NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)
OMB No. 1024-0018

Jnited States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Bethesda Theatre
other names/site number Boro Theatre; M:35-14-4

2. Location

street 7719 Wisconsin Avenue
not for publication n/a city or town Bethesda vicinity n/a
state Maryland code MD county Montgomery code 031 zip code 20814

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this x 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 x meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally ___ statewide x locally. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

1-4-99

Signature of certifying official Date

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

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

____ entered in the National Register _____
___ See continuation sheet.
____ determined eligible for the _____
National Register
___ See continuation sheet.
____ determined not eligible for the _____
National Register
____ removed from the National Register _____

____ other (explain): _____

_____ _____
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

_x_ private
___ public-local
___ public-State
___ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

_x_ building(s)
___ district
___ site
___ structure
___ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
1	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in National Register 0
Name of related multiple property listing n/a

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)
Cat: RECREATION AND CULTURE Sub: theatre

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)
Cat: RECREATION AND CULTURE Sub: theatre

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)
Art Deco

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)
foundation MASONRY
roof ASPHALT
walls BRICK
other ALUMINUM; NEON

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

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

_x_ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

_x_ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

_x_ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

____ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

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

____ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
____ B removed from its original location.
____ C a birthplace or a grave.
____ D a cemetery.
____ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
____ F a commemorative property.
____ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)
ARCHITECTURE
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance 1938

Significant Dates 1938

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
Lust, Sidney

Cultural Affiliation n/a

Architect/Builder Eberson, John, architect
Woodmont Development Co., builder

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)
___ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
___ previously listed in the National Register
___ previously determined eligible by the National Register
___ designated a National Historic Landmark
___ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
___ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data
_x_ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State agency
___ Federal agency
___ Local government
___ University
_x_ Other
Name of repository: Montgomery County HPC, Rockville, MD

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.4 acre
USGS quadrangle Washington West, DC-MD-VA
UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	318570	4317250	C	__	_____	_____
B	__	_____	_____	D	__	_____	_____

___ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated property is described as Lot 1, Block 2, Westboro Subdivision, recorded among the Land Records of Montgomery County in Plat Book 23, Plat No. 1430, June 1941.

Boundary Justification: The nominated property, 0.4 acre, comprises the property with which the resource is historically associated.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Linda B. Lyons Chair, Preservation Committee
organization Art Deco Society of Washington date 19 August 1998
street & number 3922 Oliver Street telephone (301) 654-3924
city or town Chevy Chase state MD zip code 20815

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets
Maps
A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.
Photographs
Representative black and white photographs of the property.
Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)
name Beta Corporation
street & number 36 South Charles Street telephone (410) 242-3008
city or town Baltimore state MD zip code 21201

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).
Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Description

The Bethesda Theater, constructed in 1938 at 7719 Wisconsin Avenue, is a multi-level building composed of rectangular blocks: an auditorium block and a lower street-front lobby and entrance block, including shops. A neighborhood Art Deco cinema built during Hollywood's golden age, it is located in the active downtown commercial center of an older suburb. The principal (west) facade of blond brick is divided into three parts, consisting of flanking shops with large show windows and the theater entrance, which is topped by a theater marquee and marquee tower in the form of a miniature skyscraper with "BETHESDA" spelled vertically in neon letters. Directly behind the marquee and tower is a low parapet wall of blond brick accented at the edges of the marquee tower and at the corners with horizontal bands of glazed black brick. This parapet wall differentiates the theater entrance from the flanking storefronts. The ends of this parapet wall turn toward the rear of the building for about 20 feet, ending with curved returns. About 30 feet behind this first parapet wall (across a flat roof) is a second parapet wall, also of blond brick with black horizontal accent bands at the corners and decorative vertical elements in a ribbed pattern. This parapet wall extends the full width of the theater, marking the internal division between the standard-height ceilings of the storefronts, theater entrance and lobby and the taller ceiling of the theater auditorium. Behind the second parapet wall can be seen portions of the irregular roof of the auditorium covered with dark-colored roofing material. The south side of the theater, which overlooks an alley, is faced with blond brick extending back approximately 50 feet, where it is succeeded by red brick construction. The rear of the building (overlooking a parking lot) is also built of red brick. This property displays a high degree of integrity and reflect very little fundamental change over time, except for the replacement of the original seats with a different seating pattern.

At the sidewalk, the theater entry has a centrally-situated ticket booth, trimmed in grooved aluminum, flanked by recessed theater entrances, with aluminum-trimmed movie notice cases at either end of the arrangement. The base of this section is trimmed with green serpentine, a siding material similar to marble. Each theatre entrance consists of four doors which together present an Art Deco design in the size and shape of their glass lights.

The theater marquee consists of a wide metal canopy, rounded at the corners and trimmed by parallel lines of neon lights, between which run the letters of a sign that currently reads "Theatre Cafe." At the points where the edges of the marquee canopy join the building, the facade contains aluminum plaques. Each of these vertically rectangular plaques features a rounded top and an internal pattern of fluting that mimics the external edges. The tall metal marquee tower, also trimmed in neon, rises from the center of the canopy and is tied to it by a rounded L-angle

Description (continued)

connector, in like material, that restates the rounded corners of the canopy.

Flanking the entry are two of the three original retail spaces that were constructed with the theater. The existing north storefront has been altered, but the south storefront is largely intact, with ornamental aluminum trim and enamel panes at its base painted to match the green marble of the entrance.

The interior of the theater retains its original space configuration of lobby, foyer, lounges, and auditorium. Many original interior finishes, including painted murals, remain intact,[1] with the exception of the original seating. The lobby is an approximately square room with a carpeted floor that slants down from the four pairs of entrance doors and box office toward four pairs of doors that lead to the foyer. On both front and back walls, the doors and box office are surmounted by a narrow stripped classical molding. Above the doors to the foyer is a narrow canopy supported at the corners by streamlined reverse stepped brackets. The side walls of the lobby are complex, each having a central projection with rounded corners flanked by pairs of mirrors in streamlined recesses. On each projection is a pair of display cases with Art Deco detailing, including vertical reeding and central groups of streamlined stepped finials. The bases of the side walls are trimmed in green serpentine that steps down to the foyer entrance. The lobby space is crowned by an undulated ceiling in the form of a series of waves that conceal, but are dramatized by, three bands of indirect lighting.

