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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an 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 Polk Theatre and Office Building

other names/site number Polk Theatre/8P0396

2. Location

street & number 121 South Florida Avenue n/a not for publication

city or town Lakeland n/a vicinity

state Florida code FL county Polk code 105 zip code 33801

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.)

Suzanne P. Walker / Deputy SHPO 4/20/93
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Florida Division of Historical Resources, Bureau of Historic Pres.
State of Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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

Delores Byne

**Entered in the
National Register**

Date of Action

5/27/93

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

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

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

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

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

n/a

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation & Culture/Theater

Commerce

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation & Culture/Theater

Work in Progress

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th & 20th Century Revivals:

Italian Renaissance

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Brick

Cast Concrete

roof Asphalt

other Glass

Metal

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.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

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

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(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 # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

- Entertainment/Recreation
- Architecture
- Community Planning & Development

Period of Significance

1927-1943

Significant Dates

1928

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

n/a

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Architect/Builder

Casale, James E. /

Miller, George A.

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of repository:

Polk Theatre & Office Bldg.
Name of Property

Polk Co., FL
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than 1 acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	1 7	4 0 5 8 6 0	3 1 0 2 1 6 0
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2			

3			
	Zone	Easting	Northing
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 Sidney Johnston/Barbara E. Mattick, Historic Sites Specialist
organization Bureau of Historic Preservation date April 1993
street & number R.A. Gray Bldg., 500 S. Bronough telephone (904) 487-2333
city or town Tallahassee state FL zip code 32399-0250

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 SHPO or FPO.)

name Board of Trustees, Polk Theatre, Inc.
street & number 127 S. Florida Avenue telephone (813) 682 8227
city or town Lakeland state FL zip code 33801

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Lakeland, Polk Co., FL

SUMMARY

The Polk Theatre and Office Building, located at 121 South Florida Avenue, is a 1927, rectangular, commercial building with detailing influenced by the Italian Renaissance style. The building has two major components: a two-story office building with storefronts at the first story and offices at the second story, and a massive, four-story "atmospheric" theater. Structurally, the building has a steel skeleton with reinforced concrete foundation and framing. The exterior of both flat roofed components is brick with cast concrete trim. Fenestration includes plate glass windows; single and triple, steel, 1/1 double hung sash; single, 2/2 double hung sash; and single and double glazed doors.

SETTING

The Polk Theater occupies the northwest corner of the intersection of Florida Avenue and Lemon Street in downtown Lakeland. Several small masonry buildings are located to the north, and a narrow alley separates the theater from other commercially-related buildings to the west. Commercial buildings also face the theater to the east and south.

EXTERIOR - Office Block

The east elevation (Photo 1) of the office block forms the main facade of the building. Except for the theater entrance at the north end, the office block is highly symmetrical. The first story is comprised of eight bays of storefronts, each with plate glass windows surmounted by a nine-light transom, or single doorways with a nine-light transom and side lights. An arched double doorway with a cast concrete arch and keystone, is located in the center of the east elevation. A single, glazed entry is at the north end of the block, next to the theater entrance.

The main entrance to the theater (Photos 1 & 3) is located at the north end of the east elevation of the two-story office block. It is quite distinct from the rest of the facade, with a higher parapet decorated with cast concrete shields and a blind balustrade. Its triple windows are similar to those on the rest of the facade, but are distinguished by a cast concrete surround which creates a Palladian effect. A lighted, cantilevered marquee and vertical sign, both reproductions of the original signs, further accent the entrance. At the first story, double,

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aluminum framed doors, surrounded by cast concrete with molded capitals, form the entrance to the theater.

The second story of the rest of the east elevation has triple, 1/1 double hung sash windows with cast concrete sills (Photo 2). Each grouping corresponds to a bay at the first story. The central window of each group is slightly wider than the flanking windows. Centered above each triple window is a brick ventilation grille at the attic story. The horizontal features of the two-story block are accentuated by a cast concrete water table, and brick string courses located above and below the windows, and at the top of the parapet just below a molded, cast concrete coping. Rosettes are placed between each bay, between the first and second stories.

The southeast corner (Photo 2) of the office block is clipped and contains the main entrance to the office/storefront block. The entry is similar to the central entrance on the east elevation, with a cast concrete arch with a keystone. A single, 1/1 double hung sash window is above it at the second story.

The south elevation has similar features, though the second story windows are single, 1/1 double hung sash. A single glazed entrance and a single window at the second story, similar to the features at the north end of the east elevation, mark the southwest corner of the building (Photo 2). An alcove between the office building and theater provides access to secondary exits (See Floor Plan).

The building abuts a building to the north. The north elevation (Photo 4), visible only at the second story has four, single 2/2 double hung sash windows with cast concrete sills.

EXTERIOR - Theater

In contrast to the office block, the exterior of the theater is quite plain; seven bays are defined by vertical, cast concrete, segmented bands, patterned brick and decorative grilles. A double door and 2/2 double hung sash windows are located immediately above the office block (Photo 1). The two southernmost bays are recessed from the east elevation (Photo 2). The four bays of the south elevation are similar, but the patterned brick is accented with white cast concrete squares, and a cast concrete cornice and panels correspond with the first story/second story demarcation on the office block (Photo 5).

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Three single, 2/2 double hung sash windows are located in the westernmost bay. Bays on the rear (west) elevation (Photo 6) are divided by cast concrete, segmented bands, but do not have patterned brick. Fenestration includes service bays and single, 2/2 double hung sash windows; three fire exits are accessed by a fire escape. The north elevation (Photos 4 & 6) is brick, devoid of any decoration, and has scattered, single, 2/2 double hung sash windows.

