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: National Theatre
*If any part of the **interior** is being nominated, it must be specifically identified and described in the narrative statements.*

Address 1321 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

Square and lot number(s) Square: 254 Lot: 842

Affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2C

Date of Construction: 1885 Date of major alteration(s) 1923

Architect(s) John B. McElfatrick & Sons (architects – 1885 auditorium); Warren & Wetmore (architects – 1923 structure); Samuel J. Prescott & Co. (builder – 1923 structure) Architectural style(s): LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS: Neoclassical Revival

Original use RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater
Present use RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

Property owner The National Theatre Foundation

Legal address of property owner 1321 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20004

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) 1328 Florida Avenue NW, 2nd Floor, Washington, DC 20009; (202) 783-5144

Name and title of authorized representative: Rebecca Miller, Executive Director

Signature of applicant representative: Rebecca Miller Date: 9/28/26

Name and telephone of author of application: DC Preservation League, (202) 783-5144

Case #26-12

Date received 9/28/2026
H.P.O. staff KPW

OMB Control No. 1024-0018
expiration date 03/31/2026

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.* 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.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: _National Theatre_____
Other names/site number: _____
Name of related multiple property listing**:**
_N/A_____
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing

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2. Location

Street & number: _1321 Pennsylvania Ave NW_____
City or town: _Washington_____ State: _DC_____ County: _____
Not For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

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3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___national ___statewide ___local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B ___C ___D

_____
Signature of certifying official/Title: **Date**
_____
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

National Theatre | Washington, DC
Name of Property | County and State

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official: **Date**

Title : **State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register

___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register

___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:	X
Public – Local	
Public – State	
Public – Federal	

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)	X
District	

National Theatre | Washington, DC
Name of Property | County and State

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		Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register _____

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6. Function or Use
Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)
RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)
RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)
LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS: Neoclassical Revival

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)
Principal exterior materials of the property: Limestone, wood, metal, terracotta

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with **a summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The seven-story National Theatre building, designed by the New York firm of Warren and Wetmore and completed in 1923, stands at a prominent south-facing location in the 1300 block of Pennsylvania Avenue NW. This block stands in a line with E Street NW and faces Freedom Plaza. Little more than the front façade of the theater is visible from the street. The limestone façade is in a restrained Neoclassical style designed to blend with other federal buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue, and the large hotel building adjoining it on the west side was specifically designed to the historic National Theatre building. The façade retains a high degree of integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Narrative Description

Although the National Theatre has occupied the same location since 1835, its current seven-story building dates to 1923, when New York architects Warren and Wetmore's "renovation" represented an essential reconstruction of its Italianate 1885 predecessor.

Warren and Wetmore, who designed Manhattan's iconic Grand Central Station as well as Washington's Old Italian Embassy, were noted for their mastery of the Beaux Arts style. However, its elements were less pronounced in the firm's larger Washington buildings like the Mayflower Hotel and the National Theatre. Architectural historian Shirley Maxwell's National Register nomination describes the Mayflower's style as "restrained Beaux-Arts,"[1] while such typical elements as quoins and ornamental reliefs like wreathes and garlands are not found at the National Theatre. However, while the theater never possessed the associated degree of neoclassical ornamentation, the muted Beaux Arts tones of Warren and Wetmore's design's high degree of symmetry and aesthetic balance reflects a key principle of this architectural style. Likewise, the architects' Warren and Wetmore's modulation of limestone, a favored element of this style, exhibits how relatively simple geometric forms can gain visual interest through texture and variegated tone.

The 1885 theater's five-story brick façade was divided into three flat bays by two protruding bays topped by pyramid-roofed turrets that rose above the building's flat roof and small triangular central pediment. Following Warren and Wetmore's 1922 design, the present-day theater has a flat, rectangular, virtually symmetrical façade of limestone panels facing Pennsylvania Avenue. While its west façade is obscured by a taller next-door neighbor, the brick upper stories of its east façade are visible through the airshaft above the single-story extension that accommodates a side door. Behind the original building and otherwise invisible from the street is a modernist addition for storerooms and utility space added in the 1980s.

The theater's flat roof is topped by a protruding eave mounted upon a row of more than fifty identical brackets. Below the brackets is a tiered cornice with a row of dentils running above a smooth band of curved limestone blocks that reaches to the flat tops of the seventh story window apertures. From the third through the seventh story, the rectangular, vertically paned, single windows are aligned in ten evenly spaced columns. Windows on stories four, five, and six have individual limestone sills, while the bottoms of the seventh story apertures meet a thin cornice of rectangular limestone blocks. Another slightly thicker grooved cornice runs between the third and fourth stories. Below the third story windows is a heavier cornice with four tiers and chamfered corners.

Below this cornice, the façade is faced with wider and taller limestone panels that provide a backdrop for the white illuminated "National Theatre" sign centered above the marque. The second story fenestration deviates somewhat from the symmetry of the upper stories. At its center is a row of five single windows about half the height of those above, which as an ensemble aligns with the fourth through the seventh story window columns and the theater entrance below the marque. The marque is partially supported by two chains which are affixed to lion's head anchors mounted on the façade above the center window row. To its left and right are rows of three similarly-sized windows which align with the second and third and eighth and ninth window columns above and the storefront display windows below. A single window to the left and right of these rows is aligned with the first and ninth window columns above and an

[1] Shirley Maxwell, *National Register Nomination for the Mayflower Hotel (Washington, DC*), (1983), Section 7. https://historicsites.dcpreservation.org/items/show/362

arched entrance door below. On the east end of the façade is a small square window above what was originally a display window.

At street level, the theater's main bank of six glass entrance doors is beneath the protruding marque at the façade's center. To its right and left are three-section storefront display windows whose upper sections have diamond-patterned metallic screens. Near either end of the façade is a door with a sunburst transom under an arch. At the façade's east end is a recessed single-story extension which contains another entrance door. Above this extension, which adjoins the glass-fronted office building next door, is the building-deep airshaft that permits an angled view of the rear addition.

The National Theatre exhibits high integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. Although the Warren and Wetmore building has undergone such subsequent alterations as a conversion to a movie theater in 1948 and a full interior refurbishment that included the construction of the addition in 1982-84, a photographic comparison establishes that its 1923 exterior remains largely intact. Readily visible alterations include the addition of the recessed east side extension, the replacement of sashes, doors, and display windows, and a replaced marque which differs modestly from the design of the original. The major change to the theater's exterior is the rear addition not visible from the street.

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 patterns of our history.
- [ ] B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- [ ] C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- [ ] D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ 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
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)
PERFORMING ARTS

Period of Significance
1885-1971

Significant Dates
1885, 1923

Significant Person
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

_____
_____
_____

Cultural Affiliation

_____
_____
_____

Architect/Builder
John B. McElfatrick & Sons (architects – 1885 auditorium)
Warren & Wetmore (architects – 1923 structure)
Samuel J. Prescott & Co. (builder – 1923 structure)

_____

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The National Theatre at 1321 Pennsylvania Avenue NW achieves significance under District of Columbia Criteria B as well as similar National Register Criterion A for its "association with historical periods, social movements and patterns of growth that contributed to the heritage and development of the District." The theater, founded in 1835, has survived more than 190 years to become the second oldest nearly continuously operating theater company in the United States. The National survived despite several major fires, controversy over its racially discriminatory policies, multiple changes in ownership, and demolition proposals. When the theater burned down in 1845, 1857, 1873, and 1885—fires attributed to causes such as a candle being left burning in an oil room and the storage of flammable materials—it was rebuilt and reopened. In the 1960s and 1970s, proposals were made to tear it down as part of projects to revitalize Pennsylvania Avenue, but the proposals were not implemented.

The National Theatre is significant historically as one of the city's most prominent and enduring venues for theatrical productions. Over nearly two centuries, the National has presented about 6,000 performances, including plays, musicals, and operas. In its early years, circuses and acrobatics also appeared on stage. The theater has provided pre-Broadway tryouts of shows such as *West Side Story* and *Fiddler on the Roof.* At the same time, it has been a home to traveling versions of shows that were Broadway hits. Numerous theatrical stars throughout the nation's history have performed at the National. In addition, many presidents have attended performances

at the National. Shows about presidential politics have included *State of the Union, The Best Man,* and *Mr. President.* Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and John Kennedy were frequent visitors to the National. Until the Kennedy Center opened in 1971, bringing two competing venues (the Opera House and Eisenhower Theater) to the city, the National Theatre was nearly unrivalled as the premiere site for live theatrical performances in the nation's capital.

The National Theatre is also significant as a focal point in the civil rights struggle to integrate public accommodations. From its opening in 1835, the National limited Black patrons to certain seating sections and, in 1873, it barred African Americans from attending most performances. In the 1940s, persistent efforts were made by local civil rights leaders and organizations to pressure the theater to lift its ban on Black patrons. In 1948, the theater defied overwhelming public sentiment in favor of integration by converting to a cinema rather than ending its racial discrimination policy. However, the theater reopened in 1952 under new management as a racially integrated performing arts theater and has remained so ever since.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Site History

Before the National Theatre was constructed in 1834 and 1835, a "place of entertainment" called the Rotunda, which contained an art museum, was on the site. In 1832, the *United States Telegraph* ran an advertisement stating: "AMUSEMENT. NATIONAL MUSEUM *and Gallery of Fine Arts,* Rotunda, corner of 13th street and Pa. Avenue." An 1831 article in the newspaper refers to "the voluntary offer of the Rotunda by the enterprising proprietor of the Museum of Natural Curiosities" for a school concert; it is unclear whether the Museum of Natural Curiosities was part of the Rotunda.[2] In 1929, the *Telegraph* contained articles about art exhibits at the Rotunda, for example, a panorama of West Point.[3] The newspaper also ran an advertisement in 1930 that a two-story brick house was for rent directly above the Rotunda. When the theater was built, the block contained a few brick and frame houses and a saloon.[4]

Early Iterations of the National Theatre

1835

In August 1834, a group of local citizens formed a stockholding company to construct a new theater on E Street between Pennsylvania Avenue and 13th Street NW. In October, they purchased a site on Square 254. When more money was needed to finance the construction, in July 1835, a deed was made to William Wilson Corcoran, a banker who had provided advice on where to locate the theater. Corcoran would later become one of the wealthiest people of the

[2] "Infant School," *United States Telegraph,* March 9, 1831, 3.
[3] "Panorama of West Point," *United States Telegraph,* Apr. 16, 1829, 1.
[4] Douglas Bennett Lee, Roger L. Meersman, and Donn B. Murphy, *Stage for a Nation* (University Press of America, 1985), 27.

mid-19th century, making a fortune during the Mexican-American War selling U.S. government bonds to Europeans. He also established the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Although some stockholders wanted the theater to be located on Capitol Hill, where more people lived, Corcoran spearheaded the decision to purchase a site near the White House, where he believed wealth and fashion would concentrate. The day after receiving the deed, Corcoran re-conveyed the property to the theater trustees. The theater was called the National out of a desire that it provide entertainment for the whole country.[5]

A book about the National Theatre published in 1885 described Washington in 1835 as "the most ill-conditioned city on the continent" and "a dead city, with no trade, and kept alive only by the money of the Government employees." The streets were unpaved, full of huge holes, and Pennsylvania Avenue in the winter and spring was a "vast quagmire" through which vehicles moved with great difficulty. The book explained:

> *The town boasted no theaters worthy of the name, though there were several places of amusement. The city was small and straggling, and full houses could not be hoped for except during the sittings of Congress.*
>
> *Yet every one acknowledged that the Capital of the United States ought to have a theater worthy of the name, and several patriotic citizens of the city met together and determined to form a stock company, raise funds, and erect a handsome edifice.*[6]

The first National Theatre was built in a Roman Doric style, stuccoed in imitation of granite, and fronted with large columns. (See figure 1.) According to the *National Intelligencer,*

> *The construction of the theater is admirable, both for its commodiousness and for seeing and hearing; the arrangement of the seats is very convenient, and the decorations will be elegant in every respect. The dome of the theater is finished, and is a most beautiful thing of the kind I have seen, and when the house is lighted up the effect will be exceedingly brilliant. It is painted of a pale cerulean blue color, and is divided into for allegorical designs.*[7]

The theater opened on December 7, 1835, with a performance of the comedy *The Man of the World,* staged by Philadelphia's Chestnut Street Theatre Company. Admission ranged from 25 cents in the gallery for "people of color" to $1 in the first tier of boxes.[8] The *National Intelligencer* reported that the "new and magnificent establishment opened for performance on Monday evening to a very full house…The decorations of the Theatre seemed to give general satisfaction—the effect was beautiful."[9] A saloon behind the second level of boxes served coffee,

[5] Ibid., 26-27; Alexander Hunter and J.H. Polkinhorn, *New National Theater, Washington, D.C., A Record of Fifty Years* (Washington, D.C.: R.O. Polkinhorn & Son, Printers, 1885), 11-13; Mark L. Goldstein, *Before The Gilded Age, W.W. Corcoran and the Rise of American Capital and Culture* (Georgetown University Press, 2023), 1, 108.
[6] Hunter and Polkinhorn, *New National Theater,* 12.
[7] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 29; "National Theatre," *National Intelligencer,* Dec. 4, 1835, 3.
[8] "National Theatre-Washington," *National Intelligencer,* Dec. 7, 1835, 3; National Theatre, *History of the National*, https://www.nationaltheatre.org/history/history-of-the-national/.
[9] "National Theatre," *National Intelligencer,* Dec. 9, 1835, 3.

fruit, candy, and "no doubt stronger beverages were sipped in the gallery and perhaps the boxes too."[10] Opening night was followed by shows ranging from a comedy, *Married Life;* a drama, *Englishmen in India;* and a local farce, *Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington.*



Figure 1: Artist's conception of what the first National Theatre may have looked like in 1835. (Source: The National Theatre.)

