

Capital Acts: Washington DC Performing Arts is a visually striking history that showcases the prominent and influential theater, music, film, TV, and media figures from the Nation's Capital area from 1792 through today. 54 chapters. Index.

Capital Acts: Washington DC Performing Arts

By Stephen Moore with Johnny Holliday, Stephen Lorenz, and Charles David Young

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CAPITAL ACTS

Washington DC Performing Arts

Stephen Moore

with

Johnny Holliday, Steve Lorenz,
Charles David Young



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PRINT ISBN: 978-1-958892-06-0

EBOOK ISBN: 979-8-88531-679-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Performing Arts – United States

Performing Arts – Biography

Performing Arts – Interviews

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2024

First Edition

Love Her Madly Duke Ellington

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Chapter 1 – The Learned Pig

The District of Columbia got off to a rough start, both physically and culturally, when created on July 16, 1790. Few countries in history had ever had the opportunity to plan its capital in advance, but it was still under construction ten years later when the branches of the US government outlined in the Constitution finally moved from the temporary capital, Philadelphia, to the official capital of the United States.

Indigenous peoples have inhabited America since 10,000 BC, with the Nacotchtank Indians thriving on the tidal Potomac riverbank for four thousand years. Captain John Smith had explored this area in 1608, traveling up the “Eastern Branch”—later the Anacostia River. He reported that the Nacostine villages in this area had spirited trade centers visited by other Native Americans, such as the Iroquois inhabiting the northeastern regions and the Algonquin more widespread across North America’s eastern and central lands. With abundant game, fish, and other natural resources, their name originated from the Algonquin word “anaquashtank,” meaning “a town of traders.” Consequently, “Potomac” is thought to mean “something brought.”

Nacotchtank (today the Southeast community of Anacostia) was the most significant community living in wigwams and longhouses. Two smaller villages were located on the narrow bluff between MacArthur Boulevard and the C&O Canal, above where Georgetown is today.

Their dances, hero legends, creation myths, rituals, ceremonies, and folktales would be the first “performances”

shared with other Indigenous tribes before devastating contact with Europeans. Their music was ancestral drum, flute, and vocal ceremonial and spiritual songs. In a letter to a merchant in London, the founder of Maryland, Leonard Calvert, also described “Anacostan” as one of the best places for trading with natives.

As a Washingtonian growing up in Anacostia, with southeast neighbors like Danny Gatton and Lafayette Parker “Pick” Temple, I first became aware of this native history mainly through local names like Potomac River, Takoma Park, Chesapeake River, and the Wigwam Restaurant on Route 301 in southern Maryland.

Driving through Piscataway with my parents to Waldorf’s many slot machine bars is where I remember seeing “Native American” faces. I would later learn of the forced displacement and total loss of the Nacotchtank’s ancestral territory through a combination of treaties, coercion, and military actions that prefaced the establishment of our Capital.

In the year 1800, Pennsylvania Avenue was still a muddy trail between tall trees and grass. A disdainful New Yorker surveying the fledgling village of swamps, thickets, and rude buildings proclaimed grandly: “We only need here houses, cellars, kitchens, scholarly men, amiable women, and a few other such trifles to possess a perfect city.” Added Treasury Secretary Oliver Wolcott, “The people are poor, and as far as I can see, they live like fishes, by eating each other.”

The “Mall” was a cow pasture. Stagecoaches, horses, river boats, and walking were the only way to travel. Early records paint comical tales, including several congressmen losing their way after a dinner party and “wandering until daybreak in their carriage weaving through bogs and gullies in search of Capital Hill, only a mile away.”

By Jefferson’s own account, it took him four days and three nights to travel westward from Washington through Loudon County to his Monticello home in southern Virginia. Washington was indeed primitive compared to the previous capitals of the new republic: Philadelphia, Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and New York City. But George Washington and Thomas Jefferson chose the fledgling village

over such contenders as Kingston, NY and Williamsburg, VA and persuaded Congress to create the District of Columbia as the permanent capital of the United States.