OFFICE BLOCK - Interior

The first floor of the office block is comprised of six offices and a central foyer. The foyer provides access to three adjoining offices (Photo 7). The southeast corner room, through which access is gained from either the clipped corner entrance or a side entrance on Lemon Street, is the largest of the six commercial spaces. The original interior walls, doors, and windows treatments appear to be intact.

The foyer leads to a turned stairway with landings, square newels, turned balusters, and finished wood hand rails (Photo 8). A long corridor extends the length of the west wall of the second floor, providing access to sixteen office spaces (Photo 9). Rest rooms are located at each end of the hall. The office spaces, most of which are interconnected (Photo 10) and have a variety of shapes and sizes, retain most of their original walls, doors, transoms, and windows (Photo 11).

INTERIOR - Theater

The main entrance of the theater, located at the northeast corner of the building on South Florida Avenue, opens into a rectangular outer lobby. An octagonal kiosk, which serves as a ticket booth, dominates the lobby (Photo 12). It displays a octagonal roof, a cornice and dentils adorned with fleur-de-lis finials, arched openings with keystones, capitals, spiral columns, and a marble base with stylized panels. Other features of the lobby include bronze sconces and decorative arched murals with images of fountains and exotic birds (Photo 13). The outer lobby, with its upward sloping floor, leads into an inner lobby, which is entered through a set of solid wood doors.

The inner lobby has a curving partition, with square posts and capitals, which separates it from an 1100 seat auditorium

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(Photo 14). The walls of the auditorium, which extend to a coved ceiling, contain a series of niches, sconces, and stylized casement windows and balconets that offer a distinct Italianate atmosphere (Photos 15 & 16). Many lighting fixtures from the period remain. A proscenium with elaborate molded plaster accents the stage, which measures thirty-five feet wide by twenty-seven feet deep (Photo 17). It extends to the ceiling and displays a large Palladian balconet, flanking loggias, and painted murals along the frieze. The arch displays terra cotta extrados and a spiral molding. Ashlar veneer adorns the haunch and crown of the proscenium arch (Photo 18). Full-height replicas of Italian Renaissance townhouses, which contain exit doors and pipe organs, flank the proscenium and stage which has a maple floor. The townhouses display hip roofs with barrel tile surfacing, entablatures with painted murals, a pair of arched openings protected by balconets, and plaster walls (Photo 19). Openings at the auditorium level of the townhouses are embellished with classical entablatures, shields, capitals, segmental columns, and sconces (Photo 20). The Italian villa motif is carried along the auditorium walls and to the upper reaches of the balcony walls (Photo 15). An orchestra pit with a curved wall separates the auditorium from the stage (Photo 16).

A pair of staircases located along the north wall of the inner lobby lead up to a small foyer, which in turn leads to the mezzanine lobby. The lobby displays Palladian openings supported by spiral columns with capitals (Photo 21). Lounges and restrooms are located at the east and west ends of the mezzanine, respectively. Two sloping corridors, which open onto the balcony, ascend from the mezzanine lobby. Another pair of tunnels, which descend to a small foyer at the stair landing located at the north end of the building, lead to second, higher balcony terrace. The balcony contains nearly 700 seats and slopes downward to a curved lower wall, which contains stylized panels and shields and lights (Photos 14 & 15). It is suspended approximately twenty-five feet above the auditorium floor by a steel superstructure. Ornamentation, in the form of exit door surrounds, false casement windows, pent roofs, niches, and sconces, is more fully developed along the lower level of the balcony.

The backstage area is comprised of curtain controls, light controls, and three levels of dressing rooms. A switchboard, containing 500 switches that operate footlights, hanging lights, balcony floodlights, and stars projected onto the ceiling, is

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located at the northeast corner of the stage (Photo 22). The dressing rooms are clustered in the southwest corner of the building, where winding stairs lead to narrow halls that empty into small chambers. Sliding doors, which face the stage, historically served as loading doors for trunks and other large items, which were hoisted by a block and tackle mounted on a ceiling beam (Photo 23). Two substage levels house storage rooms a deep water well, an air conditioning system, and the main electrical power box.

ALTERATIONS

The Polk Theater and Office Building has been in nearly continuous use since it was built in 1927, but not until 1962 did it suffer any substantial alteration. At that time, the outer lobby was enlarged to provide space for a larger concession stand. The ticket kiosk was dismantled, some of the decorative capitals and moldings were destroyed, linoleum was laid over the original terrazzo floor, and the entry was enclosed with aluminum doors.

In 1983, however, Polk County Landmarks, Inc. was formed to purchase and restore the building. They found the star mechanisms still in place and in working order and the original leatherette seats of the balcony still in place. Over the past several years, over \$375,000 of matching restoration grant funds have been provided by the Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources. Layers of overlying plaster have been removed from several of the original murals by Emilion Cianfoni, Chief conservator at Vizcaya, an Italian villa in Miami; and reproductions of the original marquee and sign have been provided by private donors. Restoration work is ongoing.

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Lakeland, Polk Co., FL

SUMMARY

The 1927 Polk Theatre and Office Building in Lakeland is locally significant under **Criterion A** in the area of **Entertainment/Recreation and Community Planning & Development** as one of the largest and most important theater buildings in Polk County. It is locally significant under **Criterion C** as a restrained example of the Italian Renaissance style, but as one of only three "atmospheric" theaters in Florida, it has statewide significance. It was designed by James Casale, a Tampa architect, and construction was supervised by George Miller, a prominent Tampa contractor. The Polk Theatre and Office Building retains a high degree of its architectural integrity and is currently undergoing restoration. Polk Theatre, Inc. is a member of the League of Historic American Theatres.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Early Development of Lakeland (1884-1919)

Lakeland, a large community in Polk County named for the numerous lakes that dot the region's landscape, was founded in 1884 by Abraham Munn, a wealthy Louisville, Kentucky manufacturer and investor. Lakeland experienced significant growth with the extension of the South Florida Railroad and the Florida Southern Railroad (both later part of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad) to Lakeland and through the region. By 1890, Lakeland became an important rail yard and shipping site in Polk County, with a population of 552.

