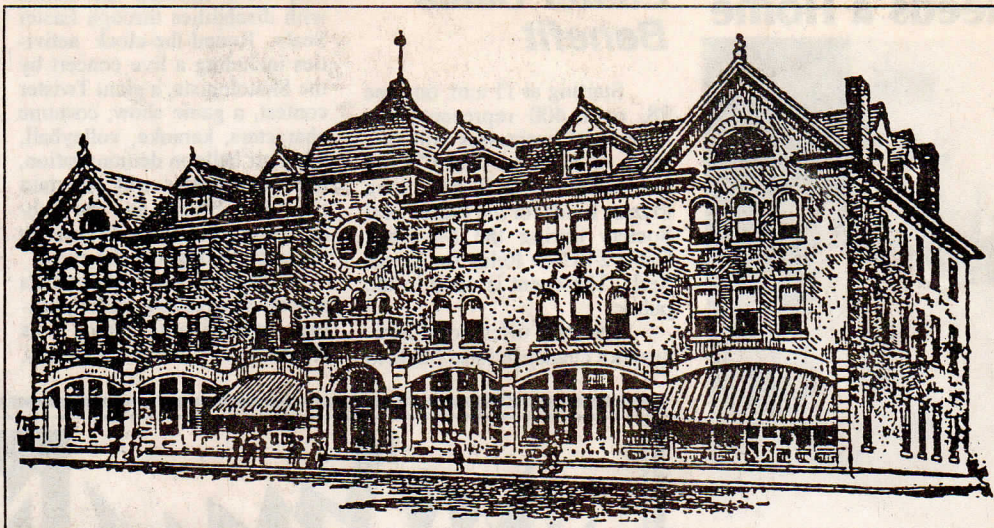


Memorable Performance at the Old Ambler Theatre

by Newton M. Howard

Early in this century a theatrical production company brought Harriet Beecher Stowe's beloved "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to the old Ambler Opera House. This was a perennial favorite with Ambler theatergoers, who looked forward to seeing it performed each year. Many in the audience were almost as familiar with the lines as were members of the cast.

The original Ambler Opera House, built around 1890, had a wide stage, flanked by four boxes with ornately-decorated curved fronts. There were two on each side, one above the other. This large stage allowed for band concerts, amateur shows, vaudeville, wrestling and boxing, minstrel shows, political rallies and graduations. Even a moderate-sized circus could be accommodated here. The acoustics of the original Opera House were considered second only to those of La Scala Opera in Milan, according to an entry in the autobiography of an opera star who had sung here. The seating was comfortable and the lighting was considered



Ambler Opera House built about 1890. This 1901 drawing shows six stores on the ground floor, flanking the entrance to the Theater. Second floor housed meeting rooms for lodges, etc., while the Opera House Ballroom occupied the entire third floor.

Drawing from the collection of Newton M. Howard

superb.

A Philadelphia-based opera company often ended their season with performances in Ambler. Their railroad car, containing scenery, costumes and props, was brought out to the freight yard siding, with the

company staying in Ambler for several performances. Ambler's Opera House was recognized as the finest on the North Pennsylvania Railroad between Philadelphia and Bethlehem, the popularity due largely to its location on the railroad. The arrival, in 1902, of the Lehigh Valley trolleys brought even larger crowds to the Opera House.

The "Uncle Tom's Cabin" company had their own car, which carried scenery and props, and provided living quarters for cast and stage crew while in Ambler. For this performance, they even carried real live bloodhounds. Coming to Ambler by railroad, their car was moved by a shifter to a siding in the freight yard just across the tracks from the Opera House.

An advance party had come to town earlier to put up posters and arrange for the big parade, necessary to ensure a large turnout. Local paper advertising and posters around town were not enough to guarantee a full house. Scheduled for the afternoon of the show, the parade consisted of a bass drummer and bugler, followed by the entire cast in costume, parading on every street in Ambler, their sole purpose being to make enough noise to bring out the residents and let them know there was a show tonight. Bloodhounds used in the play were a popular feature of this parade.

The afternoon parade was

a success, for in the evening the theater was filled to capacity, with standing room only. As the house lights dimmed and the curtain rose, the play seemed to begin normally. Before long, though, there was a sense that something on the stage was not right. Those in the audience familiar with the play were aware that the actors were speaking lines not in the play.

Before the first act had ended they realized the players were intoxicated, learning afterwards that members of the cast had sent out for an ample supply of beer before the show. As the play progressed it was quite obvious that this was going to be a surprisingly different version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin". Lines were forgotten or changed and the players began to giggle uncontrollably and to trip over props or each other. At one point an actor came precariously close to falling over the footlights into the orchestra pit.

Before the last act could be completed, the curtain came down abruptly, leaving the astonished audience in a dimmed theater for more than fifteen minutes wondering what was to come next.

Finally, the staggering manager of the group appeared before the curtain, supporting himself by the ropes, and saying, "Well, what are you waiting for? You got your money's worth, didn't you?"

You know the story. Uncle Tom's dead and little Eva goes

(Continued on page 35)



**Casual Dining in a
Friendly Pub Atmosphere!**

- Daily Lunch and Dinner Specials
- Kids Menus • Take-Out
- Private Parties
- Late Night Sandwiches Available

**1619 Bethlehem Pike, Flourtown
836-9597**

Hours: Mon - Sat. 11 am - 2 am. Sun. 12 Noon - 2 am

Memorable Performance

(Continued from page 30)

to Heaven, so what more do you want?" And with that, he disappeared behind the curtain leaving a stunned audience of more than 700 theatergoers, who would talk about this performance for years to come.

All the magnificence of the original opera house was lost, however, when it was remodeled in 1928-29 into a movie theater to compete with Warner Brothers' Ambler Theater just opened, and featuring motion pictures and vaudeville. It was soon found that Ambler could not support two movie houses, with the result that, in a few years, Warners took a long lease on the remodeled Opera House, closing it forever, to be used only for K&M Company functions, and Ambler High School graduations. If you were a member of Ambler High School Class of 1939, you are aware that yours was the last class to graduate from the Ambler Opera House.

The final blow came in 1967 when the block-long building was sold to an oil com-

pany who demolished it in order to build one more service station. Another Ambler landmark lost to progress!