## A history of the Lyons Madison Theater

14 Lincoln Place, Madison, New Jersey



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NOTE: This report was prepared during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and as such most archives were inaccessible.



Aerial image looking North, source Google Earth



Aerial 3D image looking North, source Google Earth

The Madison Lyons Theater, 14 Lincoln Place Madison, New Jersey has had a long history, and may be the last motion picture theater to operate in the borough now that the culture of movie going has changed in this 21<sup>st</sup> century age of online streaming. The Lyons Theater was not the first movie house in Madison, nor is it the last theater building standing.

A short 14 years after Edison's inaugural Vitascope's theatrical exhibition, in 1896, the first motion picture theater opened in Madison on July 2, 1910. An advertisement placed in *The Madison Eagle* newspaper on July 1<sup>st</sup> announced that the Royal Theatre located on Central Avenue "near new school building" would have its "grand opening" with "high class moving pictures," and an admission of ten cents. The manager was Samuel F. Pile, and later ads say the theatre was "next to the new high school." (A school still stands on that site today.) It is said that the Royal Theatre was short lived, and this is attested by the fact that the last advertisement for the theater ran in the *The Madison Eagle* on September 20, 1910. No vestige of this theater building, or actual location has been found.

On March 10, 1911 an article in the *The Madison Eagle* revealed that Charles Granato would soon open a motion picture theater on Main Street, and that when the fire committee made its final inspection the license for operation would be granted.<sup>4</sup> On March 17, 1911, The Madison Electric Theatre, located at 75 Main Street, placed an advertisement in *The Madison* Eagle that declared "Watch front of theatre for Saturday's announcement" for the first show.<sup>5</sup> The theater is said to have been in operation for 14 years, with "at least a half-dozen different owners." When The Madison Electric Theatre closed the building became the Cocino Garage (an automobile repair shop).<sup>6</sup> Today, the former Madison Electric Theatre building, located at today's 73 Main Street, remains largely unchanged in footprint and overall form from its days as a place to view motion pictures.

On September 22, 1911, *The Madison Eagle* reported that Edward F. Frenz was going to erect a "modern moving picture theater" opposite the fire department. The building was to be brick, "30 x 85" feet in size, and was designed by architect George E. Teets, and the projected cost was \$6,000.<sup>7</sup> The March 15, 1912 edition of *The Madison Eagle* revealed that the theater operators were planning to open on May 1<sup>st</sup>, and that the performances were to be "strictly high

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XXX, Number 26, July 1, 1910, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244338542/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XXX, Number 30, July 15, 1910, Pages 5 & 8. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244339255 and https://www.newspapers.com/image/244339302

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Electric Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*, website by Cinema Treasures, LLC. Accessed from: http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/54824

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> *The Madison Eagle*, Volume XXXI, Number 41, March 10, 1911, Page 4. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244330521

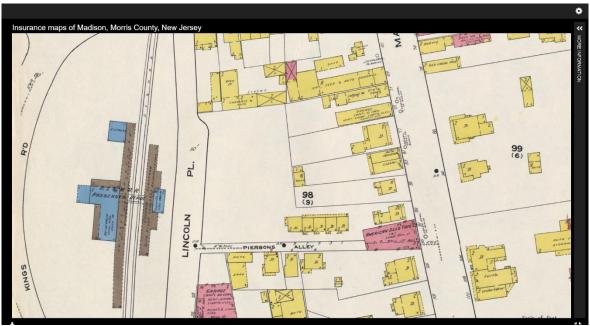
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> *The Madison Eagle,* Volume XXXI, Number 42, March 17, 1911, Page 4. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244330791

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Electric Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*, website by Cinema Treasures, LLC. Accessed from: http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/54824

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> *The Madison Eagle,* Volume XXXII, Number 17, March 17, 1911, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244337429/

class." Finally on May 24, 1912 an advertisement was placed in the *The Madison Eagle* announcing the grand opening of the "Savoy Theatre" on Memorial Day May 30<sup>th.9</sup> On June 12, 1920 the name was changed from the Savoy Theatre to the Liberty Theatre. The theater closed on November 14, 1925 – just 29 days after the Lyons Theater opened. Today the front third of the Savoy/Liberty Theatre building still stands at 21 Central Avenue, with the façade largely intact as it was shown in a 1924 photo.

