

**THE BOSTON MUSIC HALL: FROM THEN... TO NOW**  
*A Timeline History of the original Home of the "Great Organ"*

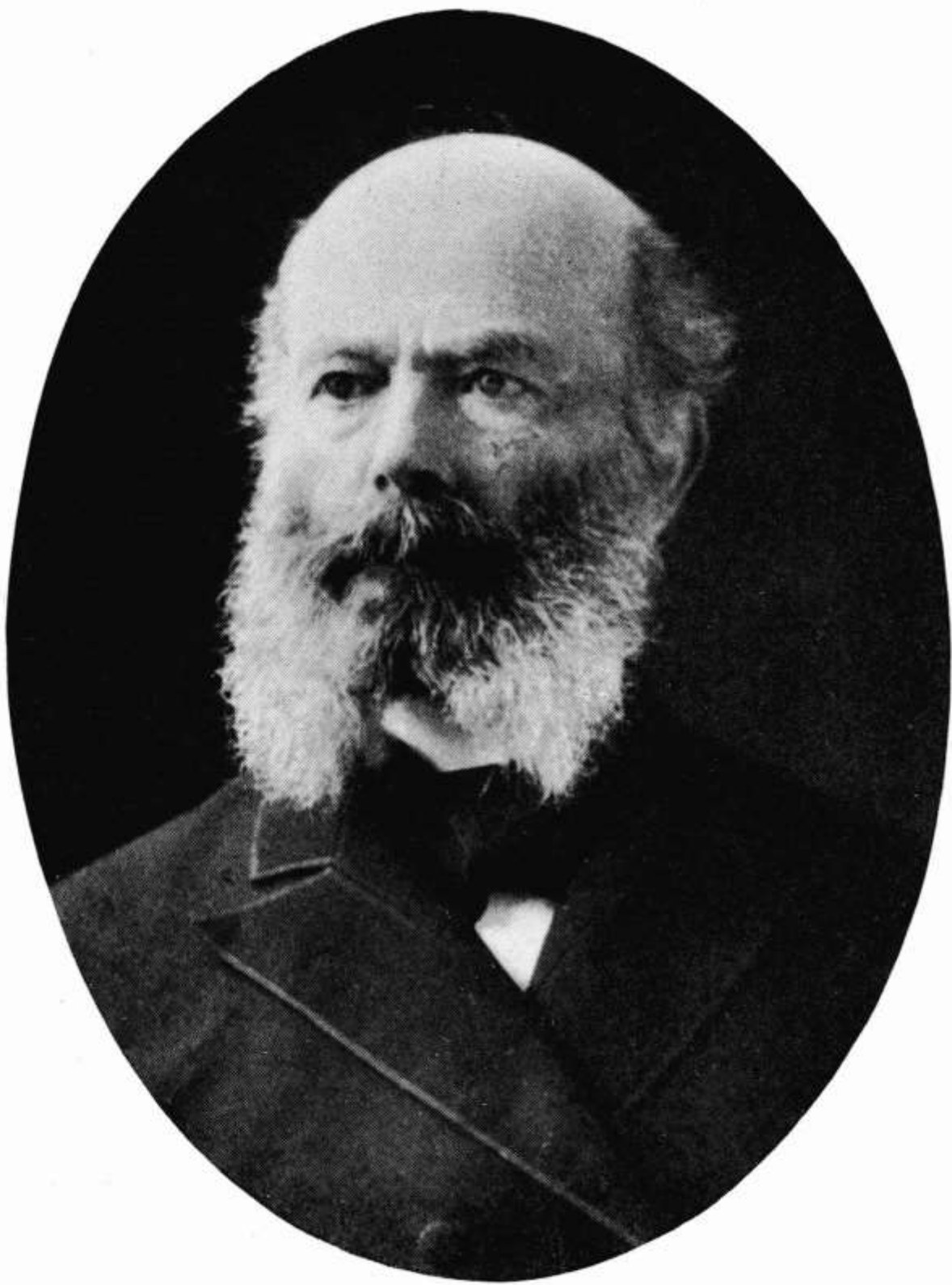
*Compiled by  
Ed Sampson, President  
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Methuen Memorial Music Hall, Inc.  
2015*

**1850**

Founded in 1837, the Harvard Musical Association, under the leadership of physician Dr. Jabez Baxter Upham (1820-1902) raised \$100,000 in sixty days to build a music hall for Boston.



Harvard Musical Association Seal (1837)