The recorded experiences of the capital's early residents, visitors and elected officials are almost totally negative. Indeed, a disillusioned Congress came within nine votes of abandoning this capital permanently after its few public buildings were torched by the British in 1814.

Meanwhile, the world was turning. Napoleon Bonaparte became the leader of the French Empire, and the expenses of his conquests ensured the 1804 Louisiana Purchase by the US, doubling the size of America. King George III survived two assassination attempts, and Beethoven performed his first symphony. Beethoven's biographers say that "certain listeners thought his work 'strange, overly extravagant, and even risqué.'" A year later Beethoven confided to friends that he thought he was going deaf.

In Philadelphia, George Washington had heard a musician a few years earlier named Alexander Reinagle. Born in England, Reinagle was a good friend of Johann Sebastian Bach's son, Carl. He performed concerts, composed bountifully, and managed concert programs. He wrote the song "Welcome Mighty Chief," sung at President Washington's inauguration, and dedicated it to First Lady, Martha. In addition, the President hired Reinagle to give piano lessons to his five-year-old daughter, Nelly.

President Washington couldn't play music, but he loved it mightily. There was usually music and dancing wherever our first President slept. Numerous taverns, clubs, and assembly rooms began to serve Washington DC's earliest citizens. In addition to offering food and drink, they supplied commerce and trading opportunities—including slaves—while featuring musicians, magicians, and other acts for fun.

Alexander Reangle partnered with Thomas Wignell, an English actor and singer, to build a theater in Philadelphia called The Chestnut. It joined the Old Theater as the first two venues in Philly. Reinagle and Wignell brought their Chestnut Company to the Blodgett hotel at 8th and E streets NW—then the largest privately-owned building in the city—in June of 1800 for what is considered DC’s first theatrical performance.



Samuel Blodgett Jr., a Revolutionary War officer, built Blogett’s hotel as a prize for a lottery to promote his real-estate investments.

Purchased by the government in 1910, Blodgett’s hotel served as headquarters of the US Postal Service and later the Patent office until it eventually succumbed to fire in 1836 like so many other DC structures of the time. 9000 drawings and 7000 models of inventions were destroyed.

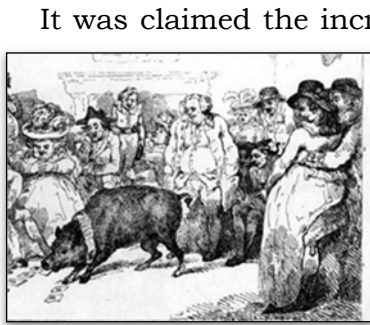
The premiere Washington DC theater show almost didn’t go on. As the group arrived, a summer thunderstorm and flood wrecked the troupe’s scenery. Waiting for their costumes to dry, the performers set up their patched scenery flats in the public meeting hall of Blodgett’s.

Wignell and Reinagle’s show on opening night was Otway’s *Venice Preserved*, ironically titled because the cast, including Mr. Wignell as Jaffier, Mr. Cooper as Prime, and Mrs. Merry as Belvidira, received a pre-show drenching on the way to town. This popular tragedy was first produced in England in 1682. The three lead characters are assassinated, commit suicide, and go insane in that order. This drama was a hot theatrical ticket. Another play, *The Secret*, was also shown during the company’s debut run.

Actor John Wilkes Booth, born in Bel Air, MD, in 1838 merely 57 miles from the DC line, once told a friend that he was “done with the stage and that *Venice Preserved* was the only play he would consider in returning to performing.” His

statement was later assumed to be a veiled hint of his plot to assassinate President Lincoln.

The city's first newspaper, *The National Intelligencer*, took no notice of this first theater production or other tavern presentations until 1801 when a hotel assembly room "about two hundred paces" from the Capitol on New Jersey Avenue announced the remarkable Learned Pig would appear.



It was claimed the incredible porker knew the days of the week, could read, spell, and tell time by consulting the watches of audience members, among other marvelous tricks. DC's patrons could witness this fantastic animal for a pricey fifty cents.

