271# Florida Theater (Script by Peggy Macdonald)

The two-story Florida Theater was the main movie theater for white patrons in Gainesville for nearly 40 years before it was converted into a music and concert hall. The brick building was capable of seating 800 people.

When it opened in 1928, the Florida Theater showed one of the first talkies, “The Four Walls,” starring John Gilbert and Joan Crawford. It was also the first movie house in town with a “Vitaphone” and “Movietone” sound system that offered music and sound effects. Vaudeville troupes performed at the theatre in its heyday, along with Dave Brubeck and Melissa Manchester.

The Florida Theater closed in 1974. It reopened as the Great Southern Music Hall and hosted country and rock stars ranging from Willie Nelson to Tom Petty, as well as road shows such as “Jesus Christ Superstar.” In 1985, it was renovated as a performing arts center and then in 1990 the movie seats were returned and a dance floor was installed. The building’s Colonial Revival details include turned balusters, sunburst panels in arched windows and unfluted Corinthian columns, as well as stone and brick coining.

Today, Gainesville entrepreneur Bill Bryson, owner of a variety of creative enterprises such as Crane Ramen and The Covered Dish, is transforming the Florida Theater into a venue for local and national musical acts with the goal of putting Gainesville back on the map as a stop for touring musical acts.