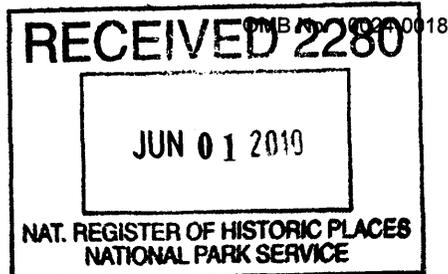


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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Varsity Theatre
other names/site number The Sideline

2. Location

street & number 104 Oxford Street NA not for publication
city or town Martin NA vicinity
state Tennessee code TN county Weakley code 183 zip code 38237

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 for 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.)

E. Patrick McHugh, L.

May 27, 2010

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

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 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:)

Edson Beall
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

JUL 16 2010

Varsity Theatre
Name of Property

Weakley County, Tennessee
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in count)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-local | <input type="checkbox"/> district |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-State | <input type="checkbox"/> site |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal | <input type="checkbox"/> structure |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> object |

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
0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theatre

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

HEALTHCARE: clinic
RECREATION AND CULTURE: sports facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Art Moderne
Art Deco

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete
walls brick
roof asphalt
other wood, aluminum, glass

Narrative Description

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

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 N/A

(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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE
RECREATION/ENTERTAINMENT

Period of Significance

1949- 1960

Significant Dates

NA

Significant Person

(complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Speight and Hibbs, Clarksville, TN architects

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): 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

Name of repository: _____

Varsity Theatre
Name of Property

Weakley County, Tennessee
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property Less than one acre Martin TN 435 SE

UTM References

(place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<u>16</u>	<u>333850</u>	<u>4023620</u>	3	_____	_____	_____
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
2	_____	_____	_____	4	_____	_____	_____

See continuation sheet

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 Vicki Smith, Corporate Secretary
organization The Sideline date January 2010
street & number 104 Oxford Street telephone 731-587-3422
city or town Martin, TN 38237 state TN zip code 38237

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 Brian Wray Smith and Candra J. Smith
street & number 172 Lakeview Drive telephone 731-588-2736
city or town Martin state TN zip code 38237

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 listing. 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 20303.

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National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 1 Varsity Theatre
Weakley County, Tennessee**Description**

The Varsity Theater is located at 104 Oxford Street, one block from Lindell Street in historic downtown Martin (2006 population 10,515), Tennessee. The Art Moderne Varsity Theater, designed by the architectural firm of Speight and Hibbs of Clarksville, Tennessee, was completed and opened to the public in 1949. The rectangular-shaped theater measures 140 by 55 feet and at its opening could seat approximately 1,000 people. It features the characteristic streamlined appearance of Art Moderne designs, such as the rounded edges and horizontal lines on the exterior. (see figure 1.) Art Moderne streamlined elements are carried over to the interior of the building, where there are also Art Deco features. The theater retains a high degree of integrity in its architectural elements and decorative motifs. In addition to retaining its architectural integrity, the building has remained a landmark in the Martin community throughout its existence.

Facing north, the two story theater is sheathed with buff color glazed bricks interspersed with inset rows of unglazed maroon brick. Brick is laid in a Flemish stretcher bond – rows of stretcher bond interspersed with single rows of Flemish bond - except at the curved edges of the building, where only brick headers are used. This brick patterning extends to roughly the first quarter of the east and west elevations. According to an article in the *Weakley County Press*, the theater

...is made up of three sections: the upper field, marquee and lower front. The porcelainizing of the material being such a tremendous undertaking it had to be prefabricated and completed in the Tex-o-lite's factory in Dallas, Texas, and upon completion was shipped direct to the Varsity Theatre. The upper section is a blue field of symmetrical figures with a border of white outlining each figure and the name Varsity scrolled in the center of the section. The letters are of orange being outlined by a white border; symbolizing our Volunteer State's University's colors.

The second section being the attraction panel and marquee, which spans the entire width of the building, having adequate space for feature attraction titles to reach across the entire face of the building. The marquee is constructed entirely of heavy reinforced steel and decorated with porcelainized enamel.

The lower front and third section of the building is indeed a masterful work of art, to accentuate the architects' curves and designs with material such as porcelain enamel and having all parts of the front to fit as though it were elastic materials. This section is in buff and maroon coinciding with the color scheme of the other two parts of the front and matching the buff brick of the building structure.¹

¹ *Weakley County Press*, August 19, 1949.

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Weakley County, Tennessee

The porcelain enamel panels, brick, name Varsity on the façade, and most of the marquee remains. Balton and Sons of Memphis designed the panels, coming to Martin before they were put on the building in order to make accurate measurements of the façade.² Letters spelling Varsity originally sat atop the marquee but they were removed circa 1996. One of the signs is now inside on the stage and the other was sold in 1996 at a yard sale. Horizontal Art Moderne detailing continues at the edges of the marquee. Although the underside lights have been replaced with an aluminum ceiling and the lettering space is empty, the theater's marquee still retains its basic character. Immediately below the marquee there is a buff porcelain frieze band with a curvilinear pattern in maroon. Under the marquee at the main entrance to the theater is the grey and red terrazzo floor. Set in a circular pattern that is seen in the interior's Art Deco details, the floor is laid over concrete and the design is carried into the main lobby of the theater.

