

# Thespian Hall

Boonville, Missouri

Built in 1857

Oldest continuously used theatre west of the  
Allegheny Mountains.



Placed on the National Historic Register of Places in 1969.

For more than 150 years Thespian Hall has captured the vision, the imagination and the essence of the community in which it was built. The roots of Thespian hall go back to 1838, when a remarkable thing happened in the frontier town of Boonville. That year, sixty leading citizens founded an all-male dramatic group called "The Thespian Society", which enjoyed wide community support that was unique in its day.

By 1855, the Thespians were ready to build a permanent structure as "...a monument to the liberality and good taste of our citizens..." It took two years to complete the four story high Greek revival building.

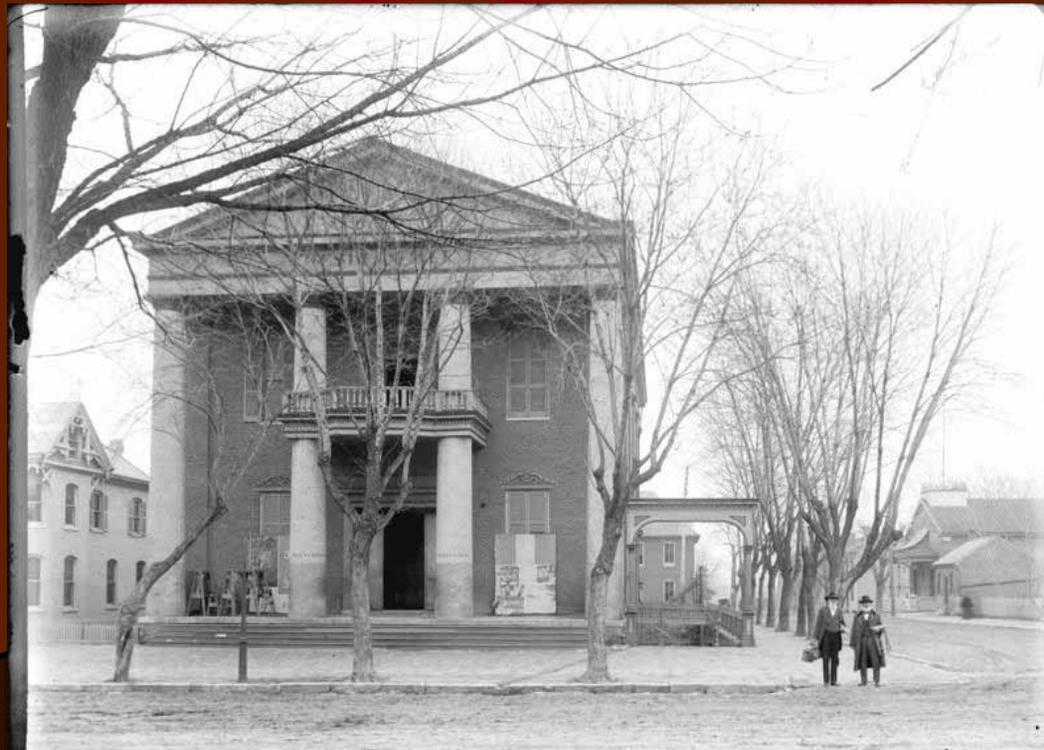
During the Civil War, Thespian Hall filled many needs, from quartering the Federal Troops to serving as a hospital for soldiers. The unity created by the Thespian Society began to disintegrate and sometime during the War, the Society ceased to exist.



Earliest known photograph of Thespian Hall, taken about 1869 by photographer James C. Macurdy.

The Hall's ownership was transferred to J.L. Stephens, once a Society member, and Boonville became known as the "best little theatre town in Missouri" as well-known performers from Eddie Foy to black pianist "Blind" Boone played the Hall. The Turn and Gesang Verein, one of the athletic and singing societies which flourished in the areas of heavy German settlement, was a major occupant of the building, sponsoring many of these events.

