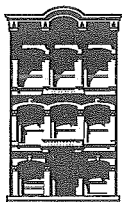


MID ATLANTIC HISTORIC BUILDINGS SURVEY

THE PARK THEATER
WILMINGTON, DELAWARE



CENTER FOR
HISTORIC
ARCHITECTURE AND
DESIGN



MID-ATLANTIC HISTORIC BUILDINGS SURVEY

PARK THEATER

305 North Union Street
City of Wilmington
New Castle County, Delaware

By

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With

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Photographs by David L. Ames

Center for Historic Architecture and Design
University of Delaware
Newark, Delaware
1999

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I. Site Information

Site Name: Park Theater
CRS Number: N-10328

Location: 305 North Union Street
City of Wilmington
New Castle County, Delaware

Date of Field Work: June—July 1999

Type of Documentation: Level II: Partial Intensive
Annotated field notes
Measured Drawings (2)
4 x 5 black and white photos (10)
Architectural data sheet

Threat: The Park Theater is slated for demolition.

Significance: Built in 1919-1920, the Park Theater represents the rapid rise and eventual decline of motion picture theatres in urban communities. It is significant as it denotes the architectural transition from storefront screening rooms to large theatres designed for motion pictures and the patrons who frequented them. This transition, in turn, marks the popularity and permanence of the new art form during the early and mid-twentieth century.

II. Architectural Description

The theater is made up of two blocks. The smaller block in front is 29 feet long and 32 feet wide and houses the lobby on the first floor and the offices and projection booth on the second floor. The larger rear block is 103 feet long and 32 feet wide and houses the one-story auditorium with a high ceiling. The theater is a three-bay building with a front façade of brown brick. Exterior detailing on the front-east elevation, facing Union Street, is stylized neo-classical, with pairs of pilasters projecting forward on each end of the facade. The pilasters are not of a particular order, but have a recessed panel in the brick shaft and decorated molded wood capitals. Two molded wood cornices run across the front façade above the pilasters. Other original elements consist of a canopy above the entrance (currently covered in aluminum) and three arched windows with brick voussoirs on the second floor of the front-east elevation. The original vertical sign for the Park has been replaced with a cross. The side and rear elevations of the building (north, south and west, respectively) are red brick in a standard bond configuration.

III. Property History

The Park Theater was built in 1919-20 at 305 North Union Street in Wilmington, Delaware. Constructed by the West End Amusement Company, the Park was one of four motion picture houses built in the 1910s to serve residents of the city's west side.¹ By this time, motion pictures had ceased to be a fad and movie houses became permanent fixtures in towns and cities in America. Early storefront screening rooms gave way to theaters with the patrons' comfort in mind.² This period was one of expansion for the movie industry as new theaters specifically designed for motion pictures were built across the country and technology was improved to provide theatergoers with a better quality theater experience.³

Period I – 1920-1937: Opening on August 9, 1920, the Park Theater was managed by A. J. Belair and featured the latest motion picture equipment including a new make of screen, state-of-the-art projection equipment, a stage, orchestra pit and a \$10,000 organ. Upon Belair's departure, A. Joseph DeFiore took over the management and, along with a later owner, Wilmington Photoplay Company, was responsible for some interior improvements in the early 1930s.⁴

Original plans for the Park Theater called for a building 73 feet wide by 140 feet deep with a seating capacity of 1,100 on the first floor, and offices and a projection booth

¹ Elbert Chance, "The Motion Picture Comes to Wilmington, Part II," Delaware History, 33.

² Marjorie McNinch, The Silver Screen, Wilmington, DE: Cedar Tree Books, Ltd., 1997, 14-15.

³ Chance, "The Motion Picture Comes to Wilmington," 33.

⁴ Ibid., "Park Reopens Wednesday as Modernized Theater," Journal Every Evening, 30 September 1937, 37-38.

on the second floor.⁵ However, the theater was not built according to these specifications, as the 1927 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows a simple rectangular building with a 30 foot width fronting on Union Street. No other information is available about the original interior elements.

Period II – 1937-1967: DeFiore and Wilmington Photoplay continued to improve the theater and, in 1937, spent \$25,000 on renovations. Their intention was to turn into the Park largest and most modern independent theater in the state, if not the mid-Atlantic region. With this renovation, the Park Theater continued as a successful neighborhood theater until after World War II. When theater attendance began to decline, the Park reduced its schedule and, by 1952, had closed. But, by 1954, the theater reopened under the new ownership of Wilmington realtor Ralph Margolin and new management of Lewis Kay, a boxer and wrestler.⁶ No information is available about the theater's activities until it permanently closed in December 1967.

