

Three Nineteenth-Century

Lancaster Theatres

By James Henke, Ph.D.

Landis Beitler's "Circus"

Sometime prior to 1818, Landis Beitler converted a building that stood on the southeast corner of Prince and Orange Streets into a theatre. As the building was sometimes referred to as the "Circus," it is possible that circus performances were held there at some point.¹

John Landis, who owned a tavern next door, was one of the proprietors of the theatre, for in a *Lancaster Journal* advertisement of October 12, 1821, the theatre is referred to as "Mr. Landis's theatre."

A local amateur theatrical organization, The Thespian Society, utilized the theatre during the period 1818-1821, presenting plays to raise money for charity.² The *Lancaster Journal* of September 30, 1818, contained an advertisement of their first performance. The article announced that new appropriate scenery had been prepared. Box seats would be 50 cents, and the pit 25 cents. The evening's entertainment would consist of *George Barnwell*, followed by the farce, *The Comet, or He Would Be An Astronomer*. The newspapers contain no reports of any other performances that year.

On October 20, 1819, the Society presented *The Revenge* and an unnamed afterpiece.³ The next announcement of a performance by the Thespian Society followed in the *Lancaster Journal* of October 12, 1821. It reported that the Society had "engaged Mr. Williams, from the different theatres of London and America, to conduct the stage business." At a performance on October 17th the Society presented *Raising the Wind, or How to Live Cheap*. Several songs followed the comedy, and the evening concluded with a musical farce, *The Sprigs of Laurel, or The Rival Soldiers*.

A performance of *The Man of Fortitude* was announced in the *Lancaster Journal* of October 26, 1821, but it is unclear if the performance actually took place since there is no report concerning it in the newspapers of the next week.

Probably the final performance of the Society took place on November 12, 1821, and was composed of "a much admired comedy, called *Matrimony*"

which was followed by the farce, *The Review, or the Wag of Windsor*.⁴ No reference to the Thespian Society exists in the local newspapers after this time.

No additional information concerning this building can be found. However, Ellis and Evans assert that the building was blown down at some point in a storm.⁵

Mechanic's Hall

In June of 1841, Mr. Cornelius A. Logan, a comedian, rented Locher's military hall in the rear of the Mechanic's Institute at 31 South Queen Street, and converted it into a theatre. The *Lancaster Examiner and Democratic Herald* of June 16, 1841, reported that the building "is admirably adapted to dramatic purposes. The numerous drafts of air created near the floors and the large ventilators constructed on the roof will secure the coolness of the temperature so necessary in places of public assemblage." Scenery for the new theatre was to be painted by "a distinguished artist of Philadelphia."

The *Lancaster Intelligencer and Journal* of June 15, 1841, reported that the hall was "84 feet long and 36 feet wide with every convenience attached and will hold more persons than any other structure of the kind in the city."

The opening performance of this new theatre took place on Monday evening, June 21, 1841, and included the soon to be famous actress Charlotte Cushman and her sister Susan as members of the company. A popular play, Kotzebue's *The Stranger*, was the choice for the opening.⁶

On the following Wednesday evening the company presented Bulwer's *The Lady of Lyons*, followed by a farce, entitled, *The Maid of Croissy*.

The local critics were impressed by the quality of the company, and quite taken by the performance of Miss Cushman, as the following excerpt from the *Intelligencer and Journal* of Tuesday, June 29th suggests:

The theatre has been very largely attended for the past week, and the satisfaction expressed by those who have enjoyed the pleasure of witnessing the performances, is universal. The company of Mr. Logan has won high credit, and we venture to say will continue to be well encouraged by our citizens. The Misses Cushman are ladies of decided talent. The performances of these ladies have called down much deserved applause. Miss Charlotte Cushman is an actress of rare and versatile powers and sustains all her characters with success. A woman of undoubted talent off the stage, she shines conspicuously in all she undertakes. She is a great favorite and we hope tomorrow evening will have a full house at her benefit.

Benefit performances added to the actors' incomes by providing them with the profits from that evening's performance. Charlotte Cushman's benefit took place on Wednesday evening. Performances of *Isabelle, or the Three Eras of a Woman's Life* (a first for Lancaster audiences), and *The Lottery Ticket* comprised the evening's bill.⁷

The *Intelligencer and Journal* of Tuesday, July 6, 1841, informed the public

that Mr. Logan had engaged a popular favorite, James E. Murdoch of Philadelphia, to appear on Wednesday evening, July 7th, in a performance of *The Lady of Lyons*, and the farce, *Married Rake*.

The final performance in which the Cushman sisters appeared took place on Monday evening, July 12, 1841.⁸

Logan's theatre continued to be the foremost place of theatrical entertainment until the advent of Fulton Hall in 1852.

The West King Street Theatre

First called the West King Street Theatre, a theatre came into existence sometime between January 1886 and July of 1887 at 220-224 West King Street. The *Lancaster City Directory* of 1886 identified this address as that of the Lancaster Skating Rink.⁹ The first reference to the building's use as a theatre was on July 2, 1887.

On July 2, 1887, what was "formerly the West King Street Theatre" was reopened as the Grand Opera House, a "reconstructed and decorated temple of Amusement." This new theatre opened with Miss Adele Carlton and her superb "Star Theatre Stock Company of New York," in "four acts, entitled *Fogg's Ferry*." The company continued the remainder of the week with the following bill: Tuesday, *Lady Audley's Secret*; Wednesday and Friday, *My Partner*; Thursday and Saturday matinee, *Ora, the Wolf*; and Saturday evening, *Hunted Down*.¹⁰ Additional attractions were offered during the following week.

