

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

For NPS use only

received SEP 30 1986

date entered NOV 6 1986

**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 Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building

and/or common N.A.

**2. Location**

street & number 1901-1903 Seventh Street, N.W.

N.A. not for publication

city, town Washington

N.A. vicinity of

state D.C.

code 11

county N.A.

code 001

**3. Classification**

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

**4. Owner of Property**

name Peoples Involvement Corporation

street & number 2146 Georgia Ave., N.W.

city, town Washington, D.C. 20001 N.A. vicinity of

state

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Recorder of Deeds

street & number 6th and D Streets, N.W.

city, town Washington, D.C.

state

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites

has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1984

federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records D.C. Historic Preservation Office, 614 H Street, N.W.

city, town Washington, D.C.

state

## 7. Description

### Condition

excellent

good

fair

deteriorated

ruins

unexposed

### Check one

unaltered

altered

### Check one

original site

moved

date \_\_\_\_\_

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building is a four story tan brick building located at the northeast corner of the intersection of 7th and T Streets, NW, in the District of Columbia. The building, which is detailed on the south and west facades, is rectangular in shape. In both massing and detailing, the Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building is based on Italian renaissance models. The balance of horizontal and vertical elements is a particularly noteworthy aspect of the composition. The primary facades both display an a-b-c-b-a rhythm that is enhanced by the central portions of the facades (b-c-b), which project out slightly from the face of the building. Concrete string courses set off by brick laid in soldier and header courses provide horizontal emphasis. The secondary facades on the north and east are detailed in a utilitarian manner in common red brick. The building is crowned by a projecting composite cornice.

The end bays of the first story are anchored by stone architrave openings topped by projecting lintels supported by scroll brackets. Stone arches with scroll keystones surmount each architrave. The theater entrance and marquee are centered below the projecting portion of the facade on 7th Street (west facade). Various blocked up entrances and window openings occupy the central portion of the south facade on T Street. The first story is set off by a full entablature below a brick soldier course.

The upper three stories of the building feature window openings that articulate the compositional rhythm of the facade. With the exception of the central opening on the west facade, each opening contains a single one-over-one double-hung window. (All windows are presently boarded over.) The west facade has five openings on each story; the central opening contains paired windows. The south facade has 11 openings on each story. There are single openings at each end above the first story architraves. The projecting central portion of the south facade has a group of five windows flanked by groups of two windows. Window surrounds are outlined with brick stretchers. Stone string courses form the sills of the second and fourth story windows. The string course below the fourth story rests on a soldier course of brick. The third story windows have brick sills.

The deep entablature crowning the building features a brick frieze outlined by cyma reversa molding above a fascia of header brick. A metal cornice projects out above dentils and modillion blocks. Elaborate paired consoles at either end of the projecting salients support the cornice. Within the frieze on each salient between the consoles are metal plaques bearing the name of the building. "SOUTHERN AID BUILDING" appears on the plaque on the west facade; "SOUTHERN AID SOCIETY OF VIRGINIA INC" appears on the south facade.

(See Continuation Sheet)

## 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify) Black History

**Specific dates** 1919 - 1920 **Builder/Architect** Isaiah Hatton; Reginald Geare (theater)

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building, designed in 1919 by noted Black architect Isaiah Hatton, served as the Washington headquarters for the Southern Aid Society, the oldest Black life insurance company in the country. The Dunbar Theater, a movie theater designed by Reginald W. Geare, occupied the first floor. The building also provided residential units, offices, and commercial space for Blacks. This mixed use building was an important element of the Black commercial area that developed around 7th and U Streets in the early part of the 20th century.

The Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building meets National Register Criteria A and C because of its importance to the history of Blacks in the United States. It meets Criterion A because of its association with the growth and development of the Southern Aid Society and because it is a physical representation of Black response to the increasingly restrictive racial climate of the early 20th century. The building meets Criterion C because it is illustrative of the work of Isaiah Hatton and embodies the monumental simplicity and superb craftsmanship characteristic of buildings designed and built by Blacks during this period. The Dunbar Theater, housed within the building, is a good example of the work of Reginald Geare who designed many of Washington's early movie theaters.

