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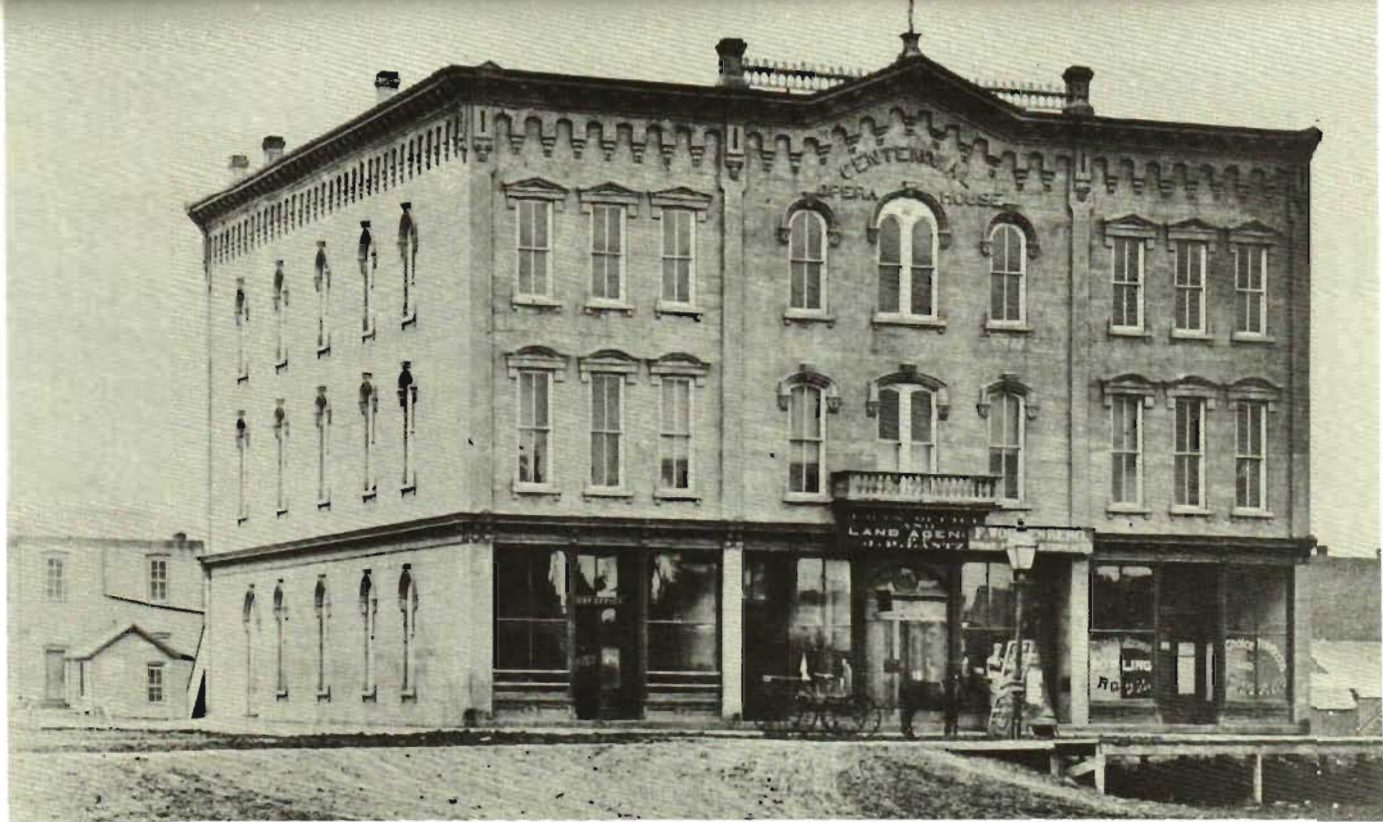
Article Summary: Lincoln's largest permanent theatre, Hallo's Opera House, built in 1873, was completely destroyed by fire on October 4, 1875. This article presents a summary history of Hallo's Opera House as well as pioneer theatre in Lincoln.

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Photographs / Images: Centennial Opera House, completed in 1876; Centennial Opera House as converted to Funke Opera House



Centennial Opera House, completed in 1876.



Centennial Opera House as converted to  
Funke's

## HALLO'S OPERA HOUSE: PIONEER THEATRE OF LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

PAT M. RYAN

"OCCUPYING the position that Lincoln does as the political, business, and social center of Nebraska, it is expected of her that she shall have a fit and commodious place for large political, business, religious, and social gatherings," the *Daily State Journal* plumped editorially on October 6, 1875. "The Opera House has supplied this need most admirably for the past three years until most of us have forgotten the miserable inconvenience we suffered before it was erected." For this was a time of crisis. Two nights before, the Capital City's largest permanent theatre, Hallo's Opera House, had been completely destroyed by fire.

