



THE THEATER AS COMMUNITY LIFE

1790 to 1830

Pittsburgh. December 11, 1818. By seven o'clock the Theatre on Third Street is filled with Pittsburgh's elite—local landowners, manufacturers, lawyers, and government officials—come to see the opening performance of the Dramatic Benevolent Society (actually a group of student thespians from the Pittsburgh Academy). The playbill posted on the front doors says that the show is to begin “promptly at quarter past seven.” But no one seems inclined to quiet the house, not the building manager, who is busy counting receipts in the ticket office, nor the candle snuffer, wardrobe mistress, or property man, who are still trying to get the tiny backstage area ready, nor even the performers themselves, many of whom can be found, at this late hour, engaged in lively conversation with family and friends. Meanwhile, in the boxes on either side of the small proscenium stage (priced at one dollar per seat), an usher uses a filthy rag to wipe away the coal dust that has settled since the theater was last used nearly a month ago. In the orchestra pit members of

the Apollonian Society warm up their instruments. And up in the gallery, where the decaying bench seats are selling tonight for seventy-five cents, a collection of keelboat drivers, wagon wheel makers, and glass blowers are crowding in, anxious to see if the town's so-called gentlemen can pull off a decent show. They jostle each other for position, spilling cups of ale and bags of pignuts as they squeeze to the front of the steeply raked seats, the better to yell out their jeers and boos when the opportunity presents itself, as it inevitably will.¹



Leisure in the Western Country

As a European settlement, Pittsburgh dates to the 1730s when a thin stream of traders and land speculators began to arrive at a tiny western outpost between the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers. Originally these men (mostly English and French) came to trade with the indigenous tribes running the river routes between western New York and southwestern Pennsylvania. A decade later, English, German, Irish, and Scottish immigrants were using the site to rest after their difficult three-week journey across the Pennsylvania mountains and before heading into the vast Northwest Territory. By the time the Ohio Company was formed in 1847, the area had become a substantial trading and supply community. After the conclusion of the French and Indian War in 1763, the British re-occupied their abandoned Fort Pitt, and a small village of inns, taverns, supply stores, wagon shops, and horse traders developed along a carefully plotted diamond of land above the river banks. Over the next two decades, the Manor of Pittsburgh, as William Penn had named it, grew in population and productivity, becoming a thriving town and farming region under the military protection of the British garrison at Fort Pitt.²

The combination of labor-intensive daily living, especially for families working large farms, and security concerns—Indian attacks on the village were common—made life in the western country particularly challenging. But other factors of frontier existence were equally difficult. There was no cultural homogeneity among the odd mix of traders, retired soldiers, immigrants, free black migrants, and landed gentry who made up the population; they spoke a variety of lan-

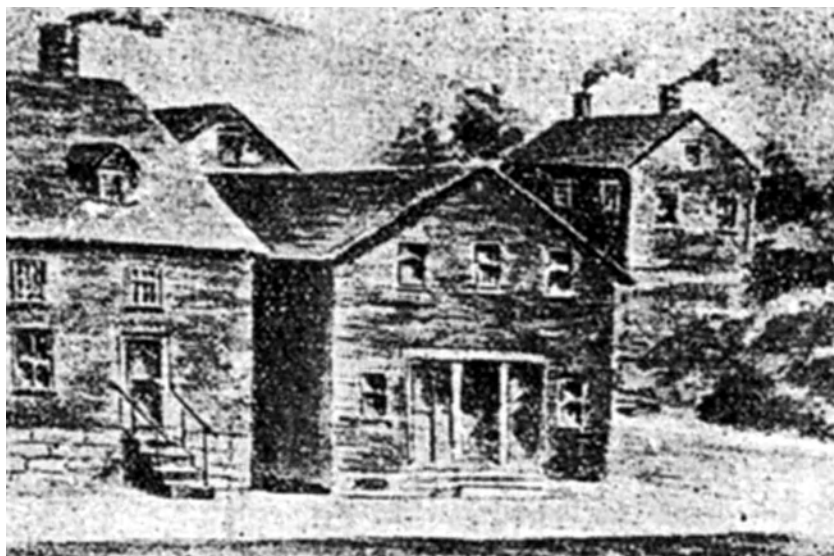


Fig. 2. The Theatre on Third Street, 1813 (center building). Source: *Palmer's Pictorial Pittsburgh and Prominent Pittsburghers Past and Present 1758–1905*. Pittsburgh: R. M. Palmer, 1905.

