

St. George Opera House

Reading History in a Building

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze primary documents about the St. George Opera House building.
- Develop a presentation on one use of the Opera House.
- Analyze how changes in the community led to changes in the use of the Opera House.

Tour Info

Address: 212 North Main Street, St. George

Tours offered: By appointment. All fourth graders in Washington County visit the Opera House as part of the Historic St. George LIVE! Program offered February-April each year.

To schedule a tour call: Angie Mason, Events Coordinator for the Pioneer Center for the Arts, (435) 634-5942, ext. 12

Setting the Stage

- 1. Ask students:** *Has your family ever made changes to your house? What changes? Why?*
- 2. Explain:** *Buildings change as the needs and desires of the people who use them change. Sometimes the way a building has changed can tell us about the history of a whole community. We're going to explore the way one old building has changed to see what we can discover about the way life in Washington County has changed over the years.*

Student Instruction

- 1.** Before beginning the lesson, create a time line from 1849 to the present on the board or a chart. Use the *Washington County Time Line 1849-1973* on page vii to add some of the major developments in Washington County history to the time line.
- 2.** Distribute one *Analyze the Evidence* sheet to each student. Divide students into four groups and give each group one set of *Evidence*. Explain that each group has information about the building called the St. George Opera House during a different phase of its life. As a class, review the questions on the *Analyze the Evidence* sheet.

Duration

Two to three
45-minute periods

Instructional Materials

Washington County Time Line 1849-1973 (pp vii-viii)

Evidence

(1 copy of each sheet)

Group 1: Gardener's Club Wine Cellar

Group 2: St. George Social Hall

Group 3: Sugar Beet Seed Factory

Group 4: Pioneer Center for the Arts

Analyze the Evidence
(1 copy per student)

Supplies

writing and drawing materials

Core Curriculum Objectives

4th Grade

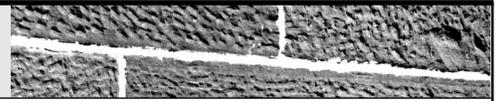
Social Studies
6040-0101
6040-0102
6040-0202

Language Arts
4040-0601
4040-0705
4040-0902

7th Grade

Social Studies
6100-0203
6100-0402
6100-0503

Language Arts
4070-1005
4070-1103
4070-1105
4070-1106
4070-0302



3. Ask groups to review their evidence and prepare a brief presentation on the Opera House for the class that illustrates the most important facts and ideas they learned about the building. The presentations can be in the form of an oral report, a skit, or an interview. All group members must participate. Assist groups as necessary to insure they understand the materials in their evidence packet.
4. Ask groups to make their presentations to the class. At the end of their presentation, groups will place their building photo or drawing on the time line at the year in which the phase they are describing began.
5. As a class, examine the transitions in the Opera House's life. Ask students to identify the changes in the community that led to each change in the Opera House building's use. Remind students that several trends in the community might work together to bring about a change. Evidence from more than one group may apply to a transition. List the community changes identified by students on the time line.
6. **Ask students:** *Do you think other historic buildings in Washington County have stories to tell about our history? What examples can you think of? Why do you think so many people in Washington County worked hard to renovate the Opera House? Do you think it is important to preserve historic buildings for future generations? Why or why not?*

Student Activity

1. Ask students to write a journal entry on the following question: *What did you find most interesting or surprising about the life of the St. George Opera House?*
2. Assign students to write a short piece of historical fiction that involves the Opera House building. Explain that works of historical fiction are set in a real historic time period and can tell about the lives of people who actually existed. The exact events and people in the story may not be real, but they fit very well with their historic setting. Give examples of historical fiction students may be familiar with, such as *Little House on the Prairie*, *Old Yeller*, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, *Across Five Aprils*, *Johnny Tremain*, or *Caddie Woodlawn*.
3. Let students choose which phase of the Opera House building's life they want to write about. Their journal entries may help them decide. If time permits, allow students to research information about their time period for their story. Students should also illustrate their stories.
4. Allow students to read their stories to younger students or share them with each other. The class may even wish to publish a St. George Opera House book.



