

The Opera House was sold to a Mr. Draper of Buffalo, New York in 1887. Previous to this, Mr. Draper had been proprietor and manager of "Drapers Uncle Toms Cabin Co.", a travelling dramatic company for 25 years. According to the company show bills, their name was "a household word." Mr. Draper did bring with him years of theatrical experience.

A tornado passed through the city of Ypsilanti on April 12, 1883, just after 7:00 p.m. The tornado demolished the Opera House, leaving only the front wall standing. The building was empty at the time, or there could have been great loss of life. Mr. Draper was home ill at the time, and died a few days later.

A new, but smaller and less grand, Opera House opened on December 31, 1896. This became the Wuerth Theater in 1920. The live stage shows were soon replaced by movies. The theater part of the building was demolished in 1959,



Opera House after a tornado passed through the city on April 12, 1883.

Charette planned for end of month

A charette is a series of meetings giving anyone interested a chance to discuss the design of a project. A gathering of this nature has been planned for the end of January regarding the Water Street Redevelopment project.

Megan Gibb, Director of Community and Economic Development for the city said the first meeting is to be held January 26, at Eagle Crest and will continue with several sessions. The consultants, architects and the project developer will be in attendance to discuss the project with the participants.

The planners will then compile the information and put together a plan to present to the city Planning Commission and City Council by late spring.

Questions regarding this project can be directed to Megan Gibb, City of Ypsilanti Director of Community and Economic Development.



The Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation

Heritage News

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Ypsilanti, MI 48197

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See you at the January Meeting - Wednesday January 30 at 7:30

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Heritage NEWS

JANUARY 2002

January Meeting

HISTORY OF DEPOT TOWN

Wednesday, January 30
7:30 p.m.

First Methodist Church
of Ypsilanti
209 Washtenaw Ave.



Depot Town buildings *have a story to tell*

James Mann, Ypsilanti's city historian, will give an informal talk about the history of Depot Town on Wednesday evening, January 30, at 7:30 at the First United Methodist Church, 209 Washtenaw.

According to Mann, buildings are the stages on which people enact the drama and comedy of their daily lives. The buildings of Depot Town, says Mann, have more than a few stories to tell. The Thompson Block, for example, may be the only building used as a barracks during the Civil War still standing in Michigan. The Follett House was considered the

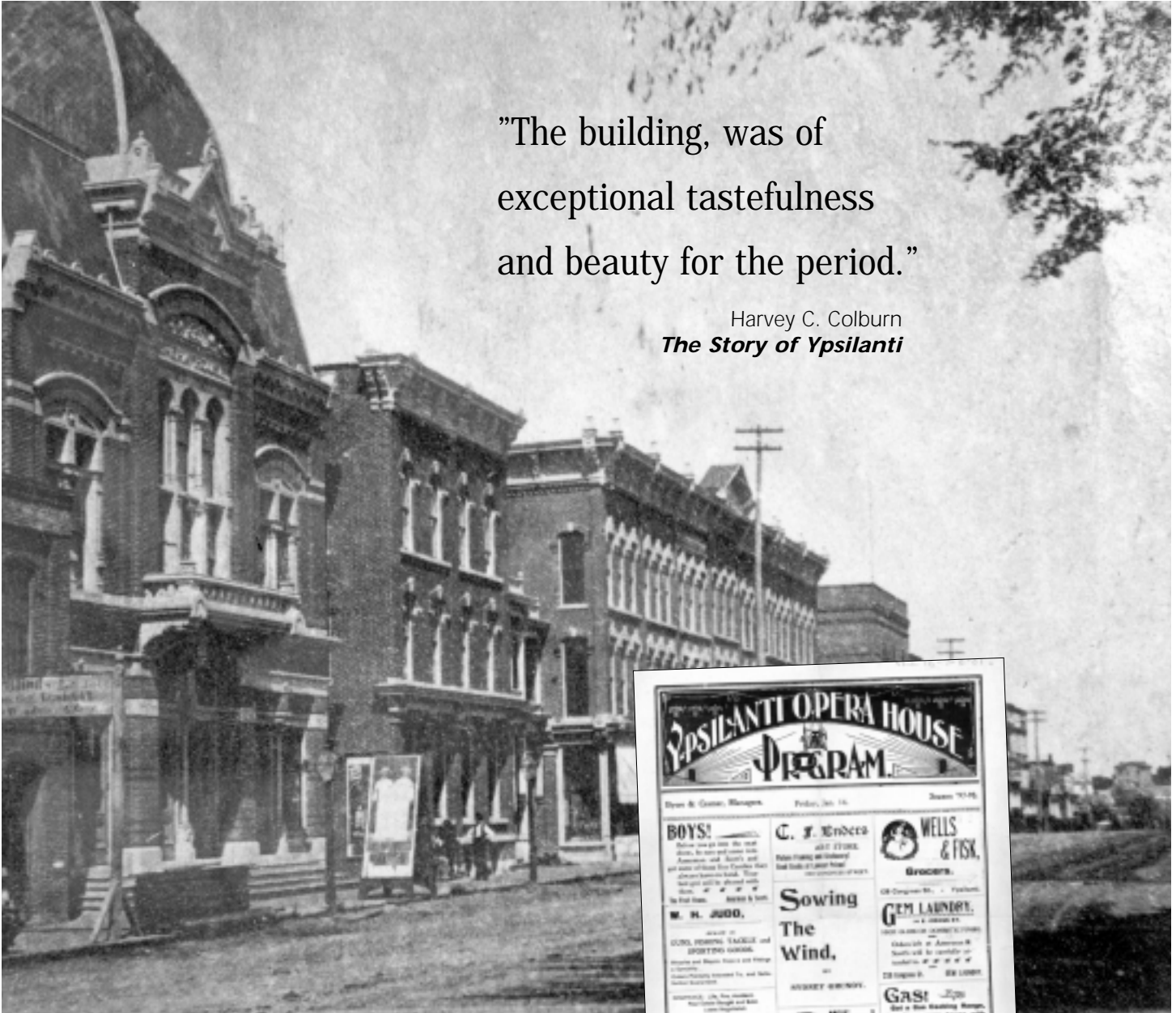
finest hotel between Detroit and Chicago on the Michigan Central line. Today it is hard to imagine that the building that company that made devices for burials. At one time Ypsilanti's Depot was thought to be the finest depot on the line. In contrast, the depots in Detroit and Chicago were considered mere barns. These are just a few tantalizing details from James Mann's treasure trove of information about the Depot Town of yesteryear.

