

THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK STAGE

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The manner in which a town amuses itself is usually a good index to the inner thoughts and outer opportunities of its citizens. In making a study of the New Brunswick stage from the Revolution to 1873 Dr. Coad reveals to us some of the means by which the people of the town and the students of Rutgers College prevented "Jack from being a dull boy." Dr. Coad, who has previously contributed to the Journal articles on Walt Whitman, is well known for his studies of the American theatre. Part Two will appear in June.

PART I

FROM THE REVOLUTION TO THE CIVIL WAR

DURING recent years the writing of American stage history has been a conspicuous phase of the recording of our cultural activity. From Boston to San Francisco and from Chicago to New Orleans the dramatic annals of our more important cities have been, or are being, set down by numerous competent investigators. Although such studies may be of limited interest in themselves, yet their contribution to a composite picture of American culture is indispensable. When the definitive history of the American stage comes to be written, New Brunswick will occupy a negligible position in its pages, for our town has made no substantial additions to the art. Nevertheless, the history of theatrical activity here is not without its significance, inasmuch as New Brunswick is essentially typical of many small Eastern cities which early manifested a pronounced religious bias, but which, with the passage of time, came more and more under the influence of the worldly metropolis in the matter of public amusements as well as in many other respects. Indeed, so far as I am aware, there is no such thing in print as the stage history of an average small American city; hence this account, which I hope eventually to bring down to our own time, may have a certain value. Furthermore it should be of interest to observe to what extent the students of a small Eastern college, in the era before New

York became so fatally accessible, were able to add to their general education through the ministrations of the stage.¹

The material for such an account must necessarily be drawn largely from the local newspapers, and fortunately the Rutgers Library has the most complete files of New Brunswick papers in existence. There are, to be sure, numerous gaps in the continuity, but a few serious omissions are made good by the collection of the New Jersey Historical Society at Newark, and in consequence a reasonably complete story is possible.²

LAST QUARTER OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The earliest intimations that some interest in the stage existed in the little town on the Raritan, however, are gleaned not from the newspapers but from the manuscript records of the University. In the *Transactions of the Athenian Society from the year 1776 to 1786*³ are entered the weekly programs of the first literary society at Queen's College, programs made up in part of readings or recitations from various authors. The first meeting reported in the *Transactions*, that of May 29, 1776, was opened by Nicholas Lansingh, who spoke from Joseph Addison's tragedy, *Cato*, as did also Simeon Vanartsdalen later in the evening. On June 12th James Schureman spoke from *Julius Caesar*, and from that time on few were the programs in which one or both of these dramas were not represented. On June 5, 1780, was delivered a dialogue between Brutus and Cassius (undoubtedly the famous quarrel scene) and on July 24, 1782, a scene from *Cato* involving four speakers. The obvious reason for the overwhelming popularity of these two plays—James Thomson's *Coriolanus* is the only other drama

¹ The word "stage," as used in this paper, means primarily dramatic performances; secondarily it means almost any kind of performance or exhibition for public amusement that takes place in a theatre, a hall, or even a tent. Lectures are excluded because their chief function is not amusement, and musical events are likewise omitted because an account of music in New Brunswick already exists. Cf. *Sunday Times*, Oct. 27, 1929.

² For this instalment the following newspapers have been examined: the *Political Intelligencer*, Oct. 14, 1783–Apr. 5, 1785; the *Brunswick Gazette, and Weekly Monitor*, July 10, 1787–May 10, 1791; the *Guardian; or, New-Brunswick Advertiser*, Nov. 7, 1792–Mar. 13, 1798, Nov. 6, 1801–Nov. 26, 1807; the *Times: and New-Brunswick General Advertiser*, June 1, 1815–May 15, 1823, May 19, 1824–May 17, 1826; the *New-Brunswick Fredonian* (weekly), June 26, 1811–May 2, 1827, May 2, 1838–Dec. 26, 1855; the *New-Brunswicker*, Jan. 15, 1855–Mar. 21, 1859; the *New-Brunswick Daily News*, Feb. 1, 1855–June 30, 1858; the *New-Brunswick Daily Fredonian*, Apr. 1, 1859–Dec. 31, 1860.

³ For a general account of this society, based on the *Transactions*, see Miss Mildred R. Woodward's delightful paper in the *Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, December, 1939.

mentioned—is that both, by their impassioned denunciation of tyranny, struck home to the ardent patriotism of the students during the Revolution.

But the young gentlemen of Queen's were not to be content for long with mere declamations culled from their favorite plays. Less than a year after the quadrangular dialogue just mentioned the undergraduates had the honor of presenting to a New Brunswick audience the first full dramatic performance of which we have any evidence. In a show case in the Rutgers Library may be seen a small, age-browned slip of paper bearing this hand-written message:

The Students of Queens College
solicit the company of Dr. Ryker
and Lady at an exhibition of a
Tragedy on Wednesday 19th Instant
at 6 O'Clock in the Evening.—

Brunswick	}	Admittance will
7. March	}	be obtained by ths
1783.	}	Card.

