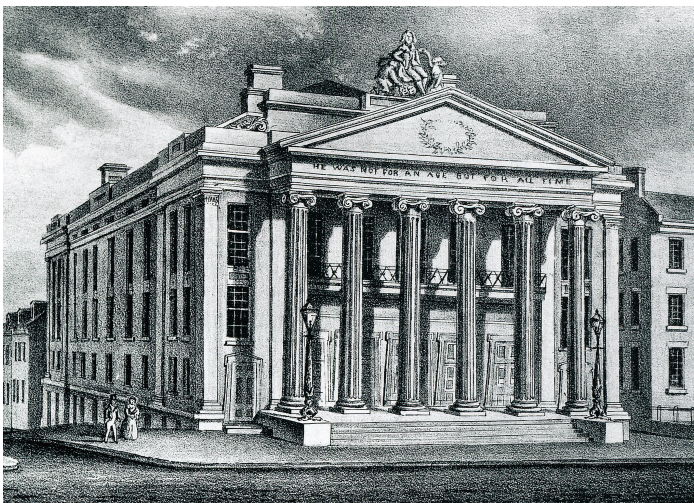


ST. LOUIS' TEMPLES OF THESPIAS: EARLY YEARS

by David J. Simmons

Commencing in the second decade of the nineteenth century, St. Louis residents discovered the excitement of live theatrical performance. At the beginning, melodrama and spectacle enticed locals to these manifestations of make-believe. Soon it expanded to encompass the full gamut of theatrical experience from variety and vaudeville to comedy and serious drama, from opera to musical review. Before the Civil War, local theater entrepreneurs Noah Ludlow and Sol Smith placed this city on the main American theater circuit. Later Benedict DeBar elevated it to be one of the premiere theater venues in the American West. The most famous performers of the time frequented the local stage. For the wealthy and the middle class the theater enjoyed widespread support. To meet this demand for live drama, more than five dozen theaters operated in St. Louis between 1837 and the First World War.

Seating from 500 to 2,500 spectators, many of these Thespian temples evoked a rich architectural heritage reflecting the era in which they were created. Their architectural history can be seen as three distinct periods – the Early Years (1837 to 1878) dominated by the architectural achievement of George I. Barnett; the Age of Specialization (1879 to 1899) shaped by the firm of John Bailey McElpatrick and Sons; and the Era of Challenge and Decline (1900 to 1919) characterized by the emergence of the motion picture and the decline of live or “legitimate” theater.



St. Louis Theatre, Third & Olive, George I. Barnett, lithograph by J. C. Wild. The first permanent theater building in the city, it lasted from 1837 to 1852. The columns shown here were never installed.

Throughout this century theater architecture faced complex issues of design. Among these problems were audience sight lines of the stage, acoustical devices for sound amplification, number and placement of exits, audience seating arrangement, performer and spectator comfort facilities, theater lighting, and scenery construction, movement, and storage. Encouraged by the insurance industry, local government started to regulate certain safety aspects of theater design.

A typical early theater occupied a lot in the center of the block with an alleyway on one or both sides of the premises. A long and narrow audience room perpendicular to the street front was divided into four levels of seating, accommodating from 1,500 to 2,000 people. Arranged in a horseshoe configuration, the upper tiers depended on cast iron columns for support, disrupting sight lines. Width of seats, space between rows, and the size of the aisles were not generous in proportion. Access to the gallery or uppermost tier came through an entrance in the alleyway. Many theaters failed to have enough exits or a proper system of egress. Facilities for the acting corps, with the exception of the star dressing room, tended to be either non-existent or few in number lacking basic essentials. Audience needs fared better with adequate toilet facilities, smoking lounge for men, ladies' lounge, and sometimes a refreshment area. A workshop and storage areas resided in the basement. Lighting came from gas fixtures with reflectors. The quality of the sound was enhanced by the sounding board above the proscenium and the tight fitted double wood parquet floor. While the theater's interior decoration displayed a certain amount of elegance, its exterior remained modest.

By the end of the century theater architecture had been transformed, producing a more pleasant experience for both spectator and performer and a much safer environment. Many new theaters were built on corner lots, giving them two street frontages. As a result, shallow fan-shaped audience rooms ran parallel to one of the fronts. Sometimes the theater occupied a two-building complex featuring a commercial structure in front and a playhouse behind. The business block had the theater's entrance and part of the lobby. In addition, it accommodated retail space on the street level and offices or even hotel guest rooms above. An auditorium and related areas filled the rear structure. Sight lines were greatly improved by replacing the iron columns used to support upper tiers by the cantilevered balcony. Wider seats, rows and aisles facilitated movement and comfort.

