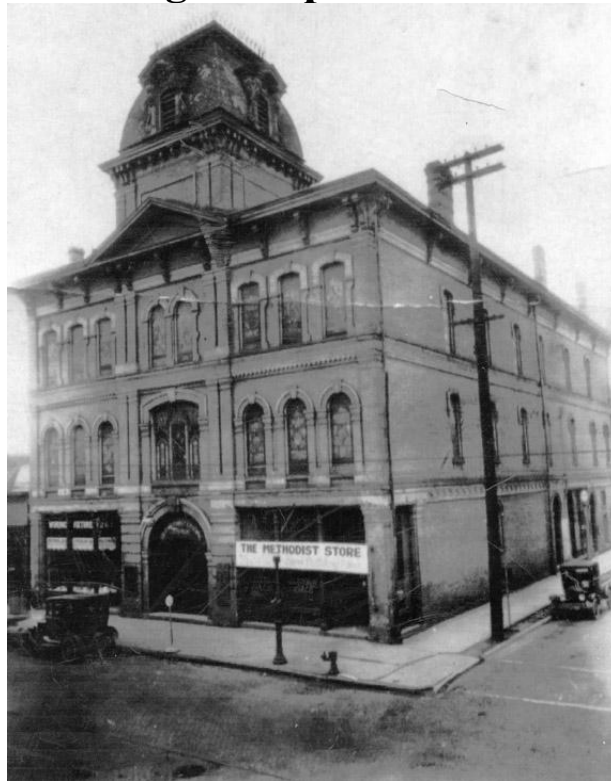


## Wagner Opera House



### *I. History*

She hangs out on the corner of Main and Merritt Streets flashing her Italianate curves and seducing local business owners and weary tenants. Her theatrical past is a bit tawdry, but she has survived Sawdust City fires, found religion, and with a humanitarian mission and a few facelifts, her reputation has been restored.

The Wagner Opera House stands as a symbol of boomtown Oshkosh and a testament to practical preservation. The stately structure has housed a musical theatre, Methodist church, homeless shelter, as well as studios for art and dance. Through each incarnation, the William Waters architectural legacy has provided the building with great genes and the aesthetic details are as timely today as they were in 1874.

Twenty years after pioneers followed the fur trade to Winnebago County, a pair of steam lumber mills facilitated by lush pine forests and the accessible Fox River accelerated the growth of Oshkosh.

Adding a railroad during the Civil War, the town sidestepped a nationwide recession. As wood products were transported throughout the country, a leisure class of lumber barons built grand houses and needed a few venues to flaunt their newfound wealth.

Captain William Wagner, a grocer turned saloonkeeper, promised citizens an elegant opera house. The plans included a grand stage, elaborate sets, social parlors, a dining room, and a raised seating section which could be removed to create a flat ball room for dancing.

It was the 19<sup>th</sup> century and “serious opera” had cast off its pretensions and moved to the public theater where a mass audience could revel in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. For a time, the acoustics of Wagner Hall sent arias bellowing upwards through three stories of load-bearing brick. And then, like the plot of an overwrought opera, the building was consumed by three raging fires.

The blaze of 1869 found Captain Wagner anxious to rebuild. Another fire in 1874 may have damped his spirits, but he solemnly set about framing the opera house with the elegant blueprints of Wisconsin architect William Waters.

Finally, the infamous “conflagration of July 14<sup>th</sup>” seemed to crush the Captain and William Wagner lost all hope to rebuild his Midwestern jewel. He sullenly reported to the *Oshkosh Weekly Northwestern* that he would simply stack stores in the structure and be done with it.

The headline read “Phoenix: Life From the Ashes of the Dead...Wagner’s Opera House” and an editorial writer penned the building’s obituary, “The beautiful Opera House which we looked upon with so much expectancy has been snatched from our grasp, and the old place which has so long been the old stand by in times of amusement and pleasure will be no more except in remembrance.”

Whether it was his rigorous military training, the braggadocio spirit of the saloonkeeper, or the fact that Captain Wagner was enchanted by his own operatic mythology, two months later *The Oshkosh City Times* reported that he was continuing construction and by Christmas of 1874, Wagner Hall would be opened with ground-level stores and a magnificent opera house.

The reporter wrote, “There is one man in this city who has passed through the fiery furnace more times than anyone we know of, and still persists in his course with a sea that in time will make him rich in pocket.”

Soon enough Captain Wagner would be rich in pocket to the tune of \$20, 000, and perhaps sidestep a final fiery furnace, by selling the opera house to the Methodist Church.

Like any evangelical group converting the pagans, there was the realization that a little bit of the past would make the transition easier, and so the occasional opera was still allowed as long as it was of “suitable moral or intellectual tone”.

For fifty years the site remain unchanged, but when the building required substantial renovations to accommodate the congregation, parishioners passed the collection plate until there were adequate funds to hire the architectural firm of Auler and Jensen, who

guttered the interior, solidified the structure with steel and concrete, and added a brick parapet.

After a pious peace that lasted until 1970, the Wagner building received new tenants. The Methodists has moved to a larger church and the Boy's Club of Oshkosh took up residence.

