

United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

For HCERS use only
received
date entered

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

1. Name

historic Theatre-By-the-Sea
and/or common

2. Location

street & number Card Ponds Road not for publication
city, town South Kingstown Matunuck 2 - Hon.
vicinity of congressional district Edward Beard
state Rhode Island code 44 county Washington code 009

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 type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input 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
			other:

4. Owner of Property

name See continuation sheet 1
street & number
city, town vicinity of state

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. South Kingstown Town Hall
street & number 66 High Street
city, town Wakefield state Rhode Island 02879

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title South Kingstown Preliminary Survey
has this property been determined eligible? yes no
date federal state county local
depository for survey records R.I. Historical Preservation Commission
city, town Providence state Rhode Island 02903

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Owners

Mr. Jesse Bontecou
Ralley Farm
Mill Brook, New York 12545

Mrs. William Harris
"Four Winds"
Salisbury, Connecticut 06068

Mrs. Clive Duval
1214 Buchanan Street
McLean, Virginia 22101

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
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Theatre-by-the-Sea is a small complex of weathered shingled buildings which rise from the flat sandy shore land in the summer colony of Matunuck about a thousand feet from Card Ponds. Included in the complex are the theatre, originally a nineteenth-century barn, much expanded and added onto; the workshop, a small single-story shed where supplies are stored; the costume shed (also called "Brando House"), a story-and-a-half nineteenth-century former wash- and feed-house, where costumes are sewn and visiting stars have, on occasion, been put up over night; the inn, a large two-and-a-half-story late nineteenth-century house with smaller story-and-a-half mid-nineteenth-century ell, now used to house the resident acting company and to provide a restaurant and bar for theatre patrons; and the one-story ranch house (1971) used as the theatre business office.

All the buildings except the red-painted workshop are sheathed in natural weathered shingle with barn red trim -- a treatment which helps unify this disparate group of structures. All the buildings, except the office, were part of the nineteenth-century Browning farm. Among them the theatre and the inn are the most interesting architecturally (as well as the most heavily altered).

The theatre (see site plan, sketch plan, and photos 1-4) was converted for use as a theatre in 1933 under the direction of then-owner Mrs. Alice Tyler, who first conceived of running a theatre here. The barn had been built in two sections: a small section about 1840 or earlier, containing six or eight horse stalls, and a larger section (most of the present auditorium) built about the end of the nineteenth century when the Brownings had started taking summer boarders at their "Ocean Star Hotel." The conversion in 1933 involved building a large "box," fifty feet tall, to house the proscenium and fly space, and the installation of all the technical equipment needed to operate a theatre (fly-bars, drops, tie-offs, new electrical system and rented lightboard and lights), as well as approximately three hundred seats. Most of the equipment -- seats, asbestos curtain, and front curtain, and backstage items such as shives, headblocks, and thirty sets of lines -- came from a small defunct movie house in Port Chester, New York, which had once also housed vaudeville shows. The proscenium section of the theatre was built in June and July of 1933 following designs and consultations with theatre designer Abe Feder, by a local contractor, Mr. Belknap, directing twenty-four Portuguese ship-builders from New Bedford. In 1934, a balcony with additional seating was installed.

The 1938 hurricane heavily damaged the theatre, stoving in the rear (ocean side) wall of the "box" and taking the roof off completely. Mrs. Tyler seized upon this disaster as an opportunity to double the theatre's seating capacity. At the same time as other repairs were undertaken, the barn was sawn apart (between the box office/lobby section

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and the auditorium) and the box office section was pulled, via rope and dump truck about twenty-five feet closer to Card Ponds Road. A whole new section was spliced in, including all of the present balcony, adding three hundred seats to the theatre. This made the theatre even less like its original barn form but even more likely to succeed as an economically viable enterprise. Further but less visible repairs, primarily steel reinforcements to brace the entire structure, were undertaken in the wake of the 1954 hurricane.