The pig moved on to appear at the Spread Eagle Tavern in nearby Alexandria, Virginia for a

suburban twenty-five cents.

An ad in the *Alexandria Gazette* proclaimed that the pig could also perform mentalism, revealing which card a patron had picked and concealed from the deck.

"Intelligent" animal acts like Morocco, the Thinking Horse and Munito, the Talking Dog were popular a century before the Learned Pig. Trained by a Scotsman, the original Learned Pig toured Europe and died in 1798. The pig that appeared in DC was owned by a William Pinchbeck who claimed President John Adams witnessed this Learned Pig in a performance "met with universal applause." Of course, these animals were trained to respond to verbal clues and whistles to appear intelligent. And there is no truth to the rumor that one was elected to Congress and engaged in pork barrel legislation.

In 1802 a group of citizens gathered, hoping for entertainment more substantial than tavern singers and prestidigitating pigs. They elected Congressman John P. Van Ness, who later became mayor of the city, as the new chairman of a group formed to build a proper theatre in the nation's capital. Work began the following year, and the first building erected specifically for the performing arts was cleverly dubbed The Washington Theater.

A colorful procession formed at the corner of Pennsylvania and 12th Street on the day of the cornerstone laying, marching down to the building site at 11th and C Streets. Leading the parade was a band of the city's earliest professional musicians, "dressed in knee breeches with their buckled slippers flashing in the sunlight."

On November 16, 1804, the theatre was ready with its premiere performance. This was a "Grand Medley Entertainment" by the celebrated Mr. Maginnis from London, who had performed in many European capital cities before coming to America. His show offered songs, magic, and "spectacular effects." The new theatre was an immediate hit and operated with some success—and intermittent dark periods—for the next eighteen years. A few classics were played, including Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *School for Scandal* in 1805. Playgoers enjoyed other long-forgotten shows like *Ways and Means* or *A Trip to Dover* and *Wives as They Were and Maids As They Are*. Other titles offered by DC's first theatre included *The School for Reform*, *How to Rule a Husband*, *Day After the Wedding*, *The Wives' First Lesson*, and *Three Weeks After Marriage*, or *What We All Must Come To*.

Six years later at The Washington Theatre, James Fennell with the Philadelphia and Baltimore Actors Group, played lead in *Othello*, *Richard III*, *MacBeth*, and *King Lear*, apparently the first Shakespeare performances in the city. Tragedy struck in 1820 when the theatre caught fire at seven in the morning. Luckily, a snowstorm the previous evening protected the roofs of the adjoining buildings, but DC's first theatre was caput. While the final opinion was that the fire was accidental, theatres of the period were prone to combustion. Fires also destroyed the Philadelphia, New York, and Montreal theatres within six months.

In more auspicious performance spaces, Washingtonians were also entertained by the President's own Marine Band, which played at the chief executive's request for entertainments and ceremonies at the Capitol Building and the White House. Saturday concerts became popular on the White House lawns from May to November. President Thomas Jefferson himself decided that the band needed extra oomph

and requested the addition of two clarinets, a bassoon, two French horns, and a bass drum to enhance the band.

Eighteen seasoned Italian musicians were imported to bolster the band, arriving at the US Navy Yard in 1805. Resentment from the proud Marine players caused all but a few of the Italians to resign. Fortunately, Giatano Carusi, his wife, and three sons from Catania, Sicily, stayed on. Carusi became a Washingtonian musician of great popularity, as was the Italian march style that Carusi helped introduce to the Marine band. It was Carusi who purchased the charred remains of the Washington Theater and restored it to distinction. Reopened in 1823 as Carusi's Theatre, it became DC's fashionable venue for concerts, entertainments, and especially balls. Presidents John Quincy Adams, Polk, Jackson, Van Buren, and Taylor held their Inaugural Balls there.

