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HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

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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 any 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 Crescent Theatre
other names/site number Sussex Theatre, Sussex Community Center

2. Location

street & number 74 Main Street not for publication
city or town Borough of Sussex vicinity
state New Jersey code NJ county Sussex code 037 zip code 07461

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] 7/22/05
Signature of certifying official Date

John S. Watson, Jr., Assistant Commissioner Natural & Historic Resources/DSHPO
State or Federal Agency or Tribal government

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

Signature of commenting official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:
 entered in the National Register [Signature] 9.7.05
 See continuation sheet. Signature of the Keeper Date of Action
 determined eligible for the National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined not eligible for the National Register
 removed from the National Register
 other (explain): _____

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

Contributing

Noncontributing

1

1

buildings
sites
structures
objects
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 & CULTURE/Theater

SOCIAL/Meeting Hall

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/Theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls brick

roof asphalt shingle; rubber

other

Narrative Description

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

See 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

(Mark "X" in all the 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 a 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

Period of Significance

1917 – 1940

Significant Dates

1917, 1929

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Flavio P. Grosso, Architect; Giles, Giles & Co., Contractor

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of Repository:

Rutgers Special Collections

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CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Description**

Section 7 Page 1

Summary

Crescent Theatre is located in the Borough of Sussex, in Sussex County, New Jersey. The theater stands at 74 Main Street, on the southeast side of the street, on a small public plaza known as Fountain Square. The building is located at the front of the lot, with an open park area to the south of the theater. The context for Crescent Theatre is primarily commercial, as it lies within the Sussex Borough Central Business Historic District.¹

The theater opened in 1917 to serve as a movie house and performance space for the Borough of Sussex (incorporated in 1901). The building exterior features red brick with limestone accents. Except for two original rounded-arch windows on the mezzanine level, original sills and fittings now house unsympathetic replacement windows. The shallow, front-gabled roof is asphalt shingle with rolled rubber, and it is concealed from view by the building's brick and stone parapet with glazed terracotta coping.

Originally, the building consisted of an unfinished basement, a ground floor, a mezzanine level that led to the balcony, and an unfinished attic area. Circa 1985-88, the balcony floor was extended to create a completely distinct second level. During the same renovations, the raked first floor seating area was leveled off and covered with vinyl commercial tile.

Besides original painted plaster work kept visible in one small area on the balcony level, the majority of the original interior has experienced unsympathetic, yet reversible modifications. To accommodate the functions of the occupants since the theater ceased operations in 1976, in addition to the major changes already mentioned, partitions have been erected, offices created, flooring covered, and the entire performance space has been covered in acoustic panels. Throughout the building, spaces have been parceled to maximize office, reception, performance, work, rehearsal, and storage space to accommodate the needs of the current tenant.

Crescent Theatre was designed as a Beaux Arts-influenced vernacular building, with very limited stylistic features on the exterior. Ocular windows on the second level, rounded-arch windows on the mezzanine level, and bilateral symmetry both on the exterior and in the original floor plans owe a distinct debt to the program of civic and public architecture emphasized by the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris. As a major building at a main intersection in a very small town, Crescent Theatre was guaranteed a prominence of place and a local stature. Yet as a new venture with a limited geographical marketing area, owned and managed by two local businessmen, the theater also maintained a continuity of scale and stylistic restraint within its commercial neighborhood. Thus the combination of Classical detailing with vernacular form reflects its physical, geographical and historic context.

¹ SHPO Opinion rendered March 6, 1995, ID #3467.

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EXTERIOR

Crescent Theatre is located on the southeast side of Main Street, facing northwest. The building is approximately 47' high to its highest point on the façade, and as it is built on grade, the foundation is not visible from the exterior. The foundation, visible in the basement, is stone. Exterior walls are red brick and limestone. Limestone is used on two horizontal accent elements on the first floor on the northwest elevation, on the northwest elevation's parapet, and on sills throughout the exterior. Excepting the two rounded-arch windows on the mezzanine level, existing windows throughout the building are replacement, installed in wood-framed masonry openings, many of which appear to be original. Openings on the mezzanine and upper levels feature decorative brick surrounds. The shallow, front-gabled roof is asphalt shingle, but as the roof flattens out, it is covered in rolled rubber. The parapet is limestone with glazed terracotta coping on all sides but the façade.

Additions to the exterior include the porches on the southwest and southeast elevations, added in the late 1980s, that give access to the upper level of the theater and its parking area on the raised lot behind the theater. The other major change to the exterior is the main entry on the northwest façade, which was originally a paired set of glass storefront doors with limestone at the base. The entry now features concrete and wood trim painted white, and the original limestone base is nearly completely covered with a sidewalk installed to comply with ADA regulations. Numerous openings throughout the building have been bricked in, while others have been created in order to provide adequate access to the newly configured interior spaces, and to comply with fire safety regulations.

Northwest Elevation (Photos 1 – 2)

The front (northwest) façade, approximately 42 feet long, is divided in a tripartite manner, with a central bay flanked by a sets of openings on either side. Brickwork along the perimeter of each bay emphasizes the division. Each side bay has two windows on the first level, a rounded-arch window on the mezzanine level, and an ocular window on the upper level. The ocular windows are currently covered with plywood. An early photo shows the ocular windows with 3 x 3 panes. The center bay features the main entrance, comprising two storefront doors with full-size sidelights. The mezzanine level has a central paired set of windows flanked by a single window on either side. Three upper-level windows are centered in the bay, with a vent directly above each window near the roof. Three metal hoods and decorative surrounds are visible on this elevation above the mezzanine level in the center bay, remnants of the 1930s-era marquee.

Southwest Elevation (Photos 3 – 4)

The southwest elevation is approximately 92 feet long and is divided into five bays. The length of the building now borders a small park, formerly the site of a small office building. Several openings on the first, mezzanine, and second levels have been bricked in to accommodate the ADA-compliant access and upper-level metal and concrete portico leading to the theater's parking lot, along with the added metal roofing covering the portico. On the first level towards the rear of the building, there is a set of metal and glass doors that lead directly into the elevator lobby for handicap access. Directly above the

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doors on the original mezzanine level, a similar set of doors provides access to the current backstage area. All other openings on this elevation besides the two sets of doors have been bricked in.

The easternmost bay on the elevation accommodates the fly loft of the theater, so it extends upward an extra half-story. Original openings on this level have also been bricked in. This bay also features exposed stacked stone on the first level, where the brick building meets the steep incline of the hill.

Concrete steps leading up to the first floor from the park and from a gazebo in the park are modern.

Southeast Elevation (Photo 5)

The southeast elevation is the back of the building, notably much more difficult to assess, given the building's situation with regard to the steep hill it abuts at this elevation. The only openings on this elevation are two sets of metal double-doors, one on the original mezzanine level, one providing access to the fly loft area. The concrete and metal portico opens to a porch at the fly loft level, which is covered by metal roofing. The walkway continues to the parking lot. There are three brick buttresses extending to the height of the fly loft, capped with concrete.

Northeast Elevation

The northeast elevation is separated from the original *Sussex Independent* offices by a narrow gangway, approximately four feet wide. Openings on this elevation have also been bricked in, including a single entry door on the first level. Above the former door, an air conditioner has been installed. Remnants of a metal catwalk are still attached to the building at the mezzanine level on this side. The catwalk extended from an opening that has also been closed off.

INTERIOR

Basement (Photo 6)

The footprint of the basement is L-shaped, occupying approximately one-quarter of the entire building. The basement consists of two rooms: a large storage room and the boiler room, with a small adjacent room holding plumbing equipment. The basement is unfinished, consisting of concrete floors, exposed rubble on exterior walls and exposed brick walls on interior walls. The ceilings are concrete, with formwork pattern visible. The storage room door appears to be original, an unfinished wood plank door. The boiler room door is hollow metal, with shop prime finish only.

There are two wood awning windows located in the storage room, both in a four-pane configuration. Both windows are filled in from the exterior side, now below grade because of improvements done to accommodate the ramp and park area. There are two openings in the boiler room, one of which is blocked. This room was probably used as coal storage area, with this opening used as a coal chute. The other opening is currently used as ventilation to the exterior.

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There is an L-shaped concrete stair between the basement and the first floor. A wood storage box for the marquee letters sits on a low wall adjacent to the stairs, with letters still stored inside. The door to the first floor is a four-panel wood door. A door opening to the exterior has been infilled with concrete block on the interior and brick on the exterior. The stone lintel above the former opening remains intact.

First Floor (Photo 7)

The first floor consists of the main lobby, ticket area, men's and women's restrooms, concession area, office, black box rehearsal space, mechanical room, wardrobe area, dressing room/kitchenette, elevator machine room, elevator lobby, and rear exit. The electrical room is the only unfinished space.

Overall, the flooring is vinyl composite tile, with the exception of the ticket area and adjacent closet, which feature ceramic tile, perhaps indicating the location of an original bathroom. Historic newspaper articles note that the theater featured ladies and gents retiring rooms near the entrance. Sources indicate the original first floor was three feet lower than the existing floor. If true, the floor in the back rooms such as the wardrobe and dressing room could be the elevation of the original stage. This information could not be verified at the time of this survey without significant demolition and removal of the existing floor. A trap door exists in the dressing room floor, which opened to a shallow crawl space.

Walls are typically gypsum board with vinyl base, non-original, added to accommodate the needs of the building.

Ceilings in the front of the building, consisting of the lobby/concession area/toilet rooms, are acoustic tile ceiling with metal grids. Above the metal grid, plaster ceilings are still intact. The underside of the balcony stairs and seating, with concrete and wood framing, is visible above the concession ceiling. Evidence of the original balcony also remains above the black box rehearsal space. Although barely visible under a layer of black paint, recessed plaster panels indicate the decorative scheme on the underside of the original balcony. The rest of the first floor ceilings are gypsum board.

The set of stairs, closed off after the installation of the restrooms, was reviewed through an access door in the men's restroom. Plaster walls were visible, showing an artex treatment, which is a textured, painted finish. Walls were furred over with V-groove wallboard. A pressed board wainscot, often documented the brand name "Beaver Board," remains in the stairwell. Both the wallboards and pressed board wainscot are also found on the mezzanine level.

The front entrance consists of paired aluminum and glass storefront doors, not original to the building. All other doors on this floor, either flush doors or with vision panels, are also not original.

Windows are double-hung, wood replacement with applied mullions. Light fixtures are fluorescent downlights with several individual spotlights added to the ceiling of the rehearsal space. There are two elevators installed in the building, one that is currently functional.

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**Crescent Theatre
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Mezzanine Level (Photo 8)

Originally, both sets of stairs from the lobby led up to the mezzanine level. The western stair is no longer accessible, with the construction of the men's restroom. The east stairs are painted concrete with rubber treads.

The mezzanine level now consists of an office and two closets. A low pile carpet runs the length of the public mezzanine area, as the closets are both unfinished. Walls are V-groove wallboard with a pressed board wainscot. The ceiling is painted acoustic panels adhered to the floor framing above. Windows are double-hung, wood replacement with applied mullions, painted.

The office space is located beneath the balcony risers, fitted out with gypsum board.

Second Floor (Photos 9 – 12)

The second floor level was added in 1985-89 to accommodate the activities of the Sussex Community Center. This floor addition bisected the main house horizontally, taking the balcony floor level as its elevation height. In doing so, the head of the proscenium arch is now approximately 5'-10" high off the floor.

The auditorium area is comprised of tiered concrete steps, the former balcony steps, covered with vinyl composition tile and plywood. Several of the tiers have been widened to increase legroom. A pipe rail is used as the front railing and is original to the balcony. Bi-level platforms were added to create the "thrust stage," allowing for two rows of seats on either side of the stage. The theater's original proscenium sits behind where stage scenery is now located.

The walls are covered with acoustic panels, installed in the 1930s. An area preserved behind glass displays a stenciled pattern on the plaster wall. A wainscot of pressed board indicates the edge of the original balcony.