The theatre presently appears, on the exterior, as a long shingled gable-roofed structure with an open wrap-around porch on the front or road side, a series of doors and dormer windows on each of the flanks, and a huge and unsightly rectangular box (now covered in tan masonite squares) attached at the rear (offset to the west because of the driveway immediately beside the theatre on the east). Box office and lavatories flank the main double-leaf entrance to the theatre. Inside (see sketch plan) is a small white-painted lobby, with stairs to the balcony at the right and straight ahead, the entrance to the auditorium. The theatre and auditorium and balcony together presently seat 518. The auditorium measures 55 by 110 feet. The proscenium opening is 29 feet wide and the stage is 40 feet deep. Despite the various modifications, the auditorium (see photos 3 and 4) still has the feel of a barn, with its-exposed-unpainted wooden framing and wall sheathing, brightened by bright red-upholstered seats. (Horses wouldn't recognize it as a barn, but theatre-goers do.)

The inn, located approximately two hundred and fifty feet southwest of the theatre (see site plan and photo #5), is a large shingled structure with, overall, an early twentieth-century "cottage" appearance. The largest part, housing bar and restaurant with actor's lodgings above, was built about 1890 or 1895 but now has a c. 1920's flavor due to its huge stone chimney and fireplace (marked 1929) and its cobblestone piers facing the ocean, which originally defined an open porch. The porch has been glassed in, adding to the sense of space of the one large room which occupies most of the first floor. On the north, an enclosed c. 1950's porch adds room for a bar. On the east, an L-shaped early to-mid-nineteenth-century ell provides kitchen and storage facilities.

Behind the main complex of buildings is a tar-paved area, slightly larger than but reminiscent of a tennis court, where scenery is painted.

See continuation sheet 3

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Across -- north of -- the road is a dirt-surfaced parking lot for the theatre (not included in this nomination). Landscaping -- the careful planting of ornamental shrubs and small trees and the brightly-planted annual borders along the paths from the road to the theatre and from the theatre to the inn -- softens some of the more awkward architectural aspects of the theatre building and reinforces the sense of summer which "barn" theatres of this "straw hat" type epitomize.

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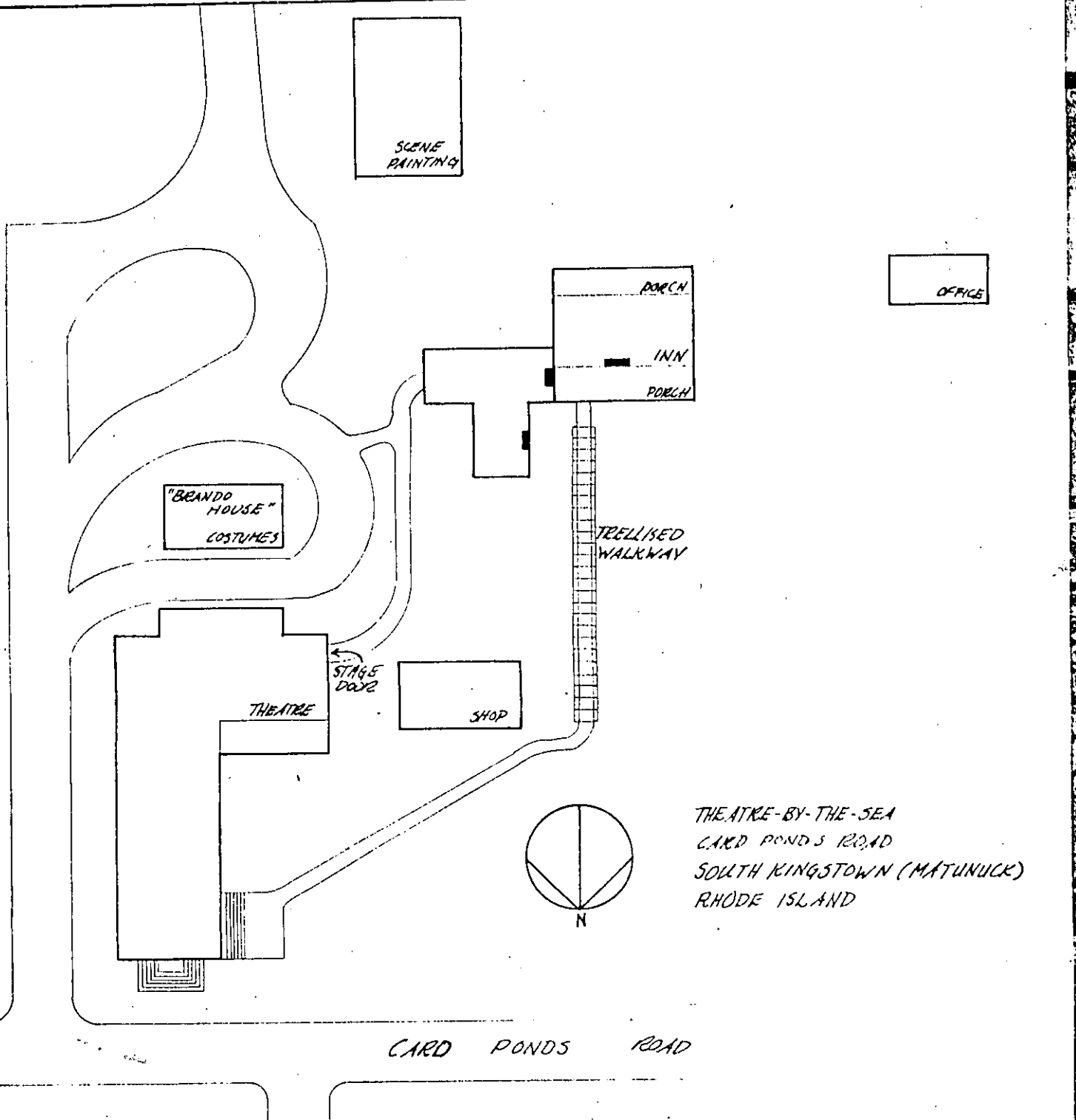
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THEATRE-BY-THE-SEA
CARD PONDS ROAD
SOUTH KINGSTOWN (MATUNUCK)
RHODE ISLAND

