

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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RECEIVED	MAR 18 1982
DATE ENTERED	APR 15 1982

**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

Comstock-Cheney Hall

AND/OR COMMON

Ivoryton Playhouse

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

Main Street and Summit Street

N/A NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Essex (Ivoryton)

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Essex (Ivoryton)

N/A VICINITY OF

2nd -

STATE

Connecticut

CODE

09

COUNTY

Middlesex

CODE

007

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED
- N/A

STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- COMMERICAL
- EDUCATIONAL
- ENTERTAINMENT
- GOVERNMENT
- INDUSTRIAL
- MILITARY
- MUSEUM
- PARK
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- RELIGIOUS
- SCIENTIFIC
- TRANSPORTATION
- OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Ivoryton Playhouse Foundation, Inc.

STREET & NUMBER

c/o Richard Stanley, President, 20 Main Street

CITY, TOWN

Essex

N/A VICINITY OF

STATE

CT

06426

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Essex Land Records, Town Hall

STREET & NUMBER

West Avenue

CITY, TOWN

Essex

STATE

Connecticut

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

State Register of Historic Places

DATE

1981

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Connecticut Historical Commission

CITY, TOWN

Hartford

STATE

CT

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Setting

The community hall that Comstock, Cheney & Co. built in 1910 on the north-east corner of Main and Summit streets in Ivoryton, Connecticut, is a 44x66-foot weathered-shingle structure with a hip roof and classic revival trim. Known for the past 40 years as the Ivoryton Playhouse, the half-acre site also includes a small, ell-shaped, shingled cottage, used as an office, and a barn-like warehouse with gable roof and dark vertical siding that were built after the hall became a theater in 1938.

Most of the neighboring structures date from the turn of the century. They include a general store, library, inn, filling station, firehouse and other retail shops, that constitute the center of the small community. Ivoryton is so named because the principal industry, Pratt, Read Corp., successor to Comstock, Cheney & Co., is in the business of processing ivory into various commercial products. The community is a neighborhood in the Town of Essex, about five miles north of Long Island Sound in south-central Connecticut.

Exterior

1
Comstock-Cheney Hall faces south, toward Main Street on a slight rise, and its central entrance is approached by a concrete walk up grade from Main Street. The facade of the 2-story block has a projecting entrance surround of wood that is painted white in sharp contrast to the dark, weathered shingles of the siding. The shingled wall flares out slightly over the foundations. (Photograph 1.) The surround is defined by four pilasters with molded capitals and marked entasis, that support a plain architrave and embellished frieze. Triglyphs with guttae occupy the spaces over the end pilasters. Corresponding spaces over the central pilasters have only the guttae, the triglyphs being omitted in favor of raised lettering that now reads IVORYTON PLAYHOUSE. The cornice above includes a dentil course and crown molding. Above the lettering, in front of the dentil course, there is a row of ten exposed light bulbs.

Wide wooden steps with five risers lead to the double, panelled doors between the central pilasters. The end spaces left and right of the doors have 6-over-6 windows under blind, half-round arches.

There is a 6-over-6 window on each side of the entrance surround, in the shingled wall plane. Three paired, 6-pane casement windows cut into the wide architrave and frieze over the entrance surround and under the roof overhang. The wide architrave and frieze, each topped by a molding, are also painted white. The wide roof overhang is supported by shaped paired brackets. (Photograph 2.) The hipped roof, covered with interlocking composition shingles, has a hipped-roof dormer with three horizontal, 6-pane windows in its front slope.

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Comstock-Cheney Hall

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1

The bracketed roof overhang and the architrave and frieze carry around to the east elevation. The east roof slope has three hipped-roof dormers, smaller than the one on the front, each with a ten-pane, horizontal window. This elevation has two double doors, toward the front and the back, under flat hoods that are supported by solid, curved brackets. There are two small windows over the doors, and three large windows between the doors but higher up in the wall. The windows are obscured, to prevent light from entering the theater. The architrave and frieze under the roof are largely covered by metal duct work for the air conditioning system. The west elevation is similar.

