

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

For NPS use only

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

received APR 19 1984

date entered

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

**Substantive Review**

**1. Name**

historic Liberty Theater

and or common Same

**2. Location**

street & number 821 Eighth Avenue

N/A not for publication

city, town Columbus

N/A vicinity of

state Georgia

code 013

county Muscogee

code 215

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	N/A in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: Vacant

**4. Owner of Property**

name William H. Spencer Golden Owlettes, c/o Mrs. Charlotte Frazier, Executive Director

street & number 4545 Kerz Court

city, town Columbus

N/A vicinity of

state Georgia 31903

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Superior Court

street & number Muscogee County Courthouse/Consolidated Government Center

city, town Columbus

state Georgia

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title None

has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date

federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records

city, town

state

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## 7. Description

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**Condition**

excellent  
 good  
 fair

deteriorated  
 ruins  
 unexposed

**Check one**

unaltered  
 altered

**Check one**

original site  
 moved date \_\_\_\_\_

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

The Liberty Theater is a brick theater building with a balcony, stage, and stage loft. The first floor contains a lobby, ticket booth, restrooms, office, seating for 600, and stage. The second floor consists of a balcony and projection area. The interior finishes and craftsmanship are simple. The interior was designed simply for use as a theater. Two sets of double doors give access and egress to the lobby. This area extends across the front of the building, with a depth of twelve feet, and provides access to stairs, office, ticket booth, and restroom. It contains a concession stand between the two sets of doors opening on the aisles of the main auditorium. There is a balcony over one-third of the auditorium.

The woodwork is varnished, the floor is sloping and concrete, and the walls were originally plastered. Original wooden, metal-frame folding seats are in place. The stage remains, while the pulleys and some other stage fittings are gone. The theater is built of solid brick construction with a wooden-and-steel beam roof. It contains original and replacement electrical wiring, fixtures, fans, and plumbing. A 1950-period water-cooled air-conditioning system is in place.

The theater occupies the entire property to the front and side boundaries with approximately fifty feet of open space at the rear of the lot. The terrain is flat and was extensively filled at the time the theater was constructed. It is located in a mixed commercial/residential area that has historically been a black section of the city. There are no outbuildings.

Changes to the structure stem from major remodeling in 1955 when the tile, plastic and glass front facade was attached over the original, ornamental brick front and alterations were made to the lobby. A new and larger marquee was added and the original one removed. Windows were closed, the front doors were changed, and the lobby was remodeled. Walls on the interior were hung with acoustical fabric.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1925 **Builder/Architect** Unknown

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Liberty Theater is significant in the history of music and theater. In music, the theater is significant for the role it played during the peak of the jazz and blues era. It was built at a time when these musical forms were at the height of their popularity, particularly with the black audiences that came to the Liberty. Of special importance were the frequent performances of "Ma" Rainey (1886-1939), a Columbus native who became the "Mother of the Blues." It was the major place in Columbus for black audiences to partake of these and other cultural performances. In theater history, it is significant for having been built as a theater for blacks by the Martin Theater chain. It was Columbus' first black theater and featured films--silent and then talkies--as well as stage and musical productions. As late as 1955, it was the regional chain's only black theater.

These areas of significance support property eligibility under National Register criteria A and B.

### Historical Narrative

When the Liberty Theater opened in Columbus by late April, 1925, it was a significant event on several counts. Most importantly, it was one of the few theaters in Georgia built solely for black people to attend. Other motion-picture and live theater houses had existed for some time, with some opera houses being converted to motion-picture houses, but few other communities had a theater solely for black people. Roy E. Martin, a prominent white businessman, owned the theater chain. The theater was also important for having the largest seating capacity of any motion-picture theater in Columbus at that time. This designation did not last long, for in April, 1928, Mr. Martin opened the Royal Theater in Columbus, which seated 2,800.

The motivation behind the building of the Liberty is not certain. Some believe that white citizens in Columbus who loved the performing arts felt strongly that blacks should have a place of their own; others believe it was primarily a business opportunity for the fast-growing Martin Theater chain. The local newspapers in 1924 show local emphasis on new recreation places and a need for entertainment for black soldiers (Fort Benning, a major Army base, being located nearby).

Roy E. Martin (1885-1948), a native of nearby Harris County, purchased his first theater in 1912 and built his first new one in 1914, both in Columbus. By

[continued]

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet.

