

Fulton renovation uncovers artist's curtain

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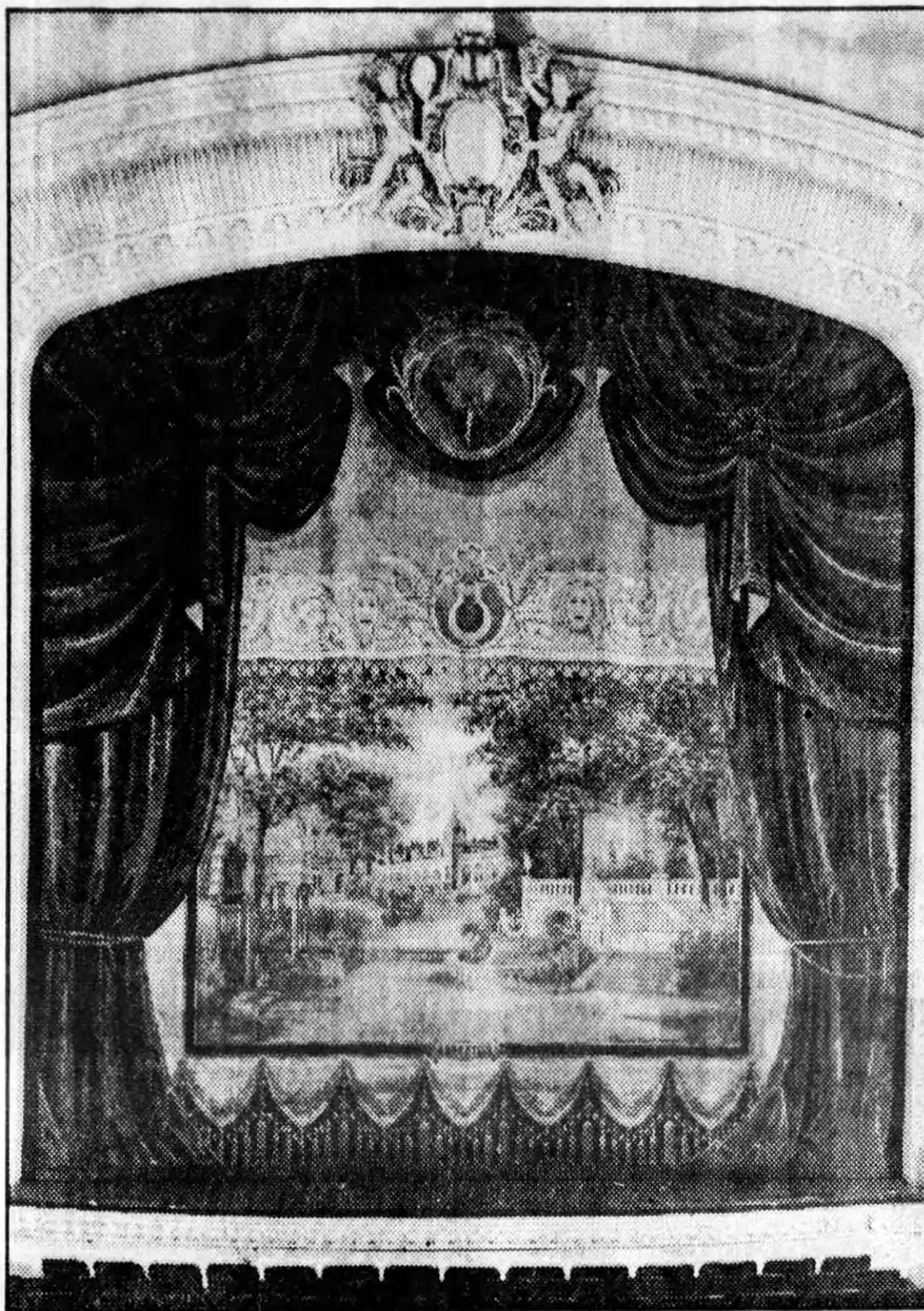
The Fulton isn't our most lavish Downtown theater, but it holds a special place in the hearts of Pittsburghers, who for generations could lean back and look up at the charms of more than a dozen lovely ladies parading across the ceiling, hand in hand, in various stages of undress.

Like the outfits of those Fabulous Fourteen, renovations to the Fulton Theater are about half complete, and the former vaudeville house once known as the Gayety Theatre is scheduled to open for live performances in May.

The announcement was made today on the 86th anniversary of the opening of the theater on Oct. 31, 1904. Back then, patrons came to see "Way Down East," a four-act play that had more metropolitan runs than any of its time.

Tonight, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, which owns the theater, will host a reception at the Fulton for potential users from the Pittsburgh arts community. The Trust wants the Fulton to become a venue for dance, family and children's events, theater, chamber music and performance art. Rental rates will be on a sliding scale for local, non-profit groups.

The \$2 million renovation has uncovered a fireproof curtain painted by Pittsburgh artist T.J. Collins and thought to have been installed at the time of the theater's opening. "We knew that something was up in the rigging — something very old and very dirty," said Trust president Carol R. Brown. The curtain is



Fireproof curtain painted by Pittsburgh artist T. J. Collins is believed to date to the Fulton Theater's opening on Oct. 31, 1904.

signed but not dated, and depicts a garden scene within layers of trompe l'oeil curtains.

Over the decades, the Fulton has seen several renovations inside and out, but its fanciful interior is mostly intact. Its restoration will have to wait a few years, until the theater's operations are well established. Brown said the full-scale rehabilitation could occur in 1996.

The first phase of the Trust's renovation is mostly a functional one that will include an updating of the building's mechanical systems — heating, air conditioning, electrical and plumbing — as well as a new roof, new seats and carpeting.

Eventually, the theater's original box seats along the aisles will be restored. They were removed around 1930 when the Fulton made the transition from live theater to films. The Fulton will have 1,399 seats, about 100 fewer than it most recently had, because some back rows with poor sight lines are being eliminated. Also, the slope of the floor will be increased.

Dressing rooms will be remodeled and the Fulton will gain new stage lights and a new sound system.

An audience lounge will be added to the lobby on the Fort Duquesne side of the theater, over steps that once led to what was probably the Gayety's main entrance. A new wall will separate the lobby/lounge area from the seating area. The wall will be "simple and functional," Brown said. When the final restoration gets under way, "we will develop an ambiance for the theater that is compatible with its original appearance."