J. BAXTER UPHAM

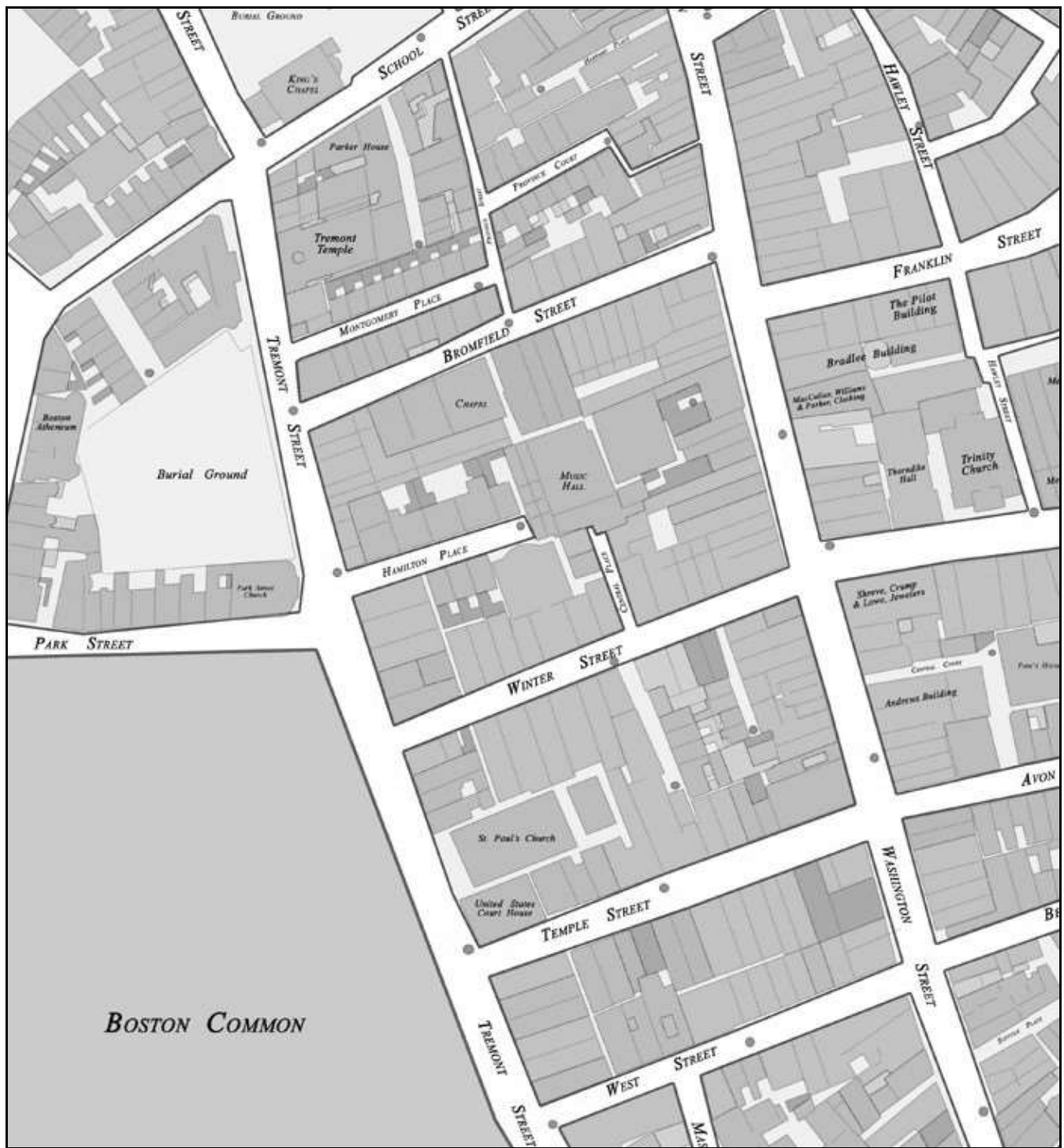
J. Baxter Upham (ca. 1900)

## 1852

The Boston Music-Hall Association, Dr. Upham, President, opened the Boston Music Hall to the public on November 20th. The architect of the four-story structure was George Snell (1820-1893). It stood in the center of a block that sloped downward from Tremont Street to Washington Street; and was between Winter Street on the south and Bromfield Street on the north. Almost entirely surrounded by other buildings, only glimpses of the hall's massive block granite foundation and plain brick walls could be seen. The hall was 130 feet long, 78 feet wide and 65 feet high. The ratio of length to width was five to three, and the ratio of length to height was two to one; with all three dimensions being multiples of thirteen. This was in agreement with the recommendations of John Scott Russell (1808-1882), a Scottish engineer and early pioneer in the field of architectural acoustics. Two tiers of balconies on each side held three rows each; two more on the north end provided additional seating. An orchestra stage platform, elevated five feet, was at the southern end of the building facing a flat main floor. Blue and white moreen upholstered chairs, with white ivory numbering tabs at their tops, provided a seating capacity of 2,585. Wide connecting corridors ran around the auditorium. The ceiling, which was forty feet above the floor of the upper balcony, was in general section flat, and was connected with the walls by a large cove, in which were seventeen semicircular windows to light the hall by day. A row of hundreds of gas jets, projecting from the edge of the cornice just below the windows, illuminated the hall by night. In a niche in the center of the rear wall, opposite the stage, was an oversized reproduction of the Vatican's Apollo Belvedere. The interior decoration of the hall was by architect Alpheus Carey Morse (1818-1893), an associate of George Snell. There were two entrances to the Music Hall: the Bumstead Place (Hamilton Place) entrance was off Tremont Street opposite the Park Street Church, while the Central Place or Winter Place (later Music Hall Place) entrance was off Winter Street. Beneath the large hall was a smaller one, called Bumstead Hall which was arranged like an amphitheatre.