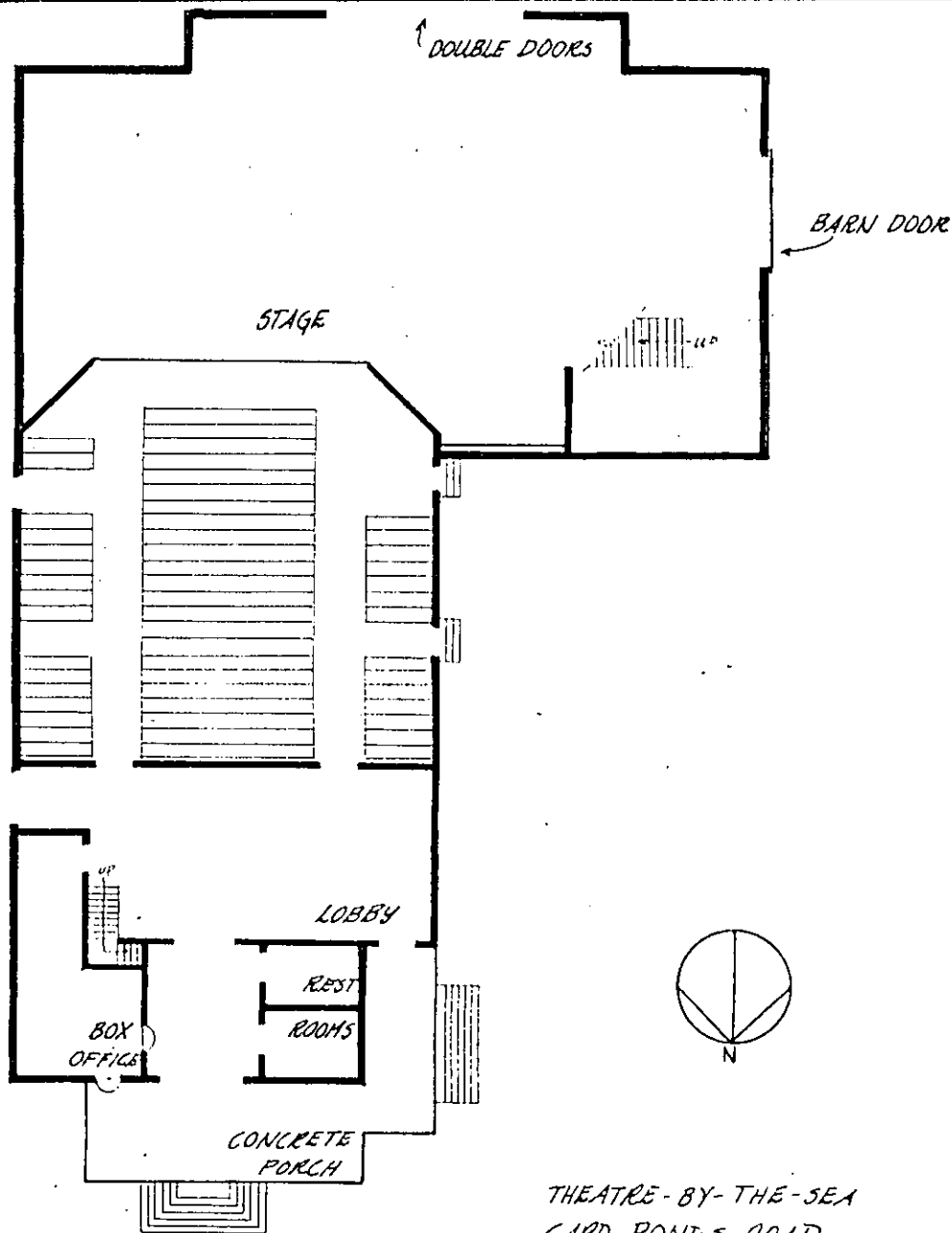
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THEATRE-BY-THE-SEA
CARD PONTI'S ROAD
SOUTH KINGSTOWN (MATUNUCK)
RHODE ISLAND

