

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

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 02001625

Date Listed: 12/26/2002

Property Name: Ritz Theater

County: Camden State: NJ

Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

Patrick Andrews
Signature of the Keeper

12/26/2002
Date of Action

=====
Amended Items in Nomination:

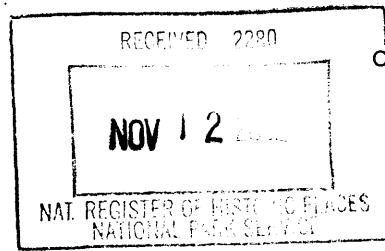
Section 3 of the registration form was not fully completed. The state has confirmed that the SHPO believes that the nominated property meets the National Register Criteria for Evaluation and is submitting the property for listing at the local level of significance.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file**
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)**

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

16975



National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 100-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name The Ritz Theatre

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street and number 915 White Horse Pike N/A not for publication

city or town Haddon Township N/A vicinity

state New Jersey code NJ county Camden code 007 zip code 08107

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this 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 meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

Marc A. Matsil, Assistant Commissioner Natural & Historic Resources/DSHPO
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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).

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Patrick Anderson

12/26/2002

Ritz Theatre
Name of Property

Camden, New Jersey
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Classical Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
walls BRICK
roof ASPHALT
other STONE: sandstone

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

The Ritz Theatre
Name of Property

Camden, New Jersey
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
 ARCHITECTURE
 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Period of Significance

1927-1952

Significant Dates

1927

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Hodgens and Hill, architects (Philadelphia)

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Ritz Theatre
Name of Property

Camden, New Jersey
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 493522 4416496
Zone Easting Northing

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing

2 _____

4 _____

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Douglas C. McVarish

organization _____ date July 2002

street & number 18 East Palmer Avenue telephone 856-854-8807

city or town Collingswood state New Jersey zip code 08108-1221

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title Ritz Oaklyn, Inc.

street & number 30 Washington Avenue telephone (856) 428-5222

city or town Haddonfield state New Jersey zip code 08033

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, New Jersey

The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, NJ

Description

This symmetrical, ten bay, two-story brick, Classical Revival theater building, erected in 1927, faces White Horse Pike (U.S. Route 30) in Haddon Township, Camden County, New Jersey (photo #1). It forms part of an attached row of commercial and apartment buildings on the northeast side of the Pike between East Ormond and East Holly avenues. The building, basically rectangular in plan, has its principal façade in its southwest elevation. This elevation is marked by a marquee that projects from the wall above the central first floor openings. The building has a rectangular footprint. The entry opens into a vestibule which, in turn, opens into a lobby area. Stairs at either side of the lobby extend up to the former balcony (now enclosed) and to second story offices. To the rear of the lobby is the 471-seat auditorium. The side walls of the auditorium are decorated with paintings of classical figures and with false theater boxes. A stage projects into the auditorium. Non-public spaces include offices, restrooms, a green room, and dressing cubicles.

In basic form, the Ritz is what architectural historian Richard Longstreth terms a two-part commercial block. This form is the predominant one of older small and moderate-sized commercial buildings in the United States. The two-part composition reflects differences in use. The single lower story, at street level, indicates public space such as retail stores or a lobby. The upper zone suggests more private space, such as offices.¹ In the case of the Ritz, the first story originally included the vestibule and lobby with flanking storefronts, while the second story originally housed lodging for vaudeville performers. These rooms have been converted to offices and rehearsal space for theatre personnel.

The Ritz's façade is dominated by the original marquee, still used to advertise the theater's productions (photo #2). The outer face of the marquee identifies the building as the Ritz while the sides have message boards topped by lighted "R"s. The outer face of the marquee is topped by a stepped signboard crowned by a shield outlined in lights. Lights border each side of the marquee, and additional incandescent light bulbs hang from its underside. The sides of the marquee have rectangular signboards on which the current attraction is listed in movable letters. The marquee shelters the box office and recessed entry doors.

Both the first and second stories of the facade are divided into three sections. The end bays of the first story are storefronts with plate glass display windows flanking recessed entry doors. These windows are topped by transoms, now boarded over. The south storefront, presently used as an office, has a replacement one-light wood door topped by an enclosed transom, while the north storefront has an original, wood-framed, glass door. A single-light wood door surmounted by a single-light transom is located at the west end of the façade and opens to stairs leading to the second floor. The central first story bay contains the box office flanked by groups of three, wood-framed, glass entry doors. The octagonal box office is original to the theater and is still used for its original purpose. Its lower exterior walls are sheathed in aluminum panels, while its upper walls consist of plate glass windows. A door on the inner wall of the box office provides access from the vestibule. A sign board is located above the box office and main doors and beneath the marquee.

The façade wall is trimmed with sandstone. Sandstone cornices extends above the first and second story openings, and sandstone pilasters define the bays of the first story façade. The date of construction, 1927, is carved at the base of the south pilaster. The second story facade bays are also delineated by pilasters. End second story façade bays contain single narrow, one over one, double hung sash windows, while the remaining bays contain wider one over one, double hung sash windows. These windows are ornamented with sandstone, false keystone lintels. Blank Roman arches surmount the windows in the second bay from either end above the recessed storefront doors. The remaining second story windows are topped by rectangular sandstone plaques. The pilaster capitals ornamentally support a sandstone fascia and cornice, and a flat parapet crowns the façade wall. Side elevations of the theater are utilitarian, finished in stucco. Both side elevations contain steel exit doors. HVAC equipment enclosures rise from the roof of the building.

