

Fredonia's 1891 Opera House:
Details from the *Fredonia Censor* and the Barker Museum
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2014

Fredonia's 1891 Opera House has had a magnificent rebirth since it was rehabilitated, reopening in 1994. However it can only be fully appreciated when seen against the backdrop of its own past and that of its predecessors. Theatricals were an early – if amateurish – form of entertainment in Fredonia's pioneer days, consisting of such memorable offerings as “the truly laughable piece of ‘The Spoiled Child’ acted by Mr. **Baldwin**” at **Abell's** Hotel in September 1826. Mr. **Baldwin**, “late of the Rochester and Buffalo theatres, respectfully informed the inhabitants of Fredonia, and its vicinity, that he had fitted up the Hall at Mr. **Abell's** with New and Splendid Scenery. The cast consisted of Little Pickle (Mrs. **Baldwin**), Old Pickle (Mr. B), Tagg (Mr. **Bates**), John (Mr. **Johnson**), Miss Pickle (Mr. **Marshall!**), and Maria (Miss **Baldwin**). Very much a family affair.”

The play was followed by the comic duet “Polly Hopkins and Tommy Tompkins,” a Sailor's Hornpipe, and the venerable 18th-century afterpiece, “Three Weeks after Marriage.” **Abell's** Hotel was a smallish frame inn standing at the side of **Barker** Common, where the **Russo** Building is today (today's *1 Park Place*). Like most inns of the time, it had a room that could be used for assemblies, balls, musical or theatrical performances.

In 1827 we had Mr. **Fielding's** company, which performed “at the Assembly Rooms of Mr. **Harmon**,” an inn on the corner of East Main and Eagle streets, and we learn that “Mr. G. **Fielding**, has arrived from the Theatres Royal in Quebec and Montreal.” (Lake travel made that possible. The primitive state of our early roads made such travel from New York City of Albany, the more obvious sources, unthinkable. When the first Principal of the Academy traveled here from Hamilton College in 1826, he got as far as Sheridan and was advised to go around by way of Dunkirk and then down Brigham Road and Temple Street rather than risk the mudholes of Main Street.)

What Mr. G. **Fielding** had to offer was “**Kennedy's** much admired Comedy of MATRIMONY.” The company included Mr. and Mrs. **Dike** and Mr. **Powel**, Miss **Wilson**, **Kilner** and Miss **Kilner**. After the comedy came a song, by Mr. **Fielding**, then a COMIC SONG by Mr. **Powel**, topped off by “the laughable afterpiece of Fire and Water” with **Fielding** and **Powel** doubling roles.

In 1828 Mr. **Archbold** also “fitted up a room at Mr. **Abell's** Hotel as a “theatre,” where he “intends to perform for a few evenings, when such Pieces will be bro't forward as cannot fail to attract the attention of the more classical part of the community. N.B. A good Orchestra and good Scenery are also furnished.” The *Censor* editor commented that the company was “the most numerous, and we believe the most respectable in their profession, we have ever had here....”

By 1829 the population in the community had increased sufficiently for the Village to become incorporated, and within a year the Trustees had passed an ordinance to control all such performances through licensing. There was a strong feeling, as we can see in the various

comments by the advertisers in the newspaper, that the theatre, plays and actors, were morally suspect. This will be particularly clear if we look at the end of an article and the beginning of the one placed directly under it in the *Censor* of 21 June 1837. The editor chose first to describe “**Hart’s Garden**,” a nursery and pleasure garden combined, running from William **Hart’s** home on Forest Place down to Canadaway Creek. After some very flattering descriptive passages about the garden, the editor got down to business and this is how the column ran:

“Taking it altogether, we venture to say that no place for recreation and amusement, of the kind, has been more tastefully and judiciously effected, than “**Hart’s Garden**,” and we are particularly desirous that he should be encouraged and compensated for his outlays of labor and money in adding so much to the embellishment of our village. Let us then patronize him – let us go with our families, and teach our children that true happiness is more readily found in examining the productions of the vegetable kingdom, than in visiting theatres, circuses and puppet shows, where human beings degrade their own natures by acts of buffoonery and its attendant train of vices.

