

David Ovens: A Charlotte Leader

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David Ovens

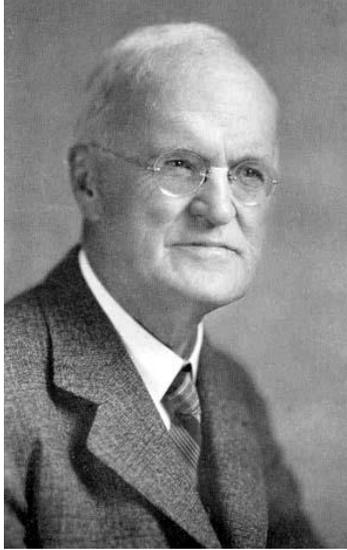
Charlotte is quick to forget the actions of its leaders once they are gone. A case in point is the career of the adroit merchant and noted philanthropist David Ovens (1872-1957). A native of Kingston, Ontario, Ovens came to Charlotte in 1903 as manager of the local shop operated by the S. H. Kress Co. J. B. Ivey, who had opened a store next door, was impressed with Ovens and persuaded the 33-year-old Canadian to become a junior partner in 1905. "He was a hard worker, enthusiastic and ambitious and was a great help to me," said Ivey. As for Ovens, he was persuaded to join Ivey's because he wanted to work for an enterprise that was locally owned. "I wasn't particularly pleased with the idea of spending my life with an out-of-town-owned cooperation--and a dime store, at that," Ovens declared in his Memoirs.



These were the Ivey's employees in 1906. David Ovens is standing fourth from the left on the on the first row. He is holding a straw hat in his right hand.



Sam Lawrence greeted shoppers when they entered Ivey's. Neal Alexander was Mr. Ovens's driver.



J. B. Ivey

Charlotte was becoming a major textile mill center in the early 1900's. The population of the town increased from 18,091 in 1900 to 34,010 in 1910. Ovens singled out New South industrialist D. A. Tompkins as the principal reason for this impressive rate of growth, calling him a "brilliant engineer." "It was he," Ovens insisted, "who led the way in persuading people from distant points to come here and invest capital in the establishment of factories and mills." "Then there was Mr. E. D. Latta," Ovens continued, "who gave us our first electric street railway, gas and electric lights." By the time of his death on September 7, 1957, Ovens himself could lay claim to being a major civic leader, especially in Charlotte's cultural life. This article seeks to describe the career of this civic-minded merchant and to assess the significance of Ovens's accomplishments.

Its business growth notwithstanding, Charlotte was still a country town when David Ovens arrived. "Charlotte wasn't much of a place to come to -- in 1903," he declared. The more money you had the closer you lived to the Square. "Beyond the homes of the aristocracy, a fringe of dwellings housed the poorer white class, and still further back were the homes (if they could be called such) of the colored folks." Charlotte's first automobile, a steam-powered Locomobile owned by Osmond L. Barringer, had arrived just three years earlier -- in November 1900. The streets were filled with horses, "stabled at Wadsworth's Will Ross', Cochrane & Brothers, Queen City Stables, and several others." Doctors drove in buggies to the homes of their patients, and the fee was from "two to three dollars a visit."



Osmond Barringer sitting in his Baker Electric Automobile

Charlotte had no skyscrapers and several saloons. Charlotte had three hospitals with a combined capacity of about 100 beds. There was only one decent restaurant in town, "The Gem" on South Tryon St. On steamy, summer afternoons folks would sit in the Mecklenburg County Courthouse and fan themselves while they listened to lawyer E. T. Cansler argue his cases. "His scathing denunciation and keen satire of his opposition was a perfect delight," said Ovens. It was Ovens who was the driving force behind the transformation of Ivey's from a small shop into a major department store chain. "I would probably have been satisfied with a moderate business that would make something over a living," admitted J. B. Ivey, "but Mr. Ovens was ambitious to make J. B. Ivey & Company a big store." Among Ovens's innovative marketing schemes was tossing unsold hats out the second story window of Ivey's at the end of each sales season. ". . . we kept this up until the police stopped us for creating a riot," Ovens proclaimed. On a more substantive level, Ovens and Ivey abandoned the practice of selling goods only for cash. ". . . we found that we could not sell to the better customers unless we sold on credit," Ivey explained. Ovens traveled to New York City to purchase goods for the store. He drove hard bargains and was always attentive to changing fashions.

