



Why Florida Theatre Is Jacksonville's Must-Visit Entertainment Landmark

October 7, 2025 Jeffrey Spear

Discover this award-winning venue's rich history, restored beauty, and unforgettable entertainment.

Just a few months ago, the League of Historic American Theatres bestowed the 2025 Outstanding Historic Theatre Award on Jacksonville's Florida Theatre. This award recognizes excellence through the theater's community impact, quality of programs and services, and the quality of its historic structure's restoration and rehabilitation.



**Located on the corner of Forsyth and Newnan Streets, The Florida Theatre has been delighting audiences since 1927. ©
The Florida Theatre**

There are many worthwhile travel attractions in northeast Florida – most notably St. Augustine, Amelia Island, and more than 22 miles of white sand beaches. As part of any visit to the area, I recommend a trip to Jacksonville's urban core, accompanied by a show at the beautifully renovated, historically significant Florida Theatre.

A Historical Perspective on the Florida Theatre

Florida was settled by the Spanish in 1565, planting the seeds for the city of St. Augustine, the oldest

continuously inhabited city in the United States. But it wasn't until 1822 that the city of Jacksonville sprouted roots. Over the years, St. Augustine has managed to preserve a reasonable amount of its architectural heritage, becoming one of the most visited destinations in Florida. Unfortunately, Jacksonville has not been as fortunate.

In 1901, with approximately 35,000 residents at the time, Jacksonville was a tightly clustered city built almost entirely from wood. On May 3 of that year, sparks from a chimney ignited a fire that would eventually consume 146 city blocks, destroy 2,367 buildings, and displace tens of thousands of residents. Shortly thereafter, reconstruction would begin, creating an entirely new city.

By 1926, approximately 123,000 people called Jacksonville home. It was this time when, among other noteworthy architectural projects, the Florida Theatre was conceived.

A Grand Setting

The Florida Theatre was built in 1926 on the corner of Forsyth and Newnan Streets in the heart of Jacksonville's urban core. At that time, Forsyth was known as "Theatre Row," with five other theaters lining the street. Sadly, only the Florida Theatre remains today.



The last remaining movie palace on Forsyth Street in downtown Jacksonville.

© Ken McCray

While it was the golden age of movie palaces, theater owners believed that showing movies was not enough. They understood that when audiences came to the theater, they went for a grand night out.

To accommodate these expectations, the performance hall was fitted with 1,900 seats and the largest Wurlitzer pipe organ in the South. Before the movie was screened, patrons would get a newsreel, travelogue, cartoon, and live stage show, complete with a band, elaborate sets, and dancers.

From an architectural perspective, the theater was designed in the Spanish Eclectic Style, more commonly

known as Mediterranean Revival, a style that dominated Florida architecture in the 1920s. With terra cotta ornamentation on its exterior, lavishly appointed details from floor to ceiling throughout its interior, and furnishings in a grand style, the setting was reminiscent of an exotic Moorish courtyard.

It's Showtime

Apart from the many movies that were screened, a number of noteworthy live performances thrilled Jacksonville audiences at the Florida Theatre. Elvis Presley appeared on August 10 and 11, 1956. About a month later, on September 9, 1956, he appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show. The rest is show business history.



Elvis Presley in 1956, thrilling audiences at the Florida Theatre.

© Jay Leviton, Florida Times-Union Archives

More recently, the stage has been graced by the likes of Lynyrd Skynyrd, Wynton Marsalis, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Fleetwood Mac, Derek Trucks, Gregg Allman, and many others.

Renovating a Historic Landmark



The magnificent, lavishly restored Florida Theatre. © The Florida Theatre

With the decades taking a visible toll on the building and its finishes, renovation of the Florida Theatre began in 1982. This earned national prominence, including an official listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Additional improvements were made in 2020. All but two of its 1,865 seats were replaced with brand-new, historically appropriate models. For modern audiences with slightly larger body sizes, they are a little bit wider and considerably more comfortable. As a result of these and many other remedies, including enhanced lighting,

fresh paint, and restored tapestries, the place is a joy to visit.

The Florida Theatre, the Olympia Theatre in Miami, and the Tampa Theatre are the only surviving movie palaces in Florida, each standing as a glorious example of the elaborate, atmospheric theatres built in the 1920s.

Paranormal Activity Abounds

While concrete evidence is in short supply, the Florida Theatre is considered one of the most haunted places in Florida. Theatre staff have reported a presence in the projection booth – doors closing on their own without explanation, and lights and equipment going on and off, even after the equipment is unplugged.

Psychics who have visited the theatre have reported a ghostly presence in the balcony. There was even a video that recorded the apparition.