In January 1844, an advertisement in the *Washington Union* announced that the theater was being converted into "a most beautiful and brilliant amphitheatre" for a circus to provide "[a]n entire change of performance, combining novelty, talent, and fun." However, the *Evening Star* reported that the 1844 version of the theater was not a paying success. "Audiences were small because the city was so dispersed, streets were unpaved and it cost $10 to hire one of the two-horse hacks to the theater."[11] Stockholders sold the theater, which had cost $45,000 to build, to Benjamin Ogle Tayloe, a prominent local businessman and landowner.[12]

Around 1845, the theater was more often closed than open. According to the 1885 history, "A stock company played alternately in Philadelphia and Baltimore, and as the two latter cities patronized the drama more regularly and certainly, the company of course acted where they made the most money, and at last rarely came to Washington except during the sessions of Congress."[13]

On March 4, 1845, an inaugural ball was held at the National for President James Polk, who had assumed office that day. This is how the event was described:

[10] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 29.
[11] "National Theater's Last Curtain Falls Before Capacity House," *Evening Star,* Aug. 1, 1948, A-4.
[12] Hunter and Polkinhorn, *New National Theater,* 20.
[13] Ibid., 22.

The new President and his notoriously straight-laced wife made an awkward appearance during which the rambunctious throng in the National's auditorium momentarily ceased drinking and the music was silenced. Moments after the Polks left, the guests attacked the food and drink set out on banquet tables.[14]

The next evening, during a performance of the *Congo Melodists*, a minstrel show from Boston, the National burned down along with several nearby homes. The *National Intelligencer* reported that the fire originated in the oil room in the back of the theater, probably because a candle without a stick had been left burning there, but that the audience escaped without "serious accident." Despite the efforts of firefighters, some of whom came from as far away as Alexandria, patrons, and actors, the theater could not be saved after water froze in the hoses. The fire left only the walls standing, and the building was not insured. In April, the *Daily Madisonian* reported that the remains of the theater, which included walls of more than a million bricks and a lot over 14,000 square feet, were sold for $11,600.[15]

1850

The theater was left in ruins for five years until Henry Willard, the owner of the nearby Willard Hotel, and James Reeside, a stagecoach line owner and mail contractor, purchased and rebuilt it in 1850, using portions of the old building's brick walls that were still standing. The rebuilt theater, called the new National Hall, had seats for 3,500 people. The *Southern Press* described it as being "elegantly illuminated with about two hundred gas lights." Willard purchased the theater partly to accommodate the visit of Swedish singer Jenny Lind, called the "Swedish Nightingale." Lind's visit to the United States was managed by P.T. Barnum, the co-founder of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus who carried out an extensive publicity campaign. Ticket prices ranged from $3 to $7. President James Fillmore and his wife, their family, the Cabinet, and Supreme Court attended Lind's performance in December 1850.[16]

In January 1851, the theater was converted into a temporary circus for a French equestrian troupe.[17] On January 23, the *National Era* reported that shortly after the performance started, "the entire dress circle on the right of the spacious building, which was crowded with members of Congress, members of the Cabinet, and their families, fell through with a tremendous crash. Nobody was killed—some were bruised. The performances were not postponed."[18]

In 1857, the theater was renamed Fanny Morant's National Theatre, named after the manager at the time, who was also an actor. On February 6, a fire started in the upper part of the theater,

[14] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 37.
[15] "The National Theatre Burnt!" *National Intelligencer,* March 6, 1845, 3; "The Late Destructive Conflagration," *National Intelligencer,* March 7, 1845, 3; Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 37; *Daily Madisonian,* Apr. 22, 1845, 2.
[16] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 38-39; "Jenny Lind," *Southern Press*, Dec. 16, 1850, 3; Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, *Reeside, James,* https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/persons/RE46553.
[17] National Theatre, *Timeline,* https://thenationaldchistory.org/timeline/; "The National Hall Troupe," *Washington Union,* Jan. 17, 1851, 4.
[18] "Great Crash and Excitement at National Hall," *National Era,* Jan. 23, 1851, 2.

burning it down for a second time.[19] The *National Intelligencer* reported that the fire quickly filled the theater, completely destroying it, and that the Mayor ordered the remaining walls to be destroyed in light of their "menacing condition."[20] According to the *Evening Star*, the general opinion was that the fire was started by a person "turned out from the theater lately for improper conduct [who] made loud threats of burning the building."[21] The National did not reopen for five years. In 1858, William E. Spaulding and William W. Rapley purchased the property for $35,000.[22] Spaulding later became the theater manager. Rapley, the owner of a fleet of steamships, continued to own the National for about a third of a century.[23]

1862

In April 1862, "The New National Theatre" sometimes also called Grover's National Theatre after its manager, Leonard Grover, reopened on the original site with a comedy, *The Serious Family*, and a farce, *J.J. of the War Department.*[24] Conditions in wartime Washington prompted the showing of skits and satires such as *J.J. of the War Department*, sometimes presented as "after-pieces," aimed at bureaucratic mismanagement of the war effort.[25]

The *National Intelligencer* praised the new theater, stating:

> *The old National Theatre is again destined to shine with all its former glory, resplendent among the noble public edifices of the country. Mr. W.E. Spaulding has erected the new National, without regard to cost, upon the site of the old building, and has leased it for a term of years to the popular and energetic manager of public amusements, Mr. Leonard Grover. The building, as completed, has capacity for about two thousand persons, all of whom can obtain an entirely satisfactory view of the stage. The ceiling and walls are elegantly frescoed, and the boxes neatly and tastefully painted and panelled…. All in all, the theatre is decidedly the most comfortable and one of the most beautiful in the country.*[26]

[19] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 41.
[20] "Burning of the National Theatre," *National Intelligencer,* Feb. 7, 1857, 3.
[21] "Burning of the National Theatre," *Evening Star,* Feb. 7, 1857, 3.
[22] Roger Meersman and Robert Boyer, *The National Theatre in Washington: Buildings and Audiences, 1935-1972*, *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.,* 1971/1972, Vol. 71/23, 198.
[23] "Wm. W. Rapley Dead," *Evening Star,* Nov. 18, 1902, 7.
[24] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 46.
[25] Maxwell Bloomfield, "Wartime Drama: The Theater in Washington (1861-1865)," *Maryland Historical Magazine,* Vol. 64, No. 4, Winter 1969, 407.
[26] "Grover's Theatre," *National Intelligencer,* Apr. 23, 1862, 1.



Figure 2: The National Theatre in 1868. (Source: Library of Congress.)

In his biography of Abraham Lincoln, Carl Sandburg wrote that Lincoln may have visited the National as many as 100 times.[27] On June 8, 1864, President Lincoln was at the National when he received word that he had won the Republican presidential nomination. On April 14, 1865, President Lincoln initially planned to see the play *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* at the National, hoping that General Ulysses S. Grant and his wife would join him there. However, when it became clear that the Grants would not be joining him and because his wife, Mary Todd, wanted to see *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre, they went to Ford's instead, where Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. Lincoln's son, Tad, had attended the show at the National that evening and learned about his father's assassination in the theater's lobby while he was waiting for his parents' carriage to take him back to the White House. When word of Lincoln's death reached C.D. Hess, the theater's acting manager, he wired Grover, who was in New York: "President Lincoln shot to-night at Ford's Theatre. Thank God it wasn't ours."[28]

1873

On January 28, 1873, during a morning rehearsal of *Les Bavards* by Mrs. James A. Oates and Her Comic Opera Company, the National burned down a third time, destroying much of its structure and most of the scenery belonging to the opera.[29] The *National Republican* said how the fire started was unknown, but added that "[t]here seems to be a fatality about this spot…"[30] Rapley subsequently bought Spaulding's interest in the theater, assumed its management, and

[27] Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln* (Harcourt, Brace, 1954), 600.
[28] Meersman and Boyer, *The National Theatre in Washington,* 236; Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 50, 52-53. In advertisements for the National in 1865, Grover was listed as the Director and Hess as the Acting Manager.
[29] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 54; "The National on Fire!" *Critic and Record,* Jan. 28, 1873, 1.
[30] "The Flames. Destruction of the National Theatre," *National Republican,* Jan. 29, 1873, 4.

rebuilt the theater in 1873. The architect was John B. McElfatrick, who specialized in designing theaters.[31]

McElfatrick began his practice in Harrisburg and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, before opening an office with his son in New York City.[32] He designed more than 100 theaters throughout the country, including the Knickerbocker, Empire, and Harlem Opera House in New York. Upon his death, the *New York Times* reported that McElfatrick "designed the vision lines and acoustic plans upon which many of the modern American theatres were built."[33] In Washington, in addition to the National Theatre, McElfatrick designed the Gayety Theatre on Ninth Street NW.[34]

In November, the *Critic and Record* reported that the rebuilt National Theatre had 1,970 seats, further explaining:

> *The building is now almost completed, and those who have examined its construction speak of it as one of the finest theatres in the country. The exits and all the avenues leading to them are in funnel shape, becoming larger as the exits are reached. Two ventilating shafts have been constructed in the towers, independent of a large tower in the dome, which will always have a supply of fresh air on hand…The burners will all be lighted by electricity and simultaneously. The orchestra chairs will be upholstered in plush velvet, and those in the parquet in enameled cloth. There will be four private boxes, all excellently furnished. Much attention has been given to the heating arrangements, and they are as perfect as possible.*[35]

The fire did not destroy the front portion of the building, leaving the theater proper to rebuild at a cost of about $90,000.[36] The theater reopened on December 1 to a showing of the play *Fanchon, the Cricket*, which President Ulysses Grant attended.[37]

1885

During the morning of February 27, 1885, the National burned down a fourth time. The *Washington Post* reported that the "[t]he flames burned with intense fury and with a roar like a blast furnace," completely destroying the theater. The newspaper stated that although the fire's origin was unknown, it was believed that it started in the property room to the right of the stage containing waste and flammable material. Rapley estimated the theater's value at $100,000, including the $90,000 construction cost and a recent $10,000 redecoration; insurance covered about $40,000. Rapley said he would immediately begin rebuilding the theater.[38] Construction

[31] "Wm. W. Rapley Dead"; Andrew Craig Morrison, *Theatre Guide of Washington, D.C.* (The Theatre Historical Society, 1972) 8; "Theater Architect's Death," *Washington Times,* June 17, 1906, 27.
[32] Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, *McElfatrick, John Bailey,* https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/23155
[33] "Architect Dies at Work," *New York Times,* June 7, 1906, 7.
[34] "Theater Architect's Death."
[35] "Local News. Opening of the National Theatre" *Critic and Record,* Nov. 20, 1873, 4.
[36] "A Theatre in Flames," *Washington Post,* Feb. 27, 1885, 1.
[37] "Local News. The Opening of the National Theatre," *Evening Star,* Dec. 2, 1873, 4.
[38] "A Theatre in Flames."

was completed eight months later. Exterior and structural work was designed by architects Alfred B. Mullett, Appleton P. Clark, Jr., and George R. Pohl, while John B. McElfatrick & Sons, architects of the previous building, returned to design the auditorium.

Mullett designed more than 40 federal buildings, including courthouses in Springfield, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri, and the State, War, and Navy Building (now Eisenhower Executive Office Building) in Washington, which is a National Historic Landmark and is on the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. Mullett started out as an architect in Cincinnati before moving to Washington, where he rose to become the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, overseeing the design of federal buildings throughout the country. After leaving Treasury, his firm designed houses, offices, hospitals, and churches in Washington, including the Sun Building which was one of the first tall buildings with an elevator.