The August 29, 1924 edition of *The Madison Eagle* ran an article stating that James J. Lyons, of Morristown, purchased the entire Harry B. Green tract "near Gruver's Garage" and "the American House" to build a "\$150,000 moving picture theatre for Lincoln Place." The new theater was to be modeled after the Lyons theater in Morristown (which he owned) and the Rialto theater in Westfield. Hyman Rosensohn, of Newark, was hired to be the architect, and the proposed building was planned to be 137 feet in depth and have a seating capacity of 1,200. Three stores at the street front were also to be part of the building. Lyons is quoted to say that he chose the location because of the abundance of parking, as he expected the theater to draw patrons from nearby towns. In addition to the theater there were plans to build an apartment house of the "California type," once the theater was completed. <sup>11</sup>



1921 Sanborn map of Madison showing the property (immediately north of Piersons Alley) purchased by James J. Lyons for his theater on Lincoln Place

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XXXIII, Number 11, March 15, 1912, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244329194/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> *The Madison Eagle*, Volume XXXIII, Number 11, May 24, 1912, Page 2. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244331594

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Liberty Theatre, *Cinema Treasures*, website by Cinema Treasures, LLC. Accessed from: http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/20434

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLIV, Number 35, August 29, 1924, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244355491/

The front page of *The Madison Eagle* on September 12, 1924 declared "Theatre War Threatening Madison With Two To Build." The article stated that James J. Lyons had plans ready for a "modern playhouse" and that Benjamin Kemelhor received a permit for a theater at 35-37-39 Main Street "to cost \$120,000." The newspaper quoted Lyons as saying that the preliminary plans for his theater had been approved and that construction would begin in four to six weeks (early November). In addition, he said that he would build the theater before making an application to obtain the required license. Lyons was emphatic saying "I mean business and my theatre will be a credit to Madison." <sup>12</sup>

## THEATRE WAR THREATENING MADISON WITH TWO TO BUILD

September 12, 1924 headline from The Madison Eagle newspaper

"Work Started On New Lyons Theatre" was the headline on page one of the December 5, 1924 edition of *The Madison Eagle*. The newspaper reported that James J. Lyons was ahead in the "so-called theatre race." Benjamin Kemelhor was quoted regarding his plans to build a theater on Main Street, that the plans were "in abeyance at least until the new year." (All indications are that Benjamin Kemelhor never began construction on his proposed theater, because of issues with investors.) The construction of the Lyons theater was described as of brick, hollow tile, and concrete. The dimensions of the building were noted to be "70 feet on the street front and 137 feet deep," and that the work was being performed by the Lyons Construction Company of Morristown. The stage was described as such to allow the presentation of "moving pictures, vaudeville, or dramatic productions and programs the equal to those shown in any suburban town." Mr. Lyons was noted as saying that he "thinks that Madison is to be one of the biggest of the commuting towns and feels that he is investing in an advantageously convenient location." <sup>13</sup>

