GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
APPLICATION FOR HISTORIC LANDMARK OR HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION

New Designation _X_
Amendment of a previous designation __
Please summarize any amendment(s) _____
Property name American Theater (Sylvan Theater)
If any part of the interior is being nominated, it must be specifically identified and described in the narrative statements.

Address 104-108 Rhode Island Avenue NW

Square and lot number(s) Square 3109/ Lot 0810

Affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission 5E

Date of construction 1913 Date of major alteration(s)_____

Architect(s) Nicholas Haller (architect), Joseph Jennings (builder)

Architectural style(s) CLASSICAL REVIVAL/Neo-Classical Revival

Original use RECREATION/CULTURE/Cinema

Property owner 104 Rhode Island Avenue NW Associates LLC

Legal address of property owner Care of Demers Real Estate: 1664 Columbia Road NW Washington, DC 20009-3610

NAME OF APPLICANT(S) DC Preservation League

If the applicant is an organization, it must submit evidence that among its purposes is the promotion of historic preservation in the District of Columbia. A copy of its charter, articles of incorporation, or by-laws, setting forth such purpose, will satisfy this requirement.

Address/Telephone of applicant(s) 1221 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20036

Name and title of authorized representative Rebecca Miller, Executive Director

Signature of representative _____ Date _____

Name and telephone of author of application DC Preservation League, 202.783.5144

Date received _____
H.P.O. staff _____

NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018

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 American Theater

other names Sylvan Theater

2. Location

street & number 104-108 Rhode Island Ave NW ☐ not for publication

city or town Washington ☐ vicinity

state DC code _____ county _____ code _____ zip code 20001-1633

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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 of certifying official/Title Date

_____
State or Federal agency and bureau

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

_____
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

_____
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby, certify that this property is:
- ☐ entered in the National Register.
  - ☐ See continuation sheet.
- ☐ determined eligible for the National Register.
  - ☐ See continuation sheet.
- ☐ Determined not eligible for the National Register.
- ☐ removed from the National Register.
- ☐ other (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

American Theater
Name of Property

Washington DC
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- [x] private
- [ ] public-local
- [ ] public-State
- [ ] public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- [x] building(s)
- [ ] district
- [ ] site
- [ ] structure
- [ ] object

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

None

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION/CULTURE/Cinema

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Restaurant and Specialty Shop

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

CLASSICAL REVIVAL/Neo-Classical Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Cement
walls Brick
Roof Metal
other

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

Description Summary:

Situated on the south side of the 100 block of Rhode Island Avenue NW, the American Theater consists of a one-story plain brick gable-roofed auditorium in the rear and a two-story polychromatic brick façade that faces the street.

General Description:

The American Theater is a single-story brick building located adjacent to the intersection of Rhode Island Avenue and First Street NW in the Bloomindale neighborhood of Washington, DC. Constructed as the "American Theatre" in 1913, the building was renovated and rebranded as the "Sylvan Theatre" in 1930.

Trapezoidal in plan, the building has south, east and west walls that are orthogonal to their respective cardinal directions; the north wall is skewed to match the angle of Rhode Island Avenue.

The rear auditorium unit is gable-roofed and built of plain brick. The two-story polychromatic brick façade that faces the street is three bays wide and neoclassical in style. A cornice that runs across the entire façade divides it into upper and lower sections.

A 1927 photograph shows that the center bay of the lower section once incorporated two banks of four entrance doors divided by a central brick pier, with a band of transom lights capped the door. Poster boxes adjoined the outer doors. The outer bays were faced with larger poster cases rather than doors or windows. A circa 1950 photograph shows the poster boxes adjacent to the entrance doors filled-in with brick and a flat marquee canopy with painted banded edges above a chevron motif suspended by the three metal hangers and its façade of buff brick in a running bond is rectangular in elevation. A shallow canopy supported by three steel hangers anchored into the brick above and painted string course molding above the canopy divide the bottom and middle parts of the façade. Commercial signage adorns the front of the canopy. Today the lower section is divided into four retail spaces with aluminum-framed windows and doors. The end bay poster cases have been replaced by a window on the east and a shop entrance on the west. The bricked-in poster case on the east side of the center bay is now a doorway, while the west side case is now a window. The two center door apertures are now the entrances to retail spaces divided by the original brick center pier.

The lower section of the façade is divided into six bays; the second and fourth bays are narrower than the remainder. The middle section of the façade above the canopy and string course is a field of brick divided into irregularly-sized bays with pilasters. The central bay above the string course contains brick laid in a diaper pattern with a diagonal grid; red brick headers form the intersecting diagonal stripes within the field of buff brick. Louvered grilles flank the sides of the central bay. The upper part of the façade consists of a painted cornice capping a brick parapet. A painted balustrade interrupts the center of the cornice. On the eastern half of the façade, a painted red metal marquee sign with white vertical "SYLVAN" lettering projects above the canopy and parapet.

An addition constructed in an alley between the theatre and the house to its west provides a supplementary public entrance and foyer. The height of the addition matches the elevation of the canopy. The addition is clad with unfinished wood planks oriented vertically. A sliding "barn" door constructed of the same type of wood as the siding hangs above the entrance. A metal canopy extends across the addition above the elevation of the doorway.

A photograph from 1917,[1] during the building's tenure as the American Theater, indicates the middle and upper parts of the façade were largely as they remain today, including the painted cornice with balustrade, the painted

[1] "American Theater, Just Sold," *Washington Evening Star*, December 8, 1917, 2.

string course molding, and the field of brick with a diamond pattern. The outer bays above the string course were infilled with a decorative lattice with a square pattern flanked by vertical bands of a material with lighter color than the surrounding bricks (both no longer extant).

A 1950 photograph shows that two vertical marquee signs with "SYLVAN" lettering symmetrically flanked a canopy marquee and a display sign above the entrance doors. All these elements, which are not present in the 1917 photograph, have been removed, with the exception of the eastern display sign and the metal marquee hangers.

Despite these modifications, the American Theatre retains its massing and distinctive decorative elements and still plainly "reads" as a theatre. The building retains integrity of design, materials, and feeling.

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)

x **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of our history.

☐ **B** Property associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

x **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 grave.

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property.

x **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Area of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/Recreation

Period of Significance

1913-72

Significant Dates

1913,1972

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Nicholas Haller (architect)
Joseph Jennings (builder)

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 files (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 #_____

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
x Local government
☐ University
x Other

Name of repository:
Newspapers (internet); ML King Library (Wash DC); DC Archives

Summary Statement of Significance:

A popular venue for entertainment and community events for one hundred years, the American Theatre building has served as an anchor for Bloomingdale during periods of stability and of change. Constructed in 1913 to plans by prominent local architect Nicholas T. Haller, it constituted a prime factor in the development of the neighborhood. Owner Jesse R. Sherwood's theater, in conjunction with his nearby row of shops, brought a true commercial and community center to the community. In this way it is a perfect example of the role such theaters played throughout the District. The building exterior has kept much of its architectural integrity, although its auditorium space has been stripped of its theatrical elements. The structure continues to serve as a social center for the Bloomingdale community through its several shops and restaurants.

The American Theatre is also significant for its association with the Black American Theater (BAT) , among the earliest, if not the earliest, significant theatrical company produced by the cultural flowering that accompanied the political self-empowerment of the District of Columbia's African-American community and anticipated the arrival of Home Rule. The BAT's record of successful productions in 1971-72 was a key achievement in what has been called a "mini-renaissance" as well as the golden age of African-American Theatre in Washington. It was also Washington's first African-American company to control a commercial theatre venue, an important symbolic achievement. Its success was a symbol of community rebirth after a long period of economic decline that accelerated in the aftermath of the disorders of 1968.

The National Parks Service (NPS) requires that properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years be of "exceptional importance… to a community, a state, a region, or the nation" to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This 50 year threshold is not an arbitrary arithmetic standard. The NPS specifically states that:

> It is not designed to prohibit the consideration of properties whose unusual contribution to the development of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture can clearly be demonstrated.

