

*Opera houses in the United States have a long history dating back to the pre-Revolutionary War era. The Playhouse in Williamsburg, Virginia, is commonly believed to be the first "opera house" in America. Although date of construction is unknown, most scholars of opera and theater history assign a date of 1722. Other early opera houses from the mid 1700s were located in cities such as New York, Charleston, Philadelphia, and Annapolis. Performers were typically English and traveled with their families in touring companies.*

*Although opera was a popular form of entertainment enjoyed by many including George Washington who noted opera performances in his ledger, there was considerable opposition to it from various religious groups. Believing that it promoted sin of all types, opponents spoke out against it and going so far as to wreck a New York theater in 1765. With the looming struggle for independence hanging overhead, the performance of opera (and other extravagant luxuries like gambling) was declared illegal by Congress in 1774. A second anti-theater law was passed in 1778. Despite the laws, performances still took place, often under disguise of being a moral lecture or with a misleading performance title. Under considerable pressure from both performers and supporters of opera/theater, Congress finally repealed the earlier laws in 1789. Opera continued to be opposed by some religious groups until well into the 1800s.*

*By the end of the Civil War negative attitudes about opera had abated "The increased appetite for popular entertainment overcame much of the lingering rural religious hostility to theater." (Dizikes, 269). Most large cities had an opera house by the 1860s. Small cities and villages were beginning to build their own opera houses, especially during the prosperity that followed the war. "The Ohio Valley and the Plains states were the center of small-town opera house culture." (Dizikes, 274). Wishing to appear more cosmopolitan and attract newcomers to their modest towns, many local politicians felt that an opera house was as essential to the community as a church or jail. An opera house provided a sense of urbanity and many small communities used them as an enticement for the railroad companies to establish a stop in their villages.*

*Conversely, the railroad greatly facilitated the ability of touring opera companies to perform in these newly established opera houses. Isolated, rural mining towns of all types often established opera houses as a much needed form of entertainment. Often the only form of cultural entertainment for miles, opera houses enjoyed immense popularity.*

*As small communities felt the necessity to construct opera houses in the post-Civil War period, they were also realizing the need for either new or improved town halls. Populations were steadily increasing and contemporary buildings were desired that conveyed the prosperous status of the community. A common building type emerged that combined an opera house with government offices. There was a precedence for entertainment activities taking place in government meeting spaces with documented accounts of opera performances in court rooms throughout the eighteenth and early-to-mid nineteenth centuries in places like Providence, Rhode Island; Augusta, Georgia; and Charleston, South Carolina. Economically, especially for a small town, it made sense to combine the two functions into one building form. The money raised from the opera could be used to help repay the debts incurred for the construction of the new municipal structure.*

*In some communities a similar building type emerged that combined the opera house with commercial space. These were often built by fraternal organizations such as the Fraternal Order of the Eagles who would then use the building for their meetings. While the building type and financial motives were very similar, the commercially oriented opera houses did not have the same motivation as the governmental ones.*

*The commercial opera houses were private investments designed to make a profit off of both the commercial and performance spaces. The municipal opera houses were born of a desire to enhance the cultural status of the community.*

*The performance space was housed on the second and/or third floors, while the first floor contained commercial space or governmental offices. Typically, the theater had a separate entry with a stairway that led to the lobby and ticket window on the second floor. Small-town opera houses seated between five hundred to one thousand people. The larger ones were more likely to have a gallery or balcony. Interior decoration varied but was less ornate than the large opera house of the big cities.*

Excerpted from the Camden City Hall and Opera House National Register nomination.

On April 27, 1884, Jamestown suffered a devastating “cyclone” which damaged or completely destroyed practically every structure in the village. By 1889, Jamestown had for the most part recovered and had again become a thriving community of agricultural and commercial business activities. Elected officials began to see the need for a centralized meeting place so during the March 23, 1889 election, residents approved a \$15,000. levy to build such a structure. As a result of this successful ballot initiative, Silvercreek Township and Jamestown Village together purchased lot #12 on the southeast corner of N. Limestone and E. Xenia Sts. from James H. and Susan Zortman Glass for the sum of \$1600.00.

According to an article in the June 3, 1889 edition of the Jamestown Tribune three firms submitted bids. George Beatty bid \$13,966.00, John W. McLean bid \$11,679.00 and the low bid of \$11,464.00 which secured the contract was submitted by Matthew Moorman and Sons. Information concerning Mr. Moorman was obtained from his obituary in the April 4, 1919 edition of the Greene County Journal.