If Dr. Ryker and Lady were curious concerning the name of the tragedy to which they had been invited, the present-day student fully shares their feeling but without the means of satisfaction that was available to them. They probably were not, however, dismayed by the hour of performance, as 6:00 or 6:15 was a fashionable time for the curtain to rise in New York. We cannot be sure that this was the first play ever acted by the local students, but it certainly represents no innovation so far as American colleges were concerned, for the practice was already known at William and Mary, the College of Philadelphia, Harvard, Yale, and probably other institutions.

The presenting of a dramatic program may have become, if it was not already, an annual affair at Queen's. At least we learn through the columns of the earliest New Brunswick newspaper, the *Political Intelligencer*, that two plays were given on March 31, 1784. The amusingly phrased news note in the issue of April 6th reads thus:

On Wednesday evening last the Tragedy of CATO and the Farce of the MOCK DOCTOR⁴ were exhibited by the young gentlemen of this place,

⁴ *Cato*, a favorite with American audiences, had been given by the students of William and Mary as early as 1736. *The Mock Doctor*, by Fielding, was likewise popular in America.

to the great satisfaction of every spectator—And, the evening following, a most brilliant entertainment was given at Whitehall [a tavern], where gaity and mirth never more abounded, and after spending the night in a very agreeable society, about three o'clock in the morning retired to rest.

But such goings-on gave something quite other than satisfaction to at least one member of the community, who, employing the pseudonym of "Clericus," penned a tirade published in the *Political Intelligencer* of April 27th. This ironical gentleman, according to his letter, for several years past had expected to see "in some of our prints" an account of the public performances by the Queen's students,⁵ and at last he had been gratified. It had formerly been assumed by "Divines and Fanatics" that colleges were intended "solely to qualify persons for the practice of religion and virtue," but behold the lamentable change: "instead of virtuous men, the world is to be supplied with *Tragedians*; in the room of men of sense and learning, we must expect to see *Mock Doctors*; instead of humble christians, a race of *gay* and *merry lads*, a set of stout and hearty fellows, who, if day-light fails, can carouse all night, till three o'clock in the morning." In the issue of May 11th a correspondent who signed himself "Mock Doctor" and who was, or pretended to be, a farmer, heavily ridiculed "Clericus" for attempting to suppress the gaiety of youth. Two weeks later a pointless reply by "Clericus" was published and also an atrocious poem, whose anonymous author essayed the role of mediator by taking both disputants to task. Having characterized "Mock Doctor's" letter as "your lousy performance,"⁶ he continues:

And as for *you, Clericus*, it is my opinion,
Your heart is as black as the plan which you go on;
And that the reflections you cast on Queen's College,
Betray a base mind, and weakness of knowledge.

And finally the magnanimous conclusion:

Now pri'thee dear Doctor do take my advice,
Let ev'ry one see you still respect Clericus;
Let them see you have charity to forgive him betime,
But still think the performance of Cato no crime.⁷

⁵ If this statement is to be taken literally, it indicates that the "Tragedy" of 1783 was not the beginning of theatrical iniquity at the College.

⁶ Apparently modern collegiate slang is not always modern after all.

⁷ I am indebted to Dr. Rudolf Kirk for directing me to these items, which he had come upon in the New Jersey Historical Society's unique file of the *Political Intelligencer*.

It may be worth mentioning that two advertisements in the *Political Intelligencer* indicate the presence of some early readers of plays in New Brunswick. On December 30, 1783, appeared a list of second-hand books to be sold by the printer of the paper, including *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *King Henry VI*, *Coriolanus*, *King Lear*, and *Timon of Athens*; and on September 14, 1784, a similar list, including Sheridan's *The Critic* and Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*.

There is no evidence that the performances at Queen's and the printed plays created any demand among the citizenry for further theatrical exhibitions, either amateur or professional. Indeed the data provided by our incomplete newspaper files make it clear that the local appetite for "shows," eschewing the more elegant but perhaps more sinful drama, was for years thereafter quite content with animal exhibitions, acrobatic feats, and wax works. The first of these exhibitors of whom we hear was one Mr. Cressin, who, on November 24, 1795, displayed at the Barracks "the two most surprising Animals that ever existed." Adults twenty-five cents, children half price. A cut accompanying the advertisement in the *Guardian* shows a monkey on a tightrope, no doubt the Jacco or Coco who was amusing New York audiences about this time with the aid of Gibbone, his simian footman.⁸ On July 25, 1797, an African lion, measuring eight feet from nostril to tail and weighing 450 pounds, was on view.

FIRST QUARTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Much more promising than any attraction so far advertised was that announced as follows on August 5, 1802: "MR. ROBERTSON and Company from Astley's Amphitheatre, London, and late of the Theatre New-York; whose astonishing performances, have given such universal satisfaction in this country, respectfully inform the Ladies and Gentlemen of New-Brunswick and its Vicinity, that they intend gratifying their curiosity for a few nights with a general display of EQUESTRIAN PERFORMANCES"—in the Gaol Yard. Not the least impressive item in the notice is the price scale: boxes, one dollar; pit, seventy-five cents.

⁸ See G. C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, I (1927), 368, 397. Most of my subsequent references to the New York stage are based on this monumental work.

