

The Saviors of the Goodspeed Opera House
By Victoria Holloway, Education & Library Intern

Over the last 54 years, Goodspeed Musicals has solidified itself as a premier regional theatre with a reputation of distinction for presenting productions of classic Broadway musicals. Some may not be aware of the fact that—long before winning two Tony Awards, mounting hundreds of shows, and sending 21 productions to Broadway—the Goodspeed Opera House was a cornerstone of everyday life in East Haddam, Connecticut.

Built in 1876 by shipbuilder and merchant William H. Goodspeed, the Opera House towered six stories above the Connecticut River. During the years of operation, it not only served as a theatre where traveling acts would perform, but also housed a post office, general store, offices, and other businesses. Patrons typically arrived via carriage or even steamboat to this beacon of commerce, art, and architectural ingenuity. After Goodspeed's death in 1882, the Opera House gradually slumped into obscurity. With few touring companies travelling so far north and economic depression, the once-grand structure was eventually forgotten and neglected. In 1943, the building was purchased by the State Highway Department and used for the storage of winter-maintenance equipment. By spring of 1958, the Opera House was set to be demolished; however, two persistent women fortunately recognized the importance of the Opera House and dedicated themselves to the cause of saving the building.

One of these key women was Libby M. Kaye, who lived across the river from the Opera House with a clear-cut view of the structure. She was an eminent court stenographer who worked with institutions such as the American Institute of Architecture and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Kaye also contributed to her community by serving as the president of the Haddam Historical Society. The other key woman, Marian D. Terry, also known as Mrs. Alfred Howe Terry, came from a family of great renown with many society acquaintances. As a member of the Antiquarian & Landmarks Society, Terry was keenly interested in the preservation of important historic buildings and landmarks. Both of these women from disparate backgrounds shared a vision of saving the Opera House from demolition and resurrecting its stature in the community.

As early as 1953, when rumors of the Opera House's imminent destruction were rampant, Terry contacted the Preservation of Historic Buildings Committee to inquire about the future of the antiquated structure and whether there was any way to save it. But it was not until April 1958 that State Highway Commissioner Newman Argraves informed Terry that, due to dried up funding, there was no hope of saving the structure. When Kaye learned of Terry's efforts to save the Opera House, she offered to partner with Terry. They both recognized and appreciated the enchanting qualities of the building from a bygone age and the fact that it was one of the last surviving Opera Houses from the Gilded Age in the United States—perhaps the grandest of them all. They began to work together to avoid demolition, and both women worked tirelessly to enlist the help of their contacts in the Connecticut area.

Realizing the need to enlist essential state support, Kaye arranged for the Opera House to be assessed by a professional architect named Henry F. Miller, who surveyed the Goodspeed Opera House in July of 1958. He reported the structure's foundation to be sound and declared that most of the necessary renovations pertained to the leaking roof and utilities such as electricity. Miller was highly confident that, with proper funding, the building could be made inhabitable. With this report, Kaye was ready to take the fight straight to the officials who could facilitate the Goodspeed's resurrection.

On August 3, 1959, Kaye sent a letter directly to then-Governor Abraham Ribicoff. She outlined information about the state of the Opera House, the names of committee members who pledged loyalty, and their plans to turn it into a historical landmark. After reading her pleas for government intervention, Ribicoff agreed to meet with her and Terry.

This fateful meeting became known as the "tea-party of ladies," during which the Governor vowed to aid the cause. Bill No. 2378: *An Act Concerning the Preservation of the Goodspeed Opera House* was introduced, which tasked the highway department to repair the roof of the building with up to \$10,000 of government money. One condition of the bill was that sufficient funds in the amount of \$300,000 had to first be raised by the Goodspeed Opera House Foundation by December 1 before the government would accept responsibility for repairing the building and enacting the bill.

Moving forward, help was enlisted from several affluent and influential parties. One of these individuals was Vivien Kellems. She was a Connecticut businesswoman and activist who served as president of the Kellems Cable Grip Company. Kellems was a notorious fighter, and she did not allow the bill to be lost in appropriations. Other prominent members of the community were instrumental in saving the building. The Muriel and Lynde Selden family was the leading organizer of all philanthropic activities. They held society events, benefits with singers from the Met, and a variety of soirées to raise funds for the Goodspeed Opera House Foundation. Within a year, more than \$500,000 was raised, meeting the State's requirement of appropriate backing. The government sold the Opera House building for \$1 to the newly formed Goodspeed Opera House Foundation, with the provision that the state could retain ownership of the adjacent dock on the river.

Renovations began immediately, spearheaded by architect Fredric Palmer. In addition to the necessary roof repairs, the interior of the theatre was entirely gutted. While the facility was being restored, there was some question as to the future use of the Goodspeed. Kaye and Terry had initially proposed a museum or cultural center; the thought of opening a theatre company never even crossed their minds. It was a young Albert Selden, the first managing director of the Goodspeed Opera House, who propelled the foundation to become a musical theatre producing organization.

The Goodspeed Opera House opened on June 18, 1963 with *Oh Lady! Lady!*. Countless society individuals poured into East Haddam to support the grand unveiling. Kellems

arrived in the grandest fashion of them all—in a 19th century gown and carriage, marking the beginning of what was certain to be a thrilling age. President Kennedy even sent a message commending the Goodspeed's opening. With this shining inauguration, a new era had begun.

Goodspeed Musicals quickly blossomed with more productions being mounted. The Goodspeed Opera House Foundation took possession of the Gelston House, and Michael Price was hired as artistic director in 1968. While many of the original founders slowly faded into other ventures, Kaye continued with the organization, serving as the foundation secretary for many years.

Today, the Goodspeed Opera House stands as a major historical landmark in both musical theatre and Connecticut history. Yet before 1958, it stood on the verge of obliteration. Thanks to the unyielding efforts of Libby Kaye, Marian Howe Terry, Vivien Kellems, the Muriel and Lynde Selden Family, and other visionaries, it is possible for future generations to enjoy the magnificent productions staged at the Goodspeed Opera House.