

**The beginnings...**

**THE COLLE OPERA HOUSE  
AND THE SHEA THEATER  
*Turners Falls, Massachusetts***

**Royal D. Colle**

**2018**

**Plaque at the Opera House**

For digital copies of this document contact:

Royal D. Colle  
121 Pine Tree Road  
New York 14850  
[rdc4@cornell.edu](mailto:rdc4@cornell.edu)

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# **THE COLLE OPERA HOUSE AND THE SHEA THEATER**

## **Turners Falls, Massachusetts**

### CONTENTS

Foreword	
.....1	Beginnings: The Colle Opera House and the Shea Theater .....,.....
	The Colle Opera House is Born in Downtown Turners Falls .....,.....3
	The Fred Colle Era.....9
	The Maturing of Turners Fall.....15
	The Passing of Fred Colle's Opera House Torch.....18
	Films at the Opera House.....21
	The Shea Era .....,.....25
	A New and Different Life for the Colle Opera House and the Shea Theater.....28
	From the Pits to Recovery – Sort of.....34
	Last Call or Curtain Call for the Colle Opera House?.....39
	A Different Kind of Show at the Opera House.....47
	Footnote About the Colles .....,.....53
	The Colle Opera House Ownership at a Glance.....55
	Contributors to the History.....56
	Acknowledgments.....57

### **Foreword**

The cover of this small publication shows a picture of a poster that was produced in 2005 by the Massachusetts Historical Commission's Preservation Awards Program. The Program works to protect

historic assets of the State. The award to the Colle Opera House marked a major step on the journey from its exciting opening in 1874 through stormy efforts to demolish the structure, and then vigorous steps to preserve its architectural landmark distinction in downtown Turners Falls. Now in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it stands with the Shea Theater as a vital piece of the dramatic renewal of this community and its River Culture on the banks of the Connecticut River.

We started this journey quite innocently — collecting genealogical information on my ancestors, the Colles in Turners Falls and the Cooks of North Adams and northwestern Massachusetts. As we worked on this genealogic story (which appears in another document), we encountered the Colle Opera House and were compelled to follow that story along with the family stories because they were so intricately intertwined. We had many questions and got many answers. But some questions remain unanswered. For example what happened to the three ornate chandeliers that once hung in the Opera House. Our appeal in the local newspaper uncovered no clues. Perhaps someday a revision of this document will contain the answer!

It is a real thrill to see what is happening in this decade at the Colle Opera House and the Shea Theater — and at other places in Turners Falls such as the Great Falls Discovery Center that attracts people to explore exhibits showing the natural, cultural, and industrial history of the Connecticut River watershed.

We hope you enjoy and learn from this excursion into the past of Turners Falls and the story of its dramatic landmarks.



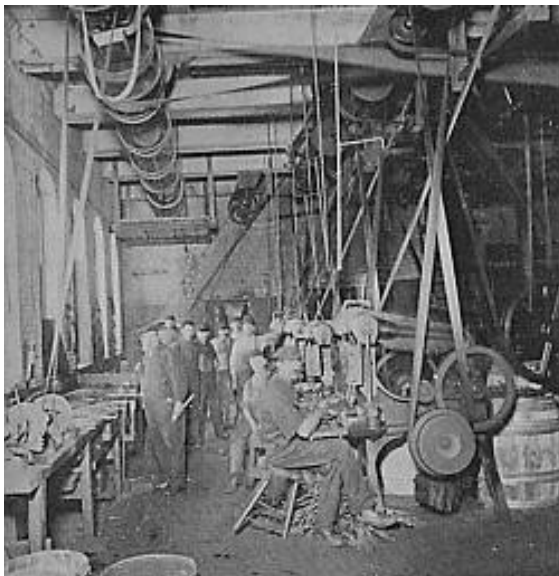
## BEGINNINGS: THE COLLE OPERA HOUSE AND THE SHEA THEATER TURNERS FALLS, MASSACHUSETTS

Many people have been identified with the history of Turners Falls. Among these is the Colle family whose earliest members — Frederick and Marie Colle — left Germany and arrived in nearby Deerfield in the middle of the 1800s — in fact, before neighboring Turners Falls was laid out by Alvah Crocker and the Turners Falls Company. This is the story of the interlocking histories of Turners Falls, the Colle family, the Colle Opera House, and the Shea Theater. Surrounding this is a sketch of the dramatic story about a community that coasted through 250 years of fortune and misfortune to become a glittering part of the northwest Massachusetts landscape in the first decade of the 21st century.

### The early background circa 1850-1870

We guess about some of the beginnings of the genealogy and the Colles' decision to leave the area now known as Germany and to build the Colle Opera House in Turners Falls. Further research in Germany may ultimately close this gap in the history. Meanwhile, we think the Colle story might have begun with Frederick Colle emigrating from Germany about 1850 to take a job in the John Russell Cutlery Company.

A few words about cutlery in Franklin County. After having made his fortune in the cotton industry, John Russell, at age 37, turned his energies to the manufacturing of quality cutlery. He built his water-powered factory on the banks of the Green River near Greenfield, Massachusetts. His first products — chisels and axe heads — were made from fine English steel of the type normally reserved for tableware. The Green River operation expanded its line to include knives — using only the finest materials. By paying much higher wages than English cutlers, Russell was able to attract skilled European craftsmen to his factory. With all the manufacturing operations consolidated under one roof, these skilled craftsmen were able to produce large quantities of high quality hunting knives to supply the needs of America's western frontier. The Russell enterprise was the leading edge of industrialization in Franklin County.



Cutlery people in Massachusetts made aggressive recruiting efforts to attract people from the states of Hessen, Baden and other nearby states in Germany.<sup>1</sup> John Russell founded his Green River Works in Deerfield on March 1, 1834 and our first record of Frederick and Marie (later to be Mary) Colle in America is Frederick arriving on August 21, 1852 in New York via the ship C. Jerome under the name "Kalle." According to his later Civil War military records, he was a "turner" which today might be equivalent to a machinist. Subsequently, in 1853 with the name Kalle transformed into Colle, Frederick purchased property in Deerfield on Petty Plain Road (176/216).<sup>2</sup> We suspect he may have been employed in the Russell enterprise because his home was near the Russell operations.

Meanwhile, there were stirrings in nearby Turners Falls. The village of Turners Falls — in the Town of Montague, Franklin County — had been settled around 1770. But it was almost a hundred years later that

William Crocker and Charles W. Hazelton started laying out streets on land originally acquired by Alvah Crocker and the Turners Falls Company. In 1868 they laid out Turners Falls as a planned industrial community. An internet on-line virtual tour relates the story:<sup>3</sup> Crocker, a prominent man from Fitchburg, envisioned harnessing the immense power of the area's waterfalls to establish a new prosperous city.

1 This account is based on <http://www.dexter-russell.com/History.asp>

2 Numbers appearing in parentheses refer to deeds and other documents filed in the Franklin County Deeds Office in Greenfield. The first number refers to the book number; the second is the page on which the document appears.

3 The tour is available at [http://www.montague.net/content/vtour/t\\_falls.html](http://www.montague.net/content/vtour/t_falls.html)

Perhaps Crocker was influenced by other earlier and successful experiments in Lowell and elsewhere. Crocker's vision for Turners Falls was to attract industry to the town by offering cheap hydropower that was made possible by the harnessing of the Connecticut River through the construction of a dam and canal. His development concept was to sell mill sites to companies along the power canal, and to sell individual building lots for homes to mill workers who would come to work in the mills. The rest of the village was laid out in a horizontal grid pattern with the main avenues labeled with letters of the alphabet and the cross streets labeled numerically. Avenue A, the main thoroughfare for the commercial district, was designed as a grand 100 foot wide, tree-lined avenue that became the backbone of the Turners Falls downtown. It would later be the home for the Colle Opera House and the Shea Theater.

Frederick and Ana Marie Colle entered the picture in the middle 1800s. As noted earlier, in 1853 they settled in Deerfield after having emigrated from Germany. Frederick purchased the property on Petty Plain Road, not far from the "lower Bridge across Green River." (231/121) When the Colles negotiated the deed for this property, the deed documents list Frederick and Ana Marie as living in Greenfield, perhaps their earlier homesite. The 1880 Federal Census puts them and the Petty Plain house unambiguously in Deerfield. For more than a century there were local disputes about the Deerfield-Greenfield boundary, and Petty Plain Road was in that disputed area. By the end of the century, the communities settled the dispute and the old Colle homestead on Petty Plain Road was officially located in Greenfield. At the time that Marie sold the property in 1882 — after Frederick's death in 1875 — Marie moved to 7 Mill Street in Greenfield.

Crocker's enterprise in Turners Falls and the Colles settling in Franklin County need to be seen in the context of some major international circumstances in the 1800s. Frederick was born in Braunschweig in 1822, and his father — also named Frederick — was also born in Germany, probably in the same locale. Marie (the Ana later disappeared from her name) was born in 1821 in Schwalheim. Frederick and Marie became part of a strong immigration wave that trailed from several German states to various parts of the United States in the 1800s. The German migration — the push from those independent areas that were to become Germany and the inviting pull from Franklin County — resulted from a convergence of social, economic and political forces. The German Information Center USA described the "push" part of German emigration in the mid-19th century:

The pursuit of religious freedom and economic hardship remained the major drivers of transatlantic migration. But now, political factors played an increasingly important role in the 19th century. After the post-Napoleonic government persecuted liberals and democrats, politically-motivated emigration surfaced. In Germany, the effects of the 1848 revolution could be felt in all parts of the country. But most emigrants came from Baden, Hessen, Rhineland, Württemberg, and Alsace-Lorraine which is now part of France.

In contrast to earlier immigrants who were mostly farmers, tradesmen and craftsmen, the "48ers" were well educated. A large number of them were doctors, teachers, lawyers, editors, artists and musicians. A German-American cultural renaissance began.

The power of word-of-mouth inspired the greatest motivation for German settlers. It was the firsthand account of friends and family members who found a better life in the United States. Land was easy to come by, and the German community was firmly established.

From 1825 to 1861, approximately 10,000 people left Germany each year with a peak of about 220,000 in 1854. By 1860 an estimated 1.3 million German-born immigrants resided in the United States. About 2.5 million German-Americans joined the military and fought in the Civil War. Many of them joined to make a living or to gain U.S. citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

The pull from Franklin County included cheap land and the emerging industrialization represented by the John Russell Cutlery Company in Deerfield — situated close to where the Colles lived (on Petty Plain Road) — and other companies needing skilled people. Many such skilled people were eager to emigrate from various European communities.

In 1861 another major situation enters our story. The outbreak of the Civil War in America drew many volunteers from Franklin County and one of these was Frederick Colle. Data from a deed (231/121) in the Greenfield Courthouse indicate that Frederick "sold" the Deerfield land to Marie in 1861 — possibly because he was joining the North's military forces. Frederick's tombstone in Greenfield's Green River

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4 <http://germanoriginality.com/heritage/1800s.php>)

Cemetery indicates that he served in Company A of the 10th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, although a search of the roster of that Company in various official sources does not list a Colle. Company A of the 10th Regiment had been organized from Shutesbury in Franklin County. However, the *Greenfield Gazette, Centennial Edition, 1792-1892* included histories of villages in the area in which the various authors listed the men who joined the military forces from their communities. Deerfield's entry included Frederick Colle on its list (p. 89). Documents from the Massachusetts National Guard Museum Archives confirm Frederick's enlistment in 1861 at age 39 and his release in February 1863 for "chronic diarrhea" after fighting in the Washington, Delaware and Virginia areas

During those early years in Deerfield, three children were born to the couple: Fred in 1853, Charles in 1858, and Amelia in 1860. Ellen (1952) was probably born prior to Mary's departure from Germany. Mary showed entrepreneurial spirit in 1866 by purchasing property in Greenfield at 7 Mill Street — now numbered 11 Mill Street (255/145) — where she managed a boarding house through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, major economic changes were taking place in the area, and the Colles soon became a part of that transformation. An internet web page notes what was happening.

Although Turners Falls never quite experienced the scale of development initially envisioned by Crocker, the village did grow significantly, and prospered well into the twentieth century. The importance of hydropower to this development was apparent in one industrial promotion, prepared by the Turners Falls Board of Trade, which referred to Turners Falls as the home of the white coal. [This obviously referred to the power from the flowing white river.] During the period 1868 - 1897, several mills were attracted to the cheap power available at Turners Falls. The most notable among them was the John Russell Cutlery Company (1868), then the largest cutlery company in America. Best known for its production of the Bowie Knife which achieved notoriety on the American frontier, the Cutlery employed 1,200 people at its height. Other industries that figured prominently in the early development of Turners Falls were Montague Paper (1871), Keith Paper (1871), Turners Falls Paper (1897), Marshall Paper (1895), the Turners Falls Cotton Mill (1874)<sup>5</sup> and Turners Falls Power Company (1885), [the latter being] the forerunner of Western Massachusetts Electric Company and Northeast Utilities. This development was fueled by a flood of immigrants, primarily Irish, French Canadian, Polish and German....As the endpoint of log drives down the Connecticut River, Turners Falls also earned notoriety as a frontier town, where lumbermen celebrated the end of long log drives drinking and brawling at one of the many taverns and bars.<sup>6</sup>

Several items in the *Turners Fall Reporter* captured some of the spirit of the times.<sup>7</sup>

Lumber on the river

May 11, 1881 Vol. X, No.19

The drive of about 35,000,000 feet of logs has begun and reached here on Saturday. The Turners Falls Lumber Company, for their mill, will take about three million feet. They will take about 2,000,000 feet from the next portion of the drive.

On liquor in Turners Falls

May 11, 1881 Vol. X, No.19

The Montague City correspondent of the *Gazette* says that \$80,000 are annually spent for liquor in this town. The statement is made without any knowledge whatever of the facts. One third of that sum more than covers the outlay for liquor, as can be verified by ascertaining the number of barrels brought to town.

It does no good to tell a big story for effect. This town, the most populous in the county, doesn't drink so much liquor as Greenfield, and we will defy any man to show us a more orderly manufacturing town in the state than

5 The Griswold Cotton Mill at Turners Falls.

6 [http://www.montague.net/content/vt\\_our/t\\_falls.html](http://www.montague.net/content/vt_our/t_falls.html)

7 These and many of the other items from the *Turners Falls Reporter* are from the fine collection compiled by Ed Gregory for the period 2015-2017.

Turners Falls. We have no rows, no man has ever been injured in a drunken brawl here, and we support eight churches. For pity sake don't misstate when the truth is more favorable to us.

### THE COLLE OPERA HOUSE IS BORN IN DOWNTOWN TURNERS FALLS

The late 19th century also saw growth and change in "downtown" Turners Falls, where commercial enterprises, as well as entertainment and social institutions, were emerging. The June 24, 1874 issue of the *Turners Falls Reporter* captured some of the spirit of the time.

-We hear it asserted that there is nothing "going on" here this year. Let us see:— J.P. Morgan has built a new barn and outbuildings worth \$1,000; Campbell & Hazelton are building a brick block worth \$8,000, the town is erecting a school house worth \$14,000. Thomas Kelly is pushing to completion his building, worth \$7,500. Mr. [Colle] has nearly completed his block, cost \$26,000. Frank Crouchier has built a house, \$1,500. Frank Gerald is putting in a foundation for a \$2,700 house. Father Quaille has completed his residence, worth \$6,000. T.F. Harrington has added an L and otherwise improved his place \$1,000 worth. C.H. Tyler has moved into his new \$2,500 cottage. A.P. Richardson is finishing a \$2,500 house. Potter & Dibble have just completed their warehouse. Lewis & Barrett are remodeling the old Kidder store and place on Fourth Street, and [Mous.] Bruno has just commenced the erection of a residence. The German Methodists are preparing to build their church estimated at \$1,000. The town is building new roads and streets, and a county bridge on Prospect Street. Mr. Griswold has completed one of the largest foundations in the county and his brickyard is running to its utmost capacity. All the mills are running full time with full help, and yet we hear it said that nothing is being done here this season. The growth is natural and healthy, and more is in store for us. Be patient.

In fact, the action began several years earlier than that issue of the newspaper. In 1868 the first lands in the future Turners Falls had been auctioned off and commercial buildings were erected by individual businessmen during the 1870s and 1880s. These consisted largely of three and four story brick buildings with storefront entrances at street level and professional offices and tradesmen housed on the upper floors. On July 23, 1872, Marie and Frederick Colle took title to a piece of land 60 x 110 feet on the corner of Avenue A and Third Street, with Marie purchasing it from the Turners Falls Company for \$1650 (275/295). On it they built the Colle Opera House in 1874 which, according to one Franklin town official, was to become "the lynchpin for the revitalization of Turners Falls in the early 21st century."<sup>8</sup> Mary also bought land adjacent to this plot running another 50 feet north along Avenue A. This was to remain vacant until a significant event took place some 50 years later — the coming of an entrepreneur named Shea and the construction of the Shea Theater.

Here is the story of the beginnings of the Colle Opera House as told by the *Turners Falls Reporter*. The items were collected by Ed Gregory.

September 17 [1873]

-Work has been commenced by M. Sullivan on the foundation of a four story block to be 48 x 50 feet, on the corner of Avenue A and Third street. It is being built for Mr. D. F. of Greenfield.

September 24

-The large building going up here belongs to Mr. F. , not D. F. as some of the papers have it. D. F. is not putting up any house here. We cheerfully correct the error.

October 15

-George O. Peabody has been awarded the contract for the erection of the Block on Avenue A and Third St. Sufficient guarantee in itself of the excellence of what that fine building is to be.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Frank Abbondanzio in 2008.

October 22

-John E. Short, with a number of workmen, commenced laying brick for the building this morning.

November 26

-The snow storm has retarded the building of the Block. The walls are above the first story, and front presents a fine appearance.

December 10

-Geo. O. Peabody is doing a good thing for the place in pushing the building of the Block along this winter, while the times are hard.

1874

January 7

-Work in the Block has been resumed, and will be pressed with vigor. The happiest man in town Monday morning was Geo. O. Peabody, the contractor, when he found the snow all out of his way and his large force able to resume operations.

January 21

-Fred [Colle] is billed for a drug store in his father's new block, as soon as it is finished.

March 18

-The building progresses. Plastering will be begun about the first of April. They are now putting the windows in. The hall will be finished first—the floors of which are to be of Georgia Pine, and will be laid double.

April 29

- building is undergoing the process of plastering.

May 27

-Workmen continued the preparation of the sidewalk in front of Block yesterday. Mr. Peabody expects to complete his contract within two weeks.

June 17

-The dedication of Hall next Wednesday is going to be a nice affair.

June 24

- Hall will be dedicated Wednesday evening, June 24, with a ball. The music will be the Greenfield Amateur Orchestra, William Wunsch, Conductor, the best in the County. Tickets one dollar and a half. Seats in the gallery will cost only twenty-five cents.

In these early days, the *Turners Falls Reporter* stories referred to the building as the Hall and sometimes as the Block. At the time that the structure was built, the main part of the building was often known as Colle Hall, and this plus the various store facilities altogether were for many years referred to as the Block. A *Turners Falls Reporter* story on October 15, 1873 indicated that George O. Peabody had been awarded "the contract for erection of the Block on Avenue A and Third St. Guarantee in itself of the excellence of what that fine building is to be." It was in 1884 that the *Reporter* wrote that "Fred Colle [Frederick's son] has decided to convert his fine hall into an opera house surpassing anything of the kind in the country towns of Massachusetts."

A brief sidelight. Because they were examples of late 19th century architecture, the Opera House and the other classic buildings around Avenue A were to survive as part of the Turners Falls Historic District and they were placed on the National Historic Register a century later (1982). This National Register of Historic Places is the Federal Government's official list of the Nation's historic places "worthy of preservation." The National Register is administered by the National Park Service, which is part of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

We return to 1874. The brick structure began going up soon after Marie and Frederick Colle purchased the land. The building cost \$22,000. According to historic records, the entrance was a large stairway on Avenue A that led to a landing. When it was built, the Colle Opera House had three stories and a basement. The hall (46x74) which occupied the second floor had 18 foot studding, giving height for a third floor. The hall was lighted by 25 large windows, the upper row of windows being double height because they served two levels. Designed by the building's architect C.E. Gardner in Springfield, it boasted its own waterworks, filling the space over the "wash-closets", and consisting of a tank capable of holding 20 barrels of water supplied by a force pump. The building had three stores on the ground floor, two facing Avenue A, and one facing Third Street. Later renovations made the Opera House the first public hall in the vicinity to have a sloping parquet floor.<sup>9</sup>

The Opera House opened its doors that year as a vaudeville theater, seating 1,000 people. The June 17, 1874 *Reporter* said briefly: "The dedication of Hall next Wednesday is going to be a nice affair." The opening featured a program with a 16-piece orchestra and a night of celebration. Note that at this time, the property was referred to as the Hall and the Block, not the Opera House — which was to be the later designation. Ed Gregory found the following news item in the *Turners Falls Reporter* dated Wednesday, July 1, 1874, Volume III, Number 26.

#### Colle Building and Hall

The dedication of Colle Hall last Wednesday evening was a very fine affair, and was enjoyed by all who had the good fortune to be present. An extra train from Greenfield brought a large party. The Greenfield Amateur Orchestra, sixteen pieces, William Wunsch, director, furnished excellent music, and the floor of the splendid hall was covered with gay devotees of Terpsichore, while a goodly number of spectators admired the scene from the gallery.

At 12 o'clock supper was announced, and we [would be mistaken] if it was not a pleasant surprise to all. In the large stores below, just finished and not occupied, the arrangements had been made. Plates for over 140 couples had been laid, and a bountiful supper provided. Besides this, a private room was prepared, where the band were entertained. Mrs. Colle certainly deserves credit for her management of this portion of the entertainment. Everything was so arranged that no more confusion occurred than if it were a common home tea party.

After supper the dancers resumed their task, and early morning found them struggling with the closing figures of a twenty-four hour order.

