



THALIAN HALL CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS, INC. 1963-2006 AN ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

The Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. (THCPA) was chartered under the laws of the State of North Carolina on September 23, 1963 under the name of the Thalian Hall Commission Incorporated (THC). The organization had its beginnings the previous year when in the spring of 1962 the Junior League of Wilmington presented the Junior League Follies in Thalian Hall. The group came away from the experience with two things, money for their community projects and a haunting desire to improve Thalian Hall.

By 1963 the interior of Thalian Hall was rather shabby. Even though the City had funded two quasi-restorations, one in 1941 and again in 1952, neither had been historically accurate. In 1963, the Thalian Association, Inc., Wilmington's community theatre group had been managing the hall for over 30 years, but their limited financial resources allowed only minimum maintenance. In April of 1963 the Junior League appointed a committee to take the initial steps in the formation of an organization whose purpose would be to restore Thalian Hall and operate it as a cultural center and historic site. The League agreed to initially fund the organization.

The committee consisted of Mrs. C. Eugene Fonvielle, Mrs. Robert Taylor, and Mrs. Robert M. Williams. By December of 1963 the by-laws had been completed and a Board of Trustees approved by the City had been chosen. The officers of the new organization were President, Mrs. C. Eugene Fonvielle; Vice President, Herb McKim, Sr.; and Secretary/Treasurer, Winfield Sapp, Jr. The other members of the board were Howard Penton, James C. Fox, Everett Huggins, and E. C. Brandon. This first board of trustees very quickly realized the enormity of the project they had taken on. They had to learn how to go about restoring a building, figure out where to get the money, and determine how it should be operated once it was restored. These were very difficult problems in the early 1960's.

Wilmington was a considerably different community than it is today. Economically, the City was still recovering from the final departure of the Atlantic Coast Railroad in 1960. There were less than half a dozen arts and cultural organizations in the City and the only restoration project was the Burgwin-Wright House. Therefore there were no ready sources of experience or advice in this field. Secondly, this project was a "theatre restoration" which at that time was an unusual project even at the national level. Today there are hundreds of theatre restorations all across the country and numerous restoration consultants who specialize in historic theatres; but in 1963 this was not the case. A third problem was the fact that Thalian Hall was relatively unknown outside of small percentage of people who attended the handful of annual performances there. This made it difficult to develop the necessary financial and political support for the project. One of the first actions by the organization was joining the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Over the course of the next two years a great deal of correspondence took place between members of the board and various agencies and individuals involved with preservation. It soon became clear that there was a need for basic documentation for the building so that it could be listed as an historic site.

A restoration committee was established under the direction of Mrs. Robert Williams. She began the task of writing a preliminary history of the building, which was necessary for the pursuit of grants for the project. Through these efforts and several visits by representatives of the National Park Service, Thalian Hall was entered on the Register of Historic Places. In order to obtain the support and funds necessary for the project it became clear that a printed report would have to be prepared describing the project, with cost estimates and future use. The Junior League appropriated \$5,000 for this purpose. It was also necessary to retain a consulting architect to work with the group and develop this report. Through the efforts of Herb McKim, contact was made with Milton Grigg of Grigg, Wood, Browne, and Laramore, out of Charlottesville, Virginia, an architectural firm specializing in preservation projects. Mr. Grigg began to

work with the project at the end of 1965.

In the meantime, the members of the THC Board spoke to civic groups seeking their support for the project. A special exhibit was prepared, under the direction of Doug Swink and Tatum Robertson, which was taken to the National Convention of the National Trust. During this period, Mr. Grigg made several visits to Wilmington studying the site and meeting with the Board to develop an approach to the project. Preliminary research was completed and drawings were made to be included in the report. By 1969 the report was ready for publication. Meanwhile the Board struggled with the development of a funding plan. In 1971, Thomas H. Wright, Jr. agreed to chair the Capital Campaign. After discussions with City, State, and Foundation sources it became apparent that the best approach to raising the necessary funds would be through matching arrangements. The board was in the process of developing the matching funds when disaster struck.

