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| Capitol Theater | **Capitol Theater** |

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20020808141332/http%3A/www.threadcity.com/capitol/pic1.htm)What do the Loomer, the Elite, the Scenic, the Bijou, the Gem , the Capitol, the Strand, and the Cameo, have in common? They were all Willimantic movie houses. Some were indeed "palaces," while others were unkindly referred to as "scratch house" or "flea pits."

Nevertheless, they offered entertainment for several generations of Willimantic residents, particularly before the advent of TV.

The city has many outstanding historic buildings, but one often overlooked is the old Capitol Cinema on Main Street. On first sight, it is a functional brick building, but for many years it was considered to be one of New England's premiere theaters.

The history of the Capitol Cinema reveals Willimantic's interesting relationship with the "movies" since the late 19th century. The $500,000 theater, a "Vaudeville and Movie Palace," opened to the public on Jan. 21, 1926, at 6:30p.m. Willimantic's original purpose-built cinema, the Gem had opened in 1912, but by 1926 it had become somewhat tarnished and was referred to as the "flea pit."

John R. Pickett was a central figure in the history of Willimantic movie houses. In 1929 he was lured away to the Capitol cinema, which by then was part of the Warner Brothers chain, where he remained manager until he retired in 1943. He died in 1945 at the age of 75. An active participant in Willmantic Democratic Party politics he was also well known as one of the organizers of the Willimantic Twilight Baseball League, and was a member of the Thread City Barbershop Quartet, which entertained audiences across the state during the 1920’s.

By 1924 the city’s two movie houses, the Scenic and the Gem were having to turn away customers, so a group of local businessmen, led by an ex-Willimantic Mayor, Charles A. Gates, decided to build, "the finest movie theater in eastern Connecticut." They formed the Capitol Theater Stock Corp., and hired as manager George A. Bartlett, a local man experienced in producing amateur dramatics. Bartlett engaged Charles Clinton Helmold’s eight piece orchestra to provide accompanying music for the silent pictures and vaudeville.

Helmold had arrived in Willimantic in 1900 and formed "Helmold’s Concert Orchestra" which provided music for Willimantic’s Loomer Opera House. The Loomer was built in 1879 and demolished in 1940, and stood on the new site now occupied by Nassiff’s, at the junction of Main and North Streets.

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20020808141332/http%3A/www.threadcity.com/capitol/pic2.htm)The Capitol was designed by a local architect, Archibald Sharpe, who had designed the Gem a dozen years earlier. Sharpe’s contemporary design consisted of pressed brick in straight lintel construction. He also included a copper marquee over the entrance. Over the marquee was a large perpendicular electric sign with a horizontal multi-colored house sign.

The theater’s lobby was described as a "long and artistically embellished affair that takes on the dignity of a salon with its marble staircase and low hanging bronze lighting fixtures." The staircase led to a promenade lounge, which ran the full length of the building’s Main Street frontage and led directly into the balcony. It was furnished "exquisitely" with divans, easy chairs and decorative lamps. At each end of the promenade lounge was a "gentlemen’s smoking room" and a "ladies" retiring room, replete with a steward and a matron.

The interior was also designed by a local man, Valentine L. Murphy of building contractors, Doyle and Murphy. Murphy’s plans ensured that every theater patron had an excellent view of the stage, no matter where they sat. The interior was decorated by another Willimantic resident, Michael Farell who based all the colors in his design on "nature." The ceiling was painted with autumn tints lined with green and gold, the walls, and the doors and casings were painted in a Spanish and Morroco leather effect, and the wall panels above that were tinted with foliage and old gold. The proscenium arch was decorated with a pale gold tint, intermixed with green and brown.

**The Capitol Cinema is pictured in 1927,
just 18 months after its opening**
[](https://web.archive.org/web/20020808141332/http%3A/www.threadcity.com/capitol/pic6.htm)

The front of the balcony, including the cornish and the molding was finished in "old glory," and the balcony panels were prairie brown with touches of green and geranium red.

The finish of the theater’s woodwork was defined as "novelty nog oak." The entrance doors were painted to give a copper effect, and the woodwork in the interior of the entrance was stained in an "antique" style.

More than four tons of paint were used. John Ashton, a local electrical contractor, wired the building. The plumbing was installed by Welch & McCarthy, another well known Willimantic company.

The Capitol Cinema held 1,224, with 800 leather seats on the orchestra floor and 400 veneer sears in the balcony, with four private boxes seating 24.

Portraits of film stars were painted on the walls. The 80 feet wide, 36 feet deep stage could "accommodate any road production entering New England." Underneath the stage were 12 dressing rooms and a chorus room, "fully equipped with modern conveniences." The arms of the seats bordering the aisles contained electric lights of small candlepower." Illuminated flower boxes were installed at each side of the stage.

The entire building project was supervised by Valentine Doyle, who created "an atmosphere of charm and relaxation in every nook and corner."

The opening night movie, or "photoplay" was Metro-Goldwin-Mayers’ "His Secretary" starring Norma Shearer. MGM had the contract to show only its movies at the Capitol. Patrons also enjoyed five vaudeville acts, including a unicycle troupe and comedians. All the vaudeville acts were, "embellished with special scenery and electrical effects."

Willimantic had previously experienced nothing like the Capitol Cinema’s opening night. More that 2,700 people packed into the first two houses that evening.

[](https://web.archive.org/web/20020808141332/http%3A/www.threadcity.com/capitol/pic3.htm)There were no reserved tickets, and hundreds of people ignored the night’s stormy weather, and packed into the theater’s foyer, waiting for the second house to begin. Others visited the town’s other two movie theaters, where there was standing room only at the Gem and Strand on the Capitol Cinema's opening night.

More than 4,500 people witnessed movies and vaudeville in Willimantic’s three theaters that evening. Automobiles were parked on both sides of Main Street from the American Thread mills up to Bridge Street.

The Capitol Cinema’s asbestos curtain rose at 6:50 p.m.. The velour curtains opened and Charles Gates, the president of the Capitol Theater Corporation, welcomed the large audience. Charles Helmold struck up the band. The first house’s program was repeated, and the second house left the theater at 12:30 a.m. on the following morning.

The Capitol abandoned its vaudeville shows in the early 1930s and concentrated on the new "soundies." The curtain came down for good on October 20, 1973, with little acclaim. The final movies shown were "Willie Wonka & the Chocolate Factory" for the matinee, and "Paper Moon," in the evening, ending a 47 year-long period residents of Willimantic and surrounding districts had access to one of the finest theaters "east of the river."

The Gem had closed in 1961. The Cameo Theater opened up in the Strand Theater building in 1958, and the Strand Theater itself closed in 1960. The Cameo continued in the Broad Street building until 1969. Until the Jillson Square Cinemas were built in the early 1980s, local residents traveled to Storrs or East Hartford to watch movies. The period of the multi-screen complexes had begun, and theaters like Willimantic’s historic Scenic Temple and the Gem Theater were no more.