

Willis Wood Theater

11th and Baltimore
completed 1902, destroyed by fire 1917

by Susan Jezak Ford

Money was no object. Colonel Willis Wood wanted his own monument in the form of the classiest theater ever built. Releasing architect Louis Curtiss of anything as troublesome as an expense account, Wood gave carte blanche to the design of the theater bearing his name. Curtiss's only order "was to design as perfect, unique and handsome a playhouse as is possible for the hand of man to erect," *The Kansas City Journal* reported in 1902.

When the Coates Opera House burned in early 1901, Kansas City was left without a first-class theater. As plans to rebuild the Coates House failed, Colonel Willis Wood stepped in. Wood had arrived in Kansas City just a few months earlier from St. Joseph, where he had acquired his fortune in the dry goods business. He lived in and owned stock in the Baltimore Hotel at 11th and Baltimore Streets and undoubtedly saw an advantage in constructing a theater across the street from his investment.

One month after the Coates House fire, excavation began for the new Willis Wood Theater while architect Louis Curtiss drew the plans. Curtiss was in the midst of his rising career as one of Kansas City's best known architects. He had designed a number of prominent residences, as well as the Baltimore Hotel (demolished in 1939.) With no financial limitations to stand in the way of his creativity, Curtiss borrowed freely from the Paris and the Monte Carlo Opera Houses for his theater design.

The Beaux-Arts creation was described at the time as "Ionic" and was fronted with a row of two-story classical columns topped with scrolled capitals. The grandiose exterior layered a profusion of swags, scrolls, arches, and carved ornaments in gleaming white terra cotta atop yellow brick. Balconies opened at the front corners of the building and wreaths encircled windows at the frieze. Ornate medallions protruded from the uppermost corners of the structure



and antefixae, or decorative upright tiles, projected from the most elaborate cornice in town. The composition—estimated to cost \$300,000—culminated in an elliptical dome topped by a cupola.

Inside the lobby, one could enter the lower floor of the house through swinging mahogany doors or ascend one of the double staircases to the first balcony, or salon, where the best seats in the house were located. The front ring of this balcony contained the box seats, each with four large mahogany chairs. Additional seats were located behind the box seats. Outside of the salon level was a promenade, where spectators could catch a breath of air or an encounter with other members of the audience between acts. The 50-cents seats in the upper balcony were also reached by the salon stairway, creating a sense of democracy among the patrons.

The auditorium's interior was lush in design and texture and seated 1,527 patrons. The most striking creations within were the caryatids—life-sized female figures—that served as columns to support the weight of interior arches. The figures were said to have been modeled after a young Kansas City woman and each figure was draped in filmy material, creating a row of sculptures down each side of the auditorium to hold back velvet draperies with outstretched hands. The auditorium walls, plastered in high relief, were painted in deep reds, green, blues, and golds, highly illuminated by the many lamps placed within the proscenium arch.

Opening night on August 25, 1902, featured "The New Magdalen," a play directed by and starring Amelia Bingham, a noted actress of the day. Congratulatory speeches punctuated the intervals between acts, including offerings by Mayor Reed and Miss Bingham. Colonel Wood had stated for weeks that he would not make a speech and he stayed true to his word. Louis Curtiss took a brief bow from his box seat—he reportedly had been paid so far only \$5,000 of his \$14,000 fee. As for the play itself, it was a disappointment to the audience, who did not receive some of the subject matter well.

One amenity frequently used by patrons was "highball alley," a marble-lined tunnel that ran under the street, connecting the theater and the Baltimore Hotel. One purpose of the tunnel was to allow audience members to have dinner at the hotel and attend a performance without venturing into inclement weather. More often, attendees slipped through the passageway between acts to enjoy liquid refreshments at the hotel's bar.

The best traveling plays and operas were produced at the Willis Wood Theater but its glamour was short-lived. Its role as the city's only first-class theater was lost in 1906, when the Shubert Theater opened and also laid claim to that title. The Willis Wood soon switched to a new format that featured a stock company. In 1913 and 1914 burlesque acts played the house. The auditorium was remodeled and a \$20,000 pipe organ was installed for silent motion pictures in 1914. The theater had returned to showing performances by stock players when it caught fire in 1917.

A 1902 *Kansas City Journal* story praising the new Willis Wood Theater proclaimed that "there will never be a fire because there is only the scenery to burn and an asbestos curtain shuts the stage off." Shortly after midnight on January 8, 1917, a fire ate its way through the entire backstage area, consuming equipment, scenery, and costumes. As the roof supports burned, the roof above the stage collapsed, drawing the flames upward and adding gusts of air that further fueled the blaze. The orchestra pit and the seats of the first level of the theater were destroyed. The chandelier fell into the first balcony and the pipe organ quickly turned into a tangled mass of tubes, wires, and steel bands.

The asbestos curtain lay in fragments over the stage and orchestra pit. "It burned as if there had been no asbestos in it at all," *The Kansas City Star* reported. "The heavy iron rod which supported the curtain is twisted and bent.... All along this iron rod are fragments of the charred asbestos." The theater was too badly damaged by the fire to be saved. Within a year, the ruins became the new site of the 20-story Kansas City Athletic Club, which eventually became the (now demolished) Continental Hotel.

The Willis Wood Theater was Kansas City's crown jewel for a very brief period. Not even Colonel Wood's unrestricted budget could save his monument from the fate that claimed its predecessor, the Coates Opera House. The scrolls, flourishes, balconies, and promenade that awed theater patrons and attracted daily sightseers had finally succumbed to a blaze that illuminated downtown Kansas City as brightly as its much-publicized opening night.

Sources:

DeAngelo, Dory and Jane Fifield Flynn. *Kansas City Style*. Kansas City: Harrow Books, 1990.

Green, George Fuller. *A Condensed History of the Kansas City Area: Its Mayors and Some V.I.P.s*. Kansas City: The Lowell Press, 1968.

The Kansas City Journal, February 8, 1918; February 9, 1918.

The Kansas City Star, August 24, 1902; August 26, 1902; January 8, 1917;
December 2, 1917; March 11, 1918.

The Kansas City Times, August 24, 1902; August 25, 1942.

Sandy, Wilda and Larry K. Hancks. *Stalking Louis Curtiss*. Kansas City:
Ward Parkway Press, 1991.

© 1999