Apparently the locals were slow to adapt to the new name for the theatre, for the *Lancaster Daily New Era* of July 22, 1887, reported under the heading of "The West King Street Theatre" that the "ventilating fans of the theatre have been placed in position and will be exhibited to the public between 6 and 8 o'clock on Saturday evening, July 23. The May Adams Burlesque Company, old favorites in Lancaster, will open Monday, July 25."

According to newspaper accounts, the theatre continued with a mixed series of attraction into the fall. Among the more interesting were those advertised for performance on August 1, 1887, in which the audience would be treated to the "Great Amazon March on an Elevated Platform running thru the main aisle of the auditorium"; and that of August 6th where, following the performance of the female minstrels, there would be "a clog dance contest for a silver cup," and "a water-melon eating contest by four colored men."¹¹

Advertisements indicate that apparently the local reporters were not too careful in their references to the organization. The *New Era* of October 10, 1887, refers to the theatre as the "King Street Opera House," and after this point the theatre is referred to either as the Grand Opera House, the King Street Theatre, the West King Street Opera House, or the King Street Opera House. However, newspaper reports indicate that the theatre was to undergo a change in management and yet another name change in October.

The *New Era* of October 19, 1887, announced that "Mr. J.W. Randolph, who will assume management of the West King Street Opera House, arrived here today from New York accompanied by his wife and Mr. Alfred Atmore, who will assist him at the Opera House."

With a change in management came a new name, the Winsor Theatre. The new organization was advertised as the "new Family Resort. A cozy and Sumptuous Theatre presenting first-class attractions *only*." The grand opening took place on Monday, October 31, 1887, with J.W. Randolph as the "sole manager." The opening performance featured "Crossen's Superb Company in *The Banker's Daughter*." Manager Randolph stated that it was his intention, "to establish in this city a theatre where ladies can attend without escort and children can come alone and plays will be presented with the same care as in Philadelphia or New York." The work of remodeling the interior of the theatre was promised to be completed by the opening.¹²

The local papers continued to refer to the theatre by a bewildering combination of names: the Winsor Theatre, the West King Street Theatre, and the West King Street Opera House, used interchangeably.

Some of the unusual attractions from the time of J.W. Randolph's management involve the walking matches that took place on a track erected inside the theatre in December of 1887, and the following amusement that was advertised for January 1888:

Dr. Gram's Concert Company will open at the West King St. Theatre on Tuesday, January 17, 1888 . . . They give free concerts and Dr. Gram sells his medical remedies while a tooth extractor extracts teeth—all free but the medicines.¹³

Noted in the same edition were the changes to the inside of the theatre:

The West King Street Theatre today presents a very different appearance inside from what it did a couple of days ago. The track where victims of the walking matches spent so many weary hours which cost considerable money has been removed and the auditorium prepared for the tooth extraction.¹⁴

The removal of the walking track created additional room for spectators, for a reference in the Lancaster *New Era* of April 23, 1888, recorded the appearance of the "Liberty Band" and suggested that the theatre was packed with "not less than 1400 persons."

The Lancaster *New Era* of April 23, 1888, reported that, "The West King Street Theatre owner has in contemplation a project for making a first-class theatre out of the place. He will either put another story on the building, in order to increase the height of the auditorium, or else will lower the floor and the stage, making a sloping floor from the entrance to the stage. The ceiling will be plastered and the place handsomely decorated and folding chairs put in the parquet. This will be done in the summer."

An interesting note regarding this same matter appeared a few days later in the *New Era* of April 28, 1888. This article asserted that, "John Evans

Contractor, has been secured by the owner of the Old West King Street Rink to prepare plans for remodeling it as a first-class theatre. The floor and stage will be lowered among other things."

Within two years the theatre had closed. The 1890 city directory reported the property was vacant. The address appeared again in the 1899 directory as "Armory Hall," and was listed that way until 1907, at which time the title was changed to the Family Theatre.¹⁵

In its new incarnation the theatre presented almost exclusively vaudeville entertainment. Charles M. Howell became manager of the King Street Theatre sometime before 1911. About this time the King Street Theatre became a motion picture house and remained so until it closed in 1916. In the city directory of 1917, this address is listed as the Packard Car Company.

Endnotes

1. Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans, *History of Lancaster County Pennsylvania with Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men*, (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1883), p. 434.
2. William F. Wormer, "The Thespian Society," *Lancaster County Historical Society Publication*, XXXIV (1930), pp. 38-43.
3. *Lancaster Journal*, October 19, 1819.
4. *Lancaster Journal*, November 9, 1821.
5. Ellis and Evans, p. 434.
6. *Lancaster Examiner and Democratic Herald*, June 30, 1841.
7. *Lancaster Examiner and Democratic Herald*, June 30, 1841.
8. *Lancaster Examiner and Democratic Herald*, July 13, 1841.
9. Lancaster, Pa., *Annual Lancaster City Directory* (Lancaster, Pa.; New Era Book and Job Printing, 1886), p. 355.
10. *Daily New Era*, July 21, 1887.
11. *Daily New Era*, August 1 and 6, 1887.
12. *Daily New Era*, October 26, 1887.
13. *Daily New Era*, January 17, 1888.
14. *Daily New Era*, January 17, 1888.
15. Lancaster, Pa., *Lancaster City and County Directory* (Lancaster, Pa.: New Era Book and Job Printing, 1890, p. 33; Lancaster, Pa., *Directory of Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Vicinity* (Detroit, Mi.; R.L. Polk and Co. Inc., 1891) p. 35; and Lancaster, Pa., *Directory of Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Vicinity* (Detroit, Mi.: R.L. Polk and Co. Inc., 1907) p. 37.

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