The seats are replacement, salvaged theater seats. The original number of seats was reported to be 500 in the main house, with 100 in the balcony. The current total number of seats is 102, with one area reserved for wheelchair use. The seating currently shows 20" center-to-center of each armrest; previous holes in the floor indicate the previous seating was 17" center-to-center. Newspaper sources indicate new seats were installed throughout the theater in 1929.

The ceiling is plaster. It is difficult to note if there was any decorative ornamentation originally, as the ceiling has been heavily painted in a dark plum color.

At the rear of the house, the original projection room is flanked by a lighting/electrical storage room and the dimmer room (allocated as such by the current tenant, a theater company). To provide the 100 seats in the balcony historic sources mention, it is assumed that these two rooms were not in the original plan, and were used as part of the balcony seating area.

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The projection room appears to have been two rooms at one time. Evidence of a wall that subdivided the room into two is noted on the ceiling. The second room may have been used either for storage or as a toilet room, as other theaters of this period had toilet rooms available for the projectionist's use. The projection room is currently furnished with controls for the theater, including sound and lighting. Both walls and ceiling are plaster, with exposed metal lath visible. Rectangular portholes into the auditorium remain and are still used. Gravity shutters, used to close off the projection room for fire protection, also remain in place.

The dimmer room is an unfinished space, with the exception of some painted treads. There are lighting control panels and speakers stored in this room. The exterior walls have remnants of plaster and metal lath. The interior walls facing the auditorium are wood framed partitions. An original seating aisle is still visible in the room, along with a now-sealed round duct.

The lighting/electrical storage area is a larger space, but has the same configuration as the dimmer room. A large pipe, installed floor-to-ceiling, services the roof. An original ceiling-mounted light fixture for the auditorium is stored in this room.

Two large exhaust fans remain in the side windows of the theater. Two large round pivot windows, approximately 34" in diameter, have been removed and the openings to the exterior boarded up. However, the window trim and hardware remain in place. Later photographs show wood vents installed, although they have since been removed.

The backstage area is unfinished, with exposed brick walls and plywood flooring. This area is currently used as a workshop area. There are few light fixtures in the backstage area, fly loft, and rear exit lobby. Any fixtures present are mainly utility, and muted to throw minimal light.

A single flush hollow metal door is found in the southeast corner, which opens to the rear of the building. There are no windows open to the backstage; all have been filled in over the years.

The elevator lobby and rear exit lobby have minimal finishes (paint on shaft enclosure, with painted plywood floor).

A lofted space above the backstage area is currently utilized for prop storage. A modern set of open wood stairs leads up to the rear of the elevator shaft, for equipment access. A pair of flush hollow metal doors is located in the east corner, which open to the exterior walkway landing to the parking lot.

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**Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Statement of Significance**

Section 8 Page 1

Summary

Sussex Borough's Crescent Theatre, built in 1917, exemplifies an early phase of movie house design in the U.S. Built in rural Sussex County, the theater helped define the thriving commercial district in the county's most densely populated area. Local businessmen owned Crescent Theatre for the first several decades of its operation before it was sold to a national chain, thus it also serves as a model for how independent theaters fared in the oftentimes contentious relationship between Hollywood production companies, distributors, and small movie houses. The life of Crescent Theatre reflects the life of the independent theater in America: established when film technology was just becoming a mass-audience attraction; reaching a pinnacle with the introduction of sound in movies; struggling through the economic devastation of the Great Depression, the competition brought about by television and the exodus of businesses from downtown business districts; and then rebounding to reclaim the historical context and financial advantages the main street movie house began to provide in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The history of Crescent Theatre encompasses both the economic growth and downturn of Sussex Borough, illustrating the progress and struggles of the downtown area, an evolution experienced by downtown districts across the country. In addition, Crescent Theatre is a distinctive example of the small-town, independent theater that initially helped propagate the film-going experience to mainstream America. Built concurrent with the many well known and fabled movie palaces in larger urban areas, the theater tells another side of the story of early, perhaps lesser-known, movie houses. Thus Crescent Theatre is an integral element in the historic fabric of Sussex Borough, Sussex County, and the State of New Jersey.

Building History

According to his obituary, Dexter S. Goble was born in Sparta, New Jersey in 1864, and he worked on railroads in Newark and Paterson in the early phase of his working life. After running the Central Hotel in Sparta beginning in 1889, he moved to Sussex Borough and purchased the DeCamp Hotel in 1892. He renamed it the Goble Inn and operated it until circa 1915. At that time, he joined in a partnership venture with Hamburg, New Jersey resident Clarence Smith to own and operate Crescent Theatre.¹ According to the *Sussex Independent*, which was located next door to the lot on which the theater would be built, Clarence Smith purchased the vacant lot on Fountain Square on July 12, 1916. The lot had been a part of the Moses C. Ayers estate, Ayers having owned and operated a butcher shop on the premises at the turn of century. The partnership's intentions were already publicly known, as the July 14, 1916 article, written just two days after the purchase was finalized, went on to give a detailed description of the proposed theater:

The building will be approximately 42x80 with frontage on Fountain Square, entrance level with the ground, a ten-foot lobby, all concreted, a modern box office, with ladies and gents retiring rooms, a balcony over the front entrance,

¹ Dexter S. Goble Obituary in *New Jersey Herald* dated 20 March 2 1941.

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seating 100 persons...The floor will be declining towards the stage. The finish will be in white. There will be five exits, opening directly upon the ground, besides the stage and front entrances. The entire front of the building will be of brick, and will be of a handsome architectural design...As now planned, there will be a seating capacity of 500 in the main auditorium, with 100 in the balcony...The power and lighting will be electric, operating fans and the direct current used in the booth for film work.²

When the Crescent Theatre Company became incorporated in October 1916, the authorized capital stock was \$50,000. Of this sum, Dexter Goble and Clarence Smith invested \$5,900 each, and their wives, Eva and Anna, respectively, invested \$100 each.

Ambitious initial plans called for the theater to open in spring 1917, but weather delays, difficulty in excavating the lot, and late deliveries of building materials forced the opening back to July 1917. The building contract was awarded to Giles, Giles and Company of Middletown, New Jersey.³ When it reported the awarding of the contract, the *Sussex Independent* named the architect as "Bassert of Paterson."⁴ No information was found on this architect. Later newspaper reports, although spelling his name a number of ways, list Flavio B. Grosso of Paterson as the theater's architect.⁵

Cinema architecture in the World War I period, while still a relatively new class of building, was nonetheless distinctive, especially in a community the size of Sussex.⁶ Between 1914 and 1922, more than 4,000 cinemas were built throughout the U.S.⁷ Many of the movie houses were restrained in style and ornament, like Crescent Theatre, built within the confines of pre-existing downtown areas, whether in large cities or small towns. The large movie palaces often associated with the early cinema era were, at this point in time, the exception rather than the rule. But, as theater historian Kathryn H. Fuller states, while there was an increase in the number of upscale small-town theaters being built in the 1910s and

² "New Theatre for Sussex" in *Sussex Independent* dated 14 July 1916, p. 1.

³ Presumably, as the architects were reported to be from Paterson, Giles, Giles and Company were located in Middletown, New Jersey, not Middletown, New York.

⁴ "Theatre Contract Awarded," in *Sussex Independent* dated 1 Dec 1916, p. 1.

⁵ 1928 newspaper items detailing the sale of the theater list Grosso as Flavio P. Grosso and Flavis Gross. According to Robert Craig of the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Grosso appears in the lists of licensed architects in New Jersey beginning in 1912. Listings in 1912, 1914 and 1916 have his address in the Silk City Trust Building in Paterson, and a listing in both 1920 and 1927 gives his address as The U.S. Trust Building, 126 Market Street, Rooms 607 & 608 in Paterson. No further information about Grosso has been discovered to date.

⁶ In 1920, Sussex Borough had a population of 1,318, according to the U.S. Census. Sussex County had a population numbering 24,905. By most standards, Sussex Borough would qualify as a small town, it is important to keep in mind that at this time, the borough had the highest population density in the county.

⁷ James Forsher, *The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown*, Westport, CT; London: Praeger, 2003, p. 38.

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Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
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1920s, the “big-city picture palaces got all the publicity and attention.”⁸ The first movie palace was built in 1913 in New York, just a few years before Crescent Theatre. For the Borough of Sussex, however, the planned 600-seat theater was large enough to qualify as a palace in size, if not in ornament.

Crescent Theatre opened with much fanfare on Tuesday, July 24, 1917. Newspaper reports indicate that there were nearly 800 people in attendance, despite advertisements stating that no more than 600 tickets would be sold.⁹ The overflow attendees were seated in camp chairs in the aisles and around the stage. In addition to the photo-play of “Miss George Washington,” opening night events included a performance by the 14-piece Sussex Orchestra and vocal solos by three local women. Harold B. Franklin accurately puts the role of small-town theaters like Crescent Theatre in context:

In the smaller town the local theater often houses the motion picture as well as the vaudeville, legitimate, or concert attractions, playing each for a day or two, according to bookings. A community of this size is willing and able to patronize a variety of amusements, but is not large enough to support a run of any continuance. The theater therefore is a kind of cross-section of the world of entertainment...¹⁰

For the next 11 years, Crescent Theatre showed films and held performances on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights. The pre-existing Sussex Theatre, which was housed in Hornbeck Hall (built 1876) across Main Street, presented similar entertainment on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. A bargain was struck by the competing businesses to alternate showings during the week when fewer people were likely to attend, but both presented programs on Saturday night.

Goble and Smith sold the theater in 1928 to The Crescent Theatre Company.¹¹ Karl T. Mitchell, of Otisville, New York became the new proprietor at this time. According to a news item discussing the changeover, “Mr. Mitchell will take over the business here April 16 [1928], at which time some improvements and changes will be commenced, and gradually completed. In time Mr. Mitchell proposes to open the theatre every night, with high-class screen production.”¹²

One change Mitchell made soon after taking over the Crescent Theatre was to change its name. An advertisement for upcoming shows in August 1928 included the line: “Note that the management has changed the theatre name, now to be known as Sussex Theatre instead of Crescent Theatre.”¹³ As noted, when the Crescent Theatre first opened in 1917, the auditorium space across the street in Hornbeck Hall,

⁸ Kathryn H. Fuller, “‘You Can Have the Strand in Your Own Town’: The Struggle between Urban and Small-Town Exhibition in the Picture Palace Era,” in *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996, p. 98.

⁹ Display advertisement in *Sussex Independent* dated 13 July 1917.

¹⁰ Harold B. Franklin, *Motion Picture Management* (1928), as excerpted in *Moviegoing in America*, edited by Gregory A. Waller, Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002, p. 117.

¹¹ Deed. Doc. No. 39003 lists Dexter Goble and wife Eva as owners of the land and building.

¹² “Crescent Theatre Soon Changes Hands” in *Sussex Independent* dated 16 March 1928, p. 1.

¹³ Display advertisement in *Sussex Independent* dated 31 August 1929.

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also showing photo-plays, play productions and vaudeville acts, was named "Sussex Theatre." It remains unclear what prompted the name change, but certainly the original commercial enterprise known as the Sussex Theatre was no longer in operation. It is likely that, as Mitchell was concerned with increased customer service and marketing, including the theater's location in its name would add to the ease in finding it and more closely associate it with the Borough of Sussex.¹⁴ By 1928, there were a number of theaters in neighboring communities with which Crescent Theatre had to compete for patrons, including the Newton Theatre (Newton, NJ) and the Franklin Theatre (Franklin, NJ).

As a major element of his improvements to the theater, Mitchell announced in March 1929 that necessary technical installations were complete and the Sussex Theatre would show the sound and talking picture "The Jazz Singer" on Sunday, March 24, 1929. According to the *Sussex Independent*, the Sussex Theatre was the "first in Sussex County to install this latest invention which is of the Vitaphone type."¹⁵ While the movie originally premiered in New York City on October 6, 1927, it had yet to reach many of the small-town markets in America. Another change to the Sussex Theatre announced by Mitchell in March 1929 was that new, softer seats would be installed throughout the building. It was also under Mitchell's ownership that the theater began showing movies on Sundays, a key development in the entertainment industry that was not without its detractors, namely religious leaders across the county.

