

History of
The Austin Club

The Austin Club: A Brief History Since 1949

The grand and historic Millett Opera House is the home of The Austin Club. The Opera House was built in 1878 by Austin contractor and businessman Captain Charles F. Millett and was designed by architect Frederick E. Ruffini. Known as “the social center of Austin” in its heyday, the building was not only used for opera and theater, but also hosted legislative sessions, political conventions, graduation ceremonies, formal dances, roller skating, parties and boxing and wrestling matches.



Millett Opera House, circa 1878

Dedicated To

The members of The Austin Club: Those who have carried on the tradition set by Captain Millett and his splendid Opera House and filled this building with good cheer and fellowship.

“The ball at the Opera House was the closing event...The large theatre was filled with...men and beautiful women, who indulged in the...dance till a late hour...The supper, prepared by...the commercial restaurant, was set in the alley next to the Opera House which, by being floored and covered and decorated with evergreens, had been converted into an enormous dining room...”

Daily Democratic Statesman
April 17, 1879



Congress Avenue, circa 1949

History of The Austin Club

Looking back in time to 1949, Austin was a small town with a population of 132,459. The Mayor was Taylor Glass, the tallest building was the 14-story Norwood Building, there was no significant local industry, dams were being built on the Colorado River and a swank private membership club known as The Austin Club was started. The Club was to be situated on the 3rd floor of the Commodore Perry Building, which was not completed when the Club moved in.

The Charter for The Austin Club was granted on the 17th day of June, 1949.

The formal "Black Tie" opening on December 10, 1949 could not have come at a better time for the party-minded Austinites of the era. The gala dinner dance was held at the peak of the holiday festivities. The new Club had a continuous round of cocktail parties, dances, luncheons and buffet suppers. The beautiful rooms were filled with excited new members and their guests. This Club was the first of its kind in Austin. The membership roster was filled with leading Texans in business and industry, as well as high ranking politicians, including current and past Governors.

The first meeting of the Board of Directors was held on the day the Corporate Charter was granted. The first meeting of the stockholders was held on March 20, 1950. At that time that the Club had 483 members consisting of residents, non-residents, widows and military.

Ten shares of stock sold for \$500 for Resident Members. Non-resident, widows and military owned four shares for \$200. The dues structure was \$12 per month for Residents and \$6 for other membership types. Due to the change in the Texas Non-Profit Corporation Laws, The Austin Club changed from stock ownership to member ownership in January 1980.

No story about the beginning of the Austin Club would be complete without mentioning Mr. E. H. Perry, Sr. He was a delightful gentleman and a favorite Austin citizen. He developed the plans for the city's new Commodore Perry Hotel. He anticipated the need and purpose for The Austin Club and inspired its coming into being.

Original Board of Directors

First President

Edward P. Clark

First Vice President

James P. Nash

First Treasurer

Walter Bremond

First Secretary

Bob J. Lyles

A.F. Ashford

Walter Bremond, Jr.

R. Max Brooks

A.C. Bull

T.H. Davis

Theo P. Davis

Fagen Dixon

Paul Fuller

Coleman Gay

Dr. Walter Goddard

W.H. Johnson

Harry E. Johnson

Wm. Lawlor

Bob J. Lyles

Tom Miller

C.C. Miller

James P. Nash

E.H. Perry, Sr.

Hiram Reed

David T. Roche

Morin Scott

Edwin Smith

E.S. Swan

James Swearingen

The Fire of 1960

After spending \$43,000 for redecorating in January of 1960, tragedy struck. On the evening of Thursday, December 15, 1960, after closing, a devastating fire totally consumed the Club's lounge area and two dining rooms. The rest of the lovely facility was completely covered in black soot and water.

After the smoke cleared, the furniture was cleaned and stored in a rented warehouse. Some of the furniture and fixtures that were salvageable were used to open a small club in the basement of the Commodore Perry Hotel, where the Club stayed for 11 months.

The Austin Club, circa 1962
Note the artwork in the back dining area.



Rebuilding at the Commodore Perry

President Harry Whitworth and the Board of Directors appointed E.J. Revell and Newton Wields as decorators. The designers created an entirely new interior that reflected the grandeur of the Renaissance Period, with many one-of-a-kind accessories dating back to the 1600's. Much to the delight of all the members, The Austin Club was totally rebuilt and re-opened in November 1961 for the Rice vs Texas football game.