One would like to know what Mr. McGinnis actually did when he exhibited "his wonderful powers in PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERIMENTS AND DECEPTIONS" on December 1, 1803. Probably he merely gave a demonstration of sleight-of-hand. At any rate his program concluded with "OTHELLO, THE AFRICAN EQUILIBREST'S FEATS ON THE SLACK WIRE." And if we are curious as to the sort of entertainment offered by the "Phantasmagoria" advertised on January 5, 1804, which had been "received with great applause in London, and New-York," we gain no enlightenment from the newspaper notice. We can, however, turn to Dr. Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage*⁹ and discover that the *Evening Post* described the "Phantasmagoria" as a mechanism that introduced "the Phantoms of Apparitions of the Dead and Absent, in a way more completely illusive, than has ever yet been witnessed, as the objects freely originate in the air, and unfold themselves under various forms and sizes . . . occasionally assuming a figure and most perfect resemblance of the heroes . . . of past and present times." The announcement of this marvelous device in the *Guardian* contains a sentence that will bear pondering: "The proprietors respectfully acquaint those ladies and gentlemen who may be desirous to see it, and to whom it would be disagreeable to attend a public performance, that it will be exhibited to select parties, by giving timely notice." Was this shrinking from public performances, which the proprietors had learned to expect in towns like New Brunswick, social or moral? Whichever it was, it might well have served as a deterrent to the drama. Apparently no such private arrangements were considered necessary for the New Museum of Wax Work, which opened on December 12, 1805, at Ezekiel Ayers' Tavern, for its life-size figures of Columbus, Washington, and Jefferson, of Hamilton and Burr fighting their fatal duel, and even of Othello and Desdemona in a scene from the play, were probably regarded as educational and improving.

For these early years of the nineteenth century our record must needs be meagre and unsatisfactory, partly because the newspaper files are incomplete, partly because some exhibitors probably advertised by hand-bills alone, and partly because

⁹ II, 206-207.

there is good reason to believe that few shows and fewer plays—pretty certainly no professional ones—were being presented in New Brunswick at this time. We can merely note that on November 7, 1811, the New Museum of Wax Work returned to town for a stay of about two weeks at Peter Keenon's Tavern with such additions to its display as the marriage of Bonaparte to Maria Louisa, the death of Lord Nelson, and "AN INDIAN WARRIOR Exercising his barbarity upon two young Captives;" and that on May 28, 1812, a living elephant, weighing 4700 pounds and standing about eight feet high, was to be seen for a quarter, also at Keenon's Tavern.

Drama uncertainly re-enters the account under date of April 10, 1818, when the Academy of New Brunswick gave, at the Dutch Church, an exhibition consisting of speeches, dialogues, and three plays. How so much could have been crowded into a single program and how the performance of plays was permitted in the church, it is difficult to see, but the notice distinctly reads: "the following pieces will be acted—*Douglas, the Natural Son, and the Death of Hector.*" Perhaps the acting consisted of the presentation in colloquy form of a few excerpts from the plays.¹⁰ An approximation of drama was also provided by Mr. Ingersoll of New York, a teacher of elocution, who, on September 14, 1820, at the Swan Tavern, gave a program of readings that included Antony's soliloquy over Caesar's body, Antony's funeral oration, and Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

But the wonders of the animal world probably continued to bring in many more quarters than these histrionic attempts. At any rate another elephant was displayed on May 15 and 16, 1818, a highly educated female, who would lie down and get up at command and who would draw the cork from a bottle and drink the contents. And for a period of three weeks beginning about August 29, 1822, the townspeople could repair to David Smith's Tavern and marvel at "THE LEVIATHAN, OR, WONDERFUL SEA SERPENT, Lately caught at Brown's Point, New-Jersey." This "greatest curiosity ever exhibited in America" was thirty-two feet, ten inches long and eighteen feet in girth. It possessed two legs, three large

¹⁰ The first two are familiar dramas by John Home and Richard Cumberland, respectively; the third, which I do not identify, may itself be an excerpt.

fins, a forked tail, and six rows of teeth in each jaw; it had no bones, no heart, no tongue, no brain, but from its large liver about four barrels of oil had been extracted. Its skin was rough and of a leadish color, and the creature was in a good state of preservation.

If public exhibitions in New Brunswick were not numerous, they were at least varied. Anyone who was disturbed by the presence of drama within the church or who had a soul above bibulous elephants and pickled sea-serpents, could visit the College about the middle of October, 1824, and for twenty-five cents contemplate a large painting, twelve by eighteen feet, of "Christ Rejected," depicting the Savior, bound and crowned with thorns, standing before Pilate, while the multitude demanded His death. This picture, one of numerous large canvases being shown about the country, was the work of William Dunlap, a Jersey-born artist of moderate ability, who gained considerable note in his day.

It may be relevant to point out that at this time there resided in the town a man by the name of Sol Smith, who was to become one of the most prominent figures in the theatrical history of the Ohio and Mississippi Valley. He had already appeared repeatedly on the "Western" stages, but with scant results financially; consequently in 1823 or 1824 he migrated with his family to New Brunswick, where his wife, the former Martha Therese Mathews, whom he had married in Cincinnati, had been born.¹¹ Here the Smiths, both of whom had considerable musical ability, gave a vocal concert, and here Sol served for a time as editor of the *Fredonian* while the regular editor, Mr. Fitz-Randolph, was absent because of his duties as State Senator. When, as occasional organist in the Episcopal Church, he made it clear that he could read music, he was urged to open a singing school. This he declined doing, but he compromised by assembling a group of twenty-four singers and training them to present an oratorio, in which his wife took the principal soprano part. The performance cleared upwards of a hundred dollars at twenty-five cents a ticket. In his sprightly autobiography, *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years* (1868), Smith makes this revealing comment: "It must be remembered that no one had

