

# The COLONIAL

## Gone, but not forgotten

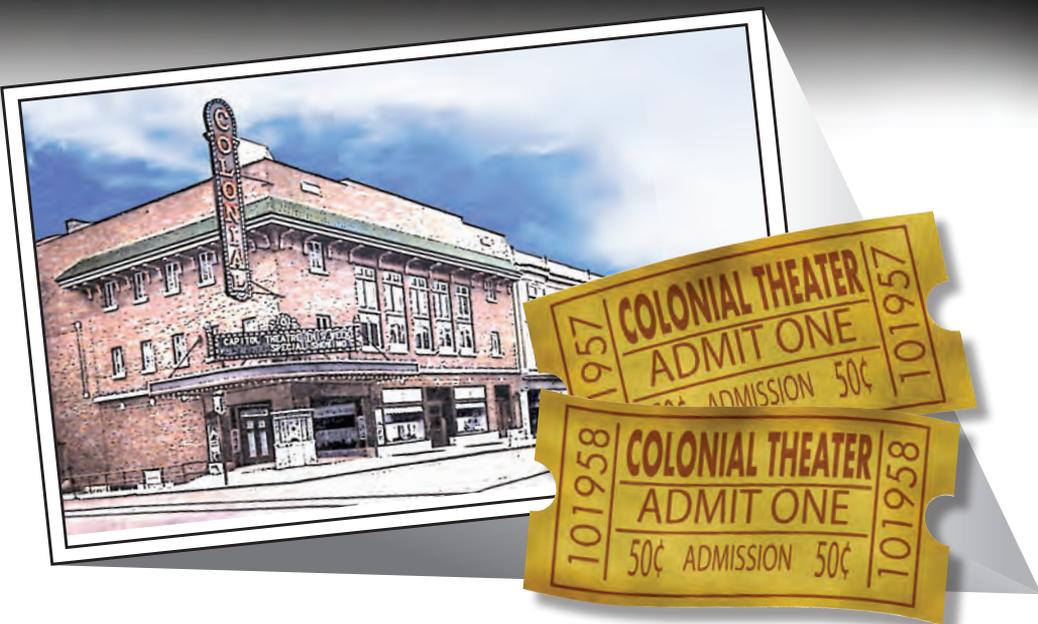
The year was 1923. The moving picture “Safety Last,” a black and white, silent flick starring physical comedian Harold Lloyd, was released. It was about a boy in the big city, and it would go on to become one of Lloyd’s most memorable films.

In 1982, “E.T. the Extra Terrestrial,” a feature film with state-of-the-art special effects, was released. One of renowned director Steven Spielberg’s earliest works, the plot centered around a boy’s friendship with an alien stranded on earth.

In the 59 years between 1923 and 1982, hundreds of films – everything from westerns to documentaries, animation to horror and science fiction, drama to comedies - were released and made their way to the big screen.

Locally, many of those films were enjoyed by Lebanon County patrons of the Colonial Theatre.

Located on the northwest corner of Ninth and Cumberland Streets in Lebanon, the magnificent Colonial Theatre grew up right along with the emerging film industry. And as the movie industry, the Colonial Theatre, even the city of Lebanon itself, was growing up, generations were growing up here as well.



For the Colonial Theatre was as important to the downtown business district as movies were to our formative years.

“The Colonial Theatre was built in 1923, during the heyday of American theater, when silent films were transitioning into ‘talkies,’” said Randy Jaye, a renowned historian who grew up in Lebanon. “It was built in extravagant style with an art deco influence. Silent pictures began in the late 1800s and were around until the late 1920s. The Colonial Theatre lived through that whole historic period.”

With its unmatched interior décor, its versatility and its place in the community, the Colonial Theatre was a Lebanon landmark and treasure.

The Colonial was built and designed by Reading architects Richter and Eiler. Part of Lebanon’s bustling business district, the Colonial Theatre was one of three downtown theatres, along with The State and The Academy.

“In the 1920s, 30s and 40s, Lebanon was a fairly busy town,” said Jaye. “There were a lot of businesses in town. There were two

train stations at Eighth (Street) and the railroad. Lebanon also had some larger hotels. It was a shopping and shipping point for people outside of town. There were a lot of visitors coming into town.

“From what I understand, 80 or 90 years ago, the Colonial Theatre was a very popular entertainment center for Lebanon,” Jaye added. “It stayed in business for almost 60 years, so it had to be doing something right. It was a real theatre, with live acts and motion pictures.”

The Colonial Theatre was as classy and distinguished and rich in character as the Lebanon County patrons who frequented it.

But The Colonial was more than just a place to go and watch movies. The 1,200-seat theatre featured a stage, a complex series of balconies, an adjacent ball room where formal dances were held, and it also hosted live theatrical performances and big band concerts.

