

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORMSEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Carolina Theatre

AND/OR COMMON

**2 LOCATION**

STREET &amp; NUMBER

319 North Chestnut Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Lumberton

VICINITY OF

Seventh

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

North Carolina

CODE

037

COUNTY

Robeson

CODE

155

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

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

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

City of Lumberton

STREET &amp; NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Lumberton

VICINITY OF

STATE

North Carolina 28358

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Robeson County Courthouse

STREET &amp; NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Lumberton

STATE

North Carolina 28358

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Determined eligible - No

Architectural and Historical Survey of Central Lumberton, North Carolina

DATE

1980

 FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Survey and Planning Branch, Division of Archives and History

CITY, TOWN

Raleigh

STATE

North Carolina 27611

## 7 DESCRIPTION

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

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DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Carolina Theater in Lumberton is a three story brick and terra cotta structure that expresses the exuberant classicism which was a feature of many public buildings built in America between World War I and the Depression. It was constructed during a boom period for the town and nation. Its quality of architectural detail and construction technique are equal to similar buildings in larger, wealthier cities. Designed in the Italian Renaissance style, the theater is a stage setting for its interior uses. The main facade through which one enters the auditorium is a well articulated composition using tapestry brick, rough cut joints and terra cotta quoins, rusticated pilasters, window frames, cornice, and paneled and balustered parapet. Along the Fourth Street side, however, architectural style gives way to a purely functional arrangement of windows and doors. Constructed as a combination of theater and doctors' offices, the two uses are reflected in the two opposing facades.

Unlike a structure of purely Italian Renaissance design, the Carolina Theater is built on a brick ground floor, not one of rusticated stone. The central portion of the theater facade contains double glass doors in wooden frames flanking a ticket booth. The left wall is pierced with a small window opening into the ladies' lounge and a sealed door originally opening into the former ticket booth. The right wall contains a show window and entrance door into a jewelry store. Above the entrance into the theater is a marquee illuminated with neon tubing which encloses the earlier incandescent bulb lighted marquee. The alteration was made about 1940. Above this, in line with the second story windows, is a triangular sign board also installed about 1940. A terra cotta belt course divides the ground level from the two upper stories and, with the corner pilasters and heavy cornice, frame the main portion of the building. Within the frame are five window bays. The center section above the entrance contains three windows closely arranged; the outboard windows are centered above the left service doorway and the entrance to the store on the right. These windows contain eight-over-one sash and are crowned with segmental, open-topped pediments of terra cotta. In the third story square windows with four-over-one sash are directly over the principal windows and are framed in terra cotta architraves with side-projecting corner blocks and sills. Close to the window heads is the architrave, supported at each end by the rusticated pilasters, above which is a classical cornice. This supports the parapet, composed of four terra cotta urns on rusticated bases, a center block in which is incised "Carolina Theater" in Roman capitals, and flanking sections of balustrade work. The entire facade gives an air of great dignity and power although an unsympathetic alteration of the store front in roughstucco detracts from the studied balance of the design.

The side elevation of the building--the office facade--was originally two stories in height, later raised to three stories, and contains an asymmetrical grouping of single and triple windows above first story store fronts. Only the terra cotta quoins carry the classical design of the main facade into this elevation.

Entering through the doors beneath the marquee one stands in a small lobby considerably changed after 1940. To the left is a ladies' lounge (originally the ticket booth and office) and the staircase to the balcony. To the right is the gentlemen's lounge and an entrance into the office block. The refreshment stand is directly ahead against the rear wall of the auditorium. On each side of the refreshment stand

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are double doors opening into the theater proper. Twin aisles divide the space into three sections--European plan--with a seating capacity of 403. A balcony, occupying the space above the lobby and projecting above the rear of the auditorium, contains 387 additional seats arranged as on the main level. Access to the balcony is from the lobby staircase and from a second ticket area and stair along Fourth Street. The latter area was designed for use by blacks and Indians. Along the lower walls are Adamesque grilles covering the heating ducts and wall sconces in Art Deco style. The upper walls are finished in blind arcades and fluted Ionic pilasters supporting a classical entablature. The centerpiece is an ornate chandelier with radiating light bulbs. It is suspended from an elegantly detailed Adamesque medallion which features stylized leaf motifs. At the far end of the room is a gilded proscenium arch decorated with an outer band of bound fagots and an inner panel of stylized acanthus leaves. This is flanked on either side by the arcades, the first openings housing the pipe organ grilles (now removed). The single-level depressed orchestra pit is presently covered with flooring.

