, took tickets. The doorway separated the ticket booth attendant from the hallway patrons and gave the attendant direct access to the patrons accessing the theatre from the lobby.

The lobby leads to an area at the rear of the auditorium that has a wood frame wall extending along the rear of the auditorium seating. Common to motion picture design this area served to divide the patrons upon entering to the main two aisles within the theatre. The wall has windows divided by square columns that have been covered in wallboard on the lobby side. This wall is clad in beaver board on the auditorium side. In this secondary lobby area there are lavatories on the north and south ends serving both men and women. The lavatories have original fixtures and are colored in pink and blue. There is an exit door on the north end of this area adjacent to the lavatory leading to the north end of the building. On the south end, there is a single-turn stair leading to the balcony. The flooring in this area is carpeted in wall-to-wall carpet, and there are remnant beaver board wallboard applied to the walls.

The auditorium has a two-aisle plan with metal-framed upholstered seats. Some seats have been clad in vinyl. The seats have metal end caps with a stylized motif and pin lights illuminating the aisle floors. The floor slopes downward to the stage at the east end of the building. The flooring is a concrete slab with carpet applied at the aisles. The walls have exposed concrete block with applied wood furring strips. The faux concrete block patterned beaver board comprises the wainscoting of the theatre space.

The proscenium stage with a rectangular opening is situated at the east end of the building. The stage floor is wood resting on a concrete block foundation. Flanking the stage on the interior walls are recessed rectangular openings that contain wood-frame infill with applied furring strips. Curtain-drawn entrances are situated at the base of these openings with accessing stairs leading to the stage. At the base of the stairs are doors leading to the exterior of the building. Two doors are situated on the east wall of the stage leading to dressing rooms within the exposed concrete block addition. These areas have exposed concrete block walls. There are lavatories situated within each dressing room.

Stairs from the lobby, in addition to the hallways flanking the lobby, also accesses the balcony. The opening from this stair is enclosed in a wood balustrade with square wood newel. The balcony has a stepped floor and a solid rail overlooking the auditorium. The rail has wood caps and is clad in beaver board. Beaver board in a similar configuration to that found in the lobby is applied to the walls. There is a single-leaf door opening on the north end that has been boarded. There is a centrally placed balustrade opening leading to the second-story lobby at the west end of the balcony. The lobby is accessed from the balcony through solid double-leaf wood doors with small lights. This lobby has two lavatories situated at the west end, where the vertical sign is applied. The lavatories have sinks mounted to the walls and a toilet. The doors to the lavatory are wood and two-panel. At the east end of this lobby there are two openings leading to the stairwells that descend to the hallways flanking the lobby and ultimately lead to the two single-leaf doors flanking the main theatre entrance. At the stairway landing on the second story there are six-over-six window openings illuminating the top of the stair and second-story lobby.

Another doorway is situated immediately south of the lavatories and leads to the projection room. A steep

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stairway with wood treads terminates at a small room. There are a toilet and sink in the corner of the room and small openings on the east walls for motion picture projection. Remnant motion picture equipment is situated within this room including a projector base. The electrical panel is also situated on the south wall. The walls within this space are stuccoed and the flooring is concrete. Six-light metal windows are situated on the north and south walls.

The storefront retail spaces are divided into two separate spaces. There is a wood frame partition wall at the approximate mid-point of the space. Lavatories are situated within the east end of the space. The spaces have been updated with wall-to-wall carpeting on concrete floors and modern wallboard applied to the walls. Remnant six-light casement windows are situated on the exterior walls illuminating the interior space.

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Statement of Significance Summary:

The Pitts Theatre, located in the Town of Culpeper, in Culpeper County, Virginia, was erected from 1937 to 1938 and served as a motion picture theatre. Designed by architect Nicholas Roney of Henrico County, Virginia, it is an Art Deco-style motion picture theatre. The Pitts Theatre was part of the Pitts chain of theatres in Virginia that extended from southeast to northwest Virginia. Founded by Benjamin T. Pitts of Fredericksburg, Virginia, the chain ultimately had thirty-eight theatres. Pitts was a Virginia state senator from 1944 through 1958 representing the counties of Louisa, Spotsylvania, Goochland, and Orange in the Virginia Senate. The Pitts Theatre operated under the Pitts chain through 1971 when it became a part of the R. C. chain, a national chain of theatres, and was renamed the State Theatre. R. C. operated the theatre until 1992, when it closed.