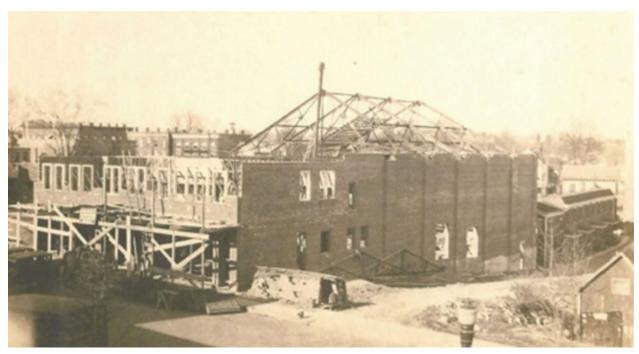
In April of 1925 plans for the theater's electric service went to the Borough's water and light committee. On May 1, 1925 *The Madison Eagle* reported that the expected opening of the new theater would be August 1<sup>st</sup>, and that the building is "fireproof throughout," in additions it was noted that the organ was going to cost \$10,000. In the late spring and summer of 1925 construction on the Lyon's Theater was progressing at a rapid pace. James J. Lyons was most assuredly looking forward to the grand opening as were the people of Madison.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLIV, Number 37, September 12, 1924, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244355763/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLIV, Number 49, December 5, 1924, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244358043/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 17, April 24, 1925, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244352028/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> *The Madison Eagle*, Volume XLV, Number 18, May 1, 1925, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244352189/



Lyons Madison Theater during construction in 1925

With the anticipation of the new theater opening a headline in *The Madison Eagle*, on August 7, 1925, announced that the "Lyons' Madison Theatre Now Nearing Completion." The article reported that the plasterers and carpenters were beginning the finishing touches on what was described as "Lyons' beautiful new movie theatre." At that time, the white coat of plaster was completed, the heating system was being installed, and the carpenters were about to start the finish woodwork. It was expected that the pipe organ installation would start in a few days, and that the seats would be delivered shortly. The reporter described "spacious offices and store rooms" in the front of the building, and that on either side of the lobby there were "comfortable retiring and smoking rooms for ladies and gentlemen." The lighting was described as the "most modern obtainable" with "an immense dome in the center of the ceiling." In addition, "side lights will also be installed." The ventilation system was described as "guaranteed to keep the theatre comfortable at all times." Although no opening date was set, the newspaper expected that the opening would be "after the first of September." 16

On September 4, 1925 *The Madison Eagle*, reported that a new electric conduit designed to carry the entire electric supply needs for the Lyons theater was being laid in "what is known as Pierson's Lane." The newspaper said that the "new movie house" was nearing completion, although another month will be necessary to add the finishing touches."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 32, August 7, 1925, Page 4. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244354870

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 36, September 4, 1925, Page 7. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244355495/

The anticipation was really building for the opening of the new theater, and on September 25, 1925 *The Madison Eagle* ran a frontpage headline stating "New Lyons Theatre Nearly Completed," with the subhead declaring "Opening Date of Lyons Madison Theatre Set as Columbus Day." The article noted that even though James Lyons of Morristown was the owner, the theater would be leased for "twenty years by the F. & S. Amusement Co." The company was said to operate theaters in Orange, Montclair, Newark, Roseville, and Belmar. The newspaper also revealed that the managers would be F. & S. employees; Henry P. Seely of Morristown, and Frederick W. Faulkner of Montclair. The theater with a seating capacity of 1,000 would not have a balcony, but rather there was to be an "orchestra section" and a section of "ascending seats which will be known as the stadium."

The workmen were noted to have removed the scaffolding and taken up the [protective] floor covering. The nearly finished theater was described as "beautifully decorated" with "marble and frescoes." The marble work was performed by a marble company from New York, and the frescoes were made by Fred Horsefield of Morristown. The reporter stated that that the stage was adorned with white pillars, and that "beautiful painted and bronzed plates surround a circle of dome effect in the ceiling." The "semi-dome" in the ceiling was further described as being "painted sky-blue and filled with stars."

The seats were described as the "most up-to-date and comfortable of any theatre seats." Draperies for the theater were being supplied by H. Shultz Co. of Newark and were noted to be "tasty." The lobby was characterized as "very attractive," and that a "modern" store would be on either side of the main entrance. Seven offices were said to be on the second floor – although

no leases were yet made for the stores and offices at the time.

