

5 South Greenwood, Hopewell - Hopewell Theaters (1897)

Rev. 3/8/24 - D. Dixon - DRAFT in progress

South Greenwood Avenue in Hopewell Borough was created around 1896 with the construction of Columbia Hall by the Hook and Ladder Company. It had the firehouse and borough offices on the ground floor and a community hall / theater above. The building was replaced in 1940 by the Colonial Playhouse movie theater. Starting in 1956 it became the Gallup "Mirror of America" polling center, and in 1984 it became the Off-Broadstreet Theatre for live theater and children's shows. The building was renovated in 2017 as the Hopewell Theater indie arts venue, which closed in 2024 after weathering COVID.



Columbia Hall (1897-1939)

- Opened 1897 - Hook & Ladder Co.
- Also opened South Greenwood Ave.
- 1st fl. - Firehouse and Boro council
- 2nd fl. - Community hall / theater
- "Columbia Theatre" for movies - 1923
- Demolished 11/1939



Colonial Playhouse (1940-1952)

- Opened 1940
- Movie theater, 500 seats
- Columbia Hall Assoc. - Bonds to fund
- Herbert & Vivienne Laird
- Closed 1952



Gallup "Mirror of America" (1956-1970s)

- Opened 1956 - Public polling research center
- Leveled floor, seats in 3 tiers
- Hosted over 250 groups, 100,000 people
- Disused 1970s
- "Hopewell Theater" - for old movies - 1973
- Mike and Viki Mokriski



Hopewell Theater (2017-2024)

- Opened 2017 - Indie arts venue
- Renovated, 180 seats
- Jon McConaughy, Liza Morehouse, Mitchel Skolnick
- Production company Skolnick & Sara Scully
- COVID shutdown 3/2020 to 9/2021
- Closed 2/2024

Off-Broadstreet Theatre (1984-2016)



- Opened 1984
- Dessert theater, 190 seats
- Live theater, Children's shows
- Bob & Julie Thick
- Closed 12/2016

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1897-1939 - Columbia Hall

The first building constructed on the 5 South Greenwood property was Columbia Hall, built in 1897 by the Hopewell Hook & Ladder Fire Company as a combination firehouse and community theater hall.

In the 1890s, South Greenwood Avenue had not yet been created, so the entrance to the current road at Broad Street was instead occupied with several buildings, including the Hook & Ladder truck house. [Scarlett 1890] But the Behre's Hall fire of 1893 destroyed that section of Broad Street [HH 8/3/1893], which eventually lead to the opening up of South Greenwood Avenue and the construction of Columbia Hall. [TET 2/16/1898, Sanborn 1902]



Columbia Hall [Hw 1909]

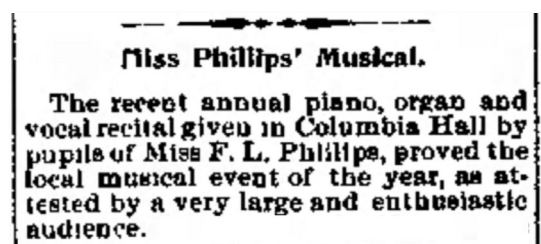
The first floor of Columbia Hall was used for the fire company, Boro Council, other community groups, and to hold elections. The second floor featured a lyceum style theater used for events including lectures, performances, dances, and films. [HH 12/2/1954, CN 8/3/2015] The fire company's room also was used for other group meetings. [HH 3/6/1901]

After the Behre's Hall fire, the Hook & Ladder Co. met in late 1895 to plan the new Columbia Hall fire house. The specifications were: "size 35 x 50 feet, 2 stories high, first floor ceiling 9 feet - second floor ceiling 14 feet, 2 dry closets outside of building, open fire in hall, 2 stairs, one heater, tin roof." With the successful sale of bonds for the building, additional land was purchased to increase the lot to 41 x 60 feet, at an estimated cost of \$50. [HFD 50th 1961]

In January 1896 the Hook & Ladder Co. purchased the property from Hannah M. Drake for \$275. It was "on the west side line of the proposed extension of Greenwood Avenue," and acquired "for the purpose of erecting thereon a building on which to store their fire apparatus." [DB 206-207, 4/7/1896]

Columbia Hall was completed at the end of 1897. [HH 11/8/1916] The next year, a "handsome and comfortable club room" was added as part of "their large building on South Greenwood avenue." [TET 2/16/1898]

In the following decades, Columbia Hall was used regularly for public events sponsored by local organizations, including local amateur productions and invited outside performers. These included entertainment - lectures, dances, plays, benefits, musical performances, high school performances, etc. - as well as meetings - organization boards, municipal boards, municipal voting, etc.