It should be noted that District of Columbia Historic Preservation law and regulations do not impose the fifty year standard, requiring only that sufficient time has passed to determine the building's level of significance. The significance of the Black American Theater in the development of Washington's African-American theatrical and cultural organizations has become well-established, especially by Robert Oliver's 2005 doctoral dissertation on the development of Washington theater from 1970 to 1990.

For these reasons, the American Theater merits designation under DC Criterion B for its "association with historical periods, social movements and patterns of growth that contributed to the heritage and development of the District," as well as that of the nation. For this reason, it is also significant under similar National Register Criterion A.

The restrained, dignified design of the American Theater, set successfully in an irregularly shaped lot, with its distinctive decoration of brick work and balustrade running its entire length, shows the skill of architect Nicholas T. Haller, one of Washington's most prolific and accomplished practitioners of the early twentieth century. Heller most often worked with residences, but, as a prominent commercial structure, the American shows his versatility. Although the façade has been modified at street-level, (the long row of doors removed for shop frontage and the flanking bays' display cases replaced with entrances) the original relationship of its sections below and above the vestigial marquee remains evident. The upper façade seems untouched from the theater's earliest days, with the exception of the Sylvan Theater sign added prior to 1950. The American Theater represents the transition from storefront nickelodeons to purpose-built large scale neighborhood motion picture theaters. It may well be the oldest purpose-built movie theater in the District that shows substantial integrity, and it qualifies for listing under District of Columbia Criteria D through F and similar National Register Criterion C because it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, style, and method of construction.

The American Theatre's period of significance begins with its construction in 1913 through the departure of the Black American Theater in 1972.

Resource History and Historic Context:

History of the Bloomingdale Neighborhood[2]

During most of the 19th century, the area of today's Bloomingdale consisted of several sprawling country estates just beyond the boundary of the city of Washington. It was bounded on the east by Prospect and Glenwood Cemeteries, both founded in the 1850s). The original Bloomingdale subdivision was created in 1889 from the former estate ("Bloomingdale") of Emily Beale, which straddled today's North Capitol Street. Beale's land extended from just west of First Street NW to Lincoln Road NE, and north from Florida Avenue to T Street. By the early 1900s, the neighborhood known as Bloomingdale encompassed other subdivisions west and north of Beale's land, eventually extending from Florida Avenue north to Michigan Avenue and from Second Street NW east to Lincoln Road NE. After the Eckington & Soldiers Home Railroad ran tracks north along the North Capitol Street corridor, the section of Bloomingdale between North Capitol Street and Lincoln Road NE became more associated with the Eckington neighborhood. Today the neighborhood's eastern boundary is considered to be North Capitol Street.

[2] This Bloomingdale history was kindly provided by Prologue DC, from a study made for the Bloomingdale Historic District Coalition.

Bloomingdale experienced relatively early and speedy development starting in the late 1880s. Row house construction began in earnest as nearby streetcar lines made new subdivisions accessible. Francis Blundon, Lewis Breuninger, Thomas Haislip, William Palmer, and Harry Wardman were among the developers and architects who built this elegant neighborhood over the course of two decades.

Many of Bloomingdale's classic Victorian row houses were designed for well-to-do families. First floors were raised for privacy and separation from muddy streets. Basements housed maids' quarters; sleeping porches made summers bearable; bay windows gave residents a view up and down the street; and towers added grandeur. Other houses were more modest. Among those who lived in Bloomingdale during its first few decades was Samuel Gompers, co-founder and president of the American Federation of Labor.

Bloomingdale is also historically significant for its role – within DC and nationally – in the battle to do away with racially restrictive covenants. When the neighborhood was first built, some developers wrote covenants into their property deeds to prevent sales or rentals to African Americans. Beginning around 1911, white residents began to organize to prevent African Americans from moving to the neighborhood. Lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston from nearby Howard University brought four cases involving Bloomingdale houses to the Supreme Court in 1947, contributing to the landmark 1948 ruling in *Shelly v. Kraemer* that restrictive covenants could not be enforced in DC or anywhere else in the nation.

When the American Theater, which admitted white audiences for several decades, opened in 1914, it stood near the core of Bloomingdale's modest commercial section at First Street and Rhode Island Avenue NW. This retail cluster included stores at 101 Rhode Island Avenue (1906), 81 Seaton Place (1913), 1942 First Street (1903), and 2007 First Street (1910), as well as a store and dwelling built in 1911 at the southeast corner of First and T streets, and a row of one-story stores along First Street's west side (numbers 1828-1836) from 1913. By 1920, these buildings housed a bakery, a dry goods store, a family dye-and-laundry business, and, on the southwest corner of First and Rhode Island, a Sanitary Grocery (later known as Safeway). A fruit market occupied 1821 First Street.

The retail district around the theatre was augmented by a cluster of stores in the nearby 1600 block of North Capitol Street that began to develop in 1906 and prospered for decades. The 1954 City Directory lists two beauty salons, a dry cleaner, a liquor store, and a shoe repair shop, among its businesses. A High's Dairy Store stood at the southeast corner of First and T Streets. Former residents recall that Rhode Island Pharmacy, which housed a postal station in the absence of a neighborhood post office, had a segregated lunch counter until the early 1950s. However, other local businesses, including Joseph Mensh's five-and-dime at 1837 First Street, welcomed everyone. By this time black-owned businesses operated nearby. On the east side of the block an African-American doctor practiced out of his home.

Development of Movie Theaters in Washington, DC[3]

The development of the motion picture industry in the District of Columbia follows a national pattern. As is characteristic of any such development, it was shaped by technological progress, reflected cultural trends, and responded to the expectations of the public. Interest in the movie as a form of entertainment first began with Edison's invention of the vitascope in 1895. The first theaters for the exhibition of moving pictures were converted stores with seating for several hundred people, which became known as "nickelodeons," a name derived from combining the Greek word for theater, "odeon", with the standard price of admission. By 1908 there were between 8,000 and 10,000 nickelodeons operating across the country.

The first motion picture theater in Washington, DC, a former store, was the Star Theater which opened in 1906 at 10th and D Streets NW. The Star was owned and operated by Thomas Armat, a Washingtonian who made a critical contribution to the film industry by inventing the "star guide." This device helped reduce the jumpiness of the images on the screen, an impediment to the creation of full-length motion pictures. In 1909, jewelry merchants A. Julian Brylawski and A.C. Mayer opened the Palace Theater, a small nickelodeon and the city's first purpose-built moving picture theater, at 307 9th Street NW.

The motion picture business immediately proved promising, and exhibitors opened theaters in existing buildings, including the Bijou on D Street NW and the Happyland on Seventh Street NW. Between 1909 and 1914, the number of theaters in the nation's capital expanded from 11 to 69. Most were located near the Star near Ninth and D streets NW. Most large downtown theatres were playhouses or vaudeville halls refitted to show motion pictures. They included the antebellum Ford's Opera House, which became the Bijou.

Cinema historian Robert Headley's authoritative *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, DC* has called the years 1913 through 1916 the "first palace" era, when improvements in presentation and the increasing popularity of movies spurred the replacement of nickelodeons by full-scale theaters specifically designed for the showing of films.[4] A burst of construction in 1913-1914 saw thirty-five new theaters open in the city, a number of which were located on streetcar lines outside the downtown commercial district. In addition to the American, Headley identifies the Savoy at Fourteenth Street and Columbia Road NW, the Regent at Eighteenth and U Streets NW, the Liberty near North Capitol and P Streets NE, the Carolina on Eleventh Street SE, and the Apollo on H Street NE as representatives of this trend.[5] These theaters were "larger and more substantial" than such recently-constructed neighborhood theatres as the 200 seat Minnehaha (1910) at 1213 U Street NW. Unlike the much larger Howard at 622 T Street NW (1910), they were specifically built as venues for film exhibition rather than as playhouses or music halls. Today, only the American still stands.

[3] This section is borrowed from the earlier nominations for the Earle and Atlas Theaters, which derive from the studies of Headley, Morrison and Valentine, listed in the bibliography.
[4] Robert Headley. *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, DC.* (London: McFarland & Co., 1999), 53.
[5] Ibid.

