

VLR-3/18/80 NRHP-5/19/80

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC Wells Theatre

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

NW corner Tazewell Street & Monticello Avenue

CITY, TOWN

Norfolk

STATE

Virginia

VICINITY OF

CODE
51

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Second (G. William Whitehurst)

COUNTY

(in city)

CODE

710

3 CLASSIFICATION

| CATEGORY | OWNERSHIP | STATUS | PRESENT USE |
|---|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT | <input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC | <input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED | <input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE | <input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED | <input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL |
| <input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE | <input type="checkbox"/> BOTH | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS | <input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SITE | <input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC ACQUISITION | <input type="checkbox"/> ACCESSIBLE | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT | <input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED | <input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED | <input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED | <input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> NO | <input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> PARK |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER |

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME Mr. Sam W. Craver, Jr.

STREET & NUMBER

Craver Investment Corp. - P. O. Box 22092

CITY, TOWN

Charlotte

STATE

N. C. 28222

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Norfolk City Hall

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Norfolk

STATE

Virginia

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

(1) (See Continuation sheet #3)

TITLE (1) The Downtown Norfolk Survey of Potential National Register Properties and Properties of Limited Interest.

Has this property been determined eligible? Y N

DATE

1976? Spigel, Carter, Zinkl, & Herman

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS

Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority

CITY, TOWN

Norfolk

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

EXCELLENT
 GOOD
 FAIR

DETERIORATED
 RUINS
 UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

UNALTERED
 ALTERED

CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE
 MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Designed by the New York firm of E. C. Horn and Sons, the Wells Theatre in Norfolk is an excellent example of vaudeville/road show theatre architecture popular in America during the first two decades of this century. The building, completed in 1913, is of hollow tile construction with a veneer of textured tan brick and terra-cotta detailing. Visually, the theatre's exterior is composed of three sections.

The first and most prominent is a three-story, three-bay entrance tower facing Tazewell Street. Here a curved front is recessed into the first two stories while an open loggia defines the top story. The first story reflects alterations made ca. 1930 and 1960. These include installation of a central box office and a new marquee. Flanking the box office on each side are double doors separated by classically derived pilasters. A triglyph and metope frieze unifies the entry. The second story displays fewer changes. The bowed front is again divided into three sections, each containing sixteen-light windows and capping transom. Surrounding the first two stories of the tower are herringbone-patterned brick piers and a connecting frieze. Decorative terra-cotta lion's heads extending from diamond-shaped panels are set into both the piers and frieze. Chains used to support the marquee extend from the mouths of the lion's heads flanking the large cartouche at the frieze center.

The three-bay loggia screened by three round-arched openings forms the tower's third story. Massive double and quadruple brackets visually support the wide overhanging pantile roof. Suspended in front of the arcade, a tall sign spells "Wells" in neon. A single acroterion marks the apex of the tower. The female statue originally atop the acroterion, the two roof piers on tall staffs, and a "Wells" sign extending diagonally across the second and third stories have all been removed.

The commercial row surmounted by an eleven-bay arcade forms the second section of the theatre. Stretching east on Tazewell Street to Monticello Avenue, this section is also faced with textured brick and originally held several retail stores and double theatre exit doors. The second story consisted of offices and a restaurant set behind the arcade. Topping the arcade, massive paired brackets support a false pantile roof. Fanciful giant candelabra along the top of this portion have been removed. A 1960s remodeling replaced the original shop fronts with aluminum and brick siding.

The auditorium marks the third section of the theatre. Located north of the commercial arcade and entrance tower, the auditorium rises approximately four stories in height and is of red brick construction. Large recessed brick panels divide the wall into nine bays. The east three bays extend another story in height to form the fly loft. Aside from sparse terra-cotta detailing, there is little that visually ties this section to the rest of the theatre.

The interior, entrance to the foyer is made through a small, richly decorated oval lobby. The lobby is composed of three double doors on the first level, with paired stained-glass window panels above. Single and paired term pilasters on lion's head bases separate the glass panels. A wide Greek key and swag frieze marks the two levels. Suspended from the ceiling is a large plaster chandelier heavily encrusted with floral decoration and colored light bulbs. The original box office is located to the west and is presently obscured by signs installed in the 1960s.

