



HISTORY OF THE OPERA HOUSE THEATER

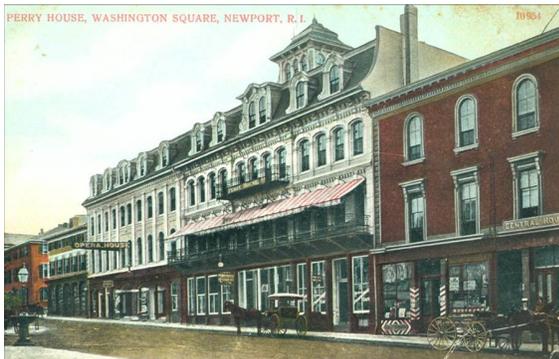
Washington Square, Newport, Rhode Island

By the time this country was born in 1776, Newport had accumulated more than one hundred and thirty five years of history and was one of the five most prestigious cities in the colonies. The epicenter of colonial Newport was Washington Square, known at times as the Mall or the Parade. It anchored the city politically, commercially, and philosophically. How appropriate that in 1867 Patrick Shanahan would select the square as the home for his theater. Shanahan's Opera House enhanced the square that included the Colony House designed by Richard Munday and the Brick Market designed by Peter Harrison. The theater enriched the square and city by providing an updated sophisticated venue for performances and presentations. As Newport entered the gilded age, the Opera House was an important resource for the city by the sea, its wealthy cottage owners and their guests.

Patrick C. Shanahan (Shanehan) was a contractor with the Old Colony Railroad. Prior to his arrival in Newport in 1861, he and his family lived in Lewiston Maine. While railroad construction brought him to the city, development and a love for the city kept him in Newport. In December 1863, Shanahan bought his first parcel of land on Touro Street at Washington Square. In May 1865 he next purchased the neighboring property from the heirs of the Oliver Hazard Perry Estate and now owned a sizable contiguous plot of ground. His first project on the property was the building of a fine hotel he named the Perry House. The hotel opened by July 4th 1865 and was an immediate success. Shanahan next turned his efforts to the empty lot between the hotel and the former home of Oliver Hazard Perry. On this site rose his Opera House (or theater). When the curtain went up on December 28, 1867, Shanahan could boast a fine theater, hotel, and historic residence. These three properties would stand united for another one hundred and thirty three years. Shanahan's life tragically ended when he was killed in an April 1869 train accident on Long Island New York. His property, including the Opera House, was sold at auction to Henry Bull, a direct descendant of one of Newport's founding families.

On August 3, 1867 the Newport Mercury reported that the plans for the Opera House included seating for 1500 people and was designed by architect/engineer Ben Coit. The Newport Daily News reported after the theater opened in December that the architect was James Rudolph who was assisted by Mr. Coit. The building was described as 105' deep and 58' wide, included

parquet seating for 600, and dress circle seating for 400 people. The report indicated that the doors opened five months to the day that ground was broken for construction of the theater.



All agreed that this was a first class structure with the theater itself at the rear of the building, the space on Touro Street occupied by shops and a billiard room on its first floor, commercial offices on its second floor, and additional lodging rooms for the Perry House on its third floor. The current arching brick entrances, which open onto the Square, were inspired by the original entrances. *Boyd's Newport City Directory* (1876) praised the original building as, " In all respects it is a first class hall... it seats 1,000, has parquet floors, a gallery, orchestra and four proscenium boxes, three stage traps, ample dressing rooms, and a complete outfit of "first-class" scenery... the stage is 55 x 45 feet and is on a level with the street.

The theater's inaugural performance on December 28, 1867, included the drama "*Lucretia Borgia*" and a farce and was presented by the Howard Athenaeum, of Boston. From its opening in December 1867, the Newport Opera House played host to some of America's most lauded and renowned actors and producers. The Opera House's earliest productions included "*Norwood!*" (written by Henry Ward Beecher) and "*Under the Gaslight*", both performed by the notable Boston Theatre Company. At the time, the Boston Theatre Company was under the management of J.B. Booth, brother of Edwin Booth, the famous Shakespearean actor, and John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin. Booth's name prominently appears in the *Newport Mercury* advertisement of the Opera House's "*Dramatic Dedication*".

In the early days of the Opera House in addition to the theatrical productions and musical presentations, the auditorium was home to a number of lectures and presentations of a more serious nature. For many years the Newport Lecture Association presented speakers in the Opera House during the late fall and winter months indicating the importance of the facility to the year round Newport community. Well known speakers included Harriet Beecher Stowe (1872), Henry Ward Beecher (1873), Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1873), and Frederick Douglass (1873). The causes of the abolition of slavery and women's rights were championed from the Opera House stage to large audiences of the time.

