

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

**Demolished, 2016  
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VLR: 9/15/2016  
NRHP: 2/7/2017**

LISTED ON:	
VLR	12/17/2009
NRHP	1/28/2011

**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 making "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 Donk's Theatre  
Other names/site number DHR #057-0069

**2. Location**

street & number 259 Buckley Hall Road not for publication N/A  
city or town Hudgins vicinity N/A  
state Virginia code VA county Mathews code 115 zip code 23076

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

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

[Signature] December 7, 2010  
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)

- X private
public-local
public-State
public -Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- X building(s)
district
site
structure
object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, and 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 and Culture Sub: Theatre

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Recreation and Culture Sub: Music facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Modern Movement: Art Deco

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Poured Concrete
Roof Standing Seam Tin
Walls Stone Cast Concrete Block

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

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)

- X 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 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)

Entertainment/Recreation
Architecture

Period of Significance 1946-1960

Significant Dates 1946-1947

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

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder W. C. Dunton, Eddie Callis

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

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

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

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

Primary Location of Additional Data

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

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1 acre

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

Table with 4 columns: Zone Easting Northing. Values: 18 382702 4148000, 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. Forms Prepared By

name/title James S. Sease, Esq. and Joanna Nix
organization James S. Sease, P.C. date 5/1/2009
street & number P.O. Box 715 telephone 804-725-4700 or 804-725-3502
city or town Mathews state VA zip code 23109

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs Representative black and white photographs of the property.

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

Property Owner

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

name D Theatre, LLC by Josephine Thorpe, Member-Owner
street & number P.O. Box 113 telephone 804-725-3862
City or town Hallieford state VA zip code 23068

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, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Services, 1849 C St., NW, Washington, DC 20240.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   7   Page   1  

---

**ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION**

Summary Description:

Donk's Theatre was constructed in 1946-1947 and features vernacular commercial form design with Art Deco touches. It is a symmetrical rectangular building comprised of a central theatre entrance flanked on the north by storefront retail spaces. It has a large marquee with neon lights with the word "DONKS" articulated at the top and an attached lighted sign with removable letters to allow the announcement of features. The building is constructed of rusticated cinder and concrete block, painted white and cream. The main theatre entrance has a box office that sits just forward of two pairs of double doors that open outward to access the main lobby. The interior of the theatre comprises an open lobby with two bathrooms at the north end of the lobby, an auditorium with 504 seats, a stage with a large silver screen, referred to as Cinemascope, provided by Radio Corporation of America, and a back stage area which includes dressing rooms behind the screen. The projection room is situated above the main lobby, accessed by a steep stairway from the storage room at the front southern corner of the building. It is a free-standing building flanked on the north by another cinder and concrete block building which originally housed an appliance store. Built and owned by the same individual who built Donk's Theatre, that building was completed just prior to the building of Donk's Theatre.

Architectural Description:

Donk's Theatre is situated on the corner of Route 198 and Route 223 in the Hudgins area of Mathews County also once known as "Chimney Corner." The building is located on the east side of Route 198 and faces west. In a small business area, which boasts a "Zooms" Store, Country Cuts Beauty and Barber Shop, an antique store, a NAPA store, and Chimney Corner Tractor Dealership, the large white two-story building stands tall next to a strip of three single-story stores on its north side. On its south side, is the main entrance to the approximately 3-acre dirt parking lot, which also houses a small store that once was Donk's Bar-B-Q restaurant owned by W.C. Dunton, the builder of Donk's Theatre. Mr. Dunton later sold that business, but not the property, to Norman O. Sutton, who continued its operation in the late 1950s and early 1960s as "Sutt's." It now houses an air-conditioning dealership.

In 1946, Wilton C. Dunton, soon to be the owner and operator of Donk's Theatre, contracted with local craftsman and contractor, Eddie Callis, to build for him a moving picture theatre. Begun in 1946 and completed thirteen months later in 1947, Donk's Theatre was built from concrete and cinder blocks made for the job at Moger's, a local concrete company, located approximately two miles from the site. W. C. Dunton, himself, could be seen assisting the builder, and it is said he even laid some of the block himself. The theatre is designed in a vernacular commercial form and exhibits a symmetrical façade. The 50 foot x 100 foot building is constructed of white-painted decorative cinder block and concrete block and is two stories high. The roof, made of standing seam tin over wooden planking, is slightly sloping to a gutter system on both sides. There are only four windows in the building, all located in the second floor projection room. Two windows face west, one faces north and one faces south. Because of their deteriorated condition, all four of these windows were replaced in 2009.