As the decade continued, movie exhibition continued to expand with the construction of both ornate large-capacity downtown theatres and smaller simpler neighborhood venues. By 1918, the Rialto (713-717 9th Street, NW with over 3,000 seats), the Palace (1306 F Street, NW with 2,423 seats), and the Metropolitan (932-934 F Street, NW with 1,484 seats) -- had been built downtown, gradually expanding the theater district from 9th and D streets, NW to F Street, NW. The 1924 construction of the Earle Theater (now renamed the Warner Theater), which was a combination of a movie theater with a major office structure at 11th and E Streets NW, was an early mixed-use business district theater. It was followed by the Capitol Theater (1328 F St NW), designed by Rapp & Papp as part of the National Press Building in 1927.[6] Meanwhile a counterpart theater district grew in the center of the African-American neighborhood on U Street.

The growth of automobile ownership after World War I had a major impact on the siting and architecture of neighborhood theaters. Individual elements such as the marquee and the signage were made larger in relation to the building in order to make the theater noticeable from a greater distance. These theaters were typically single-story structures adorned with bright lights, dominant marquees, vertical signage and ornately decorated box offices. Their plans were simple halls with a box office, a sloping floor and a projection booth. Neighborhood theater designers conducted in-depth studies on seating arrangements and acoustics, focusing on comfort and efficiency rather than fantasy and ornament. Maggie Valentine, in her architectural history of movie theaters, states that "although these individual [neighborhood theater] buildings no longer had to compete with large downtown commercial blocks, they nonetheless dominated their surroundings, both physically and psychologically."

Through the 1920s, out-of-town architects who specialized in theatrical design, such as Thomas W. Lamb, C. Howard Crane, and the Rapp Brothers, were brought in by national theater chains to create large motion picture palaces within the downtown theater district. Smaller outlying theaters were typically owned by local entrepreneurs and designed by such local architects as Reginald W. Geare, B. Frank Meyers, Julius Wenig, and C.C. Webb. Although virtually none of these local architects specialized in theaters, they included the city's busiest designers of residential and retail buildings. An exception was prolific Baltimorean John J. Zink, a specialist who designed at least thirteen of the capital's theaters during a career which lasted from the twenties into the 1950s.

The American Theater

Bloomingdale's new theater was constructed (over some opposition from groups opposed to "immorality" in movies)[7] by Jesse R. Sherwood (1863-1957), scion of a long-prominent landowning/farming family in the

[6] Headley, 109-117.

[7] The North Washington Citizens' Association passed a resolution of disapproval. A note on the original permit explains that the application to build had been made before the July 1913 regulation requiring neighbor agreement to new theaters. "Attention was called to the fact that a similar project on First Street, between S and T streets, recently was defeated through the actions of the association" (*Washington Times*, 3 Dec 1912, 2).

nearby Brookland-Langdon area and builder of the adjoining commercial row along First Street at the same time as the theater.[8] Sherwood also built the Jesse Theater at 18th and Irving Streets NE in 1927.

The building contractor for the American Theatre was Joseph A. Jennings and its architect was Nicholas T. Haller (1850-1917). Haller, a prolific and accomplished practitioner credited with 498 permits and 1,658 structures of all types, in many ways fit the eclectic profile of the early neighborhood theatre designer. A native of Frederick, Maryland, he began his Washington practice in 1883 and remained very active until the last year of his life. His *Washington Evening Star* obituary called him "the well-known architect, whose work covers some of the most important buildings erected in Washington in the last thirty years."[9] Although he designed the landmarked Warder Building at 527 Ninth Street NW, most of his work was residential. He designed 31 apartment houses and over one thousand single-family dwellings, most of which were row houses built by the city's leading developers. Haller designed substantial rows in Bloomingdale and neighboring Eckington as well as other sections of the city. Many of Haller's houses are contributing buildings in historic districts, but his listings in the *DC Inventory of Historic Sites* include the Warder Building (1892) and six apartment buildings. Although he designed several theatres, only the American was built.[10]

The *DC Architects Directory* notes that "Haller's earliest work commonly represented an eclectic style of architecture incorporating Victorian details such as integrated brick work and corbelling … finialed gables and turrets … and polychromy."[11] Haller often made dramatic use of brick in varying shades, textures, and patterns Examples in Eckington and Bloomingdale include his rows at 16 through 34 Rhode Island Avenue NW, 58 through 74 U Street NW, and 25 houses in the 1600 block of Lincoln Road and unit blocks of Quincy Place and Q Street NE. Similarly, the American Theatre had a façade of contrasting materials and textures. Its style is Neo-Classical, with what the *Evening Star* described as a "front … of Pompeian brick, with white marble trimmings"[12] Beneath the balustrade and elaborate multi-course cornice, the building's second story is punctuated by a series of recessed bays outlined by courses of bricks set on end. The large center bay features an example of Haller's brickwork patterns in contrasting colors. Here the beige brick of the façade sets off a network of dark brick set in interlocking diamond patterns.

Sherwood received his building permit on September 4, 1913 and construction apparently commenced soon after. The cost was originally estimated as $16,000 but in October a second permit specified an additional

[8] The property designation was Square 3109/lots 25-28 at the time of construction, soon consolidated as lot 810. The theater was the first building on that site.
[9] "Well Known Architect Is Called By Death," *Washington Evening Star*, Sept. 12, 1917, 11;
[10] EHT Traceries, "Nicholas T. Haller," in DC Architects Directory (unpublished database prepared for DC Historic Preservation Office, n.d.).
[11] Headley, 227.
[12] Permits #1033/4 Sept 1913, #1728/14 Oct 1913, #2439/25 Nov 1913; *Washington Times*, 13 Sept 1913, 12; *Washington Post*, 19 Oct 1913, R3; *Washington Evening Star*, 2 Dec 1913, 18; (description) *Washington Herald*, 3 Dec 1913, 15; *Washington Evening Star*, 8 Dec 1917, p. 2.

$5,000 to "remodel theater" (an extension, also by Haller). The theater had apparently been leased to Washington impresario Fayette Thomas "Tom" Moore (1880-1955) even before its construction, and it appears that these modifications may have been undertaken in consultation with the operator.

Tom Moore was Washington's leading motion picture exhibitor at the time the American Theatre was constructed. A native Washingtonian, he had entered the entertainment business as a singer and performer in vaudeville and minstrel shows. While playing the New England vaudeville circuit, he was engaged to sing as the warm-up act at a chain of movie theaters. He then traveled the Mid-Atlantic states exhibiting movies in small towns, before returning to Washington and showing an old print of Edison's *The Great Train Robbery* at neighborhood venues around the city. Moore then exhibited films in Great Falls VA and at Chesapeake Bay resorts before leasing a storefront in northwest Washington, where he and his wife sold the tickets, "ballyhooed," operated the projector, "and between reels . . . sang the illustrated song from the machine."[13] In 1906 he opened what has been called his first Washington theatre, "The Diamond," at 1342 H Street NE.[14] Moore quickly built on its success, converting the large downtown Plaza Theatre to motion picture exhibition and opening an exchange that distributed films to local exhibitors. In 1911, he acquired two more theaters, and, by April 1912, he controlled nine, including The Garden at 433 9th St NW, a large former playhouse that he converted to motion picture exhibition. Moore was an innovator; he was among the first to take out large display ads in the local newspapers and to install multiple projectors to avoid interrupting the onscreen action while changing reels. His film exchange allowed him to pass popular titles among his venues.[15]

In July 1913, Moore incorporated the American Theater Company "to establish, promote, maintain and control amusement and theatrical enterprises in the District of Columbia and elsewhere, and in so far as may be necessary to own the same." Moore's partners were his wife Nettie and Frank E. Elder, a very active Washington lawyer.[16]

At the time construction of the American Theater began, Moore's stature was such that he was called "the foremost type of exhibitor" and interviewed at length by *The New York Dramatic Mirror* on 3 September 1913. The "well-known motion picture manager" who "talks with the confidence of success" analyzed trends in the exhibition business, including that the public was steadily moving from quickie, clichéd films to more literate, "artistic" productions and would pay a higher price (10 or 20 cents) for them. Moore favored use of well-known stage actors ("a great star is an asset . . . the name draws"), extensive advertising (newspapers and lobby displays), and quality musical accompaniment. He suggested that feature-length films would replace shorter works; and he strongly spoke of legal protection for distributors against pirated screenings.

