

# **FIRST THEATER IN AMERICA**

BY  
HON. CHARLES P. DALY, LL. D.

## **Table of Contents**

INTRODUCTION.

First Theater in America.

WHEN WAS THE DRAMA FIRST INTRODUCED IN AMERICA?

THE FIRST THEATER IN NEW YORK.

CAPACITY OF THE THEATER.

CHANGE OF MANAGEMENT.

PLAYS PRODUCED.

CURIOUS ANNOUNCEMENTS.

A NEW COMPANY IN 1751.

THE DRAMA IN VIRGINIA AND MARYLAND.

HALLAM'S THEATER IN NASSAU STREET.

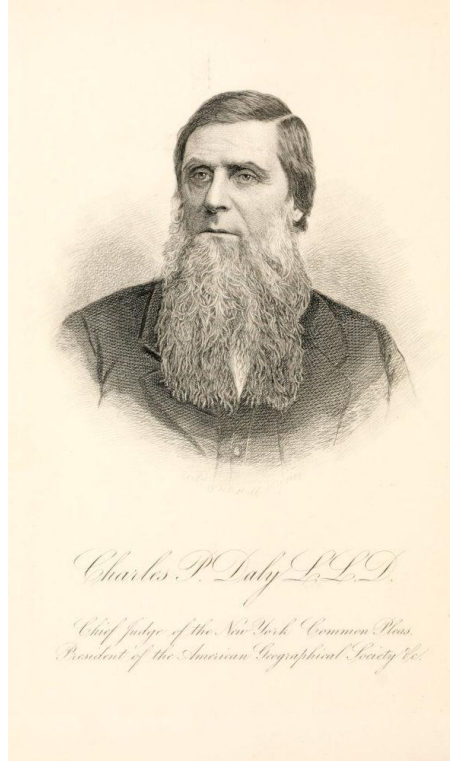
THE BEEKMAN STREET THEATER.

SUPPLEMENT.

A CONSIDERATION OF THE OBJECTIONS MADE TO THE  
STAGE.

FOOTNOTES:

# FIRST THEATER IN AMERICA



**Charles P. Daly LL.D.**  
**Chief Judge of the New York Common Pleas.**  
**President of the American Geographical Society Vc.**

## INTRODUCTION.

*The paper here reprinted by the Dunlap Society was read before the New York Historical Society more than thirty years ago. In looking through the files of Colonial newspapers in the possession of that institution for another purpose, my attention was called by the late Thomas F. De Voe, who devoted his leisure largely to the examination of Colonial newspapers, and especially those of Colonial New York, to an advertisement showing that there was a theater in the City of New York anterior to the arrival of the company that, as Dunlap expressed it, "planted the drama in America." I followed up Mr. De Voe's discovery by going over the Colonial newspapers of New York in the possession of the Historical Society for further information, and embodied the result in the paper read before that body. The paper was published at the time in the "New York Evening Post," and a limited number of copies of it were printed by that journal in pamphlet form. In expressing a wish to reprint it the Dunlap Society requested that I would augment the information by an account of what has since been ascertained upon the subject, a request with which I have complied by adding it at the end as a supplement, preferring that the paper should remain as it appeared originally.*



**First Theater in America.**

# WHEN WAS THE DRAMA FIRST INTRODUCED IN AMERICA?

Dunlap, the historian of the American Stage, informs us that the drama was introduced in this country by William Hallam, the successor of Garrick in Goodman's Field Theatre, who formed a joint stock company and sent them to America under the management of his brother Lewis Hallam in the year 1752, and that the first play ever acted in America was the "Merchant of Venice," represented by this company on September 5, 1752, at Williamsburg, then the capital of Virginia, in an old storehouse which they converted into a theater within two months after their arrival at Yorktown. Dunlap's familiarity with the subject, the fact that he derived his information from Lewis Hallam, Jr., who came out a boy twelve years of age with this early company, and the circumstance that Burke, in his "History of Virginia," has the same statement, have been deemed sufficiently satisfactory, and William Hallam, whom Dunlap calls "the Father of the American stage," has been accepted as the person who first introduced the drama in America.<sup>[1]</sup>



