

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

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

For NCRS use only  
received MAY 3 1982  
date entered JUN 3 1982

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

**1. Name**

historic The Collingswood Theatre

and/or common

**2. Location**

street & number 843 Haddon Avenue N/A not for publication

city, town Collingswood N/A vicinity of congressional district 6th

state New Jersey code 34 county Camden code 007

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	<u>N/A</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 Mr. and Mrs. Robert Giandomenico

street & number 13 Fern Avenue

city, town Collingswood N/A vicinity of state New Jersey

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Register of Deeds, Camden County Courthouse

street & number Courthouse Square

city, town Camden state New Jersey

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

Camden County Inventory of Historic  
title Sites and Structures

has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date Revised Edition, 1980  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Camden County Cultural and Heritage Commission

city, town Haddon Township state New Jersey

## 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		

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

Situated along a major commercial street between Camden and Haddonfield, the Collingswood Theatre was designed in 1928 with a Spanish theme by a Philadelphia architect, David Supowitz. The main facade of the two story masonry building, fronting on Haddon Avenue, is highly ornamented in a combination of yellow brick and warm sienna terra cotta block, creating a cross-bond pattern. The rest of the exterior is quite austere and utilitarian. This is particularly evident along Fern Street where the fly area for the stage rises five stories.

The Haddon Avenue facade has a center entrance lobby and flanking commercial storefronts on the ground floor. The second floor three window groupings treated in polychrome terra cotta break the simplicity of the wall. The two end windows are fronted with ornamental wrought iron balconies. At the roof is a parapet of polychromed terra cotta in a rich Spanish design. The terra cotta ornamentation includes butterflies, owls' heads with teardrop earrings placed at the ends of the drip hoods over the arched windows, and a diamond pattern across the entire front. The parapet is flanked by two heads of what may be described as Moorish princesses. At the center frieze of the parapet are two nudes holding a crown over a lyre. The figures stand on the engraved word, "COLLINGSWOOD." Each corner of the building has an Ionic pilaster with twisting cable.

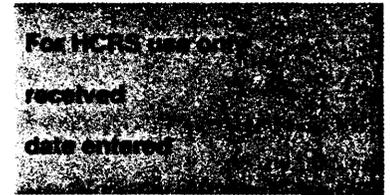
The theatre exit doors lead to a walkway giving egress onto Haddon Avenue through a portal which is an extension of the front facade. This is balanced by an entrance to the second floor apartments on the right side of the theatre building. Above each of these doorways is a wrought iron Spanish lamp surmounted by the sculpted head of a child with a blue star imprinted on its forehead. The outside ticket booth at the center entrance has been removed. The original rod-suspended marquee, removed in the 1970's, had a scroll pediment, script lettering, garlands and perimeter lighting.

The interior of the Collingswood Theatre is organized around the irregular property size and limited street frontage and has two commercial units flanking a center entrance foyer which opens to a perpendicular long standing hall. This hall has three large archway doors to the large auditorium paralleling Haddon Avenue. The auditorium, seats removed, is being used as a film studio for the producer of commercial movies and advertising photography. The side walls of the auditorium are plaster with three painted murals at intervals on each. Each panel, about 9 feet by 9 feet, is oil on board and depicts a Spanish scene (eg. two Spanish galleons on the high seas; a bull fight). The six murals are the work of John Charles Wonsetler, a young Collingswood artist at the time of his commission and later a children's book illustrator. The murals are set in stone frames with an ornamental plaster frieze above each. There is much such ornamental plaster work in the auditorium: peacocks with spread feathers stand inside a large scallop shell surmounted by smaller such shells, winged cherub heads, cornucopias, ribands are all part of the decoration.

The center portion of the auditorium ceiling is composed of glass squares, now painted over, each of four different colored pieces of cathedral glass. Inside are electric globes and reflectors which can flood the auditorium with any color or combination of colored lights. Each of the 1600 seats had a full and unobstructed view of the stage. There was provision made for a balcony to be added but this was never done.