[13] Headley, 76.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid. Also "A Fortune That Was Founded on a Song," *Washington Post*; Feb 15, 1914; SM3.
[16] *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 3 September 1913.

Moore invested primarily in downtown theaters ("the business districts are the best of all") but his analysis of the potential of new suburban communities explained his strategy in opening The American in Bloomingdale:

> I have great confidence in the residential districts of a city as well. Three of my new houses are in the residential sections of Washington. An exhibitor should select a thickly populated district. He should draw an imaginary circle about the district and then locate his house at the very center. Give the best films with the best music, along with courtesy – the cheapest thing in the business world – and you have a proposition hard to beat. It is a safe and sure investment.[17]

Moore was very much "on a roll" during this period. In 1914 he took the lease of The Academy Theater, "for years the home of popular-priced melodrama," at D and 9th Streets NW and reopened it – after renovation – as The Orpheum and later The Strand, dedicated to "vaudeville of the highest class obtainable at popular prices" as well as motion pictures. That November he secured exclusive Washington rights to all films of the Paramount Company, Famous Players, the Shuberts, Jesse L. Lasky and a slew of other prestigious producers, and was considering expansion of his circuit to Richmond, Baltimore and Norfolk.

The American Theatre was to be a notable addition to Moore's chain. With a capacity of 750, "the new theater . . . is the last word in moving picture construction, and is the most modern theater of its kind south of New York." However, this venture was among the less successful of his career. In January 1914, with the building still under construction, Sherwood filed suit, claiming that he had the right to terminate Moore's lease because his building costs of $17,000 had exceeded the agreed-upon total of $13,500. Moore claimed the overrun was not of his doing and that the lease should remain in force. In February, a municipal judge agreed with the exhibitor, and ordered Sherwood to complete construction by March 1, 1914 or pay Moore damages.[18]

Despite his victory, Moore ran the American Theater for no more than a few months. Moore may have sold his lease as early as April 1924, when the venue began to be listed as "The New American Theater" in notices and its own ads. In December 1914 Moore's Casino and Strand Theater Companies was seeking an injunction against the "New American Theater Company" ("operating a theater at First and Rhode Island Avenue northwest") for "false representation that certain films extensively advertised by them would be exhibited at the defendant's theater" – specifically, productions of Paramount. This suit was filed just a month after Moore had signed an exclusive exhibition agreement to show Paramount films at the Strand.

The American's new operator was L. W. Atkinson, "owner of a number of moving picture shows in Washington," and Moore's former partner, Frank Elder, became manager and Washington representative of the Warner Feature Company. During the three years Atkinson operated the theater, the American ("New American" endured only to spring 1915) screened films and was used by community and church groups. The

[17] Ibid.
[18] *Washington Post*, 21 Jan 1914, 9; *Washington Evening Star*, 20 Feb 1914, 5.

Emery Elementary School in nearby Eckington held a theatrical benefit for its playground fund in May 1914, and a similar event the following May. The Washington Safety First Association (also a school-oriented group) raised money in this way later the same month; noting that "the management of the American Theater contributes the theater and the films free of charge, and has done much toward promoting the affair." When the United States entered the Great War, the American hosted the North Washington Citizens' Association's war bond rally.[19]

The most publicized community activity at the American Theater was the Stevenson Bible Class. This weekly "Bible class for non-church-going men" began when several prominent Bloomingdale residents persuaded the Rev. Hugh T. Stevenson, pastor of Bethany Baptist Church across the street, to undertake "a new movement in Sunday school work" that presented religious messages with a philanthropic, sports and social flavor. Access to the theater was fortuitous, since Stevenson planned to incorporate films in his presentations. By its first anniversary, the class' membership had grown from 13 to 75, with an average attendance of 40. It moved to a private home in November 1916, perhaps in anticipation of the theater's upcoming change of ownership.[20]

In December 1917 Atkinson (who has left virtually no other record) sold his lease to Harry M. Crandall, who was then challenging Tom Moore's reign as "king of Washington movie theater operators." Crandall (1879-1937) was "an immaculately groomed man of small but robust stature" who had a life story out of Horatio Alger: a local boy, he had left school at twelve for a series of ill-paid jobs (grocery boy, telegraph messenger, telephone operator) before using his small savings to establish a one-horse livery company.[21] In time this enterprise brought him financial security but "I always looked to the future." Having an epiphany while watching a film one evening in 1910 ("it occurred to me that moving pictures were the coming thing"), he leased an empty lot across the street from his stable to open the Le Grand Open Air Park under the stars at North Capitol Street and New York Avenue. Without even funds to pay for the surrounding fence, Crandall found a sign company which built it gratis in exchange for the advertising space.

After a season of heavy rains drove him to in-door screenings, Crandall opened the luxurious Joy Theater at Ninth and D Streets NW in 1913. The Joy was extremely successful, and, by 1922, Crandall controlled twelve theaters, including the magnificent Tivoli at Fourteenth Street and Park Road, as well as houses in rural Maryland and Virginia, and various related regional distribution and supply companies. Among his innovations were valet parking, "the shoppers' matinee" (a rest for weary lady shoppers), and the Saturday children's

[19] *Washington Times*, 21 May 1914, 6; *Washington Evening Star*, 13 May 1915, 14; *Washington Times*, 22 May 1915, 9; *Washington Times*, 24 Oct 1917, 12. ("The auditorium has been donated for the evening," *Washington Times*, 19 Oct 1917, 1).
[20] *Washington Times*, 23 Jan 1915, 8; *Washington Evening Star*, 13 Feb 1915, 18; *Washington Evening Star*, 5 Feb 1916, 8; *Washington Herald*, 15 Jan 1916, 7; *Washington Evening Star*, 5 Nov 1916, 7.
[21] For this and much more on Crandall see *Washington Post*, 22 Oct 1922, 60; and Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition*, 72-73.

matinee. He served as president of the local Motion Picture Exhibitors' League, and member of the Board of Trade and other such organizations.

The American was the seventh house in Crandall's circuit, and in many ways its acquisition foretold the outcome of his rivalry with Moore. While Moore was perhaps distracted by grandiose dreams of a theatrical empire, Crandall was quickly building theaters in such rapidly-developing neighborhoods as Mount Pleasant and Columbia Heights. Moore's worst miscalculation had come earlier in 1917, when he invested $250,000 in building the 3300 seat Rialto Theatre as the ornate flagship of his circuit. The Rialto was located in the 700 block of Ninth Street, and its audience declined sharply as the theater district migrated south and east on F Street during the early 1920s. [22] Although Crandall's newly-constructed Knickerbocker Theatre collapsed under the weight of a blizzard with heavy loss of life in 1922, his company survived. As he prospered in the mid-1920s, Crandall bought out many of Moore's remaining leases.[23] After years of limited use, the Rialto was demolished shortly before World War II.[24]

Crandall considered the American a key addition, commenting "I've been angling for the house for some time… [It] is in one of the best residential portions of Washington and I consider it an important link in my chain." Newspaper accounts agreed that he had staged a coup; "The acquisition gives Mr. Crandall one of the strongest groups of motion picture theaters in the East, practically covering every section of Washington." He promised superlative service, "Only the best photoplays" and "fine orchestral accompaniment"; "my motto 'Always a good show' will be strictly adhered to." Newspaper ads proudly proclaimed Crandall's "pleasure in informing the Washington public that I have added to my circuit the American Theater" and initially called it "Crandall's American Theater."

Crandall closed the American for four days for extensive redecoration:

> [In] the interior . . . the prevailing color scheme being old gray, ivory and gold. The lobby will be painted to harmonize with the interior. The exterior will be painted verdure green, heightened with medieval bronze. The lighting system, both interior and exterior, will be entirely rearranged . . . New hangings and draperies . . . will replace that now in position. The stage will be set with new scenery; a gold fiber screen will be installed and the latest type of projection equipment . . . placed in the operating compartment.[25]

[22] Headley, 76, 78.
[23] Headley, 79-80.
[24] Headley, 109, 156.
[25] Washington Post, 9 Dec 1917, R4; *Washington Evening Star*, 8 Dec 1917, 2 (with photo of theater); Washington Times, 6 Dec 1917, 7.