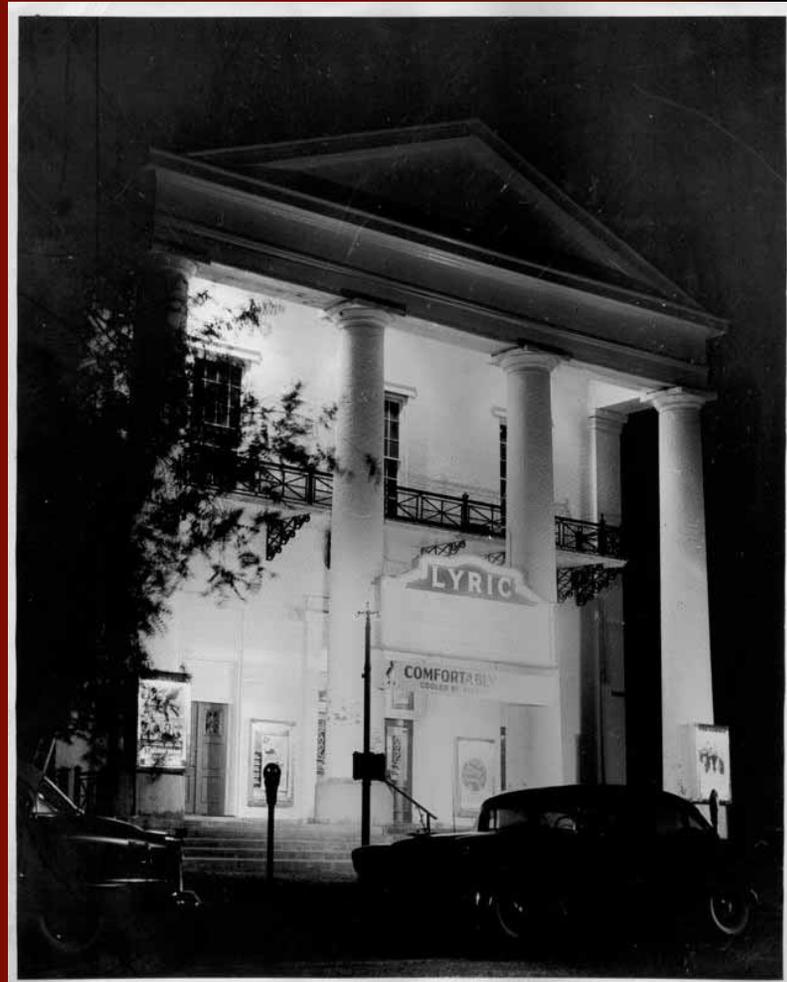
Thespian Hall c. 1890s, photographed by Maximillian E. Schmidt





After the Civil War, the building fell into disrepair. The Stephens family owned Thespian Hall at that time and began a major renovation. A stage house was added, balcony, along with four box seats and a gallery with elaborate rococo plaster decoration. The ceiling was "embellished with pink cherubs and garlands of roses," and Thespian Hall was rechristened "Stephens Opera House" in 1901.

Live stage performances eventually gave way to the silent movie era and later, motion pictures. Thespian Hall was purchased by Fox-Midwest Theatres of Kansas City and became "The Lyric" theatre.



In 1937, a large scale preservation effort to save Thespian Hall was orchestrated by local citizens. Its owners were about to demolish it in favor of a modern movie theatre in its place. This was one of the pioneering grass roots preservation efforts in Missouri and the Midwest. Fox-Midwest dropped their plans to destroy the building and opted instead to update. In addition, a bill was passed by the Missouri State Legislature and signed by Governor Stark granting \$20,000 for the preservation of the hall.

In the early 1970's, The Lyric faced a great threat. The run down movie theatre was being considered for demolition and the property slotted for use as a business parking lot. Luckily, Crosby Kemper and the Kemper Foundation entered the scene.



Mr. Kemper purchased Thespian Hall based upon fond childhood memories and a desire to preserve the western frontier architectural icon. He gifted it to the Friends of Historic Boonville along with years of financial contributions toward its renovation and restoration. Over the next two decades a major restoration plan was carried out to return the interior to the Stephens Opera House era (c. 1901) and the exterior to the original (c. 1857).

