

2004

01 West Chester, Pennsylvania's Warner Theatre

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West Chester, Pennsylvania's Warner Theatre

by Alishia M. Faller, HIS480 (submitted April 18, 2004)

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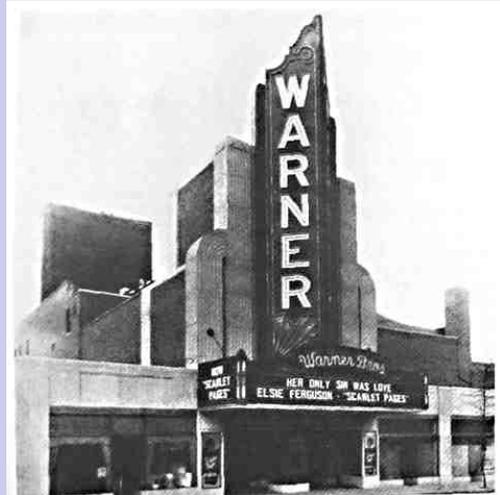
The Warner Theatre, or the "showplace of Chester County"⁽¹⁾ opened its Art Deco doors to the West Chester community on November 14, 1930. With the emphasis on modernity and prosperity, the community had been anticipating such a grand theatre, "promising to fill a want long felt in this community, and to prove an attraction to those from far and near who are seeking the best in the way of entertainment" as described in a *Daily Local News* article published the day before the opening ⁽²⁾ during the second year of the Great Depression. This paper will trace a brief background of the theatre and attempt to explain the rumor about the grand theatre, and provide a small background of the motion picture industry to connect the national industry to West Chester.

For many years, a rumor has circulated in West Chester that the Warner Theatre was actually intended for Westchester, New York, and was built in West Chester by accident. This was thought to explain why such a grand theatre ended up in the relatively small borough of West Chester. When I found no sources in West Chester that confirmed the truth of this rumor, I contacted the Westchester County (New York) Historical Society. Chris Maranaro, an employee of the society, informed me that he was not aware of any such rumor, and that there was no city or town called Westchester in New York at that time, only a county. There was an earlier town in the area called named West Chester, but it was incorporated into the borough of Queens in the late 19th century, almost fifty years before the West Chester Warner Theatre was built in Pennsylvania.⁽³⁾

To understand the beginnings of the Warner Theater, it is first necessary to understand the motion picture industry in the years prior to the Great Depression. The Warner Theatre was built during a time nicknamed "The Golden Age of Cinema" when the motion picture industry functioned as a vertically integrated industry "controlling the three major facets of the motion picture industry of production, distribution and exhibition".(4). In that system, there were five major studios that emerged as the big players during this time--Warner Brothers, Loew's, Paramount, RKO and Twentieth Century Fox.(5)

The Warner Brothers studio became part of the Big Five with their focus on sound through the use of the Vitaphone sound equipment produced and installed by Western Electric.(6) The first sound movie played on August 26, 1926: a silent film, *Don Juan*, that had a musical score set to it. Next, the Warner Brothers produced *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson, which included spoken lines at different parts of the film in 1927. The incorporation of sound propelled Warner Brothers to the top of the motion picture industry and allowed them to expand their business into theatres and studio facilities. They purchased several theatre companies to expand their business, including the Stanley Company of America, which owned 250 theatres, to distribute the new Vitaphone films. That acquisition gave Warner Brothers theatres from coast to coast -- 700 theatres in total.(7)

The Warner Theatre in West Chester was part of an effort to expand their operations into new territory. The *Daily Local News* reported in 1929 that the "Stanley Company has recently been looking for a site to build their theatre in West Chester" and mentioned that the "owners of the sites have been holding out for a higher price."(8) On February 11, 1929 the *Daily Local News* reported the purchase of land on the southwest corner of High and Chestnut Streets by the Harrison Brothers of Berwyn for the purpose of erecting a theatre. The article also described the proposed building, which was expected to cost \$600,000 including \$20,000 worth of Vitaphone equipment and a \$35,000 organ. The organ was a key feature in the silent movie industry, and still a necessary part of the theatres



West Chester's Warner Theatre in 1930

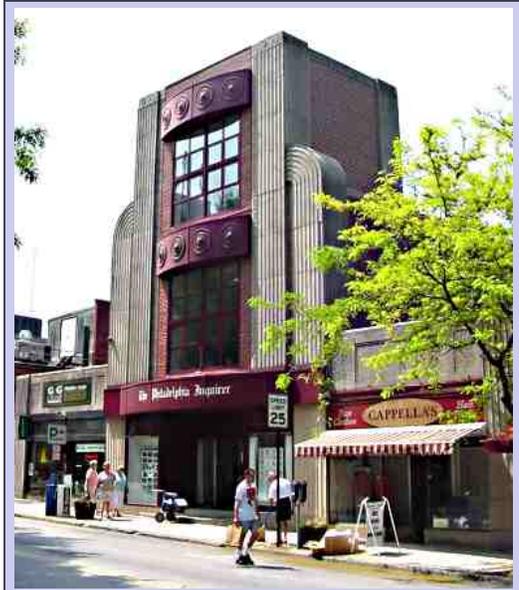


Interior of the theatre in 1930

during the transition from silent film, which utilized the organ, to the "talkie." The theatre was also expected to have a full vaudeville stage and a disappearing orchestra pit. According to the article, "work on the theatre was set to begin on the first of May and take approximately nine months to build."(9)

On June 27, 1929, four months later, the *Daily Local News* reported that the Stanley Company bought the land for \$140,000, \$20,000 higher than the original price negotiated by the Harrison Brothers. Construction was expected to cost \$700,000 for a theatre that could seat 2500 persons and would become, according to the Stanley Company, "the largest theatre between Lancaster and Philadelphia."(10) The land was purchased from the estate of Mrs. Francis Jacobs, who had used it for a stable and exercise grounds for her horses. The brick stable was the only building on the site at the time of purchase.

