

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC Cottrill Opera House; Sutton's Opera House; Sutton Theatre  
AND/OR COMMON Cottrill Opera House; Sutton Theatre

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER East Avenue  
CITY, TOWN Thomas VICINITY OF Second  
STATE West Virginia CODE 54 COUNTY Tucker CODE 093

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED (part)	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED (part)	<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 Alpine Festival, Inc.  
STREET & NUMBER Box 565  
CITY, TOWN Davis VICINITY OF West Virginia 26260

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Tucker County Courthouse  
STREET & NUMBER First and Walnut Streets  
CITY, TOWN Parsons STATE West Virginia

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE  
DATE  
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS  
CITY, TOWN STATE

# 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 type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Cottrill Opera House is a detached theater building that is rectangular in shape and constructed of brick laid in a common bond. A high front gives the impression of a four-story, five-bay configuration, but since the interior is dominated by a large auditorium with balcony seating, horizontal and vertical division of the outside is not reflected there.

The front (northwest) elevation is the only face that has features of note, although both sides have several openings with either flat or arched lintels. Large storefront windows at the north corner of the first floor surround an indented entrance which leads to present-day apartments (these were once commercial spaces). Slightly south of center is the present theater entrance, but doors here at one time opened to business quarters while double doors on the south corner led one up a set of stairs to ticket booth and auditorium.

Among interesting details are circular brick panels on what might be considered the third floor of slightly projecting bays at either side of the front. Three-course brick "quoins" are at each corner of this elevation, and a corbeled cornice is under a stuccoed upper section of the front. Above entrances and behind false brick coverings along East Avenue are three two-story high, arched windows (the glass is still in place) that form the center bays and formerly provided light for lobby areas.

As originally constituted, the building had a front roofline composed of a high central panel and projections above corners of end bays. In this top panel was the name "Cottrills", while a panel below the main cornice announced "Opera House". Two small, geometrically-divided windows, presently functional, were to the sides of this second panel, but the entire front above the "third" floor (as well as the southwest side) has been plastered over in more recent years, probably through attempts to repair damage caused by a 1940's tornado, a natural disaster that also weakened the east corner of the rear to the point where it eventually had to be rebuilt.

The interior consists of former stores (two saloons early in this century and such businesses as a barber shop later) on the first floor beneath the rear of a sloping auditorium floor and lobby above. Presently two apartments occupy space on this level of the building's north side, but the remainder of the complex is reserved for theater use. Stairs at each end bay lead to main floor, balcony and projection booth level, opening from the third run onto a high-ceilinged lobby (in recent years a suspended ceiling has been installed here) which is behind those large center windows that have been closed in. Among features that give character to this area are pressed-tin ceilings, in a variety of designs, at the lobby and above and under stairs. Additionally, projecting tin cornices with recessed lights

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atop them are at both lobby entrances onto the main floor auditorium.

There are wood floors throughout with carpet runners in aisles. Art Deco seats (capacity for approximately 600 exists on main floor and balcony) that have geometrically-patterned, multi-colored backs and bottoms follow the gentle slope of the main level, while what appear to be older, wooden-backed seats with an "S" monogram on end plates are in the tiered, five-sided balcony (this upper section is supported by round posts from below and metal rods that extend to rafters high above). Lighting at stairs and on the velveteen-covered walls is also of an Art Deco design, but caps from earlier gas and/or electric fixtures are visible on a pressed-tin ceiling beneath the balcony. Pressed tin also forms borders for a proscenium that includes painted geometrical patterns surrounding the stage area.

There is capacity for at least six scenery drops in the flies and room behind the stage for storage. At one time a wooden shed extended from the rear wall and served as dressing rooms, but this has been removed and several former doors have been bricked in.

Service as a theater for more than seventy years meant evolution of both interior and exterior features rather than drastic changes. Alterations such as construction of a projection booth, removal of dressing rooms, and addition of a marquee at the front were part of general shifts from live shows to silent movies and then into the era of motion pictures with sound. Throughout the period, however, basic lines have remained unchanged, and except for stuccoing of a section of the front elevation and rebuilding of a rear corner necessitated by uncontrollable occurrences, little of overall integrity has been damaged beyond reversal.

# SIGNIFICANCE

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

SPECIFIC DATES c. 1902

BUILDER/ARCHITECT E.C.S. Holmboe and R.C. Lafferty

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Cottrill Opera House at Thomas, Tucker County, West Virginia, is today a landmark to boom prosperity this community enjoyed early in the twentieth century. Furthermore, it is representative of a significant development in the cultural history of the United States: presentation of a variety of live shows and plays (both local and touring) in a convenient small-town building that solicited patronage from the masses. As with so many turn-of-the-century opera houses, it evolved through the silent movie era into "talkies" prosperity, eventually succumbing to declining population, increased mobility and technological developments which again revolutionized the entertainment field.