The Building, which stands on the corner of Avenue A and Third Street, is the finest block in town, the Farren House excepted. It is three stories and basement, with a front elevation of 42 feet, and the ground plan is 48x90 feet.

The building is divided into a hall with ante-rooms, two suites of rooms for offices, two tenements, two ground stores, and two basement stores. The hall is 46x74 feet, with 18 foot standing, lighted by twenty-five large windows, and has a seating capacity of 1000; there are ante rooms on either side landing at the end of the stairs, for ladies and gents' rooms, each room is 16c19 feet, over which is a gallery a16x46 feet.

The large hall is lighted by five large chandeliers—one in the centre and the other four properly disposed at fitting distance from each corner.

On the middle floor are two suites of rooms for offices facing Avenue A, and two tenements, and the water works. These last are quite an item of interest, by the way, and the invention of the builder. A tank capable of holding twenty barrels, supplied by a force pump, fills the space over the wash-closets, which are situated at the extreme end of the building. The arrangement is absolutely complete. The walls on this floor are 12-foot studding. The ground floor is given up to three fine stores, two on Avenue A and one on Third Street.

The stores on Avenue A are 19x65 feet and studs 13 feet; the one on Third Street 26x40, and studs 14 feet. Beneath these are two finished basements. The front one is 19x65 feet, and is occupied by Mr. Phillip Jacobus, who has fitted it up with much taste, and has a metropolitan air about it; the other is 20x46 feet, and is not let.

Around the building is a brick pavement, 12 feet wide in front and 10 feet on the street side. Large cellars for the stores and tenements fill the space under the north store.

The entrance to Colle Hall is from the Avenue Centre of the building, by a splendid broad stairway—6 feet wide—to the landing on the second floor, where it widens to 10 feet, with passage to the stairs where it leads to the hall above. The finish is black walnut, carved.

In the large hall there is to be immediately erected a twenty-four foot extension stage. The walls are handsomely tinted and bordered, and the stucco work of the ceiling is chaste.

We are opposed to fulsome praise, but certainly cannot help saying that Mr. George A. Peabody, the contractor,

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<sup>9</sup> J. A. Taggart, "Historical Notes," *Turners Falls Herald*, April 16, 1941.

has reason to be proud of this block. It is a credit to him, he has done it ample justice, and we owe him much for his liberal use of his influence to secure its direction at this time. He contracted for the building, has used care and judgment in submitting his contracts, and faithfully executed his bond as builder.

The wood work was done under Mr. Peabody's immediate supervision; the masonry by Mr. John Short; the painting by Bartlett Brothers; the plastering by Campbell & Hazelton; and the tinning, etc., by D.S. Kidder. G.E. Gardner, Esq., of Springfield, was the architect. The building cost \$22,000, and is a great addition to our town.

A supplement to the *Recorder-Gazette* (June 24, 1954) celebrating Montague's 200th anniversary also painted the scene on opening day.

A special train with every seat taken and the aisles jammed clickety-clacked over the rails from Greenfield to Turners Falls on June 24, 1874 to attend the gala dedication of the Colle Opera House...Feature of the opening night was a concert by the 16-piece Greenfield Amateur Orchestra. Fred [Frederick] Colle, owner of the hall, had spared no expense to bring to Turners Falls, at the time a rapidly growing community, the finest entertainment place in the county.

Initially the Opera House featured vaudevillian theater. The Colles brought a diversity of entertainment to the community including acrobats, burlesque, comedians, "animal shows," minstrels, and melodrama. Also the community used the Opera House for a variety of events as documented in the *Reporter's* pages during the next few months. And during succeeding months and years, there was a steady flow of commerce in the Block including dry goods and millenary stores, pharmacies, and grocery shops. The *Turners Falls Reporter* captured the dynamics of the early months in a series of items in the newspaper in mid-1874.

**July 8-** Hall to-night has a free promenade concert and variety entertainment. Come, you will be welcome.

**July 29-** Social hop at Hall next Saturday evening. Greenfield Quadrille Band and John Putnam.

**August 12-** C.R. Stoughton & Co. have rented one of the stores in the Block.

**September 2-** Mrs. N.B. Hall has rented one of the front rooms in the building, where she will continue the millinery business.

-The "social hop" at Hall, Saturday evening was a pleasant affair. About forty couples were present, everything passed off smoothly.

**September 16-** Three new hitching posts were yesterday placed in position before the building by Mr. Philip Jacobus.

-The C.L.A. have a social dance at Hall on Saturday evening. Washington's Last Sensation," better known as the "Great Moral Show," will put in an appearance on Monday evening next, at Hall.

**November 11-** Our enterprising fellow-townsmen, Mr. Maurice O'Donnell, is taking up more commodious quarters in the Block.

**November 18-**A concert and ball will be given by the Montague City Cornet Band, this evening in Hall.

There was a serious side too. According to the *Gazette and Courier* newspaper, local officials voted on March 27, 1875 to put a library in the Colle Block. The May 26, 1974 *Reporter* testifies to its activity:

The library will be opened for the distribution of books next Saturday evening at 6 1-2 o'clock. The room is in the second story of Block. The librarian will be there every Saturday evening from 6 1-2 to 8 1-2 o'clock, hereafter.

The activities in the Colle Block drew people from neighboring communities. The December 1, 1875 *Reporter* noted that "An omnibus runs from Greenfield to Turners Falls this evening to carry people to hear Bishop Havens lecture on 'Mothers' at the Hall."

In January 1874, before the dedication of the Hall/ Block took place, the *Gazette and Courier* newspaper indicated that "Frederick Colle of Greenfield intends opening a drug store in Colle's new block as soon as completed." However, Frederick was only on the scene briefly for he died in 1875 at the age

of 53. Frederick was buried in Greenfield's Green River Cemetery. But son Fred was to open a drug store there later.

However, the show went on, with Mary (formerly Marie) Colle continuing ownership and operation of the Opera House property for the next five years — while running the guest house in Greenfield on Mill Street. A newspaper carried a story about the first anniversary of the Opera House dedication.

From the *Turners Falls Reporter*, June 16, 1875:

-Mrs. [Colle] will give a grand ball in her hall on the evening of the 28th—the first anniversary of the dedication. The tickets will be fifty cents. -If the railroad passes through her place in Greenfield, as expected, Mrs. [Colle] will probably move to Turners Falls and build another block or a dwelling house. [We have no evidence that Marie Colle moved from her Greenfield home at 7 Mill Street. The 1880 U.S. Census shows her in Greenfield at the boarding house. However the numbering of the properties in that area had changed by the time we visited so it is unclear if the original structure remains.]

There was plenty of drama in those last years of the 1870s. Here is an unusual part of the story dealing with the Block. The following items are from the *Turners Falls Reporter*, 1878..

January 30 - A ghost has been disturbing the inmates of Block very much of late. The spirit calls on Randall's boarders and makes known its presence by rapping savagely on the head boards of the bedsteads. This is a well authenticated case of spirit rapping, and a party of watchers has been on duty every night for a week. Some of the men living in the block are afraid that the devil is coming after them, and talk of the matter with a seriousness born of fear. The spiritualists are becoming greatly interested in the manifestations.

February 6 -The "ghost" in Block has met the fate of all ghosts. After all the talk, an investigation proved that the cause of all the strange noises in the building was an uncommonly large rat which had a habit of performing between the ceilings in a manner unknown to the common rodent. When Mr. .... succeeded in capturing this mischievous rat, of course the strange noises ceased. And now Randall is happy, and says he never was afraid.

Besides entertainment (and ghosts), the Opera House saw substantial commercial enterprise in the period. Again, from the *Turners Falls Reporter* in 1878:

March 20 -Patrick Laughlin intends opening a grocery store in Mrs. 's block shortly.

-The Turners Falls Cornet Band will give a grand ball at Hall, on Easter Monday, April 2nd.

March 22 -Dr. J.M. Clark, a physician from North Adams, has located in this village, having an office in the Block.

April 10 -Prof. Harrington, the magician holds forth at Hall, Friday night.

May 1 Fred Colle will open a saloon in the basement of his block if licenses are to be had.

May 8 -Dr. Geo. G. Currier has opened a dentist's office in Block.

May 15 -A Northampton man has leased the store in Block lately occupied by M. O'Donnell, and will open with a stock of groceries.

December 11 -W.H.P. Gilmore has his insurance office in the library room, Block. -The stage of Hall has been enlarged for the better accommodation of dramatic companies. -The Turners Falls Dramatic Club will appear on the stage of Hall, for the first time, on Friday and Saturday evenings, 20th and 21st.

December 18 -Whitmore & Clark's well-known minstrels, appear at Hall on Monday evening next. They are quite popular here.

By 1881, a variety of local community organizations found the Opera House to be a hospitable setting for their activities. *The Turners Falls Reporter*, in 1881:

January 12- The Young Ladies' Guild are preparing for an "Antique Festival and Old Fashioned Supper: at Hall, on Wednesday evening, January 26th.

January 19- The Ancient Order of Hibernians will hold their annual ball in Hall on the 16th of next month.

January 2 - Gustav Adolph Lodge, D.O.H., announce that they will give a grand masquerade ball in hall, on Tuesday evening, Feb. 22nd. A costumer from the city will display many costumes in their lodge room the day of the dance.

February 23- The Y.M.C.A. of Turners Falls will hold their third annual ball, in Hall, Monday evening, Feb. 28th.

March 2- The sensational play, "Under the Gaslight," will be performed in Hall, by a New York company, on the 11th.

March 9- The St. Mary's Temperance Society have engaged Hall for Easter Monday evening, when they will give a grand ball.

March 16- The executive committee for the Library Association have decided not to inflict another fair on the people of Turners Falls, this season, but will give a dramatic entertainment and calico dance, in Hall, April 21st, instead

-Knowles & Thompson have leased the store in Block, and have opened a good stock of dry goods, etc. They say they will run their store here entirely independent of Greenfield.

March 23 -Knowles & Thompson have christened their place of business in Block the "Bee-Hive" and they claim to offer the best stock of dress goods ever shown in the village.

April 27 -It will please our readers to know that Baird's, always welcome, New Orleans Minstrels are coming again, and will appear at Hall, Thursday, May 5th.

These activities took place during the reign of Mary Colle. But another Colle was soon to play a major role in the Opera House story. Frederick's pharmacy plan took shape seven years after his death when in 1882 the *Turners Falls Reporter* said that his son Fred, who had studied pharmacy in Germany, announced plans to open a drug store in the Colle property. And Fred was to have a significant impact on the early history of the Opera House.

### **THE FRED COLLE ERA**

With the death of Frederick in 1875, his son Fred at age 22 was now the oldest male in the Colle line. In 1881, Marie turned the Opera House over to Fred who was to manage the place for the next three decades and make it "the chief entertainment center of the village." On March 8, 1882, according to the *Turners Falls Reporter*, Fred became the owner "of the block built by his mother, the price of the transfer being \$12,000." Soon after, the newspaper carried items reflecting Fred's interest in pharmacy which, as you will soon see, had studied a few years earlier in Germany,

March 22 -Fred Colle is fitting up a drug store in his block on the corner of Avenue A and Third Street. He contemplates making it the finest of its kind in the county, with huge plate glass windows, etc.

-Whitmore & Clark's well-known minstrels appear at Hall, on Friday evening next.

May 10 -Fred Colle will on Saturday next open his new drug store in his block on the corner of Avenue A and Third Street. The store has been thoroughly overhauled, cleansed and painted, and when a new plate glass front is added will be one of the finest in the street. The fixtures of the store are made of ash and cherry, the show-cases, scales, etc., being in keeping with the whole store. In the rear of the store is a well fitted up laboratory, 19 by 20 feet, with separate rooms, for acids, oils, herbs, etc. Mr. Colle has engaged the services of a drug clerk with 29 years [of] experience in the leading houses of Boston, and has selected as fine looking a stock of goods as one often sees in a drug store. He says he keeps such of the leading patent medicines as are usually called for, but wants it distinctly understood that he makes no "Injun Bitters". He is putting out his money with the intention of keeping a drug store, pure and simple, and will cater to the better class of trade.

Fred had been born in Greenfield in 1853, probably spending most of those years at the Colle's home on Petty Plain Road. He attended local schools before going to Germany in the late 1870s to study pharmacy. While in Germany he met his cousin Christina (later Dina) Meier — probably in Bad Nauheim

near Frankfurt where Dina appears to have been a teacher of French.<sup>10</sup> She was born in Bad Nauheim in 1860. According to Port of New York records, Fred (age 23) and Dina (age 16) together came to the U. S. on a ship on February 21, 1877. According to the 1880 U. S. Federal census, Fred and Dina had become residents in Marie Colle's guest house at 7 Mill Street in Greenfield.

Circumstances in the Mill Street guest house may have had a long term impact on the Colles in Greenfield. Apparently relations among the occupants did not run smoothly. In 1880, Dina returned to Germany as Fred, remaining in Greenfield, pined for her. In a letter written on September 29, 1880, he expresses his love for Dina and says he wants them to "turn over a new leaf." He says that he played the piano to compensate for being away from her. Fred says that he will go over to Germany and bring her back "next summer" (1881), and promises that they will not have to live in the Greenfield guest house. He indicates that she will live in a home and that "nobody else will come there to sleep." Fred returned to German in late 1880 or early 1881, and he and Dina returned to America on a ship in 1881, docking in New York City. They were married immediately on June 25, 1881 in New York's City Hall. Fred had purchased a house in Turners Falls on High Street ((353/248) and apparently he and Dina lived there for several years before making their home in the Opera House. A series of Turners Falls directories in the middle 1880s listed their residence as being on Avenue A and 3rd Street — the address of the Colle Opera House building. They sold the High Street house in Turners Falls in 1886 (312/37).

### **The Opera House hay days**

Some observers were critical about the development of Turners Falls in the early 1880s. They thought that speculators such as Crocker had concentrated too much on the dam and canal and over-estimated the drawing appeal of Turners Falls, thinking that water power alone would draw industry.<sup>11</sup> But apparently Fred Colle was upbeat about the times. As the *Turners Falls Reporter* noted in its April 30, 1884 issue, Fred decided "to convert his fine hall into an opera house surpassing anything of its kind in the country towns of Massachusetts." The report goes on:

He will take out the upper floor, and put in a balcony extending from the rear well up into the hall and on the sides clear to the stage. The rear of the building will be extended 10 feet to make additional stage room. The main entrance will be on the north side of the building, by broad stairways, and the other side entrance and the front stairs will be used as exits. The hall for dancing will be somewhat smaller but considerably improved. Mr. Colle will begin after the Fourth of July to remodel the building, and it will be finished by the first of September.

By September the work of remodeling the Opera House had been completed. The event was noted by The *Turners Falls Reporter* in its September 10, 1884 issue.

#### **Colle's Opera House.**

The work on remodeling Colle's opera house has been finished, and thus the handsomest little theater in the western part of the state will be opened to the public on Monday evening next, with the play of "Mugg's Landing," a comic drama of merit.

The opera house has now a seating capacity of 900, about equally divided between balcony and parquet. The seats are the celebrated Harwood folding chair, and are attractive as well as comfortable. The building is the design of Architect W. R. Farnsworth, and is very much like the Bijou, in Boston. The floors are of maple. The walls are tinted chocolate, maroon, and orange, while the ceiling is ornamented in dark shades and gold. The proscenium arch is large, and finely proportioned, while the stage, which is 25 feet square, has all modern adjuncts, convenient and ample dressing rooms, etc. The entire building is lighted with gas, and heated by steam.

*The Recorder-Gazette* remembered: "From the date of its dedication until the death of [Fred] Colle in 1913 there trouped across the stage shapely burlesque queens, black-faced comedians and animal shows. There were melodramas and minstrels, including the famous Guy Brothers Minstrels."

<sup>10</sup> Dina was the daughter of Carl Meier (Meyer), Marie (Meier/Meyer) Colle's brother. So Fred and Dina were cousins.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Robert Merriam, David Brown, Richard Davis, and Michael Buerger, *The History of the John Russell Cutlery Company*, Bete Press, Greenfield, 1976.

The flavor of this later period under the management of Fred Colle is captured in another collection of items from the 1882 *Reporter*. Note the variety of events.

**January 4, 1882-** The sixth annual ball of the Alvah Crocker Engine Co. at Hall, on Friday evening, was attended by over 125 couples. Landlord E.V. Foster served a very fine supper at the Farren House. Brown's Brigade Band was excellent.

**January 11-** Fred is raising up a barn near Hall, and fixing it up with four stalls and accommodations for customers.

-Fred is fixing up ways to Hall upon which to hand up show people's baggage.

**January 18-** The Fifth Avenue Comedy Company will appear at Hall on Monday evening, the 26th, in the famous play of "East Lynne."

**January 25-** Dan Kelliher, brother of the Mrs. Foley who died a few weeks ago, died of Small-pox, at the pest house on Friday morning last, after a severe illness. He, like his sister, had the disease in its worst form, and the skillful care of the physician was powerless. There is a peculiar sadness in connection with this death, which is apt to cause men to

shudder at the effect of ignorance and willfulness. When his sister lay dying of the loathsome disease, Dan was in attendance as floor manager of a ball at Hall, where he took pains to inform all he came in contact that his sister had not got the Small-pox, and that there was no danger whatever of the disease. While he was thus behaving, his sister died, and he was sent for. He is now dead of that disease of which he was making so light of.

**February 7-** Sullivan's Black Diamond Combination play a new version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" at hall, on Saturday evening next.

**February 15-** The ladies of the Methodist Society hold their annual fair and festival at Hall, to-morrow evening.

-Mr. S. Green will close his dancing school with a grand concert and ball at Hall, on Monday evening next, the 20th, with music by Green's Orchestra of Fitchburg. Supper will be served by Landlord Foster at the Farren House.

**March 8 -** Fred has become owner of the block built by his mother, the price of transfer being \$12,000.

-The "Peak Sisters" give the second entertainment for the organ fund for the Congregational church at Hall on Friday evening next, the 10th.

**March 22-** Fred Colle is fitting up a drug store in his block on the corner of Avenue A and Third Street. He contemplates making it the finest of its kind in the county, with huge plate glass windows, etc.

-Whitmore & Clark's well-known minstrels appear at Hall, on Friday evening next.

**April 12 -** The play at Colle Hall, to-morrow evening, "Rooms for Rent," by a company of superior actors, ought to draw a crowded house.

**April 19 -** "Broom Drill" at Colle Hall next Wednesday evening.

**May 10-** The "Widow Bedott" will be presented at Colle Hall, on Saturday evening next, the 13th, by a first-class company.

**June 14-** The French play at Colle Hall will be quite a novelty for this place, and should attract considerable attention.

-The "Canadian Dramatic Club" of Turners Falls will present the touching French drama, "Vildac," and the comedy, "The Spoiled Dinner Party," at Colle Hall, on Monday evening next, June 19th.

**June 21-** Colle Hall was packed on Monday night, when the Canadian Dramatic Club played "Vildac," and "The Spoiled dinner Party." The actors all took their part well, and were frequently applauded.

-Druggist Colle announces that his prescription clerk, Mr. A.E. Bailey, will hereafter sleep in an apartment in the rear of the store, and will promptly answer all necessary calls at any hours of the night.

**October 18-** Washburn's Last Sensation appears at Colle Hall to-night.

**October 25-** Duprez & Benedict's Minstrels at Colle Hall, Saturday evening next.

-Baird's Mammoth Minstrels, so well known here, appear at Colle hall, on Friday evening, Nov. 3d.

**November 22-** Baird's Mammoth Minstrels, so well known here, appear at Colle hall, on Friday evening, Nov. 3d.

-Fred Colle is having two windows made in the north side of his block to better light the Bee-Hive dry goods store.

**November 29-** The famous Guy family of opera singers appear at Colle Hall, to-morrow night.

-A first class variety entertainment by the Stanley Bros. Troupe will be given at Colle Hall, on Monday evening, Dec. 4th.

**December 13-** Whitmore and Clark's Minstrels at Colle Hall next Friday night.

-The original Atkinson's "Jollities" appear at Colle Hall this evening.

-The gigantic Whitmore & Clark's minstrels, numbers 25 brilliant artists are coming and are to appear at Colle Hall,

this week, Friday evening, Dec. 15. The genial, jolly Hank White you will see in all his delight, will introduce his jumbo mouth with all his might, and Geo. M. Clark will return to burnt cork, supported by the largest company they have ever had introducing the Electric Lights of Minstrelsy. Advance sale of seats at Colle's drug store. December 20 -A roller skating rink has been started in Colle Hall.

-Prof. E.M. Slocomb, and Dooney Harris, the famous boxer, and New Hampshire champion, and other athletes, will give an athletic exhibition in Colle Hall, on the 127th inst.

**January 3, 1883-** The athletic entertainment in Colle Hall, Wednesday evening, drew out a big crowd. Besides boxing and club swinging by professionals and amateurs, Prof. Slocomb coupled on the hose pipe three times in 4 seconds, 5 seconds, and 4 seconds. Young McClintock carried off the prize as the champion pie eater.

-The seventh annual concert, ball and supper of Alvah Crocker Engine Co., at Colle Hall and Farren House on Friday evening last was the event of the season. About one hundred and twenty-five couples attended, and it was a very pretty dancing party, well managed and greatly enjoyed. The music of Russell's famous orchestra was very superior, and was the subject of merited praise.

**January 31-** The ball by the pupils of Mr. W.W. Green's dancing school at Colle Hall last night was thoroughly enjoyed by about sixty couples. It was one of the pleasantest dancing parties of the season. Landlord Foster served a splendid supper at the Farren House.