To address safety concerns, architects added exits, constructed metal fire escapes, and fireproofed certain theater elements, such as the drop curtain and the proscenium arch.

Electric lights greatly improved auditorium visibility and stage lighting. For the audience room, architects introduced indirect lighting. New theaters had multiple well-equipped dressing rooms placed just off stage, under it, or in a separate structure. Theater planners enlarged the stage depth behind the proscenium arch to allow for rigging and machinery needed to move and place scenery. In most cases refreshment services ended except at saloon theaters. Interior decoration became more lavish and exterior design more exotic.

Early Years

Prior to the construction of St. Louis' first permanent theater, theatrical activity was confined to temporary plain wooden structures or converted commercial buildings, for example, a blacksmith shop. These primitive houses of Thespis seated between 500 and 700 people. In 1814 the local Thespian Society under the direction of Hempstead, Riddick and Simpson built the first theater (40 feet by 80 feet), a wooden structure located at Third Street and Barn Alley. The most important of these venues was the converted salt house which operated intermittently at Second Street and Olive from 1820 to 1837.

St. Louis Theatre

Theatrical promoters Solomon Smith and Noah Ludlow, operating theaters in both Mobile and New Orleans, formed a St. Louis partnership in 1835 for the purpose of establishing live theater in this city on a permanent basis. They built the first permanent theater building in St. Louis. To finance the project, Charles Keemle of the *Missouri Republican* and Meriwether Lewis Clark helped raise \$78,000. A site at the southeast corner of Olive and Third Streets was purchased. Noah Ludlow, M. L. Clark and Joseph Laveille constituted the building committee. According to Ludlow, a local itinerant architect by the name of "George S. Barrett" designed it. Laveille supervised its construction, which began in the fall of 1836 and ended at the start of summer 1837. The theater opened to the public on July 3, 1837 with a then well-known farce by John Tobin called "The Honey Moon." Its cost exceeded \$60,000.

Reflecting the Greek Revival style, the three story theater (73 feet by 160 feet) of brick with stone and wood trim had a front featuring a two story porch supported by six Ionic columns. Although the columns were finished, they were never installed. They remained in storage under the stage for the duration of the building's life. A tribute to Shakespeare appeared on the entablature's frieze above the porch support area, and a sculpted likeness of the Bard rose at the center of the front cornice line. Three of the five main entrances opened into a vestibule or lobby measuring 20 feet by 40 feet. This vestibule gave access to the ticket office, manager's room and the auditorium. Seating 1,650 spectators, the audience room accommodated four tiers of seating and rose to a height of 50 feet. The stage measured 73 feet wide and 53 feet deep. Other amenities included a green room, star dressing area, ladies' lounge with light refreshments, and men's smoking lounge equipped with a bar.

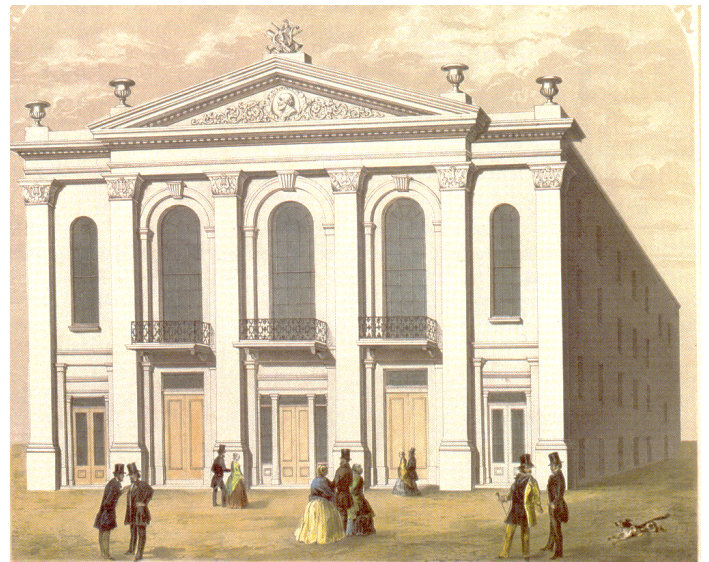
Under the skillful management of Ludlow and Smith, the St. Louis Theatre, also called the Shakespeare Theatre, enjoyed great success. After several years, however, the building's foundation began to crumble. In 1841 the theater owners hired George I. Barnett to repair the foundation and to make certain unnamed improvements. Two year later the owners defaulted on the theater mortgage, and the property was sold at a bankruptcy auction to George Collier, a prominent local businessman, for \$20,000. Collier continued to lease the theater to Ludlow and Smith until 1851 when he sold the site to the United States Government for \$30,000. It became part of the site for the new St. Louis Customs House. On July 10, 1851 the theater closed, and demolition followed at the start of 1852.