¹ Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1987), 24.

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The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, New Jersey

The main entry doors to the theatre provide access to a full-width vestibule illuminated with a replacement brass ceiling light fixture chosen to reflect the design of the original fixture (photo #3). Wood door surrounds and crown moldings are original. The end walls of the vestibule feature bulletin boards and projecting cast iron radiators. Doors at either end of the vestibule provide access to the lobby. The lobby is illuminated by ceiling fixtures installed after the theater was refurbished by its current tenant. These brass and crystal fixtures were chosen to resemble those that would have been originally installed. A refreshment stand is located in the center of the lobby and is flanked by single-light, two-leaf, wood, auditorium doors (photo #4). Rectangular windows to the left and right of these doors provide views into the auditorium. Staircases on either side of the lobby provide access to restrooms located on the second floor.

An opening has been broken through the left wall of the lobby to provide access to a storefront outfitted as a gallery (photo #5). The gallery, a single open space, is reached by a wood ramp from the lobby. Its floor is wood, its walls sheathed in wallboard, and modern track lighting is installed on the ceiling. Original elements include the baseboard, crown molding, and the transom surround with corner blocks. The frames for the transom windows that illuminated the recessed entryway are visible, although the windows themselves are covered. The theatre's handicapped restroom is presently located in a corner of the gallery space.

The highlight of the interior of the theatre are the Neo-classical murals depicting scenes from ancient Greece and Rome with idealized men and women and the false stage boxes and balconies. The murals, painted in oil by an unknown artist, decorate the rear portions of the side walls (photo #6). The stage end of the side walls contains false balconies, painted in gilt, that feature arched openings with ornamental keystones. These arched panels are flanked by rectangular, gilt-painted panels forming Palladian motifs. Plaster swags decorate the panels above the arches (photo #7). Gilt Corinthian columns divide the front portions of the side walls. The original balcony is now used as a green room on one side and an enlarged ladies' room on the other side.

The auditorium is divided into three sections with a wider central section and narrower side sections. Aisles extend the length of the auditorium along either side of the center section and along the side walls. An aisle also extends along the back of the auditorium. No pillars or posts spoil the sightlines of the 471 seats. This seat total is reduced from the original 600 because of an extension of the stage. A 12-foot by 30-foot Greek Revival arch defines the shallow vaudeville stage (photo #8). A small orchestra pit is located to the right of the stage. The ceiling, which may have originally been plastered, fell in the late 1930s, probably due to a roof leak. It is now sheathed in acoustic tile, and a variety of chandeliers and theater lighting fixtures hang from it. All of the fixtures were installed by the building's present tenant.

The rear wall of the auditorium is decorated with two stubby columns located next to single light wood doors (photo #9). The soundboard is now located at the rear of the auditorium. The fascia of the base of the balcony is still visible. The projection booth, located at the center of the balcony, now houses spotlights and other lighting for theatrical productions. The original metal-lined walls of the booth are intact. Remnants of the original cooling system and movie system also survive.

The shallow backstage area between the former movie screen and the brick rear theatre wall has been adapted as dressing rooms. These small spaces have been partitioned into cubicles by wood-framed plywood partitions. A wood-framed stairway has also been constructed backstage to provide access to a mezzanine dressing room, originally the organ pipe loft. This dressing room is also enclosed with plywood panels, some of which have been autographed by actors in theatre productions (photo #10). One side of this dressing room contains a curtained opening that looks out onto the auditorium and is occasionally used in theatrical productions.

The front of the theatre building has a second floor. This space is accessible from the exterior door located to the left of the marquee and from a doorway opposite the men's rest room door. Before the space was renovated, it consisted of a series of rooms along the façade wall with a hallway running the width of the building. These rooms appear to have been used as sleeping rooms by vaudeville performers. Each contained a sink, and a common toilet and shower served all the rooms. The second floor now contains theater offices. Most of the original partitioning remains intact. Two east rooms have been combined as one to provide a meeting and rehearsal space for the theater. The balcony, formerly located on the opposite side of the hallway, has been converted to new uses. These include a green room (photo #11), an enlarged women's rest room, and the subscription office. The green room has an enclosed shallow arch in one wall and is

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The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, New Jersey

illuminated by a stained glass hanging light fixture. A stairway at the east end of the second floor provides access to the director's office located in the east storefront of the theater. This carpeted space is largely illuminated by track lighting (photo #12). Lighting in the office spaces consists primarily of hanging light fixtures. Though installed in recent years, these fixtures were chosen to reflect the original character of the building.

Because of the condition of the theater at the time it was leased by Puttin' on the Ritz and the needs of a live theater company, much of the interior of the building has been refurbished. This refurbishment has included chandelier, sconce and theatre lighting installation in the auditorium; extension of the stage into the auditorium; removal of the front rows of auditorium seats; construction of a gallery and restrooms; installation of lobby lighting fixtures; construction of dressing rooms and a stage stairway; construction of a green room in a portion of the former balcony, and alterations to second floor rooms.

Despite these changes, the theater retains architectural integrity. The façade has been little altered. Principal spaces remain intact including the auditorium, the lobby, and the box office, and the auditorium retains its original wall paintings. Those changes made have been in the interest in retaining the building as a theater, a function it has served for 75 years.

