

Homes Away from Home

Movie Theaters on Capitol Hill

BY ROBERT S. POHL

The news that the old People's Church has been sold and will soon once again be used as a movie theater shows Barracks Row's increasingly vital nature. Having more options on this section of 8th Street than just eating and drinking will make all of Capitol Hill much more of a destination – and return it to its roots.

The Rise of the Movie Theater

In the early 1900s, mov-

ie theaters were a booming business around the world. The first movie theater had been opened in 1896, and over the next 10 years, as the nickelodeon captured the public's imagination – and nickels – movie theaters were built anywhere that people lived. The new motion pictures were slow to arrive in the nation's capitol, but by the end of the first decade of the 20th century, this was changing. From 1908 to 1909, the number of motion

picture theaters in the District exploded from three to 11. It was in this time that the first theaters appeared on Capitol Hill. These were not the grand palaces that came later, 'fly-by-night' describes them much better, and they did not last long.

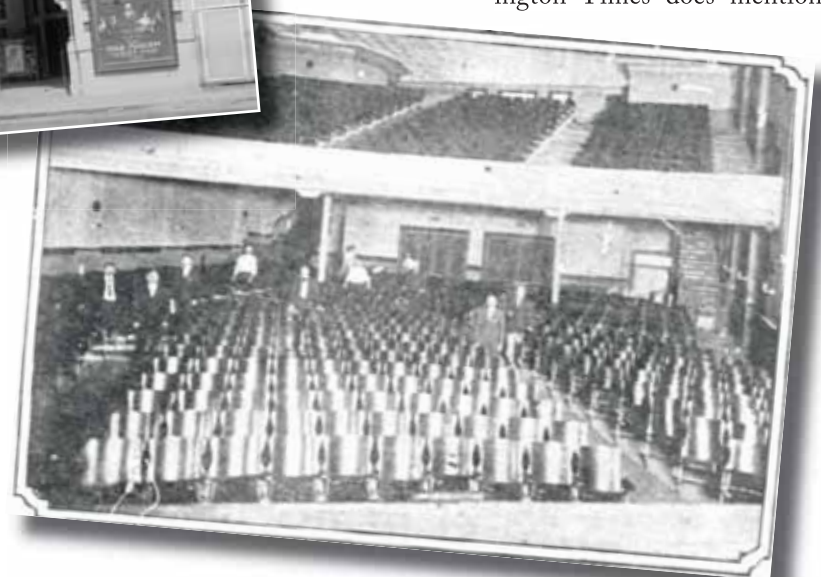
The longest-lived one of this era was the Princess Theater, at 12th and H St. NE. Built as part of the North East Masonic Temple, it opened in late 1909, and had "first-class talent and excellent features," according to the Weekly News of December 11, 1909. It continued to be used until the late 1940s, and was torn down in March 1948.

In 1910, two theaters that would have long histories were opened on the Hill. The first was Meader's theater, which opened at 535 8th Street SE. In contrast to later theaters, there was little fanfare before its opening, though that was hardly necessary: audiences bought out each of its first two shows. Little was written about the theater itself, though the Washington Times does mention



ABOVE: The Apollo Theater on September 25, 1918. The movies shown that day are Mae Marsh in Money Mad as well as the "Allies Official War Revue." Photo: Library of Congress

RIGHT: Interior of the Avenue Grand Theater in August, 1910, just before it opened, showing most of its 840 seats. This space is now taken up by the Market Place, which includes such businesses as Labyrinth and the US Coast Guard. Photo: Library of Congress



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Advertisement for the Carolina Theater from 1913. The movie advertised is *The Days of War*, starring Crane Wilbur. Wilbur, Tyrone Power's cousin, was better known as a writer than as an actor, but still managed 66 acting credits to his name. Photo: Library of Congress

that the theater was fireproof. Much more ink was spilled when the Avenue Grand, at 645 Pennsylvania Ave SE, opened on August 15, 1910. Conceived as the first major theater for the Southeast section of DC, it also showed the growth that was happening in that quadrant. The writer of the article for the Washington Times introducing this new enterprise to the public was at particular pains to explain the care that had been taken to keep the interior of the theater comfortable, with each fan and ventilator enumerated.

The Neighborhood Theater

After this spate of theater-building, it would be another three years before any more opened. In 1913 two new venues opened: The Apollo Theater, at 624 H Street NE, and The Carolina at the corner of 11th Street and North Carolina Ave SE, across from Lincoln Park.

The Carolina, which opened in May, 1913, was interesting in that it was the first 'neighborhood' theater, located not on one of the main commercial strips of Capitol Hill, but rather right where people actually lived. It was a smallish venue, with only 280

seats at first, but it was – as an advertisement for it from 1913 states – 'sanitary.'

The Apollo, which was added to the Crandall's chain in 1915, was, in contrast, the largest theater in all of the District of Columbia. It had 800 seats, and cost \$20,000 to build.

The Carolina's lead was followed two years later by the advent of the Home Theater, which at 1230 C Street NE was also right in the middle of a neighborhood. Opening

on January 29, 1916, it was praised by the Washington Times as having a "heating and ventilating system installed [which] is modern in every respect and the circulation of pure and wholesome air at all times is assured." The name 'Home' stemmed from the fact that some of the seats in a lounge on the mezzanine were not fixed to the floor and allowed the viewers to view the pictures in home-like comfort. The Home Theater was large by neighborhood standards, featuring 800 seats when built – and added another 700 not ten years later.

Another Boomlet

It would be almost 20 years before the next major theater – the Penn Theater – would open, however. In spite of the boom of the 1920s and even the expansion of the Home Theater in 1924, the only theater to be built would be the Stanton, a small theater on Stanton Park. Even more remarkably, only one theater – the 1909-vintage Zenith Theater at 715 8th Street SE – would close in this time, shutting its doors in 1919, presumably because it was too small to operate profitably.

The new Penn Theater was, however,




to be an impressive achievement. Built at 650 Pennsylvania Ave SE, across from the Avenue Grand, the theater was huge – 1438 seats – and opulently designed with a ‘stream-lined’ (as their publicity materials had it) motif. Interestingly enough, by this time the publicity writers had realized that the fact that the interior had good air conditioning was not necessarily a selling point, and there is much more emphasis on its sound reproducing equipment, which was to ensure the finest movie-going experience.

Three years after the Penn, the Atlas Theater on H Street would open, another large theater with almost 1000 seats.

It was all downhill from there, however. In 1948, the Princess closed, followed by three more in 1952. Three years thereafter, the Apollo closed, while the Stanton was shuttered in 1960. The Avenue Grand and Atlas survived into the 70s, but by 1983, only the Penn remained, and it was far from its best, showing a steady diet of shock and shock. That year, a deal was announced to sell the theater, and it was turned into the commercial space it is today.



The Atlas, which had limped along after the 1968 riots, and closed in 1976, was bought in 2001 and turned into a multi-use theater that also shows movies. And Meaders Theater, which went through multiple name changes before being bought by the People’s Church in 1962, has recently been bought by the National Community Church, who are renovating it with the eye to turning it into a theater again, including showing movies. ★

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