The building is an example of Art Deco theatre construction in Virginia and is the only example of Art Deco architecture in the Town of Culpeper, Virginia. Art Deco was the prevalent style for motion picture theatres during the 1930s and 1940s and was adapted for small towns and large cities. Many of these theatres were demolished in the late 20th century due to their obsolescence and the rise of multiple screen theatres. A proposed renovation of this building will place the building back into its original service.

The Pitts Theatre is eligible under Criterion C for its architectural character and function as an architect-designed motion picture theatre. Its period of significance is 1937-1938, its date of construction, which reflects the architectural character of the building style and the building's construction.

Pitts Theatre History:

The Pitts Theatre was erected from 1937 to 1938 and was designed by Nicholas Roney. One of the theatres in the Pitts theatre chain, it is designed in the Art Deco style and situated along the main commercial corridor through Culpeper, Virginia. The construction of this building expanded the commercial corridor along South Main Street southward and expanded the available entertainment venues in the late 1930s. It served its original function until 1992 when it closed.

R. P. and Anna Rixey of Culpeper originally owned the Pitts Theatre site, where they resided in their house. Residential development was primarily sited in the area of the current Pitts Theatre. Downtown Culpeper was centered at North and South Main Street, and East and West Davis Street. The commercial corridor comprised a two-block radius around this intersection with most of the commercial buildings situated east of the intersection along East Davis Street toward the railroad tracks.

In January 1937 an announcement was made that a \$70,000.00 motion picture theatre was planned for Culpeper to be erected by the Pitts Amusement Company.¹ The Pitts Amusement Company was a chain of motion picture theatres owned by Benjamin T. Pitts.

Benjamin T. Pitts was a Fredericksburg, Virginia, native. Born on 21 January 1890, he was reared by his

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parents Carolinus and Victoria Pitts, whom he honored by using their names on theatres. He was educated in the Fredericksburg public schools, Wissner Private School, and the International Correspondence School. He acquired his first theatre in 1909 to show motion pictures, which became a life-long occupation.² He formed Pitts Enterprises, which operated motion picture theatres first in the counties around Fredericksburg and then extending from southeastern to northwestern Virginia.

Within Fredericksburg, Pitts erected his first theatre in 1914, named the Pitts Leader. Prior to the erection of this theatre he acquired a lease on the Opera House in Fredericksburg at the corner of Caroline and William streets to show motion pictures. He operated the theatre as a motion picture house when the live-production theatre was dark. Pitts purchased the opera house and razed the building for the erection of the Pitts Leader. Benjamin T. Pitts's success led him to erect another theatre in Fredericksburg, the Colonial, in 1929.³

In 1937, the Pitts chain of theatres operated theatres in Richmond, Suffolk, Fredericksburg, Emporia, Orange, Culpeper, Warrenton, Manassas, Leesburg, Berryville, West Point, and Front Royal in Virginia, and Charles Town, West Virginia.⁴ At the time of the construction of the Pitts Theatre in Culpeper, there were 18 theatres operating under Pitts's chain. Pitts's theatre chain grew in the 1930s and 1940s. It is noted that the Roth's Valley Enterprises chain of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and the Pitts's chain merged in 1937. The merger did not include three theatres in the Roth chain, the State, Strand, and Elkton.⁵ At its height, there were 38 theatres operating under the chain. By Pitts's death, the number of theatres had diminished to 18 operating under the chain. After Pitts's death in 1964, the executors continued to operate the theatres for a period of time until the sale of the buildings in the late 20th century.

During his career, Pitts was also a real estate developer along with being a theatre chain owner. His success led to public office. Pitts was elected to public office on the Fredericksburg City Council in 1933. In 1944 he was elected as a Virginia state senator in the Virginia Senate representing the 27th district, which comprised the counties of Louisa, Spotsylvania, Goochland, and Orange. He remained in this office until October 1957, when he resigned because of ill health. He died on 21 July 1964 at the Medical College of Virginia Hospital in Richmond.