Because of its present high level of integrity, the exterior of the theater most likely remained the same during this period. The interior, however, was substantially altered during the 1937 renovation. This renovation included the addition of men's and women's restrooms near the lobby on the north and south elevations of the building. A small addition on the west elevation of the building, which appears on the 1948 Sanborn Map, also may have been added at this time. The seating was upgraded, with 700 new "airflow" seats. Anticipating an increase in attendance, a balcony with 300 more seats was designed, ready to be built when the new patrons materialized. New lighting was

⁵ Ibid., 51.

also added along with carpeting, air conditioning, screens with curtains, an acoustic system and the latest Simplex projection equipment. In addition to the new interior fixtures, the stage and orchestra pit were rebuilt. Interior murals by Philadelphia artist Grieco were added to the side and rear walls during this renovation.⁷

Period III – 1967-Present: Shortly after the theater closed, the building was taken over by the Revival Fellowship Church in December 1967.⁸ The building's shape was altered by the addition of wings on the north and south sides of the front-east elevation. The left wing has a sloped roof with a molded cornice and a stuccoed facade. It has three bays, with two covered window openings flanking a solid door. The right wing has a flat roof and brick facade. It has two bays, with a modern door on the left bay and a window on the right bay. These additions probably occurred after the church took over the building. Other alterations include a reconfiguration of the first floor of the east elevation. Currently, there are two double leaf casement doors on the outer bays of the first floor. A cross of contrasting brick has been added in the center bay with a semicircular brick base projecting from the front of the building. There is evidence that the ticket booth stood at this location. There is also a tile sign on the floor of the lobby with the words "Park Theatre" directly behind the ticket booth location. The front entrance originally may have been at this location and may have been relocated during the 1937 renovation. The second floor arched windows have been bricked in. A small one-over-one pane casement

⁶ McNinch, The Silver Screen, 84.

⁷ "Park Reopens Wednesday," 38.

⁸ Chance, "The Motion Picture Comes to Wilmington," 53.

window has been added in the center bay on the second floor. Directly above it hangs a cross which is perpendicular to the front façade.

Interior alterations include the addition of dropped ceilings in the lobby and auditorium and the addition of wood paneling on the auditorium walls. The seating from the 1937 renovation remains in the auditorium.

Bibliography

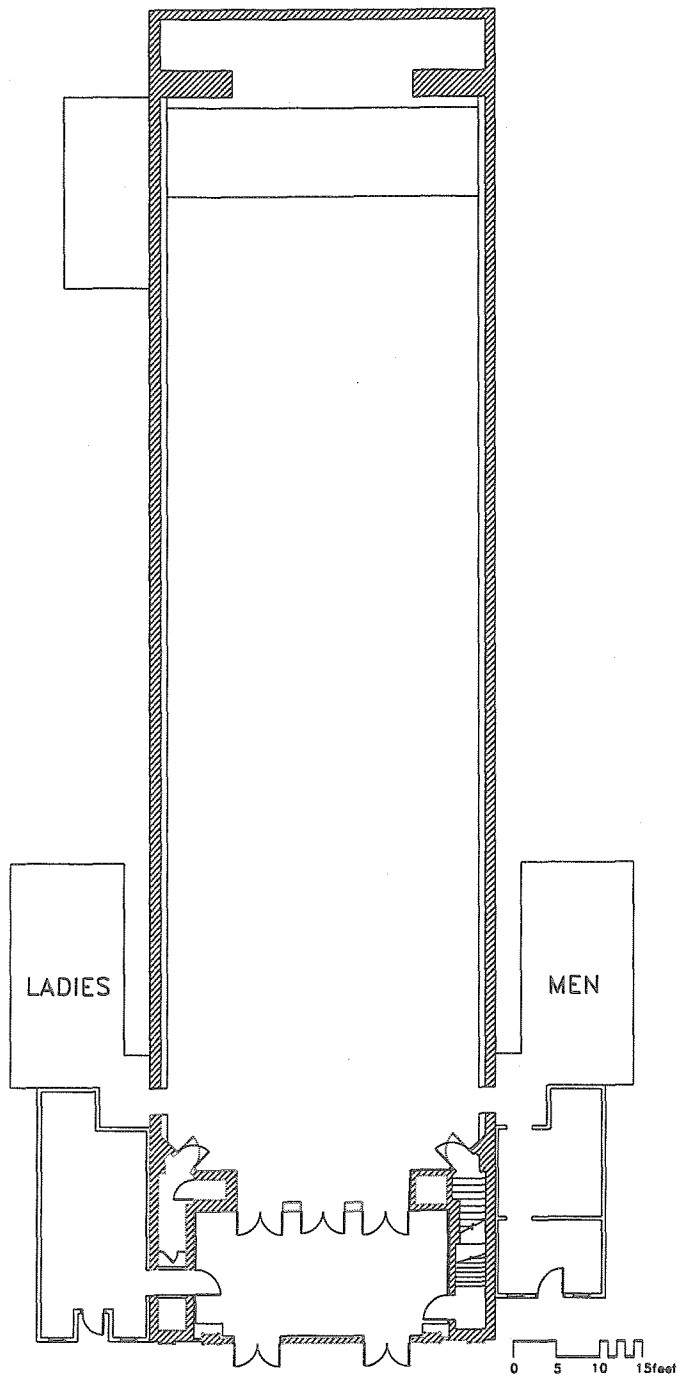
Chance, Elbert. "The Motion Picture Comes to Wilmington, Part II." Delaware History 25, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 1992): 33-57.

