

# CRAIGMILES HALL

*Cleveland's First Cultural Center*



William R. Snell, Historical Compiler

Written by Elizabeth E. Brozozog

Melanie L Radcliff, Organizational Editor

*This publication commemorates the 120 years of  
Craigmiles Hall, 1878-1998*

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Cleveland, Tennessee  
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## **CRAIGMILES HALL** *Cleveland's First Cultural Center*

CRAIGMILES HALL became the touchstone that would inspire a cultural awakening in Cleveland, Tennessee. Popularly known as the Craigmiles Opera House, its walls have embraced the thousands who thirsted for intellectual improvement, while its stage was graced by performances of such national treasures as the legendary John Philip Sousa.

Distinguished from surrounding structures, its iron window walk, white molding and green sloping mansard roof continue to compliment the historical atmosphere preserved in the heart of downtown Cleveland on Ocoee Street. To this day one may see the original window that has become a historical trademark located directly in the front of the building, with the words over it in a semi-circular molding, Craigmiles Hall.

It was the vision of 23 year-old Walter Craigmiles that ignited the development for the first performance center located on the east side of the court house or

"Craigmiles Block." A native of Bradley County, Tennessee, Walter was born to Pleasant M. and Florence Vance Craigmiles in 1855. Walter was an intelligent young man and attended Washington College. A student at the time of General Robert E. Lee's death, Walter was selected by the student body to be a pallbearer for the president's funeral ceremony. After Lee's death in 1870, the school was named Washington and Lee College. After completing his education, Walter returned to Cleveland and became involved in local businesses; including banking, industry and entertainment. Following in his father's footsteps he became one of seven incorporating investors in the Cleveland Exchange and Deposit Bank by financing over \$50,000 in capital. A man in touch with his surroundings, Walter sensed the growing need for a multi-purpose hall large enough to accommodate the community's needs. Prior meeting facilities were the city hall, Phoenix Hall, Masonic Female Institute and Cleveland Baptist Church or other sanctuaries. Walter began the pursuit of his long-time interest in entertainment and decided the time had come to put his desire for enriched local culture into effect.

Supported by the *Cleveland Herald* editor, W.S. Tipton declared that the impressive structure was "large enough for any and all amusements and not dangerous." Designed for easy access, the performance hall was placed on the upper level, while



the lower level was designated for various businesses, one a saloon. It was constructed by architect L.D. Sprague and painted by G.W. Stockin. The entertainment hall was 85-feet long, 42-feet wide, and 20-feet tall. Portraits of literary and political leaders, woodland scenes, and a drop stage curtain, which included the grand canal and other famous Venetian landmarks, were created by artist Mr. McGriff. As the building neared completion, it was reported as "the finest building house in the city."

Originally scheduled to open for Christmas in 1877, it was delayed twice more before its commencement on May 1, 1878 with a grand ball. That night over 100 couples christened the Opera House as the "cultural, social, and political center of Cleveland." One can imagine the prestigious citizens arriving by carriage along Ocoee Street that spring night anticipating the events of the grand ball with an admission charge of one dollar. Arrayed in formal attire, ladies graced the hardwood floor as they danced to the sound of the Cleveland Orchestra in the arms of their gentlemen. Those who watched from the gallery pronounced it "magnificent," the "most elegant affair of its kind." The Opera House became the topic of conversation everywhere. A reporter from the *Chattanooga Dispatch* penned a lengthy account of the festivities written in rose-colored ink.

When the hour of 8:30 p.m. had been registered upon the dial of the great clock, the portals to the Opera House were rolled back upon the massive hinges, opening wide the entrance for waiting guests to pass the gateway, ascend the easy flight of stairway and enter the reception room where gentlemen of the city were received as at the court of Louis XIV.

