

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	SEP 25 1979
DATE ENTERED	NOV 13 1979

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Alabama Theatre  
AND/OR COMMON

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

1811 Third Avenue, North

---NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Birmingham

--- VICINITY OF

6

STATE

CODE

COUNTY

CODE

Alabama

01

Jefferson

073

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

**CATEGORY**

**OWNERSHIP**

**STATUS**

**PRESENT USE**

\_\_\_DISTRICT

\_\_\_PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

\_\_\_AGRICULTURE

\_\_\_MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

\_\_\_UNOCCUPIED

\_\_\_COMMERCIAL

\_\_\_PARK

\_\_\_STRUCTURE

\_\_\_BOTH

\_\_\_WORK IN PROGRESS

\_\_\_EDUCATIONAL

\_\_\_PRIVATE RESIDENCE

\_\_\_SITE

**PUBLIC ACQUISITION**

**ACCESSIBLE**

ENTERTAINMENT

\_\_\_RELIGIOUS

\_\_\_OBJECT

\_\_\_IN PROCESS

\_\_\_YES: RESTRICTED

\_\_\_GOVERNMENT

\_\_\_SCIENTIFIC

\_\_\_BEING CONSIDERED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

\_\_\_INDUSTRIAL

\_\_\_TRANSPORTATION

\_\_\_NO

\_\_\_MILITARY

\_\_\_OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

P. M. Russell, Jr., Plitt Southern Theatres, Inc. (see continuation sheet)

STREET & NUMBER

P. O. Box 1290

CITY, TOWN

STATE

Jacksonville

--- VICINITY OF

Florida

32201

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Jefferson County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

STATE

Birmingham

Alabama

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

none

DATE

\_\_\_FEDERAL \_\_\_STATE \_\_\_COUNTY \_\_\_LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Alabama Theatre, located in the heart of downtown Birmingham, was designed by the Chicago architectural firm of Graven and Mayger. Its overall style is characterized by the numerous Spanish Renaissance and Baroque details which appear throughout the structure, though the facade has been treated in a Sullivanesque fashion and the six interior lounges depict a variety of motifs. When the theatre opened on December 26, 1927, it was the largest and most magnificent that the state had seen.

The structure is an L-shaped brick building, with the end of the short ell forming a narrow 4½-story facade on 3rd Avenue North. Flanking the theatre entrance on the west is another section of this short ell, a 4-bay 4-story commercial building, which is also part of the theatre complex. The auditorium is located in the large ell, perpendicular to the foyer, and extends through the middle of the block to 18th Street. Rising 4½ stories, the structure faces the northwest and occupies approximately 18,000 square feet of space.

Though it generates an overall feeling of Spanish eclecticism, the theatre facade is actually a composite of the old and the new. The individual elements--the sculptural parapet, intricately molded arch, carved tympanum, spiral columns, and heraldic panels--are derived from the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque periods, but their arrangement is basically Sullivanesque. This modern treatment appears in the central vertical arch, the distinct division of the slender windows, the unbroken piers, and the geometric treatment of the piers and the upper facade. The same composite of styles--the Sullivanesque vertically and Spanish details--is carried out on the facade of the commercial structure and on the 18th Street elevation (southwest).

Entrance to the theatre is through the ticket lobby and into the Hall of Mirrors, a three-story marble-walled room with a series of panelled mirrors accenting the walls and ceiling. At the far end of the room, a marble stairway leads to a spacious balcony which supports two large elaborately wrought chandeliers. Below the balcony, a passage leads into the Grand Lobby.

The Grand Lobby is a high rectangular hall, lined by rows of marble pilasters which have rose-colored shafts and verd antique capitals. Spanish-influenced ornament, such as the coffered ceiling and intricately carved frieze and capitals, adorns much of the surface area of the room. Further enhancing the elaborate setting are a huge chandelier and several large sconces. Wide doorways, featuring heavy wrought iron gates, separate the lobby from the auditorium foyer, and a large stairway leads to the balcony and mezzanine levels. At these upper levels, wall openings provide a spectacular view of the Grand Lobby.

The auditorium, which originally had a seating capacity of 3,000 consists of the main floor and two balcony levels. It is ornamented with numerous Spanish Renaissance and Baroque elements, including the intricate pierced organ screens, heraldic shields, spiral columns, and coffered ceiling. Decorating the arched

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ceiling area is a field of coffers divided by large garlands which cross the width of the auditorium. A large elliptical dome, in the center of the ceiling, is roughly textured to reflect light. In addition, the soffits of the balcony and mezzanine are decorated with similar lace-like plaster ornaments, and the balcony features several illuminated domes. The proscenium opening is 49 feet wide and 26 feet high, and the arch is decorated with a flowing floral pattern which is entwined at the bases of the arch and joins in a large blossom at the opening. The orchestra pit contains a Wurlitzer four-manual console organ on an elevator lift that originates in the basement and rises to stage level. It has 20 ranks of several thousand pipes ranging in size from 3 inches to 16 feet. It can produce sounds equivalent to a 70-piece symphony orchestra plus a 20-piece jazz band.

In addition to the main floor, there is a basement, mezzanine, and three upper stories. Wide hallways, foyers, and elaborate lounges fill in the space not occupied by the auditorium, and a maze of maintenance and equipment rooms and dressing areas for the entertainers are concealed in non-public areas.