Lincoln's earliest regular playhouse probably was Mac Lynch and John Barsby's for-men-only Winter Garden, a variety house on P Street, near 9th, which opened December 4, 1872.<sup>1</sup> Until the Opera House was completed, the State Capitol Building intermittently served the needs of travelling troupes;<sup>2</sup> Briggs' Hall (over McConnell's store, on O Street) was occasionally used for performances by

<sup>1</sup> Dramatic performances of a sort were sometimes presented, as well, on the Winter Garden stage: "a new play," *One Night in a Bar Room*, was introduced "in fine style, and with a powerful cast," on December 28, 1872.

<sup>2</sup> The musical Peak Family opened here, for instance, October 12, 1872.

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local amateurs;<sup>3</sup> and, sometime later, the City Hall also doubled as playhouse.<sup>4</sup> The city's most imposing theatre was Homan J. Walsh, Jr., and Israel Putnam's 600-seat, third-story Academy of Music, completed early in 1873; located on the south side of O Street, between 10th and 11th, it for a time boasted "the finest hall in the State, with kitchen, banquet rooms, and dressing rooms."<sup>5</sup> Though "well adapted to ordinary gatherings," the Academy of Music eventually was found to be "wholly inadequate for a popular or operatic performance, [or] for a State political gathering of any character."<sup>6</sup> Lincoln required nothing less than an opera house.

Sometime late in 1871, H. Hallo, proprietor of the Star Clothing House, had given earnest of plans to build such a theatre.<sup>7</sup> "A new opera house at Lincoln is talked of," the *Beatrice Express* disclosed.<sup>8</sup> But this announcement was premature — it was not until one year later that construction actually was undertaken. The work of putting in the foundation was well advanced by mid-October 1872; brick-laying commenced late in March 1873; and the first story was reported as completed by early April.<sup>9</sup> The roof was put on during May; and, under the direction of architects

<sup>3</sup> The Grand Templars of Lincoln staged a "Grand Entertainment" at Briggs' Hall on January 27 and 29, 1873; the Lincoln Dramatic Club premiered *The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved* here on April 8 following.

<sup>4</sup> After remodeling of its auditorium, in 1885, this became the People's Theatre, continuing as such until 1889.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily State Journal*, January 14, 1873. Walsh and Putnam were partners in a real estate brokerage firm bearing their names, and also officials of the Lincoln Gas Company. First of the travelling troupes to play at the Academy of Music were singer Mme. Anna Bishop and company, on July 12, 1873, and the Arlington, Cotton, and Kemble minstrel troupe, on July 14 and 15, following.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, October 7, 1875. This hall was converted into offices in 1880.

<sup>7</sup> Hallo also was the owner of an opera house in St. Joseph, Missouri, which he continued to operate after his migration to Lincoln.

<sup>8</sup> September 16, 1871. Cf. *Lincoln Daily State Journal*, May 18, 1873: "The principal reason that there have been so few entertainments here from abroad is that we have not had sufficient hall room."

<sup>9</sup> *Daily State Journal*, October 18, 1872; March 8, 15, & 18, 1873; April 1 & 11, 1873.

Edmund Eckel and A. Meier,<sup>10</sup> the structure was finished in the following summer.<sup>11</sup> A description was published in the *Daily State Journal*:

The hall stands on the corner of O and 12th streets, fronting on the former. It is fronted on both sides, with pressed brick, the lower story being of iron front. The lower story is divided into three excellent stores, and the hall alone occupies the space of two stores. The hall is approached by two stairways, each six and one-half feet wide, passing up between the stores. The front part of the upper portion is divided into three rooms, a ladies' parlor, a gentlemen's parlor and ticket office, each 20 feet square. Above these is a dining hall, 20X50 feet in size, and a kitchen 15X70 feet.

The main hall will be 72X75 feet in size, exclusive of the gallery and stage. This hall will seat about 800 persons. It is separated from the parlors and the ticket office by a hall seven feet wide, extending across the building. There are two entrances to the main part from the entrance hall. A gallery will extend around the building, on three sides, and will seat four hundred persons. The stage is detached from the main building, being supported by stone and brick foundations to the second story. The second story will be divided into five dressing rooms, and above these is the stage. The opening portion of the stage is 28 feet wide, and the inside portion 44 by 25 feet. It will be provided with a handsome curtain and good scenery, now being made to order at Chicago.