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The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, New Jersey

Statement of Significance

The Ritz Theatre, built in 1927 by the William E. Butler Company as a neighborhood movie theater serving Oaklyn and Haddon Township, is a product of the streetcar suburb development of the 1920s that resulted from the industrial expansion of Camden in the post-World War I era. Contextually it relates to both the expansion of motion picture venues during the twenties and the development of Camden County suburban communities. The theatre meets National Register Criteria A as exemplifying the 1920s development of the ring suburbs of Camden City and as an example of the development of the suburban movie theatre. The Ritz Theatre also meets National Register Criterion C both as a well-preserved example of a building type, the 1920s neighborhood “movie palace,” and as a locally significant example of Classical Revival architecture. Particularly notable are the auditorium murals, featuring classical scenes, the composition ornament at the front of the auditorium used to form stage boxes and gilt Corinthian columns, and the surviving original ticket booth and marquee. The theater retains all aspects of integrity and clearly conveys associations with the time of its construction.

Camden County Suburban Growth

The 1920s marked a period of substantial growth for Camden City and its nearby suburbs. Industries such as the Victor Talking Machine Company, the New York Shipbuilding Company, and Joseph Campbell Company, made the city an industrial center and employed residents of both Camden and nearby communities. Streetcar lines extended along major thoroughfares such as White and Black Horse Pike and Haddon Avenue, and commercial districts developed along these major thoroughfares to serve the residents of the surrounding communities. One such commercial district, which developed along White Horse Pike, was Oaklyn, built along the streetcar line between Clementon and the Federal Street ferry in Camden. This district served the borough of the same name, as well as the adjacent portion of Haddon Township.

Access to Haddon Township, Oaklyn and other communities along White Horse Pike was improved with the straightening, widening and resurfacing of the highway in the early 1920s. Also in the 1920s, local real estate interests developed the Edward Bettle Homestead along the White Horse Pike in Oaklyn. During the same decade, the population of Haddon Township increased from 2,708 to 9,198 and Oaklyn from 1,148 to 3,843.²

A walk along streets extending off White Horse Pike testifies to the growth of the area in the decade. Bungalows and Dutch Colonial residences line the streets. The former Bettlewood School, now Jennings Elementary School, opened in 1927, the same year, as the Ritz. Many of the two-story commercial blocks that line older portions of the commercial district, were also built during the decade. The Ritz was a landmark in the Oaklyn commercial district and exemplified the commercial boom that took place during the period. As a keystone of the White Horse Pike development, the Ritz Theatre is significant under National Register Criterion A for its role in local community development.

The 1920s Movie Palace

Recognizing the potential market for the new “talkies” or motion pictures with sound, motion picture chains erected theaters in most suburban communities of Camden County during the 1920s. In the same year that the Ritz opened, Haddon Township’s other theater, the Westmont, opened on Haddon Avenue. Other local theaters open at the time of the Ritz’s debut included Gloucester City’s Apollo and Leader, Haddonfield’s Colonial, Audubon’s Highland and New Century, and Merchantville’s Park. Camden City was served by 11 theaters including the Walt Whitman and the Stanley.

American cultural historian Chester H. Liebs cited the importance of the movie theater to small-town commercial districts of the 1920s in a recently published essay:

² Jeffery M. Dorwart and Philip English Mackey, *Camden County, New Jersey, 1616-1976: A Narrative History* (Camden County Cultural and Heritage Commission, 1976), 217, 221-222, 24.:

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The Ritz Theatre
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More than simply another business along the sidewalk, the new houses of entertainment, for the most part, visually upstaged their more staid commercial neighbors. In fact, by the 1920s, the iconic force of the movie house had become so powerful in the public mind that the brightly lit marquee, touting the latest movie playing in town, became a sure sign that the main street or neighborhood shopping area had “made it.”³

The Ritz served this role in Oaklyn. It punctuated an otherwise staid streetscape with its lighted marquee and attracted children and adults from the surrounding community with its frequently changing bill of movies and live entertainment.

The Collingswood Theater and the Westmont Theater still stand on Haddon Avenue and were important landmarks in those two communities. The Ritz Theatre and the New Century Theatre still stand on White Horse Pike, historically serving destinations in Oaklyn and Audubon, while the Harwin Theatre anchored a small commercial district along Black Horse Pike in Mount Ephraim. Of these theaters, only the Ritz and the Harwin continue in use as theaters. The Collingswood theatre now is primarily used to house a web page design firm, the Westmont Theater is vacant, while the New Century Theatre houses a costume store.

The Architecture of the Movie Theater

Developing from the earlier nicklodeons, the motion picture theater of the 1920s was typically known as a “picture palace.” The most elaborate examples of the type were built in the largest American cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia. These theaters, such as Philadelphia’s Stanley and Mastbaum had designs that, in the words of theater historian David Naylor, “mirrored that of Old World palaces of the past.”⁴ Suburban theaters, built with smaller budgets than their big-city cousins, rarely matched their exuberance, but many, including the Ritz, echoed the larger buildings in an auditorium designed to transport the audience into a world far removed from the street outside.