The foyer is a crosswise rectangular room with an elliptical opening in its ceiling and indirect lighting. The far wall provides two entrances to the auditorium consisting of flanking pairs of doors set at an angle. The side walls have wide entrances to (left) a lounge connecting to a ladies restroom and (right) a lounge connecting to a mens restroom. On the right is also a phone booth with a curved wall that projects into the adjacent lounge. The side walls of the foyer carry two parallel horizontal moldings, separated by dark fabric, near the tops of the doors that continue, along with the walls themselves, beyond the double doors into the auditorium where the walls immediately curve out toward the side walls of the theatre. The entrance to each restroom is marked overhead by a sign that appears to be of the original period. In the ladies restroom are wall tiles in colors of apricot pink accented with aqua green and mahogany and small floor tiles in

[1] A description of these spaces at the time of the theater's opening is summarized in Section 8.

Description (continued)

mixed colors of aqua green, mahogany, and shades of beige. In the mens restroom are wall tiles in the same pattern in colors of lime green accented with yellow and mahogany and small floor tiles in mixed colors of mahogany, dark brown, and shades of beige. Three of the fixtures are dark red and appear to coordinate with the tiles.

The auditorium is a long rectangular space with a high ceiling. In the rear portion of this space are a walk-through bar of standard room height in the center, a kitchen with walk-in freezer on the left, and a food preparation room, small janitor's closet, and stairway to the second floor projection area on the right. The projection booth has equipment that once closed its portholes automatically in case of fire.

Beyond the entrance doors, kitchen entrances, etc., are openings into the auditorium proper that intersect gently curved walls that are not full height and extend almost to the outer walls of the theatre. The openings have single Art Deco-detailed columns on their outside edges from which extend short waist-high walls trimmed with rounded blond wood railings. Above these walls and the bar can be seen a false shallow balcony below the ports of the projection booth that extends the entire width of the rear wall and continues as molding trim along the side walls. The balcony, which has a central streamlined projection, is trimmed by a series of three parallel horizontal moldings separated by dark fabric that present a highly streamlined effect.

The floor of the auditorium (added above the original slanted floor) is multi-level and steps down to the proscenium stage and screen. The side walls, covered with fabric above wainscot level, are decorated with sets of three parallel wooden moldings separated by dark fabric. The topmost molding trio continues from the rear-wall balcony and runs forward and down to create a streamlined pattern. The middle molding trio also begins at the rear wall, carries several rectangular light fixtures, and continues along a shallow balcony surmounting an exit door about half-way down the auditorium. Above this balcony on each side wall is a projection screen. Forward of each balcony is a round mirror with holes where a light fixture was once attached. The lowest molding, rendered in plaster, is the upper border of the plaster wainscot, beginning at the rear wall and stepping down in curves before reaching the proscenium.

Forward of the round mirrors, the walls angle in toward the proscenium. These angled walls are connected to the side walls and the front stage by groups of tall rounded pilaster-like projections. In each angled wall is a narrow full-height niche with rounded corners. In each niche is a pair of

Description (continued)

exit doors surmounted by a projecting balcony trimmed with three parallel horizontal moldings separated by dark fabric. The upper part of each niche, which is curved at the top, is decorated with a dramatic mural of starry constellations, star-like geometric patterns, and sea-shell-like forms rendered in pale colors on a deep blue background (described as "astral" at the opening of the theatre). Access to the stage is provided by curved stairs on either side, adjacent to the angled walls. The stage is almost completely filled by the main theatre screen which can be covered by a curtain.

The ceiling of the auditorium is painted with additional bands of the mural, as well as other streamlined motifs. Suspended from the long axis of the ceiling is a painted decorative trough that hides the air conditioning grills. The ceiling is cut away from the angled walls that flank the stage in a curved pattern to create ceiling recesses that reach the roof of the auditorium. A large-scale crown molding, consisting of stepped layers of ovolo moldings, connects the ceiling to the rear and side walls as far forward as the angled walls.

Statement of Significance

The Bethesda Theatre is locally significant for the following reasons: (1) It is a highly significant example of a 1930s Art Deco neighborhood cinema designed by the firm of the world-renowned "Dean of American Theatre Architects," John Eberson; (2) It was the premier facility in the regionally important chain of independent movie theaters operated by Sidney Lust; (3) As a major contributor to the development of the central business district of Bethesda, Maryland, it played a significant role not only in the history of the Bethesda community but also in the 20th-century suburbanization of the Nation's Capital region; (4) In the geographical contexts of Montgomery County and the nation's capital region, the Bethesda Theatre is now a rare example of an Art Deco neighborhood cinema from Hollywood's Golden Age, and its importance to Montgomery County has been duly acknowledged by virtue of the 1985 designation of the Bethesda Theatre on Montgomery County's Master Plan for Historic Preservation. The Bethesda Theatre meets National Register Criteria A, B, and C, and its areas of significance are architecture, entertainment/recreation, and social history.

The Theatre meets National Register Criterion A because it is "associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history" -- specifically, the evolution of the motion picture industry as a major contributor to American art, entertainment, recreation, and popular culture.

Statement of Significance (continued)

The Theatre meets Criterion B because it is "associated with the lives of persons significant in our past" -- specifically, the regionally important entrepreneur and film impresario Sidney Lust.

The Theatre meets Criterion C because it embodies "the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represent the work of a master" -- specifically, the type, period, and method of construction embodied in 1930s Depression-Era Art Deco cinema (a building type quite distinct from the earlier 1920s "picture palace); it is one of a few surviving examples of this building type in the region that display in an accurate form the physical premises of Depression-era film presentation. In addition, it is the work of a design firm that was universally acknowledged in the architectural profession as the top firm nationally and internationally that specialized in theatre design.

Historical Background and Significance

The Bethesda Theatre opened on May 19, 1938 at an elaborately staged premiere denoting the importance of this large modern theater's arrival in the growing suburb of Bethesda. Although originally named the Boro Theater, its name was changed to Bethesda within a year to better identify its important location. The movie house was an immediate success and quickly became a community landmark. It was one of the early Bethesda buildings to have air conditioning and was the site of many community events and demonstrations, as well as cinema shows. Its operator, Sidney Lust, boasted of providing the most modern equipment and Art Deco design features, hiring the renowned theater architect John Eberson to ensure its prominence. After operating as a traditional movie house for more than four decades, it was converted to a restaurant/movie house format in 1983, known then as the Bethesda Cinema 'n Drafthouse. In 1990, it became the independent Bethesda Theatre Cafe. Much of the theater's original decor remains (with the exception of its original seats), both exterior and interior, making it a valuable example of its type.