As always, the public is invited and coffee and cookies will be served after the meeting.



Ypsilanti Opera House

a matter of prestige
by James Mann



“The building, was of exceptional tastefulness and beauty for the period.”

Harvey C. Colburn
The Story of Ypsilanti

After the American Civil War every community of note had to have an opera house. This was a matter of prestige, as the sight of a opera house noted a city taste and refinement. Ypsilanti was no exception. In 1879 Bogardus, Curtis and Quirk offer to build a \$10,000 opera house, if the citizens of Ypsilanti contributed \$3,000. Enough money was raised to build one costing twice

as much as planned. Ground for the new opera house was broken on July 22, 1879. The architect was Mortimer L. Smith. “The building,” wrote Harvey C. Colburn in *The Story of Ypsilanti*, “was of exceptional tastefulness and beauty for the period. The material was red brick with

black facings, the structure being surmounted by a dome, and this by ornamental iron work. The interior was of considerable beauty. The ceiling decorations included the medallion portraits of Longfellow, Shakespeare,

Tennyson, Byron, Scott, and very properly, in the company of these notables, Ypsilanti's own Frederic H. Pease."

The Opera House had a frontage of 50 feet and a depth of 100 feet. The house seated 400 people on the main floor, and 200 in the galleries. The house could seat between 800 and 900 persons comfortably. The stage was 28 feet wide and 33 feet deep. The drop curtain represented a scene from ancient Carthage, Queen Dido and her palace. The drop curtain alone cost \$400.

The new Opera House was formally opened on January 15, 1880. Charles R. Whitman delivered the inaugural address. "This," said Whitman, "is a temple to which the mighty dead shall come as to a home. Shakespeare shall move us to tears of pity and sorrow, shall make us thrill with terror, and quiver with rage, and shall strengthen

our hearts and hands to braver and nobler thinking and doing. The masters of comedy shall make us forget our cares and troubles, while we smile and grow happy in the sunshine of their genial mirth. And here too, perhaps, shall be heard the voices of great composers: Beethoven, grand and sublime, shall speak to us from those heights where dwells repose; Wagner shall bewilder us with the lawless and irregular melodies of his school; the weird and delicate notes of Chopin shall penetrate our innermost being. Here shall sound the majestic strains of Handel's "Messiah," and Mendelssohn's "Elijah"; and Mozart, and Haydn, and Schubert, and Schuman, and Rossini, and Sullivan—the whole company of music makers, shall come and speak to us in tones inspiring holy love."

This was followed by a production of "Our Boarding House" performed by the Leonard Grover's Comedy Troupe,

which had been secured for the occasion.

"Of the Opera House itself," noted The Ann Arbor Register of Wednesday, January 21, 1880, "Ypsilanti may well be proud, and it is our opinion that it is the neatest, and prettiest and most complete little Opera House to be found anywhere."

The Ypsilanti Opera House was soon the scene for theatrical and musical productions, by both amateur and professional companies, as well as lectures, political rallies and conventions and temperance meetings. The Opera House, it seems, was never a paying concern, and there was talk in 1884 of turning the building into either a skating ring or rooms for the Ypsilanti Light Guard. Public support rallied to save the Opera House, and operations continued.

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Cast of Gilbert & Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore" given at the Ypsilanti Opera House August 3 and 4, 1892. (photos courtesy of Ypsilanti Historical Archives)