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The Spanish influence is evident in the organ grilles which were gold, silver and blue, now they are white. These areas were also highly ornamented with stylized entwined griffons, cornucopias, stems, leaves, lizards, and gargoyles. The original organ, a four manual United States model, was removed by a previous owner and its whereabouts is unknown.

The Proscenium arch surrounding the stage has an ornamental column on each side and frieze of lions' heads, fruit baskets, musical instruments, sunflowers across the top, all in plaster. The stage has been subdivided into offices, and photographic finishing, processing and dark rooms. The orchestra pit which held the house orchestra and the organ has been floored and provides a lounging area/kitchenette for the camera crews. Stage left is a gated driveway area. The five story fly area above the stage for the screen and scenery is unaltered and not in use.

The interior lobby walls are covered with large colored glass blocks which hide the original travertine blocks. The glass reflects a later modification of the theatre. On the side walls are the two original gilded plaster, wood and glass poster cases which enclosed photographs of the featured stars and movie stills. The walls above are decorated with an ornamental plaster frieze of embellished shells and urns. The ceiling, originally done in gold and silver, is white.

The entrance lobby leads to a foyer or promenade which once featured a blue and gold ceiling (now white), a gilded and highly colored ornamental plaster frieze (now white), depicting cherub heads, griffons, stylized urns and birds. Each wall has three large plaster encased plate glass mirrors. From the vaulted ceiling hang the six original Spanish style wrought iron lamps. At one time, above the frieze at each end of this foyer, were painted Spanish scenic murals, probably the work of John Charles Wonsetler. Paneled wooden doors open into the standing room lobby, referred to as the "fountain salon" because in a center niche under a compound arch is a mosaic fountain with tiles of blue, green and gold, flanked on each side by a concealed drinking fountain. The plaster fountain bowl offered a colored electrical display on sprays of water which fell into a tiled bowl beneath. This lower bowl has mosaic "fish" swimming in the blue tile. In the base of the fountain were permanently set a variety of "Spanish plants." The lobby was illuminated by large square Spanish wrought iron ceiling lanterns, since removed and stored. This area is now being used by a dance studio. Ladies' and Mens' retiring rooms are in each corner of the standing room lobby; they have tiled walls and marble floors. The illuminated silhouette signs are intact and in the Art Deco style.

The large wrought iron Spanish style hanging lamps throughout were made especially for the theatre. There were numerous large exits so the house would be cleared in less than two minutes in case of an emergency.

# 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		

**Specific dates** 1927–8      **Builder/Architect** David Supowitz

## Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Collingswood Theatre, designed by Philadelphia architect David Supowitz and opened in 1928, is a good local expression of Spanish Revival style movie theatre architecture featuring finely crafted terra cotta and plaster ornamentation. The 1920's Spanish scene murals on the interior are early works of illustrator John Charles Wonsetler. Built for the Lessy Amusement Company of Philadelphia in response to the enterprising and competitive spirit of the "Golden Age of the Motion Picture Industry," the Collingswood was an important area movie house during the second quarter of the 20th century. Although closed in the late 1960's and its marquee and seating have been removed, it remains a relatively well preserved suburban movie palace.

The show house was built at a cost of \$500,000 on the site of an earlier Collingswood Theatre torn down for the new house. The older theatre was substantially built and sufficient for the needs of a small community, but when Mike Lessy of the Lessy Amusement Company learned that a competing theatre (The Westmont) would be built nearby, he made a bold move and had the old house demolished and built a new, beautiful picture palace twice the capacity of the former one and with amenities found most often in urban theatres. Mike Lessy's company was one of the few independents in the country (Collingswood Weekly Retrospect, 7/15/1927). The Philadelphia-area movie circuit was dominated by Mastbaum, Varbalow and Sablosky. Lessy began in the business in 1906, when he became an independent film exhibitor and later obtained a franchise to show Universal films in Philadelphia. The huge investment in The Collingswood, which the local newspaper Weekly Retrospect called "the first atmospheric type of purely Spanish design playhouse in the state" was an indication of Lessy's faith (and the industry's in general) in the business future of the motion picture with sound.