Clark, a Washington native, designed a wide range of buildings in the city, including office buildings, churches, schools, theater, apartment buildings, and private homes. They include the Washington Post and Willard Office buildings, which have been demolished; the Jewish Community Center; and Homer and Victor buildings, both of which are on the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites.[39]

Pohl was a German immigrant architect who was a partner in the Philadelphia office of Schwarzman & Pohl in 1876.[40] He was listed in an 1885 Treasury Department directory as a "draughtsman" for the Office of the Supervising Architect.[41] Pohl also designed homes in Washington that are part of the Bloomingdale Historic District, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.[42] In addition, Pohl designed a billiards and bowling hall that opened in 1907 at 14th and T Streets NW, which became Club Bali in 1943 and was later a restaurant.[43]

The theater was rebuilt in an Italianate style with a five-story façade, heavy dentilled cornice, and two central bays topped by towers. The theater included several technical modernizations. According to the book *Stage for a Nation*,

> *The interior had been vastly improved from its predecessor's. Because the New National (as it was now called) was lit by electricity, the hundred-burner chandelier in the auditorium was converted from gas; an asbestos fireproof curtain separating the stage from the auditorium was installed; the seats were larger and more comfortable; the orchestra and the*

[39] Morrison, *Theatre Guide of Washington, D.C.*, 8; D.C. Historic Preservation Office, *DC Architects Directory,* https://dcpreservation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Architect-Bios-A-Z.pdf.
[40] American Architects and Buildings, *George R. Pohl,* https://www.americanbuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/26473.
[41] Senate report, *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury transmitting list of Treasury Department employees,* March 9, 1886, 60.
[42] D.C. Government, Office of Planning, *Bloomingdale Historic District,* 7, https://planning.dc.gov/publication/bloomingdale-historic-district.
[43] The House History Man, *Jazz, Drugs, Murder and the 1940s Club Bali at 14th and T,* https://househistoryman.blogspot.com/2012/02/jazz-drugs-murder-and-1940s-club-bali.html.

green room were heavily carpeted; and twenty-four dressing rooms were provided. The building was heated by steam.[44]

On October 5, the 1,900-seat theater reopened with a performance of the play *Lady Ashley*, a romantic drama.[45]



Figure 3: The New National Theatre circa 1890. (Source: Library of Congress.)

In the early 1900s, other theaters in Washington included Willard Hall, Albaugh's Opera House, the Manassas Panorama, the Belasco Theatre, the Dumbarton Theatre, and the Shubert Theatre, which featured vaudeville, musicals, opera, comedies, and dramatic plays.[46]

In 1912, opposition arose to the National's showing of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, a theatrical revue starring Fannie Brice. The Aloysius Truth Society, a Roman Catholic organization, protested the production, claiming that public morality was endangered by a "rampage of song, dance, beauty, high kicking, and other such acts."[47] A *Washington Times* columnist described it as "so unlike any other show that neither critics nor producers have yet found a classification for it," for example:

Rushing, dancing, madcap, songless choruses.
Novelties that are unlike any novelty ever presented by any other company.
Scenes that follow each other with Twentieth Century express swiftness.
Dozens, scores, perhaps a hundred pretty girls in costumes that are the last word in

[44] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 63.
[45] Ibid., "In the New National," *Washington Post,* Oct. 6, 1885, 1.
[46] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 66.
[47] Ibid., 71.

lavishness.
Whirlwind music, full of crashing sounds.[48]

The Society received assurance from the Mayor that an official censor would be present at the theater on opening night and whenever there was a concern. However, according to *Stage for a Nation*, the protest only helped business. On opening night, "despite one of the worst rainstorms of the season, the New National was overflowing, with five rows of standees at the back of the auditorium."[49] *Washington Times* columnist Julia Murdock defended the show, saying:

> *The Follies are not bad—they are not immoral. They amuse the kids in the gallery, as well as the older people in the front row. The play is beautifully costumed, and so far as a broad-minded critic can see, there is no need for censorship either in the lines, the dances, or the songs.*[50]

Design and construction of the current (1922-23) National Theatre

By the 1920s, the aging National Theatre could no longer accommodate large New York shows. Rapley had already decided to completely "renovate" the building when, in January 1922, following a two-day blizzard, a heavy accumulation of snow caused the roof the Knickerbocker Theatre in what is now Adams Morgan to collapse, killing 98 people and injuring dozens more.[51] In the aftermath of that disaster, the city had a panel of experts assess all of the city's other theaters. In February, the District commissioners ordered seven Washington theaters, including the National, to be closed as unsafe. The theaters were to remain closed until they had been renovated to meet safety requirements.[52] The closure led Rapley to adopt a multi-phase approach to the renovations. Emergency fixes were quickly made to obtain approval to reopen just four days after the theater was closed. Then, more extensive structural renovations were made during the summer, allowing the theater to "officially" reopen in November 1922. Further improvements, including a new façade, weren't completed until 1923.

The structural renovations of 1922 were extensive. However, the new construction retained the same interior shape of the auditorium as the 1885 design. Rapley considered the acoustical properties of the McElfatrick design to be so successful that he did not want any alterations that could affect those properties. While everything else was rebuilt, the walls of the 1885 auditorium remained in place.[53] When the "sixth" National Theatre reopened in November, it was largely a new building. The *Evening Star* observed, "The theater, which has undergone almost an entire

[48] Julia Murdock, "Julia Murdock Sees No Necessity For Censoring Ziegfeld 'Follies,'" *Washington Times,* Feb. 27, 1912, 10.
[49] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 71.
[50] "Julia Murdock Sees No Necessity For Censoring Ziegfeld 'Follies.'"
[51] "40 Or More Killed And Scores Injured When Knickerbocker Theater Caves In," *Evening Star*, Jan. 29, 1922, 1; Library of Congress, *Knickerbocker Theater Collapse,* https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-knickerbocker-theater-collapse.
[52] "Seven Theaters Closed by Order of District Commissioners," *Washington Times*, Feb. 19, 1922, 2.
[53] Meersman and Boyer, *The National Theatre in Washington,* 203-4.

renovation since last spring, is complete in every sense of the word, the walls alone remaining unchanged."[54]

The reconstructed theater seated approximately 1,700, about the same as the 1885 version. Among the changes that were made during the reconstruction, steel beams were added above the auditorium to support its ceiling without disturbing the theater's acoustics. Inside the auditorium, columns supporting the balconies that had caused sight problems were removed and a 30-ton steel girder spanning the auditorium was installed to support the weight of the balcony tiers. Box seating was reconfigured, with the 12 enclosed boxes on the sides of the auditorium replaced with boxes suspended from the walls. The box (or "loge") seats totaled 76. Additional improvements were made to enlarge the orchestra pit and lighting booth, and new restrooms were built.[55]

The National—fronted with scaffolding because the façade was not yet completed—reopened on November 28. Opening night featured the melodrama *Bull Dog Drummond*. The *Washington Times* cheered the reopening, saying:

> *The reopening of the National Theater—now in reality—after a period of darkness extending considerably over half a year in which time the material wand of various artisans has been waved with such magical effect that nothing, save the familiar curtain alone, can be recognized as belonging to the old order of things, proved a most auspicious occasion. In all the brilliant history of this famous institution of the drama seldom has a more distinguished and a more enthusiastic audience been confined within its four walls. While the work of rehabilitation has not yet been entirely completed, of far greater importance in the minds of its patrons, truly "show-hungry" as they were, was the fact that Washington will no longer be denied the entertainment it covets because of lack of suitable accommodations.*[56]

In April 1923, the theater closed for the season as work was underway to tear down the old five-story office section across the front of the building and replace it with new construction.[57] The new limestone neoclassical façade was much plainer than the 1885 façade. The architects intended it to "conform architecturally with the type of buildings of modern design along Pennsylvania Avenue, which thoroughfare the theater will overlook." (Construction of the Federal Triangle buildings would begin in 1928.) The six-story façade fronted new office space for the theater company on the upper floors and commercial storefronts on the ground level. Inside, a new mezzanine lobby built behind the auditorium included a smoking room and lounge for patrons. The auditorium had been undecorated when the theater opened in November 1922; additional work in 1923 included "interior decorations and furnishings…comparable with the equipment and fittings of any of New York's finest theaters."[58]

[54] "Sixth Debut Today By New National," *Evening Star*, Nov. 27, 1922, 2.
[55] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 74.
[56] "The National Opens Its Doors," *Washington Times,* Nov. 28, 1922, 26.
[57] "National's New Decoration," *Washington Post*, Apr. 15, 1923, 13.
[58] "$500,000 Theater Will Replace Old National Building," *Evening Star*, May 4, 1922, 1.

The *Washington Post* observed:

> *All repair work has been completed and the building is entirely new with the exception of the rear walls, which have been remodeled and supported to the maximum of safety….*
>
> *The auditorium is a work of art, the decorating scheme being one of the most beautiful in the city. The base colors are gold and blue, with rich paneled tapestries covering the walls. The seats are roomy and each one in the house that now seats 1,700 affords unobstructed view of the stage….*
>
> *The fire hazard in the theater has been absolutely eliminated, as concrete and steel back up every section of the house. A huge steel curtain weighing six tons that works by hydraulic pressure has been installed and it has passed all tests of the United States bureau of standards….*[59]



Figure 4: Construction of the new National Theatre in 1923. Note the "ghost" of the old theater visible on the side of the adjoining office building (Source: Library of Congress.)

The 1922-23 reconstruction was designed by architects Warren & Wetmore of New York, who are best known for designing Grand Central Terminal in New York. Construction of the new National Theatre was carried out by Samuel J. Prescott & Company, a prominent local firm.[60]

[59] "Rebuilt National, Entirely Modern, To Open Tomorrow," *Washington Post*, Sept. 23, 1923, 68.
[60] Peter Pennoyer and Anne Walker, *The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore,* (W.W. Norton, 2006), 89, 239; Morrison, *Theatre Guide of Washington, D.C.*, 8.

In 1898, Whitney Warren and Charles Wetmore formed the architectural firm Warren & Wetmore in New York. Together they completed over 300 major projects between 1898 and 1931, including the design of railroad terminals, hotels, resorts, apartments, homes, and office towers. Warren studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Wetmore was also a lawyer. As a team, they specialized in Beaux-Arts designs.[61] In addition to the new National Theatre, Warren & Wetmore's other Washington, DC projects included the Mayflower Hotel (in collaboration with Washington architect Robert F. Beresford) and the Old Italian Embassy, both of which were constructed in 1925 and are on the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The Mayflower Hotel is also on the National Register of Historic Places.[62]

National Theatre operations, 1923-1948

In 1928, A.L. Erlanger bought a half interest in the National Theatre. Erlanger and W.H. Rapley, son of the previous owner W.W. Rapley, would own and manage the theater.[63] Erlanger died two years later. In his obituary, the *New York Times* said Erlanger was the largest individual owner and operator of legitimate theaters in the country.[64]



Figure 5: Crowds at the National in 1936. (Source: Harris & Ewing Collection, Library of Congress.)

[61] Pennoyer and Walker, *The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore,* 6-9.
[62] G. Martin Moeller, Jr., *AIA Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022), 190-191, 324-325.
[63] "Erlanger Buys Half Interest Into National," *Washington Herald,* Apr. 26, 1928, 9.
[64] "A.L. Erlanger Dies After Long Illness," *New York Times,* March 8, 1930, 1. Legitimate theater refers to professional, high-quality theater, as opposed to vaudeville or burlesque.

National politics have been featured in shows at the National. For example, *State of the Union*, a play about a presidential election that won the 1946 Pulitzer Prize in Drama, appeared at the theater in 1947.[65] One of the playwrights described the show in the *Washington Post*:

> *The play is not pro-Democrat, it's not pro-Republican. It is, we hope, pro-American. We crack at plenty of heads in the play, but we do not take time out to examine whether they are Democratic or Republican heads. If they happen to be demagogic heads, or stupid heads, or selfish heads, we swing merrily away at them. We believe people go to the theater to be entertained. They can hear sermons in church and political harangues at political rallies. We've tried to do both.*[66]

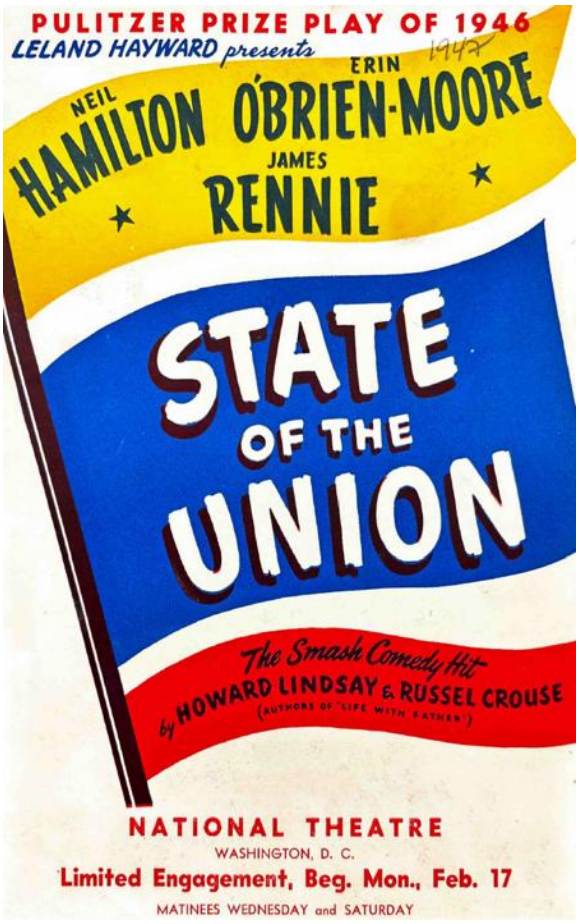


Figure 6: Playbill for *State of the Union* (Source: The National Theatre.)