The full significance of the Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building can only be grasped through an understanding of the historical context in which it was built. In the first decade of the 20th century Blacks were faced with increasing prejudice and discrimination. The hopes born of emancipation and reconstruction had been dashed by the institution of Jim Crow laws and the gradual disenfranchisement of the race. Theodore Roosevelt's response to the Brownsville Race Riots of 1906 showed that even the Republican party could no longer be relied upon to protect Black interests. In 1913 Booker T. Washington wrote, "I have never seen the colored people [of Washington] so discouraged and bitter as they are at the present time." (Constance Green, *The Secret City*, p. 173.)

The denial of civil rights was deeply felt among Blacks in Washington. The District of Columbia held a special position for Black Americans, offering them opportunities not available elsewhere. Civil service employment provided a degree of professionalism and security found in few other cities. During the Taft administration Black political appointments declined and the federal government itself gradually began to institute a policy of discrimination and segregation. The local Black community did not submit to Jim Crow meekly. By 1916, the Washington chapter of the NAACP, an organization considered radical at its founding, was the largest in the nation. Race relations in the District continued to deteriorate, reaching their nadir in the riots of July 1919. Nine

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property .083

Quadrangle name Washington, D.C. West

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

### UTM References

A 

1	8	3	2	4	6	9	0	4	3	0	9	1	5	0
Zone			Easting				Northing							

B 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

C 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

D 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

E 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

F 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

G 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

H 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

### Verbal boundary description and justification

1901-1903 Seventh Street, N.W. is located on record lots 7 and 8, Square 440, Washington, D.C.

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

state N.A. code county code

state N.A. code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Betty Bird

organization N.A.

date August 1986

street & number 2025 Eye Street, N.W., Suite 801

telephone 202-463-2033

city or town Washington, D.C. 20006

state

# 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 Carol P. Thompson

title State Historic Preservation Officer

date September 29, 1986

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

for Allores Byan  
Keeper of the National Register

date 11-6-86

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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There have been few alterations to the building. The present marquee was added in the 1940s. Architectural fabric below the marquee is missing. The interior of the building is remarkably intact. Although extremely deteriorated, the interior architectural features of the Dunbar Theater survive. Chunks of plaster ornament have fallen from the ceiling and fittings like theater seats, lights, and refreshment stand are now missing. The simple, massive interior stair survives. The slate treads are deteriorated and some marble panels adorning the baluster are gone. On the upper floors some walls have been knocked out and pieces of trim removed. Considerable interior trim still remains. Picture rails, baseboards, doors, architrave trim and wood floors are still visible. Despite alterations and the general level of deterioration, the Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building still retains sufficient integrity for designation. Moreover enough fabric remains for the Dunbar Theater to convey its historic associations as well. The exterior of the Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building survives as a monument to the skill of the black craftsman who constructed the building. Both the interior and the exterior of the building display Isaiah Hatton's sure hand with volumetric proportions and amply demonstrate the quality of his work.

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men were killed and thirty injured in civil disorders that were largely sparked by white aggression fomented by the **Washington Post**. The riots convinced the Black community that physical harassment in the District was stopped only because Blacks armed themselves and fought their white antagonists.

The Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building rose against this background of racial tension and constricted opportunity. Blacks were no longer tolerated in white-run social or commercial institutions. Discrimination exacerbated an already critical housing shortage. On several levels the Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building represented the Black response to these exclusions. On one level the financing, design, and construction of the building demonstrated Black capability. On another level the mixed use program of the building indicates the extent to which Black architecture reflected the displacement of Blacks from white services and public accommodations. The rooms on the fourth floor furnished housing, the Dunbar Theater offered entertainment, the offices provided business space for professionals, and the retail space served commercial needs. And on a sociological level, the activities housed within the Dunbar Theater illustrated a continuing theme in 19th and early 20th century Black history — the adaptation of institutions originating in the white world to serve the singular needs of the Black community.