The first part of the St. George Opera House was built in 1864 by the St. George Gardener's Club. The club used the small building as a place for storing and making wine. Early settlers hoped that selling wine from the grapes they grew would bring much-needed money to Washington County. Following are quotes, a photo, and a drawing to help you learn about this phase of the Opera House's life.

"Wine:—Have this made in but a few places, say three or four, for this southern country. At these points, obtain the best available skill to manufacture the wine, and have it properly graded in quality. Then store it in oak barrels as far as possible and preserve it for exportation, rather than for home consumption."

BRIGHAM YOUNG AND GEORGE A. SMITH,
CIRCULAR TO UNITED ORDER OF ST. GEORGE STAKE, 1874

"The warm sandy soil of Dixie invites the [winemaker]. Grapes thrive on the hillsides and bask in the summer sun. As a result, several villages specialized in raising grapes, especially Toquerville and Santa Clara, but people in Leeds and St. George and Washington were also proud of their grapes and active in wine making....An obvious advantage of winemaking was the proximity of mining camps where the product sold briskly. Pioche, Nevada, first provided a market and later Silver Reef became a boom town and a natural source for sales."

DOUGLAS D. ALDER AND KARL F. BROOKS,
A HISTORY OF WASHINGTON COUNTY: FROM ISOLATION TO DESTINATION, PP. 157-8

"Wine-making in Washington County declined in the 1880s and eventually died out. Two major reasons are given for its demise. First was the concern by Mormon church leaders about local residents imbibing too much. Leaders had always advised that the wine should be exported rather than consumed locally, but their advice was not always heeded. As a result leaders became more outspoken in opposition to wine and wine-making. Second, the value of wine as a cash crop declined. This was due in part to the bad reputation Dixie wine gained for its inconsistent and poor quality....Though there were a few knowledgeable wine-makers, such as John Naegle in nearby Toquerville, most were amateurs. Another economic factor was the decline of the number of wine consumers, as most of the miners in the area left with the closure of many of the nearby mines in the 1880s."

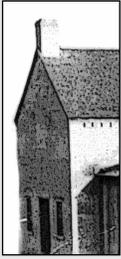
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM FOR ST. GEORGE SOCIAL HALL



The Gardener's Club built this small building as a wine cellar in 1864. It was the center of wine-making and storage in St. George. There are no photos of the building. This is a sketch of what it may have looked like.



Grape vineyard in Washington County about 1905.



The St. George Opera House was built on top of an old wine cellar between 1877 and 1880. For many years, the building was known as the Social Hall. It was the center of St. George social life for many years. There was also another earlier building called the St. George Hall. Don't get them confused. Following are quotes and photos to help you learn about this phase of the Opera House's life.

“In 1875, the St. George Hall, which had been used since its completion in 1863 for public programs, was sold to private interests. The loss of the St. George Hall for public use necessitated that a new gathering hall be secured.”

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM FOR ST. GEORGE SOCIAL HALL

“At an early date the Gardener's Club had built a large wine cellar...on Main Street. The Builders Union erected over the Wine Cellar another story that was made into a theater A wing which held the audience was extended westward.... Beginning with 1880 and continuing for the next forty-five or fifty years, the Social Hall was the center of spoken and musical drama, as well as the scene of many other social activities.”

ANDREW KARL LARSON
I WAS CALLED TO DIXIE - THE VIRGIN RIVER BASIN,
UNIQUE EXPERIENCES IN MORMON PIONEERING, P. 405.

“In those far-off Dixie days you [actors and actresses] helped by the flashes of sunlight you gave to brighten the lives of discouraged men and women.... Charlie, you were a master in your part. You loved to laugh and make others laugh. Your mission in this country ‘where the land was no good and the water no gooder,’ was to make people laugh, and to keep them laughing... [Mary], how your voice thrilled the hearts of the early Pioneers. After days of toil and privations they forgot their own sorrows....”