1948 conversion to movie theater

In 1948, after it closed due to management's opposition to racial integration, the National was converted to a movie theater. The $75,000 renovation was designed by architects John and Drew Eberson, who specialized in movie theaters. John Eberson was an architect of over 500 theaters

[65] "'State of the Union' Due Feb. 17," *Washington Daily News,* Jan. 16, 1947, 42.
[66] "'State of the Union' Is Not in Code," *Washington Post,* Feb. 16, 1947, S6.

in the United States. Born in Austria, Eberson originally established his practice in Hamilton, Ohio, specializing in vaudeville theater design, and later moved to Chicago and New York. Eberson and his son were known for creating "atmospheric" theaters, a design popular in the 1920s that used special effect to create the illusion of floating clouds and shimmering stars on auditorium ceilings. In the Washington area, in addition to converting the National Theatre to a cinema, Eberson's firm designed at least a dozen theaters, most of which have been demolished. Those that remain include the Bethesda Theater, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, in Bethesda, Maryland, and the Silver (now AFI Silver) Theatre in Silver Spring, Maryland.[67] Overseas, Eberson was one of the designers of Paris' Le Grand Rex, which is famous for its Art Deco style and is the largest single movie theater in Europe.[68]

A projection booth was installed above the second balcony, and the mezzanine lounges were given a Chinese-style makeover.[69] The *Evening Star* reported that the lobby was "luxurious"; the most impressive part of the new décor was a "rich, deep carpet" that covered the main lobby, stairways, and mezzanine-lounge lobby. The newspaper continued:

> *Next to the lobby, the most radically changed area of the theater is the mezzanine lounges. The wood wall bench which served two generations of drama lovers has been removed, and space along the north wall has been partitioned to create small lobbies for each of the two lounges.*
>
> *Inside the auditorium, the remodeling has been confined principally to relighting the house and to renovation of walls and woodwork. Balcony and box fronts have been repainted in the green-and-white scheme of the lobby entrance. The orchestra pit has disappeared beneath a temporary fabric covering and the light brackets on the front of the balcony have vanished behind metal shields….*
>
> *None of these have in any way affected its immediate reconversion to the legitimate drama should the occasion arise.*[70]

In October, the National began its run as a movie theater with a showing of *The Red Shoes*, a British dance drama.

1952 reopening as live theater

In 1952, the National reopened as an integrated live theater after new owners abolished the previous segregation policy. Commenting on the National's resilience, *Evening Star* columnist Jay Carmody said "being perpetually on the verge of financial and artistic bankruptcy and forced eternally to live by its wits, the theater tempts the most courageous prophecies ranging from its

[67] "John Eberson, 79, Architect, is Dead," *New York Times,* March 7, 1954, 90; Obituaries, *Variety,* March 10, 1954, 71; *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, Bethesda Theater,* Jan. 8, 1999, 6,8, https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/113c1d47-ad2c-4ebe-912d-167f97d9d230.
[68] Cinema Treasures, *Le Grand Rex,* https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/6785.
[69] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 91; Cinema Treasures, *National Theatre,* https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/45974.
[70] "National Puts on Shining Face For Debut as Film Theater," *Evening Star,* Oct. 12, 1948, D-10.

extinction to spectacular renaissance."[71] In March, the newspaper reported that reconverting the theater to a legitimate house "is not much of a problem" and further explained:

> *At the time it was opened as a motion-picture theater in the fall of 1948, it was announced that the change back to legitimate attractions could be made within 24 hours…*
>
> *The alterations which were made [in 1948] apply to the front of the house, the installation of a complete air-cooling system, complete redecoration of the lobbies, redesign of the entrance, and the installation of a fireproof projection booth.*
>
> *In appearance, it will be a quite different theater.*
>
> *The redesign of the front of the house was not aimed at turning it into a movie palace. It was intended rather to dress up, with carpeting, murals and new color schemes, an area whose start simplicity was deemed too stark for the new competitive function.*[72]

In May, the National reopened with *Call Me Madam*, a musical starring Ethel Merman about Washington socialite and party hostess Perle Mesta, who later became ambassador to Luxembourg.[73] The reopening was attended by Washington figures such as Sen. Robert Taft (R-Ohio), Sen. Paul Douglas (D-Ill.), Gen. George C. Marshall, and Alice Roosevelt Longworth.[74] WNBW, Washington's NBC station, televised the theater's reopening ceremonies.[75] The *Washington Daily News* described the scene:

> *It's been many a year since such a gala crowd attended an opening at Washington's National Theater. E-st surged with great, black limousines, evening gowns, furs, jewels and evening dress, to see Ethel Merman in "Call Me Madam."*[76]

About the event, the *Evening Star* observed that "[a]fter nearly four years as a movie house, the National rejoined the legitimate ranks it dominated for more than a century."[77]

[71] Jay Carmody, "Play Vista Exciting With National Back," *Evening Star,* Nov. 11, 1951, C-6.
[72] "National Chooses April 21 As Box Office Opening Day," *Evening Star,* March 11, 1952, B-12.
[73] "National Theater Will Reopen May 5 With 'Call Me Madam,'" *Evening Star,* Feb. 19, 1952, 1; Stanley Green, *Broadway Musicals Show by Show* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2019), 147.
[74] "Senators and Socialites At Opening," *Evening Star,* May 6, 1952, B-3.
[75] "TV Scene and Heard," *Times-Herald,* May 7, 1952, 19.
[76] It's Been Many a Year Since Such a Gala Opening," *Washington Daily News,* May 6, 1952, 33.
[77] "Tafts and Irving Berlin on Hand At National Theater's Rebirth," *Evening Star,* May 6, 1952, A-2.



Figure 7: National Theatre patrons in line to see *Call Me Madam* in 1952. (Source: The National Theatre.)



Figure 8: The National Theatre, circa 1959. (Source: DC History Center, Emil A. Press slide collection.)

Pennsylvania Avenue redevelopment and the National Theatre

The National Theatre faced the threat of demolition several times in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1962, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant to the Secretary of Labor and later a senator from New York, wrote a proposal to redevelop Pennsylvania Avenue, stating that:

> *Pennsylvania Avenue should be the great thoroughfare of the city of Washington. Instead it remains a vast unformed, cluttered expanse at the heart of the Nation's Capital…. Large segments on the north side are decayed beyond restoration. It is clear that a great many of the buildings are about to be torn down and replaced by new structures which will include both private and public buildings.*[78]

President John Kennedy subsequently established the President's Council on Pennsylvania Avenue, which proposed creating a public space called National Square on Pennsylvania Avenue between 13th and 15th Streets. The plan involved razing several buildings in that area, including the National Theatre, the National Press Club Building, and the Willard Hotel, and replacing them with a large new building complex. However, the Commission of Fine Arts opposed the plan, and after several years of consideration, National Square never gained support. As a result, the buildings in the demolition plan, including the National Theatre, remained.[79]

In 1962, the National presented a musical with the president as a character that was attended by a president. In January, President Kennedy, a frequent visitor to the theater, and his wife saw a performance of *Mr. President,* an Irving Berlin musical about a president and his family during their last days in the White House after losing reelection and his retirement into civilian life.[80] The *Evening Star* described the events that evening:

> *The street throng that gathered outside the National had quite a show themselves. VIP's didn't just arrive by the carload. They arrived by the busload…. The President, who went to his office at 8, did not arrive at the National Theater until 10:30. So he missed the first and best act. He saw only the anti-climatical, post-presidential second act which moved considerably slower than the first.*[81]

[78] Committee on Public Works, House of Representatives, *Report to the President by the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space,* June 1, 1962, 13.
[79] "Huge Building Proposed for Pennsylvania Avenue," *Washington Post,* Aug, 23, 1967, A1; National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, *Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site,* 2007, 171-172, 175, 190; https://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?documentID=53319; "Tear it Down! Save It!" *Washingtonian,* March 1, 2009; District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, *District of Columbia Historic Preservation Plan,* 2016. The National Theatre is not included in the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site.
[80] Internet Broadway Database, *Mr. President,* https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/mr-president-2922.
[81] "Premiere Draws Notables," *Evening Star,* Sept. 26, 1962, C-1.



Figure 9: President Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy at the National Theatre in 1962. (Source: John F. Kennedy Library and Museum.)

On April 4, 1968, the musical *Cabaret* was playing at the National when the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Frank Rich, who worked as a ticket-taker at the National during his youth and later became the *New York Times*' chief drama critic, described in his book *Ghost Light* what happened that evening:

> *There had been one full curtain call when, with the entire company flanking her, the actress playing the heroine stepped forward and raised her hands to stop the clapping. The audience expected a pitch for a charity, perhaps—or maybe a thank-you for its ovation, not an unknown gesture from stars on the road. But when the actress announced, hesitantly, in her civilian voice, what had happened, some people in the theater, white people almost all of them, start shrieking…. The actress took a pause so that the audience could calm itself, then said: 'We are told that there is unrest in the city tonight. Please go to your cars quietly and quickly, and drive safely home.'*[82]

The era of the National serving as the city's premiere venue for live theatrical performances effectively ended in 1971, when the Kennedy Center opened in Foggy Bottom.[83] The Kennedy Center was constructed as a national performing arts center, with three grand performance stages, all of them larger than the National's single auditorium, offering top theatrical productions a lavish new home.[84] The *Washington Post* commented: "Now the [Kennedy Center's] Eisenhower Theater will add much to a season that includes drama at the National Theatre, Arena Stage, Washington Theater Club and other smaller theaters."[85] From 1974 to

[82] Frank Rich, *Ghost Light,* (Random House, 2001), 316-317.
[83] Lee et al., *Stage for a Nation,* 126.
[84] Kennedy Center, *Five Decades of Performances,* https://www.kennedy-center.org/our-story/kc50/memorial/in-the-spotlight/.
[85] "At Last—A Center Stage for the Arts in Washington," *Washington Post,* Sept. 5, 1971, F1. The Washington Theater Club was a theater company that operated in Washington from 1957 to 1974.

1979, the National partnered with the Kennedy Center for booking services.[86] After the Kennedy Center opened, the National continued to host traveling Broadway musicals, but the most noteworthy productions tended to gravitate toward the Kennedy Center. [87] Other live theaters in the city during the 1970s included the Arena Stage, which had moved from downtown to southwest Washington; Ford's Theatre, which produced plays and musicals about Lincoln and the American experience; and the Folger Theatre Group, which presented Shakespeare.[88]

During the 1970s, the National also faced declining patronage as the city's population decreased. From the 1970s to the 1980s, Washington lost about 15 percent of its population, as many residents moved to the suburbs. Attracting theatergoers to downtown Washington became increasingly difficult.[89]

1984 Renovations

The National also faced potential demolition as policymakers focused on redeveloping the "decayed" or "blighted" sections of the old downtown. In 1972, Congress created the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) to redevelop areas along Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House. In its 1974 report, the PADC stated that the northern edge of Pennsylvania Avenue was deteriorating, explaining:

> *Once a lively center of activity for residents and visitors alike, it has declined in importance and today is a drab and depressing place. Since the construction of the Federal Triangle in the 1920's and 1930's the Avenue has become a barrier between the downtown and the Mall. This pronounced separation of functions, coupled with neglect by both public and private interests, has made the Avenue one of the shabbiest and least interesting of the world's main thoroughfares.*[90]

The report stated that the buildings on the block with the National Theatre, including the National Press Building, were in generally sound condition, but "somewhat outdated by competitive standards." It also noted that there were no designated landmark buildings on the block. Under the 1974 plan, the block would be redeveloped for office and retail uses and a "special emphasis would be placed on maintaining and increasing theatrical and entertainment establishments." The National and the other buildings could remain "as long as their owners chose not to redevelop them."[91]

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[86] National Theatre, *History of the National*.
[87] "Why DC is Buying the National Theatre," *Washingtonian,* Aug. 12, 2024.
[88] "Arena Stage's Molly Smith on the Wild Changes Around Southwest DC," *Washingtonian,* Sept. 24, 2019; Ford's Theatre, *What's Happening*, https://fords.org/whats-happening/; Folgerpedia, *Folger Theatre Group,* https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Folger_Theatre_Group.
[89] Chris Myers Asch & George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 382.
[90] Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, *The Pennsylvania Avenue Plan 1974,* October 1974, 3, 32, https://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?documentID=53318.
[91] Ibid.