"Talking pictures" had been unveiled as early as 1889 when William Dickson, an associate of Thomas A. Edison, demonstrated the first model of the Kinetoscope to Edison but it was not until the Vitaphone system was perfected for Warner Brothers by Western Electric and shown to a paying audience in 1926 that the talkies seemed destined to take over the movie industry. The following year "The Jazz Singer" had an astonishing effect on audiences when Al Jolson sang and spoke...revolutionizing the movie industry.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

UTM NOT VERIFIED  
ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 1/2 acre

Quadrangle name Camden, NJ

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UMT References

A 

1	8	4	9	4	3	6	0	4	4	1	8	2	0	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

Block 37, Lot 6 - Township of Collingswood Tax Map

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

state N/A code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

Revised by Terry Karschner, Office of Cultural and Environmental Services - 4/1981

name/title Gail Greenberg, Historian

organization Camden Co. Cultural & Heritage Comm. date November 5, 1980

street & number Hopkins House, 250 South Park Drive telephone (201) 858-0067

city or town Haddon Township state New Jersey 08108

# 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 Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer signature Laurence Schmelt

title Deputy SHPO date 12/23/81

For HCRS use only

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

Albion Byrne Entered in the National Register date 6/3/82  
Keeper of the National Register

Attest: date

Chief of Registration

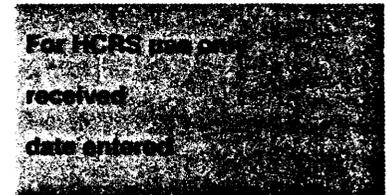
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The Collingswood Theatre

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The Collingswood Theatre, completed just after the introduction of "The Jazz Singer," was designed as a motion picture palace, but the large performing stage for live acts betrays a conservative business sense in an otherwise progressive investment venture. The earlier Collingswood had frequent vaudeville shows and plays and the new Spanish movie house provided similar programs Friday and Saturday evenings. Although limited mostly to vaudeville and burlesque performances, the live programs, drawn from the Philadelphia - Atlantic City entertainment circuit, lasted until World War II, but were discontinued soon after.

There were two major schools of movie palace design in the 1920's; the standard, or "hard-top," which had its origin in the opera house and vaudeville theatres of an earlier period; and the atmospheric, or "stars and clouds." Creating the magical illusion of a night sky in a romantic setting, the atmospheric movie palace with its ceiling of twinkling stars and drifting clouds and painted wall murals heightened the total effect of the movie experience.

The movies advertised on the marquee at the Collingswood were representative of those shown throughout the country in the second quarter of the 20th century. Lessy's independent stature did not seem to affect his ability to procure the top films of the day. Most all sound films of the 1930's were of two types - Vitaphone and Movietone. The Vitaphone system synchronized a phonograph disc to the visual image. Movietone provided an audio impulse directly on the film. Although Movietone required a more sophisticated projector system (projector with sound as compared to a phonograph and a projector), its overall superiority soon displaced Vitaphone.

Because both Vitaphone and Movietone films were shown at the Collingswood, both types of video and sound equipment were in the projection room. This was typical of movie houses of the period. The manner in which films were presented was also typical. Preceding the feature film was a newsreel and a short subject comedy or serial (and around World War II, a cartoon). Promotional films of coming attractions were also common. All were often enhanced by organ music.

The Collingswood was designed by Philadelphia architect David Supowitz. Supowitz was born June 19, 1893 and received a B.S. degree in architecture in 1915. The following year he earned a Master's degree in architecture, also from the University of Pennsylvania, receiving the Architectural Society's Arthur Spayd Brooke Medal, the Architect Alumni Society Scholarship, and Sketch and Design Prizes. Lessy's "The Diamond," built in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1923, was Supowitz's first major commission.