## **THE FIRST THEATER IN NEW YORK.**

But Dunlap and those upon whom he relied were mistaken, for there was a theater in the city of New York in 1733, nineteen years before Hallam arrived in this country. It is mentioned in Bradford's "Gazette" of that year, in the advertisement of a merchant who directs inquiries to be made of him at his store "next door to the Play-House."<sup>[3]</sup> This reference is all that has been found respecting it; but in the month of February, 1750, more than two years before the arrival of Hallam, a regular company of actors, under the joint management of Thomas Kean and of a Mr. Murray, came to this city from Philadelphia, and applied to Admiral George Clinton, then the governor of the Province of New York, for permission to act. Governor Clinton was a man of rank, the son of an earl, and had previously held a distinguished position as commander of the English fleet in the Mediterranean, while his wife, Lady Clinton, was a woman of great personal attractions and very agreeable manners, who had moved in the first circles of London society. To these cultivated persons there was nothing objectionable in the establishment of a theater, and permission was accordingly granted, though, from the spirit afterward exhibited by the local magistrates in this and other places, it would probably have been refused had the city authorities been applied to. It was announced through the columns of the "Weekly Post Boy" that the company intended to perform as long as the season lasted, provided they met with suitable encouragement, and upon obtaining the consent of the governor they hired a large room in a building in Nassau street, belonging to the estate of

Rip Van Dam, formerly president of the Provincial Council, and converted it into a theater; and here, on March 5, 1750, they produced Shakespeare's historical play of "Richard III.," as altered by Colley Cibber, in which the part of *Richard* was performed by Mr. Kean. The performance was announced to begin precisely at half-past seven o'clock, and the public were informed that no person would be admitted behind the scenes—an important reform, as it had been the practice in London from Shakespeare's time to allow the purchasers of box tickets free access to the stage; a custom which led to many abuses and immoralities.





## CAPACITY OF THE THEATER.

The room which had been converted into a theater must have been a very capacious one, as it was arranged with pit and gallery, and afterward boxes were added. The price of admission to the boxes was eight shillings, to the pit five shillings, and to the gallery three shillings. The exact capacity of this theater is known from the following circumstances: Upon the occasion of Mr. Kean's benefit, who was the leading tragedian, he was honored by a crowded house in his favorite part of *Richard III.*, and great complaint having been made that more tickets had been sold than the house could hold, Kean published a card in the "Post Boy," which was accompanied by a certificate of Parker, the publisher, to the effect that he had printed in all 161 pit tickets, 10 box, and 121 gallery tickets, declaring that as great a number had been in the house before. Kean in his card informs the public that it had been determined not to receive any money at the door, but that it was impossible to carry out that intention without giving great offense, and that the purchasers of tickets who had come after the house was filled had had their money returned. It may be inferred from this circumstance that the players found "satisfactory encouragement." "Richard III." appears to have been a favorite piece, and on March 12, 1750, it was announced that it would be acted for the last time, together with the farce of "The Beau in the Suds," and that on the following Saturday Dryden's play of "The Spanish Friar" would be represented. They continued to play on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday from the 5th of March to the 30th of April, 1750, when the

season closed, and that the experiment was successful may be inferred from the fact that they opened the theater again for another season on the 30th of December, 1750, and continued to play three times a week until the 17th of June, 1751, closing with a succession of benefits, when the company went to Virginia.



## CHANGE OF MANAGEMENT.

Before the close of the season, Kean, the joint manager, withdrew, announcing in a formal card to the public that he had resolved to quit the stage, by the advice of several gentlemen in town who were his friends, and follow his employment of writing; that his co-manager, Mr. Murray, had agreed to give him a night clear of all expenses for his half of the clothes and scenery of the play-house, and that by his Excellency the Governor's permission he would, on the following Monday evening, enact the part of *King Richard III.* for his benefit, being the last time of his appearance upon the stage. On the Monday following, April 29, 1751, the performance for his benefit was changed to "The Busybody" and "The Virgin Unmasked," and in announcing the change he informs the public, as an additional attraction, that there will be singing by Mr. Woodham, and particularly the celebrated ode called "Britons' Charter," closing with this appeal: "As this will positively be the last time of Mr. Kean's appearing upon the stage, he honestly hopes all gentlemen and ladies, and others who are his well wishers, will be so kind as to favor him with their company."



