

## SAVING HISTORIC LANSDALE

# MUSIC HALL: OUR FIRST THEATER

*First in a series featuring 10 Lansdale commercial buildings that are historically significant and worthy of preservation.*

By **DICK SHEARER**

Mid-1880s Lansdale was a busy place. The town – now a dozen years old – was growing by leaps and bounds. New businesses were flocking to the young borough and so were scores of adventuresome people who wanted to get in on the action.

While the population increased dramatically during this era, a small circle of power brokers called most of the shots. Mill owner A.C. Godshall and Dr. John “Daddy” Jacobs amassed extensive land holdings and controlled borough council while the Heebner family ran the highly successful agricultural works, Lansdale’s biggest employer.

The Heebners were especially interested in education and the arts. Son Isaac was a principal player in the development of the school system. Son William was concerned that residents of the community weren’t exposed to enough quality entertainment.

To attract first-rate acts the town needed a suitable auditorium. Several hotels had meeting rooms but William Heebner envisioned a theater. As the result, the family threw its support behind an ambitious construction project at North Broad and Second Streets.

It was planned as the Lansdale Trust Co. Building. Architect Milton B. Bean was hired to design a multipurpose structure that housed not only the bank and a number of storefronts in the basement and ground floor but also plentiful office space on the second floor. But THE key feature was a 500-seat theater built to the rear with a lobby entrance through the center of the building.

When Bean’s plans became public in 1887, this new edifice became a source both of pride and speculation among townspeople. What would this auditorium be called?

Among the speculators was H.M. Woodmansee, publisher of the *Reporter* who printed a story – true or fabricated we don’t know – about a gathering of community leaders, presumably over a few drinks, to agree on a name for the new theater. According to him, names like Lansdale Opera House and Broad Street Theater were dismissed along with other possi-



bilities like Haydn Hall and Conservatory of Music. Finally they settled on Music Hall, the name it retains to this day. Woodmansee said they celebrated their decision by breaking a bottle of spirits on the wall of the uncompleted building.

Regardless of the accuracy of this story, the Music Hall lived up to its billing. In the years that followed, it hosted hundreds of traveling theatre troupes, orchestras, vaudeville shows, preachers, community concerts organized by churches and fraternal organizations, high school plays and commencements, and even an occasional boxing or wrestling match.

Oh, we forgot to mention that it became home to the first Lansdale Symphony Orchestra with Mr. Heebner serving as concertmaster.

The Music Hall continued to serve as Lansdale’s primary entertainment venue until the late 1920s when the majestic Lansdale Theatre opened on West Main Street. After 40 years, Lansdale’s citizens now had a new and glitzy showplace, unmatched for miles

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# Music Hall has 125-year legacy

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around.

In 1938 the Music Hall was converted to movie use. Smaller and less opulent than the Lansdale, it still attracted crowds because it offered film fans a second choice during a time when the silver screen ruled supreme.

But by the 1960s, the Music Hall fell victim to multiscreen theaters and even drive-ins. It closed without prior notice in 1967, a decade before the Lansdale met a similar fate.

Although it no longer hosts movies, orchestras or even wrestling matches, it continues to play an important part in Lansdale's history and ranks near the top of our list of buildings that must be preserved.

One look tells you why. Although it has been renovated many times in the past 125 years the external appearance of the structure still bears a striking resemblance to the Music Hall of Heebner's time. Even the theater portion in the back remains intact although it

has been converted into a paint store and for other uses over the decades.

Most buildings of this age have not been so lucky.

In a perfect world, the borough or a private investor would follow the lead of the Heebners and restore the theater as a 500-seat venue to augment the 311 Arts project on Main Street which is space-limited to a 210-seat auditorium.

Regardless, this valuable piece of Lansdale history must be saved from the wrecking ball now and in the future.