Six lounge areas are designed in a wide variety of styles and furnished with decorative art objects. On the balcony level, a ladies' lounge features a Chinese Tea Room motif, with low-relief Chinese dragons adorning the walls. The men's lounge on this level, called the Hunting Room, is styled after a Tudor Period English lodge, with heavy half-timbers surrounding rough plastered panels. More elaborate still, are the three lounges on the basement level. The main lounge, called the Spanish Room, has a large fireplace with a sparkling tile hearth. Flanking this is the ladies' lounge, known as the Adam Room for its delicate Adamesque molding and paneling. The men's lounge, or College Room, is designed in the style of a Tudor Gothic manor hall, with panelled wainscoting decorating the walls. This myriad of motifs provides a fanciful contrast to the otherwise Spanish feeling of the structure.

Only a few modifications have been made on the Alabama since it opened in 1927. These include replacing the carpeting and auditorium seats on the first floor, and removing the glimmering silver front stage curtain. The Wurlitzer organ has been recently restored to good working order and the general structural condition of the theatre has been maintained.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

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SPECIFIC DATES	1927	BUILDER/ARCHITECT	Builder: Publix Theatres Architect: Graven and Mayger
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

When the Alabama Theatre opened in 1927, it was the state's largest and most ornate movie palace. Stylistically, it was a composite of Spanish Renaissance and Baroque details which were given a modern Sullivanesque treatment on the facade. It was designed by the Chicago architectural firm of Graven and Mayger for the Publix Theatres chain, an entertainment corporation based in New York. Among the few of Graven and Mayger's theatres still remaining, it is one of the finest extravagant pre-Depression theatres in the southeast.

The architects, Anker S. Graven and Arthur Guy Mayger, began their careers in the famous Rapp and Rapp firm, but in the mid-1920's they formed their own partnership. Specializing in theatre design during the decade of the lavish movie palace, they continued to work in the opulent style of Rapp and Rapp. In fact, the foyer of the Alabama was reportedly styled after that of Rapp and Rapp's Paramount Theatre in New York, and Mayger is known to have assisted in the Paramount design while employed with that firm. Other theatres attributed to Graven and Mayger include the Minnesota in Minneapolis, the Hollywood and Fischer in Detroit, and the Palace in Rochester. Of these, only the Fischer remains, though its interior has been completely gutted.

The Publix Theatres Corporation, created by Balaban and Katz in 1926, became the largest cinema chain of its time in the United States. When the Alabama opened on December 26, 1927, Publix already operated two theatres in Birmingham, the Strand and the Galax, but neither these nor any other in the city could approach the elaborate design and spectacular shows of the Alabama.

Publix aimed to "bring Broadway to Birmingham" with its host of entertainers which were featured at the Alabama. Broadway shows produced by such men as John Murray Anderson, Jack Partington, and Frank Cambria came directly from the Paramount in New York to the Alabama. The theatre had a full symphony orchestra and a large stage band conducted by Ralph Pollock. Later Vic Ince became a local celebrity, entertaining in the style of Publix's famous bandleader Paul Ashe. The "Mighty Wurlitzer" organ, a sensational feature of many Publix theatres, was the first Birmingham had seen. It was basically a pipe organ, but it could imitate the sounds of every musical instrument as well as produce a myriad of special sound effects. Played by organist Joseph Alexander, it provided dramatic background music for the silent films. In addition to the many entertainers Publix brought to the Alabama, the company also provided a well-trained managerial staff to attend to the comforts of the movie-goers and to maintain the 3,000-seat theatre.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Birmingham News. December 25-27, 1927.

Brown, Cecil. Personal communications, Spring, 1978-Winter, 1979.

Corsini, Brother Andrew. Personal communication, Spring, 1978.

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY .4 acre

QUADRANGLE NAME Birmingham North

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

A 16 518120 371071490  
ZONE EASTING NORTHING

B [ ] [ ] [ ]  
ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C [ ] [ ] [ ]

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

New Block 29, Parcel 3

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Sally Moore

ORGANIZATION

Alabama Historical Commission

STREET & NUMBER

725 Monroe Street

CITY OR TOWN

Montgomery

DATE

September 20, 1979

TELEPHONE

(205) 832-6621

STATE

Alabama 36130

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

*Miss B. Howard Jr.*

TITLE SHPO Alabama

DATE Sept. 20, 1979

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

*acting* Cecil D. Shull

DATE 11-13-79

ATTEST: Carl A. Dumble

DATE 11/12/79

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

FHR-8-300A  
(11/78)

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Plitt Southern Theatres has informed us that the following organizations own a partial interest in the building.

James A. Parsons  
Vice President  
Bank of America National Trust and Savings Association  
555 South Flowers Street  
Los Angeles, California 90071

Mr. Roger Lund  
Legal Department  
American Broadcasting Company, Inc.  
1330 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, New York 10019

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The lavish movie palace, an exhibit equal to the spectacular stage shows, had been built at a cost of approximately \$1,500,000. While the overall style drew from the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque periods, a variety of motifs were utilized in the interior ornamentation and the six lounges. Enormous amounts of material were required to complete the structure, and as much attention was given to the technical details as to the artistic elements. The air conditioning and central vacuum systems, in particular, were novel for the time. After only nine months of construction, the theatre stood as one of the largest and most modern in the South.

When the Alabama opened, its style and stage presentations characterized the extravagant mood of the decade. But by the Spring of 1929, the big stage shows and silent films were gradually being threatened by a new marvel, the talking picture. Then final disaster for the giant movie palaces came in October, with the stock market crash. Publix and the other chains could no longer hold together their troupes of entertainers, and the theatres which remained open began offering films only.

