



MANHATTAN/RILEY COUNTY PRESERVATION ALLIANCE NEWSLETTER

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Old Stage, New Act: Wareham Hall's Momentous Transformation

Written by Blade Mages

The Renaissance of a Cultural Icon: Wareham Hall

Standing proudly at 410 Poyntz Avenue, the Wareham Opera House has served as a cherished symbol of our city's rich history and unwavering passion for the arts. For over 142 years, its walls have echoed with the sounds of vaudeville acts, flickering films, and soul-stirring live music performances, tracing the evolution of entertainment in the Midwest. Today, a remarkable new chapter unfolds as the grand old building is acquired by Wareham Hall Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to breathing new life into this iconic venue. With ambitious plans for a transformative renovation, Wareham Hall aims to rejuvenate the space, ushering it into a new era as a state-of-the-art performing arts and live music destination.

From Humble Beginnings: The Transformation of the Coliseum into Moore's Opera House

In the late 19th century against the backdrop of Manhattan's rapid growth, "The Coliseum" emerged as the premier entertainment hub in town. This timber structure, measuring 40 x 70 feet and adorned with a canvas roof, quickly became the go-to destination for vaudeville performances, exhibitions, and various gatherings. The bustling town had found its semi-permanent circus tent.

In 1884, a significant develop-



Above, Wareham Hall in May 2023.

ment took place when H. S. Moore purchased The Coliseum and transformed it into Moore's Opera House. An article in *The Manhattan Mercury*, dated June 11, 1884, unveiled the details of the new venue to the public. The city rejoiced as the article proclaimed, "At last Manhattan is to have an Opera House." The stone building was hailed not just as an ornament to the city but also as a remarkable convenience and comfort for its people. With a large gallery, a spacious stage measuring 30 x 45 feet, and enhanced scenery, Moore's Opera House quickly became a focal point of the community's cultural life.

Enter Stage Right: Wareham's Ascent from Rinks to Opera Houses

In a twist of fate, the same June 11 newspaper edition that celebrated Moore's Opera House also announced the seasonal opening of Harry P. Wareham's first major enterprise—a skating rink. Harry Wareham, only 18 years old at the time, was on the precipice of a career that would shape the future of entertainment in Manhattan.

Throughout the next decade, Moore's Opera House hosted a wide range of performances, from operas and comedies to magicians, astronomers, and even trained dogs and monkeys.

In September 1886, the opera house, furnished with gas lighting—an impressive feat at the time—hosted Professor Harry A. Kinney, who delivered a lecture on the wonders of electricity. The community was urged not to miss the opportunity to witness the marvels of electricity at Moore's Opera House.

In 1887, the opera house welcomed the influential suffragette Susan B. Anthony, who delivered a lecture on equal rights for women. *The Manhattan Republic* reported that Anthony, once met with hisses in her early lecturing days, now commanded applause wherever she appeared. Her presence at Moore's Opera House symbolized the evolving attitudes of the people
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toward her cause—equal rights.

The opera house continued to thrive, hosting a multitude of performances until August 1893 when it underwent a series of trades and eventually came into the possession of H. P. Wareham's mother, Sarah. H. S. Moore traded the opera house and other properties to A. J. Dains and Fremont Earl for the exclusive territory to sell Dale's patent carpet stretcher in several eastern states. Dains and Earl subsequently sold the opera house to Mrs. Wareham, alongside Wareham's rink and other properties, in a transaction reportedly exceeding \$15,000.

H. P. Wareham had been building his skating rink business for over a decade and frequently used it for community-wide events, small performances, and farm implement shows. The opportunity to run a proper venue inspired the budding impresario, and he seized the chance to take the reins of the opera house. By October 1893, *The Manhattan Mercury* reported that Wareham was making significant improvements to the opera house, including full electrification with 42 incandescent lights. Wareham's dedication to enhancing the theater did not go unnoticed, as the article expressed confidence in his efforts to create a complete and exemplary performance space. The grand opening of the regular season, featuring the performance "My Colleen," received critical acclaim, solidifying Wareham's position as a respected cultural figure.