Millett Opera House, circa 1895

Interim Move to the Stephen F. Austin Hotel

The Austin Club remained at the Commodore Perry until 1979. Unfortunately, the building deteriorated rapidly. The hotel finally closed its doors on Tuesday, September 11, 1979. The Austin Club picked up what could be carried, stored the rest and moved to a small space previously occupied by a pizza parlor in the historic Stephen F. Austin Hotel. The 30-foot wide, 150-foot deep area had an upstairs and downstairs. The quarters were cramped but only temporary. A prospective new home was found and a membership drive initiated which increased membership to over one thousand. In December 1980, after almost a year at the Stephen F. Austin, The Austin Club moved into the Millett Opera House. This elegant building remains the home of the Club today.

A Historical Setting

At a meeting on October 9, 1979, the Austin Independent School District approved a 50-year lease of the Old Millett Opera House to The Austin Club. The lease began April 1, 1980. Royce Faulkner Construction Company, Bell Kline & Hoffman Architectural Firm, Linda Wade Decorating Association, President Charles B. Alexander, a decorating committee and many others contributed to a beautiful new Austin Club.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony with Mayor Carole McClellan was held December 15, 1980. The doors opened into a lovely and spacious 20,000 square-foot club, which offered a place of friendliness of spirit, a place the members could once again bring their guests and be proud. The entrance boasts an elegant loggia. Many items of furniture, chandeliers and mirrors from the original club are still in use today.

Ghost Stories

We all know there's no such thing as ghosts, right? Tell that to some of the Club's staff and members, especially when they close up at night.

A building 120 years old is bound to have some unexplained creaks and groans. After all, thousands of members, guests, and employees have passed through these doors since The Austin Club moved here in 1980 and many thousands before that, since the Millett Opera House was built in 1878.

This story is about The Third Floor Ghost, affectionately dubbed "Priscilla." Legend has it she was an actress—"some say opera singer"—who fell to her death from the catwalk over 100 years ago. Tragically, it had been her final scheduled performance, for she was to be married the next day.

Several employees and members have seen, or felt, her. As the staff closes up at night, Priscilla rides the elevator. No one else is in the building. Mischievous, she likes to pull all of the curtains out of the tiebacks. One longtime employee reports that when exiting the elevator to the third floor, a powerful force flipped the plate he was carrying onto the carpet. The room was ice-cold and something or someone pushed past him and spun him around.

What does the ghost look like? The few who have seen her describe a flowing white or black gown accented by a huge gold medallion around her neck. A distraught lobbyist once ran downstairs after hosting a fundraiser on the third floor. "I saw her! I saw the ghost!" he swore. He had not been drinking.

Are ghosts part of the rich heritage of The Austin Club and Millett Opera House, or is all this just coincidence? You decide.

Members Honored at Club

In 1983 two plaques were installed in the Club, one honoring the 1980 Board of Directors who authorized the leasing and restoration of the Millett Opera House and one honoring the beloved Club President Homer Leonard.

Homer Leonard was first elected to serve as President of The Austin Club in 1955-1956. He was re-elected in 1962 and served until his death in February, 1979.

He was a charter member of the Club. For the 'old timers', just the mention of The Austin Club brings Homer Leonard's name to mind. The fellowship and happy times which are synonymous with the Club are his monument for all of us to remember.

Priscilla, as seen on the Parlor dome



A Proud Tradition and Still Growing

Over the past 50 years, the staff has grown from 9 to 60 employees. As for the future, a growing interest in revitalization of downtown Austin, teamed with a strong supportive membership, ensure it to be bright and promising.

Austin Club Presidents Past and Present

Edward P. Clark, 1949
Harry Kelly, 1950-51
Edwin Smith, 1952-53
Emmet Morse, 1954
Homer Leonard, 1955-56
Claude Voyles, 1957-1958
Harry Whitworth, 1959-61
Homer Leonard, 1962-79
Charles B. Alexander, 1979-86
Danny Burger, 1986-88
Robert L. Looney, 1988-Present



Millett Opera House, circa 1898



Millett Opera House, circa 1930

History of the Millett Opera House

The story of The Austin Club would not be complete without a look at the grand building in which it resides.

