

A "New Deal" for a 75 Year Old WPA Bandshell

Slated for demolition a little less than a decade ago to make way for a parking lot, the Roxbury Bandshell in Johnstown, PA, shown in Figure 1, has been saved and rediscovered as a community asset. The bandshell, originally called the Municipal Music Pavilion, was one of twenty-seven bandshells built throughout the United States in the 1930s and 1940s under the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

A souvenir program from the 1940 dedication provides the history and details of the original construction. The project was proposed to Johnstown City Council in 1937 by a local community association who later agreed to raise funds for the required sponsor's share for a WPA project. After Council's approval, community representatives visited a recently completed bandshell in Hagerstown, MD, and subsequently established the Johnstown Music Pavilion Committee. For the proposed pavilion, the sponsor's share was to be only \$5,000, but with modifications and additions to the project, the amount rose to \$14,318 and the total cost of the bandshell reached \$70,000.

The committee raised \$4,000 in cash from many of the local ethnic singing societies, individuals and school children who called the industrial Conemaugh valley home. Donations of services and materials from local firms and the city's commitment of materials and equipment made up the difference. One such donation was by Horace Bailey, who donated his services as architect for the pavilion. By April 1939, WPA had approved the plans and on May 14, 1939 an estimated 3,000 people were present for the ground breaking.

The pavilion has a 55-ft high semicircular wall surrounding the stage which faces into Roxbury Park. A low-rise section outside the semicircular wall houses interior rooms and faces the street. The 55-ft section had a steel frame, as shown in Figure 2. According to the souvenir program, the pavilion was constructed using an estimated 2,200 tons of native stone, 969 barrels of cement, 576 tons of sand and 192 tons of slag. Approximately 697 man-months of labor were needed to complete the project. The inside radius of the performance area is 30-ft giving a 60-ft diameter for the stage. The interior portions consisted of an entrance doorway, shown in Figure 3, which could lead to the stage or to several large interior areas provided for practice, storage and dressing rooms. The interior includes exposed stone and the steel frame, as shown in Figure 4. Lighting and a two-way amplification system were also part of the project and raised the final cost to about \$80,000.

The dedication of the bandshell spanned 8 days in June 1940 and included numerous performances of music by local choral groups, ethnic associations and high school bands, as well as demonstrations of activities such as fencing and gymnastics. Figure 5 is a reproduction of a postcard showing a summer concert at the bandshell.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the bandshell was no longer being used and eventually fell into a state of disrepair. The spectator seating area was replaced by a roller hockey rink and by 2005, the city was on the verge of demolishing the bandshell to construct a parking lot to serve Roxbury Park. With the threat of demolition, the community responded and lobbied the city to abandon plans to demolish the structure. A legal battle ensued over the proposed demolition. The city wanted assurance that if spared, the bandshell would be restored and managed without the help of city funds. As a result, the Roxbury Bandshell Preservation Alliance was formed and granted an 18-month lease from the city. With little time to show progress, the Alliance made quick work of fundraising from both individuals and local businesses. The progress was noticed and helped establish a more amicable relationship with the city. This resulted in the negotiation of a 20 year lease for the bandshell. Based on their fundraising success and long term commitment to the bandshell, the Alliance has been able to apply for and receive numerous grants to help in the restoration.

To date, nearly \$400,000 has been invested in the bandshell providing a new roof, chemical cleaning and repointing of the stone exterior, repavement of the concrete stage surface, installing a handicap ramp, performing necessary sidewalk repairs, and providing new exterior lighting. Cooperation with other groups like the local garden club, have added landscaping planters to the exterior appearance. Figures 6 and 7 show some of the stone and ornamental detail of the structure and the landscaping improvements. Future repairs include restoration of the interior rooms. From the beginning of the restoration process, the bandshell has been functioning as designed, hosting Sunday evening musical performances throughout the summer months. It also serves as a location for the Roxbury community tree lighting ceremony in December. A recent part of the restoration has been the removal of the roller hockey rink allowing more room for spectators, as shown in Figure 8.

The restoration of the Roxbury Bandshell in Johnstown, PA illustrates how a community can come together to save a forgotten piece of their history and return it to a place of value in the present day community. As in its original construction, the small contributions of many community members have helped preserve a community asset for future generations.

References: Roxbury Bandshell Website (URL: <http://www.roxburybandshell.com/>, Accessed October 30, 2014)

Souvenir Program, Dedication of Municipal Music Pavilion, Roxbury Park, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, June 17 to 24, 1940. (available on the Roxbury Bandshell website (URL: <http://www.roxburybandshell.com/history-timeline/>, Accessed February 1, 2013)



Figure 1. Restored Roxbury Bandshell, Johnstown PA (photo by Andy Rose)

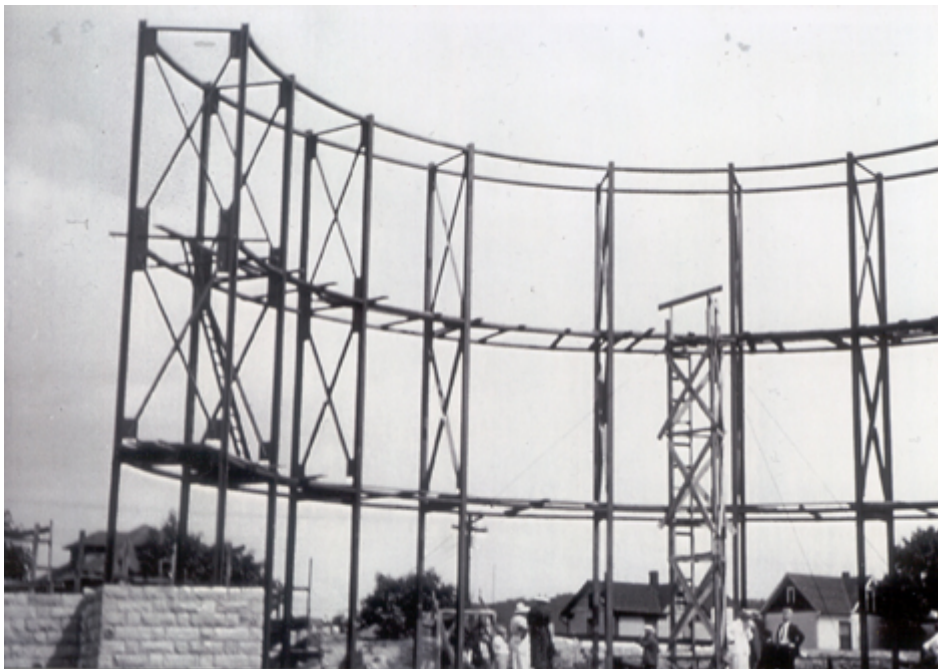


Figure 2. Structural Steel Frame of Bandshell. (photo by Leonard Emeigh, courtesy Roxbury Bandshell Preservation Alliance)



Figure 3. Street-side Entrance to Bandshell. (photo by Andy Rose)



Figure 4. Interior Stonework and Steel Frame. (Photo By Phil Balko - philipbalko.com)



Figure 5. Historic Postcard of Bandshell. (Courtesy Roxbury Bandshell Preservation Alliance)



Figure 6. Ornamental detail on Bandshell. (photo by Andy Rose)



Figure 7. Landscaping Details at Bandshell. (Photo By Phil Balko - philipbalko.com)



Figure 8. Sunday Evening Bandshell Concert 2014. (photo by Andy Rose)