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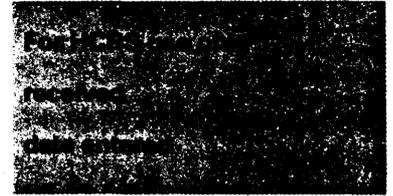
In addition to "The Collingswood" and "The Diamond," Supowitz also designed "The Lenox" at 58th Street and Chester Avenue, Philadelphia, supervised the planning and construction of residential projects in Germantown and Elkins Park, and designed a number of model store fronts on Chestnut Street, west of Broad Street. (The Exhibition. March 15, 1928, p. 57). During World War I, Supowitz was Chief Designer for the Naval Construction Division, Bureau of Yards and Docks in Washington, D.C. At the time the new Collingswood Theatre opened, he was also finishing designs on three other theatres in the area.

John Charles Wonsetler, the muralist responsible for the Spanish scenes on the auditorium walls, was born in Camden on August 25, 1900. He attended the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Arts where he studied under Thornton Oakley and was influenced by Howard Pyle. He graduated in 1925, with a First Prize in Illustration. He soon began to paint murals, receiving many commissions including one in Oil City, Pennsylvania. Aside from the murals done for the Collingswood Theatre, Wonsetler's early works are lost. It is not known how or why he received the commission for the theatre murals. Wonsetler's later work was primarily as an illustrator of magazines and children's books.

Although the Collingswood was converted into an advertising studio about ten years ago, particular care was taken to preserve the numerous decorative features of the theatre, including the terra cotta exterior details, the ornate interior plaster work, and Wonsetler's wall murals.

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Collingswood American. 2/23/1928, 1/23/1928, 7/21/1927.

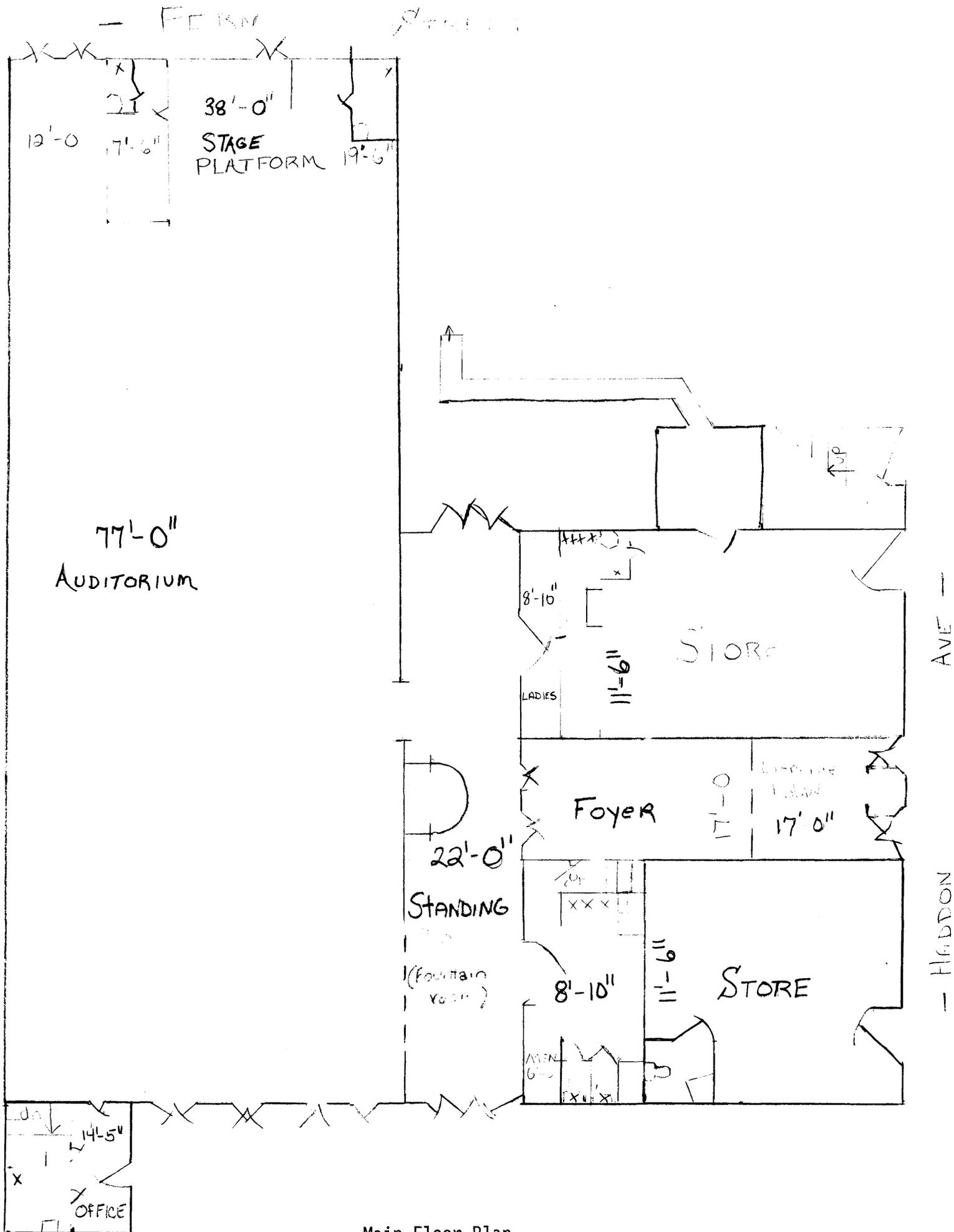
The Exhibitor. 3/15/1928.

