



Pottstown Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

568 High Street

Pottstown, PA

Officers: President, David Kerns, Vice President, Robert Evans, Treasurer, Barbara Toroney. Assistant Treasurer, Marie Kelly, Recording Secretary, Laura Groth, Corresponding Secretary, Jean Sweeney

Editor: David Kerns

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January Meeting – Monday January 15th, 7pm

The January 15th meeting will feature Elaine P. Schaefer, Executive Director of the Schuylkill River Greenways National Heritage Area. The organization headquartered in Pottstown, is one of only 49 congressionally designated National Heritage Areas in the country, encompassing the Schuylkill River corridor through parts of five counties. Historic preservation is one of the tools it uses to support community revitalization and economic development. Pottstown's role in this organization is a proud reminder of the place we played in American, Industrial, and Environmental Revolutions.

The program is at 7:00pm, at the Pottstown Historical Society. Public invited; light refreshments will be served.

Library Hours

January 2018: 14th & 28th 1-4pm

February 2018: 11th & 25th 1-4pm

Welcome New Members

Peter Stewartz	Frank Bugbee
Charlotte Veloski	Michael Hartman
Jennifer Peters	Laura Justiniano

Acquisitions

We wish to thank the following people for thinking of the Society with donations of Pottstown memorabilia:

Rich Hilligass – high school yearbooks from 1960s
Pottstown Public Library – death notice listings from 1890-1922 & newspaper clippings from W.E. Claussen
Thomas Palmer – copy of Pottstown on Parade
Bill Troutman in memory of Larry Childers – items from the high school class of 1960.

Clara & Charles Hoss – Christmas ball of Zions United Church of Christ.

Project Update!

We have started a fund for building an addition on the rear of our existing structure for the storage of our archives in a more climate controlled area. Anyone interested in helping financially to promote our future project let us know your donation is for the Building Fund. We have a good start from a generous donor but will need more assistance in this undertaking.

Also, a thank you to the family and friends of Milton Yohn for the donations made to the Society in his memory. These funds will help us continue to preserve the archives in our care.

Odds & Ends

A reminder to please email us at Pottstownhistory@gmail.com if you would like to receive the newsletter by email. It will help us to save on postage.

The Home Show will be at the Coventry Mall March 3rd & 4th. This time the show will be throughout the mall. Hope to see our members come out to support the show and stop by our booth.

Pottstown and Motion Pictures

The real beginning of moving pictures was around 1890 when Thomas Edison and some French inventors came up with a process for making photographs move. The first were nickel viewers for one person at a time and lasted at most one minute. These nickel viewers could be seen by Pottstown residents at the time in Sanatoga and Ringing Rocks Parks. The first successful permanent moving picture theater was in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1905. A few years later

Pottstown started to get in the act with "The Gem", at 144 High St. In early 1907, the "Acme" at 451 High St. later in 1907 and the "Savoy", on the second floor of the auditorium building in December 1907. At this period, they referred to them as moving pictures parlors, vaudeville houses or amusement houses. These early films were circulated by the "States Rights" method. The producer sold a print to a regional salesman who distributed the film to parlors in his area until they literally fell apart. Along with some vaudeville acts you would see such films as the Acme opening of "The Herring Fishers" and "The Straw Hat Makers" or at the Gem "The Attempted Ennobling of the Derby Favorite" or a vaudeville act. These movies sound very boring for us today but you have to put yourself in that era when moving objects on screen were a novelty. Admission to these early shows were five cents. The people that started the first parlors in Pottstown rented out small rooms wherever they could because it would be 1910 before Pottstown built a structure just for moving pictures. But the early ones faded away by 1910 as entrepreneurs came along with larger visions of running several theater partnerships.

Pottstown's first theater managers with this vision were a barber named, Thomas R. Cook, who managed the "Arcade" at 240 High St. and a Reading man who managed the "Victor" at High & Hanover Sts. in the St. Clair building by the name of George W. Bennethum. They both started here in this business in 1908 and in 1911 they formed a partnership as managers of both the Victor and Arcade theaters. Also in 1908 the "Princess" opens in the Auditorium building at High & Charlotte Sts. Then in 1910 a building is erected for the sole purpose of moving pictures and vaudeville at 249 High St. called the "Colonial". It had a white front with colored light bulbs and cherry entrance doors. By 1912 Cook & Bennethum also purchase the Princess which they rename the "Lyric". Then Henry C. Saylor announces plans to build the "Hippodrome" theater in 1914 at 220-222 High St. and that it will be under the management of Cook & Bennethum. The Hip opens officially on December 26, 1914 at a cost of \$30,000. In 1915 the partnership takes control of the Colonial to complete the sweep of theaters. Due to a new fire code in 1916 of having side exits, the Colonial and Arcade close and the

buildings altered into stores, such as, Woolworths at 249 High St. That same year the partnership leases the Opera House from Felix McCarthy still controlling all theaters in Pottstown. At this point they start purchasing properties starting in 1918 when they buy the St. Clair building from the Fegely Estate for about \$50,000. Then in July 1919 tragedy strikes.

In July 1930, Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., purchases all the theaters in Pottstown from Snyder for a grand amount of \$500,000. They in turn invest another \$50,000 in the sound systems at the Hip and Strand theaters. They run the Victor in the Opera House until 1935 and then close it. The end is near for the Opera House as in 1949 a wall and the roof collapse and the borough reaches an agreement with Warner Bros to buy it for \$16,000 in 1950 and they raze it. Also as a side note the borough finally in 1940 passed an ordinance for movies to be shown on Sunday. The Strand was sold to the J.C. Penney Corporation in 1959 and in 1960 they razed it for their department store which is now in 2017 Lastick's Carpet & Flooring store. The last survivor is the Hippodrome which operates since 1934 under the Goldman Theater Group which at that time altered the front with the new color marquee. They close it in 1971 and in 1972 Fox Theaters, of Reading, leases it and renames it the Town Theater. By 1977 the theater stands vacant and in need of structural work. The Saylor Estate decides to auction off the buildings they own from 214-224 in that year and they are bought by Donald & David Specht for \$106,000. They in turn sell off the theater to the American Organ Company who never use it because of the structural damage and they in turn sell it to the borough who razes it for what else but a parking lot.

Meantime, Fox Theaters are building new theaters out of town. The North End Shopping Center gets one in 1967 and the Norco Mall about the same time. But they also went to the wayside. People started enjoying surround sound and stadium seating. Then in 2008 they started building the Upland Center and in 2011 we were treated to a Carmike 12 and brought up to modern day standards. All through the years generations of movie goers enjoyed their particular style of film from one reelers to modern day extravaganzas.