



# MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 27, 2021

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## **Knox Narratives: Bijou Theatre a cultural jewel in Knox County history**

*KNOXVILLE, Tenn.*—When you walk through the front door of the Bijou Theatre, you set foot in the oldest surviving active commercial property in Knoxville – possibly in Tennessee.

“The Bijou started out as a premier hotel called the Lamar House [in 1817], back in the frontier days. Five U.S. presidents have stayed here,” said Bijou Theatre executive director Courtney Bergmeier.

Bergmeier explored the property’s past with Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs for the latest episode of Knox Narratives, a docuseries the mayor developed to highlight important stories about local history.

The building’s history includes service as a United States Army hospital during the Civil War. General William Sanders, the namesake for Fort Sanders, died in the hospital after he was shot on Kingston Pike.

The front of the building continued to serve as a hotel until the 1970s. However, the rear wing was demolished to build an impressive vaudeville venue in 1909 named the Bijou Theatre.

“Bijou means ‘little jewel’ in French. We like to say it is our little cultural jewel,” said Bergmeier. “The acoustics in here are so incredible. It’s a great place to see music, comedy and anything else.”

“That’s the wonderful thing about structures like this is they were built before modern amplifiers and speakers. You had to use the natural acoustics and dynamics to make things sound good,” said Jacobs.

Mayor Jacobs and Bergmeier delved into the Bijou’s tumultuous path through the 20th century. The facility’s role ranged from used car storage, a second-run movie house, to a notorious “transient flophouse” that showed X-rated films in the 1960s. The theater was slated for demolition in the 1970s to build a surface parking lot when the community organized a successful “Save the Bijou” campaign.

Bergmeier highlighted the Bijou’s financial success and stability since 2005. The venue climbed out of more than \$1 million in debt to become officially debt-free in 2018. The early retirement of the debt proved important in the last year with revenue down 97 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bergmeier also shared a few ghost stories, noting the building’s haunted reputation with visiting artists.

You can watch the full [Knox Narratives episode on the Bijou Theatre on YouTube](#).

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