A 19 x 40-foot wing was added on the rear of the structure, c. 1938, to enlarge the stage area. This section has a gambrel roof whose upper slopes are nearly flat, a departure from the hipped roof of the main structure, but the architrave and frieze are continued. (Photograph 3.) A further one-story shed extension continues beyond the gambrel-roofed wing.

There are two smaller buildings on the property, in the northwest and northeast corners of the site. A small, ell-shaped, 1-story, gable-roofed, shingle cottage in the northwest corner, close to Summit Street, was the business office for the theater. (Photograph 9.) The building in the northeast corner, used for preparing and storing scenery, resembles a barn in size and shape but its details resemble those of the hall. (Photograph 5.) This building has a gable roof whose overhang is supported by rafter extensions over an architrave and frieze, painted white, to contrast with the dark, vertical siding, like the hall. On the south elevation there is a dormer (similar to those at the hall) in the roof, with two 6-pane windows, and there are two double, 8-pane, casement windows in the wall. High, double barn doors occupy the west elevation while the north elevation is solid, vertical, flush boarding without fenestration. On the east elevation there are two high, 6-pane, horizontal windows over an added, flimsy porch.

Interior

The area immediately inside the front double doors of the hall is a small foyer, with the box office on the west wall. Further double doors lead to the auditorium, which has a flat floor, two aisles and 13 to 16 rows of seats arranged in a 6 - 12 - 6 pattern for a seating capacity of about 350. The three tall windows on each side wall can be seen from the interior to consist of double, 12-pane sash with molded surrounds. Similar horizontal moldings that connect the windows, about one-quarter of the way up, extend to become the lintels of the exit doors.

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The balcony, added c. 1938, is supported by two bracketed wood posts and by pilasters next to the walls. The front of the balcony resembles a balustrade or parapet. Its surface is embellished with five recessed horizontal panels that are separated by narrow, vertical, recessed panels. The openings to the two stairways to the balcony have consoles matching the brackets of the balcony posts. The stairways, 36" wide, rise against the east and west walls in runs to landings on the south wall, then turn and run toward the center of the building along the south wall. The balcony is stepped, with a different level for each of the seven rows of seats. There are two aisles with a seat pattern of 5 - 14 - 5, for a seating capacity of about 150.

The roof is supported by four trusses composed of two horizontal chords connected by two parallel diagonal members to left and to right, with vertical tie rod in the center. The center of each horizontal member is clad in metal plates bolted together, suggesting that the chords are not continuous timbers. Curved brackets supported by consoles connect the ends of the trusses to the walls. (Photograph 6.)

The proscenium arch is a companion piece to the facade entrance surround. In the arch the four pilasters are arranged in pairs to left and right. The triglyphs and guttae are in the frieze over the pilasters, and the dentil course and crown molding above correspond to those on the facade. (Photograph 7.)

Off stage space in the wings behind the curtain is quite small. Narrow stairs with winders descend from the corners of the building to the dressing room level below. The dressing rooms provide minimum accommodations and basic facilities. (Photograph 8.)

There is a full basement under the auditorium. The auditorium floor is supported by two rows of four posts with a concrete pier forming a fifth support in each row. The post-and-beam construction makes use of substantial timbers, 7½ x 11½" in size.

In general, the principal 1910-section of the hall appears to be in reasonably good condition structurally. The wing to rear added c. 1938 does not appear to be in as good condition. The gambrel roof needs to be recovered, and the one-story shed extension is flimsy.

1. Use of the hyphen in Comstock-Cheney Hall is taken from the lettering that appeared over the entrance. See picture, The Ivoryton Playbill, 1980, p. 3.

