

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

RECEIVED FEB 25 1992

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Ruffin Theater

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 113 West Pleasant Avenue

N/A not for publication

city, town Covington

N/A vicinity

state Tennessee code TN

county Tipton

code 167

zip code 38019

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private public-local public-State public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s) district site structure object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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. See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official

Date

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Tennessee Historical Commission

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. determined eligible for the National Register. determined not eligible for the National Register. removed from the National Register. other, (explain:)

entered in the National Register

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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. DescriptionArchitectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

ART DECO

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK
walls BRICK. STUCCO. TILE. GLASSroof ASPHALT
other METAL: brass**Describe present and historic physical appearance.**

The Ruffin Theater is located on West Pleasant Avenue in Covington, Tennessee. Covington (population 8,000) is located approximately thirty miles north of Memphis and eighteen miles from the Mississippi River. The theater is the best example of an Art Deco theater in Covington and it is also significant because of its association with William F. Ruffin, the original owner of the building and twelve other theaters in the West Tennessee area. It has been used as a theater over the past fifty-four years and has retained its integrity as such.

The theater faces north onto West Pleasant Avenue and is two stories in height. Centered on the ground floor, the box office projects a few feet onto the sidewalk. The box office is covered with white tiles and its base and pediment (with a diamond keystone) are of black tile. A circular window is centered on each of the three projected sides of the ticket box. One glass front movie poster case is mounted on each side of the double doors leading into the lobby. Two framed glass doors are also on the front of the theater; one on each end of the facade. These doors are wood framed and have Art Deco style brass handrails.

Covering the box office and entrance ways into the lobby is the theater's marquee. The marquee forms a canopy over the sidewalk by extending out from the building approximately eight feet. It is held in place by four tie rods attached to the theater. The marquee is maroon in color and has the theater's name painted on the front and sides. "Ruffin" is outlined with neon lights and more neon lights wrap around the top and bottom of the marquee. Exposed traditional white light bulbs are mounted facing down around the bottom edge of the marquee. Running parallel from the bottom edge of the marquee across the facade of the theater is a blue tile belt course accented by a black band of tile across the top of the blue tiles. Directly above the marquee is a nine light window. Centered a few feet above that opening is another nine light window. Both of these windows are in a painted black band, characteristic of Art Deco theater design, that extends to the top of the building. This black band is flanked by tan bands that offset the center of the building from the white stuccoed facade.

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The west elevation of the theater is a solid brick wall that has been painted white. Just around the corner from the box office is a portable illuminated sign that has been permanently attached to the wall.

The back elevation of the building is also of brick and remains unpainted. A pair of double, sliding metal doors are used as back stage doors for the movement of props and other theater equipment. These doors are painted grey and are offset from center by several feet. In the center of the rear wall is attached the gas main for the building. To the far left of the rear wall is a large boarded up window.

The east elevation of the theater is also brick but, is mostly covered by the one story commercial property adjacent to it. The exposed brick of the theater above is painted white along the entire wall, except for the last twenty feet.

On the interior of the theater is the lobby located directly behind the box office. A pair of staircases line the lobby walls. Located underneath each staircase is a men's and women's restroom. A pair of off centered openings covered by red velvet curtains lead into a "standee". This space is directly behind the seats of the theater and was used for standing room only capacity. In the center of the standee is the concession stand. Added circa 1950, it replaced the area originally used as the center standee. The ends of the concession stand mark the beginning of the aisles that divide the theater's seating into three sections. Four hundred and thirty-six original seats are present on the ground floor, with the middle section having the most seats. In the middle section, the end seats on every other row are "courting" seats - a double wide seat for those people with dates adventurous enough to sit in them. These seats have been used by couples since they were put in the theater during its remodeling in 1941.

Overlooking the ground floor seating are five florescent lights that have been added to the front of the balcony railing. These are not original and were added sometime in the late 1980s to improve the lighting of the stage.

The theater's wooden stage is twenty-four feet deep. The first five feet of the stage surface were added to the original stage area when the theater was restored in the late 1980s. Because of this extension, the first four rows of seats were removed from the seating arrangements. A flight of stairs is located on each end of the stage and lead down to the theater floor. Exit doors are located on each side of the stage and retain their original "exit" light above them.