Local recital [HH 7/3/1901]

The building was enlarged in 1917, "about thirty-five feet at the rear of the present building and the full width of the same, the necessary land having been arranged for." [HH 7/11/1917]

But by 1920 there was concern that the facility was too small: "Columbia Hall has been, for some time, too small to accommodate the audiences which the growth of the town has provided, and it is the purpose of the company to enlarge the hall as soon as it is possible to do so." [HH 4/18/1917]

In addition, the Columbia Hall finances needed to be separated from those of the local fire companies, which were merging into the Hopewell Fire Department. In 1922, Columbia Hall was reorganized as a public stock company, the Columbia Hall Association, owned by the citizens of Hopewell and independent of the Fire Department. This was done "so that the interest in the hall may be more widely diversified among the citizens of Hopewell." [HH 4/26/1922]

In 1939, the Columbia Hall Association decided to replace Columbia Hall with a new dedicated motion picture theatre. The Fire Department vacated the building, and Columbia Hall was demolished at the end of 1939. [TET 11/19/1939]

"Columbia Theatre" Movies - 1923

Meanwhile, in 1914 Cornelius N. Allen, Jr. had opened the Hope Theater a block away at 16 Seminary Avenue, a 200-seat movie theater that showed silent films and operated until a fire in 1922. [TET 1/24/1914] Tickets originally were 10 cents for adults and 5 cents for children, growing to 35 and 25 cents respectively in 1920.

In January 1923, the operators of Hope Theater, Harry L. Cox and William G. Lowe, moved their movies to Columbia Hall on South Greenwood, a "larger building with better accommodations." The building then also was to be known as Columbia Theatre, "when used in connection with movies." Opening night included a Fox eight-reel feature, *The Thunder Clap*, plus a two-reel comedy and a special Topic of the Day. A second projector was added to eliminate the wait while changing reels. [HH 1/17/1923] The opening drew a large crowd, filling nearly every seat. [HH 1/24/1923]

In February, the Theatre featured *A Man of Courage* on Saturday at 8 o'clock for 30 cents, 20 for children. In the same newspaper, the Garden Theater in Princeton advertised its showing of the more impressive *Robin Hood* with Douglas Fairbanks (a 1922 silent film) - all week long, with three shows a day, 3, 7, and 9 pm, for 75 cents, 99 cents for balcony chairs, and 40 cents for children under 12. (Prices also included the war tax.) [HH 2/21/1923]

In May 1924, the Columbia Theatre announced it was under new management, and featured *Wild Bill Hickok* with William S. Hart, a 1923 silent Western. [HH 5/21/1924] The new manager was Herbert Laird.

**THE
HEIRESS HUNTERS**

A RIP-ROARING COMEDY
In Three Acts
Given by HOPEWELL HIGH
SCHOOL SENIORS
With An All-Star Cast

Columbia Hall, Hopewell
FRIDAY and SATURDAY
EVENINGS
December 9 & 10, '21

Admission, 50 cts.
All Seats Reserved.

Tickets may be obtained at Pierson's
Drug Store

Dancing After Performance

High School Senior Play
[HH 11/30/1921]

Columbia Theatre

SATURDAY, FEB. 24
E. K. LINCOLN
In
"THE MAN OF COURAGE"

A western drama.
"Can a man be spoiled by too much money and adoring parents? How did a man who was afraid, and lacked courage, rescue an American girl from a bandit chief. Although not a dual role it shows what an excellent any one actor Mr. Lincoln is." Third episode of serial, "Chas. Hutchinson in Speed."

Added Comedy—Latest Fox News

One Performance at 8 o'clock
Admission, 20 and 30 cents.

[HH 2/21/1923]

Extra!

Atlas, the Boy Wonder

Who will appear in person with feats of strength and iron work
Special at 6:45

Atlas will give a demonstration of unusual strength of his jaws by pulling a Maxwell touring car with his teeth in front of the Columbia Theatre.