In 1871, the first railroad, the Houston and Central, had reached Austin enriching the city economically and culturally. Austin was just making the transition from a rough frontier town

to the proud capital city of Texas and its 11,000 citizens hungered for culture and entertainment. In 1878, the city greeted the news of the construction of the Millett Opera House with great enthusiasm and the newspapers reported often on its progress during building. It was five years before the University of Texas opened its doors and ten years before the State Capitol was built.

City Father Builds Social Center of Austin

Captain Charles F. Millett (1832-1890) was responsible for constructing and managing the Opera House. The February 17, 1878 Daily Democratic Statesman includes an article entitled "Captain C.F. Millett and his Business." The article called Captain Millett one of the "most successful men of Austin." He was a well-known contractor and builder who owned a lumber yard, which had been located where the Opera House now stands. According to the article, he moved his lumber yard to the Colorado River, then built the opera house on the 9th Street (then called Ash Street) property and next to it a luxurious boarding house called Millett Mansion. Captain Millett was at that time president of the Austin Gas Company. He was a member of the Volunteer Fire Department since its founding in 1858, acting as chief from 1866-1869. He also served as Alderman to the City Council from the Eighth Ward.

The architect on the structure was Frederick E. Ruffini, whose move to Austin was noted by the press. According to the Austin newspaper, Ruffini had won first prize in a Chicago architectural competition. The opera house featured 800 moveable seats, boxes and a balcony.

The walls were 24-inch thick native limestone and the building boasted the largest self-supporting room in Austin. In Texas, Millett's was the second in size and grandeur only to the Galveston Opera House.

The Opera House programs were not limited strictly to opera. The building was used for almost every conceivable purpose, including all forms of theatrical entertainment, medicine shows, church services, political conventions, graduation exercises, formal dances and musical recitals. Legislative sessions were held at Millett's while the Capitol Building was under construction.



Millett's was called "the social center of Austin" and it was in constant use. Some of the nation's greatest actors performed in front of its kerosene footlights. A program on Feb 21, 1888, featured John Wilkes Booth's brother, Edwin Booth, in "Othello" and another program dated January 22, 1892 starred James O'Neill in his eighth season as "The Count of Monte Cristo." Lily Langtry and Joseph Jefferson also appeared there.

