BAS 166 Opera House Saga. Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte residents were shocked to read the announcement in late September 1896 that the Maguire Opera House was to be torn down. The 1,100-seat theater, the prime venue for entertainment in Butte, was only seven years old, a new building at 50 West Broadway that replaced the original opera house that burned in 1888. But a squabble between banker James Murray, who owned the building, and John Maguire, who ran the opera company, nearly led to the dismantling of the place.

The argument focused on rights to manage the opera company’s finances, including loan payments, especially in the wake of an economic downturn following the silver crisis of 1893. Murray’s men began the promised demolition by removing seats and other fixtures, taking them to vacant lots and warehouses around town.

Maguire promptly called Murray’s supposed bluff by moving performances to the Library Auditorium, just a few doors to the west at the corner of Broadway and Academy (today’s Dakota Street). A court decided that seats and windows were indeed part of the building itself, so Murray had the right to remove them.

As some windows were removed, the Butte Miner on October 3 wryly opined in its daily editorial that “Butte now boasts the best ventilated opera house in the U.S. Purer air never filled an auditorium or kissed the dimpled cherubs in a proscenium arch.”

Crews stood ready to demolish the opera house for the next week, but an agreement was finally reached among Maguire, Murray, and their investors. Murray ended up with a controlling interest in the opera company, and Maguire remained the manager.

Legal proceedings continued for years, but evidently Maguire and Murray patched things up on a personal level, because when Maguire died and was buried in Monterrey, California, in 1907, Murray paid for a grave marker, a huge granite block carved to portray the proscenium arch of Maguire’s Butte Opera House.

Maguire, from County Cork, Ireland, had arrived in Butte in 1875 to give the first recorded theatrical performance in the mining camp.

Theatrical Manager Dick Sutton bought the opera house in 1908, changing its name successively to the Orpheum, the Majestic, and the Empress. As the Majestic, it was there that Charlie Chaplin gave his first performance in Butte in 1911, and as the Empress, it burned down May 25, 1912. Two years later, the space held the Leggat Hotel that stands there today.

 As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.