George I. Barnett

With more than a dozen theater-related commissions to his credit, Mr. Barnett dominated local theater design until the late 1870s. Of the eight new theaters attributed to his efforts, six reached completion. Four of these have special significance – Bates, Varieties, People's, and Olympic Theatres.

Bates Theatre

Prior to his arrival in St. Louis, John Bates had built and operated theaters in both Cincinnati and Louisville. Neither effort had been successful. Upon his St. Louis relocation, he purchased two lots in the vicinity of Third and Pine on June 10, 1850 for \$17,000. His plan called for a theater to be built on one lot and a related commercial structure on the other. To execute his plan, he engaged the architectural firm of Peck and Barnett.



Bates Theatre, 317 Pine, 1851-1880, Peck & Barnett

Located at 317 Pine, the brick and stone Bates Theatre (84 feet by 131 feet deep) employed a native limestone front in the Italianate style characterized by pilasters, arches, fancy cast iron balcony railings, stone carved musical trophies, and a bust of Shakespeare. Rising to a height of 65 feet, the theater had three front entrances opening into the lobby. Its center door accessed the box office, west door the dress circle, and the east door the other seating levels. A ladies' lounge occupied one end of the

first floor lobby and the men's smoking lounge the other. The south side of the audience room connected to the lobby. Seating about 2,000 people, the square audience room had windows on the side walls and contained a parquet and three tiers of boxes supported by a total of 63 cast iron columns. Each box provided space for 6 or 7 spectators. Measuring 53 feet wide and 60 feet deep, the stage opened in the rear to the theater's only dressing room. A building (60 feet by 78 feet) attached to the rear housed a green room, carpentry shop, scenery storage, and manager's office.

Construction of the project continued through the last half of 1850. Bates tried to keep construction costs down by cutting corners and doing things on the cheap. In spite of his efforts, construction costs surpassed \$60,000. The theater opened to the public on January 9, 1851 to mixed reviews. While the public praised its exterior, its interior elicited numerous complaints. It lacked decoration for the walls and ceiling. Some levels of seating came too close to the stage. Both the seats and aisles were not wide enough, and the space between rows was too narrow. Uneven acoustics left dead spots in the auditorium. Attendance suffered as a result of these issues. In the summer 1853 Barnett remodeled the Bates, resolving most of these problems. Several months later, however, another problem surfaced.

On the evening of December 7, 1853, a storm deposited six inches of wet snow on the theater's roof. Under that weight, several wood trusses gave way, causing part of the roof to collapse. An investigation of this accident revealed that the white pine trusses had been faulty. After making the necessary repairs, Bates tried to sell the theater but found no takers. He then leased it to Henry Farren and later to John Balman, but neither made a success of it. Benedict DeBar, the most important theatrical impresario in the West, leased it in 1855 and was able to turn it into a profitable operation. On June 21, 1856, he purchased it for \$45,000. It now became St. Louis' leading theater and one of the great playhouses in the Mississippi River Valley. He named it the St. Louis Theater. Barnett made additional improvements to it in 1865. In the early 1870s, the building became DeBar's Opera House, but in 1873 DeBar moved his operation (as discussed below), and George Mitchell leased the former Bates. He converted it into a variety house which he called Theatre Comique. It thrived until fire destroyed the premises on December 9, 1880.

St. Louis Varieties

J. M. Field, local theater manager, established a stock company in the spring of 1851 for the purpose of financing a new theater. Charles P. Chouteau joined the project and became its chief investor and promoter. The company purchased a theater site in the middle of block 113 at 514 Market. On the recommendation of Mr. Chouteau, Mr. Barnett was chosen to design the project. Construction commenced in the fall of 1851 and continued through the following spring. Costs exceeded \$110,000. On May 10, 1852, the St. Louis Varieties hosted its first public performance.