An organ was made by the Morton Organ Company of California, this "latest type" theater model organ and was said to have "a special harp attachment." The Morton Organ Company was the second largest producer of theatre pipe organs in the United States. The firm produced hundreds of organs for theaters and churches in all fortyeight contiguous states. <sup>19</sup>

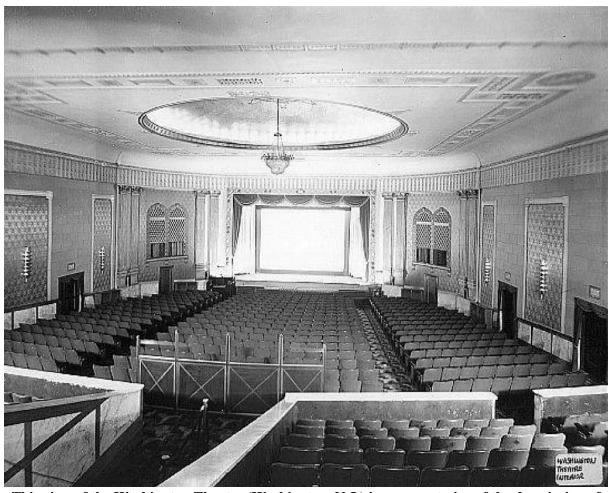


**Example of a Morton Theater Organ** 

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 39, September 25, 1925, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244355795/and https://www.newspapers.com/image/244355929

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> The Robert Morton Organ Company. Accessed from: http://www.robertmorton.org/



This view of the Washington Theatre (Washington, N.J.) is representative of the description of the Lyons Theater of Madison

On October 9, 1925, *The Madison Eagle* announced that the new Lyons Madison theatre would be opening on Wednesday (October 14<sup>th</sup>) with a "first run picture." (The theater would in fact open on Friday October 16<sup>th</sup>.) The newspaper also reported that almost all the seats have been installed, and that the draperies were yet to be hung (although they we expected to be in place for the opening). In anticipation of drawing crowds the "Lyons New Madison" theater placed an advertisement in the October 16, 1925 edition of *The Madison Eagle* announcing "opening tonight." Describing itself as "Morris County's finest theatre," the opening night feature film was to be "The Pony Express" staring Ernest Torrence, Wallace, and Betty Compson. There were to be three shows per night (7, 8, and 9 pm), with admission being, adults 40 cents (for the orchestra seats), 30 cents (for the stadium seats), and for children 25 cents. For those who wanted to call the theater, the phone number was "Madison.600."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 41, October 9, 1925, Page 6. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244356132

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 42, October 16, 1925, Page 2. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244356230



Opening night advertisement in the October 16, 1925 The Madison Eagle

After much positive press in *The Madison Eagle* concerning the anticipated opening of the Lyons New Madison theater, the newspaper ran a negative article (more akin to an opinion piece) on October 23, 1925, decrying the name of the theater. The writer wrote that "it is unfortunate that the name of the newly opened theatre on Lincoln place could not be a trifle more distinctive than the 'Lyons New Madison' theatre." The writer felt that since the theater was built for the residents of Madison the name should not lead to confusion with the name "Lyons," as that name was always associated with the sister theater owned by James Lyons in Morristown. The writer stated that the confusion was noted as both the Morristown Lyons theater and the Madison Lyons theater were showing the "Ten Commandments." The newspaper recommended that the name "Lyons" be dropped, and the theater simply be called the "the Madison Theatre."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 43, October 16, 1925, Page 6. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244356417/

The theater responded to the article by inserting a disclaimer at the bottom of the advertisement placed in the newspaper's next edition – that stated – "This theatre is not connected with any other under the name Lyons. It is in a class by itself and operated by the same management as the Capitol, Newark; Strand, East Orange; Claridge, Montclair and others." The newspaper chose to ignore the name "Lyons" when speaking of the theater, and in its November 27, 1925 edition the theater was called "the New Madison theatre" in an article reporting that the theater would be showing "Little Annie Rooney, with the world's sweetheart, Mary Pickford." This was in spite of the fact that the name "Lyons" was carved in stone on the front of the theater.