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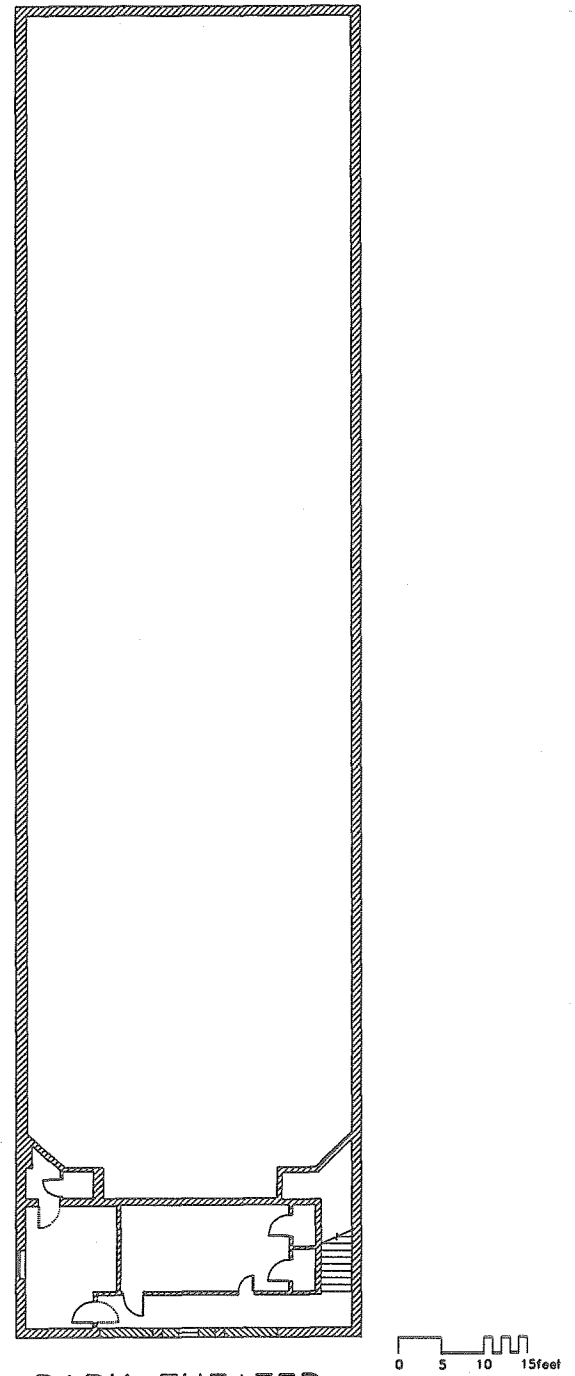
"Park Reopens Wednesday as Modernized Theater." Journal Every Evening, 30 September 1937.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, 1922, 1948.

