

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For NPS use only

received **AUG 2 1984**

date entered **AUG 30 1984**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Bama Theatre-City Hall Building

and/or common Bama Theatre and Office Building

2. Location

street & number 600 Greensboro Avenue NA not for publication

city, town Tuscaloosa NA vicinity of congressional district 7

state Alabama code 01 county Tuscaloosa code 125

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	<u>NA</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name Tuscaloosa County Park and Recreation Authority

street & number P. O. Box 1117

city, town Tuscaloosa NA vicinity of state Alabama

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Tuscaloosa County Courthouse

street & number 714 Greensboro Avenue

city, town Tuscaloosa state Alabama

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Alabama Register of Landmarks & Heritage has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date June 30, 1983 federal state county local

depository for survey records Heritage Commission of Tuscaloosa County

city, town P. O. Box 1776, Tuscaloosa state Alabama 35403

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Bama Theatre-City Hall is a three-story brick structure located on the corner of Greensboro Avenue and 6th Street in Tuscaloosa. The curved corner of the building facing the intersection and the facade facing Greensboro Avenue are both veneered with limestone. The facade along sixth street, however, is exposed brick.

The main entry into the theatre is located on the corner and was once deeply recessed from the sidewalk. A modern plate glass screen with swinging glass doors and a box office was erected adjacent to the sidewalk in the early 1960s. Above the entry is a metal, pentagonal marquee with curved corners. Rising above the marquee is the large rolled corner of the building sheathed with limestone which has been sculptured in a vertical undulating pattern to resemble drapery fabric.

The central entry to city hall located in the Greensboro Avenue facade is flanked on either side by two pairs of large storefront windows. Two of these windows have been converted into entries for small shops and another window has been reworked as an entry to the backstage of the Bama Theatre. Directly over the city hall entry is an American eagle carved in limestone.

Two horizontal rows of six-over-six sash windows can be seen at the second and third floor levels. These windows are separated by large, fluted, vertical, limestone panels. Above these windows the plain limestone wall is relieved by low relief geometric swags carved from the wall surface. A narrow, fluted, horizontal, limestone band caps the flat roofline.

The interior of the Bama Theatre is an excellent example of theatrical decor during the early twentieth century. The walls are decorated to create the illusion of a Spanish courtyard complete with arcades and balconies all plastered and painted to look like adobe. Accoustical wall panels between the arches in the walls are hand painted with landscape scenes. The ceiling is painted dark blue and has tiny, recessed, blinking lights which emulate twinkling stars. Two projectors cast images of moving clouds onto the ceiling. The proscenium has been slightly enlarged to accommodate modern theatrical productions.

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 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1937-38 **Builder/Architect** D. O. Whilldin

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

A. Architecture, Criterion C

The Bama Theatre-City Hall Building is Tuscaloosa's best example of a 1930's WPA Art Moderne structure. Among the Art Moderne features exhibited by the building is its streamlined classicism characterized by a relative adherence to classical scale, proportion and building material (stone). In contrast to this, the building also exhibits Art Moderne anticlassical decorative details such as rounded corners, small low relief sculpture and machine finished, highly polished, interior wall surfaces. Art Moderne was primarily a style specifically applied to commercial or governmental buildings. The Bama Theatre-City Hall is unique in that it was a combination of both a commercial and a governmental structure making it especially suitable for the Art Moderne style.

B. Politics/Government, Criterion A

The Bama Theatre-City Hall Building is an exceptional example of a civic 1930's WPA project which marked the beginnings of a trend in American history toward an ever-deepening involvement of the Federal government in state and local politics. The unique design of the structure incorporated, under one roof, both suitable housing for the city government and adjacent commercial rental space (theatre) which supplied the city's coffers with continuous funding.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Tuscaloosa News, April 11, 1937
Special Collection/The University of Alabama
Formal Opening, 1939, Pamphlet
Mr. John Fitts, AIA Mr. John Ross, Associate Professor of Theatre Art, University of AL

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than 1 acre
Quadrangle name Tuscaloosa Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A	<u>1</u> <u>6</u>	<u>4</u> <u>4</u> <u>7</u> <u>0</u> <u>5</u> <u>0</u>	<u>3</u> <u>6</u> <u>7</u> <u>4</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>0</u>	B	<u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>	<u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u> <u> </u>
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Verbal boundary description and justification

