

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For HCRS use only

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Metropolitan Theatre

and/or common

2. Location

street & number 371 South High Street _____ not for publication

city, town Morgantown _____ vicinity of 2nd congressional district

state West Virginia code 54 county Monongalia code 061

3. Classification

| Category | Ownership | Status | Present Use |
|---|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> district | <input type="checkbox"/> public | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied | <input type="checkbox"/> agriculture |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial |
| <input type="checkbox"/> structure | <input type="checkbox"/> both | <input type="checkbox"/> work in progress | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational |
| <input type="checkbox"/> site | Public Acquisition | Accessible | <input type="checkbox"/> entertainment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> object | <input type="checkbox"/> in process | <input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted | <input type="checkbox"/> government |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> being considered | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted | <input type="checkbox"/> industrial |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> military |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> museum |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> park |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> private residence |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> religious |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> scientific |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> transportation |
| | | | <input type="checkbox"/> other: |

4. Owner of Property

name Comuntzis Theatre Bldg., Inc.

street & number 371 High Street

city, town Morgantown _____ vicinity of _____ state West Virginia 26505

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Monongalia County Court House

street & number Court House Square

city, town Morgantown _____ state West Virginia

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title WV Historic Properties Inventory has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date May 1981 _____ federal state _____ county _____ local

Historic Preservation Unit
depository for survey records West Virginia Dept. of Culture and History, Cultural Center

city, town Charleston _____ state West Virginia

7. Description

| | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Condition | | Check one | Check one |
| <input type="checkbox"/> excellent | <input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good | <input type="checkbox"/> ruins | <input type="checkbox"/> altered | <input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fair | <input type="checkbox"/> unexposed | | |

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Metropolitan Theatre, designed by C.W. Bates and opened to the public July 24, 1924, is composed of a single-floor auditorium with balcony. It is located on west side of main street in downtown Morgantown (High Street) between Wall and Fayette streets. The building is structurally detached from the buildings which adjoin it on either side. The dimensions of the building are 72'-0" X 143'-0". There are two stores on the ground floor and a staircase leading down to a large pool room, in addition to the three double doors into the theatre on the main facade. There are more than 50 rooms in all parts of the building.

Structurally, the foundations are continuous concrete with internal concrete piers and lally columns supporting the stage and front section. The exterior walls are loadbearing (concrete) with brick facing with bricks laid in stretcher bond, with headers at the edge of pilasters and at window openings; the facade has so little brick, compared to the use of concrete that it is difficult to discern pattern for the bond. All floors are of concrete stress construction. The front section of the building is divided into five structural bays, while the auditorium is completely sparred by a series of warren tresses spanning 72'-0". A maze of L - beam griders supports the balcony. The entire building is covered with a flat roof which steps up once to the fly area, 70' - 0" from stage level. The material used was 3-ply builtup tar and felt. The building is of fireproof construction and can be completely evacuated in two minutes. Over 4,000 barrels of cement were used in the construction of the theatre, and Monongahela Supply furnished the cement, piping, conduits and some of the hardware.

The plans for the \$500,000 building are gone, and the architect's wife destroyed his sketches, so it is hard to know exactly how many rooms are in the building. A 1924 description noted a large room in the basement to house a cafeteria, billiard room and barber shop. A sub-basement included the power plant and heating and ventilating systems. Under the stage was a room for musicians, plus space for scenery, baggage rooms and dressing rooms. The dressing rooms were on outside walls to get light and ventilation. Above the pool room (below the theatre) are two storage rooms - one very large under the lobby area and a smaller one under one of the small storage rooms. A complete sign shop was located in one of the basement rooms.

The east (main) facade of the building features Neo-Classical Revival details, more exuberant than West Virginia University's Colson Hall, also designed by Bates, but based on the classical five-bay symmetry of the Georgian style. Fluted concrete ionic pilasters with egg and dart detail set off the north and south bays; the paired pilasters rest on a brick base which projects slightly (one course) from the main facade. Two brick pilasters set off the center bays. The pilasters do not reach down to ground level, as that area is used for two small stores and the three pairs of glass double doors leading into the lobby. The entry level has a concrete foundation, concrete surrounds for the double doors, fixed sash windows with transoms for the shops and a concrete string course which serves as a base for the pilasters. While the building is actually a theatre and balcony, it gives the appearance of being a three-story structure on the east facade because of the two levels of windows. The lower level windows have concrete surrounds, round arches with keytones