The oval lobby leads directly into a large rectangular foyer. Two large columns, each surrounded by four Grecian caryatids, support a vaulted ceiling. To the west only one of the two

(See Continuation Sheet #1)

8 SIGNIFICANCE

| PERIOD | AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW | | | | |
|-------------|--|---|---|--|--|
| PREHISTORIC | <input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC | <input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING | <input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE | <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION | |
| 1400-1499 | <input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC | <input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION | <input type="checkbox"/> LAW | <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE | |
| 1500-1599 | <input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE | <input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS | <input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE | <input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE | |
| 1600-1699 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE | <input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION | <input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY | <input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN | |
| 1700-1799 | <input type="checkbox"/> ART | <input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING | <input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER | |
| 1800-1899 | <input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE | <input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY | <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION | |
| 1900- | <input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS | <input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY | <input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY) | |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION | | | |

SPECIFIC DATES 1913-14 BUILDER/ARCHITECT E. C. Horn and Sons

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE Designed by the New York firm of E. C. Horn and Sons, the Wells Theatre is significant both as a representative of early 20th-century popular culture and as an outstanding example of Beaux Arts theatre architecture in Virginia. The theatre opened on August 23, 1913, as part of the Southern vaudeville chain operated by Jacob and Otto Wells. Although such Northern syndicates as the Shuberts, Keith-Albee, and Klaw and Erlanger have been the subject of recent study, thus far little research has been conducted on theatre trusts of the South.

By 1913 thirty-four theatres stretching from the Orpheum in Jacksonville, Florida, to as far north as the Bijou in Evansville, Indiana, were under the Wells brothers' management. In addition to their theatre interests, the brothers controlled allied interests in the production and management of vaudeville entertainment. The Bijou Company, the Wells Amusement Company, the Leath Theatrical Company, the Lyric Company, and the Theatre Realty Company comprised their major interests.¹

In spite of the large number of Wells-controlled theatres in Georgia² and Tennessee, the heart of their operation was in Tidewater Virginia. Thus when plans were first announced for a new Wells Theatre in Norfolk, the community responded with great enthusiasm and anticipation. Architects for the project were E. C. Horn and Sons of New York City.³ Two weeks prior to its opening, the Wells Theatre in Norfolk was described as the "most pretentious playhouse" of the Wells chain. For months promoters teased readers of the Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch and of the Virginian-Pilot with vivid descriptions and surprise glimpses of the theatre's rich interior.⁴

When opening day, August 26, 1913, arrived, advance men were anticipating "the biggest and most representative audience ever seen inside of a theater in [Norfolk]." According to Wells' promoters the crowds would come not only because of the fame of the opening bill, "The Merry Countess," but "by the desire to be present at an event that will, in after years, be part of the theatrical and civil history of the city."⁵

Predictions by promoters were not off mark. The theatre opened its doors to a capacity crowd. Special trains and boats carried patrons from Portsmouth and nearby Tidewater towns to Norfolk for the event. A "White Way," consisting of five ornamental iron posts supporting "three 100-watt decorative lights," was erected by the Wells Amusement Company in front of the theatre on Tazewell Street.⁶ Telegrams of congratulations and well-wishing streamed in from such famous theatre personalities as Klaw and Erlanger, the Shuberts, Stair and Havlin, and B. F. Keith. Souvenir programs printed on "old rose paper" bearing an engraving of the New Wells were distributed to all patrons.⁷

The theatre inauguration would have been a complete success were it not for the opening bill. Reviewers panned "The Merry Countess" as "a distinct disappointment...failing to show even mediocre calibre." The Ledger-Dispatch commented, "While the audience looked upon the theatre with admiration...it condemned the attraction that was presented for the opening and it is regretted that the contrast between the magnificence of the theatre and the quality of the play was so marked."⁸

(See Continuation Sheet #2)

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Meloy, Arthur S. Theatres and Picture Houses. New York: Architect's Supply & Pub. Co. 1916.
- Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, Norfolk, Va., 1911-1913.
- Norfolk, Va., Virginia Stage Company Archives.
- Ragey, Joe. Norfolk, Va. Interview, November 1979.
- Spigel, Carter, Zinkl, Herman & Chapman. The Wells Theater: A Report for [the] Virginia Stage Company. Norfolk, Va., 1979.
- Virginian-Pilot, Norfolk, Va., 1911-1913.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Approx. 1/4 acre

QUADRANGLE NAME Norfolk South, Va.