¹¹ Mrs. Smith later gained some celebrity as an actress on the Western circuit.

any idea that I was connected with *the stage*. If they had known I was an actor, my reception and treatment in New Brunswick would most likely have been widely different."¹²

SECOND QUARTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

That Sol Smith had rightly interpreted the feeling of many people here toward the theatre is forcefully suggested by an editorial pronouncement in the *Fredonian* of September 27, 1826: "It is *complained*, by the friends of the Drama, that the theatre is not well supported in Albany. This fact, so far from being complained of, will, we imagine, be deemed a very *creditable* trait in the character of the Albanians, by a large class of society." Do we not have here at least a partial explanation of the dearth of plays in New Brunswick during this period?

If further evidence is desired, it may be found in the *Fredonian* of January 24, 1827, which published an advertisement of "HADDOCK'S EXHIBITION OF ANDROIDES, or Animated Automaton"—seemingly precursors of the modern robot. In this announcement Mr. Haddock "states, *with confidence*, that there is no religious persuasion whatever, need apprehend censure by visiting this exhibition, there being nothing in it that can possibly offend morality or religion."

A serious break in the files of the *Fredonian* extends from May, 1827, to May, 1838. When information once more becomes available, one discovers that drama is as inconspicuous as before but that New Brunswick amusement-seekers are taking to the circus with enthusiasm. On October 19, 1838, a menagerie from the New York Zoological Institute, containing "a greater variety than any heretofore offered," was displayed "near the College." On May 22 and 23, 1840, the Victory Arena and Great Western Circus presented an equestrian show. The advertisement convinces us that the stylistic peculiarities of present day circus announcements were invented long ago, witness these superlatives: "This Exhibition is not only the largest now travelling, but is fitted up in a style surpassing in splendor and magnificence all former ones of the kind ever offered to an enlightened public."

Messrs. Knowlton and Henry probably came measurably

¹² See *op. cit.*, 34-40, for his account of his sojourn in New Brunswick.

near to a dramatic performance when, on December 17, 1840, they gave at Strong's Hotel a "chaste and intellectual entertainment" of recitations and readings in character from eminent authors—with great applause, we hope.

But we cannot doubt that the Columbian Circus was greeted on October 7, 1842, with vast acclaim. Even the most puritanical citizen must have been lured to the show grounds at the foot of Albany Street by the managers' promise that "their exhibition shall be a place of innocent and rational amusement. No violation of decorum—nothing to mantle the cheek of modesty shall be permitted." Of how many circuses we are denied the vicarious enjoyment by a further break in the files of the *Fredonian* we cannot say, but immediately following the hiatus we learn of an impending visit by Welch's (or Welsh's) National Circus from the Olympian Amphitheatre, Philadelphia, on May 19, 1847. It boasted a popular clown, Dan Rice, a variety of equestrian acts involving some impersonation, a "superb *Water Proof Pavilion*" capable of seating 3,000 persons, and a portable gas system for night use. It too assured the public that "nothing approaching a shade of vulgarity can find its way among the choice representations of the Arena."

A real novelty was offered at the City Hall on November 19, 1847, when twelve Iowa and Konzas Indians gave a demonstration of their tribal dances, games, ceremonies, war whoops, war songs, and so forth, the whole accompanied by a lecture. Also at the City Hall on January 18 and 19, 1848, Signor Jerome Blitz, a well known entertainer of the time, presented feats of natural magic and several humorous scenes in ventriloquism. In the same room on April 19th of the same year, occurred a performance by the United States Ethiopian Minstrels that must stand somewhere near the beginning of an endless line of similar entertainments in New Brunswick. This is the first burnt-cork show of which I find any evidence in the newspapers, but the advertisement describes it as a repetition; so other programs of negro minstrelsy may have been recorded in the lost issues of the *Fredonian*. This was but a small company of only six performers, but the paper of April 26th pronounced the singing excellent. An interesting side-light on the manners of the younger generation is cast by this injunction

contained in the announcement: "No boys will be admitted except accompanied by their parents."

April 27, 1848, brought Howe (or Howes, the newspapers being unable to decide which) and Company's Great United States Circus to town with 240 men and horses, a troupe of Bedouin Arab riders, eight equestriennes, a band of gymnasts, and a pantomime, *Harlequin's Frolics, or Mistakes of a Night*, to conclude the evening performance. A feature not mentioned in previous circus advertisements was a "Grand Procession and Spectacle" between 10:00 and 11:00 A.M.

And in the fall of this year two more circuses. On October 21st Sands, Lent and Company's American Circus and Hippo-feraeae Arena arrived in town at 11:00 A.M. "in procession and cavalcade" with a show including a "mammoth" troupe of equestrians and animals, a pair of trained elephants named Jenny Lind and Romeo, and ten Egyptian camels. On November 9th came Van Amburgh and Company's Menagerie, entering in the morning from Somerville with 100 dapple gray horses drawing the carriages and cages, while at the pavilion Miss Calhoun and Mr. Brooks gave "an interesting illustration of the ascendancy of intellect over the wild tenants of the forest."