Boston Music-Hall Association Seal (1851)  
*Cælo venit aurea dextro*  
"Heaven has come rightly resplendent"



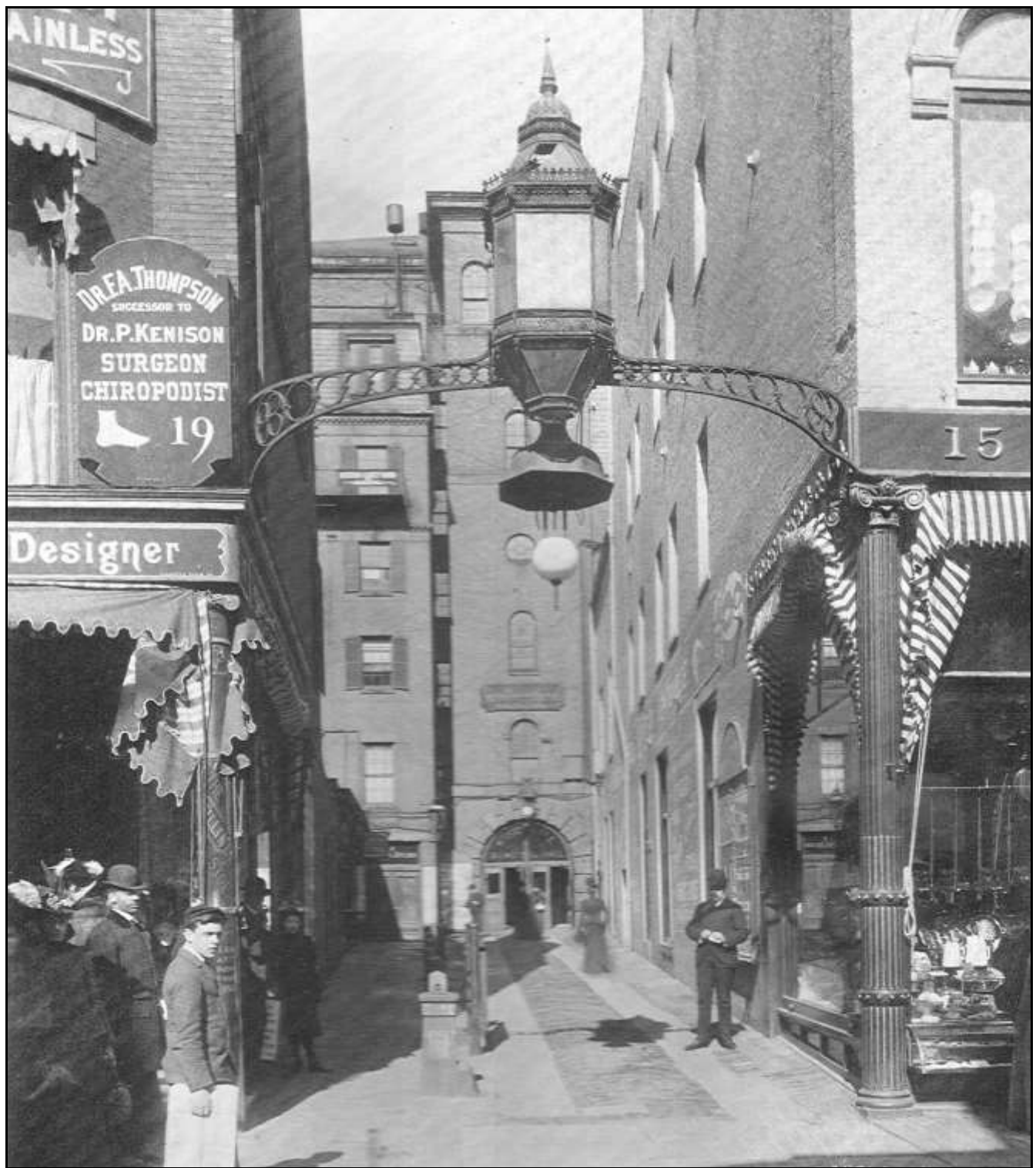
Map of Boston Music Hall Area (ca. 1872)