The Dawn of a New Era: Innovation Lights Up the Wareham



Top, a rendering of the lobby entrance. Middle and bottom, renderings of the main performance space. Design by Anderson Knight Architects. The images are courtesy of Blade Mages.

Wareham's entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to innovation propelled the theater into a new era. With the rise of motion pictures, Wareham's Opera House transitioned into "The Electric," a venue that seamlessly accommodated both live performances and state-of-the-art cinema. Wareham proved to be an early adopter of moving-picture technology, influenced by Clair Pattee, a cinema pioneer and native of Ashland, KS. By 1908, the opera house boasted a stunning electric sign, a high-quality phonograph,

and a fireproof film operator booth, prioritizing audience safety.

The introduction of these modern amenities marked the birth of The Electric, the second motion picture theater in Kansas. Audiences flocked to this dynamic space, where they could enjoy a diverse range of entertainment options under one roof. The Electric's allure lay in its ability to adapt to the changing demands of the time, captivating patrons with the magic of both live performances and the silver screen.

Standing the Test of Time: The Wareham's Journey through the Golden Age and Beyond

The mid-20th century witnessed a gradual shift in the Wareham Theater, as it gradually moved away from its vaudeville roots and embraced the golden age of cinema. During World War I, the theater became an essential source of news for the local community, showcasing Pathé films that connected residents with the realities

of the war. A heartwarming moment occurred when a resident, Harry E. Best, caught a glimpse of his son, Sgt. Harry Best, marching with his company in France through a Pathé news film. The power of film to bridge distances and foster community cohesion became evident within the walls of the Wareham Theater.

In 1922, H. P.'s nephew, Harry K. Wareham, assumed the management role of the theater. Notably, Harry K. became known as a propagator of sports media for the Kansas State Agricultural College, arranging for the filming of football games for those unable to (continued on p. 3)

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attend in person. His efforts demonstrated the theater's adaptability to meet the community's evolving interests and needs.

The year 1938 marked a significant transformation for the venue. A major remodel introduced the iconic neon sign, which has since become a recognizable symbol of the theater's identity. The renovation covered not only the theater's front but also the adjacent buildings, creating a cohesive and visually stunning structure. Though interior images from this time are scarce, it is believed that the remodel replaced the ornate finishes of 1915 with a streamlined-modern aesthetic that epitomized contemporary cinema design.

Over the next approximately 50 years, Wareham's Theater continued to be a crown jewel for the community. However, in the 1980s, increased competition and the opening of a new mega-plex on the west side of town posed significant challenges. Despite valiant efforts, the theater fell into disrepair, and in September 1986, it screened its final film, "Aliens," starring Sigourney Weaver, before closing its doors indefinitely.

From Despair to Hope: The Preservation and Transformation of the Wareham

The closure of the theater saddened the Manhattan art community, which rallied in an attempt to repurpose the space into a dedicated performing arts center. However, these endeavors did not come to fruition. In 1988, a partnership between the Wareham heirs, McCullough Development, and Brent Bowman emerged, saving the historic space from impending blight and transforming it into a multi-purpose events venue. This collaboration breathed new life into the theater, allowing it to continue hosting weddings, corporate events, concerts, comedy

performances, and other gatherings.

A Legacy Reimagined: The Birth of Wareham Hall Inc.

In 2022, the birth of Wareham Hall Inc., a nonprofit organization, marked the beginning of a new phase for the theater. United by a shared vision of revitalizing and activating this cherished venue, the team at Wareham Hall Inc. embarked on a mission to respect the theater's roots while catapulting it into the 21st century as a state-of-the-art performing arts hub. A collaboration with experienced architects, theater and acoustic consultants, preservation consultants, and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) ensured that the renovations would be appropriate, highly functional, and capable of accommodating a wide range of performances and events.

"We are excited to embark on this journey, celebrating and enhancing Wareham's legacy, ensuring its doors remain open for future generations to explore and enjoy."