The Alabama continues to operate as a movie theatre, now seating approximately 2,211 people. Since being owned by the Publix chain, it has passed to the Wilby-Kincey Service, to the American Broadcasting Company, and very recently to Plitt Theatres. Very few alterations have been made to the building, and the "Mighty Wurlitzer" has recently been restored to good working order. Today the theatre is threatened by the high cost of operation and the convenience of suburban theatres and television, but it continues to show first-run films and currently offers a matinee for downtown shoppers and an enrichment series for students.

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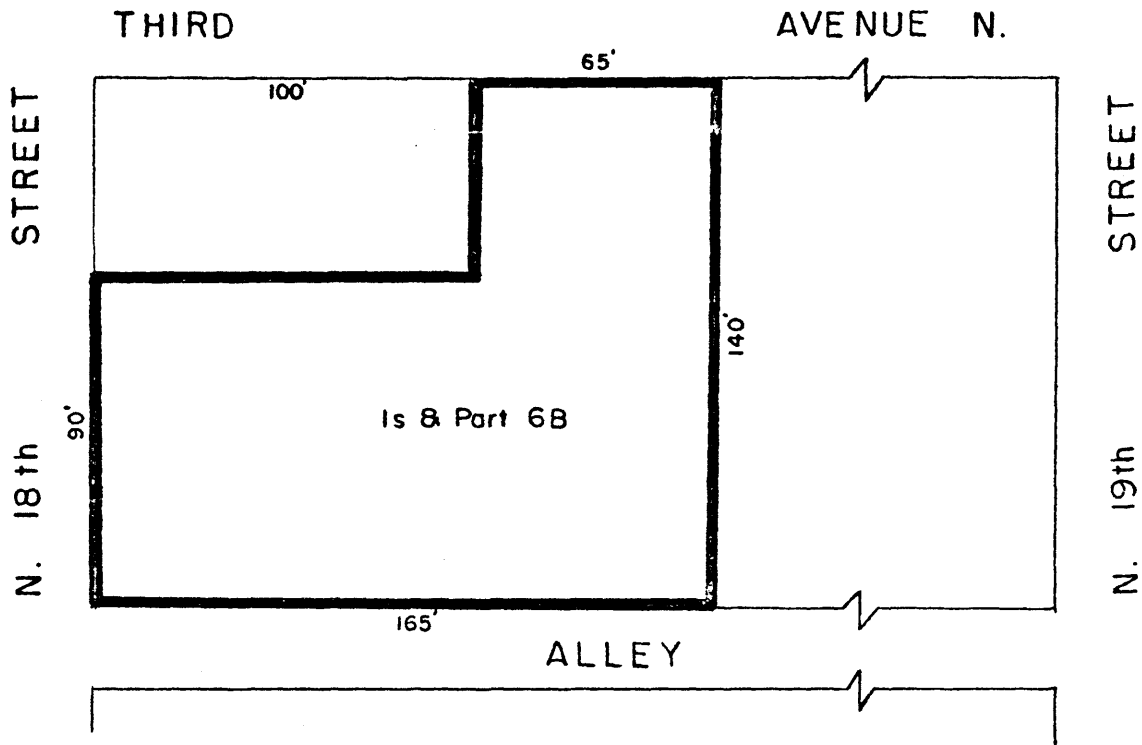
ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 1

Hall, Ben M. The Best Remaining Seats. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1961.

Sexton, R. W. and B. F. Betts, ed. American Theatres of Today, Vestal Press Reprint Edition. Vestal, New York: The Vestal Press, 1977.

Walker, James H. Proposed nomination form submitted in behalf of Jefferson County Historical Commission, 1978.



