

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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NATIONAL REGISTER

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

historic name: Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple

other name/site number: Veterans Memorial Auditorium

2. Location

street & number: Brownell Street (office: 57 Park Street)

not for publication: N/A

city/town: Providence vicinity: N/A

state: RI county: Providence code: 007 zip code: 02903

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: Public

Category of Property: Building(s)

Number of Resources within Property: 2

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>2</u>	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>2</u>	_____	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Property name Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple, Providence
County, Rhode Island

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Frederick W. Williamson
Signature of certifying official

___ See continuation sheet.
30 Sep 1993
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria. ___ See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
___ See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register
___ See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain):

Bella S. Savage 11-16-93

Signature of Keeper Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic: RECREATION AND CULTURE
OTHER
SOCIAL (INTENDED)

Current: RECREATION AND CULTURAL
VACANT
OTHER

Sub: Theater
Not Completed
Meeting Hall (Intended)

Sub: Theater
State/Veterans Office

Property name Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple, Providence
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7. Description

Architectural Classification:

Neo-Classical Revival

Other Description: _____

Materials:	foundation	<u>CONCRETE</u>	roof	<u>ASPHALT</u>
	walls	<u>sandstone</u>	other	<u>copper</u>
		<u>BRICK</u>		

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

X See continuation sheet.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: state

Applicable National Register Criteria: C

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): N/A

Areas of Significance: ARCHITECTURE

Period(s) of Significance: 1926 1950

Significant Dates: 1927 1928 1945 1950

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder:	<u>A</u>	<u>Osgood & Osgood</u>
	<u>A</u>	<u>Jackson, Robertson & Adams</u>
	<u>A</u>	<u>di Saia, Oresto</u>

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

X See continuation sheet.

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Description

The Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple consists of two massive Neo-Classical style buff brick and sandstone buildings set at an acute angle and sited on a sloped Smith Hill immediately west of the Rhode Island State House. Construction began in 1926 (Osgood & Osgood, architects), but was halted in 1928 due to lack of funds. The state acquired the property in 1945 and completed the auditorium section, dedicated as Veterans Memorial Auditorium, in 1950 (Oresto di Saia, architect). The Masonic Temple portion was left unfinished. In 1990, an extensive renovation program of the auditorium was undertaken; the Masonic Temple remains vacant and deteriorating. The property is bounded by Brownell Street (north), Park Street (west), properties fronting on Hayes Street (south), and Frances Street (east). The Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple complex has been a prominent architectural landmark in the City of Providence since 1928 and has functioned as a valuable performing arts and cultural center for the city and state since 1950.

The original 1926 design of the complex presented two complementary, six-story, flat-roof, steel-frame and masonry-clad buildings with boldly scaled classical-inspired decoration. The basic structures, exterior walls, roofs, most mechanical systems, and approximately 35 per cent of the auditorium interior were completed by 1928. The complex has been an integral part of the Smith Hill landscape, particularly as viewed from the State House and downtown Providence, since that time. A six-story, flat-roof trapezoidal hyphen connected the two buildings at their northern end. It also remained unfinished on the interior after 1928 and was demolished during the recent renovations of the auditorium. The hyphen was unheated, causing water pipes in the auditorium to freeze and burst, and its deteriorated condition was an impediment to repairs. It was simply designed with a rusticated sandstone lower level and an unadorned brick upper level. Receded between the two buildings, the hyphen was a secondary structure that never served its linkage function, as the temple portion was not finished. Its removal, therefore, does not compromise the integrity of the two dominant structures as a complex.

Veterans Memorial Auditorium

The Veterans Memorial Auditorium building occupies the west portion of the inclined site along Brownell and Park Streets, with its main theater entrance on Brownell Street. The north three-quarters of the building

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contains the auditorium, and office spaces occupy the south quarter. The structural components of the building incorporate steel framing, steel and concrete slab floors, and a steel truss roof. Measuring 229 feet by 48 feet, the blocky structure has little articulation other than the north entrance facade. Hard-fired, buff colored brick veneer laid in paired running bond is the primary wall sheathing. On the north elevation, a sandstone coursed ashlar first floor contains the central theater entrance under a marquee and two similar flanking smaller recessed entrances. All the doors are identical double-leaf, wood rails and full length glazed panels, with a four-vertical-light transom above each pair. The entrance canopy is steel with a channelled edging face, banks of lights on the underside, and a full length sign containing the name of the building. Completed about 1950, it follows the principle, though not the design, of the original intended marquee, which was to be sheathed in copper and ornamented with acroteria.