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 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

Builder/Architect

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Theatre-by-the-Sea is important within a local and state cultural context, and worthy of preservation, for a number of reasons. First, it is among the earliest summer theatre in New England. Second, it has been in almost continuous operation since its beginning in 1933. Third, its fluctuating fortunes clearly reflect the varying fortunes of the early-twentieth-century Matunuck summer colony in which it is located, as well as the larger patterns of change throughout American theatre on the local level. Fourth, the theatre has been associated with many famous theatre personalities; and, finally, the theatre continues to be a social and entertainment focus for Rhode Island summer vacationers and tourists.

The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed a coming of age in American theatre. Not only were theatre audiences, playwrights, and actors beginning to demand better material and standards of production, but nationwide there was a burgeoning of university theatres and the growth of community or "little" theatres. Probably the first experiment in American summer theatre occurred in the summer of 1915 at Provincetown, Massachusetts, when a group of vacationers there, writers and playwrights, primarily, decided to write and to produce their own plays. The initial aims of the Provincetown Players were not only their own amusement, but also the encouragement of new writers, giving them the opportunity to perfect their craft by seeing their works performed.

Despite the success of the Provincetown Players -- they secured their own playhouse in New York in 1916 and produced plays in both locations through 1929, introducing, among other playwrights, Eugene O'Neill -- summer theatre, as we think of it, did not come onto the scene until the early 1930s.

The First World War was probably at least partly responsible for the delay in the development of summer theatre, but throughout the twenties, concern with theatre as an American art form, as an enterprise which should meet certain professional literary and artistic standards, and as an experience which should be made accessible to audience and participants on a regional or local basis, continued to grow. These influences, in conjunction with the crash of 1929, which caused many people to leave the city for the country, led to the remarkable burgeoning of summer theatres in the 1930's. By the end of the decade there were

See continuation sheet 6

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more than eighty such theatres in America.¹ Most had a ten-week season and performed a new play each week. By the end of the 1940's there were at least two hundred summer theatres, concentrated in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, but scattered throughout the east and found occasionally in the midwest and in southern California along the shore.² The Baxter Theatre, Abingdon, Virginia (1931) and Westport Playhouse, Westport, Connecticut (before 1933) were among the earliest such theatres begun and still surviving; and it is in that context that Theatre-by-the-Sea should be recognized.

Theatre-by-the-Sea was begun in 1933 when Mrs. Alice Tyler, of New Haven, decided to convert the property she and her husband had purchased as a summer home in 1921 (which she had subsequently converted into a summer camp for girls after her husband's death in 1928), into a summer theatre. Mrs. Tyler's motivation appears to have been partly her own family's livelihood, partly a fascination with theatre, and partly a sense that the times were such as to make establishing a theatre in the hinterlands relatively easy: actors, directors, and designers were desperate to find work and were leaving theatre-darkened New York City in droves.

Mrs. Tyler consulted with Abe Feder, later noted for his lighting designs for Lincoln Center, New York, and Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., cajoling him into helping her design and build her barn theatre. His memoir of that experience³ is an invaluable and amusing source of information on the undertaking.