The office portion of the Carolina Theater contained shops on the ground level and two suites on the second story, used by Dr. R.S. Beam and Dr. E. L. Bowman, incorporators of the company. Because of rearrangement of the space at the corner of Fourth and Chestnut streets, the center window of the piano nobile was never opened--it remained a blind window--because Dr. Beam's X-ray room was located at this position. Entering from the center of the Fourth Street facade one ascends to a paneled reception room by an elevator enclosed by a service stair. To the left and right of this common area run the suites of offices. Later, the third story, containing additional offices, was constructed above the original fabric.

The Carolina Theater is a handsome adornment to the commercial and legislative district of Lumberton and combines well the dual function of the building as entertainment center and business use. The classical dignity of the main facade is a fine example of theater architecture which once could be found in prosperous cities throughout America, designed at a time when live theater was a part of our way of life. It is significant that such a fine structure has been preserved into the present when the taste for live theater has once again emigrated from the large cities to reach a wider audience.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

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

SPECIFIC DATES	BUILDER/ARCHITECT
1927-1928	S.S. Dixon, Architect U.A. Underwood Construction Co., Contractor
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE	

The Carolina Theatre, a handsome three-story brick and molded stone structure located at the intersection of Fourth and N. Chestnut streets in Lumberton, was erected as a theatre house for the community in 1927-1928 and served as the center of entertainment in the decades thereafter. The building, designed by S. S. Dixon of Fayetteville and constructed by the U. A. Underwood Construction Company of Wilmington, was opened with grand festivities on June 18, 1928 with "We Americans" as the main feature. The theatre also housed vaudeville performances in its early years, however, the building acquired its greatest renown with the talking movies which were first shown here on March 18, 1929 to audiences totaling nearly 1,400 people during the first day. The grand stone trimmed brick building surmounted by a balustrade supporting urns on its front facade, and equally well finished on the interior continued to serve as the principal movie house in Lumberton into the 1970s and its closing in 1975, as well as the stage for a number of road and variety shows and other entertainments. The building occupies a signal role in the social and cultural history of Lumberton as its entertainment center for over half a century and remains one of the most accomplished classically influenced buildings in this early 20th century business district.

Criteria assessment:

- A. As the principal movie house in Lumberton from 1928 until the 1970s, the Carolina Theatre brought to the city and surrounding area silent and talking movies which were the principal source of entertainment for a large segment of the American population.
- C. The Carolina Theatre embodies the distinctive characteristics of movie house design and construction in the 1920s when large classically influenced movie palaces replet with plush upholstery, chandeliers and other refinements were synonymous with the illusion and escape which movies provided.

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The Carolina Theatre, born in the 1920s, was a child of the cultural milieu of that "roaring" decade. Located on the corner of Chestnut and Fourth streets in Lumberton, in what was once the main commercial section, the theater stands as testimony to an era when the social and cultural heart of a community was centered in the inner city business district. Equally as important for Lumberton, the Carolina Theatre provides visual evidence of the years when a small nineteenth century town became a progressive twentieth century city.

Lumberton, incorporated in 1788 and the county seat of Robeson County, was a sleepy little town for nearly 115 years. By 1900 its population stood at only 848, but aided by the incorporation of the mill owned villages of East Lumberton (1901) and North Lumberton (1911), the town entered a period of prosperity and growth.<sup>1</sup> The 1920 census listed the population at just under 2,700, and with the increasing number of residents came a greater demand for entertainment and socio-cultural events.<sup>2</sup> Visiting Chataugas and Christian crusades drew huge crowds, proving that the people of Lumberton and surrounding areas were more than willing to support cultural improvements. A group of citizens, led by Dr. R. S. Beam, Dr. E. L. Bowman, and K. M. Barnes, organized a stock-issuing company to meet the public demand by building a center for entertainment and cultural events in downtown Lumberton.<sup>3</sup>

The Lumberton Theatre Co., Inc., was organized on May 30, 1927, with Beam as president and treasurer and Bowman as vice president and secretary.<sup>4</sup> Four days later the company purchased part of lot no. 95 (66.75'x 100') in Lumberton on the corner of Chestnut and Fourth streets where a fruit stand was then located.<sup>5</sup> A building committee, composed of Beam, Bowman, and Barnes, contracted architect S. S. Dixon of Fayetteville to design the structure and the U. A. Underwood Construction Company of Wilmington to be the general contractor. Interior decoration became the responsibility of John Luppe of Greensboro and New York. Construction began on October 1, 1927. Among the subcontractors was a local tinner named T. R. Driscoll who did the sheet metal and ventilation work. Driscoll was a popular craftsman who had put roofs on some of the handsomest homes in Lumberton.<sup>6</sup>