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and no lights (all concrete) and eight-light casement windows (opening to inside). The third level "windows" were always enclosed and are concrete slabs with a decorative molding, except for the center one which had a small window pierced into it and a balcony added. Topping the main facade is a concrete entablature with circular medallions and "Metropolitan" in the frieze. The cornice is set off by dentils, and a low brick and concrete parapet tops the cornice. The marquee features "Metropolitan" in Art Deco lettering not shown on a 1924 illustration, although there was a marquee on the original building.

The interior of the theatre features a lobby with marble slab walls and an entablature with fluted frieze and dentils and egg and dart motif on the corner. The ceiling has a sunburst medallion in the center and smaller medallions around the lights, all surrounded by a garland design. Two stairways, one on each side of the lobby, lead to the balcony, projection booth, upper lobby and offices. Two double doors lead off the west end of the lobby into the theatre itself. The original theatre had a seating capacity of 1,300 (800 on the first floor, 400 on the balcony, and 100 more on the rear balcony); Oversized seats were provided for oversized patrons. There are three boxes on each side on both the first and second floors. Classical details of garlands, medallions and egg and dart motif are used as decoration throughout the theatre. Dancing nymphs are featured on the wood balcony rail, and cast iron garlands and grecian urns decorate the original seats, still in place at the Met. The coffered ceiling originally supported four crystal chandeliers from Czechoslovakia that were made of 2,700 pieces each, but these melted in the 1931 fire and were replaced by simpler lights. In addition, there were 16 side wall, three-socket candles, 2 ceiling chandeliers in the lobby on the first floor and a huge chandelier in the second-floor lobby. The ceiling is designed to provide the best possible accoustics and is flat in the very back of the room over the balcony for sound dampening. Rectangular panels set off by moldings on the walls at the balcony level were Bates' way of dampening sound in the room.

There is an orchestra pit in front of the stage. The proscenium has a 36'-0" opening and is 37'-0" deep, with the wall-to-wall width being 50'-0". The "fly" can carry as many as 100 batons for drops. There are two dressing rooms on each side of the stage. There is a trap door in the floor of the stage. Doors about 20'-0" and 40'-0" above the stage now open into space but were used to haul trunks of costumes into dressing rooms on those levels. There is a large door on the rear facade at the northeast corner of the stage area and exit stairs on the side of the building at the rear. The building is about twice as high in the back as on the main facade to accommodate the stage scenery.

When the theatre opened, its furnishings were quite elaborate. The lighting fixtures, hangings, draperies and curtains were all "designed specially for the theatre, making for completeness and harmony in all of its interior appointments." The foyer was furnished with wicker furniture and potted plants. The first floor had rest and retiring rooms for women, plus the manager's office and check rooms. The men had "smoking rooms and retiring rooms" on the second floor. These lounge rooms, plus the mezzanine room (for both men and women) were furnished

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in fibre-reed furniture made by Northfield Furniture of Sheboygan, Wisconsin and sold by Royal Furniture of Morgantown; this was the most modern theatre furniture available at the time, according to the Morgantown Post of July 24, 1924. The original color scheme was "French gray, old rose and gold."

Utility service for the theatre was of very high quality. According to the Morgantown Post of July 24, 1924, "deep down in the sub-basement is a large reinforced concrete vault with steel doors. It is in this room, which the public never sees, that provision is made for the kinds of electric current necessary to operate the ventilating system, fans, picture machines [power projection machines], lights, etc. Current is delivered to the building underground through a lead covered cable. The 160 feet of cable used weighing more than 800 pounds. Instead of voltage, such as is ordinarily furnished buildings in Morgantown, 3200 volts is directly taken into the building, where it is changed to the various voltages desired. To do this it was necessary to install transformers of ninety kilowatt capacity. As an additional precaution to guard against interruptions a complete set of extra transformers were installed." The Electrical Equipment Company of Morgantown furnished and installed the lighting and electrical equipment, using a special lighting fixture designer from New York City who came to Morgantown to consult on that aspect of the work. The theatre was designed with heating and ventilating systems "of the most approved type." When built, "all the air in the theatre (was) washed and purified before being admitted. During the summer months the air (would) be sent through a spray of cold water, removing the dust and producing a chilliness that (would) make the theatre a rendezvous for those seeking to escape the heat " (Morgantown Post, July 24, 1924). In 1933, the Met became one of the first theatres in the country to install an air conditioning system; this meant that every cubic inch of air in the theatre was displaced with clean, fresh air every three minutes.