guages and carried with them differing religious practices and political allegiances. Class anxieties, though somewhat different from those of the old countries, continued to arise. Retired British officers did not mix with former indentured servants. The gentry lived quite differently from the poor immigrants who farmed the rugged acres being parceled out in colonial land grants. And the region's migrant laborers—many of them first- and second-generation Americans—had little contact with the free black settlers attracted to Pennsylvania because of its Quaker tradition of tolerance.³ If these first Pittsburghers had anything in common beyond their drive to succeed economically, it was a shared sense of isolation. In prerevolutionary Pittsburgh, a social life did not come easily. The concept of unoccupied time, defined as “freedom from business,” was unknown to many settlers.⁴ For others, opportunities for leisurely amusements were rooted in communal work activities—barn raisings and sewing circles—and in religious celebrations that steered well clear of the “vain amusements” decried by the Protestant clergy. For single male laborers, leisure time often meant drinking in taverns. In this environment, creative activities and performance events (recitations, singing, playing instruments, reading aloud) were rare outside the family

circle. Not surprisingly, ensemble art forms like theatrical performances were even more rare.

And yet, this odd collection of people who were the first Pittsburghers needed theater for the same reasons that all emerging communities do—as a means of sharing in the world of ideas, as a vehicle for expressing cultural identity, as a form of individual creativity, and, perhaps most important, as an acceptable excuse to convene in leisure hours. The editor of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, the first newspaper west of the Allegheny Mountains, wrote in 1818:

A complaint has frequently been made against the western country that we are so much occupied with the pursuit of gain as to have acquired a sordid and unsocial cast of character. . . . Whatever, therefore, has a tendency to mingle us harmoniously together, to soften the manners, to relax the brow of care; and to wear off those sharp points of character which seem to grow out of an exclusive devotion to business deserves attention. Nothing is better calculated for this purpose than a well regulated stage.⁵

Early Stage Entertainments

Before the Revolution, Pittsburgh's one clear social advantage was its proximity to the British military installation at Fort Pitt, situated at the confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers. A public assembly room was apparently in use at the fort at least from 1763, when Captain Simon Ecuyer was pleased to note, in a letter to another officer, the presence of "the most beautiful ladies of the garrison" at the Saturday evening balls. In 1765, a German doctor named Johann Schoepf recorded that "balls, plays, concerts and comedies" were being offered to the local community at the fort.⁶ Another source reports that the British officers at Fort Pitt produced "some of Shakespeare's plays" in the early 1770s.⁷ Garrison theatricals were common in British installations across the Americas. British officers, as members of the gentry, were responsible for setting standards of social protocol and helping to establish cultural activities in occupied territories. Participating in garrison theatricals was a crucial component of an officer's duty to his regiment and to the community; making theater both a way to model behavior for local inhabitants with social aspirations and a method for spreading British cultural traditions.⁸

In the early days of the Republic, leisure activities increased significantly, a change brought on by postwar prosperity and a new urge for civic assembly at both the national and regional levels. The call to “soften the brow” of the western country was made often, in and out of the pages of the *Gazette*, because the development of healthy forms of civic assembly (from military parades to agricultural fairs) was being linked to the “American spirit” rhetoric shared by both the Federalist and the Anti-Federalist parties. Not all of Pittsburgh’s newly minted Americans were welcome, however; some were forced to create parallel public events such as the Saint Patrick’s Day dinner, hosted by the overtly anti-British Sons of Hibernia, and the “Negro balls” sponsored by local African American congregations.⁹

In this new age of public assembly, commercial forms of amusement developed rapidly. Some of the most popular were also the most controversial. For some people, including the editor of the *Gazette*, horse racing topped the list of unacceptable amusements, because the “youth of both sexes run to harm, folly and debauchery at this fruitful seminary of all vice” (Oct. 16, 1801, 3). Still, the *Gazette* of the 1780s and 1790s was filled with advertisements for other types of leisure activity. Dozens of dancing masters offered to teach, for a fee, the “most fashionable Country Dances and City Cotillions” (June 20, 1798, 2). Public balls, usually following some kind of ticketed performance, were regular events in the great room at Fort Pitt. Outdoor fairs sponsored by the clerk of the Pittsburgh market began as early as 1796. These retail-oriented events (merchants paid a small fee to exhibit their wares) drew visitors by offering a variety of free entertainments, from “horse running” to “astonishing feats of Slack Rope, Wire Dancing, Balancing, Tumbling, &c. &c. &c.” (May 14, 1796, 1). Small, family-operated traveling circuses made regular stops in the city and usually set up in the empty lots next to taverns and hotels. Menageries featuring exotic animals commanded a sizable entry fee, especially for a talented animal. The proprietors of the New England Hotel on Wood Street, for example, charged twenty-five cents for a brief look at the “first and only Male Elephant ever seen in this country. . . . He will take his Keeper with his foot or trunk, and place him on his back; but what is most curious among his maneuvers, he will dance to music, and very correctly” (June 18, 1819, 3).