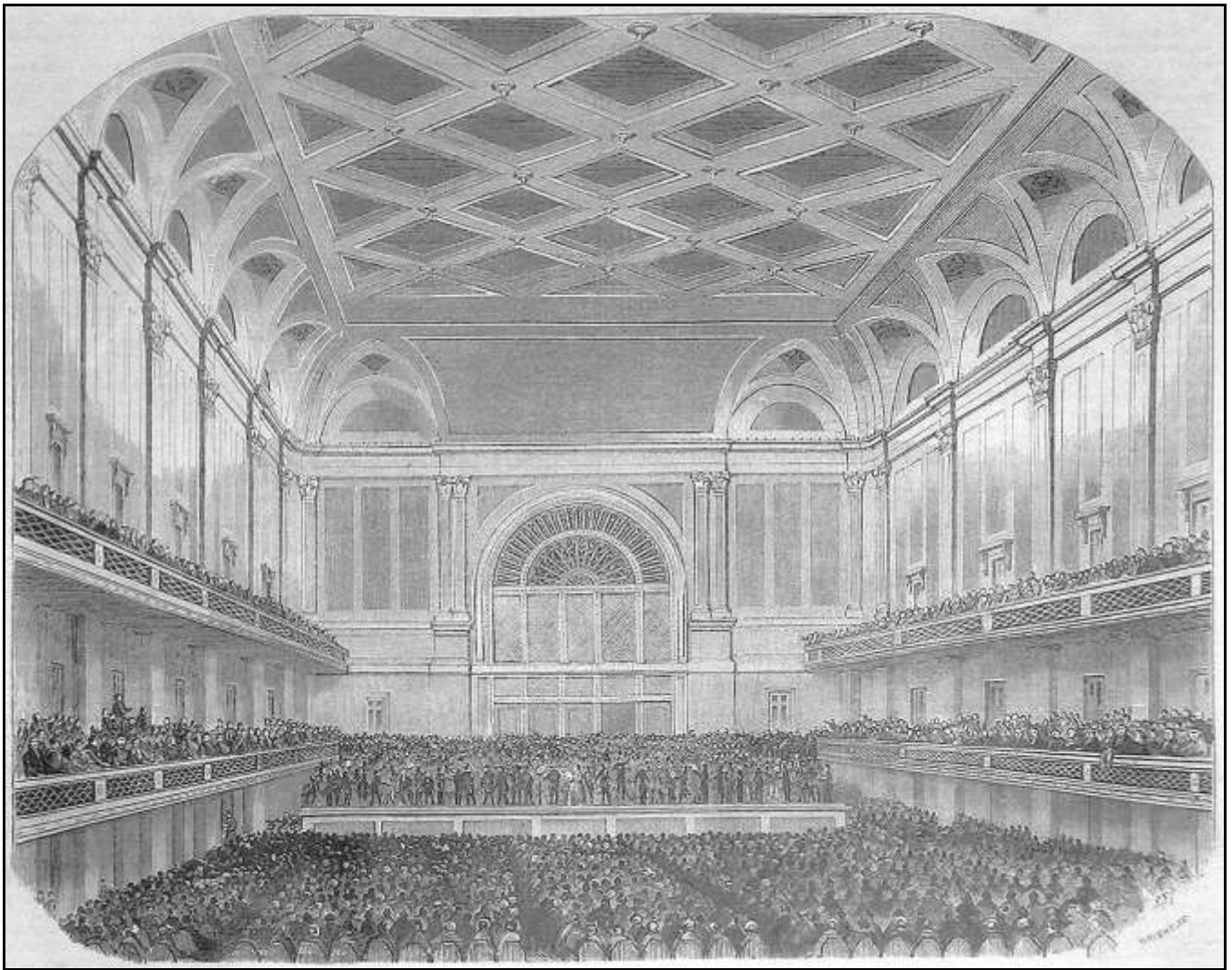


Boston Music Hall Hamilton Place Entrance (1896)