When completed in 1928, the Carolina Theatre was a modern, fireproof facility with its own power generator. With a seating capacity of 900, which could be pushed to 1,000, the building was among the most spacious in town. A good heating system for winter use, and Driscoll's excellent ventilation system for summer, offered comfort for customers all year round. Functional as it was, the theater was more highly regarded as a showplace. With an interior decor highlighted by the large crystal chandelier suspended from a large rosette, the theater was as much the object of attention as the events taking place there. Cost of construction was somewhere between \$150,000 and \$200,000, but opening night attendance showed that the end product was well worth the investment.<sup>7</sup>

Opening night, Monday, June 18, 1928, found the theater packed beyond capacity. The inaugural program began with Owen O. Ogborn playing an overture from "Rio Rita" on the organ. Brief remarks by Mayor E. M. Johnson and Dr. R. S. Beam were followed by a synchronized musical novelty (Ko-Ko Song Car Tune); an animated cartoon ("Krazy Kat"); another organ solo ("Tomorrow"); and the main feature, "We Americans" starring Patsy Roth Miller, George Sidney, and George Lewis.<sup>8</sup> Programs for the rest of the week were not so

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elaborate, but continued patronage proved that the people had long waited for construction of just such a place for entertainment.

In the early years, vaudeville acts were performed by traveling companies between features of the silent movies. Musical accompaniment was provided by Miss Allie Bird McKinnon, a graduate of the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. Miss McKinnon was placed in charge of providing the background music for the silent films on the \$12,500 Geneva organ purchased by the Lumberton Theatre Co., Inc. She also taught music in the Lumberton public schools.<sup>9</sup> The shows were well attended, and one elderly observer noted that everyone in town came to the theater at least once a week. Admission prices were ten and thirty-five cents for matinees and ten, twenty, and fifty cents for night shows. Youngsters formed much of the audience, partly because of the low admission, but mostly because "there was nothing else for young people to do in Lumberton at that time."<sup>10</sup>

"Talkies" came to the Carolina Theatre in 1929. "The Barker," a vitaphone production, opened at 2:00 P.M. on March 18 and introduced sound pictures to the people of Lumberton. Approximately 1,400 attended various showings between 2 and 11 P.M. Perhaps more would have attended, but the scheduled opening had been delayed when the vitaphone machine was lost in transit from New York. Theater manager E. R. Medd discovered its whereabouts in Norfolk and brought it to Lumberton by truck in time for the two o'clock show.<sup>11</sup> The talking motion pictures brought an end to the silent era, and with it the demise of the background sounds of the Geneva pipe organ. Vaudeville too was in its death throes, and other acts began appearing on the Carolina stage. Variety shows, playhouse groups, and western screen stars, such as Tex Ritter, began making regular appearances in the thirties and forties.<sup>12</sup> Even the great depression could not stop movie attendance, for in the theater people could escape from the harsh realities of daily life.

In the late 1930s, the Wilby-Kincey Company leased the theater and began extensive remodeling. A roof attic, containing the flyloft was added, and fronts for stores and offices were made on the Fourth Street side. Renovations were completed in early 1940. A grand opening was held during the first week in February, which Mayor E. M. Johnson declared "Carolina Theatre Week." A new neon lighted marquee, built over the old one that used electric bulbs, beckoned movie goers to the renovated theater complete with uniformed ushers.<sup>13</sup> It was the "golden age of the cinema"; the Carolina Theatre was in its heyday, but changes were on the horizon.

The 1950s and early 1960s witnessed tremendous alterations in urban landscapes. Shopping centers began appearing on city perimeters and the hub of commercial activity slowly moved away from the downtown areas. Twin theaters with virtually no emphasis on live entertainment began replacing the single, multiple purpose structures. Attendance began dwindling at inner city facilities like the Carolina Theatre and costs for maintenance and production surpassed profits from the continually decreasing audience. In January, 1969, the Lumberton Theatre Company began divesting itself of its property rights as part of a plan for dissolution. A series of deeds in February transferred title to the heirs of E. L. Bowman who currently own the Carolina Theatre.<sup>14</sup> For several years the theater struggled for survival before closing its doors in 1975.