The next year, 1849, saw the introduction of a new form of entertainment, the moving diorama; at least I have found no previous mention of it in the New Brunswick papers, although it was known in New York as early as 1828. The moving diorama was a device by which a series of painted scenes could be shown in rapid succession to create the illusion of passing the objects depicted. The Burning of Moscow, thus represented on May 26th, 28th, and 29th, became a favorite in New Brunswick and returned again and again during the ensuing years despite competition by numerous other dioramas. In fact the next panorama to visit the city arrived only about five weeks later, subject being Asia and Africa, and within another week appeared a third, picturing the Funeral of Napoleon.

1850

Only a single circus had come to town in 1849; three came in 1850. Of these Spalding and Rogers' North American Circus, which exhibited on April 24th, alone calls for comment because

of two unusual features: an "Appolonicon" combining, so the announcement averred, over 1,000 distinct musical instruments under the control of one man and drawn in the public procession by forty horses; and a complete dramatic corps presenting the patriotic drama, *The Spirit of '76*. The Campbell Minstrels, advertising themselves as the oldest minstrel company in existence, and proudly declaring that they were the "Authors of their own Music, Dances, Lectures, &c.," gave a performance on August 22nd. And in still another form stage entertainment was available this year in a series of Shakespearean readings at the City Hall by the favorably known John W. S. Hows, Professor of Elocution at Columbia College, presented under the auspices of the Rutgers students. On November 8th he read *The Merchant of Venice*, on November 18th *Macbeth*, and on November 23rd *Much Ado About Nothing*. Commenting on the second reading, the *Fredonian* stated that it was heard by a large and attentive audience, and that the play was excellently rendered on the whole, in many passages thrillingly so.

1851-1852

During the next two years circuses continued to provide almost the only amusements to be advertised in New Brunswick, save for one minstrel program by the New Orleans Serenaders on June 16, 1851. Welch's Circus, on its visit of May 8, 1851, included among its attractions a "Dramatique Corps," which was presumably responsible for the "Grand Romantic Legendary Spectacle of St. George & the Dragon." On the 24th of the same month came Barnum's Asiatic Caravan, Museum and Menagerie, presenting to the view a collection of wild animals, a group of about seventy life-size wax statues, the original Tom Thumb, an armless man, a lion tamer, and a minstrel troupe. The advertiser's statement that the pavilion containing this exhibition would hold 15,000 people must surely be regarded as a Barnumism. A third circus this year was Turner's on September 26th, which modestly asserted that its equestrian troupe was "without its superior in the known world." Robinson and Eldred's Circus, which exhibited on May 29, 1852, interests us chiefly because it announced a dramatic spectacle of *Cinderella, or the Little*

Glass Slipper, performed by twenty-five children, the oldest being fifteen years of age, and the youngest eighteen months. Welch's returned on October 21st and at the close of the evening program presented a drama called *Marion and his Men* with a full cast, scenery, and costumes.

1853

The only tent-show to appear in 1853—at least the only one to advertise in the *Fredonian*—was a combination of Driesbach's Menagerie and Rivers, Derious and Company's Circus. For our purpose the notable feature of their exhibition was not Herr Driesbach's daring entry into a den of lions and tigers, but the performance of *Mazeppa*, with which the evening was closed. *Mazeppa*, based on Byron's poem, was an equestrian drama involving a desperate ride by the hero, who is bound by his enemies to the back of a wild horse. The play was extremely popular in the equestrian theatres, especially when the part of the scantily-clad horseman was taken by the beautiful and notorious Ada Isaacs Menken. It was not she, however, who played the rôle in New Brunswick on June 29th. As a matter of fact this performance must have been brief for lack of time, stressing mainly the wild ride.

From the point of view of amusement-lovers the most significant event to occur in New Brunswick in 1853 was the opening of Greer's Hall. Hitherto indoor entertainments had been obliged to resort to the City Hall or a large room in a tavern, but on November 9th George Greer, a local baker, announced that he had fitted up a large, new, handsome hall at 197 Burnet Street, which was then in the heart of the business district. It was equipped with a stage and a curtain that could be raised and lowered, and it had a seating capacity of 448.¹⁸ Despite its very limited accommodations Greer's Hall was a great improvement over anything the city had possessed before; it at once began exerting a stimulating effect on the

¹⁸ This figure is given in an advertisement of Horace Greeley's lecture in the *Fredonian* of Feb. 4, 1867. The hall, which was on the second floor of the building, measured about fifty by sixty-eight feet, if we may trust a reference to it in the *Fredonian's* description of the new Masonic Hall in the issue of November 22, 1873. V. S. Voorhees made the surprising statement in a letter published in the *Daily Times* of April 9, 1903, that, at the time, Greer's was considered the finest and most spacious hall in the State. Could this be correct? Mr. Alexander S. Graham, who attended performances there in its latter days, remembers it as merely a bare room with wooden benches.

quantity of entertainment available, and for the next twenty years it was the sole public hall of any importance in the town. Not the least of its services was to provide a sizable room in which prominent lecturers could speak, and during its active career its walls echoed to the words of such distinguished men and women as Bayard Taylor, John B. Gough, Lucy Stone, Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, P. T. Barnum, Wendell Phillips, T. DeWitt Talmage, Olive Logan, and Josh Billings.