By August the theatre was complete. The first production, a pre-Broadway tryout of "Amourette" starring Claire Kummer, opened August 15 and ran two weeks. Unfortunately, when the production got to Broadway, it survived for only twenty-one performances. Its lack of professional success spelled the end of the connection between Mrs. Tyler and the two New York producers, Leo Bulgakov, formerly of the Moscow Art Theatre, and Leslie Spiller. The second summer, with Abe Feder as lighting and set designer and Teddy Hammerstein as manager, was a full ten-week ten-play season and a clear artistic success.

¹Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre, 1700-1950, p. 443.

²Ibid., p. 480.

³Abe Feder, "Theatre-by-the-Sea," June 30, 1976.

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Mrs. Tyler rented the theatre to various producers through the summer of 1941. The theatre was dark in 1942 and 1943 because of the war and gas rationing, and was used only as a highly visible landmark on which planes could practice their bombing raids. In 1944 and 1945 it was operated as a movie house, but 1946 saw the resumption of live performances.

In 1951 Donald Wolin and Harold Schiff, a New York attorney, approached Mrs. Tyler. They rented and ran both the theatre and the inn successfully for seven summers. In these years the theatre hosted more stars than ever before or since. A partial list of stars who came here includes Tallulah Bankhead, Orson Bean, Marlon Brando, Carol Channing, Melvin Douglas, Eva Gabor, and Rosemary Harris. (A complete list is on the theatre letterhead.)

Under the "star" system a "big-name" star would be hired to perform with the local company. Gradually, in the fifties, the "package system" evolved, in which the star would come to the local playhouse but only if a few supporting players of his own choosing came with him. Often this meant that the theatre would wind up paying both the star's supporting actors and the theatre's own supporting players. As the pattern evolved and the star brought almost the entire cast with him the expense of the overlap of "package" and resident company became prohibitive. Most theatres didn't have a package every week and therefore had to retain some capable resident company; moreover, if they wanted to be considered a professional operation, or "Equity house," they had to maintain a certain number of Equity (actor's union) players.

The increasing expense of this package and Equity system, on top of a disastrous season in 1958, led to a dark summer for Theatre-by-the-Sea in 1959. Competition from drive-in movies and summer tent entertainments also contributed to the financial difficulties of the theatre, and in 1959 the theatre was sold to the Bontecou family (who still own it). John Holmes operated the theatre for three summers, 1960-1962, but the theatre was dark in 1963 through 1966, at least partly due to the upgrading of nearby Route 1, which limited access to the theatre and caused renewed financial difficulties.⁴

⁴Tommy Brent, interview, February, 1979

See continuation sheet 6.

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In 1966, with no prospective producers in the wings, questionable success in the recent past, and considerable pressure on shore land for increased summer cottage development, the Bontecou family decided to demolish the theatre.

Fortunately, Tommy Brent, who had worked as press agent at the theatre in 1958 and who believed that it could be run as a viable enterprise, after trying unsuccessfully to find a buyer, invested his own funds to keep the theatre standing. Three days before the wrecking crew was scheduled to arrive, the commitment was made and the theatre became his project.

Mr. Brent came to the theatre late in March of 1967 and found it in great disrepair. It had been closed for three years and, while the caretaker was sick, vandals had been at work. Realizing that he had neither the time nor the funding to put the theatre in shape for the June opening single-handedly, he put an advertisement in the local paper, The Narragansett Times, on April 27th, asking for volunteers. Within a day he had received commitments from more than forty residents. Local merchants also lent support by extending credit for necessary supplies, and on June 18, 1967, the theatre re-opened. The community support for the theatre not only enabled it to re-open, but to stay open; the initial season was a resounding success.

Tommy Brent still manages and produces the season at the theatre, overseeing the hiring of actors, the stage manager, and the technical people. The theatre operates as a company theatre, using aspiring professionals and some of the best actors from Rhode Island's little theatres. In addition to the basic company there is a junior or apprentice company of thirty to forty young people who work for little or no pay and do everything from building sets to undertaking bit parts in the productions. This apprentice program is a valuable training and testing ground for new talent, as is, indeed, the whole theatre operation.

Over the years, the theatre has become a much beloved part of the Rhode Island summer scene. It is a remarkable survival in a financially difficult field. Many small summer theatres have been forced to close permanently, but theatre-by-the-Sea continues, a colorful and entertaining focal point for the social and cultural life of summertime Rhode Island.

