

The Thespian Society

By WILLIAM FREDERIC WORNER

The Lancaster Journal of Wednesday, August 26th, 1818, contained the following announcement:

"A meeting of the Thespian Society will take place at 7 o'clock this evening at John Landis's hotel, next door to the theatre.

"Any young gentlemen who wish to become members of the Society will please to attend this meeting. The company is not yet sufficiently numerous, and applications for admission will be cheerfully received.

"So soon as circumstances admit, it is in contemplation to play for the benefit of the Female Benevolent Society and other charitable institutions. It is, therefore, confidently expected that the 'want of members' will not prevent the Society from accomplishing its laudable undertaking."

John Landis's hotel, in which the Thespian Society met, stood on the south-west corner of West Orange and North Water streets. It was known as the "Western Hotel, Sign of the Waggon." In the Lancaster Journal of Wednesday, August 26th, 1818, Mr. Landis informed "his friends, and the public generally, that he continues to keep a house of public entertainment, in Orange street, corner of Water street, in the borough of Lancaster, where travelers or boarders may be conveniently accommodated either by the week or day."

The Pennsylvania Gazette, a newspaper published in Lancaster, stated in its editorial column on Tuesday, September 29th, 1818:

"We are happy to state that the Thespian Society has fixed on to-morrow evening as the time of performance for the benefit of the Female Benevolent Society of Lancaster.

"When we consider the laudable object to which the young gentlemen have directed their attention, when we reflect that their exertions on this occasion, if patronized by the liberality of a charitable public, may, with the aid of the ladies, be the means of educating thirty or forty poor children, we are confident that few of the citizens of Lancaster will refuse to honor them with their presence on Wednesday evening.

"The entertainment will consist of the instructive and highly moral play entitled 'George Barnwell,' in five acts, to which will be added the entertaining and humorous farce, called 'The Comet, or He Would Be An Astronomer,' in two acts."

The Lancaster Journal of Wednesday, September 30th, 1818, contained an advertisement of the performance. The public was informed that new and appropriate scenery had been prepared for the occasion. The doors were opened at six o'clock, and the performance began precisely at half after seven. Box seats were fifty cents, and the pit twenty-five. Tickets could be purchased at John Landis's hotel, which, as stated in the advertisement, was situated next door to the theatre.

The Lancaster Journal also contained an editorial on the entertainment which is as follows:

"At length the Thespian Society has announced its intentions of playing for the benefit of the Female Benevolent Society of Lancaster, and has fixed on this evening as the time of performance.

"It will be remembered that about two years ago, the ladies of Lancaster formed themselves into an association for the laudable purpose of relieving the wants of the poor, and of educating poor children. Hitherto, we understand the poor have derived much benefit from the institution. A number of children have not only received a literary, but also a religious and moral education through the medium of the Sunday school, the word of God has been made familiar to the minds of many, who, perhaps, would have remained ignorant of it, had it not been for this generosity of the ladies. The funds of the Society are however at present exhausted, and, unless aided by the liberality of the public, a dissolution will take place. It is, therefore, presumed that the humanity of the people of Lancaster will induce them to attend the theatre this evening; and, if the exertions of the Thespians afford no entertainment, it will at least be satisfactory to think that we have contributed our *mite* to the *relief of the poor*.

"The very affecting and moral play, called 'George Barnwell,' constitutes part of the evening's entertainment; and, however much the delicate taste of some may be nauseated by the wholesome bill, we think the play of 'George Barnwell' an honor to the stage. A continuous strain of virtuous sentiments pervades the whole, and the moral is such as entitles the piece to frequent repetitions.

"It has been well observed that plays founded on moral tales, in private life, may be of admirable use, by carrying convictions to the mind with such irresistible force as to engage all the powers and faculties of the soul to the cause of virtue, by stifling vice in its first principles. Of this description is the play of 'George Barnwell.'