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The interior of the theater also reflects the Art Deco style. A "swirl" motif runs through the theater's performance area. These light blue and rust colored swirls decorate the plaster walls of the theater. The interior ceiling lights consist of six round, Art Deco style fixtures. Also, there is one flat, round Art Deco light fixture affixed to the bottom of the balcony for lighting the first floor.

The stairs that lead up to the balcony are located in the lobby. When standing in the lobby as if someone has just walked into the theater, the stairs on the left lead up to the largest section of the balcony. After going up the first flight of stairs, there is a landing. The stairs to the right lead to the balcony. The stairs to the left also lead to a series of rooms originally used (and still used) for storage and offices. A single leaf door leads into a rectangular storage room. From this room a single leaf door leads into the manager's office. This series of rooms runs between the first and second stories, across the front of the theater. The stairs to the right of the lobby entrance lead up to the segregated section of the balcony set aside for blacks. Against the rear wall of the balcony is the projection room. It is placed in the center section of seats. A small section of the projection room, located along the side adjoining the segregated side of the balcony, was used as the bathroom for the black customers. Today, one hundred and eighty-one seats of the original two hundred and one seats remain in the balcony.

8. Statement of Significance

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

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F GN/A

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance

1937-1941

Significant Dates

1937-Built
1941-Remodeled

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

Ruffin, William F.

Architect/Builder

Speight and Hibbs

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

The Ruffin Theater is nominated under National Register Criteria B and C for its association with William F. Ruffin, a prominent theater businessman in West Tennessee, and for its Art Deco architecture.

W. F. Ruffin first entered into the theater business in May 1927 when he purchased the Palace Theater from L. L. Lewis. The Palace was housed in the old Paine Opera House. This opera house was built by William Henry Paine in 1890 and was the only theater in Covington until the 1920s. In June 1934, William Ruffin began work to convert the Palace Theater into one of West Tennessee's most modern playhouses. In this remodeling, the theater was lengthened twenty-three feet which allowed two hundred new seats to be added to the gallery. Also, a new stage, orchestra pit, drops, and a larger screen were added. The theater burned to the ground on January 29, 1936. William Ruffin built his most luxurious theater, the Ruffin, on the same site. Opened on July 24, 1937, the new theater was equipped with a spacious lobby and an air conditioning system, which is still in place today.

The theater was remodeled in the Art Deco style in 1941 by Speight and Hibbs, Architects from Clarksville, Tennessee. It was purchased by the Tipton Fine Art Council in 1980 for \$60,000. Today, the Ruffin Theater stands unaltered in its original location on the square in Covington. With its location in the surrounding commercial district, and continued use as a playhouse, the theater retains its integrity as a center of entertainment for the town.

The Ruffin Theater is being nominated under Criterion B of the National Register for its association with William F. Ruffin, a dominant figure in the theater business in western Tennessee. Ruffin, who began his theater career in Covington, soon developed an amusement company that opened theaters in many small towns in the West Tennessee area. The most successful were those that quickly expanded their operations to meet the increasing demand for the availability of films. As his entertainment

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Beasley, Gaylon Neil. True Tales of Tipton. Covington, Tennessee: Tipton County Historical Society, 1981.

Naylor, David. Great American Movie Theaters. Washington: The Preservation Press, 1987.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS): N/A

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:

MTSU Center for Historic Preservation

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property approximately .5 acres

UTM References

A

1	6	2	6	0	0	7	0	3	9	3	8	3	8	0
Zone	Easting				Northing									

B

Zone	Easting				Northing									

C

Zone	Easting				Northing									

D

Zone	Easting				Northing									

Covington 414 SW

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

City lot C-3, 113 West Pleasant Avenue. Roughly 105' X 102'

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundaries include the entire city lot that has historically been associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Patrick C. Craddock and Carroll Van West

organization Center for Historic Preservation

date October 1991

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city or town Murfreesboro

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company grew, William Ruffin's name soon became synonymous with entertainment in the area. Between 1927 and 1943, Ruffin had built an empire of thirteen theaters that stretched between Covington, Tennessee and Benton, Kentucky. In Covington, the Ruffin Theater is the only building associated with this significant local entrepreneur. Some other West Tennessee towns have extant Ruffin theaters. For example, in Union City, the Capitol Theater stands on the courthouse square. However, only the Ruffin Theater in Covington carries the owner's name; it was the flagship of his entertainment company.