The dedicatory speech was delivered by Colonel Dave Nelson, a local leader, who predicted a "bright future for the arts in Cleveland." He proclaimed, "Mr. Craigmiles truly deserves warm praise for the liberal aid given to the fine arts, and to the city of Cleveland, and the handsome structure of the Temple of music that proudly bears his name . . ."

The city of Cleveland owed a debt to Walter Craigmiles for his cultural vision which would continue to glow brightly as the social light in the center of a community. During the first fifty years the Opera House provided the stage that thrilled audiences with a colorful variety. Even though famous and local talent brought life to the theater, consequently, it was the civic, educational and beneficent endeavors

that met within the walls that offered the most abundant financial assistance of all.

As with any new facility one can often find places for improvement. When the Opera House was having a slow period, Craigmiles added a "nice duck awning" to the front of the building. The Opera House debuted its first scheduled traveling attraction, "Southern Favorites," on July 18. A group of talented young ladies who were blind, participated in various featured comedies, instrumental and vocal performances, plays, and poetry. On August 15, the warm summer's glow faded with the first community dance. The cool autumn brought more outstanding amateur performances leaving audiences thrilled. On September 16, Thome's Comedy Company played four nights. With the Opera House available, local citizens formed their own theatrical group, the Cleveland Amateur Dramatic Company. Emma Hampton, a local historian of the Baptist church, was one of the first nine players to participate in the company. *Fanchon the Cricket*, performed first by the Cleveland Dramatic Company, became a fast favorite and was repeated numerous times to sold-out audiences. Professor Henry Mylius arranged the music and conducted his orchestra for the Dramatic Company as they offered renditions of *Dandelions Dodges* and *Our Jemmy*. Wintry hearts melted at the seasonal plays given by Kate Putnam, "the great southern favorite," for her performances in *Little Nell And The Marchioness* and Charles Dicken's, *Old Curiosity Shop*, on that cold Christmas Eve night.

<p><b>CLEVELAND OPERA HOUSE.</b> <b>One Night Only.</b> <b>Tuesday Evening, 24th.</b> <b>December</b></p> <p>THE GREAT SOUTHERN FAVORITE</p> <p><b>Katie Putnam</b></p> <p>Will appear in her famous impersonation of <b>Little Nell</b> <sup>AND</sup> <b>Marchioness,</b> IN DICKENS</p> <p><b>OLD CURIOSITY SHOP,</b> Supported by her Excellent Company.</p> <p>Admission 75 cents. Reserved seats can be secured at J. M. COWAN'S without extra charge. <b>HENRY SELLERS,</b> General Agent.</p> <p>Dec 20 1878—1t.</p>
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*Cleveland Daily Banner*  
December 20, 1878

The year 1879 opened with major opera companies from other cities enhancing the stage of the Opera House with their presence. However, not all attractions visited Cleveland such as the famous Adah Richmond Group which performed for audiences in both Chattanooga and Knoxville. Openly critical, W.S. Tipton of the *Herald* cited Cleveland as the place "they go by." Stewart's English Opera Company offered their interpretations of the *Bells of Corneville* and *Pinafore*, on October 28 and 29, leaving audiences stirred. Miss Bessie McGhie, an Irish music teacher in the community often rented the building for her pupils' performances. In 1879 she produced a benefit given by her students and was credited for her "careful training and teaching." Local churches held grand fairs and suppers to raise money for worthy causes. Six performances by the Cleveland Dramatic Company and an unforgettable concert by the Mendelssohn Quintette Club of Boston, also played the Craigmiles. The Mendelssohn's concert became one of the most famous appearing at the Opera House.

August was the time for 99 degree weather and the Grand Red Hop, where lemonade was sold on credit for five cents a glass. Finally, another successful year ended when the gentlemen requested a Grand Hop which was held on December 23, 1879. The ladies decided to waltz the New Year in at the Leap Year Hop on January 9, 1880. Brass bands made audiences "stand up and cheer" as musical entertainment claimed its place in the new cultural arena of Cleveland.