The north façade contains the main entrance to the theater, set several feet behind the brick façade wall. There are two sets of modern glass double doors facing Oxford Street providing primary access to the theater. The front doors and ticket booth are surrounded by buff porcelain enamel tiles, with maroon porcelain enamel tiles as the base. To the east and west of the main entrance are inset glass display cases surrounded in aluminum and used to showcase movie posters. Both cases have "NOW SHOWING" at the top. To the west of the main entrance is the box office ticket booth. The ticket booth is a deep elliptical shape, highlighted by the same buff porcelain enamel found across the main entrance, with maroon porcelain enamel tiles providing the base of the ticket booth. The glass of the ticket booth is not curved/elliptical but made up of several flat panes of glass. To the west of the ticket booth is a single glass door which also provides access to the theater. When constructed, this entrance was for the African American patrons. This entrance leads directly to a separate staircase which leads to the uppermost portion of the balcony. To the west of this entrance is another display area for movie posters.

The Varsity Theatre, as stated by the Ruffin Amusement Company owners and operators, was the "last word" in modern fireproof buildings and no expense was spared in making this building completely fireproof.³ The building is constructed of concrete with reinforced steel.

The west elevation retains the buff and maroon brick pattern of the façade for about twenty feet, where a narrow pilaster separates the decorative features from the unadorned part of the west elevation. Unglazed red brick continues for the remaining 120 feet of the theater. Brick pilasters are on this elevation and there are no openings.

Like the west elevation, the east elevation has the buff and maroon brick pattern for the first twenty feet. There are also two one-over-one double-hung windows at the marquee level that are part of the upper level efficiency apartment. The remainder of this elevation has glazed buff brick laid in

² *Weakley County Press*, Friday, August 19, 1949.

³ *Weakley County Press*, Friday, August 19, 1949.

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Weakley County, Tennessee

Flemish stretcher bond. The first story of the west elevation is flat/unbroken, while the second story is inset a brick width and is delineated by brick pilasters.

The south, rear elevation, is a red brick wall. At the first story level there are two sets of doors, leading to a basement level, at the east and west corners. They provide the fire exits from the building. A one story section that leads to the boiler room and storage space extends from the main elevation. There are two double doors in the center of the wall and modern HVAC equipment rests on the roof of this part.

Most of the interior features of the Varsity Theatre are original to the building and are representative of the Art Deco style. The main entrance leads to the theater's central lobby where gray terrazzo flooring with intersecting maroon circular designs carry the colors and designs from the exterior inside to the elliptical lobby. A narrow frieze of triglyphs and metopes enhances the walls of the lobby and other main floor rooms. The interior walls and ornamental details are plaster. Along the west wall is the entrance to the ticket booth, which also contains the main electrical switches for the theater's house and balcony lights. The ladies' and men's restrooms are along the east wall, with their original ceramic floor tiles, wall tiles, and crown molding. The south wall has two large doorways on either side of a modern curved counter work station which sits where the original concession stand was located. The two doorways provide access to the hall. On the west wall of the hall is the original cry room with two original large glass windows. The original Art Deco etched glass "CRY ROOM" sign is mounted above the doorway. The stairway leading to the upper balcony is located on the east wall of the hall. The south and west end of the hall has a door leading into the new space that houses the physical therapy clinic. The physical therapy clinic measures 35 by 37 feet. The south and east end of the hall has a door leading into the main hall of the theater. There are historic lights at the wall-ceiling edge in the former lobby area.

The main hall of the theater is striking in appearance, with the most dominant features of the theater found in the ceiling and wall decor. Large plaster rosettes with sunburst patterns in blue, red, and green are framed by grey pilasters. The rosettes hide the lighting. The wall lights have been restored and can once again shine red in the winter and blue in the summer to give the impressions of warmth and coolness, respectively. Pilasters have a row of rosettes with a bas relief quatrefoil pattern capped by a larger row of alternating rosettes with bas relief urns and profiles capped by the rosette motif. A frieze at the ceiling contains alternating reeded panels and rosettes with bas relief urns. The seating has been removed and the floor in the main hall of the theater has been leveled; originally there was a five foot slope. Even with this change, the original look of the theater has been preserved. The main hall of the theater now houses the fitness center and physical therapy clinic. It measures 72 by 52 feet.