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Columbus, Georgia-Alabama

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A	<u>16</u>	<u>681961010</u>	<u>31591321210</u>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
C			
E			
G			

B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing
D			
F			
H			

## Verbal boundary description and justification

The nominated property is Lot 9, which is the theater lot today and the same lot purchased for the theater in 1924. It is marked on the enclosed plat.

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

state	N/A	code	county	code
state		code	county	code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., Historian  
 organization Historic Preservation Section  
Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources date March 26, 1984  
 street & number 270 Washington Street, S.W. telephone (404) 656-2840  
 city or town Atlanta state Georgia 30334

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature Elizabeth A. Lyon  
 title State Historic Preservation Officer date 4/5/84

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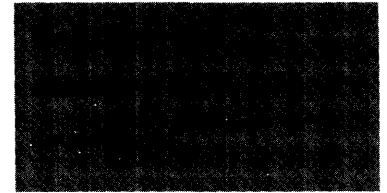
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

William D. Smith date 6/22/1984  
 Keeper of the National Register

Attest: \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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Continuation sheet    Significance

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1928, he owned nine theaters in Columbus and nearby Phenix City, Alabama, in addition to the Liberty, and the chain rapidly spread to surrounding states. Martin Theaters is still in business in the Southeast.

The Liberty was not just a movie house for blacks but was the only local place they had for entertainment and cultural activities outside of church, school and fraternal facilities. The productions there were an inspiration for young blacks, one of the few positive influences they received in a largely segregated world.

The theater was begun in 1924 in a predominately black section of Columbus. The site of the Liberty was residential until immediately before the project began, even though the land had been purchased for the theater in 1920. The architect Mr. Martin used for a proposed theater begun in 1923, and for the Royal, completed in 1928, was T. Firth Lockwood (1894-1963) of Columbus. It is reasonable to assume that Mr. Martin used Lockwood for the Liberty, although no evidence has been discovered to substantiate this attribution. Lockwood designed buildings of all types, including private homes, schools, churches and libraries, and he worked in Columbus and the southwest Georgia region. Interviews have established that Jim Ingersoll and family of Phenix City, Alabama, did the grading and landscaping of the site.

When the theater opened, there was no inside concession, food being obtained from the adjacent cafe which had a connecting opening to the theater. Later, a concession was added inside. In 1927, cost for a movie at the Liberty and other local theaters was 5¢ for the balcony and 10¢ for the orchestra. After the theater opened, some seats were reserved for white citizens.

In its hey-day, the Liberty saw many important black figures in the entertainment world. Primary among these was "Ma" Rainey, a Columbus native who performed here on many occasions while known as "Mother of the Blues." At least once, she had Bessie Smith, another great blues singer, with her. Marian Anderson is said to have played here in 1925-26, as well as the famous Whitman Sisters. The Marching Club of the Elks sponsored most of the big bands of the times, including Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald singing with the Chick Webb Band, and others. It is not known if they performed at the Liberty, but they were part of the black cultural activities represented by the Liberty.

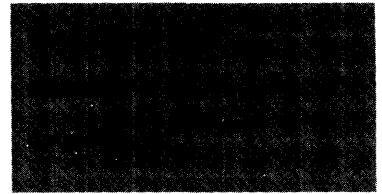
Before the first talkies began to appear after 1927, the silent movies were accompanied by local musicians. The theater was also, as mentioned, a multi-purpose facility, being the scene of many revues, minstrel shows, vaudeville acts, and other types of live entertainment. It also hosted dramatic readings and poetry readings.

A local band, sponsored by the International Benevolent Society, often played at the Liberty. Occasionally, there would be an inspirational speech,

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Continuation sheet

Significance

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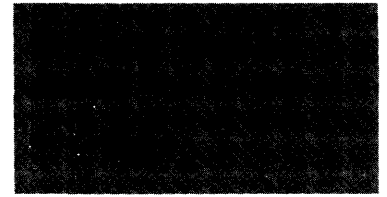
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like the time baseball star Jackie Robinson spoke, challenging young blacks to succeed at their chosen fields.

From World War II until the theater closed in 1973, it functioned mostly as a movie house. The theater closed after integration opened all other local theaters to all people. There was then no longer a need for an all-black theater. After it closed in 1973, it was retained by the Martins until December, 1980, when it was transferred to the present owners, who hope to reopen it as a facility for the young of the area to participate in the performing arts, once again bringing the Liberty back to its original use as a cultural center for the black community.