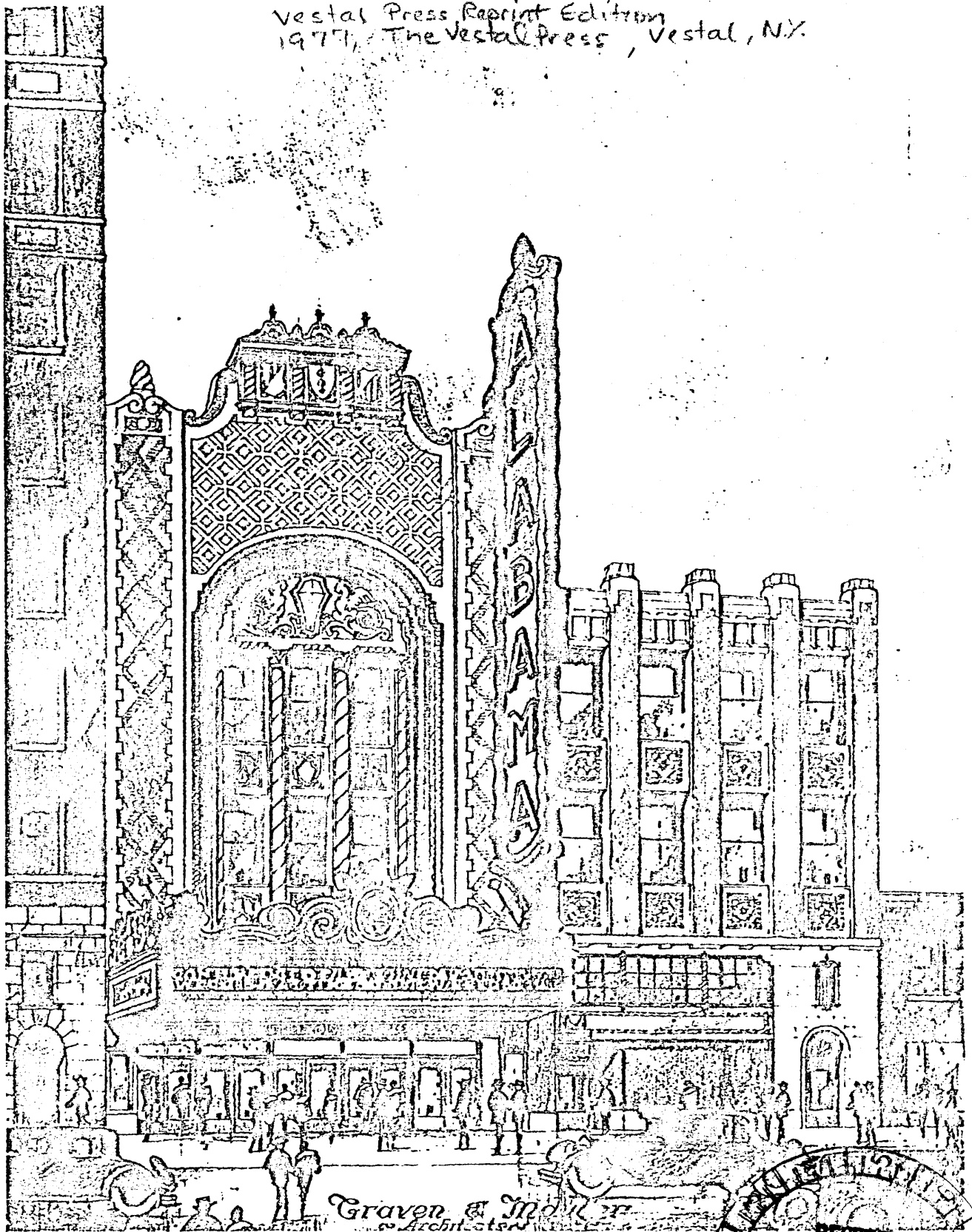


ALABAMA THEATRE

1811 THIRD AVENUE NORTH  
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

AMERICAN THEATRES OF TODAY

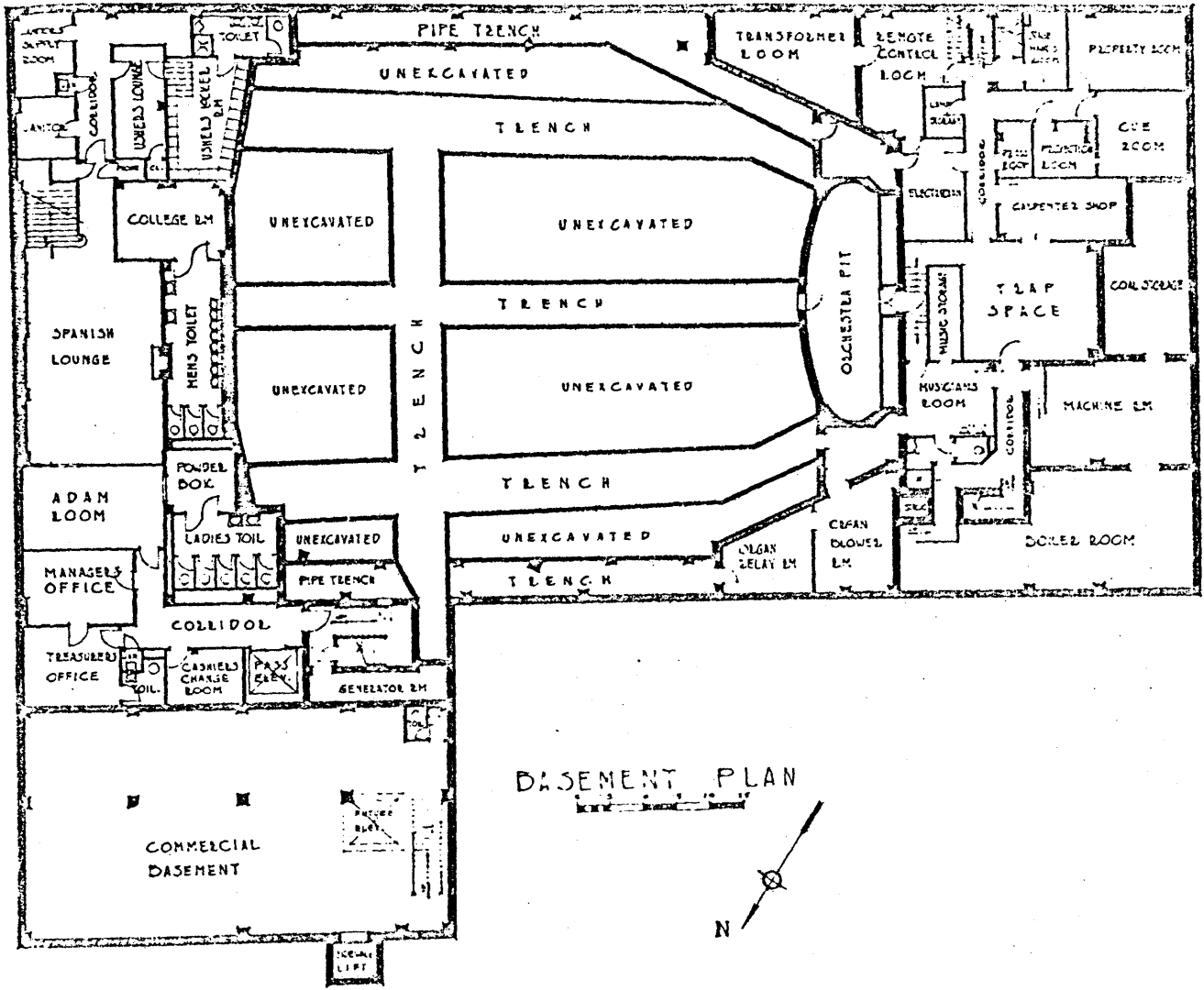
R. W. Sexton & B. F. Betts, Assoc. Editors  
Vestal Press Reprint Edition  
1977, The Vestal Press, Vestal, N.Y.