The original stage at the south end of the theater still exists. The historic gold rayon screen curtain and valance are still in place and the original electric hoist and sandbags are still operable to raise

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Section number 7 Page 4 Varsity Theatre
Weakley County, Tennessee

and lower the curtain. (See Figure 2. The heavy velvet drapery is gone.) From a *Weakley County Press* special section about the new theater, the curtain is described as

Just in front of the Screen is a rayon Screen Curtain of rich gold with a scallop design of rayon running horizontally thru it. This curtain is operated with a steel track and motor control machine which automatically opens and closes the curtain from the projection booth. These drapes are all made with rich and ample fullness which will allow the curtain to hang in a series of folds which are very beautiful.....All of the curtains and draperies were designed and furnished by the Knoxville Scenic Studios, Inc., manufacturers of "Distinctive Stage Equipment," Knoxville, Tenn.⁴

On each side of the stage are double door openings to the fire exit from the theater, exiting to the rear of the building. Above the stage, mounted on the south wall, are the original exterior lighted Varsity letters. One doorway on the stage leads to an upper storage room. In front of the stage to the east and west side, are double doors leading to rear entrances of the building and used as fire exits.

The staircase in the hall leads to the balcony of the theater. The balcony décor maintains the theater's rosettes and pilasters. The balcony is divided into three sections – one section historically segregated for African Americans. The seats in the balcony have been removed and the floors have been leveled into two tiers and presently house the cardio section of the fitness center. The projection room was in the center of the balcony, along the north wall. The projection room has been remodeled into two shower rooms. The back staircase is located on the east wall of the balcony and leads down two flights to the exterior of the theater (to the historically African American entrance). The back staircase also leads up one flight to two bathrooms (historically African American) and the original efficiency apartment located over the main lobby. The efficiency apartment has a large room used as a combination bedroom and living room, an efficiency kitchen, and a tiled bathroom, having tub and shower. The efficiency apartment is now used as office space and the efficiency kitchen is the laundry room.

When the Varsity Theatre was converted into the new home of Daystar Church in 1996 minor renovations were made to the interior: painting, plumbing, electrical. In 2004, the church moved to the vacant Martin Junior High School building on McCombs Street and once again the historic theater stood empty. On October 21, 2004, Brian Wray Smith and wife Candra J. Smith purchased the Varsity Theatre renovating the interior into a physical therapy clinic and fitness center, giving the historic theater a facelift and new life.⁵ The original stage, curtains, Art Deco house lights, molding, pilasters, terrazzo floors, and elliptical lobby remain. The front lobby desk was rebuilt to follow where the old concession stand was originally. The floor was leveled in the main hall due to the five-foot slope, but otherwise the original look of the theater has been preserved. The Art

⁴ *Weakley County Press*, Varsity Theatre Section, August 19, 1949.

⁵ Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. October 21, 2004 in Book D397 Page 134.

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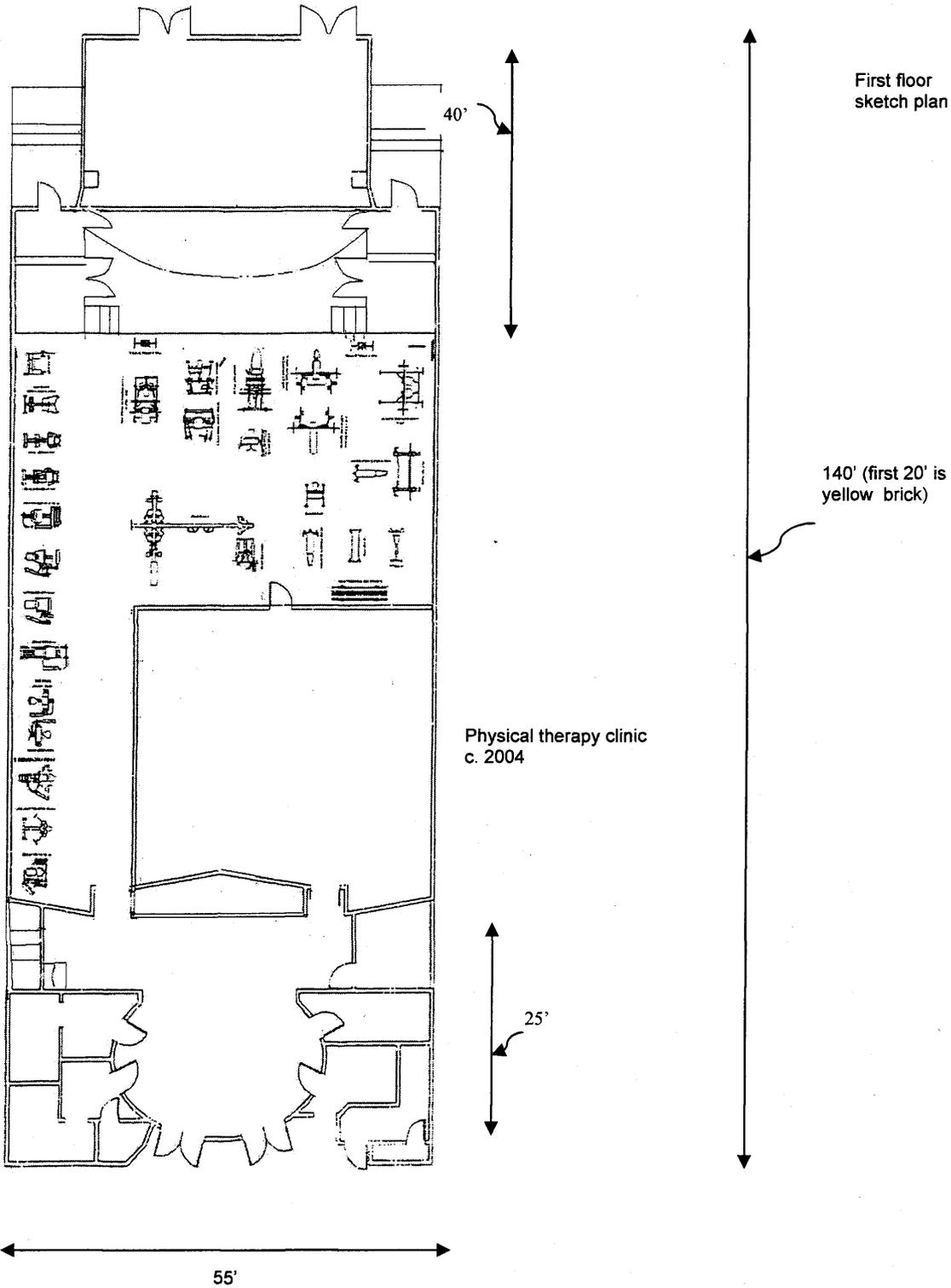
Section number 7 Page 5 Varsity Theatre
Weakley County, Tennessee