Within Culpeper, Pitts had acquired the Fairfax Theatre in 1929 and had been operating it as a motion picture theatre.⁶ The erection of a new motion picture house in Culpeper was an effort to expand the holdings of Pitts's theatre chain. A number of sites were under consideration within Culpeper for the location of the new theatre, though they are not noted. The plan for the theatre was to have a seating capacity of 822, of which 600 seats were to be in the main auditorium, and 222 seats were to be situated in the balcony.⁷ An announcement in the 4 February 1937 Culpeper newspaper showed a proposed rendering of the building. It appeared with an Art Deco façade, broad marquee, and vertical sign. The façade had vertical projecting banding that was emphasized by vertical windows and a vertical sign. The design was different from the executed building in that it had a single massing across the street front. No storefront retail spaces were designed as part of the initial rendering.⁸ This release was most likely to serve as a promotional device and may not have been the intended design.

On 17, February 1937, Benjamin T. Pitts purchased the Pitts Theatre site and an adjacent parcel from Anna

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Rixey, who had been willed the parcels from her husband R. P. Rixey. The parcel with buildings was purchased for \$600.00 and comprised two lots of 17,100 square feet and 3,885 square feet. Lot 1 was described as being situated on the east side of Main Street with a 69-foot frontage extending eastward for approximately 250 feet. Lot 2 was described as being situated north of the east end of Lot 1 and facing Locust Street to the north. It had a street frontage of 73.5 feet and was 53 feet deep.⁹ The Rixey house was described as an antebellum residence that was built by George Ficklin, a prominent and prosperous resident in the 1830s and 1840s. It was once the home of James Field, brigadier-general in the Confederate Army.¹⁰

In May 1937 the Rixey house was demolished in preparation for the construction of the Pitts Theatre.¹¹ The site lay vacant until 23 August 1937, when construction for the Pitts Theatre was begun. The contractor commissioned to erect the theatre was Keith Fletcher of Warrenton, Virginia. By this time changes to the design were made and it was noted that the seating capacity had increased to 926. Additional storefront retail spaces were added to the façade comprising two 22-foot widths and 44-foot depths. The lobby was noted as having dimensions of 20 by 44 feet and the main auditorium was 50 by 100 feet. Also noted is that the building would have air-conditioning and house the only air-conditioned auditorium in the Town of Culpeper. The theatre's completion was anticipated by Christmas of 1937.¹² Strikes in the steel mills and the winter months extended the construction period, which did not get back on schedule until the early spring.¹³

Leading up to the opening, the Pitts Theatre was described in newspaper articles of the time as a modern building constructed of concrete block clad in brick veneer. It was air-conditioned and was constructed using advanced fireproof construction methods. Additional information about the construction of the building yields that it combined a steel structural system that supported a steel roof system clad in gypsum. The cost of the building was \$105,000.00 upon its completion: \$75,000.00 was expended for the building construction and \$30,000.00 was expended for theatre equipment.¹⁴ The Heyward-Wakefield Company of Baltimore, Maryland provided 825 theatre chairs. J. F. Dushman of Baltimore, Maryland provided the heating and air-conditioning for the Pitts Theatre. The building materials were provided by J. William Swan, including the brick, doors, moldings, door and window frames, gypsum board, and nails.¹⁵

The architect for the Pitts Theatre was Nicholas Roney of Henrico County, Virginia. He was listed as an architect of Richmond for the Pitts Theatre commission but was not listed as an architect in the *Richmond City Directories*.¹⁶ Roney appeared as a builder in Richmond, Virginia, from 1900 to 1910, associated with James W. Atkinson, also of Henrico County, Virginia. Their firm Roney & Atkinson designed and built the Bijou Theatre in Richmond in 1904. They were the contractors for the Broddus Memorial Church in Richmond, which was designed by D. Wiley Anderson. They were also the contractors for the Richmond City Home for Negroes, designed by C. K. Bryant in 1907.¹⁷ Information about Atkinson & Roney after 1910 is largely unavailable. It is not known if they built or designed other buildings in the Richmond or Fredericksburg area. From U.S. census records, Roney appeared as a builder in 1900 and in 1920. In 1900, he and Atkinson resided near one another, though there is no notation that they were associated, only that they both were builders. By 1920 Roney was a widower and resided in a rooming house in Henrico County. By the time of the Pitts Theatre commission, he was seventy-two years old and information about him is largely unavailable.¹⁸