MEASURED DRAWINGS

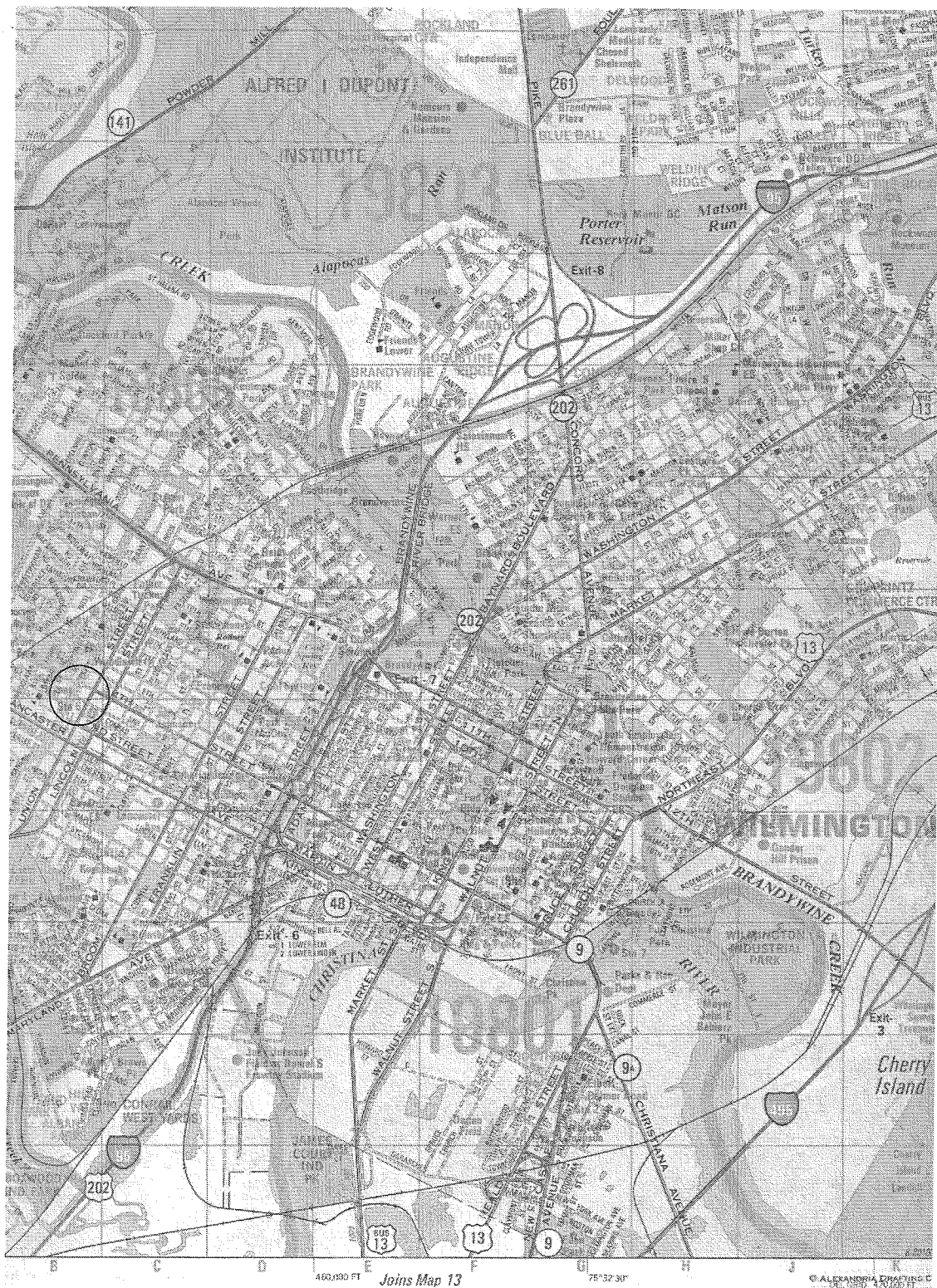


PARK THEATER
305 UNION STREET
WILMINGTON, DE

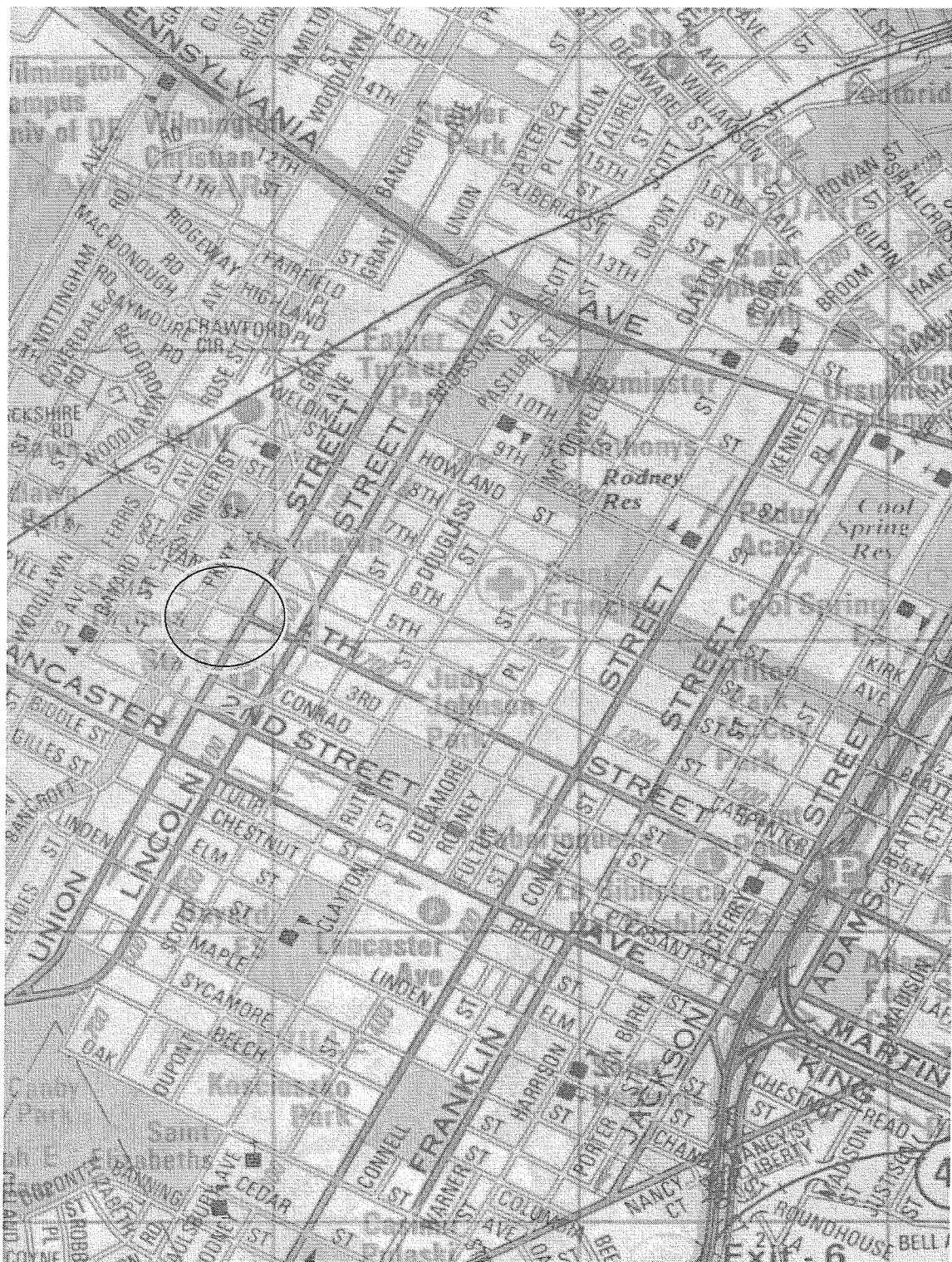


PARK THEATER
PROJECTION BOOTH

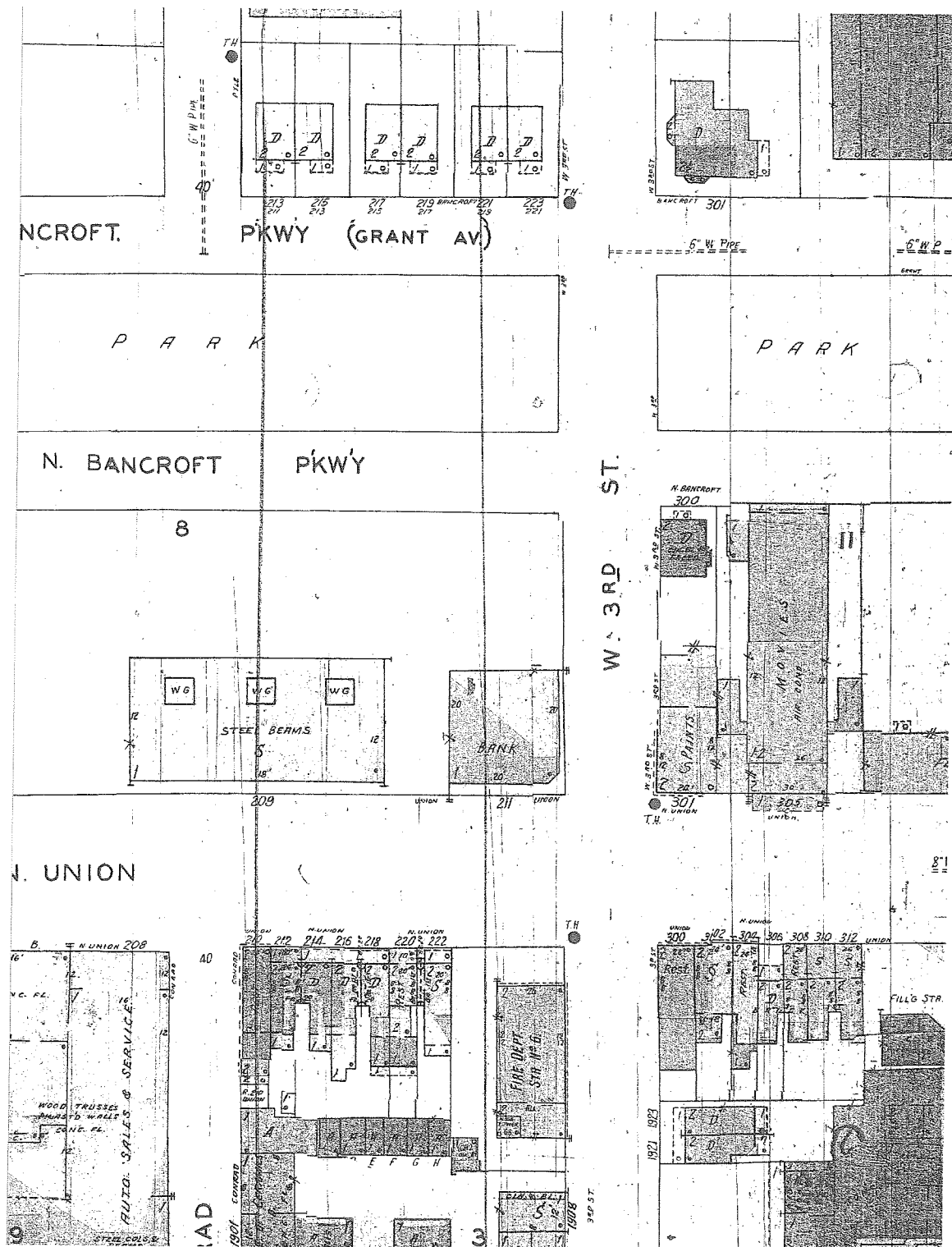
MAPS



Wilmington
ACS Map, 2000



Wilmington
ACS Map, 2000



Park Theatre
Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1948

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305 North Union Street
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CRS# N-10328