The PADC considered various proposals from developers for a hotel and office development between E and F Streets and 13th and 14th Streets, which included the National. The National Press Club Corporation and architect-developer John Portman originally proposed that the National be razed and a new theater built. However, the idea of building a new theater was later dropped because of the cost; a revised proposal was to relocate the theater to a nearby block. In a competing proposal, the Akridge company would replace the theater with an office tower and build a new theater in the center of the block behind the site of the current one. In 1978, the PADC selected a third proposal from Marriott, the Quadrangle Development Corporation, and Aetna Life and Casualty that left the National Theatre in its current place and built a hotel and office complex around it, which became the Marriott Hotel and National Place.[92]

The development team provided more than $5 million to pay for structural and architectural improvements to the theater, and the Shubert organization provided more than $1 million for new décor. The renovations to the auditorium were designed by Oliver Smith, a noted Broadway set designer. Theater capacity remained about the same, with 1,679 seats, and the overall external appearance of the theater was not substantially altered. Windows on the façade were replaced, the marquee was replaced with a larger one, and the ground-floor storefront windows were replaced with redesigned ones. The entrance lobby and the intermission lounge at the balcony level were both expanded and redecorated according to Smith's design. A new intermission lounge was created at the second balcony level by taking space that previously was used for offices at the front of the building. In addition, a four-story attached building was constructed at the rear of the theater, with a two-story section in the narrow space on the east side of the building. The new space provided dressing rooms, storage, and other uses, including space for the theater's archives. The newly built J.W. Marriott hotel complex to the west of the theater was designed to connect visually with the theater as a cohesive whole.[93]

Architectural critic Benjamin Forgey of the *Washington Post* noted:

> *Simply saving the theater in its original location is perhaps the principal accomplishment we should be celebrating here, for it was a very near thing…. The death of the National had been widely feared from the combined effects of the riots in 1968 and the construction of the Kennedy Center in far-off Foggy Bottom.*[94]

On January 18, 1984, the National reopened with the musical *42nd Street*.[95] On January 23, President Ronald Reagan spoke at the theater:

> *The National Theatre opened, as you were told, on this site in 1835 when the occupant of the White House was Andrew Jackson. Americans perched on the roof and peered through the*

[92] Ibid.; "Plans Dropped for New National," *Washington Post,* Dec. 8, 1977, E1; "New Script For An Old Playhouse," *Washington Post,* Apr. 16, 1978, K1; "The Show Goes On at the National," *Washington Post,* Nov. 1, 1978, E6.
[93] Benjamin Forgey, "National Theatre, Splendor Restored in Turquoise and Gold," *Washington Post,* Jan. 15, 1984, K1.
[94] Forgey, op. cit.
[95] "Theater: Great Strides and Star Power," *Washington Post,* Jan. 1, 1984, F1.

windows of this building to watch the horseback inaugural parades of McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt. They saw the face of the National when they watched newsreels of the inaugural parades of Wilson, Coolidge, and F.D.R. -- parades that took place when American admirals still wore cockeyed hats. And through all those years, the National was staging productions that entertained and delighted the people of this city.

In recent years, though, the National fell on hard times. Some even talked of tearing her down. And then a year and a half ago, an army of designers, electricians, and carpenters went to work to save it. They cleaned the exterior. They've refurbished the interior, as we have been able to see tonight, installed a new lighting and a sound system, and added a whole new building four stories high for dressing rooms and storage. And they did it all without a penny of government money. [Laughter][96]

In 2024, the District of Columbia proposed purchasing the theater for $5.3 million and leasing it to the National Theatre Foundation, the nonprofit that operates the theater.[97] However, in 2025, the Foundation purchased the National Theatre from Quadrangle Development Corporation for $5.5 million, allowing it to focus on capital improvements such as HVAC upgrades, an electrical modernization, and new seating.[98]

Segregation and the National Theatre

When the National opened in 1835, more than a quarter of the city's population was African-American, about one-third of whom were enslaved and two-thirds free.[99] Washington was governed by "Black Codes" restricting the freedom of African-Americans, and in 1835 the codes had recently been modified to allow Black people to be on the streets only until 10 pm. Black patrons were limited to certain less desirable seating sections at the back of the new National Theatre. Furthermore, many Black characters in shows onstage were performed by Whites in blackface.[100]

In 1838, Black patrons were barred from the main seating gallery to see the play *Gladiator* about a Thracian slave revolt, out of a fear that some scenes "might be incendiary."[101] An advertisement stated that the second act of the play will be a "Grand Combat between Spartacus and the Gladiator of Gaul." In 1873, the National Theatre increased its restrictions, setting a general policy of barring African Americans from attending most performances.

[96] Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, *Remarks Following a Performance Reopening the National Theatre,* Jan. 23, 1984.
[97] "D.C. is buying the National Theatre. Here's why," *Washington Business Journal,* May 29, 2024.
[98] "National Theatre Foundation acquires historic D.C. venue for $5.5 million," *Washington Business Journal,* Dec. 19, 2025.
[99] Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit, *The Dark Days of the Black Codes,* https://dcchs.org/the-dark-days-of-the-black-codes/.
[100] National Theatre, *Desegregation,* https://thenationaldcpolitics.org/desegregation/
[101] Smithsonian Institution, *The Black Washingtonians,* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 51.

In 1916, the National showed D.W. Griffith's 3-hour silent film, *Birth of a Nation*, a story about two families affected by the Civil War, fighting in opposite armies, that follows the development of the war in their lives through to Lincoln's assassination and the birth of the Ku Klux Klan.[102] The film, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan, played at the National to packed audiences.[103] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and several community organizations protested the showing.[104] According to the National Theatre website, "The NAACP's response to the film indicated the growing resistance to blatantly racist messaging in films and the degree to which theatres and cinemas would become battlegrounds in the war against segregation." *Birth of a Nation* played again at the National in the 1920s.[105]

Although Black patrons were still not allowed to attend shows in the early 1900s, Black performers were allowed on stage. This led to controversy during the 1933 run of *The Green Pastures*, the first Broadway production to feature an all-Black cast. The play, which won the 1930 Pulitzer Prize in Drama and was later made into a movie, presents stories from the Old Testament, including Adam and Eve and Noah and the Whale, as told to young Black children in a Sunday School class. The *Washington Daily News* reported that the author and the producer of *Green Pastures*, as well as several Black organizations, led by the NAACP, protested the exclusion of African Americans from attending the play. The newspaper quoted their joint letter to the theater management:

> *Inasmuch as "Green Pastures" has played to 1,500,000 persons, whites and Negroes, in all parts of the United States, none of whom has ever raised the question of Negro exclusion in the theaters in which it has appeared, we wish to protest the reported exclusion of Negroes from the National Theater in Washington, D.C.*[106]

The *Washington Daily News* praised the play, saying:

> *Some plays have passion and some plays have nothing but thin, gossamer sparkle, but "Green Pastures" has spirit. Sometimes it shines mightily and again it moves softer than a whisper but it burns so surely that the divine comedy unfurls and flows its length before the first part seems well under way.*[107]

The play was popular with White audiences, and the theater extended its run. However, some commentators have criticized the characterization of Black people in the play and the author's claim to be presenting an authentic view of Black religious thought. For example, the Black Film Archive, a register of Black films, said some of the bible stories are "tinged with negative

[102] IMDb, *Birth of a Nation,* https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0004972/.
[103] "'Birth of a Nation' Begins Fourth Week," *Washington Times,* May 9, 1916. 4.
[104] "To Protest Showing Of Birth Of A Nation," *Washington Times,* March 24, 1916, 4; "Citizens In Opposition To 'Birth Of A Nation,'" *Evening Star,* Apr. 16, 1916, 4.
[105] National Theatre, *Desegregation.*
[106] "Author of 'Green Pastures' Protests Exclusion of Negroes From Play Here," *Washington Daily News,* Feb. 10, 1933, 4.
[107] "Saluting the Green Pastures," *Washington Daily News,* Feb. 14, 1933, 17.

stereotypes about Black people."[108] In the end, theater management allowed an integrated audience to attend two special performances.[109]

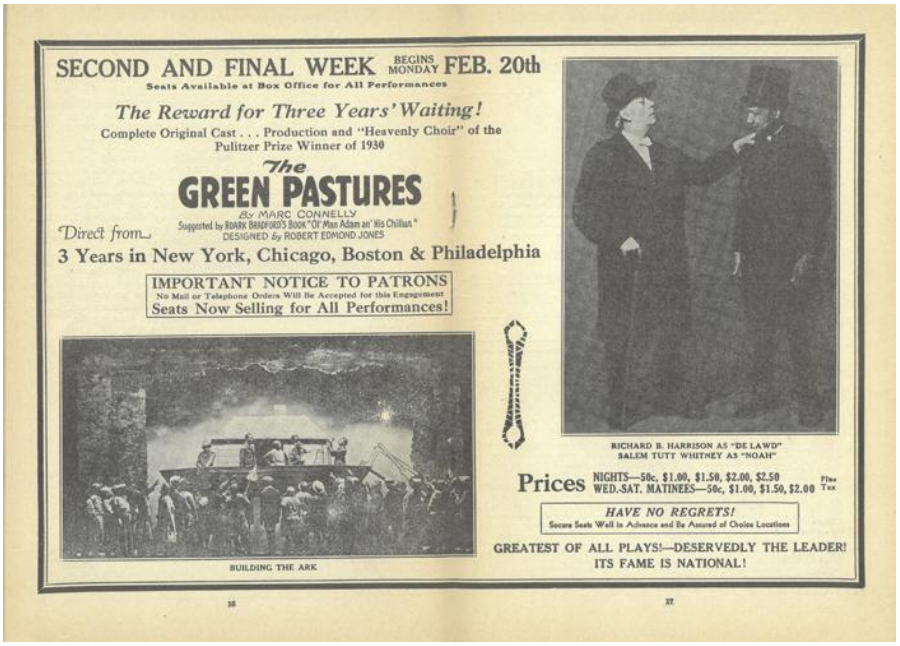


Figure 10: Advertisement for *The Green Pastures.* (Source: The National Theatre.)

Race relations were also at issue in the National's 1934 presentation of *They Shall Not Die*, a play about the Scottsboro affair in which nine young Black men were falsely accused of raping two White women on a train. A review of the play, which had opened in New York, appeared in the *Washington Herald*:

> *I am not resorting to that old subterfuge when I call "They Shall Not Die" a good social cause and a bad artistic result. It is undoubtedly both of those things. It never rises above the hard, black-and-white factuality of a newspaper account; and sometimes, when it turns sentimental, it falls far below that. But it hits out with terrific vigor, with scorn for peril, libel, death, despot or devil, and it tells what it has to tell too positively to be easily denied…. I cannot pretend that anyone will have a good time at "They Shall Not Die," if a good time means a downy forgetfulness of what a cruel and stupid world we live in.*[110]

However, the National cancelled its performance of *They Shall Not Die*. The *Evening Star* provided an explanation:

> *According to word received from New York, the reason that "They Shall Not Die" was withdrawn from presentation here was because three children featured in the cast were*

[108] Black Film Archive, *The Green Pastures,* https://blackfilmarchive.com/The-Green-Pastures; African American Registry, *The Green Pastures Debuts on Broadway,* https://aaregistry.org/story/the-green-pastures-debuts-on-broadway/.
[109] National Theatre, *Desegregation.*
[110] "'Dodsworth' Real Satire As a Play," *Washington Herald,* March 4, 1934, 39.

barred from the stage of the National.[111] *This was one of the reasons. The other—not generally known—was that local Theater Guild patrons raised a terrific howl when they heard that their final play of the subscription season dealt with the Scottsboro case.*

The National Theater management was flooded with indignant protests. "We do not want to see a play about the Scottsboro trial," cried a swarm of furious theater patrons….

It makes us, however, very, very sad to think that audiences should sit in judgment on a new play before it has had even a chance to reveal itself. It makes us also very sad to think that local audiences have suddenly gone timid.[112]

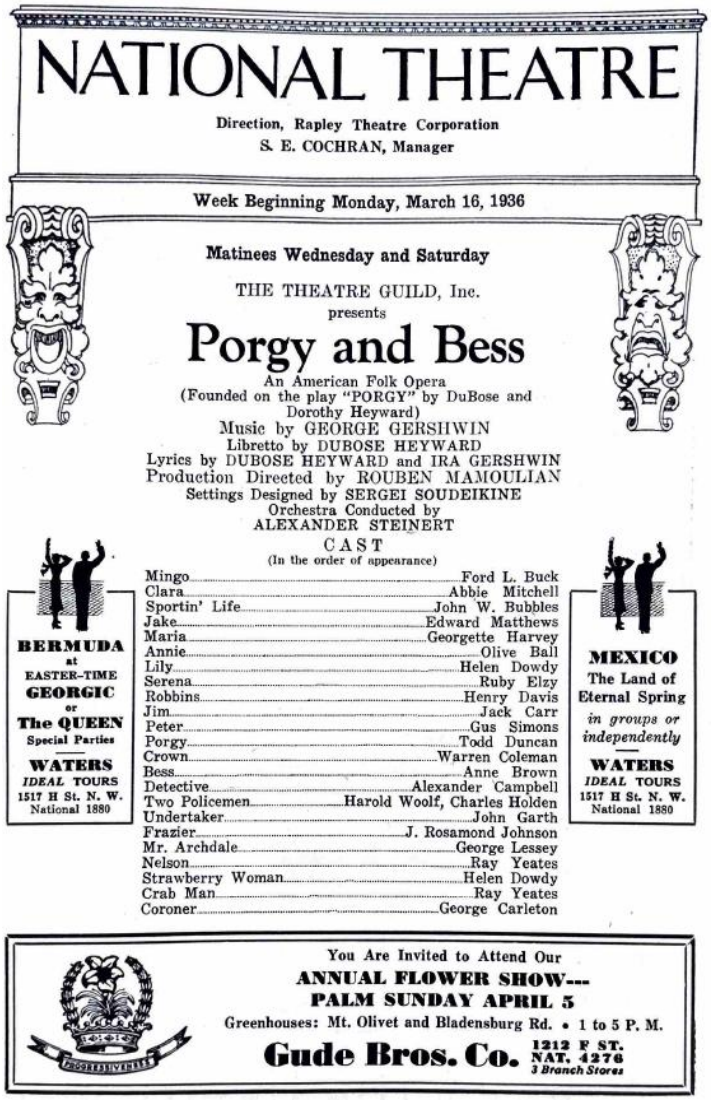
The theater's management claimed that race was not a factor in its decision to cancel the performance.[113]

