

By Jeremy Craig

Alumni Hall, the venerable building at Gilmer and Courtland streets in the heart of Georgia State University, is turning 100.

Now the headquarters for the university administration, the alumni association and other key offices, the marble and concrete structure once was known as Atlanta Municipal Auditorium and served as epicenter of the city's entertainment scene.

Back then, it hosted everything from performances by the New York Philharmonic to decidedly more informal gatherings such as concerts by the Grateful Dead.

"This place is synonymous with the city of Atlanta," says McRae Williams (B.B.A. '70, M.B.A. '72).

The auditorium, with the adjoining National Guard Armory, was witness to speeches by both Presidents Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The facility also served as a soup kitchen in the Great Depression and as a civil defense command post in the mid-20th century.

For decades, the auditorium was *the* place for major events in the city — "ideal for nothing," said the late Mayor William B. Hartsfield, "but it can accommodate anything."

Indeed, the building did accommodate nearly all major public events required of it.

Beginnings and the first 50 years

Mayor James G. Woodward first called for an auditorium and armory in 1905. Urgency for the project became clearer when, during the 1906 race riots, there was no place for police and state militia to gather.

Construction began in 1907 and the building opened in 1909 with a dedication by President William H. Taft. During its first decades, it wasn't uncommon for circuses to be held one night and orchestras to perform the next.

As entertainment changed in the '30s and '40s, gatherings reflected the times, with performances by jazz greats such as Cab Calloway. Also reflecting those times, audiences were segregated.

Atlanta's prominence in the national consciousness was cemented by the world premiere in 1939 of "Gone With the Wind," celebrated across the city. As part of the occasion, the auditorium hosted a costume ball, attended by Vivian Leigh, Olivia de Havilland and Clark Gable.

In those years, the building was quite ordinary in appearance. Red bricks sat atop a granite foundation. It took a fire in 1940 to give the hall its current look.

A carelessly tossed cigarette sparked the blaze, which gutted the four-story front section and caused the roof to cave in. No one was hurt, and the auditorium itself was protected by a firewall. Because metal had been diverted for the war effort, the marble and concrete currently seen today were used for the rebuilding, with a new addition and entrance opening in 1943.

- 1 American Federation of Labor Convention, 1943
- 2 Shrine Circus, 1951
- 3 A rock 'n' roll flier published in the *Great Speckled Bird*, 1972
- 4, 5 Circus, ca. 1941
- 6 Civil defense command post, 1953
- 7 Postcard, ca. 1943
- 8 Roller derby, 1937

FROM U.S. PRESIDENTS TO THE CIRCUS TO THE
GRATEFUL DEAD, ALUMNI HALL HAS SEEN IT ALL

CELEBRATING A CENTURY OF ALUMNI HALL

The fabric of Atlanta life

fittingly, even before its acquisition by Georgia State in 1980, the building was part of the lives of future alumni, hosting high school graduations and Atlanta Symphony Orchestra performances, among other events.

But the dignified edifice brings up memories from outside of the building, too — including shenanigans involving the Joel Hurt Memorial Fountain, which dazzled visitors with rainbow-colored light displays long before the ring fountain at Centennial Olympic Park.

“I was in a fraternity,” alumnus McRae Williams recalls, “and when someone got engaged or pinned, we threw our fraternity brother in the fountain. I must have carried a million people down there and dumped them.”

For native Atlantans, it was also the scene of many a date. “My first solo behind the wheel of the family Chevrolet was to the Municipal Auditorium with my girlfriend for a concert in the early 1960s,” says Wade Medlock (B.A. ’72).

Unfortunately, the key memory of that night for Medlock was not the rock ‘n’ roll stylings of Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry.

“My most vivid memory of the evening is not the show, but instead backing the car into a post as I tried to park — and worrying about explaining the damage to my parents,” he recalls.

Boxing and wrestling also drew Atlantans to the facility. “It was the wrestling capital of Georgia,” says Howard Eason (B.S. ’81). “I remember seeing Dick the Bruiser, Mario Galento and Bruno Sammartino.”

Into the late ’60s and ’70s, the auditorium continued to reflect the times, booking a diverse array of acts from soul men like Sam and Dave to punk pioneers like the Ramones.

“The one concert that continues to stick out in my mind 40 years later was having front row center tickets to see Peter, Paul and Mary in 1968,” remembers Chuck Bernstein (B.B.A. ’81).

A second chance

As Atlanta burgeoned into a major cultural and economic hub of the South, new venues popped up and eclipsed the auditorium — including the Boisfeuillet Jones Civic Center in 1967, the Woodruff Arts Center in 1968 and the former Omni Coliseum in 1972. The facility saw its last major event in 1979 with the filming of “The Prize Fighter.”

The Atlanta City Council approved the sale of the auditorium in 1979 for more than \$1 million, and the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia acquired the building in 1980. Georgia State fully occupied it in 1982, after demolishing the main part of the hall due to the expense of renovating it. The top floor was expanded in the early 1990s.

In a city once notorious for the destruction of historic buildings, Alumni Hall is at the heart of a university now known for reviving its urban core.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES, GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



1 View looking up Courtland Street, 1944
2 A ticket stub from a Ramones concert, 1978
3 Performance, 1945
4 A women's professional wrestling match, 1945
5 Hurt Park view, 1944
6 Muhammad Ali returned to boxing after a three year absence to defeat Jerry Quarry in the third round, 1970
7 Circus, ca. 1941

THOSE WERE THE DAYS

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| Feb. 7, 1907
John Morris, John Savage, J.R. Smith, Mrs. Rachael Sinkovitz and Mrs. J.R. Allen all sell their property on the corner of Courtland and Gilmer streets to the newly-formed Atlanta Auditorium Armory Co. for \$59,000 for the construction of a civic auditorium and armory. | Jan. 15, 1909
President-elect William H. Taft delivers a speech at the auditorium's convention hall marking its first official use. The hall is named Taft Hall. | Dec. 14, 1939
The auditorium plays host to the premiere of “Gone with the Wind.” Vivian Leigh accidentally hits Governor Eurith “Ed” Rivers in the nose while waving to the adoring crowd. | Nov. 11, Armistice Day, 1940
During a dance attended by more than 300 disabled war veterans, a fire begins on the fourth floor in a space used by the 179th Field Artillery. All escaped unharmed, but the fire caused the roof to collapse, requiring \$200,000 for repairs. | March 1943
The auditorium reopens with a new façade and entrance. Because metal could not be obtained during World War II, Georgia marble and concrete were substituted. | April 13, 1961
During her only Atlanta performance, Judy Garland receives standing ovations after every song. | Oct. 26, 1970
Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason and Bill Cosby watch as Muhammad Ali, in his first fight since evading the Vietnam War draft, scores a technical knockout over Jerry Quarry in the third round. | Nov. 11, 1971
The Grateful Dead perform. They would return to play the auditorium three years later. | June 1980
The Georgia Board of Regents purchases the building from the city for \$1.3 million and renames it Alumni Hall. |
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