Sources indicate the theater changed hands several times, including the June 1929 purchase by James Sarro and Joseph M. Smith. It is unknown whether Smith was any relation to one of the original partners, Clarence Smith. In 1931, theater was again sold to a local realty company, Essaness Realty Company, which leased it to a Lee Shafer, who had been the theater operator during its ownership under Sarro and Smith.¹⁶ Later owners include the St. Cloud Amusement Company, and the Brandt Theatres chain.

An art deco marquee was added to the façade of the building in the early 1930s. Theater historian James Forsher notes that many theaters in the early 1930s added marquees to accommodate the new drive-by traffic created with the proliferation of automobile travel and ownership.¹⁷ The marquee has since been removed, with historic photos showing it *in situ* as late as 1976.

Building Use Post-1976

Sussex Theatre closed in 1976 and remained vacant until the Borough of Sussex purchased the building in 1980. Using a \$200,000 grant to purchase and renovate the theater, the borough reopened the building as the Sussex Community Center, a facility for senior citizens' and community events. At this time, the balcony level was extended to create a full second floor and the original orchestra floor on the

¹⁴ According to the *Sussex Independent*, Mitchell had numerous changes he wanted to make to the Sussex Theatre, in order to have it "measure up to his idea of what a country motion picture house should be." (22 March 1929, p. 1.)

¹⁵ "Talking Pictures Here" in *Sussex Independent* dated 22 March, 1929, p. 1.

¹⁶ "Sussex Theatre Sold" and "Theatre Is Leased" in *Sussex Independent*, both dated 24 April 1931, p. 1.

¹⁷ Forsher, p. 65.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Statement of Significance**

Section 8 Page 5

first story was filled in and leveled off. The community continued to occupy the center until 2001, when major repairs necessitated closing the building. Sussex Borough owns the property currently, and leases it to the Tri-State Actors Theater, which has used it as their live performance space since 2002. The lease extends for 25 years.

Architectural Context – Small-Town Theaters

With the skyrocketing interest in motion pictures generated by the 1893 Chicago and 1904 St. Louis World's Fairs, movie houses were built across the country at an incredibly rapid rate. By May 1907, there were between 2,500 and 3,000 five-cent theaters ("nickelodeons") in the U.S.¹⁸ Nickelodeons originally showed the same film, often travel-related, for weeks at a time. Entrepreneurs like Adolph Zukor, however, recognized that if consumers were willing to pay \$1.50 to sit in the orchestra at a play, he could probably charge more than five cents admission, provided the entertainment value increased as well. The current short-form movie would not likely support such a price increase. Thus, the first long-form film, a 40-minute photoplay with Sarah Bernhardt, "Queen Elizabeth," debuted in the U.S. in July 1912. Also, if the movie shown was changed more often, it was likely that consumers would return to the theater more frequently. The entrepreneurs proved right. Audience sizes soon outgrew the storefront theaters that originated with the nickelodeon.

In 1914, there were 96 million Americans living in the U.S. and weekly, 26 million went to the movies.¹⁹ By 1928, the number of theatergoers increased to more than 47 million.²⁰ Appropriating the building type used for vaudeville and live theaters, movie house architects combined amenities and décor that had previously been reserved for upper-income amusements with necessary technological requirements, resulting in a new architectural form specific to the first two decades of the 20th century. Variations on the model included adaptations to accommodate size and grandeur. The first true movie "palace" opened in 1913, the 1,845-seat Regent Theatre in New York City, built by architect Thomas Lamb. Between 1914 and 1922, more than 4,000 new theaters were built in the U.S.²¹

To help maximize audience attendance, even in the smallest town, theater-owners situated their movie houses typically within the central business district. The "downtown" business district attracted people with available income for entertainment, namely workers and families, creating a self-perpetuating circle of producers and consumers. Sussex Borough stands as an example of this type of town. Surrounded by agricultural interests, its downtown offered area residents commercial enterprises to support both business and pleasure pursuits.

Distributors typically offered theaters like Crescent Theatre films after they had already appeared in the urban centers. Showing second-, third-, or fourth-run films did not necessarily negatively affect these theaters, as local residents were unlikely to go big cities to see first-run movies very often. Both

¹⁸ As quoted in Forsher, p. 15.

¹⁹ Forsher, p. 16.

²⁰ Harold B. Franklin, *Motion Picture Management* (1928), as excerpted in *Moviegoing in America*, p. 123.

²¹ Forsher, p. 38.

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National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Statement of Significance**

Section 8 Page 6

distributors and small-town theater-owners, then, seemed to benefit from the arrangement at the outset. Distributors were able to print fewer copies, offering small theaters the film after it had already been shown numerous times in the city thus extending the life of the film, and theater-owners were able to acquire “used” films at a lower price, while still maintaining audience interest. Fuller clarifies how the small-town theaters were able to survive in the era of urban movie palaces:

The answer lies in the creation of movie fan culture. The proliferation of movie fan magazines, the evolution of male and female movie fans, the cults of movie star worship, the spread of movie references to other parts of popular culture...all worked to compensate small-town movie fans for any perceived deficiencies in their local experience...Despite being overwhelmed by the picture palaces, small-town movie theaters still continued to offer, within a familiar community setting, the considerable pleasures of fantasy-inflected Hollywood movies, mysterious stars, and movie fan culture.²²

The mutually beneficial relationship soon wavered, however, as audiences recognized the poor quality of overused films, and distributors realized that small-town theaters required many more films annually, as their limited market would not support a lengthy single-film run.

At the time Crescent Theatre was built, it was a sound business venture for its owners. Theaters were being built all over the U.S., and the movie industry was hard at work satisfying the ever-increasing demand of its audience. Over the years, however, difficulties experienced by both distributors and moviegoers affected the popularity of the small-town theater, and thus its economic viability for owners. The ownership turnover at Crescent Theatre attests to the difficulties inherent in running this type of independent, small-market movie house. The onset of the Great Depression and the development of the suburban mall also contributed to the erosion of the economic feasibility of the downtown business district, and, in combination with the invention of the television, the decline of the downtown movie theater. Recent forays into recreating the “main street” experience have served to resuscitate the interest in renovating and/or adaptively reusing downtown commercial buildings, however, which Crescent Theatre also illustrates.

²² Fuller, p. 221.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
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Section 9 Page 1

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Bibliography**

Section 9 Page 2

Maps, Image Sources

Fire Insurance Map of Sussex Borough, (1924), published by the Sanborn Map Company.

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Verbal Boundary Description**

Section 10 Page 1

Boundary Description

The Crescent Theatre is located in the Borough of Sussex, Sussex County, New Jersey at 74 Main Street, Block 702, Lot 4, on the southeast side of the street. The lot's approximate perimeter measurements are as follows: northwestern boundary (Main Street), 48'; northeastern boundary, 115'; southwestern boundary, 54'; and southeastern boundary, 136'6".

Boundary Justification

Boundary lines follow legally recorded property lines. The property lines are indicated in the existing Sussex Borough Tax Map, which conforms to the information provided in the 1924 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. Please see Attached Documentation for these maps.

**United States Department of the Interior
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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey**

Photographs

The following information applies to all photographs:

3. Name of Photographer: Ann M. Keen
4. Date of Photographs: June 25, 2004
5. Location of Negatives: New Jersey Historic Preservation Office

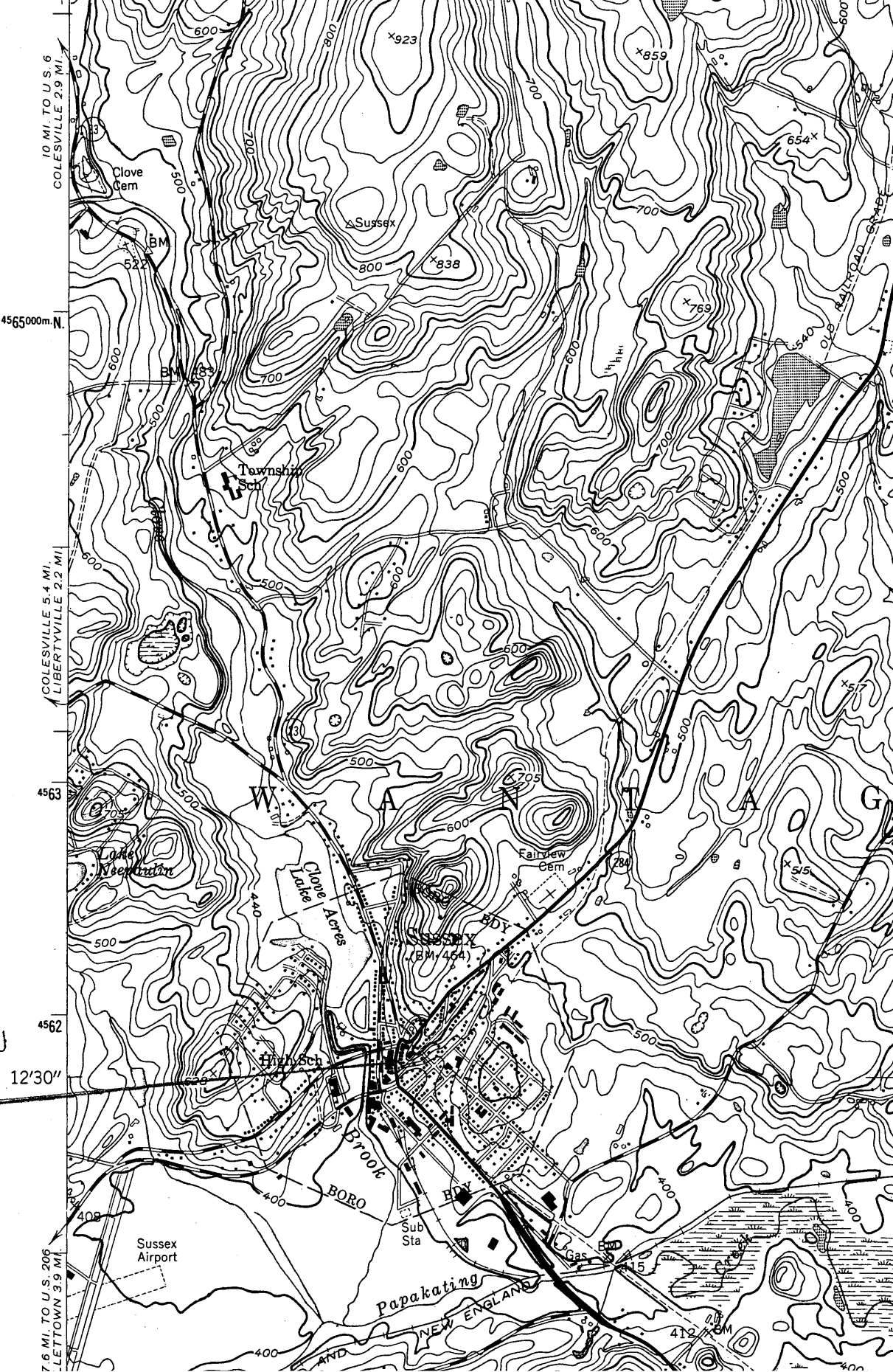
Item 6. Description of View:

- Photo 1. Northwest façade, view looking south
- Photo 2. Northwest and southwest elevations, view looking northeast
- Photo 3. Southwest elevation, view looking north
- Photo 4. Southwest elevation detail, view looking northeast
- Photo 5. Southeast elevation detail, view looking northwest
- Photo 6. Marquee letter-holder in basement stair, view looking west
- Photo 7. Black box rehearsal space, first floor, view looking east
- Photo 8. Mezzanine area, view looking northeast
- Photo 9. Detail, original proscenium arch, second floor, view looking southeast
- Photo 10. Performance space, second floor, view looking southeast
- Photo 11. Seating area, second floor, view looking west
- Photo 12. Preserved painted plaster wall, second floor, view looking east
- Photo 13. Buildings across Fountain Square from Crescent Theatre, view looking west