The period between 1884 and 1916 brought significant expansion in Lakeland, based on a diverse economy supported by the railroad, citrus, naval stores, and phosphate industries. By the beginning of World War I, Lakeland contained hundreds of buildings with large concentrations located in the commercial district and surrounding residential neighborhoods.

Florida Land Boom (1920-1928)

In the 1920s, the nation entered a period of enthusiastic economic expansion; in Florida, a land boom began almost immediately after World War I. It is difficult to exaggerate the speculative proportions of that land boom, for few communities in the state failed to experience a fever for real estate. Property values rose dramatically, and in virtually every city and town

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new subdivisions were platted and lots were sold and resold for quick profits.

Polk County and Lakeland shared in the growth as property assessments countywide nearly trebled from \$15 million in 1917 to \$35 million by 1927. Bank deposits swelled and numerous real estate companies were established. In Lakeland, the population grew from 7,062 in 1920 to 18,554 by 1930, making Lakeland the second largest inland city in Florida after Orlando.

The City of Lakeland sponsored a road paving program, which resulted in an increase from twenty-five to nearly 150 miles of paved streets between 1922 and 1928. Numerous subdivisions were platted in the community, and construction filled many lots in new subdivisions, as well as those left vacant from earlier periods of development. In December 1924, the city limits were extended from four to thirty square miles, and in 1925, residential construction costs approached \$5 million annually with nearly 1,300 homes built that year. Building construction in the commercial area surged. Notable additions to the building stock during the decade included the Florida Hotel, Marble Arcade, and Polk Theatre and Office Building.

Florida's speculative land bubble showed signs of stress in 1925, and busted in 1926. The effects of the bust were moderated somewhat in Lakeland by the town's diversified economy, and construction in Lakeland continued, though at a slower pace. Important public improvements included a municipal complex that encompassed a city hall, fire station, library, civic center, and several other buildings, including the Lake Mirror Promenade, completed in 1928 (NR 1989).

Although the local economy appeared solid, it began to dissolve in the late 1920s. In 1927, in a move to cut overhead expenses the Atlantic Coast Line removed the bulk of its railroad repair shops from Lakeland, dealing the community a severe economic blow. Banks failures also rocked the community.

Great Depression (1929-1942)

The full brunt of the Great Depression hit Florida in the early 1930s. Between 1929 and 1933, 148 Florida state and national banks collapsed, including several in Polk County. Nevertheless, Lakeland's population rose during the Great Depression from 18,554 in 1930 to 21,017 in 1935 due to a number

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of developments which resulted in an improved economy: the Detroit Tigers opened a spring training camp at Marchant stadium in 1934, and several large public projects, including the construction of a municipal airport and an armory and municipal pool, were begun under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. By 1940, the population of Lakeland stood at 22,068. That year the City and U.S. Army reached an agreement that resulted in the establishment of a pilot training school based at the municipal airport, which set a foundation for additional growth in Lakeland during World War II.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Polk Theatre and Office Building, originally known as the Melton Theatre, was conceived and developed by John E. Melton, one of Lakeland's important promoters and developers. Melton arrived in Lakeland about 1910 and established a real estate business. In 1914, he purchased property at the northwest corner of Florida Avenue and Lemon Street, where he financed the construction of the Dixie Garage, which he leased to a number of businessmen over the next decade.

In the mid-1920s, Melton began looking for support to construct a large theater/office complex, like those in other major cities throughout the state. After contacting several cinema companies, he entered into an agreement with the Famous Players-Laskey Corporation of New York. Melton agreed to finance the construction of a theater, and the company would manage the business. A national theater chain, the Famous Players-Laskey firm subsequently leased its management responsibilities to the Lakeland Amusement Company, which was apparently a local division of the larger company. Melton's successful negotiation with the Famous Players-Laskey Corporation in Lakeland is significant, for it represents the commitment of resources a national theater chain was willing to venture in the community at the end of the 1920s land boom.

James E. Casale, a Tampa architect was commissioned to design the theater, and George A. Miller, a well known Tampa contractor supervised the construction. Miller, who placed two shifts of laborers on the construction of the Polk Theater and Office Building, completed the two-story commercial portion of the building, which contained about sixty offices, in January 1927. Cheatham Realty Company, a local development firm, was among the first businesses to occupy space in the building. The

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steel frame for the theater portion of the building, which rose four stories and supported hollow-tile walls faced with brick and concrete veneer, was assembled by January 1927. The exterior walls were completed in April, and interior furnishings were installed over the next several months. Construction costs totaled approximately \$500,000, bringing Melton's total cost of the project to nearly \$750,000. The theater contained approximately 1,800 seats (including the balcony). State-of-the-art interior features and special effects equipment included a 100 ton air conditioner, a cloud machine, and an extensive switchboard and lighting system, including twinkling stars. A vitaphone, a mechanical device consisting of a projector and record player requiring two operators, was installed above the balcony.

Even as the building was being constructed, however, Melton's theater venture began to unravel. In late 1926, Melton assumed several mortgages on the property to help pay construction costs. Nevertheless, he ran short of funds and the theater failed to open after it was completed in April 1927. Melton attempted to avoid bankruptcy by transferring the property in September 1927 to Melton & Pulliam, a local real estate company he operated with Benjamin Pulliam. Financial problems continued to beset Melton, however, and in October 1928, the theater portion of the property was sold to the Polk Theatre Corporation. Melton retained control of the two-story office building.

