

## Ottawa American Legion hall has hidden history

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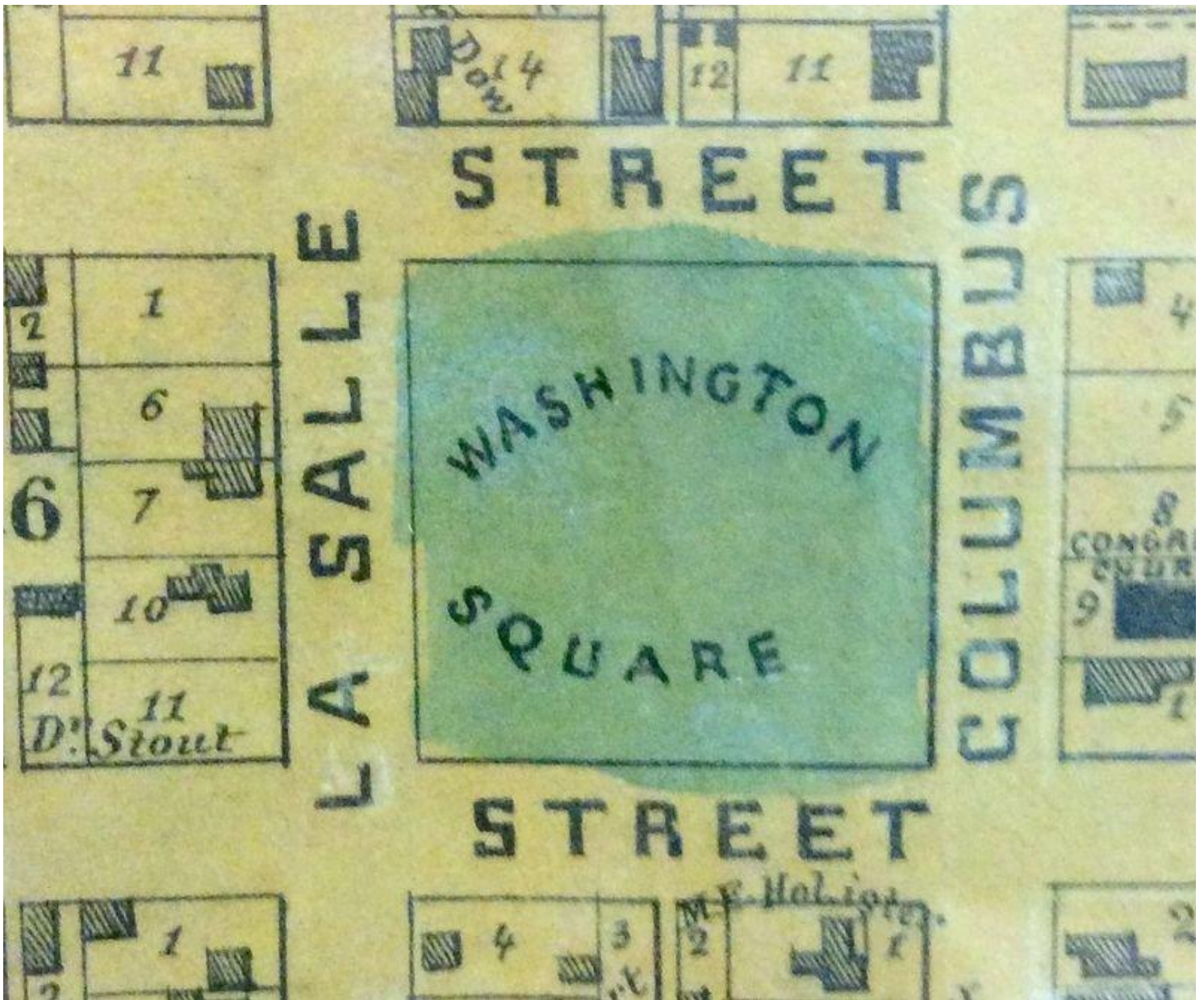


### Caption

The Ottawa American Legion Hall received some tuckpointing last month. The brick exterior covers a performing hall that dates back to the Civil War era.