In 1936, the National was briefly integrated for its run of the George Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess*, after management gave in to demands from the American Federation of Teachers Union; the Theatre Guild; and Todd Duncan, a Howard University music professor. Duncan originated the role of Porgy in *Porgy and Bess* in New York, and later brought the show, which featured a mostly Black cast, to the National Theatre.[114] The *Washington Herald* described how Duncan got the part:

Gershwin gave Duncan an audition, thinking to cast him in a minor role, but was so startled with the magnificence of his voice and dramatic ability, that before the session was over, Duncan had the lead.[115]

As a spokesman for the cast, Duncan said that he would never perform in a theater that barred him from purchasing tickets to certain seats because of his race.[116]

[111] The *Washington Times* reported that the District's strict child labor laws prevented children from performing in the show. "New Film Star Bows," *Washington Times,* Feb. 14, 1934, 14.
[112] "Scottsboro Case Yields To Protest and to Moliere," *Evening Star,* Feb. 14, 1934, 31.
[113] National Theatre, *Desegregation.*
[114] Ibid.
[115] "'Porgy and Bess' Is Scheduled for the National Tomorrow," *Washington Herald,* March 15, 1936, E-10.
[116] Library of Congress, *Today in History, Porgy and Bess,* https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/september-02.



NATIONAL THEATRE

Direction, Rapley Theatre Corporation
S. E. COCHRAN, Manager

Week Beginning Monday, March 16, 1936

Matinees Wednesday and Saturday

THE THEATRE GUILD, Inc.
presents

Porgy and Bess

An American Folk Opera
(Founded on the play "PORGY" by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward)
Music by GEORGE GERSHWIN
Libretto by DUBOSE HEYWARD
Lyrics by DUBOSE HEYWARD and IRA GERSHWIN
Production Directed by ROUBEN MAMOULIAN
Settings Designed by SERGEI SOUDEIKINE
Orchestra Conducted by
ALEXANDER STEINERT

CAST
(In the order of appearance)

Mingo	Ford L. Buck
Clara	Abbie Mitchell
Sportin' Life	John W. Bubbles
Jake	Edward Matthews
Maria	Georgette Harvey
Annie	Olive Ball
Lily	Helen Dowdy
Serena	Ruby Elzy
Robbins	Henry Davis
Jim	Jack Carr
Peter	Gus Simons
Porgy	Todd Duncan
Crown	Warren Coleman
Bess	Anne Brown
Detective	Alexander Campbell
Two Policemen	Harold Woolf, Charles Holden
Undertaker	John Garth
Frazier	J. Rosamond Johnson
Mr. Archdale	George Lessey
Nelson	Ray Yeates
Strawberry Woman	Helen Dowdy
Crab Man	Ray Yeates
Coroner	George Carleton

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Figure 11: Program for *Porgy and Bess*. (Source: The National Theatre.)

In January 1947, several attempts were made to racially integrate the National. Actors' Equity, the actors' union, launched a campaign to end racial discrimination in Washington theaters and called for the National to change its discriminatory policy.[117] In addition, a lawsuit was brought by seven White patrons whose African American guests to the theater were refused admission or ticket refunds. Another lawsuit was brought by an African American who alleged that the theater's refusal to sell him a ticket violated the Civil Rights Act of 1875.[118] Also in January, an interracial group called the Committee for Racial Democracy in the Nation's Capital established

[117] "Actors' Equity Maps Drive to End Theater Segregation in D.C.," *Evening Star,* Jan. 11, 1947, A-3.
[118] "Five Suits Charge National Theater Refused to Refund," *Washington Daily News,* Jan. 31, 1947, 30; "National Theater Suit On Racial Ban Settled With Ticket Refund," *Evening Star,* Apr. 28, 1947, 17. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 guaranteed all citizens, regardless of color, access to accommodations, theaters, public schools, churches, and cemeteries. The Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional in 1883. United States Senate, *Landmark Legislation: Civil Rights Act of 1875*, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilRightsAct1875.htm.

a picket line in front of the National, asking patrons to sign a pledge not to attend the theater unless African Americans were admitted.[119] Later that month, the NAACP criticized President Harry Truman for crossing the picket line to attend a production of *Blossom Time*, an operetta featuring melodies by Franz Schubert.[120] In a press conference, the President said he was unaware the theater was being picketed. "I wanted to see that show for 20 years, so I went down there and saw it," he said.[121]

In a telegram to the President, the NAACP said:

> *Since the issue concerning the admittance of American citizens regardless of race, creed, or color to public institutions has been widely publicized through the press and by picket lines for months, it seems incredible that the Chief Executive of the Nation, residing in Washington, could inadvertently attend that theater.*[122]

In February, the Committee asked members of the Theatre Guild to cancel their subscriptions to *The Glass Menagerie* playing at the National as part of a drive to have the National and Lisner Auditorium at The George Washington University boycotted because of their discriminatory policies.[123] When The George Washington University decided a few days later to lift its racial ban on public meetings at Lisner, the Committee urged the National to follow suit.[124]

In March, in response to the lawsuits brought against the National for refusing to seat Blacks and refund their money, the National charged that the people associated with the Committee had obtained tickets by "fraud and deceit" by concealing the fact that tickets were for African Americans.[125] In April 1947, the lawsuit was settled when the theater agreed to refund a total of $77 to the ticket buyers.[126]

In August, the *Evening Star* reported that the actors' union was demanding a contract clause that would bar union members from appearing at the National unless the exclusion of African Americans was stopped, and quoted a statement from the company that operated the National:

> *We will change only (1) if the general policy is changed in Washington by legislation or (2) if business and civic groups will revoke racial restrictions.*
>
> *Local and national groups have gone on record in statements to the effect that once they break down the policy of the National Theater, Washington, they will go after other places locally and nationally.*

[119] "Interracial Group Plans To Picket National Theater," *Evening Star,* Jan. 7, 1947, 3.
[120] Green, *Broadway Musicals,* 38.
[121] Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, *The President's News Conference,* Jan. 23, 1947, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/14/presidents-news-conference.
[122] "Colored Group Hits Truman's Attendance at National Theater," *Evening Star*, Jan. 24, 1947, A-6.
[123] "Theatre Guild Aid Sought in Boycott," *Washington Afro-American,* Feb. 8, 1947, 16.
[124] "G.W. Lifts Racial Ban At Lisner but Limits Use of Auditorium," *Evening Star,* Feb. 14, 1947, A-2. In its decision, The George Washington University also barred the use of the hall for commercial theatrical productions.
[125] "Ticket Refund Suits To Be Heard March 31," *Evening Star,* March 15, 1947, A-2.
[126] "National Theater Suit On Racial Ban Settled With Ticket Refund."

> *Therefore, we will not be coerced into doing anything which may affect others. We will remain steadfast in our position and be reconciled to the final outcome. Let others build theaters or do anything they please. If we cannot get plays because of the actors' unions we will eliminate presenting them and offer some other form of entertainment.*[127]

Actors' Equity pledged that its members would stop performing at the National if the theater did not change its policy by August 1948.[128] In the meantime, in January 1948, the Committee asked President Truman that the old Belasco Theatre, which was then a Treasury Department storehouse in Lafayette Square across from the White House, be used as an integrated theater in light of the National's refusal to change its policy.[129] Veteran actor Helen Hayes, who was vice president of the American National Theater and Academy, supported the effort to lease the Belasco Theatre for an integrated audience. In June, in a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, Hayes, who had played an eight-day engagement of the play *Alice Sit by the Fire* at a theater in suburban Washington, wrote:

> *In recent days the people of Washington have proven beyond a doubt that they are behind Actors Equity in its fight against racial discrimination. For 13 straight performances, 9100 Washingtonians from many stations in life and of all races and colors—9100 Americans—have sat side by side in the Olney Theater in nearby Maryland. Of this number only 10 have registered complaints with the theater management—an overhelming [sic] and gratifying indication that the people of Washington, given a chance, will back a theatre with the courage to practice actively and conscientiously our Bill of Rights.*[130]

On June 2, a D.C. Municipal judge ruled that the National did not act illegally in refusing to sell a ticket to an African American, stating that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was omitted from the U.S. Code.[131] The next day, Marcus Heiman, the owner of the E Street Theatre Corporation, which operated the National, announced that the theater would switch to showing films because of the actors' boycott. The *Evening Star* quoted Heiman: "These people want to do it through blackmail. They have given us an ultimatum—either the policy changes or we are out of business. We accept the challenge." The newspaper noted that the National was Washington's "only legitimate playhouse" then in operation.[132]

After failing to reach an agreement with the union, the National closed on July 31. The cast of *Oklahoma* ended its final performance by leading the audience in singing "Auld Lang Syne."[133]

[127] "National Theater Says It Shifts Racial Policy Only if All D.C. Does," *Evening Star,* Aug. 12, 1947, 1.
[128] "Actors' Equity Sure of Victory in Fight Against D.C. Theatre," *Washington Afro-American,* Oct. 11, 1947, 17.
[129] "Truman Aid Asked to Make Belasco Bi-Racial Theater," *Evening Star,* Jan. 16, 1948, A-2.
[130] Helen Hayes, "Letters to the Editor, Nonsegregated Theater," *Washington Post,* June 11, 1948, 20.
[131] "Judge Holds National Theater Can Legally Exclude Negroes," *Times-Herald,* June 3, 1948, 31.
[132] "National Theater Will Switch To Films Because of Equity Ban," *Evening Star,* June 3, 1948, 1.
[133] "National Theater's Last Curtain Falls Before Capacity House," *Evening Star,* Aug. 1, 1948, 1.



Figure 12: Actors sing Auld Lang Syne at the National on July 31, 1948. (Source: Aug. 1, 1948, *Evening Star*. Reprinted with permission of the D.C. Public Library, Star Collection © Washington Post.)

Evening Star columnist Jay Carmody lamented the theater's closing:

> *And so the conflict ends with legitimate theater left in Washington. The argument moves on over its dead body. If there is a martyr involved, it is not either of the principals but the public, the white and Negro public which might have met in understanding and mutual enjoyment at the theater, if the theater had lived.*[134]

In November 1951, Broadway producers Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers announced plans to lease and reopen the National in May 1952 and that their "first policy" would be to abolish segregation in the theater.[135] The *Times-Herald* reported that the Munsey Realty company, owner of the National, selected the bid to lease the theater submitted by Aldrich and Myers out of five or six bids, and rejected one from a corporation headed by Heiman.[136] According to the *Washington Afro-American*, with a change in policy at the National, Washington would then have three integrated legitimate playhouses, including the Gayety and the Arena Stage.[137]

The *Washington Afro-American* praised the new operators of the National for "practicing real democracy in spite of practices to the contrary in most of the other theaters in downtown Washington."[138]

[134] Jay Carmody, "Extinction on E Street," *Evening Star,* Aug. 1, 1948, C-6.
[135] "National to End Segregation With Return of Stage Plays," *Evening Star,* Nov. 8, 1951, 37.
[136] "National Will Offer Stage Plays in 1952," *Times-Herald,* Nov. 8, 1951, C-1.
[137] "National Theatre to Go Interracial," *Washington Afro-American,* Nov. 10, 1951, 16.
[138] "National Owners Deserve Praise," *Washington Afro-American,* May 10, 1952, 4.

Conclusion

A book written about the National more than 75 years ago summarized the theater's significance, which continues today:

> *The reason why the National is so popular to the profession is the fact that the greatest artists have trod its boards; and it is popular with Washingtonians and all American citizens because it is a link to the dramatic past. It has great charm because of its traditions. There is no great actor of the modern era whose name is not inseparably connected with the National. The old place must be immortal. It must have a soul.*[139]

[139] George Atkinson and Victor Kiraly, "—a great curtain falls," (Strand Press, 1950), 65.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

____ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
____ previously listed in the National Register
____ previously determined eligible by the National Register
____ designated a National Historic Landmark
____ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
____ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

____ State Historic Preservation Office
____ Other State agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
____ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property approximately .47 acres

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates
Datum if other than WGS84:_____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)
1. Latitude: 38.8963720 Longitude: -77.030592

2. Latitude: Longitude:

3. Latitude: Longitude:

4. Latitude: Longitude:

Or
UTM References
Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☐ NAD 1927 or ☐ NAD 1983

1. Zone: Easting: Northing:

2. Zone: Easting: Northing:

3. Zone: Easting: Northing:

4. Zone: Easting : Northing:

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundaries of the National Theatre correspond to those of Lot 842 within Square 254.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

These boundaries, which correspond with the lot lines, were selected because they align with the National Theatre building.