Local philanthropist Father Carr purchased the Wagner in 1994 for 80,000. He transformed it into a homeless shelter, the St. Francis Medical Clinic, and a soup kitchen. When he moved his mission in 2001, Terry Laib, the namesake of Laib Restoration, purchased the building and began a laborious renovation that allotted space for offices, apartments, a gallery, and a studio that would bring dancing girls back to the old opera house.



## *II. From Demolition to Resurrection*

When the City of Oshkosh sent a request for purchase proposals to likely developers, there were a few caveats to acquiring the 30,000 square foot structure. The ground floors were to be used as retail or office space, and the upper stories were slated for affordable and market housing. The deal also specified that the developer restore the building. With a career-long interest in historic preservation, Terry Laib looked forward to the challenge.

Because the Wagner property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, there were strict guidelines concerning its renovation. William Waters had only designed one other operatic venue, the Grand Opera House of Oshkosh, and his blueprints were evident in the fine bones of the Wagner building.

Terry Laib was tempted to faithfully restore the theatrical locality with all the accoutrements of its 1875 Waters heyday, but the extra two million dollar tab required to pay for such grandeur convinced him to settle on a more realistic 1924 period of significance (a respectful nod to the Auler and Jensen remodel).

A large part of the visual charm of the Wagner is its Italianate design. In restoring the property, it would be important to preserve artifacts of antiquated craftsmanship. Conceived as a reaction to formal classicism, the Italianate aesthetic borrows from rambling, informal, rural farmhouses of Italy and its dominant features are the familiar façade of Midwestern Main Streets.

Jutting eaves supported by corbels, pedimented entryways and windows, low-pitched roofs with accompanying belvedere or campanile towers, cupolas, grand cornice structures and quoins are hallmarks of this Tuscan Villa architecture.

Terry Laib paid one dollar for the building and one dollar for each adjoining brownfield parking lot. Before the monumental renovation was complete, he would often remark that he had paid too much.

For the first few weeks of demolition, the Laib Restoration crew found themselves lost in a labyrinth of rooms. The early tear-outs were performed by college students and the sons and daughters of employees looking for summer work. Occasionally, former residents of the homeless shelter would come to the Wagner during mealtimes. After providing directions to Brother Jonathon's soup kitchen across the way, Laib would offer them day labor. Patrons familiar with the former shelter now lent a hand in its restoration.

To satisfy the first requirement of purchase, Laib signed Great Estates Furniture to a three year lease and began the renovation of bricked-in retail space. The crew removed hundreds of feet of interior walls, repaired ceiling plaster, and Laib was able to refurbish the original 1924 kitchen with maple cabinets he had purchased at a fire sale in the building eight years earlier. The antique furniture dealers opened shop in September of 2002.

The building would shelter an advertising agency, art gallery, and upscale gymnasium. Years after the musical theater chorus lines had vacated the property, thoroughly modern Steele's Studio had ladies updating the Wagner dance tradition with choreographed kickboxing instruction and saucy strip aerobics classes.

To fulfill the second obligation of sale, the restoration crew constructed three units of affordable-housing on the second floor. A two-bedroom apartment complete with fireplace, a one-bedroom illuminated by six great windows, and a cozy loft with an oak spiral staircase offer economical living space for local residents.

To finalize the historic restoration contractual request, Terry Laib would find his three dollar purchase bloom into a million dollar project. There was the demolition grunt-work, skilled reconstruction, and peculiar unexpected costs.

WPS demanded \$5,000 to cut power on Merritt Street so the Laib team could safely restore the south wall without getting electrocuted. The roof had not been maintained and there was a great deal of mold-making and plaster repair.

The grand auditorium, with its opera acoustics, had served as the Methodist sanctuary for a hundred years and then as the Boys and Girls Club gymnasium from 1972 to 1994. The floor still had a basketball court layout painted in the tight nap carpet and missed free throws had chipped the terra cotta column capitals.

The work ranged from exhaustive physical labor to painstakingly precise period reconstruction. Despite escalating costs, there were hidden treasures that made the project worthwhile.

When the team's sixty foot lift punched through a manhole cover in the sidewalk, they discovered a fuel room for the boilers built under the street. A found pair of early light fixtures had survived by hiding in the rafters for thirty years. A secret room was located above the lavatories. As the crew removed dropped ceilings throughout the structure, they uncovered a majestic canopy measuring thirty-two feet from floor to vaulted arch.

The historic restoration of the old opera house was not just about preserving a relic of the past, but offering functional space for the future. Following green trends and eco-friendly city planning, recycled sustainable arenas are a modern alternative to wasteful urban sprawl and prefab construction. Reusing period lumber and architectural salvage decreases waste while contributing to a unique regional aesthetic.

Dilapidated structures, transformed into brightly-lit buildings with classical storefronts and eclectic apartments, are important in reviving Main Street and contributing to downtown rejuvenation. They provide the aesthetic backdrop that inspired director Michael Mann to film his depression-era crime drama *Public Enemies* in Oshkosh. It is the scene of Monday morning commerce and Saturday night art walks.

The Wagner is not a museum or antiquated example of turn-of-the-century architecture, it is a living building; a beating heart in the center of the city.