On the afternoon of Saturday, February 3, 1973 a fire broke out in the historic theatre. (Ironically the next scheduled performance was *THE LAST OF THE RED HOT LOVERS*.) Though the cause of the fire was never determined, it could well have been in the wiring, much of which had not been upgraded since the turn of the century. The Board, under the direction of President Mrs. William H. Sutton, had two options, the first was to limit the necessary repairs so that the theatre could reopen and postpone the restoration until adequate funds could be raised. The second was to proceed with the restoration plan while public concern was high. The Board decided that there would probably never be a time when the project would have as much support from the public and to move forward. The City offered to pay over the fire insurance totaling some \$40,000 to the restoration effort. Supported by a sympathetic public and with access to a ready source of matching money, the Board decided to proceed with the full restoration. The City's lease with the Thalian Association was abrogated and the building was turned over to the THC for restoration.

The firm of Leslie Boney Architects was hired for the work and the scope of the project was estimated at about \$237,000. The restoration proceeded under the direction of the THC over the next two years. During that time, the THC was able to obtain a \$50,000 matching grant from the State, an additional \$40,000 from the City of Wilmington, \$45,000 in foundation grants, \$17,000 in local civic and arts organizations, \$20,000 from the corporate community, and \$25,000 from private donations.

On October 17, 1975 the theatre reopened with a gala production of *1776* presented by the Thalian Association Community Theatre. Actors in the production included architect Leslie Boney Jr, and Tony Rivenbark, future Executive Director. Special guests included Governor James Holshouser. Following the reopening the organization concentrated on the development of the Hall as a historic site for area visitors, completion of the first phase of restoration and the development of a plan for the renovation of the back stage. In conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce under the direction of H. Van Reid the Historic Wilmington Tour was developed. The Hall was established as the starting point and a very impressive 15-minute slide presentation about the area narrated by David Brinkley was created to be shown on a regular basis to visitors taking the tour. In 1976 a part-time manager was hired and the following year, two full-time tour guides were hired to operate the Tour.

During this same period cost estimates and plans were secured for the restoration of the second balcony stair and with approximately \$25,000 in state and federal funds the project was completed in 1977. Preliminary discussions on the renovation of the backstage area and the installation of a new fly system also took place during this period.

However, during the first few years of operation the Hall's use as a performance space was greatly underutilized. During the first 3 seasons the stage hosted less than 100 public events. Rental income during this period averaged approximately \$3,500 annually. There were a number of contributing factors to account for this situation including the state of the backstage, lack of equipment, length of pre-production time necessary for good presentations, and competition from other better-equipped facilities. Also due to the contractual arrangements with the City, the rental income was paid directly to the City, so there was little impetus for the management to seek additional users.

In 1979 a new contract was prepared by the City, which put the financial operation of the building directly under the responsibility of the board of trustees of THC. A particularly important aspect of the new arrangement allowed for the rental income to be paid to the Thalian Hall operating account. At the same time a new manager, Tony Rivenbark was hired and he began a concentrated effort to attract more user groups combined with a program of short term improvements to make the Hall more efficient for performances.

By 1981, these efforts had paid off. The Hall began to be used much more extensively and rental income doubled. Over the next few years a program of capital improvements were instituted including some re-painting, minor repairs, and the purchase of new equipment. It was during this period that Thalian Hall joined the League of Historic American Theatres, which provided a network with other similar operations all across the country. Further study of backstage renovation and costs were also undertaken at this time. The Hall actively participated in the creation of the St. Thomas Celebration of the Arts and for the first time in many years first rate professional touring artists performed on the Thalian Hall stage to full houses. Groundwork began to be laid for a fund drive for the backstage renovation. Previous contributors to the 1975 restoration were honored during the Celebration at a special ceremony with special guest, Caterina Jarboro, a native of Wilmington and international African-American opera diva. Later in that same year, North Carolina publishers and editors were introduced the Thalian Hall through the efforts of board member and publisher of the Wilmington Star News, John O. Fullerton. The Star News hosted the North Carolina Press Association with a special performance of BOX AND COX produced by the Executive Director in Thalian Hall.

In 1983 the next phase of the renovation project was begun. With a grant from the Junior League of \$10,000, the firm of Theatre Projects Ltd. of New York and London were retained to develop a Master Plan for the facility in conjunction with Boney Architects of Wilmington. In order to give maximum attention to the plan, a month long celebration was developed to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the original opening of the theatre. Activities included special productions by the Thalian Hall Concert Series, The University Theatre, Kicks and Company, as well as exhibition at the New Hanover County Museum. The centerpiece of the celebration was an original musical comedy written by North Carolina playwright Randolph Umberger and composer Benjamin Keaton. The production entitled REMEMBERED NIGHTS was jointly funded by the Thalian Hall Commission, the North Carolina State Arts Council, the Thalian Association, the Arts Council of the Lower Cape Fear and several private donors including Walter and Lynn Pancoe, Thomas Kenan III, Emma Bellamy Williamson Hendren, and Thetis Moore. The special opening night performance included a champagne buffet in the City Hall lobby.

