PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-62

The 1841 Cass County court house as the “Old Court Ho.” in 1899 and the “Opera Ho.” in 1909: the Sanborn maps of Cassopolis

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SUMMARY

Cass County’s second court house, a white frame building 54 by 46 feet built under a contract of 7 August 1839, stood on the northeast quarter of the Cassopolis public square until the stone court house of 1898–1899 replaced it. Glover’s county history of 1906 records its sale to George M. Kingsbury for $25, on condition that he move it and leave the county its use until the new building was finished, and found it on the south side of State Street “used as a storage house.” A theatre history says it opened as the Colonial Opera House in 1899; the earliest newspaper mention of it as a hall found until now is of November 1913. The Sanborn fire-insurance maps of Cassopolis settle part of this. The map of May 1899 shows the building at the southeast corner of State and Disbrow Streets, marked “Old Court Ho.” and heated by stoves. The map of January 1909 shows the same building on the same lots as the “Opera Ho.,” heated by steam and lit by electricity, with a two-story wing behind marked “Stage & Scenery.” Scaled from the maps, the main body is about 53 feet long, the length the 1839 contract required. The building had been fitted as an opera house, with a stage built on, by January 1909.

THE RECORD

1. **Sanborn-Perris Map Co., *Cassopolis, Cass County, Mich.*, May 1899, sheet 1, south side of State Street at Disbrow Street, lots 503–504**

   > *"OLD COURT HO. HEAT: STOVES."*

   Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn03951_003/)

2. **Sanborn Map Co., *Cassopolis, Cass County, Michigan*, January 1909, sheet 2, south side of State Street at Disbrow Street, lots 503–504**

   > *"OPERA HO. HEAT: STEAM. LIGHTS: ELECTRIC."; on the rear wing, "STAGE & SCENERY"; and in the index on sheet 1, "Opera House, 2"*

   Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn03951_004/)

3. **Bond of the Court House Company, 7 August 1839, in *History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago: Waterman, Watkins & Co., 1882), p. 72**

   > *"a court house fifty-four feet in length and forty-six feet in width and twenty-four feet high from sills to the eaves"*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/historyofcasscou00wate/page/n91/mode/1up)

4. **L. H. Glover, *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago, 1906), p. 209**

   > *"The old court house was soon sold to the highest bidder, George M. Kingsbury being awarded the sale at $25, conditioned on his removing the building from the court house site and giving the use of the building for county purposes until the new structure was finished."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/twentiethcentury00glov)

5. **Glover, *Twentieth Century History*, p. 207**

> *“the building which now stands on the south side of State street, west, and is used as a storage house”*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/twentiethcentury00glov)

WHAT IT CHANGES

The old court house is placed on its State Street site, as the “Old Court Ho.,” by May 1899, and in use as the village opera house, with a stage wing built on, by January 1909: nearly five years earlier than the first newspaper mention of the hall found until now (November 1913). The 1909 map shows the building already as the theatre that the 1913 postcard calls the Colonial. The May 1899 map, heated by stoves and with no stage, does not support the account that it opened as an opera house in 1899.

LIMITS

The Sanborn maps name buildings by use, not by their owners’ names; neither map calls the hall the Colonial. The identification of the 1909 “Opera Ho.” with the 1841 court house rests on the same corner and lots, the 1899 label, and the size, which is scaled from the maps’ bar scales and agrees with the contract within a few feet. The maps date the uses only to the months of survey, May 1899 and January 1909; between them, Glover (1906) found the building used for storage.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

The county histories of 1882 and 1906; Cinema Treasures’ entry for the Gem Theatre; the Cassopolis Historic Walking Tour; the Clio and HMDB entries for Cassopolis;

Wikipedia; Chronicling America for Cassopolis with “opera house” and “Colonial,” 1899–1913; the Internet Archive’s full text; web searches for the Colonial and Gem theatres and for the Sanborn maps of Cassopolis.

Our standard for calling a finding new is set out in How we research (projectscroll.com/how-we-research/), and how we weigh each kind of record in Scrollsigns (projectscroll.com/scrollsigns/).

“New” means new to print as far as we can tell. If you know of an earlier publication, tell us and we will credit it here and raise the note’s version.

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WORKS CITED

Earlier work, catalogues and databases named in this note, besides the records quoted above.

1. *History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago: Waterman, Watkins & Co., 1882). https://archive.org/details/historyofcasscou00wate
2. L. H. Glover, *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1906). https://archive.org/details/twentiethcentury00glov
3. “Gem Theatre, Cassopolis, MI,” Cinema Treasures. https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/18611

4. Cassopolis Historic Walking Tour, Cass County Council on Aging with the Cass District Library Local History Branch. https://www.casscoa.org/news/cassopolis-historic-walking-tour

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THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in The courthouse that became the Colonial (projectscroll.com/news/the-courthouse-that-became-the-colonial/). In the discoveries register:

- `colonial-sanborn-old-court-house-opera-house` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#colonial-sanborn-old-court-house-opera-house)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

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