Melton had intended the Polk Theatre to accommodate live performances, but when it formally opened on December 22, 1928, it was for the showing of the film *On Trial*, a courtroom drama starring Pauline Frederick and Bert Lytell. About 1933, the property went into foreclosure, and was sold to the Orleans-Lakeland Company of New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1934 for \$25,000. Later, in 1943, the theater was sold to Lakeland Theatres, Inc., a local business which acquired and managed theaters throughout the state. The theater became Lakeland's primary displayer of first run movies, but also staged live performances, such as revues, minstrel shows, and plays. Individual performers who appeared at the Polk include Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, Gene Kruppa, Eddie Arnold, Tom Mix, Gene Autry, Sally Rand, Glenn Miller, and Elvis Presley.

The Polk Theatre and Office building was an anchor at the south end of Lakeland's historic Munn Park, and was the finest

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theater in Polk County when completed in 1927. The building represents the epitome of the tremendous building boom that swept Lakeland and Florida during the 1920s. Lakeland's downtown was transformed during the decade, and the theater was an important part in that change. It provides a visual testimony to the maturity Lakeland attained in the late 1920s.

ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

Italian Renaissance Style

The Polk Theatre and Office Building is an example of the Italian Renaissance style, which was popular in the United States between 1890 and 1935. The earlier Italianate style, which persisted between 1840 and 1885, was loosely based on Italian models, resulting in considerable artistic license in the reproduction of prototypes. In the 1880s, the firm of McKim, Mead, and White gave impetus to the Italian Renaissance style, which was part of the Second Renaissance Revival movement, with the Villard Houses in New York. In the 1890s, fashionable architects employed the style, which provided contrast with Gothic-inspired Shingle and Queen Anne styles. After World War I, the perfection of simulated masonry exterior veneering fabrics made possible the accurate representations even in modest examples of the style.

Italian Renaissance was one of many architectural types with Mediterranean precedents that became popular in Florida during the land boom of the 1920s, though it was not as popular as the contemporary Spanish Colonial or Mediterranean Revival styles. Most of the state's Italian Renaissance style buildings were erected between 1920 and 1930. Identifying features of models built as commercial or public buildings include a symmetrical facade; a flat roof with parapets and balustrades; cornices and frieze bands; and projecting extensions. Entrances were often recessed within the main block of the building and displayed classical influences, including arched or Palladian openings, pilasters or columns with capitals, and parapets or roofline balustrades. Brick or stucco serve as exterior wall fabrics, and terra cotta, cast concrete, and ashlar veneers are often applied liberally.

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Theater Architecture

In the 1850s, the European opera house was adapted in the United States. The design of theaters required a number of technical refinements, which included a stage, auditorium, rows of seats, and horseshoe-shaped balconies. Fire safety, acoustics, sight lines, spatial design, lighting, and ventilation were additional considerations not commonly associated with the design of most buildings.

The development of motion pictures in the early twentieth century stimulated a boom in theater design and construction. A variety of formal styles were employed on theaters, including Art Deco, Beaux Arts, and Mediterranean Revival, and ornamentation of exterior wall surfaces reached new heights. Buildings were designed to accommodate more people, and generally contained a single deep balcony rather than the horseshoe design associated with live theater.

Interior appointments became richer, and special effects were introduced in the form of colored cove lighting, large pipe organs, and marble fountains. "An acre of seats in a garden of dreams" reflected the architect's goal to enhance the cultural experience of film and theater, and to entertain the masses in an "oasis of regal elegance."

The idea of such "atmospheric" theaters originated with John Eberson, an Austrian born architect who designed many small town opera houses across the United States. Bored with these rather plain buildings, he designed the first true atmospheric theater in 1923: Holblitzelle's Majestic Theater in Houston, Texas.

The main characteristic of this type of theater is the illusion it creates of being in an open-air amphitheater through the use of blue plaster ceilings with twinkling star lights and machines which create cloudlike effects. The stage and side walls usually represent an exotic setting, such as an Italian villa and garden, a Persian court, or an Egyptian temple. In addition, many atmospheric theaters have a full working stage and orchestra pit for vaudeville or other live performances.

Eberson designed over 100 atmospheric theaters across the United States, many of which could seat 2,000 people or more. At

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the opening of the Tampa Theater and Office Building in October 1926, Ebersson described the origin of his ideas:

My idea for the atmospheric theater was born in Florida. I saw the value of putting nature to work and so have borrowed the color and design that are found in the flowers and trees. The inhabitants of Spain and Italy live under the sun and enjoy the happiness nature affords them. So I decided their architecture probably would provide the firm foundation for a theater.

Only three atmospheric theaters are known to have been constructed in Florida: Ebersson's Olympia Theater and Office Building in Miami (NR 1984) and Tampa Theater and Office Building (NR 1978) in Tampa, and James Casale's Polk Theatre and Office Building in Lakeland.

James E. Casale, Architect

Born in 1890, Casale immigrated to America from Villarosa, Italy with his family in 1900. He later attended schools of architecture at Cooper Union College and Columbia University in New York City. Apparently, he did not graduate from either institution; nevertheless, he gained substantial knowledge about building design and construction. About 1925, Casale arrived in Tampa, where he established an office in the Tampa Theatre and Office Building, which had recently been completed.

The Polk Theatre in Lakeland was among Casale's largest projects in Florida. The Italian Renaissance styling of the building may have been influenced by the Tampa Theatre and Office Building, which featured a similar design. Casale also designed a large commercial store for the John Hill Company in Lakeland. Also embodying Italian Renaissance styling, the building was to rise eight-stories at the southeast corner of Florida and Orange avenues. Although Casale completed the plans, financial distresses associated with the collapse of the boom prevented the building from being constructed. Casale may have designed other buildings in Tampa and surrounding areas.