The treatment of the upper levels consists of six monumental, fluted, sandstone pilasters with composite capitals creating five barely recessed, equal bays between corner pier sections of brick. Each bay contains a single, four-light, steel-sash window at second floor level, with sandstone surrounds and alternating segmental-arch and pedimented tops. The windows are four-light steel sash. The bays are sheathed in flemish bond brick and divided into a square upper panel and a rectangular lower by a broken sandstone string course. A brick band outlines each section. Above the pilasters, a wide string course, heavy overhanging cornice with modillion blocks, which turns each corner, and a simple parapet with stone coping top the building.

The east, west, and south elevations are plainly finished, with brick walls rising from a few courses of sandstone ashlar to an unarticulated parapet cornice. A sandstone string course above the basement level echoes the horizontal line of the roof as the basement descends with the slope down Park Street. The southern end contains offices on each floor, reached through a small entrance near the southwest corner of the building. The only windows are one-over-one steel sash with stone sills in this south end, arranged singly and in pairs. Several other service doors, and two concrete ramps and fire stair systems rebuilt in the 1990 restoration, are the other features of the west side elevation on Park Street.

The interior, executed ca. 1950, is elegantly decorated in a somewhat simplified version of the original 1926 design. The final rendition also incorporates patriotic images reflecting the auditorium's dedication as a veterans memorial. The primary spaces, particularly the main lobby and the

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auditorium, are finished in plaster walls with decorative raised plaster ornamentation derived from eighteenth-century Adamesque prototypes and polychrome paint schemes of cream, rose, blue, and gilt. Classically-inspired imagery includes swags, rosettes, panels depicting the muses, and a variety of floral and geometric motifs. An important element of the decor are four patriotic murals, forty state and town coats of arms, five service coats of arms, and ten pilgrim images, all painted on canvas by Robert C. Haun in 1949. Marble and mirrors, brass lighting fixtures, grilles, and hardware further enrich the decorative scheme.

At the entrance marquee, five sets of doors provide access to the marble sheathed ticket lobby with a decorative plaster ceiling and ticket offices at either end. The street front corners of the building are occupied by staircases leading to the exterior doors flanking the marquee. A mirrored and paneled curved wall separates the carpeted main lobby from the 2,200-seat main hall. Ornamentation includes decorative plaster ceiling and cornices, and brass light fixtures. Staircases in the northwest and northeast corners lead to the upper lobby and the lower lobby. The wrought iron stair balusters were installed in 1928. Large murals depicting the Statue of Liberty and the "raising of the flag at Iwo Jima" overlook the stairs between the upper and main lobby. The lower lobby and the upper lobby have simple plaster finishes.

A large oval dome with elaborate plasterwork ringed by Rhode Island town shields dominates the auditorium ceiling. The sweeping curve of decorated boxed cornices links the dome to the spandrels, each containing an allegorical/patriotic image, at the front of the proscenium. Fluted columns flank the backstage exits, with organ rooms above, and a large central rosette is set in a geometric grille field in the arch of the proscenium. A smaller dome ornamented with military emblems provides light and ventilation under the balcony, while monochrome profile silhouettes of pilgrim busts are set in the walls panels above the balcony. The auditorium is distinguished by its excellent acoustics.

Behind the 3,460 square foot stage and the orchestra pit, are dressing, locker, and property rooms. The upper floors were originally intended for band, drum corps, legion, and charters rooms, but were completed as divided office spaces. Beneath the auditorium, the basement contains a large two-story room rimmed by a mezzanine in three sides, intended as a banquet room, and ancillary spaces. These areas with exposed bare concrete and tile were not completed after initial construction stopped in 1928. They were used for state document storage until a fire, in June 1989, caused minimal damage to the building. Renovation plans

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include finishing the banquet room as a "black box" flexible space for rehearsals and for performances not requiring the main hall.

