

THE BOSTON OPERA HOUSE

ORIGINALLY B.F. KEITH MEMORIAL THEATRE

539 WASHINGTON STREET

EST. 1928

THOMAS LAMB, ARCHITECT

THEN



Courtesy of the Bostonian Society

NOW



HISTORY

The 3,000+ seat B.F. Keith Memorial Theatre was designed in the late 1920s by Thomas Lamb for the Keith-Albee-Orpheum company. Named for influential vaudeville theater owner and operator Benjamin Franklin Keith, the theater was originally intended for both movies and vaudeville performances, though the latter would fall by the wayside when the theater was purchased by Joseph Kennedy, Sr. (father of President John Kennedy and Senator Ted Kennedy). Later purchased by the Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO Radio Pictures) conglomerate, the theater was renowned for its beauty. Lamb, a New York-based architect trained at Cooper Union, built his career on the construction of ornate vaudeville and movie palaces all over the country.

The theater was built by E.F. Albee, Keith's former partner, at the remarkable cost of \$5 million. Reportedly, "Mr. Albee sought the world over for art treasures with which to beautify the theatre...Much of the marble used in the building was selected by him in a quarry in Italy. It was transported to this county in solid pieces – some of them weighing six tons apiece – turned in Vermont and installed under Mr. Albee's personal supervision" (Boston Globe, October 17, 1928). Indeed, Albee was known for his obsessive attention to detail. The Boston Globe's opening day review, bluntly titled "New Theatre is Amazing," likened Albee to "the old master builders of the great Gothic cathedrals" giving Albee more credit for the finished design than the architect himself.

The magnificent exterior of the B.F. Keith Memorial Theatre was executed in highly ornamented terra cotta. Bronze doors led into a 40-foot-tall vaulted lobby replete with Albee's "art treasures," and the auditorium itself was reportedly "so magnificent that it kind of takes your breath away for awhile" (Boston Globe, October 30, 1928).

The movie theater (renamed RKO-Keith's and later the Savoy Theater) was purchased by the Opera Company of Boston and renamed the Boston Opera House in 1980. After a decade of acclaimed opera productions, the Opera Company folded in 1991, resulting in the building's closure for several years. Water damage destroyed the roof and much of the historic interior of the building.

Landmarked thanks to the efforts of Mayor Menino and Senator Kennedy, the Boston Opera House was restored by Clear Channel in the early 2000's at a cost of \$54 Million. Though still called the Boston Opera House, the space is host to Broadway shows, rock concerts, and productions by the Boston Ballet. The Boston Opera House is currently the busiest theater in New England, serving over 400,000 patrons a year.