Casale left Tampa about 1928 and apparently returned to New York. Later, he became a prominent architect associated with the redesign of important landmarks in New York City. His adaptive use projects include the Villard House, an Italian Renaissance building designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1883, and the

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mansions of Joseph Pulitzer and Kermit Roosevelt. His professional associations included the American Institute of Architects, the Columbia University Club, and the New York Building Congress.

George A. Miller, Contractor

George A. Miller, a prominent Tampa contractor, began construction of the Polk Theatre in September 1926. A native of Philadelphia, Miller moved to Florida about 1900. His first large projects included the Federal Building and Post Office in Tampa (NR, 1974), which was completed in 1905. Later, in 1913, he became a general contractor, and in 1928 formed G. A. Miller, Inc.

Miller's business ultimately grew into one of the largest contracting firms in Florida. In Tampa, he supervised the construction of a number of important buildings, including the Tampa Theater and Office Building (NR, 1978), the eighteen-story Floridian Hotel, the twelve-story Wallace Building, and the Maas Brothers Department Store. In St. Petersburg he built the expansive Vinoy Park Hotel (NR, 1978) and the eight-story First National Bank Building. Miller's projects outside of the Tampa Bay area included the Orange Court Apartment Hotel in Orlando; Lord Arcade in Sarasota; Marble Arcade in Lakeland; Lake View Hotel in Lake Wales; and First National Bank in Ft. Myers.

Perhaps Miller's most important commercial venture was his work for the S & H Kress Company. Kress buildings in Florida built under Miller's supervision include those in Daytona Beach, Orlando, and Tampa (NR, 1983). He also supervised the construction of seventeen other Kress buildings throughout the country, including those in Billings, Montana and Spokane, Washington. His most important residential contracts are associated with the community of Mountain Lake, near Lake Wales, where he built "El Retiro" (NR, 1985) and the Colony Club.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The historic Polk Theatre and Office Building embodies Italian Renaissance styling as expressed by a flat roof, an elaborate cast concrete Palladian window surround, a blind baluster and shields on the parapet above the entrance. Concrete veneer quoins and segmental pilasters contrast with the red brick exterior walls. Both commercial and entertainment functions are

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included in the design of the building. The theater portion of the building retains its original lobby, stage, balcony, dressing rooms, and other interior spaces, as well as much of its original detailing. The commercial office spaces that front along Florida Avenue also retain their original configuration and many of the interior window and door treatments. Terra cotta rosettes adorn the exterior wall of the commercial storefronts. Designed as a business arcade, the majority of offices are reached through two main entrances, which are marked by large ashlar arches with keystones.

The building is typical of large theaters built in Florida during the 1920s, many of which also contained commercial or residential spaces. Only a handful of such historic theater/office buildings remain in Florida, with examples listed in the National Register located in Jacksonville, Miami, Palm Beach, Pensacola, Sarasota, Tampa, and Vero Beach.

The Polk Theatre is also significant as one of only three "atmospheric" theaters in the state. Local accounts indicate that the interior of the Polk Theatre was modeled after Palladio's Teatro Olimpico, an elaborate reconstruction of a Roman theater in Vicenza. Access to the mezzanine and balcony was embellished with arched openings and spiral columns in Palladian motifs. Arched niches with statuary and frescoes of flora and fauna adorned wall surfaces. Although not designed by Eberson, the "father of atmospheric theaters", it is quite likely that his influences are strongly evidenced in the design of the Polk. Casale, the architect of the Polk, had offices in Eberson's Tampa Theater and Office building, and G. A. Miller, the contractor for the Polk, also oversaw the construction of the Tampa Theater and Office Building.

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary follows the property lines of the south one-half of lot 5 and all of lot 8 in block 10 of the West Lakeland Addition.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundary encloses the property historically associated with the Polk Theatre and Office Building.

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Photographs 1

Section number _____ Page _____ Polk Theatre and Office Building,
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- 1 1) Polk Theatre and Office Building, 121 S. Florida Avenue
 2) Lakeland, Polk County, FL
 3) Robert Bennett
 4) 1992
 5) Historic Property Associates, St. Augustine, FL
 6) Main (E) elevation, facing SW
 7) 1 of 23

Numbers 1-5 are the same for the remaining photographs.