The year 1880 was full of new beginnings for the Craigmiles Opera House and the county population was growing. The 1880 census reported 12,124 Bradley County residents and 1,874 citizens in Cleveland. Walter Craigmiles became briefly associated with the relatively new industry in town, the Cleveland Hub and Spoke factory. Twenty-six year old Walter witnessed the first unicycle in town. He and a small group of friends bought one and tried to learn to ride it.

On stage in January, the Duprey & Benedict Famous Minstrels, along with the Royal Brass Band, marked the first minstrel show performance since the Civil War. As the Opera House became more popular, people began to take advantage of the variety of entertainment it scheduled. Ticket prices ranged from 15 to 50 cents for children and up to a dollar for adults. Difficulties were experienced from those paying regular prices but sitting in reserved seats. Walter Craigmiles issued a rule that no one would be permitted a reserved seat without a ticket, to which the *Herald* read, "this rule will be strictly enforced."



*East view of Craigmiles Hall from Court House. Notice the mud streets.*

In 1881 additional changes occurred as the Opera House performance hall was converted into a skating rink by T.A. Hayes, who convinced Walter to lease him the building the months of October and November. The ability to transform the facility for skating during 1881 and 1883 became a recreational success. It could be used for skating and other entertainments. Miss Claire Scott, the most talented actress in the country, performed *Camille*. The *Herald* editor believed her portrayal "butchered Camille in a frightful manner."

Changes came on a personal note for Walter when he and Annie Sandusky of Shelbyville, Tennessee, became husband and wife on November 3. Walter moved to Chattanooga with his wife and began a new chapter in his life. While Walter was relocating in Chattanooga, the state of Tennessee equalized a license tax on theaters and opera houses in 1881. According to size based on the 1880 census, Craigmiles Opera House would have to pay 15 dollars per quarter. The semi-annual tax was calculated on the size of a town and collected by the county court clerk.

The decade of the 1880s was continuously marked by several key and repertory events. Each May the community could count on Miss McGhie's annual music recital. The musical ensemble would be followed by "Pomp and Circumstance," as the commencement exercises were held for Cleveland High School and the



Cleveland Masonic Female Institute. In 1884 political rallies and lectures were held in the auditorium of the Opera House. The Democratic elector for the Cleveland district spoke and declared that no one with "self respect" would vote for his opponent, Frank Reid. On August 14 the women were praised for their work on decorations for the Republican convention.

Conferences were held in October in 1890 as Professor Rodgers, L.G. Seral, and the Reverend James P. McTeer lectured on "Your Mother-in-Law." Also conferences on "Christian Education," and on extensive travel "from Germany to America" were held. In fact, Henry Mylius, offered the final lecture of the season entitled, "Sad and Humorous Pictures from the Franco-Prussian War 1870-1874."

One of the more noted performers that played three times at the Craigmiles Opera House was Blind Tom Wiggins. Blind Tom was "the greatest musical prodigy of his time," and "the wonder of the world." He was a black man who, blind since birth, possessed a phenomenal talent to hear a piece of music played once, and then perform the piece of music note for note on the piano. His talents consisted of "his memory of the piano, his acute ear, and his retentive memory." Professor Mylius played one of his own works, which Tom performed with perfection. At concerts Blind Tom played a variety of new popular tunes as well as classical favorites. The *Chattanooga Daily Dispatch* wrote, "His performance of Beethoven's beautiful Sonata reminds a musical friend that a totally blind man performs the music of a perfectly deaf composer. Beethoven was deaf as a poet and Tom was as blind as a bat." Tickets to see Blind Tom on stage could be purchased at Roger's Drug Store. In 1891 Tom gave his last formal performance in Cleveland.

