

33 Claremont Opera House/City Hall

58 Opera House Square, Claremont, New Hampshire

In a time when small cities abandon their old buildings for what appears as new and better, Claremont, New Hampshire exemplifies a delicate balance of moving forward while honoring the heritage of their textile and manufacturing roots. Commanding brick mills proudly showcase thoughtful renovations along the Sugar River. And, Opera House Square, Pleasant Street, and Broad Street continue to emphasize a business/residential mix that originally gained distinction as the first multiple-use historical District on the National Register.



In the very early years, Claremont's center of town was actually located in West Claremont, where the Congregationalists and Episcopalians had come together to build a shared church – Union Church. The shared space was short lived as the Congregationalists moved to the southern end of town and built their own meeting house on Maple Avenue. The Episcopalians remained in the old settlement area completing their church after the Revolutionary War.

In the early 1790's the town acquired a portion of Colonel Josiah Stevens' land on the "Plain," known today as Broad Street Park area, for a more centrally located town hall. Ichabod Hitchcock, master carpenter and builder of both Union Church and the Congregational Church, built a new Congregational meeting house on this tract, now the site of the present day City Hall. The meeting house, like most early Congregational churches, served as both church and town meeting house for the residents to gather and vote on various government issues facing their town. When the Congregationalists completed

their new church on Pleasant Street in 1835, the old building became solely the Town Hall.

In 1895, architect Charles A. Rich designed a new brick Town Hall and Opera House in the Italian Renaissance Revival style. Rich, who also designed buildings at Dartmouth College, and whose firm later designed the Empire State Building, worked with local contractor and architect Hira Beckwith of Claremont. The pair spent two years and \$62,000 to build the city's hall and opera house as a regional center for entertainment, cultural, community and political events. Dedication of the building occurred on June 22, 1897.

The structure featured a regional mix of materials, including a foundation of Green Mountain Rock, a base of Connecticut River Brownstone, and nearly one million bricks from Lebanon, New Hampshire. The ground floor entrance and lobby originally led to an assembly hall which seated 700 and was used for balls and town meetings. The second floor Opera House, with seating for 780, continues to boast much the same grandeur of its early days with birch floors, walls in olive green and old rose, with subdued frescoing ceiling, and arch adorned with a combination of basswood, painted cream, and gold leaf molded plaster-work. Above the proscenium arch there is a circular multicolored fresco of the New Hampshire state seal.

Much of the Opera House's early success was due to Claremont druggist, Harry Eaton. Eaton managed the Opera House for 32 years, arranging stock companies for plays, road companies for one night stands, musicals, vaudeville minstrel shows, and films. During its more notable highlights, John Phillip Sousa's Band of Fifty, with three soloists, appeared in a 1906 Saturday matinee. Sousa, as one of America's most famous conductors, composed "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and the Marine Corps' "Semper Fidelis," among more than 300 musical works.

Later in years, the first floor was remodeled, turning the former hall into offices and a City Council chamber in 1960. The Opera House closed in 1963 as the city contemplated removing the auditorium in favor of a more modern building for the city offices and the District Court. A Restoration Committee was formed in

1972, and through its efforts, the Opera House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in April 1973. With the joint effort of the City Council and the Opera House Restoration Committee, and supported by numerous State of New Hampshire and federal funding sources, the Opera House was restored, the Opera House Square was improved with a new parking area and gardens in the center, sidewalks were re-paved, power lines were buried from view, and historic lighting poles were added in the Square as well as along Pleasant Street. The historic city center was returned to a more appropriate historic appearance and a grand re-opening of the Opera House was held on May 26, 1979.

Today, the entire building remains the historic treasure of years past, while also housing the Claremont Police Department, District Court, City offices, and Claremont City Council chambers. The second floor Opera House continues to hold a wide variety of entertainment, including ballet, concerts, symphonies, plays, comedians, and community performances.

With the City's historical hall sitting proudly at the convergence of Broad, Pleasant, Washington, and Main Streets, visitors traveling into Claremont may utilize several highways, including Routes 11, 12, 120 and 103. Interstate 91, which follows the Connecticut River north and south in Vermont, is five miles west of Claremont's center.

SOURCES:

<http://www.crjc.org/heritage/N07-7.html>

<http://www.claremontoperahouse.com/history.jsp>

<http://www.claremontnh.com/government-information/bcc/documents/Revised-HistoricResourcesChapter.pdf>