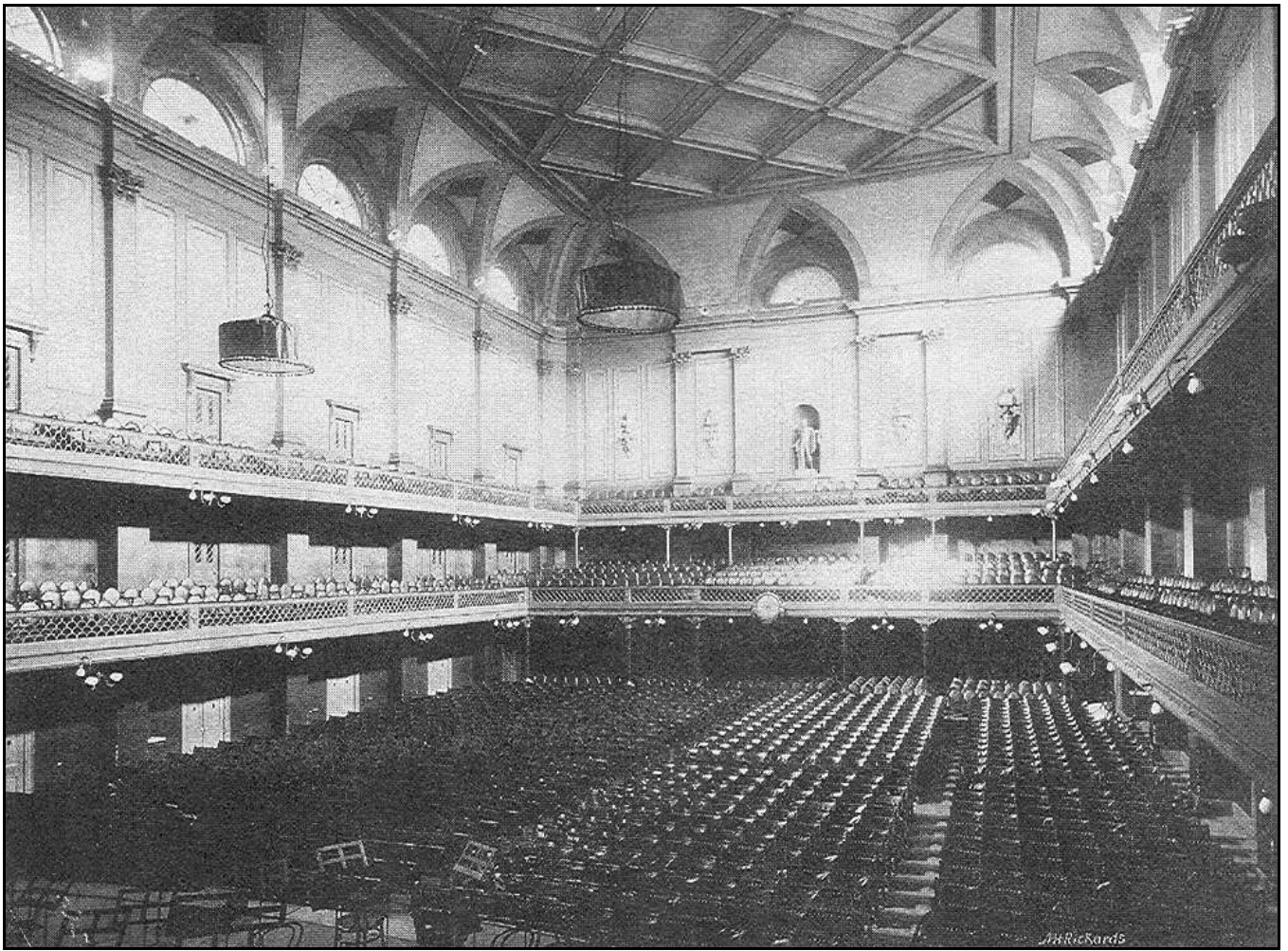




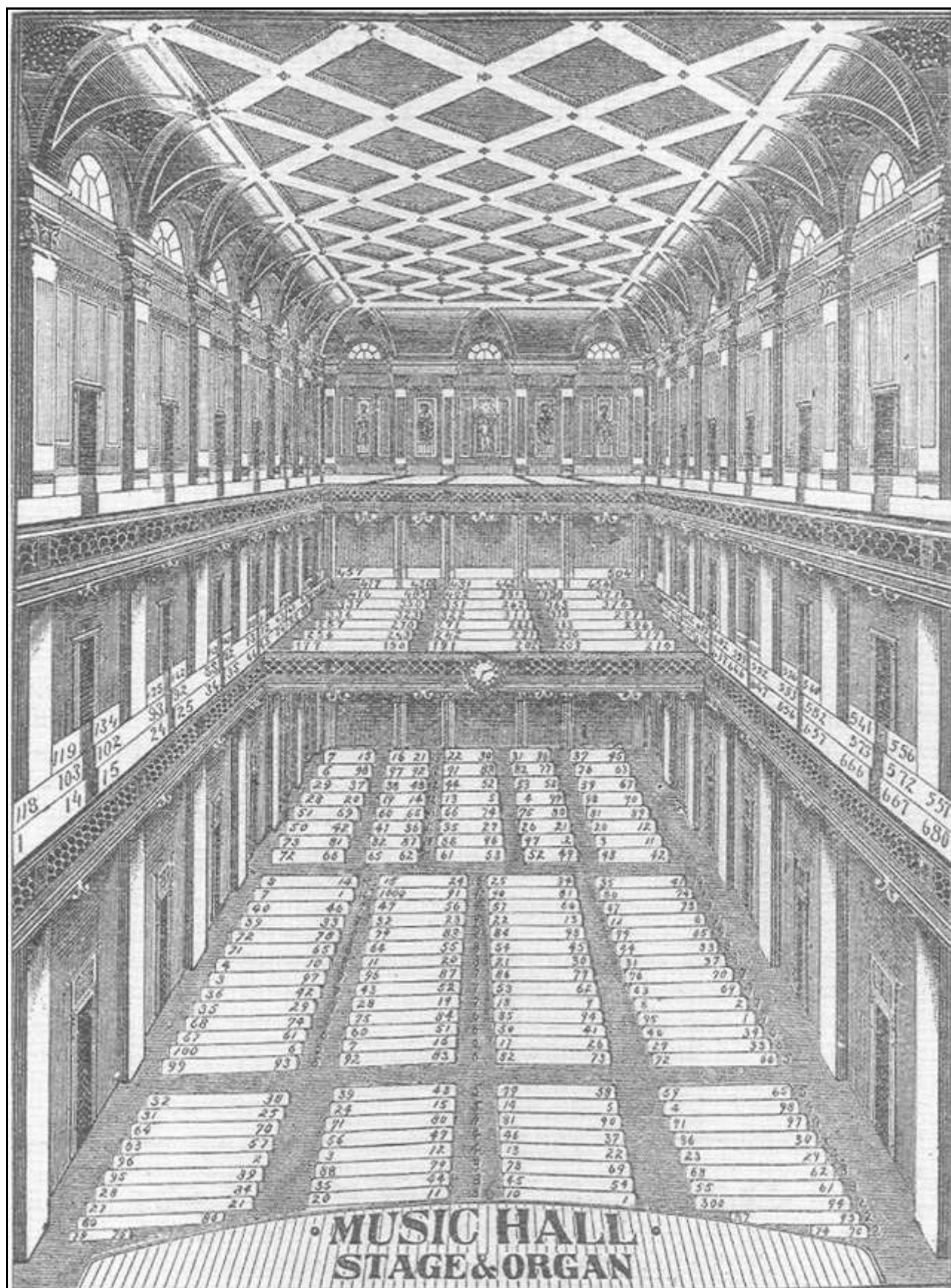
Music Hall Place Entrance (1900)



View toward the stage (ca. 1856)