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JRT JERVIS SOUTH

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

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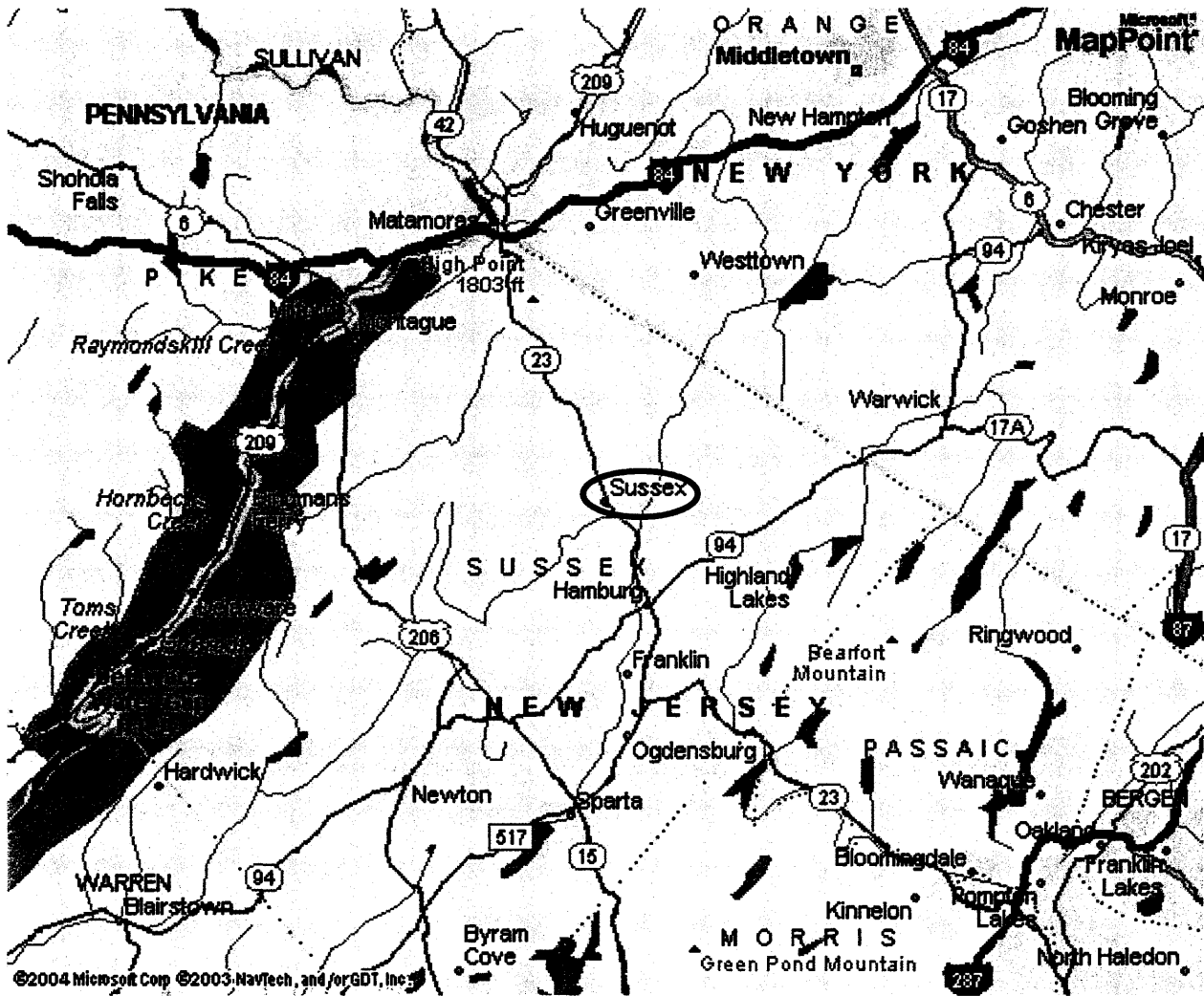


CRESCENT THEATRE
BOROUGH OF SUSSEX, NJ
(SUSSEX COUNTY)

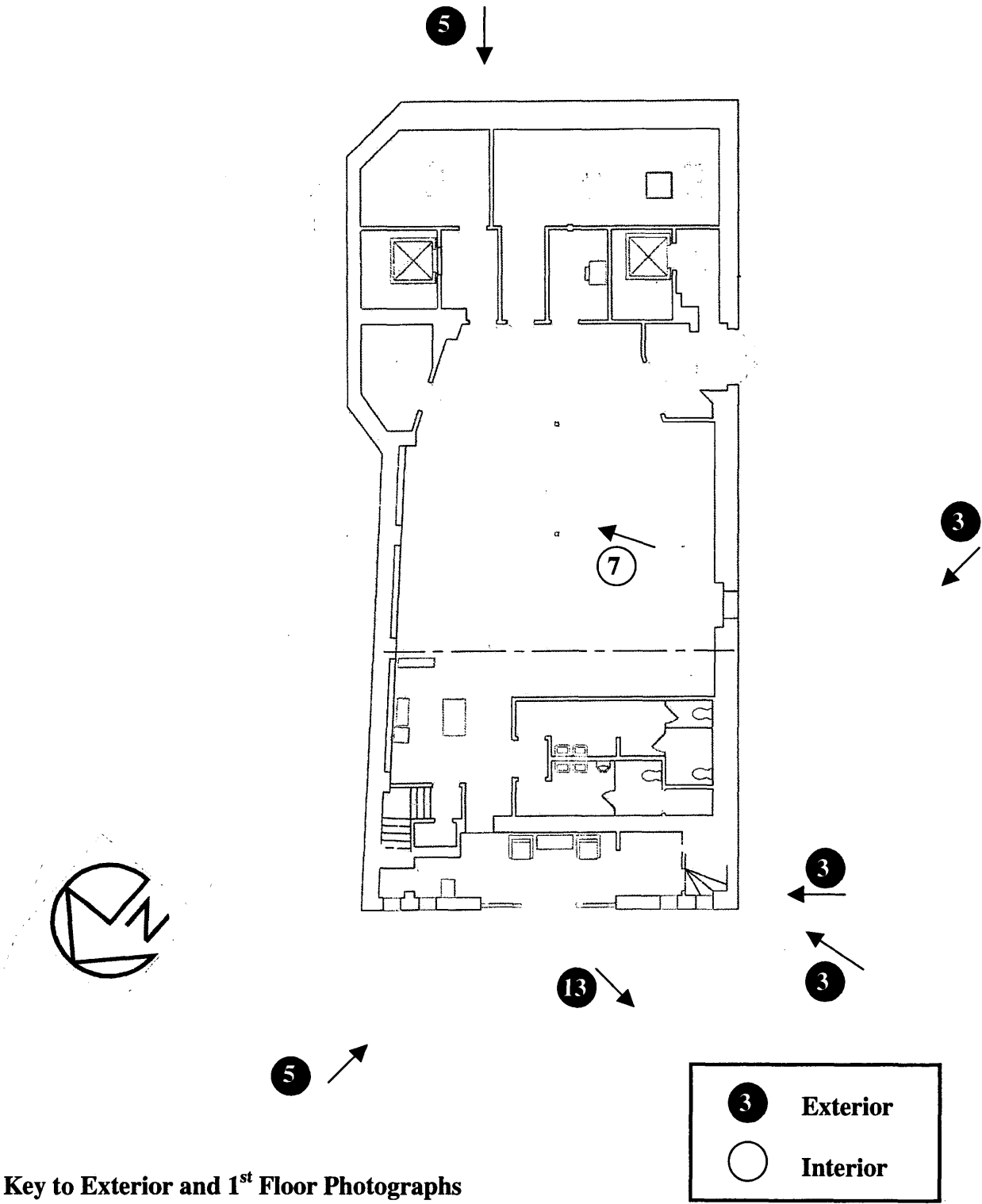
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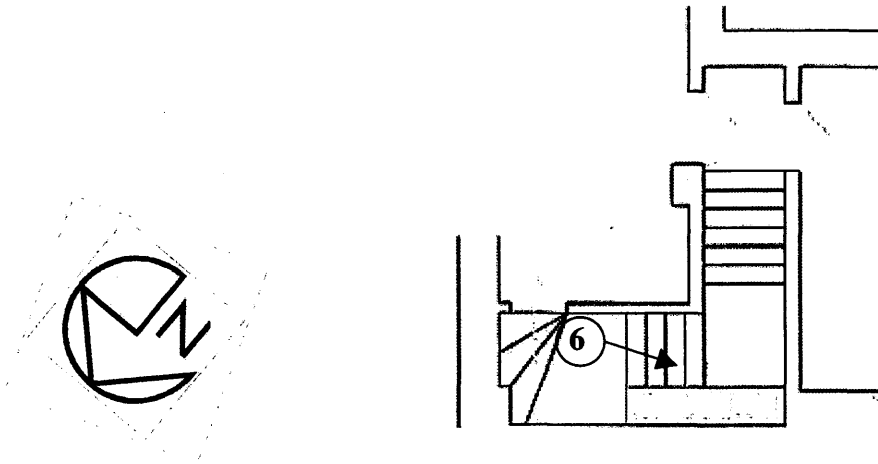
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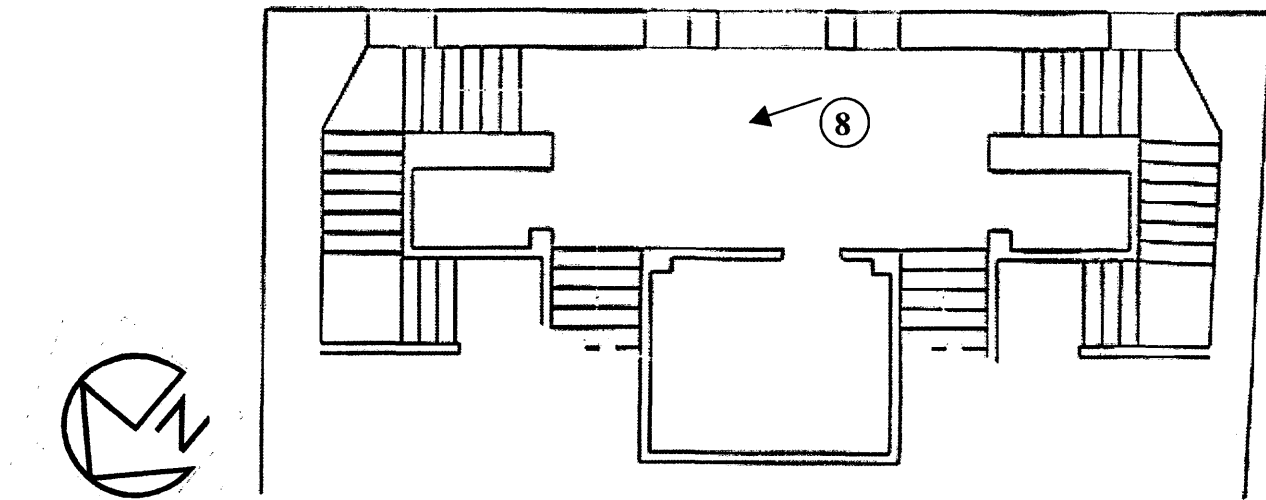
Current map of Sussex and surrounding area.