The Bethesda Theatre typifies the new type of large suburban movie theater that came to dominate the industry in its Golden Age, especially in the Washington, D.C. area. The 1930s and '40s were known as the Golden Age of Hollywood because studio ownership of production and exhibition peaked during this period. Nevertheless, even the film industry was not immune to the woes of the Great Depression, experiencing declining attendance nationwide. However, in

Statement of Significance (continued)

Washington, where the New Deal drove the local economy, Washingtonians could still afford the movies. This relative prosperity meant that local theater owners could install such new technologies as air conditioning and invest in innovative designs. Thus, Washington enjoyed a theater building boom during the Great Depression matched by only a few other American cities. With its population growth and high per capita income, Washington was a pacesetter, and local movie house owners, along with the national chains, helped develop the Art Deco style of theater. Theaters built in and around the nation's capital were nationally famous. Writers in the movie trade papers and architectural journals praised Washington theaters as some of the finest examples of the new modern style.

In 1935, the Penn Theater on Capitol Hill became one of the first new theaters constructed in the United States since the stock market crash. For this important project, the dominant Warner Bros. theater chain brought in architect John Eberson. During the 1920s Eberson had built a national reputation based on elaborately decorated atmospheric picture palaces that gave patrons the illusion of sitting in an exotic courtyard. In fact, the Penn had been planned in 1930 as a classic Eberson atmospheric palace. However, with the onset of the Depression, the project was delayed, and Eberson, who had learned of the International style from Europe, abandoned his earlier concepts for less adorned and more economical Art Deco designs that came to exemplify the second phase of his career. Thus, when the Art Deco-styled Penn opened, it initiated a new age in Washington theater design. Over the years, Eberson's firm designed 13 theaters in the Washington area, including the Bethesda Theatre and the Silver Theatre in Montgomery County.

While the Art Deco Penn simply added to the possibilities of movie-going on Capitol Hill, another cinema house, the Uptown in Cleveland Park, was part of a significant social change in Washington and was a vanguard of the movies' response to the car-driving public. This theater was built just down Connecticut Avenue from Washington's first "Park and Shop" center of 1930, an early example of a national change in commercial design in which space for parking became the centerpiece of the shopping complex and a drawing card for patrons. Because of its revolutionary design, the Park and Shop was a success, and Cleveland Park's commercial stretch prospered. When the Uptown opened in 1936, patrons flocked to the easy parking that was available just one block to the north at the Park and Shop. A greater elaboration of this concept was the Silver Theatre and Silver Spring Shopping Center, both designed by John Eberson, that opened September 15, 1938, in the heart of Silver Spring, which had grown from a quiet farm and residential area of Montgomery County into a major Washington suburb and Maryland's second

Statement of Significance (continued)

largest retail center. It seemed inevitable that a planned shopping center and theater would open there, carefully coordinated in the latest architectural fashion, with parking for 600 cars. Eberson's other 1938 Washington-area theater, the Bethesda, also featured parking for hundreds of cars behind it. This project and others like it marked a turning point, as downtown city centers gradually ceased to be the primary locations for new trend-setting movie houses.

As the city's growth opened new areas to development, local movie chains challenged the national chains, especially in the emerging residential sections of the District and new suburbs in Maryland and Virginia. The Art Deco style helped these new theaters stand out as neighborhood centers. These were modern movie theaters built not to evoke European elegance, but to serve the movie presentation and its audience. Planned parking, standard air conditioning, and Art Deco design were important in attracting customers, as these outlying theaters were usually second-run houses and had to offer non-movie attractions that would encourage patrons to wait for the later showings.

One of Washington's major challengers to the national chains was Sidney Lust. His ten-theater chain included two theaters in the District, five in suburban Maryland, and three in Alexandria. Lust, who had begun his career with Warner Bros., struck out on his own in the 1930s and began to challenge Warner in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. The finest of Lust's creations was the Bethesda Theatre, which opened May 19, 1938, designed by John Eberson, elaborately decorated and equipped with the most modern conveniences, and prominently featuring space for 500 cars in the back.

The Bethesda Theatre draws significance from its association with the renowned theater architect John Eberson. Eberson (1875-1954) was born in Austria and came to the United States in 1901. After serving as an apprentice to a St. Louis theater designer and contractor, Eberson established his own architectural firm in Hamilton, Ohio, specializing in vaudeville theater design. By 1910, his practice had grown so extensive that the firm moved to Chicago, only to relocate in New York City during the 1920s. among the important theater designs that emerged from the Eberson firm in these years were the Crown and Paradise theaters in Chicago, and the Majestic theaters in Savannah, San Antonio, and Houston. The latter was one of the first of

Statement of Significance (continued)

the so-called "atmospheric" theaters, world famed for their mechanical special effects designed to create the illusion of floating clouds and shimmering stars on auditorium ceilings.

By the 1920s, Eberson had entered "the national spotlight and shook the complacency of the traditionalists among the palace architects," according to theater historian David Naylor.[2] Dennis Sharp, in his book The Picture Palace, has said that Eberson, Thomas Lamb, and C. Howard Crane were the three preeminent architects whose work "characterized the movement towards luxury and elegance in movie palace architecture."[3] In the estimation of theater historian Ben M. Hall, Lamb and Eberson stood alone at the pinnacle:

> Two individuals stand out among all the hundreds of architects who practice... during the golden age of the movie palace. Not only were they the most prolific, but their places in the history of the art were undisputed. One was Thomas Lamb... the other was John Eberson... whose influence on the climate of moviegoing in the Twenties was both original and enchanting.[4]

With the advent of the Depression, important changes in the scale and design of movie theaters were brought about. No longer was there money available to finance the construction of huge, lavishly-decorated, downtown movie palaces. The decline in movie attendance during the early years of the Depression pointed the way towards smaller, less ornate neighborhood houses when large-scale construction of theaters resumed in the mid-1930s. Eberson's office weathered this storm and grasped the changing trends, creating streamlined economical designs which were well received and brought business back to the firm. Color, lighting, and fabrics were substituted for expensive ornamental plaster, and attention to construction, maintenance, and operational costs were made part of the designs. One of Eberson's earliest and most important theaters of this period was the Rex Theatre built in Paris in 1932.