8. 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> education | <input type="checkbox"/> military | <input type="checkbox"/> social/ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799 | <input type="checkbox"/> art | <input type="checkbox"/> engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> music | <input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899 | <input type="checkbox"/> commerce | <input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement | <input type="checkbox"/> philosophy | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900- | <input type="checkbox"/> communications | <input type="checkbox"/> industry | <input type="checkbox"/> politics/government | <input type="checkbox"/> transportation |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> invention | | <input type="checkbox"/> other (specify) |

Specific dates 1924 Builder/Architect C.W. Bates, Architect

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Metropolitan Theatre in downtown Morgantown opened in 1924 and is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as one of the city's best examples of Neo-classical Revival architecture, as the only theatre to have retained its original architectural integrity, and as the home of some of the city's best live entertainment over the past 60 years. As such, like Charleston's Kearsse Theatre, it is a significant example of theatre and moving picture house architecture of the mid - 1920's, and it was billed as "West Virginia's most beautiful playhouse" when it opened July 24, 1924, 2½ years after construction began.

The theatre was owned by George P. and John P. Comuntis of Morgantown, who purchased the land from Milton and Hattie Hirschman of New York City for \$130,000 on January 10, 1921. The architect for the building was C.W. Bates of Wheeling; Bates also had branch offices in Pittsburgh, Youngstown and Cleveland. He apparently received this commission because he was the architect for the West Virginia University College of Law building (now Colson Hall), and the Comuntis brothers got to know him from this project. The Georgian Revival features of Colson Hall are evident in the more ornate Metropolitan Theatre. No expenses were spared to construct this small-town counterpart to New York's Metropolitan Opera House - hence the name for the theatre. Charles T. Hoskins was the first manager of the theatre, with Herbert A. Shaw as his assistant.

The opening night performance featured "seven Acts of vaudeville sent here by the B.F. Keith Amusement Company from its New York Office with the assurance that the players are among the highest priced and most capable under the Keith management will be presented" ("New Metropolitan Theatre Opens," Morgantown Post Metropolitan Theatre Section, 24 July 1924, 1:1) Uniformed ushers led the opening night guests into the 1300-seat theatre. Music was provided by Marvin's Metropolitan Symphony (Louis H. Marvin, director), and all the local dignitaries (including Jennings Randolph) were on hand to thank George, Harry and John Comuntis for their efforts.

From 1924 on, the Metropolitan has provided generations of area residents with high quality entertainment, and the theatre is still used for both live productions and films. Stage shows were produced and scheduled by two outstanding organizations - the Keith Orpheum circuit and the Pantages Production Company. The "Met" scheduled them in two days a week; these "tab" (tabloid) shows ran 50-55 minutes and were composed of a variety of acts. Theatres usually used "pit bands" or pianists to provide music for the silent films shown at the theatre, but George Comuntis installed a \$50000 "Mighty Wurlitzer" in 1928.

It is interesting to note some of the outstanding attractions during the theatre's first years: Ziegfield's "Sally," operas such

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as "The Marriage of Figaro" and "Madame Butterfly," the original cast of George White's "Scandals" which opened at the Met before going to New York for a multi-year run, the farewell tour of the nationally known "McIntyre and Heath," Schubert's "The Student Prince," a New York City production of "The Green Hats" with Charlotte Walker and Norman Hackett, Maria Jeritza (leading prima donna of the Metropolitan Opera Co.), Will Rogers, "The Beggar's Opera," "Pat Rooney's Five Rodeo Boys" with three-year-old Mickey Rooney, etc.)

On March 30, 1930, a flash fire on stage caused a great deal of damage to the theatre, forcing the Comuntis's to close it for repairs. When it reopened on May 10, 1930, the Met was completely restored except that the projection room was extended, resulting in the loss of some balcony seats.