He will entertain you with some of his marvelous feats at 9 p. m. on the stage.

ADMISSION:
Adults, 25c.; Children, 15c.

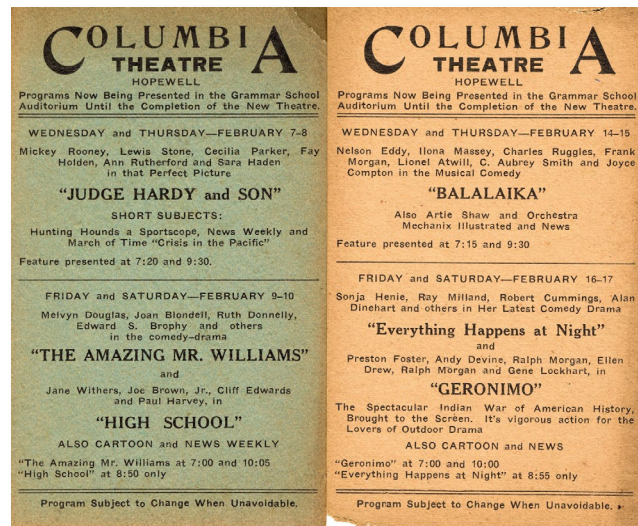
[HH 11/19/1924]

In November 1924, the Theatre had two shows on Saturday with the latest Fox News and Comedy reels - plus Atlas, the Boy Wonder, appeared in person to pull a Maxwell touring car by his teeth in front the theater. All for 25 cents, or 15 cents for children. [HH 11/19/1924]

In 1926, the Theatre polled its patrons to choose a regular second night to be open. [HH 8/11/1926] It had sometimes held shows on Wednesdays or Fridays. The Broad Street Garage also advertised a showing of a four-reel movie at the Theatre showing the manufacturing of the Hudson and Essex automobiles, to be shown in conjunction with the regular Saturday feature. [HH 2/17/1926]



[HH 5/21/1924]



Columbia Theatre at the Grammar School, 1940 [DD]

Regular shows continued into the 1930s, but apparently without the use of large newspaper advertisements, instead using only a brief note listing the names of the featured shows.

Then in 1938, the Wednesday show was halted for "the first time in fifteen years" as the town was inundated by winds and rain from a major hurricane [The Great New England Hurricane of 1938]. The town lost power for over six hours, and East Broad street near the borough line was "under a few feet of water for several hours." [HH 9/24/1938]

When Columbia Hall was demolished at the end of 1939, Herbert Laird transferred his "photoplay equipment" to the Grammar School Hall (then on Model Avenue). The new venue opened on Christmas night, and planned to be showing movies four nights a week, Wednesday through Sunday. [HH 12/27/1939]

The February 1940 program at the Grammar School Auditorium had one feature on Wednesdays and Thursdays, presented at 7:20 and 9:30 pm, and two different features on Friday and Saturday, alternating at 7:00, 8:50, and 10:00 pm.

1940-1952 - Colonial Playhouse

In 1939, the Columbia Hall Association decided to build a "new modern fireproof ground floor theater." The design was in the shape of a "T," with the lobby section facing the street with second-story offices and bathrooms, and the theater section extending behind, made of cinder block and with a sloped floor for theater seating.

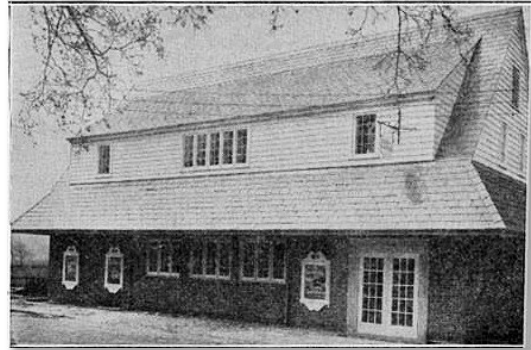
The new building was planned to feature an "elaborate and beautiful lobby," a structure of the "latest style in houses of photoplay." [HH 11/8/1939] Funds were to be raised through the issuance of four percent debenture bonds, issued on a ten-year basis, callable on thirty days notice. [HH 10/4/1939] The entire bond issue of \$25,000 was sold. [HH 11/8/1939]

The new Colonial Playhouse opened May 6, 1940. It was run by Herbert N. Laird, lessee and manager (who had been "presenting screen entertainment" at Columbia Hall since 1924). The opening attraction was *Young Tom Edison* (1940) with Mickey Rooney. Tickets were 25 cents for evenings, 20 cents for matinees, with children 15 and 10 cents respectively.