A steady decrease in state maintenance funds over several decades created conditions in the 1980s where major restoration of the building and the stage equipment were needed in order for it to have a viable future. A renovation and rehabilitation study conducted in 1989 for the Rhode Island Public Buildings Authority found the Auditorium to be in sound structural condition and recommended a program of restoration (Robert Haig Associates 1989). Undertaken in 1990 with \$6.5 million from the Rhode Island Public Building Authority, the program included the restoration of all decorative plasterwork, brass fixtures, marble, and mirrors; repainting; restoration of canvas paintings; refurbishing of the entrance marquee; cleaning of stone and brick work; replacement of exterior staircases; upgrading of mechanical systems; and installation of new stage equipment and sound systems. The state-owned building is now operated under a lease arrangement by the Veterans Memorial Auditorium Foundation.

Masonic Temple

Conceived to contain office and meeting spaces for the Rhode Island Freemasons, the eastern building overlooking the State House lawn is the most highly visible and fully articulated of the two buildings in the complex. The Masonic Temple is a rectangular box form, approximately the same scale as the Auditorium, with its narrow end along Brownell Street and its long side running down Francis Street. Like the Auditorium, its primary facing is buff brick veneer and its structure is riveted steel. Terra cotta fire brick underlays the face brick and limestone.

At each end (three bays) and on the east side (eleven bays), colossal sandstone Ionic columns in antis rise from a two-and-one-half-story sandstone coursed ashlar basement to a massive cornice. The corner piers are brick, pierced with a vertical band of slightly inset windows. Windows of nearly square proportions are set between the columns, with triglyph and patera lintels. Stone balustrades front the lowest level windows. The basement openings vary in proportion and include a round-arch opening near each end. All the window openings on the east, north, and south are boarded up. The cornice treatment consists of a sandstone frieze set with panels with paterae, a dentil course below a running moulding, and a simple parapet with stone coping. A stage structure on the roof projects above the parapet. It consists of an auditorium section under a low hip, copper

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seamed roof with acroteria, and a taller flat-roof section containing the stage.

The interior of the building contains the steel framing and concrete flooring for eleven levels, but is otherwise unfinished. The 1926 plans indicate that it was to contain two-story lodge rooms as well as three theaters, candidate rooms, regalia rooms, sleeping rooms, lounges, lobbies, offices, supper rooms, and kitchens. The building has been essentially abandoned since 1928 and has been subject to continuous environmental damage. A condition evaluation conducted in 1984 found extensive deterioration of the roof and other elements, but reported that the structural steel and walls were essentially sound (The Maguire Group 1984).

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple
Brownell & Park Streets
Providence
Providence County
Rhode Island 02903

View 1 Photographer: Frank Giuliani
 Date: 1992
 Negatives: F. Giuliani, 64 Lambie Circle, Portsmouth, RI
 02871

View 2 Photographer: Veterans Memorial Auditorium Preservation
 Assoc.
 Date: 1992
 Negatives: VMAPA, Providence, RI

View 3 & 4 Photographer: Aaron Usher
 Date: 1992
 Negatives: A. Usher, Providence, RI

View 5 Photographer: Jim Egan
 Date: 1992
 Negatives: J. Egan, Providence, RI

1. View looking southeast at north and west elevations of Auditorium at night.
2. View looking west from State House to Masonic Temple.
3. View looking southwest in Inner, Main Lobby, auditorium to right.
4. View looking north from stage to back of auditorium.
5. View looking south from back of auditorium to stage.

