"Unhappy Differences:" The American Revolution and the Disruption of the Course of Theatre in Virginia

Allison Finkelstein
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/797
“UNHAPPY DIFFERENCES”: THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE DISRUPTION OF THE COURSE OF THEATRE IN VIRGINIA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in History from The College of William and Mary

by

Allison Sarah Finkelstein

Accepted for (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

________________________________________

Dr. James P. Whittenburg, Director

________________________________________

Dr. Richard H. Palmer

________________________________________

Dr. Susan A. Kern

Williamsburg, VA
April 23, 2008
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of many people. At the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. library provided many of the primary sources and images. Willie Graham and Jeff Klee at the Department of Architectural History generously provided permission for the use of several drawings and photographs. Particular thanks goes to the library’s Special Collections department and the Digital History Center where Lisa Fischer, Greg Brown, and Sarah Reeder went out of their way to assist me in my research. I greatly appreciate the long-distance advice from Odai Johnson, who eagerly answered my questions after a brief meeting at the Theatre Symposium Conference at Colonial Williamsburg in the Spring of 2007. Kevin Kelly provided vital insight on the Continental Congress. Rhys Isaac, Susan Kern, and David Finkelstein also provided much needed counsel. Special thanks go to Richard Palmer for his inspiration for this thesis several years ago and of course, to my supportive advisor, James Whittenburg, for all of his help, kindness, and encouragement, and my mother, Michel Finkelstein for her constant support.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

List of Illustrations 1

Introduction 2

Chapter 1: Pre-Revolutionary Theatre in America and Virginia 9

Chapter 2: The Darkened Theatre of War: The American Revolution and the Stalemate of the Theatre in Virginia 30

Chapter 3: Chapter 3. Post Revolutionary Theatrical Restoration and Renewal 62

Conclusion 78

Bibliography 81
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Sectional drawing of the 1760 Douglass Theatre in Williamsburg, Virginia. 13

Fig. 2. The interior of the Georgian Theatre in Richmond, England. 15

Fig. 3. *The Laughing Audience* by William Hogarth. 15

Fig. 4. American Company playbill, June 20, 1770. 26

Fig. 5. *Virginia Gazette* advertisement for the Virginia Company’s March 31, 1768 performance. 27

Fig. 6. *Virginia Gazette* January 28, 1775 announcement of the departure of the Douglass Company. 31

Fig. 7. *Virginia Gazette* February 17, 1775 announcement of the departure of the Douglass Company 32

Fig. 8. Graph, “Individual Delegate’s Votes by Region for the 1778 Recommendation Prohibiting Theatre.” 46

Fig. 9. Ticket for a box seat for a performance by the Old American Company. 65

Fig. 10. Latrobe’s 1797-98 sketch of the old Richmond Theatre. 68

Fig. 11. Latrobe’s design for the interior of the proposed Richmond Theatre. 70
Introduction

There can be little doubt that the theatre has—and has always had,—an influence and power over society. Much can be learned about a society, culture, or period of history by examining the theatre associated with it. Therefore, it is curious and regrettable that until recently, the theatre of early America has been greatly overlooked in most historical scholarship. Due to the work of Odai Johnson and the excavation of the Douglass Theatre of 1760 by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in 1996, the colonial American theatre has finally gained more attention and been investigated more thoroughly. These recent studies have highlighted the importance that theatre held in colonial America, especially in Virginia and its capital at Williamsburg. Indeed, theatre in the colonies became, as it had been in Great Britain, a popular pastime and an important part of social interaction.