ALABAMA THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.  
GRAVEN & MAYGER, ARCHITECTS.



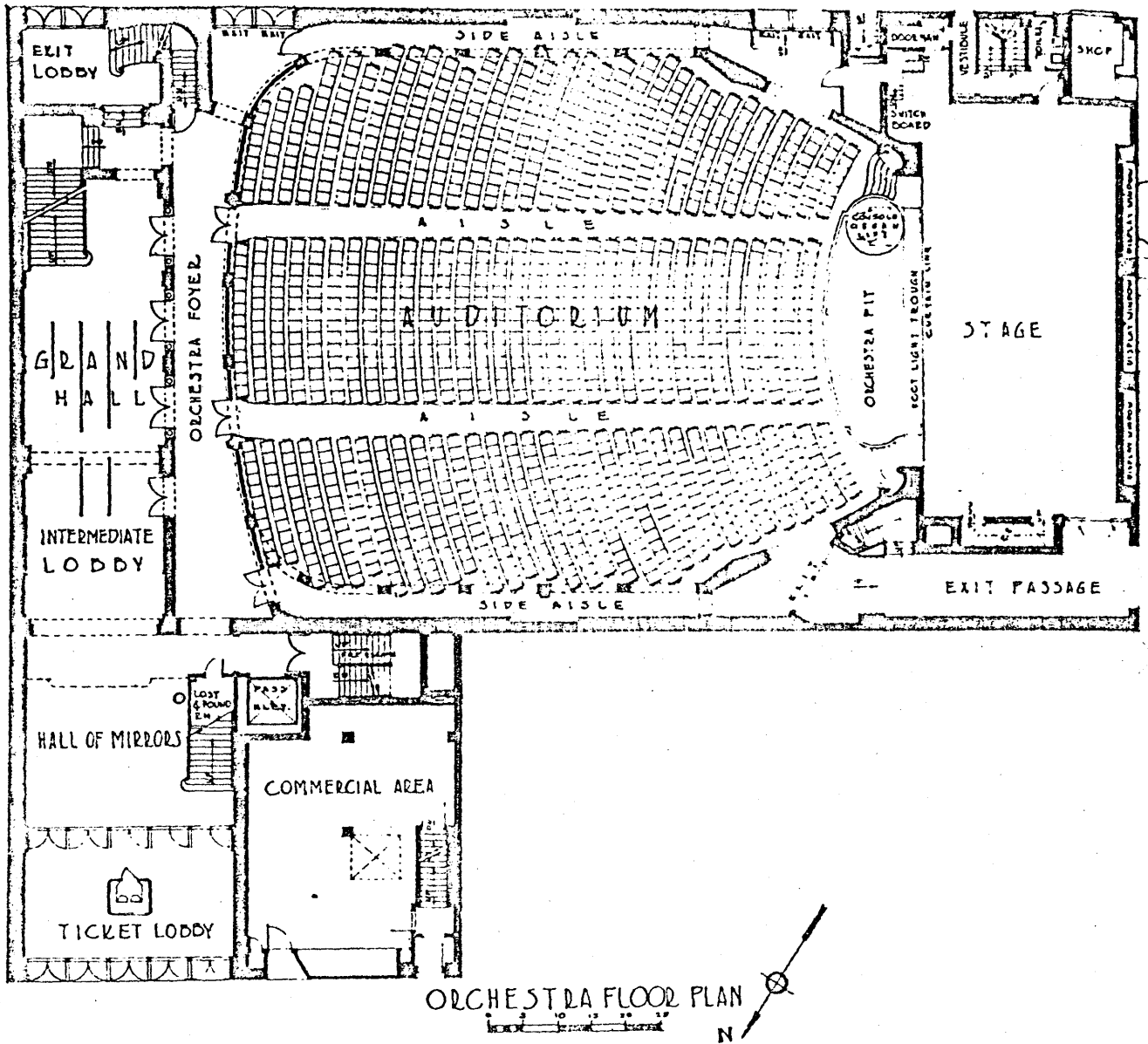
AMERICAN THEATRES OF TODAY



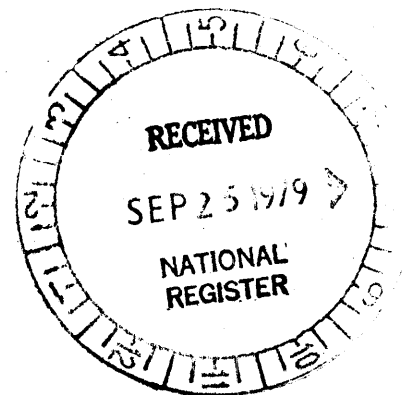
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GRAVEN & MAYGER, ARCHITECTS.