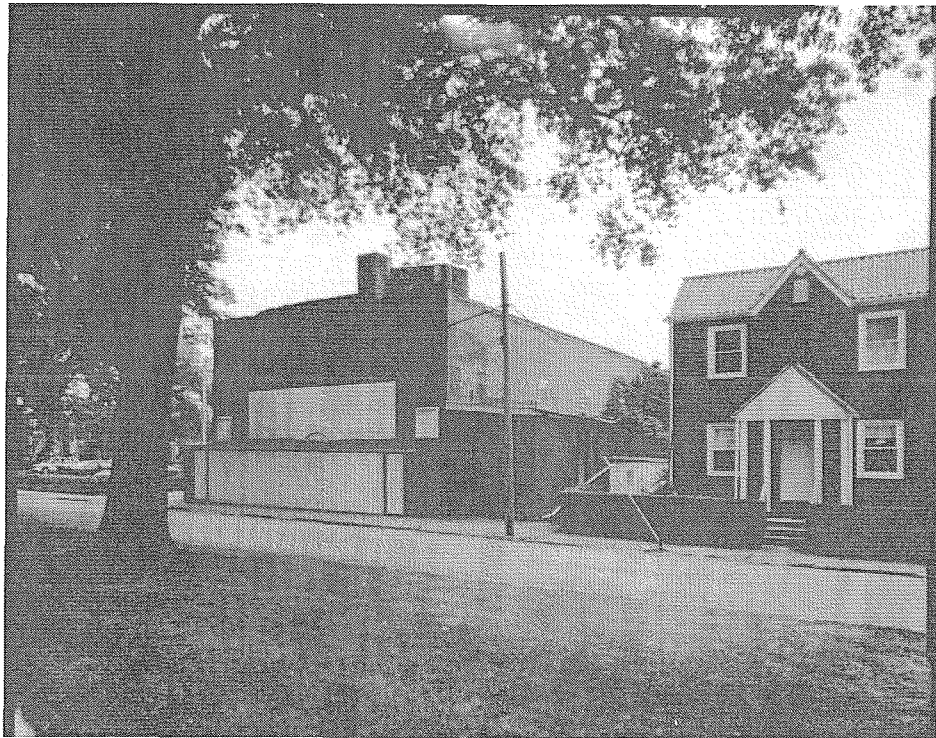
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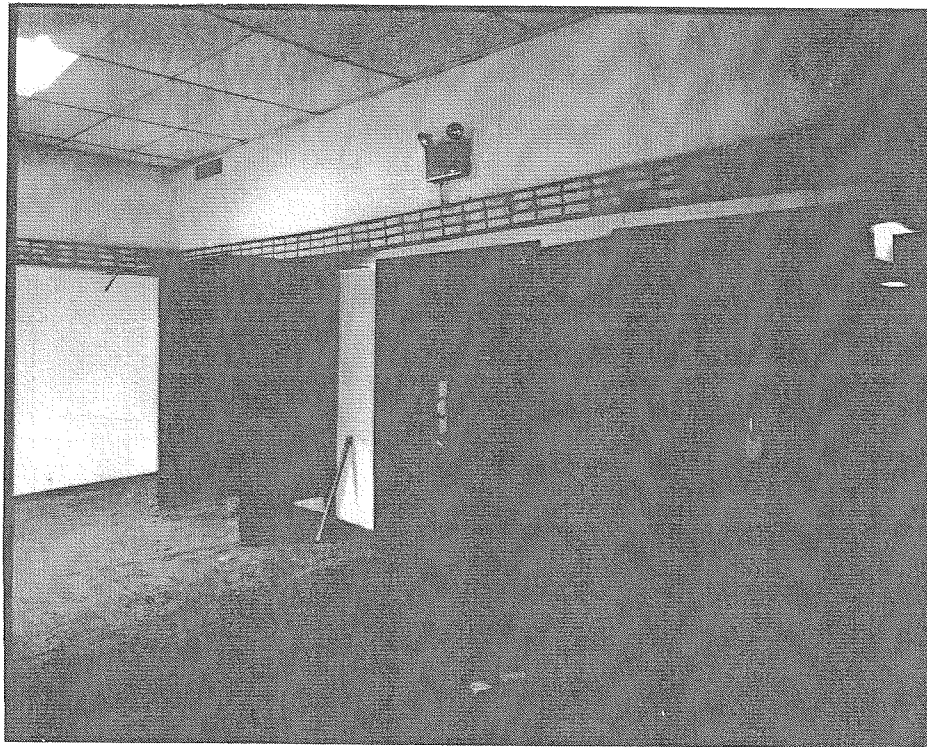
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N-10328-1 Environmental perspective of east-southeast front and
west-southwest side looking north



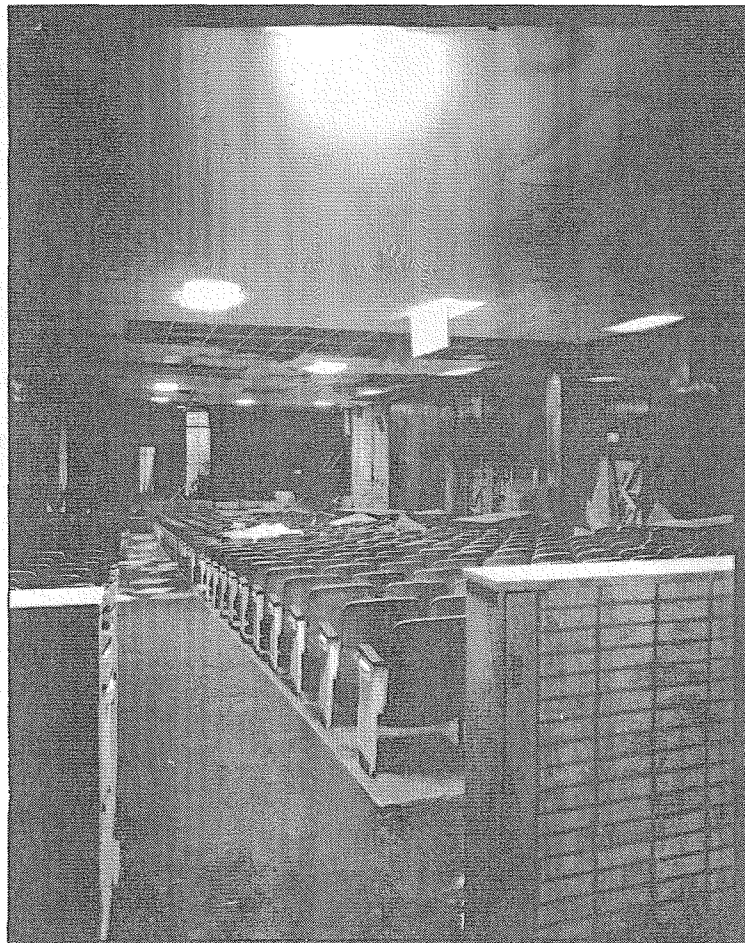
N-10328-2 Environmental perspective of west-northwest rear and
west-southwest side looking south