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Continuation sheet

Bibliography

Item number 9

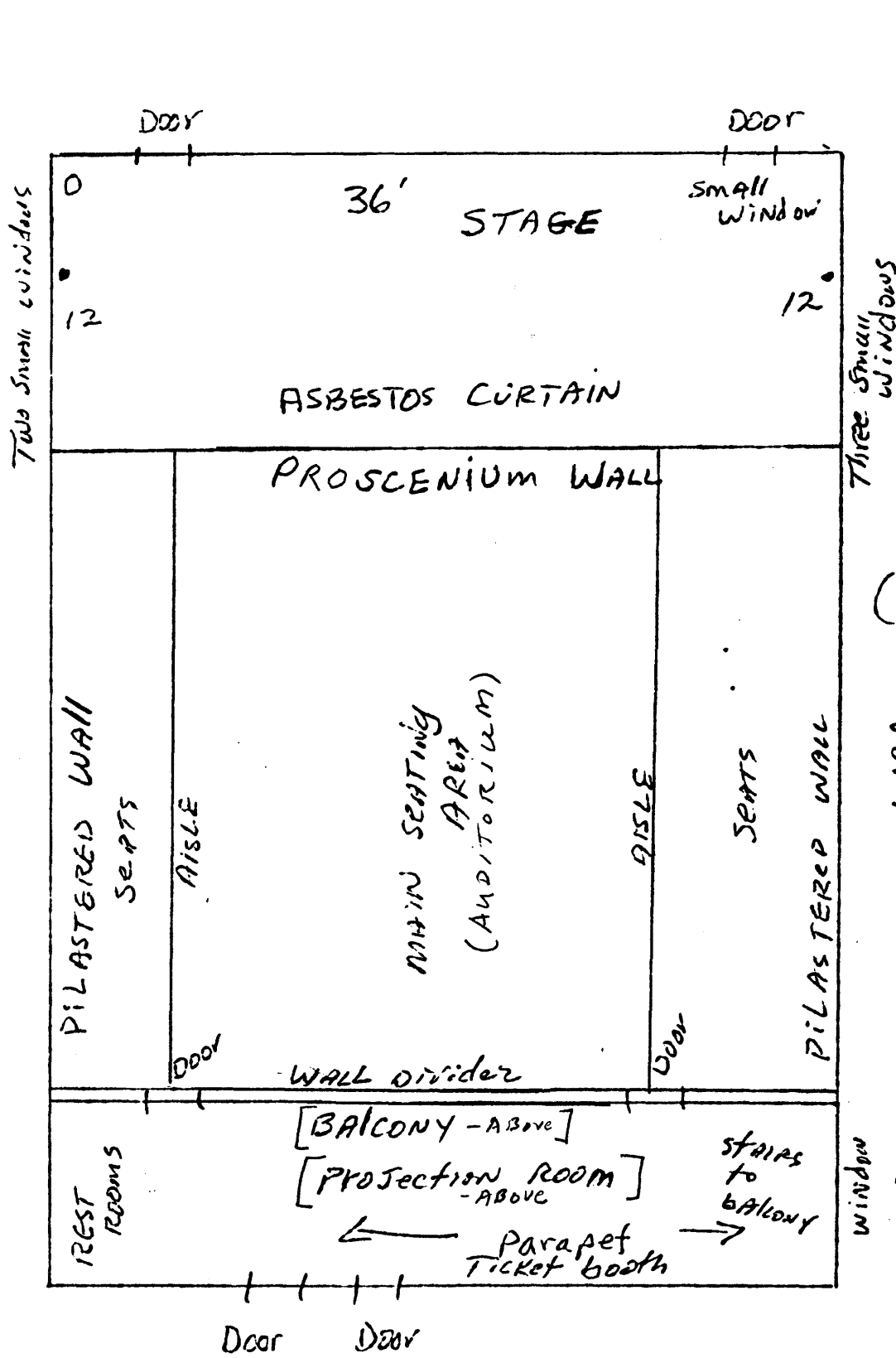
Page 2

Smith, Eugene. "A History of the Liberty Theatre in Columbus, Georgia (1924-1982)." Class paper, August, 1982. Copies on file at Historic Preservation Section.

Mahan, Joseph B., Jr. "Liberty Theater," Historic Property Information Form, April 5, 1983. On file at the Historic Preservation Section, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Atlanta, Georgia.

"\$30,000 Theater for Negroes," The Industrial Index, April 29, 1925, p. 24-C.

