

# FALL INTO ARTS FESTIVAL

## Step Back in Time: Kennett Courthouse Square & Beyond Historical Walking Tour

### The Opera House - Built 1896

100 North Side Square

#### History

The year 1896 witnessed a devastating event that would eventually give birth to an iconic landmark - Kennett's Opera House. The story begins on February 12, 1896, when two men attempted to rob the post office located in the middle of the block on the north side of the square.



They blew up the safe which started a fire and by the next morning, the entire north side of the square lay in ashes.

Soon after, businessman W.F. Shelton set his sights on constructing an opera house. In July he directed contractor R. H. Stanley to build it over his two new brick buildings which he had built on the northwest corner of the square after the fire. It was to be a 50x80-foot structure with an 18-foot ceiling. The new venture was controlled by a local stock company comprised of D.B. Pankey, W.F. Shelton, Jr., O.S. Harrison, Dr. M. Rosenthal, and Lee Shelton.

The resulting opera house was said to be the largest and best in Southeast Missouri with a stage 25 feet deep, electric chandeliers, and fitted with modern chairs to comfortably seat 400.

The Opera House opened its doors on October 23, 1896, with the popular "Our Dorothy Company" and the favorite Miss Gussie Johnston as the star. On the bill for the week were "Pawn Ticket 210," "Little Detective," "Rose of Killarney," and "The Power of Money." Tickets were 25 cents, 35 cents, and 50 cents.

Earlier that month, the New York Store moved into the rooms on the ground floor. The space was described as having extra high ceilings and having modern counters and shelving.



One of the scenes from Edison's Talking Pictures.

**Opera House** SATURDAY Nov. 22  
Mat. & Night  
THE SENSATION OF THE CENTURY  
**EDISON'S TALKIN' PICTURES**  
You see the Actors and hear their voices as in Real Life SINGING, DANCING, PLAYING AND TALKING PICTURES  
Drama, Opera, Vaudeville, Minstrel, Comedy, Farce  
Every man, woman and child in Kennett should see these wonderful Pictures  
Reserved seats on sale at Baldwin Drug Store.  
THREE PERFORMANCES, 2:30, 7:00 and 9:00 P. M.  
Night, 15c, 25c, 35c. Matinee adults 25c children 10c

A wide variety of entertainment was enjoyed through the years. In 1906 the local paper notes that silent moving pictures had arrived along with "high-class vaudeville." In November 1913, Kennett became home to the most modern entertainment available with the arrival of Edison's "Talkin' Pictures."

The passage of time brought change, and by 1915 there were no records of performances. The Opera House served multiple purposes in the next decade including serving as a basketball hall from 1917-1922, where young boys and girls honed their skills on the hardwood floors. High school graduations were also held in the space.

In 1923, it became the temporary home of the Ely & Walker Dry Goods Company as it awaited the completion of its new factory just south of the square.

The James Kahn Department Store opened its doors in 1925 and became a shopping destination for those seeking the latest fashions and trends.

Fast forward to 1998, and The Opera House's chapter as a department store concluded. For a time, the building stood empty and later became a warehouse. Then, in 2010, renovations breathed new life into the structure, and it was reborn as a venue for weddings, celebrations, and cultural gatherings. It reclaimed its original name, The Opera House, a symbol of continuity and resilience.

Since 1896, The Opera House has stood as a testament to adaptability and endurance. From its inception after a devastating fire, through its roles as a cultural center, a sports hall, a factory, and a department store, it has remained a cornerstone of the community. Its story resonates with the tenacity and spirit of a town that continues to evolve while honoring its history.



Special thanks to Homer Swain and the Dunklin County Genealogical Society.  
Photo of Opera House door courtesy Delta Dunklin Democrat.

OPERA HOUSE, KENNETT, MO.

**COMING!**

Tuesday, November 5th.

DIXIE BELLES CONCERT COMPANY,  
PRESENTING  
MISS SHATTEEN MITCHELL, Dramatic Reader,  
MISS JEAN TAYLOR, Violinist,  
MRS. BESSIE BROWN HILLIGAN, Sopranoist,  
MRS. MARY ELIZABETH KELLER, Pianist.

Admission, 75c; Children 50c; Reserved  
Seats \$1.00. At Harrison's.

Above, an ad from 1901. Left, In this photo from the early 1900s, The Opera House occupied the second story; the New York Store was on the ground level.