"It is true that some passages in this favorite play are highly exceptionable. But it ought to be remembered that 'Time changeth all things,' and that which was fashionable in the licentious reign of Charles the Second, may now, in consequence of the change of

manners, be deemed too grossly obscene for the public ear. We are happy to state, however, that every indelicate or unchaste expression, has been carefully stricken out by the Thespians. The ladies, therefore, need be under no apprehensions on this account.

“As a foil to the serious morality of ‘Barnwell,’ the humorous farce, called ‘The Comet, or He Would Be An Astronomer,’ has been selected. In this piece the scheming Plotwell will, we think, excite the ‘risible faculties’ of ‘the laughter-loving few.’ Upon the whole we hope that the people of Lancaster will not fail to evince their liberality on this occasion.”

The late Dr. F. R. Diffenderffer, in a paper read before The Lancaster County Historical Society on December 5th, 1902, and published in its Proceedings, states, on page 35, volume 7, that the theatre stood on the south-east corner of North Prince and West Orange streets. The building was sometimes called “The Circus.”

The performance seems to have been a success; at least, from a financial view-point. The sum of \$59.10 was turned over to the treasurer of the Female Benevolent Society¹. It probably represented the profits from the show, after the necessary expenses had been paid.

This, doubtless, was the only performance given by the Thespian Society during that season, as nothing further could be learned from local newspapers about the organization until the fall of the following year, when another performance was given.

The Lancaster Journal of Tuesday, October 19th, 1819, stated editorially:

“To-morrow evening the Thespian Association intends to perform for the benefit of the Female Benevolent Society. We hope that the citizens of Lancaster *will think of the poor*, and manifest their usual liberality.

“The play selected for this occasion, viz. ‘The Revenge,’ by Dr. Young, is one of the noblest compositions in the language. There are few writers who would have ventured to treat on a subject already so finely wrought upon by Shakespeare. The aim of Young seems to have been to give probability to jealousy, and a motive to treachery, stronger than his great master had shown in his Othello and Iago. In one of his characters, indeed, he has surpassed the genius of Shakespeare. The high sounding vengeance of Zanga charms every breast with abhorrence. ‘The Revenge’ is, indeed, a masterly play. The sentiments are lofty and the language magnificently bold.

“The after piece is also a most excellent and highly humorous production, by the witty author of ‘Plot and Counterplot’; indeed,

¹ Lancaster Journal, Friday, October 8th, 1819.

it is one continued series of mistakes; a perfect budget of blunders. In addition to this variety of entertainment, the lovers of music will have a treat in the Scottish and Irish airs on the newly improved union pipes. If all this cannot bring a *good house* for the poor their case must be desperate."

It is gratifying to note that the citizens of Lancaster responded to this urgent appeal by attending the performance, as the sum of \$67.37 was realized for the good work of the Female Benevolent Society².

After giving two theatrical performances in Lancaster, the Thespian Society seems to have lapsed into "innocuous desuetude," or to have disbanded entirely. In the spring of 1820, according to an announcement which appeared in the Lancaster Journal of Friday, April 7th, an attempt was made to revive the old Society, or else form a new organization. The advertisement is as follows:

"The young men desirous of forming a Thespian Society, to contribute to the relief of the poor, are invited to attend a meeting at John Landis's, to-morrow evening at 8 o'clock."

Concerning the activities of the rejuvenated Society, nothing could be learned from local papers until the autumn of 1821, when it seems to have entered upon a most ambitious career. On Tuesday evening, October 2nd, the Thespian Society agreed with Mr. Landis to repeat Young's celebrated tragedy, "The Revenge," to which was added the comic after-piece, in two acts, entitled "Fortune's Frolic."

A professional actor, named Williams, was in Lancaster at this time. He associated himself with the Society, infused life into the organization, and inspired it to put on an ambitious program³. With the aid of this talented actor, the Society was enabled to produce a number of plays, which were, in all probability, well received.