ZAIDEE WALKER MILES,
DEVELOPMENT OF THE DRAMA IN DIXIE
(MILES SAW MANY PLAYS AT THE OPERA HOUSE AND ACTED IN SOME HERSELF)

“There was probably more theater produced in St. George then than there is now, even with all the high school and college productions of the present day. One does not have to search far for a reason to explain the decline—the advent of motion pictures. After 1910 the Opera House was used for a while to show moving pictures as well as for staging college musicals.”

DOUGLAS D. ALDER AND KARL F. BROOKS,
A HISTORY OF WASHINGTON COUNTY: FROM ISOLATION TO DESTINATION, PP. 166-67



This building was constructed in two sections sometime between 1877 and 1880.



Lynne Clark Collection—donor Edna Cloward

Cast of one of the early productions performed in the St. George Social Hall.



The Utah and Idaho Sugar Company (U & I) bought the St. George Opera House in 1936 and converted into a sugar beet seed cleaning plant. U & I also built three warehouses on the site that could store 2.25 million pounds of seed. One of the warehouses is the St. George Art Museum today. Following are quotes and photos to help you learn about this phase of the Opera House's life.

"In the 1930s, the Utah and Idaho Sugar Company bought the building and turned it into a sugar beet seed cleaning plant. Because sugar beet seed was one of the main cash crops in Southern Utah, this allowed the old Opera House to become an important part of the area's economic development mix, according to St. George City Public Information Office Brent Crosby."

LOREN WEBB

"SOCIAL HALL TO BEET SEED PLANT, AND BACK AGAIN"

ST. GEORGE MAGAZINE, AUGUST 1997

"While [beet seed] was a good cash crop, Quayle said it was a lot of work, especially early on, when much of the work had to be done by hand, by horse drawn mower and by stationary thrashing machines.... 'I remember people buying ground, getting a beet seed contract, and being able to pay the ground off in a couple or three years,' Cox said. 'Land was cheap in those days and if they got a pretty good crop, they would do really well.'"

LOREN WEBB

DRAFT OF "SOCIAL HALL TO BEET SEED PLANT, AND BACK AGAIN"

AVAILABLE AT THE ST. GEORGE ART MUSEUM

"An average of 750 acres was planted to [beet] seed in Washington County during World War II. At that time, seed was shipped to Belgium and other foreign countries under the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration program...."

LOREN WEBB

DRAFT OF "SOCIAL HALL TO BEET SEED PLANT, AND BACK AGAIN"

AVAILABLE AT THE ST. GEORGE ART MUSEUM

In 1943, Lyle Mitchell became the first woman hired to work in the [beet seed] lab. As the work load increased, more women joined the work force including Viola Goates, Rhoads May Goates, Jean Fawcett, and Blanch Bennett . . .

In 1946-1947, the plant operated around the clock with three eight-hour shifts as one million pounds of beet seed were shipped to Germany under the Marshall Plan.”

LOREN WEBB

DRAFT OF “SOCIAL HALL TO BEET SEED PLANT, AND BACK AGAIN”

AVAILABLE AT THE ST. GEORGE ART MUSEUM

“By 1978, much of the United States sugar industry was in financial trouble. In its annual report that year, U&I reported a net loss of \$2 million, the first loss since 1933. The loss was attributed to the depressed prices for refined sugar ‘as well as for most raw farm products . . . Sugar prices remained below the cost of production during the entire year.’

By December 1979, U&I had closed its St. George operation and eventually its entire Intermountain operation faded into oblivion.”

LOREN WEBB

“SOCIAL HALL TO BEET SEED PLANT, AND BACK AGAIN”

ST. GEORGE MAGAZINE, AUGUST 1997



Beet seed growing in Washington Field.



Utah and Idaho Sugar Company bought this building in 1936 and converted it to a sugar beet seed factory.



The Utah and Idaho Sugar Company installed machinery for cleaning sugar beet seed in the St. George Opera House.



