

# **The Van Cise Building**

## **“The Summit Opera House”**

*By Robert A. Hageman*

One of the foremost historic buildings in downtown Summit was designed and built in 1893-1894 and is located on the northwest corner of Springfield Avenue and Kent Place Boulevard. Today it houses Winberie's Restaurant & Bar on the street level and the Renaissance Church on the upper level. The building itself is still known as the “Summit Opera House” as it was beginning in 1909. It is truly a Summit landmark built in the Classical Revival / Second Renaissance Revival Style. The building's history is long and varied.

In return for the deed to the property, which was owned by the financially strapped W.C.T.U. (Women's Christian Temperance Union), Joel Garretson Van Cise (1844-1918) completed the structure late in the nineteenth century at a cost of \$35,000.

### **Who Was Joel Garretson Van Cise?**

Van Cise was a state W.C.T.U. leader who later became a onetime candidate for president on the Prohibition Party ticket. He had visions of the building becoming the headquarters of the local W.C.T.U. chapter and a central meeting place for state W.C.T.U. leaders. This was in the early days before temperance and prohibition became national issues in American politics.

Van Cise was born in York, Pennsylvania on February 8, 1844. He was one of nine children. Living in Iowa for several years at a young age, he later fought with an Iowa regiment in the Civil War and became a sergeant.

He married Laura Helen Marsh in 1870 and brought his family to Summit from Newark in 1880. The couple raised eight children, four of whom were born in Summit. Their home was located at 701 Springfield Avenue and was razed



*Joel Garretson Van Cise*

in 1936. They were members of the Methodist Church of Summit

Van Cise worked for Equitable Life Assurance Society in New York for fifty years and held the position of actuary from 1898-1910. It is said that he was lightning fast with calculations, often giving public demonstrations for charity events.

He died at his home in Summit on December 8, 1918 at the age of seventy-two.

### **The Various Phases Of the Van Cise Building**

The photo of the Van Cise Building (opposite page) was taken about 1900. The bricks on the right were probably for the construction of the James York Building at 485-487 Springfield Avenue which was built in 1900.

Besides its two main halls, Willard Hall and Howard Hall, the Van Cise Building also had several bedrooms on the top floor for various tenants. There were bowling alleys in the basement, a library, reading rooms, a coffee shop, and a large kitchen. These facilities served as a place for games and recreation for young people in an effort to keep them out of saloons. On the ground floor were several large stores, including a grocery store, a bicycle shop and a sporting goods store.

Willard Hall fronted Springfield Avenue. It was named for Frances Caroline Willard (1839-1898), who was a noted teacher and American educator, and a leader for women's rights and temperance. She became very prominent as the organizer of the World W.C.T.U. and president of the National W.C.T.U. in 1879. At one time her picture was in all Summit school classrooms. The Hall served as the local W.C.T.U. headquarters for many years. The only other long-term occupant of the Willard Hall portion of the building, besides apartment occupants, was the Summit Art Association.

Howard Hall, which fronted Kent Place Boulevard, was named after Clinton N. Howard who became a leading Republican force for prohibition. In 1901 free public lectures were held in the 800-seat facility. The first lecture was given by Rollo Ogden, a Summit resident who later became editor of the New York Times from 1922-1937.

Howard Hall only saw limited use until 1911 when moving pictures - "flicks" - were introduced by the Brown Amusement Company. By 1914, however, the Company opened a theatre exclusively for moving pictures at 23 Beechwood Road called the Lyric Theatre. On May 25, 1951 that theatre burned down.

Theatrical productions and vaudeville acts were presented at Howard Hall until 1920. In 1909 the building was named the "Summit Opera House" where it was listed in the City Directories until 1920.