Other changes resulted from changes in the entertainment industry's technology. The Met became the first theatre in northern West Virginia to install Vitaphone as a sound system and Movietone sound equipment. These advancements meant the end of the "tab" shows for Paramount and Fox began producing 20-minute films of orchestras and accompanying acts. "Pit" bands and pianists were no longer needed, although the Met retained an organist to be used as a filler between shows.

Some live entertainment continued to be featured throught the 1930s and 1940s; as stars started touring to develop a following. These included Ken Hackley's NBC "Oklahoma Cowboys;" "Freckles" of "Our Gang" comedies; Admiral Richard Byrd with films of his flights to the South Pole; KDKA's "South Sea Islanders;" Gilbert and Sullivan's "Pirates of Penzance," "The Gondoliers," "Mikado" and "Jolanthe;" Lowell Thomas with his "Adventures Around the World on the Air;" "Casamanana Revere" with Sid Page; Gene Autry ("The Singing Cowboy"); "Tobacco Road" with John Barton; "Broadway Revelations of 1940" with Peggy Lee, "The Coquettes," America's Greatest All Girl Band; The Andrews Sisters, "Bring on the Girls" with Ozzie and Harriet Nelson; and "Oomph in Swingtime" with Fifi D'Orvay. Numerous big bands also played here, including Dan Gregory and his Victor Recording Band, Tony Christian and his Roseland Dance Band, Lt. Ferdinando's Havana Orchestra, Gene Austin, Gene Krupa, Duke Ellington and his Orchestra (4 times), "Woody" Herman, Count Basie (4 visits), Vincent Lopez and Sunny Skylar and Betty Hutton, Lena Horne, Paula Kelly and Little Jack Little. Art Carney, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby also appeared at the Met over the years. In addition, the Met was chosen as one of a handful of theatres around the country to show films on a pre-release basis so that the production companies would have some indication of nationwide response. As an "index town," Morgantown was privileged to see new movies as early as 60 days prior to national release.

Morgantown's Met Theatre was a center for imported talent, but it was also a community center, as local groups sponsored a variety of programs there. Local talent shows sponsored by the Kiwanis Club, joint religious services on Sunday evenings sponsored by the Ministerial Association, West Virginia University graduations, community cooking

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schools (lasted c. 30 years), WVU orchestra and Glee Club concerts, "Morgantown on Review" (local talent/ WVU talent show), Service League Follies (1938 production featuring all outstanding Morgantown citizens), Women's Music Club concerts, war relief drives during World War II, free use of the theatre for fund-raising causes during World War II - all were housed at the Met. The theatre also sponsored games that were played on the screen for cash from the mid - 1930s to late 1940s. One such game was "Wahoo," a spin game projected on the screen in which a button would be pressed by those in the audience causing the spin; the jack pot increased by \$25/week, and, when the spin stopped, the Comuntzis paid whatever percentage (100%, 50%, 25%, 10%) showed on the screen. "Bank Night" was another popular game; in this, those entering the game daily signed a journal opposite a number, which was placed in a large drum. On "Bank Night" a number would be drawn for each \$500 increment in the jackpot, and, if the winner was in the audience, he or she received the cash immediately.

After World War II, the Big Bands began travelling again, and many returned to Morgantown. One of these bands was Tony Pastor's, including his sisters, Rosemary and Betty Clooney of Kentucky. Paul Whiteman made one of his last appearances here before his retirement. Live entertainment and films have continued at the Met until the present. Some of the more recent celebrities to appear here have been John Denver(1972), Helen Hayes and Maurice Evans in a talk show and Fred Waring and His Pennsylvanians on their last tour.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet #5

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property c. .26 acres

Quadrangle name Morgantown North, WV

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------|---|---------|---|---|---|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 7 | 0 | 9 | 0 |
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| Zone | | Easting | | | | Northing | | | | | | | | |

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| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Zone | | Easting | | | | Northing | | | | | | | | |

Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet # 6

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

| state | code | county | code |
|-------|------|--------|------|
| N/A | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

11. Form Prepared By

name/title C.G. Comuntzis/Property Owner and Barbara Howe/Asst. Professor

organization Department of History

date 26 September 1983

street & number 125 Sherman/West Virginia Univ.

304-292-2714 (Comuntzis)
304-293-2421 (Howe)

city or town Morgantown/Morgantown

state W.Va. 26505/W.Va. 26506

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 Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title Commissioner, Department of Culture and History

date November 29, 1983

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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C.G. Comuntzis, owner, personal interviews.