Taverns and inns that had originally catered solely to travelers began serving a more crucial civic role. With their large public rooms, they quickly became de

facto assembly halls for convocations of all sorts, legislative, religious, and cultural. Local residents in search of social intercourse and an evening's entertainment found them well suited for gathering and delivering news, celebrating important occasions, and sharing the performance traditions brought from home. Tavern owners in turn found their spaces well suited to a new source of income and began charging admission for a range of cultural events, from exhibitions of "curiosities and wonders" to musicales and dramatic readings. The Black Bear Tavern, for example, was well known in the 1790s for its lively evenings filled with a variety of entertainments—from chamber concerts to play readings to improvised farces. At William Irwin's popular inn, Punch and Judy shows played alongside circus acts. John Reed imported traveling curiosities and sold tickets to see "an elegant and extensive Collection of WAX WORK FIGURES AS LARGE AS LIFE." Mr. Carr's Tavern featured solo performances by local residents, including "Mr. Dwyer's Readings & Recitations" and a vocal concert by Thomas Sheldon, leader of the Apollonian Society, the city's first orchestra association. Mr. Morrow's Tavern also hosted dramatic readings and vocal concerts featuring "the most favorite pieces of music, among which are the *Yellow hair'd Laddie*, with variations."¹⁰

Dramatic Entertainment

In the early years of the Republic, dramatic stage entertainments were produced at a variety of spaces around the growing town. At Fort Pitt, for example, a room called the Theatre in the Garrison featured amateur work by the state militia occupying the increasingly dilapidated structure. The first to be announced in the *Gazette* was a production of Addison's *Cato* in April 1790. The story of the Roman leader, long a popular choice in the colonial theater, was first produced in the Americas at Charleston's Dock Street Theatre in 1735. During the Revolution George Washington quoted it often in his writings and speeches and even ordered a wartime production of the piece at Valley Forge in 1778. When *Cato* finally appeared on the western front in 1790, the four-year-old *Pittsburgh Gazette* proudly placed the news in a front-page box: "Ladies and Gentlemen are hereby informed, that a Theatrical Representation of the tragedy of Cato, with the farce

of All the World's a Stage, will take place on Tuesday the 20th in the Theatre in the Garrison."¹¹

The New Theatre over the Allegheny, which opened in 1795, seems to have been the first commercial space in Pittsburgh to call itself a theater. On February 27, 1796, the *Gazette* noted in a front-page editorial:

The New Theatre over the Allegheny was opened last season under the direction of the Managers of the Population Company. The principal characters were ably supported by many of the leading and knowing ones of the State. . . . The Dresses, Scenery, and Decorations entirely new; Transparent Paintings, with shades after the Italian manner, were towards the close of the Season exhibited with astonishing effect, the colours so well applied as to be perfectly seen through.

The unsigned article reports that the Population Company Troupe, "having some time been moved to the Old Theater, Philadelphia," was currently being replaced by a strolling company from whom "the character of the actors much entertainment may be expected."¹² Among the new pieces the company was reportedly getting up were *Like Master Like Man*, *The Landlord Ousted*, *Who's the Dupe*, and *High Life Below Stairs*. In what was perhaps the first theatrical review published in Pittsburgh, the *Gazette* noted, "Although the taste of the whole audience may not be fully gratified, there is little doubt of the Gallery being much diverted." Since no other record of the Theatre over the Allegheny has been located, we do not know how long the venture lasted or who ran it. Nevertheless, the list of plays (short farces) indicates that its repertoire was populist in orientation.¹³

Another theater space that operated regularly during this period was the Great Room of the first county courthouse located in the Diamond (now Market Square), constructed in 1799. Before that time, all county business was conducted in various village taverns. During 1789, for example, the first Court of Common Pleas convened in Andrew Watson's tavern, while in the 1790s court proceedings were held on the third floor of William Irwin's inn.¹⁴ Once legal proceedings had an official home in Pittsburgh, theater moved in as well: "The great room of the upper story of the courthouse, which from its size, and having several other contiguous apartments which serve for green room, dressing rooms, &c.,

is very well adapted to that purpose.”¹⁵ Over the next decade, newspapers advertised a wide array of performances at the courthouse, from amateur and traveling professional productions of popular English comedies, comic operas, and farces, to “Indian dances by the chiefs now in town.”¹⁶