The Ruffin Theater is being nominated under Criterion C because of its unique Art Deco style of architecture. The theater is one of two Art Deco playhouses in Covington. Unlike the Ritz, the Ruffin Theater is of particular architectural importance because it retains nearly all of its original design, inside and out. The interior of the theater exhibits several important design features. On the east and west walls of the auditorium are a pair of Art Deco swirl motifs which were added in 1941. Original features in the theater include the manager's office in the mezzanine, the staircases, and the seats. The balcony on the north end of the theater is also original. The exterior of the building exemplifies how the architects worked with an existing building and remodeled what they had to work with into a stylish, appealing building that would draw people downtown to the movies. It is the exterior that helped draw movie goers to the box office. The Art Deco redesign of the Ruffin Theater was a small town attempt to keep up with big city trends. In the larger towns, from the east to west coast, theaters had undergone a transformation from opera houses, to vaudeville halls, to movie palaces. With flashing lights and a lavish facade, the larger movie palaces drew more patrons through their doors. By the early 1940s small theaters across the nation had begun to mimic the large town movie palaces. Just as in the big cities, William Ruffin was looking for ways to take a bigger piece of the entertainment pie.

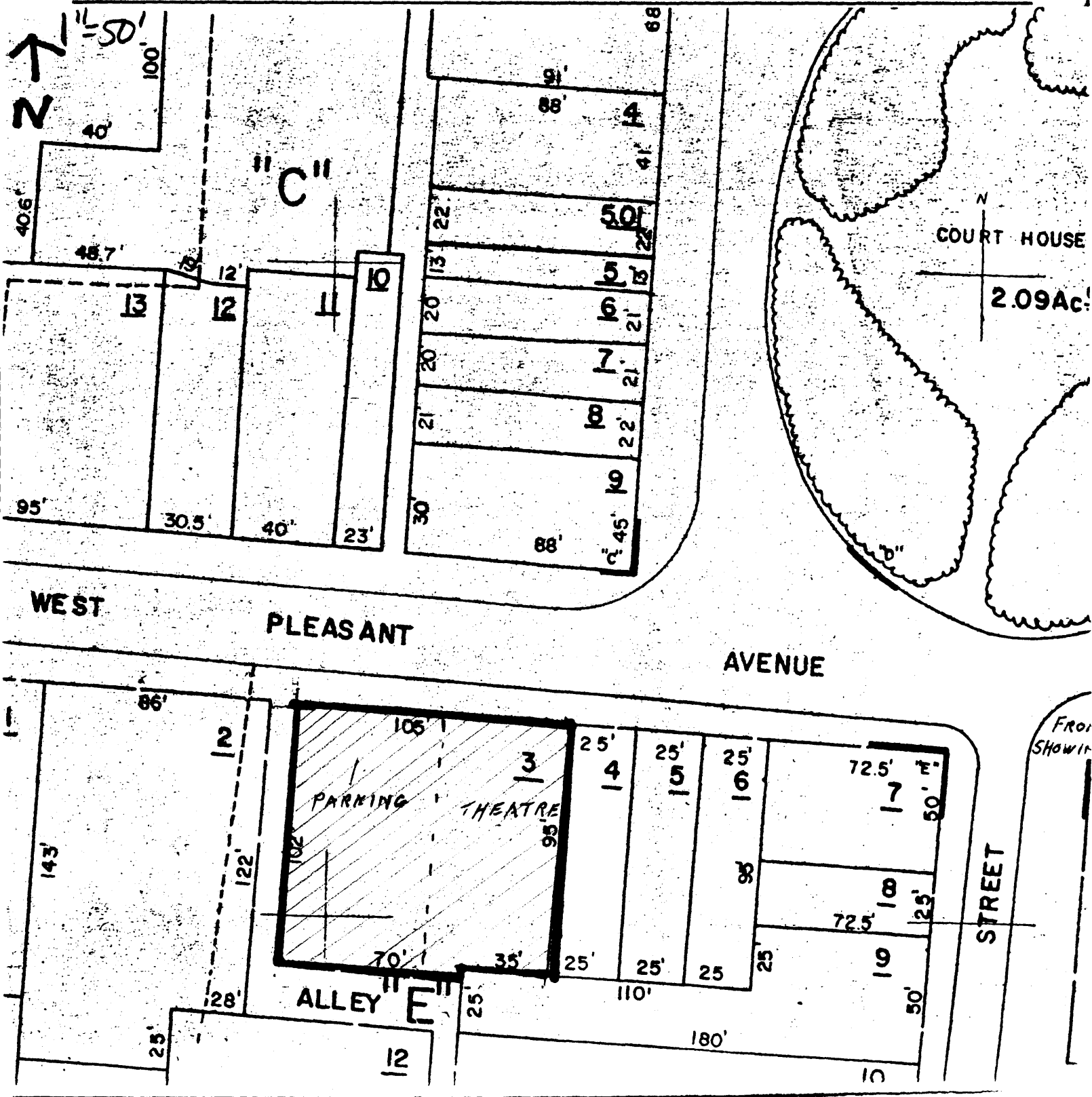
The Ruffin Theater, because of its architectural style and its relation to William F. Ruffin, is a building with historical importance to Covington and the West Tennessee area. The theater served as a catalyst for the development of Ruffin's amusement company and as the only cultural attraction in Covington until the addition of a second theater in the 1940s. The theater building retains its integrity as a playhouse and amusement center for the town.