Name "Lyons Madison Theatre" with construction date carved in stone

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 44, October 30, 1925, Page 8. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244356618/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLV, Number 48, November 27, 1925, Page 9. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244357364/



Circa late 1920s-1930s view of "Lyon's Madison" theater Note the Fred Miller Real Estate office (on left with awning) and the Yellow Cab office (on right)

On June 3, 1927, *The Madison Eagle* reported that the Lyons Madison theater was now under the management of Roth Amusement Enterprises. The company, run by I. A. Roth and his brother Harry, operated eight theaters, located in Morristown; Summit; Maplewood; and Yonkers, New York. When the announcement of the new management was "flashed on the screen" the audience broke out in a "round of applause." The newspaper noted that "Mr. Roth" announced that beginning on June 16<sup>th</sup> a regular feature of the theater would be "opportunity night" where amateur talent would have a chance to perform. Although, the Roth brothers were the new managers the name of the theater in its advertising remained as "Lyon's Madison."

In the winter of 1929 RCA photophone electricians, engineers, and acoustical experts were working behind the scenes (so as to not shut down the theater) to install the required equipment for motion pictures that at the time were described as "talkies." According to *The Madison Eagle* the equipment was "the latest system of sound reproduction." And the outstanding features of the system were "remarkable naturalness of music and speech." The audience was to witness "synchronization of action and speech" with a "wider range of sound effects."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLVII, Number 22, June 3, 1927, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244362350/?terms=Roth%2BLyons%2BMadison%2BTheatre <sup>26</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume XLVIII, Number 25, June 21, 1929, Page 8. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244364874/?terms=Lyons%2BMadison%2BTheatre

James J. Lyons died intestate in November 1931, and as part of settling the estate the theater he built in Madison was scheduled to be auctioned on October 10, 1932. The liquidation of the estate for the heirs was being performed under the supervision of the Morris County Orphans' Court. Later, in December of 1932, the manager of the theater, Albert J. O'Neill appeared before the Borough Council to request that the theater be allowed to open on Sundays. The Borough Council, after the new year, approved the request.

On December 1, 1933, *The Madison Eagle* reported that Madison's only theater was changing its name. Known as the "Lyons Madison" since it opened in 1925, it would know be known as "Roth's Madison." By April 15, 1937, Dick's Lunch was operating in one of the theater's storefront locations, the establishment offered service "day or night." Later, in

December 1937, John Smozanek manager of the Madison Theatre announced that a new Western Electric sound system, a new projector, new lighting, and a new screen had been installed. According to *The Madison Eagle* the improvements cost \$10,000. The newspaper reported that theater patrons "blinked in gratitude surprise." 32



1937 Advertisement for Dick's Lunch

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume LI, Number 38, September 16, 1932, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244500542/?terms=Lyons%2BMadison%2BTheatre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Information relating to the results of the auction were not able to be located.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume LI, Number 51, December 16, 1932, Page 9. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244501641/?terms=Lyons%2BMadison%2BTheatre <sup>30</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume LII, Number 48, December 1, 1933, Page 6. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244505537/?terms=Lyons%2BMadison%2BTheatre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> *The Madison Eagle*, Volume LVI, Number 15, April 15, 1937, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244368891

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> *The Madison Eagle*, Volume LVI, Number 49, December 9, 1937, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244373407/?terms=Madison%2Btheatre

On July 28, 1938, *The Madison Eagle* reported the exterior of the theater was painted blue and white, new carpet was installed in the lobby, and throughout the theater. In the lobby and the ladies' lounge "new modernistic furniture" was placed for use of the patrons. To assist with the sound quality, "enormous drapes" were hung on the walls at the back of the stage. <sup>33</sup>

In 1948, the Rose City Taxi company was operating out of one of the storefronts in the theater building. The company was operated by J. & A. Filippone and George Scinto, Jr. 34 Three years later, in 1951, Myra Witt was operating a dance studio out of one of the storefronts. 35