*“Matthew Moorman was born one of eleven children on June 15, 1830 to Charles and Matilda Watson Moorman on a farm one and a half miles east of Jamestown which was part of a tract of land belonging to his grandfather, Thomas Moorman, an original settler. Thomas Moorman came from Virginia in 1809. Matthew Moorman married Martha Clemans in 1855 and they became the parents of five children. After her death in 1873, Mr. Moorman then married Louise Corbley in 1876 and they had one daughter.*

*He learned the carpenter trade under A.J. Christopher and is believed to have been instrumental in the rebuilding of many buildings after the 1884 tornado. He built the Jamestown Opera House in 1889. His sons worked with their father and for years they were known as “Jamestown’s best”. Matthew Moorman died March 13, 1919 and is buried in Jamestown Cemetery.”*

Although his bid for the construction was too high, John McLean, a noted Cedarville contractor and builder, was awarded the design of the building. Mr. MacLean designed the Cedarville Opera House, several churches and residences in Cedarville including the residence of the mother of Whitelaw Reid. Before entering into private business, Mr. MacLean had a military career during the Civil War. He enlisted in the Co. D 44<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry and later transferred to Co. D 8<sup>th</sup> Ohio Calvary. Mr. MacLean died in 1908 at the age of 72 and is buried in Cedarville North Cemetery.

Construction on the Late Victorian/Romanesque style building started on June 12, 1889 and was completed in December of the same year. The grand opening was held December 31, 1889, January 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1890.

The following articles describing the grand opening appeared in the Xenia Gazette and Torchlight. From the December 28, 1889 edition: “*The people of Jamestown will open and dedicate their new town and township house (Opera House) on the nights of Dec. 31<sup>st</sup>, Jan. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. The company they have engaged is the Blanche Slader Comedy Co. which is highly recommended. The opening of the hall is quite an important affair and the Jamestown people will see that it is done right.*” From the December 31<sup>st</sup> edition: “*The new Opera House at Jamestown will be opened this evening December 31<sup>st</sup> by the Blanche Slader Co. The Opera House is one of the prettiest in the county. A number of young people from this city will go up to attend the opening.*” From the Jan. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: “*The young people who attended the opening of the Jamestown Opera House Tuesday evening report it quite a success. The Opera House is one of the nicest in the county and the evening was attended by a crowded house. The seats arrived just in time to be placed in position as they had been delayed until the last minute. The play, “The Blanche Slader Comedy Co.” holds forth three nights. Jamestown may well be proud of her new and handsome structure.*” From the January 3<sup>rd</sup> edition: “*The opening of the handsome new opera house in Jamestown was such a decided success in all respects that the citizens of that place have prevailed on the traveling troupe, “The Blanche Slader Comedy Co.” to remain over the rest of the week. The admission has been reduced to 20, 25 and 30 cents.*”

Most opera houses constructed in that era were of commercial/entertainment design or municipal/entertainment design. The Jamestown Opera House is unique in that it served all three concepts. The upstairs entertainment area hosted musical and drama presentations by local talent, school graduations and plays, agricultural and educational seminars, temporary meeting place for churches, revival services, movies with sound and silent movies accompanied by local pianists. Many traveling troupes came to Jamestown as it was easily accessible by train and the nearby depot hotel provided housing. The hotel building is still standing on Verity Street.

The downstairs municipal space housed the mayor’s office, council chambers, township offices, fire department, police station, jail, library and for a short time the post office. A barbershop (in 1912, the barber, Elijah Anderson, murdered his brother-in-law, Howard Hickman because Mr. Hickman thinking Mr. Anderson was being “unduly familiar” with Mrs. Hickman had entered the Anderson home and “knocked Mr. Anderson around savagely”. Being a small man, Mr. Anderson held the 6 foot tall Mr. Hickman in “deadly fear”), gun shop, clock shop, shoe factory, jewelry store and repair shop for small engines are some of the businesses that occupied the commercial space.

From 1889-1936, the Opera House was the center of community activities. When the new centralized Silvercreek School opened in January of 1937, it had a fully equipped auditorium/gymnasium that included complete theatrical facilities with a stage, lighting,

sound system, dressing room area and permanent theatre type seating. The last known event in the Opera House was the graduation of the class of 1936.

There have been no commercial enterprises in the building for many years, the township offices moved to the township building on Sycamore Street in 1982 and the village offices and library moved into the new municipal building in 1997. The Opera House was used only for storage and soon fell into severe disrepair.

