

History of Fulton Opera House

BY JOSEPH T. KINGSTON

(Read October 3, 1952)

In little more than one week from today, on October 14, the citizens of Lancaster will gather for a unique ceremony; unique in many respects, but chiefly because there are few other communities in the United States today where a similar ceremony could be observed.

Once again, the men, women and older children of Lancaster will fill the seats of old Fulton Opera House, just as they did exactly one hundred years earlier—for the grand opening of a “new” theatre which at first, and for many years, was known simply as Fulton Hall.

For this one night of October 14, 1952, the present Fulton Theatre on North Prince Street, will be transformed into some semblance of its former glory—when, as Fulton Opera House, it was one of the most famous showplaces in the East.

It is my personal hope, and a hope I know is shared by many others here tonight, that next week’s program may lead to the eventual restoration and careful preservation of this magnificent old relic of an important phase of Lancaster’s community history.

For the Fulton Opera House was much more than a theatrical showhouse. For two generations or more, it was the keystone of the city’s cultural development. This phase of its service to the community is only sketchily realized today, and I have touched upon it only briefly in my series of newspaper stories covering the history of the Fulton Opera House. Some day, soon, I hope to be able to round out the full picture. Meanwhile, we have been concerned with the building itself, its various transformations and its theatrical history—which is almost without parallel today.

A brief review of some salient facts in the history of the old showhouse seem to be in order, together with a few sidelights on the personalities involved in the development of that history.

Ever since coming to Lancaster, some eight years ago, I have been fascinated with the background of the old Fulton Opera House. Long interested in American theatrical history, I had come across frequent references in obscure diaries, journals and published works of old-time theatrical people to "The Fulton" at Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Later, working with the old files of the *Intelligencer Journal*, in the course of other projects, I was amazed to discover the almost-unbelievable range of attractions that were presented on that stage through the years. From the advertisements of the period, I began to form a list of famous shows and famous show-people Lancaster had seen on that stage.

However, it was not until early this year, when it occurred to me that this would be the one hundredth anniversary of the building of Fulton Hall, that I decided to attempt a definitive story on the old theatre.

Durang Enters the Scene

By coincidence, and about the same time, thousands of New York theatre-goers were reading, in their copies of *The Playbill*, an intriguing suggestion by Eugene Burr, editorial writer for that famous publication.

Mr. Burr was suggesting that, since the American Theatre had decided that John Durang probably had been the very first American-born professional actor, it would be fitting to erect some sort of memorial to John Durang, at his birthplace in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Well, that did it. Several people forwarded copies of *The Playbill* to the *Intelligencer Journal*, with Burr's suggestion underlined.

Here, it appeared at once, was a perfect opportunity to do something about the old Fulton Opera House. Just how perfect was that opportunity was not immediately apparent, but there was enough to go on already.

What followed was even more encouraging. Mr. Burr was apprised of the fact that the *Intelligencer Journal* at Lancaster had picked up his suggestion, publicized it here, and had added



Fulton Opera House—Prince Street in 1862

the further suggestion that Lancaster's old Fulton Opera House would provide a suitable showcase for any national theatrical memorial to John Durang.

Burr enthused at once, and in the very next issue of *The Playbill* reprinted part of the local newspaper's suggestion, adding his own hearty endorsement.

During the next few weeks, *The Playbill* kept up the enthusiasm. Incidentally, this *Playbill* is the official program publication for all New York legitimate theatres; the editorial content is the same for all theatres, and it is distributed, free of charge, to all ticket-holders.

New York Writer Visits the Theatre

Mr. Burr, in fact, was so enthused that he made a special trip to Lancaster just to see the Fulton Theatre. In conversation with him at that time, I learned that there was a very strong possibility that the professional theatre would be willing to go along—financially—in any attempt to acquire and restore the old Opera House. He visualized, as I did, at the time, a complete restoration of the famous showhouse, to be used as a “living workshop” for young people interested in the dramatic arts — where professionals could instruct, under actual theatre conditions, aspiring actors, theatrical scene designers, electricians, make-up and wardrobe technicians.

At the same time, the theatre could be used for local dramatics, symphonic concerts, recitals, and to stage the occasional touring shows that would be glad to have a suitable “house” in this locality.

