

The Lewisburg Opera House

The Lewisburg Opera House was one of the most modern community theatres of its time. Originally called The Music Hall, the handsome brick structure was located on South Third, just off Market Street.

Henry G. Schwartz, who had designed and built a row of houses on South Third Street, designed and built the Hall in 1868 on property owned by Sarah and Martha Meixell. The Meixell sisters sold the property to Schwartz in 1870.

The Opera House was purchased in 1872 by a group of local businessmen. From 1872 to 1894, there were numerous sales among these owners and to others. In 1894, a corporation was formed, allotting shares for ownership. Investor H. Eyer Spyker made improvements to the Opera House from 1894 to 1907, eventually assuming control.

The development of the railroads in the late 1800's allowed touring theatrical companies (of which there were hundreds) to travel the country and perform at many small towns. This gave theatre companies more chances to work and to perfect their performances, while townspeople were provided with entertainment. Local citizens were sometimes cast as extras in plays or provided music for traveling shows.

In addition to plays and musicals, the Opera House hosted speeches, high school graduations, local productions and civic events. In 1907, motion pictures - the latest entertainment fashion - were being shown.

A Magnificent Building

The Opera House was a three-story brick building facing South Third Street with 60 feet along the front and 100 feet (eventually 150 feet) along the sides. On the ground floor was John Showers' Oyster Bar Restaurant where fresh oysters were served daily. There were also stores - such as a cobblers and farm goods shop, and offices - an insurance firm and later, coal company and dental offices. The GAR, an association for Civil War veterans, then the Masons, occupied the third floor.

A long red-carpeted stairway went up from the entrance to the second floor box office and theatre. Rows of upholstered seats and a balcony faced the orchestra pit and stage. Gas footlights provided illumination.

An extension was added and an elevator installed in 1900, the roof replaced and large storage area added by 1906. Electric lighting replaced the gaslights in 1906.

Fire

On Sunday December 27, 1908, just after 3:00 in the morning, nearby residents saw smoke and flames coming from the Opera House and alerted the Fire Company and townspeople. The Beaver Memorial Church bell initially raised the alarm, and later the fire bell.

The Fire Department (then on South Fourth Street behind the theatre) was soon playing streams of water on the blaze. The Milton Fire Department was called to assist.

The fire was first found in the Opera House restaurant, spread to another business in the building and then to the theatre. The scene loft burst into flames.

Fire Chief Wensel focused on containing the fire within the walls of the Opera House (which collapsed within hours), and protecting neighboring buildings from wind-blown embers and flames that rose from all parts of the Opera House. Fires at the United

National Bank, Bennetts' stables, the Cameron house, Prowant's store, Saturday News building and other structures were extinguished. Fortunately there was snow cover on nearby buildings and the wind was light, or the destruction would have been far worse.

As it was, the Opera House was completely destroyed. All that remains today is a brick pillar - next to the municipal parking lot - marking the place where this great building once stood.

SOURCES:

Lewisburg Chronicle January 2, 1909

Lewisburg Journal, Jan 8, 1909

"Lewisburg Opera House" by Gary W. Parks, *Susquehanna Life*, Spring 2001

The Lewisburg Opera House, Miranda W. McGinnis. Thesis presented at Bucknell 1980.

Mifflinburg Telegraph Jan 1 1909



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After the Fire