The building, which stands on its own, has a white concrete block façade with two sets of red double doors, which have remained since its construction, on either side of the ticket booth. There is a 12-inch round window at adult eye-level on each door. The ticket booth is a three-sided attachment to the front middle of the building and is constructed of wood to a height of 4 feet with windows and framing reaching to its own dedicated roof.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   7   Page   2  

---

The doors and ticket booth are all beneath the large metal two-sided marquee jutting out from the theatre face in a triangle position, making for easy viewing for passers-by traveling either north or south. On both sides on the top half, the marquee reads in block green neon letters, DONK'S, under which is a white backlit signboard of the same size that holds red lettering giving notice to the public of coming attractions. The red lettering is made of molded plastic with grooves on the back that attach to the metal strips on the marquee for easy changing and updating. Also located on the front of the building are two wooden and glass window boxes that advertise upcoming movies, ticket prices and other information.

The front double doors open to a rectangular-shaped carpeted lobby, which, when the theatre was first opened, housed a luxuriously appointed lounge for movie-goers and a small concession area with a popcorn machine.<sup>1</sup> Today it is still used as a concession area; however, all seating has been removed. At the west end of the lobby the restrooms for men and women (one each) are located to the left through a small alcove.

To the right, is a small supply room with a staircase leading to the projection room over the lobby. There is a toilet and a sink in the corner of the upstairs projection room. There are small openings onto the back auditorium wall for motion picture projection and monitoring. Remnant motion picture equipment is situated within this room, which includes two projectors and bases and the film splicing table and reels. The electrical panel as well as the lighting system is also situated on the south and west walls of the projection room.

There are two four-stepped entrances into the rear of the 504-seat auditorium, one on either side of the lobby. 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. Large velvet curtains cover the exposed concrete block walls, which originally were covered with wood furring strips and acoustic panels. The side-light fixtures are located on the north and south walls of the auditorium. They are in Art Deco style approximately 8 feet tall with metal tubes at various lengths which deflect the light they emit into a soft glow.

The stage is located at the east end of the building and is approximately 13 feet deep and 30 feet wide. At present, the stage floor is carpet over hardwood oak flooring with a row of foot lights located across the entire length of the front of the original stage. A five-foot wide extension to the front of the original stage, which runs the entire length of the stage, was added in late 2004. A large 13 feet x 30 feet painted backdrop over ¼ inch plywood (for protection of the screen) covers the movie screen at the back of the stage. Curtain-drawn entrances/exits are situated at the back and on both sides of the auditorium. The doorways lead to the exterior of the building and to rooms with accessing stairs leading to the stage. To the left of the stage is a backstage carpeted seating area approximately 14 feet x 10 feet with a curtained doorway leading to dressing rooms located behind the stage. These dressing rooms have exposed concrete walls and hardwood flooring. To the right of the stage is a room, approximately 10 feet x 14 feet which housed the old oil furnace used to heat the building. The old furnace was removed and the room is being prepared for use as additional dressing rooms.

The building originally was equipped with the most affordable air conditioning--two clutch-operated squirrel-cage circulation fans, approximately 5 feet square, located at the east and west sides of the stage area. These fans are enclosed in the walls at a height of 12 feet. They are designed to draw fresh air into the building through grate-covered openings in the building and circulate it so efficiently that the light fixtures hanging from the ceiling swing in the breeze whenever the fans are operating. These fans are still in place and operable,

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   7   Page   3  

---

although they are no longer used. A modern air-conditioning and heating system was installed in 2009.

Except for minor changes, the building remains true to its original appearance. The gutters were replaced in 2009 and flood lights installed on the outside of each exit door located at the rear of the theatre. Interior changes include an addition to the stage in 2004 (which stands free from the stage itself and can be removed); a free-standing sound booth constructed at the back of the auditorium four steps above floor level in 1999; paneling and flooring in the lobby and bathrooms in 1990; installation of the new air conditioning/heating system in 2009; and a new face for the stage curtain (attached to the original curtain) in 1984. Some minor and removable changes have been made to the walls in the auditorium and the wiring has been updated to accommodate the current tenants, who have rented the theatre since 1975.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page   4  

---

---

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Summary Statement of Significance:

Donk's Theatre, located in the Hudgins area of Mathews County, Virginia, was erected during 1946-47 and served as a motion picture theatre until 1970. It was opened again in 1975 as a country music theatre and continues to be used for that purpose today. Donk's Theatre was built by W.C. (Donk) Dunton who also built and owned several stores on the property including a sandwich shop and an appliance store as well as a pool hall/gun shop. Mr. and Mrs. Dunton operated this theatre until Mr. Dunton's death in 1968. His wife, Mary, continued the operation until it was closed as a motion picture theatre in 1970. Donk's Theatre was reopened by members of the Smith Family of Mathews County in 1975 as a country music concert hall. In its 63-year existence, Donk's Theatre has been vacant only five years.

The property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history in that at its construction it represented an era when the motion picture was king of the entertainment scene. After it had served its purpose in that capacity, Donk's Theatre, since 1975, has housed a live stage show, following the pattern of the famous Grand Old Opry in Nashville, Tennessee, and has hosted many famous country music stars.