The St. George Opera House was used as a sugar beet seed cleaning plant for many years. When the sugar company went out of business in 1979, the Opera House sat empty. Nobody took care of the building and it became very run-down. The City of St. George bought the Opera House in 1987 with hopes of finding a new use for the building. Following are quotes and photos to help you learn about this phase of the Opera House's life.

Poll Says Citizens Want More Culture

Deseret News, April 9, 1980

"A survey by Southwest Research Associates and requested by Southwestern Utah Arts Council shows some unexpected but pleasing findings, St. George leaders say. The arts council wanted to know what the community wants in the arts and how to provide preferred art programs. Washington County residents agreed by a 56 percent majority that the community has too few artistic events such as stage plays, concerts and art exhibits."

Society Reviews Opera House

The Daily Spectrum, June 30, 1988

"...Bob Nicholson, community development director for St. George City which owns the building, told of the work currently being done on the [Opera House]. City crews have been removing heavy metal bins left behind by the sugar company which inhabited the building for years, wrecked cars, pipes, and much of the bulkier debris. Much of the residue from pigeons, vandals and sheer neglect needs to be removed, after which the volunteers will attack the plaster which covers the original adobe walls.

While the initial clean-up work will be done by [Historical Society] members and friends, it is hoped other organizations and individuals will become involved so restoration of the historic building will become a community project...."

Money Pouring in to Restore Opera House

The Daily Spectrum, 1994

"Money is pouring in to restore the Pioneer Opera House. At a recent fund raiser in the old Cottonmill in Washington, approximately \$50,000 was collected for the project. 'I was absolutely stunned,' said Elaine Alder, chairperson for the fund raising committee sponsored by Sun Capital Bank. 'I'm really gratified.'

...The restoration project has been undertaken by the city of St. George, Sun Capital Bank and the Washington County Statehood Centennial Committee. The Opera House, at the corner of Main Street and 200 North, is now called the Pioneer Center for the Arts and was purchased by the city in 1987 with the hopes it would become an historical anchor for the town.

'The idea was let's make downtown attractive, tell the St. George story,' said Karl Brooks, former mayor and fund raising committee member. 'It seemed a great place to tell it.' Ultimately, the center will house small plays, recitals, group performances, and concerts, Alder said. 'I just envision it being a wonderful square,' she said. 'I have such hope for it.... It will help link the present with the past.'

'We have people still living that acted in some of the plays given back then,' Brooks said. 'I just think it's important for the community to hang on to their heritage, to remind us where we come from....'

From a nomination form for a Community Award for Cultural Enrichment prepared for the St. George Opera House

"This vision of a few starting in January of 1994 has now become reality for the whole community. A committee of 18 grew into the participation of over 10,000 citizens and resulted in the restoration of this historic building to its former purpose. Four fund raising dinners brought in over \$125,000 and utility bill inserts resulted in citizens contributing \$25,000. A musical production, "Good Guys of Broadway," a parenting workshop, a youth dance, cook books and a quilt sale, plus matching gifts netted another \$20,000. Then a foundation grant brought the total to over \$300,000 in private donations and expressions of community generosity."

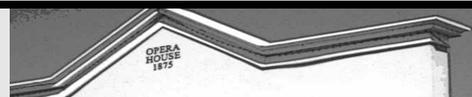
Renovation on the Opera House was just beginning when these photos were taken.

You can still see parts of the sugar beet seed factory on the outside of the building.





Since its opening in 1995, the St. George Opera House has been used for plays, receptions, and other community events.



Read the questions on this sheet carefully. Then work with your group to examine your evidence about the life of the St. George Opera House and answer the questions. Make sure your answers are based on your evidence. Your answers will help you prepare your presentation for the class.

1. What is the time period covered in your evidence? When does it start? When does it end?
2. How was the building used during this period?
3. Who was using the building? What kinds of people in the community went there?
4. Were the activities taking place at the building important to the people of Washington County? Why?
5. What is the most important thing for your classmates to know about the building in this time period?