## PLAYS PRODUCED.

How this company were collected, or where they originally came from, it is probably now no longer possible to ascertain. As they were announced, upon their first appearance in New York, as a company of comedians who had come from Philadelphia, it is highly probable that they had played before in the Southern cities, and that they came originally from the West Indies, where, especially in Jamaica, theatrical companies from England had been in the habit of performing for some years previously. During the two seasons of the company in New York the following plays were given: "Richard III.;" Otway's "Orphan"; Dryden's "Spanish Friar"; Farquhar's "Sir Harry Wildair," being the sequel to the "Trip to the Jubilee"; "Recruiting Officer" and "Beaux' Stratagem"; "George Barnwell"; "The Beggar's Opera"; "The Distressed Mother"; Congreve's "Love for Love" and the "Bold Stroke for a Wife"; with the following farces: "The Beau in the Suds," "The Mock Doctor," "The Devil to Pay," "The Walking Statue," "The Old Man Taught Wisdom," "Damon and Phillida," "Hob in the Well," and "Miss in Her Teens." The names of the *dramatis personæ* were not printed in the play-bills, for the reason, probably, that the same actor had to play different parts in the same piece, but from references made to individual performers, the following persons are known to have been members of the company: Kean and Murray, the joint managers; Messrs. Taylor, Woodham, Tremaine, Jago, Scott, Moore, Marks, and Master Dickey Murray, the manager's son; Miss Nancy George, Miss

Osborne, Mrs. Taylor, Mrs. Davis, and Mrs. Osborne. Kean, Tremaine, and Jago played in tragic parts. Murray and Taylor were comedians. Miss Nancy George and Miss Osborne were the chief ladies in comedy and tragedy. Woodham and Mrs. Taylor were comedians and vocalists, and Kean, like his more distinguished namesake, Edmund Kean, appears to have possessed some musical talent, for on the occasion of his first benefit he announces that he will sing "an oratorio." Master Dickey Murray would seem to have been a favorite of the public. The other actors performed in subordinate parts.



## CURIOUS ANNOUNCEMENTS.

During the second season, which lasted for six months, they had repeated the same plays many times, and probably having nothing new or more attractive to offer for another season, they determined to try their fortunes elsewhere. They closed with a series of benefits, and some of the appeals made respecting them are sufficiently curious to be noticed. Mrs. Davis announces that a benefit is given to her to enable her to buy off her time, and she hopes that all ladies and gentlemen who are charitably inclined will favor it, closing in legal phraseology, "and their humble petitioner, as in duty bound, will ever pray." It was the constant practice at that time for masters of vessels to bring out passengers to New York upon the condition that they should be sold immediately upon their arrival as servants to any person who would pay their passage-money. They were sold for a definite period of time and were called Redemptioners, of which class Mrs. Davis, from her earnest appeal, appears to have been one. Mr. Jago humbly begs that all gentlemen and ladies will be so kind as to favor him with their company, as he never had a benefit before, and *is just come out of prison*; and Mrs. Osborne appropriately selects the play of "The Distressed Mother," with the announcement that it is the first time this poor widow has had a benefit, and having met with divers late hardships and misfortunes she appeals to the benevolent and *others*.

It is stated in Clapp's "Records" that Otway's "Orphan" was played in Boston, in the Coffee House in State street, in the

early part of 1750, by two young Englishmen, assisted by some volunteer comrades of the town; and as this is about the period when Murray & Kean's company began to perform in New York, this may possibly have been an initiatory attempt on the part of some of the members of that company to introduce dramatic amusements among the people of New England. Whether it was so or not, it was immediately followed by the passage of an act by the General Court of Massachusetts, in March, 1750, prohibiting stage plays and theatrical entertainments of any kind.

## **A NEW COMPANY IN 1751.**

In the winter of 1751 another company came to New York, and opened the theater in Nassau street on December 23, 1751, with "Othello" and the farce of "Lethe." The company was under the management of a Mr. Upton, and in all probability came from Jamaica, in a vessel which had arrived a short time before. The company were either inferior to the former, or the public had become indifferent, for the manager, after performing three weeks, announced that, to his great disappointment, he had not met with encouragement enough to support the company for the season, and that he would bring it to an end by giving a few benefits. Some doubt of the merits of the new performers seems to have prevailed, as he assured the public in a card that the company "were perfect, and hope to perform to satisfaction." It was the custom then for the actors to wait upon all the principal inhabitants and solicit their patronage, and fearing that he had been held accountable for some remissness of duty in this particular, he begs the public to remember that "he is an absolute stranger in the city, and if in his application he has omitted any gentlemen or ladies' house or lodging, he humbly hopes that they will impute it to his want of information, and not to want of respect." But though he produced several pieces not yet played in New York, such as "The Fair Penitent," "Venice Preserved," "The Provoked Husband," and "Othello," it was of no avail. A few benefits were given, one for a Mr. Leigh, another one for the poor widow Osborne, who, with Mr. Tremaine of the former company, had



become attached to this one; and on March 27, 1752, the last performance took place for the benefit of the manager's wife, Mrs. Upton. Upton delivered a farewell epilogue, and a few days after he left in a vessel for London.



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