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Ruffin Theater 741



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Ruffin Theater
113 West Pleasant Avenue
Covington, Tipton Co., Tennessee

Photographs by: Carroll Van West
Date: February 1991
Negs: Tennessee Historical Commission
Nashville, Tennessee

North facade, facing south
#1 of 18

West elevation, facing east
#2 of 18

South elevation, facing north
#3 of 18

West elevation, facing northeast
#4 of 18

North facade detail, box office and entrance doors, facing south
#5 of 18

North facade detail, former black patron entrance, facing southeast
#6 of 18

North facade detail, for white patron entrance, facing south
#7 of 18

Interior, entrance doors detail, facing north
#8 of 18

Interior, concession stand and lobby, facing east
#9 of 18

Interior, first floor stairs, former black patron entrance, facing south
#10 of 18

Interior, concession stand and theater seats, facing northeast
#11 of 18

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Interior, east wall design, facing east
#12 of 18

Interior, west wall design, facing southwest
#13 of 18

Interior, west stage entrance and exit, facing west
#14 of 18

Interior, west wall design and stage, from balcony facing southwest
#15 of 18

Interior, stage from balcony, facing south
#16 of 18

Interior, balcony, facing south
#17 of 18

Interior, manager's office, facing west
#18 of 18

50'

3

10' ALLEY

4

48 1/2'

BUILDING

102 1/2'