The new theater had a capacity of 500, including a block of loge seats, plus seats in the center back with hard-of-hearing aids. The seats were "arranged to allow ample leg room in each row so that it would not be necessary to rise when allowing persons to pass to inside seats." [HH 5/1/1940]

The Colonial Playhouse added an "air-cooling" system for the summer of 1941, using water from a new artesian well. [HH 4/16/1941] With the new slogan "Now Air Conditioned - Cool and Comfortable," the theater could host a different slate of movies every two days or so, up to every day of the week.

Herbert Laird eventually also was described as the owner, and continued as manager until his death in December 1950. The Playhouse continued to be run by his wife Vivienne Laird until it finally closed in December 1952. [HH 12/29/1950, 1/17/1951, 12/24/1952] The Columbia Hall Association finally dissolved in 1956 when the building passed to the Gallup organization. [TET 10/31/1956]



Colonial Playhouse, c.1940 brochure
[HT.com]

The playhouse interior presents an attractive walnut finish with velour wall covering and draperies to harmonize. Indirect lighting effects have been provided with ample directional signs and aisle lights to facilitate finding seats in a darkened theatre.

The exterior is of a beautiful colonial design of brick with a picturesque sloping roof of slate, with two large doors for ingress and egress, and a spacious lobby where the ticket office is located. Then there is a foyer finished in knotty white pine with wrought iron lighting fixtures to complete the colonial pattern of architecture and furnishings. The lobby floor is of heavy inset tile and the foyer has a floor of cement covered with heavy carpet. A ladies' powder room is located on the second floor, and the men's room is on the opposite side of the same floor. The projection room is one of the most modern equipped with every safety device and is on the second floor, where the managerial offices are also situated. A heavily carpeted stairway leads to the second floor.

Colonial Playhouse description
[HH 5/1/1940]

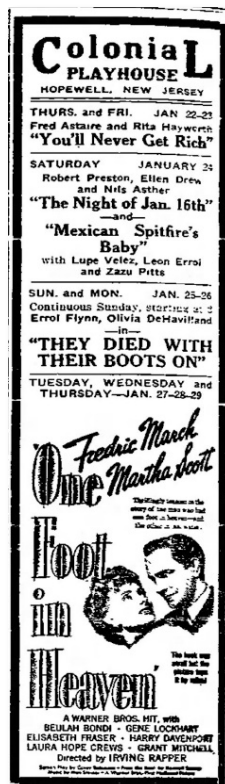
Friday Night Movies - 1940s

Hopewell Borough residents Virginia Lewis and Elaine Zeltner remember attending the Colonial Playhouse as children, starting in the early 1940s. Friday nights were "kids night," with groups of kids around 9 or 10 years old walking from home, and more arriving from Pennington on the bus to meet up at the theater. Friday nights might be a fun western movie, maybe with Roy Rogers or Hopalong Cassidy. Wednesdays evenings were more for adults, with murder mysteries, and Sundays were more musicals with Betty Grable type shows.

Virginia Lewis recalls: "The building was warm in the cold weather, and luxurious, with the new carpeting and nice upstairs bathrooms." The section of seats with hearing aids was in the middle of the back. The kids also appreciated the candy machine in the lobby - "If we had the money" (there were no concessions with popcorn or sodas). Mrs. Laird collected tickets and took "no guff" from the kids. Mr. Laird ran the projector from the upstairs projection booth (there was no balcony seating).

The show would start with a News of the World news reel, typically focusing on the ongoing World War II. When the distinctive music started, "dum-da-dum-da-dum-dum-dum," it was time to quiet down and take your seat. There would also be cartoons shown before the feature.

Elaine Zeltner remembers: "It was a nice theater, and it was well-kept... I went regularly." She remembers Thanksgiving Days: "My mother would always allow my cousin and my sister, who was older than I was, to go to the movies [after dinner], because they'd come in from Long Island, and that was always special for them." Mrs. Laird would keep track of the ages of the kids, making sure that they were paying the adult price after they aged out: "I can remember when Mrs. Laird found out. She knew I had changed my age, and she said to me, 'You tell your mother that you owe more money here.'"