1854

At once Greer's Hall was requisitioned for various musical events, and early in 1854 it began housing theatrical performances as well. The first of these was provided by Old Duke Morgan's Ethiopian Minstrels, who came to financial grief on January 24th and 25th through the meagreness of their audiences. But immediately on the heels of Old Duke Morgan came the first traveling dramatic company ever to visit New Brunswick, so far as my sources of information indicate. This troupe, which was under the proprietorship of one Keenan, must have been a very minor one, for its advertisement boasts of its unprecedented success in Trenton, Burlington, Mount Holly, and Norristown. Arriving on Tuesday, January 31st, it played each evening for the rest of the week, offering, with commendable consistency, an uninterrupted fare of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mrs. Stowe's novel having come out less than two years before. The announcement stressed a series of tableaux depicting such scenes as "the Escape of Eliza," "the Trappers Entrapped," "the Death of Uncle Tom," and "Eva in Heaven," from which we gather that the slender scenic and dramatic resources of the actors forced them to resort to motionless stage pictures whenever possible. Our worst suspicions concerning this troupe are confirmed by an editorial in the *Fredonian* of February 15th, warning all printers against "Keenan's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin Company,'" which left New Brunswick without paying its printer's bill, besides narrowly escaping jail for violating an unspecified city ordinance. Not an auspicious beginning for drama in the new auditorium.

July 19th saw the first of an incredibly long series of moving panoramas to be unfolded at Greer's Hall. This one dealt with Niagara Falls, representing the region from over two hundred

points of view and in all seasons. To dispose at once of the subject of panoramas, it will be sufficient to state that among the themes presented by later exhibitions were: Arctic Searches, the Bombardment of Sebastopol, the Mormons, China and Australia, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a Voyage to Italy, Scenes from the Revolution, the Russian War, the Mexican War, the Mississippi River, Illustrations from the Bible, a Pilgrimage through Egypt and the Holy Land, the American Rebellion, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Oriental Life, the Dawn of Christianity, Dante's *Inferno*, and the Drunkard's Progress. The most extensive of these was probably that depicting Oriental life, which advertised about 70,000 square feet of canvas. The pictures were always serious and instructive and were frequently accompanied by an explanatory lecture, but sometimes the evening was lightened by the addition of ventriloquism.

That public amusements were still somewhat suspect in certain quarters in New Brunswick is shown by an editorial published in the *Fredonian* of December 12, 1854. Therein the writer took his fellow-townsmen to task for their failure to attend a recent lecture by a visiting clergyman although they would flock to a minstrel show or a sleight-of-hand performance, thus neglecting a teacher "who leaves something really valuable behind him, instead of something which is worse than useless."

1855

But despite this commentator's disapproval of such light-minded pleasures, at least one sleight-of-hand performance and seven minstrel shows were offered at Greer's Hall during 1855. Only one of the minstrel bands, Wilkinson and Vanderburgh's Excelsior Southern Burlesque and Opera Troupe, which performed on November 5th and 6th, need detain us. The interest lies in the word "burlesque," its first appearance in New Brunswick announcements, so far as I have observed. Perhaps it is not necessary to explain that the term as here used had a different connotation from that of today. Then as now a burlesque was a take-off, not, however, in the Gypsy Rose Lee sense, but in the sense of a travesty on some popular play, opera, or story.

Probably the above editorial writer would not have applied his strictures to Morton's Grand National Dramatic Troupe, which presented the "moral Drama" of *The Drunkard* on March 5th, with *A Phenomenon in a Smock Frock* as a farcical afterpiece. The company remained for a week, presenting, among its other plays, *A Glance at New York*, *The Stranger*, adapted from Kotzebue's *Menschenbass und Reue*, J. M. Morton's *Box and Cox*, and Garrick's *Katbarine and Petruchio*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*. The *New-Brunswick* of March 9th described these actors as better than the average that visited the city—a remark which suggests that the present record of previous theatrical visitations is not complete.

The most conspicuous form of amusement available to the populace during 1855, however, was the circus. On April 26th arrived Howes' Menagerie in conjunction with Myers and Madigan's Circus, advertising an impressive list of wild animals, not excepting a giraffe and a rhinoceros. May 17th brought Welch and Lent's Circus, which ended its performance with a pantomime, *The Miser of Bagdad*. Rivers and Derious' Grecian Circus with its trained Russian bears and a new comic afterpiece appeared on September 10th, and the very next day came the circus of the popular clown, Dan Rice, which featured an elephant that walked the tight rope and a pair of educated mules. Mention should be made, too, of Seymour and Company's Indian Exhibition that, on August 16th, offered a representation of the manners and customs of the Red Men with the aid of eighty men and horses. This forerunner of the Wild West show failed to impress the *Fredonian*. "No great shakes," was its comment the next day.