The “Ghost Seats” (Section B500, Row E, Seat 2) © The Florida Theatre

In case you were wondering, the Ghost Seat (Section B500, Row E, Seat 2) and its companion seat (1) were the only seats that were not replaced during renovation. While fully restored, they were kept in original condition to ensure the ghost would not be disturbed.

Civic Leaders Sing Their Praise

The Florida Theatre has many supporters throughout Northeast Florida, including a few prominent members of the community.

“The Florida Theater is an absolute gem,” says Jacksonville’s Mayor Donna Deegan. “I have many fond memories of attending and even presenting shows there, everything from Norah Jones and Elvis Costello to the ‘pink carpet’ we created at the Donna Foundation Fashion Show. Very proud to see them honored, and may this historic space continue to shine for years to come!”

For Diana Donovan, Executive Director of the Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville, “The Florida Theatre is an iconic and impactful cultural and economic anchor in our city. Its world-class programming and historic legacy not only enriches Jacksonville’s creative identity, but also fuels the vibrancy of our restaurants, small businesses, hospitality, and tourism.”

Long-time resident Michael Corrigan, President & CEO of Visit Jacksonville, has enjoyed his fair share of

performances at the Florida Theatre as well. He mentions, “While the historic restoration is worth celebrating, and certainly gives the theatre its charm, the people working the place make it even more appealing. Whether I see a movie, attend a concert or watch one of my kid’s recitals, I always feel welcomed and appreciated.”

One of the Most Attended Theatres in America

Today, the theater’s mission is “to enhance the quality of life in North Florida by providing diverse and memorable arts and entertainment experiences and by maintaining a unique historic Jacksonville landmark.” Less officially, the theater still strives to be a thing of beauty, a palace of dreams, and a symbol of hope and progress.

With so much to offer, people have been coming from all over the world to experience the charms of the Florida Theatre. While they come for a show, they stay for the weekend and enjoy some of the other amenities Jacksonville has to offer.

If You Go

The Florida Theatre is centrally located in Jacksonville’s urban core, offering performances that range from movies and concerts to comedy, dance, and so much more. While tours of the theater are no longer offered, you can

find a full calendar of events and purchase tickets [here](#).

From the theater, it's an easy walk across the Main Street Bridge into the charming San Marco neighborhood or along the river into the lively Five Points neighborhood. Of course, if the fresh air and roar of the surf are more to your liking, it's a relatively short drive out to Jacksonville's colorful beach communities. If you prefer to stay close to the theater, these are a few suggestions you're sure to enjoy.



A sizeable collection of top-shelf spirits distinguishes the offerings at Dos Gatos.

© Jeffrey Spear

The Culinary Scene

Known for its specialty cocktail menu, curated spirits, and diverse beer list, Dos Gatos is considered Jacksonville's

original craft cocktail bar. Located directly across the street from the theater, it is a dark and mysterious place. Without a proper introduction, it could easily be confused for one of those shadier watering holes visited by career alcoholics and ne'er-do-wells. It's actually quite safe, frequented by the cool and groovy living in and around the city.

Housed in the beautifully restored Bostwick Building in the city center is [Cowford Chophouse](#). This open, two-story, upscale steakhouse features high ceilings, arched windows, muted colors, and distinctive cow-themed paintings by local artist Jim Draper. Their rooftop bar provides a little fresh air and panoramic views of the city.

Museums and Symphony, too...

One of the more recent contributions to Jacksonville's culinary scene is [Dorothy's Downtown](#). With a somewhat quirky and curious vintage vibe, their authentic Louisiana Creole cuisine is not to be missed. Notable options include the Voodoo Balls, Fried Chicken & Gumbo, and Short Rib Poutine.

The [St Johns River Taxi](#) is a great way to take in the sights while cruising the St Johns River. You can ride along, making a round trip between all the River Taxi docks, or hop on and off along the way to explore different parts of the city.

Located a few blocks away from the theater is [The](#)

[Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville](#). As the only museum in Northeast Florida dedicated to contemporary art, it is a place where visitors can learn and interact with art and ideas from around the world.



The Bryan Concert Organ at the Jacoby Symphony Hall. © Jacksonville Symphony

In case you're disheartened to learn that the Florida Theatre's Wurlitzer organ did not survive renovations, the Bryan Concert Organ can be enjoyed just down the street at [Jacoby Symphony Hall](#). Built in 1914, the instrument has been restored to include 97 ranks, 80 stops, and 6,215 pipes, weighing nearly 20 tons. While there are no public tours, you can see, hear, and feel it in action during performances at the Jacksonville Symphony's Concert Organ Series.