Ad, 1942 [HH 1/21/1942]



Colonial Playhouse Program, 1951

[R. Anderson]

1956-1970s - Gallup "Mirror of America"

In 1956, pollsters Dr. George Gallup and Dr. Claude Robinson purchased the old Colonial Playhouse from the Columbia Hall Association and opened "The Mirror of America," a Gallup Poll public opinion research center, the first of its kind in America. [DB 1376-272, 8/6/1956]

The center was to study the public's reactions to "new movies, television programs, new styles, advertised products and books." Some 475,000 people lived within a 25 mile radius of Hopewell, so the center could draw representative proportions of city, small town, and rural residents. [TET 10/16/1956]

The atmosphere at the facility was designed to be relaxing, with "comfortable chairs, deeply-padded rugs, soft background music, a steaming cup of coffee and light refreshments." During the building renovations, the rows of theater seats were removed, and the sloping floor was changed to a three-level floor "with attractive chairs and tables set in a modern golden decor." [CNJHN 10/26/1956]

The idea of this center was "reverse interviewing," where the people interviewed come to the interviewers, unlike the opposite as in most poll-taking. Each interview would take about 1 1/2 to 2 hours, with probing questions about products advertised or shows seen. The center reached out to organizations including garden clubs and volunteer groups to attend in groups. In return, the organizations received \$1 per respondent, and the respondents received light refreshments and small gifts such as ashtrays or pens. [CNJHN 10/26/1956]

Visiting groups included sororities, chambers of commerce, fire companies, churches, granges, PTAs, American Legion, and Camp Fire Girls. [TET 1950s] By the end of 1958, nearly 5,000 people from the area had visited The Mirror of America. [TET 1/5/1958]

In 1958, the Mirror of America division of the Gallup Public Opinion Institute issued a call for males, between the ages of 25 and 50 and who owned 1955 through 1958 automobiles, to attend a session to register opinions on proposed new cars. [Levittown Pa. Times 7/29/1958]

One of the approaches used in the polling was to have audiences watch potential sit-coms, which the audiences were told would be interspersed with commercials for a more realistic viewing experience. After the shows, it turned out that the researchers actually were testing the commercials. [CNJHN, 12/11/1988]



Mirror of America, 1956 [TET 10/16/1956]



[TET 1/5/1958]

In 1959, Dr. George Gallup also purchased the large three-story former residence of the late Dr. T. A. Pierson on the corner of East Broad Street and Blackwell Avenue. The ground floor was to be used for research offices connected to the Mirror of America research center. [TET 4/4/1959]

In 1960, the Gallup Poll (the American Institute of Public Opinion) celebrated its 25th anniversary and developed a long article published in numerous newspapers on "How a Public Opinion Poll is Created." This was illustrated with photos of Dr. George Gallup performing interviews at the Mirror of America interview testing center. [Daily Press, Newport News, Va. 6/27/1960]



Dr. George Gallup, former college professor, organized the U.S. Gallup Poll twenty-five years ago and also is the founder of international opinion polling. All survey questions put to the public are carefully tested for possible bias and for comprehensibility. Here Dr. Gallup is seen taking part in the regular question testing procedures at the "Mirror of America," interview testing center.

[Daily Press Va. 6/27/1960]

By 1960 and 1961 the Mirror of America was advertising for clubs and organizations to provide volunteers. More than 250 groups had received cash payments, earning over \$25,000 for their church, civic, service, and social organizations. [TET 12/24/1961]

A 1965 article reported that after a decade in operation more than 100,000 homemakers and career women had visited the "Mirror," to give opinions on "hundreds of products, television commercials and pilot films, package designs and political campaigns." Some five to 200 people could be interviewed at once. As a result, "crackers have been re-shaped, packages re-designed, and TV shows shelved." One such project was a measurement of reactions to the Kennedy-Nixon debate from sixty respondents. However, Gallup was concerned that it has "just about exhausted" the list of area organizations. It was then paying \$1.25 per respondent, or a premium rate of \$2 per male respondent because they were "more difficult to enroll." [TET 12/12/1965]

In 1967, the Mirror of America still was advertising for groups to attend sessions, and reported donating over \$100,000 to various groups. [Allentown Messenger, 1/5/1967]

A 1969 article from Gallup published in multiple newspapers, "A Conversation With Youth," also references an interview at the Mirror of America to provide insight into the nature of the "generation gap." [Wichita Falls Times 6/1/1969]

**HOW
RESIDENTS
OF THIS
AREA HAVE
EARNED
OVER \$25,000
FOR THEIR
CHURCH,
CIVIC,
SERVICE AND
SOCIAL
Organizations**

Members of more than 250 clubs and organizations in the New Jersey-Pennsylvania area have received cash donations for participating in opinion surveys at the Mirror of America in Hopewell, N. J., the nation's first and largest public opinion interviewing center.