PARKING LOT

2

MARQUEE

SIDEWALK

STEPS

7

5

6

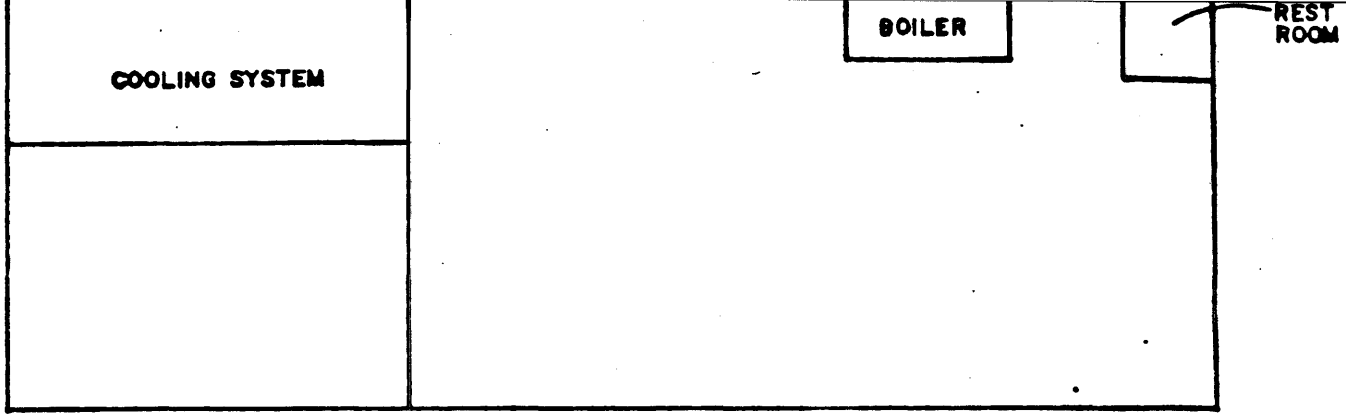
1

PLEASANT STREET

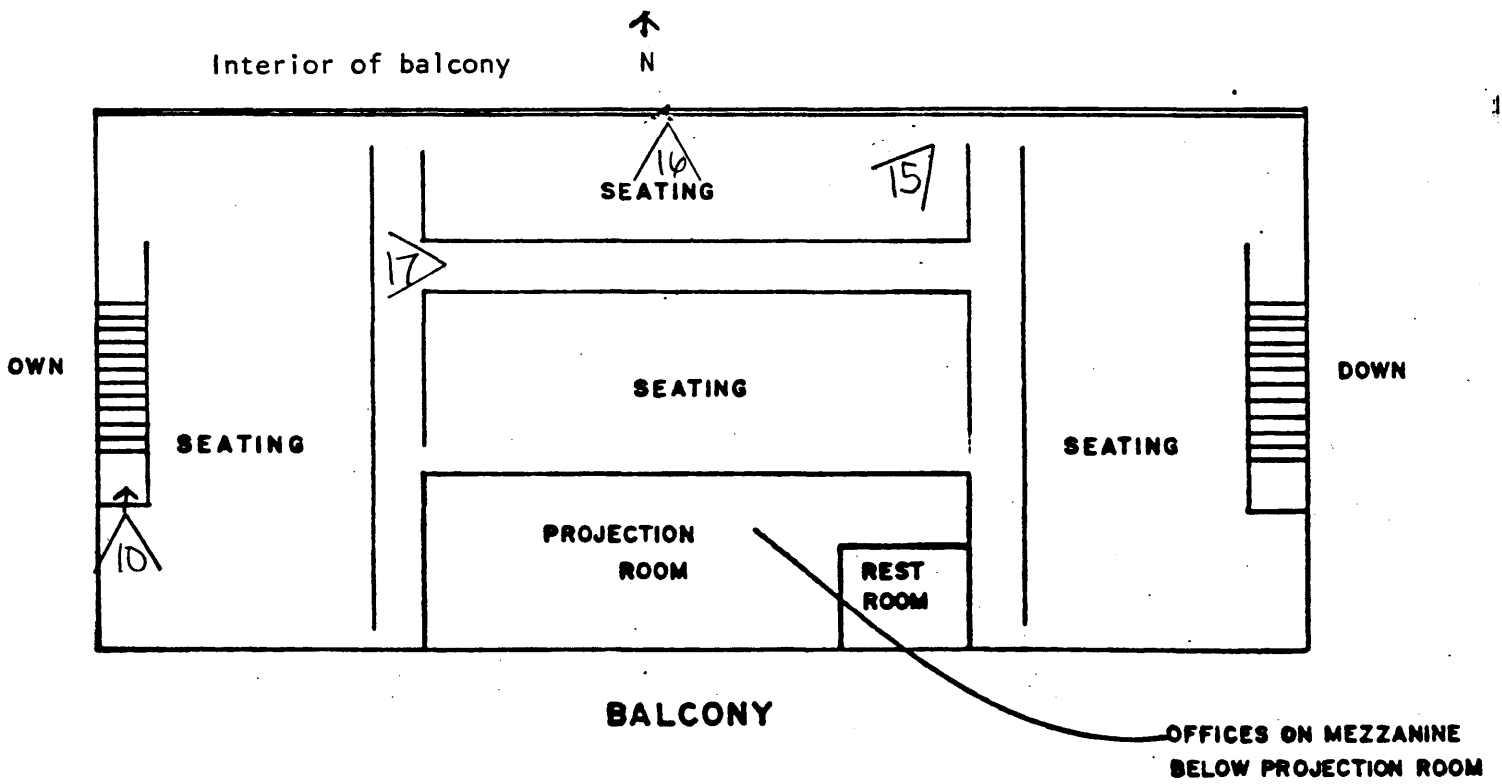
... RUFFIN ...
... TIPPIN ...

^ Photo key

N.T.S.



AREA UNDER STAGE



△ Photo key

ROEFIM Y HEATON
TIPSON CO. TN