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24000

| UTM REFERENCES | | | UTM REFERENCES | | |
|----------------|---------|-------------|----------------|---------|----------|
| ZONE | EASTING | NORTHING | ZONE | EASTING | NORTHING |
| A | 1,8 | 3,8,4,9,5,0 | 4,0,7,8,6,8,0 | B | |
| C | | | | D | |
| E | | | | F | |
| G | | | | H | |

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION Beginning at the intersection of the western line of Monticello Avenue, as the same is now located, with the northern line of Tazewell Street, as the same is now located; running thence in a westerly direction, along the northern line of Tazewell Street, as the same is now located, approximately one hundred nineteen and five-tenths

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES (See Cont. Sheet #4)

| STATE | CODE | COUNTY | CODE |
|-------|------|--------|------|
| | | | |
| STATE | CODE | COUNTY | CODE |

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME/TITLE Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Staff

| | | | |
|-----------------|---|-----------|-----------------------|
| ORGANIZATION | <u>Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission</u> | DATE | <u>March 1980</u> |
| STREET & NUMBER | <u>221 Governor Street</u> | TELEPHONE | <u>(804) 786-3144</u> |
| CITY OR TOWN | <u>Richmond</u> | STATE | <u>Virginia 23219</u> |

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 *[Signature]*
 TITLE Tucker Hill, Executive Director
Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission
 DATE MAR 18 1980

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE _____

ATTEST: **KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER** DATE _____

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

Wells Theatre, Norfolk, Virginia

CONTINUATION SHEET 2
DESCRIPTION

#1

ITEM NUMBER 7

PAGE 1

half columns (fronted by a single caryatid) remains. All caryatids stand on high cylindrical bases decorated with classical swags. A curved, three-foot-high, paneled rail screens the lobby from the auditorium. This rail was either added or moved when the original seating arrangement was altered during the 1930s. A decorative tile floor has been recently uncovered beneath wall-to-wall carpeting. The north end of the lobby contains a stairwell leading to the balcony levels. A ladies' restroom has been built into the original hat check room beneath the stair.

Seating in the auditorium is arranged on three levels: orchestra, balcony (20° slope), and gallery (30° slope). In addition, two tiers of cantilevered, semicircular box seats flank each side of the stage (six to each side). The orchestra pit, located in front of the stage, has been blocked in with cement. While seats were replaced during mid-century, several rows of the original chairs remain at the rear of the second balcony.

A large proscenium stage measuring 56 feet in width and 35 feet in depth faces the auditorium. The proscenium arch is 45 feet in height and fronts a fly loft rising 85 feet above stage level. From ca. 1960 to October 1979 the arch had been cemented off and the stage space used as a restaurant. Efforts to rehabilitate the stage are currently underway. Twelve dressing rooms are arranged in three tiers to the north of the stage. A full basement lies beneath the stage and originally held a workshop for set and scenery construction.

The auditorium is richly decorated with Beaux Arts ornamentation. Terra-cotta statues, ceiling murals, gilt plaster, marbled walls, stained glass, ornate light fixtures and chandeliers, and heavy drapery all fuse into a romantic image of Renaissance luxury. The auditorium has undergone little repainting and retains much of its original character. The box seats are united by three tall arches leading from the balcony to the stage. Piers supporting these arches are decorated with gilt plaster moldings, while gilt plaster swags and shields embellish the spandrels.

A large pastel-colored mural dominates the auditorium ceiling. Painted in the French Rococo tradition, the mural depicts four figures seated on a terrace overlooking a wide landscape. Flowers border the edges of the scene and spill out from a central urn. A large ornate lyre stands prominently in the composition. To each side of the mural are three large panels with florid decorations, plaster shields, and chandeliers. Plaster lyres are also set at the far edges of the panels.

For the most part, the Wells Theatre retains its early 20th-century architectural integrity. Although exhibiting such significant alterations as the addition of air conditioning ducts, the removal of all stage lights, alterations to both balconies, the filling in of the orchestra pit, the addition of a new box office and marquee, and the replacement of the original seats, the Wells is fortunate in retaining its rich Beaux Arts decorations. With minor exceptions the theatre exhibits its original color scheme including gilt plaster work, marbled walls, and decorative murals. Recently leased by the Virginia Stage Company, the Wells is currently undergoing extensive rehabilitation to restore the building to its original use as a stage theatre. Rehabilitation plans are by the Norfolk firm of Spigel, Carter, Zinkl, Herman, and Chapman.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

Wells Theatre, Norfolk, Virginia

Continuation Sheet

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

#2

ITEM NUMBER

8

PAGE 1

At the time of the Wells opening, Norfolk was a leading entertainment center of the south Atlantic seaboard. Seventeen vaudeville and movie theatres operated here in 1913.⁹ Of these, the Wells was reported to be the most modern and the most prodigious.¹⁰