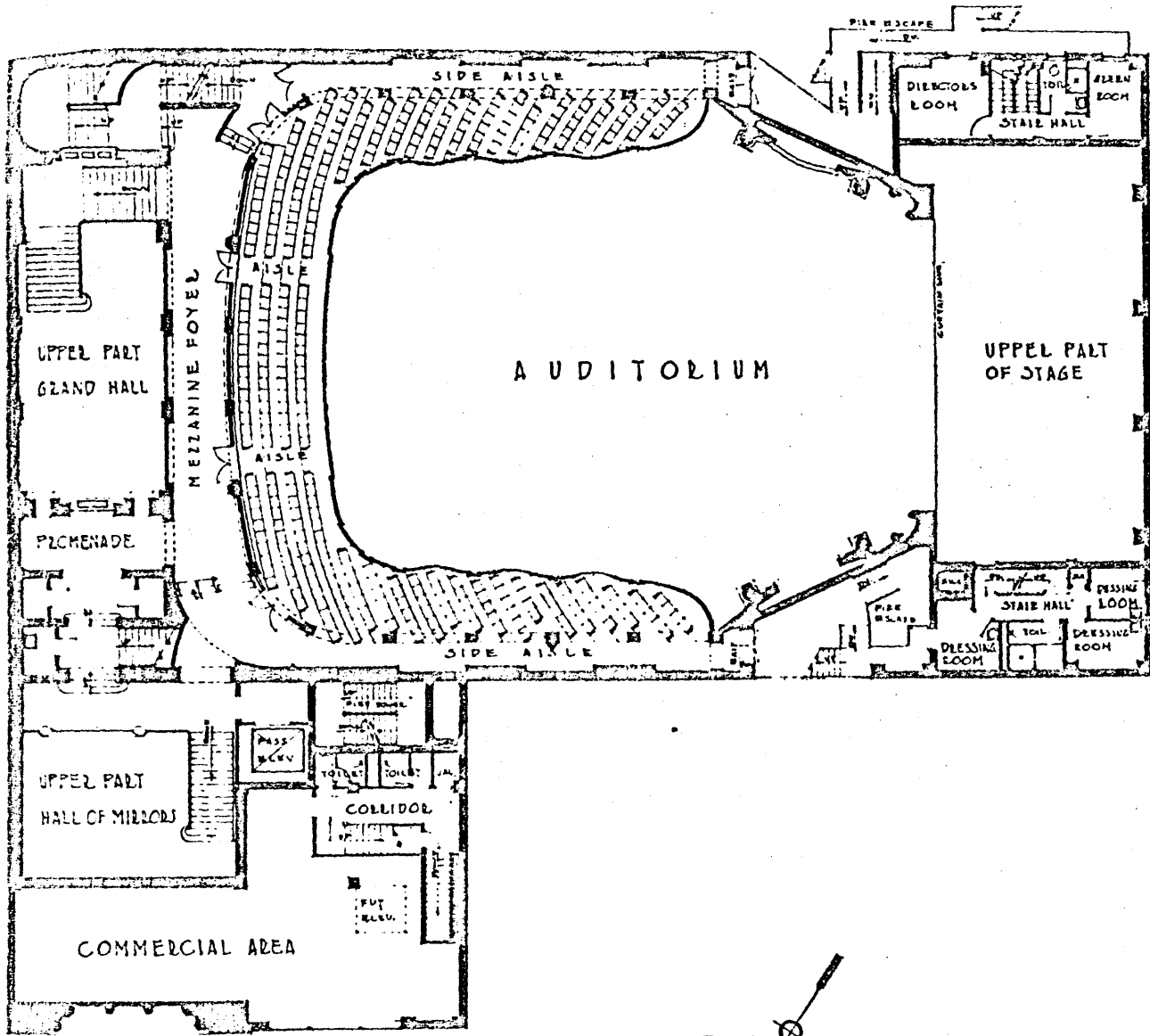


AMERICAN THEATRES OF TODAY



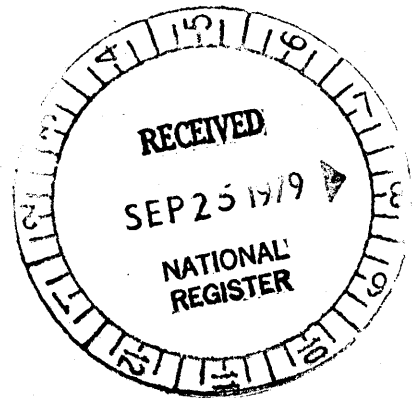
ALABAMA THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.  
CRAVEN & MAYGER, ARCHITECTS.