There is a shocking difference in women's fashions since the century turned over the page from the nineteenth to the twentieth. Then, modest women went around completely covered from top to toe. Now, many leave nothing to the imagination. Formerly, women were not even supposed to have ankles; and as for legs, they tried to keep it a deep dark secret as to how they got about! Now they haven't much they want

to conceal; and at that, the modern bathing "suit" is simply an excuse for women to walk on the beach almost naked.



Ladies covered from head to toe. This is what fashionable women were wearing when David Ovens arrived in Charlotte in 1903.

The most tangible reminder of Ovens's contributions to the growth of J. B. Ivey & Company is the large building, recently converted into condominiums, that stands at the corner of North Tryon and Fifth Sts. It was designed by architect William H. Peeps and opened as the new home of J. B. Ivey & Company in 1924. The store was renovated and enlarged in 1939.



Ivey's Department Store

David Ovens is best remembered as a lover of the arts. A man of conservative tastes, he detested modern architecture and modern art. "Everyone should be allowed to have one pet peeve," he proclaimed. "Mine is modern architecture." He spoke with special disdain about "those straight up-and-down, steel-ribbed, glass-enclosed structures, that are more in keeping with the design of a small-town factory, or parking garage." Ironically, the Charlotte landmark that bears his name, Ovens Auditorium on East Independence Boulevard, is just such a building. It was fashioned by A. G. Odell, Jr., whom Ovens called a "good friend."

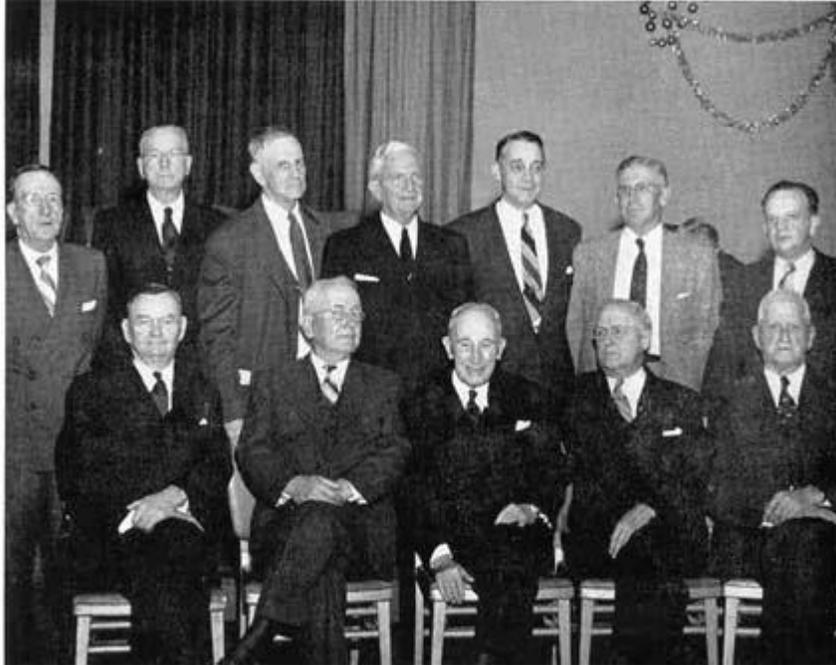


Ovens Auditorium



Charlotte Coliseum, now Independence Arena

Ovens played a pivotal role in securing public backing for Ovens Auditorium, originally called the Civic Center, and the Charlotte Coliseum, now Independence Arena. On October 27, 1949, Mayor Victor Shaw selected Ovens to head a planning committee to select a site for the new facility and to recommend an architect. Shaw described Ovens as "the most public-spirited citizen that Charlotte had ever known." As early as 1912, when he had headed a fundraising campaign to build a new YWCA, Ovens had begun to establish himself as a prominent local philanthropist. He was president of the Good Fellows Club, a charitable organization that had its origins in Second Presbyterian Church. "The chief value of this club lies not in its charitable work alone, but in acquainting five hundred men with the other side of life apart from our palatial clubs, luxurious homes, trips to Florida in winter and to Europe, or expensive resorts in Newport or Bar Harbor in the summer," Ovens declared. He headed Charlotte's first Community Chest Drive, forerunner of today's United Way. Ovens was the local chairman of the American Red Cross during World War II and served on the boards of several other prestigious Charlotte-Mecklenburg institutions, including Queens College, Davidson College, and Presbyterian Hospital. The list goes on and on.