<p><b>OPERA HOUSE.</b> <b>BLIND TOM,</b> THE <b>MUSICAL PHENOMENON</b> Will give one Grand Concert <i>Thursday, December 7th.</i> Admission 50 and 75 cents. Reserved seats now on sale at Rogers' Drug Store, without extra charge.</p>
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*Cleveland Daily Banner*  
December 1, 1882

The year 1891 brought remodeling and the opening of Mr. Duff's saloon. Julia A. Hunt and her troupe graced the hall with their performances featuring, *Pearl of Savoy*, *Florinel*, and *Lady of Lyons*. For a few years, the *Pantomime of Humpty*

*Dumpty*, featuring Miaco the Clown, was in demand. The gentlemen and ladies of Cleveland would alternate sponsorship of the dances, social hops, and masque balls. Lover's music filled the air as the Georgia Minstrels offered a cantata entitled, "Under the Palms." In 1891 the Weber Concert Company featured a boy violinist and soprano. Local businesses such as Steed Brothers and Johnson's became regular sources of tickets for activities held at the Craigmiles Hall.

In 1896 a syndicate headed by J.E. Johnston, purchased the building for \$4,750. Other investors were J.T. Johnston, S.M. Johnston, W.P. Lang, J.A. Steed, and May J. Brown. More renovations were made in 1897 when new doors were added that swung out instead of in. Electricity replaced the former means of lighting and new curtains were installed in the hall. The phonograph, graphophone, and the gramophone had been the only tools for listening and recording. Now entertainment came in the form of a Vitascope, an Edison invention that projected moving pictures on a screen for audiences to observe. In 1899 rumors of a "radio" filled the air, yet the Opera House was still in demand for live entertainment. Ministries such as the Baptist Church held various annual meetings that year and a benefit given by the Young Christian Men became a much-anticipated event. As another decade was closing, the new sound of ragtime and the "king," Scott Joplin, thrilled listeners with his new sound.

The 1900s would bring an electronic revolution and America would never again be the same. The radio, although a wonderful invention, would eventually affect the future of the community Opera House. Another census was taken in 1900 listing 15,759 residents in Bradley County and 3,859 citizens in Cleveland. With comedy still "hot," the owner booked the Murry Comedy Company and the audience was ecstatic. A sensational Fourth of July ball was reason enough to celebrate the 1900s. Mrs. Perkins, president of the local chapter of the Women's Club of Tennessee, held a benefit to raise money for the library which included a lecture on "The Homes and Huts of Shakespeare." Musicals and other theatrical performances played in Craigmiles Hall during 1901 offering unforgettable attractions for their wide array of audiences. Lectures given by the Taylor Sisters began in March 1902.

The fall lured the ever funny Brennan-Sale Company and their three comedies, *A Happy Pair*, *Mistaken Identity*, and *One Christmas Eve*. The Vaudeville Company came in December and filled the house for a week's worth of show-stopping performances. Also in December, the Bonnair Price Company gave performances of *A*

*Woman Delayed*. In 1905 the Nickelodeon became the latest rage, however, live performances were still appreciated. Craigmiles Opera House, like numerous concert facilities, was slowly replaced by the radio and motion pictures. It did not slip quietly away. John Philip Sousa and his band, was a stellar performance in 1906, and probably the most "gala event of all" to play the Opera House. In 1909 the property was sold to John A. and Ida A. Steed and they located Steed's Drugstore on the ground floor.

Because of changing times and interests the hall was used for other purposes. The druggists used the space for storage. After World War I the large hall was used as an armory for the National Guard. In 1925 Vastine F. Stickley and A.B. "Blondie" Jones leased Steed's Drugstore and founded Central Drug Store. It was quite an undertaking for the two pharmacists to get the building ready for business. They completed an enormous remodeling job on the facility both internally and externally. The owners operated their well-stocked and well-equipped drugstore on the ground level, specializing in their prompt delivery service by motorcycle. Central Drug Store also featured a popular soda fountain which would seat forty people. Teenagers would gather celebrating good times while drinking a Coca-Cola and listening to the sound of "Swing."