We agreed that this sort of thing would be a most fitting memorial to John Durang, the pioneer actor, who was born in Lancaster in 1768.

That, briefly, was the reason behind the series of stories on the Fulton Opera House. I recount the sequence of events here so that you may understand why so much emphasis was placed upon the theatrical history of the building.

Many Missing Links

But, to get back to the Fulton Opera House itself:

I soon discovered that there were a great many “missing links” in the published history of Fulton Hall. Through the years, various phases of the place had been recorded—special civic functions



Interior Fulton Opera House—Remodeled 1873

and things like that. But there was absolutely no existing chronological record of the history of one of Lancaster's most fascinating structures.

For just one example, it required a tremendous amount of of patient digging into original newspaper files to uncover the exact date when Fulton Hall became Fulton Opera House. With only the "approximate" period between the end of the Civil War and 1875 as a guide, it was necessary to "bracket" the elusive date by working forwards and backwards at the same time.

This was complicated by the fact that, for some reason, even after the transformation had been made—in 1873, incidentally—the advertising continued to identify the place as “Fulton Hall.”

That pin-pointing of the actual date of transformation, which, I believe, was of utmost importance, since it marked a definite transition in the character of the old public hall, was the most difficult phase of the research.

Another Durang Appears

It also produced an unsuspected fact that tied in perfectly with the object in mind. When Blasius Yecker, the great showman who did more than any other single person to make Fulton Opera House great, decided to remodel old Fulton Hall in 1873, he chose the top theatrical designer of his day—a man named Edwin Forrest Durang, who happened to be the grandson of the original John Durang.

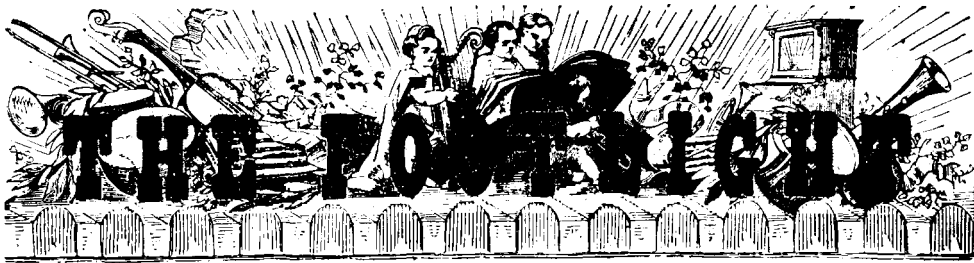
This unexpected windfall of forgotten fact provided a dramatic peg upon which to hang the John Durang Memorial proposed by the New York theatre people. When Eugene Burr learned of it, *The Playbill* again began to beat the drum for Lancaster’s Fulton Opera House.

The complete story of how Edwin Forrest Durang transformed Fulton Hall into Fulton Opera House, by authority of Blasius Yecker, can be found in the *Daily Express* of Lancaster, issue of October 1, 1873.

Fortunately, a photograph of the interior of the “new” Fulton Opera House, essentially as it appeared on opening night in October, 1873, has been preserved. This photograph, reproduced as an illustration of the *Intelligencer Journal’s* series of stories earlier this year, also will appear in the Souvenir Program for the Centenary Celebration on October 14.

The photograph, with another wonderful exterior view, showing Fulton Hall as it appeared in the Civil War era, was made available by Miss Janet Yecker, 412 North Duke Street, granddaughter of Blasius Yecker, creator of Fulton Opera House.

The date of October 14, commemorated in next week’s special program, when the long-darkened stage of the old theatre will be re-lighted for the first time in nearly one-quarter of a century, is the actual date of the formal opening of the original Fulton



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2. 1882.

MODJESKA'S AMERICAN TOUR,

Under the Management of Mr. John Stetson.