"A Community Enterprise." Morgantown Post, 24 July 1924.

"A Full Fifty Years of Gleaming Footlights." Mason-Dixonland Panorama,
28 July 1974: pp 8-10, 14.

DeVries, Mabel. "Review of the Opening Bill at the Metropolitan
Theatre." Morgantown Post, 24 July 1924 really 25 July .

"Metropolitan is Ready for Formal Opening Tonight." Morgantown Post,
24 July 1924.

"Metropolitan Theatre Observes Its 14th Anniversary." Morgantown Post,
22 July 1938.

"Metropolitan Theatre Opening." Metropolitan Theatre Section of
Morgantown Post, 24 July 1924. Most of quotes are from various
articles in this section.

"Metropolitan Theatre Opens with Splendor." New Dominion, 25 July
1924.

"Metropolitan Theatre Will Open Tonight." New Dominion, 24 July 1924.

"Players at Metropolitan Praise Both Theatre and Their Audience."
Morgantown Post, 24 July 1924.

"Rogers Pleases Large Audience." Morgantown Post, 22 April 1927.

"Grand Opening. Metropolitan Theatre." Souvenir Programme, July 24-
25-26, 1924.

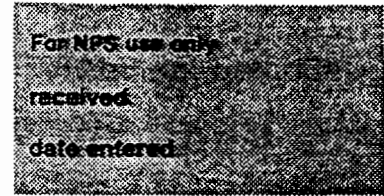
Morgantown Post, 1924-1940s for information on performances at the Met.

New Dominion, 1924-1940s for information on performances at the Met.

National Register nomination for Kearsse Theatre, Charleston, W.Va.
(1980).

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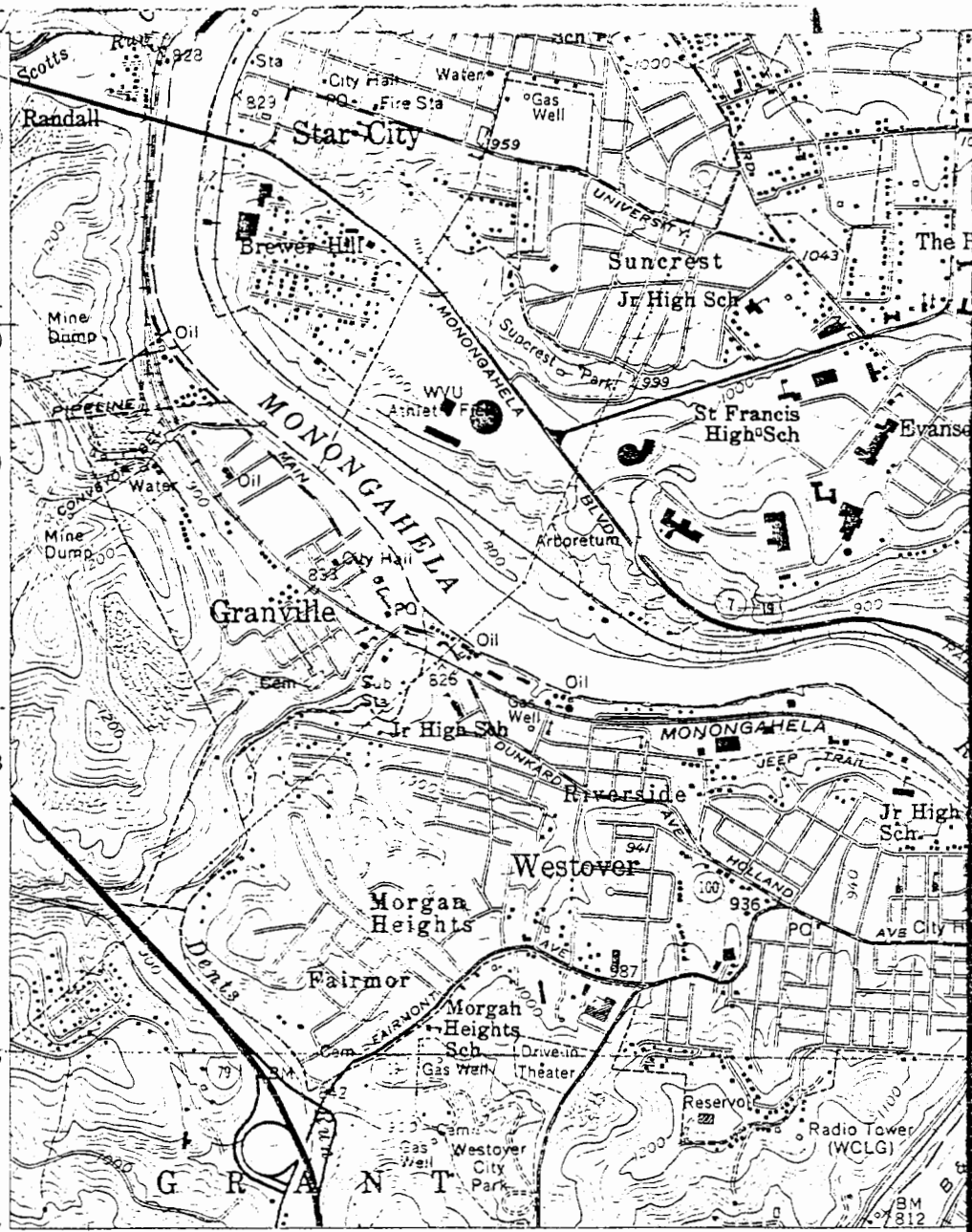
Item number