Tucker County was sparsely settled until a boom era in coal and timber came late in the nineteenth century, bringing speculators, developers, businessmen, railroads, industry and relative prosperity. Thomas, at an elevation of about 3000 feet and with a reputation for hard winters, was in the heart of this coal and timber region. It had been settled first around 1880, but it was the coming of the Davis brothers' (Thomas B. and Henry G.) West Virginia Central & Pittsburgh Railway from Cumberland, Maryland, in 1884 that provided impetus to growth. Soon coal extraction, centered on the Davis Coal and Coke Company, lured hundreds and then thousands of people. The town was incorporated in 1892 with a population of 693, and by 1910 it peaked at 2,354 within city limits and a total approaching 7000 in the district. Railroad shops, coal mines and coke ovens offered employment to all who came; a sizable business community quickly evolved to serve residents of Thomas and the nearby company town of Coketon.

Hiram Cottrill had arrived around 1887 and worked for the Davis coal interests, rising to mine superintendent. His prosperity, however, rested on a saloon business, begun near the turn-of-the-century, and landholdings throughout town. Riding the bubble of boom, merchants and developers had rapidly built wooden structures close together without much consideration to potential disaster posed by such things as open-flame lighting and rowdy crowds. A devastating fire had struck in 1893, but the town had rebuilt. Then, in November 1901, Thomas again became an inferno as flames, swept by heavy winds, destroyed nearly 100 buildings. Cottrill suffered significant losses, yet he was committed to the community and shortly thereafter hired the Clarksburg architectural firm of Holmboe and Lafferty (designers of the Thomas Miners and Merchants Bank, on whose board Hiram Cottrill

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sat) to set about erecting one of the few professionally conceived and masonry constructed edifices in town.

His new opera house featured a variety of live entertainment for inhabitants of this community that was largely populated by Eastern European immigrants (Davis Coal and Coke Company even had hired a full-time interpreter in 1903, a Pole who could speak eight languages; an Italian newspaper was published here for a number of years). It was a time of traveling shows in the interior; Parsons and Elkins had recently opened their opera houses, and a circuit was formed. Everything from vaudeville and minstrel shows, concerts and stage plays preceded the silent movie era, but when film became available it quickly pushed live entertainment into the background.

With this change in medium also came a change in ownership, and in 1915 the Sutton family began an association with films that would last until the theater closed some sixty years later. Not only would they witness the revolution of "talkies," but they would struggle through a significant outmigration as coal and timber declined (2,099 in 1920, 1,660 in 1930 and 713 in 1970) and the Great Depression compounded difficulties.

Throughout its history, though, the opera house/theater has been at the heart of Thomas' business district. It represents the best of its commercial architecture, constructed at the height of boom. It served as cultural heart of the community and, along with stores of the Schilanskys, DePolos, Rubensteins, Tolmies and Benedettos, and hotels of McLaughlins and Murrays, became a symbol of local history and development.

Today Thomas has a population of less than 1,000, but state parks at nearby Blackwater Falls and Canaan Valley and natural phenomena peculiar to the area lure thousands each year. One might wonder if the town in general, and the old opera house in particular, might better serve the local populace and visitors again by reuse of this theater building as, say, a multi-purpose community center providing facilities for social and cultural activities.

**9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Fansler, Homer F. History of Tucker County, West Virginia. Parsons, W.Va.: McClain Printing Co., 1962.  
 Morgantown, W.Va. West Virginia Collection, West Virginia University Library. Sanborn Maps.  
 Nutter, T., Comp. Thomas, West Virginia: History, Progress and Development. 1906. (Reprinted. Parsons, W.Va.: McClain Printing Co., 1968.)

**10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1/2 acre

QUADRANGLE NAME Davis, W.Va.-Md.

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24000

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,7	6,2,9	7,9,0	4,3	3,4	3,2,0	B						
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING							
C							D						
E							F						
G							H						

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION The theater building is located on lot 8 and part of lot 9 in the city of Thomas. It is fronted by East Avenue, and an alley below Spruce Street is at the rear. Lot dimensions are roughly 80 feet wide by 120 feet deep.