If your organization would like more of the details, write or call "Collect" Mirror of America, Hopewell, N. J.

HO 6-0870

HO 6-0331

[TET 12/24/1961]

A 1972 article on the Nixon-McGovern presidential race references "pre-test sessions at our [Mirror of America] interviewing center," which then paid \$2 to \$5 per person, unlike the general polling, which was never paid. [Asbury Park Press 10/29/1972]



[TET 11/5/1989]

From this point, there is little public discussion of the Mirror of America location in Hopewell. Gallup does go on to use the "Mirror of America" term to describe its public opinion polling in general, for example in reporting on changing American eating habits. [TET 11/5/1989]

The building was still used for some special events, including a puppet show held at the "Mirror of America Theater" [TET 11/19/1974], and for a gala performance for the Gilbert & Sullivan Association, which George Gallup helped sponsor and performed with in leading roles. [TET 7/18/1976]

Local resident Tom Reeder worked for the Gallups in the 1970s, and reports that by the late 1970s the Gallup organization was using the building to store large quantities of boxes of computer punch cards that had been used to record the results of completed surveys.

Yet as late as 1980, the Pennington United Methodist Church Women still were organizing a poll at the Mirror of America in Hopewell. By then, the building had apparently mostly fallen into disuse, and in 1984 Gallup leased the building to Bob and Julie Thick for their Off-Broadstreet Theater.

Movies at the "Hopewell Theater" - 1973

There was one other use of the Mirror of America building in the 1970s. Movies returned to Hopewell in 1973 when Mike and Vicki Mokriski rented the building in order to open the "Hopewell Theater" there to show old movies, plus matinees for children.

The grand opening was the weekend of November 9, 1973. The Friday and Saturday evening shows at 8 pm were \$1.50, including free coffee and cake, featuring the *Maltese Falcon* (1941) with Humphrey Bogart. The Saturday and Sunday children's matinees at 1 pm were \$1.00, showing *Robin Hood* (1938) with Errol Flynn. [Franklin News Record 11/15/1973]

Hopewell Theater
★ GRAND OPENING ★

Week-end of Nov. 9th in Mirror of America Bldg.,
 Greenwood Ave., Hopewell

Fri. Sat.	Evening Show - 8 o'clock <i>Maltese Falcon</i> - Humphrey Bogart All Seats \$1.50
Sat. Sun.	Children's Matinee - 1 o'clock <i>Robin Hood</i> - Errol Flynn All Seats \$1.00

Theater will open at 7:30 for free coffee and cake
 Friday & Saturday night.

[Franklin News Record 11/1/1973]

Vicki Mokriski reports that opening night drew huge crowds, but they were unable to continue to draw enough people and so had to close after a couple of years. "After opening night, I don't recall huge crowds at all. The matinees were good babysitters, so we used to get kids there on Saturday and Sunday. ... People would be so grateful to have a place on the weekend to drop the kids off that was safe, and they could go and get a little something done without them. I know at Christmastime, people were so happy that they could run out and get some Christmas gifts that their kids wouldn't even know they went shopping for."

The building itself was "spartan" when they started using it, but in good shape. The lobby was empty, with only a small half round counter by the stairway on the left side. The theater had round wicker tables, with four chairs at each table, with the stage, screen, and curtain at the front. Upstairs above the lobby were the bathrooms and offices, and Mike Mokriski also acquired the movie projector to install there.

Preparing the theater for movies included removing the tables, lining up the chairs in rows, and "some fix up and some painting." The counter in the lobby was used as the concession stand, with a popcorn machine, rack of candies, little refrigerator for cold sodas, and coffee machine. There also was a working sink in the counter.