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Almost immediately the building was threatened by a new redevelopment plan for downtown Lumberton. A number of interested citizens began generating public enthusiasm for preservation of the theater as a civic auditorium. Particularly concerned were members of the Little Theatre and Civic Chorale who admired the excellent acoustics of the Carolina Theatre, a feature unequalled in any other structure in Lumberton. To demonstrate the building's qualities as a home for the performing arts, the Robeson Civic Chorale presented its spring concert there on May 15.<sup>15</sup> Additional support came when a delegation of interested citizens appeared before the city council one spring evening in 1975. The council recognized the public concern and the validity of acquiring the building for local performing arts. They appointed a Theatre Commission and appropriated sufficient funds to research the possibilities for preservation of the Carolina Theatre. The commission reported that the owners were willing to sell at a reasonable price and that they too were interested in seeing the building used for the performing arts.<sup>16</sup>

Since 1975, the road charted for preservation of the Carolina Theatre has been a bumpy one. Negotiations are continuing, however, and this landmark of Lumberton's cultural development looks towards a brighter future.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>William S. Powell, The North Carolina Gazetteer (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 157, 303, 356, hereinafter cited as Powell, Gazetteer; and Bill Sharpe, A New Geography of North Carolina (Raleigh: Sharpe Publishing Company, 4 vols., 1956-1965), I, 403, hereinafter cited as Sharpe, A New Geography.

<sup>2</sup>Sharpe, A New Geography, I, 403.

<sup>3</sup>The Robesonian (Lumberton), June 18, 1928, hereinafter cited as The Robesonian. See also Diane E. Lea and Claudia Roberts (Robert M. Leary and Associates, Ltd.), An Architectural and Historical Essay of Central Lumberton, North Carolina (Raleigh: Department of Cultural Resources, 1980), 8.

<sup>4</sup>The Robesonian, June 18, 1928.

<sup>5</sup>Robeson County Deed Books, Office of the Register of Deeds, Robeson County Courthouse, Lumberton, Deed Book 7-U, 387. For earlier transfers of the property, see Deed Book YYY, 97, and Deed Book 4-E, 399. For statement about fruit stand, see "Summary of Interview with Horace M. Barnes" by Kathleen Faulk, undated. Copy in Carolina Theatre File, Survey and Planning Branch, Archaeology and Historic Preservation Section, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, hereinafter cited as Barnes interview.

<sup>6</sup>The Robesonian, June 18, 1928.

<sup>7</sup>The Robesonian, June 18, 1928.

<sup>8</sup>The Robesonian, June 18, 1928.

<sup>9</sup>Barnes interview; and The Robesonian, June 18, 1928.

<sup>10</sup>Barnes interview.

<sup>11</sup>The Robesonian, March 18, 25, 1929.

<sup>12</sup>"Conversation with Howard Stephens" by Kathleen Faulk, undated. For repository, see fn. 5, hereinafter cited as Stephens conversation. Howard Stephens was the last manager of the theater.

<sup>13</sup>Stephens conversation; and The Robesonian, April 25, 1975.

<sup>14</sup>Henry A. McKinnon, Jr., to /Dr./ Larry E. Tise, director of the Division of Archives and History, July 29, 1978. For repository, see fn. 5. McKinnon was replying to a letter of inquiry concerning ownership of the property by the heirs of Dr. E. L. Bowman.

<sup>15</sup>The Robesonian, April 25, 1975.

<sup>16</sup>The Robesonian, May 20, 1979, extra issue.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

See continuation sheet.

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Quad name: SW Lumberton

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than 1 acre

Quad scale: 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,7	6,8,2	6,1,0	3,8	3,2	4,1,0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING					ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C							D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The property in this nomination includes the the less than one acre lot in Lumberton's CBD on which the theatre stands. It is bound on the North by Fourth Street, on the East by North Chesnut Street, on the South by another commercial property, and on the West by a service alley.

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE	Davyd Foard Hood, Survey Specialist	
ORGANIZATION	Ed Turberg, Consultant	Jerry L. Cross, Researcher
	Survey and Planning Branch	DATE
	Archaeology and Historic Preservation Section	December, 1980
STREET & NUMBER	Division of Archives and History	TELEPHONE
	109 E. Jones St.	(919) 733-6545
CITY OR TOWN	Raleigh	STATE
		North Carolina 27611

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL  STATE  LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

*William S. Pien, Jr.*

TITLE State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE January 8, 1981

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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McKinnon, Jr., Henry A. Letter to [Dr.] Larry E. Tise, July 29, 1978. Division of Archives and History, Raleigh.

