

# Hopewell's Historic Beacon Theatre Survives COVID-19 Pandemic

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Hopewell's Historic Beacon Theatre Survives COVID-19 Pandemic

Hopewell's 94-year-old Beacon Theatre is alive and well. The historic theater has survived the COVID-19 pandemic. While other independent entertainment venues have closed, the Beacon Theatre is open and operating with a regular production schedule of two to three concerts a week, local shows, Sunday church service, and even weddings.



Laurin and Susie

“When the pandemic hit in March 2019, we were on fire!” said Laurin Willis, part of the husband-

“

Laurin and Susie Willis have been a great asset to the Beacon and to the City. We're very lucky that they have stuck with us through the pandemic. They have been very tenacious.”

*Mark Haley, former Hopewell City Manager*

and-wife management team. “We had 80 shows on the books. When the edict came down that we couldn't have more than 10 people in the auditorium, we closed the doors to public performances and looked for alternative income streams.”

THE SHOW MUST GO ON....

While the doors were closed per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, shows still went on. The Willises switched to a live-stream series of “Secret Stage” concerts where bands of no more than seven people performed on the Beacon stage with the backdrop

of the empty auditorium. Viewers generously started donating money to keep the music alive in Hopewell. As a result of these donations, the Willises were able to keep their crew and pay the

rent.

The Willis live streamed 27 “Secret Stage” concerts until Virginia’s governor announced that theaters could open at 30% capacity with a social distancing plan. Limiting seating to 30% meant that Laurin could book 281 seats, but social distancing requirements limited attendance to 200. The venue capacity is 669.

After each performance, Laurin and Susie used a fogger to disinfect the theater. Masks were required of all attendees and theater staff checked

the temperature of everyone entering the theater. They kept the thermostat at 68 degrees and the fan on to keep the air moving and fresh. Finally, once all restrictions were lifted, the Beacon Theatre presented between 70 and 80 events in 2021.



A view from the stage of the Beacon Theater

During the pandemic, the Willis team’s efforts were recognized and shared by the William Morris Endeavor (WME) agency, through an interview that was published in WME's Nashville Newsletter.

This year The Beacon Theatre is looking forward to hosting bands such as Live at the Fillmore on Saturday, April 23rd an Allman Brothers Tribute Band, as well as Leonid & Friends on Thursday, May 12th. Leonid & Friends is a Chicago tribute band that’s based in Moscow, Russia. Calling the theatre is the best way to hear about shows as new bands are resuming tours every day (804) 446-3457.

“Laurin and Susie Willis have been a great asset to the Beacon and the city,” said Mark Haley, former Hopewell City Manager, and a member of the board of directors which oversees the management of the Beacon Theatre. “We’re very lucky that they have stuck with us through the pandemic. They have been very tenacious.”

#### ABOUT LAURIN AND SUSIE WILLIS

Laurin Willis was originally in TV sales and Susie was a photographer. They married and formed their management team in 2008. Laurin started in the music business by managing the Doobie Brothers fan club. He put together conventions around the United States where fans from around the world could gather to see their favorite group. Through these conventions, the fan club raised over \$500,000 for charity. For ten years, Laurin and Susie managed the Innsbrook After Hours concert series at the Innsbrook Office Park, a mixed-use corporate center outside Richmond. In March 2015 they were brought in to manage the Beacon Theatre.

#### ABOUT THE BEACON THEATRE

The Beacon Theatre opened in 1928 as a movie theater and vaudeville house. In 1981 it was closed and left dormant for 30 years. The decision to restore the old theater building was part of the City of Hopewell's Downtown Development Plan and Hopewell's Main Street designation in 2011. The plan was to reopen the Beacon Theatre in time for the centennial of Hopewell in 2016. The theatre reopened in 2014. This rehabilitation project by Commonwealth Architects received an Honor Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation from the Virginia Society AIA.

#### ABOUT HOPEWELL, VIRGINIA

Hopewell is a quaint city of 23,000 residents located about 20 miles south of Virginia's capital located at the confluence of the James and Appomattox Rivers. Hopewell's historic section of City Point was one of North America's oldest English-speaking communities. In the 18th century, Hopewell became a significant port city, and in World War I it became a boomtown with the production of guncotton in the local DuPont plant. During the war, the city's population rose from 200 residents to more than 30,000. The DuPont plant was closed after the war causing the city's population to decline momentarily until new manufacturers took their place. In 1915 a fire destroyed 300 buildings in Hopewell, but the city quickly rebuilt. For about fifty years the industry and city have been committed environmental stewards and this is finally paying off with a bit of a renaissance. There are new businesses, new restaurants, and new and exciting projects. The city has invested close to \$15 million in new streetscapes, the reopening of the Beacon Theatre, a modern new library, and a remodeled marina.

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