As the *Reporter* items show, Fred was also a druggist with his pharmacy on the ground floor of the Opera House in the corner shop at Avenue A and Third Street. The Reporter carried the story:

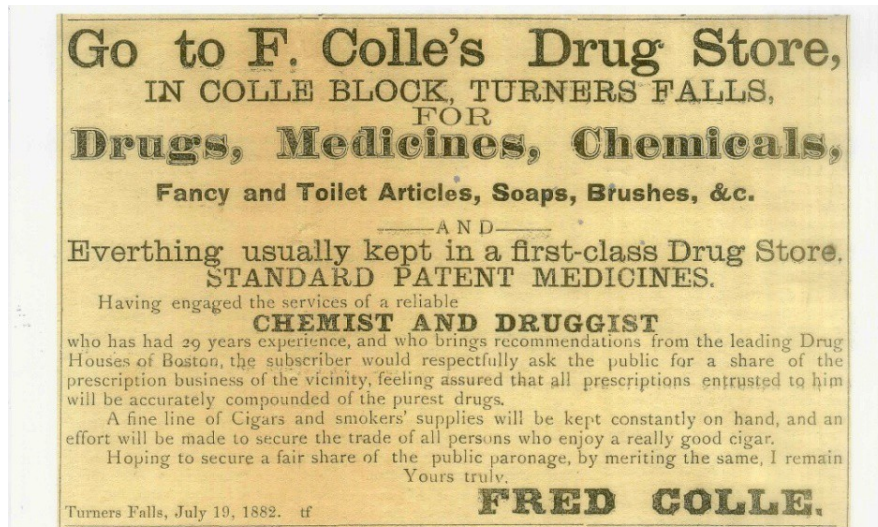
May 10, 1882 --Fred Colle will on Saturday next open his new drug store in his block on the corner of Avenue A and Third Street. The store has been thoroughly overhauled, cleansed and painted, and when a new plate glass front is added will be one of the finest in the street. The fixtures of the store are made of ash and cherry, the show-cases, scales, etc., being in keeping with the whole store. In the rear of the store is a well fitted up laboratory, 19 by 20 feet, with separate rooms, for acids, oils, herbs, etc.

Mr. Colle has engaged the services of a drug clerk with 29 years experience in the leading houses of Boston, and has selected as fine looking a stock of goods as one often sees in a drug store. He says he keeps such of the leading patent medicines as are usually called for, but wants it distinctly understood that he makes no "Injun Bitters". He is putting out his money with the intention of keeping a drug store, pure and simple, and will cater to the better class of trade.

Advertising in an old *Montague Business Directory* said simply:

**Fred Colle**  
**Druggist**  
**Colle block      Turners**  
**Falls**

Another advertisement in 1882 with more detail directed people to "Go to F. Colle's Drug Store. In Colle Block, Turner Falls for Drugs, Medicines, Chemicals..."



*The Reporter* noted in 1884 that "Druggist Fred Colle supplies the many orders for drugs and medicines called for at Lake Pleasant through C.P. Wise, who is his agent." We have found no evidence of a regular pharmacy shop in Lake Pleasant so we presume C. P. Wilson was a peddler.

There were some unusual happenings at the Opera House. Here is what happened in February 1884.

**February 20-** A female minstrel company will attract the bald-headed portion of the community at Colle Hall to-night.

**February 27-** The selectmen refused the female minstrels a license to show in Colle Hall. If Greenfield was too modest to stand such a racket, Turners Falls couldn't be expected to put up with it. The giddy blondes were "dead broke" and the company disbanded.

[Note the following item that appeared three years later in 1887]:

**February 16-** A female minstrel company held forth sat Colle's opera house, Saturday night, and of course they had a packed house. The audience did not contain a solitary female.

The beginning of the Opera House more formally as an opera house took place in April 1884 Here is the *Reporter* on April 30:

-Fred Colle, agent for the Allen Line of ocean steamers, sells tickets to Ireland for \$17 now. Passage this way costs \$19.

-Fred Colle has decided to convert his fine hall into an opera house surpassing anything of the kind in the country towns of Massachusetts. He will take out the upper floor, and put in a balcony extending from the rear well up into the hall and on the sides clean to stage. rear of the building will be extended 10 feet to make additional stage room. The main entrance will be on the north side of the building, by broad stairways, and the other side entrance and the front stairs will be used a exits. The hall for dancing will be somewhat smaller but considerably improved. Mr. Colle will begin after the Fourth of July to remodel the building, and it will be finished by the first of September.

-The Texas Jubilee Singers will doubtless have full houses at Colle Hall to-morrow and Friday evenings. They sing to the largest audiences in our cities and these concerts will be a rare entertainment. The price of single admission is 25 cents. Reserved seats, 35 cents.

On July 9<sup>th</sup> that year (1884):

-Work was begun on Colle's new opera house Monday morning, under the superintendence of Wm. R. Farnsworth, and a large force of men are at work tearing the partitions down, cutting out the upper floor, building new walls, and generally remodeling the structure. When finished, it will be a magnificent little opera house, with a seating capacity of 800 to 1000, with fine scenery, and will be illuminated with gas.

-Fred Colle offers for sale cheap all the doors in his block which he is taking out in making the changes for his opera house.

-The painting and decorating of Colle's new opera house will be by W.A. Herbert.

It appears that standards of behavior were to be elevated with the new name and remodeling as reflected in the *Turners Falls Reporter* September 10, 1884.

The work of remodeling Colle's opera house has been finished, and thus the handsomest little theatre in the western part of the state, will be opened to the public on Monday evening next, with the play of "Mugg's Landing," a comic drama of merit.

The opera house has now a seating capacity of 900, about equally divided between balcony and parquet. The seats are the celebrated Harwood Folding Chair, and are attractive as well as comfortable.

The building is the design of Architect W.R. Farnsworth, and is very much like the Bijou, in Boston. The floors are of maple. The walls are tinted chocolate, maroon, and orange, while the ceiling is ornamented in dark shades and gold. The proscenium arch is large and finely proportioned, while the stage, which is 25 feet square, has all modern adjuncts, convenient and ample dressing rooms, etc. The entire building is lighted with gas, and heated by steam.

**September 17-** A fair audience turned out at the opening of Colle's opera house, Monday evening. The play, "Mugg's Landing" was a very good one of its kind, and kept the audience in good humor all the evening.

- Kit, the Arkansas Traveler," at Colle opera house, Tuesday next, the 23rd.

**September 24-** Fred Colle has done a fine thing for the village in constructing a handsome little opera house, to which will be attracted artists in the amusement world such as play in the largest theaters in the cities, furnishing a class of amusements such as the cosmopolitan people of the village have been used to in drifting about the world, and the people should look with favorable eyes on his endeavors to keep the place decent and respectable, and especially in his efforts to stop the filthy habit of tobacco spitting on the floor.

-Colle's opera house was well filled last night to witness Frank Chanfrau's "Kit," and the man, who has filled the Boston theatre during his run there, every year for thirteen years, had an appreciative audience, here as might be expected. In Greenfield, about one hundred turned out, which will pass without further comment.

-Fred Colle offers for sale all the lamps and fixtures that were formerly in Colle Hall and his drug store, replaced by gas.

-Fred Colle has resolutely decided to stop the filthy habit flooding the floor of the opera house with tobacco juice, and has instructed officers to eject every person willfully disobeying the notices to that effect. And everybody will uphold him in putting out of the place such as cannot sit in a decent room a couple of hours without destroying everything about them. The other evening a lead pencil would float in the tobacco juice in the polished maple floor. It is a disgusting shame.

While the variety of entertainment and community events was diverse no attraction was stranger and extraordinary as the event described by the *Reporter* March 25, 1885.

We would take pleasure to announce to the citizens of Turners Falls, that at considerable expense we have secured the live wild cat captured at Wendell, and will exhibit him at Colle Opera house for a few nights only. He was captured alive after a desperate struggle. One of his captors now lies badly wounded at his home in Wendell mountains. Admission 10 cents, Saturday afternoon, children 5 cents. Do not fail to come and see him as it is a rare sight.

Fred Colle attempted to keep the Opera House in good order. In 1887, the *Turners Falls Reporter* noted:

April 27 - Manager Colle has almost decided to make a change in the seating arrangement of the house which will be a decided improvement. He proposes fitting up the lower floor in a magnificent manner, with carpets, orchestra chairs, etc., elevating the seat slightly as they recede from the stage, and making the parquet the high priced part of the house, seating the small boy and all others who don't desire the best seats up in the gallery. The change has been

suggested by many ladies who fancy they would like good seats in the parquet rather than go up stairs to the balcony.

Of course nothing has yet been permanently decided upon, but the change will be made if Manager Colle is convinced it would suit the public better. All theatre-going people should think it over, and give their ideas to Mr. Colle who is doing his best to please the patrons of his house.

The Colle Opera had other bizarre happenings in its early life. From the *Reporter* in 1887:

October 10- Druggist Colle came very near losing his life the other day from the careless handling of a gun in the hands of one of the show people. The showman borrowed the gun from Mr. Colle to use on stage, and before he could be told it was loaded he pulled up and fired directly at Mr. Colle's head. The entire charge passed by his ear and went into the wall without further damage. Mr. Colle was made deaf as a beetle for a day or two.

Liquor was on the mind of local officials in the fall of 1887, and unfortunately Fred Colle may have been involved. This is how the newspaper reported the story:

The *Turners Falls Reporter*, October 19, 1887 -Druggist Fred Colle was brought into court to answer the complaint that he had made sales of liquor in a manner not contemplated by his license. The two witnesses, however, were positive that they had never got liquor there and the accused was discharged for want of evidence. One of the witnesses, D. Reen, was immediately arrested on complaint of the selectmen, charged with perjury, and bound over to the Grand Jury under \$5000 bonds, the selectmen claiming to have positive evidence that he told untruths. Mr. Colle was arrested on another complaint and his hearing will be on the 29th. [We do not know if these legal issues were related, but an item in the *Reporter* later that year, on December 12, reports that "the selectmen have granted Fred Colle a druggist license again."]

As noted earlier, Opera House in its early years was home to a variety of Turners Falls activities in addition to entertainment. The mix of uses of the Opera House is reflected in the *Reporter* in 1889.

June 12 -Principal E.B. Hale and the High School graduating exercises will be at Colle's opera house, Friday evening, June 14th. All seats upon the floor of the house are reserved; balcony free to the public.  
-At Colle's opera house next Saturday evening will be presented for the first time in Turners Falls the brand new musical farce comedy in three acts, entitled, "An Egyptian Mummy," with a strong cast headed by comedians, H.W. Brown and George F. Hall, for the past two years leading support of the Lillian Kennedy Combination.

Several years later there was (again!) a major renovation to the Opera House. Electricity had come! From the *Turners Falls Reporter*, July 17, 1901:

-Fred Colle has decided to light his opera house with electricity, and has made contracts for the installation of a 200 light plant of his own. He will use a motor to drive the dynamo. The opera house will then be exceedingly well lighted, as almost all good companies now use electrical effects, better attractions may in future be seen on the local boards. The season will open in the latter part of August.

October 23 -The ten horse power engine, dynamo and all wiring for lighting Colle's opera house by electricity has been installed and everything is now complete. It is expected that on Oct. 30 the full electrical effects will be used. The introduction of electricity in the opera house is a great improvement and the patrons of the house as well as the actors playing there will fully appreciate it. -"A Breezy Time," which appears at Colle's opera house, Wednesday evening, the 30th, has one of the very best bands and orchestras its possible for money to obtain, with special arrangements made for this band only.

Ed Gregory's fine compilation of stories in the *Turners Falls Reporter* related to the Opera House showed a vast array of talent and events on its stage. A 1901 comment in the newspaper gives great credit to Fred Colle.

May 22 -The past season has been the most successful one in the history of Colle's opera house. An unusually good class of plays [has] been presented and Manager Colle deserves all the success he has had.

However Fred Colle found challenges in running the Opera House. Remember the earlier story in 1884 about the tobacco juice on the floor of the Opea House? The *Reporter* notes that the issue in 1884 continued to happen.in 1901

August 28 -Manager Colle notifies all persons that all who break the rules of the board of health, by spitting in his opera house will be arrested and prosecuted. The authorities in their efforts to prevent consumption<sup>6</sup> and other diseases, will henceforth keep a sharp eye on spitters in public places.  
-Manager Colle insists upon having the date and his name stamped on all tickets presented at the opera house for admission. Some people have juggled with old tickets to his loss.

### THE MATURING OF TURNERS FALLS

During this time, Turners Falls began to develop its distinctive character featuring a strong industrial base with cutlery, paper and other important manufacturing products enveloping the community. A writer notes other changes:

The late 19th century also saw growth and change in the downtown area, as commercial enterprises, as well as entertainment and social institutions, developed. Commercial buildings were erected by individual businessmen during the 1870's and 1880's, and consisted largely of three and four story brick buildings with storefront entrances at grade and professional offices and tradesmen housed on the upper floors. Downtown Turners Falls was a vibrant place at the turn of the century. From 1895-1934 an electric trolley ran up Avenue A on its route from Greenfield to Montague and Millers Falls. The Grand Trunk Hotel was among the most prominent buildings on the village's main street. There were taverns, as well as the Colle Opera House, which was the chief entertainment center of the village. The Opera House was built in 1874 and served as a vaudeville theater seating 1,000 people. As the endpoint of log drives down the Connecticut River, Turners Falls also earned notoriety as a frontier town, where lumbermen celebrated the end of long log drives drinking and brawling at one of the many taverns and bars.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently lumber workers were not paid until the end of the log drive, and then they scrubbed themselves, bought a new suit of clothes and then headed for one of the local taverns. The Town of Montague also "watched breathlessly as in rapid succession" industries moved into the area. These developments help explain Turners Falls becoming a lively place for entertainment, and the Colle Opera House was in the middle of all this. Mentioning the Farren House (later the Grand Trunk Hotel) and the Colle Opera House, the *Recorder-Gazette* noted that it was here that the newest revues and shows — "some mighty spicy" — were shown. There were vaudeville, concerts by the Montague City German Band, and major banquets. Parties came from Greenfield by horse-drawn stage until the coming of the electric trolley in 1895. In his "social history of Greenfield, Massachusetts," Paul Jenkins describes the attraction of Turners Falls and the Opera House.

The street railway also allowed Greenfield people to seek out entertainment considered to be on the lower side of the cultural scale. Apart from frequent appearances on the upper Silver Street circus grounds of P. T. Barnum's circus and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show...Greenfield was relatively free of the more rowdy forms of popular culture. Since 1882, however, the Colle Opera House in Turners Falls had presented a regular program of minstrel and burlesque shows, and a number of Greenfield people had been known to attend. Letters to the *Gazette and Courier* occasionally complained of the liquor and coarseness which accompanied these shows.<sup>13</sup>

### Enter: a new form of entertainment

12 Virtual Tour, Town of Montague, MA, [http://www.montague.net/content/vtour/t\\_falls1.html](http://www.montague.net/content/vtour/t_falls1.html)

13 Paul Jenkins, *The Conservative Rebel*, Town of Greenfield, Massachusetts, Greenfield, 1982, p. 161. This book was commissioned and published by the local Greenfield government.

At the turn of the century Fred Colle and Turners Falls greeted a new form of entertainment that was to have a major impact on the future of the Opera House. The silent film had entered the entertainment picture in 1894 with kinetoscope parlors that provided the public with very short "peep shows." These silent films featured bits of vaudeville, boxing matches, and other visually interesting scenes. It was in 1896 that an audience first saw an American screening of a film in a regular theater (but not in Turners Falls.) They showed angry waves, girls dancing with parasols, and military parades — but no story line. These were a part of the regular live vaudeville shows, and the short films often were used as "chasers" — signaling that the entertainment program was ending.

In 1900, the *Turners Falls Reporter* carried a short story and an advertisement for the show titled "The Heart of Chicago" which was to be featured at the Colle Opera House. The story describes the special effects spectacle that was about a roaring train. It's a railroad scene in which a train is *perceived* by the audience as being a great distance away, and then the train rapidly approaches the audience, getting bigger and bigger until the full-sized locomotive dramatically stops abruptly at the footlights. The *Reporter* newspaper story observed that: "The mechanism of the enlarging locomotive is the most intricate and costly piece of machinery ever used in stage effect. After seeing 'The Heart of Chicago' one must admit that the possibilities of stage illusion [are] indeed great." How much did patrons pay to see this feature at the Colle Opera House? From the *Turners Falls Reporter* October 24, 1900:

**Colle Opera House, Oct. 30 [1900]**

—Tickets for Lincoln J. Carter's "Heart of Chicago," which will be presented at Colle opera house next Tuesday night, will go on sale at Colle's drug store Friday evening. The prices are only 25, 35, and 50 cents, and the house should be packed.

Cars [streetcars] will run after the performance of "The Heart of Chicago" at Colle's opera house next Tuesday evening. Prices only 25, 35 and 50 cents.

And, indeed, more illusions were on the way, thanks to electricity!

Fred Colle has decided to light his opera house with electricity, and has made contracts for the installation of a 200 light plant of his own. He will use a motor to drive the dynamo. The opera house will then be exceedingly well lighted, and as almost all good companies now use electrical effects, better attractions may in future be seen on the local boards. — *Turners Falls Reporter*, July 17, 1901

[And then...]

October 23 -The ten horse power engine, dynamo and all wiring for lighting Colle's opera house by electricity has been installed and everything is now complete. It is expected that on Oct. 30 the full electrical effects will be used. The introduction of electricity in the opera house is a great improvement and the patrons of the house as well as the actors playing there will fully appreciate it.

**The beginning of changes in the Opera House**

The year 1903 was significant for two reasons. Mary Colle, co-founder of the Opera House, died in that year, almost 30 years after Frederick's death. She had been the rock on which the Opera House had been built. In the emerging motion picture industry, the first timid move toward story telling took place in 1903 in a film by Edwin S. Porter "Life of An American Fireman" that included a dramatic fire engine chase. One of the first genuine narrative story films was Porter's 12-minute 1903 production "The Great Train Robbery." Fred Colle guided the Opera House into this new era of entertainment. However, in Greenfield, Paul Jenkins discovered a rather cool reception for the new film entertainment. In his book on the social history of Greenfield, he notes:

Until the Lawler Theater opened on Federal Street in 1913, theatrical entertainment virtually disappeared from Greenfield. Into this vacuum slipped the very first examples of a strange, novel art form — the silent movie — denounced in some quarters as no art at all but an immoral sensationalism conducted under the cover of darkness. As early as 1904 short films were being

shown in Washington Hall [Greenfield] (safe, presumably, for a small movie audience) on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings....

From the very beginning movies were considered improper diversions for respectable people. Even the third volume of the *History of Greenfield* (Kellogg) laments the decline of serious theater at the hands of popcorn and celluloid. But the audience for movies seems to have increased and diversified very rapidly....From 1905 on, local newspaper columns devoted a substantial amount of space to describing weekly film offerings, as though movie programs deserved public announcement, not paid advertising.<sup>14</sup>

Although the film had come to Turners Falls and to the rest of the world, the Colle Opera House continued to be home for a variety of entertainment events. We look at Ed Gregory's compilation of stories from the *Turners Falls Reporter* for 1910 to capture a view of the many and diverse activities.<sup>15</sup>

March 23 -An operatic minstrel entertainment to be given in opera house, April 6th, is now under way and promises to be an interesting performance. The minstrel show is under the direction of Louis A. LaShier and William Bourdeau, and is for the benefit of St. Anne's church. The entertainment is comprised of southern scenes, acrobatic stunts, plantation dances and sketches. Besides many patriotic features and popular songs, there will be many local jokes (not one of which will be personal).

-One of the best attractions of the season at Colle's opera house will be William Lawrence in "Uncle Dave Holcomb," a true story of New England life. His play will hold the boards on Friday evening, April 1. -Friday evening, April 22, has been fixed as the date for the grand vocal and instrumental concert to be given by the Turners Falls Military Band at Opera house. G. Curtis Munson of Springfield is training a chorus of 40 voices for the occasion, and the band will give several selections under the direction of their leader, T.V. Short of Springfield.

March 30 -The Yale Stock Company will close a three night's engagement at Colle's opera house to-night. The performances have been well attended.

-A minstrel show, under the auspices of the German Methodist church, will be given at 's opera house on Friday evening, April 17. There are to be six end men, and the second part will consist of the laughable farce, "A Little More Cider." Reserve seats will be fifty and thirty-five cents.

-The lantern slide lecture on the topic "My Travels in Venezuela," to be given by Rev. T.A. Bendrat, M.S., at Colle's opera house, April 13, will be another attraction of the season. The slides are exceptionally good, showing every detail. They involve the newly discovered petroglyphics [sic] (carvings in rock). Everybody interested in geography and the allied sciences will certainly be greatly benefitted by this lecture and therefore ought not to miss it.

April 6 -Don't fail to see the big snake that will be exhibited at 's drug store. It is from the country<sup>7</sup> Mr. Bendrat is going to lecture on April the 13th.

-A rousing minstrel show will be given by the Young Men's Dramatic Club, for the benefit of St. Anne's church, at opera house this evening. Louis A. LaShire is the director of the affair. Charles Shulda will be the pianist and John Edson the Violinist. Tickets have sold readily and there will be a big house.

April 13 -"The Farmer's Daughter," a play written by Avis Paige of Montague, will have its initial performance at 's Opera house, on Monday evening,

April 18. "Avis Paige" in the nom de plume of a lady who is a resident of Montague Centre. -A minstrel show under the auspices of the Ladies' Aid Society of the German M.E. church is to be given at Colle 's Opera house, Friday evening. John A. Partenheimer is interlocutor<sup>8</sup> and will be assisted by a large circle. The second part concludes with the farce, "A Little More Cider." Much time and effort has been put into rehearsals and a large attendance is expected.

-The Father Mathew C.T.A. Society will hold a minstrel show in Opera house, Friday evening, April 29. J. Donovan will be the interlocutor and there will be a chorus of 40 voices. -The play, "Among The Breakers," to be

<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> "Opera House 1873-1922, Items gleaned from the *Turners Falls Reporter* 1873 to 1922"

presented in May at 's opera house under the auspices of Companions of the Forest, is progressing splendidly. There will be specialties between the acts by notable local talent.

