

THE EARLIEST KNOWN ADVERTISEMENT OF A THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE IN LANCASTER

By William Frederic Worner

In Vol. 7, No. 2, of the Proceedings of the Lancaster County Historical Society, appears a very illuminating paper on the subject of "Early Lancaster Playbills and Playhouses." In this monograph the author, Dr. F. R. Diffenderffer, describes what is undoubtedly the oldest playbill, that so far has come to light, advertising a theatrical performance in Lancaster, Pa. It bears the date January 2, 1800, and states that by the desire of Governor McKean, who intended honoring the occasion with his presence, a theatrical performance would be given at the public house of Mr. [Archibald] Lanegan, who at that time conducted a tavern at the sign of the White Horse, which was located at the northwest corner of East King and Ann streets, where Mr. Charles J. Swarr now resides.

While Dr. Diffenderffer had every reason to believe that this was in all probability the oldest playbill that had "survived the wreck of time," he did not think that it advertised the first theatrical performance given in Lancaster borough. As a matter of fact, the mere statement on the playbill that "the greatest variety of amusements that has ever been exhibited in this town will be presented," was satisfactory evidence that theatrical performances were known to the citizens of the staid old borough prior to the year 1800.

Recently, while searching the files of an old German newspaper established in Lancaster more than one hundred and thirty-five years ago, the writer discovered what doubtless is the earliest newspaper advertisement that has thus far been brought to light of a theatrical performance in Lancaster borough. The newspaper bears the euphonious title of *Neue Unpartheyische Lancaster Zeitung und Anzeigs Nachrichten*; and under date of Wednesday, November 30, 1791, appears the following:

THEATRE ————— LANCASTER

Second Night

By Mr. M'Grath's Company of Comedians,
(from Virginia and Maryland, late from Carlisle and York,)

On Friday Evening, December 2d,

Will be Presented,

A celebrated Comedy,

Written by a Citizen of the United States, called

THE CONTRAST

Exult each Patriot heart! this Night is shewn,

A Piece, which we may, fairly, call our own.

The Original Prologue to be
spoken by Mr. M'Grath.

At the End of the Play,

A humorous Epilogue called,

THE MAIDEN'S CHOICE,

By Mrs. M'Grath.

To which will be added,

The Farce of,

LIKE MASTER LIKE MAN; OR, THE WRANGLING LOVERS.

The Doors to be opened at half past five o'Clock, and the Curtain to rise, at half past 6 o'Clock, precisely.

Tickets, to be had of Mr. Slough, and Mr. Hamilton.

The Patronizers of the Drama are most respectfully entreated to furnish themselves with Tickets, previous to their going to the Theatre; the Doorkeeper (to avoid Confusion) being expressly prohibited from taking Money on any Account.

The foregoing advertisement states that this is the "second night." It is, therefore, natural to infer that a performance was given in Lancaster preceding the one on December 2, 1791, although I am unable to find an advertisement previous to the one referred to above.

Our forefathers evidently heeded Poor Richard's goodly admonition and retired to bed early; unless, indeed, the hour at which the curtain was advertised to rise indicated that the performance was unduly long. Imagine society people of the present day attending a theatre the doors of which open at 5.30 P. M. and the play starting at half after six, the hour when most people sit down to dinner!

And then, too, we infer from the last paragraph that a large audience was anticipated, as the doorkeeper was expressly forbidden to accept any money "to avoid confusion;" and those desiring to attend the performance were urged to purchase their tickets in advance from Mr. [Matthias] Slough, the well known innkeeper, and Mr. ——— Hamilton.

On the Friday evening following the performance just described, another theatrical entertainment was given in Lancaster borough, being what we are led to believe was the third performance by Mr. M'Grath's company. The *Neue Unpartheyische Lancaster Zeitung und Anzeigs Nachrichten* for Wednesday, December 7, 1791, contains the following advertisement; which, like the one that appeared in the preceding issue of this paper, was printed in English. All other matter in the paper, save one little advertisement, was printed in German. I quote the advertisement in its entirety the better to show the quality of the plays our forefathers patronized:

THEATRE ————— LANCASTER

By Mr. M'Grath's Company of Comedians.

On Friday Evening, 9th December,

Will be Presented,

A celebrated Comedy, called

THE MISER,

(Taken from the French of Moliere.)

Between the Play and Farce, the admired Epilogue, to

THE CHILD OF NATURE

By Mrs. M'Grath.

