

# Ready for the Next Hundred Years

THE "NEW"  
CHANDLER MUSIC HALL  
TAKES CENTER STAGE



John Jackson's favorite "Chandler moment" happened in February 1971, when the lights came up for the opening of *Brigadoon*, the first theatrical production to be staged at Randolph's Music Hall since World War II. Jackson had reason for elation. He first set foot in the "decayed and nearly derelict"



BY STEPHEN MORRIS

PHOTOS BY JACK ROWELL

building two years earlier. Although vestiges of its original elegance were obvious, 20 years of idleness and disrepair had taken a toll. A community group had tried to stage a production there in 1968, but the lack of even basic services

turned it into a disaster. As described by Jackson in his memoir: “For starters, there were only 60 amps of power available in the hall, including the house lights. The only technical lighting equipment was an ancient rheostat about a foot in diameter

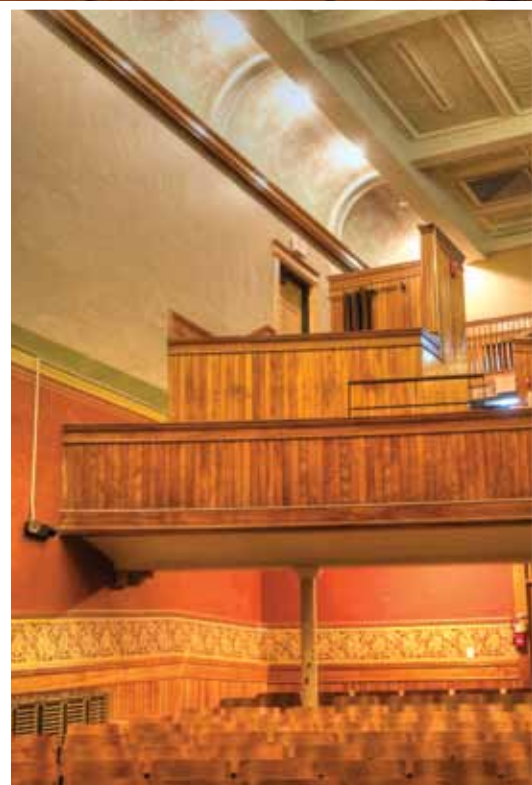
*The 103-year-old Chandler Music Hall gets a much-needed facelift—fresh paint, new LED lights, and a welcoming front plaza.*



that dimmed the footlights. If one tried to use it, it tended to throw sparks and blow out the building fuse. The attic had numerous buckets scattered around to catch the drips from the leaking roof. The back wall of the stage had loosely fitting windows and structural cracks that did little to keep the weather outside. On at least one occasion we had to sweep snow off the stage before rehearsal.”

### Looking Back

Funded originally by philanthropist and summer resident of Randolph, Albert B. Chandler, the hall was completed in 1907 and donated to Bethany Church, located directly across the street. For the next 25 years Chandler Music Hall lived up to its billing as a place “where the arts and community meet,” hosting plays, concerts, lectures,





The Music Hall's historic interior remains essentially unchanged and its legendary acoustics have been carefully preserved. Restoration work in the lobby has improved patron traffic flow and resulted in a more elegant connection between the Music Hall and Gallery, and new woodwork was painstakingly created to match the original features. As a way of celebrating the importance of the visual arts to the organization, the Chandler Board voted to fund two commissioned pieces of original art by slate artists Andrea Wasserman and Elizabeth Billings and stained glass artist and cartoonist Phil Godenschwager as an integral part of the renovation project. Ms. Anjou, an original sculpture in blue granite by local artist Jim Sardonis, is on loan and graces the new grand staircase.



*Chandler commissioned stained glass artist Phil Godenschwager to design a commemorative window celebrating the building's 100th anniversary.*

films, meetings, and events. Chandler became known as the most acoustically perfect venue in the state of Vermont.

But the 1927 flood, the stock market crash, the Great Depression, and subsequently World War II took their tolls, not just on Chandler but on the arts in general. By 1947 the hall was undeniably a “white elephant” and ownership passed to the town of Randolph for one dollar. Unfortunately, the town was reluctant to incur the expenses of

maintenance or renovation. Chandler’s long slide into oblivion had begun.

Many other people in central Vermont have favorite “Chandler moments.” Kevin Dunwoody’s moment came during the New World Festival a few years ago. This rollicking noon-to-midnight festival is held annually the day before Labor Day and celebrates Vermont’s Celtic and French-Canadian roots with six musical venues that fully utilize the Music Hall’s facilities. Festivities spill out onto Main

Street, transforming a sleepy town into a throbbing orgy of painted faces, sidewalk murals, microbrewed beers, and whirling dancers.

For Dunwoody, who founded the festival 18 years ago and who has served as the volunteer musical director ever since, the magic came when his teenage daughter turned to him and said simply, “At least for one day a year, Randolph is cool.” Dunwoody’s many years of volunteer service were instantly, and fully, rewarded.

### **Time to Renovate**

This year’s festival attendees received a bonus in the form of a sneak preview of the 3.5 million dollar renovation that has just been completed thanks to the combined financial efforts of the town of Randolph, the office of Senator Patrick Leahy, and a huge number of supporters of the local arts community.