This is the Board of Directors of the Good Fellows Club. David Ovens is sitting in the middle of the first row.

One of Ovens's favorite civic responsibilities was serving for eighteen years, from 1934 until 1952, as president of the Community Concert Association. His job was to bring excellent professional actors and musicians to perform in Charlotte. The problem was that Charlotte had no building that could meet even the minimum performance requirements of artists during the 1930's and 1940's. The first concerts were held in the auditorium at Piedmont High School and then in the Armory Auditorium on Cecil St., later Kings Drive. There was a time," remembered Ovens, "when the old Armory was becoming so shabby that people didn't want to go to artistic events there, and the attendance fell off."

Determined that Charlotte would have a cultural and entertainment facility worthy of its status, Ovens and his fellow members on the planning committee pushed ahead with their agenda. In May, 1950, City Council approved the committee's recommendation that A. G. Odell, Jr. be the architect. The voters of Charlotte went to the polls on October 14, 1950, and gave their backing for bonds to acquire the land and build a new auditorium and a new coliseum. The Charlotte Coliseum and Ovens Auditorium were completed in 1955. David Ovens attended the official dedication ceremonies on September 11th. Not surprisingly, the featured speaker was evangelist and native son Dr. Billy Graham. David Ovens died almost exactly two years later, on September 9, 1957.

The home of David Ovens and his wife, also a Canadian, still stands in Myers Park at 826 Ardsley Road. The house is in the straightforward Rectilinear style. The original landscaping was by Earle Sumner Draper for the John Nolen firm. The home and its surroundings are suggestive of the straightforward pragmatism that formed the core of David Ovens's being. This man, now forgotten by most Charlotteans, is one of many individuals who have demonstrated the pivotal importance of leadership in making Charlotte the city that it is today.

J. B. Ivey, *My Memoirs* (The Piedmont Press, 1940), p. 175. This writer is indebted to the research performed by Marc Ben-Joseph in his unpublished manuscript, "Charlotte's Built Environment. David Ovens And The Ovens Auditorium" (1994). Joseph Benjamin Ivey, the handsome son of a Methodist preacher, opened a small store room in rented space near the Square on February 18, 1900. A devout Methodist, Ivey insisted that the curtains be drawn in his store windows on Sundays, so that the pedestrians would not be tempted to consider matters of this world on the Lord's day.

David Ovens, *If This Be Treason. A Look At His Town And Times* (Heritage House, 1957), p. 210. David Ovens was born on December 4, 1872, to James and Eliza Campbell Ovens. Ovens had lived in several Southern cities before coming to Charlotte, including Little Rock, Memphis Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Nashville.

¹ Ovens, p. 94.

² Ibid.

³ Ovens, p. 1.

⁴ Ovens, p. 2.

⁵ Ovens, p. 75.

⁶ Ovens, p. 157.

⁷ Ovens, p. 188.

⁸ Ivey, p. 175.

⁹ Ovens, p. 26.

¹⁰ Ivey, p. 175.

¹¹ Ovens, p. 24.

¹² On May 4, 1990, Ivey's was purchased by Dillard's, another department store chain.

¹³ Ovens, p. 32.

¹⁴ Ovens, p. 34.

¹⁵ Quoted in Paula M. Stathakis, "The Old Charlotte Coliseum Historical Essay" in the "Survey and Research Report On The Charlotte Coliseum (Original)" prepared by the American Institute of Architects, Charlotte Chapter in conjunction with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission (July, 1990).

¹⁶ Ovens, pp. 138-139.

¹⁷ The Amory Auditorium, destroyed by fire, stood about where the Grady Cole Center is now located on Kings Drive.

¹⁸ Ovens, p. 68.

¹⁹ Mrs. Ovens, whom he married in 1908, was Margaret Allan Ovens, a former school teacher from Kingston, Ontario. Born in 1874, she died in May, 1957, just a few months before her husband.