

THE ATTUCKS THEATRE

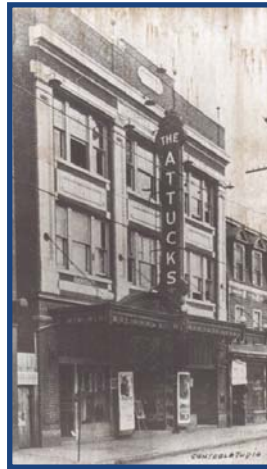
The Attucks Theatre was the brainchild of the Twin Cities Amusement Corporation, an enterprise run by black businessmen from Norfolk and Portsmouth. Their vision was to develop a state-of-the-art cultural center in the heart of a minority community where patrons would be treated with dignity and respect.

The Attucks noted as the nation's oldest remaining theatre that was completely financed, designed, constructed and operated by African Americans.

Named in honor of Crispus Attucks, an African American who was the first person to die in the Revolutionary War, the theatre was designed by noted architect Harvey N. Johnson.

When it opened in grand fashion in 1919, the Attucks showcased plays, concerts, vaudeville and movies at a price its audiences could afford.

During its heyday a host of legendary performers graced the Attucks' stage: Cab Calloway, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Lionel Hampton, Nat King Cole, Dinah Washington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Ruth Brown, Billy Eckstine, Redd Foxx, Smokey Robinson, Gary "U.S." Bonds, and many more.



What attracted such an impressive roster of performers? "The Attucks was one of the most modern and well-equipped theatres of its time," wrote Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., in *The African American Theatre Directory 1816-1960*. It was "one of the outstanding black-controlled theatres of the 1920s," Peterson said.

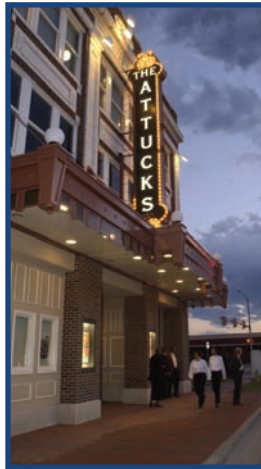
Heralded for its cultural contributions, the Attucks was a much-needed home for other activities. It became a vital platform for advocating social and political reform. It offered a place for church services and religious concerts. It held the offices of leading doctors, dentists, attorneys, and other professionals. It was also an adjunct facility for Norfolk Public Schools, hosting poetry readings, music recitals, writing contests, graduation exercises, and Black History Week exhibits.

In 1953, the Attucks ceased to function as a theatre. Soon the historic building became home to local retailer Stark & Legum.

The Attucks was gone, but it would not be forgotten.

In 1985, Father Joseph N. Green, Jr., former vice mayor of Norfolk, began exploring the idea of restoring the Attucks. By 1990, the Crispus Attucks Cultural Center (CACC) had been incorporated to raise the millions of dollars needed to resurrect the historic theatre.

In 1991, CACC received tax-exempt status from the IRS. An executive director was hired for CACC in 1994 and its board was reorganized. Two years later, fundraising for the Attucks restoration began in earnest. Congress designated the Attucks a National Historic Landmark in 1997.



CACC's diligent fundraising efforts culminated in a groundbreaking ceremony for the restoration on August 27, 2001, held by the Attucks partnership: CACC, the City of Norfolk, and Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

With experience in more than 20 historic restorations, Virtexco Corporation was hired as general contractor and construction began in September 2001. From meticulously restoring the stage curtain to skillfully refinishing the original doors, the renovation project was well-planned and carefully carried out.

The Attucks was gradually coming back to life.

Not only would the original theatre be restored to its original splendor, a new 10,000-square-foot wing was to be added. This new wing would enable CACC to accomplish its comprehensive mission of presenting artistic, educational, civic and multicultural activities, while emphasizing an appreciation for the richness of the African-American experience.

This unique national treasure will serve as a multipurpose resource for Norfolk's African-American citizens, a focal point of the revitalized Church Street corridor, and a leading stimulus for community enrichment, educational opportunities and economic growth.

Ten Fun Facts About the Attucks Theatre



1. Architect Harvey N. Johnson was only 25 years old when he was given the project of designing and overseeing the construction of the Attucks Theatre. Johnson died in 1973 but his son, Harvey N. Johnson, Jr., still lives in Norfolk and remembers spending hours at the theatre as a child delighting in silent films.

2. The original building contained 21 offices that were rented by African-American physicians, lawyers, real estate brokers, insurance agents, and a dentist. Architect Harvey Johnson also had an office in the Attucks.

3. “The Attucks was one of the most modern and well-equipped theatres of its time,” wrote Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., in *The African American Theatre Directory 1816-1960*. Published in 1997 by Greenwood Press, the reference book is a comprehensive guide to early black theatres, organizations, companies, and performing groups.

4. Top names that played the Attucks include Cab Calloway, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Errol Garner, Lionel Hampton, Nat King Cole, Dinah Washington, Count Basie, Slappy White, Dizzy Gillespie, Marian Anderson, Louis Armstrong, Ruth Brown, Moms Mabley, Jimmy Reed, Mamie Smith, The Flamingoes, Clyde McPhatter, Billy Eckstine, Redd Foxx, Smokey Robinson, Ruth Brown, Sam Cooke, and Gary “U.S.” Bonds.



5. The stage’s fire curtain, depicting the Boston Massacre in which Crispus Attucks was the first American killed, isn’t the only original aspect of the theatre to be saved. Ornamental plaster around the stage, a wood guardrail at the third-floor gallery, several original doors and chandeliers, and a gorgeous stained-glass skylight have all been restored to their original beauty.

6. Also preserved from the original theatre are artifacts that have come to be known as the “glowing-eyed angels.” These plaster light fixtures above the box seats were state-of-the-art when the theatre opened in 1919. Back then, electricity was still considered innovative, so to show off the theatre’s cutting-edge technology, exposed bulbs illuminated the angels’ eyes. These fixtures were removed and stored until earlier this year, when they were refurbished by Lamplighters of Williamsburg. The angels are now back in their proper places, overseeing the box seats.

7. Soon after demolition work began in 2002, Virtexo’s construction superintendent, Armin Schallermeir, ran across something in the rafters he never expected to find: a mama cat and her litter of five kittens. The first kitten was found on Valentine’s Day, so Schallermeir named her Valentina, fed her from a bottle for a few weeks, and then took her home. The remaining kittens and their mother were rescued from the building in March and given to the SPCA; within weeks, all were adopted by local cat lovers. Schallermeir says Valentina, now 2-1/2, is still doing fine.



8. Under the stage in the theatre’s original dressing rooms, performers used to decorate the walls with graffiti and their signatures. Much of this has been preserved, including Dizzy Gillespie’s signature, and is displayed in lighted cases on second floor, along with original sheet music found in the theatre.

9. Today, total seating capacity in the Attucks is 624: the orchestra level holds 359; the balcony, 251; and there are 24 box seats. A 9,000-square-foot, three-story addition to the original building now accommodates a green room, dressing rooms, two meeting rooms, and a mechanical room.

10. The Attucks restoration occurred in three phases. The total cost was \$8.3 million. All three phases came in under budget. Federal historic tax credits of \$2.5 million will help pay for the first two phases. A federal ISTEA (Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) grant is offsetting the cost of the final phase.