The plan of the theatre reflects a highly sophisticated patron circulation system. The main lobby accesses the

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auditorium seating on the main floor. After its opening, the auditorium seating was reserved for white patrons to the theatre. The two parallel hallways flanking the lobby leading to stairways to the balcony were for use by African Americans. The balcony was designed with a separate lobby and lavatories. During segregation, African-American and white patrons were separated within theatres. Traditionally African Americans were relegated to balcony seating in churches and courthouses from the 18th to mid 20th centuries. Motion picture theatres used similar philosophies employed for these facilities in the 20th century prior to integration in the 1960s. Many theatres used traditional church and courthouse plans for balcony access, which had a common entrance to the building and stairways that led to the balconies. In the Pitts Theatre, the circulation system to separate the entrance and exit of patrons of different race were further expanded creating separate entrances. This enabled the balcony patrons to come into minimal contact with the auditorium patrons.

The Pitts Theatre opened for its first showing on 23 May 1938 with great success and fanfare. The opening of the theatre was reported to have a full house. The theatre was decorated with flower baskets sent by friends of Benjamin Pitts. Pitts attended the ceremony and made a moving speech about his connection to Culpeper and appreciation of their support in his businesses. T. I. Martin was introduced as the manager of the theatre and then the first motion picture was screened, "Sally, Irene and Mary." Over the weekend there were 1,500 people that attended the screening of the motion picture.¹⁹

The two storefront retail spaces were occupied by commercial businesses. The north storefront retail space was occupied by a beauty shop that relocated from another storefront retail space in Culpeper.²⁰ Situated in the south storefront was the "Theatre Shop," a soda fountain.²¹ The "Theatre Shop" was operated by two well-known men of Culpeper and served sandwiches and soft drinks. It also supplied magazines,²² and became a telegraph office prior to 1951.²³

The theatre continued to be a part of the Pitts theatre chain until 1970, when on September 25, it was renamed the State Theatre and became part of the R. C. chain of motion picture theatres. The executors of Benjamin T. Pitts's estate retained ownership of the building until 1994, after its closure in 1992.

The Pitts Theatre operated through the 20th century concurrently with the Fairfax Theatre, which Pitts also owned. The Fairfax Theatre and Pitts Theatre were operated under the Fairfax Theatre Corporation. Formed sometime prior to the opening of the Pitts Theatre, this corporation had officers from the Fredericksburg area, including Benjamin T. Pitts, L. G. Payne, Freda Pollard, T. I. Martin (Culpeper), and Mrs. Roberts B. Fray.²⁴ The Pitts Drive-In was added north of Culpeper in the 1950s and operated until the 1980s. The Fairfax Theatre closed in the 1950s in the town of Culpeper, which left the Pitts as the only theatre in the town. In 1980 a two-screen motion picture house opened in the Culpeper Town Mall Shopping Center. This direct competition is what was believed to have caused the demise of the Pitts Theatre. The Pitts closed in 1992 because of low attendance. Ironically, the two-screen Regal motion picture theatre closed in 1999, and the century closed without a motion picture theatre in Culpeper. A Regal motion picture theatre opened in 2000 along South Main Street near the Pitts Theatre and is currently in operation.²⁵

Motion Picture Theatre Context:

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Motion pictures have been a part of American culture since their appearance in the late 19th century. During the 20th century, the motion picture industry grew to represent the most frequented mode of entertainment for Americans throughout the United States. With the popularity of the motion pictures, the need for theatres that primarily showed motion pictures brought about a new architectural type based upon traditional theatre architecture. The motion picture theatre, though based in traditional theatre architecture, deviated stylistically in that it sought to create an atmosphere of fantasy or illusion similar to the motion picture themes shown within the theatres.

Among theatre architecture, there were a variety of types and subtypes associated with this building form. Theatre buildings initially were constructed as a venue for performance arts of various kinds, including vaudeville, stage productions, opera, and dance. With the addition of the motion picture to traditional theatre, interior building plans minimally changed, as motion pictures were first thought of as a novelty in the 1900s and 1910s.