Although he mentioned plans to expand the theater to 1,000 seats and add a balcony, its capacity remained 700 with room for 300 standees.[26] Was there any undue dismay that the theater office was burgled on the first night of the new ownership?[27]

The American advertised regularly under the new regime, specializing in Paramount films under the slogan "If It's a Paramount, It's the Best Show in Town." Neighborhood programs, such as a Community Songfest in 1918 and a Victory Loan meeting in 1919, also continued. When city inspectors closed seven theaters for building code and safety violations in 1922, the American proudly placed its name in a group ad announcing: "These theaters have not been closed by the District Commissioners."[28] Otherwise, notices of small fires, more burglaries and ads for employees remind us of the normal operations of a neighborhood business.

Through the 1920s, the American had only two local competitors. The Truxton Theater, an "airdome," was built in 1910 near Truxton Gardens at North Capitol Street and Florida Avenue NW. A newspaper reported that "the theater is cozy, comfortable and scrupulously clean, and is manned by courteous attendants. [It] has won the hearty approval of the neighborhood in which is found many of the best and most refined houses in the city." The Truxton declared bankruptcy in 1923 but apparently was picked up by another operator, since it was till advertising in 1929. The Liberty, 1419 North Capitol St NE, followed the American by one year. The theater – "one of the most up-to-date neighborhood theaters in Washington" – drew from all the adjacent neighborhoods until it closed in 1931.[29]

Just before the onset of the depression, Crandall sold his lease on the American to the smaller Wilcox and Bernheimer chain, a partnership of William, E.S. Wilcox and Louis Bernheimer. According to the *Evening Star*, "'Willie' Wilcox, who was once engaged in the phonograph business in his native London, has been known long and favorably here."[30] Louis Bernheimer (1883-1951), who hailed from Southwest Washington, had come to theater management through his brother-in-law, the more prominent impresario A. Julian Brylawski (who built the wonderful Earle Theatre downtown). Wilcox and Bernheimer also operated the Jesse and the Seco Theatre in Silver Spring by 1932. After the partnership dissolved in 1934, Wilcox ran the Seco and

[26] Ibid.
[27] (Ads) E.g., *Washington Times*, 8 Dec 1917, 12; see *Washington Times*, 16 Feb 1918, 7 for a banner ad for "Crandall's Circuit of Theaters – Finest Chain of Motion Picture Theaters in the East"; (burglary) *Washington Evening Star*, 8 Dec 1917, 10; for another burglary see *Washington Evening Star*, 8 July 1922, 1; *Washington Times*, 8 July 1922, 2.
[28] (Events) *Washington Evening Star*, 28 July 1918, 4; *Washington Evening Star*, 3 May 1919, 2; (closing) *Washington Times*, 18 Feb 1922, 1; *Washington Times*, 22 Feb 1922, 13.
[29] (Truxton) Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition*, 333; *Washington Times*, 27 Apr 1913, 14; *Washington Times*, 4 May 1913, 17; *Washington Post*, 3 Mar 1915, 4; *Washington Evening Star*, 18 Jan 1923, 40; *Washington Evening Star*, 2 Oct 1929, 46; (Liberty) Headley, 285; *Washington Evening Star*, 3 Mar 1929, 33. It was used for storage of a coal supplier afterward.
[30] *Washington Evening Star*, 13 Oct 1936, 38; *Washington Evening Star*, 8 Mar 1938, 29.

built the magnificent John Eberson-designed Silver Theater in Silver Spring. [31] Bernheimer, whose chain was known as "Bernheimer's Theaters" or "Louis Bernheimer Theaters," operated perhaps four houses at any given time into the 1950s. In addition to the Sylvan and the Jesse, these included the Newton, Atlas, Senator, and Village in other northeast neighborhoods, the Academy on Capitol Hill, and several theatres in nearby Virginia, including drive-ins.[32] After Louis died (on the same day as his brother, who managed the Earle for the Warner Company), his son Joseph Bernheimer operated the chain until his death in 1957.[33]

In May 1930, the *Evening Star* advertised a "Gala Reopening of the Sylvan Theater" with a feature film, "comedy and short subjects. "[34] However, Wilcox and Bernheimer had surely taken over September 1929 when an advertisement referred to it as the "Sylvan Theater." The new name came from manager Sylvan V. Dietz,[35] a Hyattsville native who "although only 25 years of age [in 1929]… has been identified with the exhibition of motion pictures for a decade." At other times Dietz managed the Arcade in Hyattsville and served as regional manager of the Loew chain and a theater in Allentown, PA. In 1947 he was the "spokesman for Hyattsville merchants" and from 1953 to this 1969 death served on the Hyattsville City Council, holding various positions of responsibility and twice running

It was during this period that the Sylvan Theatre gained the large vertical sign at the east end of its façade and a full marquee fastened to the building by three support brackets slightly below the original mid-level cornice. Although no building permit can be found, this marquee was likely added as an adaptation to the automobile era. It has long since been removed, although the support brackets remain.

The life of a local movie theater is not generally a varied one – for its first two decades under Bernheimer The Sylvan continued much as it had under its previous operators – showing movies and providing a venue for occasional community uses (a Boy Scout event, a "scrap matinee" collecting metal for the war effort, a civic rally, and – returning to its earliest days – a film fundraiser for neighborhood playgrounds); police once searched the place (during a performance) for a fugitive killer.[36] However, the post-World War II years bought changes. In 1949, Jesse Sherwood sold the theatre building to Louis Bernheimer Theatres, Incorporated.[37] As

[31] *Washington Evening Star*, 19 Jan 1934, 3.
[32] As found in various advertisements o the period.
[33] *Washington Evening Star*, 8 Feb 1951, 28; *Washington Evening Star*, 31 Mar 1957, 79.
[34] (Ad) *Washington Evening Star*, 30 May 1930, 38.
[35] This is explicitly stated in Dietz's obituary (*Washington Evening Star*, 9 Dec 1969, 25). Other sources for his life and activities are: *Washington Post*, 9 Aug 1925, F3; *Washington Post*, 27 Apr 1947, M1; *Washington Post*, 20 May 1953, 39; *Washington Evening Star*, 10 Mar 1967, 26. The earliest reference to the name Sylvan comes from *Washington Post*, 19 Sept 1929, 10.
[36] Respectively: *Washington Evening Star*, 3 July 1942, 5; *Washington Evening Star*, 13 Nov 1942,5; *Washington Evening Star*, 6 May 1948, 16; *Washington Evening Star*, 16 May 1954, 11; *Washington Evening Star*, 8 Jan 1960,15.
[37] Doc #1949036112 of 11 Oct 1949 (roll 9063/frame 529).

much of Bloomingdale's middle-class white population moved to the suburbs and was replaced by middle-class African-American residents, the Sylvan shifted from white to so-called "colored" admissions in 1950.[38]

During the 1950s, District's continuing population loss, the development of suburban theaters in a car-oriented age, and the growing popularity of television thinned the ranks of neighborhood theatres, which declined from 57 in 1950 to 34 in 1960.[39] The Sylvan survived the deaths of the Bernheimers and for a time defied the decline of city theaters, but the District's Recorder of Deeds office shows that a succession of mortgages were placed on the building. The Sylvan closed in 1965, and, by the late 1960s, the long-term economic decline of the Bloomingdale commercial strip and the aftermath of the civil disorders that followed the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King in April 1968 left many surrounding storefronts vacant. For several years, the Sylvan was advertised for rent as a church or meeting hall. It was often condescendingly referred to as "the old Sylvan Theater" in the notices for these events – a health lecture in 1966 and a revival in 1968, for example. The property was sold at a bankruptcy auction in February 1967, and again in 1969.[40]

However, in 1971, the Sylvan entered a new era which radically departed from its past. Founded in 1967 by writer-producer-director Paul Allen (1927-2016) and his wife Thomasena Allen, the Black American Theater (BAT) was a company run "entirely by and for the black community."[41] The BAT, which was a subsidiary of a performance and educational entity known as the New Theatre of Washington, grew out of the era's tumultuous cultural and political trends. These forces produced what theatre historian Robert Michael Oliver defines as "theatres of identity." Such companies were founded on the belief that "Washington's theatrical culture had ignored the role of politics, class, race, gender, and ethnicity in the formulation of aesthetic precepts, processes, and tastes." They "represented counter-publics that the dominant public had disempowered, culturally,