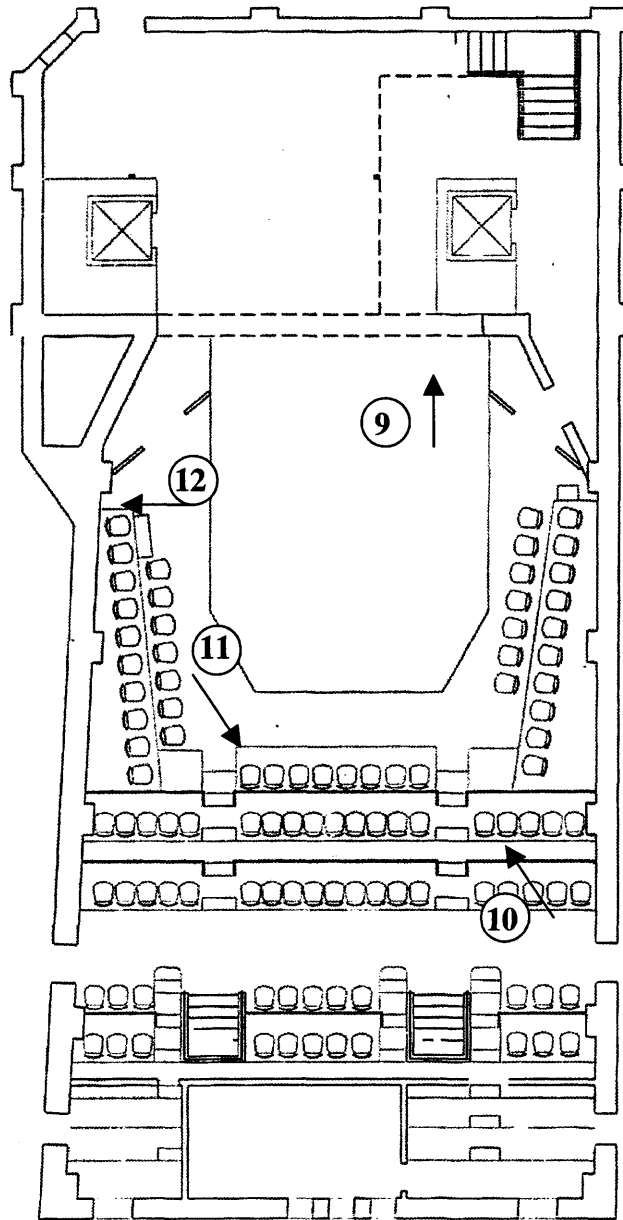
Key to Exterior and 1st Floor Photographs



Key to Basement Stair Photograph



Key to Mezzanine Level Photograph

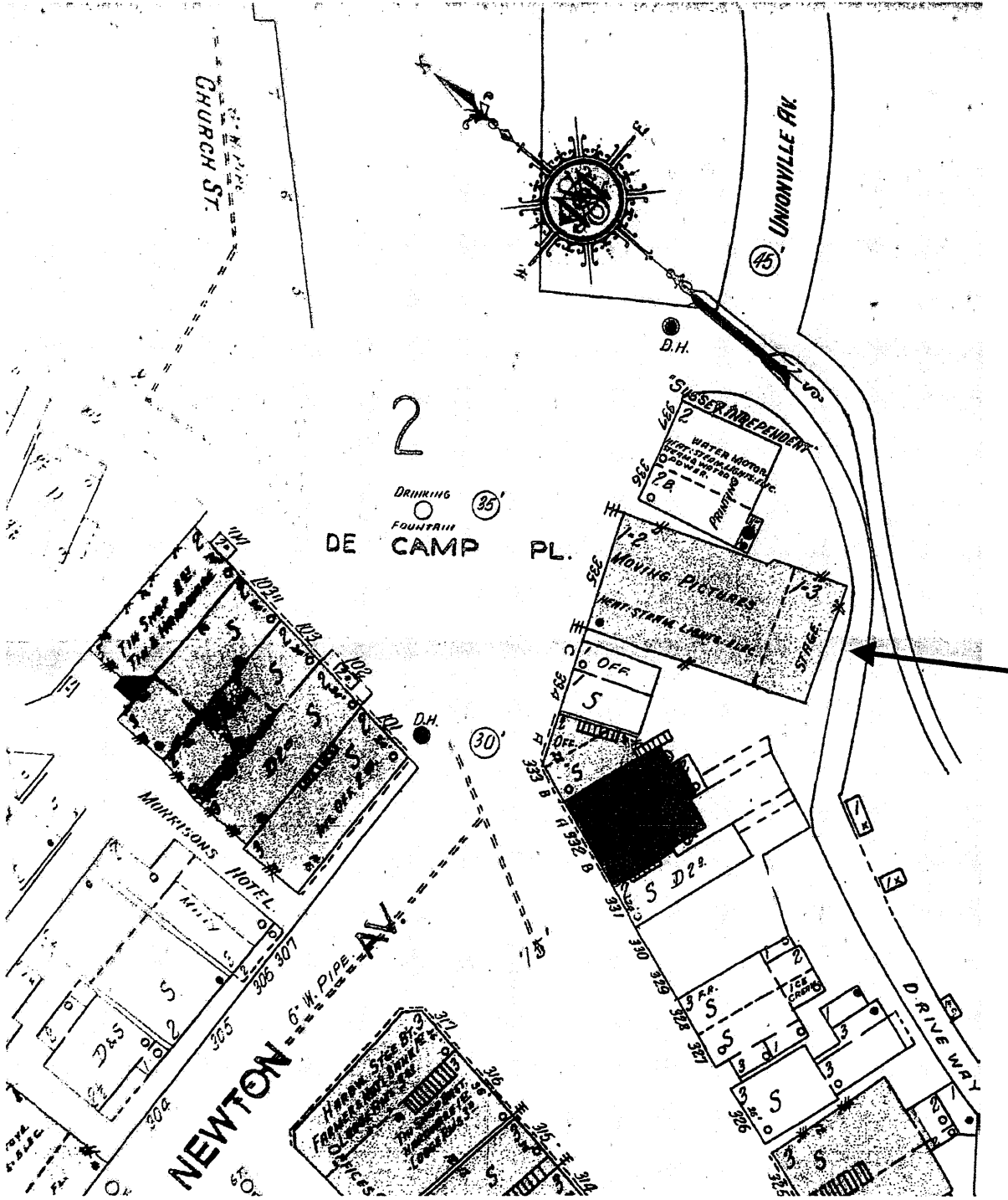


Key to 2nd Floor Photographs



Historic map of Sussex County featuring Deckertown, later known as Sussex, from *Topographical Map of Sussex County, 1872*.

Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Additional Documentation

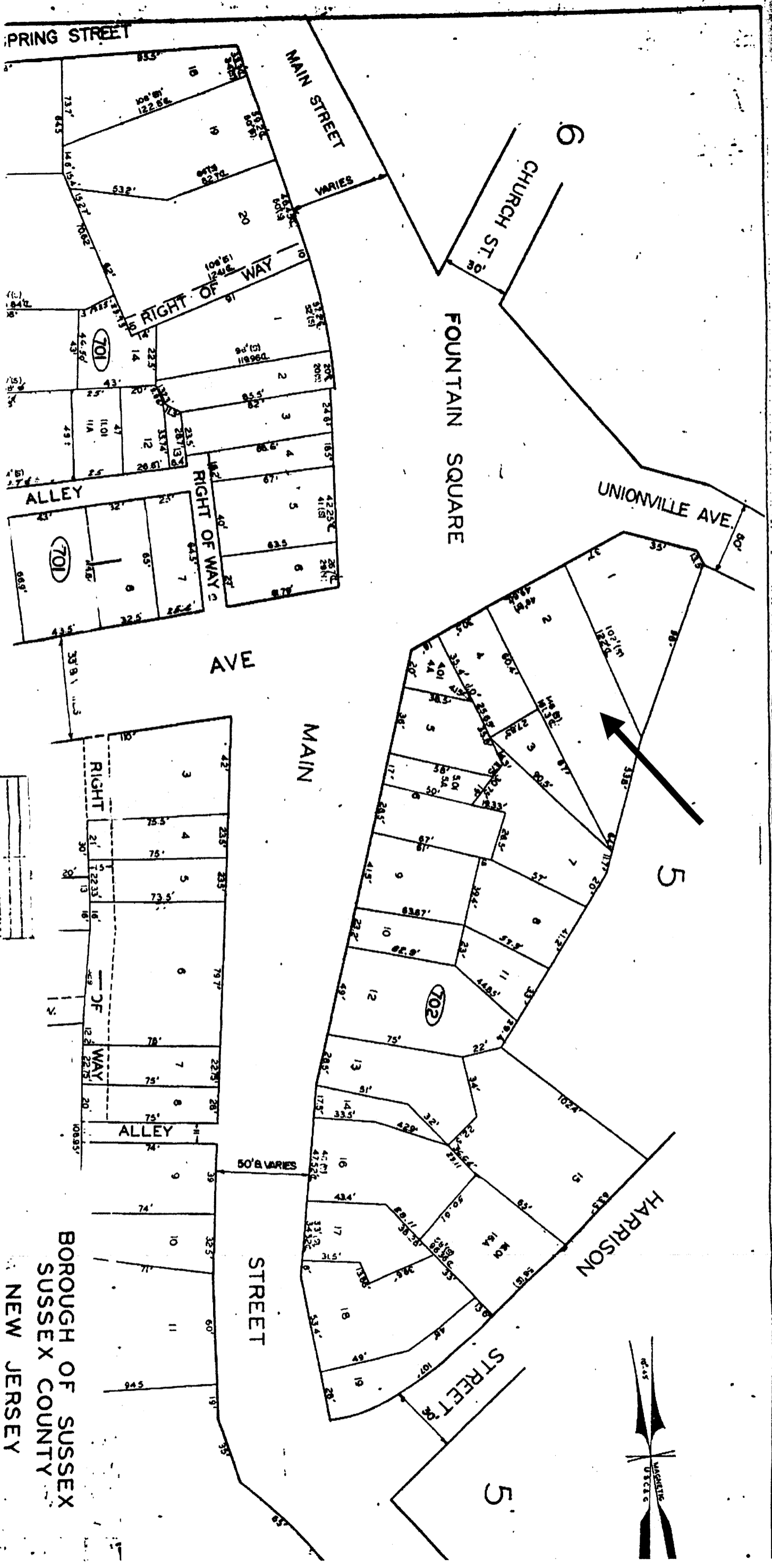


Crescent Theatre, as depicted on the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Sussex Borough (1924).

Crescent Theatre
Sussex County, New Jersey
Additional Documentation



Crescent Theatre (aka Sussex Theatre), 1976. Collection of the theater.



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 WELAND ENGINEERING P.C./INC.
 FEBRUARY 1985.