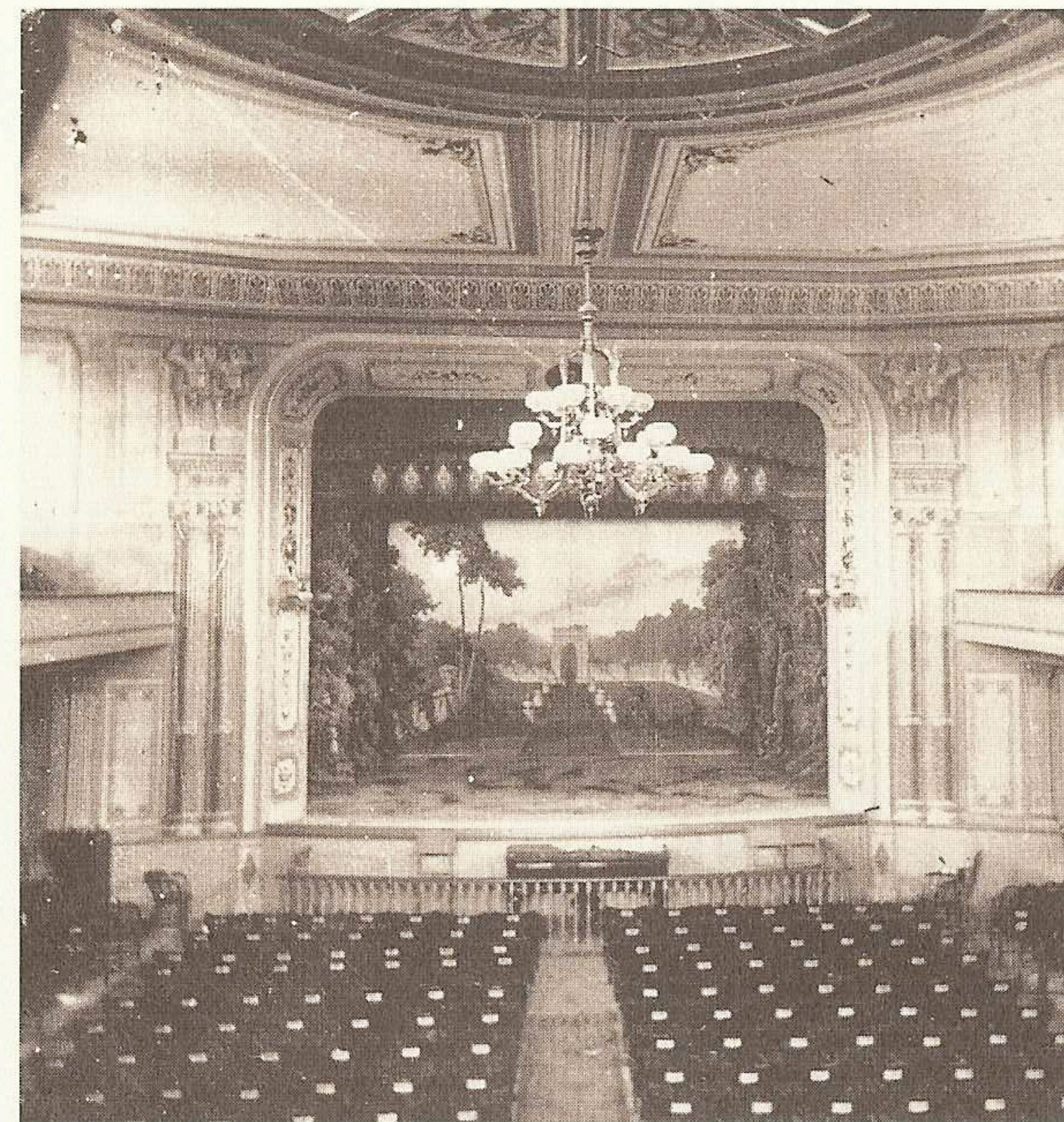
Less frequent, but also popular, was prizefighting. In 1884, the great John L. Sullivan presented an exhibition of boxing and wrestling. William Jennings Bryan spoke from the Opera House stage and when the famous Gilmore's Band played at Millett's on December 2, 1889, young John Phillip Sousa was a member.

When the all-electric Hancock Opera House opened in 1896, Millett's went into decline. Captain Millett reportedly refused to install electricity at his opera house, but later found it could not compete with its new uptown rival.

New Owners Operate Businesses at Millett's

In 1896, the property was sold to Dr. M.A. Taylor, an Austin physician who had been appointed in 1873 as one of ten administrators for the University of Texas. Dr. Taylor was one of the founders of Austin National Bank and was also president of People's Building and Loan Association. Two months after the purchase, Dr. Taylor sold the property to his daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. John T. Phillips. They removed the theater balcony and added a third floor to the front of the building and resided there. For 15¢, turn-of-the-century Austinites could rent roller skates and take a turn on the rink Phillips operated. He also rented storage space for household goods.

Phillips sold the property in 1910 to the Knights of Columbus, who maintained ownership until 1929. In 1911, they spent \$15,000 to add the Classic Revival Portico to the front of the building. The Opera House was then known as the "KC Hall" and hosted many dances, parties and community meetings.



Millett Opera House Interior, circa 1878

A portion of the hand-painted ceiling is displayed in the Club's House Conference Room.

School District Purchases Property

The Von Boeckman-Jones Printing Co. owned the building from 1929 until 1940, when the Austin Public Free Schools bought it. Von Boeckman-Jones continued to lease the property. In 1950 the J.C. Bair Company took over the lease. When the building was threatened with destruction in 1956, Maverick-Clarke, an office supply and stationery store, took out a long-

term lease on the property and restored much of the first floor. Captain Millett's lovely boarding house, Millett Mansion, continued to rent rooms to tenants until 1963, when it was torn down.

In 1979, the Austin Independent School District approved a 50-year lease of the old Millett Opera House to The Austin Club.