The Ritz’s architects, a Philadelphia firm, were no doubt influenced by the architecture of contemporary Philadelphia theaters, many of which were designed by their competitors, Hoffman and Henon. This firm was one of the more conservative of its day with many of its facades designed in the Beaux-Arts or Classical Revival style.⁵ The firm’s monumental Classical Revival compositions included Philadelphia’s Stanley, Mastbaum, and Erlanger.⁶

The movie theaters of the 1920s were, for the most part, designed not to blend in with the surrounding buildings but to serve as a focal point. In most cases, their scale was larger than the surrounding buildings. They often rose above the two-story taxpayer strips of the streetcar suburbs that stretched outward from center cities of the Eastern and Midwestern United States. While many downtown commercial buildings that lined such streets as Haddon Avenue and White and Black Horse Pikes were anonymous blocks with storefront on the ground level and apartments above, movie theaters often showed the hand of an architect with façade ornament and marquee intended to draw customers. The marquee was designed to grab the attention of the passerby with bright lights, colors, and large frequently changing signs.

Because of the desire to reflect an architectural statement, the style of the buildings differed from the architecture of the community in which they were located. For example, the Collingswood Theater has a 1920s Spanish Colonial façade, an innovation in a community that at the time had its main thoroughfare dominated by late Victorian-Colonial Revival buildings. The Westmont, the Ritz, and Audubon’s Century all employed Classical Revival decorative elements.

³ Chester H. Liebs, “Silent Screens in a New Century,” in *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater*, edited by Michael Putnam (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 77.

⁴ David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987), 19.

⁵ David Naylor, *American Picture Palace* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), 60.

⁶ Irwin Glazer,

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The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, New Jersey

Unlike the Ritz, the Westmont and Century are free standing landmarks rather than parts of commercial strips. The Century, now used as the home of Capa's Costumes, occupies the prominent corner of Kings Highway and White Horse Pike in Audubon. Although altered, some of its original grandeur can still be discerned. Its three part façade features a slightly projecting central section with a marquee projecting from the first floor. The façade, which is constructed of brick, now painted white is divided by brick pilasters with acanthus leaf capitals. The ends of the façade are marked by paired pilasters. Most façade openings have been infilled but gabled window frames are still visible above the marquee. Other decorative elements include a dentilled cornice with paterae and a flat parapet with two central plaques. Both of these plaques feature central shields flanked by griffins which are in turn flanked by sculpted vines. The auditorium had a gabled roof topped by metal ventilators. The stage was marked by a large, tall brick fly loft.

The Westmont Theatre, though vacant and deteriorating, still possesses an elaborately detailed façade facing Haddon Avenue. This façade, faced in beige brick and beige metal panels features a full-width marquee with neon lights spelling out "Westmont." A metal-clad ticket office is placed in the center of the ground floor and is flanked by glass doors. The upper story bays are marked by Ionic pilasters. Tall arched top metal frame windows are placed in the three center bays, while the end bays contain metal-framed casement windows placed in gabled surrounds. Stone plaques are placed above these end windows. The façade is crowned by a metal fascia and dentilled cornice. The parapet has a central signboard identifying the building as the Westmont Theatre.

The Classical Revival

The Classical Revival may have been chosen for the theaters because it connoted a civic landmark in many small towns and suburbs. In addition to theaters, this style was often used for governmental buildings, telephone buildings, and banks. Examples of other types of Classical Revival buildings in nearby communities include the Collingswood Borough Hall, a former bank; the former Bell Telephone (now Verizon Building) in Collingswood; and the Haddonfield Public Library. The present Borough Hall, located on Haddon Avenue, has been altered in its conversion from a bank but retains its stone façade, paired fluted pilasters, first floor window openings with shelf lintels, and elaborate door surround with a clock in the pediment. The three-story, brick Bell Telephone building also features a stone door surround, rectangular stone window surrounds, and a balustraded parapet. The Haddonfield Library's design is based on Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. A brick, single story building, its west façade features a pedimented entrance portico. Fenestration consists of 12 over 12 windows with splayed lintels with false keystone. The walls are crowned by a bracketed wood cornice, and a low dome rises from the roof.

Among the characteristic stylistic elements displayed by the Ritz are a symmetrical façade with pilasters and false arched openings, and the use of stone panels to punctuate and elaborate the façade of a brick building. As noted, a more exuberant rendition of the Classical Revival is displayed in the auditorium with its false boxes, Corinthian columns, and painted murals. These elements contribute to the Ritz's place as a Classical Revival building that conveys local significance under Criterion C as one of the most elaborate and best preserved buildings of its style in the Camden suburban ring.

The Theater Program

Unlike today, when a trip to the movie theater includes only a movie introduced by previews of coming attractions, in the 1920s, a visit to the theater meant an afternoon of varied entertainment. Audiences were entertained by the movie itself, by a concert from the theater organist, and by live vaudeville or dramatic entertainment. For example, in 1929, Camden's New Lyric Theater presented a double feature of "*The Black Watch*" and "*The Big Squalk*" on the same bill with a stage show featuring Fargo and Richards in "Something Different." The Clementon Theater featured five vaudeville acts and the Clementon orchestra presented along with its feature, Paul Muni in "*The Valiant*."⁷ In the early years, the Ritz offered a similar program of music, live theater, and motion pictures.

⁷ *Camden Courier*, August 31, 1929.