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[2] David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York, 1981), 68.

[3] Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace* (London and New York, 1969), 74.

[4] Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York, 1961), 95.

Statement of Significance (continued)

In Washington, beginning with the 1935 Penn Theater (of which only a remnant of the facade remains), Eberson's firm designed 13 theaters, including the Bethesda and Silver Theaters in 1938. Most of these have been destroyed. The Cheverly Theatre (1947) in Prince George's County has been restored by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission for use as a community theater.

The creator and owner of the Bethesda Theatre was Sidney B. Lust (1884-1955), one of the local theater chain owners who joined and extended the trend of Art Deco neighborhood cinemas. A native of New York City, he began his career as a road-show stage carpenter and then managed big-time vaudeville acts. He was a partner with Warner Bros. in opening their local film exchange when he came to Washington in 1914. A year later he went into business for himself, buying, distributing and selling motion picture films for independent producers in the Washington metropolitan area. He leased his first theater in the early 1920s on Ninth Street, NW, and then branched out into suburban Maryland, taking over theaters in Mount Rainier and Hyattsville, Maryland. At the time of his death, he was operating 11 motion picture theaters and owned a shopping center and other retail stores.

In a special supplement to the *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Tribune* published to commemorate the opening of the Boro Theatre, Lust was described as one of the first to realize the ever-growing demand for first class neighborhood theaters in the suburbs. He carefully researched the areas in which he chose to purchase or build theaters and made sure that his establishments were the best equipped. He had long felt that the Bethesda area needed and would support a large modern theater, in keeping with the prestige of the growing community. The publication carried letters of commendation from officials of towns where his theaters were located and others in state and national offices--including the mayors of Hyattsville and Rockville, State Senator Stedman Prescott, and U.S. Senator McKellar. Greetings from such Hollywood personalities as Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Spencer Tracy, Shirley Temple, and W.C. Fields were also prominently featured.

The supplement also described the new theater in vivid detail, calling it "a triumph in modern theatre construction." Interior spaces, most of which retain original details and finishes, included the "streamlined lobby... painted in modern designs" with mirrors, display cases, an elaborate coved ceiling, and indirect lighting. Off the domed foyer were "beautifully appointed" smoking rooms and lounges. The walls of the auditorium were surfaced in fabric over acoustical insulation or acoustical plaster, all surmounted by a highly painted ceiling that included a broad section

Statement of Significance (continued)

painted in an "astral"design on a blue background--perhaps a holdover from Eberson's atmospheric period. Air conditioning grills were hidden in a "decorative trough... suspended from the center of the ceiling." Seating for 1,000 was of the best quality and carefully arranged for good viewing. The stage was described as "the largest in the suburban area and... equipped to handle presentation acts." Also of the highest quality and latest design were the Carrier Air Conditioning equipment, RCA Victor High Fidelity Sound System, and the projection equipment. Construction was said to exceed "the requirements of the strict state laws," and the projection booth was described as fireproof, closing its doors and portholes automatically in case of a fire.[5]

The significance of the Bethesda Theatre must also be evaluated in the context of the prestige and importance of the Bethesda community, which has grown between the two World Wars to become a major suburban center. Originally a crossroads and agricultural community that was not given the name of a nearby Presbyterian meeting house until 1871, the town experienced little growth until the 1890s, when the first electric railroad line arrived on Wisconsin Avenue and continued on Old Georgetown Road to Alta Vista. Land companies began buying farmland and subdividing it for residential development. Commercial growth centered on Wisconsin Avenue, with some industrial activity to the west depending on the B&O Railroad's freight-only Georgetown Branch of 1910.

Yet all this, it seems, was in preparation for the true real estate boom of the 1920s, promoted by such factors as the establishment of the Bank of Bethesda in 1919, the founding of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission in 1918, and increasing use of the automobile as a means of commuting. From 1920 to 1930, the population of Bethesda increased from 4,800 to 12,000, becoming approximately 30% of Montgomery County's population. These trends promoted the growth of Bethesda's commercial district. New construction included the Tudor-styled Leland Shopping Center of 1926-27, the Bank of Bethesda (1926), the C&P Telephone Company's Bethesda Exchange (1928), and the Leland School (1928), as well as numerous small businesses.

Even with the coming of the Great Depression, Bethesda, along with the rest of the Washington area, was relatively protected and benefitted from the coming of the New Deal. Construction of

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[5] "Boro Theater Opens Thursday," *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Tribune*, May 17, 1938, B1-B6.

Statement of Significance (continued)

new buildings reflected the growing importance of the community. Public works included the new Post Office (1938), Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School (1935), and the Bethesda Farm Women's Market (1934), a self-help effort to sell produce directly to families living in the area. Also stimulating activity in downtown Bethesda were the development of the National Institutes of Health complex in 1938 and the Bethesda Naval Hospital, begun in 1939. With the Bethesda Theatre leading the way, commercial enterprises that were built included the Pumphrey Funeral Home (1935), the F.W. Woolworth Store (1938), the Little Tavern hamburger restaurant (1939), and Chevy Chase Chevrolet (1939), one of more than 20 auto-related businesses in Bethesda at the time. Between 1930 and 1940, the population had more than doubled to 26,000, indicating that Bethesda was a major contributor to the suburbanization of the Nation's Capital area.

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NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018

M:35-14-4

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Catholic University project

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse

other names/site number Boro Theatre; 35/14-4

2. Location

street & number 7715-7723 Wisconsin Avenue ☐ not for publication

city or town Bethesda ☐ vicinity

state Maryland code MD county Montgomery code 031 zip code 20814

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☐ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☐ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State of Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is: Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.

☐ removed from the National Register.