In 1984 the City included the Thalian Hall Renovation in the plans for a city wide bond issue scheduled for 1985. In preparation for the successful passage of this issue, the Thalian Hall operations and staff were expanded. Also at this time the City appointed a building committee named the Thalian Hall Project Team to oversee the renovation. Susan Dankel, Assistant City Manager, chaired the committee consisting of members of the City staff, Jean Anne Sutton and John T. Talbert, Jr. from the THCPA Board of Trustees, and Tony Rivenbark, Executive Director. In addition, a committee named Citizens for a Better Wilmington was created to help promote the Bond Issue which included 1.7 million dollars for the Thalian Hall project. On March 26, 1985 a referendum was held and the Bond Issue was passed by the City voters with a substantial margin.

Later that year the Board retained the services of Ampersand, Inc. of Winston-Salem, N.C. and formed a citizen's study committee to develop a long range planning and programming study for the project. The committee, representing a wide variety of community leaders, was chaired by Thomas H. Wright III. The Board and the City Council approved the final report in March of 1986. The results of the report were given to the project's theatre consultant, Peter George Associates of New York who had been retained by the City after recommendation of the Thalian Hall Project Team. Based on the results of the Ampersand Study, a new set of bylaws were approved which included an expanded and restructured board and a new name to better reflect the organization and facilities' purpose. On June 30, 1986 the "Thalian Hall Commission, Inc." became the "Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Inc."

During this same period, the Thalian Hall Project team made recommendation for the hiring of the other members of the design team. Hanbury and Evans of Norfolk and Ligon Flynn of Wilmington were retained as architects for the project and McKim and Creed of Wilmington were retained as engineers. Basic design of the project was completed and the project was expanded to include the reopening of the second floor of City Hall for public use and a new mechanical system for the entire complex. Peter George, theatre consultant, designed all the stage-related improvements. The City agreed to commit an additional \$1.1 million dollars to the expanded scope of the project.

By 1987 usage of the Hall had reached record proportions. The facility was operating seven days a week and the auditorium was in use over 320 nights a year with over 110 public events, attracting around 40,000 people annually. Rental income had increased to an average of \$30,000 annually. With the support indicated by the passage of the Bond Issue, the high visibility of the Hall's function in the community, and

a reorganized and strengthened Board of Trustees everything was in place undertake a capital campaign. David Winslow and Associates was retained by the THCPA Board to conduct a feasibility study for a fund drive and then further retained as fund raising counsel for the effort. Mrs. William H. Sutton and Mrs. Franklin L. Block agreed to chair the campaign. A \$1.5 million drive was kicked off in May of 1987 with a lead gift of \$80,000 from the New York Times Foundation.

By January of 1988 the Hall was closed for performances. A new community box office for former rental clients was established at 118 Princess Street and the administration and archives were moved to the campaign office at 116 Princess Street. The Historic Wilmington tour was re-designed due to the closing of the Hall but continued to be administrated by the THCPA staff. The bids for construction were opened in March and the total was \$500,000 over the original cost estimates. By this time THCPA had raised approximately \$900,000 toward its original goal of \$1.5 million. At this point the Board of Trustees and the Capital Campaign Committee launched an intense lobbying effort to obtain \$1,000,000 from the N. C. State Legislature.

In July of 1988 this effort was successful and a special appropriation of \$1,000,000 was awarded to the project. The City was then in a position to let the contracts for construction. On September 1, 1988 the THCPA held the official ground breaking ceremony at the corner of Fourth and Princess Streets with Mrs. Patrick Dorsey, Secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources, as the special guest. The Thalian Hall/City Hall Renovation Project had begun.

The renovation was constantly in the news. One story that received a lot of coverage was a crack that appeared in the north wall of the backstage shortly after excavations had begun for the new wing. It was later determined that the cause of this crack was an original fireplace that had been removed many years ago without being properly filled. Another story that made the news was the discovery of a set of human bones underneath the floor of the auditorium. The remains were sent to Archives in History in Raleigh. It was determined that the large sand hill where Thalian Hall stands was probably the burial site of a Native-American Indian long before the colonization of the Lower Cape Fear.