“It had some really elegant balconies and there were some side balconies,” said Jaye. “It had big, beautiful curtains and beautiful ornate plaster work. It was amazing. It had a beautiful ceiling. It had a lot of class and character, unlike the movie theatres of today. It was the most elegant theatre in Lebanon County, no doubt. As far as local theatres go, nothing compared to it.

“As a kid, it was one of my favorite places to go,” continued Jaye. “When I was a teenager, I would go in there for movies and live theatre. I remember going to a rock concert there one time. When you went in there, it was beautiful. It made you feel good about being out on the town.”

By the late 1960s, the world began to change – and the fate of the Colonial Theatre shifted.

Two multi-store malls were built in Lebanon’s suburbs, taking shoppers out of the city’s downtown business district. The Trans-Lux, a theatre with the ability to stage multiple films at a time in one place, was built adjacent to the Lebanon Plaza Mall, then a similar theatre was constructed at the Lebanon Valley Mall.

With reduced income, it became more



Courtesy of the Lebanon County Historical Society



Interior of the Colonial Theatre in 1972 - Courtesy of the Lebanon County Historical Society

and more difficult to maintain the aging Colonial Theatre.

“Live theatre started to die out in the mid-1950s, and The Colonial became just a movie theatre,” Jaye said. “Those theatres at the malls started taking away business from the downtown theatres. Businesses started moving to the suburbs and the malls. People stopped parking and walking around downtown.

“The new theatres were of a prefabricated design,” Jaye continued. “The seats were comfortable. They were in a mall. That’s where the entertainment started to go. That’s where people were going. That helped with the downfall of the Colonial Theatre. Now it’s kind of twisting back around, because people aren’t going to malls as much anymore.”

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Colonial Theatre - Official Opening  
 The Lebanon Daily News - October 1, 1923, p. 8



*Colonial Theatre - A view from the balcony looking toward the stage - the roof had collapsed Summer 1996 - Courtesy of Hillary Hess*



*Colonial Theatre - The hole in the roof Summer 1996. Courtesy of Hillary Hess*



*Randy Jaye, Lebanon historian.*

In 1982, the magnificent Colonial Theatre closed its doors.

For nearly a decade, the Colonial Theatre was abandoned and unmaintained, resulting in structural damage. In 1992, a watchdog group for historical buildings, the Pennsylvania Preservation Trust, placed the Colonial Theatre on its most endangered list. Later in that same year, the group Friends of the Colonial Theatre was formed to try to save the structure.

“Obviously, business had fallen off and there just wasn’t a demand for movie-goers in the downtown Lebanon area,” said Jaye. “When it was placed on the most endangered list, it was the final chapter of the Colonial Theatre. When the roof collapsed, it

was the beginning of the end. At that point, it became beyond economical repair.

“The Colonial Theatre would be a poster-child for what happens when a building falls into disrepair and is demolished,” Jaye added. “It’s a story you hear all over the country. It becomes a liability for the owner. They still have bills and taxes, but they’re not making any money. It becomes an eyesore and then it meets the wrecking ball. That’s what happened to the Colonial Theatre. No one found a way to make money out of that building.”

In 1993, the city of Lebanon funded a feasibility study that determined it would cost \$6 million and six years to repurpose the building. Seven years later, Empire Ser-

vices of Reading was paid \$207,000 to demolish the Colonial Theatre and haul away the remaining debris.

“It was terrible. It was dangerous and moldy,” Jaye said. “Who was going to invest that kind of money in Lebanon at that time? Everybody hates to see a historic building get demolished. But when you look at the underlying reasons, you start to understand. It simply ran its course. If a building isn’t worth something, it’s probably going to get demolished.

“For a lot of older people in Lebanon, it really hits a nerve,” added Jaye. “I don’t know if everyone knows the details of it. When I was a kid and I went there, I felt like it was the Taj Mahal of Lebanon. I would say a lot of people from Lebanon consider the Colonial Theatre an elegant building that they miss. Once it’s gone, it can never come back.”

Today, the ground upon which the Colonial Theatre once stood on the corner of Ninth and Cumberland Streets is a parking lot. But if you stare at the area long enough, and you use your imagination fully, you can still see and hear the distinctive sights and sounds emanating from that glorious movie house.

“It was a full-service theatre, and Lebanon’s finest and most elaborately furnished theatre,” said Jaye. “It should be remembered as Lebanon’s most elegant theatre of all time. It served a purpose for nearly 60 years. It fell into disrepair and the city of Lebanon had no choice, they had to demolish it.

“Local history is important because it gives you a purpose,” concluded Jaye. “If you don’t have that, you lose part of your identity. You have a sense of belonging if you understand what your history is all about. I think that’s why people become emotional when they think of the Colonial Theatre being downtown. It’s rooted in your history.”

And, the greater the beauty, the fonder the memories.



*Jeff Falk*