☐ other, (explain:) _____

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Name of Property

Montgomery, Maryland
County and State

M:35-14-4

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

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

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

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

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
0	0	Total

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

Bethesda Theater Complex

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/theater
COMMERCE/specialty store

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/theater
COMMERCE/specialty store
WORK IN PROGRESS

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Art Deco

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
walls BRICK
METAL/Aluminum
roof METAL
other

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

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

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

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

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
COMMERCE

Period of Significance

1938-Present

Significant Dates

N/A

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Eberson, John
Woodmont Development Company

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

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

Primary location of additional data:

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

Name of repository:

MD-National Capital Park & Planning

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Name of Property

Montgomery County, MD
County and State

M:35-14-4

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property _____

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

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1			
2			
3			
4			

☐ See continuation sheet

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

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

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Peter Vincent Ionata

organization The Catholic University of America date May 6, 1993

street & number 95 Hawthorne Court N.E. telephone 202-667-4452

city or town Washington state DC zip code 20017

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

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

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

Photographs

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

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

Property Owner

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

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

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

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

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

Description

The Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse is a one and one-half (1½) story building located on Wisconsin Avenue in the commercial district of Bethesda, Maryland. The building fronts west onto the avenue and is constructed in the Art Deco Style of the 1930's and 40's. The structure is built in the form of a square block and incorporates the use of cream-colored bricks for its exterior. Although the front portion of the building consists of only one (1) story, there is a one-half (½) story false front which gives the facade more substance. The lightness of the facade is accented by two (2) double parallel bands of black brick located at the top of the building. Each band of black consists of two (2) brick courses which in turn are separated by the same amount of cream bricks.

Atop the entry way sits the theatre's marquee which runs the full length of the facade. It is of substantial width and is constructed of metal which is partially covered over with a purple material which displays the building's name. The edges of the marquee are curved and articulated with grooved decorative aluminum material. The edges of the marquee are trimmed with a set of double neon parallel lines. Rising from the marquee is a tall rectangular formation said to look..."like a miniature skyscraper." Within the tower the word "Bethesda" is spelled in neon.

As the building proceeds towards the rear lot line, there is a drop and the building gradually becomes a two (2) story building. The most rear portion of the building, the east side, is constructed of red brick and fronts a large parking lot. Access to the front of the building from the rear is made possible through the use of an alley-way located on the right side or south end of the theatre.

Inspection of the interior of the theatre reveals that many changes have taken place over the theatre's 55 year history. The most glaring change is the absence of the "normal" theatre seating arrangement. All of the seats in the

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

Description (continued)

theatre have been removed and replaced with more commodious chairs, tables, and bar-tops. The new arrangement allows for approximately 365 occupants. A large snack bar has been placed at the theatre's rear which accommodates all food services. A large organ which is not contemporary to the theatre has also been added. Other than these changes, the interior of the building seems to have been kept in good condition.

The interior walls are adorned with a large band which runs the length of the theatre and false balconies which mirror the design and shape of the marquee on the exterior. Both the bands and balconies have the same color combination as that of the exterior brick. The ceiling is multi-colored and carries the 'art deco' theme through the use of "stream-lined" patterns.

The interior lobby area contains a decorative projector directly in front of a false "facade front". The walls of the lobby are adorned with aluminum-lined showcases which advertise today's movies. The ceiling is that of a theatre in that it undulates allowing recessed lighting within its "folds". The entire lobby area is painted with warm variations of purple and violet and contains a large baseboard painted in black. The entrance consists of four (4) double glass-doors separated by a ticket booth in the center.

Originally called the "Boro", the theatre was constructed as part of a small commercial complex. Hence, the theatre is flanked on either side by small, one story commercial units. These units were never put on the register because they are considered a part of the theatre complex. The unit on the north (left) side has been bordered up due to fire for approximately the last three (3) years. The unit to the south (right) side, a custom framing store, appears to have lost its original fenestration. To the south of the framing store and across from the alley is a Chevrolet dealership

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

Description (continued)

which has a large plastic arch and ongoing sign which obstructs views of the theatre's facade and marquee from the south.

While this building retains much of its original historic fabric, it has also sustained some losses to its integrity. The proud marquee once sported tiny white light bulbs perhaps reminiscent of the "Great White Way" in New York City. These lights have now all been removed. A new, plastic sign has been placed immediately below the marquee which detracts from the facade of the building. Also, portions of the neon in the tower are not working.

Statement of Significance

The Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse presents a number of features which can be categorized in the style of Art Deco. Conspicuous use of modern building materials such as neon, grooved aluminum and blonde brick is one Art Deco characteristic present in this theatre. Other characteristics typical of the "streamlined" aspect of Art Deco may be found in the facade of the building, such as the curving of the edges of the marquee and the sleek, smart lines of double bands of black brick. Art Deco strove to be a style "moderne", and what could be more modern than the image of a skyscraper glittering with lights and rising up from the marquee. Since the theatre's opening in 1938, it has been the finest product of the commercial district's first boom period during the late 1930-1940's. Therefore, it is justified in stating that the Bethesda Theatre helped usher in a new era in the development of commercial Bethesda.

The Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse meets National Register Criterion C in the area of Architecture as one of only a few examples of the Art Deco style in the Washington, DC area. There is only one other identified Art Deco movie theatre in Montgomery County, the Silver Theatre in Silver Spring. The

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

Statement of Significance (continued)

others are located downtown and while they have many of the same decorative elements as that of the Bethesda Theatre, they are currently in a state of disrepair and have had unsympathetic renovations.

For one exuberant decade, John Eberson--architect, showman, and entrepreneur--built "atmospheric theaters" that were part architectural history, part circus, and wholly enchanting to the audiences that sat beneath their starry ceilings. With an exuberant disdain for architectural consistency, he combined styles, motifs, and materials. His goal, Eberson said, was to suggest "a magnificent amphitheater under a glorious moonlit sky...". Beginning in the 1930's, Eberson quickly mastered the Deco style, though he thought it too severe for his inventive spirit, and continued to build movie houses until his death in 1954.

Born in Austria in 1875, Eberson began his formal training in Dresden before moving to Vienna to complete his studies in electrical engineering. In 1901 he emigrated to the United States and settled in the German community of St. Louis. Soon he joined the Johnston Theatrical Firm, where he learned the principles of theater design and construction. During the years that followed he traveled through the Midwest, building a series of attractive small theaters and a reputation as "Opera House John." In 1904 he visited the St. Louis world's fair and was fascinated by the fairground architecture, with its fanciful yet inexpensive structures. That same year he established his own firm in St.Louis. From then on, Eberson's unique style, made him one of the era's most adventurous and prolific designers.