THE CELEBRATED ACTRESS,

MODJESKA,

Supported by a carefully selected Dramatic
Company, in

ADRIENNE LECOUVREUR.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

ADRIENNE.....	Mme. MODJESKA
Maurice de Saxe.....	Mr. Maurice Barrymore
Michonnet.....	Mr. Geo. H. Griffith
Prince de Bouillon.....	Mr. Frank Clements
Abbe Chazeuil.....	Mr. Norman Forbes
Quinault.....	Mr. N. D. Jones
Poisson.....	Mr. M. Mitchell
Servant.....	Mr. Cooper
Call Boy.....	Mr. Saville
Princess de Bouillon.....	Miss Kate Meck
Duchess D'Atmont.....	Miss Helen Leigh
Marquise de Sancerre.....	Miss F. Clairmont
Jouvenot.....	Miss Clara Ellison

Act 1.—Boudoir of the Princess de Bouillon.

Act 2.—Green Room of the Theatre Francaise.

Act 3.—Villa of M'lle Duclos.

Act 4.—Salon in the Palace of the Prince de Bouillon.

Act 5.—Apartment of M'lle Adrienne Lecouvreur.

Hall, built by Christopher Hager, Lancaster merchant and civic leader.

1,500 Attended 1852 Opening

On October 14, 1852, Fulton Hall was officially opened and dedicated with 1,500 people in the house. Free tickets of admission had been distributed by Mr. Hager, and the program presented on the stage was of strictly local origin. A. L. Hayes, noted attorney, made the formal address, and the orchestra of the Lancaster Philharmonic Society furnished music.

Professionally, the Hall was first put to use by the famous Ole Bull, the Norwegian violinist, whose earlier performances had caused singer Jenny Lind to break down and cry, on stage.

Ole arrived in Lancaster shortly after he had settled his first batch of Norwegian immigrants on the tract he had purchased in Potter County, Pennsylvania—in the rude community he had christened “Oleana,” and which he hoped to develop into a unique American settlement for his Scandinavian people.

The great violinist had put aside his instrument for some time, while he was engaged in these works of humanity, but now, since such projects required a great deal of money—most of those he befriended had none at all—Ole had turned back to his music, arranging another series of recitals whose proceeds would be poured into his Norwegian settlement in Pennsylvania.

Ole Bull Repeats Performance

Lancaster was one of his first stops. He sold 1,200 tickets here, at \$1 each, and was so astounded by the response and the new “Hall” that he stayed over and repeated his recital two days later.

But it was that first recital, the first professional use of Fulton Hall, that Lancaster remembered. It was the night of October 21, 1852, just one week after the new Hall had been opened to the public.

Ole was touring with a hastily picked-up ensemble, consisting of Maurice Strakhosch, pianist, and a nine-year-old girl who possessed a startlingly-beautiful soprano voice. Her name was Adelina Patti.



APR 1926

Fulton Opera House, October 1926

Lancaster was impressed with little Miss Patti's performance, which even seemed to overshadow the famous Ole Bull's fiddling, and in later years—when Miss Patti had become one of the world's most publicized operatic singers — they would remember, with pride, how they had heard her here, as a child, in one of her very first professional appearances.

So, Fulton Hall got off to a memorable start, one hundred years ago this month.

Much has been said about the fact that Fulton Hall was erected on the site of the old Lancaster Jail. This, of course, is true; but there have been some misconceptions about the exact site of the theatre.

Relics of Old County Jail

Underneath the present Fulton Theatre still may be seen the ancient, rusted iron hangers, set into heavy stonework, upon which hung the original "Jail Gates." For years thereafter, this masonry arch, opening into Water Street, was the stage door of the Fulton Opera House. But the auditorium floor of the theatre today, as always, rests not over the "Old Jail," but over what once was the exercise yard of the prison.

The only part of the present theatre, as it was built in 1852, that touches upon the foundations of the prison itself is the south wall, in the now-dark basement. Now a cob-webbed, dusty space, lighted only by the flashlights carried into it, this once was the "green room" of the Fulton Opera House.

From it, there led up to the stage, and still remains a partial staircase, the steps upon which hundreds of persons later famous in the American theatre climbed to stardom. To cite just one example, and only because she is still with us, consider Ethel Barrymore.