Donk's Theatre is an outstanding example of the movie theatres constructed in a smaller community to provide a relatively inexpensive but modern theatre facility for its patrons. The building is an good example post -World War II vernacular commercial theatre construction in Virginia and is the only example of such in Hudgins, Virginia. Many of these popular theatres in small towns were demolished in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the rise of multiple screen large-box form theatres.<sup>ii</sup> However, since the building was given new life as a concert hall, it served that purpose well and has been a popular and well-known landmark.

Donk's Theatre is eligible for the National Register with local significance, under Criteria A and C, in the areas of Entertainment/Recreation and Architecture respectively, as a prominent motion picture theatre and country music concert hall. Its period of significance is 1946-1960, as its significance in Mathews County recreation continued well into the 1970s and beyond.

Donk's Theatre (Motion Picture) History:

Born in early 1904, W. C. Dunton, whose nickname was "Donk," was a slight-built man with a big "can-do" attitude. He was a street car driver in Hampton, Virginia, where Mathews County native, Mary Benston, had found a job. She happened to rent an apartment on the street where Mr. Dunton operated his street car. They met and married and by early 1936 had moved to Mathews County. In late 1936, they were operating Donk's Bar-B-Q just to the west of the current site of Donk's Theatre and approximately 50 feet from where the front door of Donk's Theatre would come to be. It was a success from the beginning, and became one of the most popular gathering places in the Tidewater area of southeast Virginia. It was the first drive-in barbeque in the tri-county area (Mathews, Middlesex, and Gloucester) to have large speakers installed outside the building which blared out country music constantly during operating hours. The small barbeque building was expanded twice during the time that Mr. Dunton operated it, in order to accommodate the growing number of customers.<sup>iii</sup>

In July 1946, Mr. W. C. Dunton and his wife, Mary Dunton, made an announcement that a new theatre would be built in the Hudgins community of Mathews County known as Chimney Corner. The couple built the 504-



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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page   5  

---

seat theatre on property they already owned which also was the site of their home, their appliance store (Dunton's Home Appliances) and the one and only Donk's Bar-B-Q.<sup>iv</sup>

An article from the Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal, dated June 5, 1947, lauds the "remarkable development" of the "town" of Hudgins during the mid-1940s, with a great acceleration in 1947 by the organization of Chimney Corner, Incorporated. This organization, headed by R. T. Whitney and P. C. Dillehay, and including W. C. Dunton, established a group of business enterprises designed to stimulate the growth and development of the neighborhood. By the mid-40s, this small group of dedicated businessmen was operating a modern service station and a Pontiac dealership. The MGM Gas Company, so named because it served Mathews, Gloucester and Middlesex Counties with bottled gas, was up and running and the old Bennett store building had been rejuvenated to house a complete stock of gas ranges, refrigerators, radios, auto accessories, hardware and household appliances. There was also Foster Garage, operated by Allen and Roland L. Foster, Jr., which sold Dodge and Plymouth Automobiles, and repaired all makes and models of cars and The Chimney Corner Tea Room, operated by Mrs. Boyd Dixon, which was one of the most popular eating places in the area. Buck's Service Station (operated by S. C. Hutson), was added to that as well as U.G. Dillehay's grocery store and E. L. Billups' shoe repair and awning shop.<sup>v</sup>

When the Chimney Corner group began to announce their plans for development, Mr. Dunton advised that he would soon start construction of a new appliance store building, followed by a new theatre. The store building was completed after a hard struggle during which Donk laid many concrete blocks himself. It was well stocked with all sorts of home appliances, from can openers to refrigerators. Later, when Donk was heavily involved in the construction of the theatre, he sold the Dunton Home Appliance business to Arnold S. (Jimmy) Hudgins. He had previously sold the barbeque business to Mr. Norman O. Sutton, who operated it with much success as "Sutt's."<sup>vi</sup> Donk's Theatre was the second movie projection theatre built in Mathews County, but the first of its kind in the small community of Hudgins. In December of 1930, Mr. G. S. Marchant, a local businessman, opened the Westville Theatre on Main Street in Mathews, just across the street from the county courthouse. It was the first sound movie house in the county. In 1936, Bob Bertschy and his wife, Helen, moved to Mathews from New Jersey and bought the Westville Theatre from Mr. Marchant. They renamed the theatre "The Be-Jo Theatre" after their two daughters, Betty Lou and JoAnne, and continued to operate it until 1949. The Be-Jo Theatre was soon the center of Mathews' night life. "On Saturday nights in Mathews, there would a line stretching around the corner," Bertschy recalled in an interview with the local paper in May of 1973. "There were so many people you had to push your way down the street. People would come from Gloucester and Middlesex as well as Mathews because the movies we showed were tops. None of the stuff you see nowadays. They were much better and cleaner than today's film. All of the bad words were cut out of the films by a censor board, and you couldn't even show a revolver in a movie on Sundays." By 1949 a competitive movie house (Donk's Theatre) had opened in Hudgins and televisions were becoming an addition to every home. Bertschy closed his theatre in 1949.<sup>vii</sup>