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CL
 STATE ENGINEER

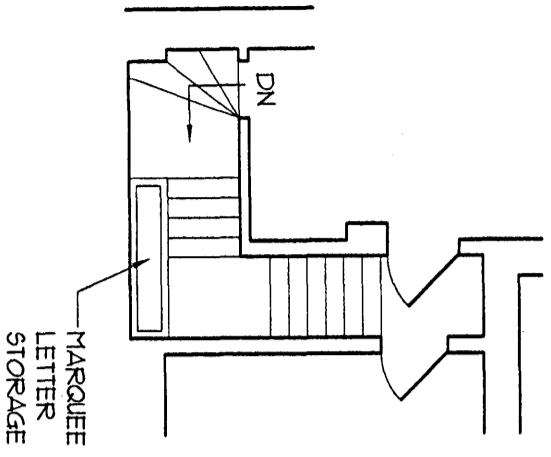
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 SUSSEX COUNTY
 NEW JERSEY

REVALUATION & APPRAISAL SERVICE, INC.
 W. HUDSON MILLS ENGINEER & SURVEYOR
 JAMES J. DATA LAND SURVEYOR

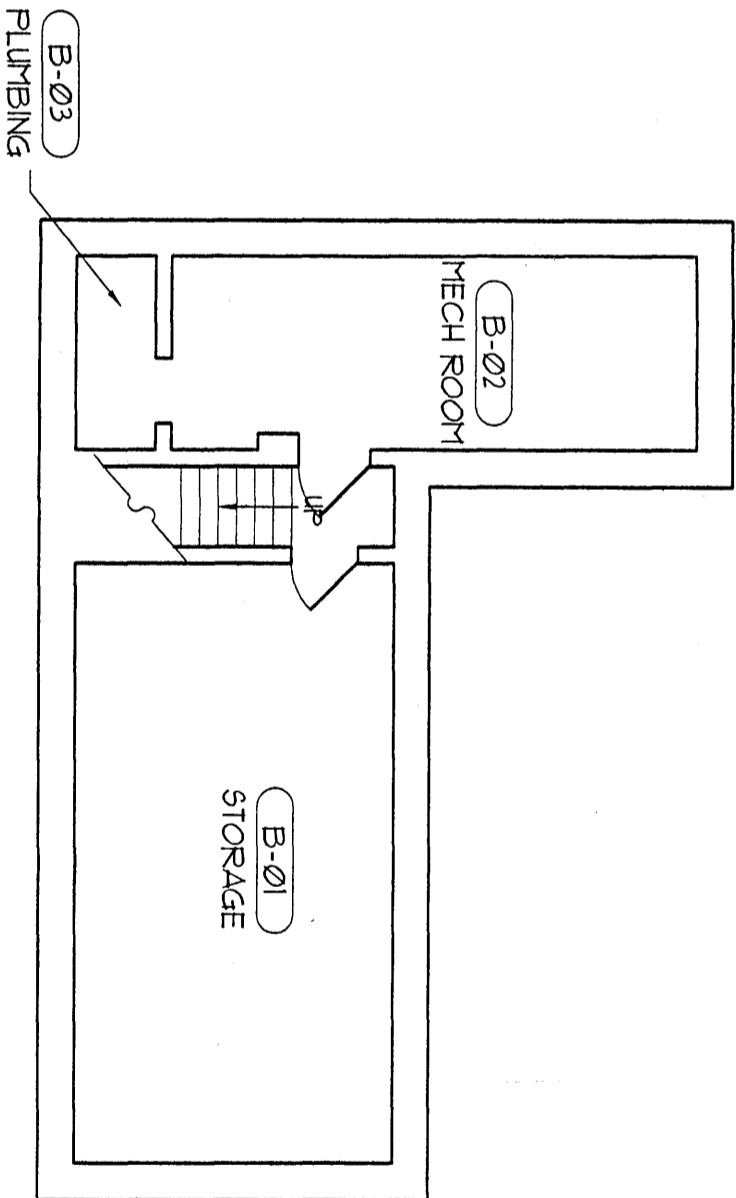
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SEPT. 1959

837



1 STAIR TO BASEMENT PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



2 BASEMENT PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Signature and Date

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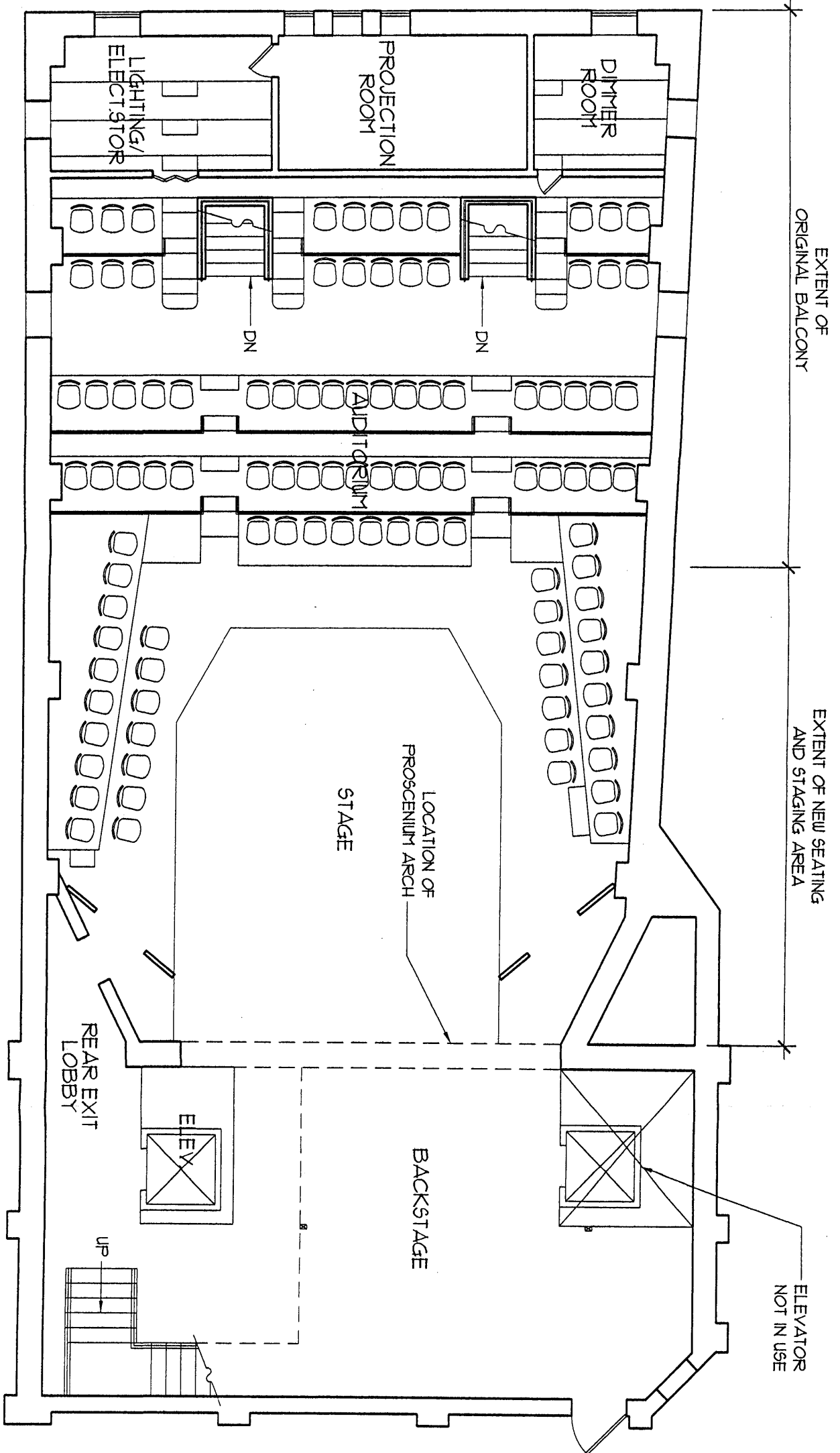
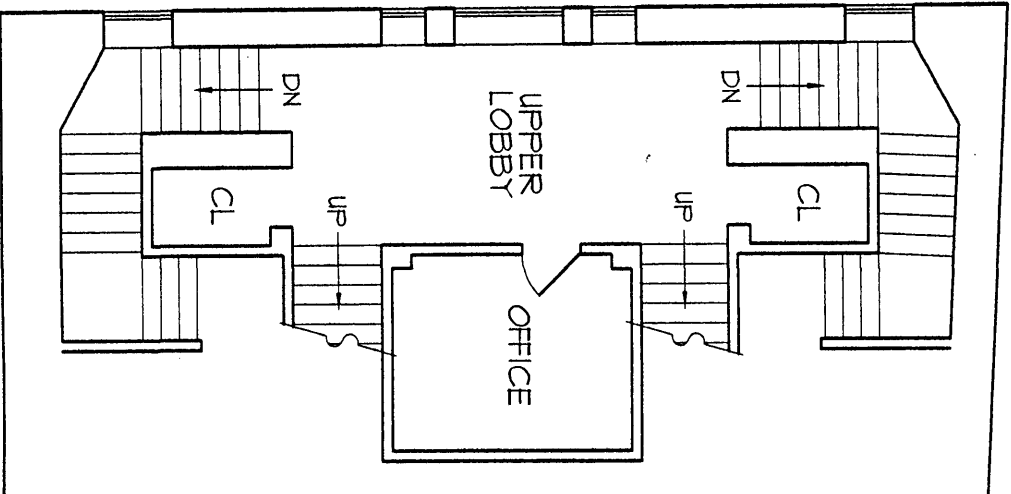
Drawn by
Checked by
Date DATE
Revisions

CRESCENT THEATRE
PRESERVATION PLAN
74 MAIN STREET
SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY

Project No. 0343
Drawing Title
BASEMENT PLANS

The Name
CF-jb

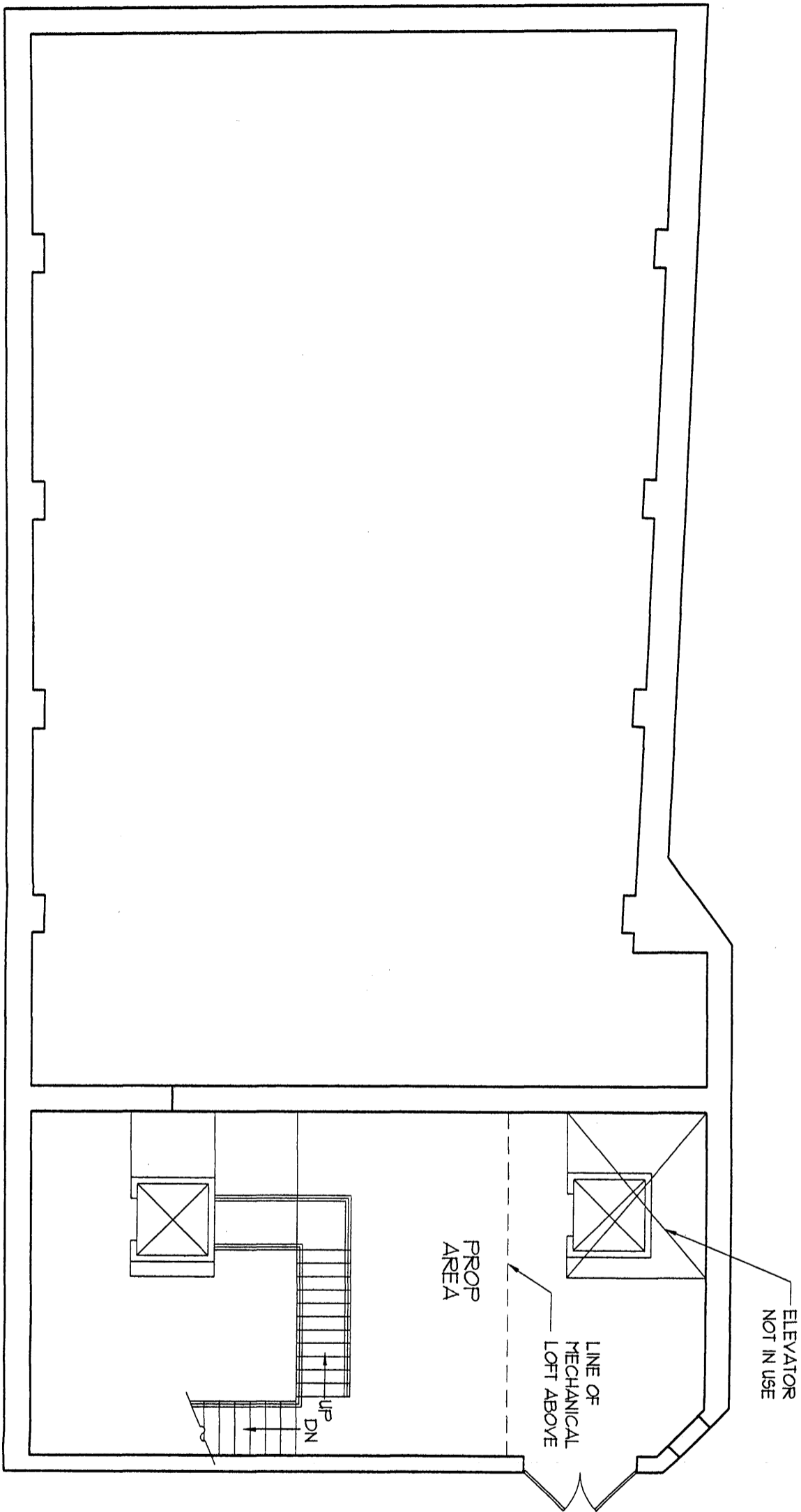
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1 MEZZANINE PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