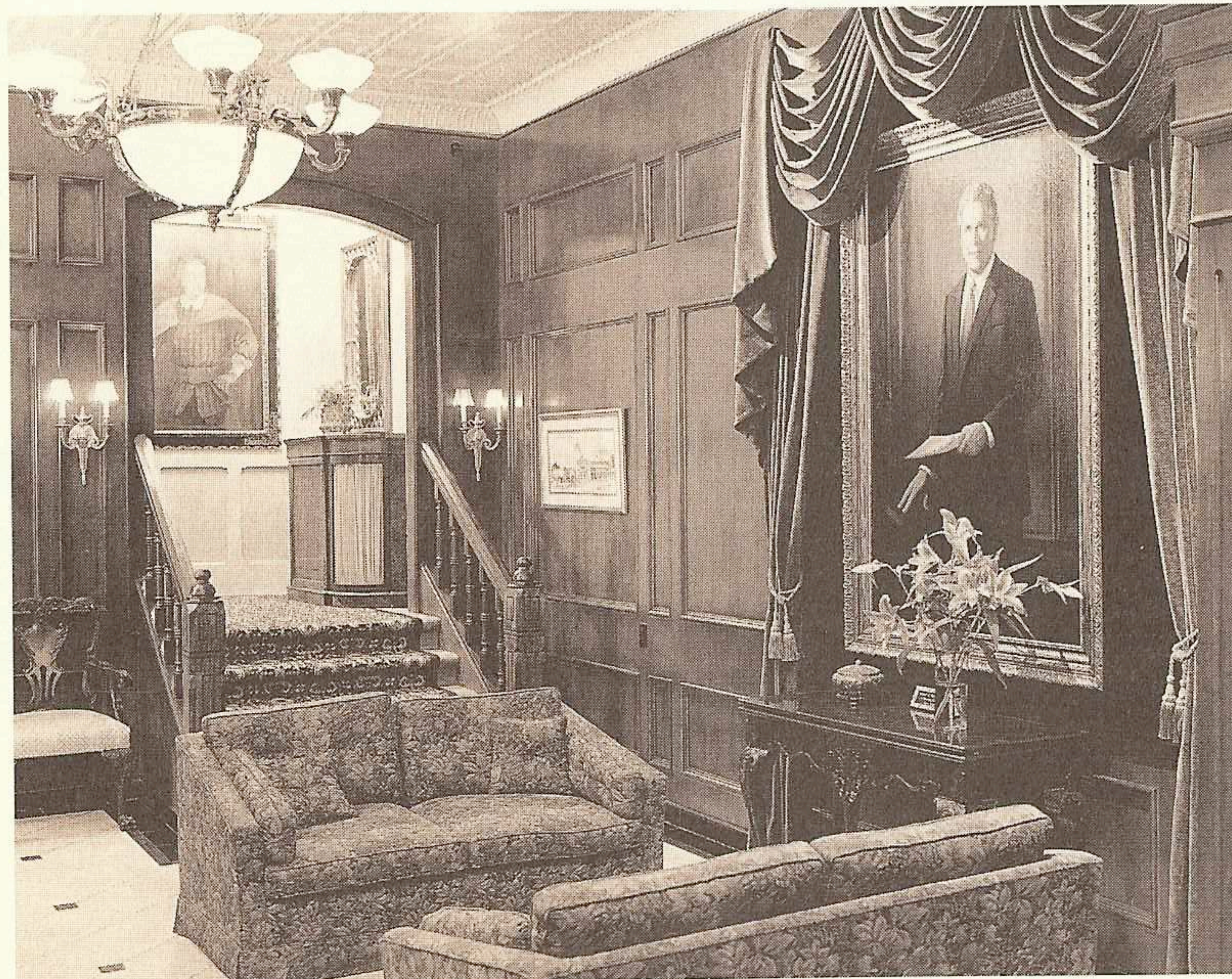
Historic Landmark Well-Preserved

In 1965, the Millett Opera House was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark by the State Historical Survey Committee. On April 2, 1981, the Heritage Society of Austin gave The Austin Club its distinguished History Preservation Award for the restoration of the Opera House.

A plaque from the National Register of Historic Places was awarded in 1989, marking the

grand old building in time for the Austin Club's fortieth anniversary.

Club president Robert Looney shared the honor of placing the bronze national register plaque on the building with club restoration architect David Hoffman and the Honorable J.J. "Jake" Pickle, U.S. Representative from the 10th District of Texas, on October 28, 1989.



The Austin Club, 2002

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