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Somers Pride of India Lodge or Somers Playhouse (formerly Somers Opera House)



Somers Opera House (red arrow) dominates the corner of Wellington Street and St George's Avenue now re-named Rose Hill Street.

BUILT HERITAGE | APRIL 2021

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This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.

Somers Pride of India Lodge No. 899 in St George's was the first of the lodges established by the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows when it was founded on 10 May 1848 with schoolmaster John Gilbert Allen as secretary and later Grand Master. Alexandrina Lodge No. 1026 in Hamilton and Victoria and Albert No. 1027 in Somerset followed. By 1860 the three lodges had over 200 members.

In April 1850 the trustees of Somers Pride of India Lodge, all of whom were residents of St George's, purchased land on Cut Road from mason Peter Tucker. It wasn't until 14 January 1862 that, with much pomp and ceremony, the cornerstone was laid for their first hall. A gale in October 1870 blew down the upper walls of both sides of their not-yet-completed hall but did not discourage them. The Odd Fellows celebrated their 25th anniversary in May 1873 with a service and procession to their new building where the foreman of the Building Committee, John Cornelius Bascome, gave the welcoming address.

The rapidly growing membership saw the need for a larger building and in 1903 a more prominent parcel of land was purchased. The Somers Pride of India Lodge Trustees Act 1909 allowed the trustees to sell their building on Cut Road and on 13 November 1913 at what was described as "one of the greatest ceremonies of its kind" the cornerstone was laid for their new lodge building on York Street and St George's Avenue (now Wellington Street and Rose Hill). Work parties were held with bus loads of members from sister lodges across the Island arriving to help with the construction.

The building was dedicated on 5 July 1923 with a procession from Cut Road led by Grand Marshal Alexander Richardson. Prominent members included John Henry Corbin, Ernest Sinclair Smith, Arthur C Smith, Thomas Trott, Walter Darrell and Jacob Richardson Trott who as the Building Committee chairman had supervised the entire work on the new building. Massive pieces of timber weighing up to 2,400 lbs apiece had been placed into position by stevedore George Swan. The south end of the building facing York Street was to be used for lodge purposes while the northern portion facing on St George's Avenue was planned as a public and private entertainment hall with stage, balconies and space for the orchestra.

By 1924 the building had become known as Somers Opera House. Weekly movies were shown by Royalty Moving Picture Co. After 1925 the hall began to be used more frequently for concerts, lectures and amateur theatricals such the East End School students' performance of Hiawatha under the guidance of their headmaster, Mr Charles Cecil Snaith. In 1950 General Theatres Company announced plans to begin showing nightly movies. With a seating capacity for 300 people, the theatre was as large as the one at City Hall in Hamilton. Community-organized fairs were held on the grounds. Sadly though, by 1954 apathy among the lodge members appears to have set in causing John Corbin to comment "There is something lacking. We don't try to act and do and build as they did in the old days."



The Somers Playhouse in the early 1960s.

Sometime in the 1960s the building became known as Somers Playhouse. The last movie was shown in 1981 although Lodge members continued to meet upstairs. The theatre remained unused until 1993 when it re-opened as New Somers Playhouse until its final closure in January 2000. Its use as a lodge has also ceased and sadly the Grade 3 listed building remains empty.

Somers Pride of India Lodge No. 899 once played a key role in the St George's community. Primarily a meeting place for members, the building and grounds were used to bring people together for education and entertainment. The late Ira Philip described lodges as "the hub of social life. They provided a useful forum for members to develop skills in leadership, money management, social interaction and community outreach."

Today, windows that were not boarded-up are broken, foliage is peeking out through the roof and the general exterior is worn and dreary. Despite this neglect, it's clear that Somers Opera House with its massive proportions was built to last. The early lodge members worked hard and were proud of their building. It should not be left to deteriorate further.



Somers Opera House today.

Sources: Bermuda's Forgotten Heroes by Joy Wilson-Tucker, Bermuda Times 31 Jan 1992, The Bermudian.com, RG 30 May 2015 article by Ira Philip, numerous articles in The Royal Gazette 1848-2011 and Bermuda Recorder 1933-1974.