April 27 "Billy, the Boy Artist" "Billy, the Boy Artist" the new musical comedy is to be presented at 's Opera house, Monday evening, May 2. The musical support includes a fine chorus of dancing girls and an exceedingly good quartette. The costumes are all beautiful and the scenic investiture is striking and good.

May 4 "Uncle Tom's Cabin" at Opera House To-morrow Night One of the prettiest and truest to-nature stage pictures ever created is the cotton picking scene in the ever-popular production of Stetson's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" which is to be seen at Opera House, Thursday evening, May 5th.

Aug. 3 -Avis Paige in her successful play "The Farmer's Daughter," will be the attraction at Colle's opera house on Saturday evening, Aug. 13. "Avis Paige" is a well known Lake Pleasant lady and her many friends hereabouts will be pleased to see her in this play.

August 24 The opening attraction at Colle's opera house will be on Thursday evening, Sept. 8, when "Quincy Adams Sawyer," that sterling rural play, will open the season. This play will be presented by the Charles Atkinson Company, and that is sufficient guaranty for a first rate performance.

[And into 1911:]

January 18- So many people wanted to get into Colle's opera house on Sunday evening to see the splendid new pictures of the Passion play which were exhibited that night, that every seat in the house was taken, and about 150 people had to be turned away for lack of seats. A law prevents standing in a theatre and forbidding admission of patrons beyond seating capacity. The pictures will be shown again in two or three weeks, so that those unable to see them last Sunday might need not despair but may have the opportunity to view them later on, if they get an early start. Children under 14 will not be admitted unless accompanied by their parents.

However, the extensive activities in the Opera House and the demands of running the Colle Drug Store were taking a toll on Fred Colle. On June 21, 1911, the *Reporter* indicated:

June 21- Druggist Fred Colle has stuck so close to his business that he has not had a vacation in fifteen years which is beginning to tell on his health. He has hired A.A. Cross, a registered pharmacist to take charge of the business while he goes away and seeks a rest long enough to bring back health. Mr. Colle will spend a week at his lake pleasant cottage before starting for the seashore.

Despite the wide acceptance of the performances at the Opera House, there were problems beyond the spitting reported earlier. Here is an item from the April 30, 1913 *Turners Falls Reporter*.

Some grown men who should have known better, amused themselves and mortified others the past week, by throwing fruit and vegetables at the actors on the stage in Colle's opera house, angering the women players exceedingly. The missiles ranged from over-ripe lemons to passe onions, interspersed with a vegetarian bill of fare. The manager of the show came before the curtain and delivered a lecture depreciating all such hoodlum exhibitions in play houses, going far beyond the noise, cat-calls, and nuisances to be heard in far too many public halls in country villages, where the hoodlum license to practice deviltry is never revoked, because of fear of offending "somebody."

Over many years there was continual upgrading of the Opera House. On August 28, 1912, the *Turners Falls Reporter* noted that "The Colle Opera House has been thoroughly renovated and fireproofed and everything done to guard against fire. The stage has been tinned all over, the stairs have been fireproofed underneath, and independent fire hose has been installed."

#### **THE PASSING OF FRED COLLE'S OPERA HOUSE TORCH**

Fred Colle had owned and managed the Opera House and the drug store for more than 30 years when the newspaper announced a major change in this fixture of Turnes Falls.. From the May 14, 1913 *Turners Falls Reporter*:

Fred Colle, one of the veteran business men of the town, has decided to take things a little easier, and has leased his

opera house to W.A. Wesley of Gardner, a well-known theatrical man, who is sure to manage the house in a first class manner and in a way which Turners Falls theatre goers will approve of. Mr. Colle plans to retire from active business life entirely as soon as he can dispose of his drug business. His health has not been good for some time and he thinks he is entitled to drop business cares. He and his family will occupy their cottage at Lake Pleasant this summer, and Mr. Morrissey, who will be the local manager for Mr. Wesley, will move into the tenement in the Colle Block on the Avenue where Mr. Colle is now living. Managing an opera house is hard work, and no joke, and as Mr. Colle's health has been poor for several years, the strain of looking after this business has been greater than he cared to continue to endure, and he is very glad to relinquish the management into the hands of a born and bred theatrical man. Mr. Colle has bought a very desirable building lot on the corner of maple and North streets in Greenfield, and will probably build a home there in the near future. [See a later story below.]

The first of a series of managers over the next year was announced in the same newspaper issue.

"Wesley Says So." Colle Opera House Opens Saturday Manager W.A. Wesley of the Gardner Theatre has leased the Colle Opera house for the coming season and will present to the patrons of this popular playhouse the latest improved photoplays and vaudeville. He will also feature the best road attractions obtainable at this season of the year. Mr. Wesley has engaged a corps of painters and decorators who will start immediately to renovate and beautify the interior of the house. Mr. Wesley has established an enviable reputation as a most successful producer of the popular styles of entertainment at popular prices and is known far and wide by his convincing slogan "Wesley Says So." The house will open under the personal management of Mr. Wesley, Saturday, May 17th, with Miss Blanche McDonald, who needs no introduction to the music lovers of Turners Falls, as pianist. The opening road attraction will be presented Monday, May 26th, the offering being a drama of New England life, "Quincy Adams Sawyer."

The coming importance of the silent film in the Opera House was foreshadowed in a short item on June 4, 1913 that said: "Unusually low summer prices prevail for this excellent attraction [the play "A Night at the Telephone Exchange], and a daily change of high class motion pictures will be offered in connection with the regular performance." The changing entertainment culture was underlined by a story soon thereafter.

*Turners Falls Reporter*, August 6, 1913. Manager Wesley re-opened the Colle Opera house last Thursday with a splendid line of feature pictures. "The Pent of the Plains" and "The Eye of a God" were on the program during the past week, and they were enjoyed by the lovers of silent drama. To-day and Thursday "Regeneration," a thrilling drama. Friday and Saturday "Tracked by Wireless," a sensational detective story will make up part of the show. A matinee is given every day at 3 p.m. and the evening performance starts at 8.15. The prices are: Matinees, children, 5c; adults, 10c; evenings, 10c to everybody, any seat in the theatre.

For further emphasis there were these items: "Five reels of the kind of pictures you like, produced by Biograph, Vitagraph, Kalem, Edison and Essanay companies are shown daily at 3.00, 7.30 and 9.00 p.m." — *Turners Falls Reporter*, September 10, 1913. And: "The Colle Opera house will open up again Thursday with the regular picture and vaudeville show. There will be five reels of trust pictures shown every day. This week pictures will change Thursday and Saturday and Sunday. Friday night will be amateur night and that means another night of fun" (October 22, 1913).

Later in September 1913, the newspaper revealed another chapter in the Colle history:

Fred Colle has moved his family into the house he recently bought on High Street in Greenfield. He has been making vast improvements in the place, having it painted in the latest fashionable colors, and every room and closet, and even the cellar, garret, barn and hen house is wired for electricity.

Mr. Colle intends to retire from business when a customer can be found and then pass the remainder of his days in his fine new home. The lot is 100 by 200 feet, which gives him plenty of room to cultivate a garden which he so much enjoys.

Retire he did and for the next few years a variety of new names appeared in the Opera House history. And apparently there were several closings and re-openings of the Opera House during this period. The *Turners Falls Reporter* kept track of the changes.

November 5, 1913 - Philius Brunelle, Michael S. O'Leary and John W. Haigis have leased the Colle Opera house and will conduct it in the future. Mr. Brunelle will act as manager.

December 17- The opera house will be re-opened on Friday, Dec. 19, under the management of a well-known local man, Sigmund Klaiber, who promises to conduct a high class orderly house, and has secured the best picture service there is. The opening attraction will be a children's matinee at 3.30, when will be shown the famous Carl Hagenbeck and Wallace indoor circus, a splendid feature. This circus will also be shown Friday evening and Saturday afternoon and evening.

January 7, 1914 January 7- S. Klaiber, who has been managing the opera house for a few weeks, has retired from a losing game, and the house is once more closed.

January 28 The Colle opera house will be opened again Monday evening by the professional showman, W. A. Wesley, who ran the house last summer. Mr. Wesley is better equipped to run this opera house successfully than almost any man in this region, having many show houses and continuous contracts with performers. The policy will be more acting and fewer pictures, and bosh sandwiched well to suit the public. Mr. Colle himself has been a very successful theatrical manager, and has invariably made money in the business. Few men could give him points on an attraction, and as it has been proved, no one of all that followed him could have anyway near his success. Mr. Colle is a good business man, and a profound philosopher, both needful qualities in a theatrical manager. But Mr. Colle has decided to leave all such cares to others now and enjoy a serene autumn of life, with nothing to annoy.

### **Fred Colle's last years in the Opera House**

Fred Colle spent most of his life in Franklin County — mainly operating the Opera House and the drug store in Turners Falls with an agent as an accessory outlet in Lake Pleasant. The local newspaper announced his passing. He died on April 6, 1914. His obituary in the Monday, April 8 *Greenfield Recorder* noted that he had attended to his business until the previous Friday when he decided to go home. He had been in poor health for several years and had suffered the amputation of one foot, according to an item in the March 2, 1921 *Turners Falls Reporter*. [His obituary (below) indicated that it was a leg amputation.] The *Greenfield Recorder* reported:

...Mr. Colle came to Turners Falls in 1881 and since then has conducted a drug store on Avenue A [Turners Falls] and was also manager of the opera house ever since [1881]. He attended faithfully to business and for many years never took a vacation. Mr. Colle's education was received in Germany and he had few superiors as a pharmacist. While outwardly stern and outspoken he had a big heart and did many acts of kindness which his closest friends never heard of. About a year ago he decided to take life a little more easily and to this end purchased a fine home on High Street in Greenfield, planning to dispose of his business and enjoy life there. For several years he was a member of the school committee and faithfully attended to these duties until his health began to fail...

A similar item appeared in the *Greenfield Recorder*, April 8, 1914:

### **DEATH OF FREDERICK COLLE Was Respected Merchant of Turners Falls for Many Years**

Frederick Colle, 60, one of the oldest and most respected businessmen of this town, died at his home in Greenfield Monday noon, his death being caused by heart failure. He had attended to his business until Friday afternoon when he decided to go home. His health has been poor for several years and something over a year ago he suffered the amputation of one of his legs. Mr. Colle came to Turners Falls in 1881 and since then has conducted a drug store on Avenue A and was also manager of the opera house ever since it was built. He attended faithfully to business and for many years never took a vacation. Mr. Colle's education was received in Germany and he had few superiors as a pharmacist. While outwardly stern and outspoken he had a big heart and did many acts of kindness which his closest friends never heard of. About a year ago he decided to take life a little more easily and to this end purchased a fine home on High Street in Greenfield, planning to dispose of his business and enjoy life there. For several years he was a member of the school committee and faithfully attended to these duties until his health began to fail. He leaves, besides his widow, one son Carl Colle, and three daughters, Mrs. Beatrice Riera and the Misses Harriet and Irene Colle, all of Greenfield. Funeral services will be held from his

late home tomorrow afternoon, Rev. J. B. Whiteman [of the Episcopal Church] officiating. Interment will be in Green River Cemetery at Greenfield.. He was a member of Court Turner, Foresters of America, and Gustav Adolph lodge of Harugaris.<sup>16</sup>

Businesses in Turners Falls closed for the funeral. Wife Dina (Christina) Colle inherited the property but did not manage the Opera House. She died three years later (1917) leaving the Opera House to her children Harriet, Irene and Merle.<sup>17</sup> The Opera House continued formally in Christina Colle's hands after Fred's death, but it was leased to various people including one Aime. J. LaCapelle (597/301). The Opera House management ultimately shifted to Denis Shea, a robust showman with a variety of showmanship enterprises. According to Franklin County probate records, ownership of the Opera House passed to Fred's son Merle C. Colle. The ownership transfer was deeded to Carl Merle Colle on November 18, 1919. This was "the Colle Block" and referred only to the corner piece of property on Avenue A (60 feet wide) and 3rd Street (110 feet long). Merle C, and Carl Merle were the same person.

Merle at age 19 was too young to take over the Opera House. He attended Greenfield High School (graduating in 1916), and began his studies in Engineering at Ohio Northern University in the 1916-17 school year. The events continued at the Opera House with new leadership:

August 26, 1914 -Denis J. Shea, the well-known manager of the basketball team and of dances, has leased the Colle opera house for a term of three years, and will run it, along the same lines followed by Mr. Colle, running moving pictures, vaudeville, and plays. Mr. Shea will have some needed alterations and repairs made at once, and will install modern fixtures before re-opening.

September 2 The opening of the Opera house under the management of D. J. Shea will occur on Labor day, Monday, September 7th, at 2.30 in the afternoon, with a first class moving picture entertainment, of five reels, including the great feature film picture, two reels of "The Million Dollar Mystery." This is the greatest motion picture ever exhibited. Ten thousand dollars will be paid by the Thanhouser film corporation to the person who will explain in one hundred words or less the best solution of the mystery. You can read the story in the newspapers and see it in real pictures at the Opera house for two days only, Monday and Tuesday, September 7th and 8th; matinee and evening.

### **FILMS AT THE OPERA HOUSE**

The first major film program at the Colle Opera House came in 1914 (under the reign of Denis Shea). It was a 23-episode silent film serial "The Million Dollar Mystery" featuring Sidney Bracy, James Cruz, and Florence Labordie.

Meanwhile there were happenings outside of the Opera House. The Colle estate involved a variety of properties in Franklin County. Denis Shea acquired the Colle Opera House block at Avenue A and 3rd Street in Turners Falls in 1920; the Colle property on High Street in Greenfield was sold by Merle in 1923 (233/689). The Colle guest house on Mills Street had been transferred by Mary to Christina (Dina) in 1898 (346/463) and Dina sold it in 1905 (261/515). These transactions signaled the end of an eight decade relationship between the Colles and Franklin County, with the Colle Opera House now (2018) a contemporary symbol of that history. Under new ownership, the Colle Opera House was to see glory and struggle ahead.

Ed Gregory's collection of Colle Opera House items from the *Turners Falls Reporter* shows the beginning of Shea's extraordinary leadership in the area's entertainment.

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<sup>16</sup> The Harugari Lodge was part of a national fraternal organization based on German heritage. It was identified with the ancient German tribe the Cherusei. The name came from Harue which signified "forest." Teutons who met in the forest were called Harugarisi. The organization's core was friendship, love and humanity. "An exceptionally altruistic declaration of principles was adopted, features of which were the brotherhood of man and the desirability of working for the good of society in general instead of for self." See Albert C. Stevens, *The Cyclopaedia of Fraternities*, Hamilton Printing and Publishing, New York, 1899, p. 235.

Merle Colle appears by a variety of names in various documents. These include Merle Carlyle, Merle Carl, and Carl Merle. His first son was named Carl, Jr. To simplify, we use Merle henceforth.

December 23, 1914 -Extra good pictures are being shown at the opera house all this week. There will be new pictures Christmas afternoon and evening, also a change of pictures Saturday. The management is giving away boys' and girls' skates every afternoon and a duck every evening as a holiday treat. [1915 started off with a big event]:

Opera House to Show Two Serial Photoplays. Commencing next Friday and Saturday the first two episodes of the much advertised serial, "The Perils of Pauline," will be shown at the Opera house. This serial is full of thrills and adventures, and the leading parts are taken by well-known stars. "Zudora," the greatest serial photoplay ever produced on the screen, follows "The Million Dollar Mystery," and is practically made up of the same cast. Reports from theatres where "Zudora" has been shown already say it even surpasses "The Million Dollar Mystery." Episode No. 1 of this great serial will be shown here on next Monday and Tuesday The early episodes are constructed to lead up to some of the most remarkable pieces of acting in the history of motion pictures.

January 20- At the Opera house, as a special for to-day and to-morrow, "Sands of Fate," a Majestic drama in two parts, will be shown. Friday and Saturday the fourth episode of "The Perils of Pauline" will be presented in addition to a two reel Kay Bee, "The World of His People," a strong western drama, and a Keystone comedy with the favorite performer, Cha's. Chaplain. Next Monday and Tuesday four reels of "Zudora," fourth and fifth episodes, will be shown.

January 27- The big all-star photoplay, "The Greyhound," will be shown at the Opera house to-night and to-morrow afternoon and evening. "The Greyhound" is produced by the Life Photo Film corporation and is in five reels. On Friday and Saturday the fifth episode of "The Perils of Pauline" will be shown and start Monday and Tuesday, Thanhouscr's great serial photoplay of 'Zudora."

Two significant and not-so-subtle changes were taking place in the Opera House under Shea's ownership and management, and these were reflected in items in the *Turners Falls Reporter*. First was the prominence of silent films and photoplays on the Opera House agenda, and the second is the appearance of the word "theatre" attached to the Opera House. The term "photoplay" was frequently used in Opera House stories about current attractions. According to *YourDictionary*, a photoplay is "a theatrical play that has been filmed for showing as a movie. a novel adapted from a movie and illustrated with photographic stills taken from the film. Usage largely confined to the silent era of Hollywood." The following items from the *Turners Falls Reporter* illustrate these developments.

#### December 22, 1914 **Big Special Photoplays at the Opera House Theatre for the Holidays**

On to-morrow afternoon and evening the Metro Pictures Corporation presents at the Opera house theatre the charming dramatic actress, Florence Reed, in Clyde Fitch's great romantic story, "Her Own Way." On Friday and Christmas afternoons and evenings the Paramount pictures present "The Girl of the Golden West," taken from the stage play of the same name. This is a wonderful photoplay in five parts.

January 5, 1916- The presentation of the great photoplay, "Carmen," at the Opera house last Thursday evening was easily the greatest event in the moving picture world locally for the play was witnessed by two big houses. At the first performance every seat in the house was occupied and at the second performance the assembly was almost equally large. Evidently Geraldine Farrar and the seductive "Carmen" were a puzzle to not a few of the spectators to judge by some of the comments heard. The photoplay is undeniably a masterpiece and on account of the prominence of the famous prima donna everyone was anxious to see it.

February 16 -"The Great Divide" "The Great Divide," in five big acts, with Ethel Clayton and House Peters, will be the next attraction at the Opera house. Recording the grandeur and splendor of the world-famed Grand Canyon of Arizona and abounding with thrillers of the first water, the latest of the big stage plays to be adapted for the motion picture screen, "The Great Divide," has been completed for presentation and through the preserving efforts of Manager Shea of the Opera house theatre, has been booked for next Monday afternoon and evening, at the regular prices. "The Great Divide" is conceded to be one of the most pretentious offerings to come from the plants of any of the motion picture producing companies.

In mid-1916 the Opera House once again underwent some repairs and renovations. And it was enough to warrant notice in the *Turners Falls Reporter*.

July 19 -Opera House Theatre to be Closed for Repairs The Opera House theatre will be closed Saturday night for about a month, in order that extensive repairs and improvements may be made. A new ceiling is to be put in, and the

theatre is to be newly papered and painted and freshened up generally. Manager D. J. Shea announces that the junior Ford automobile will be given away on Saturday evening, and all holders of coupons should see that they are in his hands not later than Saturday noon.

September 20- The Opera theatre is to be opened Monday, Sept. 25, after having been, closed a number of weeks, during which time Manager D.J. Shea has had numerous repairs and improvements made. Mr. Shea expected to be able to open the theatre before, but the non-arrival of the new iron fire escape ordered, to replace the antiquated wooden fire escape now on the building has caused the delay. The new fire escape has arrived at the station and will be set up forthwith.

The first World War touched Turners Falls in various ways. The war had begun in Europe in 1914 when Austria declared war on Serbia Subsequently there were many such declarations: Germany over Russia and France (and Germany entered Belgium); Britain and Japan over Germany; Russia over Turkey; Britain and France over Turkey; and finally in 1917 the United States declared war over Germany in part because of Germany's use of submarines to sink American shipping. The War ended November 11, 1918.

One impact on Turners Falls and on the Opera House was the theatre tax.

October 31, 1917 -Patrons of the movies will have to pay a cent war tax on every ten cent admission fee, on and after to-morrow. Moving theatre managers must collect a war tax on each ten cents or fraction thereof paid for admission. This means a one cent tax on each 10 cent admission, two cents on each 15 cent admission, and so on.

Turners Falls' Lyric Theatre became a small part of our story in 1918 along with the prospect of another Turners Falls theatre.

January 30, 1918 -The Lyric Theatre and the Opera House are closed every Tuesday, instead of on Monday holidays which other businesses observe by compulsion. This gives the non-workers who are "all dressed up and nowhere to go" a chance to enjoy a part of their holiday at the place—the movies— which has a universal appeal.

February 13 **D. J. Shea Buys Lyric Theatre** D. J. Shea, the manager of the Opera House theatre, has bought the Lyric theatre on Third Street from Lawler Brothers of Greenfield "and will conduct it in the future, as well as retain the management of the Opera House theatre. The Lyric is closed this week, while necessary repairs are being made. The Lyric is Turners Falls first and oldest moving picture theatre and has been successfully run by Lawler Bros, for the past six years or so. Mr. Shea has been very successful managing the Opera House theatre, and his conduct of his new purchase will doubtless follow the same successful lines.

July 2 **Turners Falls to Have New Theatre Building** D. J. Shea, the energetic manager of the Opera House Theatre, has bought a lot, 70 x 110 feet, on Avenue A, below the Hotel Vladish, where the school gardens now are, and inside of a month, work will be commenced on the erection there of a new moving picture theatre building. While Mr. Shea's plans are not yet perfected, he expects to erect an up-to-date brick building for a theatre, with two stores, one on either side of the main entrance. The new theatre will have a seating capacity of 1000, and will be constructed with the idea of being as comfortable, pleasant and up-to-date as possible. Mr. Shea expects to occupy the new theatre about the first of the year. During the summer, the Opera house theatre will be closed, but the Lyric Theatre will be open instead. Mr. Shea controls the Lyric as well as the Opera house theatre, and thinks patrons will find the Lyric more comfortable during the heated term. The erection of a new theatre will be appreciated by the moving picture patrons. Since Mr. Shea took over the management of the Opera house theatre, business has greatly increased. He shows only the high grade pictures and is ever alert to give the best the morning picture producers provide. The new theatre will have a splendid location and the disappearance of a vacant lot on our main street will be pleasant.