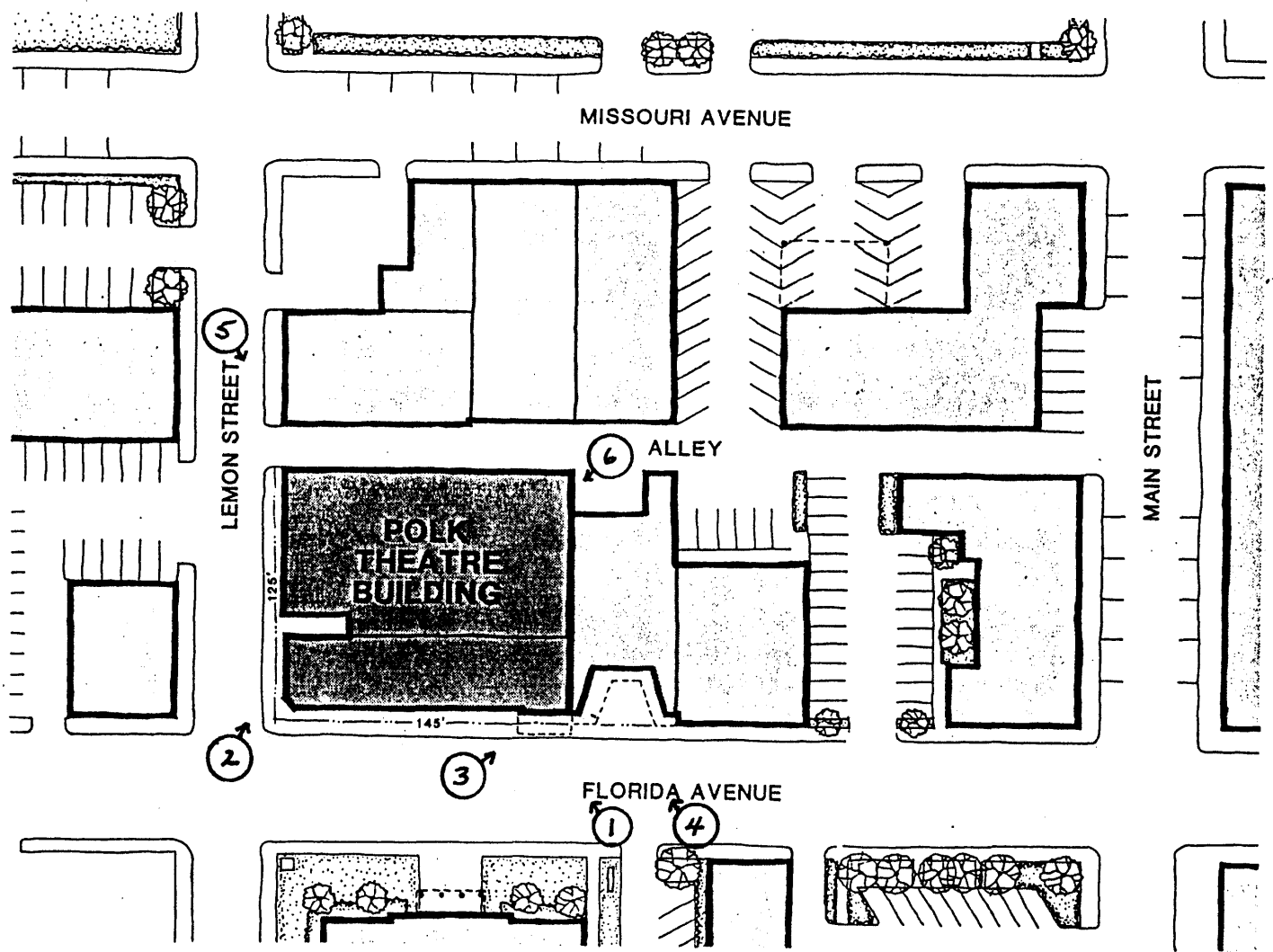
- 2 6) E & S elevations, facing NW
 7) 2 of 23
- 3 6) E elevation, facing NW
 7) 3 of 23
- 4 6) N & E elevations, facing SW
 7) 4 of 23
- 5 6) S & W elevations, facing NE
 7) 5 of 23
- 6 6) N & W elevations, facing S
 7) 6 of 23
- 7 6) Central foyer of Office Block, facing E
 7) 7 of 23
- 8 6) Central hall stairway, facing W
 7) 8 of 23
- 9 6) Second story hall, facing N
 7) 9 of 23
- 10 6) Second floor office spaces in Office Block, facing N
 7) 10 of 23
- 11 6) Typical door, transom and windows in Office Block, facing W
 7) 11 of 23
- 12 6) Kiosk in Main Lobby, facing E
 7) 12 of 23

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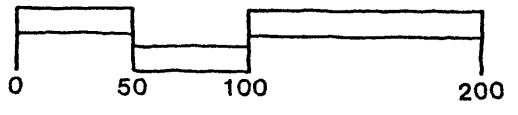
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Photographs 2 Polk Theatre and Office Building,
Section number _____ Page _____ Lakeland, Polk Co., FL