**Rose City Taxi Advertisement** 

In July 1954, *The Madison Eagle* reported that a Cinamascope system was installed in the theater. As part of the improvement a panoramic screen was installed, along with new projection equipment.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume LVII, Number 30, July 28, 1938, Page 2. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244361631/?terms=Madison%2Btheatre

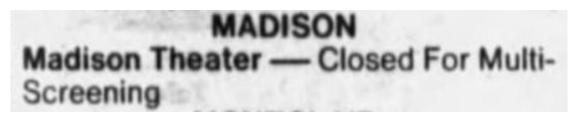
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume LXVI, Number 8, February 19, 1949, Page 10. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244359112/?terms=Madison%2Btheatre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume LXIX, Number 35, August 30, 1951, Page 12. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244392456/?terms=Madison%2Btheatre

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume LXXII, Number 29, July 22, 1954, Page 14. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244381111/?terms=Madison%2Btheatre

From the mid-1950s through 1970s the Madison Theater (as it was commonly known) was operated as a typical run of the mill small American town theater. Not much happened during this time, and as was often the case theater operators would run less than first run feature films. This is attested by a letter to the editor of the *Madison-Florham Park Eagle* which was published on August 12, 1976. The writer expressed "I would like to thank the Madison Theater for lowering their prices to go see a movie. I would also like to thank them for getting more popular movies. Most of the movies that have played there before I had never heard of or had seen two years ago at neighboring theaters. I think it is a great improvement." The stature of the Lyons' theater, once described as "Morris County's finest theatre," continued to diminish, and on March 20, 1980 a self-described "kid" wrote a letter to the editor of the *Madison-Florham Park Eagle* that sadly said "The Madison Theater always has R-rated movies and we kids don't like this. We want to go to the movies and I hope the play PG movies for us to see." "

On Sunday, November 29,1981 at 8:30 pm the Madison Theater featured the film "Kentucky Fried Movie" – this was the last time the theater would play a movie on a single large screen.<sup>39</sup> On December 4, 1981 the movie timetable published in the *Daily Record* of Morristown noted that the Madison Theater was "closed for renovations." Later, on Friday December 11, 1981, the *Daily Record* published its movie timetable that noted the Madison Theater was "closed for multi-screening" (obviously the single large theater was being divided up into a number of small theater screening spaces).<sup>41</sup>



Daily Record newspaper movie timetable for December 11, 1981

The Madison Theater reopened on December 18, 1981 as a tri-screen theater showing "Buddy," "Pennies From Heaven," and "Modern Problems." The renovations to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Madison-Florham Park Eagle, Volume 95, Number 32, August 12, 1976, Page 4. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244324354/?terms=Madison%2Btheater

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Madison-Florham Park Eagle, Volume 98, Number 12, March 20, 1980, Page 29. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244393815/?terms=Madison%2Btheater

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 82, Number 142, November 29, 1981, Page 49. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/253806557

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 82, Number 147, December 4, 1981, Page 49. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/253763585/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 82, Number 154, December 4, 1981, Page 51. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/253774933

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 82, Number 161, December 4, 1981, Page 47. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/253785449/

theater were performed rather quickly, and as a result – the grandeur of the once proud Lyons Madison Theatre was lost.

On Thursday September 4, 1986, the *Daily Record* newspaper published a page one article with the headline "End of the reel for 4 movie theaters." The article started off stating "movies will play for the final time tonight in downtown theaters in Morristown, Madison, and Summit." Norman J. Schonfeld, president of the Wood Theater Group, owner of what was then called the "Madison Triplex" declined to comment on why the theaters were closing, though in a statement by the company the closings were to precede "the eventual sale of these properties." The Wood Theater Group purchased the Madison Theater in 1976. A letter to the editor of *The Madison Eagle* on September 25, 1986 stated "OK, so the Madison Theater is folding – continuous operation since 1925 – no matter; it long-ago ceased to be a fun place, what with its cramped and ill-kept triplex cubicles, video games and vegetable oil instead of butter on the popcorn," but the writer went on and called for a movement to "restore the place to is former glory."