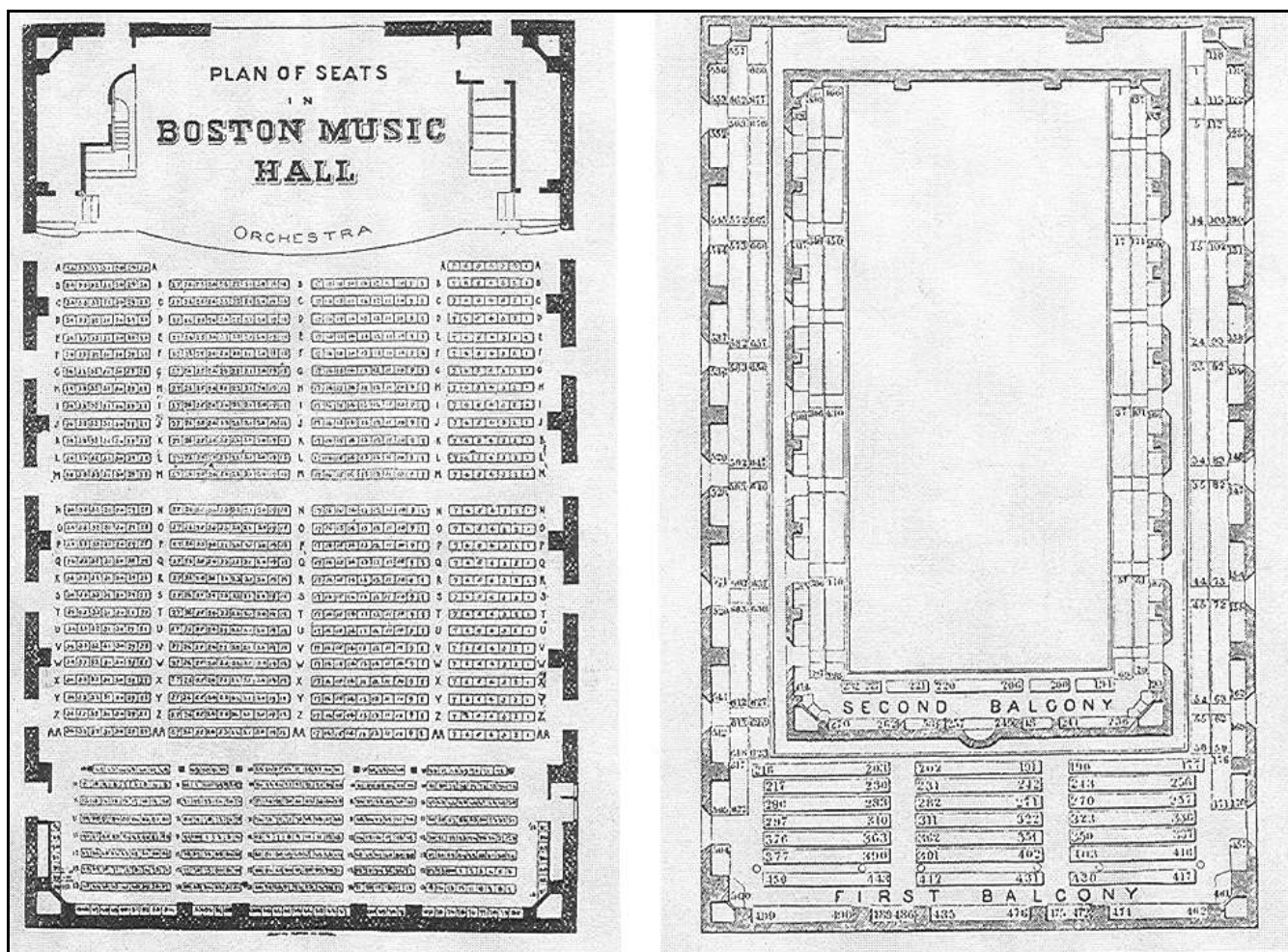


View toward the rear (ca. 1884)



Engraving of interior (ca. 1870)





Seating Plan (ca. 1885)

**1853**

Dr. Upham published a 43-page treatise entitled "Acoustic Architecture, or the Construction of Buildings with Reference to Sound and the Best Musical Effect". Discussion topics were drawn from his recent series of articles in "Dwight's Journal of Music". The treatise expanded on the discussions given in the articles, reported the results of his further investigation into architectural acoustics, and included several references to allied design and construction considerations of the Boston Music Hall.

**ACOUSTIC ARCHITECTURE**  
OR THE  
**CONSTRUCTION OF BUILDINGS**

WITH  
REFERENCE TO SOUND  
AND THE  
**BEST MUSICAL EFFECT.**

BY  
**J. B. UPHAM, M.D.**

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*"Architecture is frozen Music."—Madame de Staël.*

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**NEW HAVEN:**  
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**1853.**

"Acoustic Architecture" Title Page (1853)