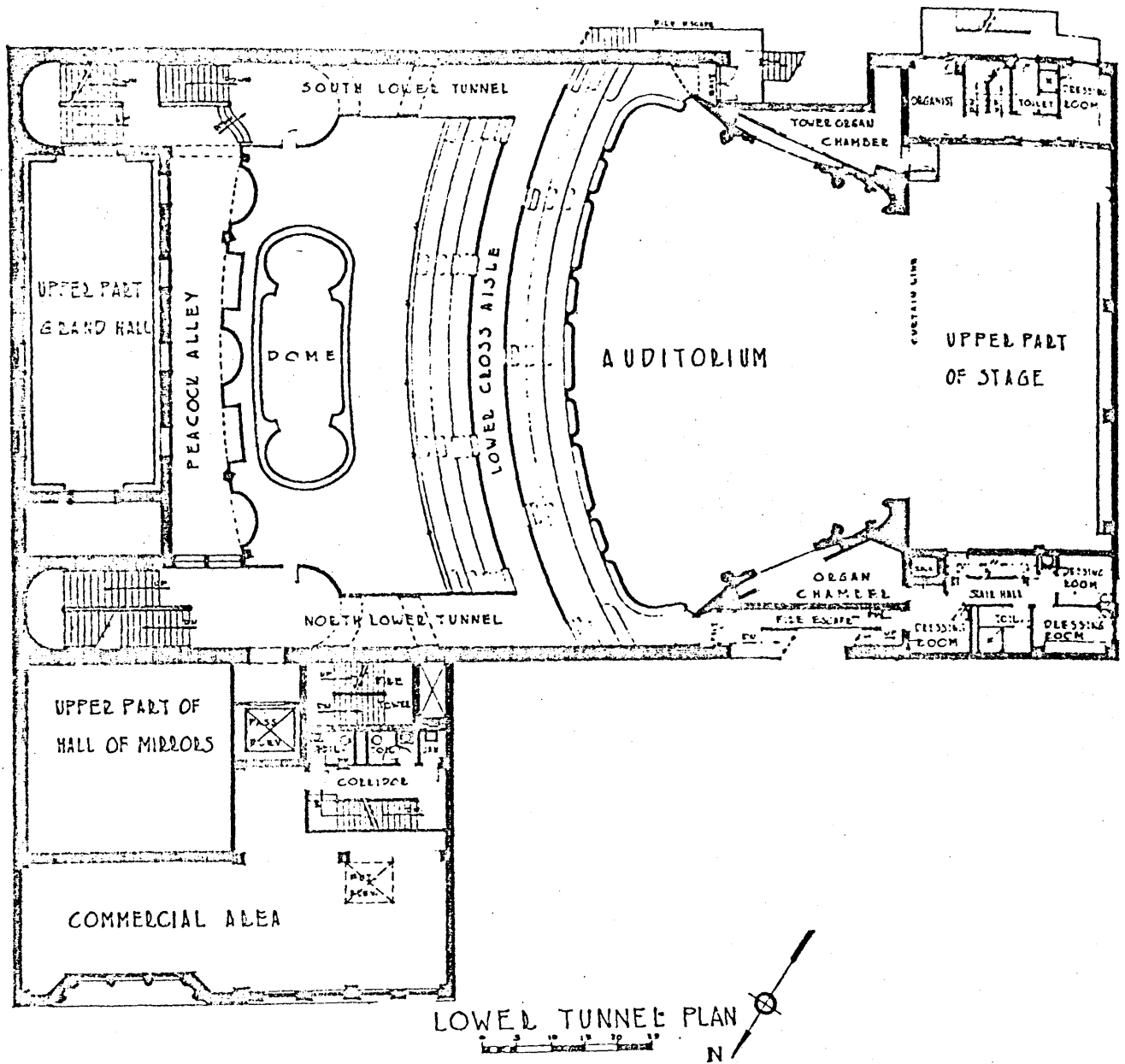




MEZZANINE FLOOR PLAN

ALABAMA THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.  
GRAVEN & MAYGER, ARCHITECTS.