Deco lights on the east and west walls and ceiling have been restored and once again shine red or blue. The balcony remains and is now the cardio section of the fitness center. The upstairs shower rooms are where the old projection room was located. The original efficiency apartment and original cry room are now office space. Painting, plumbing and electrical renovations were also made to the building. The exterior brick, upper blue field and the name Varsity remain. Renovations to restore the marquee and neon lights are being planned for the near future. Plans also include replacing the modern glass front doors with replicas of the original doors. (See figure 1.)

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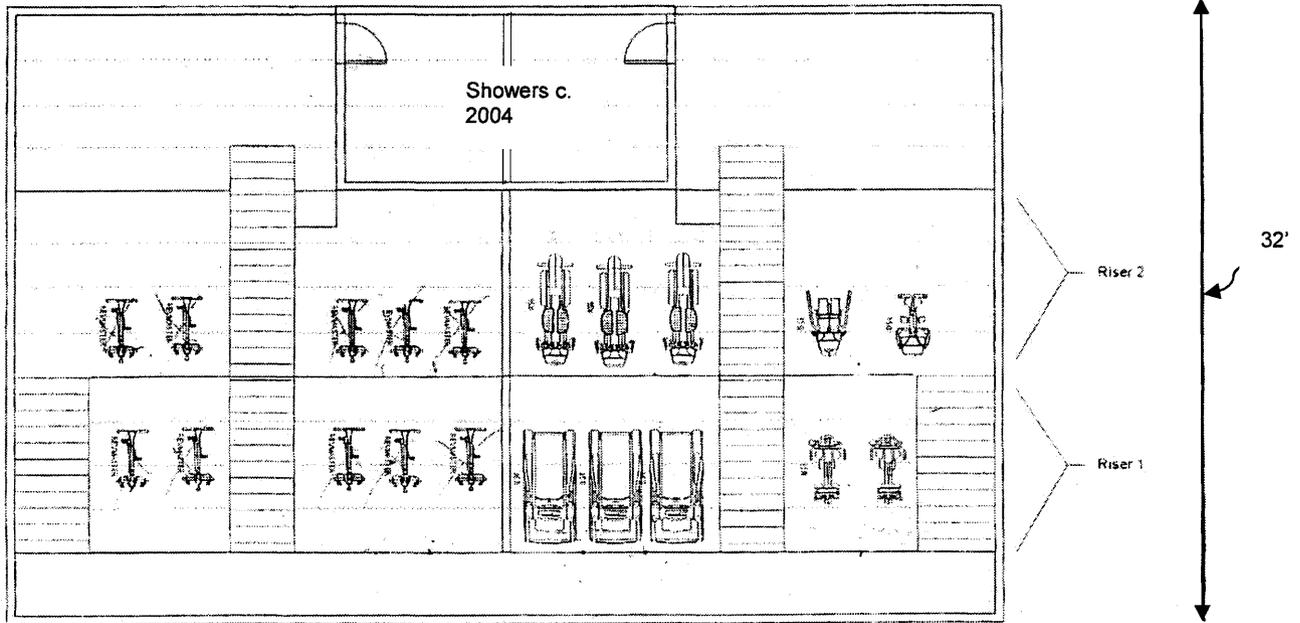
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Weakley County, Tennessee



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Weakley County, Tennessee



Balcony sketch plan

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Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 8 Varsity Theatre
Weakley County, Tennessee**Significance**

The Varsity Theatre is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with the development of mass entertainment and recreation in Martin and Weakley County, and under Criterion C as a locally significant example of Art Moderne - Art Deco commercial architecture. Completed for the Ruffin Amusement Company in 1949, the theater became the center of movie entertainment in Martin, surpassing Ruffin's smaller and older Capitol Theatre in popularity from its opening until its closing many years later. The Clarksville architectural firm of Speight and Hibbs, who designed other theaters for Ruffin, designed this building with the curved edges and simplicity of the Art Moderne style. Inside, they used the more exuberant Art Deco style for details in the lighting and other decorative features. The theater retains its architectural and historic integrity.