The Varieties, later called the Grand Opera House, 514 Market St., 1852-1881, George I. Barnett. Photo courtesy of Tom Gronski

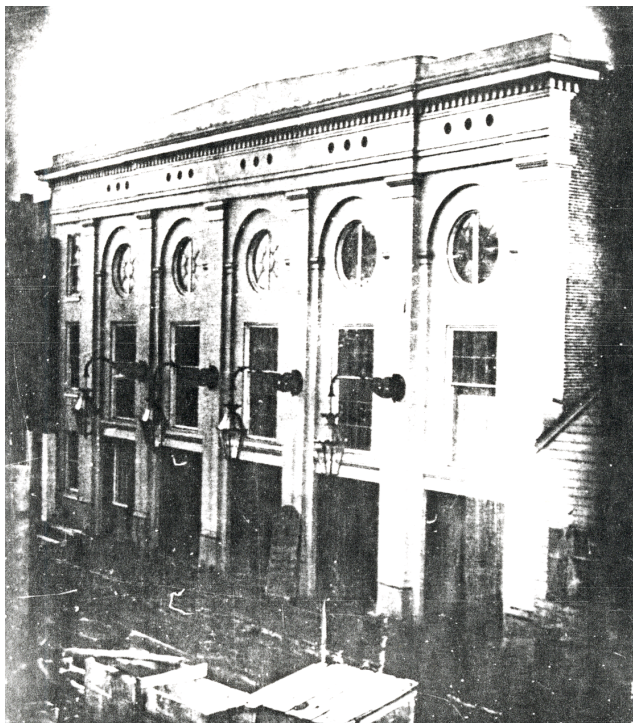
Inspired by the Bartholomew Theatre in Paris, France, Barnett's three story brick Varieties (72 feet front by 140 feet deep) showcased a native limestone front in the Italianate style. Its seven-bays façade used large openings for the lower two floors. Each aperture had a rounded head supported by engaged columns with foliated caps. A round window in the center of the third floor fenestration served as a central focus. Three street-level entrances connected with the theatre's vestibule. A fourth entrance in the east alley led to the gallery seating in the auditorium. alleyways on both east and west sides of the theater allowed for a system of 12 exits.

The Varieties had three important interior spaces: an elegant and commodious first floor lobby or vestibule; a lavishly appointed grand salon (20 feet by 67 feet) for both men and women, located on the second floor over the lobby; and an oval audience room (68 feet wide by 82 feet deep) seating 1,600 people in four tiers. Slender cast iron columns gave support to the box seating tiers. The parquet level had a double floor, with its upper level raked for seating and the lower one flat for dancing. Between the parquet and the stage was the orchestra pit with a capacity for 25 musicians. An elliptical stage measured 65 feet wide and 36 feet deep with a height of 27 feet. Like a string of pearls, white globe-covered gas lights encircled each tier. Heating in the building relied on two furnaces augmented by a series of stoves in the audience room.

But the auditorium's crowning achievement came from Leon Pomerade's paintings on the ceiling and the drop. He placed "Triumph of Apollo" on the front area of the ceiling and "Temple of Fame" in the rear. For the drop curtain (27 feet by

26 feet), he created a thirty-figure tableaux called the "Dreams of Happiness."

The theater failed to attract widespread community support. J. M. Field's poor management made many locals believe it catered only to the rich and elite. After his departure, Dr. Henry Boernstein, publisher of the German-language daily *Anzeiger des Westens*, leased the theater in 1855, directing his chief appeal to the German community. He promoted the performances of local and amateur drama groups, a grand opera company, dance parties, and German-language drama. George J. Deagle leased the building in 1861, converting it into a variety house called Deagle's Varieties which enjoyed considerable success. Eventually he added his own stock company to the theater's offerings. George D. Martin joined the theater's management in 1869, but three years later Martin and Deagle terminated their lease and moved their operation.



People's Theatre, 320 Olive St., 1852-1860, George I. Barnett

A. B. Wakefield purchased for \$25,000 the controlling interest in this theater from James B. Eads and the estate of Charles Dickson on November 28, 1871. Wakefield asked Barnett to gut the current structure except for its outer walls and to rebuild it into a new theater at a cost of \$55,000. The Wakefield Opera House differed from its predecessor in several ways: larger stage, different seating arrangement, more exits, additional dressing rooms, a lobby placed differently, and a veranda across the front of the theater. Faced with financial difficulties following the completion of the theater, Wakefield sold it to Benedict DeBar for \$34,500. At DeBar's invitation Barnett made changes to the new playhouse, one being the addition of 300 seats. DeBar's Grand Opera House opened to the public on September 1, 1873 with great fanfare. Two years later Barnett returned to install safety apparatus and to construct a fire-escape system. After DeBar's death in 1877, control of the theater passed to John Norton and Charles Chouteau, who renamed it Grand Opera House.