The renovation and expansion project took 18 months to complete. During that period the Board continued to with the Capital Campaign. The Executive Director worked closely with the architects and the actual construction. The staff consisted of Greg Potter who operated the new box office and Steve Cooper who assisted Mr. Rivenbark and kept the books. By the end of 1989 plans began for the reopening of the facility. The City had begun a renovation of the City Hall basement and first floor which would not be complete until after the reopening of the theatre. Angela Rowe was hired to help plan the re-opening and Jeffery Loy was hired as technical director.

A conflict developed between THCPA and the Thalian Association Community Theatre over who would reopen the renovated theatre. Following a meeting between the two boards a compromise was developed whereby THCPA would reopen the theatre with a series of gala events over the first weekend and then in the following weeks all of the arts groups including the Thalian Association would be offered a night in one of three venues for their own event at no charge. The reopening celebration was entitled "Curtains UP" and was scheduled for first two weeks in March of 1990.

On March 2nd THCPA reopened the theatre with a performance by Peter Nero and members of the North Carolina Symphony with Dr. William C. Friday as the Master of Ceremonies. Honored guests included poet, Maya Angelou, artist Dorothy Gillespie, and Mary Regan, Director of the NC State Arts Council. Six hundred of Wilmington's most influential people turned out for the black-tie opening and gala party which was held throughout the building. The following night was another gala evening with a touring performance of KISMET with many sets and costumes which highlighted the technical improvements of the theatre. The weekend's events were completed by a public dedication sponsored by the THCPA and the City of Wilmington. The public was invited to tour the entire facility and have refreshments in the Ballroom following the ceremony.

Over the next two weeks over twenty other events were presented in the complex and along with a number receptions. The presentations included a Victorian Fashion Show by the Lower Cape Historical Society, A Living History Presentation by the 250th Anniversary Commission, A Broadway Medley by the Thalian Association and a Civil War program by the Cape Fear Museum. Several organizations brought in touring productions including, a Celtic Evening with Fiona Ritchie by WHQR, The Tulsa Ballet by the Arts Council, and AS YOU LIKE IT by the Charlotte Shakespeare Festival. There were a host of musical performances including jazz artist Larry Price, The Wilmington Choral Society, The Cape Fear Chordsmen, the Wilmington Symphony and Opera House Theatre Co. Theatre productions were given by Tapestry Theatre,

Playwrights Producing Company, Celebration Theatre, and the Grey Seal Puppets. The new Thalian Hall had hit the ground running.

1991 Junior League moves the annual production of Pied Piper Theatre from Kenan Auditorium to Thalian Hall under the direction of Executive Director Tony Rivenbark.

1992 The establishment of annual program underwriting (Producers Circle) begins. With the reopening of the theatre THCPA establishes regular season of touring presentations now known at the Main Attractions, an annual giving program which becomes the Friends of Thalian Hall and a program of underwriting which evolves into the Producers Circle.

1995 Capital needs presented to the THCPA Board including Steinway concert grand, orchestra shell, film projection equipment, theatre museum, and new 250 seat theatre at 4th and Princess.

1996 THCPA installs film projection equipment and joins with WHQR in establishing Cinematique at Thalian Hall.

1998 THCPA acquires a new Steinway nine foot concert grand through a gift of the Weyerhaeuser Family and the Kenan Foundation.

2000 THCPA completes a new 5 year plan and establishes the Joseph Jefferson Club.

2002 The 5K Run is instituted. - Architects- Hanbury, Evans, Vlattas and Wright and Theatre consultant - Robert Long are chosen to develop Master Plan.

2003 Master Plan calling for renovation of Thalian Hall and addition of a new 250 seat theatre is presented to City Council and authorization is given to begin fundraising.

2004 Following completion of a Feasibility Study, The David Winslow Group is retained to develop a Capital Campaign for 8 million dollars.

2005 City of Wilmington commits 3 million dollars for the renovation & expansion of Thalian Hall.

2006 Board of Trustees retains the services of Louise McColl to guide the Capital Campaign. Hanbury, Evans, Vlattas, and Wright of Norfolk, Va. are retained to complete the Construction Drawings.