The oval entrance lobby, highlighted by a raised chandelier, large stained-glass panels, paired plaster terms, and classical revival friezes and swags, spoke of additional splendor waiting inside. Although the interior has lost some of its original features (carpets, floor tile, seats, and some light fixtures), it retains much of its early character. Focal points of the interior include a pastel-colored ceiling mural and round, cantilevered box seats set into a Renaissance loggia. Gilded and richly painted plaster work, heavy drapery, and marbled walls accentuate the decorative qualities of the building. Unfortunately, the original plush act curtain, manufactured by the Arnold Constable Company of New York City, has been removed.

As originally constructed the theatre could seat 1,650 patrons.¹¹ In addition to box seats, seating was arranged on three levels: orchestra, balcony, and gallery. Both the balcony and the gallery are of cantilevered construction.

Mostly catering to road shows and vaudeville acts, the Wells enjoyed popular success during the teens and twenties. Anna Held's All-Star Variety Jubilee, Mary Irwin, John Phillip Sousa and his band, and Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., in "The New Henrietta," are only a few of the acts appearing at the Wells during its first season of operation.¹²

The decline in the popularity of vaudeville coupled with the rise of the movie industry in Hollywood during the twenties, led to the folding of many road show theatres. The Wells chain was not immune to these pressures. In the late 1920s the Wells Theatre was converted to a movie theatre and sold. Since this time the theatre has gone through a succession of owners and changes. Alterations to the theatre have been of varying degrees. Seats were changed on at least two occasions, and a new marquee and box office were installed during mid-century. From 1961 to 1979 the theatre was used as an X-rated movie house.

Surprisingly, in spite of the number of owners, the theatre retains most of its original ceiling murals and plaster decoration. The theatre has been leased recently by the Virginia Stage Company, and efforts are currently underway to restore the building to its former opulence.

BNZ

(See Continuation Sheet #3)

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

Wells Theatre, Norfolk, Virginia

CONTINUATION SHEET

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

#3

ITEM NUMBER

86

PAGE

2

1

1. Virginian-Pilot, December 24, 1911.
2. In Atlanta these include the Forsythe, Bijou, Lyric, and Orpheum. In Savannah they controlled the Bijou and the Liberty, and in Augusta, the Bijou and the Grand. Ibid.
3. Virginian-Pilot, August 3, 1913.
4. The first mention of the New Wells Theatre was in 1911. Photographs of the theatre under construction appeared intermittently during 1912, with press coverage becoming more intense near the building's completion.
5. Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, August 26, 1913.
6. Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, August 25, 1913.
7. Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, August 27, 1913.
8. Ibid.
9. Hill's Directory of Norfolk, 1913, 1914.
10. Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch, August 26, 1913.
11. As of October 1979 the theatre held 1,035 seats. The gallery and box seats have been closed to the public. Original seats dating to 1913 still exist in portions of the gallery.
12. Virginia Stage Company, archives.

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

(2) Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Survey
1975, 1979 State
Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission
221 Governor Street
Richmond, Va. 23219