People's Theatre

The genesis of the People's Theatre was Dr. George T. Collins' effort to bring live theater at a reasonable price to the working classes. This idea found favor with two construction contractors, Joseph Hodgman and Bill Maway, and a businessman, Otis Haven. In the fall of 1851 they decided to build a theater for this purpose. After acquiring a site at 320 Olive and appointing Mr. Barnett as architect, they inaugurated construction in the spring of 1852 and completed the building seven months later. Under the management of Jack Huntley, the People's Theatre gave its first public performance on December 9, 1852.

Equipped with a limestone foundation and front façade, the three-level brick theater covered an area 76 feet wide and 128 feet deep. Italianate in design, its front was enhanced by a series of pilasters, round windows, and hanging lamps. With three street-level entrances, the lobby had the usual amenities. A 2,500 seat auditorium had three levels: parquet, dress circle, and gallery. T. Naxon and J.B. Laidlow executed the theatre's modest decorative scheme. The three partners spent about \$60,000 to erect this place.

While its low ticket prices often drew large crowds, audiences frequently contained local rowdies and undesirable transients who disturbed and sometimes disrupted the performances. On occasion fights erupted in the audience room. A series of inexperienced managers added to the theater's problems. After George Wood assumed the management in 1854, the theater enjoyed a period of modest success as Wood's Theater. On several occasions Benedict DeBar tried to purchase it without success. Financial returns failed to live up to expectations, and its owners closed the theater in 1860. They then remodeled the structure into a bowling alley.

Olympic Theatre

Hoping to capitalize on the opening of the first Southern Hotel, Moses Flanagan acquired a lot at 107 South Broadway across the street from the new hotel. Seeking to attract hotel guests and locals frequenting the hotel's dining facilities, he wanted to build a theater to offer spectacle entertainment. To this end, he secured the architectural services of Barnett and Isaacs, with Henry Milburn as contractor. Costing close to \$80,000, construction on the project advanced through the last half of 1865 and ended at the start of the following spring. After naming the theater the Olympic, Flanagan started public performances on April 23, 1866.

Created in the French Empire style with mansard roof, the three-story-plus-attic brick Olympic Theatre covered an area 85 feet wide by 127 feet deep. It had an Athens limestone front accented by a recessed second floor balcony over the theater's main entrance. The three-tier audience room in a coliseum arrangement seated 1,500 people. At the center of one end was the stage measuring 36 feet by 48 feet. A giant reflector 24 feet in diameter installed in the center of the audience room ceiling and fed by 44 gas jets lighted the area along in tandem with footlights and wall sconces. At the rear of the building was a

separate two-story structure containing dressing rooms, carpentry shop and scenery storage.



Olympic Theatre, 107 South Broadway, 1866-1882, Barnett & Isaacs

Unfortunately, spectacle theater failed to attract large enough audiences to continue in operation. After six months Flanagan closed the Olympic. Eventually, he sold the premises to the Spalding family – Gregory (father) and Charles (son). They chose architect Henry Isaacs to remodel the Olympic's interior into a regular theater format. Isaacs installed 1500 new seats in the audience room. He improved and enlarged the theater's entrances and exits. He added two green rooms, several dressing rooms, and a paint shop to the rear building. Functioning on three levels, the reborn Olympic had a lobby, orchestra seating and stage on level one; a circular balcony and reception room on level two; and an upper balcony with promenade on level three. By the close of summer in 1868, the Olympic remodeling had been completed at a cost of \$50,000. It reopened on September 12, 1868. Appealing to the German and Irish communities, the Olympic operated successfully under the ownership of the Spalding family until 1882. It became a Mecca for St. Louis' social elite. The owners demolished the Olympic in 1882 and build a new theater on the same site.

Other Architects

While Barnett dominated theater design during this period, Henry Isaacs, as indicated, made an important architectural contribution. Architectural contributions also came from these

firms – Robison and McClaren, Mitchell and Brady, Randolph Brothers, and Raeder and Wood.

New Museum and Opera House

Capitalized at \$100,000, the New Museum and Opera House in 1866 obtained a site on the west side of Fifth Street just north of Franklin Avenue. The local architectural firm of Robison and McClaren (active 1865 to 1869) designed the opera house and art museum building. Reflecting the façade of Pike's Opera House in Cincinnati, Ohio, the building's stone front used Renaissance ideas. Its main entrance was twenty feet wide. The theater part of the interior consisted of a lobby (20 feet by 60 feet), an audience room (67 feet by 100 feet), and a stage (40 feet by 35 feet deep). Covered with large glass skylights, the museum wing had a fine art gallery (28 feet by 110 feet) and a sculpture gallery (20 feet by 110 feet). Arrangements had been made for the museum to exhibit the Rice Bancroft Art Collection formerly of Columbus, Ohio. After spending more than \$80,000 on the project, the theater presented its first public event in September, 1866. Less than a year later the building burned, and it was not rebuilt.