The hall will be finely frescoed, and a splendid new style chandelier, containing 78 jets, will hang in the centre. The building will be covered with a handsome Mansard roof of slate, and the whole building, when completed in the handsome manner provided for by the specifications, will be an honor and an ornament to our city. It will cost between \$35,000 and \$40,000.<sup>12</sup>

Upon completion, the Opera House was proclaimed to be

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<sup>10</sup> "Edmund Eckel . . . will remain in Lincoln during the summer" (*Daily State Journal*, March 15, 1873); "Mr. A. Meier, of the firm of Eith and Meier, who has been superintending the building for the last three weeks, left yesterday for St. Joseph" (*ibid.*, July 20, 1873).

<sup>11</sup> "Hallo's new Opera House is now being plastered, the lathing having been completed. Mr. Hallo has had some splendid scenery painted for the hall, . . . and a magnificent drop curtain." (*Daily State Journal*, July 17, 1873); "The scenery will arrive here this week, and next week the frescoing will commence. A stage carpenter will be at work in a couple of days and put in the stage, grooves, and rigging for the stage, which will complete the Opera House, by the last day of August" (*ibid.*, July 20, 1873).

<sup>12</sup> *Loc. cit.*, May 31, 1873.

"the finest west of the Missouri River;"<sup>13</sup> and attractions for its initial season were booked as early as May 1873.<sup>14</sup>

"We undertand that the people of St. Joseph are displeased with Mr. Hallo of that place, because he shows his good sense in expending a large sum of money in building an Opera House here," the *Daily State Journal* reported on July 8. "Mr. Hallo did a very wise thing, and we have every reason to believe that the people of Lincoln will see him out in his enterprise, for he certainly deserves success for having invested his money here, as well as great confidence in the future greatness of our city." But business in the 1870s "ended at Twelfth Street, where stood Hallo's Opera House," pioneer resident Mrs. S. B. Pound told a Lincoln audience in January, 1893, "and the croakers—of whom there were many—wondered why he had located it so far east, and said that business could never stretch beyond that distant point."<sup>15</sup> The croakers were mistaken, however, for H. Hallo's enterprise prospered.

The new theatre opened its doors October 6, 1873, with a "dramatic entertainment" evidently of local origin.<sup>16</sup> Robinson's Minstrels followed in due course in December; R. H. Winslow's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* troupe played there January 7 and 8, 1874; and the balance of that bountiful first season included visits by magician Professor St. Jean, Quakeress "free-love" lecturer Victoria Woodhull, Howarth and Morris' musical and comedy Hibernica troupe, the Kendall Comedy Company (with *Rip Van Winkle*, *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, and *Arrah Na Pogue*), the New York Comedy Company, dramatic reader Mrs. Scott Sidons, Sharpley's Minstrels, the Royal Veddo Japanese Troupe of jugglers and acrobats, and Carolyn Richings-

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Wolfe's *Lincoln City Directory* (Lincoln, 1873), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> "Harry Robinson's well known minstrel company have engaged the Opera House in this city for the 4th and 5th of December." (*Daily State Journal*, May 27, 1873).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew J. Sawyer, ed., *Lincoln, The Capital City, and Lancaster County, Nebraska* (Chicago, 1916), I, 179.

<sup>16</sup> A hiatus in the Nebraska State Historical Society's *Daily State Journal* file (issues of July 31 through October 4, 1873, are missing) prevents my supplying further particulars of the house's opening.

Bernard's Old Folks Conccent Company. Mrs. Scott Siddons, in the course of her much admired performance, "took occasion to compliment the audience upon. . .the fine hall (which she remarked was better than any in Omaha)."17

Yet Hallo's Opera House, nostalgically recalled in 1890 as Lincoln's "most popular resort"18 during its heyday, had had to struggle sometimes, to keep its dignity. The *Journal* of October 23, 1874, for instance, reported:

The committee who had charge of the dancing at the Opera House, last evening, complain bitterly of the manner in which Mr. Hallo, the proprietor, treated them. They say they paid him \$35 for the use of the hall, and he agreed to see that it was properly cleaned and put in shape for dancing. When the appointed time for dancing arrived, the floor was found to be covered with dust, and it was with the utmost difficulty that the dancers could inhale anything but dust.

And on a subsequent occasion, this newspaper complained:

At the opera house last evening, a couple of individuals were noticed circulating the bottle very freely in the gallery, without seeming to care who saw them partake of the flowing bowl. One of the parties also thought his feet needed a little airing and pulled off his shoes and stockings and held them out to the breeze . . . .19

(That was no way, certainly, for the "political, business, and social center of Nebraska" to receive visiting Payson's Opera Company!)

When, at length, *grand opera* came to the Opera House, it was in distinctly frontier style. In the vanguard of hardy touring opera troupes to perform on this stage was Redpath's English Opera Company ("of Boston"), presenting a portmanteau version of Flotow's *Martha*, September 11, 1874. "The opera," Redpath's advertisements promised, "will be brought with full and correct costumes, stage effects, etc., and in all respects save chorus and orchestra, the work will be presented as upon the Italian

17 *Daily State Journal*, February 25, 1874.