“ *Theatricals*. – Mr. T.F. **Lennox**, of the Eagle street Theatre, Buffalo, and Mr. D.C. **Anderson**, of the Bowery, N.Y., have formed a copartnership, and purpose making their first essay at Fredonia, this week, with a talented company: the particulars will be duly intimated. – *Dunkirk Beacon*, June 14.’ Not so, Mr. Beacon. Their “first essay” was made at Dunkirk, and that place is perfectly welcome to all the credit it has gained in taking up with what Fredonia would not have. It is true they did ‘purpose making their first essay’ here – having lit down among us – hired a room at a tavern, erected their seats – [‘front seats reserved for the ladies’] – bespoke their handbills, &c., when lo and behold, the Trustees of our village, much to their credit and in accordance with the wishes of a large proportion of its inhabitants, refused to grant them a license, notwithstanding the *bills* said the company ‘had been selected with every regard to *morality!*’ And what no doubt astonished these moral people, no persuasions or teasings or appeals on the score of expenses and sacrifices, could move the Trustees from the commendable stand they had taken. Hence the honor to which Dunkirk has arrived in the theatrical line. May our village always be blessed with as happy a riddance.”

Wow! With that kind of community attitude we may wonder that any plays were ever put on, but they were. Of course, this is a time before the advent of a real theater building, so other venues had to serve, such as the assembly Room of an inn, as we have seen. Amateur theatricals, especially by the young, might be put on in the school room itself, such as the tragedy of David and Goliath of 1817 described by Levi **Risley** many decades later. That production was mounted at the school house on the Common (today’s Barker Commons) just across from the site where today’s Opera House stands. It starred Major **Handy**, and **Risley** said, “The Major personated Goliath, and his brother Alfred, then a very little boy, personated David. This was my first attendance at a theatrical performance, and since that day I have seen **Forrest**, **Keene**, **Booth** and **Hamblin** perform the greatest of Shakespeare’s tragedies, but no acting have I ever witnessed that impressed me like that evening’s performance.

“The Major in his lofty bearing came on to the stage with a spear that the head of which would weigh more than 600 shekles and the weaver’s beam would be a light thing in comparison to its shaft. With shield, sword and helmet, he audaciously defied the army of the Israelites and the

living God – a boy’s measurement for his height was surely ten feet, and then that awful spear; the tines of which were stained with the clotted gore of his former victims. Next came the little shepherd boy, Alfred **Handy**, as David, with his little sling and his pouch containing the five smooth stones he had gathered from the brook. After some boasting by the giant and skirmishing in words, the battle commenced and the mighty sling proved victorious. The monster with a stone in his forehead fell to the earth, and little David drew from its sheath the giant’s sword and cut off his head, and we little ones were astonished to find it was only the cap that was cut off.” Despite the disappointment to the bloodthirsty, this was obviously a most uplifting and moving performance.

By 1826, the Fredonia Academy occupied the site of today’s Opera House, but some of its rooms seem to have been reserved for lectures, amateur theatricals, and concerts. Until purpose-built halls were put up, large, multi-use rooms continued to serve. By 1844, for example, **Abell’s** Hotel by the Common had been replaced by the larger **Johnson** House, where Dr. **Clark** and Associates offered “a Moral and Temperance Exhibition, the Reformed Drunkard.” Concern about the immorality of stage presentations altogether is evident in the testimonials, attached to the notice, by the Rev. Wm. H. **Beecher** and other worthies of the time, and by the fact that nowhere is the performance referred to as a “play.” We will see this same attitude later in connection with opera houses.