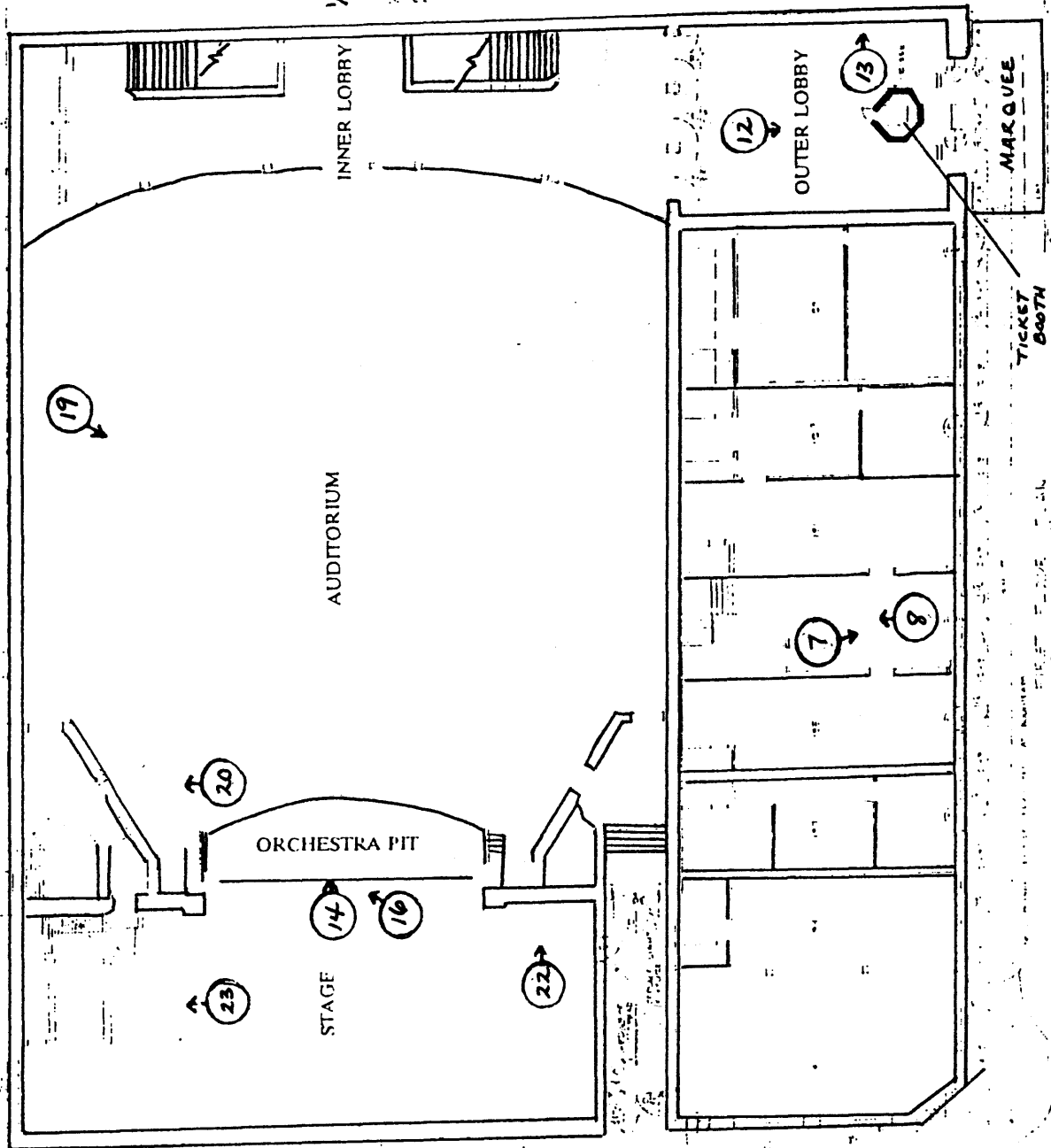
- 13 6) Outer Lobby showing mural and sconce, facing N
7) 13 of 23
- 14 6) Auditorium and Balcony, facing N
7) 14 of 23
- 15 6) Balcony and W wall of auditorium, facing SW
7) 15 of 23
- 16 6) Auditorium and balcony, facing NW
7) 16 of 23
- 17 6) Proscenium and stage, facing S
7) 17 of 23
- 18 6) Detail of proscenium, facing S
7) 18 of 23
- 19 6) Stylized townhouse, facing SE
7) 19 of 23
- 20 6) Auditorium/Stage connector and surround, facing W
7) 20 of 23
- 21 6) Mezzanine Lobby, facing W
7) 21 of 23
- 22 6) Back stage switchboard, facing N
7) 22 of 23
- 23 6) Back stage loading doors, facing W
7) 23 of 23