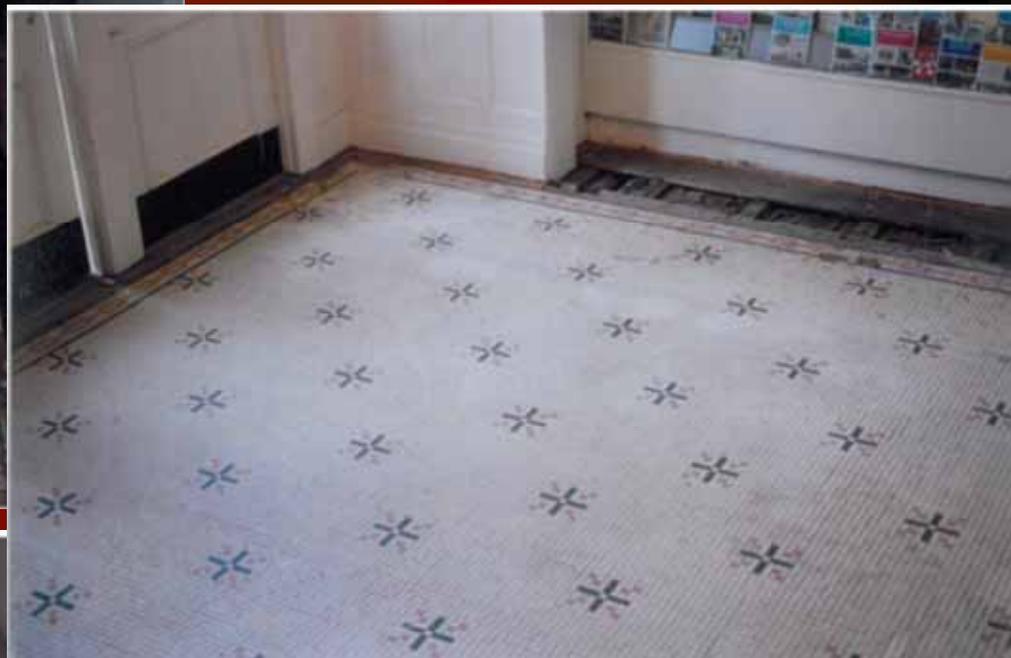
# Interior Restoration



Color testing was performed to determine original color schemes.

Movie screen had to be torn out to access the stage and orchestra pit. (It hadn't been accessed in over 40 years and was filled with bat dung.)





Original hardwood and tile flooring found under the carpeting in lobby, box office, and foyer.



One of the most labor intensive projects was the repair and restoration of the rococo balcony scroll work.



Originally, the Stephens Opera House had four box seats in the gallery. They had been removed when the building was remodeled as a movie theatre. Through generous local donations from UMB Bank, and Potter Transport, the two upper boxes were rebuilt.



# Exterior Restoration



Exterior renovation included a new roof, major gutter repair, painting, tuck pointing, concrete work to the base of columns and steps, new exterior lighting, fire escape, restoration of exterior shutters, re-bricking of the plaza, and removal of the painting on the front of the building. The latter was a real mess....white water ran down Main Street for weeks.



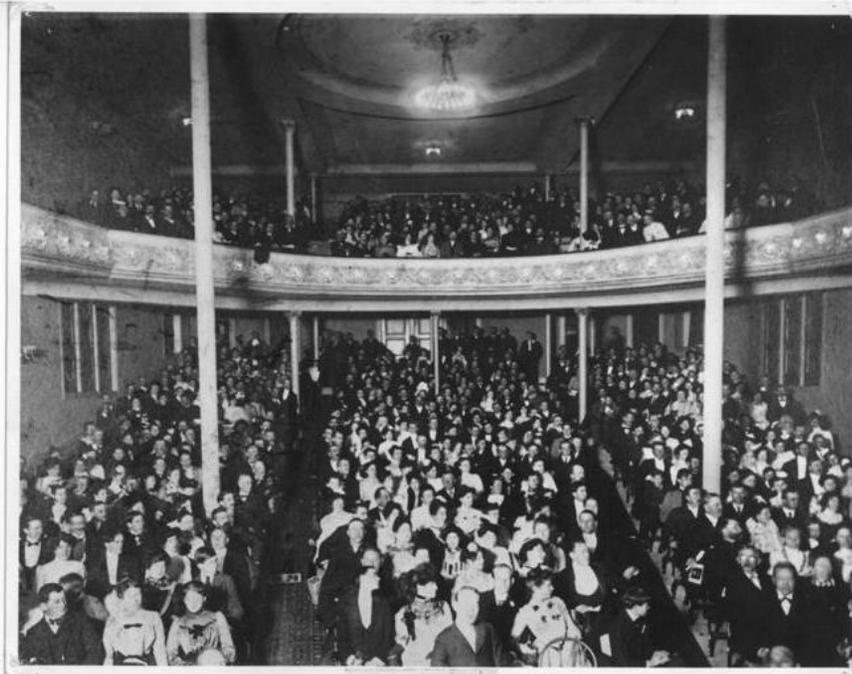
# Restoration Estimates

Kemper Foundation Funding  
\$1,500,000

Local Funding - \$600,000

In kind gifts from contractors and  
volunteer hours - \$500,000

# Then and Now



Opening night Stephens Opera House

1901



Thespian Hall Sesquicentennial  
celebration 2007

# Thespian Hall Today

Thespian Hall serves once again as a home for the arts. Because of the vision and hard work of the Friends of Historic Boonville, not unlike the Thespian Society which built it, Thespian Hall is an historic building still making history.

# Missouri River Festival of the Arts

This year celebrates the 35<sup>th</sup> annual Missouri River Festival of the Arts in Thespian Hall.



# Big Muddy Folk Festival

This year celebrates the 19<sup>th</sup> annual Big Muddy Folk Festival.



# Thespian Hall Summer Theatre Camp



Fairies from *A Midsummer Nights Dream*



Bottom, Puck, and the Mechanicals from  
*A Midsummer Nights Dream*

# Thespian Hall's Future

Begin an endowment campaign

Ongoing maintenance

Currently, the hall is in need of exterior and interior painting, gutter repair, and a new roof.

Handicapped accessible restrooms

Dream of restoring the third floor which has been unused for over 70 years.