The Ruffin Amusement Company of Covington, Tennessee, started operation of a theater in the city of Martin on September 14, 1931. Called the Capitol Theatre, the enterprise soon outgrew its location in the Ryan Building and moved to the Parker Building. The growing popularity of movies during this era meant that Martin needed a larger, much better equipped theater and more comfortable surroundings for motion picture entertainment. Plans for construction of a new, modern theater were first made around 1941-1942, but the project was delayed until after the war, when construction materials could be obtained.⁶ In October 1945 the Ruffin company purchased another location in Martin. Plans were drawn and completed before the end of the year for a deluxe theater, to be known as the Varsity Theatre, located at 217-219 Lindell Street. However, the plans for this theater were held up because of local building restrictions. The company made two separate applications; but each time they were denied permission to build. Ruffin Amusement Company gave up trying to build on the Lindell Street location and instead purchased property on Oxford Street for the theater.⁷ The company purchased the property from Mrs. Alleen Smith Dalton on November 17, 1947.⁸

The Weakley County paper noted that the architects for the new building, Clarksville's Speight and Hibbs, were "...among the leading exponents of architecture in the South, specializing in theatres, having built and remodeled more than 150 magnificent structures in the past 10 years."⁹ C. W. Speight was responsible for what the paper called the "ultra-modern motif used in the streamlined design" for the theater.¹⁰ He was on site for the last few weeks before the theater opened. Modern seating, acoustics, lighting, and heating and cooling resulted in the paper calling this the

⁶ *Weakley County Press*, Friday, August 12, 1949.

⁷ *Weakley County Press*, Varsity Theatre Section, August 19, 1949. Research has not determined what the building/zoning problems were.

⁸ Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. November 17, 1947 Book 109 Page 22.

⁹ *Weakley County Press*, Varsity Theatre Section, August 19, 1949.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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Weakley County, Tennessee

"South's finest Theatre."¹¹ Edd Hughes of Dickson, Tennessee was the contractor and supervisor for the construction of the building.

In an effort to build suspense until it opened, the theater was covered with a "wooden obstruction" that would not be removed until shortly before the first show on August 18, 1949. The *Weakley County Press* lauded the new theater in an August 19, 1949 editorial in a special "Varsity Theatre Section." The paper noted that with two factories and a junior college in Martin, the new theater was a welcome enterprise. It reported that this was "The South's Finest" and also the most elaborate of the Ruffin Amusement Company's theaters.¹² Colors of the façade and the name were chosen to honor the University of Tennessee Junior College (now UT Martin). The theatre seated over 1,000 people comfortably and had an air-conditioning unit that was capable of reducing temperature in the building to near freezing. "It's A Great Feeling" starring Dennis Morgan, Doris Day, and Jack Carson was the feature attraction showed on opening night.¹³ (See figure 3.) It cost adults forty cents and children fourteen cents to see the show. W.F. Ruffin, Jr., the Vice President and Field Manager for Ruffin Amusement Company, was the temporary manager of the theater. The grand opening was a success, as a capacity crowd of movie patrons waited in line over a block long for about an hour to get into the theater. Opening dedication ceremonies were broadcast by radio from the stage (See figure 4).¹⁴

Air Temperature, Inc. supplied the Chrysler Airtemp central air conditioner and dehumidifier. Two units that provided "the equivalent of 80 tons or 160,000 pounds of ice every 24 hours" cooled the theater. According to an advertisement at the time the theater opened "Air Temperature, Inc., a division of Mills Morris Co., which has served MidSouth Industry for three generations, stands together with the Chrysler Corporation as your warrant of satisfaction service and year after year maintenance."¹⁵ Beginning in the early twentieth century the problems of ventilation and humidity control in public buildings was being regulated in many cities. As popular as movie theaters were, keeping crowded patrons comfortable was not only required, but an advantage to theater owners. Theaters and other public buildings were often the only places where people could experience air conditioning.¹⁶

Heat for the theater was provided by an electric oil-fired furnace with "heating coils scientifically placed in the chamber of the distribution system."¹⁷ When opened the theater used about the same amount of electricity in twelve hours as two and one-half houses would use in a month. A new Simplex E-7 projection and sound system was put in the Varsity. Knoxville Scenic Studios,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Martin Mail and The County Times*, August 19, 1949.