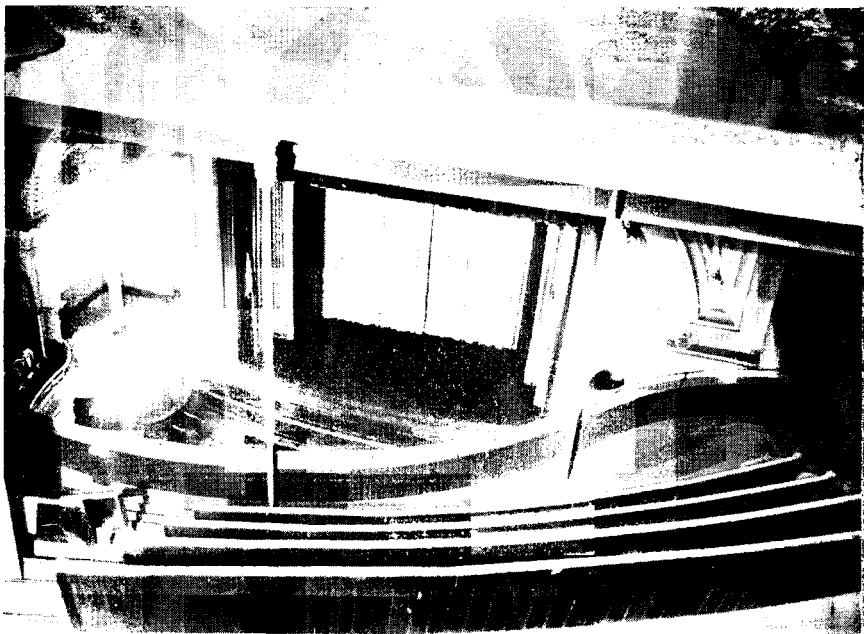
Miss Barrymore came into the Fulton for the first time in 1901, just fifty-one years ago. A young and beautiful girl, she was playing her first starring role, in "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines," a Clyde Fitch comedy.

She had heard about the "Fulton" at Lancaster from her mother, and her grandmother, both of whom had played the theatre more than twenty-five years before.

Mrs. Drew Here in 1873

Many of those in that 1901 audience remembered the 1873 season at Fulton Opera House, when Mrs. John Drew and her son, John, came here from Philadelphia.

Mrs. Drew's Arch Street Theatre Company arrived here on October 6, 1873, with the melodrama "Lost In London!," in which the famous actress played her celebrated character of "Tiddy



Interior Fulton Opera House
A view From "Peanut Heaven"

Dragglethorpe." John Drew, her son, had a minor role in this, and a major role in the "afterpiece," a comic sketch entitled "Cool As A Cucumber."

The following year of 1874, Mrs. Drew would return to the Fulton Opera House stage, and this time she would feature her young daughter, Georgianna Drew, in "A Mother's Love." Georgie Drew, of course, was destined to marry Maurice Barrymore and become the mother of the so-called "Royal Family of the Theatre," the famous Barrymores of stage and screen.

Fulton Opera House quickly established the reputation of being one of the finest houses on "The Road," and Blasius Yecker was known as possibly the most meticulous operator in show business. No difficulties of setting or rigging were too complex for his top notch stage crews, and the most elaborate production then on the road could move into Lancaster's Fulton Opera House without sacrificing—for lack of facilities—a single item of scenic or lighting effects.

Held Enviably Record

The Fulton held the record, in the East, for mounting and clearing a traveling show; a record that was due, partly, to the fact that the railroad—after 1876—ran through Water Street, directly behind the theatre.

This was very important in the days when a road show often carried several carloads of scenery, costumes and props. At Fulton Opera House, the show could unload directly from the railroad cars to the scene dock of the theatre, and also re-load, saving expensive draying charges from distant rail points.

The motion picture, as a medium of entertainment, had been shown in Fulton Opera House as early as 1900, and in the early years of the century, Lyman Howe's unusual film shows were regularly featured in the theatre, sandwiched into "open dates" of the touring season. The original motion picture screen used for these films is still in place on the deep stage, behind the big, modern screen now used each day.

For twenty-two years now, old Fulton Opera House has been operated exclusively as a motion picture showhouse. Sound equipment clutters up the deep stage behind the screen; the old scene dock, adjoining the stage, houses air-conditioning equipment.

Overhead, the vast dark space of the rigging loft is empty and inches of dust cover the narrow catwalks where the "fly men" used to perch amid the ropes, sandbags and painted canvas.