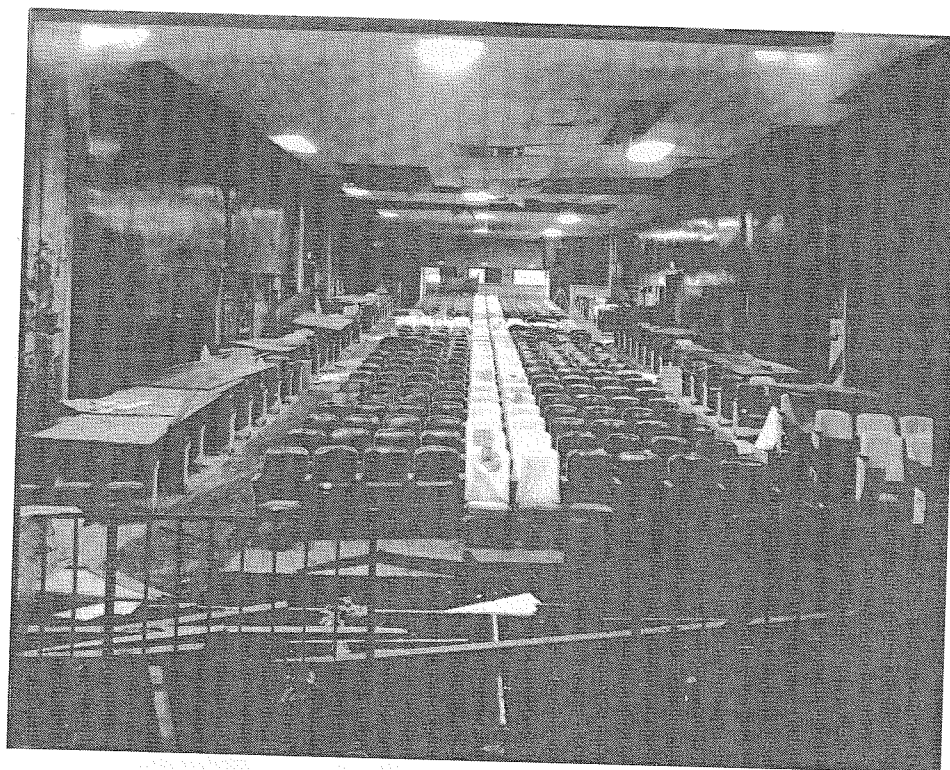
N-10328-3 First floor: view of west-northwest and west-southwest walls of lobby showing doors to theater on west wall looking west



N-10328-4 First floor: detail of tile lettering on lobby floor looking east-southeast



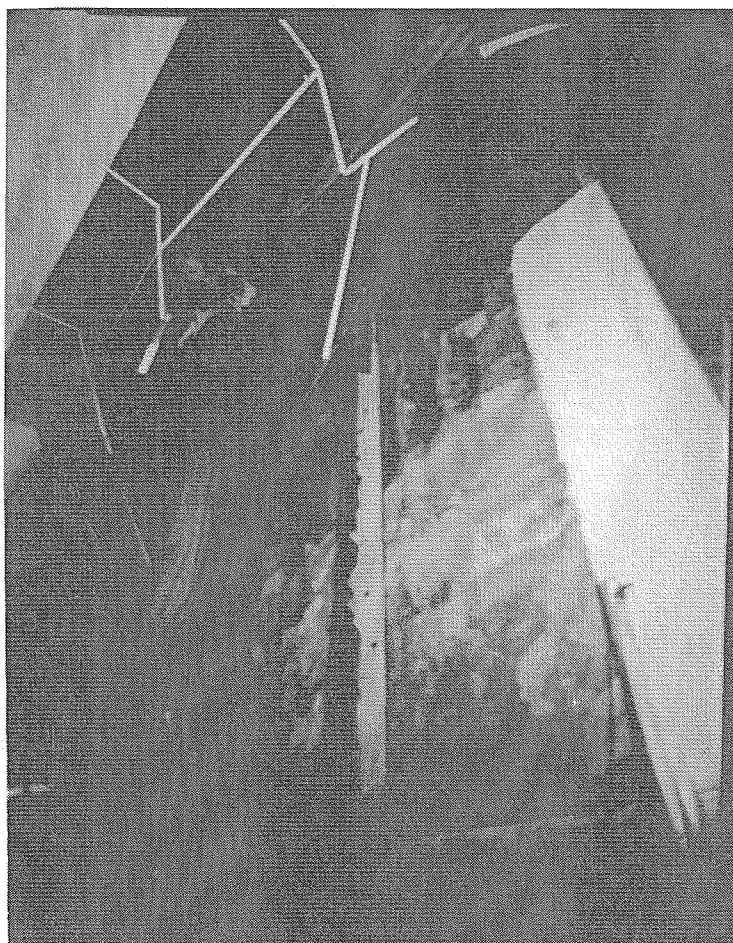
N-10328-5 First floor: view of theater auditorium from rear showing west-northwest and north-northeast wall looking east north northwest