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The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, New Jersey

Historical Narrative

In 1927, when the Ritz Theatre opened, Camden County had a wealth of movie houses. Listings in the *Camden Courier* for September 12, 1927, the date of the theatre's opening, include a total of ten movie and two legitimate theaters in Camden City, two theaters in Gloucester City, as well as theaters in Audubon, Haddonfield, Westmont (Haddon Township), and Merchantville. Within a few years, new theaters had opened in Delsea, West Collingswood, Clementon, and Audubon. Seventy years later, few of these theaters remain. Camden City does not have a single historic theater. The Westmont Theatre, which opened in the same month as the Ritz, was recently vacated by its last tenant, a theatre troupe. The New Century Theatre in Audubon now houses a costume company, while the Collingswood Theatre (National Register-listed) recently housed a photography studio and the recording venue of the Philadelphia Orchestra and now houses an website design firm. Of the Camden County theatres listed in 1927, only the Ritz remains largely unaltered and in active use. It is now the home of Puttin' on the Ritz of Oaklyn, Inc., a regional professional theatre group.

Ground was broken for the Ritz Theatre in February 1927 in a ceremony in which Mayor Charles C. Durges and other Oaklyn borough officials took part. (Although the theatre is in Haddon Township, it is located in an area considered part of the central business district of Oaklyn Borough). The Ritz was built as part of the William E. Butler & Son chain of theaters. Butler, headquartered in Philadelphia, also operated the Elvay Theatre in the Frankford neighborhood of Philadelphia and the Clearfield Theatre in the Kensington neighborhood. The Ritz opened at 6:15 p.m. on September 12, 1927, showing Marion Davies in "Tillie the Toiler." This movie was followed in rapid succession by "Pleasures of the Rich," "Heart of Salome," and "Out of the Storm." Films were initially changed four times weekly. The latest releases from Metro-Goldwyn, First National, Warner and other companies were shown. A total of 1,200 people attended the first day's showings.⁸

The theatre was a typical small neighborhood movie house like many other constructed in suburban areas at about the same time. Its appearance was described in an opening day article in the *Camden Courier*:

...of buff brick, with an imposing entrance, the building is one of Oaklyn's most attractive structures. The interior, however, may be too briefly described as being extremely tasteful in coloring tints and pleasing decorations. There is real artistry displayed in the effect of the soft lighting scheme, blending so harmoniously with all surroundings. The total absence of garishness is its greatest attractiveness. The decorations are the original designs of William E. Butler.

The theatre originally had a capacity of 800, all orchestra seats. Theatre appointments included the seats, described as the identical type installed in the million dollar Freihofer Theatre in New York; a Simplex picture machine, touted as representative of the "world's greatest projectors;" and a Brown cooling system, designed to maintain an interior temperature 35 degrees cooler than the exterior temperature on the hottest days of summer.⁹

Clem Rizzo of Philadelphia supplied the theatre's projectors and booth equipment. The original projector, sound equipment and original amber lighting remains in the theatre. Theatre seats were furnished by L.E. and E.C. Stone, seating engineers and contractors of

⁸ "New Bettelwood Show House Attracts Crowds," *The Retrospect*, September 16, 1927.

⁹ "Oaklyn to Open Handsome New Playhouse Tonight," *Evening Courier*, September 12, 1927:17.

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The Ritz Theatre
Camden County, New Jersey

Philadelphia; iron and steel was furnished by the American Iron Works of Camden; lumber by E. Frank Pine of Blackwood; concrete by John J. Brolin of Camden; the buff vertical chenille face bricks by E. Brown Pardee of Collingswood; draperies by the Reliable Decorative Company of Philadelphia; carpet by the Hardwick & Magee Company of Philadelphia; and HVAC equipment by the American Heating & Ventilating Company of Philadelphia. Music in the theatre was originally provided by a \$25,000 orchestrion, a pneumatic organ equipped with pipes intended to replicate most of the instruments in the symphony orchestra. This instrument was described in an article in the *Retrospect* as the "equivalent in tone and in musical selection of a fifty-piece orchestra." It was first played by Edward Sheppard who also operated a music store in the building.¹⁰ The total cost of the theater was estimated at \$400,000.¹¹

The theatre's architects were the Philadelphia firm of Hodgens and Hill. Principals of the firm were Harvey Childs Hodgens and Albert Douglas Hill. Hodgens, who had been born in 1876, spent his early professional years in Pittsburgh. He was a member of the atelier of the noted Beaux-Arts architect Henry Hornbostel and gained additional experience in the Pittsburgh offices of Rutan & Russell, George Orth & Bros., F.J. Osterling, and Peabody and Stearns. The latter firm, headquartered in Boston, had become known for their grand Colonial Revival mansions for members of America's ruling class. Much less is known of Albert Douglas Hill, whose Philadelphia career spanned at least the years 1923 to 1942. The two began their partnership in 1924.

For several years prior to joining forces with Hill, Hodgens spent a major portion of working hours designing theaters. His earliest known theater commission was the Nixon Theatre and stores in Chester, Pennsylvania, designed for Thomas M. Love in 1919. Other theater designs of Hodgens included the American Theatre (7th & Girard streets, Philadelphia), the Criterion Theatre (Moorestown, New Jersey), a theater for Abraham Felt (Broad and Girard streets, Philadelphia), the Felt Brothers Theatre (Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia), and a theatre for Marcus A. Benn and the Stanley Company (63rd Street and Woodland Avenue, Philadelphia). The partnership of Hodgens and Hill continued to receive theater commissions. Among them were the Bala Theatre (Bala, Pennsylvania); alterations and additions to the Franklin Theatre (South Street, Philadelphia); the Crosskeys Theatre (5931 Market Street, Philadelphia), the Commodore Theatre (43rd and Walnut streets, Philadelphia); the Boyd Theatre (19th and Chestnut streets, Philadelphia); the Circle Theatre (4662 Frankford Avenue, Philadelphia); the Earle Theatre (11th and Market streets, Philadelphia); the Karlton Theatre alterations and additions to the Strand Theatre (Atlantic City); theatres for N.J. Taub, Inc., H. Roy Whitaker, and William Freihofer in Philadelphia, and additions to the Clearfield Theatre in Philadelphia. The firm's best known theater commission was the Tower Theatre of 1928 which is still in use at 69th and Ludlow streets in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania.¹²