Inspired by the theater's 1938 Streamline Moderne architectural style, Wareham Hall Inc. embarked on an ambitious renovation plan that celebrated the hall's unique legacy while modernizing it to meet today's performance and audience expectations. With a multifaceted programming model in mind, Wareham Hall Inc. envisions a dynamic calendar of ticketed live music,



Both images are renderings of proposed lounge space. Design by Anderson Knight Architects. The images are courtesy of Blade Mages.

theater, cinema, lecture, dance, and comedy performances. The hall will also host community and university-driven arts education programs and workshops. Private events such as weddings, conferences, and celebrations will contribute to a diverse income stream, ensuring the hall's long-term financial sustainability.

Toward a Bright Future: The Next Act for Wareham Hall

Wareham Hall Inc. has embarked on an ambitious journey to revitalize the historic Wareham Opera House into a state-of-the-art performance venue. This \$17.5 million undertaking aims to fill a vital gap in Manhattan, Kansas' arts scene, engaging local and regional artists, performers, and the wider community.

The comprehensive renovation is expected to take place over the next three years, with the design (continued on p. 4)

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phase beginning later this summer when it is anticipated that 50% of the funds for the project have been secured. Our team is hopeful that we will be open for our first performance season in the fall of 2026.

We are excited to embark on this journey, celebrating and enhancing Wareham's legacy, ensuring its doors remain open for future generations to explore and enjoy. As we take the helm for this next act, we

are humbly aware of the history we are inheriting, and passionately driven by the future we envision. From the first notes of vaudeville that filled the hall in the 1880s to the electrifying performances to come, Wareham Hall will remain a testament to the power of the arts to connect, inspire, and entertain. We look forward to welcoming audiences back into the heart of Manhattan's cultural scene, ready to delight in the transformative

power of live performance once again.

In the coming months, the organization's website will become active with full renderings of the concept-level plans and other project updates. Follow along with the journey at WarehamHall.org.

Blade Mages is the president of Wareham Hall Inc.

Built by Local Youth: Manhattan's Bluemont Scenic Drive

Written by Kathy Dzewaltowski

Fifty years before the Kimball Avenue extension between Anderson Avenue and Fort Riley Boulevard was given the name "Scenic Drive" by Riley County commissioners, another scenic drive was constructed in northeastern Manhattan. Described as providing "sweeping views of the city, the college, and the Kansas and Blue River valleys" ("Fifty youths"), the winding, steep drive that ends atop Bluemont Hill with a park and overlook was constructed in the early 1940s by local youth as part of a national program.

At the time, the nation was in the grips of the Depression, and many Americans were struggling financially. Pres. Franklin Roosevelt enacted a number of so-called New Deal programs intended to provide jobs, help the economy recover, and reform the financial system to ensure there wouldn't be a future depression. One of those New Deal programs was the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was established in 1935 and employed millions of Americans who worked on public projects, including many projects in Manhattan and Riley County. A program that operated as part of the WPA was the National Youth Administration (NYA),

which employed male and female youth aged 16-24 and provided student aid for those attending high school or college (Rosin).

Reportedly, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had a hand in establishing the NYA. Due to the hardships of the Depression, she was concerned that students would drop out of school because they lacked the funds to continue their educations, which had the potential to have a devastating impact on the nation's future. She urged the creation of the NYA, which was established by executive order in 1935 (Rosin). The NYA provided on-the-job training, and similar to the WPA, many of the projects the youth worked on benefitted the public. Locally, a project completed by the NYA was the Bluemont Youth Cabin located in Goodnow Park. Approximately 115 youth worked on the cabin's construction, which was completed in 1938, and NYA youth also worked on recreational features in Goodnow Park (Spencer).

In December 1939, Bernard Conroy, who was Riley County's NYA director, announced plans to build a road from the north end of Juliette Avenue to the top of Bluemont Hill. The road would



Above, Bluemont Scenic Drive.

branch, with one branch circling the water reservoir at the top of the hill and the other branch connecting to Hwy 13. The two-way road would be over a half-mile long and 40 feet wide. Harold Harper, city engineer, would plan the road and draw the specifications. It was estimated the NYA would invest approximately \$5,300 in labor and materials. The city would provide equipment and additional materials as needed ("A scenic drive up Bluemont").