1856

That Greer's Hall was attracting professional actors to New Brunswick is attested by two visits from the Newark Theatre Dramatic Company early in 1856. On January 31st and February 1st and 2nd this troupe, which, according to the *New-Brunswick* had been playing in Newark for the past five or six months with great success, presented the inevitable *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The players were well enough liked to gain a return engagement of two weeks beginning on March 4th, during which "the young American Tragedian," William Henderson,

was featured. The program of the first night consisted of *Ingo-mar, the Barbarian*, based upon the German of F. Halm, and *The Omnibus*; the second night *The Stranger* and *The Stage Struck Lawyer* were given; while the third night saw *Otello* and *The Good for Nothing*. By this time, the newspaper assures us, the players were creating quite a sensation, their company being described as the best ever to visit the city. After *Uncle Tom's Cabin* again on the 7th, the Newark troupe presented on the 8th a bill the details of which we know from a program preserved in the Rutgers Library. It was as follows: the popular *Don Caesar de Bazan* in three acts, adapted from the French, a dance by Miss S. Bishop, a song by Mr. D. Myron, another song by Little Lavina Bishop, and *Jack Sheppard* in five acts, based on Harrison Ainsworth's novel—all for twenty-five cents. The curtain rose at 7:30. "Front Seats strictly reserved for Ladies." *Richard III* was the drama on March 10th, the farce being *The Rough Diamond*, and the next evening began a series of benefit performances for the actors in true metropolitan style. The benefit plays included such ephemeral pieces as C. W. Taylor's *Little Katy*,—*the Hot Corn Girl*, *Black-Eyed Susan*, *The Carpenter of Rouen* by the American J. S. Jones, and *The Toodles*, written by the comedian, W. E. Burton.

The *New-Brunswick* was warm in its praise of the company. On the 13th it remarked that the Newark Theatre had been "more successful than any other kind of amusement in this city," and that every performance had played to a paying audience. The reason was "the excellence of their personations, correct reading, and the skill in putting plays upon the stage, together with good scenic displays." And on the 17th the troupe was commended for its freedom from gross language and indecent allusions "that have been the usual accompaniments of theatrical exhibitions in times past." On the contrary, this troupe has desired to redeem the stage from the condemnation it has in great measure heretofore deserved. Clearly suspicion of the stage died hard in New Brunswick.

On May 9th Greer's Hall was graced by the presence of none other than General Tom Thumb, who held two "grand Levees," at which he gave "personifications" of noted statuettes in appropriate costume and displayed his cabinet of

“bijoutry.” He impressed the *New-Brunswicker* as being full of humor and as resembling “an old looking young one.”

The year brought a total of five circuses, the second being Spalding and Rogers’ New Railroad Circus, so called because it was conveyed by railroad cars, and not by wagons, from town to town. Presumably this procedure was something of an innovation in 1856. Its advantage, as stated in the advertisement, was that the performers arrived fresh and rested instead of being bedraggled and tired from all-night traveling over rough roads. Considering the frequency of circuses hereabouts, one easily credits the statement in the *New-Brunswicker* of April 29th that “the population of New-Brunswick and the neighborhood are great on all such entertainments”—including minstrel shows, it might have added, for at least nine such were offered in 1856.

1857

The panic of this year considerably curtailed New Brunswick’s amusement calendar. After the comparative riches of 1856 the theatre-goers no doubt agreed with an editorial note in the *Daily News* of September 25th, commenting on a minstrel show of the previous evening: “It is so long since an entertainment of any kind has been offered to our citizens that any troupe however commonplace would have been warmly welcomed.” Nevertheless, whether in spite of or because of the depression, negro minstrelsy broke all local records with a score of eleven programs for the year. Notable among the visiting Ethiopians were Christy’s famous comedians, who, performing here for the first time, announced two “Chaste and Fashionable Musical Soirees” for February 23rd and 24th. The townspeople turned out to the capacity of the hall. The only other events of 1857 worth mentioning were two evenings of the Chinese Artists and Jugglers, two programs by Signor Blitz, the magician, and the arrival of Sands, Nathans and Company’s Circus, which offered another performance of *Mazeppa* in full costume and with a “splendid cast.”

1858

The amusements of 1858, like those of the previous year, were few and unimportant, perhaps as a continuing result of

the depression. Minstrel shows and circuses were still nearly the sole attractions, but the former fell off sharply in number, while the latter increased. Moreover black-face entertainers apparently had obstacles to contend with, judging from the announcement of Pierce's Company, which visited the town on January 9th: "To prevent the noise of boys, there will be no half price, and an officer in attendance." The circuses at this time were putting special stress on theatrical features. For instance Sands, Nathans and Company advertised a comic afterpiece, *Love and the Baboon*, in connection with their performance of April 29th; Ball and Company's Gymnasium and Amphitheatre, exhibiting on July 29th, included portions of a minstrel program; on September 30th Rivers and Derious' Gymnastic, Acrobatic, Ballet, and Dramatic Establishment stressed a dramatic spectacle, *The War in India, or the Siege of Lucknow*, with the aid of music, costume, and properties.

Mild curiosity is aroused by Beale's Panopticon of India and the Sepoy Rebellion, which was shown for a week in May, and which employed not paintings but finished models that could "do anything but talk." The display involved much movement of troops and ships, but the *New-Brunswick* of the 25th was especially impressed by a horse that licked its wounded leg, nuzzled its fallen master, shuddered, and fell dead. And perhaps one would have been casually diverted by Mr. and Mrs. D. Clinton Price's Drawing Room Entertainment, with the aid of George Wrenn, comedian, on June 28th, which, though composed of music, dancing, and impersonation, was described by the *Daily News* as a real novelty, in which Mr. Wrenn would represent a fast young man in search of a wife, and Mrs. Price would delineate eleven characters and introduce seven fancy dances.