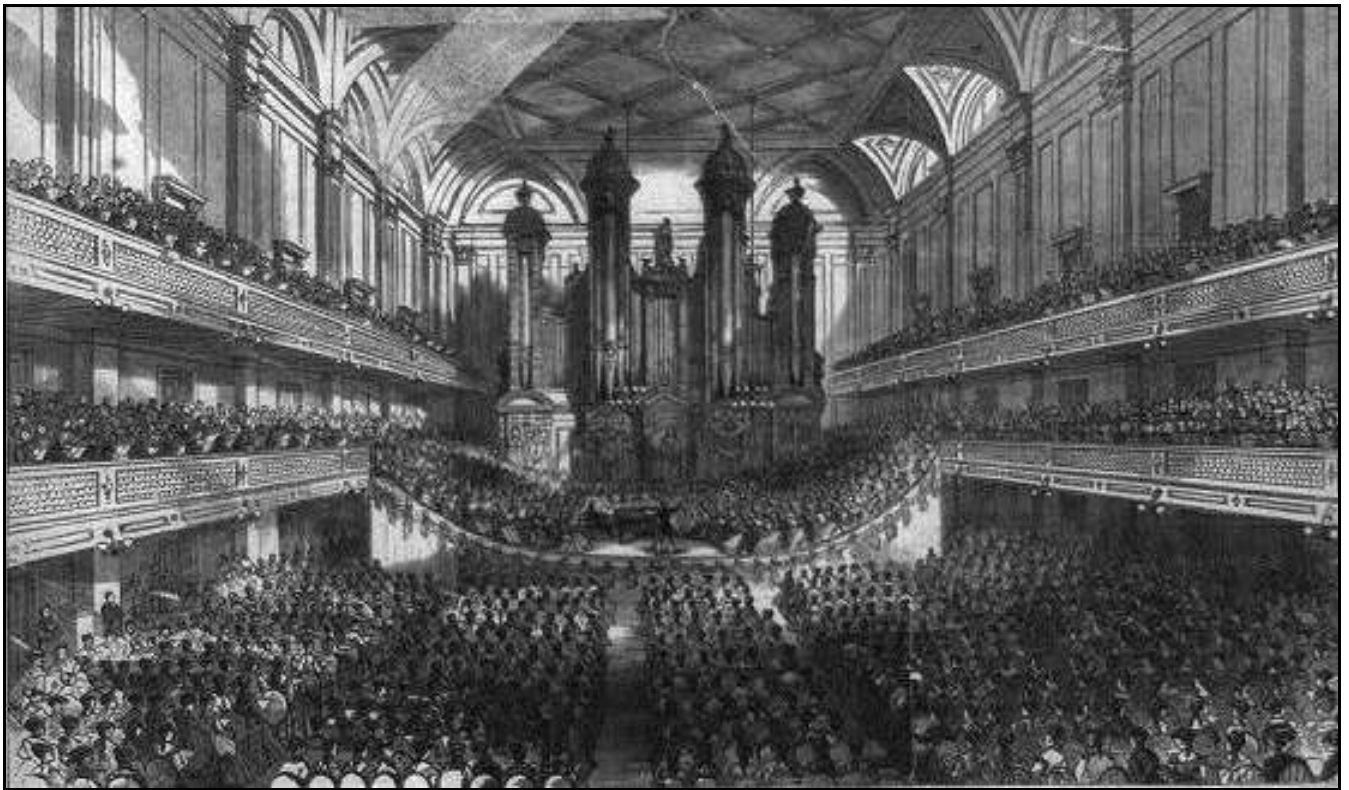


**1863**

The "Great Organ" was inaugurated on November 2nd. It was built by E. F. Walcker and Company (Eberhard Friedrich Walcker (1794-1872)) of Ludwigsburg, Germany and installed behind a resplendent American black walnut case created by the Herter Brothers (Gustave Herter (1830-1898) and Christian Herter (1839-1883)) of New York from a preliminary design by the Boston artist and architect Hammatt Billings (1818-1874). Billings' design consisted only of an outline of the façade, and drawings of St. Cecilia and the two groups of cherubs on the main pedal towers.



The "Great Organ" (ca. 1870)



National Peace Jubilee Rehearsal (1869)

**1881**

Henry Lee Higginson (1834-1919), the founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and his associates purchased a controlling interest in the Boston Music Hall during the summer, when preparations were being made for the debut of the orchestra. The orchestra gave its inaugural concert in the hall on October 22nd under the direction of conductor Georg Henschel (1850-1934).



Boston Symphony Orchestra under Georg Henschel (1882)

**1884**

Despite vigorous protest which extended to legal action, the "Great Organ" was dismantled and removed from the Boston Music Hall during the summer to provide more stage platform space for the orchestra.

**1885**

With the organ having been removed, a large sounding board was constructed over the stage platform to increase the acoustical projection of the sound of the orchestra into the hall.



The sounding board (ca. 1885)



## **1900**

The nineteenth season of the Boston Symphony Orchestra was the last held in the Boston Music Hall. The final concert in the venue took place on April 28th under the direction of conductor Wilhelm Gericke (1845-1925). Independent theatrical act booking agent William Morris (1873-1932) convinced real estate developer R. H. Allen to convert the Boston Music Hall into a vaudeville theater. Boston architects Little and Brown, with W. L. Morrison, produced a design for a remodeled facility. The stage platform, sounding board and balconies were removed; a new theatrical proscenium stage was erected at the opposite (northern) end of the hall. Starting at the height of the original first balcony, an orchestra floor sloped to a new orchestra pit. The new first balcony was constructed from the level of the old second. Above, and set well back from the balcony front below, was a new gallery. All that remained of the old Music Hall were its walls, ceiling and the narrow side balconies closest to the new proscenium, which served as boxes. Two elevators were installed to connect every floor. Entrances from Tremont Street's Hamilton Place and Winter Street's Music Hall Place were retained. Three thousand electric lamps were set into the ceiling and cornices, and a modern ventilating system was installed. The remodeled facility opened on Labor Day as the Boston Music-Musee Hall, offering "Continuous Refined Vaudeville." On September 17th, the Musee portion opened in the former Bumstead Hall, under the old auditorium level, off the Winter Street entrance. Exhibits, mostly wax figures, were brought directly from the Eden Musee in New York City. On October 15th, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Wilhelm Gericke conductor, held its inaugural concert in the new Symphony Hall, located at Huntington and Massachusetts Avenues.

## **1905**

The Boston Music Hall was substantially remodeled yet again. Architect Arthur H. Vinal (1854-1923) discarded the shelf-like boxes and added two tiers of new ones on either side of the proscenium, and the rather Spartan balcony and gallery fronts were redesigned. A new color was created especially for the Music Hall, "Rose Dubarry Red," which was used in redecorating the auditorium. A third entrance was added from 415 Washington Street. On February 12th, the Music Hall was renamed the Empire Theatre.

## **1906**

On September 3rd, the Empire Theatre became Percy G. Williams' (1857-1923) Orpheum Theatre.