Thespian Societies

Like the officers and enlisted men stationed at Fort Pitt during the French and Indian War, native-born citizens of the new nation also enjoyed theatrical entertainment. After 1803 and into the 1820s, a number of thespian societies came and went, some dedicated to educational and charitable aims, others clearly reflecting the creative urges of well-heeled lawyers, merchants, and other professionals with leisure time. In the early nineteenth century most American cities with growing economies and an established elite supported at least one community-based dramatic society, since the “thespian art” complemented other forms of aesthetic training and liberal education being established for members of the leisure class. By 1800, Pittsburgh supported many dancing academies, music schools, literary clubs, and lecture series. The Apollonian Society, for example, was founded in 1806 as the city’s first semiprofessional musical organization. Led by S. W. Dearborn, a professional musician reportedly from Boston, the society consisted of twelve performers and a circle of subscribers willing to pay to hear the music of Bach and Mozart.¹⁷ Other professional advancement clubs were the Mechanical Society, a “reputable tradesmen” group organized in 1788; the Columbian Society of Virtuosi, founded by a group of wealthy professionals in 1810 to collect specimens for a projected natural history museum; and four Freemason lodges in operation by 1815.¹⁸ In addition, Pittsburghers attended lectures on a variety of subjects, most curiously a series on chemistry conducted by a Dr. Aigster “to be held at the Laboratory, corner of Smithfield and Second Streets, every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday” (*Gazette*, Dec. 27, 1811, 3).

Pittsburgh’s first nonmilitary community theater troupe, made up of “Young Gentlemen of the Town,” performed *The Poor Soldier* (a comic opera) and *The Apprentice* (a farce) at the courthouse in February 1803. According to an ad in the *Gazette*, the curtain would “rise precisely at half past six o’clock,” with box seat tickets selling for “Three Quarters Dollar” and gallery seating at “Half a Dollar”

(Feb. 18, 1803, 1). Among the players that evening was the school-age son of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the most prominent Pittsburgher of that era. Henry Marie Brackenridge recalled that he had “had the honour of delivering a letter to captain Glenroy [in *The Poor Soldier*] and appearing as a Scotchman in *Dick the Apprentice*.” His account and several others suggest that the elder Brackenridge was so appalled at seeing his son on the stage (and in bit roles) that he immediately sent him off to a boarding school.¹⁹

Another thespian society was formed about this time among working-class Pittsburghers. According to Fortescue Cuming, a professional traveler, in 1803 a thespian group made up of “respectable mechanics” began mounting joint productions with the courthouse club “in order to cast the pieces to be performed with more effect.” By 1807 the two groups were being led by S. W. Dearborn, the Apollonian Society conductor, who in addition to his musical duties renovated the courthouse space and began offering monthly dramatic performances throughout the winter, with young men playing the women’s parts. Though Cuming noted the “respectable manner” of these “rational entertainments,” he had some criticisms: “The female characters being sustained by young men, are deficient of that grace and modest vivacity, which are natural to the fair sex, and which their grosser lords and masters vainly attempt to copy.”²⁰

Others must have shared Cuming’s opinion, because in 1812 another thespian society was formed that included young women. This group, also called the Thespian Society, seems to have lasted in one form or another for nearly two decades, with several generations of Pittsburgh’s young elite taking part. It appears to have evolved, in structure and purpose, into a semiprofessional theater company comprised of paid managers and unpaid performers with an operating budget, a governing board, a growing stock of costumes and properties, and a regular season of shows. According to an early historian, “The society numbered among its members the brightest and best bred young people of the city, most of whom took part in each performance.”²¹ The group performed in a small makeshift theater beneath the auditorium of the original Masonic Hall on Wood Street. A related group, sometimes referred to as the Academy Thespian Society, dates to about 1810, when students at the all-male Pittsburgh Academy (which later became the University of Pittsburgh) began producing plays.²² The academy, which was essentially a secondary school for sons of the elite, operated out of a small wooden building on Third Street and Cherry Alley. An important part of the

curriculum was classical literature, which meant memorizing passages from ancient dramas as well as performing recitations from the classical canon. The academy thespian group was an extracurricular organization with a mandate to produce full-length plays of literary merit, including those by Shakespeare and his contemporaries; Otway's *Venice Preserved* was a favorite choice.