In its early years, the Ritz presented a mixture of movies and vaudeville acts typical of smaller theaters of its day. An article in the *Retrospect* at the time of its reopening as a legitimate theatre described its original fare:

The theatre opened as a combination celluloid or film and variety theater. The custom then was for smaller theaters not on the major circuits to run continuous showings of films and acts. Five variety acts usually accompanied the feature films which included at the Ritz classics by Lon Chaney, Marion Davies and Clara Bow.¹³

A Collingswood resident, John D'Alessandro, remembered performing at the Ritz with his brother Michael in the mid-1930s. The two were members of the George Stratton Song and Dance Revue: "Dressed in loud suits, straw hats and canes, they danced on skates while singing 'strolling through the park one day in the merry, merry month of May.'¹⁴"

¹⁰ "New Bettelwood Show House."

¹¹ "Westmont Theatre Opens Labor Day," *The Retrospect*, September 2, 1927.

¹² Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1985):378, 383-385.

¹³ "Ritz Theatre to Reopen with Stage Production," *The Retrospect*, December 26, 1985.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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Advertisements placed in the *Camden Courier* give information about the motion pictures presented at the theater. For example, in July 1928, the theatre presented the film version of Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables," Douglas Fairbanks in "The Gaucho," Harry Langdon in "The Chaser," and George K. Arthur and Karl Dane in "Baby Mine." In August 1929, a typical week included Renee Adoree in "Tide of Empire" as well as three acts of vaudeville, Willard Mack in "Voice of the City" (advertised as "100% Talkie"), the "Fox Follies of 1939" advertised as "all singing—talking—dancing" and "Bridge of San Louis Rey," also accompanied by three acts of vaudeville. In September 1930, moviegoers could watch Jack Oakie in "Sap from Syracuse," H.B. Warner in "Wild Company," Jack Holt in "Vengeance," Greta Garbo in "Romance," and Benny Rubin in "Sunny Skies." Vaudeville acts accompanied at least the last film. The theatre's original ceiling fell in the 1930s. After the damage was repaired, the capacity of the theatre was reduced from 800 to 600.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the theatre continued to show first run movies. For example, in December 1940, the Ritz presented Don Ameche and Betty Grable in "Down Argentine Way." By the mid-1950s, the Ritz had become part of the Samuel Varsalow chain of theaters that included three in Camden City, as well as the New Century in Audubon, the Collingswood, the Westmont, and the King in Gloucester City. It shared movies with other theaters of the chain. In March 1956, the theatre presented "The Last Frontier," as well as Glenn Ford and Donna Reed in "Ransom." During the latter part of the 1950s and into the 1960s, the theatre began to emphasize fine art and foreign films to create a niche for itself and to differentiate it from the increasing numbers of theaters constructed as post-war suburban expansion continued apace. For example, in September 1962, the theatre presented "Murder She Said," followed by Dirk Bogarde, John Mills, and Mylene Demonreot in "The Singer Not the Song," described in a *Camden Courier-Post* advertisement as "a new and powerfully different kind of motion picture story."

By the 1970s, the theatre had become infamous. The foreign and art films had been replaced by pornography. It was operated by Budco, a company that also operated another pornographic theater in Pennsauken. Films with such titles as "Starlet Nights," "Purely Physical," "Airport Girls," and "Man and Wife" were invariably advertised with an "X" rating. The Ritz movie theatre closed in early 1985.

In August 1985, Bruce Curless, a Delaware Valley producer and director, held an organizational meeting with the aim of acquiring the Ritz as the home for a legitimate professional theatre. By October 1985, the enterprise, a stock company called Puttin' on the Ritz, Inc., took occupancy of the theatre and began preparations for a full theater season beginning in January 1986. The first season opened on January 17, 1986 with "The Boy Friend" directed by Curless. The cast of this inaugural presentation was chosen from over 150 auditioners from the entire Delaware Valley area. The Ritz currently presents a full season of six subscription productions, as well as children's theatre and special productions. Its 2002 season began with a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado."

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9. Major biographical References

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_____. Oaklyn to Open Handsome New Theatre Tonight. *Camden Morning Post*. September 12, 1927.

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10. Verbal boundary description

Haddon Township Tax Parcel Block 7.09, Lot 31

Verbal boundary justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the theatre.