The Lancaster Journal of Friday, October 12th, 1821, contained the following advertisement:

"The Benevolent Thespian Society informs the ladies and gentlemen of Lancaster that it intends to perform again in Mr. Landis's theatre on Wednesday evening, October 17th. As we have engaged Mr. Williams, from the different theatres of London and America, to conduct the stage business, they may depend that nothing will be neglected on our part to claim public patronage and support. We have selected for their amusement Kenney's celebrated comedy, 'Raising the Wind, or How to Live Cheap'."

The part of Jeremy Didler was portrayed by Mr. Williams.

² Intelligencer & Weekly Advertiser, Saturday, April 8th, 1820.

³ Lancaster Journal, Friday, September 28th, 1821.

Other characters were assumed by gentlemen of the Society. The part of Miss Peggy Plainway was taken by a lady in Lancaster. It is to be regretted that the names of local participants were not mentioned in the paper as it would be of interest to learn who were the active members of the Society.

Following the comedy, a song, entitled "Such a Beauty I Did Grow," was rendered by a member of the Society. Mr. Williams followed with a comic song, entitled "Barney, Let the Girls Alone."

The evening's entertainment concluded with a much admired comic musical farce, in two acts, called "The Sprigs of Laurel, or The Rival Soldiers." The part of Nipperkin was taken by Mr. Williams; other roles were acted by gentlemen of the Society. The character of Mary Tactic was essayed by a lady in this city.

During the farce, a number of musical pieces were rendered as follows: song—"A Man of a Thousand;" duet—"March Before Great Justice Laro;" trio—"Tap Beats the Dub;" song—"A Lass is Good and a Glass is Good;" finale—"Till to Your Cliffs."

The doors were opened at 6 o'clock, and the curtain rose at 7.

The Lancaster Journal of Friday, October 26th, 1821, contained the following announcement:

"We understand that the gentlemen of the Benevolent Thespian Society are getting up the grand historical drama of the 'Man of Fortitude,' in a superior style, which will be performed in the course of next week, with other entertainments, for the benefit of Mr. Williams, as a remuneration for his services. It is hoped the lovers of the drama will evince their taste by a brilliant display of full boxes."

Whether or not the drama was enacted, as stated in the Journal, is not known. Subsequent issues of local papers do not contain any comments on it.

The next, and probably the final, performance of the brief season was given shortly thereafter. The Lancaster Journal of Friday, November 9th, 1821, contained the following advertisement:

THEATRE.

The Thespian Benevolent Society respectfully informs the inhabitants of Lancaster that it intends to perform

On Monday evening, November 12, 1821, when will be presented a much admired comedy, called

"MATRIMONY."

Delavel, . . . Mr. Williams.

Between the Comedy and Farce,
Comic Songs, by Mr. Williams.
To which will be added Colman's celebrated
Farce of
"THE REVIEW,
OR THE WAG OF WINDSOR."

Caleb Quotem, . . . Mr. Williams.
Box 50 cents. Pit 25 cents. Doors to open at 6,
curtain to rise at 7 o'clock.
For particulars see bills.

After this performance, the Thespian Society seems to have disbanded; as the local papers contain no references to it, it is naturally assumed that the organization ceased to exist.

Eight years later, an attempt was made to form a Thespian company. The Lancaster Journal of Friday, November 20th, 1829, printed the following notice:

"The young men of this city favorable to the formation of a Thespian company are requested to meet at the house of Jacob Rathfon, on Saturday evening next, at 7 o'clock."

It is not known whether or not an organization was perfected, as no notices relative thereto appeared in the papers after that date.

The Widows' Society of Lancaster

By WILLIAM FREDERIC WORNER

AT a special meeting of the Widows' Society, held at the house of Christian Smith on Wednesday, February 20th, 1822, it was resolved, that the principal features of the constitution of this society shall be published in the German and English papers of the city of Lancaster. They were as follows:

"The members of this association have formed themselves into a society for the purpose of providing a fund for the support of the widow of any deceased member.

"The association shall consist of none but such as are citizens of Pennsylvania at the time of their admission, between the ages of twenty-one and fifty years, being married men of steady habits and free from all bodily complaint and infirmity, except where the complaint or infirmity may be of such a nature as will not accelerate their death.