In 1849 The New York Circuit Company, under the management of J.H. **Powell**, Esq., put on “The Stranger,” the thrilling drama of “twenty years of a Gambler’s Life, (The Cobbler and the Lord as an afterpiece), and some of Shakespeare’s celebrated tragedies [which] will be performed by the company, when our citizens will have an opportunity of seeing them in a variety of characters.” What that meant was that the company consisted of Mr. and Mrs. **Powell**, Mr. and Mrs. **Miller**, and Messrs. **McKibbin**, **Morris** and **Cooper**. Watching seven actors perform a full Shakespearian tragedy must have been instructive indeed. That same season brought to the **Johnson** House “**Hough’s** Olio Company,” which meant a Variety Show. The newspaper advertisement refers to “**Hough’s** Original and Far-Famed Olio Company” which was laying it on a bit thick, since the same issue of the newspaper pointed out that the company was “newly organized.” However, responding to the concerns of the time, they did promise a “Chaste and amusing Entertainment.”

Powell’s Shakespearean productions must have been satisfactory, because the company returned in 1850 to the **Johnson** House for a week or two, an unusually long run. They may have had to struggle a bit, because the *Censor* remarked after their first week that “the corps, throughout, are well worthy of commendation. We understand that two more actors are expected, which will make it complete, and it will undoubtedly secure the patronage it merits.” On the other hand, a really complete acting company might not have been able to fit into the **Johnson** House “theater.” It was not until 1852 that the first attempt was made to provide a facility specifically for performances, and that was in the so-called Center Block, *10-18 West Main Street*.

What ultimately caused the building to go up, providing real theater facilities, was the railroad. Even with Dunkirk’s developed harbor it was hard to justify the effort and expense of getting there, and then to Fredonia for whatever audience could be drawn, and then taking at least another day or two to travel to the next location. However, when the railroad arrived in Dunkirk

on 14 May 1851, everything changed. Where today's Central Avenue now runs had been a virtually impassible trail, with swampy thickets and deadfall barring the way. With the advent of the railroad, a transportation company was formed, and the trail was cleared, widened, and filled. A plank road, with toll booths, was installed between Dunkirk and Fredonia, and on south through Water Street. Following that were horse-drawn omnibuses plying the route between the railroad station in Dunkirk and the Hotel in Fredonia, beginning in April 1852. In less than a year from the railroad reaching Dunkirk, other great changes had followed. It is no coincidence that planning for Fredonia's Center Block began at the same time, with construction completed by December 1852.

Typical of this kind of building, the main point was to design and build a "block," a multi-storied business establishment, often with several stores by side, with room above for storage, apartments and meetings. The Center Block at *10 – 18 West Main Street* was an ambitious 100 feet long and three stories high. "It is to have a cast iron front, and will be the best block in the County. In the third story is to be a Concert Hall, 70 feet by 40...." In 1871 the American Block was built, with its Union Hall at 9 East Main Street, billed as "the best public hall aside from the Opera House at Dunkirk." It was a lavishly frescoed room with seating for 1,000, although the main entrance had to be altered in 1872 to eliminate drafts. The competition that Union Hall offered was too much, and at that point, the Concert Hall in the Center Block, in effect, went out of business and was sold to be remodeled as a Masonic lodge.

The Opera House at Dunkirk that was being compared to the new hall was in **Bartholomew's** Block (*106-118 Central Avenue*), put up in 1867 at the corner of today's Lake Shore Drive East and Central Avenue. Covering the site of the old American & **Risley** block, with a frontage on Central Avenue of 128 feet, it had six stores with a "public hall" upstairs. The *Censor* rather grudgingly remarked that Dunkirk's new Opera House would "afford a much needed convenience to the people of that place." The hall was later owned by J. **Nelson** and was known for many years as **Nelson's** Opera House. In her study of "the **Nelson** Opera House: 1867-1946," Frances N. **Dew**, Dunkirk City Historian, provided a full account of the events and performances there, including such standbys as "East Lynn" and "Uncle Tom's Cabin," John Phillip **Sousa**, local minstrel shows, and musical concerts, including one by Madam **Schumann-Heink**.

Nowhere, however, is there any mention of opera at Dunkirk's Opera House. That was typical of theatres of the time, and it was certainly true of the 1891 Opera House in Fredonia. It should be no surprise to learn now that when the building to house the Fredonia Opera House was first discussed in the 1880s, the plans inevitably focused on a large, multi-purpose building with space that would provide revenue as well as a theater – although, once again, it wouldn't be called that.

