

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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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

Byrd Theatre

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

2908 West Cary Street

CITY, TOWN

Richmond

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Third (David E. Satterfield, III)

STATE

Virginia

CODE

51

COUNTY

(In City)

CODE

760

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" 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"/> MUSEUM
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL
			<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
			<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. Charles Somma, Jr.

STREET & NUMBER

2721 E. Weyburn Road

CITY, TOWN

Richmond

VICINITY OF

STATE

Virginia 23226

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Richmond City Hall

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Richmond

STATE

Virginia

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

None Previously Recorded

DATE

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Except for the removal of the marquee and lobby fountain, the Byrd Theatre has survived its forty-nine years of continuous operation with few alterations. The front of the building, in keeping with its interiors, generally follows Italian Renaissance precedent. The facade is of red brick with white terra cotta ornament. The plain but impressive box office is black Italian marble, a material also used in framing the main entrance. There is an outer lobby between two sets of a dozen plate-glass doors framed in brass.

The ceiling of the main lobby is twenty-five feet high, vaulted and heavy with gold-leaf plaster decoration. There is a large crystal chandelier, and the walls are covered halfway up with heavily veined marble. Three hand-painted murals line one wall, while the other three sides open onto a mezzanine lounge, itself heavily decorated with gold-leaf plaster, crystal chandeliers, wall brackets, and solid bronze handrails. A concession counter stands today where formerly a twenty-by-eight-foot pool and fountain were located. The marble fender, bronze rails, and other parts of this feature are carefully preserved in storage.

The auditorium recalls an Italian opera house in the elegant and flamboyant Rococo style expressed in a superabundance of marble, crystal, gold leaf, crimson velvet, and elaborate plaster decorations. The basic colors are amber and gold, with red velvet accent. The 1,396-seat auditorium is spacious but not so large as to lose its feeling of intimacy and elegance. The color scheme and detail are continued in the balcony, an integral part of the theatre's visual effect.

A huge chandelier in the dome, containing four thousand imported hand-cut crystals and three hundred bulbs in four colors, weighs some two tons but can be lowered for cleaning and relamping. There are an additional eight chandeliers, smaller in size, but also in four colors. Along the top of the auditorium's side walls in the niches are six hand-painted murals. The large murals on each side of the stage form a background to the opera-style boxes in which are displayed a grand piano and a harp.

The piano and harp are playable through the organ console, which can be raised from the basement to stage level. A gold grill extends along the entire length of the proscenium, concealing the organ chamber openings. Three chambers housing the pipes are located directly over the stage, which has been extended over the original orchestra pit.

All the lighting for the stage and auditorium, as well as the curtain and screen maskings, is controlled from the main switchboard located in the projection booth at the rear of the lobby. The only discordant element at the Byrd is the plastic and metal marquee built in 1971 as a replacement for one in the art deco style. The original marquee was a simple bronze structure with no lettering.

HPP

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION: The boundary has been drawn to coincide with the limits of the city lot on which Byrd Theatre sits (described in Verbal Boundary Description, Item 10).

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 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 1928 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Fred Bishop

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The grand opening of the Byrd Theatre on Christmas Eve of 1928 was a great civic event. Richmond's citizens could point to a bona fide movie palace which, in its design and interior appointments, could justifiably be described as comparable to the famed Paramount and Roxy Theatres in New York and the Atlanta Fox. It was certainly similar to them in representing the popular extravagance of the 1920s and the epic age of motion pictures.

"In our big modern movie palaces," an observer of contemporary culture wrote in 1929, "there are collected the most gorgeous rugs, furniture and fixtures that money can produce. No kings or emperors have wandered through more luxurious surroundings. In a sense these theatres are social safety valves in that the public can partake of the same luxuries as the rich and use them to the same full extent." The Byrd, constructed for Walter Coulter and Charles Somma at a cost approaching one million dollars, was in this class.

Fred Bishop of Richmond was the architect and contractor, with decoration and art-work done by the Brounet Studios of New York. The great chandelier in the auditorium was assembled and hung by the electrical contractors Union Electric of Richmond. The Byrd was built for talking motion pictures and was equipped with Vitaphone, a relatively new sound synchronization system pioneered by Bell Telephone Laboratories and commercially developed by Warner Brothers.

Walter Coulter, dean of Richmond showmen, employed his brother Robert as manager of the Byrd. The theatre opened with "Waterfront" and remained, during the heyday of Hollywood, the showcase theatre for such major studios as RKO, Universal, Fox, Disney, Paramount, First National, and Warner Brothers. While the limited backstage area would not support stage productions, major film stars appeared on stage to celebrate the Richmond premiere of their pictures.

The Byrd enjoys a national reputation achieved through the many recordings made on its great house organ. The Rudolf Wurlitzer Company, which custom made organs for the leading theatres of the country, installed the organ when the theatre was built. It has four manuals and seventeen ranks of pipes plus a complete percussion section. Patrons have enjoyed live organ music on a daily basis since the theatre opened.

See Continuation Sheet #1

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INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

BYRD THEATRE, Richmond (city), Virginia

CONTINUATION SHEET #1

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 1

8. SIGNIFICANCE

The Byrd remains, with the Radio City Music Hall, one of only two theatres in the country today that has a regularly employed organist. Among its nationally known musicians was Dick Leibert, who left Richmond to become staff organist at the famed Music Hall when it opened in 1932, a position he held until his retirement in 1970. The Byrd has been the scene of many organ concerts, most recently during April 1977. The 1972 national convention of the American Theatre Organ Society was held in Richmond, with two concerts at the Byrd figuring prominently in the program.

Robert Coulter managed the theatre from 1928-1971 and was succeeded in this capacity by his long-term assistant, George Stitzer. Although the Byrd is currently leased to Neighborhood Theatres, Inc., it is managed by Stitzer and owned by Charles Somma, Jr., son of an original owner.

HPP

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

"The Byrd Forerunner," issues for 1929-32 (title varies)
 Hall, Ben M. The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace.
 New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., Publisher, 1961.
 Manuscript and printed materials on the Byrd Theatre in possession of Miles J. Rudisill, Jr.,
 Richmond, Virginia.
 Queney, Elroy E. "Movie House Architecture, Twenties Style," Arts in Virginia, Fall, 1976.
 Rambusch, Harold W. American Theatres of Today. New York, 1929 (cited in Hall, op cit.)
 See Continuation Sheet #2.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than one acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,8	28,11,0,0	4,15,88,4,0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Situated on a city lot measuring approximately 84' x 135' with the 84' fronting on West Cary Street; located near the middle of the 2900 block (NE side) of said street; Block W1282, Card 24, Richmond City Assessor's Office.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Staff

ORGANIZATION

DATE

Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission

June 1977

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

221 Governor Street

(804) 786-3144

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Richmond

Virginia 23219

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.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

Tucker Hill, Executive Director

DATE JUN 21 1977

TITLE Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

USGS 7.5' quadrangle (scale:1:24000)
Richmond, Va. 1964 (PR1968,1974)

BYRD THEATRE, Richmond (city), Virginia
UTM References:

18/281100/4158840

