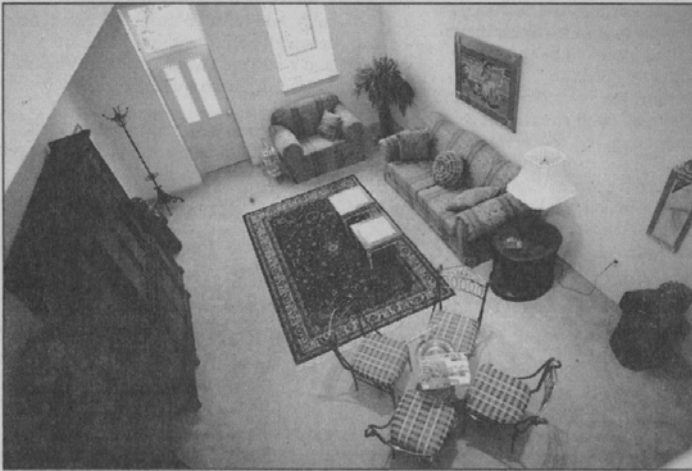


PRINCE

file Historic Site File Conner Bldg.



The new apartments go for \$800 to \$1,000 a month, among the city's highest rents.

Opera House's Encore

Old Manassas Building Gets Retail-Residential Role

By Michael D. Shear
Washington Post Staff Writer

For nine years, the Conner Opera House sat in Old Town Manassas, an empty reminder that even buildings with a vibrant history can become eyesores.

With barely a hint of its former role as the cultural center of a turn-of-the-century community, the Opera House for years had been the largest symbol of Old Town's decay. A year ago, 25 of the town's buildings were deserted.

But now, a local businessman has pumped new life into the Opera House, converting the first floor of the building into space for retail stores and the second floor into some of the city's highest-priced apartments.

The renovation—which cost about \$500,000—is the first large-scale project in an ongoing effort to upgrade and revitalize the look of Old Town Manassas with an eye toward capturing more tourists and shoppers.

"You lead a lot better by stepping out and actually doing something," said Loy Harris, the owner of an insurance company and the president of a nonprofit group called Historic Manassas Inc. "That was a building I thought gave the sense of blight and decay. I hoped [it would] give a spark to revitalization."

Harris said he hopes other buildings in Old Town would be renovated soon. He said the ultimate goal of Historic Manassas is to bring more businesses into the downtown area so that more people will visit.

Already, two art studio-galleries have moved into the Opera House, and Harris is planning to open an upscale wine and cheese store in the old building.

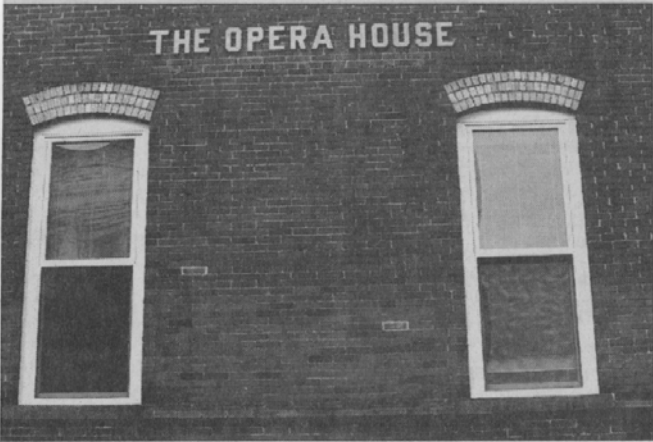
"We were looking for something that would tie in with the fine dining we have here," Harris said. "We need to get away from the redneck or blue-collar image. We need to change the image of Manassas and bring it back to a cultural city."