The first motion picture theatres provided short films of 10-minute productions comprising silent melodramas or comedies with musical accompaniment provided by an orchestra or organ. Commonly called “nickelodeons,” these films comprised the first motion pictures in 1905. The term nickelodeon is derived from the word ‘nickel,’ which was the cost of admission, and ‘odeon,’ which is the Greek word for theatre. The popularity of the nickelodeon and advancements in film technology led to the development of longer feature length films. These films were imprinted on celluloid, but they were still considered supplements to the existing live-action vaudeville shows of the 1910s.²⁶

The first purpose-built motion picture theatres combined vaudeville and nickelodeon entertainment. Nickelodeon was the first short motion picture popularized in the 1900s through 1910s, and, combined with live vaudeville entertainment, created the need for facilities or theatres that could serve both live acts and motion pictures. Penny arcades were also popular during this period for motion pictures, but the 1910s saw the greatest draw of audiences to the longer length motion pictures, which would supplant traditional theatre, including vaudeville, within a short timeframe.²⁷

Vaudeville was the most popular entertainment form in the late 19th century and into the early 20th century. It derived from variety shows and musicals of the mid-19th century, forming an art rooted in working class traditions. Troupes of vaudeville players produced their own productions and traveled from theatre-to-theatre and town-to-town presenting their acts to the local audience. Vaudeville’s popularity was built upon fresh and new talent, and variety of shows. The addition of motion pictures to vaudeville houses and shows was made as a novelty that was akin to type of productions desired for the venue. What started as a novelty eventually overtook the theatres, and many traditional theatres were in fact converted for use with motion pictures once full-length motion pictures were available on a regular basis for showing.²⁸

Novelties for showing films extended to the creation of open-air theatres, where chairs were set up in a lot with a projector and motion picture screen. The films were then presented under the cover of darkness to patrons who sat under the stars. These theatres were called “airdomes.” While there was no dome associated with the theatre, it was subject to the weather for its showings. It was most popular in warmer climates where shows

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could be scheduled all year round. As with traditional motion pictures, an orchestra would have played to the film. Popular during the 1910s through 1930s, the unpredictability of the weather, the difficulty of having a seasonable year round climate, and the introduction of air-conditioning gave the airdome a short-lived period of existence.²⁹

Experimentation with the construction of purpose-built motion picture theatres was begun in 1913 in New York City. The Regent, named for entrepreneur Marvin Regent, was a Classically-styled building with a marble façade. The theatre was not terribly successful, and Regent sought additional investors to help rescue him from a short-lived first. Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel took over the theatre and redressed it much like an upper class theatre, and it became a popular venue. More theatres followed in New York for the showing of motion pictures only and, thus, began the trend of motion picture theatre construction.³⁰

In the period after World War I, the construction of theatres, specifically for the purpose of screening silent motion pictures, commenced. The motion pictures competed with vaudeville and in many cases operated concurrently within the same building.³¹

Instrumentation for commercial silent motion picture theatres was provided by organ music. Wurlitzers, manufactured by the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, New York, were the most commonly found organs at motion picture theatres. The Wurlitzer provided numerous sounds not heard from typical traditional organs. Organists were many times touted for their ability to instrument a motion picture and crowds sought talented organists at motion picture theatres.³²

Motion pictures had become so popular that organists were wooed from churches to the motion picture theatres. In addition, motion picture theatre attendance grew so quickly attracting men from saloons and families from churches. Allegations of family destruction from "theatre addiction" were levied by the Catholic Church and were echoed by tavern owners who lost patrons in their establishments. These two disparate conflicts brought about a moral quandary for social reformers of the period whose distaste for both the motion picture theatre and the consumption of alcoholic beverages were widely pronounced.³³ Reformers lobbied for changes in motion picture content, when and where theatres could be constructed, when motion pictures could be shown with a desired restriction for Sunday showings, and whether women and children should be permitted in such an environment.³⁴