2 SECOND FLOOR PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

<p>A-12</p>	<p>CRESCENT THEATRE PRESERVATION PLAN 74 MAIN STREET SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY</p>	<p>FORD FAREWELL MILLS AND GATSCH ARCHITECTS, LLC</p> <p>103 CARNEGIE CENTER, SUITE 301, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540-9539 609-452-1777 FAX 609-452-7192</p>	<p>Signature and Date</p> <p>Approved For: III MIC - 05/04 Michael Farewell FALA Michael J. Gatsch FALA MIC - 02/07 Farewell, Gatsch & Mills FALA Michael J. Gatsch FALA MIC - 05/04</p>
<p>Project No. 0143 Drawing Title MEZZANINE PLAN SECOND FLOOR PLAN File Name CT-112</p>	<p>Drawn By Checked By Date DATE Revised</p>		



1
FLY LOFT PLAN
 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Signatures and Date

Ford Farewell Mills
 MIC - 0500
 Michael Farewell
 MIC - 0520
 Nicholas G. Gatsch
 MIC - 0500
 James A. Gatsch
 MIC - 0500
 Michael Schmitt
 MIC - 0500

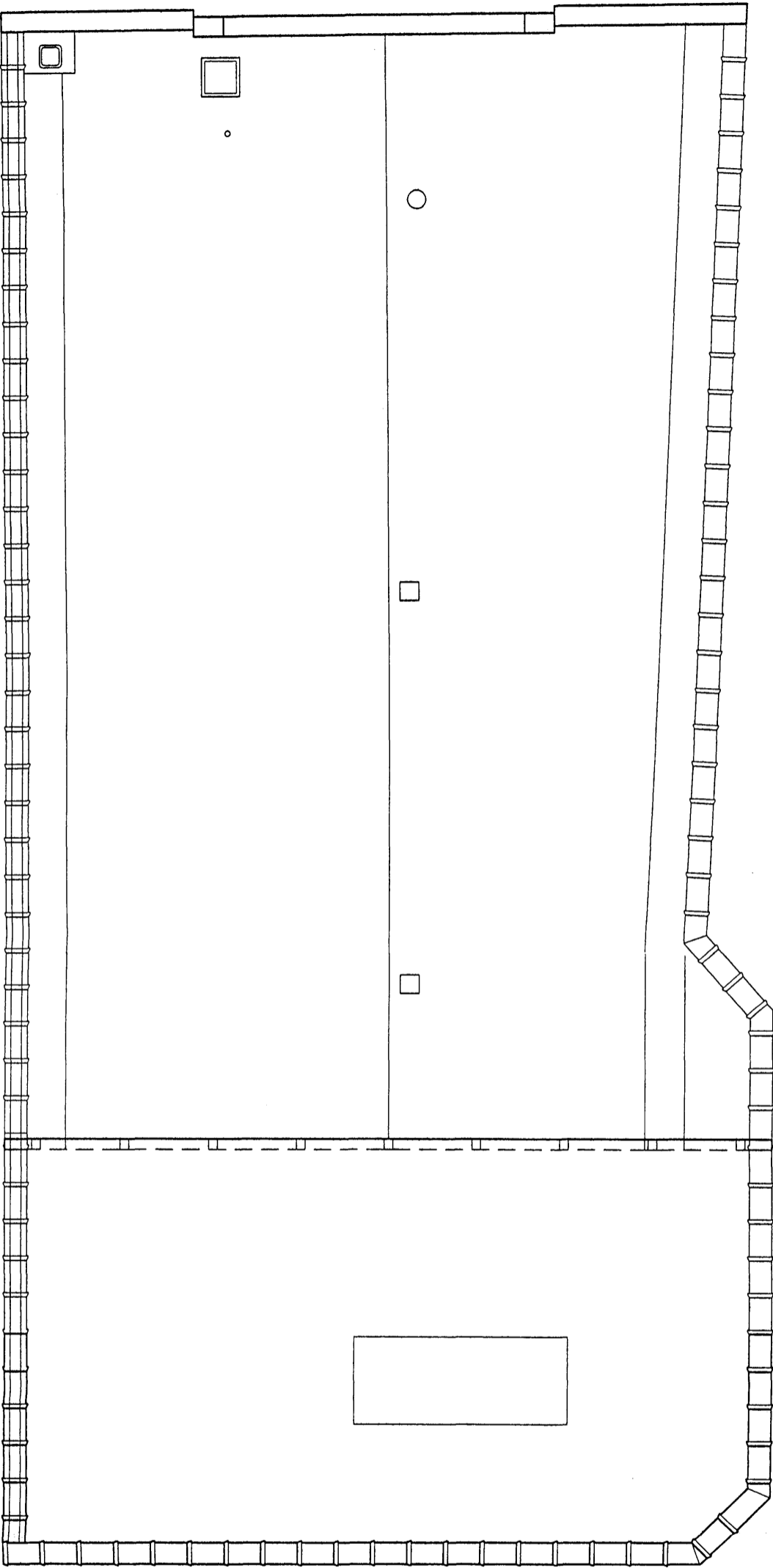
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Drawn By
 Checked By
 Date
 DATE

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 74 MAIN STREET
 SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY

Project No.
 0343
 Drawing Title
 FLY LOFT PLAN
 File Name
 CT-p13

A-13



1 ROOF PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Signature and Date

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N.C. - 4589

Michael Farewell P.A.A.
N.C. - 5029

Michael H. G. - 5037 P.A.A.
N.C. - 5037

Andrew A. Gutsch P.A.A.
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74 MAIN STREET
SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY

Project No. 0343
Drawing Title
ROOF PLAN

File Name
CT-P4

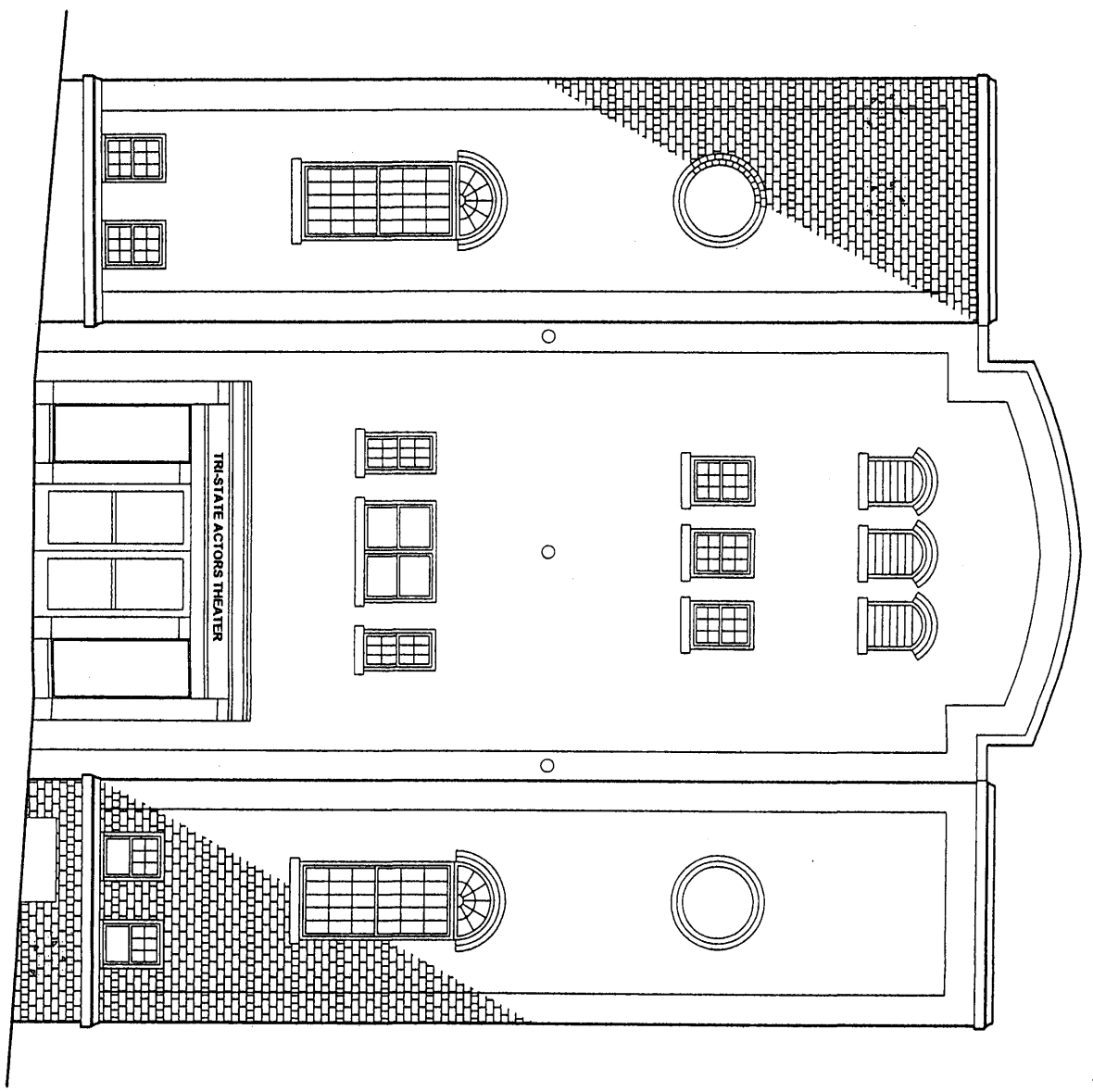
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Date
DATE

A-14

1

FRONT ELEVATION (NORTH WEST)

SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



Signature and Date

Arnould Ford II JIA
DEC - 2006
Michael Farnwell FALA
November, 2007
Michael J. Gatsch FALA
DEC - 2007
James A. Cahill FALA
DEC - 2008
Richard J. Gatsch JIA
DEC - 2008

