

Barber Block (Portland)

By Val Ballestrem

Located on the main commercial street in what was once the city of East Portland, the Barber Block has survived more than a century to become one of southeast Portland's most significant and recognizable historic buildings.

The three-story Barber Block, located at 532 Southeast Grand Avenue in Portland, was constructed in 1890, at an estimated cost of \$25,000, for Edward Holman, a local undertaker. Holman named the building after Henry Barber, his father-in-law, who was also in the mortuary business. Barber had come to Oregon in the 1850s, working in the timber industry and then as a surveyor before establishing a successful East Portland mortuary business in 1879. He died in 1898; Holman died in 1920.

Architect Thomas J. Jones designed the Barber Block. He had begun designing buildings in Portland in the late 1880s and later became the first staff architect for Portland Public Schools. His work included Portland's Washington High School (1905) at Southeast 14th and Stark Streets, which was demolished after a 1922 fire. Jones also designed Portland's Woodstock School (1911), which still stands.

Filling its entire 50-by-100-foot lot, the Barber Block is a skillful blend of architectural styles popular in Portland around 1890. In addition to the Italianate-styled window bays and other late Victorian-era architectural ornamentation, Jones included simulated stone archways over the building entries, reflective of the emerging Richardsonian Romanesque architectural style.

In the 1920s, a nickelodeon theater operated in the Barber Block, and the building later served as a single-room occupancy hotel with a furniture store on the ground floor. The apartments on the second and third floors remained relatively unchanged, and many residents lived in the building for decades. Over time, however, the building deteriorated and the owner considered demolishing it, especially after it sustained significant roof damage during the 1962 Columbus Day Storm. It wasn't until 1977, when the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, that the owner decided to renovate the building rather than tear it down. Since then, the Barber Block has become a centerpiece of the East Portland-Grand Avenue National Register Historic District.

For many years after the building's 1970s renovation, the ground floor of the Barber Block was occupied by Digger O'Dell's restaurant. In 2011, the building housed a commercial bank, with apartments on the upper floors.

Sources

Hines, H.K. *An Illustrated History of the State of Oregon*. Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1893.

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