Carusi brought European cosmopolitan culture to DC's new high society. As a music hall, early performances included Borska, then known as the greatest harpist in the world; Talburg, pianist; Viex Temps, violinist; Anna Bishop prima donna, and many other nineteenth century favorites. "The greatest furor created within its walls," declared *The Evening Star*, "was when (opera soprano) Adalina Patti, a mere child, sang two songs in concert – all that her manager would allow her to sing."

Another pair of Philadelphia actors, William Warren and W.B. Wood arrived in Washington in 1821 and proposed building a second theatre. They sold sixty shares at \$150 each to such distinguished gentlemen as John Quincy Adams, (not yet President) John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, and Commodore John Rodgers, who had commanded the frigate, "President" during the War of 1812. This raised enough money to build the New American Theater, located only a few blocks from the capitol building at Louisiana Avenue and 4th Street, holding 700 people. With this venture they broke the Washington Theater's monopoly on entertainment. The choice was now the American Theater or the New American Theater. Very catchy names. Sensibly, smoking was fiercely prohibited.

Plays popular in New York and London attracted DC audiences too. The premiere presentations were *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The Spoiled Child*. Soon well-known actors Edwin Booth and Edwin Forrest appeared in shows. Another actor, John Howard Payne, wrote and starred in *Clari* or *The Maid of Milan* starring an actress, “Mrs. Warring” who sang for the first time Payne’s extremely popular song, “Home, Sweet Home,” a favorite of both Confederate and Union soldiers during the Civil War.

The DC theatrical seasons ran for only five weeks during the winter with performers often returning to their homes away from Washington. One who stayed was Joseph Jefferson, a comedian whose stage personas “Paul Pry” and “Billy Lacaday” were popular. Another DC stalwart actor, “Old Joe” Jefferson and his performing family lived inside the New American Theater. Audiences loved Old Joe’s songs like the parody of “Nobody Coming to Marry Me” as “Nobody Coming to Bury Me.” His son, Joe Jefferson Jr., eventually became an actor, as well as the scene painter and manager at the theatre.

As DC’s population grew, so did the demand for entertainment. In 1831 the New American Theater was enlarged to fit a thousand patrons. However, during the 1830’s, Washington remained a work in progress. Washington incurred its first debt of \$1.75 million dollars by 1837. That would be near \$56 million today adjusted for inflation. With few incentives to build factories or any other inventions of the Industrial Revolution, the government town suffered economic ups and downs. By mid-century the New American Theater had gone downhill, reduced to a bath house, a bowling alley, and a pistol-shooting gallery in that order, until its reincarnation as “Canterbury Hall,” a variety theater during the Civil War. One of the more popular performance venues in DC, it featured plays, burlesques, comedy routines, circus acts, and melodrama. An observer described its atmosphere as consisting of “soldiers and roughs, screeching, catcalling, smoking, and spitting” with “scantly clad ladies.”

Records show that much of the popular entertainment of the Civil War era was indecent. DC’s early capital acts ran from the highbrow to the gutter.

Capital Acts: Washington DC Performing Arts

Lust murders were sentimentalized in ballads like “The Jealous Lover.” Abortion was sensationalized in “Tam Lin” and “Mary Hamilton.” Occasionally separate performances suitable for families or for “men only” were held. Some of the most popular bawdy songs included dreadfully indecent lyrics like “Up start the crab fish and catch her by the c*nt. Which made him have a mighty mind to clip, kiss, and f*ck.”

In 1872, Carusi’s Theater was elegantly revamped as the Washington Theater Comique and later became Kernan’s Lyceum in 1891, named for James L. Kernan, a theater manager and philanthropist based in Baltimore. But like many of DC’s entertainment venues, even this stately theater degenerated into “cheap variety” and “crude buffoonery.” It eventually became “Strictly a man’s house.” An urban pattern emerged as DC’s folk music and jazz clubs of the next century sometimes turned into strip joints.

