

Boston & Maine Railroad Depot
1876

Building History

The Boston & Maine Railroad Depot was built in 1876 and designed in the High Victorian Gothic style. Consisting of a two-story brick headhouse with a clocktower, it is one of downtown Lowell's most outstanding buildings and its rich polychromed masonry, cast iron colonettes, and iron roof cresting were some of the features that also helped make it a local landmark.

Originally the building was home to a waiting room and other depot uses as well as offices while a long train shed housing the platforms extended from the rear of the building. Among other early occupants were an express company, printing office, tailor shop, and the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company from 1896-1909. Trains ceased running out of here in 1895 and until 1913, portions of the building were used as a cotton and wool storehouse.

From 1913-1920, the Owl Theater was located here. Between 1921-1960, the building housed the Rialto Theater. In 1961, the Rialto was converted into a bowling alley and billiards parlor. Other occupants of the building included music teachers, barbers, florists, real estate agents, and a paint supply store. In the 1970s, it housed Paul Tsongas' congressional campaign office.

In order to preserve the seriously dilapidated building, the owner transferred ownership of the Rialto to the federal Lowell Historic Preservation Commission for \$1 in 1989. Over a fifteen year period the Commission, and later the Lowell National Historical Park, acquired grant funding to restore its storefront façade, rebuild the missing cornice, reconstruct its two towers, and install reproduction doors and windows, all true to its original historic character.

Through an intergovernmental transfer program, the Middlesex Community College acquired the building to redevelop as the new home for its theater and performing arts programs. Breaking ground in 2015, this \$19 million project was completed in 2018 and the building is now home to the Richard & Nancy Donahue Family Academic Arts Center.

The first floor and basement of the new building house a new performing arts theater, as well as classrooms. The second floor houses dance and music performance spaces and classrooms. Design of the new egg-shaped theater was done by Leers-Weinzapfel, who also designed Harvard's Hasty Pudding theater.



The Boston & Maine Railroad Depot as seen in ca. 1880.. (Photo – UMass Lowell Center for Lowell History)