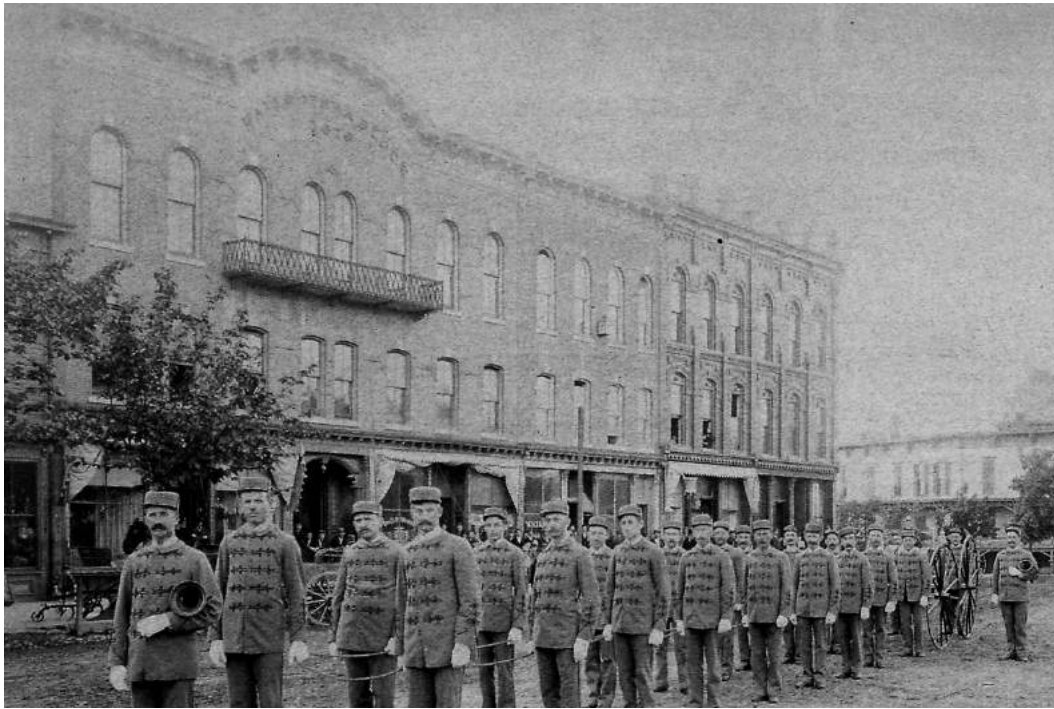
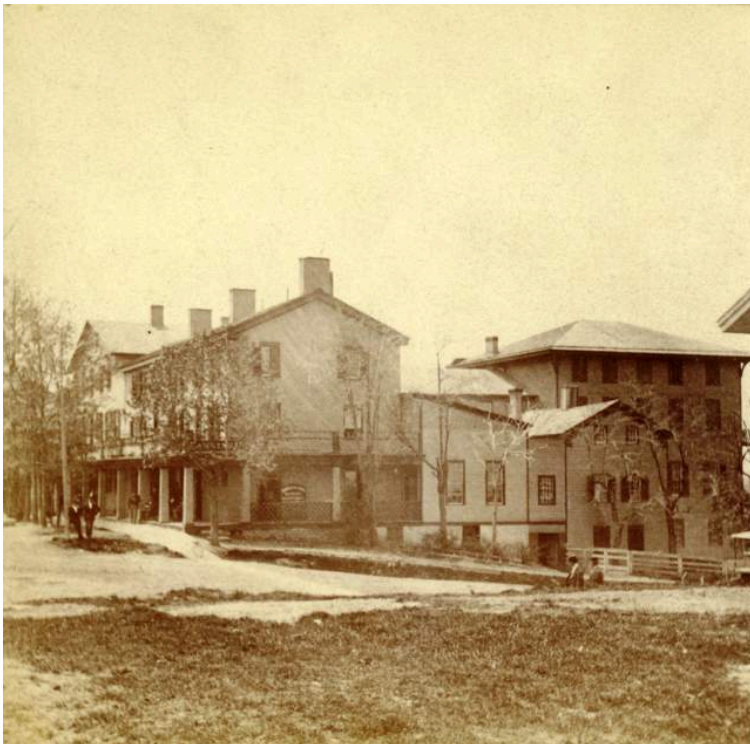


Hall's Opera Block



Hall's Opera Block, circa 1906. *AP&HS Collection*

In 1876, a new three story brick building was constructed on the corner of Genesee Street and Main Street. William Hall hired two Avon residents, Benjamin Long and Myron Watkins, to design and build the cornerstone structure. In June 1876, two railroad cars of bricks were arriving every day, and by October the Hall's Opera Block was finished.