Block 25, part of lot 205, 119' x 120'

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	<u>None</u>	code	county	code
state	<u>None</u>	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Mrs. Betsy Tierce Hayslip, Heritage Commission of Tuscaloosa Co.; and Tom Dolan

organization Alabama Historical Commission date 8/19/83

street & number 725 Monroe Street telephone 205 261-3184

city or town Montgomery state Alabama

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

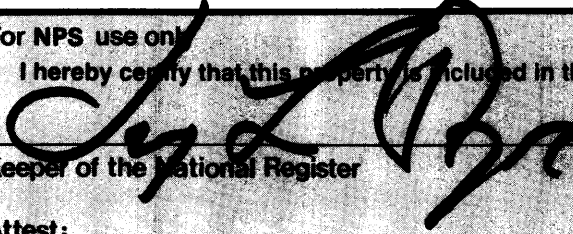
national state local

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  date July 26, 1984

title State Historic Preservation Officer

For NPS use only
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

 date 8/20/84

Keeper of the National Register

Attest: _____ date _____

Chief of Registration

Historical Development
Bama Theatre-City Hall Building

The Bama Theatre-City Hall is the finest and best known of the New Deal buildings in Tuscaloosa County. It was designed by D. O. Whilldin in 1937-38 as a WPA Project in the Art Moderne style. The origins of Art Moderne date back to 1920 when Bertram Goodhue designed the Nebraska State Capitol which was widely admired and recognized as a totally new style especially suited for public buildings. Art Moderne did not become popular, however, until c. 1930 immediately following the brief flowering of Art Deco. With the birth of the New Deal and its subsequent involvement in public architecture, the Art Moderne gained great popularity as an ideal new style in keeping with the image of modernity desired by the Roosevelt Administration.

The interior of the theatre is even more striking than the exterior. Unlike the exterior, however, the interior is somewhat retardataire in decorative design. It is a superb example of theatre design of the 1920s rather than the 1930s. The theme of the decor is a Spanish courtyard with surrounding adobe walls, arcades and balconies. The walls were partially covered in certain areas with accoustical tile which was hand painted by the artist, Professor Navino Nataloni, to resemble distant landscape as seen through various wall openings. The ceiling was painted dark blue with tiny, recessed, blinking lights to replicate twinkling stars. A pair of special projectors were used to create the illusion of clouds moving across the ceiling.

The Bama Theatre-City Hall is an eloquent legacy of, and monument to, the far-reaching change in the role of government in America that Franklin D. Roosevelt wrought. Whether that change was for the best or for the worst can be, and is, hotly debated, but there can be no doubt that the change is one of the most significant occurrences in U. S. history.

The Great Depression was especially hard on the deep South, for the South had been in a depression since the Civil War turned one of the world's richest regions into the nation's poorest. James Agee and Walker Evans tell the story of the destitution of the South and its human toll from the fairly horrified point of view of outside investigators in their landmark book, Now Let Us Praise Famous Men. Bordon Deal tells it more warmly and enjoyably, but no less compellingly, in his novel The Least One. FDR decided the South had to have priority treatment, and not only his New Deal policies but also his wartime policies did just that. For many years afterward, the deep South states received \$2.00 to \$3.00 in Federal outlays for every \$1.00 in Federal taxes they paid - or more.

Tuscaloosa County certainly realized its share of the largesse. Public Works crews worked on roads and on conservation projects. As the University of Alabama New Deal Program built the still-used Amelia Gayle Gorgas Library, and Bidgood Hall, which has housed the state's premier business college ever since; and several other lesser facilities.

The WPA also built the first county library, which now houses the County Board of Education. And it built the airport terminal that the city used until the mid-60s and now houses Dixie Flight Service.

During World War II a gas and tire plant that became B. F. Goodrich was built in Tuscaloosa. But most notably, the WPA built the Bama Theatre through the enterprise of the city fathers, giving the city an elegant show place and a badly needed City Hall that cost the taxpayers nothing.