Local lore has it that the Be-Jo Theatre, which was located in downtown Mathews approximately 3 miles from the site of Donk's Theatre, banned Donk's son, "Bud," from attending that theatre because he and his friend, John Dixon, shot peas from a pea shooter against the tin ceiling of the building during a movie. In a recent interview with John Dixon, who was the first employee of Donk's Theatre (he was hired to be the popcorn popper long before the building was completed), he reminisced that plastic had just become attainable and one could go across the street to Sibley's Store and buy a handful of very small, hard peas and a plastic straw for 5 cents. A number of kids would buy these and go into the Be-Jo Theatre. The peas made an awful noise on the tin ceiling and then fell on the patrons. One Saturday night when Bud Dunton and John Dixon were heavily

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page   6  

---

engaged in pea shooting against the tin ceiling, they were ushered outside and told not to return--ever. For sometime, the Duntons had made it a habit to attend the Be-Jo Theatre every Monday night and the next Monday night the boys returned with Mr. and Mrs. Dunton, who were very good friends with the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Bertschy. They were told that the boys were banned from the theatre by the ticket salesman and the ticket taker, but Mr. Dunton said he would take care of it. When the sheriff came and ushered the boys out of the building, Mr. Dunton comforted his son by saying, "Never mind. I'll build you a theatre," and he did. Still, the Bertschy and Dunton families remained good friends, attending the same church and even bowling together. There never seemed to be any obvious animosity between them. The Be-Jo Theatre was smaller than Donk's Theatre, with a seating capacity of approximately 300. The screen itself was much smaller than the one at Donk's Theatre. The Be-Jo Theatre had upholstered seats only in the rear of the building for the adults and wooden benches for the young people and children toward the front.<sup>viii</sup>

On June 9, 1947, after almost two years of frustrations common in the business of construction, W. C. Dunton and Mary Dunton opened to the public the grandest commercial building in Mathews County, which Mr. Dunton proudly named after himself. The large screen, the comfortable upholstered seats, the modern restroom facilities; the heating and cooling systems, the projection room and sound equipment; and last, but not least by any means, the acoustic materials used, were the finest available.<sup>ix</sup>

By contrast, when Mr. Dunton built Donk's Theatre he was determined to provide the best in comfort and entertainment to his theatre's patrons and installed the latest in affordable air conditioning--two clutch-operated squirrel cage circulation fans, approximately 5 feet square, that drew air into the building and circulated it. Additional information about the construction of the building yields that it combined cinder block and cement block construction, finished in a paint job of white and cream with a seating capacity of 504. The cost of the facility was \$40,000.00 upon its completion: \$22,000 was expended for the building construction and \$18,000 was expended for theatre equipment. The International Seat Corporation provided 504 theatre chairs, blowers (air conditioning) were provided by United States Air Conditioning Corporation, with the heating system provided by Elmer H. Brient and Sons and the projection machines were purchased from DeVry Corporation.<sup>x</sup>

Donk's Theatre was constructed in approximately 13 months during 1946 and into early 1947. Plagued by delays in construction and delivery of equipment and other vicissitudes of the early Post-war era, Mr. Dunton opened his new theatre, possessively named with pardonable pride after himself, in the Hudgins (Chimney Corner) section of Mathews, County.<sup>xi</sup> Its opening expanded the commercial business of the area as well as provided entertainment opportunities for residents and tourists alike, and essentially moved the entertainment center of Mathews County from Main Street Mathews to Hudgins. With Donk's Bar-B-Q, and Donk's Theatre, along with other businesses which had relocated from Main Street Mathews, the traffic and business was booming, particularly on weekends. This significantly decreased the business done on Main Street.<sup>xii</sup>

Donk's Theatre opened for its first showing on Monday, June 9, 1947, with great success and fanfare. The opening of the theatre was reported to have a full house. The main lobby of the theatre was filled with many vases and baskets of flowers sent by friends of "Donk" to wish him well in his endeavor. The movie on that opening night was "Tomorrow is Forever" starring Claudette Colbert, Orson Welles and George Brent "in glorious black and white" (quoting from a movie poster announcing the event).<sup>xiii</sup>

When Mr. and Mrs. Dunton's only son, Bud, returned from military duties after the Korean War, they added a store front addition to the north and in line with the front door of Donk's Theatre. This building was known as Bud's Sport Shop, where their son, "Bud" Dunton, sold guns and ammunition and operated a pool hall. Today

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page   7  

---

the buildings on the north side of the entrance to Donk's Theatre house a United States Post Office and a church.<sup>xiv</sup> Donk's Theatre continued to be operated by Mr. and Mrs. Dunton until Mr. Dunton's death in June of 1968. Mrs. Dunton, known affectionately as "Miss Mary," continued to operate the movie theatre until October 1970.