[38] Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition*, 227.
[39] These numbers, taken from the telephone directories, might include some local legitimate houses. Headley (184) puts the beginning of the precipitous decline at the mid-1950s.
[40] *Washington Evening Star*, 5 June 1966, 90; *Washington Evening Star*, 24 Feb 1967, 28; *Washington Evening Star*, 22 May 1969, 43.
[41] Jeannette Smyth. "Fresh Promise of Success," *Washington Post*, Jun 20, 1972;. B2. Founding dates for the BAT vary by source. Most interviews with Paul Allen state that the group began as an integrated venture in the mid-1960s, and became an entirely African-American run organization a few years later. Its first mention in the mainstream press came with its move to the Sylvan in 1971. Whether the BAT was the city's first "Theater of Identity" company also depends on definitions. The Everyman Street Theater was a venture funded by the as-yet-unbuilt Kennedy Center which Oliver at different places states began in 1968 and 1970. In addition to being a subsidiary of an established mainstream theater organization, The Everyman Street Theater differed in conception from the BAT which performed on a traditional stage. Although Oliver acknowledges that Washington African-American groups staged plays before the late 1960s, few undertook a sustained succession of productions. In the late 1960s, the only group actively producing plays in the African-American community was the Howard players, composed of Howard University alumni. Plays with African-American themes and cast members were also performed at white-controlled venues such as Arena Stage. See Oliver, 238.

materially, and economically" and "constructed new audiences from disenfranchised communities."[42] These audiences:

> Consisted of four distinct categories of theatergoers, which represented a spectrum of counter-publics whose perspectives and concerns about art and its function in society were distinct from those of the dominant Washington theater-going class. The four categories were: 1) a recently energized, politically radical community eager to address a range of social problems that were all linked by the issue of class, 2) an African American population that was relatively united in its desire for socio-political enfranchisement, 3) a rapidly developing white feminist community, and 4) a growing Latin American population that wished to preserve its cultural heritage and language.[43]

Theatres of Identity strove to eliminate "the separation between the aesthetic event and the community for which the object or event was intended."[44] Because the core theater of identity audience was economically disadvantaged, these companies had to keep ticket prices low. However, the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts in the late 1960s and increasing access to foundation grants after 1970 provided alternative sources of funds that helped such companies proliferate and expand.[45]

Washington's earliest widely-known "theatres of identity" were the politically energized Living Stage, a project of the Arena Stage, and the Back Alley Theater, both founded in 1967. Although the Living Stage utilized professional actors, it came to improvise participatory texts in collaboration children and community members and performed in non-theatrical venues such as schools, hospitals, and prisons. The Back Alley Theatre literally began in a Capitol Hill garage and alley with "the orchestra floor a driveway and the troupe motley of neighborhood kids and friends of the producer" before it acquired funding and moved to the basement of a Northwest Washington apartment house.[46] In addition to performing, both companies conducted open workshops in playwriting and stagecraft for their audiences. These early troupes were soon joined by companies that represented other disenfranchised communities, including the BAT, Earth Onion, a feminist theater collective founded in 1971, and Teatro Latino, a Spanish language company founded in 1973.[47]

The BAT grew out of the rising expectations and concomitant sense of frustration experienced by many African-Americans in the late 1960s, as well as "the increasingly conspicuous fact that the city's 70% African American population did not have a viable theater of its own." Its founder, Paul Allen described his life as

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[42] Robert M. Oliver. *National Theater or Public Theater: The Transformation of the Theatrical Geography of Washington, D.C., Circa 1970-1990.* (Unpublished Dissertation submitted to University of Maryland Department of Theater), 2005. 213.
[43] Oliver, 216.
[44] Oliver, 223.
[45] Oliver, 213.
[46] Oliver, 223-224.
[47] Oliver, 216-218.

"shuttling between the poverty war and the arts." He saw these endeavors "as having a common objective … to involve the black community … to develop skills [and] its creative forces."[48] In addition to performing, the BAT conducted workshops in acting and playwriting for youth and harnessed the energies of students from both Howard University and Federal City College.

In 1971, with the aid of a $5,000 grant from the Institute for Policy Studies, the BAT made "the old Sylvan" its first home.[49] Bloomingdale had long-standing cultural connections. It is situated near the Howard University campus, and had been the home of the Barnett-Aden Gallery, the first African-American-owned art gallery in the United States. However, the gallery had closed in 1969 at the death of its surviving founder, the Rhode Island Avenue commercial strip struck observers as desolate, and the Sylvan was shabby, without parking, and located far from Washington's established theatrical precincts. Nonetheless, possessing the theater fulfilled important functions for the BAT. As Oliver observed:

> As Mike Sell writes in his essay on the Black Arts Movement, the acquisition of identifiable theatrical structures strengthened theater's ability to "answer specific sociopolitical needs, particularly to a community that is economically distressed and politically advanced." In other words, control of a theater building suggested more than just performances to a community; it also implied jobs and economic development. ..The control of venues was an essential ingredient in the representational equation.[50]

Secondly, the BAT company envisioned their work renovating the Sylvan would symbolize the artistic endeavors happening within. As Paul Allen recalled:

> It was a dilapidated old movie house that saw its heyday during the '20s and '30s and had been closed for years. Brooms and hammers wielded by actors and community kids cleared out the inches of dust and piles of junk that had accumulated . . . They rebuilt the stage and replaced the seats. And no one was paid for their labor. The spirit was there.[51]

Such a collaborative project served to break down the barriers between artists and audience and to make the company an integral part of the community. A *Washington Post* reporter noted that the Sylvan's location "sadly mirror[ed] many urban streets. The wide vista of Rhode Island Avenue and First Streets reflect[ed] a desolation and dustiness even in the blaring sunshine."[52] However, others saw the theater's rebirth as transformative.

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[48] Oliver, 242.
[49] Angela Terrell**.** "The 'Sage' of Black Stage," *Washington Post,* Jan 14, 1973. K1, and Smyth. *Washington Post,* Jun 20, 1972, B2.
[50] Oliver, 238.
[51] Terrell, *Washington Post,* Jan 14, 1973. K1
[52] Jacqueline Trescott, "Beauty That Touches the Black Spirit," Washington *Evening Star*, June 6, 1971, 9H.

> There's a certain lift to everyone's walk who crosses the theater's freshly painted threshold. Passers-by spotting the colorful marquee or hearing the continuous music peek in and ask ... 'When do audition start?[53]

The BAT's rehabilitation of the theater building thus became a narrative of resurrection, self-determination, and empowerment, which, as Oliver notes, was perhaps "more significant than a story that the theater might tell on its stage."[54]

The BAT staged its first production, *El Hajj Malik*, a drama about Malcolm X, at the Sylvan in June 1971. Its second production, the gospel musical *Jesus Christ- Lawd Today* was called "superb" and full of "marvelously riveting scenes" by *Washington Post* critic Richard L. Coe. [55] The Sylvan had been designed for film exhibition, but the BAT's modifications helped the play break the barrier imposed by a traditional stage with proscenium arch. It was performed on a "rough-hewn stage with unpainted wooden platforms." Seats had been removed from the auditorium's center section and "down its length stretches an unpainted wooden ramp on which about a quarter of the action takes place," thus further integrating performers and spectators.[56] The atmosphere during a performance was described as electric:

> The theater is dark, hiding the faded formerly plush seats now filled with black men and women in jeans and dashikis. The sound of gospel music fills the air, and from that point on, the audience is as active as any sanctified church congregation during a revival meeting. Foot-patting and hand clapping, this black audience shows its appreciation by participating…It has been said that to be successful black theatre must encompass all the 'pleasure and passion' of the church.[57]

During the 1971-72 seasons, the BAT staged other well-reviewed productions at the Sylvan. *Five on the Black Hand Side* was a revival of a domestic comedy about the influence of the women's movement on a middle class African-American family. [58] In July 1972 *Songs My Father Taught Me*, a musical written by Thomasena Allen, traveled from the Sylvan to the stage of Joe Papp's Public Theatre in Manhattan. In August 1972, the BAT's production of three one act plays by students in a Howard University playwriting workshop were described as "assured, impressive, and impassioned" by *Washington Post* critic Tom Shales.[59]

At the end of 1972, Paul Allen reflected on two seasons of struggle and success with cautious optimism. A series of grants meant that the BAT could pay deferred salaries to its staff of 25 actors and technicians.