6 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input checked="" 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		

SPECIFIC DATES 1910

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Criteria

Comstock-Cheney Hall, now the Ivoryton Playhouse, is a well-proportioned, early 20th-century structure designed in the Neo-Classical Revival style but visually striking for its weathered-shingle siding, characteristic of the popular, turn-of-the-century, shingle style of architecture. (Criterion C.) The historic importance of the building arises from its function as the community hall of the company town of Ivoryton and, later, as one of the earliest and longest-lived summer theaters in the country. (Criterion A.)

Community Hall

Comstock, Cheney & Co. had been in business in Ivoryton for some years processing ivory into combs and other novelties when, toward the end of the 19th century, the product line was expanded to include piano keys. This move brought a great increase in the size of the business, and required the addition of a number of employees to the work force. As there were no houses in Ivoryton for more people, the company was obliged to provide housing, as well as community facilities in general. At about the turn of the century, the company owned as many as 135 houses.¹

The company was motivated by a desire to provide itself with workers. Similar motivation had led to the creation of a number of company towns in eastern Connecticut in the early to mid-19th century. Often the circumstances in eastern Connecticut centered on the location of a waterfall suitable for providing power for a textile mill. It was essential to locate the mills near the power sources, which were away from existing urban centers and therefore the construction of housing was a necessity. A similar circumstance led to the establishment of a woolen mill and company

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See continuation sheet.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 0.6

UTM NOT VERIFIED

QUADRANGLE NAME Essex

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

A 1,8 | 7,1,3 | 4,5,0 | 4,5,8,0 | 3,7,0

B | | | |

C | | | |

D | | | |

E | | | |

F | | | |

G | | | |

H | | | |

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The nominated property is described in the Essex Land Recors, volume 73, page 590.

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

David F. Ransom

ORGANIZATION

Architectural Historian

DATE

November 10, 1980

STREET & NUMBER

33 Sunrise Hill Drive

TELEPHONE

203 521-2518

CITY OR TOWN

West Hartford

STATE

Connecticut

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL X

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

TITLE Director, Connecticut Historical Commission

DATE March 2, 1982

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

Entered in the
National Register

DATE

4/15/82

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST:

DATE

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

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received **MAR 18 1982**
date entered

Comstock-Cheney Hall

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Continuation sheet

housing at Humphreysville (now Seymour) in western Connecticut in the first quarter of the 19th century. Colonel Samuel Colt built some company houses at the time of the Civil War in connection with his Hartford armory. The Comstock, Cheney & Co. program in Ivoryton is notable for being much later than the others, but was occasioned by the same needs.

In Ivoryton, Comstock, Cheney & Co. owned the inn and the general store as well as houses. But in addition to these basics, the company also provided some social facilities. One of these was the Ivoryton Wheel Club, built by the company in 1893 and twice enlarged by 1899.² In addition to its principal function in connection with the popular sport of bicycling, the club provided a reading room, two pool tables, and a billiard table.

It was in pursuit of such social objectives that the community hall was built. The company bought the land in 1910,³ moved away the house that was standing on the corner, and built the hall promptly, for a picture of it showing the structure very much as it appears today was taken in 1911.⁴ A 1912 picture shows that the pipe fence, still in place, was installed by that time. (Photograph 9.)

A local resident recalls that for some years the townspeople made good use of the hall. Movies were a favorite attraction, after which the seats were stacked on the sides and dances were held. Military whist⁵ was another regular function. Especially important were the graduation exercises of the elementary school next door (demolished), that itself had been built largely with company funds.⁶

As the 20th century progressed, such property ownership by the company became unnecessary, and out of date. The company sold its real estate throughout the community, including the inn, the store, and Comstock-Cheney Hall, reflecting the changes in immigration and economic conditions.

The Ivoryton Playhouse

The new owner of the hall, in 1938, was Milton Stiefel, a Broadway impresario who also lived in Essex. He enlarged the stage by building on the north wing, installed a revolving stage (manually operated), built the outbuildings, and launched the Ivoryton Playhouse on a decades-long career as a summer theater. In addition to being the owner, Mr. Stiefel was also the producer, and often the director. The success of the Ivoryton Playhouse was his personal triumph.