Adelphi Theatre

When George Deagle moved his variety show operation out of the Varieties in 1871, he relocated it to a new theater called the Adelphi at 412 North Sixth Street in the fall of 1872. Deagle converted the former Benton Public School into the Adelphi Theatre under the architectural supervision of the Randolph Brothers (active in St. Louis between 1867 and 1873). At a cost of \$55,000 the conversion was completed during the summer of 1872. Imitating the Italian Renaissance, the brick front of Deagle's new theater was embellished with three street level entrances, a second floor balcony, and a domed roof line. Patrons used the central entrance to gain admittance to a spacious lobby complete with a ticket office, toilet facilities and saloon. The auditorium seated 1000 people on three levels. The south front entrance connected to the gallery, while the north entrance led to the stage and dressing rooms. The Adelphi remained open through the spring of 1876.

Uhrig's Theatre

As early as 1862 the Uhrig family offered a summer resort experience with refreshments and entertainment on their property at the southwest corner of Jefferson and Washington Avenues. A decade later Christian Nunz obtained this property with plans to erect a theater. The architectural firm of John Mitchell and Thomas Brady received Nunz's commission. Their plan called for a two story brick theater (75 feet by 203 feet) fronting on Washington Avenue. Twin clock towers defined its Italian Renaissance front. Covering an area 75 feet by 105 feet deep, the audience room seated 1,500 people. At its southern end was the stage (60 feet by 35 feet). A lobby ran along the west side of the building with access to toilet facilities, ladies' parlor, men's lounge, and restaurant. Eight dressing rooms, property storage, theater offices, and a green room were placed at the rear of the building.

Unfortunately, the theater as described was never built. A simple modified version of the original plan focused on a summer musical theater part of which had been constructed by the end of the 1870s. As a summer theater, Uhrig's Cave flourished with a format of comic opera and operetta performed by a twelve-piece orchestra and either their own or an outside opera company. In 1880 the McNeary family purchased the property and appointed Pat Short to manage it. Under Short's supervision, it became one of America's most important summer theatrical venues. The theater closed in 1901 and the land was sold for commercial development.

Apollo Theatre

During the fall of 1868, the 1,000-seat Apollo Theatre opened at 608 South Fourth Street (at Poplar) as a German-language drama house under the proprietorship of Louis Schiller and Ferdinand Kruger. Its Romanesque design came from the short-lived architectural partnership of Raeder and Wood. Newspaper accounts of the period fail to provide details about the new theater. The Apollo was the first St. Louis theater to perform German-language drama on a continuing basis.

After four years, the Apollo changed to a variety/vaudeville house. Later local amateur acting groups frequently rented it for public performances. In addition, it attracted a large following among the local sports crowd by scheduling sporting events such as boxing and wrestling matches. Then in the 1880s it became associated with the local labor movement, hosting union organizational meetings, conventions, social activities, and fund raisers. St. Louis' anarchists also found a home at the Apollo. Remodeled in 1891 and renamed the New Park Theatre, it entertained its audiences with high class vaudeville. But its first season proved to be financial disaster resulting in its permanent closure.

Minor Theaters

In addition to the theaters already described, at least another dozen theaters operated during this period. The most important of these was John Looney's Varieties housed at 516 Christy Avenue (which was later renamed Lucas). Its seven-year run between 1873 and 1878 made it the longest-operating theater in this category. One local playhouse hosted three different theaters between 1867 and 1876. Located at 114-118 North Fifth Street, it housed the Wilson Opera House (1867-68), Ranken's Theatre (1872), and Esher's Varieties (1875-76). Another local playhouse served as the home for the Sixth Street Varieties (1872), Metropolitan Theatre (1873), and the Globe Theatre (1878-79).

Public Halls

On occasion, theatrical performances found their way into several St. Louis public halls, especially during the 1850s and 1860s. Among those venues most frequently used were Wyman's Hall (350 seats), Fourth and Market, designed in 1848 by Charles Pond; the Mercantile Library Hall (500 seats), Fifth and Locust, designed in 1854 by Robert S. Mitchell; Knickerbocker Hall (500 seats) in Veranda Row, Fourth and

Washington, designed in 1854 by George I. Barnett; and Temple Hall (650 seats) in the Temple Building, Fifth and Walnut, designed in 1867 by Randolph Brothers.