## **1909**

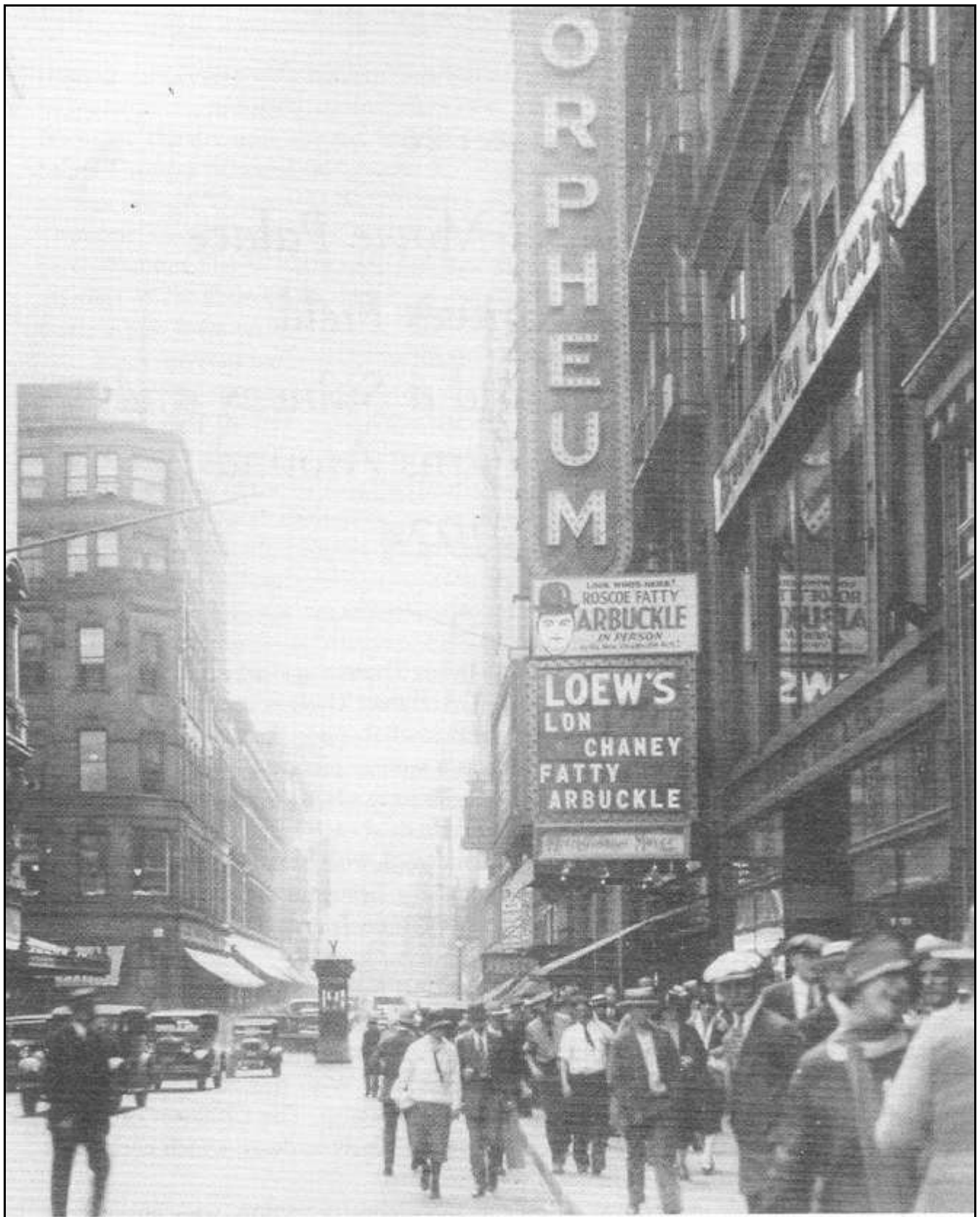
On September 13th, the "Boston Globe" reported that the Orpheum Theatre would be known as the American Music Hall.

## **1910**

After a summer of stock plays, the American Music Hall became the Orpheum once more.

## **1916**

The Boston Music Hall was gutted and rebuilt with additional land permitting greater width. Architect Thomas W. Lamb (1871-1942) designed the prototype of his later movie palaces. The 1,700-seat orchestra floor rose back from the stage to a wide cross aisle nearly midway, which connected via ramps to a foyer underneath. A 1,500-seat balcony, almost as large as the orchestra section, was cantilevered over the main floor. The old Music Hall Place entrance, shared with Bumstead Hall, was abandoned; eventually becoming part of an adjacent department store. Marcus Loew (1870-1927) opened his new Loew's Orpheum Theatre on January 20th with continuous vaudeville and pictures, whose titles were not advertised. Soon, the programs did include feature-length films, making the Orpheum Boston's first authentic movie palace.



Marcus Loew's Orpheum Theatre from Washington Street (ca. 1925)

**1972**

On January 18th, the Orpheum was abandoned by Loew's Theatres, and the facility reopened for the performing arts as the Aquarius.

**1974**

In May, Sarah Caldwell (b. 1924) and the trustees of the Opera House Company of Boston began using the Aquarius under its old name of the Orpheum Theatre.

**1978**

The Opera Company use of the facility ceased when it purchased Benjamin Sack's (1911-2003) Savoy Theatre.

**Today**

After more than one hundred and sixty years since its original construction; and numerous changes in internal design, entrances, ownership and purpose; the old Boston Music Hall serves as a rock concert venue, accessed only via the Hamilton Place entrance and seating 2,763.



Orpheum Theatre from Hamilton Place (ca. 2000)

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