Thus, it seems surprising that in 1774, on the eve of the American Revolution, the Continental Congress would ban all theatrical activities in the rebelling colonies. However, there has been only limited scholarship discussing this ban and the subsequent state of American theatre during the Revolutionary War, especially in the south and particularly in the influential state of Virginia. This thesis will therefore be an attempt to examine the early American theatre through the lens of Virginia in light of Virginia’s theatrical history, the congressional ban on the theatre during the Revolution, and the beginning stages of the theatre’s rebirth during the early federal period up to 1800. Chapter one will begin by exploring the state of the theatre in Virginia before the start of the Revolution and in comparison to the other colonies in order to gain an understanding of the theatrical traditions that preceded the Revolution and the ban. The second chapter will discuss the theatre occurring in Virginia during the Revolution. It will also examine
the Congressional ban in terms of its creation, implications, implementation, and enforcement, and how it affected the theatre in Virginia. Finally, the third chapter will investigate how the theatre re-emerged in Virginia after the Revolution to 1800. Though Virginia will remain the focus of the investigation, throughout each chapter, the theatre outside of Virginia will be briefly touched upon in order to put Virginia in the larger context of North America and draw necessary comparisons to the other states. After examining these periods of theatrical history in Virginia, a conclusion will attempt to reconcile the state of theatre there during the Revolution with its pre-Revolutionary past and post-Revolutionary renewal in order to better understand how the theatre in Virginia affected the nation as a whole.

Recent scholarship has begun to focus on early American theatre but has not paid any special attention to the trajectory of the theatre in Virginia. Theatre historian Odai Johnson’s detailed and analytic work, *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli’s Plaster*, investigates the early American theatre but stops just before the Revolutionary period. *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics*, by historian Ann Fairfax Withington, examines the Congressional ban on the theatre in great depth in terms of its larger meaning in the Revolution, but not with the specific goal of connecting this ban to America’s theatrical history. Jared Brown’s 1995 book *The Theatre in America During the Revolution* thoroughly and broadly investigates both the congressional ban on theatre and the theatre during the American Revolution. However, this work focuses on America as a whole, and although it discusses individual states, it does not focus on any state in particular in a way that considers the entire history of that state’s theatrical past. Likewise, the south is altogether
excluded in Heather S. Nathans’ 2003 work, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People*. This is particularly unfortunate in the case of Virginia, the birthplace of American theatre and until the Revolution, one of the bastions of the American theatrical tradition. One of the rare works that does focus on the South, Susanne Ketchum Sherman’s *Comedies Useful: A History of the American Theatre in the South, 1775-1812* presents detailed facts but offers little analysis of the information in terms of the larger theatrical history of the south.

New scholarship on the theatre of this era has continued to emerge, but nothing has yet focused on any individual state. Jason Shaffer’s 2007 book, *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theatre*, examines the different types of theatre occurring during the Revolution and connects the theatrical history of the colonial, revolutionary, and post-revolutionary periods, but does so in a broad manner. Jeffrey H. Richards’ 2005 book, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* examines the actual plays being performed starting at the end of the Revolution. It asserts how these plays and the American theatre began to create an American identity in the early years of the Republic, filling in the missing pieces of what happened to the theatre after the war. These works have all added greatly to the study of early American theatre and provide much critical information and analysis of this period. None of them, however, have ventured to specifically study the theatre of Virginia during the Revolution, overlooking an integral piece of the puzzle of the often elusive history of the early American theatre.

Thus, there remains a gap in the theatrical history of the southern United States and specifically Virginia, the region that gave birth to the first western theatre in North
America. The first theatrical production in Britain’s North American colonies took place in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1702 and from that time forward the theatre flourished in Virginia. It is significant that the theatre was an important part of life in Virginia because Virginia was one of the most influential states in the Revolution. The internal and external forces leading to the abrupt end to the theatre in Virginia during the Revolution require investigation for it seems out of character for a state so supportive of the theatre to lose it so suddenly. There is still much to be learned about the connections between Virginia’s theatre and the American Revolution that can inform our knowledge of the Revolution in that state and its effects on the nation as a whole.

The congressional ban on theatre, introduced by the Continental Congress in 1774 and again in 1778, serves as the critical dividing line in Virginia’s theatrical history. It broke the continuous progression of theatre occurring in the state and separated Virginia’s theatrical endeavors into two periods: those occurring before the ban and those occurring after. These two periods are highly dissimilar from each other in that one period occurred under British colonial rule while the other occurred under the newly formed government of the United States. Thus, this ban deserves critical consideration in this study as it significantly altered the course of the theatre in Virginia and the other states.