**Caption**

The Ottawa Turn Hall at the northwest corner of La Salle and Jackson streets, before it was encased in the brick veneer on the Ottawa American Legion Hall.



### Caption

This 1853 map of Ottawa shows the property now occupied by the Ottawa American Legion post was then owned by Dr. Joseph Stout.



The Ottawa American Legion Hall is a two-story building with a hidden story.

The structure at the northwest corner of La Salle and Jackson streets across from Washington Square doesn't show its true age, which is estimated to date back to the Civil War era.

Neither is it easy now to guess its original purpose. But upstairs in the second story, where bingo is now regularly played, the stage and curved balcony reflect its original life as a one-story meeting and performance venue called Washington Hall.

One of the earliest mentions of the hall was in the March 30, 1867, issue of the Ottawa Free Trader newspaper, which reported the purchase of the hall by the local branch of the "German Turners."

More formally known as the Ottawa Turnverein, the parent organization was founded in Cincinnati in 1848 by German immigrants. It was a fraternal, social and athletic organization prominently devoted to physical education and gymnastic instruction. Politically, the Turners supported the election of Abraham Lincoln as president, and members served as bodyguards during his inauguration and funeral.

The Ottawa branch, organized on Aug. 28, 1854, originally was located in a stable at the northeast corner of Columbus and Madison streets, and then moved to other locations. It planned to build its own building, but decided a better deal would be the purchase of Washington Hall at La Salle and Jackson streets, from Dr. Joseph Stout, at one time a prominent abolitionist.

The Turners quickly made their improvements.

"This favorite hall, which has been enlarged by the addition of another story, and otherwise thoroughly overhauled and improved, it gives us pleasure to announce, is again ready for use," the Ottawa Free Trader reported on Sept. 28, 1867.

In the O.P. Sweet Amusement directory of 1870, "Turner Hall" of Ottawa was listed among the leading opera houses and halls of the state.

"This hall, as long and intimately known, combined advantages which commends it to the favorable opinion of the show profession... Good stage and scenery, comfortable seats and well adapted for singing. Will accommodate 1,000 persons."

In 1891 the Ottawa Free Trader ran a complimentary article about the Turners.

"Of late years the organization has been a prosperous one in every respect," it said. "They have a large membership and their treasury is a fat one, and more than that, by their entertainments and socials events, they have afforded more pleasure to the public than any other social organization in the city."

In 1920 the Turners sold their frame building for \$25,000 to the Ottawa Knights of Columbus, which substantially remodeled the structure to its current appearance.

A basement was installed in the middle of the lot and the hall placed on top of it. The pillared front porch was added and the exterior covered with a dark brick veneer.

A crowd estimated at 3,000 people turned out for an open house on Feb. 6, 1921.

"The building was erected from the old Turn hall, but so skillfully have the architects and contractors done their work that the building would not be recognized as anything but an entirely new structure," the newspaper reported the following day.

The change also was noted by Daily Republican-Times writer and Ottawa historian C.C. Tisler, who referenced the building's listing in the 1870 directory.

"The building is still standing at the same old place that it was in the days of 1870 when the directory was published, but any gay young blade of the times, grown white-haired and feeble who returned to Ottawa now would find the building changed in appearance.

"It would not be the same building in all appearances in which he hissed the villain, cheered the hero, or wiped a furtive tear from his eye at the plight of the old couple about to be ousted from their little home or farm by a flinty hearted lord or banker."

At some point in the 1930s, ownership of the hall passed to the Ottawa YMCA.

During World War II, the hall was used by the National Youth Administration to assemble target frame slides for use at army rifle ranges.

In 1946, Ottawa American Legion Post 33, its membership swollen with returning World War II veterans, voted to buy the building.

The Legion refurbished the hall, including installing the current glass block windows, and has occupied the building ever since.

The Turners long ago faded from Ottawa. Why, it is not clear. But during World War I German organizations in America sometimes found themselves in disfavor.

The national organization, however, still exists. Now known as the American Turners, the organization's motto is "A Sound Mind in a Sound Body," according to its web site, [americanturners.com](http://americanturners.com).

- The Times extends its appreciation to Dave Mumper of Ottawa for making available his research file on the America Legion hall and its predecessor buildings.

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