A follow up letter to the editor of *The Madison Eagle* on October 2, 1986, by Joseph M. Gillis, applauded the sentiment of the September 25<sup>th</sup> letter. Mr. Gillis recounted how in 1929, at age 13, he worked for the theater "running errands and billposting." Later he was an usher and part-time ticket taker. Mr. Gillis went on to say the multiplex alterations could be removed, and thus uncover "the beautiful dome over the orchestra section" that when properly lit is "beautiful with gold stars gleaming on its ceiling." He also said that the "winch and cable which held the large chandelier is still in the attic," although the original chandelier had been previously removed. Speaking of the exterior, he went on to say "originally, the theater had a beautiful marquee which read, 'Lyons Madison,' with flashing lights going around it," and that "it was taken down during the war years." (A study of period and modern photographs indicates that only the façade of the marquee was altered, and that elements of the original marquee are still extant. A search in the local papers for an article about the removal of the marquee façade alteration proved fruitless.) Mr. Gillis also noted that there was a store on each side (of the main entrance) "one was Dick's Lunch and the other White Bros. Taxi" both of which "were ripped out to enlarge the lobby." In addition, Mr. Gillis stated that the organ was sold to a church in Florham Park "in the late 1940s." A rally to save the theater was planned for October 25, 1986, Jack Krug was the main organizer, and the intent was to simply save the theater. 46

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 87, Number 72, September 4, 1986, Page 1. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/254686648/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume 104, Number 39, September 25, 1986, Page 2. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244398546/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume 104, Number 40, October 2, 1986, Page 2. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244398897/?terms=marquee

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> The Madison Eagle, Volume 104, Number 43, October 23, 1986, Page 5. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/244400253/

On Thursday, October 29, 1987 an auction was held at the Maison Theater – the item to be auctioned – was the theater itself. The *Daily Record* newspaper reported that a group of about 30 potential buyers and spectators were in attendance. The Louis Traiman Auction Company was hired to manage the sale of the 62-year old theater. The crowd gathered under the marquee, and bidding began slowly, until the auctioneer cajoled a bidder to make a bid of \$400,000,



Daily Record newspaper photograph of the 1987 auction held outside the Madison Theater

eventually the price rose to \$600,000, where it stalled. Norman J. Schonfeld, president of the Wood Theater Group, owner of the theater and auctioneer, Douglas Clemens conferred – and the auction was ended. Mr. Schonfeld was quoted by the *Daily Record* as saying "we decided that the property was worth much more than what was offered," and that "it will remain on the market until we find a buyer."

On September 2, 1988, the *Daily Record* newspaper reported that the Madison Theater was scheduled to reopen later that month. Two years after closing the theater, Norman J. Schonfeld leased the theater to a "Prospect Park businessman." The new lessee was said he intended to show "first-run movies." Jesse Sayegh the new operator was quoted as saying he is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 88, Number 128, October 30, 1987, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/254853040/

cleaning the theater for an anticipated opening between September 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>. Between April 22, 1994 and May 20, 1994 the center orchestra section of the theater was divided down the middle thus making the "triplex" theater into a quad theater, 49 the theater would then be known as Cinema 4.

The October 22, 1997 edition of the *Daily Record* newspaper published an article that

announced that Clearview Cinema Group, Inc. was buying "two large Morris County movie theaters from Roxbury based Nelson Ferman Theaters, Inc." One of those theaters was Cinema 4 in Madison. The company was looking forward to operation by the "holiday season, traditionally a popular time to see movies."50



Madison Cinema 4, August 14, 1998 Daily Record newspaper photo

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> *Daily Record,* Morristown, Volume 1, Number 283, September 2, 1988, Page 3. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/254858638/?terms=madison%2Btheater%2Breopens