NYA high school students working on the drive would be paid \$4/month, which was enough for the students to purchase hot lunches, books, and pay for transportation. College students received proportionately more and received \$12/month, and graduate *(continued on p. 5)*

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students were paid \$15/month (“Local NYA units observe”).

By January 1940, the work on the new scenic drive was well underway despite cold and snowy conditions. This first phase focused on the north side of Bluemont Hill where the road would connect to Hwy 13 (“Weather doesn’t stop NYA workers”). As the weather grew warmer, the project got into full swing with work expanding to the north end of Juliette Avenue and employing two crews of 25 boys and young men. The crews worked in alternating eight-day shifts. Barely two months into the project, the NYA youth had already worked 5,000 hours on the road. Using picks and shovels, the workers embarked on the arduous task of cutting through a four-foot shelf of stone and shale and removed 150 tons of rock. The rock was transported down the hillside on sleds and then was ground into gravel for surfacing the drive. Removed soil was deposited on Griffith Field and on the ball-fields at City Park (“Fifty youths”).

By July 1940, the project was half finished. Over 9,600 hours had been invested in the effort with over 45 youth constructing the roadway. The workers focused on removing tons of rock to make a 50-ft. cut on the south side of the hill, which was described as being in the area that was once the first road into Manhattan (“Want a bird’s eye view?”). The plan was to reduce the hill’s steep grade from 20% to a more manageable 12-14%. As a co-sponsor of the project, the city provided two teams of horses, two men, and two scrapers to help move the project along (“Scenic drive near city”).

As the months passed and the project progressed, NYA youth quarried 2,513 perch of rock from the roadbed, removed over 33,000



Top, the park at the top of Bluemont Hill. Middle, a section of the drive where workers made a 50-ft. cut in the side of the hill to accommodate the road. Bottom, the view from the top of the hill.

cubic yards of dirt, and constructed two stone retaining walls at the base of the hill (“Want a bird’s eye view?”). The youth encountered 50 snakes as they worked, which were captured and given to K-State’s zoology department (“Miscellaneous”). NYA workers also cut several acres of marijuana, although it’s unclear whether any was removed as part of the scenic drive project or occurred elsewhere in Manhattan (“Local NYA units

observe”).

At the top of the hill, the area was developed into a park for picnickers and motorists wanting to enjoy the panoramic view, which was 200 ft. above the city. In addition to the spectacular view, the park featured picnic tables and fireplaces, a circle drive, and ample parking (“Want a bird’s eye view?”).

After approximately 18 months of work, the project was finally completed in July 1941. In total, the NYA spent \$8,947 and the city contributed \$4,000 toward the road work, which involved over 30,000 hours of labor. On average, each youth worked 66 hrs./mo. across the 18 months of the project. The NYA program provided the youth with a job when many would have been otherwise unemployed; provided a monthly paycheck, which allowed them to pay for necessities and schooling expenses; and taught them valuable skills to help with future employment. As a result of the training received through the NYA program, a news article noted many of the youth went on to find work locally as well as work with construction projects at Fort Riley (“Want a bird’s eye view?”).

Plans were made to celebrate the project’s completion with a dedication ceremony to be held on July 24, 1941, at the top of the hill. Anne Laughlin, who was the administrator of Kansas’ NYA program, provided remarks. Fred R. Smith, who was the Riley County Historical Society’s president, shared information about Manhattan’s early days. The Manhattan Municipal Band performed its weekly concert atop the hill, and temporary lighting was installed for the occasion. It was estimated that 1,800 people attended the dedication (“Many attend”).

The new road was christened (continued on p. 6)

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“Bluemont Scenic Drive,” and an item in *The Morning Chronicle* provided a seemingly fitting description of the completed drive: “Cut deep into the hillside, the road brings first a glimpse of trees and rock silhouetted against an awe-inspiring background of sky. Then, a wide turn brings one to the top of Manhattan’s ‘world,’ and the sight of the city of trees and homes spread across its lovely valley . . . The NYA, which constructed the drive, and the local officials who cooperated, have given Manhattanites and their neighbors an addition to the city which enriches it greatly” (“Beautiful scenic drive”). Beyond the picturesque drive and spectacular view, the road also created access to that section of Manhattan and opened the possibility of developing it for residential use.