By 1824, interest in amateur theatricals had evolved beyond their function as exercises for students and young men and women of the upper class. That year the Thespian Society was headed by Magnus M. Murray, chief magistrate of Pittsburgh (and in 1828, the city's fourth mayor) and included a list of members whose names are now attached to many Pittsburgh streets and localities: Richard Biddle, Matthew Magee, Morgan Neville, Alexander Breckenridge, William Wilkins, T. B. Dallas, and J. S. Craft. Murray not only managed the society's business affairs, he also acted and guided many of its productions with some skill. But he was apparently unable to solve the problem of the society's debts. After the 1824–25 season, in which only one production's receipts (*Tom and Jerry*) exceeded expenditures, the charitable institution was formally dissolved. The society's use of students from the Western University (the recently expanded Pittsburgh Academy) may have contributed to its demise, since the season's decidedly nonliterary repertoire—including *Who Wants a Guinea*, *Tom and Jerry*, *Who's the Dupe*, and *Day after the Wedding*—reportedly displeased the various clergymen who made up the faculty. According to the reminiscences of John Parke, "Many of the members of the company were students of the Western University, and the whole thing was suddenly brought to a full stop by the faculty taking the matter in hand."²³

Early Professional Theater

By 1812, the population of the borough of Pittsburgh exceeded 5,000 people, not including an additional several thousand living in Birmingham (now called the South Side), Allegheny City (the North Side), and the Northern Liberties (roughly, the East End).²⁴ The act of incorporation chartering Pittsburgh as an official city was still four years away (March 18, 1816), but residents of the rapidly growing town were actively building an independent metropolis. The city was already well established as an industrial site producing glass, cannons, tinware, keelboats,

wagon wheels, whiskey, cabinets, shoes, and Windsor chairs. Its geographic importance made it a leading trade center where waves of travelers stopped to rest from their long overland journeys and to exchange the wagons that had crossed the Alleghenies for keelboats in which to float down the Ohio. The impact of these travelers on the local inhabitants was both economic and cultural, since they brought with them not only money and goods for trading but also customs, habits, and opinions on everything from politics to art to social practice. This heady stream of outside influence brought information and ideas from Europe and the Atlantic seaboard, particularly Philadelphia. It must also have helped to establish standards of taste and to inform the cultural habits of the town's early inhabitants.

Among those who traveled through Pittsburgh were members of professional theater companies forging new performing circuits to the west and southwest. These routes complemented the well-established touring theater circuits along the eastern seaboard, from Boston to Charleston and beyond as far as Jamaica. The first established theatrical circuit west of the Allegheny Mountains dates to about 1811, when James Douglas brought his acting company from Canada to Lexington, Kentucky. But earlier troupes had been making their way to Pittsburgh at least since 1795 with the one-season residency of the Population Company at the Theatre over the Allegheny, already mentioned, and continuing with Bromly and Arnold, itinerant actors who performed at the courthouse in "the comedy of Trick Upon Trick" (*Gazette*, Jan. 20, 1803, 1).²⁵ Other traveling professionals performed in local inns and taverns, as shown in this ad: "The celebrated comedy of the Birth Day, Or Reconciliation will be presented by Mrs. Turner and Mr. Cipriani, ballet master from Sadler's Wells" (*Gazette*, Nov. 2, 1810, 3). Sophia Turner, an English actress, was the wife of William A. Turner, a theatrical manager whose traveling stock company frequently stopped in Pittsburgh en route to Cincinnati and Kentucky and who later became the director of the Theatre on Third Street (discussed below). The professional credentials of Mr. Cipriani, late of Sadler's Wells, are harder to verify. He seems to have been known primarily for his tumbling skills.²⁶

Clear proof that substantial income-producing theater existed in Pittsburgh during this period are the borough and city ordinances "Concerning Plays, Shows and Theatrical Entertainments." Beginning as borough law in the late eighteenth century, these regulations were adopted by the newly formed city of

Pittsburgh in 1816 and published in the *Gazette*. The new ordinance (presumably based on earlier regulations) applied to “any show, spectacle, or natural or artificial curiosity, where money may be demanded for admission.” The ordinance covered licensing and permissions (“to be obtained from the Mayor of the City”), content (plays were “to be of a decent and moral tendency”), performance conditions (“a Constable must attend . . . and prevent any outrage, or disturbance of the harmony of the citizens”), and the actors (those employing minors without consent “shall forfeit and pay the sum of Forty Dollars”) (Sept. 6, 1816, 3).