September 3 **New Theatre to Come Shortly** D. J. Shea is receiving bids on the new theatre building which he is to erect on Avenue A below Fifth Street. The plans and specifications are from the office of McNaughton & Perry, and H.E. Cleverdon, who is associated with them, is to be the engineer in charge. Mr. Cleverdon was formerly with the Turners Falls Power and Electric Company. The plans call for a three-story building 70 by 110, with two stores on the ground floor. The upper part is to be given over entirely to theatrical purposes with a seating capacity of 1000 and will be modern and up to

date in every way. Mr. Shea hopes that the work on it will be started soon and that it will be completed by January 1 [1920]

-There was a very quiet auction sale of the Colle block on Avenue A one day last week, when it was offered for sale on the premises to the highest bidder. After a few bids it was knocked down to Carl Colle, one of his offer something like \$18,000.

[Note: As mentioned earlier, Shea bought the property in mid-1920.]

July 28 **Opera House Block Bought by D. J. Shea** Dennis J. Shea, the energetic and popular manager of the Opera House Theatre, and actively identified with a number of other amusement and sport enterprises, has bought the Colle Opera House property of the heirs of the late Fred Colle. He will make extensive improvements and changes in the property, one of the most important being an entirely new and adequate heating system, and such other changes as seen desirable. Mr. Shea's acquisition of this property is assurance that it will be kept up in first class shape, but probably means that no new theatre will be erected at present.

August 11 -The Opera house theatre is closed while repairs and improvements are being made, and a new heating system installed. New seats will also be an appreciated improvement. While the Opera house theatre is closed, the Lyric theatre will be open instead.

While the silent film seemed to dominate the program of the Opera House, other events continued to take place there. Here is a sample from the *Turners Falls Reporter* pages in 1921.

January 26, 1921 -"**Katcha-Koo**" **Next Week** The popular opera."Katcha Koo" is to be presented under the auspices of the Turners Falls Woman's club at the Opera House, next Thursday and Friday evenings, Feb. 3 and 4. Rehearsals are now in progress daily and the affair will undoubtedly be a huge success. Some 200 people of all ages will be in the production. As practically all the talent will be local, more than ordinary interest will be taken in the presentation.

February 16 -**Cho-Cho, the Health Fairy** Turners Falls was favored on Monday afternoon by a visit from Cho-Cho the picture man, the health fairy and the jolly jester. Cho-Cho is a clown christened with the initials of the Child Health Organization, by whom he is employed. An audience of about 500 children gathered with their teachers in the Opera house and gave undivided attention for about forty minutes to his charming nonsense and droll antics with which he teaches the simple facts of health and hygiene. With the various vegetables he tries to impress on children's minds the kind that the most benefit is derived from, and also those that should be discarded from their bill of fare. As an incentive to this right living and eating he showed a number of medals and a \$500 diamond ring that he had won in various athletic contests. The talk was concluded with various slight of hand stunts. It was through the courtesy of the Board of Trade and Woman's Club that the children of the town were able to see and hear Cho-Cho

April 13 -The cast for "The Yokohama Maid," a Japanese operetta which will be produced by the high school glee clubs at the Opera House on Friday evening, April 22, includes: Chenery Salmon, Elliot Stoughton, Gordon Templar, Douglas Donovan, Joseph Briggs, Warren White, Misses Elizabeth Bassett, Gertrude Bardwell, Anna Crean, Helen Milkey and Helen Jillson, beside a mixed chorus.

October 19 -**White Face Minstrels** The White Face Minstrel show recently so successfully given in Millers Falls and Montague, will be repeated at the Turners Falls Opera house on Friday evening, Oct. 21, and is sure to make a hit and be largely attended. Members of Mechanics Lodge of Masons and Millers Falls and Montague members of Bay State Lodge will be in the cast, and a highly laughable and diverting entertainment is assured. The show will abound in local hits and is said to be quite out of the ordinary.

December 21 -It is desired to have a chorus to sing familiar Christmas carols at the Community Christmas tree exercises Friday night. All singers are earnestly requested to attend the rehearsal this evening at 9.15 at the Opera house to form a large mixed chorus.

### Other events in Turners Falls

While entertainment was the biggest attraction at the Opera House, and much of Turners Falls life revolved around the Opera House, commerce also became part of that life during the first decade of the 1900s. The Avenue A and 3rd Street block attracted a variety of retail outlets ranging from millinery and electronics to grocery stores including, of course, Fred Colle's Opera House Pharmacy. In addition to that pharmacy, Fred Colle had the pharmacy business in Lake Pleasant — "a profitable venture since the Lake at that time was scene of outings and a leading resort site."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Montague 1754-1954, *Recorder-Gazette*, June 24, 1954.

One of the most unusual of the earliest occupants of the Opera House was the Turners Falls public library. The *Recorder-Gazette* (June 4, 1954) indicated that, in 1874, local officials voted to establish a library in Turners Falls as soon as \$500 was privately donated. Thus the first library in Turners Falls "was opened in the Colle building in 1876 with 1,000 books on the shelves." The library remained there for more than 25 years.

In an October 18, 2006 piece in the *Greenfield Recorder*, Diane Broncaccio wrote:

In 1903, back when the Turners Falls public library was housed in the Colle Opera House, trustees learned that steel magnate Andrew Carnegie was giving out money for libraries across the country. They asked him for funding, and received \$12,500 for a new building. Later, Carnegie gave the trustees another \$1,000 for their future library. Today, the Carnegie Library in Turners Falls is the only one of the 85 New England libraries Carnegie helped build that carries his name. The Carnegie Library is 100 years old, and the Friends of the Montague Libraries will celebrate the centennial Thursday at the library from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. The event will feature birthday cake, music by...."

Soon after the Carnegie grant, the new Carnegie Public Library opened farther south at 201 Avenue A on land purchased from the Turners Falls Company. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

Meanwhile the Opera House looked out on a prosperous street railway system that passed in front of the Opera House on Avenue A and turned the corner onto 3rd Street and then on to Millers Falls. It brought many people from around Franklin County into the busy life of Turners Falls. The trolley cars ran every half-hour with special rates for mill workers during the usual hours of work. The cost was 10 cents from Turners Falls to Millers Falls or Lake Pleasant, and 5 cents from Montague City to Turners Falls. The last trolley ran from Turners Falls to Greenfield on July 7, 1934. The tracks were removed in 1952 when Avenue A was resurfaced. The era of the trolley had seen "boom and bust, war and peace, a quiet place of comfortable living and a racehorse pace of 'go-go-go'."<sup>19</sup>

#### **THE SHEA ERA 1914-1947**

As noted in the previous pages and reported every week in the *Turners Falls Reporter*, the Opera House block was host to a variety of businesses in the years after Fred's death. Denis J. Shea was the key entrepreneur, having arrived on the scene in 1914 as one of the post-Fred Colle managers to operate the Opera House after Fred died. As noted earlier Shea bought the Colle block in 1920. Shea was to be linked to the entertainment field of Turners Falls for the next 40 years. In its Montague 200th anniversary edition, a reporter at the *Greenfield Recorder-Gazette* remarked that "In its 87 years as a village, Turners Falls has seen only one Denis J. Shea." Shea was employed in his earlier years at the John Russell Cutlery Company and Wells Brothers Tool Company before going into the insurance business. Apparently show business was his *forte* because he scraped together money to lease the Opera House from Dina Colle in 1914 and embarked on a career of sports and entertainment promotion that brought an extraordinary variety of programs to Turners Falls and other communities in western Massachusetts. Shea made part of the Opera House into a dance hall and it became the venue for stage plays in the community. According to newspaper accounts,

For the next 30 years the town was to roar through some tremendous entertainment — keen wit, pathos, humor, drama, revues and — after 1914 — the 10-cent movie.... Shea was great with the kids. Many's the afternoon the small fry from Third Street and the avenue jammed into the theater to shriek and cavort along with the hero and heroine as they flicked and danced across the screen to the accompaniment of a grand piano."<sup>20</sup>

Toward the end of 1916, the Opera House embarked on a new community-oriented activity. In addition to its entertainment and civic-related programs, it moved into education — mixed with entertainment. The *Turners Falls Reporter*, October 18:

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<sup>19</sup> Montague 1754-1954, *Recorder-Gazette*, June 24, 1954, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Montague 1754-1954, *Recorder-Gazette*, June 24, 1954

### **The School Department Arranges for First Educational Films at the Opera House Theatre**

The first attempt will be made to put on in Turners Falls a series of educational films of such a character that the Department of the Public Schools can endorse, on Thursday, Oct. 19, 1916.

A motion picture of unusual type has been secured to be presented at the Opera house this week in the presentation of "Old Deerfield, 1675-1704," a subject so familiar to everyone. This feature ranks preeminent in the educational world for its historical value, having been successfully shown abroad as well as in America. Last season Herbert Streeter, who presents the picture with a brief and stirring lecture, presented "Old Deerfield" at Keith's theatre in Boston as well as in many other New England cities. The incidents of early Indian warfare in the days of King Philip and Queen Anne are realistically enacted by an excellent cast 'from the Edison studio. The scenes were taken on the very grounds in the Deerfield valley. This will be presented as an extra added feature to the regular program and is sure to attract a large audience.

Inasmuch as the department and Mr. Shea have been in touch with each other for some time, with a view to producing some kind of an educational picture, the department feels that it should encourage the children to attend this particular thing.

Should it prove a success, other educational features will follow, presumably on Saturday mornings, or some other time outside of school.

The picture and the lecture begin Thursday afternoon at a quarter of four, and will be supplemented by something of a lighter nature, which will be clean and pure.

The first half of the 1920s decade was the high point in the history of silent films and, as we have documented, these were shown regularly in the Opera House. That was to change. History was made in New York on October 6th, 1927 when Al Jolson, a minstrel singer, appeared in a ground-breaking movie "The Jazz Singer." In the middle of the film there was a nightclub scene in which Jolson was suddenly heard by the movie audience *speaking out loud*. The first words ever spoken in a movie were, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain't heard nothin' yet!" Talkies were born! The reaction by the theater audience was immediate — "they rose to their feet, applauding ecstatically."<sup>21</sup>

Shea had bought the vacant land next to the Opera House in 1925 from William Porter who had got it from Merle Colle when the latter was settling Fred and Christina Colle's estates. As noted earlier, the vacant lot had been purchased by Mary Colle in the 1870s from the Turners Falls Company. On that land Shea built the Shea Theater in 1927 — the Shea sharing a brick wall with the Opera House. The Shea and the new "talkies" influenced the character of the Opera House from then on. The projectionist at the Shea was Ernest Fugere of Turners Falls, who had been a projectionist at the Colle Opera House for its silent films showings. So in 1927, films and other shows appeared at the Shea. To provide musical background and sound effects for the films, Shea engaged an orchestra for a year and a half. It was led by Warren E. Brigham.

Denis Shea continued as an entertainment and events entrepreneur in various parts of the state, including management of Wilson's "singing orchestra" which appeared throughout New England. He also managed the Gables ballroom in South Deerfield which attracted outstanding performers.

On the Shea Theater web page, Helen Cavuto described the early days of the Shea.<sup>22</sup>

The Shea was an up-to-date movie theater designed in the "Spanish" style so popular in the Hollywood of the twenties. "California Stucco" walls were tinted in appropriate shades, the ceiling was graced by wooden beams (three of which remain today), the lobby boasted a lantern imported from Madrid and Spanish style wrought iron wall fixtures. The screen and projection booth were the best available and the stage could accommodate live productions. Denis Shea opened his theater on Valentines Day 1927. The program for the event lists an overture by the Shea Theater Orchestra, Warren E. Brigham, Director.

1. Pathe News,
2. An Our Gang comedy,

21 See the history of the first talking films at [http://www.essortment.com/all/firsttalkies\\_refn.htm](http://www.essortment.com/all/firsttalkies_refn.htm).

22 See <http://sheatheater.org/p/7/The-History-of-the-Shea-Theater,-TF,-MA>

3. Variety Entertainers,
4. The feature "Loves Great Mistake", starring William Powell and Evelyn Brent. The program for the rest of the week listed a different show for each day, including "It" starring Clara Bow.

That time is still vivid in the minds of some Turners Falls residents as a time of five cent matinees, movie serials and (in the thirties) dish nights, when you could see a movie and add a piece of "Depression Glass" or china to your table setting.

The opening of the Shea Theatre on Valentine's Day in 1927 had spelled the end of silent film showings in the Opera House. And thereafter the Opera House declined in prominence as an entertainment center with the Shea taking over that role. While still visibly a community centerpiece, the Colle Opera House took on a new role, one perhaps less spicy and glamorous than its earlier one. Its space was used by clubs and amateur groups, and was home for the Turners Falls Athletic Club. It housed a miniature indoor golf course for one brief season. The Montague 200th anniversary issue of the *Recorder-Gazette* in 1954 spoke nostalgically about the Opera House and foreshadowed a somber future. The *Recorder-Gazette* said wistfully that "The old Opera House remains only as a happy memory — gone but not forgotten."

After Fred Colle died, Joseph Trudel ran the Opera House Pharmacy in the prominent corner shop of the Opera House on the ground floor. The Economy Dress Shop, Pipione's Sport Shop, Kohler's Appliance Store, and Stanley's Jewelry Shop also occupied spaces in the Opera House over the years.

The Opera House history was rather unremarkable during the years of the 1930s and through the 1960s. However, a new chapter began in the 1970s and then its history became quite remarkable.

### **The industrial downsizing**

A walking tour guide for Turners Falls contains a collection of memories about the early 20th century history of the community.<sup>23</sup> That history recognized the modest prosperity that the industrial boom of earlier years had brought to the community. "Life wasn't necessarily easy for everyone; families were large in those days, wages were low. Many had to work two jobs to make ends meet," says the guide. But, the guide reports, "recreation and entertainment were plentiful: dance halls were scattered throughout the village, as well as an abundance of bars, speakeasies, music and theater, huge parades down Avenue A, and winter and summer festivities on the river." It didn't last. The companies that had contributed much to the growth and character of Turners Falls began downsizing during the early 1940s as the Second World War gripped much of the world. For the J. Russell Cutlery Company, downsizing meant merging with the Harrington Cutlery in Southbridge, Massachusetts and moving out of Turners Falls. The various paper companies began a 40 year process of job reductions that was "economically devastating" to Turners Falls and nearby villages and towns.

Caught in the maelstrom were the Shea Theater and the Colle Opera House. Irmarie Jones, columnist for *The Recorder-Gazette*, recapped the period:

#### **Memories**

The Colle [Opera House] had been the village's theater before the Shea, showing silent films. Clubs, and amateur groups used the Colle stage for a while after the Shea opened. Then it [the Opera House] was transformed into a miniature golf course. That lasted but one brief season....

After Shea died, the theater was sold in 1947 to Max Zallen of Newton. It continued to be the center of entertainment for the community for nine more years. In 1951, Vincent A. Choate leased the property, but moved to Springfield, Vt. within a few years. By 1956, the Shea was closed.

According to advertisements in *The Recorder-Gazette*, [the Shea] was opened briefly in 1963 and 1964 by another owner [Edward Krysiak], but finally, in 1973, it was taken over by the Renaissance Community. The balcony was stripped and converted into a professional-quality sound booth. In 1986, the commune sold the theater and the adjoining Colle Opera House to the Franklin County Community Development Corporation, and the agency, in turn, sold the buildings to Montague.

<sup>23</sup> *Historical Walking Tour of Turners Falls Village*, Great Falls Discovery Center, Turners Falls, MA., 1995.



**A glimpse of the early factories in Turners Falls along the Connecticut River mostly abandoned in this photo taken in 2013. This is the Keith/Strathmore /Hammermill Paper Company, 1871-1963.**

Denis Shea died in 1945 after almost 40 years in the entertainment field. As Irmarie Jones notes, Mrs. Ina B. Shea sold the Opera House and the Shea Theater on April 1, 1947 to Max Zallen. Zallen built a bowling alley on the property but there is no evidence of other creative enterprise at that time. During a period of about 25 years — in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s — when stagnation enveloped the Opera House and the Shea, these community icons went through a variety of financial transactions involving the Crocker Institution for Saving, Edward Krysiak, the Greenfield Savings Bank, and the William Porter family. Emerging from those dreary times came an unanticipated force in the community.

#### **A NEW AND DIFFERENT LIFE FOR THE COLLE OPERA HOUSE AND THE SHEA THEATER**

In 1972, a commune called the Brotherhood of the Spirit took over the Shea Theater and the Opera House. Michael Metelica, the Brotherhood's founder, brought the organization to Turners Falls away from the controversies he had generated earlier in Greenfield. Metelica's group rechristened themselves "the Renaissance Community" and Metelica was the "engine that ran the Renaissance." Reflecting on those earlier days, Daniel Brown, a former member of the commune, in 2003 wrote in *The Montague Reporter*:

Later that year [1972], Michael made the unilateral decision to move to Turners Falls because he wanted to change the group's image from impoverished rural hippies to that of savvy business people and to have a community that was self-sufficient. Turners at this juncture was in a state of visible decay. Pictures taken of the Colle Opera House/Shea Theater Block reveal a structure as inviting as the Bastille. Gazing around the deserted streets, you would have thought aliens had abducted all the inhabitants. But Turners also had a wild reputation as the snubbed outlaw suburb of Greenfield, a town with as many saloons as churches, and it was for this notoriety that Michael decided to try his own experiment in urban revitalization. — *The Montague Reporter*, March 6, 2003.

The Renaissance Community was one of the largest and most controversial New-Age intentional communities of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>24</sup> It was Ronald Sellers, a member of both the Brotherhood and the related band called Spirit in Flesh, who purchased the Opera House and the Shea on behalf of the Community. The deed (1321/39) shows that Ronald's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ronald W. Sellers, who lived in Springfield, Pennsylvania, were also "grantees" on the purchase.

A newspaper story documented the sale of the Colle Opera House and the Shea to the Seller family.



24 A brief history of the Renaissance Community by member Daniel Brown appears at <http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/galleries/brown/history.htm>.

**Colle Opera House in 1972 when it was purchased by the Sellers on behalf of the Renaissance Community — "as inviting as the Bastille!" Photo from the Renaissance Archives at the University of Amherst**

In an email communication to us in 2008, Ronald Sellers described the purchase event:

You probably know that I originally bought the property from William Porter. Porter was a long time resident of Turners Falls who lived down near the hospital. He was very anti-commune.

In order to buy the place, I got a haircut and had my father drive up to MA in his Cadillac with PA tags. Porter thought I was just some young kid from Philly with a lot of money to throw away on old buildings in dried up mill towns in New England. He couldn't believe that he'd had the good fortune to attract my attention with the opera house complex. I met with him two or three times, and each time he gave me an earful about the goddamned hippies that were buying up property all over Franklin County.

We didn't have enough money to buy the thing outright, so we had to get a mortgage. I wanted to try to get the mortgage without my father having to cosign it, so I created a business plan for the place that included a restaurant next to the theater with sidewalk cafe-style seating in the summer, a nightclub/concert hall in the theater itself, and various retail businesses in the other spaces. David Stackhouse did architectural drawings for it. When I presented it to the bank in Greenfield, they commented that it was one of the most well thought out business plans they'd ever received. They still rejected it, however, because they didn't believe that people would cross the hill to Turners Falls to go to a restaurant.

So my father volunteered to cosign the loan on the condition that the deed be held in my name until the mortgage was paid off (the bank would have stipulated this anyway). With him as cosigner, the mortgage went through without a hitch. The community made all of the payments on the property, and when it was paid off (after I had left the community, I think), I signed the deed over. My recollection is that we paid \$30,000 for the place, but again, that could be totally incorrect....

Anyway, the day that the deed was registered, the hippies descended on the Opera House Complex with paintbrushes in hand!



**The Block after "restoration" in 1973.**

**Photo from Renaissance Archives**

The Sellers transferred the property to the Renaissance Community in 1974.

Michael, who renamed himself Rapunzel, gained legal non-profit status for the Renaissance Community as a church in 1974. The Colle Opera House/Shea Theater was the "nerve center" of the movement. Daniel Brown described the glory days of the Renaissance in the Opera House, in the Shea, and in other Turners Falls places. The following from a web page captured some of the Renaissance action.

All community properties (which now included several residences in Turners Falls) were outlandishly renovated while members worked a variety of jobs in the outside world. The foremost of these employers was at the Belchertown State School for the developmentally challenged where 50 members worked on the wards and earned a reputation for treating the residents there with care and respect. The first of many business and creative ventures were launched during this time while Rapunzel worked full-time in the Shea Theater's recording studio with various bands. He also began a series of meetings for his followers which were mainly lengthy monologues of his philosophy and worldview. The Renaissance Church, meanwhile, opened its Sunday services to the general public featuring music and meditations with an accommodating spiritual philosophy. It also sponsored a free Christmas dinner in the Shea Theater for the next few years which was fully attended and highly popular with the outside population.

[The year] 1975 was the apex of the Turners Falls era with Renaissance operating a dozen businesses downtown including a 24-hour grocery, a record store, an audio supply center and a stylized pizza parlor. Notable among these were the Noble Feast restaurant which featured diversely innovative cuisine, Rocket's Silver Train which provided luxury-modeled tour buses to rock musicians (Elvis Costello, Pink Floyd, Linda Ronstadt, and Queen among others) and the forerunners of the now nationally distributed Silver Screen Design and Renaissance Greeting Cards. These were coupled

with contracting crews specializing in high-level industrial painting, paving and excavating, carpentry and plumbing. There was also an explosion of creative talent from community members as the recording studio, video lab, darkroom and media equipment were made freely available. The Choir, an all-women chorus, was created at this time and performed both at church services and at outside gigs. The community also produced the weekly Renaissance Radio Show that attained national distribution and featured topics ranging from the spiritual to the practical. Outreach to the local community was made through a series of free public events culminating in the Renaissance Faire, a street festival that attracted about 3,000. The young people of Turners Falls flocked to the community in droves, working in the many new businesses or hanging out in the drop-in center members created. It is worth noting that this Renaissance-inspired revitalization of Turners Falls occurred without any government grants or taxpayers' money. The community at this point was operating several dozen businesses and was, essentially, self-supporting.