The first theatre magnates of the 1910s were Marcus Loew and William Fox, who constructed theatres in New York and shaped the relationship of the motion picture company and the theatres in which the motion pictures would be viewed.³⁵ The number of motion picture theatres grew in popularity as the filmmaking companies were created and subsequently grew. Among the largest was Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, who had a chain of Loew's Theatres across the United States, many of which were erected in the mid- to late 1920s. The company hired the architectural firm of Rapp and Rapp, who designed many notable motion picture houses. Rapp and Rapp also designed theatres for Warner Brothers Pictures in the late 1920s and 1930s. The creation of United Artist Studios (UA) in the mid-1920s increased the number of companies showing films and precipitated additional theatre erection to show UA motion pictures. C. Howard Crane designed theatres for UA and for William Fox, who also created motion pictures in the late 1920s.³⁶

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The motion picture theatre building type initially drew its sources from European theatres. Though generally used as a source for motion picture theatres, all elements of traditional European theatres were not necessarily added into motion picture theatres. This new building type required architects to consider variations in traditional theatre planning because of the type of entertainment presented. The purpose of the motion picture theatre was purely economic, which was to attract moviegoers to the box office.³⁷

The exterior of a the motion picture theatre stood out from its surrounding buildings using broad canopy marquees, often accompanied by vertical signs announcing the building's name and purpose. Tracer and chaser lights were used to accent the signs and marquees. Nighttime illumination was very important and lighting of the signage extended to lighting on the exterior of the building including billboards. The ticket box office was introduced in the 1920s and provided another means of contact for the consumer.³⁸

Theatres of the 1920s were designed to be inviting with an unobstructed entrance. The entrance was broad and usually had a recessed vestibule or was enclosed behind double glass doors. The box office varied from theatre to theatre depending on the organization of the vestibule and entrance. Some theatres had a box office or ticket window incorporated into the architecture of the building. Those with an open vestibule had a separate box office that was freestanding within the entrance. Depending on the number of patrons, some theatres had multiple box offices.³⁹

The marquee also was a major focus of the theatre's architectural plan. In those theatres with an open vestibule, the marquee served as part of the entrance in which the sidewalk became part of the interior of the theatre. These boundaries were purely aesthetic and were strategic in drawing people into the theatre. The space is described as an area that "formed a parenthetic arms that enveloped and funneled (the patron) into the theatre."⁴⁰

The interior of the building provided a large lobby space in some cases on multiple levels accessible by staircases. Lobbies were designed to keep the patrons visually entertained. Seats were plush, and mostly upholstered in mohair or velvet. The motion picture interior theme was continued from the interior walls, to the ceiling, to reliefs on the seat end panels.⁴¹

Pin lights mounted within the motion picture seats along the aisles assisted in navigation while not impeding the ability of patrons to view the film. Additional lighting was designed to be concealed and integrated within the interior design elements. Indirect lighting hidden from the patrons' view within interior architectural elements, which illuminated the ceiling, commonly called "cove lighting," was popular and provided an atmospheric feeling to the theatre's interior.⁴² Backstage equipment incorporated both traditional theatre elements, such as dressing rooms and an orchestra pit. Other areas incorporated within the theatre were lobbies, lounges, and in some cases playrooms. Ventilation was a major concern and air-conditioning was introduced in theatres in the 1920s in Chicago and New York.⁴³

In the southern climate, air-conditioning provided major changes in motion picture houses. The introduction of air conditioning allowed theatres to remain open on the hottest days of the year, when they most often closed.

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Air-conditioning was advertised as a part of the show with signage added to the fronts of theatres. Air-conditioning was not readily available for mass distribution in motion picture theatres until the 1920s. It was still expensive and rare, found mostly in larger motion picture houses. During the 1930s, Carrier developed a smaller compact system of air conditions and humidity control. Employed in motion picture theatres, this was one of the few venues in which the average public could be affected by a luxury that was primarily for the rich during the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁴ While many theatres could not afford air conditioning in the 1920s, the invention of freon in 1931 provided a less expensive and safer way to air condition. Within nine years most theatres that were not previously air-conditioned had either added it to their buildings.⁴⁵