By 1943, the NYA program had come to a close in Manhattan and

Riley County, and nationally, the NYA program officially ended on Jan. 1, 1944. The U. S. was involved in World War II by then, and it was easier for workers to find jobs in support of the war effort, lessening the need for the government program.

Today, the drive, the park, and the overlook are still popular spots for residents and visitors to enjoy a winding drive, a picnic, a sunrise or sunset, or a stroll to the “Manhattan” letters on the side of the hill established by the Kiwanis Club in 1927. Though the NYA ended 80 years ago, its legacy lives on with Bluemont Scenic Drive. While enjoying a picnic or sunset on Bluemont Hill, Manhattan residents can marvel at and appreciate the hard work and hand labor that went into constructing the road and park so many decades ago by local older teens and young adults working with the NYA.

“Beautiful scenic drive.” *The Morning Chronicle*. 27 July 1941: 8.

“Fifty youths work to make scenic drive and park on Bluemont Hill.” *The Manhattan Mercury*. 28 March 1940: 6.

“Local NYA units observe five years of building.” *The Morning Chronicle*. 21 July 1940: 7.

“Many attend the dedication.” *The Manhattan Mercury*. 25 July 1941: 1.

“Miscellaneous.” *The Manhattan Mercury*. 28 March 1940: 1.

Rosin, Elizabeth. *New Deal-era Resources of Kansas*. National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2002. Kansas.

“Scenic drive near city will open in the near future.” *The Morning Chronicle*. 21 July 1940: 32.

“A scenic drive up Bluemont.” *The Morning Chronicle*. 12 December 1939: 1.

Spencer, Brenda. *Bluemont Youth Cabin*. National Register of Historic Places, 2014. Manhattan, Riley County, KS.

“Want a bird’s eye view? Take new Bluemont Drive.” *The Morning Chronicle*. 13 July 1941: 12.

“Weather doesn’t stop NYA workers on scenic drive.” *The Manhattan Mercury*. 13 January 1940.

Genealogy and History Fair

After skipping 2021 due to the pandemic, the biannual Genealogy and History Fair is back! The Fair is sponsored by the M/RCPA, the Riley County Historical Museum, and the Riley County Genealogical Society. Details below.

Saturday, August 19, 2023, 10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Location: Pottorf Hall, CiCo Park, Manhattan, at Kimball & Wreath Avenues

- **Information Tables:** Genealogical & historical societies, museums, libraries, historical & preservation organizations, and others will share information about their organizations.
- **Kids’ Corner:** Activities for children of all ages to engage and learn about history, genealogy, and preservation will be available.
- **Personal Family & History Projects**
 - Family stories
 - Quilts and memorabilia
 - Record preservation, including Kansas history
 - Family food history – family recipes & stories
 - Family albums & photos
- **Classroom Presentations** on genealogical and historical topics. Details to be posted at www.rileycgs.com

For more information and to submit registration forms for information tables and exhibit entries, visit the RCGS web site at <http://www.rileycgs.com/> or call RCGS Library at 785-565-6495.

Open to the public & free to attend.

Historic Conservatory Demolished

Kansas State University's historic conservatory completed in 1909 was demolished in May as part of a plan to reduce the deferred maintenance backlog, focus resources on a smaller footprint, and improve space utilization of existing buildings.

Unstable glass panels containing asbestos were cited as part of the reason for demolition. Demolition was estimated to cost \$350,000, and no information was provided about what it would have cost to renovate.



Top, the conservatory in 2022. Bottom, demolition in progress in May 2023.

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The Board of Directors meets the third Thursday of the month via Zoom. Members are welcome to participate in board meetings. Contact the M/RCPA if you would like to participate in a board meeting.

