

# the penn theater: a brief history

THE PLACE FOR ARTS, EVENTS, & CULTURE IN BUTLER, PENNSYLVANIA

**1938**

## the grandest of openings

### Crowds & Fanfare Greet the Penn Theater

The Penn Theater was to open on April 16, 1938! But the usher and theater worker labor union voted to strike, delaying the opening by one week. Instead, the Penn opened on April 23, showing *The Girl of the Golden West*. The Pennler Theater Corporation, charged with managing the facility, thanked the thousands of patrons who attended showings throughout its first weekend.

**1965**

## always a favorite of his

### DeMarsh Purchases Penn

Chester DeMarsh, founder of the DeMarsh Company, which eventually became Theater Management, Inc., a Florida-based cinema company, purchased the Penn Theater, and held its deed until 2004, even though company executives wanted to either sell or demolish the Penn, for it was 'always a favorite of his.'

**1973**

## a major facelift

### Penn Closes For Major Renovations

James Casale, a family New York architect, originally designed the Penn Theater for Anast N. Notopolous in his signature 1920s & '30s luxurious art deco style, with attention paid to its lighting, flooring, marquee, and artwork. However, by the 1970s, such style fell out of favor, and the theater was updated to reflect pop art and postmodern influences, such as bright colors, carpet, and linoleum.

**2001**

## closing up shop

### DeMarsh Shuttters Penn for Good

After the quarter of a million dollars DeMarsh spent on renovations and upgrades failed to attract the necessary support and patronage of the greater Butler community, Theater Management closed the Penn Theater for good in May of 2001.

**2004**

## sold to a non-profit

### DeMarsh Agrees to Sell to BPTCT

The Butler Penn Theater Community Trust (BPTCT) pays DeMarsh \$180,000, with a total mortgage of \$250,000 to also provide renovations. Downtown Butler Assn provided \$5,000 start-up cash, Pennsylvania provided support through grants, and a private supporter gave \$240,000 if the large room was named after his late mother. This is now the Lydia Mainstage.

**2023**

## new owners, vision, & future

### Butler Native Transforms Main Street

After more than a decade of decay and stagnation, new owners, Wallace Group Productions, lead by Bryan Frenchak, a Butler native and true self-made success story, and Marina Silver-Frenchak, a mental health advocate, community-organizer, restaurateur, and fashion designer, set out with a new mission, new vision, new purpose, and a new future for the Penn Theater, along with downtown Butler and the entire community. The Frenchaks purchased the Penn from the RACB

## new theater announced

**1937**

### Butler to Receive State-of-the-Art Venue

Paramount Theater Service Corp, of Altoona, PA, announced a grand new theater for downtown Butler. The general contractors, Miller & Dumbaugh, had a budget of \$70,000. At the time, Butler had 5 other theaters, but this would stand out with its geothermal air conditioning.

## tragedy strikes

**1954**

### Fire Damages the Penn Theater

A fire breaks out in the main cinema room, severely damaging the Penn and forcing Pennler to close the facility for three months to complete repairs. It could not have come at a worse time, too; Pennler was struggling as Paramount dealt with anti-trust pressure.

## butler-made namesake

**1969**

### Penn Theater Adds Second Film Space

In an effort to accommodate various audiences, DeMarsh added a second cinema to the Penn, named in honor of a recognizable Butler-made icon: now the Bantam Auditorium. The American Bantam Car Co famously created the formidable jeep for the U.S. Army during World War II. This gave way to the modern Jeep.

## times, they are a-changin'

**1991**

### Slow Demise of Downtown Spells Disaster

The 1970s and '80s were turbulent for the Penn, as sales continued to decline and community support atrophied. Trends towards megamalls outside of downtowns took hold across America. The Penn closed for the first time in 1991. However, in 1997, DeMarsh contributed \$250,000 in upgrades to the facility for a revival and eventual reopening, including new food service and audio-visual equipment.

## opening bids please

**2003**

### Penn Theater Offered for Auction

Unsure of what to do with the physical property, and unwilling to spend any more money on the upkeep of the building, Theater Management, Inc., lists the Penn Theater for auction on eBay, the premiere auction and bidding website. Starting price was \$195,000.

## phlf loan to the rescue

**2007**

### RACB Purchases Penn

The Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation (PHLF) loaned the Butler Redevelopment Authority (RACB) \$250,000 to buy the Penn Theater, which had been condemned by the city of Butler and was facing foreclosure, with the hopes a non-profit organization would restore and operate it once again. This launched the first Penn Theater Performance Company (PTPC).

and PHLF for \$65,000, while also spending their own time, talent, and treasure on renovating and reconstructing the physical space, reinvigorating the non-profit organization, and rallying support from the community through meaningful connections. The new Penn Theater will truly be a multipurpose, community-serving event facility, focusing on art, entertainment, culture, and heritage for all of Butler. It's time to rediscover the magic of Butler again!