

**BOOKER T. THEATER**, 116 W. Broad St, 1935. Renovated from the Strand Theater after a fire in 1926, the Booker T. opened in 1933.

musicians perform at the Booker T., and the Delta Rhythm Boys, too. Dr. Foster was 13 when he saw a dancer performing on stage at the Booker T., Etta Moton, who subsequently had a long career as a dancer and singer. Young Francis was entranced and, determined to get her autograph, waited nervously behind the theater by the milk bottle building. He had never seen a woman with make up and décolletage in person, and he was speechless as she wrote "To Francis Foster, a very fine young man" in his book. He trailed a block behind her, totally fascinated, as she walked to the home of some friends on Clay Street, and he sat on the steps of the library several hours, then followed a block behind her as she returned to the theater for her next performance.<sup>28</sup>

Lichtman assumed control of the Hippodrome and Globe theaters in Jackson Ward. On December 31, 1936, Lichtman took over the long-closed Little Theater next door to the Booker T. to open the Maggie Walker Theater. A citywide contest was held to name the new movie

house, and Mrs. Mattie Booker won a \$25 dollar prize for suggesting the winning entry.

Lichtman expanded his chain further by building a new facility in the Church Hill neighborhood, the 350-seat Robinson Theater, which opened at 29<sup>th</sup> and Q streets on September 29, 1937. It was named in honor of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson; a plaque beside the entrance honored "The World's Greatest Tap Dancer." A *Richmond Planet* article described the new theater's exterior as "cream California stucco with black alberene base, trimmed in a modern design of midnight blue. The theater front will be illuminated at night by a dazzling neon marquee. The interior decoration is strictly in the modern motif, the side wall treatment being four shades of rust with a background of peach."<sup>29</sup> Projection, sound and heating equipment were pronounced the most modern available. The gala opening featured executives from Lichtman Theaters, a delegation from the Southeastern Federation of the National Association of Colored



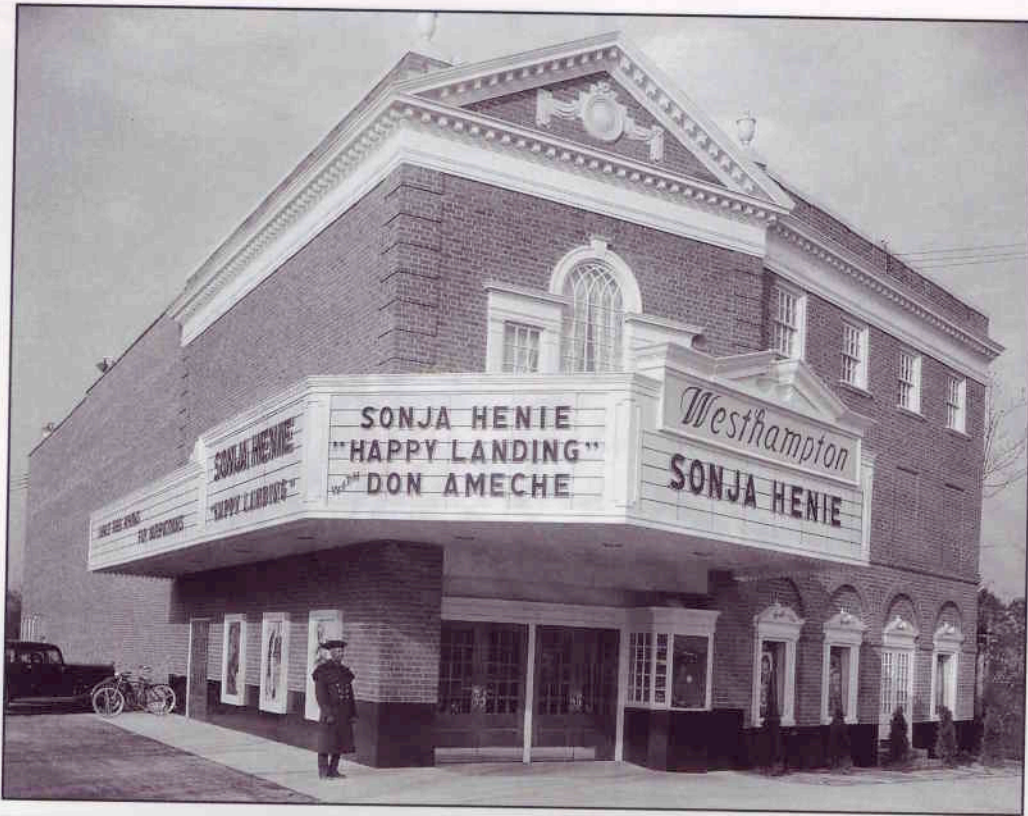
**MAGGIE WALKER THEATER**, 118 W. Broad St, 1943. *The Maggie Walker Theater opened in the old Little Theater building next door in 1936.*