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

Bibliography

Poppeliers, Chambers, & Schwartz. What Style is it? Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1983.

Preddy, Jane. "Grand Illusions." American Heritage (September/October 1990): 114-21.

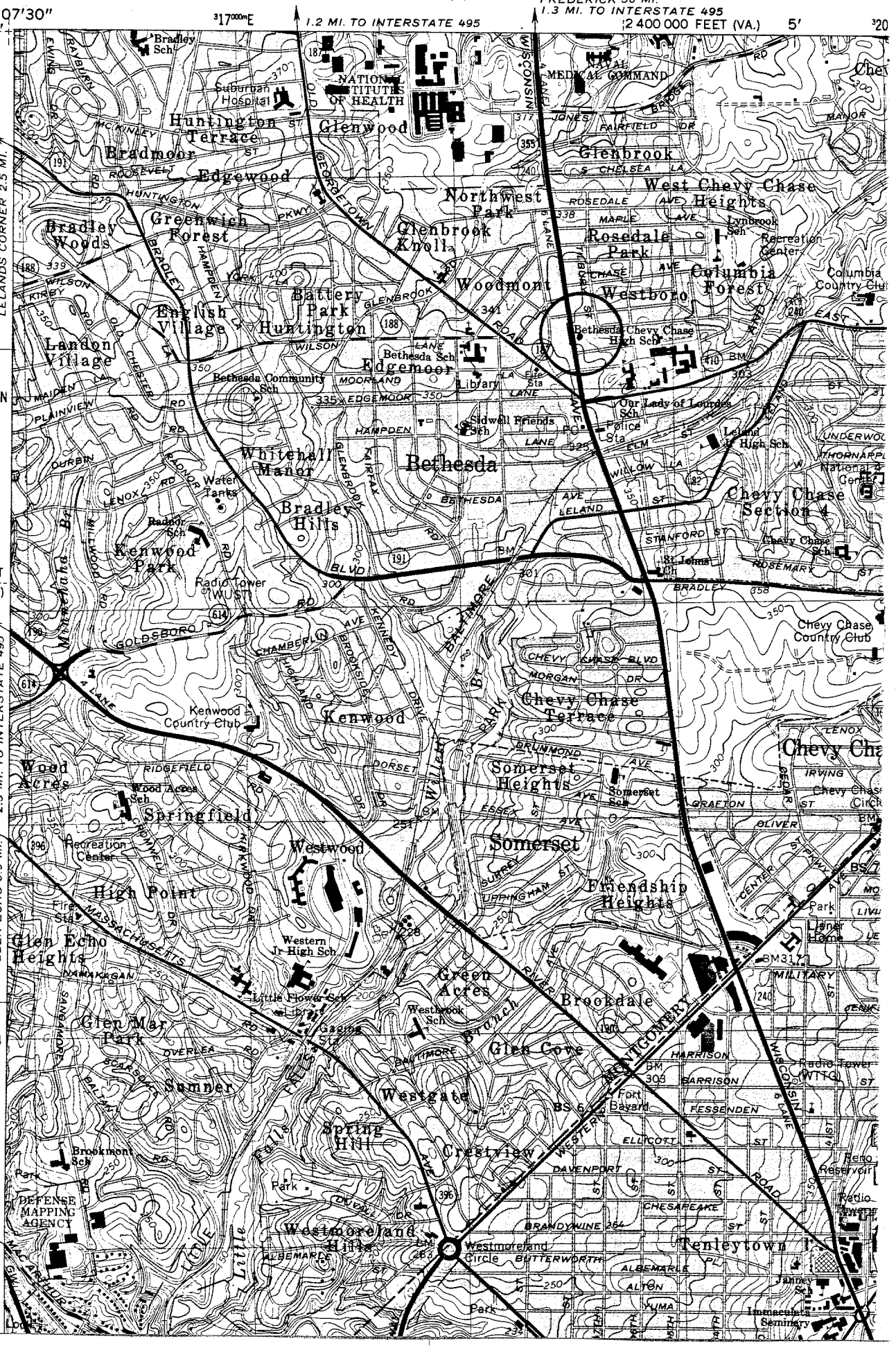
Wirz, H. & Striner, R. Washington Deco.

5562 II SW (ROCKVILLE)

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

M:35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE
MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
18-318570
4317250