Midst rumors the building might be razed, 14 concerned citizens met in 1997 to reorganize the Jamestown Area Historical Society with Jim Weeks serving as president for 2 years. In 1998 the Historical Society became incorporated and received its tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status. In 1999 Ted Sesslar became president. After reviewing a structural engineer's report that stated "in general, all structural components that have been protected from the weather are in outstanding condition" the Historical Society began serious talks with township and village officials concerning the possibility of renovation, repair and the return to community service of the Opera House. The loss of several historic buildings in 1993 and 1995 fires made the Opera House with its historic and sentimental value an even more important link to Jamestown's past and gave a heightened sense of urgency to its preservation.

After much discussion in the community that possibility became a reality. The building was still jointly owned, and while highly supportive of the project, village council did not wish to take an active role. Township trustees agreed to become involved and so in January, 2001, the village donated its share to the township for \$1.00 making Silvercreek Township the sole owner. In May, 2001, the Historical Society signed a lease agreement with the township.

Due to severe leakage, the roof and some trusses had to be replaced. In 2002 these items were paid for by community members who bought bundles of shingles. In 2003, Hank Caudill became project administrator and a state grant was obtained to replace the windows on three sides of the building and repair the brick around the new windows. In 2004, another state grant and a HUD grant were obtained for a new electrical system including new light fixtures with the look of 1889 and HVAC. Greene County CDBGs have been used for "as-built" drawings, a new stage floor, additional exterior brick repair, to completely refurbish the balcony and to restore the front of the building to its 1889 appearance by rehabbing and rehanging the original front doors, and by purchasing new front windows. The original glass globes from the balcony façade were found, cleaned and reinstalled.

Other improvements include a new auditorium ceiling and new floors throughout the downstairs. The Greene County Historical Society gave a beautiful chandelier for the landing at the top of the grand staircase. Cooper Security donated a state-of-the-art security system. Sheriff Gene Fischer's inmate worker program has helped with cleaning, carpentry, painting and plastering. Rick Grimes repaired the stained glass windows. The fire escape is completed. King Painting has painted and stenciled the Proscenium Arch around the stage as well as the auditorium walls, sanded and applied a

polyurethane finish to the stage floor and painted or stained all wood in the auditorium. Walls and staircases from the auditorium entrance downstairs to the front entry doors are also finished. Sherwin-Williams allowed us to purchase the primer at a deep discount and then graciously donated all paint for the final coat. Rick and Linda Johannes gave us a 19<sup>th</sup> century ticket booth which is fully compatible with the décor of the Opera House. We were fortunate to have obtained a corporate grant from Vectren Energy Co. to rehab the auditorium, balcony, stage and dressing room area exit doors all of which were in need of repair and leaked air. Harner Plumbing Supplies donated two pedestal sinks for the first floor bathrooms and allowed us to purchase the remaining needed fixtures at cost. The orchestra pit railing was restored to its original configuration. Condition of the advertising banner was assessed, determined to be in surprisingly good condition and was refurbished by Moana King. Walmart and Greene Giving have made donations.

We are pleased to have been given 400 seats from Springfield Memorial Hall which is being razed. These seats are of the same vintage as our original seats which are for the most part unusable, however, we were able to save enough of the original seats for one row of 25 in the balcony and 1 row of 6 against the auditorium back wall. Although the Springfield seats were donated, we incurred a substantial expense while having the seats removed due to environmental regulations. Fannin Trucking Co. transported the seats from Springfield at no charge. King Painting has completed the necessary repairs and refurbishing of 270 seats which have been installed in the auditorium and balcony. Unfortunately some of the donated seats were also unusable so padded folding chairs have been purchased for use until more wooden seats of the 1800s era can be obtained. The balcony, dressing room area and 2 largest first floor rooms are now completed.

The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places October 17, 2007.

Our first fund-raiser was a letter-writing campaign to the Silvercreek/Greeneview Alumni Association which resulted in our membership representing 17 states. Letters of encouragement and appreciation as well as generous donations have been received from these former residents, many of whom tour the Opera House when they visit Jamestown. Area citizens have been extremely supportive of Historical Society fund-raisers by donating to and shopping the garage sales and visiting the tent during the Bean Festival. Merchants have donated lovely prizes for the raffle and citizens touring the Opera House are more than generous. Many cash contributions have been made and are gratefully accepted by the Historical Society. Our Christmas candy sales have become quite popular.

The Historical Society is pleased with the reaction of our students who have taken tours. They always express surprise that such a “cool” venue exists in Jamestown and inquire if they can sometime perform there. This is what it’s all about – recalling past memories and creating more for many years to come.