The Theatre on Third Street

The most concrete indicator of Pittsburgh’s growing interest in professional theater was the construction of the Theatre on Third Street, Pittsburgh’s first free-standing playhouse, in 1813. The initiative was similar to other community-building efforts during this period. Municipal services, ranging from care for the indigent, child welfare programs, education, and circulating libraries, were supported entirely by privately funded groups sponsored by religious, ethnic, and professional organizations.²⁷ The construction of a theatrical playhouse was also seen as a private responsibility arising out of a common need. But it was, additionally, an entrepreneurial opportunity. Financed on a subscription basis by members of the wealthy elite, the effort was modeled on a shareholding system long used by theaters in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. The goal was twofold: to promote the social advancement of the community while satisfying the cultural tastes of the subscribers; and to boost their economic interests, since a successful playhouse only increased a community’s real estate value. To make the project happen, elite citizens (male, white, and property-owning) bought shares, became members of the board of directors, built the playhouse, and hired or leased the space to a professional actor-manager. The manager then formed a resident professional acting company, known as a stock company, which performed a rotating repertoire on a nightly basis.

The first record of the Theatre on Third Street is an advertisement in the *Gazette* from May 15, 1812, offering subscriptions at a cost of “one-third of the Season Ticket” (3). Another ad three months later noted that the building was

“about to be erected” and requested subscribers to “attend a meeting to be held in the house of James Gibson” (Aug. 14, 1812, 3). Investors were guaranteed seating and a share of the profits. Since there is no record of production in the theater until a year later, in August 1813, subscription-style financing may have proved difficult. The shareholders eventually purchased a lot on Third Street near the corner of Smithfield and hired architect and builder Charles Weidner to erect a “substantial frame structure, sixty feet front, two stories in height.”²⁸

The Theatre on Third Street was completed in the summer of 1813, and Pittsburghers were proud of their new playhouse. A judge noted that the 400-seat interior was “tastefully fitted up with dress-circle, pit, gallery, and proscenium boxes,” with a “fine” painting under the proscenium arch bearing the Latin motto “Veluti in speculum.”²⁹ The space was immediately leased to the English-born actor-manager William A. Turner, who had started with James Douglas’s troupe in Canada before founding his own traveling company in Cincinnati around 1811. By 1812 he was adding theaters to his western circuit stretching from Lexington, Kentucky, to Pittsburgh. Turner’s company featured his wife and a Mr. Webster, billed as a “celebrated actor from Europe.” Most of Turner’s actors seem to have been little known, though a few had extensive London and New York credits.³⁰ Perhaps they joined the provincial company because Turner’s circuit allowed for steady employment, as his troupe moved from city to city performing month-long seasons.³¹ The Turner Company’s Pittsburgh residency began in the fall of 1813 with *The Tale of Mystery*, Holcroft’s popular adaptation of Pixérécourt’s French melodrama. Other plays in the repertoire were comic operas or farcical short pieces such as *To Marry, or, Not to Marry* and *The Irishman in London*, featuring the singing talents of both Webster and Mrs. Turner.

Despite Turner’s management experience, the Theatre on Third Street never achieved financial solvency. Almost immediately some of the original investors began attempting to sell off their shares. In November 1813 an ad appeared in the *Gazette* offering up a “half part” of the theater, “with the scenery, Decorations, Embellishments.” Though described as “a very valuable property to a purchaser,” it clearly was not, since attempts to resell shares continued to appear over the next decade. The theater had fallen into disrepair by the time the Samuel Drake Company took up a three-month residency in the fall of 1815. In the words of Noah Ludlow, an actor,

[It was] the poorest apology for [a theater] I had then ever seen. . . . It was situated on the eastern outskirts of the city. . . . It contained a pit and one tier of boxes, as they were called. The form was after the old style—two parallel elongations, with an elliptical curve at the entrance. The decorations, if such they might be termed, were of the plainest kind, and every portion bore the Pittsburgh stamp upon it—coal smut.³²

It is not clear why the Theatre on Third Street failed to thrive. Some accounts suggest that with only 400 seats it was not large enough to make a profit, while others blame everything from the antitheatrical tendencies of the Presbyterian elite and the superstitious laboring class. Noah Ludlow clearly blames the latter in his memoir, *Dramatic Life as I Found It*. Recounting his difficulty in casting the supernumerary roles for his company's production of *Pizarro* in the fall of 1815, he noted with evident frustration, "Virgins (of course I mean stage virgins) were not to be had in Pittsburgh in those days. Seamstresses and shoe-binders would have as soon thought of walking deliberately into Pandemonium as to have appeared on the stage as 'supers' or 'corps de ballet.'"³³ Ludlow's memoir is not reliable, however, since there is ample evidence of a thriving amateur thespian community in 1815 made up of citizens willing to appear on stage. Perhaps the Drake Company failed to attract the attention of the city's established thespian societies, or perhaps local amateurs held their own prejudices about consorting with itinerant actors.