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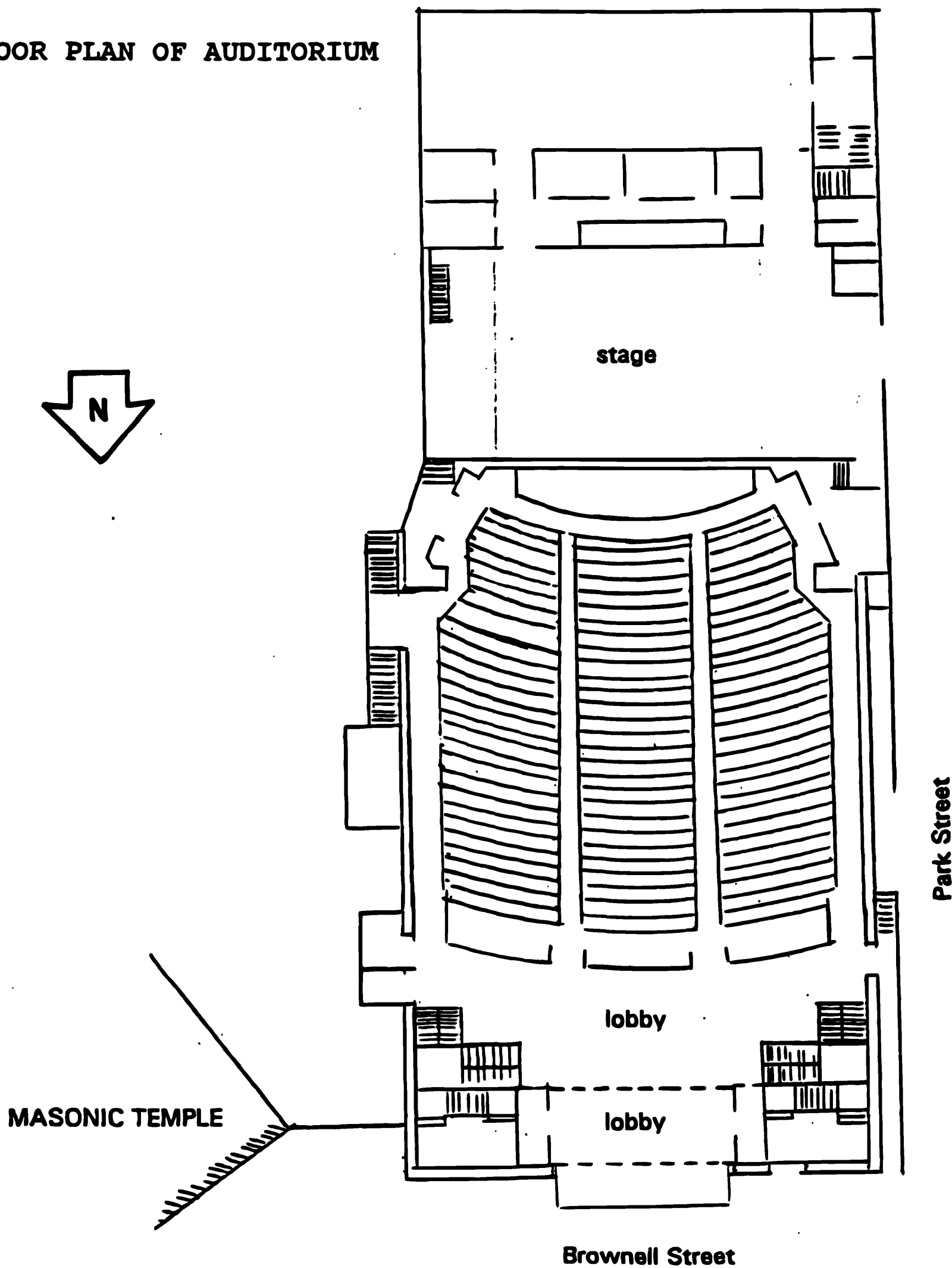
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SKETCH, FIRST FLOOR PLAN OF AUDITORIUM
Not to Scale