The Southern Aid Society, founded by Blacks in Richmond in 1893, exemplifies the way in which distinct commercial institutions developed within the Black community. By the early 1940s the Southern Aid Society could boast that it was the oldest surviving Black insurance stock company in the United States. The company, which confined its operations to Virginia and the District of Columbia, was chartered to provide "life insurance and weekly benefits to sick members". (M.S. Stuart, **An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes**, p. 231.) During its first year of operation the company employed seven people and conducted a gross business of \$7000. In 1921, the Society had ten district offices, including the one in Washington. By 1937 it employed over 300 people and claimed paid up capital of \$150,000, policy and contingent reserves of \$437,137, surplus of \$222,777.50, and admitted assets of \$872,131.38. (Stuart, p. 232.) In **An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes** published in 1940, M.S. Stuart featured four photographs of buildings constructed or owned by the Southern Aid Society, including the Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building in Washington.

The significance of insurance companies to the Black community cannot be overstated. In addition to providing disability and death benefits to laborers ordinarily denied them, the capital held by the associations supplied the foundation for Black banks. The development of Black insurance companies, until

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recently the most successful of Black businesses, was an outgrowth of economic relief provided through Black churches or Black secret fraternal organizations.

Mutual benefit associations and insurance companies enjoyed a tremendous growth in the last two decades of the 19th century. In 1881 the Prudential Insurance Company began charging Blacks higher premiums, justifying the rate increase on the basis of higher mortality rates. (August Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, p. 142.) Other companies soon followed suit. Spurred by discrimination as well as the movement for Black self-help and racial solidarity, fraternal benefit societies such as the Order of St. Luke and the United Order of True Reformers (both based in Richmond), originated as alternatives to white insurance companies. Among the first stock life insurance companies to develop independently from fraternal organizations and churches was the Southern Aid Society, founded in Richmond in 1893. The insurance companies provided dignified jobs for Blacks and also eliminated the humiliating visits from white insurance agents. Because most Black men were employed as laborers, their insurance would be collected weekly and the home visits of white agents were a major source of dissatisfaction among Blacks. (Stuart, pp. 11 - 15.)

When the Southern Aid Society began selling insurance in Washington, the *Washington Bee*, a Black newspaper, urged readers to patronize the company:

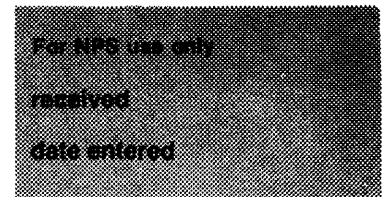
One of the most reliable and up-to-date insurance companies in the U.S. is the Southern Aid Society of Virginia, with a branch office in this city. This company is supported entirely by colored Americans. Its officers are colored and the new building that is being erected at the northeast corner of 7th and T streets northwest in this city is being erected by colored men, and above everything, it deposits in a colored bank. . . . Go and see its new building, which is a monument to colored Americans. (Editorial, April 17, 1920.)

The Southern Aid Society became involved in real estate in Washington when it bought a building at the northeast corner of 7th and T with the intent of remodelling it. By September 1919 the Society determined that remodelling was not feasible and the land was cleared for a new building later that year. The site faced the 7th Street commercial corridor that extended north to Georgia Avenue. It was across T Street from the Howard Theater, the premier entertainment center for the Black community. Howard University was several blocks north; Florida Avenue and U Street were one block north. Clearly the Southern Aid Society had chosen to locate in an area that was rapidly developing as a center of Black activity.

The building they constructed housed a mix of tenants that would further con-

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tribute to the vitality of the area. The building housed a pool room with a separate entrance in the basement, a motion picture theater and retail establishments on the first floor, office space for professionals and the Southern Aid Society on the second and third floors, and apartments on the fourth floor. It is important to bear in mind that each of these uses served a distinct function within the Black community. William Howard Jones, the noted Black sociologist, devoted an entire chapter of *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.* to the role pool rooms played in the Black community. Like barber shops, they served as public meeting places and information centers, a function of critical importance to a large, widespread community without daily newspaper service. (Jones, p. 135-138.) Similarly, during the early 20th century motion picture theaters assumed significance both as public places for social interaction and entertainment as well as arenas in which Blacks were exposed to broader aspects of American culture.