One significant difference in the planning for the 1891 building was that the major function of the structure was to house Village offices. Yet there was revenue to be derived from renting out the rest of the building, just as the commercial "blocks" rented their stores. The location of the Village Hall also had some precedents; it was to stand on the site of the old Academy building where so many concerts and lectures had been held. The Academy began building in 1823, and the first classes were held in 1826. In 1850, the Academy was significantly enlarged, almost doubling in size. When the Normal School (today's *1 Temple Square*) was built in 1867 and the

academic program was transferred there, the Village bought the old Academy building for its own use. In fact, with an interesting sense of foresight, the Trustees had created a committee in 1851 to “procure a plan for an [Fire] Engine House and Village Hall.” From 1855 until 1867, the Village offices were located in a fire hall on Center Street, not far from Church Street. By 1869, the Village and the fire department had both moved to the old Academy building. The old Academy also provided a large, upstairs room for meetings and assemblies of all kinds. The front entrance was widened, and a ramp was constructed, so men and horses could haul the fire apparatus out quickly.

By the 1880s, discussions had begun about replacing the venerable Academy structure with a brand new building. As we might expect, the earliest suggestions envisioned the usual multi-purpose building, a Village hall “to include first class Post Office rooms, Fireman’s parlors, trustees’ room, election hall and Opera House, with provision in the basement for fire apparatus and lock-up.” One of the most important elements in the plan was the Post Office, which would rent space on the first floor. To investigate this possibility, the *Censor* editor traveled to Washington D.C., discovering that the rent would probably be about \$600 per year which, along with other rentals, would easily pay the interest on a \$30,000 bond. A petition to that effect was presented to the Trustees in April 1889, signed by a very long list of Village worthies. The enabling legislation passed Assembly and Senate in May, and architectural plans were received in August 1889.

Interestingly, all three architectural proposals were from “local” men: E.A. **Curtis**, M.E. **Beebe**, and G. Wilton **Lewis**, the latter of whom was then of Boston but had been born and raised in Fredonia. The **Curtis** plans were accepted in September 1889, and bidding on the contract began in January 1890. After some preliminary skirmishing by residents who were opposed to the project, the six construction bids were opened. The low bidder was the Dean & Spring Mfg. Co. of Franklinville, the company which was awarded the contract for \$28,960. The Academy building came down and construction on the Village Hall began in April 1890. The formal laying of the cornerstone was held in June.

As planned, the building included rooms for the Post Office, Village offices, a news stand, public meeting rooms, a fire hall, a lockup, club rooms, private offices, and an Opera House. There was an additional, unplanned, element. Following a long architectural tradition, a junior member of **Curtis’s** team, a draughtsman named John L. **Telford**, sneaked in an embellishment all the way up over the Temple Street doors, which were designed as the entrance to the Opera House. **Telford’s** embellishment consisted of the masks of comedy and tragedy, which meant that at least one unobtrusive decoration said “theater,” even if the official name did not.

When the Opera House opened with much fanfare in April 1891 it was to a presentation of “Josephine the Empress of the French,” starring “Rhea, the Celebrated and Accomplished Actress,” with a company of 22 people. Over the years the Opera House stage saw the full gamut of events: local amateur minstrel shows; political rallies; tragedies; farces; the Fruit Growers Institute with a display of apples, pears, plums, peaches and grapes; Gilbert & Sullivan operettas; and a horse show: Prof. Bristol’s trained troupe of 30 horses, ponies, and mules.

There were lots of special effects, which the full-size stage allowed for. 1892's "The County Fair," presented "*precisely as given*" for six months in New York City, concluded with a genuine County Fair and horse race. "Three full sized, live horses run the race, and they are so fixed on a moveable platform that while they run with all their might they are some time crossing the stage and the race becomes quite exciting when the colt 'Cold Molasses' wins and redeems the farm." In March of 1892, "Little's World" was offered at what was then being called the Grand Opera house. The second act involved a sinking ship with "intricate mechanical storm effects" which require "the entire usage of the stage, from wall to wall." "A Barrel of Money" featured a young woman tied to a revolving belt in the great Iron Mills scene. The steam engine puffed, and the wheel and belts whirred. She was rescued at the absolute last minute.