Collingswood Weekly Retrospect. 7/15/1927, 2/24/1928.

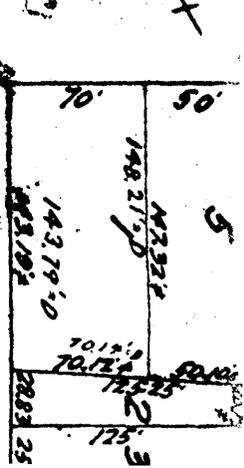
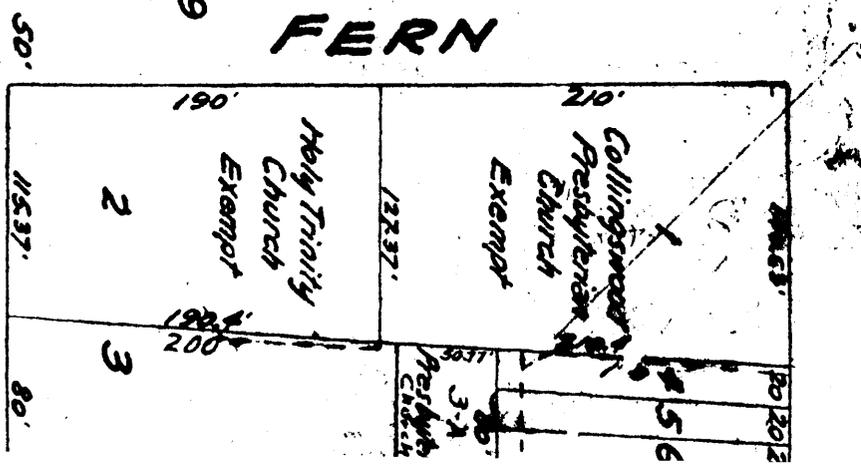
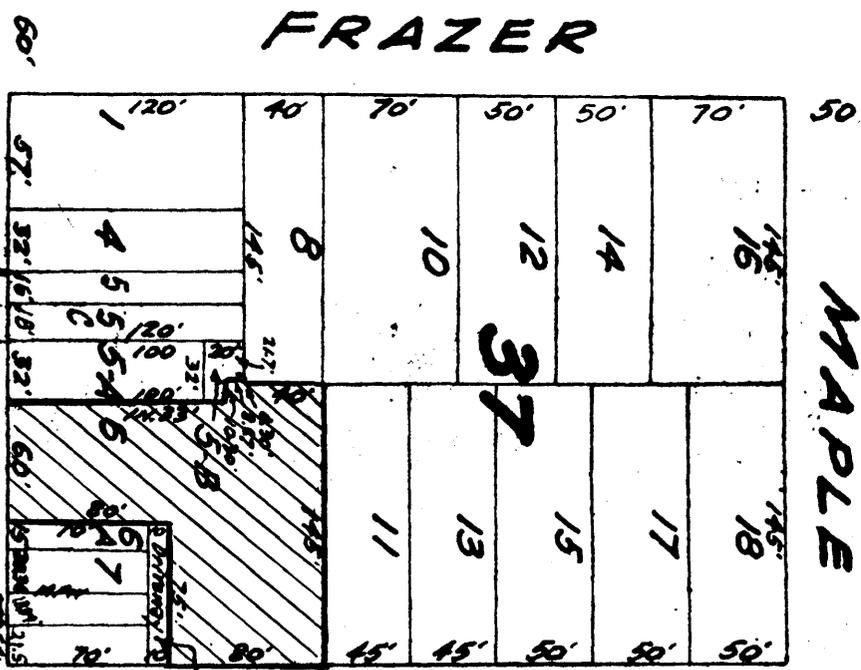