To which will be added,

A Comedy, of two Acts, called

THE GHOST; OR, LOVE AND MONEY.

The Doors to be opened at half past five o'Clock, and the Curtain to rise, at half past 6 o'Clock, precisely.

Tickets, to be had of Mr. Slough, Mr. Hamilton, and Mr. Jordan's Tavern, and of Mr. Dering, next Door to the Theatre.

The Patronizers of the Drama are most respectfully entreated to furnish themselves with Tickets, previous to their going to the Theatre; the Doorkeeper (to avoid Confusion) being expressly prohibited from taking Money on any Account.

BY DESIRE OF
GOVERNOR M'KEAN,

Who means to honor the Theatre with his presence.

THIS EVENING, January 2, 1800,

At the House of Mr. LENEGAN, in East King-street, Lancaster.

At the Sign of the White Horse.

The **LADIES & GENTLEMEN** of Lancaster are respectfully informed, that this evening will be presented the greatest variety of amusements that has ever been exhibited in this town, consisting of

Pantomime, Singing, Hornpipe *Dancing*, Tumbling, **SPEAKING**, &c. &c.

And in particular an Indian **WAR** and **SCALP** Dance,
by Mr. Durang and Mr. F. Ricketts.

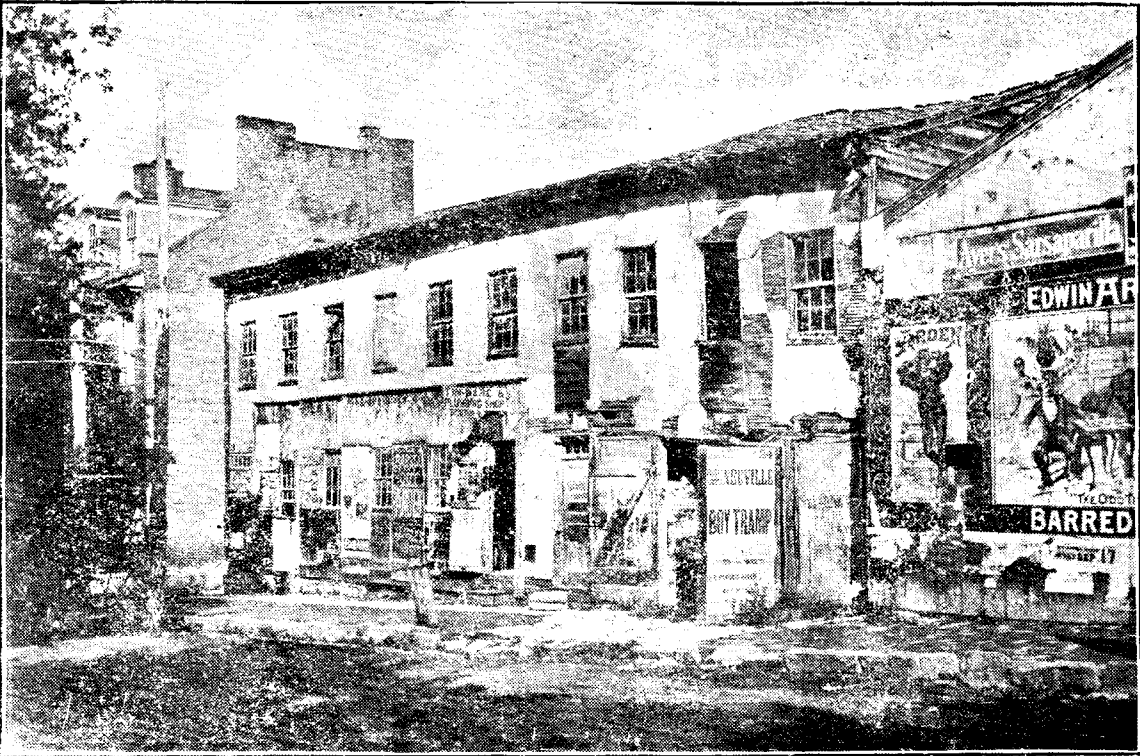
Doors to be opened at six and the performance to begin at 7 o'clock.
Tickets to be had at Mr. Lenegan's and at Hamilton's Printing-Office.

LADIES and **GENTLEMEN** who wish to engage seats may have calling upon **MR. ROWSON** at the Theatre.

ROWSON & Co.

Printed by William Hamilton, King-street, Lancaster.

No one Box was appropriated and occupied by the Librarian.



REITZEL'S HALL

Northeast corner of Orange and Market Streets, now the site of the Y. M.
C. A. Swimming Pool, used as a Theatre from 1837 to 1847.