Motion Picture Theatre Context:

Americans began enjoying motion pictures in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century motion picture viewing was the most popular mode of entertainment throughout the United States. During the 1920s, in big cities like New York and Chicago, movie theatres were being built in a very decorative style with Classical ornamentation designed after the fine opera houses of Europe and were centers of entertainment that appeared to cater to not only the rich but to all people.<sup>xv</sup>

In the late 1700s, Mathews County was primarily a shipbuilding community. As shipbuilding declined, agricultural pursuits and seafood harvesting were primary occupations. Like nearby Gloucester, Mathews is known for daffodils, first shipped by steamboat, then by refrigerated truck through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Mathews families had been self-sufficient of necessity until electricity and cars permitted new occupations and mobility.<sup>xvi</sup>

By the 1930s and 1940s, Mathews County was a quiet, rural area on the Chesapeake Bay made up primarily of a few boat builders, commercial watermen and farmers and their families. Located approximately 90 miles from Richmond and 55 miles (and one ferry ride across the York River) from Newport News and Hampton, Virginia, entertainment included school sponsored plays and musicals, church socials, pool halls, a bowling alley, horseback riding, baseball and football games, and family outings near the Bay.<sup>xvii</sup>

The people of Mathews have always loved to be entertained and from 1914 until 1941 they flocked to attend "The James Adams Floating Theatre whenever it arrived at Fitchett's Wharf near Moon Post Office in Mathews (approximately 8 miles south of the site where Donk's Theatre would be built). The floating theatre was an important cultural resource for people in small coastal towns. It inspired the novel "Showboat," which became the Broadway play in 1927.<sup>xviii</sup>

Based on an interview with Vernon Christopher Hudgins, Jr., a 92-year-old retired waterman who has lived in Mathews all his life, long before any movie theatre was built in Mathews County, residents looked forward to the arrival of "Barker's Tent," a traveling silent film show operated by a Mr. Barker. Mr. Barker showed movies in a tent and moved his tent from place to place within the county for a period of several weeks each summer, to accommodate the people of the area. Mr. Hudgins remembers that Mr. Barker set up his tent on what is now Route 14 near a store building located between what is now Beulah United Methodist Church and the old Bavon Post Office Building, approximately eight miles south of Mathews Court House. Mr. Hudgins remembers there was music provided but he could not remember the source. He remembers the most popular movies were westerns and that in the New Point area of the County of Mathews (where Mr. Hudgins lived) it was attended mostly by men and children.<sup>xix</sup> By July of 1919, there were regular showings of movies at the Marchant Hotel and the Virginia Hotel located on Main Street in Mathews.<sup>xx</sup> A little more than ten years later in 1929, Mr. G. B. Marchant built and opened the Westville Theatre near his hotel on Main Street.<sup>xxi</sup>

In 1936, a New Jersey native, Mr. Bob Bertschy and his wife, Helen, came to live in Mathews. He was a staunch Democrat and a personal friend to Franklin D. Roosevelt. He had unsuccessfully vied for a seat in the

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page   8  

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New York legislature, but prior to that he had spent twenty years working with various motion picture companies such as United Artists, as a sales manager. Ten years after the first "Talkie" was made by Warner Brothers, the enterprising businessman bought the Westville Theatre on Main Street in Mathews and renamed it after his two daughters (Betty and JoAnne). He began operating The Be-Jo Theatre in 1936. The Be-Jo Theatre was soon the center of Mathews' night life. For the admission price of 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for children, Mathews residents nightly filled the old Be-Jo Theatre. With a different movie showing almost every night, theatre-goers viewed classics like "Gone With the Wind" and "Yankee Doodle Dandy," and saw stars like Shirley Temple, Betty Grable and Wallace Beery. "Those were wonderful days" said Mr. Bertschy in an interview with a local newspaper, "There were a few fishermen who, when they couldn't pay the admission price, promised a catch of fish the next day." Using all the resourcefulness of an advertising agent, Bertschy transformed his theatre into something of a community house. "On some nights we had amateur nights in the theatre. Local businessmen would sing on the stage, play the banjo and we even had a quiz program before they were popular. I can remember the night when Sam Hudgins sang "It's A Sin To Tell A Lie" and the Smith girls were always there."<sup>xxii</sup> John Dixon, a 77-year-old Mathews native remembers that the Be-Jo, which he attended often, was always clean and neat but it was not a showplace. It had a beautiful tin ceiling and upholstered seats in the back for adults. Those seats were small and not very comfortable, but there was always good entertainment. Mr. Bertschy installed new sound equipment in The Be-Jo in 1937 to better accommodate the "talkies."<sup>xxiii</sup>

After the opening of Donk's Theatre in 1947, with its comparable plush interior, "air conditioning system" and modern restrooms, crowds at The Be-Jo began to dwindle and the small community of Hudgins, just three miles from Main Street in Mathews, became the entertainment center of Mathews County.<sup>xxiv</sup> The building which housed The Be-Jo Theatre still stands, but it has undergone significant renovations during the years and at present there is nothing that remains which can be readily identified with the movie house.