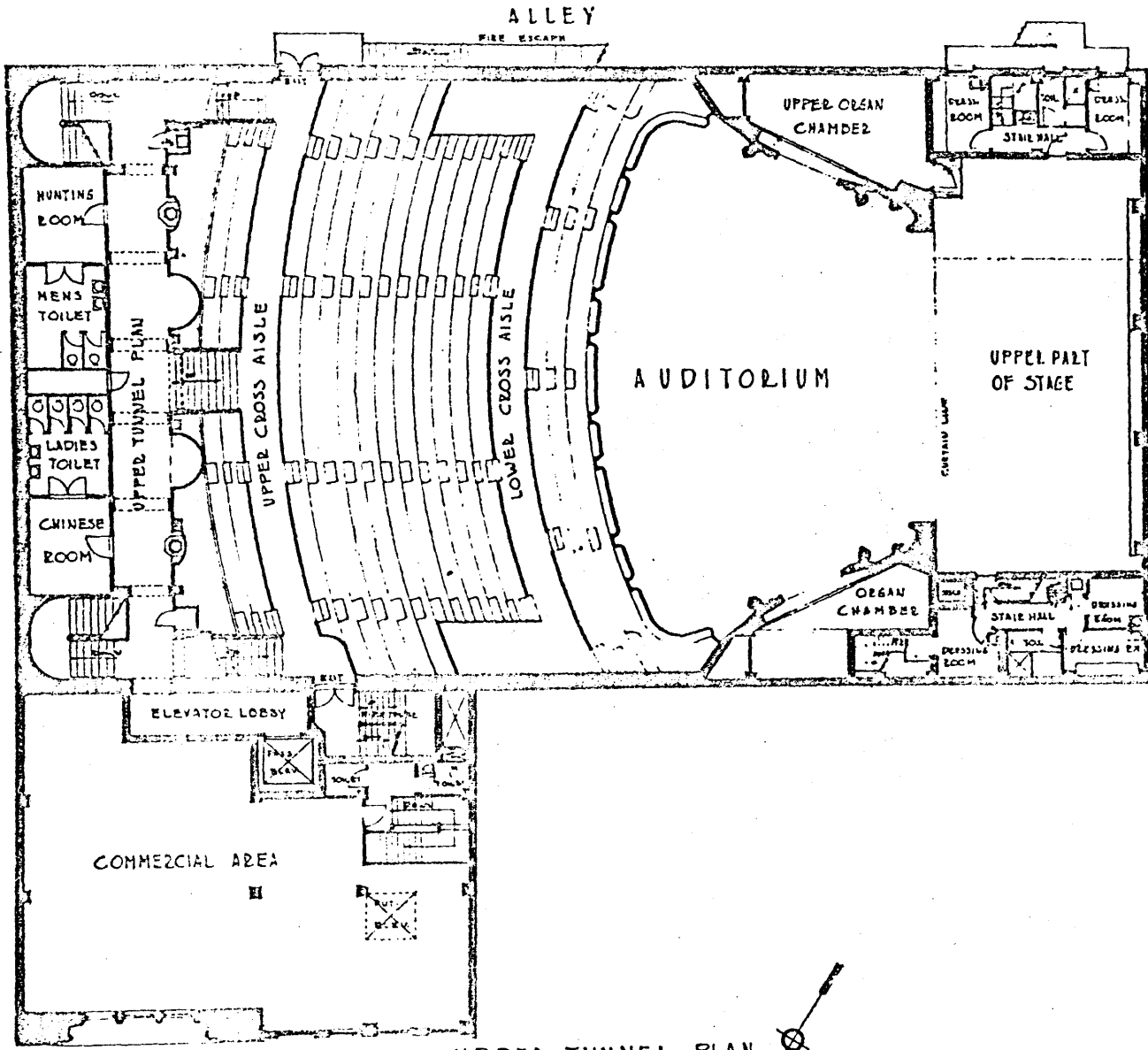




ALABAMA THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.  
GRAVEN & MAYGER, ARCHITECTS.

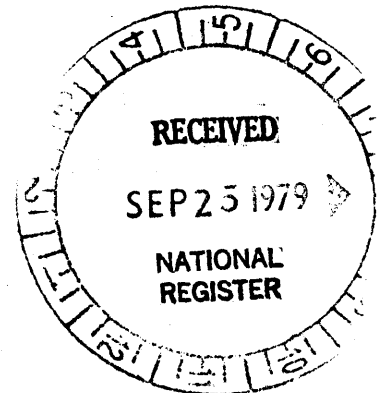


AMERICAN THEATRES OF TODAY

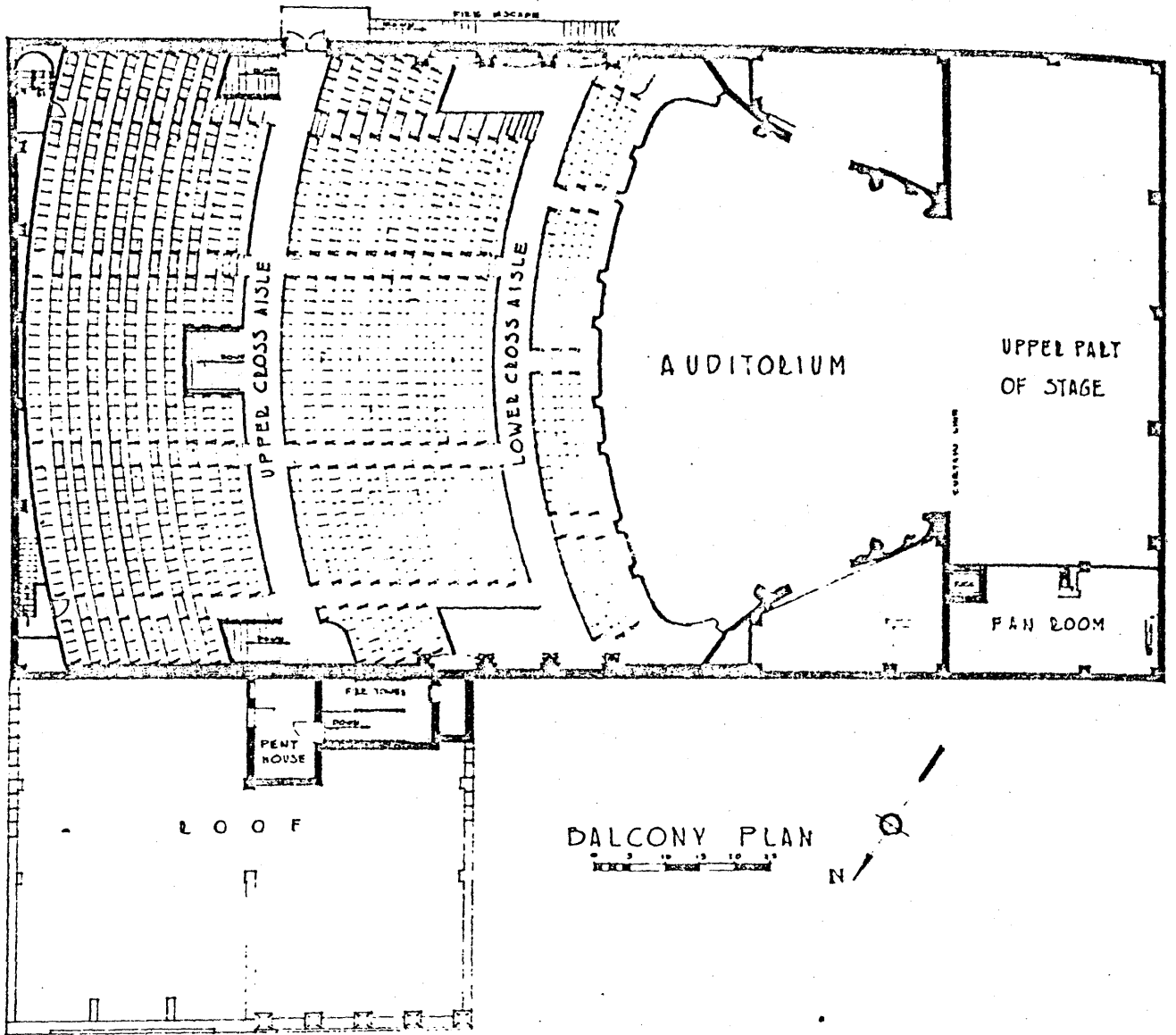


UPPER TUNNEL PLAN

ALABAMA THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.  
GRAVEN & MAYGER, ARCHITECTS.



AMERICAN THEATRES OF TODAY



ALABAMA THEATRE, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.  
CRAVEN & MAYGER, ARCHITECTS.