The new structure projected an air of prosperity in West Chester at the height of the Depression, and there was much local excitement about the new building. The September 1930 issue of *Bores & Strokes*, a company newsletter for the Schramm air compressor company of West Chester, contained a photo of the construction site with a Schramm machine situated in the middle of the steel skeleton.(11) Warner Brothers company representative Harry Gantz, reinforced the excitement in a speech to the Board of Trade at which he "assured the Board of Trade that his firm had every confidence in the stability and growth of West Chester."(12) Confidence in planning and an expectation of stability were helpful in a country feeling the effects of the depression, and a movie industry trade publication observed that "Warner Brothers' new theatre in West Chester, Pa., commands an important location in a current business development, and has been designed to harmonize and at the same time contrast, with the other building and minor elements of the projects."(13)



The remains of the theatre in 2004

The 1,650-seat Warner Theatre opened on November 14, 1930 with a full program that demonstrated all of the modern amenities available in the new theatre. Guests received a booklet, much like a modern day playbill, that included the program of the evening, articles about the theatre, Warner

Brothers, and the Art Deco architecture, as well as explanations of the new Vitaphone sound machines that were a part of the theatre. The author of the program gushed, "Not only is it (the Warner) the most modern and the most beautiful theatre in West Chester, but it is second to none among the community amusement places in the State of Pennsylvania. The Warner is the new pride of the progressive City of West Chester"(14).

The Inaugural Program listed nine items on the agenda for the opening evening. Following the "Star Spangled Banner," West Chester Burgess George J. Brinton delivered "Dedicatory Address" followed by a similar speech from the President of the Borough Council, J. Paul MacElree. Next, the audience saw the Warner "News of the Hour" followed by a *Looney Tunes* cartoon "The Booze Hangs High," a film called "Believe it or Not" by Robert L. Ripley, another film called "Excuse the Pardon" starring Ralph Morgan and Katherine Alexander. The night came to a climax with Davey Lee starring in the comedy "The Life of the Party." The program also listed advertisements and wishes for the theatre from the community.(15)

The day before the opening, the local newspaper ran articles on every detail about the theatre, including a large picture of the familiar "Warner" marquee sign. The newspaper also contained advertisements welcoming the new theatre and announcing each firm's involvement in the construction of the new movie palace. Interestingly enough, the advertisements show that the electrical work, plumbing, heating, ventilating and cooling were all completed by New York firms.(16) Two Philadelphia firms installed the seats, the carved glass and glass store fronts. Three local companies, the National Bank of Chester County and Trust Company, Philadelphia Electric Company, and Knox and Marshman, paid for congratulatory advertisements.

The use of sound was innovative and it helped retain audiences during the Depression. The *Daily Local* published articles on the new medium and the consequences of the change from silent pictures to "talkies."(17) All over the country, sound technology helped "stave off the Depression in the motion picture industry for well over a year,"(18) and overall attendance at films grew from 57,000,000 in 1926, the year when the first sound pictures were released, to more than 115,000,000 by 1930, according to the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America.(19)

Besides sound, the architectural design of the theatre was a product of its time. The Warner Theatre was built in the *Art Deco* style that was employed for only about two and a half years. The architects, C.W. and George Rapp, designed many *Art Deco* theatres in the eastern part of the United States,

including the Warner Theatre in West Chester. Their use of complex Art Deco ornamentation on traditional theatre designs created a strong sense of style that was shown by the similarities that existed between Warner Theatres in Erie, Pennsylvania and West Chester.(20)

The modern Warner Theatre in West Chester functioned until the early 1980s but was eventually closed despite many attempts to save the theatre. Parts of the building are gone, but the main structure still stands, currently housing several shops and the Philadelphia Inquirer offices.

Reference Notes

1. *Daily Local News* (November 25, 1930, 11).
2. *Daily Local News*, 13 Nov 1930, 1.
3. Telephone interview with Chris Marano of the Westchester, NY Historical Society, March 5, 2004.
4. Robert Stanley, *The Celluloid Empire* (New York: Hastings House, 1978), 50-74.
5. Tina Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 213-227.
6. Balio, *Ibid.*, 214.
7. Stanley, *Ibid.*, 57.
8. *Daily Local News* (January 11, 1929).
9. *Daily Local News* (February 11, 1929).
10. *Daily Local News* (June 27, 1929).
11. *Bores & Strokes* (West Chester, Schramm Inc., September 1930).
12. *Daily Local News* (November 15, 1930).
13. Arthur F. Adams, "A New Warner House that Follows the Modern Trend" in *Exhibitor's Herald-World* (December 20, 1930), reprinted in *Marquee, Journal of the Theatre Historical Society of America*, 31 (1999), 27-28.

14. "Warner Theatre Inaugural Program" (November 14, 1930), in CCHS clippings file "Warner Theatre File."
 15. Warner Theatre Inaugural Program, Ibid.
 16. *Daily Local News* (November 13, 1930), 12.
 17. *Daily Local News* (November 11, 1930), 11.
 18. Balio, Ibid., 214.
 19. *Daily Local News* (November 13, 1930), 11.
 20. Steve Lecvin, "Editor's Comments" in *Marquee, Journal of the Theatre Historical Society of America*, 31 (1999), 3.
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