¹³ *Martin Mail and The County Times*, Friday, August 19, 1949.

¹⁴ *Weakley County Press*, Friday, August 12, 1949.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gail Cooper, *Air-Conditioning America: Engineers and the Controlled Environment, 1900-1960* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 80.

¹⁷ *Weakley County Press*, Friday, August 12, 1949.

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Weakley County, Tennessee

Inc. provided the "Contour Curtain" for the stage was electrically operated and made of satin and rayon, while exit door drapes were made of velour.¹⁸

Although modern in most aspects, the Varsity Theatre did not challenge prevailing notions of race relations in the South. The layout of the theater was a reminder of segregation in the South. The plain entrance, leading up a staircase to the west portion of the balcony, was historically used by the African American patrons of the Varsity Theatre. Halfway up this staircase, the landing opens up to a water fountain and bathrooms that were used only by African Americans.

Even as the Varsity Theatre was being opened, W.F. Ruffin was involved in a company that was building a newer type of theater – a drive-in - in Weakley County on Highway 22. The company, RACO Enterprises, was planning on more drive-ins in other states. This foreshadowed the future of movie-going when drive-in theaters became more popular than downtown theaters.

The Varsity Theatre operated continually from 1949-1977 under the ownership of Ruffin Amusement Company providing shows every week night plus Saturday matinees. The Varsity Theatre was sold by the Ruffin company to Jaxson Drive In Theatre, Inc. on March 15, 1977.¹⁹ When Jaxson Drive In Theatre purchased the Varsity, nightly showings and Saturday matinees continued. They added Sunday matinees to the lineup. The theater was closed in March of 1987 due to the owner's illness. A new tri-plex cinema, the Cine Theatre, also opened in the University Plaza in 1987 which assuredly affected the closing of the Varsity. The Varsity reopened in June of 1992 and according to the *Weakley County Press*:

Memories of the smell of popcorn, sweaty palms on a first date and waiting for mom and dad to come pick you up can once again be experienced at the Varsity Theatre in Martin. The theatre has reopened after five years on March 22, 1992 by David Christian, new manager, bringing a touch of nostalgia back to the community. The amazing air conditioning unit had to be replaced since the March 1987 closing, but the warmth of the building remains. Though the opening rings in a new era for the theater, renovations have been limited. The Varsity still has the original screen, swag curtains, and house lights. Besides the air conditioning unit, some plumbing and painting, the main work was giving everything a bath. For the anniversary of the grand opening, Christian ran "It's A Great Feeling" on August 18, 1992, a full 43 years after it first played at the Varsity. Ticket prices on opening night 1949 were: Adults, 40 cents; Children, 14 cents. The late Mr. Paul Lovell, a native of Martin, was the first house manager for the Varsity. There was, and still is, an apartment in the theater that the manager lived in.²⁰

¹⁸ Today only the stage curtain remains.

¹⁹ Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. March 15, 1977 in Book 187 Page 303

²⁰ *Weakley County Press*, March 22, 1992.

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When the theater reopened in 1992, it could seat 450 and the balcony was closed. The theater was only open from June 1 to July 31, 1992. Larger multi-plex theaters were located outside the city and the smaller Varsity did not catch on with the public. The neon sign/lettering was still up but not operating. The Daystar Ministries purchased the Varsity Theatre building from Jaxon Drive-In Theatre, Inc. on May 6, 1996.²¹ The Varsity Theatre was converted into the new home of Daystar Church. In 2004, the church moved to the vacant Martin Junior High School building on McCombs Street and once again the historic theater stood empty. On October 21, 2004, Brian Wray Smith and wife, Candra J. Smith purchased the Varsity Theatre renovating the interior into a physical therapy clinic and fitness center giving the historic theater a facelift and new life.²² The original stage, swag curtains, Art Deco house lights, molding, pilasters, terrazzo floors, and elliptical lobby remain. The front lobby desk was rebuilt to follow where the old concession stand was originally. The floor was leveled in the main hall due to the five-foot slope, but otherwise the original look of the theater has been preserved. The Art Deco lights on the east and west walls and ceiling have been restored and once again shine red in the winter and blue in the summer. The balcony remains and is now the cardio section of the fitness center. The upstairs shower rooms are where the old projection room was located. The original efficiency apartment and original cry room are now office space. Painting, plumbing and electrical renovations were also made to the building. The exterior brick, upper blue field and the name Varsity remain. Renovations to restore the marquee and neon lights are being planned for the near future.