— <http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/galleries/brown/history.htm>.

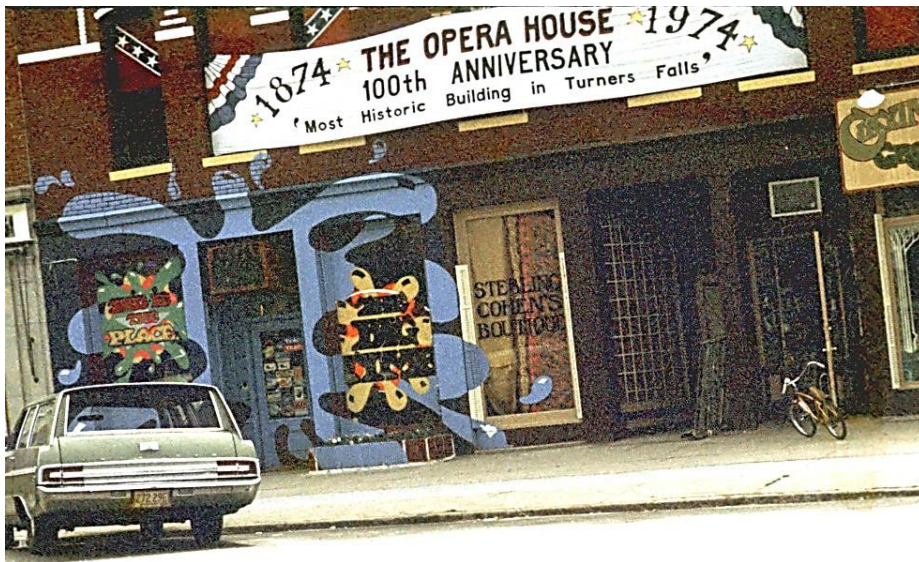
Daniel Brown and Gary Cohen photographed some of the highlights of the Renaissance period.



**A Turners Falls billboard 1975. Photo from the Renaissance Archives.**



The Colle Opera House rejuvenated by the Renaissance Community.



**The Colle Opera House in 1974.** This photo shows how the Renaissance members celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Colle Opera House, 1874-1974. In an email to us, Daniel Brown notes that "Because we owned the building, the local media pretty much ignored the event."

**Photos from the Renaissance Archives.**

The Renaissance launched a variety of businesses in the Opera House. The first was DP Audio which operated between 1972 and 1974. According to Daniel Brown, the business sold audio equipment, mostly to bands.



**This photo shows the first anniversary party of the DP Audio in the Opera House.  
Photo from the Renaissance Archives**

There was a variety of other businesses including Zapmia's Pizza located on the 3rd Street side of the Opera House (which, Brown reports, "featured pizza by the slice, a rarity in those days"). In his *Montague Reporter* article, Brown captures some of the activity:

Visitors coming into downtown Turners Falls in the middle 1970's could be forgiven for rubbing their eyes (and throbbing temples) in disbelief. Colors, shapes, and names that one rarely associated with New England mill towns were suddenly in glaring display, Atop the Colle Opera House sat an ornate golden crown, with Confederate flags in the windows, eagles on the sidewalks, and a huge surreal goddess with glowing eyes and wild hair gracing the far edifice. The Cumberland Farms on the corner had been replaced by Cucumber Grocery which was flanked on both sides by a dizzying array of shops.... The streets of downtown were filled with hundreds of people, mostly young teens who adored the rebelliousness of the group as much as their parents probably feared it. The kids were welcomed, given places to hang out, and hired to work at some of the businesses.

But the movement sputtered. Writing about the history of the Renaissance Community on a web page (<http://www.acomproductions.net/history.php> ), Brown notes:

At the end of 1975, the Renaissance Community purchased the rural Olde Stone Lodge in Gill and within a year decided to build a self-sufficient community utilizing a variety of alternative energy and sustainable technologies. Again, the group radically changed its identity as the focus shifted away from the Turners Falls businesses (which receded in number) to the building of several innovatively-designed houses on the 80-acre Gill property, nicknamed the 2001 Center.

For the next few years, this remnant continued to build their houses and maintain the land in Gill despite the departure of other long-term members and the influx of new ones, some of whom were violent or otherwise dysfunctional. [Metelica's] increasingly erratic behavior caused another rebellion against his authority in 1984, this time centered around the silkscreen company. This led to a final migration of vital members from which Renaissance never recovered....

From 1984 until 1988, the Renaissance community, now down to its final dozen members, struggled to maintain some semblance of cohesion as group meetings and projects came to an end and the land itself began to deteriorate. [Metelica], meanwhile, "managed" the community's once-successful bus touring company into bankruptcy as his abusive conduct became obvious even to his closest friends. In 1988, the remaining community leadership offered him \$10,000 to leave and never return. He accepted and was never seen on the Gill property again.

#### **FROM "THE PITS" TO RECOVERY — SORT OF...**

After Metelica left Turners Falls, the remaining members of the Renaissance Community migrated out, some to nearby Gill. In 1984, the Renaissance Community transferred the Colle Opera House and the Shea to the Town of Montague (1783/251). There followed 15 years of struggle and ambivalence about the future of these architectural icons that some considered a piece of Turners Falls history. Changes were already being seen in the economic health of the community. In the late 1970s one town official described the town as "the pits." In an email to us, Montague Town Administrator Frank Abbondanzio recalled the situation this way:

Physically, the downtown infrastructure was crumbling and buildings were experiencing serious disinvestment. Ownership was overly concentrated in a few absentee landlords, who were basically milking their properties. Although the ugly word was never officially used, downtown Turners Falls was effectively "redlined" during this period<sup>25</sup> ....

[T]he Noble Feast Restaurant, initially a very successful restaurant business, ended up closing its doors after taking on a reputation as a loud and rowdy bar and losing its liquor license. There were many other bars that fell into the same category (the American House, Carneys, Fireside, Tuscon East, Bridge Cafe, Rendezvous, Vets Club, St.Kaz, St. Stans,). Turners Falls was looked upon by the rest of Franklin County as the mini- "Combat Zone."<sup>26</sup>

The police department was extremely busy on Friday and Saturday nights. One of the most important leadership decisions made by the Board of Selectmen, in their role as License Commissioners, was to crack down on the bars. There were liquor license violations nearly every week. One of the first that I remember involved the American House — for an after hours serving violation. The Police Officer described the scene as he entered the bar at 2:30 a.m. "A man was seated at the bar, with a half full glass in front of him. There was a bottle of tequila on the bar. There were fruit flies in the bottle. I counted them. Must have been about 150 flies". That observation said it all.

Abbondanzio notes that the Selectmen were successful in bringing the bar problem under control, "however, at that time the bars were the only profitable businesses, and as they closed, the town took on the appearance of a ghost town. All that remained were a few marginal businesses." This struck a sharp contrast with the picture seen decades earlier as described by another observer.

At the turn of the [19th] century, though, downtown Turners Falls was a vibrant place indeed. From 1895 - 1934, an electric trolley ran up Avenue A on its route from Greenfield to Montague and Millers Falls. The Grand Trunk Hotel was among the most prominent buildings on the village's main street. There were taverns and the Colle Opera House, a vaudeville theater seating 1,000 people. Today, the town's architecture is sadly all that's left of its former glory. There have been restoration efforts on the Opera House, the Shea Theatre and the Crocker Building (which was almost destroyed in a tragic fire set by runaway youth several years ago). But Turners itself is struggling to survive, a town with lots of potential but little money. Though the majority of the town is still white,

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25 "Redline" indicates that it was a high risk area and was not a good candidate for loans, insurance, or other financial services to people or businesses.

26 Ed Gregory notes that these "are private clubs and are not considered to be troublesome venues. However, they were and are part of the 'bar scene' in Turners Falls." (Personal communication from Gregory, July 20, 2017.)

there is a growing diversity, including new African American, Latino, Russian, Asian and Mexican residents. And that has made racism yet another problem for the town to face, along with economic disparity, the lack of youth activities, and (currently) the fight to keep control of MCTV, the town's community cable access channel, with Montague Community Cable rather than under the control of GCTV, rival Greenfield's community access station.<sup>27</sup>

After the Renaissance Community left the Colle Opera House and the Town of Montague took ownership, the Opera House was described in a variety of ways. On the more positive side, it was called: "a landmark", "a showplace", "a community treasure." Less favorable labels included: "decaying", "a tall (but historic) Avenue A eyesore", "a hollow brick shell", "dilapidated", and "a red-brick elephant." The Renaissance Community had pretty much stripped the insides of wood and anything else they had installed. The Town looked for a private developer, but none came forward and the building stood vacant for more than a decade — during much of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s.



**A sign of the future: entrance to the property in 2013.**

### **The beginning of restoration and the National Register**

Meanwhile some efforts at restoration of the downtown area began in the early 1980s. Earlier the town had created an inventory of the community's historic buildings and had hired the Conway School of Landscape Design to prepare a master plan for the downtown. The architecture — "its former glory" — was considered a unique aspect of the Turners Falls community. Many outstanding examples of late 19th century architecture survived in what later became the Turners Falls Historic District — roughly bounded by the Connecticut River, the Power Canal, and 9th and L Streets. These architectural treasures were listed on the National Historic Register in 1982. They included the Colle Opera House along with the Cutlery Block, the Crocker Building, the Shea Theater and the Discovery Center Buildings. Being part of the National Historic Register provided at least one piece of the argument for the ultimate preservation of these properties. With the appointment of Frank Abbondanzio in 1980 as community planning director

<sup>27</sup> L. Nichols, *Town Spotlight: Turners Falls*, <http://www.valleyviewpoint.com/spotlights/turners.htm>.

and assistant to the Board of Selectmen, serious efforts to gain support for restoration began. A key catalyst was Abbondanzio contracting the University of Massachusetts Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning to do a downtown revitalization study for Turners Falls. He told us that:

The primary value of this study was that it helped to draw attention of the positive attributes of Turners Falls, including its history, its outstanding architecture and the natural beauty of the Connecticut River. The idealism of the students helped to improve upon the negative image that had come to be associated with Turners Falls. It also helped to inspire hope.

An early step in revitalizing Turners Falls occurred when the town combined a Public Works Economic Development grant (\$300,000) with Montague taxpayers funds (\$550,000) to implement the Streetscape Improvement Program in 1983. This was an investment in brick sidewalks, historic lighting, and benches. Another concrete sign of restoration followed with the Powertown Project a year later. With strong support from Congressman Silvio Conte, ten buildings in Turners Falls were rehabilitated by making physical upgrades. Both Federal Government subsidies and nearly \$5 million in private investment through a tax credit initiative helped save the Hibernian Building, the American House, the Vladish Hotel building and other properties of significant historical value in the downtown area. Abbondanzio reported that all the work was done according to the historic restoration standards of the U.S. Department of the Interior and "really set a standard for future rehabilitation efforts."

A third effort during the 1980s decade started out as a proposed \$7 million Heritage State Park for Turners Falls. The State's economic woes crippled but didn't topple the idea. Some of the money was salvaged to redefine the project from a heritage park to a discovery center. In fact, it became today's Great Falls Discovery Center at one end of Avenue A.

During this period of renewal, the Colle Opera House did not fare well. The big obstacle that the Town of Montague faced was the need for a \$750,000 investment to correct major structural problems of the building. Abbondanzio reported to us that various attempts to move forward on this front never got beyond the preliminary design stage — probably influenced in part by an economy that got "tanked" before proponents could get started. He commented:

Unfortunately, the entire downtown, whose revitalization program appeared to be taking off, became a victim of [another] economic decline. Properties, which had escalated significantly in value as a result of the physical upgrades, suddenly plunged in value. In many instances the owners were left holding real estate that the rents couldn't begin to support. And the cycle of disinvestment downtown began all over again.... This lasted throughout the early 90's. It didn't help that three major downtown businesses (Strathmore Paper Company, Railroad Salvage, and Indeck Energy) closed their doors during this period.

### **A bright light — the Shea Theater**

Meanwhile something was happening with the Shea and it had relevance for the fate of the Opera House. The histories of the Opera House and the Shea Theater had been closely entwined ever since the Shea's bricks began rising next door to the "Colle block" in 1927. The Shea Theater web page captures the image of the Shea Theater's earliest days. (See page 26 above.)

Various potential developers saw activities of one feeding into those of the other — to create a symbiotic relationship. The Shea was to lead the way in renovation of the historic Avenue A location downtown.



**The Shea Theater, a part of the Colle Opera House landmark.**

Turners Falls' residents remembered the Shea's earlier days. Irmarie Jones wrote in the *Recorder* that children used to run home from school on Monday, "quickly change their clothes and rush down to the Shea." Stella Skrypek of Turners Falls remembered that admission on Monday was only 5 cents. "There would be one chapter of a serial and a Laurel and Hardy movie or a light musical, something that the children could enjoy. Denis Shea would walk up and down the aisles. All the children were afraid of him [because] he made sure the children behaved themselves." But Shea was generous with children. If the admission was 10 cents and the child had 5, the child got in.

In a Memories column for the *Recorder*, Irmarie Jones reports some of projectionist Ernest Fugere's memories: during one Christmas vacation time, Shea scheduled a free show for the kids in the morning. "For Halloween there was a parade and he let in all the kids in costume for free." Shea also minded the popcorn machine. Sally Livingston remembered that it was the "best popcorn I ever ate" and it was also 5 cents. In the various financial transactions involving the transfer of the Shea property in the 1960s, the popcorn machine was obviously important and was mentioned in an official document that read: "Included in this mortgage, and considered as part of the real estate, are all theater seats, projection machines and corn machines." (1193/189)

The 1927 Shea had little shops built into each side of the entrance. One occupant was the Greenfield *Recorder-Gazette* newspaper. A small candy store occupied the other. Besides films and vaudeville shows, some persons in Montague recall dance recitals being held there as well as the Rotary Club's annual stage show. Before Turners Falls High School's auditorium was completed in 1937, the theater was used for the senior class plays. Helen Yarmac recalled that her graduation was held at the Shea in 1936.

Shea also brought in occasional vaudeville shows. He ran the theater until 1943 when he hired someone to manage it for him. He died in 1945 and his family sold the theater two years later. It continued to operate under various owners until 1956. It then went dark and remained dark except for a short time in 1963-64 when it was owned briefly by Edward Krysiak and was renamed the Falls Theater.

A new life for the theater came in 1990. The Town of Montague was then owner (having taken it over from the Renaissance Community) and the Town began renting it to the non-profit Shea Community Theater at the cost of \$1.00 a year. The Town of Montague and a group of local citizens raised more than \$200,000 for the Shea's renovation. State Senator John Oliver (later a member of the U. S. House of Representatives) helped secure a state civic center grant of \$1 million to launch the project. However restoration work began in a modest way — it started with nine volunteers stripping the walls back to the

brick. The involvement of volunteers established a tradition — the Shea has always depended heavily on a corps of volunteers to maintain its active programs.

Approximately 300 seats from the old Shea Theater were sold for \$200 each to raise money for the restoration. There were parties and a host of other activities to raise money to add to the funds provided by the Town of Montague for the restoration. Members of the community mobilized an effort to bring the architectural firm Fisher Dachs Associates (FDA) to make the Shea a multipurpose home for community theatre, music, dance, and film. FDA is a well-known theater design organization whose clients have included commercial and non-profit theaters at universities, cities and cultural organizations like the Miami and Detroit operas, Guthrie Theatre, Radio City Music Hall, the Hollywood Bowl and Lincoln Center. Its international assignments have included performing arts projects in Singapore, Korea, Taiwan and Mexico.<sup>28</sup> For a budget under \$700,000, the Shea was completely gutted and new raked seating, an expandable stage, and complete theater lighting and rigging systems, box office and storage facilities were designed and installed. Alternate rows of seats are removable to create, when desired, more flexible cabaret-style seating, making the theater both more functional and more intimate.

In 1990 the renovated and glittering Shea Theater opened its doors with a production of *Butterflies Are Free* staged by The Country Players, who became one of the Shea's resident theater groups. Within 20 years the Shea was providing performance space for a variety of attractions designed to appeal to a wide range of tastes. For example it hosted touring groups such as the Crabgrass Puppet Theater. Musical offerings have included folk, pop, rock, swing, jazz, country and traditional music performances. Theatrical productions now encompass musical comedy, drama, comedy, and political satire. For example, in 2008 the show "The Producers" appeared on stage for two weekends. In addition, audiences can take advantage of magic shows, children's shows, and silent film revivals. The Shea organization has continued to offer a popular program of drama classes and summer camp workshops.



**The Shea Theater was the Falls Theater in 1966. Photo courtesy of Ed Gregory.**

In a 2001 *Greenfield Recorder* newspaper story, Andrew Varnon suggested that the Shea Theater's 1990s renovation had been a turning point in Turners Falls fortunes, and that it was a good sign for the revitalization of the downtown of Turners Falls and for the neighboring Colle Opera House.

**As the Shea Theater enters its second decade as a home for community theater in Franklin County,**

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.fisherdachs.com/projects/she.html>.

### **Turners Falls is rallying to the standard of downtown revitalization.**

However, it isn't the first time. Today [2001], the Shea is often touted as an example of the potential value of other Turners Falls buildings like the Colle Opera House and the Crocker block.

But when "Butterflies Are Free" opened at the Shea Theater in October of 1990, it signaled a victory for downtown Turners Falls. Four arduous years had passed since the Renaissance Community relinquished its hold on the then-dilapidated theater in the heart of downtown on Avenue A. In those four years, the building was transformed from a symbol of downtown blight into a working performance arts space, and a symbol of downtown potential.

The town acquired the building, and Franklin County Community Development Corp. and the Shea Theater Board undertook the task of raising money needed to renovate it. It was an uphill task, as the "Massachusetts miracle" had deflated and state money was drying up.

In the 1980s, a number of ambitious ideas for revitalizing Turners Falls surfaced. Along with the Shea, the Colle Opera House was to be developed and the State Division of Environmental Management was working on an idea for a state heritage park on Avenue A.

While the other projects stalled, the Shea Theater proponents pushed on, securing \$840,000 in public and private funding -- the bulk of it coming from a state civic center grant. The theater was refurbished and began to stage shows. Perhaps even more remarkably, the theater continued to hold the line into the next decade, as Great Falls Discovery Center and Colle Opera House projects queue up to be next elements of the town's plan to become a regional tourist destination.

The 320-seat Shea Theater was a diamond in the rough, according to Nick Waynelovich, who was the president on the theater's board of directors for six years and now heads up one of the theater's three resident companies, Ja'Duke Productions.

"We turned an eyesore into a community asset," he said, describing the Shea as a "tremendous success story."

Waynelovich grew up in Turners Falls and knows its history. He was there when the factories closed; he watched downtown buildings decay under absentee landlords. When he was a kid, there were as many bars in Turners Falls as there were churches. The Montague selectmen were working to dry up Turners' bar-brawling image around the time they acquired the Shea theater in 1986.

Jay DiPucchio, another Turners Falls resident, was the Franklin County Community Development Corp.'s project manager for a couple of years leading up to the theater's opening in 1990. He said the story of the Shea Theater reflects a turnaround in attitude about the village. Before being renovated, the building hadn't had any attention in a decade and was suffering structurally....

Now that the Shea Theater has become a reliable draw for the community, DiPucchio believes that people are getting a new sense of Turners Falls. "They see that here is a community that is struggling to rebuild itself," he said.

DiPucchio believes that the current spate of development [2001] has been helped along by the spark that the effort to renovate the Shea Theater brought to downtown.

According to Montague Town Administrator Frank Abbondanzio, the effort to revitalize downtown Turners Falls rests on bringing a "critical mass" of visitors into the village. Abbondanzio considers the Shea Theater to be an important part of that effort....

More immediately, Abbondanzio is also hoping that the Shea Theater can help him draw tenants to the neighboring Colle Opera House, which the town now also owns. If the Colle could get a restaurant on the first floor, he said, the town might knock out part of the wall in the Shea lobby and join the two buildings....

Although the theater is a source of hope now, that wasn't always the case. In the beginning, there were doubts as to whether the Shea would get off the ground, according to director Debra Guerke. Guerke's depiction of the climate in the early days of the Shea speaks to the obstacles the theater board faced.

In 1990, the Massachusetts economy was pretty much squashed and times weren't looking ripe for arts organizations. Typical sources of funds vanished, Guerke said, and a lot of arts groups folded. People in town doubted whether the theater would work, and even people within the Shea community had doubts. The first few years were lean and the theater was going into debt, and Guerke said there was even some consideration of closing the theater...

People looked at the Shea and said that it was too small to succeed. At 320 seats, the Shea is among the

smaller theaters....What that means, according to Waynelovich, is that the Shea would be a pretty pricey ticket for nationally known acts. So the Shea didn't become a professional production house, like the Calvin or the Colonial Theater in Keene, N.H....

The town owns the theater, but an independent board of directors runs the theater. The board consists of 12 members, six of whom are from Montague. The board hires a director to oversee the running of the theater.

The theater produces some shows, but what provides the theater with its regular business are its resident companies, which produce their own shows. The Arena Civic Theater and the Country Players were the original resident companies at the Shea, and Ja'Duke was added in 1998 as the third company.

