

# The Clinton Music Hall

## 1880's – 1920's



The original building was erected in 1880 by Belden and Emery for use as a stable and exchange stable for horses and mules. Altemus and Brother bought the building on 1881, changing the interior by converting the hayloft into a Music Hall. Other areas of the building were used for the manufacture of infants' and children's shoes by Evans and Shuman, the overall department of W. H. Jones, and for Altemus' marble works.

In 1890 the building burned and the town band lost its bandwagon valued at \$225. A new building replaced the old one in 1891, and the Music Hall was placed on the ground floor. The 40' x 85', two-story brick structure contained two large street front offices, one for their monument business, the other to rent, and a 300 seat proscenium theatre to the rear. Hoffman and Duckworth grocers occupied a portion of the building until they moved in 1892. For the next 16 years, Fred Johnson catered to the public in a "grocerly manner" out of the end room known as the "Music Hall Grocery." Nelson Pickel took over the grocery in 1908. In December of 1909 Morris W. Robinson bought the building, added a fourth floor to the structure, and moved his carriage and business into it.

The Town of Clinton was originally known by Bonnell's Tavern at the juncture of Spruce Run and the Easton-New Brunswick (PA-NJ) Turnpikes. Later the Clinton House, built in 1743, catered in hostelry to the travelers of these

major crossroads. Traveling theatre companies found The Clinton Music Hall a convenient stop-over, and Clinton citizens boasted it as the “best show stop in the state.”

Early productions in the 1880’s included “Fun in a Grocery,” representing an early form of vaudeville, or variety performance. The audience (men, women, and children) of the 1880’s wanted a combination of clean variety entertainment which included a lot of music and dancing; a freak show; and a play—called an after-piece. Black Minstrelsy was also popular.

Another form of entertainment in the 1880’s at The Clinton Music Hall was the Medicine Show, especially the Indian Medicine Show. These performances borrowed from every and any performance form. They used the performers and the bits from Wild West shows, burlesque, minstrels, and vaudeville, and was sponsored entertainment which meant that the audience did not pay admission to see it. The show consisted of variety acts with “commercial breaks” when patent medicines and other materials were sold, usually the cheapest items early in the show; the more expensive fare later on.

From about 1890 to 1904 live touring attractions dominated the bookings. Every major form of popular theatrical entertainment was represented: Stock companies, one-night stands, Medicine Shows, Minstrels, “Tom” Shows (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), and Vaudeville. There were also elocutionery, literary, musical recitals, and early cinema attractions.

In 1904 Hermin Altemus died, and his brother declared bankruptcy. Ownership passed to the First National Bank of Clinton, which ran it successfully

for five years. Morris Robinson, a wheelwright and carriage salesman by trade, purchased it in 1910 and added a 30' by 40', four-story timber extension to the rear of the Hall for his shop and carriage house. He included an elevator for carrying his buggies from the ground floor to either of two floors above.

Charles Bonnell, an automobile dealer from Pattenburg, bought the Clinton Music Hall in 1915. He added a 16' brick extension to the east front office allowing space for his auto showroom for his new "Willeys" and "overland" display models.

During the years of 1912 to 1920, film surpassed live touring attractions. The Clinton Music Hall, except for an occasional one-night stand, was no longer in the professional touring circuit.