The Varsity Theatre is Martin's most extraordinary example of Art Moderne - Art Deco architecture, located within the locally zoned Martin Historic District and one block in proximity to National Register listed buildings: U.S. Post Office/Weldon Public Library (NR 7/5/96), and the University Street Historic District (NR 7/5/96). The Varsity provides a major local landmark, important both as an architectural statement as well as a gathering place for the community for many decades. The theater retains its character defining design elements, both on the exterior architecture, as well as in its interior design.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**Speight and Hibbs**

Clarence Warren Speight (1903-1979) and James Lacy Hibbs (1905-1985) formed Speight and Hibbs in Clarksville, Tennessee in 1937.²³ Speight was a graduate of Clarksville High School, attended what is now Austin Peay State University, and in 1922 went to the University of Pennsylvania to study architecture, although he never completed his degree. In 1925 he returned to Clarksville and worked with his father's building/architecture company, A.F. Speight and Son.

²¹ Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. May 8, 1996 in Book D348 Pages 426-428.

²² Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. October 21, 2004 in Book D397 Page 134.

²³ Rufus Johnson Associates, <http://rufusjohnsonassociates.com>, accessed February 4, 2010.

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Clarence Speight established his own company, Clarence Speight and Associates by 1934 and in 1936 he hired James Hibbs to work as a draftsman.²⁴

Kentucky native Hibbs studied engineering at the University of Kentucky, graduated from the University of Michigan with a bachelor's degree in architecture in 1930, and did post-graduate work at Washington University in St. Louis in 1932. Hibbs worked in Kentucky until he began working for, and eventually forming a partnership with, Speight

During WWII, Hibbs served in the Army Corps of Engineers and Speight formed a partnership with Henry Clinton Parrent. Hibbs returned to the firm after the war.²⁵ Speight and Hibbs was the architect for Austin Peay State University's post-war master plan. During the 1940s and 1950s, the firm designed and remodeled at least 200 theaters, many of them for the Ruffin company, Cumberland Amusement Company of McMinnville, and Rockwood Amusements, Inc., of Nashville.²⁶ Rufus S. Johnson Jr. of Clarksville joined the company in 1950 and in 1959 Speight, Hibbs, and Johnson was formed. In 1960 the company split up, in 1973 Hibbs retired, and today the company is known as Rufus Johnson Associates.²⁷

In 1941 Speight and Hibbs remodeled the Ruffin Amusement Company's flagship Ruffin Theater (built in 1936-1937, NR 3/26/92) in Covington, Tipton County, into its current Art Deco style. The theater retains its neon marquee, circular motifs in the ticket booth and on the walls of the theater.

Across the state, in 1945 Speight and Hibbs completed the Ritz Theatre (NR 12/4/98 as Ritz Theatre and Hoskins Rexall Drug Store No. 2) in Clinton, Anderson County.²⁸ The Ritz Theatre was an early twentieth century building that was remodeled into a theater. The curved lines and horizontal bands of the façade are similar to the later Varsity Theatre. Other similarities are the central panel with the theater name on it, dual entrances, ticket booth at the edge under the marquee, and circular lobby. The interior of the Ritz has the same swirl motif as the Ruffin Theater. Much like the Varsity Theatre, the Ritz was heralded as a modern theater when it opened and there was a lot of press in the local newspaper.²⁹

After the Varsity Theatre, Speight and Hibbs designed the Crockett Theater in Lawrenceburg, Lawrence County in 1950. This theater is much more Art Deco in design, with glass blocks, vertical brick trim, and vertical neon light details. Inside, the firm's archetypical circular designs are seen throughout. (NR 7/29/97)

²⁴ Robbie Jones, "Tennessee Architecture: Professional Builders and Architects, 1920-1950." Unpublished manuscript, 1988.

²⁵ There was no information available on the name of the firm during WWII.

²⁶ Kimberley Murphy, "Ritz Theatre and Hoskins Rexall Drug Store No. 2" National Register nomination (1998), 15.

²⁷ <http://rufusjohnsonassociates.com/>, accessed February 4, 2010.

²⁸ Architectural renderings of the theater in the local paper show that a one-story addition had been planned with the theater – like the drugstore in Clinton. However, the one-story portion was never built.

²⁹ Murphy, 12.

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Weakley County, TennesseeRuffin Amusement Company

Ruffin Amusement Company was based in Covington, Tipton County. W. (William) F. Ruffin's first theater was in Covington in 1927 when he purchased the older Pleas-U and Palace theaters.³⁰ The Palace Theatre burned and was remodeled into the flagship Ruffin Theater in 1936-1937. With the purchase of the Chickasaw Amusement Company, Ruffin became president of two companies. The companies had the same boards but were run as different entities. Ruffin continued to buy theaters and remodel them into modern Art Deco or Art Moderne buildings. In 1942 he moved both the Chickasaw Amusement Company and Ruffin Amusement Company headquarters to his new Ritz Theatre in Covington. When the Varsity Theatre was built, W.F. Ruffin, Jr. and Annie M. Ruffin, his son and wife, were working for the amusement companies. By 1943 the company had opened thirteen theaters in Tennessee and Kentucky.³¹

Balton and Sons

This company was begun in 1875 by D.F. Balton in Memphis. Now known as Frank Balton and Company, they "began the tradition of signmaking – painting buildings, houses and signs."³² D.F. Balton's son Arthur ran the company until 1929. Most early twentieth century signs in Memphis were done by the Balton company. Among their well-known signs was the first Holiday Inn sign for the original motel in Memphis. The family still runs the company and specializes in electric signs.

