



Mississippi State University Riley Center for Education & Performing Arts FACT SHEET

History & Renovation

The Grand Opera House and adjacent five-story Marks Rothenberg department store were built in 1889 by two half brothers I. Marks and Levi Rothenberg. The brothers were attracted to Meridian as a bustling center for commerce and arts and culture because of its proximity on the rail lines between New Orleans and large markets to the north, i.e. Chicago and NY. They built the department store and theater to complement each other, attracting patrons from all over the south to shop in the store during the day and attend shows in the evening. After a \$25 million renovation project, Meridian's beautifully restored historic downtown buildings have come full circle. Today, the Mississippi State University Riley Center serves as a vibrant hub for educational workshops, conferences and world class performing arts events, attracting theater patrons and conference attendees from across the state, southeastern region and beyond.

Grand Opera House

- Operated from 1890 to 1927
- Presented popular touring shows of that day, including vaudeville shows, minstrels and even some silent films
- As new motion picture theaters were built, older presenting houses such as Meridian's Grand Opera House closed
- Trapped in a legal dispute that lasted decades, the theater was shut down and forgotten by generations of Meridianites; it essentially became a time vault of sorts, making renovation to its original state possible

Marks Rothenberg Department Store

- Operated under various forms and ownership through late 1980's
- Utilized the theater as storage space during the department store's operation
- Renovated store into a conference facility that works in conjunction with the theater

Timeline

1950's-'60's: exterior of the Marks Rothenberg building was covered with metal siding and glass to "modernize" the department store

1980's-'90's: community support grew to restore the buildings for new use; a portion of the siding was removed to show what the wonderful building once was and could be again; theater tours and other fundraising activities took place helping to fund upkeep to prevent the theater from total disrepair, while efforts increased to find funding to revive the buildings for new use

2000: The Riley Foundation committed anchor \$12 million construction grant to return the Grand Opera House to its original glory and convert the department store into a premium conference facility; funding was provided with the stipulation that Mississippi State University own and operate the center, ensuring the center remain active, improving the area's quality of life, contributing to economic development and downtown revitalization, and enhancing the community's educational offering for generations to come

2002/2003: master planning began followed by construction

September 8, 2006: Grand Opening Gala with Emmy-winning actress & Meridian native Sela Ward serving as mistress of ceremonies and Aaron Neville performing, after more than a century of the theater being dark

Architectural Notes

- EverGreene Studios (New York, NY) restored theater's interior
- Original elements include rich woodwork throughout lobbies and audience chamber, intricate wainscoting, lambrequin (fixed curtain above the stage), Sunburner chandelier, and four private boxes
- Remnants of over 50 different wall coverings were cataloged and researched; a palette of 30 wallpaper designs were selected and digitally recreated as exact replicas of what once hung on the walls and ceilings
- New modern stage house and state of the art audio, video, lighting and backstage amenities were added

Renovation & Rebirth: A Vibrant, Multi-faceted Educational, Arts & Cultural Center

Annual figures:

- Present 30 performing arts events a year
- 40,000 patrons attend from all over state, region & country
- 12,000 students (K-12) attend school programs
- 25,000+ attend arts education workshops & conferences
- Performances include: John Hiatt, Joan Osborne, Robert Cray Band, Garrison Keillor, Boyz II Men, DRUMLINE Live, *The Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe*, Kathy Mattea & Marty Stuart, Dance Theater of Harlem, Chris Botti and more.

"The MSU Riley Center in Meridian is such a beautiful place! I am proud of the community of Meridian for realizing what a treasure they had and restoring it to its original magnificence. It was truly an honor to perform there."

- Trisha Yearwood

"The Riley Center is the crown jewel of Mississippi. In the future, music fans worldwide will make pilgrimages to Meridian and renew their faith."

- Robert Earl Keen

Partner with the leading arts entities/icons around the country:

- Selected to join **John F. Kennedy Center's Partners in Education Program** with local city and county school systems; prestigious program provides arts education training, networking opportunities and access to national experts in the field of arts integration
- Selected to host national opening of **Smithsonian Institute's Traveling Exhibit on American Roots Music**
- Presented **Wynton Marsalis & Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra** twice, including a daytime school performance for area students; presented **Monterey Jazz Festival's 50th Anniversary Tour** concert
- Secured funding from **National Endowment for the Arts** for arts programs with educational component

Active in national and statewide arts integration movement, providing teacher training, workshops and seminars on how to incorporate arts into the classroom as a tool for learning

Schools with strong arts programs report:

- Lower dropout rates
- Higher test scores
- Students with stronger analytical skills
- Greater understanding/appreciation for other cultures
- Enhanced teacher morale and retention

"For the past quarter century, we have failed to make arts a core subject... Given the shift in our nation's economy from mechanized labor to ideas and creativity as its driving force, can we afford to allow another generation to receive an incomplete education?"

- Douglas Herbert, United States Department of Education



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