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1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. July 1999
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Southwest façade toward northeast.
7. #1

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. July 1999
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Detail of marquee toward east.
7. #2

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. July 1999
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Vestibule toward northwest.
7. #3

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. July 1999
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Lobby toward northwest showing snackbar.
7. #4

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. January 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Gallery (former storefront) toward west.
7. #5

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Curt Hudson, photographer
4. May 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Detail of murals toward southeast.
7. #6

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1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Curt Hudson, photographer
4. May 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Detail showing false boxes toward southeast.
7. #7

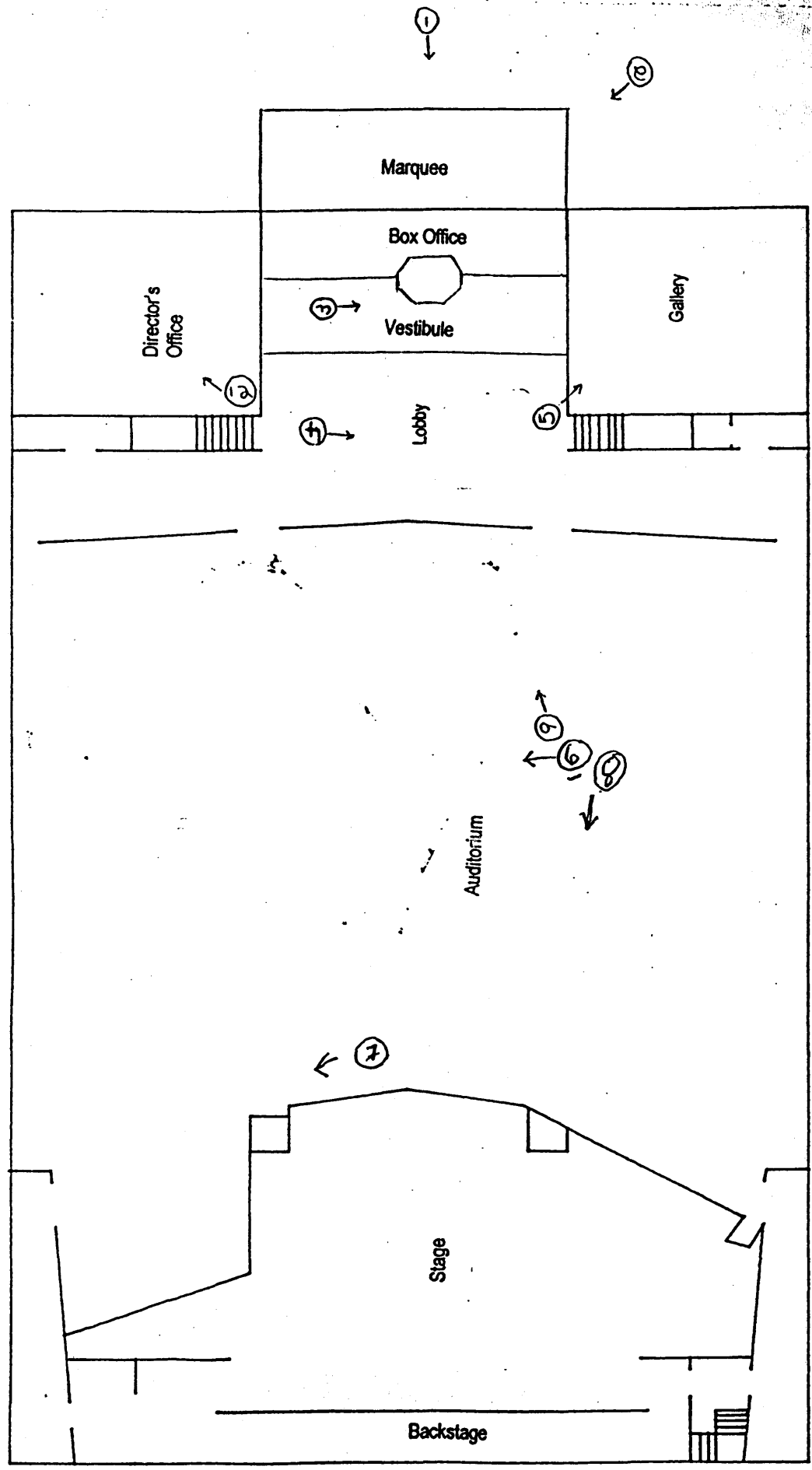
1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Curt Hudson, photographer
4. May 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Detail of auditorium showing stage toward northeast.
7. #8

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. January 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Rear of auditorium toward south.
7. #9

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. January 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Mezzanine dressing room toward southwest.
7. #10

1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. January 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Green room (portion of former balcony) toward south.
7. #11

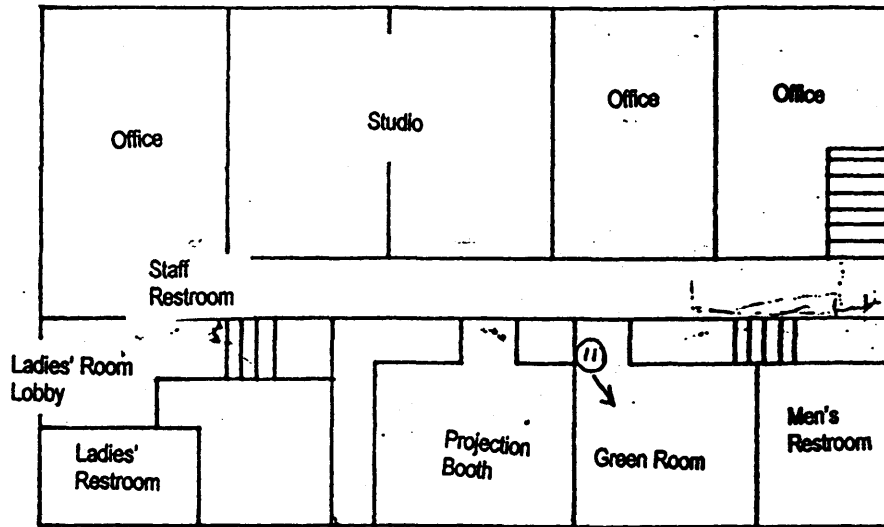
1. The Ritz Theatre
2. Camden County, New Jersey
3. Douglas C. McVarish, photographer
4. January 2002
5. New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton
6. Artistic director's office (former storefront) toward south.
7. #12