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Oliver, 239.
[55] Richard L. Coe. "Jesus Christ-Superb Show," *Washington Post,* Jul 24, 1971, E1.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Terrell, *Washington Post,* Jan 14, 1973. K1.
[58] Richard L. Coe. "A Laugh for Each Handshake," *Washington Post*, Nov 3, 1972, B8.
[59] Tom Shales. "Three One-Acts': Impressive," *Washington Post*, Aug 3, 1972 C1.

Although Allen felt that segregated venues had left African-Americans unfamiliar with live drama, the BAT's organic relationship with the community had won it an audience.

> We had to go out and bring them in by hand. Telephone calls, letters, and handbills handed out by neighborhood kids are what it took to get black folks out. Young people dropped in out of curiosity and once they saw scenes familiar in their lives – a sense of self-identification- they came back again and again. Black people want and need to see themselves, their lives, and daily rituals being portrayed. But they're not seeing this in any depth in films or on television.[60]

At the beginning of the 1973, the BAT announced a major decision, seemingly based on this sense of optimism as well as the success of the Black Repertory Theatre. The "Black Rep," as it was popularly known, had been founded by Robert Hooks at about the time that the BAT had renovated the Sylvan. Hooks, a native Washingtonian, was an established who had starred in television series and appeared in films and on the New York stage. Like the BAT, the Black Rep conducted acting and playwriting workshops and staged plays of interest to the African-American community. However, Hooks' aspirations were more mainstream; he sought to create a parallel Actors' Equity Company that would raise funds through more commercially-oriented projects. In the summer of 1972, the Black Rep had moved into the large Colony Theater on upper Georgia Avenue, where it was attracting increasing media attention.[61] In January 1973, Allen announced that the BAT would leave the Sylvan for the Sheridan Theatre, a 1937 John Eberson-designed former movie house on Georgia Avenue near Sheridan Street NW. In addition to being larger and in much better repair than the Sylvan, the Sheridan had off-street parking, a necessity for attracting larger audiences.[62]

However, it does not appear that the BAT ever mounted performances at the Sheridan. Its next venture, a much-praised revival of the musical *Inner City*, appeared in June 1973 on the rented stage of the Washington Theater Club (WTC) in the West End.[63] Later that year, the BAT and the Ebony Impromptu troupe combined operations with the WTC as the New Theater of Washington.[64] However, in late 1974, the collaboration's

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Oliver, 237, 245-248. Although Hooks briefly achieved his dream of creating an Actors' Equity company, the Black Rep collapsed financially in 1976. The surviving non-Equity troupe became a workshop group and left the Colony Theater, and Hooks departed for Hollywood. The company was later reorganized as "The Rep" and produced plays intermittently, See Jacqueline Trescott. "Fade-Out," *Washington Post,* Nov 7, 1993, G1.

[62] Terrell, *Washington Post*, Jan 14, 1973. K1. It is unclear why the BAT's move to the Sheridan was apparently abortive. In 1971, the vacant theatre had been acquired by the Blackman's Development Center, a community-based organization which announced plans to open it as an arts center. In the fall of 1973, the theatre, renamed the Crème Beaux Palace, briefly became home to Theater West, a Dayton, Ohio-based performance group. See Hollie I. West. "Arts Center for Georgia Avenue," *Washington Post*, Mar 1, 1971, B6, and Richard L. Coe, "Living 'The System,'" *Washington Post*, Nov 22, 1973, C21

[63] Richard L. Coe. "Snapshot Of Ghetto Survival: Exuberant Ghetto Cynicism," *Washington Post*, B1.

[64] Richard L. Coe. "Theaters Plan to Merge," *Washington Post*, B1.

theatre, a converted church at 23rd and L Streets NW, was lost to foreclosure. Under the direction of Thomasena Allen, the New Theater of Washington mounted productions in other spaces into the early 1980s.[65]

Although the BAT's residence at the Sylvan was brief, it was highly influential. With the possible exception of the very differently-conceived Everyman Street Theater, Robert Oliver's research indicates that BAT was the earliest significant theatrical company representing the cultural flowering that accompanied the political self-empowerment of the District of Columbia's African-American community and anticipated the arrival of Home Rule. Its record of successful productions was a key achievement in what has been called a "mini-renaissance" and a golden age of African-American Theatre in Washington.[66] It was Washington's first African-American company to control a commercial theatre venue, an important symbolic achievement. Its success was also a symbol of community rebirth after a long period of economic decline accelerated in the aftermath of the disorders of 1968. The *Washington Post* acknowledged the BAT's stature when a 1972 editorial listed it as a key member of a group of the city's new African-American cultural organizations distinguished by their "amazing diversity and vitality." The *Post* concluded that:

> No doubt there are more such groups in New York or San Francisco. But people in a position to know and to judge now tell us that the average quality of black Washington's cultural activity is as good as or better than elsewhere. The black arts in Washington are young and daring and experimental.[67]

After the BAT departed, the Sylvan reverted to sporadic rental uses. The Metropole Cinema Club leased the Sylvan in 1975-76 before closing. It was followed by a store called Antiques 'n Old Stuff, still operating in 1984.[68] The theater building now holds an assembly of stores and restaurants.

The theater in recent years – repaired and minus its earlier marquee – has held an assembly of stores and restaurants along its frontage.

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[65] "Upbeat: Theater, Entertainment, Music, Arts," *Washington Post*, Jul 24, 1980, DC6.
[66] Trescott. *Washington Post*, Nov 7, 1993, G1.
[67] "Black Culture," *Washington Post*, Nov 23, 1972, A22.
[68] (Lecture) *Washington Post*, 7 Feb 1966, C2; (revival) *Washington Post*, 9 Mar 1968, C6; (ABT) *Washington Evening Star*, 9 June 1971, 58; *Washington Post*, 24 July 1971, E1; *Washington Post*, 10 Dec 1971, D18; *Washington Post*, 4 June 1972, G12; *Washington Post*, 3 Aug 1972, C1; *Washington Post*, 3 Nov 1972, B8; *Washington Post*, 14 Jan 1974, K1; (Metropole) numerous ads, e.g. *Washington Evening Star*, 29 Oct 1975, 81; (antiques) *Washington Post*, 9 July 1978, L2; Wash Post, 15 Nov 1984, DC4.

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D.C. land transfer records (Recorder of Deeds)
City directories, telephone directories

Washington Evening Star
Washington Herald
Washington Post
Washington Times

Kiplinger Library, Historical Society of Washington

American Theater
Name of Property

Washington DC
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property _____

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1				3			
2				4			

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Hayden M. Wetzel

Organization DC Preservation League date 27 September 2016

street & number 1221 Connecticut Ave NW, #5A telephone (202) 783-5144

city or town Washington state DC zip code 20036

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional Items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO)

name 104 Rhode Island Avenue NW Associates LLC

street & number c/o Demers Real Estate, 1664 Columbia Rd NW telephone _____

city or town Washington state DC zip code 20009-3610

Paperwork Reduction Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et. seq.).

