

Stepping Into History: The Woodstock Opera House

- 1. Fire!** On October 10, 1871 a huge fire destroyed nine buildings on Van Buren Street from Dean Street to Johnson Street between the corner of Dean Street and the Court House. This is the same day as The Great Chicago Fire and Peshtigo, WI fire.



In 1888, the Woodstock City Council met to vote on the **construction of a City Hall** on the Northwest corner and part of the empty space ravaged by the fire.

The Woodstock City Council voted a tie vote. Woodstock Mayor, Merritt Joslyn cast the deciding vote that made it possible to proceed with the construction of City Hall, now known as the Woodstock Opera House. This structure was built in 1889 to house the library, council room, justice court, fire department and second floor auditorium for the City of Woodstock. It was built by an Elgin Based architect, Smith Hoag, at a cost of \$25,000. The construction materials are mostly of local origin including limestone, terra cotta, fieldstone, white brick and sandstone.



Merritt L. Joslyn
Mayor 1887-1889

Mayor Joslyn's framed portrait can be viewed in the "Library" room to the left of the entry of the Opera House.

Today, the Opera House is a fully modernized theatre and its exterior Romanesque architectural style reflects late Victorian era tastes combined with Early American, Midwestern and even Gothic & Moorish elements throughout.



As it looks today...

- 2.** When the Opera House was built in 1889, it was the **home of a jail and fire department**. The round doors on the west side of the building were used by the fire department.



Fire Company NO. 1

3. **Is something missing** from this photograph?

The photograph was taken approximately 50 years ago! The tower was removed because the tower was originally made of wood, which had deteriorated and rotted to the point where it was falling apart.



4. **Books in the Opera House?**

From 1891 until 1959, the Woodstock Public Library was located in the Opera House!

In 1890, the private subscription library run by the Woodstock Literary and Library Society decided to turn their collection over to the city to provide the foundation for the Woodstock Public Library. The Woodstock public library opened in the two rooms on the south side of the newly constructed City Hall (Woodstock Opera House).

If you look at the lower walls in the room to the left of the entry, you can still find 'scars' from the old bookshelves on the wainscoting.

One of the original library tables sits in this room (*Shown in photo*)

Another table is located in the current library on Judd Street!



Woodstock Public Library, 1927

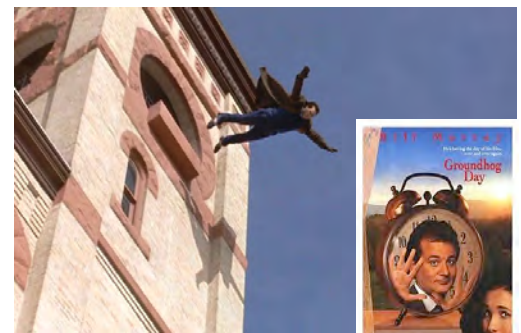


As the room looks today....

5. **Who jumped** from the **Opera House Tower?**

Only one person, during the filming of the 1993 movie, *Groundhog Day*.

In this Movie, Bill Murray has the 'worst day of his life...over and over again! A movie stuntman, Rick LeFevour, portraying Bill Murray jumped from the tower!



6. The **interior of the Opera House** is modeled after the showboats of the time, with dimensions and decorations that imitate many of those grand floating theatres.



The Theater is very colorful. It features historic furnishings, stained glass windows, tin ceilings, original woodwork and hand drawn stencil designs. During the 1970's restoration, the original stencils were discovered! The stencils you see are actual copies of the stencils that once decorated theater when it was built in 1890. Each stencil was painted by hand.

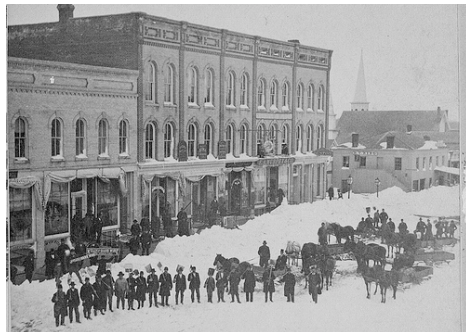
7. Where is the **date on the cornerstone of the building**?

It is not there because the builders were in such a hurry to complete the structure that they forgot to carve in the date!



8. **What did the City of Woodstock look like in 1889** when the Opera House was built?

Do you see anything on the Square that you could not see today?

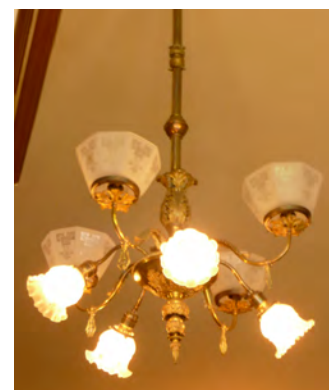


Great Snow Storm of 1881



Historic Main Street, Circa 1910

9. Take a look at the **light fixture** hanging over the entry in the Opera House. The chandelier fixture has "knobs". When the Opera house was built, it was lighted by gas light. At that time, the builders did not believe electricity would work!



10. When the Opera House was built, the **theater had a flat floor**. Dance, wrestling matches and meetings were held there. Do you think you could use this building for these purposes today?



The interior of the theater as it looks today..

11. How do you think **people dressed** when the Opera House was built? The Patti Rosa Company provided the inaugural performance of Margery Daw on Thursday, September 4, 1890.

“The scenic effects were excellent, and in every way the affair was a brilliant success”

- The Sentinel

This is a photo of Patti Rosa. She was one of the first shows that performed in the Opera House.



12. This is a photograph taken of students who visited the Opera House in the Spring of 2010. Do their **clothes look different?**



13. There are several other buildings on the Square that are very old. The Court House was built in 1857 before the Opera House. The **oldest building** is photographed as it stands today on the same block as the Opera House! Can you find it?



103 E. Van Buren Street as it looks in 2011

In 1960, the Junior Civic Arts League invested time and effort to battle the increasing deterioration of the auditorium and stage. The Woodstock Fine Arts Association was formed in 1961 with the purpose of restoring the Opera House through the next decade. In 1972, the Opera House was declared a “landmark” by the city and the Woodstock Opera House Community Center, Inc. was formed to raise funds for the

woodstockfinearts.org
wfaa2010@owc.net