In July of 1946, Wilton C. Dunton and his wife, Mary, announced that they were going to build a modern theatre with all up-to-date appointments and conveniences at Hudgins and that construction had already begun.<sup>xxv</sup> Although modern air conditioning had been introduced in the 1920s in Chicago and New York City,<sup>xxvi</sup> it was still not considered economically feasible in Mathews County in the 1940s. Although Donk's Theatre was advertised as air conditioned when it opened, the building was actually equipped with two large fans, 5 feet across, which drew air into the building from large louvered openings in the sides of the building, 12 feet above the ground. It was an effective cooling method and it continued to be the only means of cooling this theatre until the installation of modern air conditioning in 2009. 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 before they had most often closed.

When Donk's Theatre was built in 1946/1947, the more clean-cut streamlined styles and trends had emerged with some Art-Deco touches. This was primarily because of the expense involved in building and maintaining the more ornate theatres. In addition, the adding of sound to the movies themselves required the consideration of acoustic materials and designs when planning construction.<sup>xxvii</sup>

As was the custom in that day for many rural entertainment establishments, Donk's Theatre was a motion picture theatre which allowed only white patrons. There were no provisions made for the black population to enter the establishment. The closest theatre available to the black population was The Star Theatre in adjacent Gloucester County, which opened in 1934.<sup>xxviii</sup>

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page   9  

---

Statistics show that motion picture attendance grew to an all-time high during the mid-1930s through the mid-1940s. In rural towns, more neighborhood theatres were constructed which enabled patrons to travel shorter distances to "see the show." In the 1950s, a new drive-in theatre form rose in popularity due to the availability of the automobile and the fact that families could attend without having to hire a babysitter. It also gave more privacy to families as they sat comfortably in their own vehicles. Largely due to the number of cars sold and owned in the 1940s, drive-in motion picture theatres were quite popular through the 1960s.<sup>xxx</sup> Competing with motion picture theatres in the 1950s was the invention of the television and the commercial distribution of television sets to the American public. Motion picture theatre attendance declined in the period after World War II and concurrently, motion picture houses closed. The 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.<sup>xxx</sup>

Donk's Theatre continued to be operated by Mr. and Mrs. Dunton until Mr. Dunton's death in June of 1968. Mrs. Dunton, known affectionately as "Miss Mary", continued to operate the movie theatre until October 1970. An ad from a local newspaper read, "We will close October 3<sup>rd</sup> until Spring," but the theatre was never reopened as a motion picture theatre.<sup>xxxi</sup> Miss Mary told friends that because of low attendance, she was only able to get low-rated films, too risqué for her taste and that she would rather close the theatre than bring that entertainment to Mathews. The last movie shown at Donk's Theatre was on Friday and Saturday, October 2-3, 1970, entitled, "From Nashville With Music." Ironically, only five short years later, the Smith Family of Mathews reopened the theatre as a country music concert hall. With few change, the Smith family has, for the past 34 years, continued to operate Donk's Theatre as a country music venue.

Donk's Theatre is a rare example of a highly intact rural town vernacular style theatre with wonderful Art Deco features, erected during the height of theatre construction in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Completed in 1947, it was a sole proprietorship owned and operated by Wilton. C. "Donk" Dunton. The building is reflective of the development of motion picture theatres in the United States during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and an excellent example of the type that was built in a rural region of Virginia.

Donk's Theatre (Country Music) History:

From the day it opened as a movie theatre, on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1947, until after the last show on Saturday night, October 3, 1970, twenty-three years later, Donk's Theatre faithfully served the community as the entertainment center. Mr. Dunton not only showed films, but also brought in a country-music star now and then. Two of the most popular of the day were Tex Ritter and Grandpa Jones.<sup>xxxii</sup> Oddly enough, the title of that last movie was "From Nashville With Music!" Then it sat – unused – for the next five years. It was then that Jimmy Smith, a young Mathews County native, began to realize a dream he had been nurturing for a long, long time. A family partnership was formed to start the business and the Smith's first Country Jamboree was held in the old building on June 14, 1975.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

June 14, 1975, Opening Night, saw crowds at the corner at Hudgins that were well above expectations. The place was alive again and the theatre was filled to capacity and overflowing. Since that night the original name of the weekly Saturday night shows has been changed. A new sign has been put up on the marquee under Donk's name and the theater has gained a reputation far and wide as the home of "Virginia's Li'l Ole Opry."