Women headed by president Ora Brown Stokes, Mayor Bright, and radio station WRTD, which broadcast the ceremonies across the area. The guest of honor was to have been Bill Robinson himself, but at the last minute he was called back to California on business, and so Fredi Washington, Robinson's co-star in the theater's opening film, *One Mile From Heaven*, appeared in person. Bojangles himself must have shown up soon afterwards for a second ceremony. Former State Delegate James Christian, Jr., who was doorman and assistant manager of the Robinson when it opened, remembers, "If you look today, in front of that building you'll see his footprint in that sidewalk. We left that section out until he arrived that night and they poured concrete in that night and he put his footprint in it."

Christian recalled the important role the Robinson played in the lives of Church Hill's children: "The theater was a social institution for the neighborhood. It certainly was a help to the youngsters in the community.

We sponsored a lot of talent shows. They would display their talents and we had prizes for them, for example. It became really a community interest especially on Saturday, so we had something going on for the youngsters all day on Saturday."<sup>30</sup>

Former governor Douglas Wilder recalled the Robinson Theater as part of the vibrant Church Hill community of his youth. Within a three-block radius of Wilder's home there were several churches, a hardware store, print shop, sawmill, laundry, candy store, bakery, drycleaner, butcher, barbershop, pool hall, drugstores and restaurants. Wilder commented that the neighborhood seemed to him to be a large, self-sufficient city. "Another thing that impressed me was the Robinson Theater. [Manager] George Clarke would stand out there with a cigar in his mouth and I would think he was a wealthy man. Those were the impressions of a child. People would go to the theater like they were going to a premiere on Broadway."<sup>31</sup> Dr. Jean Harris Ellis remem-



**WESTHAMPTON THEATER**, 5706 Grove Ave, 1938. *The most elegant suburban theater in Richmond, located in the West End, the Westhampton initially drew speculation from skeptics that no one would drive so far out of town to go to the movies.*

bered the Robinson as “the principal source of recreation for the whole community. One could go to the movie and on Saturdays, all of us young people [were] off to watch the westerns.” The Robinson Drug store, on another corner, was open late at night and was the place to go to get ice cream after a show.<sup>32</sup>

Carolyn Brown recalls the excitement she and her classmates felt when the word flew around school that a prominent African-American star, such as Lena Horne or Cab Calloway or Duke Ellington, was going to perform in an upcoming feature film at the Robinson Theater. The opportunity to see blacks on screen in Hollywood films was rare and thus precious. Occasionally a film created by a black filmmaker would be shown, and this was also greeted with great anticipation by the schoolchildren. Director Oscar Michaux’s films were popular in Richmond in the 1920s and 1930s. The Lichtman movie theaters also featured performers live on stage – singers, dancers, jazz bands, comedians, and amateur talent shows; there was always something of great interest going on at the Robinson, Booker T., Walker, Lincoln, Hippodrome and Globe theaters.<sup>33</sup>

### Special Events and Publicity Stunts

The theater manager’s goal was to keep his movie house’s name in the public eye as often as possible. Some of the best publicity-getters were special in-person appearances by film stars, but Hollywood was a long trip from Richmond in the days of travel by train. Nevertheless, Richmond had some celebrity sightings.

Freeman Gosden, co-star of the radio comedy series “Amos and Andy,” was a Richmond-born celebrity. When an “Amos and Andy” movie was released in 1933, the Byrd Theater booked it, and the stars (Gosden and Charles Correll) made personal appearances on stage during the intermission between showings. In another celebrity sighting at Christmas, 1934, “Pete,” the canine star of the “Our Gang” comedies, was in town. The ten-year veteran of motion pictures, who had also played an important role in Harold Lloyd’s silent comedy *The Freshman*, appeared with his trainer Harry Lugenay, in a comedy skit on the vaudeville bill at the Lyric Theater for a week’s engagement.<sup>34</sup>

On September 7, 1939, the legendary Mary Pickford (the biggest star of silent films and still the social leader of Hollywood) passed through Richmond on her way