

A Look Back in Time

The Rhode Opera House, located at 514 56th Street is a theatre building that sits on a large lot on the north side of Kenosha's downtown, the building fills its lot and is surrounded by other commercial buildings and a large parking lot.

*Section 15.04 of the City's Zoning Ordinance establishes standards for designating structures and sites as historic and the site or structure must meet at least one of these standards. It was determined that **The Rhode Opera House** is architecturally and historically significant under Standards 1,3, and 6; “exemplifies or reflects the City's cultural, social...history; or “embodies the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen...; or is representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect...” The Rhode Opera House is architecturally significant because it is a fine example of a 1920's-era movie palace that features a simple Mediterranean Revival exterior design with an elaborate Moorish-Spanish interior. It is also significant because it is the work of a master architectural firm, Rapp and Rapp, who were one of the most noted theatre designers in the United States in the early twentieth century.*



The Rhode Opera House was built as the Gateway Theatre in 1927, a movie palace designed by the noted theatre architectural firm of Rapp and Rapp of Chicago. It was built on the site of the old Rhode Opera House, a theatrical landmark in Kenosha for many years, and from which it takes its current name. Like most movie palaces of this era, the Rhode is sparsely detailed on the exterior, saving its lavish architectural style for moviegoers on the inside. The building's main elevation is a narrow two-story block that extends to triple its size at the rear, where the bulk of the theatre is located. Most of the building is constructed of tan bricks with very few openings punctuating the walls. The main elevation consists of two sections, the historic portion of the building on the second story, and a remodeled theatre entrance on the first story. The historic second story is decorated in a very simple Mediterranean Revival motif that consists of a facing of smooth tan bricks, an arcaded arched parapet flanked by foliated panels, and three large round-arched openings. The openings are recessed behind smooth terra cotta portals and are filled with multiple lights topped with fanlights. To the west of the second story that is also faced with smooth tan bricks. The first story of the main elevation features a modern metal overhang, fieldstone veneer, and modern lobby doors and transoms. The Rhode Opera House was originally designated in 1988 and re-designated on July 25, 1996.

The history of the modern Rhode Opera House dates back to 1891, when Peter Rhode built the first Rhode Opera House on this site. That building was destroyed by fire in 1896, and Peter Rhode immediately rebuilt the theatre on the same site. All types of theatrical productions were shown at the old Rhode Opera House, primarily by traveling repertory companies and others who presented vaudeville acts, plays, operas, religious productions, and lectures. It was one of the first theatres to show moving pictures, including Edison's early productions at the turn of the twentieth century. The old Rhode Opera House featured fine acoustics, comfortable seating, and modern gas lights. Peter Rhode's son, Joseph, operated the old opera house until 1924, when motion pictures were replacing live, theatrical entertainment. Although Kenosha had two other movie palaces in its downtown, in 1926, the old Rhode Opera House was razed for the construction of this building, originally known as the Gateway Theatre, a modern movie palace.

In 1924 The Rhode Opera House was turned over to Saxe Brothers Theaters, Milwaukee. In 1927 the Saxe Brothers built the Gateway Theater for a half-million dollars. Architect: George Rapp, and First Manager: James J. Morrissey. The grand opening was on December 29th, with seating capacity of 1250.

In 1963 Standard Theaters leased the theater and renamed it Lake Theater. In 1976 the Lake Theater added a center wall and changed to duplex screens, with approximately 420 seats in each auditorium. Balcony seats were removed, a false ceiling was added over the audience, and the projection facilities were located from the third floor to the mezzanine. The Lake Theater closed its doors in April, 1984.

In December 1987, in honor of the Rhode family, Lakeside Players President Gary Stamm recommended the building be renamed the Rhode Opera House. In 1988 Lakeside Players became the tenant. In September of 1989 the Lakeside Players purchase the Rhode Opera House from Lakeshore BID. As of today The Rhode Opera House continues to have live entertainment.