A movie house until 1970, the old theatre, three miles from Mathews Court House on Route 198, is a country-

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page  10 

---

music landmark. As Home of Virginia's Li'l Ole Opry, Donk's is now a family theatre where native performers and touring Nashville professionals show off their talents before enthusiastic audiences. There are no alcoholic beverages sold and there are no eating or dancing facilities in the white block building, but there's candy, soft drinks, and a popcorn counter in the small lobby.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In the country music arena, Donk's Theatre hosted many of the great entertainers of the day. Ernest Tubb and his Texas Troubadours performed live on September 12, 1975; The Kitty Wells Show, which included country music greats Johnny Wright and Bobby Wright appeared on January 9, 1976 and by late 1975, Donk's Theatre had attained such a good reputation in Nashville that Dolly Parton's agent called to ask if Dolly could come perform at Donk's because she had just had an operation on her throat and needed a small venue to try her voice in her "first time out" after the operation. Dolly Parton took the stage at Donk's for two sold-out performances in October of 1976. At what should have been the close of her second show, she just kept on singing while her manager paced the floor in the back room, worrying that she might overtax her throat. Finally, he threatened to come and get her if she didn't stop singing and she came off stage stating, "I just couldn't help it. It felt and sounded so good out there!" So, Donk's Theatre presented the very famous Dolly Parton followed by performances by many country-music giants. Meanwhile, members of the Smith family performed, worked lights, cleaned, wired and rewired, photographed, covered seats, installed carpet, painted and sang, sang, sang, their way through the years.

The building itself now has a new owner who has already begun to restore and improve the facilities, including the addition of air conditioning! Plans are to return the building and facilities at Donk's Theatre to its original "splendor."

Today, the business is run in much the same way as when it started. Making good music and proving great entertainment remain the goals of Virginia's Li'l Ole Opry at Donk's Theatre. Producing some 22 shows per year with a regular cast (including the band, of 15 or 16 performers), Donk's is a labor of love for the Smith Family and the cast of Virginia's Li'l Ole Opry.

Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> *New Theatre Opens at Chimney Corner, The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA. 5 June 1947, p. 1.

<sup>ii</sup> *Theatre Catalog 1947-1948*. (Sixth Annual Edition), Jay Emanuel Publications, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, p.108-109

<sup>iii</sup> John Waverly Dixon, Interview, Aug 18, 2008. Recorded and transcribed by Joanna Nix, typescript on file at home of Josephine Thorpe, Mathews, Virginia, no page number.

<sup>iv</sup> *Theatre Catalog 1947-1948*. p. 108-109

<sup>v</sup> *New Theatre Opens at Chimney Corner, The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA. 5 June 1947, p.1.

<sup>vi</sup> *New Theatre Opens at Chimney Corner, The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA. 5 June 1947, p. 1.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page  11 

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- vii *Heyday of Once Popular Be-Jo Theatre Recalled by Former Owner, The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette Journal*, Gloucester, VA, 17 May 1973, p. 3
- viii Dixon Interview, no page number.
- ix Lewis, Sara E., *Images of Mathews County*, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, SC, Chicago, IL, Portsmouth, NH, San Francisco, CA. 2007 p. 114.
- x *Theatre Catalog 1947-1948*. p.108-109.
- xi *Theatre Catalog 1947-1948*. P 108-109.
- xii *Business Drop in Courthouse Since Be-Jo Closed, The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA, January 1950.
- xiii Advertisement for "Donk's Theatre". *The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA. 5 June 1947, p. 6.
- xiv Dixon Interview, no page number.
- xv Naylor, David, "Great American Movie Theatres," (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1987), 15.
- xvi Lewis, Sara E. "Images of Mathews County," p. 8.
- xvii Brooks, Catherine C. "Didn't Know We Were Poor" (West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing Co.) 2007.
- xviii Lewis, Sara E., "Images of Mathews County," p. 71.
- xix Vernon Christopher Hudgins, Jr., Interview, August 31, 2009, Recorded and transcribed by Joanna Nix, typescript on file at home of Josephine Thorpe, Mathews, Virginia, no page number
- xx *Regular Showings at Marchant Hotel, The Mathews Journal*, Mathews, VA, July 1919.
- xxi *G. S. Marchant Opens The Westville, The Mathews Journal*, Mathews, VA, December 1930.
- xxii *Heyday of Once Popular Be-Jo Theatre Recalled By Former Owner, The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette Journal*, Gloucester, VA, 17 May 1973, p. 3.
- xxiii Dixon Interview, no page number
- xxiv *Business Drops in Court House Since Be-Jo Closed,* The Gazette-Journal, Gloucester, VA. January 1950,
- xxv *New Theatre Started, The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA. 4 July 1946, p.1.
- xxvi Naylor, David, "Great American Theatres" (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1989, p.15.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   8   Page  12 

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Herzog, Charlotte, "*The Movie Palace and the Theatrical Sources of Its Architectural Style*," *Cinema Journal*. Vol 20, No. 2, Spring 1981. p. 16.