POLK THEATRE & OFFICE BUILDING
 Lakeland, Polk Co., FL



SITE PLAN

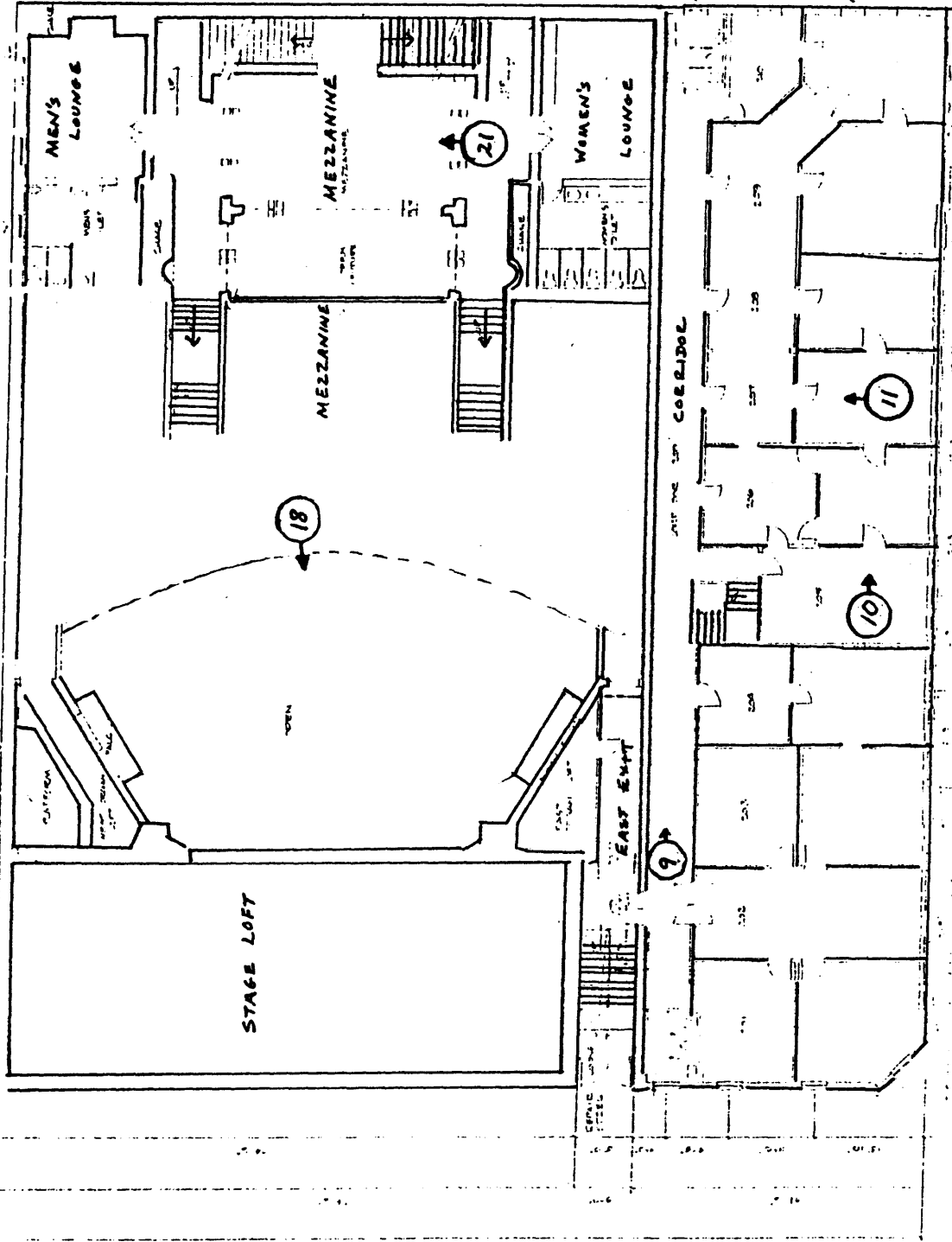


FIRST STORY FLOOR PLAN AND PHOTO KEY

POLK THEATRE & OFFICE BUILDING, Lakeland, Polk Co., FL

SEAT WITH TABLE AND CHAIRS
WALL MOUNTED PAINTING
FRAMES & BENCHES TO BE ADDED

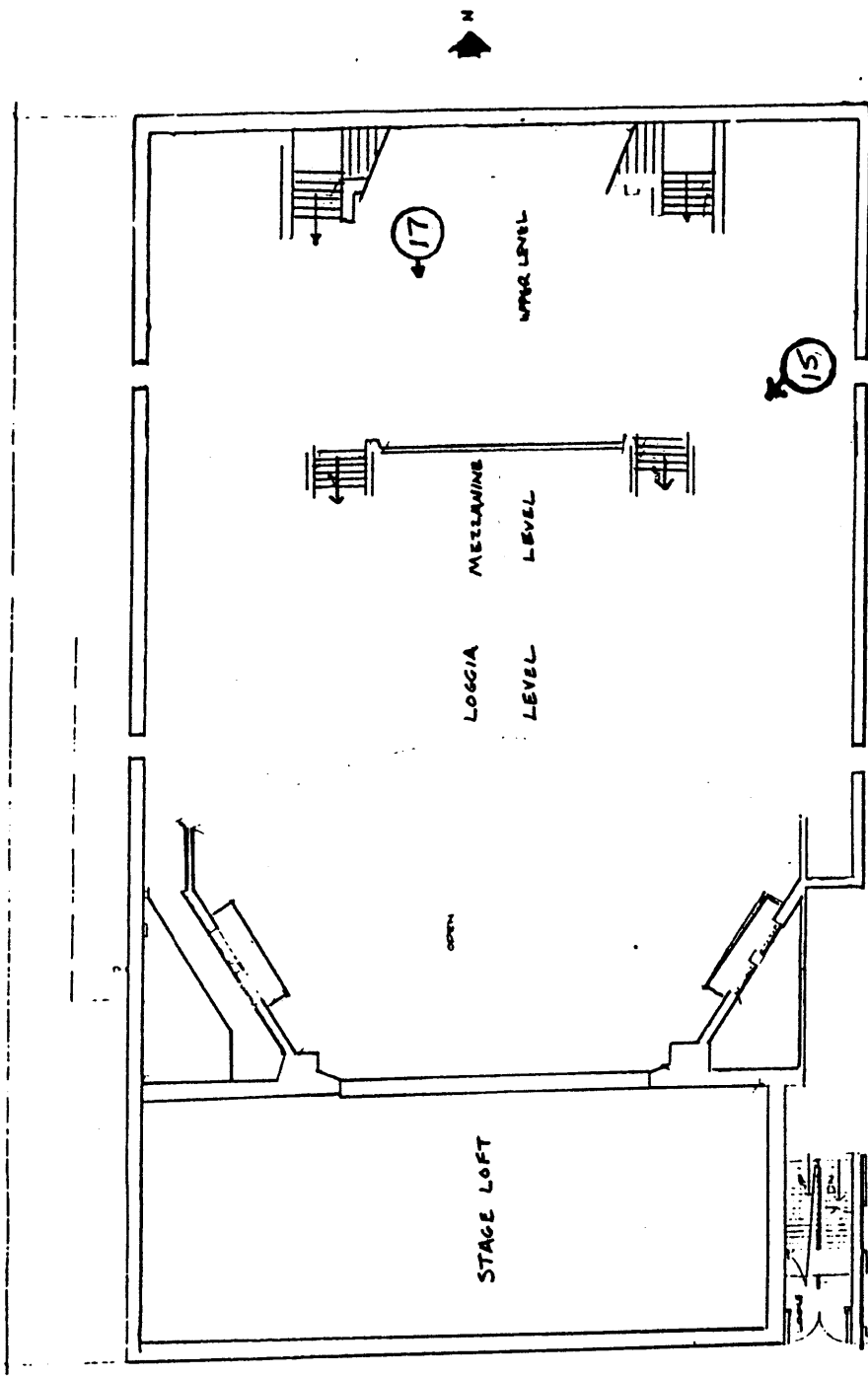
N
1/8" = 1'



FLOOR PLAN - SECOND FLOOR
SCALE

SECOND STORY FLOOR PLAN AND PHOTO KEY

POLK THEATRE & OFFICE BUILDING, Lakeland, Polk Co., FL

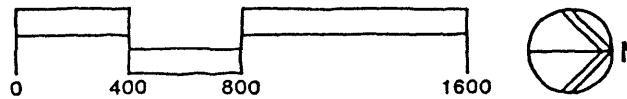


UPPER LEVEL FLOOR PLAN AND PHOTO KEY

$\frac{1}{8}'' = 1'$

POLK THEATRE & OFFICE BUILDING, Lakeland, Polk Co., FL

POLK THEATRE & OFFICE BUILDING, Lakeland, Polk Co., FL



CITY OF LAKELAND CONTEXT