

Spotlight: The Attucks Theater

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Words by Penny Neef.

Images as credited. Feature image by Mike Penello.

In the early 20th century, segregation was a fact of life for African Americans in the South. It became a matter of law in 1926.

In 1919, a group of African Americans from Norfolk and Portsmouth met to develop a cultural/business center in Norfolk where the black community “could be treated with dignity and respect.”

The “Twin Cities Amusement Corporation” envisioned something like a modern-day town center. The businessmen obtained funding from black owned financial institutions in Hampton Roads. Twin Cities designed and built a movie theater/ retail/ office complex at the corner of Church Street and Virginia Beach Boulevard in Norfolk.



Photo courtesy of the family of Harvey Johnson

The businessmen chose 25-year-old architect Harvey Johnson to design a 600-seat “state of the art” theater with balconies and an orchestra pit. The Attucks Theatre is the only surviving theater in the United States that was designed, financed and built by African Americans.

The Attucks was named after Crispus Attucks, a stevedore of African and Native American descent. He was the first patriot killed in the Revolutionary War at the Boston Massacre of 1770. The theatre featured a stage curtain with a dramatic depiction of the death of Crispus Attucks.

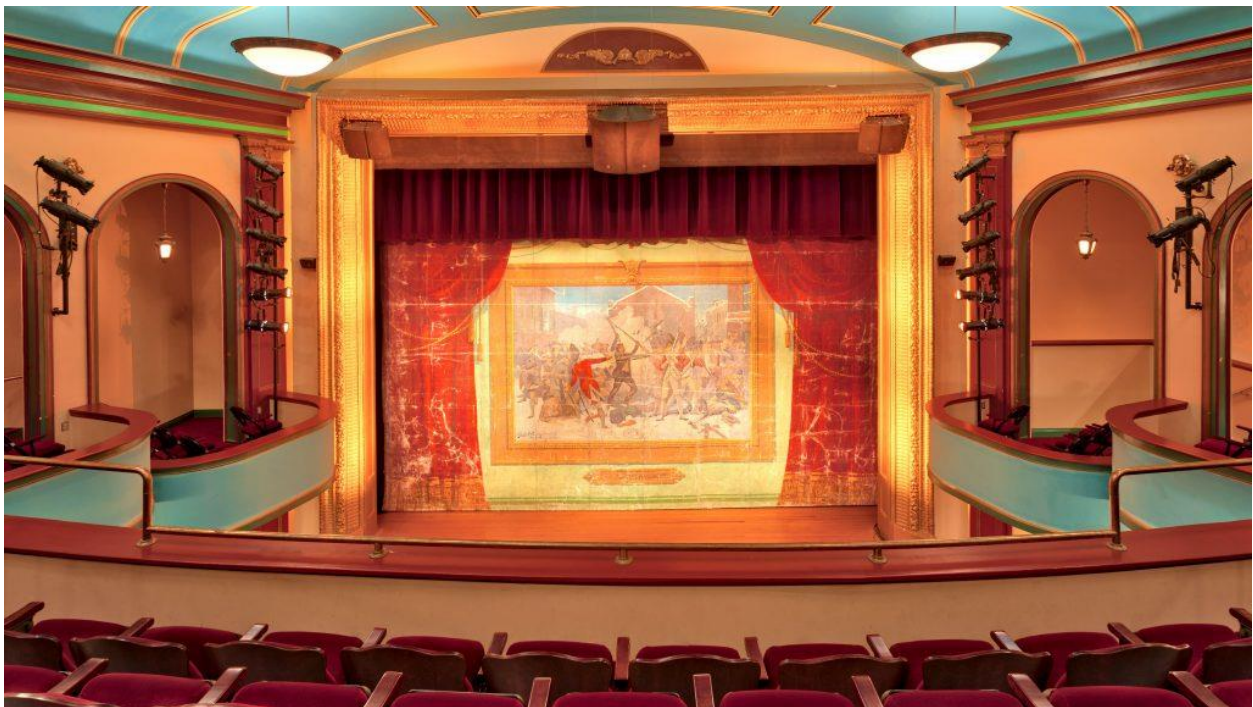


Photo by Scott Wertz.

The Attucks was an immediate success. It was known as the “Apollo Theatre of the South.” Legendary performers Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Nat King Cole, and B.B. King performed at the Attucks. Opera star Marian Anderson and blues icon Bessie Smith graced the stage. Smokey Robinson, Sam Cooke, Norfolk’s own Gary U.S. Bonds and Portsmouth’s own Ruth Brown made appearances. Great black comedians Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley and Slappy White brought down the house. Friday nights were reserved for local talent to be booed off the stage or to be cheered to greater glory.

The Attucks also served as a stage for local events, from church services to poetry readings to graduation ceremonies. After 34 years of being the “cultural heart and soul of Church Street’s African American community”, the Attucks lowered its curtains as an entertainment venue.



Photo by Scott Wertz.

By 1952, the theater was a furniture store, Stark & Legum. Most of the surrounding retail and offices were demolished. In 1982, a group of citizens worked to add the theatre to the National Register of Historic Places. The Crispus Attucks Cultural Center was formed to raise the millions of dollars it would take to restore the Attucks Theatre.

The Attucks Theatre reopened in 2004. It is a gem of theater, carefully restored to its former glory. The original fire curtain, depicting the dramatic death of Crispus Attucks, has been meticulously restored. The stained-glass skylight, plaster ornamentation and other ornate features of the Attucks make it unique.

There is not a bad seat in the house. Legends like Wynton Marsalis and Preservation Hall Jazz Band are back on the stage. Leslie Jones from Saturday Night Live appeared last year in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Attucks Theatre. The Attucks also hosts cutting edge performances like the world premiere of the opera “Kept: A Ghost Story”.

“Norfolk is proud to celebrate the rich history of this landmark theatre and the cultural impact it has had on the city for the last 100 years,” said Norfolk Mayor Kenneth Cooper Alexander.

WHRO and the City of Norfolk produced a documentary to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Attucks Theatre. [You can learn more about the Attucks Theatre and its history here.](#)

It's pretty quiet at the Attucks today, just like every other entertainment venue. The ghosts have the place to themselves. The hundreds of performers who were on stage at the Attucks decorated the walls of the dressing rooms and hallways with their signatures, an old theater tradition. Many of those have been preserved and are on display on the second floor. I'd like to think Dizzy Gillespie or Bessie Smith stop by once in a while, especially now that the theatre is quiet. Might be some great shows going on that we can't witness right now. Who knows?