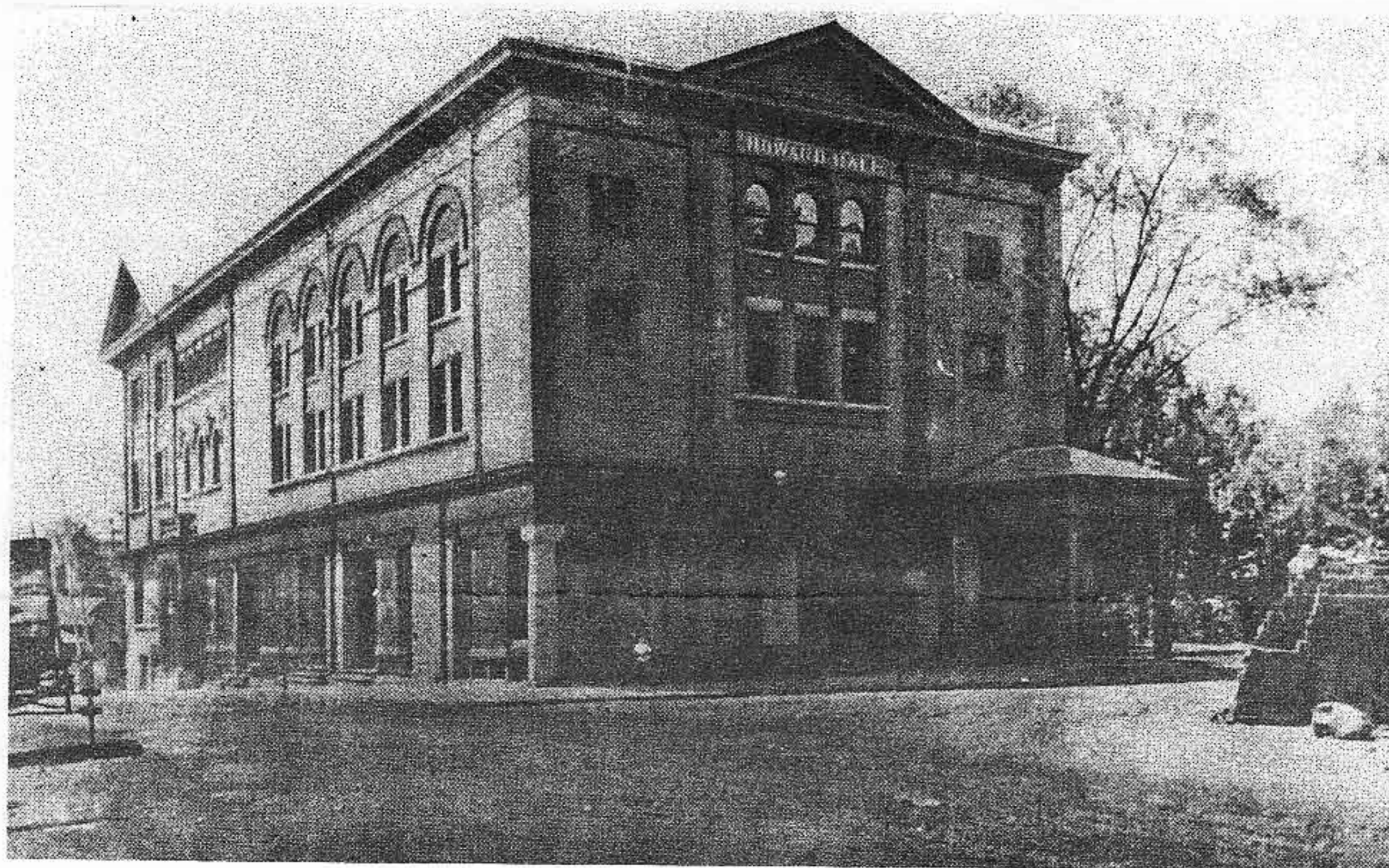
A major change occurred in May, 1920 when Overlook Masonic Lodge No. 163 (established 1888) bought the Van Cise Building for \$28,816. The Lodge spent another \$57,858 for improvements and \$9,100 on furnishings. Howard Hall was then named Masonic Hall.

The Masons made a third floor out of the theatre balcony by inserting seven steel beams through the wall to make a 44' x 64' Italian Renaissance meeting room. On the left front of the building they placed a lightened Masonic emblem in the second floor level. The second floor was used as a ballroom.

Until 1952 several local businesses existed on the lower levels of the building on the 2 Kent Place Boulevard side. The city directories show some of the inhabitants as follows: Sunny Corner Tiffin (luncheon) Shoppe from 1918 to 1920 and the Blue Lantern Tea Room from 1920 to 1946. No other listings were found until 1952 when Hughes M. Ryder opened the New Hampshire House restaurant which included both the No. 2 and No. 4 Kent Place Boulevard locations. The latter site had included such occupants as the Laird Electric Company in 1944, Modern Glass and Supply in 1948 and the Hollywood Shop in 1950.

By 1962 Hughes M. Ryder purchased the entire building from the Masons. He converted the second floor into a banquet hall in 1969 and the third floor into the Craig Theatre in 1973.

## The Van Cise Building



Over time the building took on the name "The New Hampshire House", although it has been and is still known as the "Summit Opera House".

By 1973, when the Craig Theatre opened, the New Hampshire House restaurant was titled "The Bunch of Grapes" because of the grapey ornaments throughout the décor. The restaurant offered a dinner theatre package on the nights of the Craig Theatre's regular performances. The theatre-in-the-round had a seating capacity of 150, and the performers were a resident company of professional actors. The \$14.95 package price included a ticket to the show, your choice of a dozen entrees, a salad, an appetizer, coffee or tea, tax, and tip.

In 1984 the Ryder family began an 18 month renovation of the building. It was completed in November, 1985, at which time the J.B. Winberie restaurant opened. Then in 2003, after further remodeling, Winberie's Restaurant and Bar opened as we know it today.