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Collection 240 Taylor's Opera House

**By Ned Kolpan
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History

On March 18, 1867, not long after the end of the Civil War, Taylor's Opera House opened its doors for the first time. The theatre's namesake, John Taylor, had bought the First M.E. Church, located on Greene Street (now State Street), in early 1866. It took more than a year to construct the theatre from the foundation up due to the removal of a series of large rocks. The purpose of the theatre, according to a 1919 memorial, was for Trenton to have a "regular" theatre.

The lead architect on the project was Harry E. Finch. A respected Trentonian, he had also designed the theatre's predecessor, Bechtel Hall, in the 1850s. With the opening of Taylor's Opera House, the caliber of entertainment in Trenton soared, leaving Bechtel Hall to fall into disrepair. At its height, it became famous as a Broadway tryout theatre, allowing the citizens of Trenton to view many shows before they hit New York. It was also the city's premiere spot for vaudeville. After vaudeville went out of style, Taylor's Opera House became a hot spot for movies, which may have lessened its commercial appeal, leading to its demise.

In addition to scouting the theatre's location, John Taylor was also the head of Taylor's Opera House's personal theatre company. It was his job to keep the theatre from slipping into the easier to produce but "seedy" burlesque. At the same time, he had to keep it from evolving into the upscale, highly conservative follies that many of the company's members wanted to perform. For his efforts, the building was named in his honor. However, it had to be called an Opera House because, at the time, the word theatre was associated with scandalous doings and goings on. Very few, if any, operas were ever performed at the theatre.

By 1919, the 50-year-old theatre had entered city lore. Of note was its stage, which was originally only supposed to be 12-feet wide. Harry Finch didn't think such a small stage would work, so he put in a stage that was 32-1/2 by 80-feet. Despite the initial chagrin of the company, this stage worked much better for the space, despite being less intimate. The theatre's foundation was also a time consuming and arduous task to create. There was so much bedrock on the site

that part of the theatre rested on flat, unmovable stone, a feat that remains unusual to this day. It was one of the first theatres to make drinks available in the lobby, although not in the theatre itself. This allowed theatregoers to congregate in the lobby in-between acts and discuss theatre, city affairs or even the space's unique, ahead-of-its-time design.

At its height, the theatre's admission fee was 50 to 75 cents for the ground floor. The balcony, which was added later to meet growing demand, was 35 cents. It was not uncommon for the harshest critics, mainly teenage boys, to take up residence on the upper level. Unlike many theatres of the time, the audience was known for paying rapt attention. Once a performance concluded, it was a common practice to retire to nearby cigar stores and spend hours discussing and debating shows.

A few years later, Taylor's Opera House was sold and became vaudeville venue, Keith's Capitol Theatre. In 1921 it was converted into a movie theatre that would eventually become the R.K.O. International. It remained that way until 1969 when the Trenton Saving Fund Society purchased it and tore it down for a parking lot (18 South Broad Street), which is still there.

Series I: Programs

A collection of programs dated 1868-1912. These are programs of mostly vaudeville shows, the theatre's specialty, with some minstrel shows. Of note is a program dated February 25, 1868, the theatre's first year of operation; an 1891 program showcasing Marshall P. Wilder, the "The Prince of American Humorists" (which also displays the admission prices); several programs printed on silk; program of literary exercises for the 125th Anniversary of the Battle of Trenton (1901); and an 1896 program of "Faust". Also included is a scrapbook of 139 programs from the 1885-1886 season (31 August 1885 – 15 May 1886), and a scrapbook of programs and clippings from 1902-1904. A 2019 program commemorating Mark Twain's speech in February 1869 at the Opera House is included for informational purposes.

Series II: Newspaper Clippings & Adverts

This series contains a collection of newspaper clippings from the history of Taylor's Opera House. Most of these clippings are reviews of shows or adverts for upcoming programming. Of note is a retrospective from 1931 that gives both a history and a sense of flavor regarding the theatre; and an 1887 ad for a double bill featuring Neil Burgess that showcases the theatre's pricing (the standard 35, 50 and 75 cents). There is also a copy of "The Evening Effort" newspaper of May 2, 1911, published by the Vaudeville Committee in Trenton, which reports an incident of a stunt gone wrong in front of a crowd of 2,000.

Series III: Ephemera

A collection of items that cannot be classified as programs nor as news-related. Of note is a list of plays in a bound booklet; a ticket (#52) in its envelope from March 22, 1884; sheet music for "The Volunteer Organist" from 1893; a 1905 personal letter addressed to Nellie Manning of Asbury Park from "Frank", written on Taylor Opera House letterhead; and an Artist's contract circa 1913.

Provenance: unknown

Restrictions: none

Container List

Box / Folder / Folder Title

1 / 1 / Programs

1 / 2 / Programs

1 / 3 / Newspapers & Adverts

1 / 4 / "The Evening Effort"

1 / 5 / Ephemera

2 / Scrapbooks [SB259, SB262]