Mike Mokriski ordered the films, which then arrived by mail to the theater. "One time the movie came to the theater but we weren't there. And so they went next door and left it at the drug store. So it was Leonard Caputo. And he said, 'Oh yeah, sure. You can just leave it here. I'll make sure Mike gets it.' I just love small towns, things like that."

They showed "mostly old time movies," including Westerns and mysteries, and *Hawaii* (1966), which was "the most recent movie that we ever showed there." There also were "lots" of Marx Brothers films. "The Marx Brothers always had everybody laughing. I mean, unless you really see them, you just do not realize how really funny they were."



OLD FASHIONED ribbon cutting by Hopewell Mayor Joseph Hill helped Mike and Vicki Mokriski formally open Hopewell Theater Friday night.

Movies return to Hopewell

[Franklin News Record 11/15/1973]

Vicki Mokriski concludes "There's one great little story, but I don't know how appropriate it is to tell it. But we had one friend with a great big dog, and she used to bring that dog every Sunday when the movies were all over and let it go in and clean up all the popcorn. But I don't know how sanitary a tale that is, although the statute of limitations is over, right? But that was always fun to watch, and the dog was so happy. Its tail would start wagging the minute it came through the doors. I think because it remembered what was waiting for it in the theater part. All the spilled popcorn from the little kids."

1984-2016 - Off-Broadstreet Theatre

In 1984 Bob and Julie Thick launched the Off-Broadstreet Theatre on Greenwood Avenue, performing live theater plus children's shows. They originally leased the building from Gallup, and then purchased the property in 1997. [DB 3226-126, 8/14/1997]

As explained by Julie Thick, the name not only came from being one building way from Broad Street, but also worked "because you did think of Broadway."



Off-Broadstreet Theatre, 2000 [R. Labaw]

When the Thicks moved into the building, there were "tons and tons of telephone wires going into the building, and it had big peacock wicker chairs throughout the auditorium." In order to convert the building from movies to shows the Thicks built the stage in the front of the auditorium section, and converted the projection booth on the second floor of the front lobby into a lighting booth. They also added platforms to the two levels in the theater "to make it a little bit easier for people to see."

The second floor above the lobby had the bathrooms, an office, and a room for actors at the end of the hall. The auditorium section of the building also had a second floor attic, where the Thicks added safer flooring, and then used the space to store costumes and props. There also was backstage space and lofts that actors could use to change costumes. "We would manage to collect things along the way. People would donate things to us. Our attic was a treasure trove full of costumes and props and things."

The resulting theater auditorium area included 50 tables that seated some 190 people. The original plan was to be a dinner theater, but audiences preferred the lower cost of a dessert theater, with dessert and beverages served an hour before curtain. [CJ 6/24/2004]

The first show to open the theater in 1984 was "Starting Here, Starting Now." There were four or five desserts, plus fresh fruit, along with coffee or tea. Shows originally ran only four weekends, which then immediately overlapped with rehearsals to prepare for the next show. As the audience grew, the shows could run for six and seven weekends, "which gave us a couple of weeks to get ready and prepare for the next one."

The Children's Classic Series was designed especially for young children, ages 2 1/2 to 7 years old. It provided familiar stories and fairy tales played out by adult actors. The productions were tailored to the audience so that they feel free to participate in the zaniness, adding sounds to the "Deep Dark Forest" and enlivening the frequent "very sudden thunderstorms." Participation in songs and games led by the characters also kept the children involved and entertained. Performances were generally Friday and Saturday mornings. [HT.com] The Thick's role model was the 1960s Rocky and Bullwinkle's "Fractured Fairy Tales" cartoon series. The plays were fun and interactive, and the kids were invited to participate by making sound effects. [CN 7/1/2014]

Producing Shows

Bob Thick had an extensive professional singing background. He was the artistic director, directing most of the shows and the children's series, building the sets, and sometimes also performing. Julie Thick was a gymnast and dancer. She was business manager, marketing director, and house manager on show nights. She also was in charge of choreography and costumes, created the dessert menu, and helped Bob choose the shows by reading hundreds of scripts every six months. [CJ 6/24/2004]

When they started in 1984, the Thicks had 34 subscribers for the first five-show series, with productions running for four or five weekends. In 2004, after 20 years, they had performed 168 productions, and had than 1,000 subscribers, with shows playing for six and seven weekends. Tickets, including dessert and the show, were \$22.50 for Friday and Sunday, \$24 Saturday, and \$21 senior-citizen rate on Sunday. [CJ 6/24/2004]