Both the New American and the Washington Theater perished by fire in the late 1800s. The hurly-burly DC theater life of these two-of-a-kind early American playhouses, patronized by Senators, society ladies, soldiers, and strumpets came to an end. It would take two men with higher aspirations and a rivalry forged in the fire of the Civil War to set the stage ablaze in Washington once more (metaphorically of course).

* * *

“Get down you fool!” said Col. Wendall Holmes as President Abraham Lincoln ducked whistling bullets from Rebel muskets fired from Virginia at Fort Stevens, four miles north of the city in Maryland. Part of DC’s temporary defenses, these fortifications were often manned by clerks and convalescent troops.

Washington was under attack by Confederate troops in July of 1864 and the Civil War raged on. Bluecoats and civilian workers streamed into the city, swiftly transforming it into a colossal base camp for the Union army. The saloons thrived, the jails jammed with drunken soldiers, and the ladies of the night were kept busy. Restaurants sprung up. Reportedly, it took twenty men to shuck oysters for the hungry patrons of

Harvey's restaurant. For many the winds of war blew prosperously. Music hall managers catered to troops and camp-followers. Even under attack, wartime Washington was open for entertainment.

Patriotism swelled with public displays for DC's citizens. Large public spectacles on Pennsylvania Avenue with military parades and grand reviews of the "Army of the Potomac" attracted hundreds of sightseers to the city. It was said that the "sheen of the brass and the flash of the bayonets mesmerized the crowds," while the blare of bands and cannon fire was breathtaking.

An enormous military display took place near Bailey's Crossroads in November 1861 with 50,000 troops assembled to march off to war. Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, a visiting Bostonian, was so inspired she returned to her Washington hotel room at the Willard and wrote new lyrics for the popular abolitionist song, "John Brown's Body," and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was born.

Patriotic songs were popular at The Varieties Theater located on 9th Street near Pennsylvania Avenue—a barn-like building with bare rafters and shoddily plastered walls—a few blocks from the White house. Blustering with flags of the stars and bars, the popular venue provided a medley of nationalist songs each evening in a musical finale.

The question on the minds of two young men from Baltimore was, how they too, could join in on the heady prosperity to be found in wartime Washington.



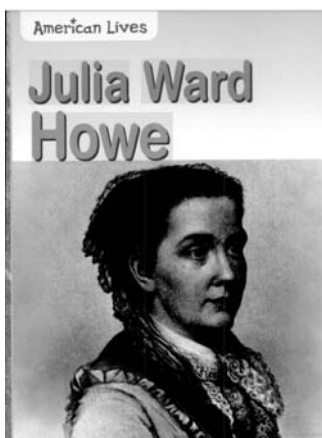
BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC.

BY MRS. JULIA WARD HOWE.

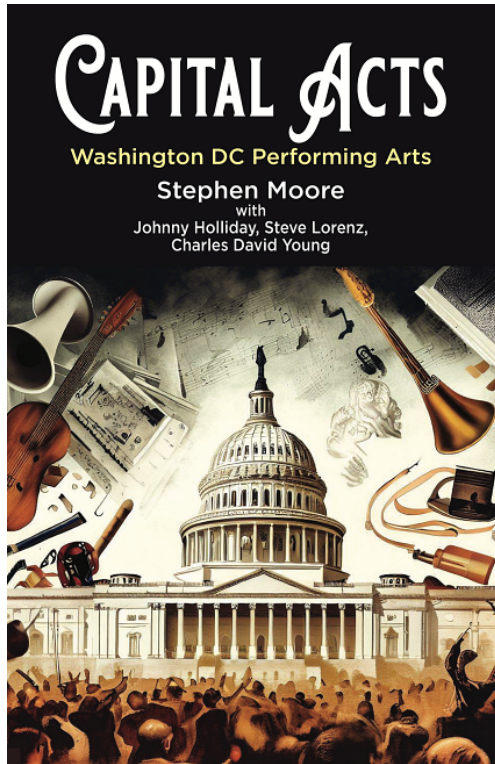
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath
are stored;

He hath loosed the fateful lightnings of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

CHORUS—Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.



by Elizabeth Raum (2004)



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