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

James E. Harding, Historian

ORGANIZATION Historic Preservation Unit  
Department of Culture and History

DATE April 11, 1979

STREET & NUMBER The Cultural Center, Capitol Complex

TELEPHONE (304) 348-0240

CITY OR TOWN Charleston

STATE West Virginia

**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

*Clarence Moran*

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

DATE

ATTEST: KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

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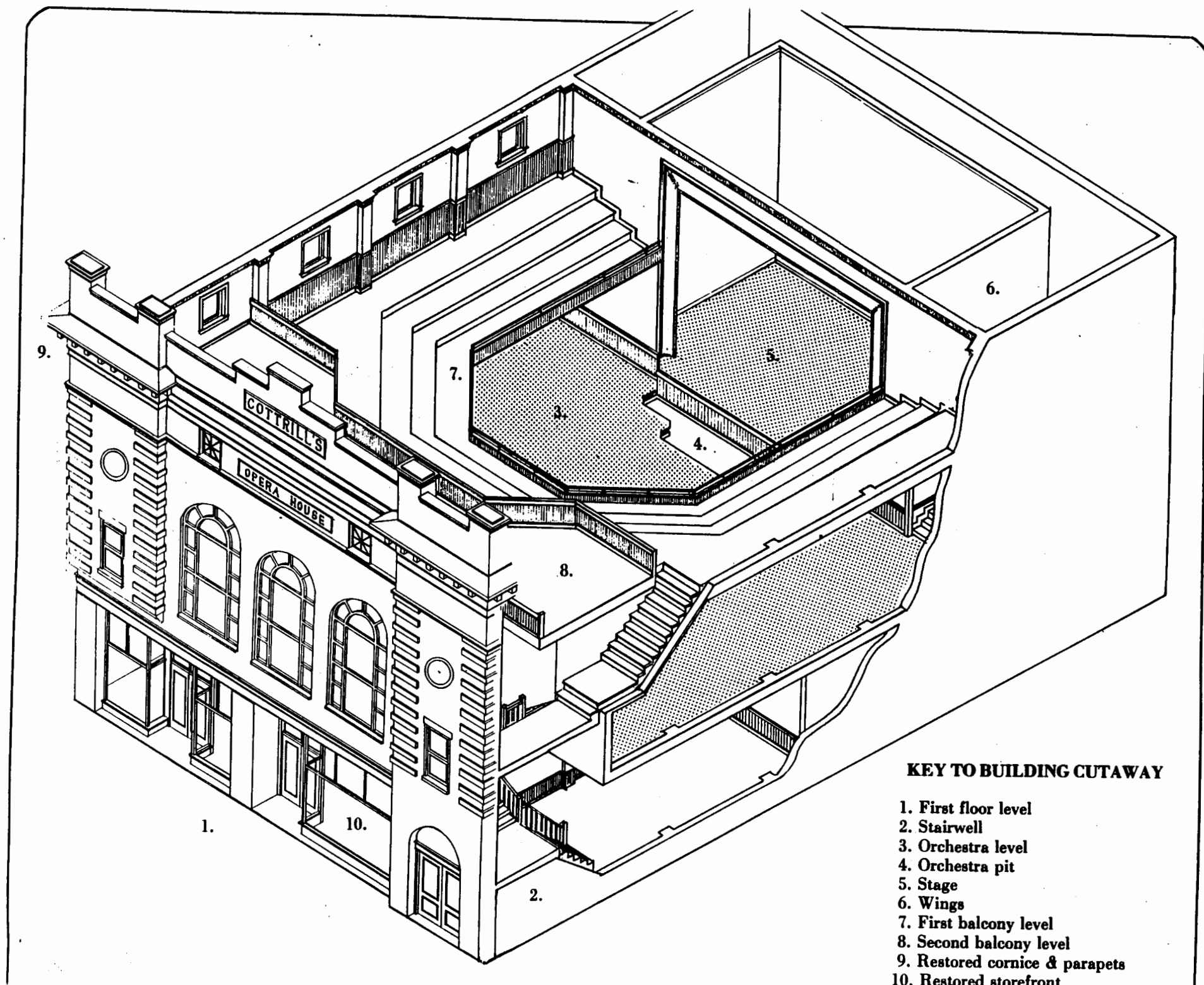
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Parsons, W.Va. Tucker County Courthouse. Deed books.

R.L. Smith Architectural Associates. "A Study of the Feasibility of Renovating the Cottrill Opera House and Surrounding Businesses as a Historical District in Thomas, West Virginia." Prepared for the West Virginia Department of Culture and History, Charleston, W.Va., 1978.



**KEY TO BUILDING CUTAWAY**

- 1. First floor level
- 2. Stairwell
- 3. Orchestra level
- 4. Orchestra pit
- 5. Stage
- 6. Wings
- 7. First balcony level
- 8. Second balcony level
- 9. Restored cornice & parapets
- 10. Restored storefront



COTTRILL OPERA  
HOUSE, THOMAS,  
TUCKER COUNTY,  
WEST VIRGINIA  
UTM REFERENCE:  
17/629790/4344300