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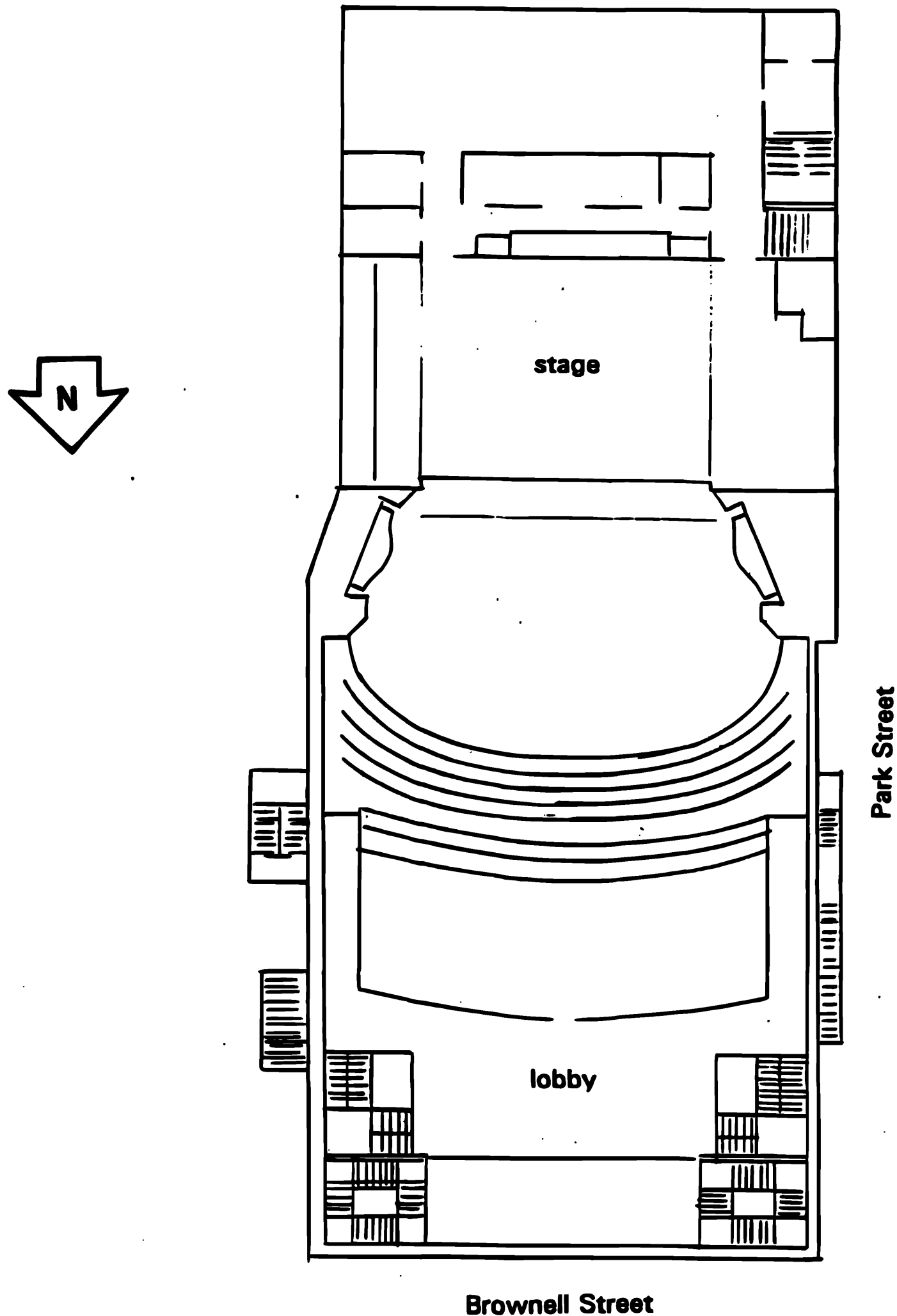
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SKETCH, FIRST FLOOR MEZZANINE PLAN OF AUDITORIUM
Not to Scale



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Significance

The Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple Complex is significant for its architectural quality and its contribution to the urban fabric of Providence. Begun in 1926 and partially completed in 1950 after a nearly 20 year hiatus, the two buildings are good examples of Neo-Classical design. In addition, although not categories determining National Register eligibility, the complex is of historical interest for its early twentieth-century association with the Masonic Order and for its relatively recent role as a cultural center and community auditorium for the city and the state from 1950 to the present.

The Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple Complex is one of the most monumental Neo-Classical buildings in Providence and the state. The buildings' exteriors retain excellent integrity of their 1926 design. The Temple building, in particular, embodies the large blocky massing, Greek-derived ornamentation, and solemnity of design that characterized American Neo-Classical architecture from about 1900 to 1930. In its urban context, it relates extremely well to the white marble, Beaux Arts Rhode Island State House (1891-1904; McKim, Mead & White, architects), one of the state's finest buildings. The State House, the Veterans Memorial Auditorium/Masonic Temple, and the red-brick and stone-trimmed, Georgian Revival style State Office Building on Smith Street (1928, 1935; Jackson, Robertson & Adams, architects), stand as the major historic public and institutional buildings dominating Smith Hill.