The Ivoryton Playhouse is considered to be the first self-supporting summer theater in the United States. Theaters at Dennis, Massachusetts, and Skowhegan, Maine, were started earlier but were not self-supporting operations.

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Continuation sheet Comstock-Cheney Hall
Ivoryton, CT

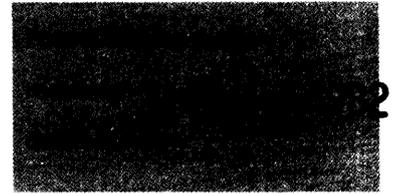
Item number 8

Page 3

1.
Interview September 1, 1980 with Peter H. Comstock, president of Pratt, Read Corp.
2.
Supplement to the Deep River New Era, September 29, 1899. 7:2.
3.
Essex Land Records, volume 11, page 471.
4.
The picture is in the collection of the Ivoryton Public Library.
5.
Military whist is progressive whist with flags at each table that are acquired by winners, the winning team being the one that has the most flags at the end of the evening.
6.
Interview October 31, 1980 with Mrs. Mabel Johnson. Mrs. Johnson was born in 1904 in the house in which she now resides, three doors up Summit Street from Comstock-Cheney Hall. Mrs. Johnson recalls that when work was slow at the factory, and employees put in less than a full week, rent for the houses was reduced accordingly.
7.
Mrs. Johnson remembers Miss Hepburn walking up Summit Street from the Playhouse to the neighborhood home where she boarded, in season, as one of her fondest memories of the early years of the Playhouse.

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Continuation sheet Comstock-Cheney Hall
 Bibliography

Item number 9

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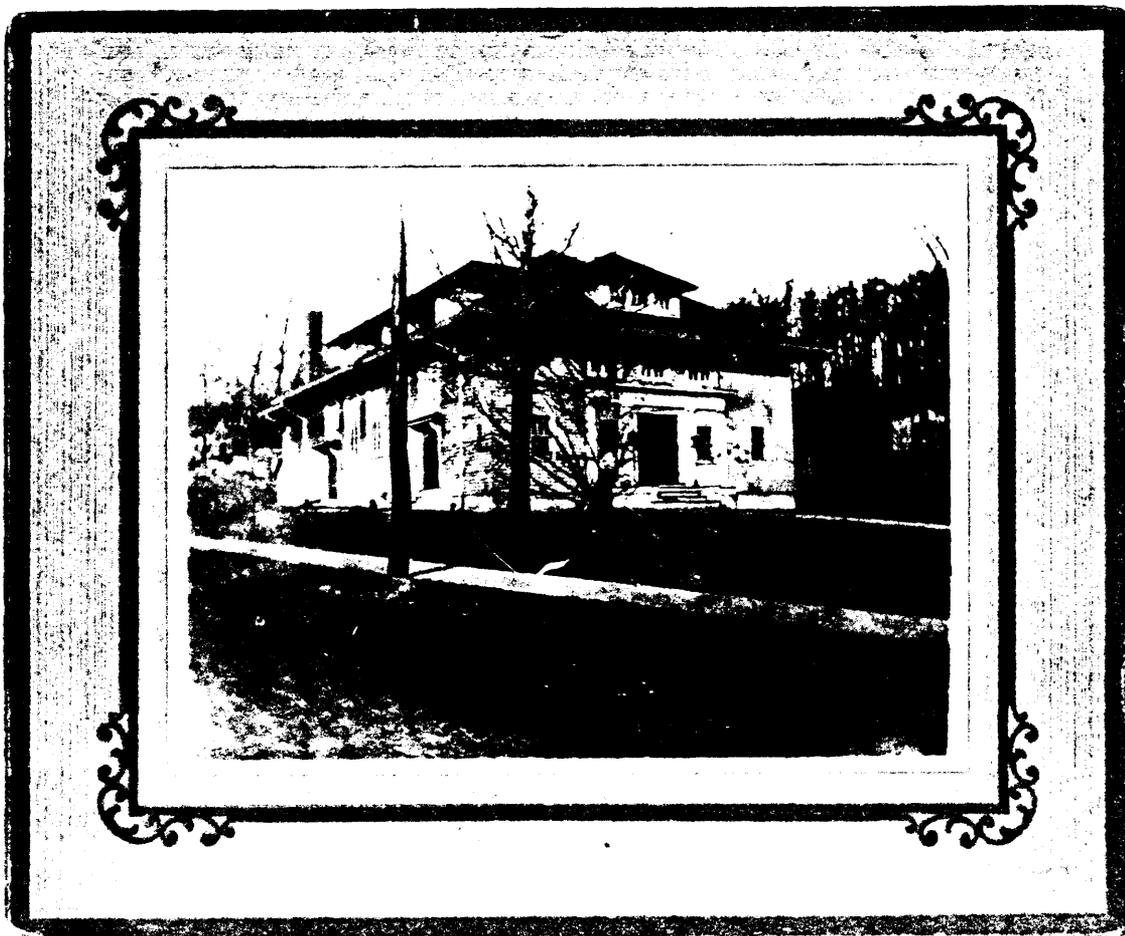
Interview with Peter H. Comstock, president of Pratt, Read Corp.,
September 1, 1980.