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

Wells Theatre, Norfolk, Virginia

CONTINUATION SHEET #4 ITEM NUMBER 10 PAGE 1

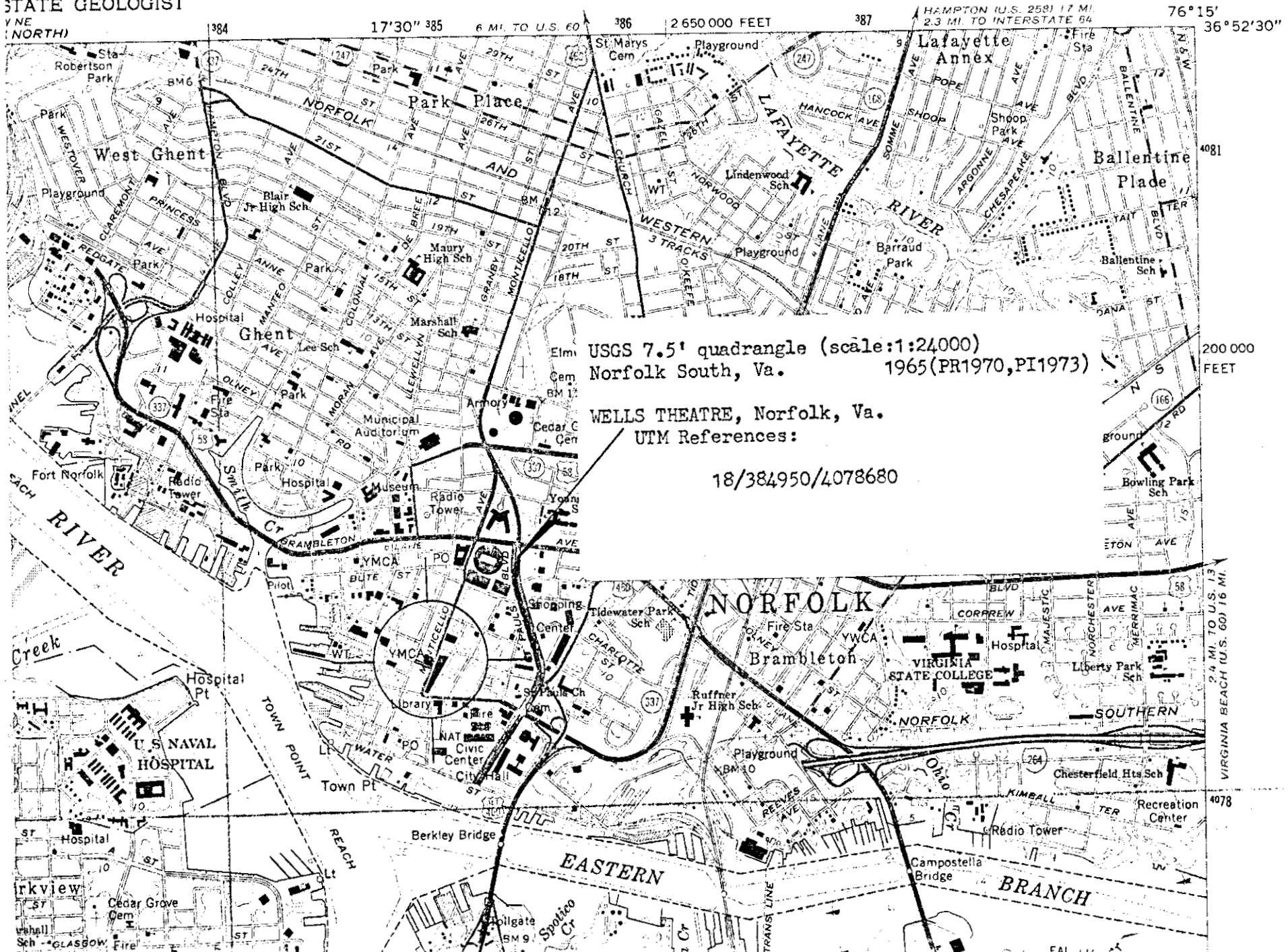
10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

(119.5) feet, more or less, to the center line of a lane approximately seven and four-tenths (7.4) feet in width, extending northerly from the northern line of Tazewell Street, (said center line being the eastern line of the property conveyed by the Granby-Tazewell Realty Corporation to Shulman Investment Corporation by deed bearing date the 3rd day of January, 1928, and duly of record in the office of the Clerk of the Corporation Court of the City of Norfolk, Virginia, in Deed Book 303-B, at page 172); thence in a northerly direction, along said center line of said lane, and approximately parallel with the western line of Monticello Avenue, one hundred (100) feet, more or less, to the southern line of the property now or formerly belonging to Minton W. Talbot; thence in an easterly direction, along the southern line of said property now or formerly belonging to Minton W. Talbot, and parallel, or nearly so, with Tazewell Street, one hundred twenty and five-tenths (120.5) feet to the western line of Monticello Avenue, as the same is now located; and thence in a southerly direction, along said western line of Monticello Avenue, one hundred (100) feet, more or less, to the point of beginning aforesaid.

DEPARTMENT OF VIRGINIA
NATURAL RESOURCES
STATE GEOLOGIST
VIRGINIA
(NORTH)

NORFOLK SOUTH QUADRANGLE
VIRGINIA
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

5757' 1 NW
LITTLE CREEK



USGS 7.5' quadrangle (scale:1:24000)
Norfolk South, Va. 1965(PR1970,PI1973)

WELLS THEATRE, Norfolk, Va.
UTM References:

18/384950/4078680

200 000
FEET

2.4 MI. TO U.S. 13
VIRGINIA BEACH (U.S. 60) 1.6 MI.