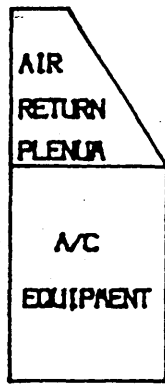
RITZ THEATER
 OAKLYN, NJ
 1ST FLOOR PLAN

Sketch Plan with angles of photographs

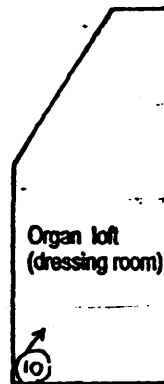
North
↓



SECOND FLOOR OFFICES



A/C MEZZANINE
STAGE LEFT



MEZZANINE
STAGE RIGHT

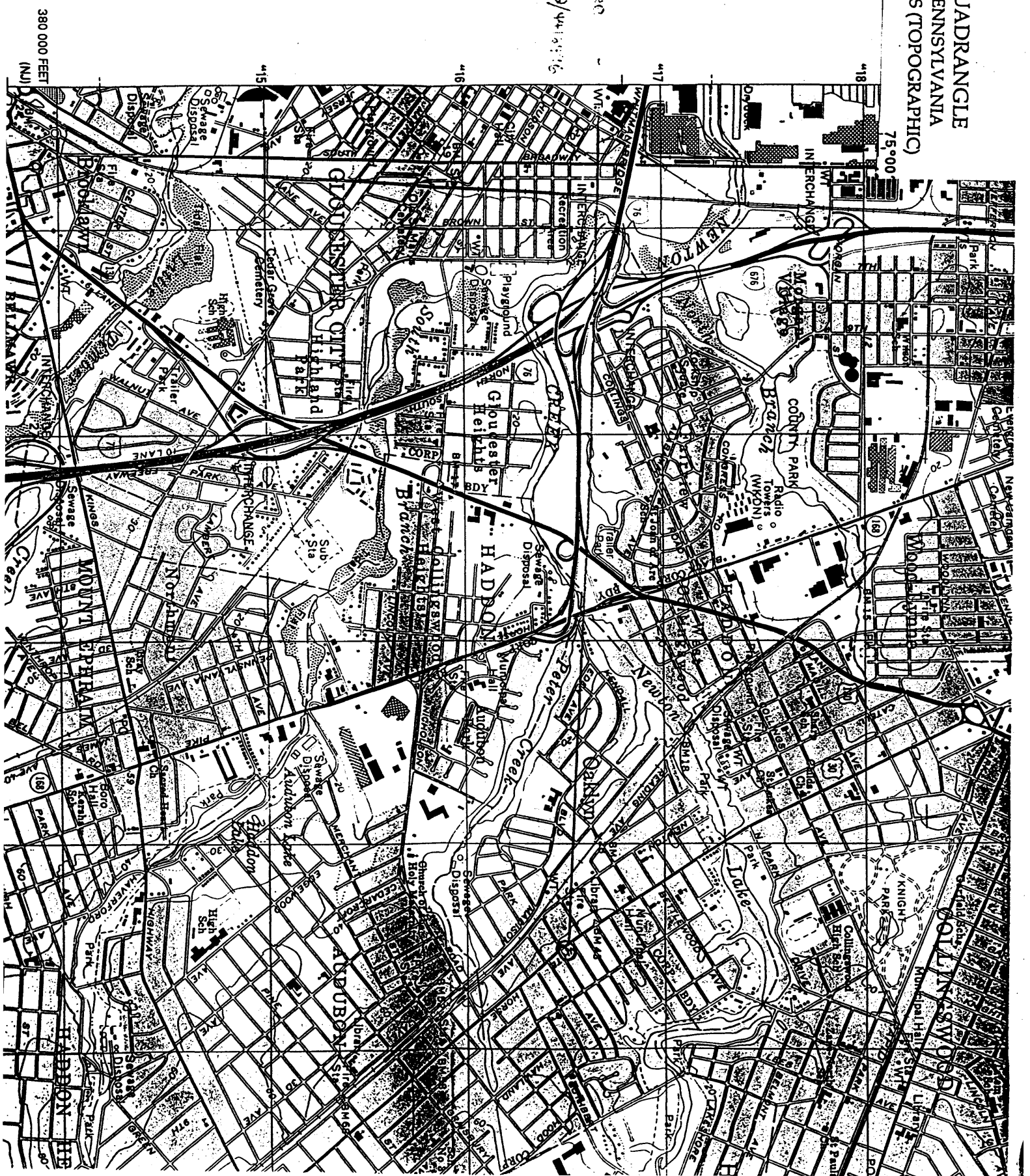
FLOOR PLAN RITZ THEATER OAKLYN, NJ

Sketch Plan with angles of photographs

CAMDEN QUADRANGLE
NEW JERSEY-PENNSYLVANIA
7.5-MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

(N11) 99

The Ritz Theatre
UTM: 1749333/441816



380 000 FEET
(N11)