There were benefits for local organizations, such as a stereopticon presentation called "Beautiful Scenes from Foreign Lands." Movies arrived in May 1898. The "Oberammergau Passion Play," captured by Edison's cinematograph – a hand-cranked improvement over the biograph – was shown. Of course it was without sound, but a narrator stood by and "read the descriptions eloquently." During the performance, a Mr. Allen **May** sang – against a backdrop of screened illustrations – including the new patriotic song "The Explosion of the Maine." The *Censor's* review pointed out that only ten or fifteen years earlier an attempt to present the Passion Play on a New York stage was soundly defeated because of the impiety of connecting anything so sacred with as profane a locale as a public stage.

When the first Normal School building burned in December 1900, some of the classes were moved to Village Hall. Commencement Exercises were held in the Opera House in June 1901 and 1902. By 1903 trouble was looming on the horizon, although no one may have noticed at the time. The movies had really arrived. **Morgan & Hoyt's** Moving Pictures were featured with musical interludes. In 1905 all of the **Rogers** Stock Company plays also featured "moving pictures" shown between acts. Lyman H. **Howe's** "travel pictures" became a perennial favorite, and in 1908, there was the Cameraphone, a device that combined "the moving picture machine and the graphophone" [phonograph]. The graphophone was hidden behind the screen and controlled electrically by the camera operator. One of its specialties was a rendition of the entire garden scene from the "Merry Widow."

The 1908 political season had the Hon. Horace **Lanza** making an address in Italian, with music provided by Fredonia's Italian Band. The following night offered Congressman **Vreeland** with music by the Glee Club and the Band. The next week was Gov. **Hughes**, preceded by a Grand Torch Light and Grand Cavalry Parade, marching grandly from White Street along Main to Forest Place, Barker, Temple, Water, Norton, Eagle, Orchard, Cushing, Green, Main, Temple, and finally to the Opera House. "East Lynn" returned to the stage, and there was vaudeville as well as "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch," but still the movies came.

Patriotic shows and meetings were frequent during World War I, but by 1917 movies had become a staple at the Grand Opera House. Except for occasional experiments like the Cameraphone, they were silent films. However, as the manager Mr. **Landers** pointed out, they were "a great blessing to the deaf and all who are hard of hearing. Such people do not enjoy regular theaters any more unless they have a front seat, and then they lose a great deal." Or, as an earlier manager, A.H. **Hilton**, said, the "silents" were a great boon to all who had "poor

earsight.” A typical week of showings offered “Chas. **Chaplin** in the Vagabond,” travel pictures, a William S. **Hart** western, Lionel **Barrymore** in “Millionaire’s Double,” the **Drews**, and more. Finally, the management bowed to the inevitable. The Opera House was closed during the summer of 1926 to reopen under new management in the fall, now as the Winter Garden Theatre. Two new projectors were acquired as well as a nine-stop **Mars & Colton** organ to replace the piano that accompanied the silent films.

The Winter Garden functioned as a neighborhood movie house, doing very well in the heyday of silents and then sound, but then came radio, drive-ins and – most significantly – television. Attendance began to drop. The theater limped along for a good while, but in 1981, ten years short of its centennial, the theatre closed its doors for good – or so it was thought. When the possibility of the entire Village Hall being torn down was broached in 1983, the reaction included the formation of the Fredonia Preservation Society, which took as its first task the preservation of Village Hall. With that accomplished, the Society mounted a campaign to rehabilitate the Opera House, which was done. In 1994, the new, old, and again magnificent Opera house was turned over to a separate not-for-profit group, The 1891 Fredonia Opera House, which had managed its affairs ever since. And that is how the Fredonia Opera House came to be, and happily came to be again.