See OPERA, Page 4, Col. 1

WILLIAM

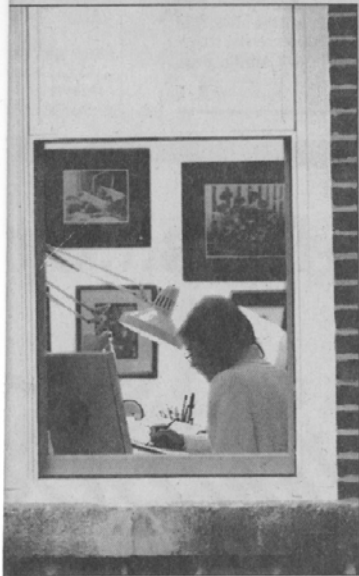
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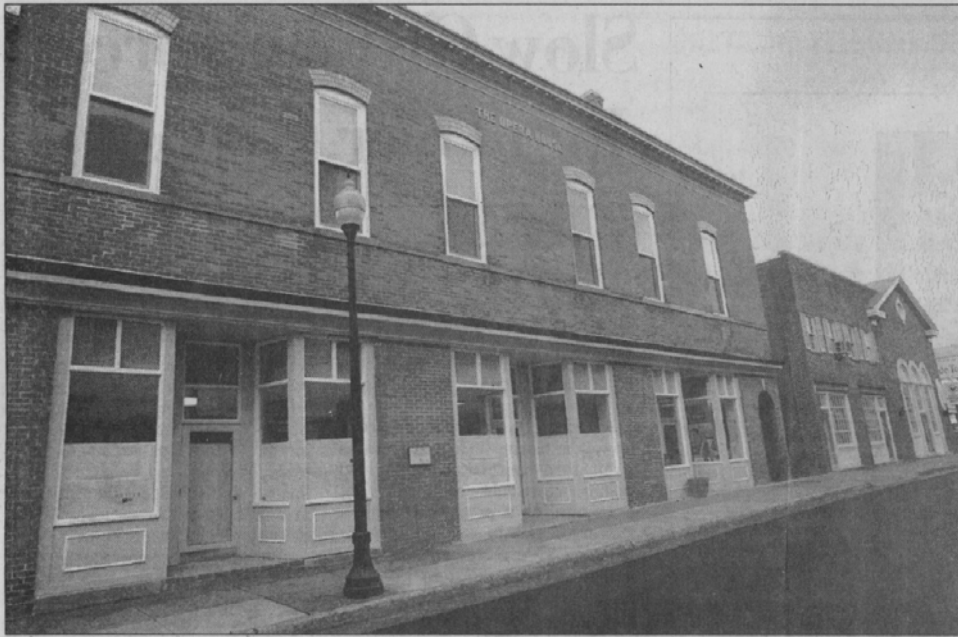
THE OPERA HOUSE



PHOTOS BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

At the Opera House in Old Town Manassas, artist Karyn Hume works in her studio, left. Below, Mary Reilly, left, and Linda Parker paint in their studio. At the turn of the century, the building was a cultural center. Now it contains stores and apartments.





BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

The renovation of the Opera House is part of an effort to upgrade and revitalize the look of Old Town Manassas.

New Life for Historic Opera House

OPERA, From Page 1

That goal makes the history of the Opera House even more important, said Laura Peake, the curator of the Manassas Museum.

"With Old Town as a whole working toward revitalization, it's important to bring more people here," Peake said. "[The Opera House] is one of our historic structures. It's wonderful to see the building in a much better condition and being used instead of sitting there empty."

Built in 1906, the Opera House has often had retail stores on the first floor, Peake said. According to documents from the Historic Landmark Commission, the building's first owner, E.R. Conner, moved his grocery store there in 1907.

In 1910, the two-story brick building became the first in Manassas to be lighted with electricity. During those early days, the lower floor of the building also housed the offices of the Manassas Journal-Messenger newspaper.

But it was the second floor of the building, Peake and Harris said, that made it special for many years.

Although it was called an Opera House, the building probably never staged what most people think of as a full-blown opera. Instead, it was used for touring theater companies, local dance troupes, costume parties and social functions.

According to the landmarks commission, a reunion of Mosby's Raiders, attended by Confederate hero

original support beams with decorative cornices are still visible. The apartments overlook a restored brick courtyard with a wooden deck and patio furniture.

Harris said the addition of more homes in the downtown is a key feature of bringing life back to Old Town.

"One of the strategies is to get more people living in Old Town," he said. There are other apartments in the town, but most rent for \$450 to \$600 a month, he said. The new apartments will rent for \$800 to \$1,000 a month.

"If you bring enough people here, the retail will sort itself out," he said.

New Life for Historic Opera House

OPERA, From Page 1

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According to the landmarks commission, a reunion of Mosby's Raiders, attended by Confederate hero J.S. Mosby, was held in the large second-floor room in 1916. A plaque is mounted on the building's front wall, describing the history of the 8,400-square-foot structure.

"Until now, you walked up to this abandoned structure, with the sign on the front that said 'opera house.' It was basically a vacant structure," Peake said. "Now, to have people walk by and see a structure with businesses is certainly much more appealing and will have a bigger impact on the visitors."

Harris's renovation of the building is most striking on the top floor, where the large open space was transformed into four apartments, each with high, vaulted ceilings and lofts overlooking the main sitting area.

In each apartment, the building's

original support beams with decorative cornices are still visible. The apartments overlook a restored brick courtyard with a wooden deck and patio furniture.

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