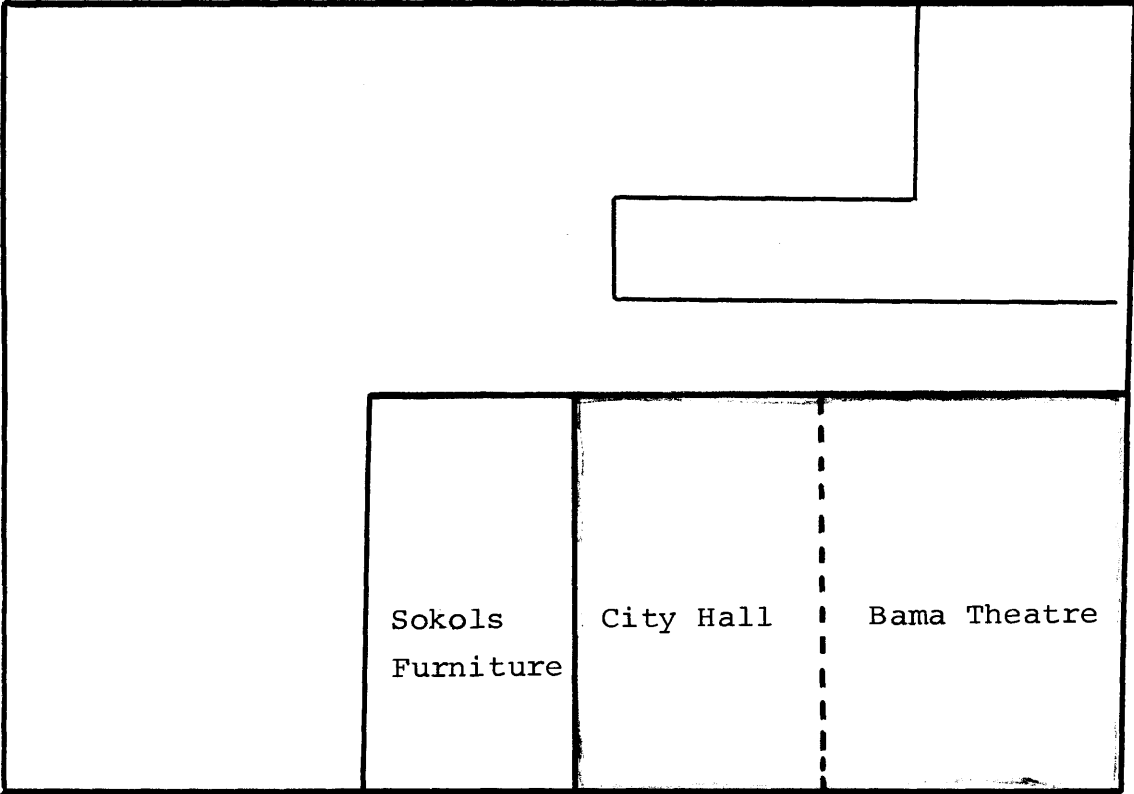
The City Commission arranged for materials and the WPA supplied the labor. The city had worked out a deal with a theatre firm that agreed to lease the theatre section of the building, thus paying for what the city spent on the building and probably supplying profits, we well, in later years.

The country people in the county now tell of riding into Tuscaloosa as children, on wagons with produce and taking a dime to the "Bama" and being entranced - not just by the moving pictures, but by the ambiance of the Bama, with its grand furnishings, the carnevous auditorium with Spanish Villa Decor and "stars" twinkling in the ceiling - for a dime being transported to an air-conditioned paradise for the length of a movie.

They didn't realize, though probably wouldn't have been surprised, that wonderful theatre was brought to them by the same New Deal that brought them the commodities that helped ease the malnutrition that was rampant in the region, and that brought some of them the mules that pulled the plowshare across the fields to enable their families to raise crops and pulled the wagon into town to let them sell their produce, and that in many cases was the dime that paid for the admission.

Now the building is used as the Civic Performing Arts Center and is undergoing extensive restoration in phases determined by availability of funding.

Site Plan of the Bama Theatre, Tuscaloosa, Al.



Greensboro Avenue

6th Street