Despite its financial problems, however, the Theatre on Third Street continued to operate. In the winter of 1815 Turner and his actors (now the Pittsburgh Company of Comedians) produced *Richard III* and *King Lear*—no doubt the first professional productions of Shakespeare in the city (though not the first Shakespeare, as we have seen). An advertisement for *King Lear and His Three Daughters* "respectfully solicits the attendance of the patron of the Drama" to witness "Shakespeare's universally admired Tragedy."³⁴ There is no record of the Turner Company after this appearance.³⁵

A few amateur productions were mounted at the Theatre on Third Street in 1816. Then, in the fall of 1817, another professional group took up residence. An itinerant company headed by John Entwisle, an actor and playwright, regularly traveled the western circuit offering "first rate talents, from the Theaters, New-York—Philadelphia—Boston and Charleston" in standard works from the popular repertoire. In August, Entwisle announced that considerable repairs to

both the house and the stage of the Theatre on Third Street had been completed and that “neither pains nor expense has been spared to render the Theatre worthy the patronage of a liberal public” (*Gazette*, Aug. 5, 1817, 3). The Entwisle Company enjoyed a busy three-month season in Pittsburgh, then apparently never returned.

Over the next decade, a variety of traveling stock companies performed at the Theatre on Third Street, and a few more attempts were made to establish a resident stock company. In 1822, sixteen-year-old Edwin Forrest, later one of the most influential American actors of the century, came to Pittsburgh with a company organized by Joshua Collins, a former member of Turner’s company, and William Jones, formerly with Drake’s company. Forrest recorded his first impressions of the city in a letter to his mother in Philadelphia: “I arrived here yesterday at about eleven o’clock, and am much pleased with the place and its inhabitants. . . . Pittsburgh . . . is a sort of London in miniature, very black and smoky. The Alleghany River and Mountains surround it. The theater is very old.” Forrest’s biographer offers more detail:

About the middle of October they began playing in Pittsburgh, in a building so ruinous and dilapidated that on rainy nights the audience in the pit held up their umbrellas to screen themselves from the leakings through the roof. The first performance was *Douglas*, Forrest sustaining the part of Young Norval with much applause. In the course of the season here he played many characters, in tragedy, comedy, farce, and ballet.³⁶

Even the disgruntled Noah Ludlow repeatedly returned to the Theatre on Third Street after leaving the Drake Company. He appeared many times in Pittsburgh between 1818 and 1830 with his own barnstorming company and over the years developed close friendships with local residents. His final season at the theater began in June 1830, and, according to Ludlow, “worried along to fluctuating business.”³⁷ He left Pittsburgh in November to join James Caldwell’s company, leaving behind many of his actors. A Mr. Fuller briefly took over for Ludlow “with a very respectable stock-company, under whose management considerable changes and improvements were effected in scenery, decorations, etc.”³⁸ Still, by the end of the 1820s the theater was often dark, its original purpose to “mirror the world” diminished to occasional productions by the various thespian societies and a series of one-night-only magic shows, circus acts, and “dramatic ven-

triloquists.” The building itself was gradually being whittled away, as a traveler noted in 1824: “There was a day when a series of columns supported the projection of the upper story; but the rude and naughty boys, by occasionally whittling them with their pocket knives, have ruined the proportions of some, and left no traces of others” (*Gazette*, Nov. 17, 1824, 2). By 1830 the Theatre on Third Street had entered its final phase of useful existence, signified by a notice that ran repeatedly in the *Gazette* over the course of that year: “For Sale. The old Theater Lot . . . And a quantity of good seasoned boards” (Jan. 1, 1830, 2).

Early Theater Audiences

The poor financial history of Pittsburgh’s first permanent playhouse and the failure to establish a lasting professional stock company at the Theatre on Third Street have frequently been interpreted as evidence of Pittsburgh’s antitheatrical bias. This oft-cited “Presbyterian” characteristic is attributed to the city’s Scots-Irish founding elite, their repugnance toward idleness, and a general disposition to “take their pleasures sadly.”³⁹ These qualities predate the Scots-Irish, however, and are more characteristic of Pennsylvania’s colonial Quaker culture. William Penn himself set the standard in 1682 when he declared playgoing to be “an offense against God [which incited] people to Rudeness, Cruelty, Looseness, and Irreligion.”⁴⁰ Additional contributing factors were the realities of frontier living. As Zadok Cramer, Pittsburgh’s first bookseller, noted around 1810: “The character of the people is that of enterprising and persevering industry; every man to his business is the prevailing maxim, there is therefore little time devoted to amusements or to the cultivation of refined social pleasures. . . . The amusements of these industrious people are not numerous.”⁴¹