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All that lot or parcel of ground in said city, county and state, beginning on the Northwestern boundary of High Street, corner to lands formerly belonging to the Union Improvement Company, and extending in a Northwesterly direction with one of the lines of the said Union Improvement Company, one hundred and twenty (120) feet and six (6) inches to lands of the late Mary R.A. Kiger, thence in a Southwesterly direction with a small run and parallel with High Street until it strikes the Northermost line of the lot on which the said Mary R.A. Kiger formerly resided, thence Eastwardly with said line to the Northwest side of High Street, and with the said High Street about ninety-five (95) feet to the place of beginning, together with all the improvements thereon and thereto belonging, and including all the conditions, stipulations and benefits belonging to said grantors relating to the divisional wall between the building formerly belonging to the Union Improvement Company and the property hereby conveyed, and being the same property conveyed to said Milton Hirschman by Stuard Hirschman and wife, by deed dated the 26 day of August, 1914, and now of record in the office of the Clerk of the County Court of Monongalia County, West Virginia, in Deed Book No. 134, page 140.



Metropolitan Theatre
 371 South High Street
 Morgantown,
 Monongalia County,
 West Virginia

Morgantown North, W.V.-Pa.
 U.S.G.S. Quadrangle
 U.T.M. Coordinates
 17/589630/4387090

39°37'30" 80°00' 1860 000 FEET (W. VA.) FAIRMONT JUNC. U.S. 2501 16 MI. 988 GRAFTON JUNC. U.S. 501 26 MI.

(RIVESVILLE)
 4983 11 SE

Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey

Control by USGS, USC&GS, and USCE
 Topography from aerial photographs by Kelsh plotter
 Aerial photographs taken 1955. Field check 1957

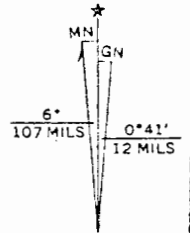
Polyconic projection. 1927 North American datum
 10,000-foot grids based on West Virginia coordinate system,
 north zone, and Pennsylvania coordinate system, south zone
 1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid ticks,
 zone 17, shown in blue

Fine red dashed lines indicate selected fence and field lines
 visible on aerial photographs. This information is unchecked