As of their 30th year in 2014, the Thicks had produced 239 plays. They had some 700 season subscribers, with the core age 50 and above. They presented musicals, comedies and dramas, although the audience tastes had changed from musical revues to book musicals with more of a story. [CN 7/1/2014]

Julie Thick notes that Off-Broadstreet was a for-profit theater, which was "a little bit unusual." It did not receive government funding from the state, but at the same time, "we didn't have to answer to anybody or set things up accordingly. So we didn't have government funding, but we did have an incredibly strong group of subscribers that would come to every show." They also did pay the actors a small stipend. [CJ 6/24/2004]

"We had a town that was incredibly supportive," says Julie Thick. "I remember early on we needed a set of kitchen cabinets and we went to the two big hot spots in town. We went to the post office and said something to them, and we went to the drug store and said something to them. And the next day I had two full sets of cabinets sitting in our side yard. Franco's Pizza, which was Vincenzo's Pizza when we first arrived, would stay open on our closing nights because we would buy 12 or 14 pies. But he would stay there and wait for us to get done. And what would happen is we would take down the sets on the last night. And so the actors stayed and often our waiters stayed to help. That was a whole group of young people that helped us in those ways. The fire department would come over occasionally, especially in the beginning the basement used to flood. They would come pump it out for us. They were wonderful. The doctor's office in town would make appointments for us if we needed something: an actor that had a sore ankle or had lost their voice, whatever. So the town was very supportive of what we did."

The Thicks sold the property to the Hopewell Theater group in 2013 , but the Off-Broadstreet Theatre continued to hold performances there until it closed at the end of 2016.



2017-2024 - Hopewell Theater

The Hopewell Theater opened in September 2017 as an indie arts venue with a 180-seat theater. It presented live music performances, comedy, talks, and varied films, including first-run independent films and films for families. [HT.com]

The new owners were Jon McConaughy, Liza Morehouse, and Mitchel Skolnick, who partnered with Skolnick and Sara Scully as the production company to manage the facility. [HT.com] They purchased the property from the Thicks in 2013 [DB 6163-225, 1/11/2013], who then continued to operate the Off-Broadstreet Theatre there until the end of 2016.



Hopewell Theater 2020 [DD]

Interior demolition for the Hopewell Theater began at the end of April 2015. Over the next two years, the interior was gutted and the heating and plumbing were updated, adding two accessible bathrooms on the first floor and a prep kitchen. The electrical system was replaced, supporting a state-of-the-art sound and lighting system, with the acoustics adjustable depending on the event. [HT.com]

The entry area added a ticket booth, serving bar, and catering space. Upstairs, a mezzanine balcony provided more seating overlooking the main floor, with two event spaces and a "cigar room" with a ventilation system. The theater itself had a mix of seating, including tables and chairs as well as three rows of permanent theater-style seating and seating along the sides. [NJ.com 6/12/2015]

On the exterior, the lobby entrance was moved to the center of the front, with two doors replacing the three windows. The old lobby entrance on the right was replaced with a metal door. On the second floor, a fire escape for the second floor was added on the north end (by the Pharmacy), replacing a window.

In 2019, Skolnick also purchased The Brothers Moon restaurant and began renovations, with the plan to expand the Theater's programming with the addition of a new restaurant and dining options. [Town Topics 8/21/2019].

However the Hopewell Theater was shut down in March 2020 by New Jersey COVID restrictions, and was only able to begin reopening with limitations in September 2021. The Theater finally announced in February 2024 that it was closing permanently: "Rising costs and the inability to obtain a liquor license – a key income source for live venues – have contributed to our decision." [HT.com]



[HopewellTheater.com]

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Information extracted and summarized from sources including books, reports, maps, deeds, newspapers, photos, and personal interviews. Comments, additions, and corrections are welcome.

Many of the original materials (i.e., documents, maps, aerials, and photos) come from the many contributors to the Hopewell Valley History Project and are shared on the site - see the Acknowledgements page (HopewellHistoryProject.org).

See related Hopewell History Briefs for more information:

- East Broad / Seminary / Greenwood – Street Brief (2022)

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- Websites: HopewellTheater.com, Off-Broadstreet.com

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