Yet a closer look at the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth reveals another Pittsburgh, many of whose citizens were not in the least opposed to idleness or an evening at the theater. As noted, the frontier town was settled by a varied mix of people who were anything but “Presbyterian” in their behavior, including former soldiers from Fort Pitt, Fort Lafayette, and Fort Duquesne, Indian traders and other economic adventurers, former indentured servants, religious exiles, and the ever-increasing number of immigrants from Western Europe. Population statistics show that the Scottish and Scots-Irish population

of the city was never greater than 29 percent and that the majority of early Pittsburghers were of English, German, and Irish stock.⁴² Further, many seem to have adopted a certain independence of behavior, regardless of their ethnicity or religious beliefs. One diarist complained in 1773: “A great part of the people here make the Sabbath a day of recreation, drinking & profanity. . . . The inhabitants of this place are very dissipated. They seem to feel themselves beyond the arm of government, & freed from the restraining influence of religion. . . . Drinking, debauchery & all kinds of vice reign, in this frontier of depravity.”⁴³ This criticism undoubtedly focused on traders and laborers but may also have included craftsmen: nailers, shopkeepers, glass blowers, foundrymen, and brewers who were able to afford the substantial prices being charged at taverns and other houses of entertainment where drinking and other forms of vice, including theatergoing, were to be found. Though these varied settlers reflected a constantly shifting mixture of cultural and ethnic identities, they soon began to take on a collective “western” character, at least for journalists seeking to create a cultural profile for the new nation’s growing cities and towns. The rough, plainspoken, free-spirited “western” label was the first of many tags to be applied to Pittsburghers—and by extension, to Pittsburgh audiences.

Even among the Presbyterian founding elite there is no evidence of a consistent antitheatrical sentiment. The synod may have maintained an official stance against “theatrical exhibitions and other vain amusements,” but the mainstream presbytery did not prohibit theatergoing. Further, as the records of many thespian societies make clear, members of the Presbyterian elite were among the most prominent theater practitioners and consumers of the era, themselves responsible for launching the city’s first indigenous theater. The myth about an antitheatrical bias among Pittsburghers is probably the legacy of the Covenanters, a reformed branch of the Scots-Irish presbytery. In Pittsburgh, the Covenanters were established in 1800 and led for nearly fifty years by Reverend John Black. Though he was “identified with almost all the literary and charitable institutions of his adopted city” and was a professor of ancient languages and classical literature at Western University, Black shared the antitheatrical zeal of all Covenanters.⁴⁴

Black led many attacks on the stage from his pulpit at the Covenanters’ downtown meeting house on Oak Alley and was the subject of many counterattacks led by commentators grown weary of his fire-and-brimstone rhetoric. In 1818 Morgan Neville, editor of the *Gazette*, took Black to task in a front-page ed-

itorial by touting both the “considerable spirit” of local amateur performers and the “intrinsic merit of their charitable enterprises.” After echoing a passage from Ecclesiastes—“According to a very high authority there is a time for *all things*”—Neville ended with a satirical portrait of “Sombrius,” a reference to Black: “He looks on a sudden fit of laughter as a breach of his baptismal vow. All the little ornaments of life are pomps and vanities. Mirth is wanton and wit profane. After all Sombrius is a religious man and would have behaved himself very properly had he lived when Christianity was under a general persecution” (Nov. 13, 1818, 1). Whereas Neville did not identify Black by name, others, including visitor Ann Royall, were not afraid to assign blame for a rhetorical posture they deemed both hypocritical and detrimental to Pittsburgh. In a travelogue written about 1828, Royall blames Reverend Black and his fellow “tract people” for the city’s paucity of cultural amenities, exclaiming: “Every thing learned or liberal falls before the march of these priests.”⁴⁵

Although Black garnered attention in print, the majority of early Pittsburghers did not share his attitude or follow his advice. As this chapter recounts, from the colonial period Pittsburghers from all social classes and ethnic and religious heritages were eager for theatrical entertainment at markets, fairgrounds, taverns, the courthouse, and the Theatre on Third Street, enjoying everything from farces and dramatic ventriloquists to Shakespeare and Sheridan. When the Samuel Drake Company arrived in 1815 to produce *Pizzaro*, the itinerant actors may have had difficulty in finding extras to appear as stage virgins, but they had no trouble finding an audience. During the company’s three-month residency, the theater’s 400 seats were priced at the astonishingly high cost of one dollar. Yet, notes Ludlow, “the house was filled to its utmost extent” each night, the pit crowded with “foundrymen, keel-boat men, and sundry and divers dark-featured and iron-fisted burghers,” the boxes filled “with dark-skinned yet beautiful ladies.”⁴⁶