### LAST CALL OR CURTAIN CALL FOR THE COLLE?

Despite the negative descriptions of the Colle Opera House since it was abandoned by the Renaissance Community, some forces in Montague Town and Turners Falls saw the importance of having a strong rallying symbol in the prominent space that was the corner of Avenue A and 3rd Street — neighboring the Shea. They weighed the cost of demolition (\$350,000) and the resulting gap in the downtown landscape — against the benefits of the Opera House as a catalyst for Turners Falls revitalization. Some steadfastly pursued funding and potential tenants. For example, in its December 13, 1994 issue, the *Springfield Union News* reported that Greenfield resident and French entrepreneur Olivier de Cavele wanted to develop the Opera House into a newspaper museum "housing artifacts and memorabilia from all newspapers that have served Franklin County over the years." de Cavele suggested that the ground floor could house "a couple of shops and perhaps a small restaurant in the future." Putting a restaurant in the Opera House was an idea that surfaced from time to time in discussions by others about the property. However de Cavele failed to follow through. The *Greenfield Recorder* noted that de Cavele had "acquired the First National Bank and the former GTD buildings in Greenfield, then never made good on his proposals for them."<sup>29</sup>

In 1994, under a headline "**It may be the last call for the Colle**", Diane Broncaccio wrote in the *Recorder* that there were disagreements among local government officials about the fate of the Colle.<sup>30</sup>

**Turners Falls** — Although once a showplace for vaudeville, minstrels and melodrama, the 120-year-old Colle Opera House is now an eyesore: vacant, boarded -up and decaying next door to the rejuvenated Shea Theater on Ave A and Third Street. Montague selectmen want to know if the building should be razed or saved.

By a split vote, the board decided 2-1 Monday night to give the building a last look by agreeing to spend \$12,750 of the town's \$17,000 Community Development Block Grant money for a \$25,000 feasibility study. The town block grants would be matched by a Massachusetts Government Land Bank pre-development assistance program in order to study the costs to rehabilitate, lease and manage the building....

"It's been in a bad state of disrepair for 15-20 years," Executive Secretary Deborah Radway said of the building. "Yet it is at the center of downtown Turners Falls and is irrevocably linked to the economy...."

The newspaper went on to report that Selectmen Hugh Campbell and Clarkson Edwards believed the historic opera house should be saved and restored. Campbell said: "If we can garner enough interest to a developer, [the renovation] is worth doing, it's worth it. I won't sit here and just write it off completely." The reporter concluded: "Now that the Shea has been renovated and restored to use, selectmen would like to see the Colle either restored or used, or else destroyed."

The Town of Montague proceeded to apply for a \$1.2 million grant from the state of Massachusetts' Housing and Community Development agency for the restoration, and this was to be a factor in the next attempt to rescue the old opera house.

In 1995 local real estate developer Earl W. Bowen proposed that there be a 70-80 seat restaurant that would serve lunch and dinner and especially cater to crowds attending events at the Shea.

29 Diane Brocaccio, "Once grand lady offered new role," *Greenfield Recorder*, December 26, 1998.

30 Diane Broncaccio, "It may be the last call for the Colle," *Greenfield Recorder*, August 2, 1994.

Bowen, president of the New England Investment Holding Corporation, and a native of the Greenfield-Deerfield community, expected to purchase the property for \$1.00 and then take responsibility for all the renovation costs, but part of these costs would be paid for by the Housing and Community Development agency grant if it came through. The renovation costs were estimated at around \$1.7 million. The Housing agency turned down the town's request because of "uncertainty over how and when an additional \$700,000 would be raised."<sup>31</sup> So, again, nothing happened. Bowen held an option on the property through the end of 1997, and then transferred the option to Historic Massachusetts, a Boston-based not-for-profit organization dedicated to preserving and rehabilitating historic buildings. The option was extended for a year to the end of December 1998.

The Colle Opera House was one of three buildings that were a vital part of Turners Falls' landscape. The other two were the Crocker and the Cutlery buildings. On June 26, 1997, the Crocker Building caught fire and its resulting badly-burned-out condition caused some townspeople to suggest the demolition of both the Colle Opera House and the Crocker Building. Some voices called for giving up on a restoration of the Opera House. A letter to the local newspaper expressed some of the frustration:

### **Protect the taxpayers.**

When are Montague taxpayers ever going to get a break? The legitimate concerns of municipal government include the town hall, schools, libraries, police, fire and highway departments. They cost us plenty now, and projections of spending for these purposes in the next four years will be overwhelming to many ordinary property owners.

The town should not take on more building than is needed to accomplish its legitimate functions. The notion that government should be the landlord of last resort is socialistic and a pernicious threat to every taxpayer/resident. Cut the rhetoric about holding down costs, and start doing some cutting. For openers let's drop any further spending by the town on these twin red-brick elephants -- the Colle and the Crocker. *Greenfield Recorder*, November 9, 1999.

A reporter once asked Montague Community Planner Denis Superczynski if there was any news regarding renovation plans for the Crocker Building, the Colle or the Cutlery Block. "The big story is if we ever have a building to renovate that doesn't begin with the letter C," he grumbled (*Greenfield Recorder*, July 31, 1998). Ultimately, both the Crocker and the Cutlery were restored with outside funding available.

TURNERS FALLS -- Two more dominoes have fallen into place for the rebuilding of downtown Turners Falls: a \$500,000 Housing Stabilization grant and \$446,790 in Housing Tax Credits for the restoration of the Cutlery Block and the fire-scarred Crocker Building. The million dollars worth of fix-up money and tax credits will speed the rehabilitation of the two historic buildings for low-income housing and future retail space, according to Paul H. Douglas, executive director of Rural Development....— *Greenfield Recorder*, April 19, 1999.

Earlier, in 1997, the Franklin County Regional Council of Governments had included the Colle Opera House among its possibilities for consolidating its various offices — which were then spread around Greenfield — into one 19,000 square foot location. The Opera House met the Building Facility Committee's criteria for a place in a highly visible and accessible location for the public. In 1998 and throughout 1999 newspaper stories abounded discussing the addition of a fourth floor to the Opera Houses, and dividing a 30-year lease into three sequential 10-year leases to satisfy the Council. Although, the Council wanted a fourth floor to accommodate its 50 or so employees, State funding sources declined to provide money for the addition.

Meanwhile Montague Town officials maintained confidence in the viability of the Opera House as a Turners Falls institution — first by committing funds to fix a leaky roof. The money for the roof repair came from the town's Community Block Grant program revenues that had to be spent on community development projects. In July, 1997, Montague selectmen accepted a \$34,400 bid from Pinnacle Systems of Shrewsbury to repair the roof to stem further deterioration of the old landmark until future renovations could get under way. The *Greenfield Recorder* (December 24, 1997) wrote that "Because of its prominent location — at Third Street and Avenue A — selectmen have said they see the blighted building's restoration as crucial to the revitalization of downtown Turners Falls." Efforts by Turners Falls artist Nina

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31 Diane Broncaccio, "Opera house request denied," *Greenfield Recorder*, December 3, 1996.

Bander and store owner Arnold Houle to mobilize students to decorate the boarded-up windows of the Opera House failed to get traction. But in March 1998 the Town sought support from outside funding agencies for the restoration of the exterior and to bring the building into accessibility compliance with the America Disabilities Act. Significantly, Historic Massachusetts became a partner in efforts to gain additional financial support and in the search for a future tenant for the Opera House. The following newspaper story in 1998 suggested that the impending renovation of "the Colle" made it a lively candidate as a home for the Council of Governments.

**Colle Opera House gets \$280,000 revitalization boost**

By Diane Broncaccio, *Recorder Staff*

**Tuners Falls** – The Colle Opera House will be taking that long-awaited first step toward revitalization, now that \$280,000 in grant money and matching funds have been earmarked for the once-stately building.

A \$140,000 Massachusetts Projects Fund grant was awarded through the state Historic Commission to stabilize the vacant Colle and make it handicapped accessible. The grant will be matched with another \$140,000 to come from Historic Massachusetts Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving historic buildings throughout the state. Last December, Historic Massachusetts took over an option to purchase the town-owned building.

Besides restoring the building to its former charm, town officials believe the improvements will strengthen Montague's bid to house the Franklin Regional Council of Government.

Community Preservation Program Manager Marilyn Fenollosa of Historic Massachusetts said the agency is happy about receiving the grant. "We think it's a wonderful space with a lot of potential," she said of the Colle. "It's the best location in town. We hope we will find a tenant that will appreciate the space and location, one that will work with us to bring (the building) back to life...."

"The town is grateful that an organization with the stature of Historic Mass. is willing to step forward and take responsibility for the building," said Montague Selectmen's Chairman Bradford Councilman. "It's a very positive step toward the reuse of the building." "EDIC brought (Historic Massachusetts) out here, and we're really thrilled that they're such a positive and assertive developer for that property," said Nancy DuBosque, project manager for the Montague Economic Development and Industrial Corp....

The money will be used to remove the harsh, reddish paint and restore the natural brick facade. Part will be used for an elevator and to make the building handicap accessible. Some of the money may also be used for structural improvements that would "put the building into shape -- where we could build to the specifications of a future user," Fenollosa said.

Built in 1874, the building originally had two floors and a vaulted ceiling above the opera stage. Fenollosa said the building will eventually have three floors, which would provide more income opportunities....

Town officials and Fenollosa believe the impending renovation also makes the Colle a more desirable choice as a future home for the Franklin Regional Council of Governments.

When asked if planned restoration makes the Colle more viable now as a candidate for the future COG home, Executive Director Jay DiPucchio said the commitment of grant money "does increase the competitiveness of Montague's proposal to bring the Colle forward as a site."

"As a regional planning agency," he added. "We're very glad to see this, as an investment in a downtown center in Franklin County...." Fenollosa said [Historic Massachusetts] has committed its share of the matching grant funds from a revolving fund it has set up, until other grant sources can be found. She said the agency must have a viable tenant for the Colle before it exercises its option to buy the building.

— *Greenfield Recorder*, March 13, 1998.

Saloomey Construction of Springfield, Massachusetts refurbished the exterior of the Opera House for \$315,000 in what was called Phase One. In *The Montague Reporter* (October 10, 2002) Joseph Parzych, describing the restoration process, wrote that the Renaissance Community had painted the brickwork with epoxy paint.

Saloomey used just about every environmentally acceptable chemical known to man to remove the stubborn paint. Chemicals and water blasting took out more of the old lime mortar than anticipated along with the paint, necessitating a major repointing of the bricks rather than the minor repointing anticipated. The contractor took a loss on the job.

The return of Frank Abbondanzio as Town of Montague Administrator in 1998 was also a factor in rescuing the Opera House. In January 1998, *Recorder* reporter Diane Broncaccio wrote in the paper:

After a 5-year hiatus from his dozen years as Montague's town administrator, Abbondanzio came to town government in 1998 just in time to see some of his projects from the 1980s bear fruit.... "I see some very positive things coming in the next year [1998], particularly with the Colle Opera House," Abbondanzio said. He was referring to the purchase option on the town-owned building acquired two weeks ago by Historic Massachusetts Inc.... Abbondanzio sees the Colle renovation as the centerpiece for other downtown Turners improvements. He hopes the Colle's eventual restoration as office space for professionals will stimulate the downtown economy. "Job creation is critical to supplying the kinds of retail activities that could help downtown," he said.

And it looked as if progress was being made. A headline in the *Greenfield Recorder* March 19, 1999 announced:

**Council approves Colle lease with no dissent**

At a special meeting of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments Thursday [March 18], all of the 21 towns present voted in favor of signing a lease to move into the 1874 Colle Opera House in Turners Falls.

After \$1.3 million in renovations to the building, the council of governments hopes to occupy it by the fall of 2000....The council will not actually sign the lease until the building is accepted after the renovations are completed.

Within a month the *Recorder* editorially reflected on the brighter outlook for Turners Falls after years of struggle with a diminished industrial infrastructure and the community's ambivalent reaction to the Renaissance sparkle. The newspaper spread credit around for the new optimism.

Once upon a time Turners Falls was envisioned as a sort of storybook town of industry and prosperity, with well-cared for workers, happy families and a strong sense of community. The canal and the mills were supposed to bring that vision about, and for the most part did so.

Then the storybook times passed and Turners Falls fell on hard times, poverty and decay. Now local agencies and local residents are working to make the happier vision live again, and it looks as though they are on their way to bringing a happy ending -- or should we say a happy new beginning -- to the town.

The recent announcement of \$1 million in funding for the restoration of the Cutlery Block and the fire-damaged Crocker Building in downtown Turners is one more sign of that new beginning.

The funding will speed up renovation of the two buildings for low-income housing and future retail space. The Cutlery Block (built in the 1860s as housing for industrial workers), the Crocker Building and the old Colle Opera House are the Three Cs of downtown Turners. With a little luck, they could all see a restoration to new life by the end of the year 2000

The now-vacant Colle is already scheduled to be rebuilt by then as the new offices of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments. Just as important as the renovation of the Three C's buildings though, is another set of C's undergoing rebirth in Turners Falls: community, caring and commitment.

Those three C's are evident in the people who have worked to secure the funding: leaders of local agencies and local residents, Montague selectmen, state legislative representatives, the state Department of Housing and Community Development and others. But those three C's also extend beyond these projects and beyond the monetary commitment.

Local agencies and community leaders are working to make sure that jobs and training and child care are available locally for those who will live in the renovated low-income housing. Turners Falls residents are developing truly grass roots projects, like the community garden downtown, to make Turners a better place to live.

Leaders, including the selectmen, have sought input from residents about how to improve the community and made it a point to listen to ideas and try to find ways to implement good ones.

Those are all great signs that point to a happier future for Turners. Paul Douglas, executive director of Rural Development Inc. and the Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority, says he believes Turners Falls has a window of opportunity right now. It appears the community is prepared and empowered to take full advantage of that window.

We wish the town best of luck in that endeavor.



### **The Cutlery Building in 2008**

Everything appeared to be on track, especially with the expectation that the Franklin County Council of Governments would anchor the occupation of the Colle Opera House. However, another shout — this time discordant — came less than a year later, in early 2000, announcing a blink in the Turners Falls revitalization vision.

#### **Council members vote down move into Colle building. Plan to keep offices in courthouse**

By Michael Puffer

Members of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments overwhelmingly voted against a move into the former Colle Opera House in Turners Falls Wednesday night, ending a two-year project aimed at moving the scattered council offices under one roof.

For the moment, the council will remain in its offices at the Franklin County Courthouse in Greenfield and seek space within a planned new courthouse. The council's attempt to secure 10,000-square-feet of office space within the proposed courthouse is the same amount of space it had hoped for in the Colle, said Council member Stanley Gawle.

Construction of the courthouse, however, could take as long as three years, according to Judge Thomas Merrigan, co-chairman of the Franklin County Courthouse Facilities Committee.

Considering the incredible effort that has been expended during the search for new quarters, it is un-likely that the council's facilities committee will take up the issue again in the near future, said Charles Mackie, chairman of the committee and of the full council.

"The bright side of it is we are squatters," said Gawle, referring to state legislation that allows the council to stay in the current court-house indefinitely and rent-free. "As far as I am concerned, let them take their time."

Renovations to the Colle along Avenue A, currently a hollow red shell, will continue, said Montague Selectman Patricia Allen. In the absence of the council, the town will look to real estate agents to market the building, said Allen.

Montague Town Administrator Frank Abbondanzio estimated that renovations on the Colle should be complete

in early 2002.

The facilities committee recommended the larger council vote against a move into the Colle after becoming convinced no money would be found for construction of a fourth floor on the building, said Mackie.

The Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development informed Montague in October that it was eligible for a \$1 million grant for Colle renovations, \$600,000 less than the amount for which the town originally applied. The three-floor plan developed by the town in light of the shortfall does not include enough space to accommodate both the council and its sister agencies, said Gawle. Prior to Wednesday night's meeting, all three sister agencies -- The Franklin County Retirement System, the Franklin County Solid Waste Management District and the Franklin County Cooperative Building Inspection Program -- voted not to make the planned move into the Colle with the council because of a lack of space.

Without the \$32,000 rent the sister agencies would have provided in the Colle, the council cannot afford the building's lease, said Gawle. —*Greenfield Recorder*, January 26, 2000

This was a setback, but a temporary one. Abbondanzio recalls the "leap of faith" that took over:

The involvement of the Franklin County Regional Council of Governments was critical in getting both the EDA and CDAG grants for the Colle. The agencies made a commitment to fund the Colle at a time when they thought a good portion of the building would be leased upon completion of the work. The leap of faith came after the FRCOG backed out of the deal. I remember a meeting with state officials at which the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Community Development stated that in spite of the loss of our tenant the agency remained committed to fund the project, because of its importance to the downtown revitalization. They essentially set a precedent by funding a real estate project on a strictly speculative basis. There was no previous precedent for it. I think the town's decision to come up with \$500,000 of its own money influenced their decision.

Later that year, on July 27, 2000, the turning point was reported in the *Springfield Union News*:

#### **\$1 million to benefit historic site**

By David A. Vallette

**MONTAGUE** — A key element in the economic revival of Turners Falls fell into place yesterday when the town received a \$1 million state grant to rehabilitate and reuse the historic Colle Opera House.

The grant from the Department of Housing and Community Development was announced by state Sen. Stan Rosenberg, D-Amherst, and state Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington.

Officials will celebrate the award today at 2:30 p.m. at the opera house. Among those on hand will be Lt. Gov. Jane Swift... Officials hope the renovated Colle will play a key role in the village's economic revival.

It was clear that the success of the Colle restoration initiative was tied to a variety of funding sources and to related activities in the community. The Opera House project was part of those "three C's" of the village development vision. The others were the Crocker and the Cutlery buildings which were part of the \$6.2 million rehabilitation by the Franklin County Housing and Redevelopment Authority. Another piece of the vision for Turners Falls was the already successful 1990 renovation of Shea Theater.

In addition to the \$1 million grant for the Colle Opera House, a federal grant of \$585,000 joined the funds from the state's Historical Commission and the Town's own funds.

Still another piece of the Turners Falls restoration occurred in 2003 with the "alleyscape" project behind the Colle Opera House and the Shea Theater. It garnered a \$468,000 federal Public Works Economic Development grant that added a new parking lot on Second Street. Parking spaces were allocated to the Colle building, the Shea Theater, the Cutlery apartments, and the public. The project brought some of the lighting features of the Avenue A "streetscape" to the prominent public alley running between Avenue A and L Street.

Commenting on the anticipated Opera House renovations, one official said: "This will be a postcard." In fact, the Colle was once on a postcard, as seen below.



Postcard showing the Colle Opera House circa 1910.

Photo courtesy of Frank Abbondanzio.

The Opera House renovation had some challenges and some disappointments, including the loss of a unique mural. Joe Parzych, long time resident of nearby Gill, wrote us the following message in July 2008:

#### ***Mural in the Colle Opera House***

The windmill mural in the color photo [below] was once the backdrop for the stage. It was discovered on the east wall during the latest renovation and now is covered up with a sheetrock wall. For a historic preservation project the architect goofed on that point. The B&W photo [also below] is the actual windmill used as a model. It was a working mill to grind corn, primarily, and was situated in Millers Falls in the 1920's. Cornmeal was a breakfast staple, usually in the form of johnnycake or cornmeal mush.

In his article "Restoring the Colle Opera House" in the *Montague Reporter* (October 10, 2002) Parzych quotes builder Henry Lupa as saying: "We have to remove all the interior walls and floors from top to bottom. Everything goes but the outside walls, leaving nothing to hold it together." However, the renovation went on. The October 27, 2003 edition of the *Springfield Republican* heralded the completion of the renovation with the headline **Opera house's ready** — reporting that the town-owned structure was ready to anchor the downtown of Turners Falls. A local realtor was quoted as saying "It's a beautiful downtown but it needs a shot in the arm."



**The Windmill Mural(s).**

**Photos courtesy of Joe Parzych**

An email to us from Town of Montague Administrator Frank Abbondanzio summarized some of the details of those years of struggle to save the Colle Opera House.

The Town took possession of the Colle in 1986. The CDC [Franklin County Community Development Corporation] had purchased both buildings for \$110,000, but its main purpose was to undertake the Shea Project. They did not do anything with the Colle. The commune turned the building over to the Town free of all the wooden partitions that they had removed for salvage purposes. The Town paid \$90,000 for the Colle. We did a lot of predevelopment work on the building in the late 1980's, and had some bites on the building, but it always ran into road blocks. Square footage rents (\$2 per sq. ft.) never supported any development at that time. Cost

was also a factor. The project's higher cost was primarily driven by the need to put in a floor between the second and third stories, because it was an opera house and the balcony had been removed, causing structural issues. Before the renovations, the brick walls of the second and third story stood unsupported for about 30 or 40 feet (??), the expanse from floor to ceiling.

In the mid to late 1990's, Earl Bowen, a developer from Maine held an option on the Colle. He had big ideas, but little money, and the grants he needed to make the project work never materialized. I became involved in the project when I returned to Montague in 1998. At that point, with the assistance of Historic Mass. Inc., we took control of the property again, and began the development of a public project. Basically, we realized that it wouldn't work as a private project. Ultimately, the project required five state or federal grants and a town appropriation of \$500,000 to work.

Because DHCD and EDA grant money is involved, the town needs to own the building for 30 years. We currently generate about \$100,000 in lease revenues. That is sufficient to cover all of the annual operations and maintenance costs, including the funds needed to pay the town's \$500,000 loan.

### **A DIFFERENT KIND OF SHOW AT THE OPERA HOUSE — 2005**

A rapid-fire series of news stories in early 2005 rewarded those who had contributed faith and energy to the restoration of the Colle Opera House and the revitalization of downtown Turners Falls.