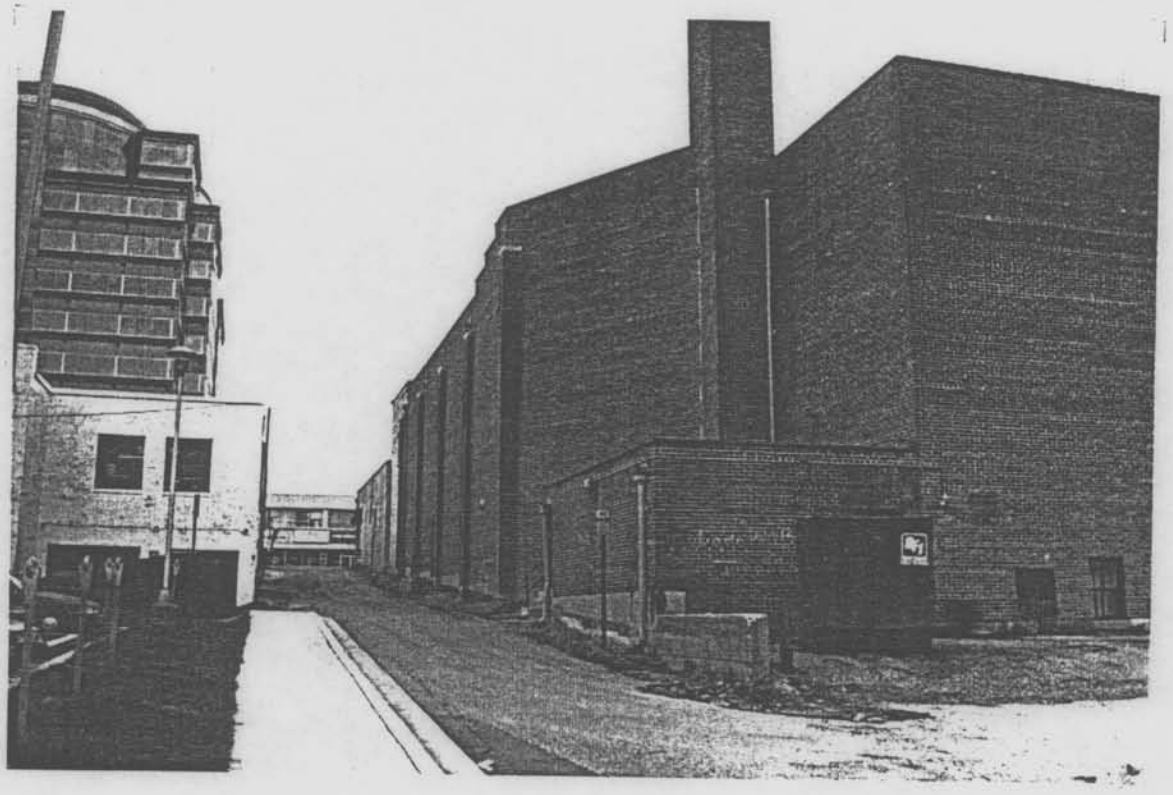
M: 35-14-4

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 1: Northeast corner; parking lot in rear.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M: 35-14-4



Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 2: Southeast corner; alley way to Wisconsin Avenue.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M: 35-14-4

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 3: West (front) facade; looking northeast.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M: 35-14-4

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 4: West (front) facade; looking southeast.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M:35-14-4

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 5: Marquee and tower.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M:35-14-4

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 6: Interior of lobby; movie showcases.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

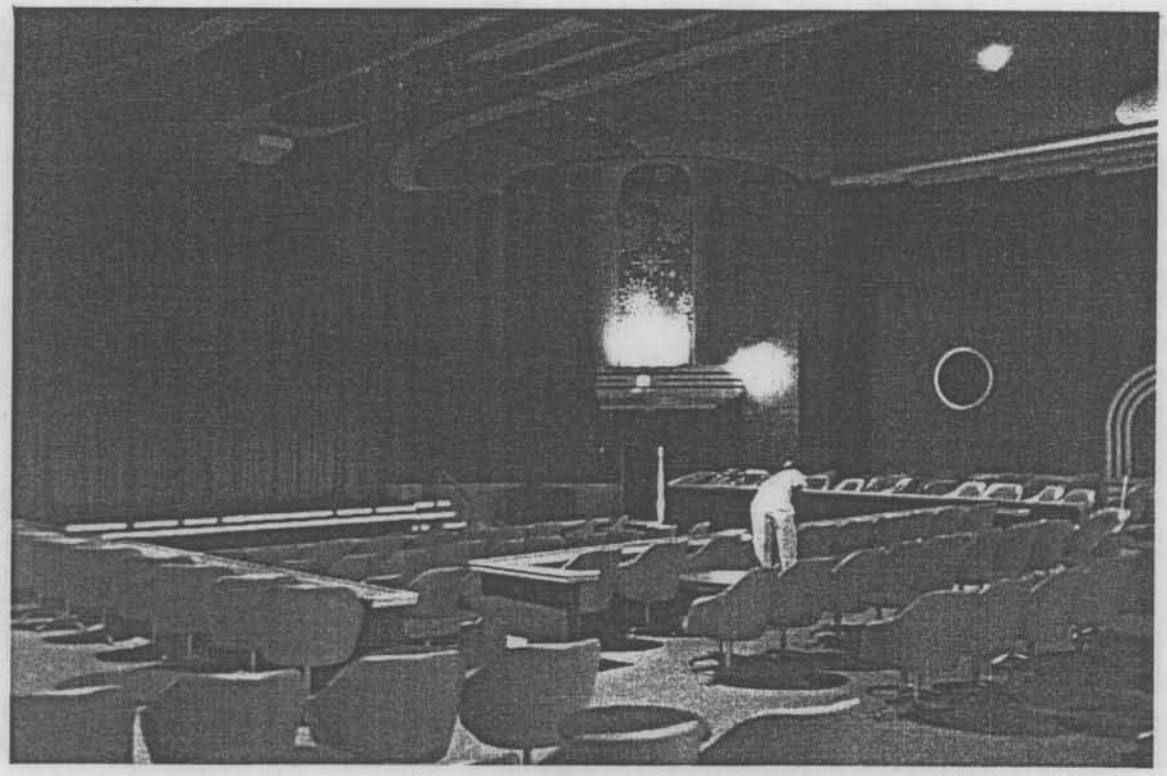
M:35-14-4

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 7: East end of lobby; entrance to theatre.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M:35-14-4



Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 8: Southeast corner of theater (interior).

