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# PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Volume 1971 – Number 3



THE PATERSON OPERA HOUSE Circa 1901

## *The PATERSON THEATRE*

AN INFORMAL HISTORY

by MARY C. HENDERSON

The history of the legitimate theatre in Paterson is predictably both unique and typical of the rise and fall of live theatrical entertainment in the middle-size cities of the United States. It is typical because it was largely a late nineteenth-century movement, which was eclipsed around the turn of the century by the introduction of new, less-expensive and fascinating motion pictures. And, as in most of the towns and cities in post-Civil War America, the rise of the theatre went hand in hand with the rise of a prospering middle class and was a manifestation of the culture search and increasing leisure time of this group.

But before the theatre had time to establish itself as a cultural "habit" of this group, before it could attract a large enough audience to cut through all classes by lower admission rates, it languished and eventually perished. Theatres in cities the size of Paterson were run as businesses in an age when the profit-and-loss statement was the Bible of the times. Any economic recession or business setback, however slight,

brought red ink to the theatre managers, and with it, came retrenchment, changes of policy, and even, closing of theatre doors, sometimes temporarily, but more often permanently. Paterson's stage underwent all of the throes and agonies widespread among the theatre-cities in America during the last hundred years.

The unique aspects of the history of Paterson's stage center around the growth of the city itself. Because of the Passaic River and Falls, the surrounding area on which the city developed was almost militantly conceived of as an industrial Eastern hub by none other than Alexander Hamilton. As a young officer with Washington's troops, Hamilton surveyed the area and carefully filed away this information until he was in a position to use it. While Secretary of the Treasury, he encouraged the creation of an industrial center in the land he had surveyed through his support of a New Jersey organization known as the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures (S.U.M.)

Given its rationale for existence, Paterson did not, unfortunately, have an easy and logical development and growth. Even with its abundant resources for manufacturing and its excellent location, the town experienced great difficulty in establishing its industrial metier. It went from the manufacture of cotton to locomotives to silk dyeing to airplane engines, and is today still known for its textile industries, but has actually become diversified in product output.

What is especially interesting in Paterson's history is that almost from its conception, it was a city populated by a skilled laboring class, often painstakingly recruited from the British Isles and Germany. Added to the Dutch farm population already in existence, the average Patersonian in the nineteenth century was a sober, industrious family man, whose after-work activities usually centered around his church. He was not likely to regard frivolous activities very highly, and the theatre with its self-conscious mummery and fakery could not find fertile ground in his world.

This is not to say that there were not a few individuals or groups in Paterson's early history who could find pleasure and instruction in dramatic entertainment. During the early decades of the last century, Timothy B. Crane, the progenitor of the Crane Family, long prominent in American industry, owned all of the land surrounding the Passaic Falls, which he turned into a park called Forest Gardens. During the summer months, dramatic readings and recitations were conducted on its grounds under his auspices. Later in the century, there is evidence that an amateur German language theatre existed for a time in Paterson, although very little has been preserved of its activities. Professional theatre was given its first important boost largely through the efforts of one man, John Walden, about whom only bits and pieces of information remain but enough facts are left to establish him as Paterson's first theatrical entrepreneur.

In the 1860's, he managed a building on the corner of Main and Van Houten Streets known as Continental Hall, which was described as the only "amusement resort for Patersonians" in the city. Walden probably booked travelling attractions into Continental Hall and Paterson audiences may have seen one of Edwin Booth's last performances in early April, 1865, on its stage before his abrupt, but temporary, retirement from the stage following his brother's assassination of Lincoln.

Whether prompted by an increasingly receptive cultural climate in Paterson, or by some other reason known only to him, Walden built Paterson's first theatre on Main Street, which he operated as a stock company house for one season. Known as Walden's Opera House, the age's polite euphemism for theatre, it opened its doors on April 2, 1866, with a performance of The Lady of Lyons, and included The Rough Diamond as the afterpiece. Almost exactly one year later, the theatre was sold in a sheriff's sale.

One can only conjecture that Walden was bankrupt as a result of his venture and evidently put the entire experience behind him by emigrating West. The house and property, with the theatre designed and built by John P. Post and Son, had cost about \$70,000, and was bought by a group of leading citizens and businessmen, who formed a business entity known as the Paterson Opera House Company. The Company controlled the theatre directly or indirectly through lessees during its lifetime as a legitimate theatre.

Although from time to time, new theatres were built, and other theatrical organizations arose to challenge the supremacy of the Opera House, it remained the "first-class house" during its history and dominated the theatrical scene in Paterson. Its first manager, after Walden's departure, was Harry C. Stone, an actor who had been in Walden's original stock company. Stone remained as manager for the next twenty years and during his tenure, Paterson audiences were treated to the great performers and performances of the American stage. Edwin Booth played his Hamlet and Edwin Forrest his Metamora on the Opera House stage. The Opera House was included in the tours of every performer of note during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

To appeal to the greatest possible audience, Stone and his successors varied the fare when circumstances demanded it. Opera was brought to Paterson, as well as the great oratory of the day — Grand English Opera Bouffe one week, followed by Henry Ward Beecher the next. Tony Pastor, the Father of American Vaudeville, made Paterson the first stop on his first tour in the 1870's. Uncle Tom's Cabin, was a perennial favorite as were P. T. Barnum's shows. Mlle. Mary Delacoeur's Can Can Dancers, chased out of New York by the Police Department, danced on the Opera House Stage and were pronounced an "unmitigated fraud" by the press on the following day. Minstrel shows, song recitals, appearances by the Cuban Giants (a black baseball team), along with amateur groups and light opera companies kept the Paterson Opera House limping along, but functioning, during the last years of the nineteenth century.