Chrysler Airtemp

Walter P. Chrysler had his Chrysler Company engineers design a better air conditioning system when he was having the Chrysler Building erected in 1930. A high speed radial compressor was engineered and the Airtemp Corporation was established in 1934, working first in Detroit and later in Dayton, Ohio. It was the first company to have capacity regulators for air conditioning and to have self contained units. However, it was not the first auto company to offer air conditioning, that was Packard. When a new post war auto plant was designed by Albert Kahn and completed in 1947 it had no windows and was cooled with Airtemp equipment.³³ Eventually becoming a division of Chrysler, Airtemp was sold to Fedders in 1976. (See figure 5.)

³⁰ Gaylon Neil Beasley. *True Tales of Tipton: Historical Accounts of Tipton County, Tennessee* (Covington TN: Tipton County Historical Society, 1981), 71.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² <http://www.fbalton.com>, accessed February 5, 2010.

³³ <http://www.allpar.com/corporate/airtemp.php>, accessed February 11, 2010.

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Verbal Boundary Description and Justification

Warranty Deed State of Tennessee County of Weakley Book D397 Page 134:

Beginning at a stake in the South margin of Oxford Street and at Thomas Taylor's Northeast corner and runs thence east with the South margin of Oxford Street 100 feet to a stake at Dr. M. H. Buckley's northwest corner; thence south with Buckley's west line 250 to a stake; thence west parallel with said Oxford Street 100 feet to a stake at Taylor's southeast corner; thence north with Taylor's east line 250 feet to the beginning. It being Lot No. 180 in the original plat of the City of Martin and a part of the lands that was allotted to me by the Chancery Court of Weakley County, Tennessee, in the division of the lands of my deceased father, J. L. Smith, the same being in the cause of Frank Smith et al, vs. Mrs. Mary E. Smith, et al, Chancery Docket 8, page 12 of said court.

Being the same conveyed to Daystar Ministries, Inc., a Tennessee Corporation, by Deed of Jaxon Drive-In Theatre, Inc., a Tennessee Corporation, dated May 6, 1996, of record in Book D348, Page 426, ROWCT.

Map 72ID, Group D, Parcel 1



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Photographs

Photo by: Vicki Smith
Date: January 2010
Digital image: Tennessee Historical Commission

1. North facade, facing south
2. North facade, Varsity field
3. East elevation, facing west
4. East elevation and marquee, facing west
5. West elevation and marquee, facing east
6. West elevation, alley
7. South elevation, facing north
8. Main entrance, facing south
9. Ticket booth, historic African American entrance, movie poster glass display cases, facing south
10. Ticket booth, terrazzo tile, facing west
11. Main entrance, movie poster glass displays, terrazzo tile, facing east
12. Main entrance, terrazzo tile
13. Main entrance, facing east
14. Main lobby, facing south
15. Main lobby, crown molding, terrazzo floor, facing west
16. Main lobby, facing east
17. Main lobby, terrazzo floor, facing west
18. Interior hall, facing east
19. Interior hall, stairs to balcony
20. Interior hall, cry room, facing west
21. Interior hall, cry room
22. Interior hall, detail of etched glass Exit sign, facing north
23. Interior hall, detail of etched glass Cry Room sign, facing west
24. Interior hall, entrance to new addition physical therapy clinic
25. Physical Therapy clinic new interior addition, facing south
26. Physical Therapy clinic new interior addition, facing east
27. Main theater, stage view, facing north
28. Main theater, facing northwest, showing physical therapy clinic east and south walls and view of balcony
29. Main theater, facing southeast, showing physical therapy clinic
30. Main theater, Art Deco light and crown molding
31. Main theater, pilaster and crown molding
32. Main theater stage
33. Main theater, balcony view, roof of physical therapy clinic, facing south

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- 34. Main theater, balcony, facing southwest
- 35. Main theater, balcony, facing northeast
- 36. Main theater, balcony, stairs to women's shower room, facing northwest
- 37. Balcony stairs from historic African American entrance, facing north
- 38. Balcony level historic African American bathrooms, entrance door to efficiency apartment, facing east
- 39. Balcony level, office space (original efficiency apartment living area), facing east
- 40. Balcony level, laundry room (original efficiency apartment kitchen), facing east
- 41. Balcony level, bathroom (efficiency apartment), facing east

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Figure 1. Undated copy of post card from The Sideline web page.



Figure 2. Undated image of original stage curtains from http://centraltheater.blogspot.com/2007_06_01_archive.html

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Figure 3. Movie Poster of first movie shown at the Varsity Theatre.

Varsity Filled To Capacity Opening Night



Figure 4. Friday, August 25, 1949 Marth Mall and The County Times showing movie crowd on opening day.