We now know, for a certainty, from the advertisements just quoted, that as early as December, 1791, a professional company of "theatrical barnstormers" had appeared in plays in Lancaster borough, but where these performances were given we are unable to state. At that time there was no such thing in the town as a theatre or a building devoted exclusively to theatrical purposes.

Dr. Diffenderffer states, in his paper, that during the close of the year 1777, Henry Dering, who kept a tavern on the old Philadelphia road near the Conestoga river (present site of Conestoga Park), moved into town and purchased a large house. He started a brewery on North Water street, now the site of the Liberty Can and Sign company. During the time that British prisoners were quartered in Lancaster this large brewery was converted into a theatre, and in it probably were held the earliest theatrical performances in Lancaster borough. It is altogether possible that in this old brewery the theatrical performances advertised in the German newspaper of 1791, were given by M'Grath's company. This, however, is conjecture. I have no grounds for declaring that in this building the dramas were presented. It is a problem I leave to some future local historian to solve. All that I can state, with certainty, is that we now have satisfactory evidence that at least as early as 1791 the people of Lancaster patronized theatrical entertainments.

The Neue Unpartheyische Lancaster Zeitung und Anzeigs Nachrichten for Wednesday, December 21, 1791, contained another advertisement, which reads as follows:

THEATRE ————— LANCASTER.

The Last Night but One.

By Mr. M'Grath's Company of Comedians.

This Evening, (Wednesday) 21st Dec.

Will be Presented,

A celebrated Comedy, as written by R. B. Sheridan, called

THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL.

In Act 4th, will be Exhibited, an Elegant Picture Scene.

Between the Play and Farce,

THE CHILD OF NATURE,

By Mrs. M'Grath.

To which will be added,

A Comedy of Two Acts, called

THE LYING VALET.

The whole to conclude with

A DISSERTATION ON LYING.

By Mr. M'Grath.

This was probably the first time that Sheridan's famous comedy, "The School For Scandal," a play that has stood the acid test of time and was only recently revived in New York, was enacted in Lancaster. Another evening's entertainment was to follow the one on the 21st of December, and then, doubtless, the season ended in Lancaster borough and the company left for other "worlds to conquer."

However, the fates ordained that Lancaster was not to be without theatrical entertainment for any great length of time. The Neue Unpartheyische Lancaster Zeitung und Anzeigs Nachrichten for Wednesday, July 25, 1792, contains the following advertisement, which shows that a part of an old company gave a performance in Lancaster borough on the evening of Thursday, July 26, 1792:

THEATRE.

By a Part of the Old American Company.

On Thursday Evening, July 26, 1792,

Will be presented—A Comedy,

in Two Acts, called

THE CITIZEN.

With the Original Epilogue,

In the Characters of Old and Young

PHILPOT,

By Messrs. Ashton & Martin.

After the Comedy, an Elogium, on the

MARRIAGE STATE,

By Mr. Ashton; To be followed by the favorite Song of

NOTHING LIKE GROGG,

By Mr. Hammond.

To which will be added, A Farce, called

THE MAYOR OF GARRET.

The whole to conclude, with the

Picture of a Playhouse, Or,

Bucks have at Ye All.

By Mr. Ashton.

What has been written throws comparatively little light on the theatre in the early days of Lancaster borough. It does, however, establish the fact that Lancaster, as early as 1791, was visited by a professional company of thespians who presented the best plays of that day; and proves, beyond a doubt, that our forbears not only patronized the drama but were interested in the literature on the subject.

In conclusion, I wish to quote from an advertisement that appeared in the Neue Unpartheyische Lancaster Zeitung und Anzeigs Nachrichten of Wednesday, August 22, 1792, which not only substantiates my statement regarding interest in literature and theatricals but also shows that the Lancaster of 1792 was not unlike the Lancaster of this modern day in that it had that most detested of all parasites, the book-worm who borrows but never returns books:

"One of the young Gentlemen of the town, borrowed a Collection of Farces, in four vol. for the use of the Theatre, the winter of 1791. After the Plays were over, he got back into his hands, the 1st, 2d, and 4th volumes, but could never again come across the 3d. He wishes to return them all to their owner, and will thank any Lady or Gentleman, who may have in possession the said third volume, to lodge it immediately at Mr. Lahn's Bookstore."

"J. S."

Author: Worner, William Frederic.

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performance in Lancaster / by William Frederic Worner.

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