The Dunbar Theater was the enterprise of the Murray Brothers, owners of the Murray Palace Casino and proprietors of the Hiawatha and Foraker, both movie theaters for Blacks. They chose Reginald Geare for their architect. Geare was a prominent local motion picture theater architect in Washington in the early 20th century. He was the architect of the Knickerbocker, whose collapse in 1922 signalled the end of his career. Although it was determined that the contractor installed the steel beams in the roof incorrectly, Geare never recovered from the indictment for manslaughter that was returned against him and committed suicide in 1927. In addition to the Dunbar and the Knickerbocker, Geare also designed the Metropolitan (now demolished). Like the Dunbar, all showed Geare's sure hand with Georgian revival and Adamesque detailing, appropriate styles for the nation's capital. (Obituary, *Washington Post*, August 21, 1927; James M. Goode, *Capital Losses*, pp. 370 - 373.)

The *Washington Bee* took notice of the opening of the Dunbar in October 1920. One of the theater's managers, R.G. Byars, was a great favorite of the paper.

The Dunbar, the new theater, opened Monday evening with waving of flags and beating of drums. The crowds began to arrive at 6 and there was a continuous flow until 11 p.m. The new organ, which was installed last week, is one of the attractions of this new theater. This is strictly a picture house, under the management of R.G. Byers, who also manages the Hiawatha. The new Dunbar has been a drawing card this week. (October 23, 1920.)

Advertisements stated that Prof. George E. Battle would be giving daily recitals on the theater's pipe organ. (*Washington Bee*, October 23, 1920.) The *Bee* later commended Byars' practice of showing matinee films based on litera-



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ture children were studying in school. (April 2, 1921.)

In 1927 William Jones described both the Dunbar Theater and the Southern Aid Society Pool Room in **Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.:**

This theater is located on Tea Street near Seventh Street, Northwest. It is owned by the Crescent Amusement Company, a Negro corporation. It is under the management of Mr. Raymond Murray. It has a seating capacity of 395. The approximate attendance, except during the summer months, is 700 daily. This theater features motion pictures only, the western type chiefly. Ventilation and sanitary conditions are inadequate and the floors and furniture are not kept free from dust. the performance begins at two p.m. and continues through until eleven p.m. The prices of admission are as follows: matinee -- adults and children ten cents; night -- adults and children fifteen cents. (p. 115.)

The Southern Aid Building Parlor is located at Seventh and T Streets, N.W. The room is kept in good condition and the three tables are in good condition. (p. 138.)

While the uses to which the Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater Building was put are important, its architecture is also significant. The Southern Aid Society chose Isaiah Hatton (1888 - c. 1921) as the architect for the building. Hatton graduated from D.C.'s M Street High School (*Washington Bee*, August 21, 1920) and probably apprenticed under John Lankford, a notable black architect whose international practice was based in the District. Hatton's other buildings included the Whitelaw, the Industrial Bank Building, and the Murray Palace Casino. (Ethridge, HABS Documentation on the Whitelaw Apartment Hotel; Jones, p. 125.) Hatton was one of several Black architects active in Washington during this period. Although little is known about him, his buildings and references to him by contemporaries establish his status as a master.

Hatton's buildings were among the finest designed for the Black community during this period. Both in terms of architectural quality and in the importance of the activity they housed, the buildings held tremendous significance for the Black population of Washington. The Whitelaw Apartment Hotel (1918-1919) was the first hotel in the city developed, designed, and constructed entirely by Blacks for Blacks. It offered an elegant setting for social interaction and hotel and apartment living in an era when Jim Crow excluded Blacks from public facilities. The Industrial Savings Bank, which is still in opera-

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tion, was among the first Black-owned banks in the District of Columbia. The Murray Palace Casino on U between 9th and 10th was among the first reinforced concrete buildings constructed in Washington and was the site of most dances held by social and fraternal organizations. (Jones, *Idem.*) Hatton's buildings all share a well developed volumetric sensibility. Each of them features a sophisticated play of vertical and horizontal elements that gives them an extraordinary Renaissance balance. Hatton used projecting salients and the decorative brickwork of Black craftsmen to great effect in his buildings. Because his approach to form is more sculptural than decorative, his buildings still possess a remarkable presence despite the deterioration that marks most of them today. The Southern Aid Society/Dunbar Theater is an excellent example of Hatton's work because it incorporates design characteristics that distinguish his architecture and because the building itself so thoroughly embodies the milieu in which it was created.

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