As the 20th century unfolded, the Opera House played host to minstrel shows, burlesque performances, boxing exhibitions, pre-parade exercises and exhibitions before Fourth of July and Memorial Day celebrations, and funeral processions for notable Newport citizens. One notable performance took place on stage on October 30, 1907, when George M. Cohan appeared with family members in his Broadway hit, "The Honeymooners". Two decades later a new entertainer was advertised as appearing on stage at the Opera House by the name of Duke Ellington. The advertisement for the show on Sunday July 25, 1926 at 8pm stated that the "music that is different", and called Ellington "the colored Paul Whiteman of America"

With the emergence of the moving picture industry in the 1920's, the Opera House entered a new era as a single screen movie palace. Patrick H. Horgan of Newport had purchased interest in the Opera House in 1910 and in 1917 became the sole owner of Shanahans former properties. In 1929 Patrick's son, Harry R. Horgan directed the complete renovation of the building, creating a grand movie house that was enjoyed for decades by Newporters and visitors alike. The existing interior features of today's theater are testimony to the sumptuous decor the Horgan family installed in the outdated structure. The neighboring Perry House Hotel was damaged by a fire that began on Thames Street in November 1955. Most of the damage to the hotel as a result of this fire was from smoke and water, but no doubt this contributed to the decision in 1957 to demolish the hotel and the top floor of the Opera House. The Horgan family built a new structure where the Perry House once stood while the movie theater remained in business for decades.

The golden age of cinema faded and the Opera House evolved in March of 1979 into a more modest and modern "twin" theater that could show two films simultaneously. Within a few years, a third theater was created to increase options for customers. At this stage of its life, the Opera House was rented to the company that presented the first run movies. The rent paid for the use of the building provided funds to the owners to pay the mortgage. Unfortunately, by turn of the 21st century the building showed clear signs of structural and cosmetic deterioration that threaten its legacy and preservation. In part as a result of the building condition, the tenant ended the use of the structure in August 2010 and the Opera House went dark!

Now under the care of the Newport Performing Arts Center, the first task was to stabilize the deteriorating structure. The condition of the building was painfully evident as water cascaded through the structure during an historic rain storm in April 2010. The back brick wall of the 1867 Opera House, which borders the historic Brick Market Alley, showed signs of bowing and deterioration. Conversations with members of Newport's Historic District Commission had mentioned citing the Opera House for potential demolition due to this deterioration and neglect. Their desire was not to have the building demolished but to alert everyone as to the serious condition of this important historic resource. Patchwork repairs were made to leaking roofs, weak or missing floorboards, clogged drains, electrical supply, roof drainage systems, and sump-pumps installed to help move water out of the building. Temporary lighting was installed in unused portions of the building to light the way for firemen in case of a fire. Fire code mandated that parts of the building have sprinklers installed. The NPAC Board of Directors, in accordance with local and state fire officials, made significant progress to meet immediate fire safety regulations by clearing debris from all areas of the building and all cited fire safety hazards. While progress had been made, the building was still not a desirable site for potential tenants and the possibility of rental income for the building had ended.

As good stewards of the building, the NPAC Board took all necessary safeguards to secure the building from the weather and vandals by draining pipes, minimizing utility usage, procuring proper insurance, and building a security fence around the back of the building. In 2002, the founding NPAC Board of Directors had already transformed the building facade, returning it

(in part) to the elegant appearance of 1867. With the interior now unused, the opportunity was seized to strip away late twentieth century layers to reveal historically significant architecture such as the soaring fifty foot proscenium arch, decorative plaster wall columns, vaulted ceilings, and arched windows.

The NPAC Board is actively seeking funds to continue its mission to return the Opera House to a single stage performing arts center for live entertainment, and bring audiences back into Washington Square on a year-round basis. The first Annual Appeal was launched in December of 2010, theater designer Chris Buckley, Architect Mohamad Farzan, and builder/preservationist Jim Farrar have joined the team to assist in the rebirth of the venue. Jim Farrar and his team will conduct a thorough assessment of all structural, electrical, plumbing, drainage, roof, HVAC, sewer, water and masonry elements of the building. Once assessed, Farrar Associates, NewPort Architecture, and their teams will address and make the necessary repairs to the building to stabilize it, and prepare the structure for the creation of the theater.

*Our thanks to Lew Keen
for researching and preparing this history of the Opera House.*



For further information, please e-mail the Opera House Board of Directors at
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We welcome your participation
and all donations to the Opera House Restoration Project.

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