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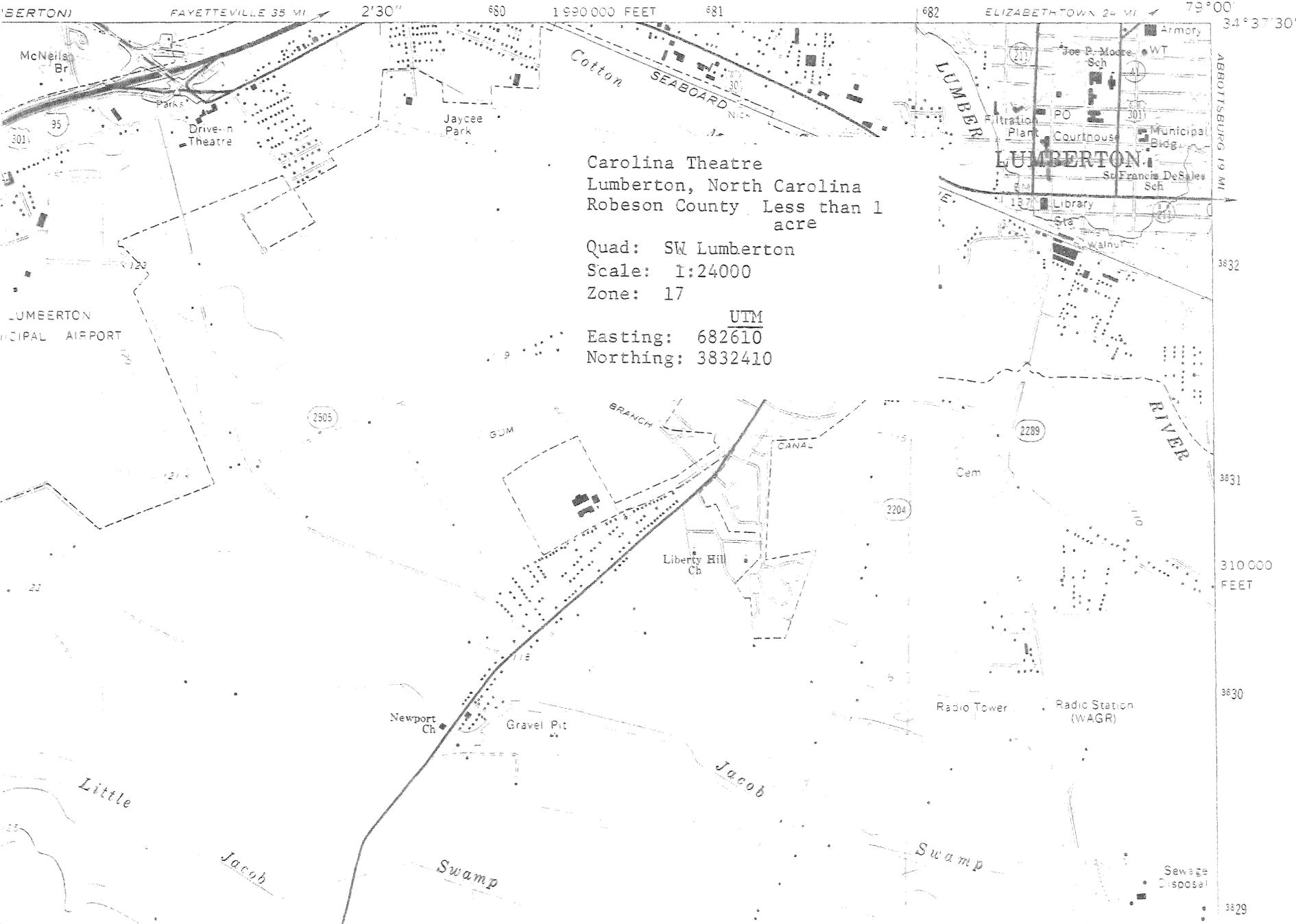
The Robesonian. Lumberton. June 18, 1928; March 18, 25, 1929; April 25, 1975; May 20, 1979, extra issue.

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The State Magazine. November 29, 1952.

SOUTHWEST LUMBERTON QUADRANGLE  
NORTH CAROLINA-ROBESON CO.  
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

5253 III  
(BLADENBORO 1:62,500)



Carolina Theatre  
Lumberton, North Carolina  
Robeson County Less than 1  
acre

Quad: SW Lumberton  
Scale: 1:24000  
Zone: 17

UTM  
Easting: 682610  
Northing: 3832410