During the 1920s theatres evolved from sole-proprietor-owned or individual-leased auditoriums to an industry that created chains of motion picture theatres. During this period many chain businesses grew into household names of which many continue today, such as Krogers. The advantage of chains was scale economics, where costs could be fixed, and because of increased supply, could be lower. This type of savings could be employed by the motion picture industry, with those making the films as the distributors and ultimately providing the venues for public viewing.⁴⁶ Chains varied in terms of type, such as national, regional, or local. Film production companies and distributors could partner with a chain to provide their motion pictures and establish a business relationship.⁴⁷

Theatre architects saw their designs as showplaces that appeared to cater to not only the rich, but to all people. It was considered one of the few spaces of “democracy” where the wealthy and poor would sit together. The democracy was limited to economics alone, as African American and white patrons still were separated within the theatres’ interior seating configuration. The motion picture theatre provided mass appeal not found in the tradition of grand opera houses and theatres that preceded them. The interior decoration was part of the show of the theatre. Its predecessors used the same conventions, but the decoration within motion picture theatres took on a folly above and beyond traditional ornamentation. These architects were trained in Europe and many of their designs are reminiscent of the opera houses of Europe with their heavy Classical ornamentation. Architects after the 1920s added more diverse architectural styles deviating from traditional Classical ornament, employing Spanish Colonial, Babylonian, Persian, and pueblo styles reminiscent of a more eclectic period in architectural history.⁴⁸

Architect John Eberson was European-educated and spent a twenty-year career designing theatres in Classical European styles. Eberson popularized the atmospheric style in theatres, which comprised an effect of outdoor areas surrounded by exotic environments and highlighted by a ceiling painted like the sky. Effects within the theatre were made through lighting, plasterwork, and projected images. This illusion of environment was fueled by competition by both theatre owners and architects. Eberson was seen as one of the most prolific in this field and designed theatres all over the United States exhibiting his fanciful architectural ideas.⁴⁹

Additional styles were employed, adapting various architectural sources from around the world giving the theatre impressions of ancient temples from lands far a field. These more exotic styles were fueled by discoveries in Egypt in the 1920s bringing a new source of opulence to theatres. As these styles became more common within theatre architecture, architects began to compete in the exotic nature of the theatre’s architecture.⁵⁰

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The late 1920s into the 1930s saw the rise of the Art Deco style in theatre architecture, which was a geometric and stylized adaptation of organic form. Two architects, S. Charles Lee and Timothy L. Pflueger, were primarily associated with this style of architecture and influenced many theatre architects during this period. Growing out of the west coast, the styles and forms proliferated throughout the 1940s.⁵¹

Architectural styles changed from pre-Depression era eclectic ornamented theatres to those reflecting a streamlined appearance. The more clean-cut streamlined styles and trends were illustrated during the Exposition des Art Decoratifs et Industriels held in Paris in 1925. The change in style to the more minimal and streamlined character of the Art Deco was also a result of the expense in maintaining ornate plasterwork and updating of theatres for acoustical reasons.⁵²

Another advantage of the Art Deco style was its clean-cut modern appearance with sweeping vertical and horizontal lines.⁵³ The Depression era was a bleak existence for the American public of the 1930s. Main Streets housed dark empty storefronts and were primarily composed of buildings that exhibited the architectural character of the past with Classical elements. Many of these buildings, which would have been occupied and vibrant elements of the streetscape, took on a different appearance abandoned and dark. The motion picture house provided an escape from the realities of the Great Depression and the misery it presented to the public. During this period, sound was introduced in motion pictures and themes of motion pictures were overall positive. There was also a focus of looking forward to a bright future with modern conveniences and a better life within the motion picture theatres and motion picture themes.⁵⁴

The addition of the motion picture to the entertainment corridors of major cities created a new motion picture theatre patron. Statistics compiled commencing in 1922 reflect that motion picture attendance grew dramatically during the 1920s only seeing a dip during the Great Depression before rebounding to all time highs from the mid-1930s through the mid-1940s. With increased attendance, many entrepreneurs had theatres constructed in varying areas of cities and towns competing for business in commercial areas. Neighborhoods also reaped the benefit of the boom in motion picture construction, as neighborhood theatres along small commercial corridors were added to the landscape enabling motion picture attendees to travel shorter distances for entertainment. New forms of theatres were created to cater to the automobile. The varying types and locations of theatres is a reflection of ingenuity of businessmen in recognizing the importance of entertainment to the American public.