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 7, Number 149, April 22, 1994, Page 33. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/254951161/, and Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 7, Number 177, May 20, 1994, Page 37. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/255257301/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> *Daily Record,* Morristown, Volume 10, Number 332, October 22, 1997, Page 17. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/255674099/

On August 14, 1998, the *Daily Record* newspaper reported that the Cablevision Systems Corp. was buying Clearview Cinema Group, Inc. in a stock and cash deal "worth \$160 million." The massive Cablevision Corporation had 115,500 cable subscribers, managed Radio City Music Hall, owned a majority interest in Madison Square Garden, and three major movie channels (American Movie Classic, Bravo, and the Independent Film Channel). The name "Clearview" though would remain on the 45 theaters (with 254 screens) that operated under that former owner. In Morris County six theaters, including Madison Cinema 4 would now be under the ownership of Cablevision.<sup>51</sup>

In 2013 Bow Tie Cinemas, LLC. leased the Madison Cinema 4, when it acquired operation of most of the Clearview Cinemas' theaters from Cablevision. The Ridgefield, Connecticut based company operated theaters in New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Connecticut, Colorado, and Virginia. Cablevision had divested itself of the Madison theater before September 16, 2015 when Chatham-based Garibaldi Group listed the theater on the market for sale. By February 27, 2017, the theater had been on the market for a year, and was sold to Saxum Real Estate, a Parsippany based real estate investment and development company. Bow Tie Cinemas continued to lease the theater on a month-to-month basis.<sup>52</sup>



Garibaldi Group photo of the Madison Bow Tie Cinema published in February 2017

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, Volume 11, Number 263, August 14, 1998, Page 29. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/255767084/?terms=Madison%2BCinema%2B4

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Website for The Garibaldi Group, Chatham, New Jersey, February 27, 2017. Accessed from: https://thegaribaldigroup.com/madison-movie-theater-sold-but-movies-remain/

On May 29, 2017 Bow Tie Cinemas chose to terminate its lease on the Lyons movie theater at 4 Lincoln Place in Madison. The closing of the theater was reported to be unexpected. By May 30, the movie theater chain had completely moved out of the historic building. At that time, the future of the building, with "four movie screens, including two with stadium-style seating," was uncertain. A representative of the Saxum Real Estate Group was quoted as saying that the building's owners were "reviewing the site to determine the highest and best use" of the site. After 92 years from the first feature film at the Lyons Madison Theatre being shown, the final movies to be viewed in in the historic theater were – "Baywatch," "Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Long Haul," "Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2," and "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales." "Say the Long Haul," "Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2," and "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales."









Posters for the last movies shown at the Madison Theater

On July 31, 2017, the Madison GOP Committee published an article on its website entitled "The Bowtie Cinema in Madison, NJ is Closed, and the Building Sold. Did it Have to Happen That Way?" The article noted that "it is common knowledge in the region that downtown cinemas in small municipalities" were threatened with closure. Further the article noted that a theater like the one in Madison was an "important amenity" to a small town. The thrust of the article was to promote the preservation and continued use of the theater as a "cultural center." Such ideas though never took root, and the theater remained permanently closed.

The Madison Historic Preservation Commission approved the demolition of the Lyon's Theatre subject to certain conditions with a 14-page resolution adopted on July 9, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> The Madison Eagle, June 2, 2017, "Historic Madison movie theater closes." Accessed from: https://www.newjerseyhills.com/madison\_eagle/news/historic-madison-movie-theater-closes/article\_c52c3756-327d-5174-8364-debc7fb744ae.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Daily Record, Morristown, May 30, 2017, Page C4. Accessed from: https://www.newspapers.com/image/307635495/?terms=bow%2Btie%2Bmadison

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> The Madison GOP Committee website, "The Bowtie Cinema in Madison, NJ is Closed, and the Building Sold. Did it Have to Happen That Way?" July 31, 2017. Accessed from: https://madisonnjgop.com/content/bowtie-cinema-madison-nj-closed