

City's Opera House drew mixed reviews in 1880s

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The facelift about to take place at city hall is certainly not the first change on that corner.

For 110 years the center of city government has been in the building at the southeast corner of William and Sandusky streets. For the first half of that era, the corner also was the cultural hub of the community.

In 1879, voters approved funds for the construction of a new city hall. The building would include a second-floor opera house, the city fathers decided.

"After months of weary waiting and anxious expectation the city Opera House, in the new city hall building, was formally opened last evening to the public ... to be recorded upon the pages of our city history as one of the great occurrences of the times," the March 30, 1882 *Gazette* reported.

The building had been under construction for nearly three years. The residents' patience was growing thin; the cost of the building was exceeding the earlier estimates. Voters had approved \$35,000. By the time the curtain was ready to rise for the first time, the cost of the building and furnishings was estimated to be \$110,000. *The Gazette* called it Delaware's "White Elephant."

"... numerous controversies arose during the progress of completing the structure ... We have the building now, and we have it to pay for; let us accept the situation as gracefully as possible and exhibit at least some degree of pride in the same." *The Gazette* reported, after a splen-

175th
year



The
Delaware
Gazette

did review of the first performance on March 29, 1882.

"There's Millions In It," a comedy adapted from a Mark Twain story, was the opening night's bill by the John Raymond company. People came from Marion and Marysville for the event. Admission fees ranged from 75 cents to \$1.50.

"... (T)he audience ... contained the most fashionable assemblage that was ever present at a public entertainment in the city," *The Gazette* reported.

The 1,050 seats in the hall were not full the first night. *The Gazette* reported the comedy troupe "played to a fair-sized audience last evening. Everybody was disappointed with the attendance and a large number of seats in every part of the house were empty during the entire evening."

The second floor of city hall included a public auditorium at the south end, and the opera hall at the north. The opera hall was richly decorated with art work, statues, chandeliers, and a domed ceiling. The acoustics were good — an im-

portant consideration for any performing area in the days before electronic sound equipment was available. The seats were raised in the amphitheater style. Words spoken in an ordinary tone on stage could easily be understood in the most remote parts of the room, *The Gazette* reported.

By all accounts it was considered one of the most elegant of all opera houses in Ohio.

The first floor included the fire department with stables for the horses, a public library, city council chambers, offices, a courtroom, a vault, and a prison for both male and female prisoners.

Odors from the horse stables below often drifted upstairs, and were annoying to the audiences enjoying the stage production.

As the flood of culture poured into the city, Delawareans responded with little enthusiasm. Just one month after the opening, only a handful of people came to see "Jane Eyre," featuring Charlotte Thompson.

"Delaware is being 'showed to death,'" *The Gazette* reported in the April 20, 1882 edition.

Some thought that the price — for renting the hall, and ultimately the cost of the tickets — was too high.

The Gazette reported: "It is quite evident that the price charged for the use of the City Opera House is too high. Every theatrical manager that has visited the city since the completion of the building has expressed his surprise at the exorbitant