"Chains Only Colored House Remodeled," Martin Tipster, August, 1955.



Interior of Liberty Theatre  
(Not to scale)

SANBORN Insurance Co  
MAP of Columbus, GA

New Index  
1925

SEATING CAPACITY  
540

LIBERTY THEATER  
Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia

FLOOR PLAN

Scale: Not to scale

Source: Drawing based on Sanborn Insurance Map, 1925

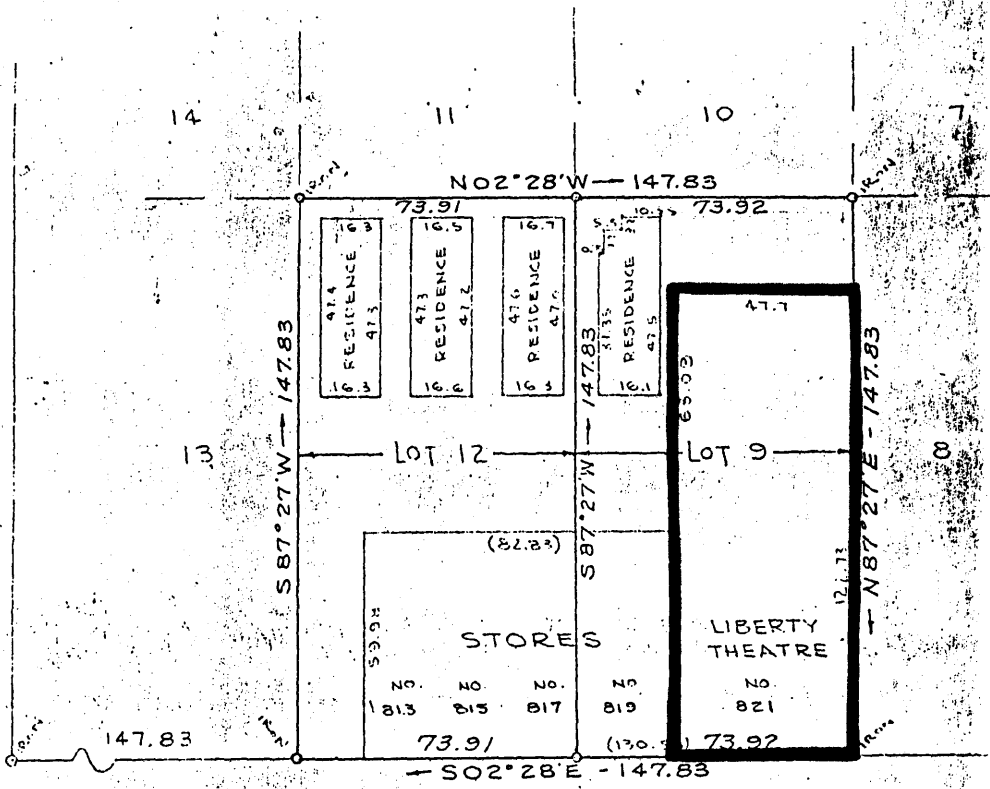
Date: Drawn in 1983

Key: Areas of the theater are marked on the map. This shows only the first floor. The only elements on the second floor are the balcony and projection room, the location of which is shown in brackets.

8th AVE



8TH STREET 99'



8th Avenue 99'

LIBERTY THEATER  
 Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia  
 PROPERTY/SKETCH MAP

Scale: 1" = 40'  
 Source: Aldridge, Moon and Associates, CE  
 Date: 1965  
 Key: The nominated property is marked by a heavy black line and consists of the theater itself.



In my opinion this plat is a correct representation of the land platted and has been prepared in conformity with the minimum standards and requirements of law.

*A. B. Moon, Jr.*  
 A. B. MOON, JR., R. L. S.  
 GEORGIA NO. 762



Lots 9 and 12, Block 38  
 Commons  
 Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia

TO ALL PARTIES INTERESTED IN TITLE TO PREMISES SURVEYED  
 I hereby certify that this is a true and correct survey, the improvements are as shown, and that there are no encroachments except as shown.

Revised 30 August 1965  
 Date 12 August 1965

ALDRIDGE, MOON & ASSOCIATES  
 CIVIL ENGINEERS COLUMBUS, GEORGIA  
 GEORGIA REG. 1662 & 3224  
 ALABAMA REG. 1192 & 1927

LIBERTY COLUMBUS