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"Brutal Workloads; Cosmic Rewards," The Narragansett Times,
August 9, 1973.

Feder, Abe H., "Theatre-by-the-Sea." Typescript, June 30, 1976.
Copy on file at Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission.

Hughes, Glenn, A History of the American Theatre, 1700-1950.
Samuel French, New York, 1951, pp. 442-445, 480-481 especially.

MacGowan, Kenneth, Footlights Across America. Carnegie Foundation,
1929, passim.

Taubman, Howard, The Making of the American Theatre. Coward McCann,
Inc., New York, 1965, pp. 125-149, 148-167, and passim.

Tyler, Matilda. "A Short Account of Theatre-by-the-Sea and Its
Founder." Typescript, 1976. Copy on file at Rhode Island
Historical Preservation Commission.

Wilmeth, Donald B., Chairman, Theater Department, Brown University,
Interview, September, 1979.

Wilson, Geoff B., Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre,
from "Ye Bear and Ye Cubb" to "Hair." Prentice-Hall, Inc.,
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1933, passim.

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is the northern portion of Lot OL-4, Block 120, South Kingstown Assessor's Map 64; described as follows: Beginning at the northeast corner, the bound runs south from Card Ponds Road a depth of approximately 491 feet to a stone bound at a southeast corner; then turns and runs 90 feet west to another stone bound; then follows in that same line across Lot OL-4 to the west bound of Lot OL-4; then north along the west bound in three segments, defined by two stone bounds, of 160 feet (approximately), 100 feet, and 227.79 feet to the northwest corner of the lot on the south side of Card Ponds Road; the bound then runs east along the south edge of the road to the point of beginning.

9. Major Bibliographical References

"A Crossroad for Dreams," The Narragansett Times, August 2, 1973.

Brent, Tommy, Producer of Theatre-by-the-Sea since 1966, Interview, February 1979. See continuation sheet 9

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 3.6 acres

Quadrangle name Kingston

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

A

1	9	2	8	5	6	8	10	4	5	8	3	5	5	10
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D

Zone		Easting				Northing								

E

Zone		Easting				Northing								

F

Zone		Easting				Northing								

G

Zone		Easting				Northing								

H

Zone		Easting				Northing								

Verbal boundary description and justification

The boundaries are drawn to include all of the theatre buildings and the scene painting area. The area included (See continuation sheet 10)

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 Ancelin V. Lynch, National Register Coordinator

organization R.I. Historical Preservation Comm. date March, 1980

street & number 150 Benefit Street telephone 401-277-2678

city or town Providence state Rhode Island 02903

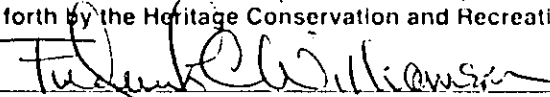
12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

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 State Historic Preservation Officer

date May 14, 1980

For HCRS use only
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register
date

Keeper of the National Register
Attest: date

Chief of Registration



Theatre-by-the-Sea
South Kingstown (Matunuck), Rhode Island

Warren Jagger, Photographer September 1979
Negative at Rhode Island Historical Preservation
Commission

View of theatre from the west, looking east south-
east. Box office/ lobby section at left, expanded
auditorium in middle, "box" of proscenium section
at right.

Photo #2



Theatre-by-the-Sea
South Kingstown (Matunuck), Rhode Island
Warren Jagger, Photographer September 1979
Negative at Rhode Island Historical Preservation
Commission

View from stage looking north into auditorium.

Photo # 3



Theatre-by-the-Sea
South Kingstown (Matunuck), Rhode Island

Warren Jagger, Photographer September 1979
Negative at Rhode Island Historical Preservation
Commission

View from balcony looking southeast toward stage.

Photo #4



Theatre-by-the-Sea
South Kingstown (Matunuck), Rhode Island

Warren Jagger, Photographer September 1979
Negative at Rhode Island Historical Preservation
Commission

View of the Inn from the south.

Photo #5



THEATRE *by the Sea*

Theatre-by-the-Sea
South Kingstown (Matunuck), Rhode Island

Warren Jagger, Photographer September 1979
Negative at Rhode Island Historical Preservation
Commission

View of the theatre from Card's Pond Road, looking
south southwest.