But even now, after all these years of disuse, merely to stand on that darkened stage is a stirring experience—an eerie, poignant experience.

With your permission, I should like to make a partial "roll-call" of the famous performers who once peopled that stage. There is no complete roster extant, and these names were gathered from

contemporary newspaper advertising of the Fulton Opera House during the years of its glory as a top-flight legitimate showhouse.

The "roll-call" appended was prepared for inclusion in the program for the Fulton Opera House Centenary of October 14, 1952. Limitations of time and space, however, ruled it out.

CURTAIN CALL

1852—1930

Ole Bull	Kyrie Bellew	William Gillette
George M. Cohan	Digby Bell	Harry Houdini
Josephine Cohan	Blanche Bates	De Wolf Hopper
E. L. Davenport	George Arliss	Kate Claxton
Fanny Davenport	Mary Anderson	Kathryn Kidder
Helena Modjeska	John Barrymore	Fannie Kemble
George Primrose	Lionel Barrymore	Margaret Leighton
Chauncey Olcott	Ethel Barrymore	Maude O'Dell
Otis Skinner	Maurice Barrymore	Andrew Mack
Maude Adams	Georgie Drew Barrymore	George Moran
Frank Bacon	Mrs. John Drew, Sr.	Gladys Cooper
Dion Boucicault	Sarah Bernhardt	Blanche Walsh
Aubrey Boucicault	Richard Bennett	Howard Kyle
Raymond Hitchcock	Amelia Bingham	Victor Moore
Eddie Foy	Edwin Booth	Lenore Ulric
Maxine Elliot	John Wilkes Booth	Pauline Frederick
Nat E. Goodwin	Agnes Booth	Irene Fenwick
John Philip Sousa	Mrs. Leslie Carter	Louisa Eldridge
Frank Gilmore	Lew Cody	John Barton
Willie Howard	Rose Coghlan	Viola Allen
Lew Fields	Charles Coghlan	Lee Baker
Joe Weber	William Collier, Sr.	James K. Hackett
Adelina Patti	Frank Craven	Henry Miller
Grace George	Denman Thompson	Emma Abbott
Fannie Ward	Tyrone Power	Billy Watson
Ethel Waters	Laura Keene	Sophie Tucker
Walter Hampden	Edmund Kean	Joe Jackson
Genevieve Hamper	Ralph W. Ince	Joe Penner
Robert B. Mantell	Fiske O'Hara	Charlotte Cushman
Sir Harry Lauder	Mrs. J. W. Wallack, Jr.	Anna Thillon
Richard Mansfield	Lester Wallack	Henry Burr
Ada L. Menken	William F. Cody	William E. Burton
Ezra Kendall	(Buffalo Bill)	William J. Ferguson
Lew Lehr	J. B. Hickok (Wild Bill)	Irene Bentley
Bobby Clark	Sam Hemple	Mme. Schumann-Heink
Constance Collier	Frank Mayo	Giovanni Martinelli
Ruth St. Denis	James T. Powers	Freda Hempel
Ted Shawn	Frank Tinney	Kathryn Meisle

John Drew (1858)
John Drew
Fred Stone
David Proctor
Frank Deshon
Joseph Jefferson
William W. Jefferson
W. C. Fields
Thomas E. Shea
Ada Rehan
Edward H. Sothern
Eva Tanguay
Fannie Brice
William J. Scanlan
John F. Sheridan
Anna Bishop

Howard Thurston
Robert Warwick
James O'Neill
Ada Lewis
Alexander Salvini
Harry Carey
Alice Brady
Marie Cahill
Lew Dockstader
Gus Edwards
Dustin Farnum
William Faversham
Minnie Maddern Fiske
Edwin Forrest
Edward Hanlon
William S. Hart

Max Rosen
Percy Grainger
Pavlova Ballet
New York Philharmonic
Cleveland Symphony
Minneapolis Symphony
Paul Althouse
Arthur Middleton
Manhattan Opera
Company
Christy's Minstrels
Maurice Dumesnil
William J. Bryan
Carrie Nation
Salvi
Paul Whiteman



Statue of George Eastman

In a Niche High Above the Marquee