1859

The year began ponderously though undramatically on February 28th with an "Exhibition of Wonders," consisting of a young woman weighting 750 pounds and a "living skeleton," who tipped the scales at thirty-seven and a half. More grace and beauty were provided on May 14th by the Cinderella Children, a troupe of juvenile dancers and pantomimists, employing appropriate properties, tricks, and transformations,

with which they had recently won a success at Niblo's Garden, New York. Two days later William P. Fitzsimmons, described as a character actor and humorist, gave a one-man show with scenery and costumes, called "The Seven Ages of Man," for the benefit of the Liberty Hose Company, a volunteer fire brigade. Unfortunately the performer proved to be such a humbug that many left before the program was finished.

After another lapse of two days the Dramatic Lyceum Company began an engagement of two weeks. Among the members of this troupe were J. V. Bowes, Colin Stewart, P. C. Bryne, J. C. De Forest, Amelia Harris, and Virginia Vaughen. The players were described as having been selected from some of the principal theatres of New York, but as a matter of fact, according to Odell's exhaustive *Annals*, only one of them, J. C. De Forest, had appeared in the metropolis. The New Brunswick repertory included *The Stranger*, Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons*, John Howard Payne's *Thérèse, the Orphan of Geneva*, adapted from the French, *The Felon's Fate*, *The Drunkard*, *The Toodles*, J. M. Morton's *All That Glitters Is Not Gold*, and Moncrieff's version of Irving's *The Spectre Bridegroom*. The *Fredonian* of May 18th was sure the company would tolerate nothing that could offend the most fastidious taste. Its moral and artistic merits were sufficient to win for it a further engagement of one night on June 9th, when it presented a generous bill of three plays: *The Momentous Question*, *Crossing the Line*, and *Jemmy Twitcher in France*.

After the usual profusion of minstrel shows, two or three circuses, and an evening with Wyman, the wizard and ventriloquist, the year closed with a display on December 22nd of a "Chinese Walking and Speaking Automaton," standing seven feet, six inches high, and with a visit on December 29th, 30th, and 31st from Dolly Dutton, who, with her twenty-six inches and her thirteen pounds, had some claim to the title of the "smallest girl in the world." Dolly sang songs and danced the polka at each of her "levees."

1860

Better times were reflected in the stage activities of 1859 and equally in those of 1860. Among the varied attractions of the latter year were Professor W. H. Donaldson, necromancer,

Chinese juggler, and ventriloquist, on February 3rd and 4th, and Deliah Mossco, Egyptian wizard, ventriloquist, and "fire king of the four elements," on December 10th; also, on April 30th, M. Bihin, a French giant of seven feet, eight and a half inches, who spoke several ancient and modern languages with ease and fluency, and, in striking contrast, General Tom Thumb, who, on November 22nd and 23rd, rode in a miniature carriage drawn by Lilliputian ponies from the City Hotel to Greer's Hall, where he gave his programs of songs, dances, and imitations. Inevitably there were performances by a number of minstrel troupes (six, to be exact), and three circuses visited town, notable among them being William Cooke's Royal Amphitheatre, a splendid equestrian aggregation from London and New York, on June 15th. And for two weeks or more at the end of June and the beginning of July the Bohemian Glass Blowers drew good audiences by their interesting art and by the blown glass prizes they distributed.

More strictly dramatic fare was provided from May 8th to 19th by the De Forrest Dramatic Association, "late of Barnum's Museum, N. Y.," under the direction of J. C. De Forrest, evidently the gentleman with one *r* in his name of the previous year. Its leading lady was Charlotte Thompson, "late of the 'Varieties,' New Orleans," and its comedian was James Lewis, whom one would like to identify, probably erroneously, with the James Lewis who later became the favorite comic actor of Augustin Daly's Company in New York. The bills of the Association were made up largely of such stand-bys as *The Lady of Lyons*, *Ingomar*, *The Spectre Bridegroom*, and *His Last Legs*, but it also produced a few novelties, conspicuously Dumas' *Camille* on May 11th, Charlotte Thompson taking the part in which Matilda Heron had achieved a sensational success at Wallack's Theatre three years before. The only indication of the reception given De Forrest's actors is the statement in the *Fredonian* of May 10th that the audiences the first two nights were good, but not good enough to remunerate the managers, which is understandable, since even a full hall at the advertised price of twenty-five cents a seat would bring in only a very modest sum.

Probably the most unusual dramatic event of 1860 was a performance on October 27th by the Great North American

Indian Troupe (real redskins, we are assured) of a play called *Pocahontas*, as a part of their program of varied entertainment.

Thus ends the account of New Brunswick amusements before the Civil War. The record is in a sense disappointing inasmuch as it contains no names truly distinguished in the ante-bellum theatre of America. But with the very modest accommodations the town afforded perhaps that could scarcely be expected. At least there was an increasing demand for such amusements as could be provided for, and this demand led to better things before many more years had passed.

(Part II will be published in the Spring issue of the JOURNAL.)



Courtesy of Dr. Frederick L. Brown

*From the New Brunswick, New Jersey Union
September 5, 1850*

MADemoiselle LOUISE

*“The only Equestrienne who has ever appeared in America,
who rides without saddle or bridle.”*