The complex represents a highly ambitious project conceived by the Masons as one of the most magnificent temples in the country to meet both their needs and the theater needs of the community. Veterans Memorial Auditorium was the only early twentieth-century theater in Providence conceived as a civic auditorium and as a concert hall. The approximately half-dozen lavish theaters built in and around downtown between 1900 and about 1930 were movie palaces (often with stage facilities) that conformed to lower acoustical standards than required for a first-rate concert hall. Consequently, none came close to Veterans Auditorium in the fine acoustical quality that is a result of the original size, shape, proportions, and surface finishes of the hall. Furthermore, no facility was built to rival Veterans' community gathering place function before it was completed, or until the 1970s.

In the late 1910s or early 1920s, the Masons began planning for construction of a new Masonic Temple to replace the existing 1897 temple at 121-123 Dorrance Street (NR; Downtown Providence Historic District) and

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acquired the lot bounded by Brownell, Hayes, Park, and Francis Streets. An agreement was reached among the Mason chapters in 1923 that the building should be a memorial rather than a commercial structure. Fund raising commenced for erection of a \$2,500,000 white marble building, for which a preliminary design had already been prepared.

The temple was to be occupied solely by the local Masonic bodies, including the blue lodges, chapter, commanderies, and shrine. The memorial portion was to be an auditorium, which according to a 1923 news article would "give Providence for the first time an adequate auditorium" (PJ 6/29/23). The auditorium would be connected to the temple, but could be closed off, making it available for conventions, public affairs, concerts, or large public gatherings.

The architects for the project were Osgood & Osgood of Grand Rapids, Michigan, a firm specializing in masonic temples and public buildings. Their work included the George Washington Masonic Temple in Alexandria, Virginia, and other large temples and courthouses. Jackson, Robertson & Adams, were the local collaborating architects. The prolific and highly regarded Providence firm was responsible for the design of many early twentieth-century institutional and government buildings in Rhode Island. At the time, they were working on designs for the nearby State Office Building, 133 Smith Street, erected in 1928.

Plans were completed in 1925 for a brick and limestone building with a "Grecian" architectural design that would "not conflict with the architecture of surrounding buildings" and contained "complete facilities for both lodge work and public functions" (PJ 2/28/25).

Grand Master William L. Sweet officiated at the groundbreaking ceremony on November 13, 1926. Construction was expected to take about two years. In order to promote the civic function and benefit of the auditorium, the Masons solicited name suggestions from the public. "Hope Hall" and "Capitol Hall" were two of many submittals (PJ 4/20/26; 11/14/26). Despite optimistic expectations, in June 1928, a shortfall of funds, followed by the Great Depression, caused construction to cease. The building shells subsequently stood empty and unattended for nearly twenty years.

In response to a demand for increased state office space, a special legislative committee was established in 1942 to study state acquisition of the Masonic Temple complex. The committee recommended acquisition, and a heated debate ensued in the General Assembly, with the building being

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described both as a "wreck" and as "beautiful and well constructed" (PJ 4/2/43). Eventually, however, the bill passed, and voters approved a bond issue for funding. The state purchased the building for \$754,000 on June 1, 1945 with the intent of converting it to an office building for state workers (PJ 6/2/45).

Oresto di Saia (1900-1976), Providence architect and former Director of the State Department of Public Works, was awarded the contract for preparation of reports and plans. Di Saia had designed the Uptown Theatre at 264-270 Broadway in 1926 (NR; Broadway-Armory Historic District), Aquinas Hall at Providence College in 1939, and several churches. He proposed to engage Providence architect Albert Harkness in detailing special interiors; Providence engineering firm Jenks & Ballou for plumbing and electrical installations; and John S. Webb of Boston for heating and ventilating (PJ 8/2/45). Local artists Robert Haun and George DeFelice were commissioned to produce the allegorical and heraldic paintings and emblems.

Construction on the auditorium and offices block began in the spring of 1949, funded by \$800,000 in state fire insurance monies and the governor's contingency fund. On May 4, Governor John O. Pastore signed a bill dedicating the building as the Veterans Memorial Auditorium and providing free office space for chartered veterans organizations (PJ 5-14-49). Restoration of the auditorium was completed for a dedication ceremony on January 29, 1950, and the grand opening concert on January 30, with performances by the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Long range plans to finish the Temple as office space never materialized.

