

Thespian Hall... Boonville's Jewel on Main Street



“This impressive Greek Revival theater on the corner of Main and Vine streets was erected in 1856-1857 by Homan and McDearmon as a joint project of the Boonville Thespian Society, the city government, the Masons and the Odd Fellows, culminating nearly 20 years of cultural activity...the cornerstone was laid on July 25, 1855. The building was completed in the summer of 1857, and opened to the public on the evening of July 3rd with a grand ball.”

- Robert L. Dyer, *Boonville, an Illustrated History*

For more than 160 years, Thespian Hall has captured the vision, the imagination, and the essence of the community in which it was built.



Thespian Hall c.1880
Photograph by Maximillian E. Schmidt

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.

During the Civil War (1861-1865), Thespian Hall filled many needs, from quartering the Federal Troops to serving as a hospital for soldiers.

Later, 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” hosting well-known performers from across Missouri, and beyond.

By 1898, Thespian Hall had lost much of its charm, and some debated whether the theatre should be torn down. Owners Lon Vest Stephens (Governor of Missouri, 1897-1901) and his brother W. Speed Stephens decided to renovate the hall instead and, in 1901, opened it as the Stephens Opera House with a stage house added at the rear of the building. The main floor had been slanted, cutting into the former reading room, and an orchestra pit, box seats and curved balcony completed the modernization. A new era began, with Boonville a stopping point for many major touring companies, only to end in 1912, when the nickelodeon began the hall's transition to movie house.



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Thespian Hall 1936

The second and most serious threat to the building occurred in 1937 when Fox Mid-West Theaters, owners of the building, announced plans to tear down Thespian Hall and replace it with a “modern movie palace.” Concerned local citizens, led by historian Charles van Ravenswaay, called a public meeting and formed the Thespian Hall Preservation Committee. This group mounted a state wide preservation effort, one of the first of its kind in Missouri.

This well-orchestrated campaign saved Thespian Hall and for the next 38 years, it continued as a movie theater. In 1975, the Friends of Historic Boonville acquired the theater as a gift from the Kemper Foundation of Kansas City. With the help of the Foundation and the community, the Friends have worked to restore the building, making Thespian Hall once again a home for the arts.

www.friendsofhistoricboonville.org

Boonville's Thespian Hall, the oldest theater still in use west of the Alleghenies, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1969. Because of the vision and the hard work of the Friends of Historic Boonville, not unlike the Thespian Society which built it, Thespian Hall is still making history today.