Walter Craigmiles' career ended with his death in October 3, 1928; fifty years after his vision for the Opera House was born. In 1948 Stickley and Jones bought the building from Ida Steed's heirs. The news accounts identified the building as the "first opera house" and the "city's first theater." After improving their drugstore, the entertainment hall continued to be used for storage.

In the early 1970s Stickley and Jones retired, selling the building in 1973 to a group of local businessmen who were partners in Uptown Corporation. Several new companies began on the first floor, including a popular restaurant called Diamond Lil's, promoted by owners, James R. "Bud" Hope, and Richard Hope, his son. The meals were prepared by Lillie Lawson, "as only Lillie can prepare them." Ms Lawson eventually bought the business. The other store on the first level was short lived; Golden Girl, an ice cream parlor and sandwich shop, was located to the left of Diamond Lil's.

In 1979 a local attorney purchased the Craigmiles building, and like those before him, remodeled the interior and rented the spaces to businesses. Craigmiles Hall was included on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 by the



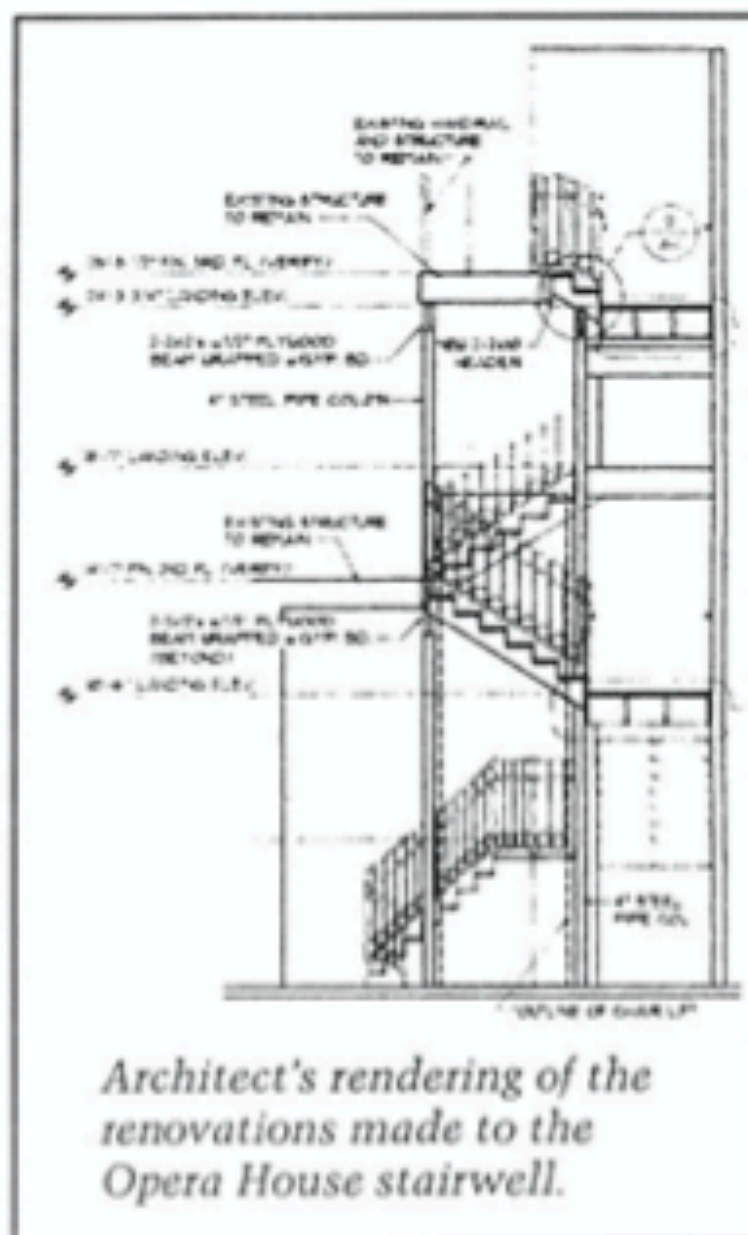
*A.B. Jones bought Craigmiles Hall in 1925 and founded Central Drugs on the main floor and used the performance hall for storage. The store was operated until 1973.*

Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. In 1981 the offices on the lower level were occupied by Ocoee Travel Agency; Ken Jones, stockbroker; Diamond Lil's Restaurant; D.S. Architects; Suits Insurance Company; Carolyn Clark School of Dance; Cleveland Associated Industries; and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). While some tenants relocated, others sought office space in the historic shell of the first cultural center in downtown Cleveland.

In July 1993 the landmark was sold to local businessman W. Allan Jones, Jr., a native of Cleveland dedicated to historical preservation. Jones sensed the need for restoration of the original exterior portion of Craigmiles Hall to the approximate features of the original building. After extensive photographic research, sketches were composed with suggested remodeling ideas for the structure. He installed four 300-watt and two 500-watt halogen lamps to light the face of the structure for the first Halloween Block Party in October 1993. The unique lighting continues to illuminate Craigmiles' Victorian-style extrados each evening at dusk. The interior was renovated to recapture Walter Craigmiles' original vision. New brick was matched with that of the original 116 year-old color. The leaky tin roof was repaired while custom-made moldings were added to the exterior. Many historic artifacts are displayed throughout the once-again graceful halls of the structure. In 1994 Jones commented that Craigmiles Hall was: "one of the most historical and architecturally significant buildings, not only in Cleveland, but in the state of Tennessee."

As of May 1, 1998, the current tenants of Craigmiles Hall are the following: on the first floor, Diamond Lil's Restaurant with Lillie Lawson as owner and proprietor; David Medford, Certified Financial Planner; and Ocoee Insurance, owned by Pam Nelson. Located on the second floor are Shannon, Key and Associates, an advertising agency; and Randy Sellers, attorney at law. The third floor is comprised of Hart Group, with Chuck Jabaley as agent; Primerica Financial Services owned by Janice O'Connor; Sunset Portraits, owners Mr. and Mrs. Philip Munck; Products Plus with owner Dave Luzader; and Accounting and Tax Services, owned by Jena Cavett and Sheila Sauer.

Regretfully, nostalgia is the only means we have of escaping into the past and sometimes by reading the accounts that history has so graciously left us can we hope



*Architect's rendering of the renovations made to the Opera House stairwell.*

to experience life of days gone by. Fortunately, in the case of Craigmiles Hall, the building still remains 120 years later. We owe a special debt of gratitude to those involved in historic preservation for creating a place where memories can be recaptured. Once the center of weekly conversation, Craigmiles was the beacon of enlightenment that dawned the epic of cultural refinement. Walking by Craigmiles Hall one can still imagine the strains of music and song, the laughter of an audience, and the soft weeping of those who identified with the trials of life portrayed of stage. As former governors, temperance speakers, and church leaders spoke their convictions from the podium, perhaps their raised voices could be heard. School teachers and principals presented their students, dressed in frills, knickers and bow ties as they recited their lessons. If you listen closely you might hear their nervous giggles.

John Philip Sousa was the crowning jewel that honored fifty years of unforgettable productions that celebrated the signature standard begun by Walter Craigmiles



*Front view before Allan Jones' restoration. Note the small trees.*

in 1878. Allan Jones, like Walter Craigmiles, has chosen to keep his vision alive. Craigmiles Hall has been masterfully restored for the citizens of Cleveland and Bradley County to appreciate now and in the future.



*Allan Jones in front of Craigmiles Hall*

This research has been compiled by the following students of Lee College: David N. Abernathy, Douglas Holt, George W. Allin, Jr., Charlene Prescott, Deborah Bellomy, Dani Allred Smith, Pam Coker, Roger A. Vaughan, Sally High Conrad, Connie Willis, and Ronald K. Griffin.