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Robert Homan, John DeFerrari, and Peter Sefton; Zachary Burt (DCPL Staff)
organization: DC Preservation League
street & number: 1328 Florida Avenue NW, 2nd Floor
city or town: Washington state: DC zip code: 20009
e-mail: info@dcpreservation.org
telephone: (202) 783-5144
date: September 28, 2026

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

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

- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.

- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

	DESCRIPTION	FACING	PHOTOGRAPHER	DATE
1	National Theatre south elevation	N	Library of Congress	c. 1922
2	National Theatre south elevation	N	National Theatre	1950s
3	National Theatre south elevation	N	John DeFerrari	5/15/26
4	National Theatre 1984 marquee	NW	Robert Homan	5/7/26
5	South façade with main entrance	N	John DeFerrari	5/15/26
6	South façade detail of cornice	N	John DeFerrari	5/15/26
7	Adjoining side entrance to 1984 addition on south façade	N	John DeFerrari	5/15/26
8	Main entrance lobby	N	John DeFerrari	5/15/26
9	East façade upper stories with rear addition viewed along airshaft above east extension	NW	Peter Sefton	5/29/26

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations 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.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.
Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
Tier 2 – 120 hours
Tier 3 – 230 hours
Tier 4 – 280 hours

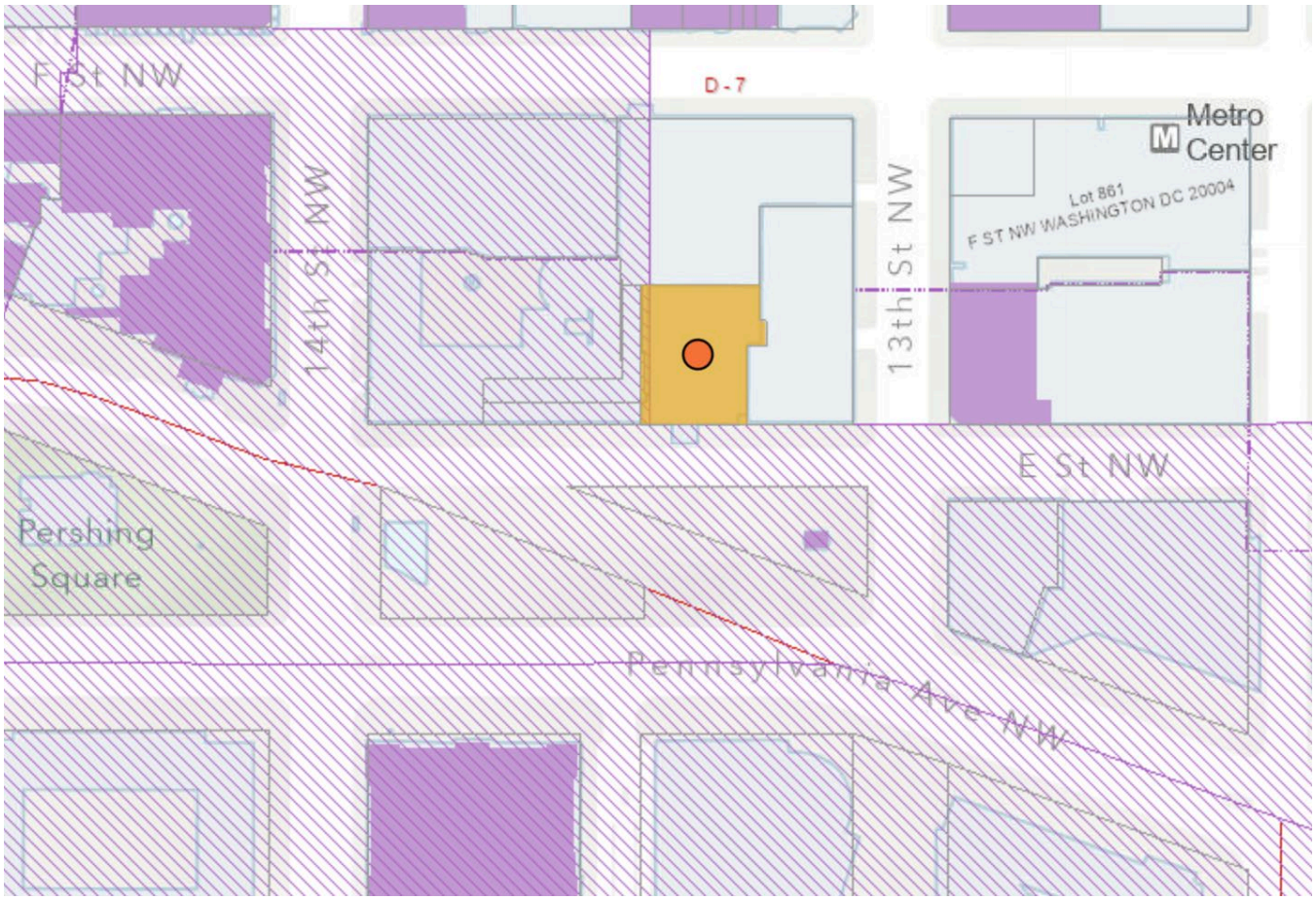
The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

National Theatre
Name of Property
Washington, DC
County and State
N/A
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number Maps Page 1



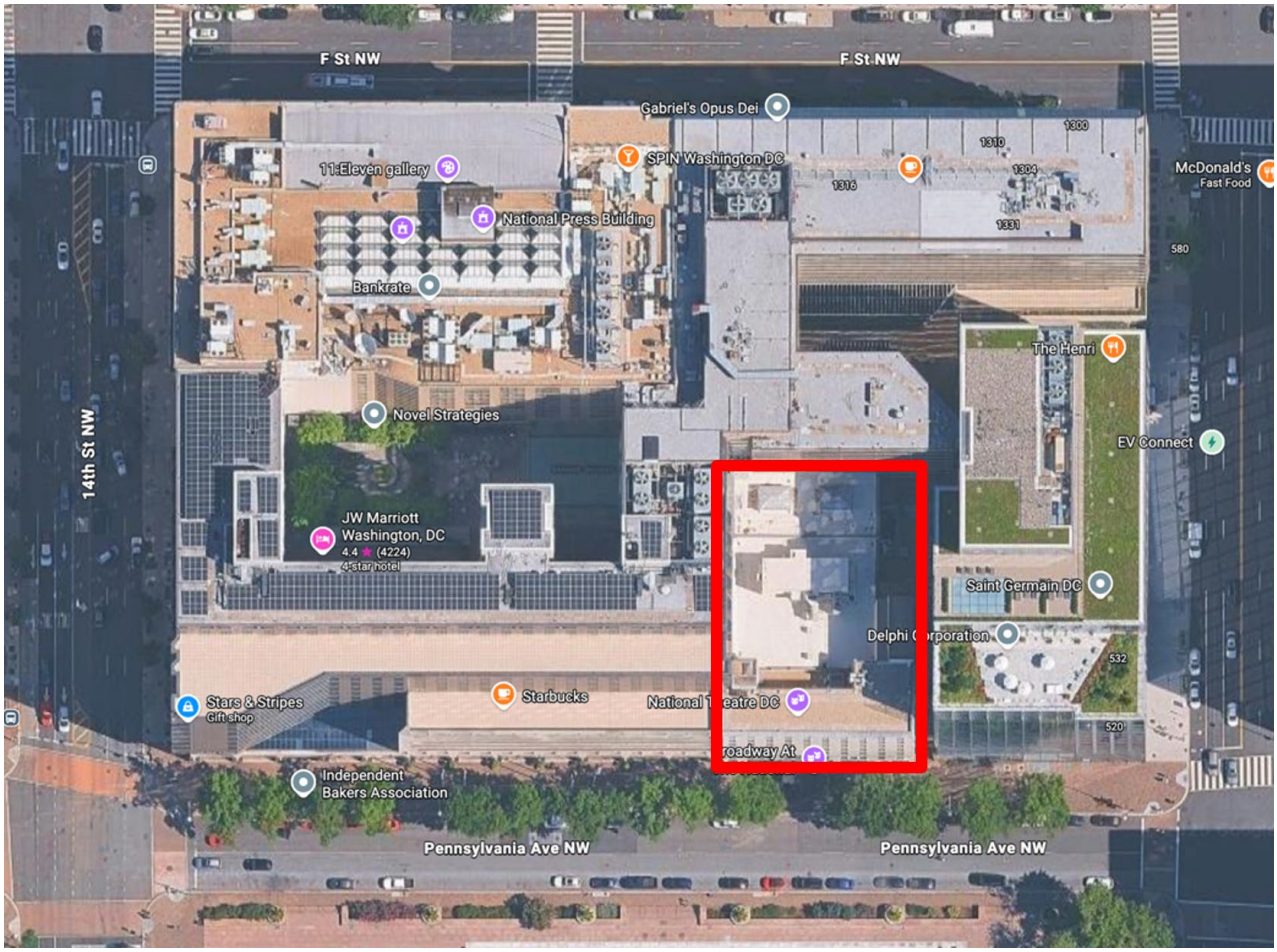
Map 1: National Theatre boundaries, with National Theatre highlighted in yellow (DC PropertyQuest).

United States Department of the Interior
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Washington, DC
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Section number Maps Page 2



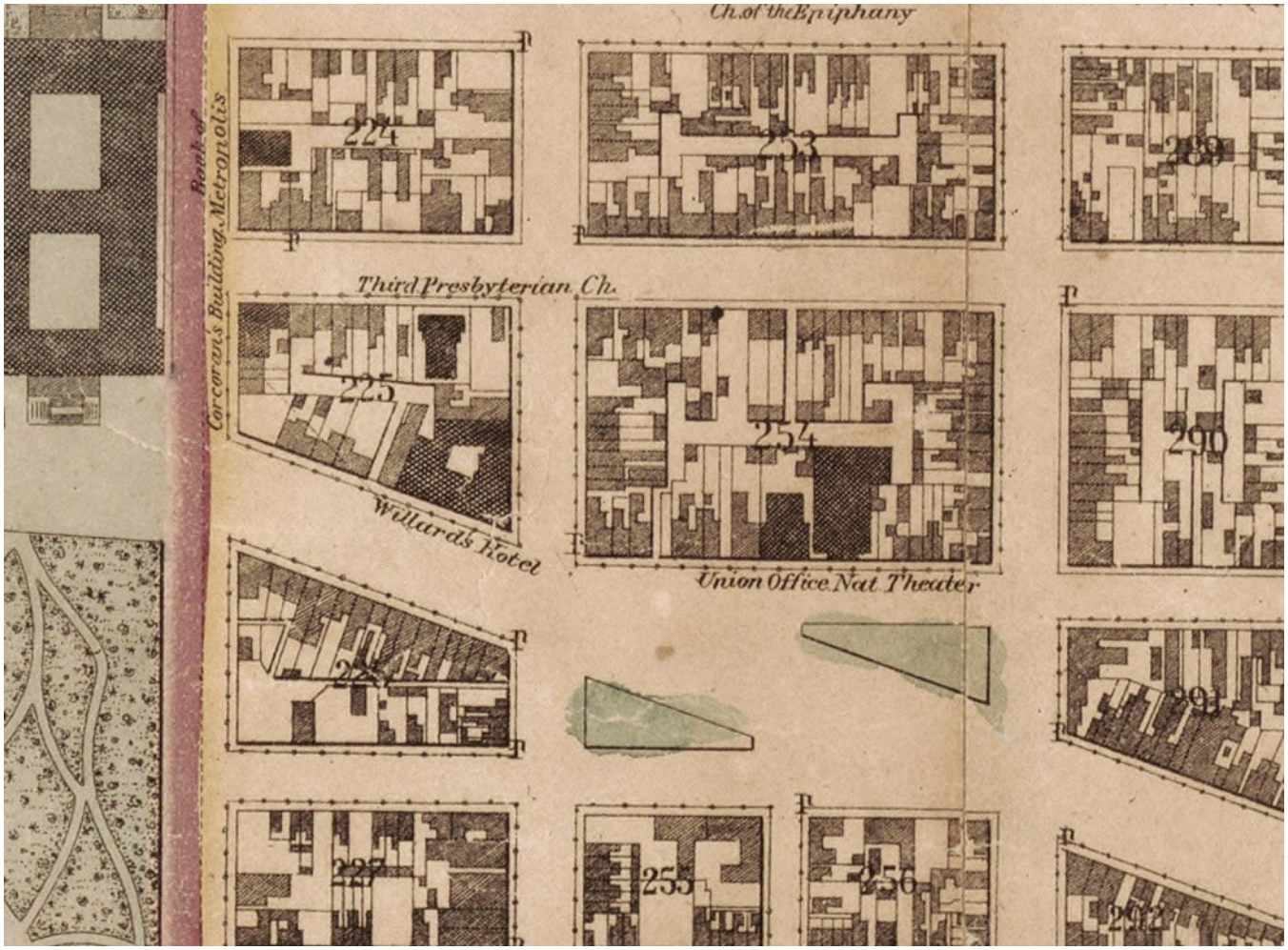
Map 2: National Theatre overhead view, with National Theatre indicated in red (Google Maps).