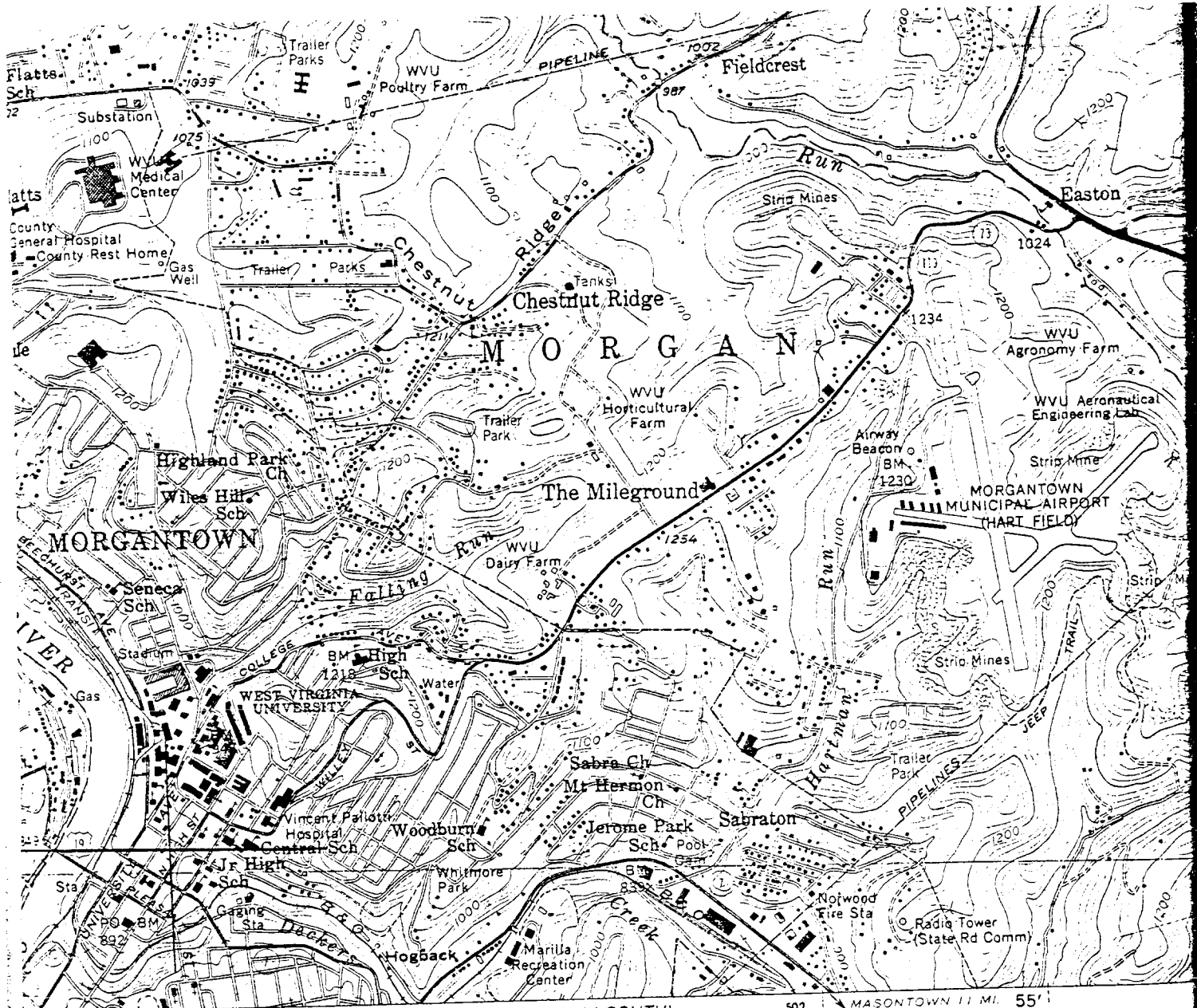
Contours in strip mine areas from 1955 photography

Red tint indicates areas in which only
 landmark buildings are shown

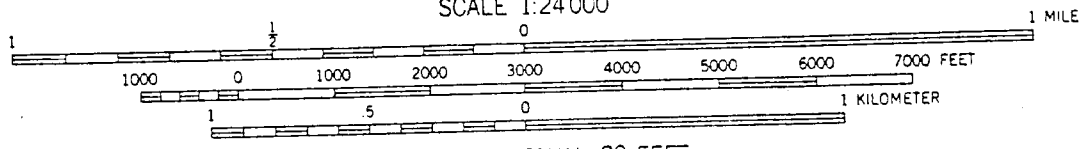
Unchecked elevations are shown in brown
 Purple tint indicates extension of urban areas



UTM GRID AND 1976 MAGNETIC DECLINATION AT CENTER OF



SCALE 1:24 000



CONTOUR INTERVAL 20 FEET
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929

NORTH SHEET

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

Revisions shown in part taken 1976. This info

KELLER'S PHOTO
804 BANAWHA