

Theatre on the River: The Showboat Majestic

In 1967, the City of Cincinnati purchased a venerable showboat named the **Majestic**, docking it at Cincinnati's Public Landing. The city was reviving its riverfront and thought the vessel, which spoke to an earlier era of river life, a perfect addition. To keep the tradition of the showboat entertainment alive, the city leased this boat to the University of Cincinnati, and in the summer of 1968, UC theatre students began performing on the **Showboat Majestic**.



Carrie Cochran, Cincinnati Enquirer

Unique History & Status:

The **Showboat Majestic** is the last of the purpose-built floating theatres once common along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, last to make one-night stands, last to actively travel, longest-lived under one owner and home of the largest family, the nine Reynolds children, ever reared on a showboat.

Showboats like the **Majestic** brought traveling entertainment to people who lived in river towns in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first showboats began to appear as settlers moved Westward, originally traveling from town-to-town by boat. William Chapman's Floating Theatre, 1831, is the first documented theatrical showboat. Showboats provided diverse entertainment ranging from combined museums and theatres to floating circuses to disreputable gambling boats and medicine shows.

Although the Civil War temporarily halted free travel on most rivers, showboats were revived in the 1870s with performances including vaudeville, melodrama, and variety acts. The bigger showboats, including the **Majestic**, were barges without steam engines and paddle-wheel propulsion, allowing for larger theatres. They traveled the rivers pushed by sternwheeler tugboats.



Performing on stage, Showboat Majestic, Cincinnati Public Library

Built in 1923, the **Majestic** was the third showboat owned by **Thomas Reynolds** and his brother-in-law and business partner, **Thomas Nichols**.

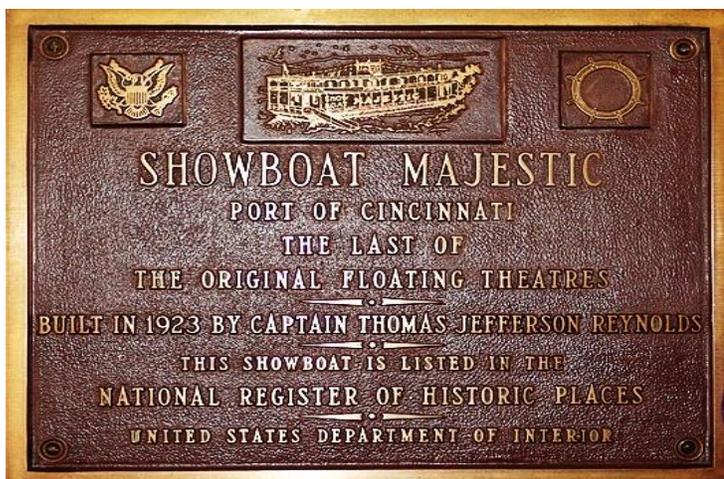
His first showboat, the **Illinois**, was originally a trade boat selling glassware, china, pottery and ironware before **Reynolds bought equipment to show movies in 1912**.

The **Illinois** was lost in a fire when a projector spark ignited highly flammable nitrate movie film. (Carbon arc projectors and nitrate film stock were subsequently banned from theatres).

Reynolds was passionate about his business and wasted little time building a second showboat. The **America**, a drama and vaudeville showboat with a professional troupe of actors and musicians, was launched in 1917. Business was so successful that Reynolds and Nichols, decided to build a larger boat in Pittsburgh at the close of the 1922 season. They named the new boat the **Majestic**.

Thomas Jefferson Reynolds and his family lived and performed on the boat as they traveled the Ohio River and its tributaries. After World War II and with his family grown, Reynolds found it harder to maintain the showboat lifestyle. Starting in 1945, he began leasing the **Majestic** to Kent State University and Hiram College for a summer theatre experience for their students. In 1959, Indiana University bought the **Majestic**, but Reynolds skippered the boat until his death in December of 1959, whereupon his son John stepped in as pilot.

In 1965, the **Majestic** was declared ineligible for travel under federal legislation – the “Safety at Sea Act” – regulations applied to all wooden hull excursion vessels travelling overnight from town to town. It was docked in Jeffersonville, Indiana until 1966. In the late 1960s, after the **Majestic** was purchased by the City of Cincinnati, theatre students at the University of Cincinnati began regular performances on the boat. At first, the performances were only in the summers, but during the 1970s, fall and spring performances were added. In 1988, UC ended its lease of the **Majestic**. Subsequently, Cincinnati Landmark Productions, in cooperation with the Cincinnati Recreation Commission, operated the **Majestic** as a seasonal venue through September, 2013.



With the burning of the original *Goldenrod* showboat in St. Louis, Missouri, on June 1, 1962, the **Majestic** became the lone survivor of the singularly American tradition of floating theatres.

In recent times the *Majestic* was fitted with a steel hull, air-conditioning and fire-suppression system.

In 1989, the **Showboat Majestic** became an official National Historical Landmark.

Fast-forward to October 2015: The vessel has been vacant for two years. Testing the viability of our idea to preserve a home for the Showboat in this area, Cincinnati World Cinema held film screenings on the *Majestic* in [August](#) (Sundance Shorts) and [October](#) (British Arrows). More than 1,500 attended eight days of cinema with universally positive response. Stay tuned for news and future developments – CincyWorldCinema.org.

Sources: The bulk of the above was written by Suzanne Maggard for the University of Cincinnati: archives@ucmail.uc.edu or 513-556-1959 or <http://libapps.libraries.uc.edu/liblog/2011/06/theatre-on-the-river-the-showboat-majestic-records/>.

Additional content from: <http://ohioriverlife.blogspot.com/2006/12/showboat-majestic.html>.

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