Photo #1

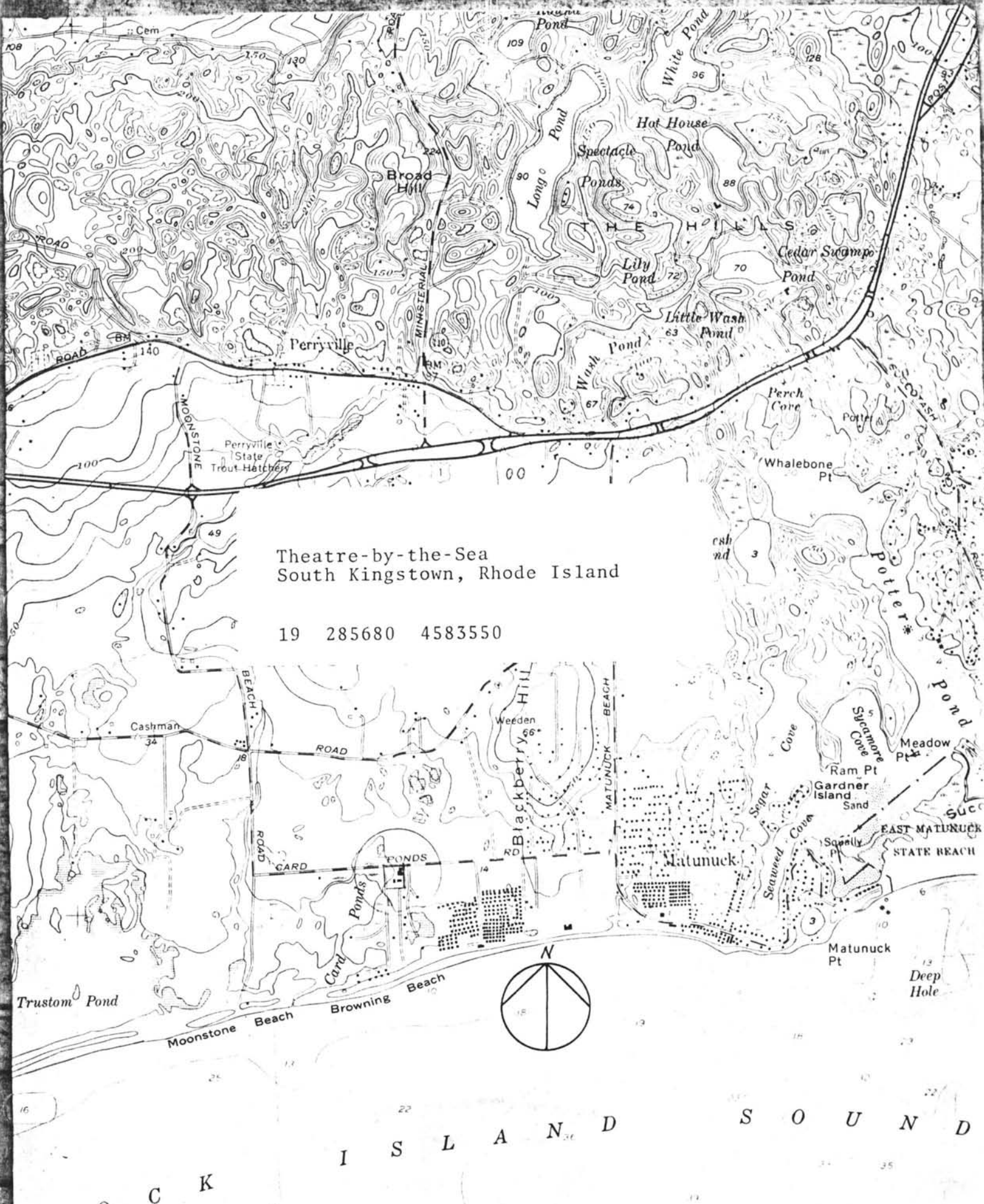


Theatre-by-the-Sea
South Kingstown (Matunuck), Rhode Island

Warren Jagger, Photographer September 1979
Negative at Rhode Island Historical Preservation
Commission

The costume shop or "Brando House," from the
southwest.

Photo #6



Theatre-by-the-Sea
 South Kingstown, Rhode Island

19 285680 4583550

L O C K I S L A N D S O U N D