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ATTUCK THEATRE





Sept. 2, 2011--

NORFOLK, Va. — Like the form of a fine guitar solo or the pacing of a Nat King Cole ballad, there is space for dreams at the Crispus Attucks Theatre.

The Attucks is the oldest African-American-operated theater in America.

Opened in 1919, the red-brick palace has featured Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and Chicagoans Dinah Washington, Sam Cooke and Cole.

Although it is on the National Register of Historic Places, the 620-seat theater is not on the same cultural radar as the Apollo in New York City, nor does it have the legacy of the now-raised Regal in Chicago.

But it is a living piece of history that demands a stop during a visit to Norfolk.

The theater is named after Crispus Attucks, an African-American soldier who was the first person shot to death by the British in the 1770 Boston Massacre. Attucks also had Wampanoag ancestors, which resonates with local Native Americans.

“This was needed for the African-American community to have somewhere to go,” said administrative assistant Priscilla Fuller during a late spring tour. “It not only served as a theater, but there were 20 offices for attorneys and dentists.”

The Attucks was built and paid for by the African-American community. It was designed by African-American architect Harvey Johnson, who was 25 when he took on the project.

The Attucks is on the north side, about five minutes from attractions such as Harbor Park and the Norfolk Scope Arena, home of the Norfolk Admirals of the American Hockey League.

In 1933, the theater became the Booker T. picture house before shifting into a site for emerging rhythm and blues. Before it closed in 1953, Norfolk area natives Ruth Brown and Gary “U.S.” Bonds cut their chops at the Attucks. “The space was bought by a clothing store,” Fuller said. “The lobby was the store, and the theater was used for storage. In 1999, the CACC [Crispus Attucks Cultural Center] board was put together by then vice mayor

[the Rev.] Joseph Green, and their job was to get this theater open again.”

In a separate talk, the Rev. Green said, “While I was on the city council, they were tearing down everything in Norfolk. I asked them to please save this building. The churches held on because they took responsibility and fixed their churches, but none of the public buildings we associated with the old Norfolk stood.

“I retired from the council in 1996. And I have spent the rest of my life trying to restore the Attucks Theatre.”

The \$8.1 million restoration began in 2001; the theater reopened in October 2004 with a performance by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. People were dancing in the aisles. The rebirth was a result of a partnership between the City of Norfolk’s Department of Cultural Facilities and the CACC.

Speaking in a voice that recalls the cool baritone of Chicago soul legend Jerry Butler, the Rev. Green said, “This is one of the great restoration jobs in the history of theaters.”

Legendary Chicago session man Gene Barge was born and raised in Norfolk. He lived in Norfolk until 1964, when at age 38, he moved to Chicago to become producer-arranger and sax player at Chess Records. “It was the only theater in town where we could see a show,” Barge said from his Chicago home. “I saw Gene Ammons there. I worked that theater with Guitar Slim, Jimmy Witherspoon and Bo Diddley in the mid-1950s.” Barge cowrote the 1961 Bonds smash “Quarter to Three,” and last summer he and Bonds did a reunion show at the Attucks.

Norfolkians (that’s my term) take pride in the original Attucks stage fire curtain, which has been restored. The painted canvas curtain, 30 feet wide and 21 feet tall, depicts the soldier at the center of the battle in which he died.

Before the Attucks opened in 1919, the curtain was created by Lee Lash Studios, a now-defunct New York stage-scenery company. It was restored by conservation technicians of the EverGreene Painting Studios in New York City.

The theater is the anchor of the Crispus Attucks Cultural Center, which also offers courses in African ballet, steel drums and writing.

The Attucks is on Church Street, an inspirational place for African Americans during the

early 20th century, just as Bronzeville was in Chicago. Church Street offers an uncanny spiritual parallel for the Rev. Green, who recalled, “Black, Greek and Jewish businesses were up and down Church Street. Our famous paper was the New Journal and Guide. It had its offices near the theater. They printed the paper right there. They didn’t send anything away. This neighborhood was quite a lively place,” and his voice drifted off. “And it went away.”

The Rev. Green grew up on a South Carolina farm and studied agriculture at South Carolina State. He enrolled in the Navy and worked at Great Lakes Naval Hospital near Chicago. He was named pastor of Norfolk’s Grace Episcopal Church in 1963 and was elected to the Norfolk City Council in 1977.

During the era of segregation, entertainers could not stay in Norfolk hotels. “They stayed with families,” Fuller said. “When they came to the community, they were in the community. This was one of few places where African-Americans could walk through the front door. And be treated with respect.”

You can still feel that respect in one of the South’s most precious spaces.