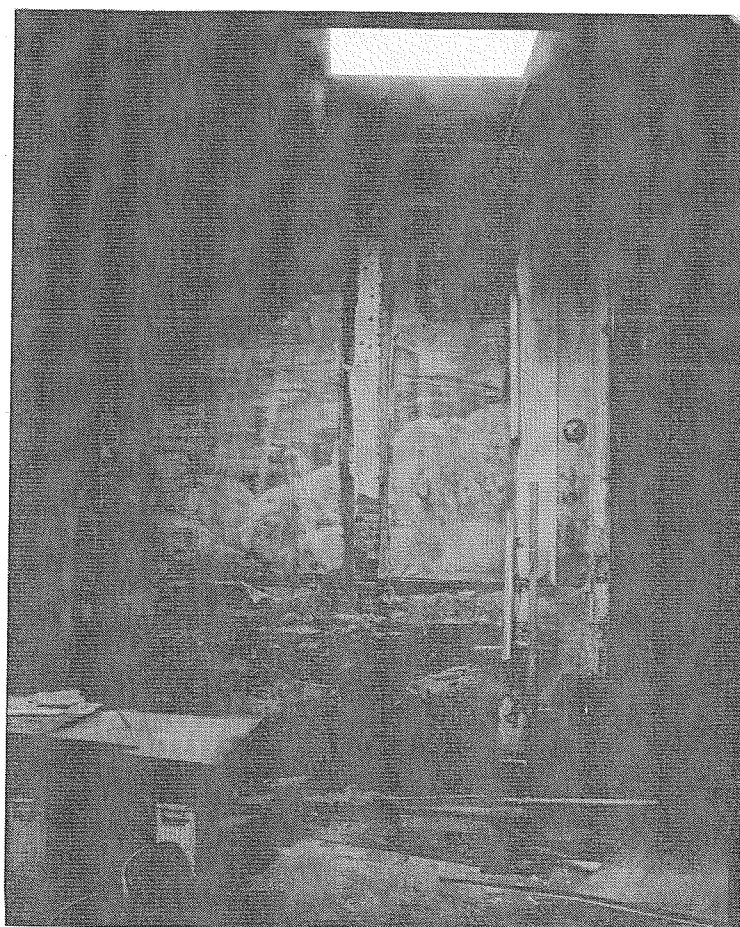
N-10328-6 First floor: view of auditorium from stage showing east-southeast walls with entry doors and west-southwest, and north-northeast walls



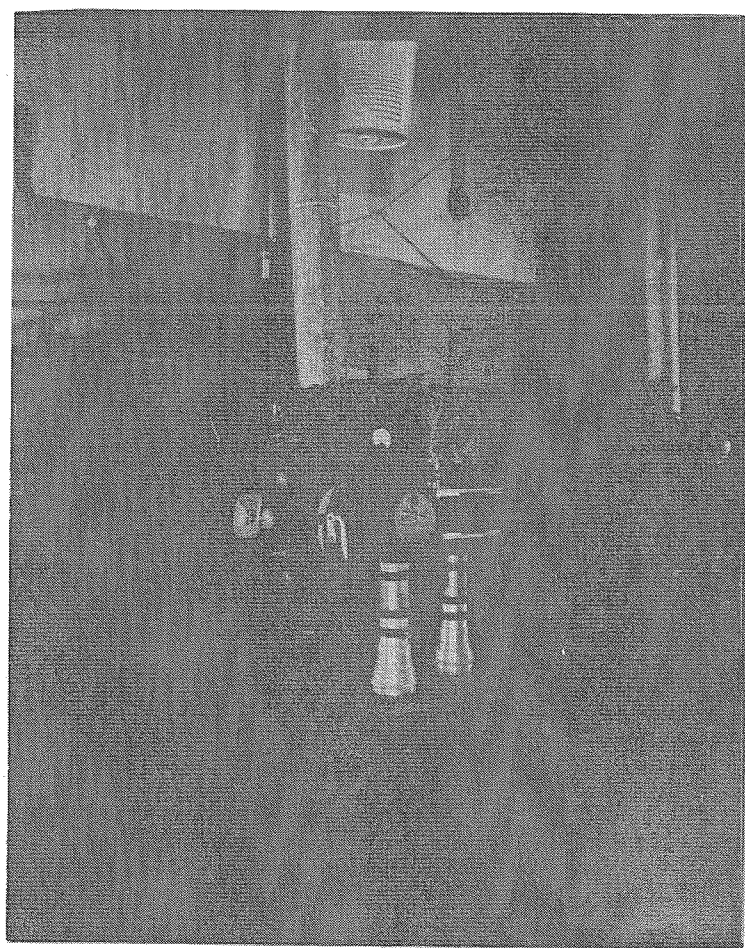
N-10328-7 First floor: view of revealed original
mural on west-southwest wall near the
stage



N-10328-8 First floor: detail of revealed original
mural and decorative pilaster and beam
on west-southwest wall near the stage



N-10328-9 First floor: view of revealed original mural on north-northeast wall near the stage



N-10328-10 Second floor: view of west-southwest wall in projection room with projector looking west