United States Department of the Interior
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National Theatre
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Washington, DC
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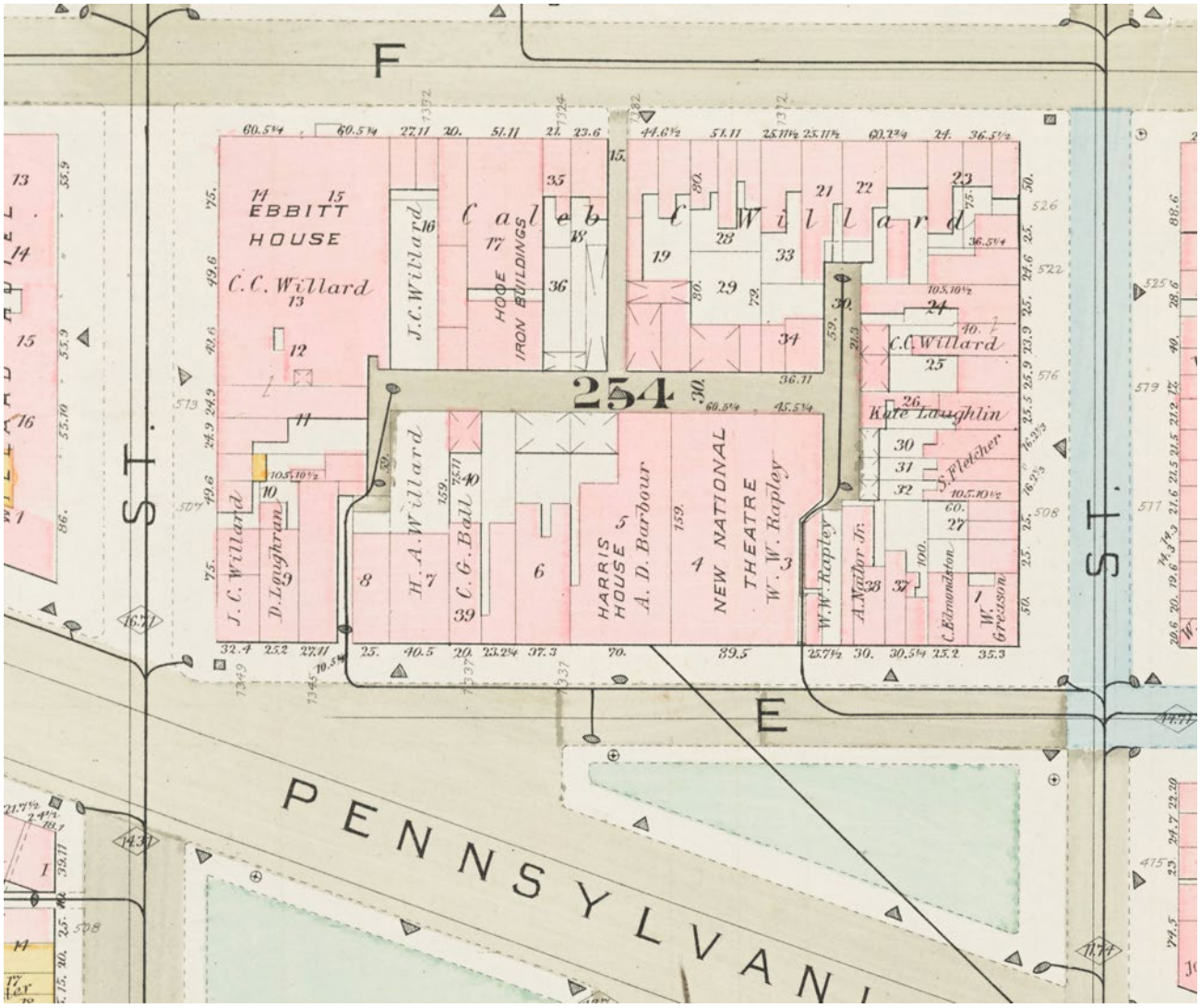
Map 3: Excerpt from A. Boschke, *Map of Washington City, District of Columbia, seat of the federal government*, (1857), showing the location of the National Theatre. (Library of Congress).

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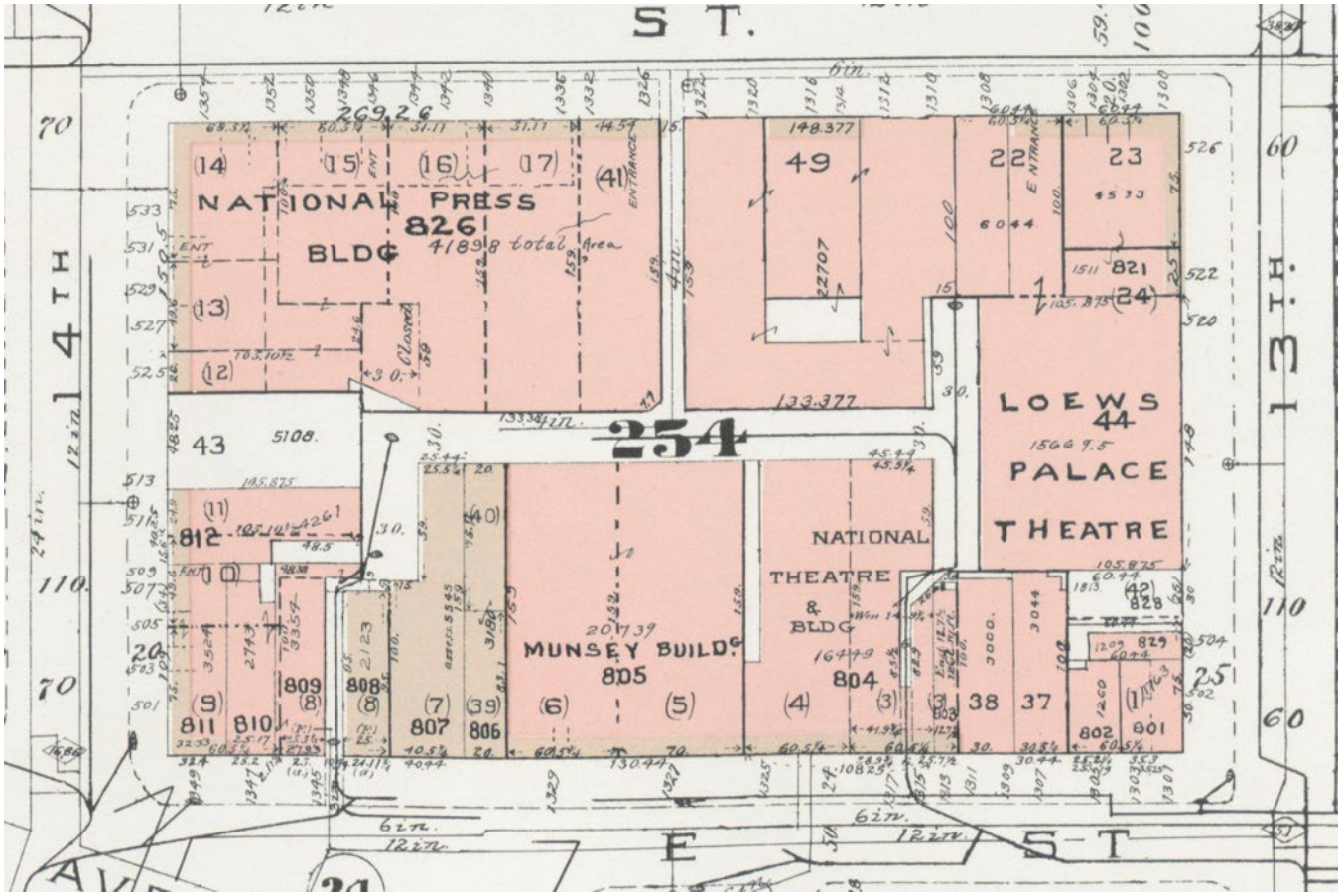
Map 4: Excerpt from Griffith M. Hopkins, *Surveys and Plats of Properties in the City of Washington, District of Columbia* (1887), Plate 13, showing the location of the New National Theatre. (Library of Congress).

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Map 5: Excerpt from G.W. Baist, *Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Washington, District of Columbia*, 1965, Vol. I, Plan 23. (DC Office of the Surveyor).

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Section number Photos Page 1



Photo 1: National Theatre south elevation, circa 1922. (Library of Congress)

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N/A	
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Photo 2: National Theatre south elevation, 1950s. (National Theatre)

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Photo 3: National Theatre south elevation. (J. DeFerrari)

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Photo 4: National Theatre 1984 marquee (R. Homan).

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Section number Photos Page 5



Photo 5: South façade with main entrance (J. DeFerrari).



Photo 6: South façade detail of cornice (J. DeFerrari).

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Photo 7: Adjoining side entrance to 1984 addition on south façade (J. DeFerrari).

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National Theatre
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Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

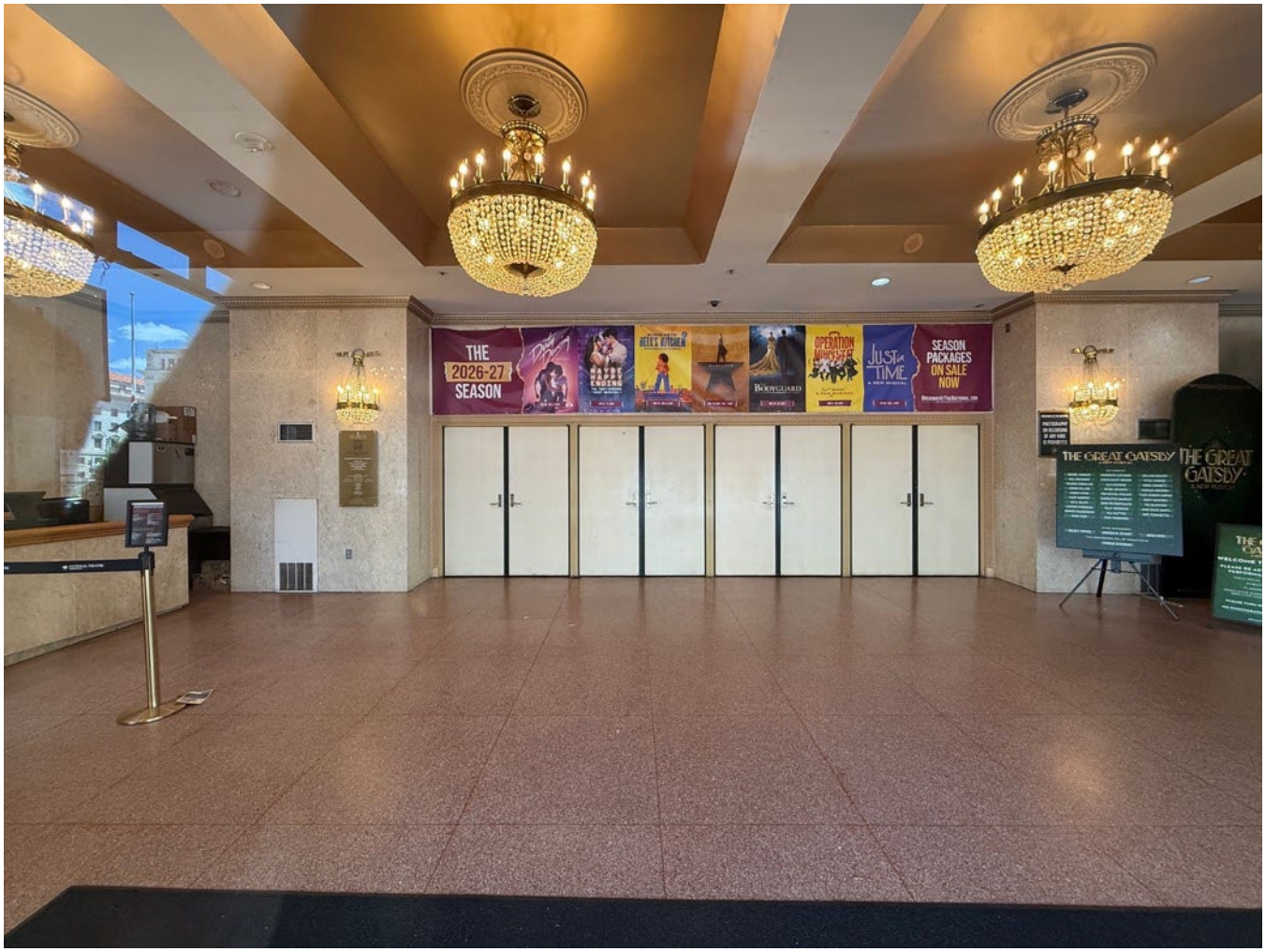


Photo 8: Main entrance lobby (J. DeFerrari).



Photo 9: East façade with rear addition, viewed along air shaft above east extension (P. Sefton).