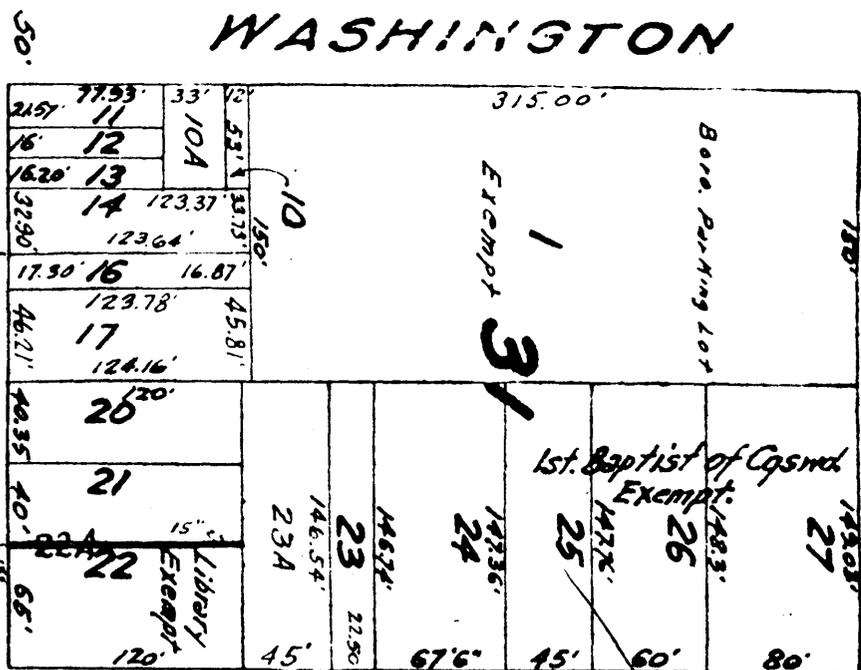
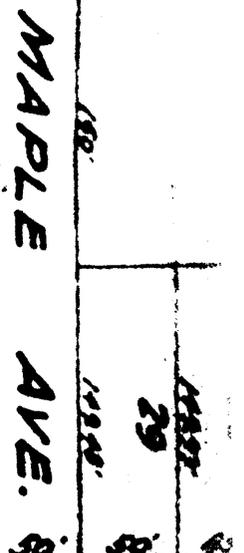
Illustrators of Children's Books, 1946-56. Comp. by B.M. Miller, R.H. Viguers,  
M. Dalphen, Boston, Horn Books, 1958.