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Star Theatre for Blacks Opens*, *Gloucester Gazette*, Gloucester, VA, 17 May 1934. p. 1.

<sup>xxix</sup> Melnick, Ross and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A new Look at Classic Movie Theatres*. St Paul, MN: MBI 2004 15-07

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<sup>xxxi</sup> Advertisement for Donk's Theatre. *The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA. 1 Oct 1970, p. 6.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Theatre Turning Into Music Hall*. *The Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, Gloucester, VA. 12 June 1975. p. 1.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Lewis, Sara, "*Images of Mathews County*, p.114

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Rowe, Marjorie Webb, *Pickin' and Singin' Bring Visitors to Bay*, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, 31 January 1988, p. K-3.



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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   9   Page  13 

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES:

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section   10   Page  14 

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

**Verbal Boundary Description:** The boundary of the nominated property corresponds to Mathews County tax parcel number 16A 240.

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary includes the property historically associated with Donk's Theatre. There are no secondary resources on the property.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

Section Photographs Page 15

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**PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION**

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are of:

**DONK'S THEATRE**

Location: Mathews County, Virginia

VDHR File Number: 057-00069

Photographer: James S. Sease, Esq.

Date of Photographs: December 4, 2008

Negatives are stored at the VDHR Archives in Richmond, VA

SUBJECT: Second Floor Original Movie Projectors

VIEW: north

NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre 125

PHOTO: 1 of 9

SUBJECT: Front of theatre building and marquee

VIEW: northeast

NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre 122

PHOTO: 1 of 9

SUBJECT: Close-up of marquee

VIEW: northeast

NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre

PHOTO: 3 of 9

SUBJECT: View of stage

VIEW: east

NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre DSC 0179

PHOTO: 4 of 9

SUBJECT: Base of aisle seating

VIEW: north

NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre 128

PHOTO: 5 of 9

SUBJECT: Art Deco style lighting

VIEW: south

NEG. NO.: Donk's Theater 129

PHOTO: 6 of 9

SUBJECT: View of Auditorium from south side entrance

VIEW: northwest

NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre 130

PHOTO: 7 of 9

SUBJECT: View of Auditorium from southwest entrance

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Donk's Theatre  
Mathews County, Virginia**

**Section Photographs Page 16**

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VIEW: north east  
NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre 126  
PHOTO: 8 of 9

SUBJECT: View of Lobby Area  
VIEW: northwest  
NEG. NO.: Donk's Theatre 127  
PHOTO: 9 of 9

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UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

COMMONWEALTH  
DIVISION OF MINES

5759 1/2 SW  
(WILTON)

76° 22' 30" W  
37° 30' N  
4151000m N

379000m E  
15 MI. TO U. S. 17  
COBBS CREEK (1.7 MI.)



Dave's FILE  
MATHEWS Pt. VA  
DNE 10F 057-0069  
MATHEWS QUART  
1927 NAD  
Zone 18  
382702 Easting  
4148000 Northing

1:24,000  
13 MI.  
12.4 MI.



# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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December 21, 2016

Mr. Paul Loether  
Chief, National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks Programs  
National Park Service 2280  
National Register of Historic Places  
1201 I ("Eye") Street, N.W.  
Washington D.C. 20005

### **Re: Delisting of Previously Registered Property of Donk's Theatre, Mathews County, Virginia**

Dear Mr. Loether:

The enclosed material is being sent for your review and approval for the delisting of this previously listed property (NRHP 1/28/2011). This request was approved by the Virginia State Review Board on September 15, 2016.

The Donk's Theatre was listed for its local significance in the areas of Entertainment/Recreation and Architecture. At the time of listing, the less-than-one-acre property included only the 1946-1947 theatre building, which was an example of a vernacular commercial building with Art Deco flourishes as well as an original marquee with neon lights. During a snowstorm in January 2016, the theatre's roof collapsed from the weight of snow; the collapse also damaged perimeter walls. Inspection of the building after the storm revealed that the remaining walls lacked structural integrity and the locality's building inspector required that the remaining structural elements be removed. A photograph of the damaged building is included herein.

Additionally, an aerial map showing the property prior to its demolition is attached and includes location coordinates. The property owner has elected to build a new theatre on the site of the demolished building. Due to the rebuilding work, as well as the fact that the original building was just 60 years old at the time of its loss, the property is not believed to retain any archaeological potential.

On September 15, 2016, the Virginia State Review Board recommended that the Virginia State Historic Preservation Officer request that the Keeper remove the Donk's Theatre property from the National Register of Historic Places. On the same date, the Virginia Board of Historic Resources removed the property from the Virginia Landmarks Register.

Sincerely,

Lena Sweeten McDonald  
National/State Register Historian

Enclosures

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