18 Sawyer, ed., *Lincoln, The Capital City*, I, 188.

19 *Daily State Journal*, September 12, 1876. Gounod's *The Love Test* and Offenbach's *Vertigo* were presented by the Payson's troupe on September 11.



or English stage."<sup>20</sup> The English Opera Company, in fact, comprised only five members: Clara Nickels, soprano, as Lady Harriet; Flora Barry, contralto, as Nancy; Charles Clark, tenor, as Lionel; Edward Peyson, basso, doubling as Lord Tristan and Plunkett; and J. A. Howard, pianist and director. Yet their single performance—bad weather notwithstanding—was well attended and delighted its patrons:

If anything could compensate for a walk home after the thunderstorm of last night through the mud and drizzle, as several hundred of our Lincoln ladies and escorts did, it was the splendid entertainment given at the Opera House by the English Opera Troupe. All join in pronouncing it the most pleasurable performance that has been given in the city since the hall was completed.

The gratified reviewer had praise all around for the four singers, and declared that Mr. Howard, the pianist, ". . . was an orchestra in himself."<sup>21</sup>

Furbish's Fifth Avenue Combination visited Hallo's for a one-night stand of *Divorce!* on October 26, 1874; and "the eminent and natural actor" Robert McWade appeared there in his popular version of *Rip Van Winkle* on November 5, following. The succeeding winter and spring, moreover, saw East Coast and Midwestern troupes regularly clogging the theatre's calendar, otherwise taken up with dances, lectures, musicales, and religious and political meetings.

The caliber and frequency of entertainment at Hallo's steadily improved, indeed, until the crowded week of October 3, 1875, when the following troupes were booked: Frank E. Aiken and Genevieve Howard in *The Two Orphans* (October 2 & 4);<sup>22</sup> Milton Nobles in *Bohemian and Detectives!* (October 5 & 6); and William Horace Lingard & Co. (October 7). But these attractions did not all appear. At about 10:30 o'clock, Monday night, October 4,

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, September 6, 1874.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, September 12, 1874.

<sup>22</sup> In this, a bootleg Chicago company of *The Two Orphans*, the role of Louise was played by Flora Baker—not by Kate Claxton, as erroneously recorded in Sawyer, ed., *Lincoln, The Capital City*, I, 188.

during a performance of *The Two Orphans*, overhead gas-lights ignited a row of screen curtains; and within a half an hour, the entire theater was consumed by uncontrollable flames. (The following year, while Kate Claxton was starring in *The Two Orphans* at the Brooklyn Theater, fire broke out in much the same way, to claim more than two hundred lives.) Although there were no human lives lost, and no serious injuries, in the burning of Hallo's Opera House, its enterprising proprietor was wiped out. "Mr. Hallo informed us that his loss is \$40,000, upon which is no insurance," the *Journal* reported on the morrow. "He built the Opera House at a time when it was thought by all citizens that it could not pay." (Hallo's loss afterward was determined to be in excess of \$43,000, plus above \$4,000 in clothing stock damaged.)

"Lincoln's Calamity/The Most Destructive Fire Ever Had in Our City," next day's *Journal* headlines declared. And at 7:30 that evening, in a meeting held at the office of Judge J. L. Palmer, concerned citizens affirmed that ". . . the loss is theirs, and that *Hallo's Opera House must be rebuilt*."<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, at another meeting, held Wednesday evening, October 6, the people of Lincoln were urged to subscribe \$10,000 for a new theater building: "The Opera House. . . Certainly Will Be Rebuilt."<sup>24</sup> At a third meeting, held the next night, \$6,342—"two thirds of the amount requisite"—was pledged;<sup>25</sup> and on October 12, the work of clearing away the wreckage began.<sup>26</sup>

The subscribed \$10,000 was shortly forthcoming; construction on the second opera house followed (it was to be larger than the first, with a seating capacity of 1,600); and by March 1876 the superstructure had been completed. When the theater reopened, early in May, it was as the Centennial Opera House, renamed "in honor of the national celebration of our birth as a nation." In 1882, the

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<sup>23</sup> *Daily State Journal*, October 6, 1875.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, October 7, 1875.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, October 8, 1875.

<sup>26</sup> Sawyer, ed., *Lincoln, The Capital City*, I, 181.

Centennial Opera House was purchased by wholesale liquor dealer Fred Funke; and in 1884 it was redecorated and renamed the Funke Opera House. Renovated again in the summer of 1888, it was partially destroyed by fire in March 1894, then reopened that fall as the "New Funke". The final performance on its stage, the Spedden and Paige production of *A Knotty Affair*, occurred March 22, 1902, after which the building was converted into office space.