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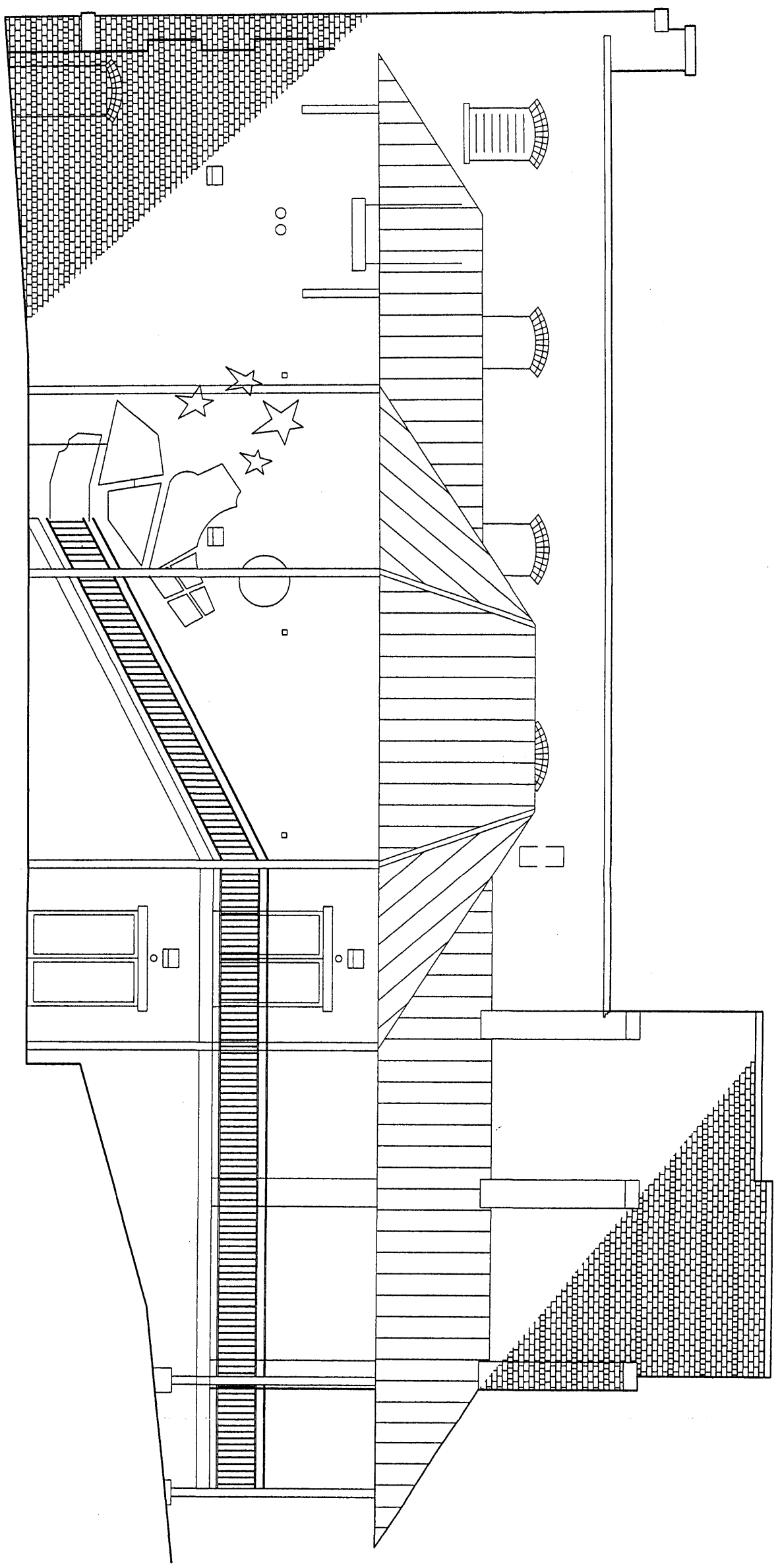
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Checked by
Date DATE
Revision

CRESCENT THEATRE
PRESERVATION PLAN
74 MAIN STREET
SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY

Project No.
Drawing Title
FRONT
ELEVATION
File Name
CI-dwd

A-3.0

1 SIDE ELEVATION (SOUTH WEST)
 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



Kenneth Ford II AIA
 MIC - 6565
 Michael Farnell FAIA
 MIC - 6565
 Michael J. Ford FAIA
 MIC - 6567
 Andrew J. Gatsch FAIA
 MIC - 6568
 Nicholas J. Mills AIA
 MIC - 15154

Signature and Date

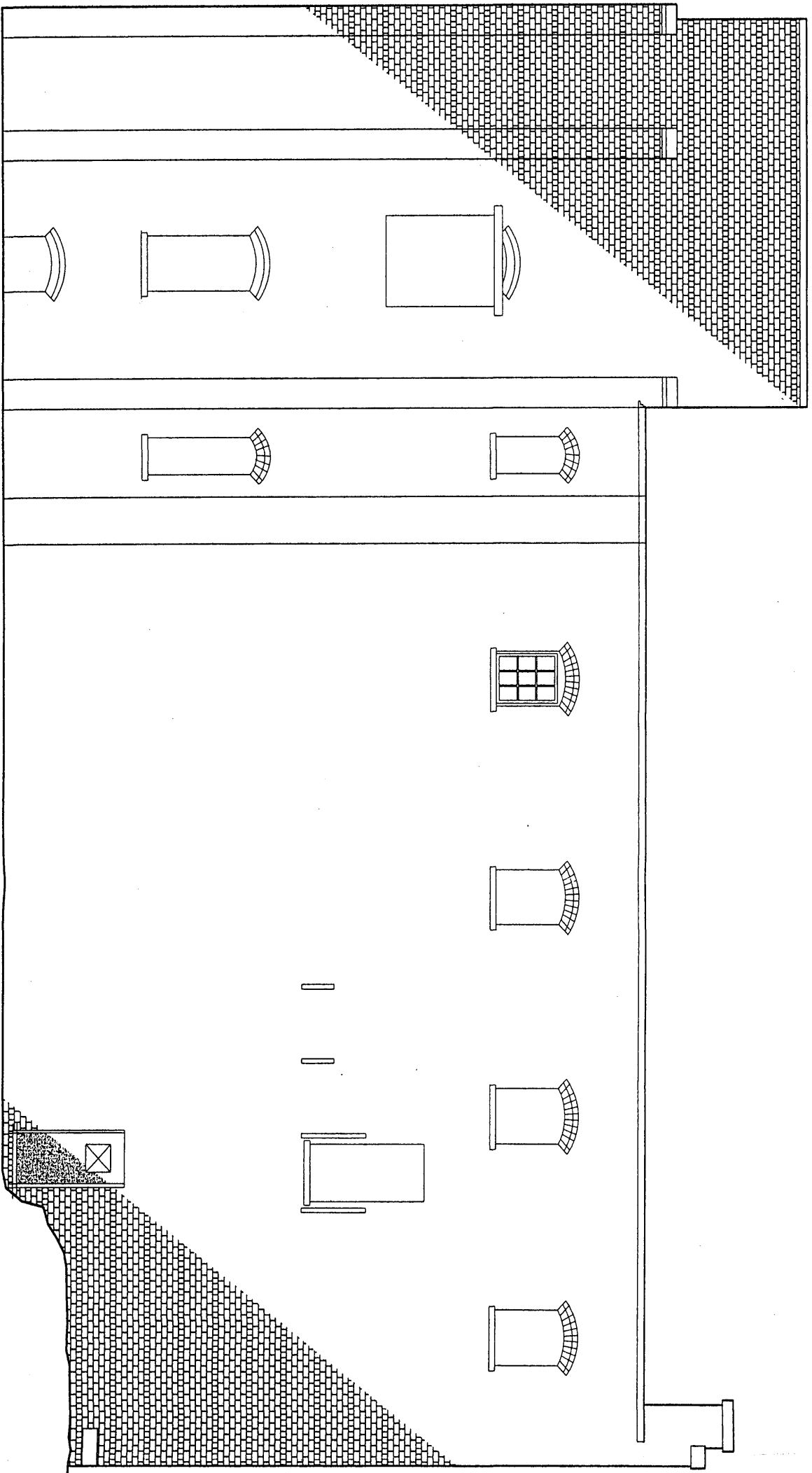
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 103 CARNEGIE CENTER, SUITE 301, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540-9639 609-452-1777 FAX 609-452-7192

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PRESERVATION PLAN
 74 MAIN STREET
 SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY

Project No. 0343
 Drawing Title SIDE ELEVATION
 File Name CT-dwg2

A-31



1 SIDE ELEVATION (NORTH EAST)
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Signatures and Date

Architects: Ford M. Mills, P.E. - 4534 P.A.M.
 Architects: Ford M. Mills, P.E. - 4534 P.A.M.
 Architects: Ford M. Mills, P.E. - 4534 P.A.M.
 Architects: Ford M. Mills, P.E. - 4534 P.A.M.
 Architects: Ford M. Mills, P.E. - 4534 P.A.M.
 Architects: Ford M. Mills, P.E. - 4534 P.A.M.

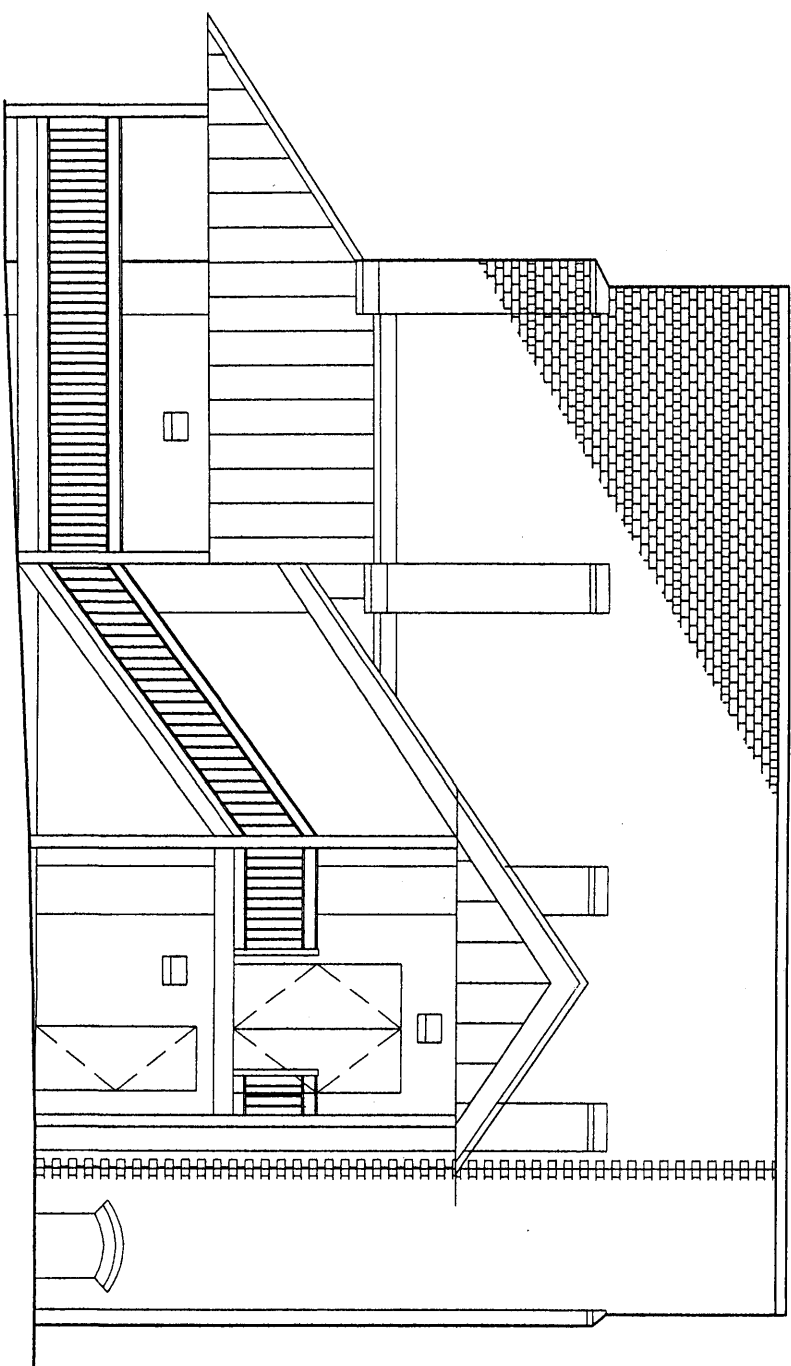
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 103 CARNEGIE CENTER, SUITE 301, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540-9539 609-452-1777 FAX 609-452-7192

Drawn By _____
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 Date DATE
 Revision

CRESCENT THEATRE
 PRESERVATION PLAN
 74 MAIN STREET
 SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY

Project No. 023
 Drawing No. 023
 ELEVATION
 File Name: CT-dim.3

A-3.2



1 REAR ELEVATION (SOUTH EAST)
 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Signature and Date

Intervenor: Ford, M. AIA
 DEC - 2008
 Michael Farewell, P.A.A.
 MICHEL - 2008
 MICHEL - 2007
 James A. Gatsch, P.A.A.
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 MICHEL - 2008

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 Checked By
 Date DATE
 Revision

CRESCENT THEATRE
 PRESERVATION PLAN
 74 MAIN STREET
 SUSSEX, NEW JERSEY

Project No. 0343
 Drawing Title
 REAR
 ELEVATION
 File Name
 CT-draw4

A-3.3