Conclusion

At the start of this period one theater offered locals a performance season, but forty years later this number had grown to eight or nine. Some of these playhouses were landmarks of merit worthy of a great city. The expanding St. Louis public appetite for live theater demanded a greater variety of theatrical experience and more major theaters. During the next two decades (the Age of Specialization), these demands were met as the number of major playhouses tripled.

Sources

Brockett, Oscar G. *History of the Theatre*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1968.
Hammack, James Alan. *Pope's Theatre and St. Louis Theatrical History 1879-1895*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1955.
Herbstruth, Grant M. *Benedict de Bar and the Grand Opera House from 1855 to 1879*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1953.
Ludlow, Noah Miller. *Dramatic Life as I Found It*. St. Louis: G. I. Jones & Co., 1880.
Primm, James Neal. *Lion of the Valley, St. Louis, Missouri*. Boulder, CO, Pruett Publishing Co., 1981.
Van Ravenswaay, Charles. *St. Louis, An Informal History of the City and Its People 1764-1865*. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1991.

St. Louis City Directories, 1865-1878

Missouri Democrat, Sept. 8, 1853; Nov. 19, 1853; Dec. 19, 1853; Aug. 29, 1865; Feb. 9, 1866; Nov. 21, 1867; Sept. 29, 1872.
Republic/Missouri Republican, March 19, 1836; April 2, 1851; April 27, 1851; May 2, 1851; April 11, 1852; Aug. 19, 1852; Nov. 21, 1852; Sept. 26, 1853; Feb. 26, 1866; April 12, 1866; July 25, 1872; Oct. 13, 1875; Nov. 12, 1875.
St. Louis Globe, Sept. 15, 1874.
St. Louis Times, Nov. 24, 1867; Dec. 22, 1868; May 24, 1873; Dec. 12, 1876; Dec. 10, 1880.

Missouri History Museum Archives:

John Green Scrapbook

Theater Program Collection:

Box 5: Apollo Theater; Bates Theater
Box 12: Deagle's Theater; DeBar's Opera House
Box 44: Olympic Theater
Box 48: People's Theater
Box 56: Ludlow & Smith; Varieties Theater
Box 57: Varieties Theater
Box 63: DeBar's Opera House; Varieties Theater

MID-CENTURY MODERN ARCHITECT CHARLES ERWIN KING

By Larry Betz and the Belleville Historical Society

Charles Erwin King was born the middle of three children to Lawrence and Myrtle King on October 10, 1919, in the small town of Cythiana, Kentucky. In 1924, the family move to Lexington and in 1933, to Louisville. King graduated from Louisville Male High School in June of 1937 and entered the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois that September. In 1942, he had his professional training interrupted by World War II.

While at the University of Illinois, King met Audrey Marsh from Belleville, Illinois. In June of 1943, He took a leave of absence from serving his country to return home and marry Audrey at St. George's Episcopal Church in her home town. Upon returning, he served in the U.S. Army Air Corps as a B-17 Command Pilot until September of 1945 and then returned to the University of Illinois. In 1946, he was awarded a Bachelor of Science in Architecture Degree by the College of Fine and Applied Arts.

Upon graduation, Charles and Audrey moved to Belleville and in 1947, he opened an office, "Charles E. King, Architect," at 19A North Illinois Street and soon took his first commission for a private residence. He favored a design style that today is known as Mid-Century Modern. He continued to practice in Belleville until 1961, when his firm was purchased by Hellmuth, Obata and Kassebaum in St. Louis. During his fourteen years in Belleville, King designed and completed 34 public and commercial projects and an estimated 100 custom designed residences and home additions. Perhaps most notable is the Belleville City Hall. All but three of King's works in Belleville still stand today.



Mr. & Mrs. Ralph Contrael House (rear), Belleville, IL, 1951-52

In February, 1967, King married Constance Goldman-Baer, a St. Louis native, and they moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he joined the Westinghouse Corporation as manager of Architecture and Interior Design. He eventually became director of the Corporate Design Center for Westinghouse. In 1973, they moved to Ponte Vedra, Florida, where King managed the Architectural Design Department for Westinghouse-Tenneco Offshore Power Systems. In 1979, he returned to private practice in Florida and continued after he and Connie moved back to St. Louis in 1990.

Charles died on August 16, 1993 and his Central West End home at the age of 73. At the time of his death, he was working on a design for a residence. He enjoyed a prolific career. His body of work includes more than 200 homes and commercial buildings in Illinois, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Florida. He also did design work at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas and Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In 1949 he was elected to membership in the St. Louis Chapter, A.I.A. and in 1967 was bestowed "Fellowship" status, the most prestigious honor granted by the American Institute of Architecture, for his achievement in Design. He was Program Chairman 1956-1957, Director 1962-1964, Chairman, Urban Design Committee 1964-1966, and Professional adviser, National Competition for Design of the St. Louis Gateway Mall in 1966.