To the casual observer, the renovation is not immediately obvious. Yes, there’s a new electric marquee and some landscaping changes, but the main stage is still recognizably the main stage, the stenciling is still impressive, and the sound is still perfect. Much of the renovation occurred below ground and behind the curtains. When asked about the benefits of the renovation, Becky McMeekin, executive director,

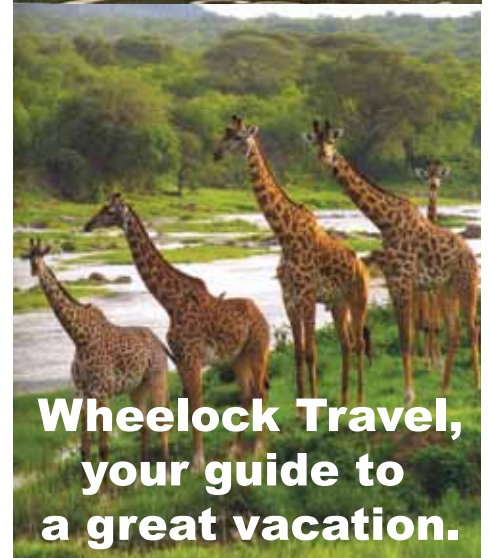




*Jim Green and Beth Telford offered traditional music in the Gallery during Chandler's community-wide open house in September. Green's father Robert (bottom of facing page), whose wife Shirley served as Chandler's volunteer box office manager for more than 20 years, listened appreciatively with Kathy Nowlan.*



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*Ellie and Chandler Anderson find their profiles among more than 170 gathered from community members by artists Elizabeth Billings and Andrea Wasserman. These sandblasted slate profiles are interwoven with images of native plants and trees and echo the "sometimes complex or conversely quiet sequences and cadences" of music, theater, and dance.*



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### Of Note

Much of the historical information in this piece came from *Not a Bad Seat in the House: Albert B. Chandler and His Marvelous Music Hall*, a centennial year history and celebration written by M. Dickey Drysdale, available through Chandler.

Amateur musician Chris Smith and friend brought music to the Upper Gallery space, now the dedicated Esther Mesh room, during the September open house. More than 200 community members, visitors, artists, performers, and funders celebrated the grand opening of the renovated and expanded facilities.

responds exuberantly and unequivocally, “Restrooms and accessibility! Finally, all portions of the building are accessible. Elevator access and the reinforced floor in the Upper Gallery allow us to add a sixth venue for the New World Festival.”

McMeekin knows firsthand the challenges of crowd control within the limitations of an old building—the complaints about interminable lines for the restrooms, the cramped dressing spaces for the performers, the issues of wheelchair access. All these issues are magnified with an annual, weather-influenced, one-day festival. “We work hard to find the perfect balance—a sufficient number of festival-goers to make an event profitable, but not so many that venues are overcrowded. We want it to feel intimate, but we need to be financially viable, as well.”

The facility changes backstage delighted the performers, who now have more room to warm up before taking the stage. The infrastructure improvements are immediately apparent to anyone familiar with the “old” Chandler. Charlotte Phillips, a veteran of the student tech crew for many years and now returning with her husband as a festival attendee, noticed a new door that connects the Upper Gallery with the balcony. “Do you know how many trips up and down the stairs this would have saved me?” she exclaimed.

### The Challenge of Fundraising

McMeekin credits capital campaign co-chairs Sharon Rives and Linda Morse with much of the fund-raising success. “Sharon focused on individual gifts and Linda worked on the public funding pieces. One of our biggest successes was the \$200,000 challenge from Jane’s Trust, but more than 700 individual, business, and foundation gifts supported the project in addition to the bond from the town and the Historic Preservation gift that Senator Leahy leveraged.”

McMeekin’s favorite fundraising story is the nationwide support generated from people across the country to honor beloved music teacher Esther Mesh, who taught in the area from 1932 to 1957. Scores of gifts poured in, ranging from \$2 to \$10,000. As a result, the Upper Gallery has been named in her honor.

### Serving the Community

Betsy Cantlin is Chandler’s outreach director. It’s her job to make sure that the building and the organization serve the whole community, not just the few. Her moment is decidedly more subtle. “My favorite moment was when the new sheetrock in the Upper Gallery received its first coat of paint. It totally changed the face of that tired and shabby space—now with a new wooden floor and evenly hung cabinets! The space is absolutely beautiful and is ready to serve the public with room

for classes, public and private gatherings, and celebrations of all sorts.”

Classes, demonstrations, and roundtables are of equal importance to big-name entertainment on the main stage, and the renovations will allow people of all ages and abilities to utilize the facility. More classes and a film series are in the works, and community members are encouraged to rent the renovated spaces for their own celebrations or performances.

The organization also offers scholarships to youth in need so that they can attend Chandler’s summer youth musical theater program. It’s all about expanding “where the arts and community meet,” the organization’s slogan.

“We even support an ‘Arts Bus’ that travels to childcare centers, elementary schools, libraries, low-income communities, and youth camps to share the gifts that exposure to the arts can bring,” says Cantlin.

Charlie McMeekin, Becky’s husband and a Chandler veteran as both a performer and a director, had his own Music Hall epiphany when he saw his son, a bluegrass musician, appear recently on the main stage. “He was up there playing his own music in front of hundreds of hooting and hollering friends and fans. It was a validation of all his life choices.”

From bluegrass frenzy to painted sheetrock to the opening of *Brigadoon*, Randolph’s Chandler Music Hall will be providing memorable moments for another hundred years. ●

**Chandler Music Hall**  
71-73 Main Street  
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[www.chandler-arts.org](http://www.chandler-arts.org)

For upcoming events at Chandler, log on to [www.uppervalleyimageonline.com](http://www.uppervalleyimageonline.com).

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