

Al Southwick: How 'The Aud' was built

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As it has for more than 80 years, the World War 1 Memorial Auditorium looks commandingly down on Lincoln Square. It is still an impressive piece of architecture, fronted by those striking Doric columns and majestic stairway. But does it have a future? The jury is out on that.

Plans are afoot to hold occasional organ concerts at the auditorium, which will attract at least some musicians and organ enthusiasts. The majestic organ, once famed far and wide, has been silent for too long. Even though somewhat impaired by time and weather, it still has the power to thrill. But much more than organ concerts will be needed to make the old building a vibrant part of civic life again.

The auditorium has an interesting story to tell. It had been long in coming. I know the story well because I heard it from George F. Booth, publisher, editor and part owner of the Telegram & Gazette and radio station WTAG from 1925 to 1955. He had been a prime mover in the project to build a new auditorium, and he was not reluctant to tell about it. He did not underplay his own role. I was a green editorial writer in 1952, and I had many opportunities in the next three years to hear about Worcester history as seen from the fourth floor of the old T&G building on Franklin Street. Booth died in 1955.

City leaders had been pushing for a new auditorium since the turn of the century in 1900. Mechanics Hall by then was considered antiquated, run down and too small for the needs of the dynamic city. Also, with no sprinklers in the main hall, it was a recurrent nightmare for the Worcester Fire Department. (It is one of the ironies of Worcester history that Mechanics Hall, renovated and sprinklered in the 1970s, is now regarded as a city jewel and prime locale for classical music concerts).

Construction of a new auditorium required a site. One plan to locate it east of the Common was rejected as too expensive. Through most of the 1920s the city council dithered, using the lack of a site as an excuse to do nothing. The logjam was broken when, on November 4, 1929, a group of "representative citizens" announced that it had raised enough private money to buy from the Worcester Art Museum 100,000 square feet of land at Lincoln Square. Stephen Salisbury III had left his estate and millions of dollars to the Art Museum when he died in 1905. The sale of that parcel in 1929 brought the museum \$150,000.

The group of "representative citizens" who bought the property were not all that representative. They included George F. Booth, Harry G. Stoddard, George F. Fuller, Francis H. Dewey and a clutch of Worcester's elite. No one would mistake them for the hoi polloi. Booth had advocated for years for the project, but to no avail. Finally, to hear him tell it, he summoned the city's biggies to the Worcester Club where each man was told how much he would contribute to the cause. In those days, Worcester really had a power structure and George Booth was a key part of it.

So, in the teeth of the Great Depression of the early 1930s, Worcester launched one of its biggest construction projects ever. By coincidence, the Worcester Art Museum, perhaps encouraged by the Lincoln Square sale, at the same time was building another big project - the Renaissance Court addition that doubled the size of the museum. Those two projects helped bolster the city's economy and took some of the sting out of those bleak depression years.

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The \$2 million construction began on September 10, 1931, the cornerstone was laid on April 14, 1932 and the dedication was on September 26, 1933, when a crowd estimated at 4,000 showed up. Harry Stoddard was chairman of the event. Governor Joseph Ely spoke and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, just arrived at the White House, sent a congratulatory telegram saying that he wished he could be here.

The Auditorium served the community well for the next 60 years. Although the acoustics were not perfect at first, improvements were made over the years and many fine productions of music, dance and lectures were appreciated by audiences that sometimes numbered as high as 3,000. The large, retractable stage and the mighty organ were noted approvingly.

The new building meant big changes at Lincoln Square. Stephen Salisbury's old peach orchard had to be hollowed out to make room. The land on the northeast side had to be prepared for the World War I memorial and the new Boys Club. One of my early memories of downtown Worcester was in 1930 or 1931, when my father drove our Overland up north Main Street. As we approached Lincoln Square, we were held up by the construction going on. And there, to my astonishment, was the Salisbury Mansion, jacked up on timbers and being carefully towed up Highland Street to its new location - where it is now. I've never forgotten that episode.

The Auditorium is part of Worcester history and is still a striking piece of architecture. What the future holds for it I wish I knew.

-- *Albert B. Southwick's columns appear regularly in the Telegram & Gazette.*