Essex Land Records

The Ivoryton Playbill, 1980.

Interview with Mrs. Mabel Johnson, lifetime resident neighbor of
Comstock-Cheney Hall, October 31, 1980.

Supplement to the Deep River New Era, September 29, 1899.



Comstock-Cheney Hall
Ivortyton
Middlesex County, CT
1912 VIEW NORTHEAST
(showing pipe fence,
still in place)
Picture at Ivoryton
Public Library
Photograph 9 of 10

BRIAN AHERNE ★ FRANK ALBERTSON ★ ALAN ALDA ★ ROBERT ALDA ★ JUNE
ALLYSON ★ DON AMECHE ★ DANA ANDREWS ★ EVE ARDEN ★ RICHARD ARLEN
CLIFF ARQUETTE ★ MARY ASTOR ★ JEAN PIERRE AUMONT ★ TALLULAH
BANKHEAD ★ PATRICIA BARRY ★ DIANA BARRYMORE ★ ANNE BAXTER
WILLIAM BENDIX ★ JOAN BENNETT ★ MIMI BENZELL ★ GERTRUDE BERG
JOAN BLONDELL ★ SHIRLEY BOOTH ★ LEE BOWMAN ★ EDDIE BRACKEN
MARLON BRANDO ★ SHERRY BRITTON ★ CAROL BRUCE ★ NIGEL BRUCE
BILLIE BURKE ★ SPRING BYINGTON ★ EDD BYRNES ★ SID CAESAR ★ KITTY
CARLISLE ★ ART CARNEY ★ JENNIE CARSON ★ PEGGY CASS ★ DANE CLARK
CHARLES COBURN ★ IMOGENE COCA ★ STEVE COCHRAN ★ HANS CONRIED
KATHRYN CROSBY ★ ZAMAH CUNNINGHAM ★ DENISE DARCEL ★ LINDA
DARNELL ★ CLAUDE DAUPHIN ★ ROSEMARY DEKAMP ★ SANDY DENNIS
TROY DONAHUE ★ JOANNE DRU ★ FAY DUNAWAY ★ BUDDY EBSEN ★ FAYE
EMERSON ★ STUART ERWIN ★ MAURICE EVANS ★ TOM EWELL ★ BETTY
FIELD ★ FYV FINKEL ★ JOAN FONTAINE ★ CONNIE FORD ★ HENDERSON
FORSYTHE ★ JOHN FORSYTHE ★ ARLENE FRANCIS ★ KAY FRANCIS ★ EVA
GABOR ★ REGINALD GARDINER ★ JOHN GAVIN ★ WILL GEER ★ DODY
GOODMAN ★ BETTY GRABLE ★ FARLEY GRANGER ★ MITZI GREEN ★ GENE
HACKMAN ★ ANN HARDING ★ NOEL HARRISON ★ GRACE HARTMAN ★ PAUL
HARTMAN ★ HURD HATFIELD ★ JUNE HAVOC ★ HELEN HAYES ★ EILEEN
HECKART ★ TOM HELMORE ★ KATHARINE HEPBURN ★ JUDY HOLLIDAY
CELESTE HOLM ★ KATHARINE HOUGHTON ★ HENRY HULL ★ KIM HUNTER