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

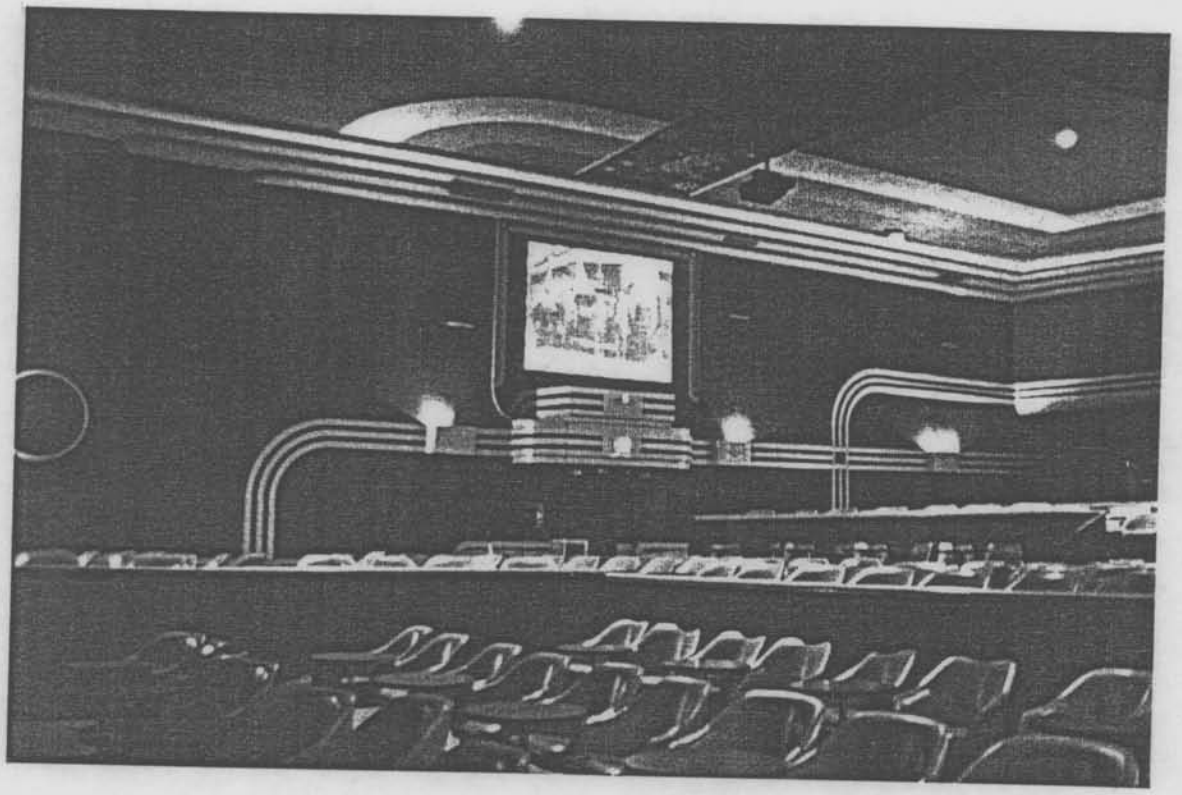
M:35-14-4

Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 9: Southern interior wall.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M:35-14-4

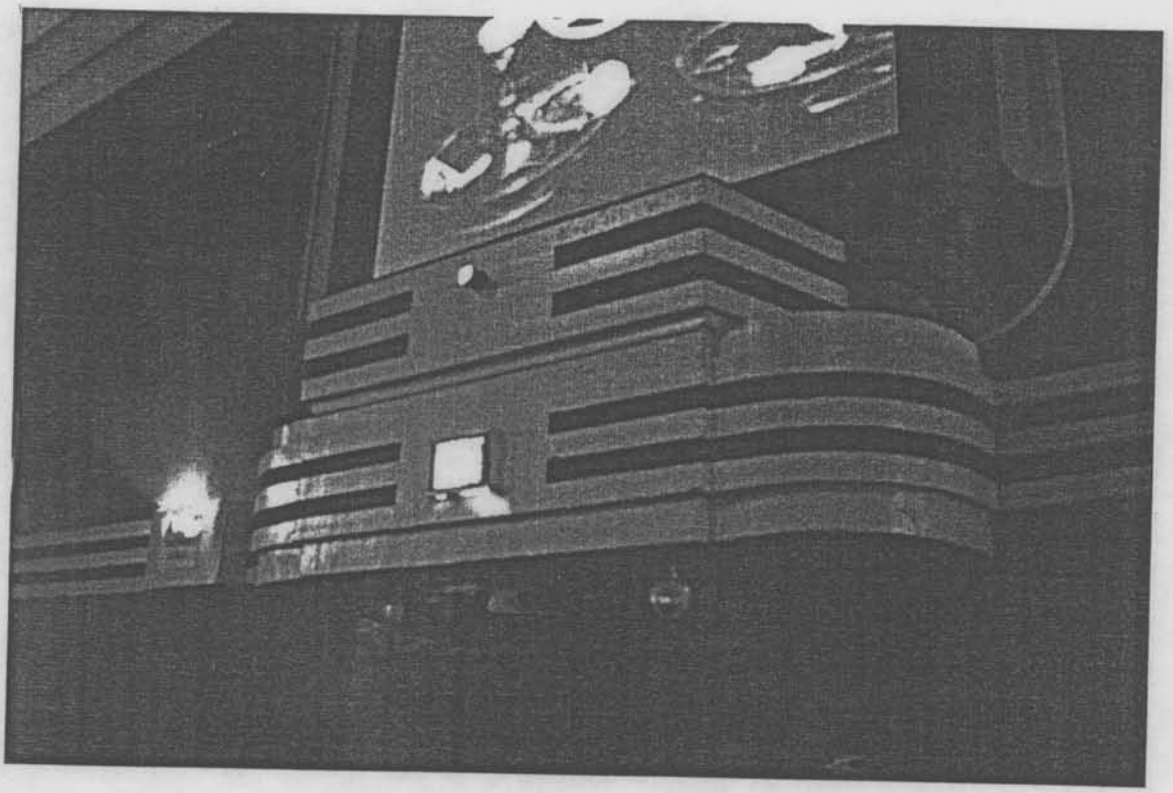


Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 10: Southern interior wall.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

M: 35-144



Bethesda Cinema 'N' Drafthouse
Montgomery County, MD

No. 11: Detail of interior balcony.

Peter Vincent Ionata
April 1993

THEATRE CAFE
CARPET DEPOT

M:35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE
MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A.L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W
PASADENA MD 21122

WEST FACADE

#1/12

BETHESDA THEATRE
MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD

THEATRE CAFE

M: 35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A. L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

FACADE DETAIL

#2/12

Blow-out Sale
Blow-out Sale

M: 35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A.L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

VIEW FROM S.W.

#3/12

M: 35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A. L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

VIEW FROM S. E.

4/12

STARLB 00068 MMMMA

M:35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A.L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

NORTHWEST CORNER

#5/12

7719
ENTRANCE

M: 35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A. L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

ENTRANCE DOORS

#6/12

M:35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A.L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

LOBBY

7/12

STAPLE 00068 NNN29

EXIT

M:35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A.L. WILNER 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

FOYER

8/12

M;35-14-4
BETHESDA THEATRE
MONTGOMERY CO., MD
A.L. WILNER 2/98
8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W.
PASADENA MD 21122
AUDITORIUM, FRONT
#9/12

BETHESDA THEATRE
MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD. 9

M:35-14-4
BETHESDA THEATRE
MONTGOMERY CO. MD
A.L. WILNER, 2/98
8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W
PASADENA MD 21122

AUDITORIUM, DETAIL

#10/12

M: 35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A.L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W

PASADENA MD 21122

AUDITORIUM, SIDE

11/12

M: 35-14-4

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

A.L. WILNER, 2/98

8110 BUTTERCUP LANE W
PASADENA MD 21122

AUDITORIUM, REAR

#12/12

BETHESDA THEATRE

MONTGOMERY CO., MD

12