In the 1950s, a new drive-in theatre form rose in popularity due to the availability of the automobile and dispersion of the population into new residential suburbs. These outdoor theatres were similar to the "airdomes" of the 1910s and 1920s, except that the viewer would sit in his car to view the film. This enabled families to travel to the theatre without having to hire a babysitter, and for people to be more private within their vehicles. Largely due to the number of cars sold and owned in the 1950s, drive-in motion picture theatres were quite popular through the 1960s.⁵⁵

Competing with motion picture theatres in the 1950s was the invention of the television and commercial distribution of television sets to the American public. Motion picture theatre attendance declined in the period

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after World War II and concurrently, motion picture houses closed. This decline is mostly attributed to the rise of the television and available programming where American families could be entertained in the comfort of their home versus at a theatre. Many families opted to purchase a television during the 1950s to be entertained at home, furthering the decline of the motion picture theatres.⁵⁶

Single screen motion picture houses faced additional competition in the 1960s, which caused numerous small theatres to close. In the 1960s, a new type of motion picture theatre that provided multiple motion picture screens was developed to maximize patronage to motion pictures within a single building. Called the "multiplex," this type of theatre comprised two or more screens, and was primarily sited within developing suburbs and within new commercial centers marked by shopping centers. While the concept of multiple screens began in the 1920s at central urban shopping centers of the period, it was not until the 1960s that the competition of the multiplex would impact single screen motion picture theatres. Parking was readily available at multiplexes to cater to the number of moviegoers and the buildings that fit into the surroundings of shopping strips and malls.⁵⁷ The development of the multiplex theatre continued through the beginning of the 21st century and is currently the prevalent type of motion picture theatre erected.

Conclusion:

The Pitts Theatre is an example of an Art Deco theatre erected during the height of theatre construction in the mid-20th century. Erected in 1937-1938, it was part of a chain of motion picture theatres under the ownership of the Pitts Amusement Company. The building is reflective of the development of motion picture theatres in the United States during the first half of the 20th century.

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GEOGRAPHICAL DATA:

Boundary Description:

The boundary is described as the Culpeper County, Virginia Tax Parcel 41A2 1C1 2 and is shown on the attached base map from the Culpeper County web site.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary comprises the original boundaries of the property as delineated in the Culpeper County Deed, Book 97, pages 209-211, 17 February 1937 from Anna Wine Rixey to Benjamin T. Pitts, described as Lot 1 and delineated in the plat within Culpeper County Deed, Book 97, page 211. The boundary supports the period of significance and historic statement as outlined in this submission and was historically associated with the theatre.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs are common to:

PROPERTY: Pitts Theatre

LOCATION: Culpeper County, Virginia

VDHR FILE NUMBER: 204-5053

PHOTOGRAPHER: Kimble A. David

DATE: October 26, 2007

DIGITAL IMAGES STORED AT: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia.

VIEW: West Facade

PHOTOGRAPH: 1 of 11

VIEW: Northwest Oblique

PHOTOGRAPH: 2 of 11

VIEW: Facade Detail

PHOTOGRAPH: 3 of 11

VIEW: Lobby, view east

PHOTOGRAPH: 4 of 11

VIEW: Lobby, view west

PHOTOGRAPH: 5 of 11

VIEW: Auditorium, view west

PHOTOGRAPH: 6 of 11

VIEW: Auditorium, view east

PHOTOGRAPH: 7 of 11

VIEW: Auditorium – view east from Projection Room

PHOTOGRAPH: 8 of 11

VIEW: Projection Room

PHOTOGRAPH: 9 of 11

VIEW: Balcony – west view

PHOTOGRAPH: 10 of 11

VIEW: Storefront retail, view northwest

PHOTOGRAPH: 11 of 11

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- ³¹ Ibid., 15.
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- ³³ Ibid., 15.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 15.
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PITTS THEATRE

81238594 / 4262400

303-307 SOUTH
MAIN STREET
CULPEPER, VA
22071

DHRND
201-5053

CULPEPER
EAST QUAD

27'30"