The theatre itself was a brick two-story building, 200 feet in depth, fronting on Main Street and extending back to Cross Street. It underwent a major renovation in the spring of 1884, when the theatre was enlarged and another story was added to increase balcony seating. Orchestra seats were padded and an annex was built at the rear of the theatre to accommodate additional scenery and baggage. Located at the center of the town's activities, the theatre was readily accessible from all points within a radius of a hundred miles. Three railroads served Paterson, which made the town an ideal jump-off point for New York companies to begin their tours. According to one account, a frequent sight on a Sunday afternoon was to see performers emerge from the Erie Station and walk along Market Street bound for Elizabeth Cole's boarding house at 35 West Street.

Misfortune befell the theatre several times. In early November, 1900, the Opera House was gutted by a fire which had begun in the rear storage annex. The house was rebuilt and reopened the following year, but not to its former glory. Although John Goetschuis, the last prominent manager in its history, continued to book attractions over the next few years and even promoted a stock company for a while, the encroachments of the store-front movie houses, the population shift from a largely English-speaking middle-and skilled-laboring class to a large non-English speaking unskilled-working class, and generally depressed times, all proved too strong for the survival of the Opera House.

In 1914, another disastrous fire struck the theatre, but a different kind of theatre arose from its ashes. The theatre and site were sold to the Adams brothers, motion picture theatre operators, who reopened it in 1916 as a picture house. Known as the United States Theatre, its prosperity as a prestige movie house was destroyed by the arrival of television, and it was sold again in 1959 to the Stanley Warner chain which, in turn, disposed of it to a realty corporation in 1969.

The Opera House was Paterson's "vanity house." It was owned, supported, managed and patronized by the rising business and managerial classes of Paterson. During the very early years of the theatre, the theatre reviewer of the Daily Press concerned himself more with a description of the audience than with the presentation on the stage.

The Opera House offered the best in entertainment, but it also charged the highest prices. The Patersonians who turned away from the Opera House for one reason or another could, and did find cheaper, and frequently livelier, entertainment elsewhere. For a while, Continental Hall remained in operation and booked variety shows at lower admission prices than the Opera House. In the 1870's, the principal competition to the Main Street entertainment was presented at the Odeon Variety

Theatre, in a hall popularly known as the "Wigwam," built by the Paterson Republican Club for the campaign of 1864. During the 1880's, other theatres emerged and more entertainment was offered to the Paterson public. In 1884, Achille Phillion, an enterprising circus performer, operated a combination museum and 1200-seat playhouse on West Street, along the lines of Barnum. For a base-price admission of ten cents, he offered a pre-performance band concert in front of the theatre and a pot pourri of entertainment on the stage. The theatre became inevitably known as Phillion's, testifying to the colorful personality of the proprietor. Phillion gave up his theatre in 1888 to go back on the road and died in the performance of his own daredevil act, pedalling a ball on a spiral track. His theatre was subsequently taken over by a succession of managers until it became known as the Bijou, a twentieth-century burlesque house under Ben Leavitt's management.

Another theatre built in the 1880's and originally known as Apollo Hall was conceivably built as a direct challenge to the Opera House. Located on Van Houten Street, it did not survive the competition. Its name was later changed to the Lyceum and there are Patersonians today who can still recall its first class stock company during the 1920's. Vaudeville was well represented in the theatrical life of Paterson during its peak years from the end of the nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth. The Eden on Market Street, the Empire on Ellison Street, and the Majestic on Main Street offered vaudeville at first, vaudeville and movies in combination next, and finally, movies exclusively. The Star Theatre, on Market Street, was a Ten-Twenty-Thirty house for a while and the Orpheum, on Van Houten Street, ran "refined burlesque" into the 1920's.

The depression of the 1930's rendered the final *coup de grace* to what was left of live entertainment in Paterson. Gone were the days when Mae West could bring a show into downtown Paterson on her way to New York, or when actors and actresses could recall Paterson as the place where they got the first big break. From time to time, in the last forty years, newspapers have carried announcements that live theatre was on its way back to Paterson, but aside from a short-lived venture or two, the living stage died in Paterson many years ago. If it is to come back at all, it will only be in the hands of local, fledgling groups, such as the Paterson People's Theatre, who will give it a different form, and a more personal focus.

On the site of the old Paterson Opera House will stand — if that is the word — a parking lot. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*



H. R. JACOBS'  
PATERSON OPERA HOUSE  
(As seen after Blizzard of 1888)

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Ward Morehouse was not the only one to start his theatrical career in Paterson. There were many who learned their trade on Paterson stages. James O'Neill, the great playwright's brother, died in Paterson in a private sanitarium. Cordelia Howard, the original Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had many memories of her appearances at the Paterson Opera House,