Pictured left: The original building on the same site. The wood framed United States Hotel had burned in 1874. *Photo courtesy of the Livingston County Historian*

Avon is fortunate the Opera Block remains intact at the center of the village. What had become a deteriorated building by the early 2000s transformed into a rehabilitated Avon Town Hall by 2009. However, a remarkable event had to take place first. The Town purchased the Opera Block in 2005, but chose to give the residents a choice: Do you approve of rehabilitating the Opera Block as a town hall, or should a new structure be built alongside the town barns on Agar Road? The February 2007 vote resulted in an astonishing 624 tie. Choosing to retain the building, the Town Board reduced the cost of the proposal by restricting the upgrades to only the first and second floors, leaving the third floor auditorium space untouched. The re-vote brought out rally cries from both sides. Some thought it too costly to bring life back to the old building, and some thought it better to protect the historic village core and reuse an existing structure. The second resolution passed in August 2007, 878 to 572, allowing Bero Architecture to proceed with the project. Previous efforts to become listed on the National Historic Register in 2006 proved important. Grants specifically for historic buildings were thus secured, covering a significant portion of the entire project. The Opera Block embodies important architecture coupled with community use, significant of the times. The National Historic Register outlines the chosen criteria for the listing:

“Hall’s Opera Block is an excellent example of a late nineteenth-century, multi-purpose, commercial and community building that was commonly called an opera house. It maintains a high degree of integrity of materials and finishes on both exterior and interior. The building also has a long history as the social and cultural center of the village, and is representative of the position such buildings held in communities across the state.”

The Italianate style is highlighted by the elaborate wooden cornice and projecting brickwork over the windows. Corinthian pilasters, the eight cast iron columns lining the front of the building, are supporting beams and the brick wall above.

The Avon Opera Block is one of only twenty-five remaining opera houses of the 110 in our ten-county area. And remarkably, the third floor is largely in its original state. The color scheme and stenciling have not been lost to time. The stage and dressing rooms remain, adorned with 1870s graffiti by early travelling performers. Defying a declaration by the original owner, William Hall: “Ples (sic) Do Not Mark on The Wall”, autographs and statements were scribbled on walls and doors: “This is a rotten show town – 1907”. The huge trusses supporting the ceiling above eliminate the need for obstructing columns below. With no fixed seating and room for up to 600 people, the Opera Block served as the focal point of Avon’s recreational and social activities for over 50 years. The first public event took place on Nov. 1, 1876 sponsoring a political rally for Hon. E.G. Latham. Women’s rights activist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and former slave Sojourner Truth are the most prominent figures to visit the Opera Block. There would be benefit concerts, roller skating, the 1899 graduation ceremony, and the Avon Springs Minstrels performing in 1906. Opera halls, though not known for grand operas, were used to distinguish the entertainment from tavern ballrooms and entertainment that was thought to be less reputable during those times. These buildings served as social centers regardless of social status.

The third floor has remained historically intact largely due to diminished use. Building a new high school and St. Agnes School in 1907 and 1908 respectively decreased the need for auditorium space.

Uses for the first and second floors included businesses, vendors and offices, and Orange Sackett's Billiard Hall. In 1918, it was said that Dr. Frederick A. Strassenburgh, who had an office on the second floor, was known to remove children's tonsils with the help of his teenage son. Later, these offices were turned into apartments. Groceries occupied the first floor, as did a hardware store, which lasted from the early 1900s to 2003. When the final owners, Sally and Ray Leonard, reluctantly closed the hardware had been the longest continuous business in the building.

The Avon Preservation and Historical Society is honored to lease museum space on the ground floor of this historic building. The museum houses Avon artifacts and is open to the public on Thursday and Sunday, from 1 – 4 pm. Free tours of the third floor are offered during the Corn Festival in August, and by special appointment. There is renewed interest in securing additional grants to complete the restoration of the third floor to its original use: community space for recitals, lectures and programs. If successful, the Hall's Opera Block may once again be a cultural center for Avon.



Present Opera Block

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Clara Mulligan, AP&HS Trustee