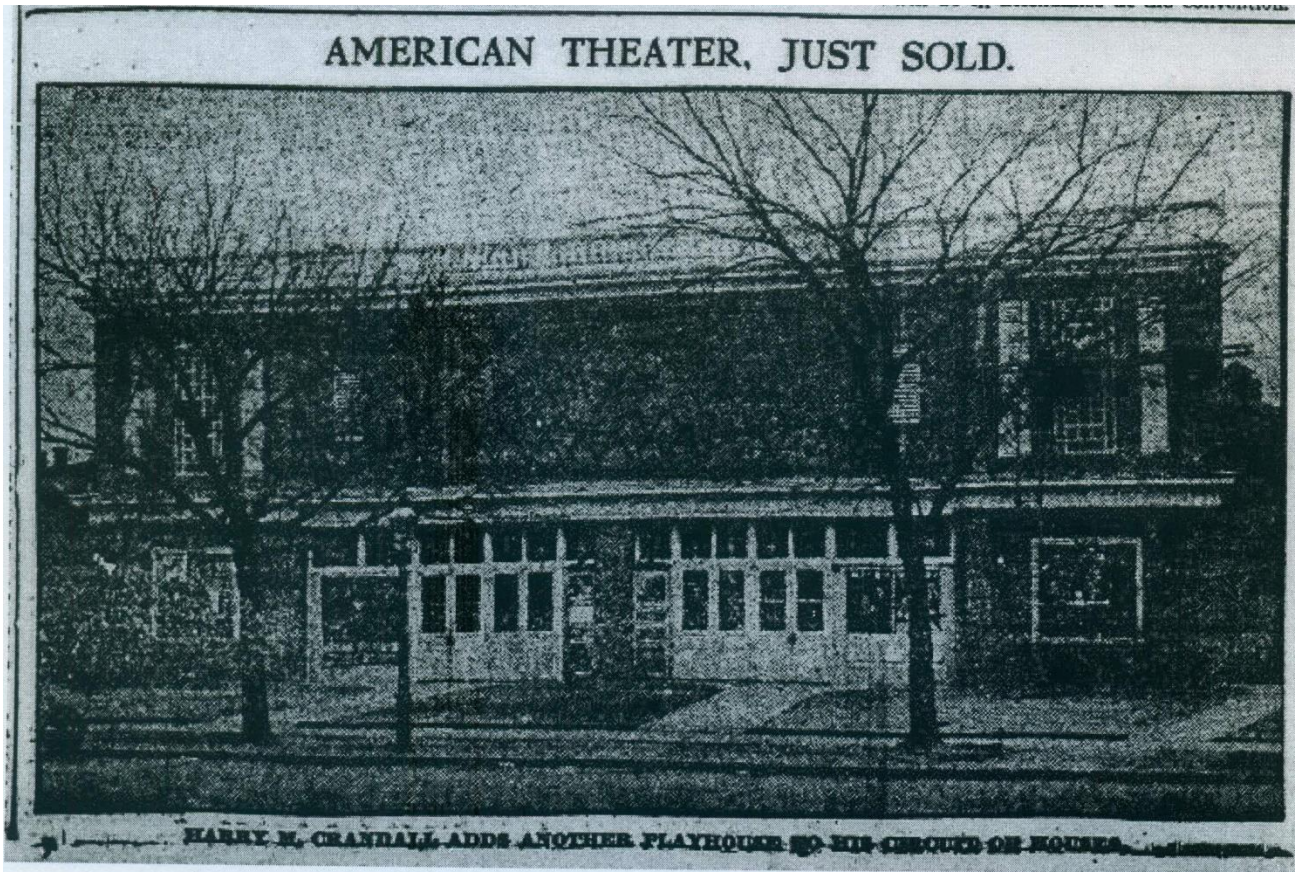
Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Verbal Boundary Description:

The nominated property consists of all of lot 801 of Square 3109.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary holds the complete building and any attached open spaces.


AMERICAN THEATER, JUST SOLD.

HARRY H. CRANDALL ADDS ANOTHER PLAYHOUSE TO HIS CIRCUIT OF HOUSES

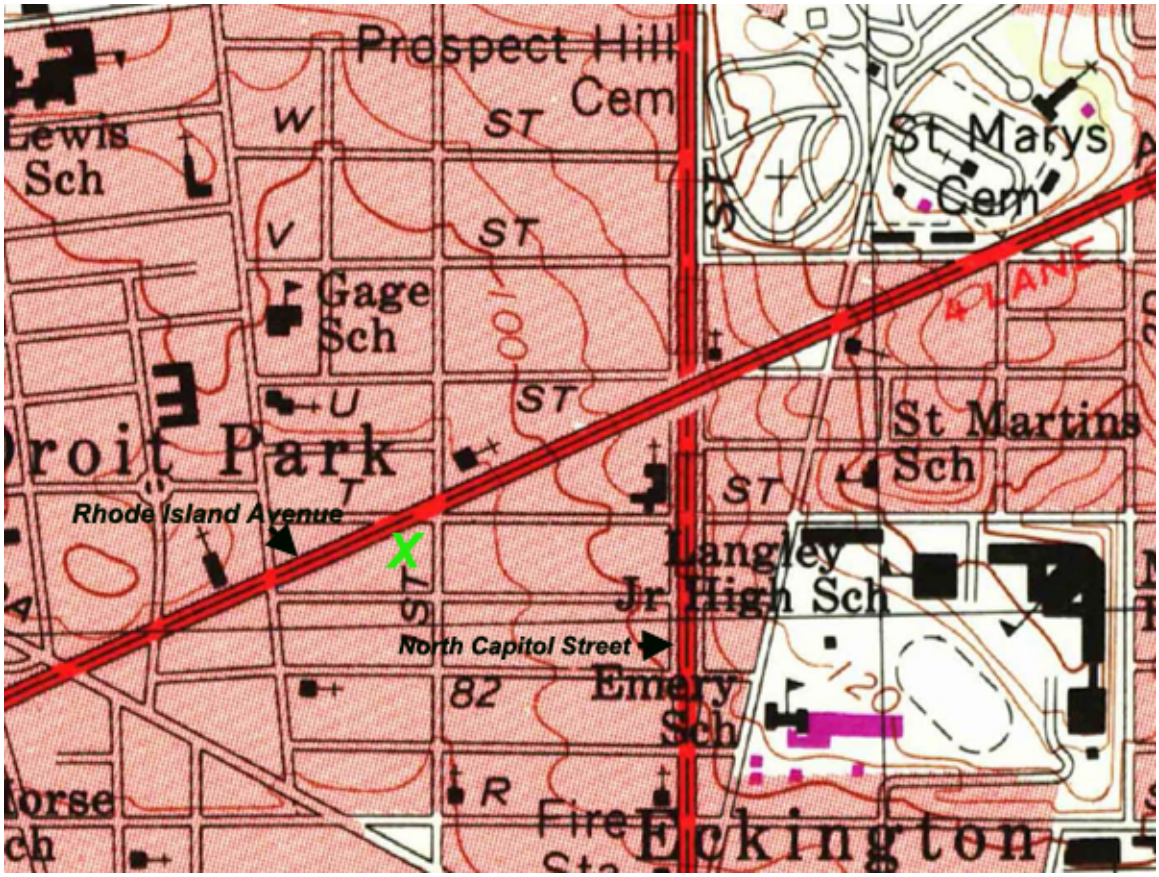
Image 1: American Theater, Rhode Island Avenue façade (*Washington Evening Star*, December 8, 1917 (Page 2))

Image 2: Sylvan (former American) Theater, Rhode Island Avenue façade, 1950

IMAGE LIST
American (Sylvan) Theater
Washington, DC

Image Of 006	Subject	Photographer and Date
001	Theater façade looking southeast, showing side entrance and gable auditorium roof	D.P. Sefton, February 20, 2017
002	Theater façade looking southwest	D.P. Sefton February 20, 2017
003	Theater façade looking south	D.P. Sefton, February 20, 2017
004	Detail of balustrade and brickwork, pattern of front facade	D.P. Sefton, February 20, 2017
005	Detail of theater facade looking east	Hayden Wetzel, 2016
006	Bloomingdale commercial cluster east of theater at the intersection of First Street and Rhode Island Avenue NW, looking southeast	Hayden Wetzel, 2016

Site Map


Prospect Hill Cem
Lewis Sch
W ST
V ST
Gage Sch
U ST
Park
Rhode Island Avenue
X
St Marys Cem
PLANE
St Martins Sch
ST
Langley Jr High Sch
North Capitol Street
82
Emery Sch
R
Fire
Eckington


Lot 91
160 U St
Thomas St NW
1st St NW
T St NW
MU-4
T St NW
Rhode Island Ave NW
Seaton Pl NW
S St NW
RF-1
MU-4
Randolph Pl NW
DC GIS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