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Fire, Carnival balls and intrigue: The French Opera House lived up to the drama

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER JUL 12, 2019 - 7:00 AM

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The French Opera House, 1867, photo by Theodore Lilienthal. Located at Bourbon and Toulouse Streets, it was commissioned by opera company director, Charles Boudousquie in 1859. The building was completed in a little over seven months. It burned down in December 4, 1919.

Courtesy of Tulane University Special Collections/Southeastern Architectural Archive

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Opera has been performed here since the 1790s, and fittingly, New Orleans was the first city in the United States to have its own opera company. In 1859, its director, Charles Boudousquié, commissioned James Gallier Jr. (Gallier, Turpin and Co.) to build the French Opera House.

At its site today, however, opera and history lovers alike can only drop in and lift a toast to days, and buildings, gone by.

The Opera House, a melding of Italianate and Greek Revival architectural styles on the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse streets, was completed in a little over seven months at a cost of about \$118,000. It opened Dec, 2, 1859, with a performance of Rossini's "Guillaume Tell."

For the next 60 years, the opera house was the center of the city's cultural life: The space also hosted concerts, debutante presentations, and

according to Mardi Gras Guide Publisher Arthur Hardy, Carnival balls such as Proteus and Comus.

The Civil War brought its closing in 1862, but it reopened in 1864.

In 1913, the building was purchased and donated to Tulane University, which operated it until Dec. 4, 1919, when it burned. The last performance was Giacomo Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots."

Over the years, several plans were created for a new opera house by various architects and architecture firms, such as Benson & Riehl; Goldstein, Pelham and Labouisse; Freret and Wolf; and N.C. Curtis Sr., but none was ever built.



A drawing for a new French Opera House designed by Goldstein, Pelham and Labouisse, c. 1961. The drawing is by architect and director Milton G. Scheuermann Jr.

Courtesy of Tulane University Special Collections/Southeastern Architectural Archive

The site was a lumber yard and a parking lot until the 1960s, when it was developed into a hotel by Arkansas Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller. It now operates as a Four Points by Sheraton, which in a nod to the site's original origins, has a lounge called the Puccini Bar.

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