



## Raise the Curtains!

Mount Vernon's Woodward Opera House Lives on After Nearly a Century of Silence

With a spark, the Woodward Opera House raised the first curtain in downtown Mount Vernon in December 1851 with a public lecture on electricity. Since its opening over a century and a half ago, it has persevered, and through a series of fortuitous events, it is one of the oldest public theaters in America.

Woodward Hall was conceived to be not only a entertainment complex for the community of just under 4,000 residents, but also to be a sustainable venture. In addition to the opera house, the building would house retail and office space to make the entertainment venue a viable downtown attraction. Over time, the space was renovated and expanded into the beautiful space you can see today.

Competition from newer theaters and the rise of feature films brought about the Woodward's closing in 1921. One of the last known events at the opera house was coincidentally a lecture on electricity. After doors closed and the curtain fell, the space was used as a gymnasium, and later for storage, filling the grand space with layers of dust and clutter.

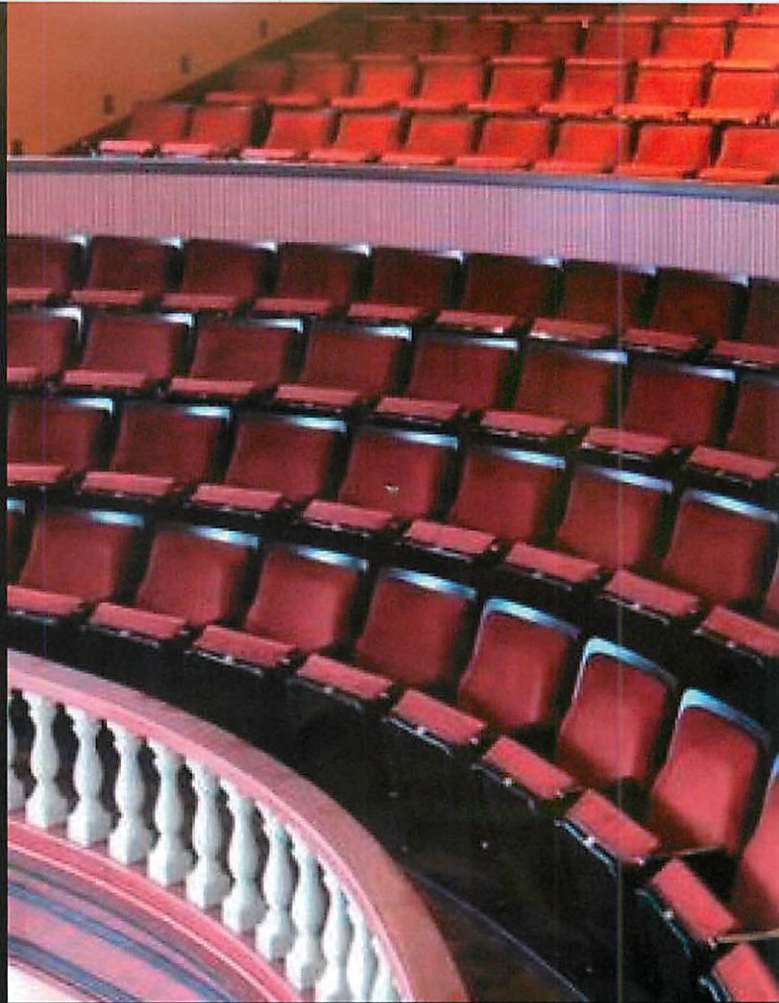
In 1975, the long process began to raise the Woodward's curtain once again. The opera house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places and community support for the Woodward began to grow. The Woodward Development Corporation purchased the opera house in 1998 and the neighboring Cooper Building in 2000, which serves as an annex for the Woodward. During the construction period, public tours were held to increase public buy-in and support.

"We have people working here who came here on their third-grade tours," according to Pat Crow, construction manager for the Woodward Development Corporation (WDC).

Like many rehabilitations, at no point was project funding truly easy. "When you start, you think someone will just come in and write you a check," Pat said of the project's shaky start, "but of course, it's not that simple."

After years of working out the kinks, WDC finally obtained Ohio and federal historic preservation tax credits, as well as State and Federal New Market Tax Credits. Their non-profit





TOP OPPOSITE PAGE: Woodward Opera House finally open and hosting performances once again in 2019. TOP LEFT AND RIGHT: Woodward Opera House after restoration, 2019. BOTTOM LEFT AND MIDDLE LEFT: Woodward Opera House interior before restoration, 1998. BOTTOM RIGHT: Woodward Opera House exterior, 1916.







"I like the history and the story: how it got built and the way it got built," Charissa said of her work, "We like to renovate historic buildings. Why demolish a cool, old building and replace it?"

It's not only the work that Charissa enjoys, however. She also praises Pat and his work ethic.

"We were lucky that [Pat] really wanted to get the documentation down," Charissa said of Pat's

tax status led to a few challenges, including pulling together a network of for-profit entities willing to partner with WDC and hiring a tax attorney to file all the paperwork required to define Woodward's relationships with the groups.

"If you had to print it all, you'd have a stack of paper about a foot-and-a-half high," Pat said of the rehabilitation paperwork.

Despite the arduous process of finding investors, Pat speaks highly of his team for bringing the Woodward rehabilitation to fruition. The most important piece of advice he offers to anyone heading their own rehabilitations is to make sure they assemble the best team possible.

"You need to have the right people in the game," Pat said of his colleagues, "You'll have to rely on them to guide you through this process. Do what they say when they say it."

One of those people "in the game" is Charissa Durst, President and Principal Historic Architect at Hardlines Design Company, who has eagerly worked on the opera house since 2001.

contributions to making the process smoother, "He hired a historical consultant to perform an assessment and he had an intern scour through old newspaper articles way back to the 1850s."

After years of hard work and a tireless effort, the Woodward Opera House opened for its first performance in nearly a century in January of 2019.

"It's not a bittersweet moment, it's a transitional moment," Pat reflected on the rehabilitation's completion. "The hardest part of the project is ahead of us: to make the Woodward benefit the community. We hope to see that downtown prospers as we prosper."

Tickets to the Woodward Opera House can be purchased online at [www.thewoodward.org](http://www.thewoodward.org). For more information about downtown Mount Vernon, contact Main Street Mount Vernon at (740) 393-1481 or visit their website, [www.mainstreetmountvernon.com](http://www.mainstreetmountvernon.com)

  
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