**February 15, 2005 — TURNERS FALLS** — "The long, narrow windows of Roxann Kriete's new third-floor office in the 130-year-old Colle Opera House reveal an iconic view of Turners Falls: the rolling hills to the south, punctuated by a series of traditional church steeples. "We've seen gorgeous sunsets from here," remarked Kriete, executive director of the Northeast Foundation for Children, a nonprofit educational agency that moved into its Avenue A suite of offices in October. "There's a sense of substance -- the high ceilings, the tall windows, those qualities that are part of an old building are really nice." Besides the architectural grace, Kriete says the new location provides room for... —Diane Broncaccio, the *Recorder*

**February 16, 2005— TURNERS FALLS** — The last space available in the Colle Opera House was leased out this week. The Northeast Foundation for Children, which already occupies the second floor and half the third floor of the building, has now leased the first-floor space that faces Avenue A and shares a wall with the Shea Theater. Mark Abramson of Benchmark and Pratt is the real estate agent who worked for the town to rent out the Colle. He said the first-floor space will initially be used for office and meeting space, but may eventually be used for a store to sell the teaching materials of the foundation... — Karen P. Chynoweth, *Recorder* staff.

**March 29, 2005 — DEERFIELD** — It could be called "smart growth for dummies," but a visit to Turners Falls might just offer a view of what the [Governor Willard "Mitt"] Romney administration has in mind with its initiatives for growing local economies without creating sprawl. State Undersecretary of Commonwealth Development Stephen H. Burrington laid out the principles for about 145 Franklin County Chamber of Commerce members Friday. The Turners Falls village, with its Colle Opera House, cutlery block and Crocker Bank structure, is a statewide model for redevelopment of historic buildings, Burrington told The Deerfield Inn breakfast gathering. — Richie Davis, *Recorder* staff

Another recognition of the progress made by Montague was an award in 2005 given by the Massachusetts Historical Commissions Annual Preservation Awards Program for the renovation of the Colle Opera House. The award came in the category "adaptive reuse." Other significant landmarks that received similar awards in past years include Trinity Church in Boston, the Crocker & Cutlery Blocks in Montague, Lenox Town Hall, the Gate of Heaven Church (South Boston), and the Holyoke Health Center. The *Recorder* reported the event.

**TURNERS FALLS -- A town landmark, which has become a thriving center for arts and education ventures, is being honored by the Massachusetts Historical Commission.** The Colle Opera House is one of nine projects around the state being honored with a 2005 Massachusetts Historical Commission Preservation Award. The award will be presented to the town sometime this fall at the commission's annual conference. Twenty-two projects were nominated for the honor. "It's recognizing a nice closure for a project that has a happy ending," said Town Administrator Frank Abbondanzio. "It's 100 percent leased up with nice tenants, tenants making a difference in the rehabilitation of the town....The building won the award in the category of 'adaptive reuse.'... The Northeast Foundation for Children occupies the second floor and half of the third floor of the building and the first-floor space that faces Avenue A and shares a wall with the Shea Theater. The Hallmark Institute for Photography has its Hallmark Museum of Contemporary Photography on the first floor in the spaces that face Third Street and will officially open in December. Nick Waynelovich's Ja Duke Productions and dance studio is in the Colle's basement and Winrock International's Ecosystems Services occupies the remaining section of the third floor....The two-phase renovation cost about \$3.2 million....Bryan McNiff, spokesman for the Historical Commission said the building is 'considered an outstanding example of the late 19th century commercial vernacular design.'" —Karen P. Chynoweth, *Greenfield Recorder*, July 7, 2005.

The Commission includes an announcement of the Turners Falls award on its web page:

### The Preservation Awards Program

Massachusetts enjoys a cultural heritage rich in historic resources. The preservation of these resources has revitalized neighborhoods, added to the revenues of cities and towns, and preserved community character. Preservationists, working to protect our historic assets, have maintained the sense of time and place that forms the essence of our Commonwealth. To honor these outstanding citizens, the Secretary of the Commonwealth hosts the Massachusetts Historical Commission's Annual Preservation Awards Program, which is now celebrating its 30th year.

### 2005 Preservation Awards

Community	Recipient
Boston	Roxbury Center for the Arts at Hibernia Hall
<b>Cambridge</b>	City Hall Annex
<b>Holyoke</b>	Latino Professional Building
<b>Lowell</b>	Pawtucket Congregational Church
<b>Natick</b>	The Center for the Arts in Natick
<b>Newburyport</b>	<i>Gardens of the New Republic: Fashioning the Landscapes of High Street, Newburyport, Massachusetts</i>
<b>Stockbridge</b>	Naumkeag Evergreen Garden Restoration
<b>Turner's Falls</b>	Colle Opera House
<b>Individual Lifetime Achievement: Richard Candee</b>	

Source: <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcpra/prawin.htm>

A highly graphic poster also celebrated the event. (See below.)

Frank Abbondanzio summarized what had been accomplished in the transformation of Turners Falls going from the pits to a vibrant community.

The three c's were the tipping point for the revitalization, but I believe the Colle was the key project. It accomplished a couple of things. Aside from eliminating one of the most blighted buildings in the downtown, it brought a professional workforce (about 40 people) into the downtown. Up until then, our rehabilitation efforts, including Cutlery and Crocker, had resulted in improved affordable housing, but they did not directly contribute to job creation and general economic development. The Northeast Foundation did do this, and through their participation in our commercial homesteading program, they also renovated another historic structure for a seminar center that brings additional people with disposable income into the downtown. The Hallmark Museum, with its class photography exhibits, openings and receptions, took the downtown up an additional notch. The Italian restaurant (Ristorante Dipoalo) that followed would not have happened without the traffic generated by the Colle and the Northeast Foundation seminar center.

The Hallmark Museum of Contemporary Photography referred to in the previous quote was established by the Hallmark School (Institute) of Photography which had its beginning elsewhere in Turners Falls in 1974. In 2006 the Museum opened on the ground floor of the Opera House. However, the Hallmark School went through a decade of challenges and legal problems and it closed its doors in 2016 with financial problems and a student body of only 10 persons. As a result the Museum closed its doors in the Opera House. Its space was taken by the Center for Responsive Schools, a non-profit organization dedicated to elementary and middle school teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community. The Center had earlier occupied upper floors of the Opera House.

However, the restorations in Turners Falls not only stimulated revitalization of the community but provided momentum to go beyond the downtown. Abbondanzio noted that the River Culture Project succeeded in making Turners Falls a destination for cultural and recreational activities "both through the creation and nurturing of special events and its successful marketing effort." An attractive web page notes that cultural events now draw tens of thousands of people yearly to Turners Falls — a majority of those visitors come from outside of Montague.<sup>32</sup> In 2007, a total regional economic impact of almost \$800,000 was generated. Of equal consequence is Turners Falls being *perceived* as a cultural center, and no longer perceived as "the pits." A canal side bikeway, 20 years in the making by people at both the town and regional level, also has brought many people to the community. Ironically, Abbondanzio recalls that

In 1981, an economic consultant hired by the town concluded that tourism was not a feasible path to pursue, because there was no destination in Turners Falls that people would want to visit. This conclusion was definitely shortsighted and uncreative, but did nevertheless reflect the prevailing opinion at that time.

Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Turners Falls River Culture agenda illustrated how short-sighted the consultant was. In a May 2009 issue, *The Montague Reporter* listed one week's events in the area: a jazz program at Ristorante DiPaolo's every Thursday evening, a Saturday afternoon tour of sites in a newly-released Great Falls Discovery Center booklet titled *A Geologic Walking Tour*, a Greenfield College Community College and Brick House evening of information about these community institutions, a Community Awards Dinner featuring "a fun evening of music, free dinner and dessert" sponsored by the Gill-Montague Community School Partnership, a Hands-on Nature Series, and live performances of the Country Players' production of Ken Ludwig's comedy "Moon over Buffalo."

The history of the Colle Opera House contains many stories of physical updating of the building (as we have reported herein), and the updating continued into 2018! A bid notice was issued in September 2018 for the "weatherization" of the Opera House:

Work consist of resealing 44 interior storm windows; sealing of two (2) unused doors on the front side of the building. The doors are a great source of heat loss and drafts are evident; installing exterior compression storm windows on two (2) narrow side windows that front the entrance recess. Neither of these windows has either interior or exterior storm windows. Due to space limitation inside the building, contractor will have to install exterior compression storms on these windows and install wood trim that will match the current wooden enclosures; installing interior compression storms on three (3) transoms above the three front doors to eliminate drafts and heat loss.

32 See: <http://www.turnersfallsriverculture.org>

The Shea Theater continued to be a major fixture in the area's entertainment. On the Shea's webpage in 2017, Helen Cavuto described some of the action.

The Shea provides performance space for a variety of attractions designed to appeal to the widest range of tastes. Musical offerings include folk, pop, rock, swing, jazz, country and traditional. Theatrical productions encompass musical comedy, drama, comedy, and political satire. In addition, audiences can take advantage of magic shows, children's shows and silent film revivals.

An increasingly popular program of drama classes and summer camp workshops has attracted to its staff some of the most talented teachers in the area. There is also an exciting curriculum based school program open to local schools at affordable prices.

The Shea, with the help of a wonderful corps of volunteers, has been attracting a growing audience and as a result is bringing people into Turners Falls from an ever larger geographical area. This growth has put the Shea on a firmer financial footing, providing the basis for expectations of an even more exciting future for this vital community asset.



**Announcing  
the Shea  
Arts Center**

The Shea's  
page tells about  
developments  
Theater Arts

**STAC —  
Theater**

2018 web  
later  
— the Shea  
Center.

When Turners Falls asked the community what to do with the Shea Theater, a group of us imagined a place that would serve all of us — artists, families, students, elders, youth, businesses, and nonprofits — who make our homes in Franklin County.

Now, we have a rare opportunity to create something amazing: an arts center and community space for the 21st century. A place for those who have been here for generations and those just arriving.

Carefully conceived upgrades coupled with significantly enhanced programming will make the Shea a regional destination, a center of conversation, and a headquarters for Franklin County's cultural and economic revival. Franklin County has an exceptional community college, a new generation investing in social entrepreneurship and the local food economy, a blossoming arts scene, and a strong sense of community. A publicly owned, non-profit theatrical performance space will enhance all these efforts, making our community an even better place to live and visit.

With 330 seats, the Shea is the perfect venue to encourage the growing local arts scene. 25 years after its initial renovation, the Shea Theater Arts Center (STAC) will realize the original vision of providing a dynamic center for

performing arts. STAC will offer diverse, creative programming – from punk rock to poetry slams – supported by energetic marketing, strong operational and fiscal management, and a commitment to inclusive community engagement.

**Historical note: The view from Boston**

Following is a view of Turners Falls as seen and reported by Beth Daley of the *Boston Globe*, September 9, 2007.

Now, turn around and look down Avenue A - the village's wide main road - and imagine what industrialist Colonel Alvah Crocker envisioned in the 1860s: another Holyoke or Lowell filled with humming mills and thousands of workers. By the early 1900s, cotton, cutlery, and paper mills lined a canal off the river that bypassed the powerful falls. The village bustled with a grand hotel and the Colle Opera House, which seated 1,000. But by the 1940s, like so many other New England mill towns, the factories began closing. Turners Falls was preserved, somewhat raggedly, in time.

Today, it takes only about 10 minutes to walk the planned village, from First to Seventh streets. The downtown has been designated a National Historic District for its 19th century architecture, and you'll find stories about the village from the people you meet. In the past five years, the Crocker Bank Building, the opera house, and a historic row house were renovated through public and private efforts totaling close to \$10 million, according to Frank Abbondanzio, Montague town administrator. The Hallmark Museum of Contemporary Photography, showcasing professional photographs and the personal collection of founder George J. Rosa III, is on the first floor of the opera house. The museum, which opened last year, is expanding into the Crocker building and that new addition should be open early next year. Next door, check out the Shea Theater, the cultural nerve center of the village, where music, community theater, and dance are performed and classes taught.

If you stand long enough at the Shea, a local may start talking to you about the controversial Renaissance Community, at one time the largest commune in the eastern United States. The commune was founded in 1968 and underwent several incarnations. At one time it was a dominant presence here, owning the opera house and the Shea, which was used as a concert space and recording studio. Today, stories abound about the commune, and many people in town have some connection to it – some good, some bad, but always interesting.

[http://www.boston.com/travel/explorene/massachusetts/articles/2007/09/09/historic\\_but\\_not\\_traditional?mode=PF](http://www.boston.com/travel/explorene/massachusetts/articles/2007/09/09/historic_but_not_traditional?mode=PF)

## Poster commemorating the Massachusetts Preservation

### Award

[The text in the poster says:]

#### 27<sup>th</sup> Annual **Massachusetts Preservation Awards**

Colle Opera House

Montague

Adaptive Reuse

The Colle Opera house is an outstanding example of late 19th-century commercial vernacular design. Built in 1874, the 1000 seat vaudeville theater had ground floor store fronts. The town acquired the building in 1986. Having been gutted in the 1970s by the Renaissance Church and Commune the building was critically unstable, but as a cornerstone of the Turner's Falls Historic District, the town decided to preserve the building's façade and store fronts and to convert the majority of the building's interior for office space.

[The list below the inscription identifies Key Personnel in the preservation. Listed are:]

**Board of Selectman**

**Town Administrator**

**Building Inspector**

**DPW Superintendent**

**Town Planner**

**Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development**

**Massachusetts Highway Department**

**US Department of Commerce**

**US Department of Housing and Urban Development**

**Historic Massachusetts, Inc.**

**Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority**

**Franklin Regional Council of Governments**

**Studio One Architects**

**N.L. Construction Company of Ludlow**

**Salomey Construction Company**

**Colle Tenants**

### FOOTNOTES ABOUT THE COLLES

Marie (Mary) Colle, wife of Fred, has been recognized among Pioneer Valley History Network's "Remarkable Women of the Pioneer Valley." She was born as Ana Marie Meier in the small village of Schwalheim, a short distance from Bad Nauheim in Germany's Hesse Darmstadt in 1821. She was one of eight children born to a miller. She was a pioneer in building the Opera House in 1874 with her Civil War veteran Frederick. We were invited to tell her story briefly on the web page: [Women in the Valley](http://www.womeninthevalley.com). The web page is: <https://pvhn2.wordpress.com/1800-2/mary-colle/>.

In the 1920s, after Mary and Frederick Colle's grandson Merle Colle sold the Opera House and various family residential properties in Montague, Merle Colle took up residence in Meriden, Connecticut where he owned and managed an auto parts store called Silver City Motor Parts, and he invested wisely in the stock market. He and his wife Mary (from North Adams) raised three children, Jane Ann (Colle) Armstrong, Carl Merle Colle, Jr., and Royal (Roy) Colle (the author of this document)..

In the early 1950s the senior Carl retired to Florida where he was active in community affairs. He died in 1979. Mary died shortly after in 1982. Carl Jr. returned to Greenfield and Turners Falls in 1986 to begin the genealogy part of this history. He died in 2000 in Arizona before completing it. Jane lived in Asheville, NC where she died in 2017.

Royal Colle, a professor emeritus at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and his wife Susana took up the genealogy project 2008 — building into the Colle genealogy the story of the Opera House and its partner the Shea Theater. In their research, Royal and Susana appeared in the September 4, 2008 issue of *The Montague Reporter* in the feature "Faces and Place" and in several Irmarie Jones columns in the *Greenfield Recorder* — as they sought (and received) information from the community to fill gaps in the history. *The Montague Reporter* carried the following story along with the picture below taken by Joe Parzych outside the Opera House.



### Colles at the Colle

Susana and Royal Colle, of Ithaca, NY, were back in town for the second time this summer, seeking information on family history. They are the descendants of the woman who built the Colle Opera House on Avenue A, Mary Colle, Royal's great grandmother. His grandfather Fred was a druggist, and he operated a drugstore on the ground floor of the building. By 1920, Fred had sold out to Denis Shea, who built the Shea Theater next door a few years later.

People who may have information regarding the history of the Colle Opera House, or the Colle family, may contact Susanna and Royal Colle care of this newspaper. Royal is interested in solving one particular mystery: what happened to the five chandeliers that once graced the Opera House?

By the way, the old residents seem to know, but younger residents of town seem to have forgotten, the family name is pronounced as if it were spelled Coalie, not as if it rhymed with a popular breed of dog.

— *Montague Reporter* , September 4, 2008



**Susana and Roy Colle at the 3rd Street entrance of the Colle Opera House, 2008.  
Photo courtesy of Joe Parzych.**

We never did solve the riddle of the missing chandeliers. But in April 2009, the Town of Montague put a plaque on the Opera House commemorating the earlier Colles' contribution to the community. The dedication was attended by Selectboard representatives Al Ross and Patricia Pruitt, local historians Ed Gregory and Peter Miller, Susana and Roy Colle, and Frank Abbondanzio.

The "Colle family line" extends to two more generations: Robert Dale Colle (born 1961) and Royal David Colle (born 1982). Dale and David are both Cornell University graduates. Ryley David Colle and Ryan Dale Colle are twin sons of Robert Dale and they live in Hawaii where they were graduated from the University of Hawaii. Among those who carry the Colle (and Opera House) genes without the Colle name are the Armstrongs (in North Carolina), Hairgroves (North Carolina), Ferdinands (California), Burkharts (Arizona), Black/Lenharts (Arizona), Crabtrees (Minnesota) and Meads (New York)..

While the Opera House was the center piece in the Colles' genealogy research in Turners Falls and Greenfield (and Germany), a trail also led to a collector of old druggist bottles elsewhere in Turners Falls. For many years Turners Falls resident Edwin Potter had collected old milk bottles from farms and dairies in and around Montague Town. He donated this unique collection to the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association's Museum in Deerfield, accompanied by extensive annotations on their origins and history. Fortunately old drug store bottles were also a part of Potter's archeology-like searches. From dumps, landfills and other unlikely places, Potter collected those old druggist bottles, and amid his treasure Potter discovered a few large and small bottles from the Fred Colle Drug Store. Molded into the glass is the etching: "Fred Colle Druggist, Turners Falls, Mass." While the Colles have one small bottle from the collection as an heirloom, the Potter collection is being preserved by the PVMA Museum.

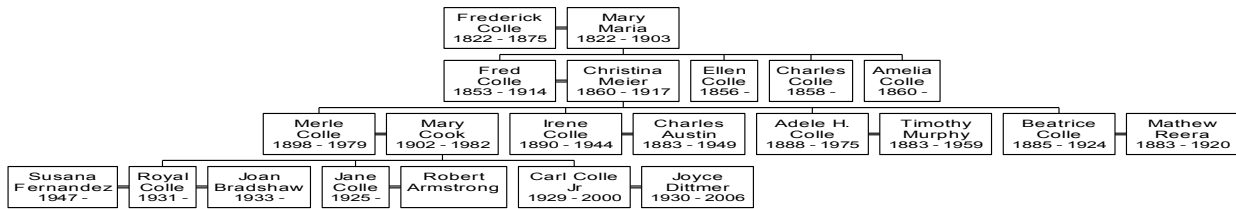


**Photo by Paul Franz, *Greenfield Recorder***

## THE COLLE OPERA HOUSE CHRONOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AT A GLANCE

1874-1920	The Colle Family
1920-1946	The Shea Family
1946-1956	The Zallen Family
1956-1969	The Crocker Institution for Saving
1963-1966	Edward Krysiak
1966-1969	The Crocker Institution for Saving, the Greenfield Savings Bank
1969-1972	The Porter Family
1972-1986	The Sellers Family and the Renaissance Community
1986	Franklin County Community Development Corporation
1986-2038	Town of Montague

## THE GERMAN LEGACY: DESCENDANTS OF FREDERICK AND MARY COLLE



### **Contributors to this history**

Many persons helped make our various visits to Montague rewarding adventures. We are indebted to them all. They include persons we met as well as unseen persons who generously shared information, pictures, and newspaper clippings with us. With apologies to some whom we may have erroneously missed, we thank the following for their help.

Frank Abbondanzio

Jane (Colle) Armstrong

Janice Boudreau

Dick Chaisson

James M. Greene, Jr.

Helen Cavuto

Irmarie Jones

Joe Parzych

Edwin Potter

Susan A. SanSoucie

David Sautter

Stella A. Skrzypek

Bernice Tuttle

Steve Winters

Arn Albertini

Debra Bourbeau

Daniel A. Brown

David Detmold

Ed Gregory

Kiersten Hanna

Peter S. Miller

Hollie Poirier-Smith

Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Libraries

Bob Saulnier

Second Street Bakery

Barbara Stewart

John Waite

Charles Woodard

## Acknowledgements

The Colle Opera House and the Shea Theater together are sometimes described as the cornerstone of the Turners Falls Historic District. They are located in the town of Montague in northwestern Massachusetts. Many people helped us tell their story and many of those people are acknowledged throughout this text. However, special acknowledgement and thanks go to the following without whom this story could not have been told.

**Frank Abbondanzio** — Frank, formerly Montague's Town Administrator, spent much valuable time with us providing background on the Colle Opera House and information about the history of Turners Falls. However, his most important contribution, which is reported in this document, was the enormous effort he put into saving the Colle Opera House from the wrecking ball and providing leadership to get it restored as an icon of the revitalized Turners Falls community.



Frank Abbondanzio (left) and Royal Colle (2008)

**Ed Gregory** — Ed was extremely generous in providing a great deal of documentation regarding the Colle Opera House. He compiled items about the Opera House that appeared in the *Turners Falls Reporter* during the years 1873 to 1922. These provided much detail and reality to the Opera House history. Ed was born and brought up in Turners Falls and now (2018) lives in Greenfield. We and the Turners Falls community owe him many thanks for his extraordinary contribution.



Ed Gregory and Susana Colle on the bank of the Connecticut River in Turners Falls (2015)

**Susana Colle** — My wife Susana was an ever-present partner in this labor-of-love. From the local government offices and libraries in Greenfield, Turners Falls, Deerfield, and North Adams to archives in southwest Germany (and the cinnamon roll shop then on 2nd Street in Turners Falls), she aggressively collected clues and leads to a substantial amount of vital information, and provided companionship on those numerous trips between our home in Ithaca, New York and the many places here and abroad

where we sought information about ancestors who shaped the beginnings of the Colle Opera House and the Shea Theater.