Belleville City Hall, 1957-59

Professional awards include the Francis J. Plym Fellowship in Architecture, 1951 University of Illinois; A.I.A. Silver Metal Award for the Contrael residence in Belleville in 1953; Brauer and McQuillan residences in Belleville, *Better Homes & Gardens*' "Five Star Homes 1950-1960"; Institutions Magazine Honor Award, Food Service Design for Belleville Township High School Cafeteria and Centerville Grade School Cafeteria, 1959; Bell System Merit Award for Excellence in Architecture, Edgemont Dial Office Building, 1960; Institutions Magazine Award for outstanding institutions interiors, Town House Motel, 1961; Profession adviser, St. Louis Gateway Mall Competition, 1966.

One of King's most notable awards was being named in 1991 as one of the "Top 100 Architects in America" by *Architectural Digest*. In 1988, he was featured on ABC's "Good Morning America" for his design of a dream home built into the bluffs near Washington, Missouri.

In November of 1990, King was granted "Emeritus" status by the A.I.A., and although technically retired from the architecture profession, he continued to design homes until his death.

From the Belleville Historical Society's website, <http://bellevillehistoricalsociety.org/projects/architect-charles-erwin-king/>

Exhibit: "Charles King, Modernist Architect"
Continuing through the Fall, 2014
Architecture St. Louis (Landmarks Association)
911 Washington Avenue, Suite 170

Charles King has the advantage that many of his records have survived and are being cared for by the Belleville Historical Society. The exhibition they produced last year has now found its way to the Carolyn Toft Gallery of Landmarks Association. Concentrating on King's buildings in and near Belleville, the exhibit includes photos old and new. Mid-century furniture of the style that would have fit into these houses is included in the exhibit. For more information call (314) 421-6474 or e-mail Susan Tschetter at landmark@landmarks-stl.org. The exhibit is made possible by the generous support of the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission.

Exhibit: American Buildings: Architectural Drawings from the Collection of Kyrle Boldt III
October 3, 2014 to February 14, 2015
The Sheldon Galleries, 3648 Washington Ave.

The Bernoudy Gallery of Architecture at the Sheldon is featuring selections of early- and mid-20th century architectural renderings exhibition from the collection of Kyrle Boldt III. They celebrate the art of the architectural delineator. Created before the days of computer technology and AutoCad, the drawings selected by Boldt were made primarily for presentation purposes. The exhibit includes

examples of residential, commercial and industrial designs from the offices of Frank Lloyd Wright; Harris Armstrong; Frederick Dunn; Helfensteller, Hirsch and Watson; Murphy & Mackey; Meyer Loomstein; Henry Ives Cobb; Holabird and Root; Leonard Haeger; and many others.

**Gallery Talk: American Buildings:
Architectural Drawings**
Wednesday, October 29, noon
The Sheldon Galleries, 2648 Washington Ave.

Michael R. Allen, architectural historian and director of the Preservation Research Office, St. Louis, discusses individual projects and architectural genres included in the exhibition drawn from Kyrle Boldt's collection. Admission free, but reservations required. Call Susan Sheppard at 314-533-9900 x37 or email ssheppard@TheSheldon.org.

© 2014 The Society of Architectural Historians. St. Louis and Missouri Valley Chapters.

News Letter

NewsLetter is published quarterly by the St. Louis and Missouri Chapters of Architectural Historians.

Please mail editorial correspondence and submissions for publication to: Esley Hamilton, Editor, 7346 Balson Avenue, University City, Missouri 63130 or contact him by telephone: (314) 615-0357 or by email ehamilton@stlouisco.com. Deadlines for submission of material for publication in **NewsLetter** are as follows:

Spring issue	15 February
Summer issue	15 May
Fall issue	15 August
Winter Issue	15 November

St. Louis Chapter, SAH 2013 –2014 Board of Directors

John Guenther, FAIA President
Paul Hohmann, AIA Vice President
Mimi Stiritz Secretary
Richard Mueller Treasurer
Esley Hamilton NewsLetter Editor

Memberships:

Individual, \$15	Student, \$5
Supporting, \$30	Joint, \$20

**St. Louis and Missouri Valley Chapters
Society of Architectural Historians**
Post Office Box 23110
St. Louis, MO 63108