The Golden Age of the Movie Palace. by Benn M. Hall, New York, Chas. N. Potter, 1961.

"Ticket to the World of Movies" in Historic Preservation, May-June, 1979, pp. 27034.  
By David Naylor.

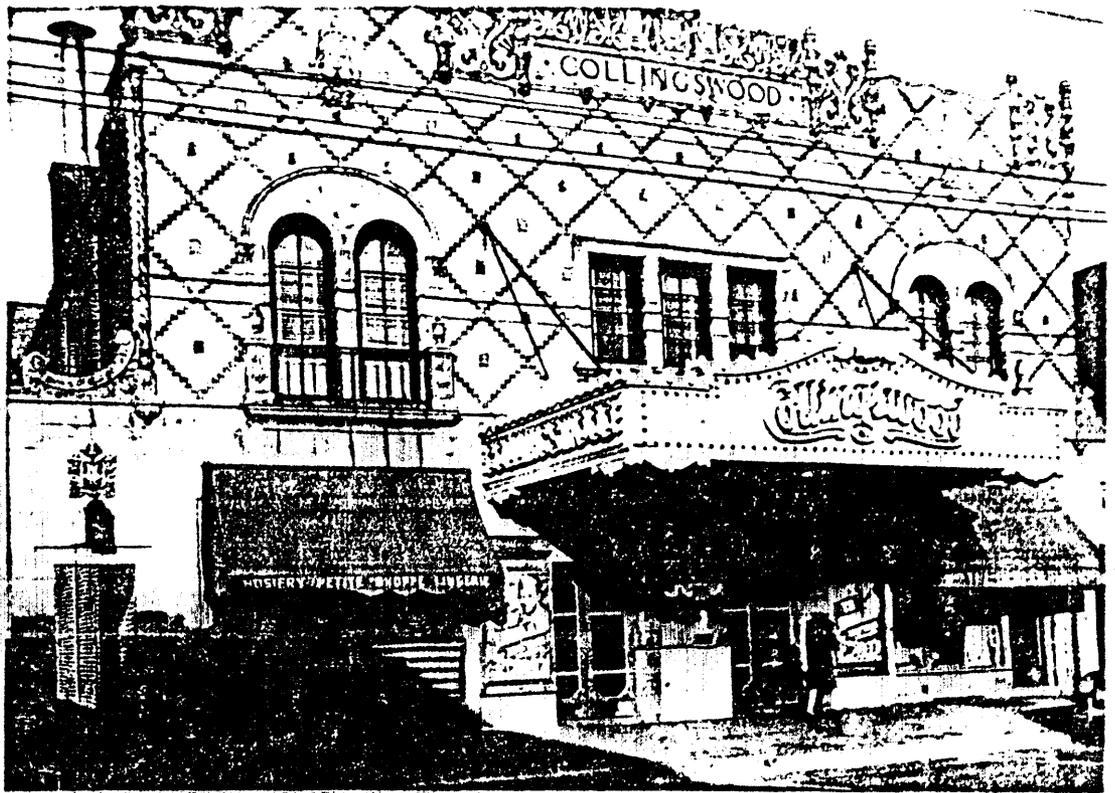


Main Floor Plan  
 Collingswood Theatre , Collingswood, N.J.



**ADJOI**  
 Collingswood Theatre  
 Collingswood  
 Camden County, New Jersey

**PLA7**



Collingswood Theater. Showing original marquee and center ticket office.

Photocopy of black and white in possession of Irwin Glazer, President, Theater Historical Society, Springfield, Pa.

Date of photo uncertain. Estimated ca. 1950.