

About the Leesburg Opera House

Pretty and quaint are words that would describe Main Street in downtown Leesburg. Palm trees, brick crosswalks, and decorative streetlights all add to the feeling of a com-



Leesburg Opera House

munity that cares.

Kitty-corner across Main Street from the spacious green Towne Square (in front of City Hall) is a terra-cotta colored two-story stucco building that encompasses the Main Street block between 5th and 6th Streets. On the ground level, it features many shops including “Alada’s China & Gifts,” and “Michael’s Couture Salon.” The second floor is accentuated with many tall windows. But, not visible from the street, is the true treasure (as you’ll see below) – that is the upper level of the Leesburg Opera House.

The building, born circa 1889, was originally called the “Mote Building” and was constructed by eight-term Leesburg Mayor, Edward H. Mote.

The Sumter County Court House originally occupied the land. In the early 1880’s, when new county lines were drawn, Leesburg became a part of the new Lake County and Sumter County was downsized to its current boundaries. In the process, the town of Leesburg acquired the old Sumter County Court House, which was right in the middle of the Main Street block between 5th and 6th Streets.

The Board of Trade asked the town to donate or sell the lot, “Court House Square,” at a nominal price to anyone or any group willing to build a modern hotel. Eventually, Mote and a partner acquired the property and agreed to build a brick business building as well as a brick hotel, which became “The Lake View.” The old courthouse was moved to its current location at the corner of Magnolia and 5th Streets, and the first, two-story, brick business building was constructed on Main Street.

There are two ways to access the second floor, both of which are mid-block on the 5th Street side of the building. The first entry is a long, wide, wooden stairway. The second, next door to the stairs, is an elevator lobby, which offers an easy ride between the two primary levels.

The elevator opens to a massive room, with cross beams at 14-feet and a beamed roof an additional 10-feet above. White and original brick walls, along with dark-wood window frames and moldings, present a clean and formal look. Closer examination of the window frames reveals attractive and unique wood-working that combines original and restored craftsmanship.

As you look at the huge room, you can imagine the long satin dresses and stiff white collars of an 1890’s audience attending a one-night performance of opera. Leesburg was the way station as opera companies were traveling by rail from Atlanta to Miami. The mid-way, overnight stop in their trip allowed the Leesburg Opera House to host an evening performance.

The theater season opened in the fall of 1890, advertising for November 26th, “Charming Hettie Bernard Chase, supported by a Fine Company of Dramatic Artists and the Famous Golden Gate Quartet, in her latest, Best and Great Play, ‘Uncles Darling,’ a Romance of Alaska.” The advertisement prom-

ised special scenery during the three acts: a great shipwreck scene, a wonderful ice glacier scene, with a “grandly illuminated aurora borealis.””

In addition to performances, according to local historian George Rast, “they held dances there, but it was always a New Year’s ball when all the girls got new evening dresses. Some even wore strapless, they were downright brazen,” chuckled Rast.

During World War II, the Opera House was used as an officers’ club, and also hosted USO shows.

Back to the present, the floor of the Opera House is a mixture of look and texture. Much of the original floor was retained, but there are dark charcoal stained planks from a fire that damaged the building about 20 years ago. There are also fresh wood planks in the floor where water damage and unsafe areas were replaced.



Main entrance on 5th Street, stairs to left, elevator lobby to right.

There was a time when the space was a maze of walls, creating many offices, and over the years the floor was covered with layers of tile, tar, and carpet.

“We have worked hard to go back to original where we could”

said one of the new owners/partners, Kathy Cook.

“The building was originally brick, but to go down to the brick and restore the outside look would have been prohibitive” noted Cook.

“We do hope to make a few dollars on the building, eventually” was the comment of another owner/partner, realtor Jim Miller.

The goal for the project is to be the starting point of a local art district. The perimeter of the west, north, and south sides of the building’s second floor are offices/studios.

According to Cook, “there are 90 windows in the second floor which create wonderful lighting in the studios.

“The east side of the building offers great morning light.



A number of artists are located in loft studios in the new Leesburg Opera House,

“The front of the building has north light and also has reflected light from the buildings across the street.

“The studio floors are back to the original wood and are either natural or painted.

“We have taken out the dropped ceiling and put new sheet rock ceilings 10 to 12 feet high.

“The artists (tenants) can finish their space as they wish, which allows us to keep the cost at a very reasonable level.

“Each artist has their own space, their own key.

“When a number of artists are working in the same area, there can be synergy that develops, they can enjoy cooperative relationships.

“An additional plus is that when a number of artists are working in the same area,” said Cook, “they also draw more buyers.”

Miller summed it up saying, “this building was truly a diamond in the rough,” and added, “we invite you to come experience the 19th century in the Leesburg Opera House.”

*The Daily Commercial - 1.16.2001 - Reminisce, Leesburg self-made mayor by Rick Reed.

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