Newsletter editor: Kathy Dzewaltowski

Beyond Tomorrow Downtown Plan

Written by Kathy Dzewaltowski

The Downtown Tomorrow Plan was a planning initiative adopted in 2000 to develop principles and design guidelines for downtown, plans for redevelopment, and to identify other opportunities for the downtown area. More than 20 years have passed since the plan was adopted, and the city is currently working on an updated planning document known as the Beyond Tomorrow Downtown Plan.

The general goal of the new plan is to create an overall vision for downtown for the next 10-20 years with themes of improving land utilization, considering riverfront development, improving integration of the Manhattan Town Center Mall into downtown, maintaining streetscape and pedestrian friendly development, capitalizing on culture-defining places, and creating an environment that will allow businesses to thrive.

A steering committee and a technical committee began meeting in December 2022, and the City Commission has been receiving quarterly updates, with the most recent occurring during a work session on May 9.

Plan development had entered the community outreach phase, which included a community survey, a downtown business owner survey, and the start of stakeholder meetings. Commissioners were provided with information about the survey results completed by 1,400 residents and 49 business owners.

Survey respondents wanted to see continued investment in downtown. Two areas identified as having the most potential for development included the area east of the mall and the southwest edge of downtown along Ft. Riley Boulevard. Responses noted a lack of housing in the downtown area, and as the plan moves forward, developers will be engaged to discuss the

potential for investing in various types of housing. Respondents also noted a potential to extend existing landscape along Poyntz Avenue to the side streets to improve those streetscapes and make the area safer and more attractive. The surveys provided valuable feedback and direction about transportation in terms of how people access downtown, increasing walkability and bike safety, and the use of public transportation.

The historic core was described as an important downtown component. Maintaining the historic core will be examined and how it could be leveraged in terms of tax credits and other financial benefits as well as how it adds energy and excitement to downtown. As the plan develops, the role of newer structures built mid-century will be considered when it comes to helping to meet housing and retail demands.

Commissioner Linda Morse commented on the historic aspects of downtown, specifically its aesthetics and her desire to maintain its historic nature. She mentioned recent developments in Aggieville and noted that its historic area had been defined as limited to Moro Street. She didn't want to see downtown's historic core limited to Poyntz Avenue because there are numerous historic buildings on downtown side streets. Morse said, "I would like for us to respect the historic nature of downtown and not have glass buildings and metal buildings and keep the integrity of our limestone as a theme as best we can. I like the brick of Aggieville and the limestone in the downtown area as a kind of separation."

As the community engagement phase continues, the M/RCPA is listed as one of the stakeholder groups to be contacted as part of the the plan's development.

Commissioners will receive a third quarterly update, and then a draft of the Beyond Tomorrow Downtown Plan will be presented the end of 2023 or early 2024.

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2023 M/RCPA Membership Roster

\$35 Historic Level

Barbara G. Anderson, Steven Brewer, Charlene Brownson, Randi Dale, Mike & Jan Danenberg, Nancy Danner, David & Jana Fallin, Wanda Fateley, Richard Harris, Katharine Hensler, Lisa Caitlin Highsmith, Melanie Highsmith, Kent Kellams, Phillip & Camille Korenek, Melissa Janulis, Steve Lee & Nancy Raleigh, Dawn Munger, Bill Pallett, Allana Parker, Jerry & Martha Powell, Gloria Juhl Raney, Roger & Virginia Reitz, Linda Rice, Lauren Ritterbush, Tom & Karen Roberts, Charlie & Sharlin Sargent, Alicia Stott, Catherine Tremblay, Ronald E. Wells, Ron & Dixie West, Nancy B. Williams, Judith Willingham

\$100 Preservation Level

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\$125 Corporate Preservation

Colene Lind & Rex Fowles, Bruce McMillan AIA Architects PA

\$250 Landmark Level

David & Kathy Dzewaltowski, Larry & Linda Glasgow, Rick & Judy Glowiak, Mark & Ann Knackendoffel, Barbara Poresky, Kevin West & Alyn Pennington West/SNW Gallery and Custom Frames

Honorary Lifetime Members

Mel Borst, Enell Foerster (in memory of Bernd Foerster)