JIM HUTTON ★ JOHN IRELAND ★ GERRY JEDD ★ VAN JOHNSON ★ ALLAN
JONES ★ KURT KASZMAR ★ EARTHA KITT ★ VERONICA LAKE ★ DOROTHY
LAMOUR ★ SAM LEVENE ★ BEATRICE LILLIE ★ JUNE LOCKHART ★ MARJORIE
LORD ★ FRANK LOVEJOY ★ MYRNA LOY ★ CLAIRE LUCE ★ PAUL LUKAS
GUY MADISON ★ LUCILLE MANNERS ★ JAYNE MANSFIELD ★ HAL MARCH
HERBERT MARSHALL ★ GROUCHO MARX ★ JAMES MASON ★ PAMELA MASON
ILONA MASSEY ★ RAYMOND MASSEY ★ MARILYN MAXWELL ★ VIRGINIA MAYO
LON MCCALLISTER ★ DAVID MCCALLUM ★ MERCEDES MCCAMBRIDGE ★ PAUL
MCGRATH ★ BIFF MCGUIRE ★ MARY MINER ★ GEORGE MONTGOMERY ★ TERRY
MOORE ★ HENRY MORGAN ★ CHESTER MORRIS ★ CONRAD NAGEL ★ LOIS
NETTLETON ★ MICHAEL O'SHEA ★ MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN ★ REGINALD OWEN
BETSY PALMER ★ ELEANOR PARKER ★ JUDY PARRISH ★ MARISA PAVAN
WALTER PIDGEON ★ ZASU PITTS ★ TOM POSTON ★ MARIE POWERS ★ VINCENT
PRICE ★ BASIL RATHBONE ★ GENE RAYMOND ★ MICHAEL RENNIE ★ CYRIL
RITCHARD ★ MARIA RIVA ★ PAUL ROBESON ★ CESAR ROMERO ★ MICKEY
ROONEY ★ TOMMY SANDS ★ MARIAN SELDES ★ WILLIAM SHATNER ★ ANN
SHERIDAN ★ SYLVIA SIDNEY ★ NANCY SINATRA ★ PENNY SINGLETON
ALEXIS SMITH ★ ANN SOTHERN ★ ROBERT STACK ★ CRAIG STEVENS
HAILA STODDARD ★ GLORIA SWANSON ★ NORMA TERRIS ★ LAWRENCE
TIBBETT ★ FRANCHOT TONE ★ ARTHUR TREACHER ★ PHILIP TRUEX
VIVIAN VANCE ★ GLORIA VANDERBILT ★ AL VEESE ★ BETSY VON
FURSTENBERG ★ ETHEL WATERS ★ DAVID WAYNE ★ MAE WEST
CORNELL WILDE ★ SHELLY WINTERS ★ JANE WYATT ★ BLANCHE YURKA

Figure 10 of 10

Comstock-Cheney Hall
Ivoryton
Middlesex County, CT
The Ivoryton Playbill, 1980.
NAMES OF STARS WHO HAVE
PLAYED THE IVORYTON PLAYHOUSE

Comstock-Cheney map
Ivoryton
Middlesex County, N.Y.

Plot plan

Photo key