The Veterans Memorial Auditorium proved to be one of the finest and largest acoustical halls in the state. The facility served as the home for the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rhode Island Civic Chorale, the Broadway Theater League, Artist International, the State Ballet of Rhode Island, and the Rhode Island Grand Opera. From 1950 to the 1970s, it was the state's only major auditorium space and the site of innumerable community events such as high school graduations, conferences, state functions, and public lectures. It hosted many nationally known classical music, dance, and popular performers including: New York Philharmonic, Leningrad Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Arthur Rubenstein, Roberta Peters, Jessye Norman, Luciano Pavarotti, Rudolf Nureyev, Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra, New York City Opera Company, The Handel & Hayden Society, Jack Benny, Jay Leno, Pink Floyd, Lou Reed, the Beach Boys, and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band.

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In the late 1970s, use of the Veterans Memorial declined due to a combination of factors. The building had deteriorated from twenty years of public events and deferred maintenance. In addition, competition arose from the restored Providence Performing Arts Center (former Loew's movie/stage theater, 1928; Rapp & Rapp, architects; NR; Downtown Providence Historic District) in 1978, and the opening of the Civic Center. The orchestras and other organizations moved to the new and large concert halls.

In the early 1980s, part of the roof gave way, and some of the upper levels suffered damage. Serious efforts to save and restore the auditorium began in 1983 with the founding of the Veterans Memorial Auditorium Preservation Association (VMAPA), a non-profit corporation dedicated to preserving the auditorium. Through the efforts of VMAPA and others, the state pledged \$5 million for restoration and rehabilitation. Studies and planning began under the Public Building Authority in 1989, and restoration commenced in 1990. The auditorium reopened in 1990 with restored lobbies, house, and systems.

As a performing arts and community civic center, the auditorium has fulfilled its original intended function admirably from the 1950s through 1970s. Its outstanding acoustical quality, elegant house, and status as the only large auditorium space in the state gave it an important visual and cultural role in local community history.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property: approximately 1.25 (56,900 sq. ft.)

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	<u>19</u>	<u>299250</u>	<u>4633500</u>	B	_____	_____
C	_____	_____	_____	D	_____	_____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description: See continuation sheet.

The nominated property boundaries are City of Providence Assessor's Plat 4, Lot 174.

Boundary Justification: See continuation sheet.

The selected boundaries are those historically and presently associated with the buildings. The buildings fill the lot to the sidewalk edge.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/Title: Virginia H. Adams, Senior Architectural Historian
 Organization: The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc. Date: May 1993
 Street & Number: 210 Lonsdale Avenue Telephone: (401) 728-8780
 City or Town: Pawtucket State: RI ZIP: 02860

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Major Bibliographical References

Anon. Veterans Memorial Auditorium, General Information. Promotional materials, January 1992.

The Maguire Group. Masonic Temple Study For State of Rhode Island Division of Purchases. Providence, April 1984.

Osgood & Osgood, architects. Masonic Temple. Original architectural plans, 1926. Rhode Island State Archives Collection, Providence, Rhode Island.

Providence Journal

- "Masons to Erect \$1,500,000 Temple." June 29, 1923, p. 3.
- "Names Offered for Auditorium." April 20, 1926, p. 17.
- "Work on Masonic Temple Launched." November 14, 1926, p. 15.
- "Masonic Temple Bill is Approved." April 21, 1943, p. 7.
- "State Acquires Masonic Building." June 2, 1945, p. 16.
- "Di Saia Chosen to Survey Temple." August 2, 1945, p. 22.
- "Work on Temple Will Start May 1." March 9, 1949, p. 8.
- "Governor Signs R.I. Budget Bill." May 14, 1949, p. 8.
- "Grand Opening - Two Decades Late." January 29, 1950, p. 19.

Providence Evening Bulletin

- "Death for Temple?" January 22, 1963, p. 1.
- "Arson Burns R.I. Records at Veterans Memorial Auditorium." June 9, 1989.

Robert Haig Associates. The Veterans Memorial Auditorium, Providence, Rhode Island, Associated Needs for Renovation and Rehabilitation. Report for Rhode Island Public Buildings Authority. East Providence, July 1989.

Woodward, Wm McKenzie and Edward F. Sanderson. Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources. Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1986.