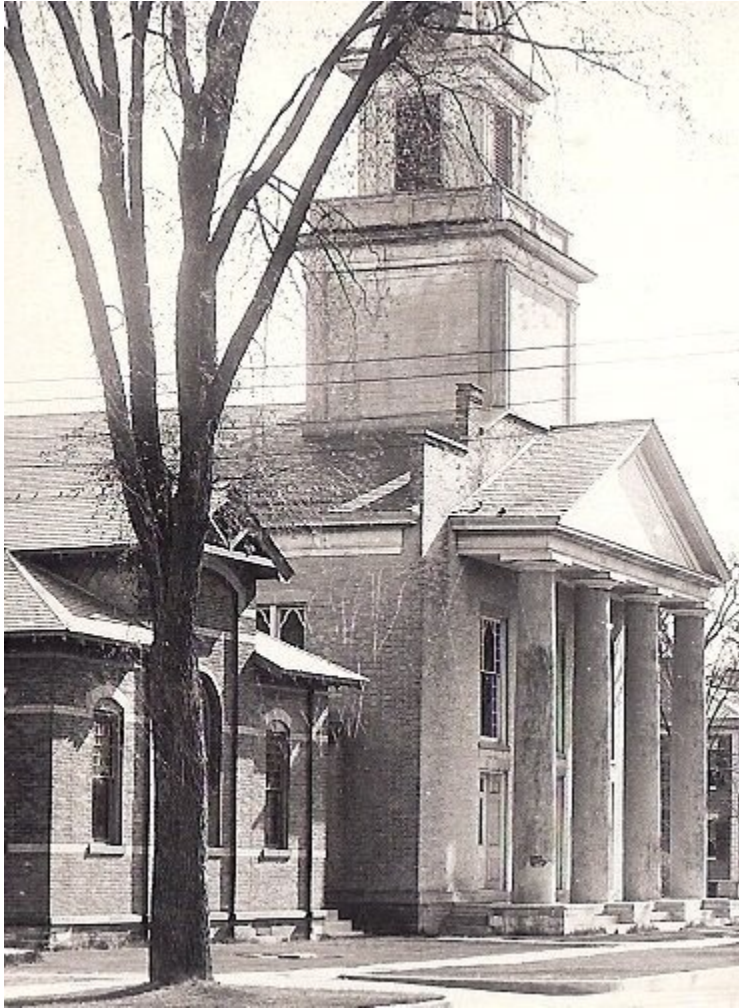


This History of Fort Salem Theater



Fort Salem Theater, a cornerstone of the Salem, New York community for over 50 years, stands as a testament to both history and artistic innovation. Nestled in the heart of the Salem's National Historic District, this iconic 53-year-old theater resides within a stunning structure that dates back to **1774**. The building's towering white columns and Greek Revival portico welcome visitors, while its tall steeple, set atop white marble steps, recalls the elegance and resilience of its past.

The journey of this historic building is as remarkable as the performances it hosts. Originally constructed to house the county's First Presbyterian Church, the building's early years were shaped by the tumult of the American Revolution. In **1777**, as British forces loomed, Patriot troops occupied the unfinished church, fortifying the structure as a stockade and barracks—giving rise to the name “Fort Salem.” Tragically, the building was burned by the opposition later that year. Despite two subsequent rebuilds, both structures succumbed to fire, and were thoughtfully rebuilt over time to the main building you see

today. Some charred timbers in the basement are testament to the building's history. In **1882** a chapel was added.

Fast forward to **1972**, and the building's future was transformed when *Judge William Drohan*, a New York City summer resident with a passion for theater, saw the potential of the space. After converting the altar into a stage, he set the foundation for what would become Fort Salem Theater. The theater's legacy was further solidified in **1979** when it was purchased by popular director and actor *Quentin C. Beaver*. Under his guidance, the theater became one of the Northeast's premier summer stock venues, known for its professional quality productions and family-friendly fare. The tradition of excellence continued with Kathy Beaver, who served as artistic director for five successful seasons. During the Beaver's era (known as the "summer stock" years), several Broadway and movie stars got their start, including *Connie Britton* (best known for "Spin City," "Friday Night Lights," "Nashville," and "American Horror Story"), *Casey Nicholaw* (Tony Award-winning director and choreographer, with Broadway credits that include "The Book of Mormon," "Aladdin," "Something Rotten!," "Mean Girls," and more), and *Tina Landau* (Broadway's "The Spongebob Musical," "Bells Are Ringing," and "Superior Donuts.")

In **2006**, Fort Salem Theater underwent a major renovation, with it's newest owner, *Jay Kerr*, transforming the space into a more modern and versatile venue. The former chapel became an elegant "Cabaret Room," with state-of-the-art lighting and sound, while the mainstage, redesigned by *David Pedimonte*, was fully renovated, complete with a new proscenium arch and stage. While much of the original church's charm remains, including a few of the 19th-century pews and stained glass windows, the mainstage seating was upgraded with chairs from the legendary Helen Hayes Theater on Broadway. Jay's popular "Singing Anchors" concerts featured Emmy Award-winning TV news anchors *Benita Zahn*, *Jerry Gretzinger*, and *Jessica Layton*.

In **2020**, amidst the global challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fort Salem Theater entered a new chapter under the ownership of *Kyle and Jared West*, who relocated from Texas to rejuvenate this beloved institution. Transitioning the theater to a nonprofit organization, the Wests breathed new life into the space. Their commitment to preserving the theater's legacy while fostering new artistic endeavors led to a triumphant reopening in June of **2021** with a sold-out run of *The Marvelous Wonderettes*. Today, Fort Salem Theater hosts a vibrant season of full-scale plays and musicals, along with concerts, cabarets, and community events from February through December. The theater provides a platform for artists of all ages and experience levels, with onstage and backstage opportunities for members of the community, working alongside local professionals, regional guest artists and Broadway guest stars, including *Brennyn Lark* ("Six," "Les Miserables"), *Nathan*

Lucrezio (“Cinderella,” “Aladdin,” “The Who’s Tommy,” “Diana: The Musical”), *Sarah Beth Pfeifer* (“The Lightning Thief”) and *Lisa Franklin* (“The Secret Garden” and “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” at Lincoln Center.)

Later in **2021**, the nearby Fort Salem Studio opened, offering an array of dance, fitness, and theater classes for students of all ages, from 3 to 73, and is also home to “The Susi Shoes Dancers” and “The Space Martial Arts Studio.”

Fort Salem Theater has since earned numerous accolades, including recognition as the “Best Theater in Washington County” and “Best Historic Venue” by the NYVT Media Awards. It has been featured in prominent news outlets, including a special feature in the iconic / ❤️NY campaign, solidifying its status as a cultural treasure in the region.

New plays and musicals that have been produced at Fort Salem Theater (since 2021) include “Beethoven: Live in Concert” by *Jad Jacob*, “this old haunt” by *Maggie Marie Rodgers, Rebecca Wahls, & SMJ*, “ICU | A Musical That Is Also A Play” by *Dan Costello*, “Been Bad” by *Sarah Zweighaft*, “Moving On” by *Jeremy Buechner*, “Freemont” by *Phoenix Pedroso*, “Nietzsche! The Musical” by *Kimerer LaMothe & Jeffrey Gee*, and “Corn: The Musical” by *Al Budde* and *Jay Kerr*, who collaborated on many other FST productions.