The ban itself raises many questions that, when answered, could explain Virginia’s theatrical history in this period, and, in a broader sense, Virginia’s unique character in comparison to the other states in the period before, during, and after the Revolution. If the theatre was so popular in Virginia and many of the other colonies, why would the Continental Congress ban it? Was the theatre less popular and less acceptable
in different regions of the colonies, overriding the opinions of Virginians who may have supported the theatre? What does this mean in terms of how differing regional attitudes affected the management of the American states during the Revolution? Did the ban on theatre represent a legal expression of a religious mindset of morality and frugality that existed in some states but perhaps not in Virginia at the start of the Revolution? Or perhaps the ban reflects an overall desire of the political leaders of all the states, despite whatever predilections they may have had for the theatre, to focus the efforts of the new country solely on the war, eliminating frivolous exploits and expenses in an attempt to advance the goals of the war.

Colonial American theatre closely resembled the British theatre of the time because it developed directly from the British theatrical tradition. During the Revolution, such a resemblance to the theatre of the enemy may have influenced some Americans to villianize this art. Perhaps the American theatre was too closely related to British theatrical traditions and was even so close a reflection of British theatre that it seemed to be a threat to the American cause in the war against Britain. Answers to all of these questions could provide potential explanations for the ban on theatre during the Revolution and need to be addressed in order to understand the effect of this ban on the theatre in Virginia.

Any study of the early American theatre is inherently challenging because of the limited resources available to study the theatre of this period. The theatre is by nature an elusive and fleeting art, present only for a particular time at a particular place, and often poorly documented and preserved. For this reason, it is an art that historically has been difficult to concretely document in the historical record. In the case of early America,
there are hardly any surviving documents and data on the theatre. For the colonial period, the most reliable sources include a few surviving playbills, newspaper records, and comments in private correspondence related to the theatre. There are no surviving playhouses from the eighteenth century and only one thorough archaeological investigation of an eighteenth century playhouse. Even this investigation, though illuminating, has led to still more unanswered questions about the theatre of early America.

This evidence dwindles to even smaller proportions in the Revolutionary period, when theatre was a prohibited activity, thus discouraging people from recording its existence. There may very well have been much more theatrical activity occurring in Revolutionary Virginia than is known today, but this can never be proven because scholars must of course work only from what they have. For Virginia in particular, there is very little trace left of the theatrical history of this period. This makes an investigation such as this one challenged in that the information that would benefit this study most is unavailable and non-existent. However, that is the nature of history, and despite this shortcoming in existing evidence, this study will work with what is known to create as a clear a picture of the theatre in Virginia as possible and find the meaning that has been overlooked in it for so many years.

Therefore, this examination will allow Virginia’s theatre before and after the Revolution to be more concretely understood. Such an examination will help to understand the trajectory that the theatre followed in Virginia. It is frequently said that theatre does not exist in a vacuum, and it is for this reason that one must consider Virginia’s theatrical history in light of the crucial events preceding and proceeding from
the American Revolution that exerted such a strong effect on the theatrical events in this state. Furthermore, Virginia and Virginians played a critical role in the events leading up to the American Revolution, the Revolution itself, and the founding of the United States. Much can be learned about Virginia’s history and the history of early United States by finally attempting a critical analysis of Virginia’s theatre in this period.
Chapter 1. Pre-Revolutionary Theatre in America and Virginia

Colonial American Theatre: A General Introduction

On the 24th of April in 1752, Londoners, accustomed to a steady selection of theatrical entertainments, had the choice of seeing either Henry VII at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane or The Fair Penitent at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden. On that very same day an ocean way, the citizens of Williamsburg in the British colony of Virginia enjoyed a performance of The Constant Couple and The Lying Valet by the Murray-Kean Company of actors in the town’s newly built playhouse. Despite the distance—physically, culturally, and politically—between Williamsburg and London, both cities enjoyed performances from the same theatrical tradition and were considered to be centers of urban theatrical activity in their respective locations.

By 1752 the theatre had already become a well established part of the cultural and artistic activities in the American colonies. Though only a few towns were privileged enough to have playhouses and be visited by the traveling companies of players that performed throughout the British colonies in North America and the West Indies, and although most colonists probably never saw a theatrical production, the theatre was by no means invisible to the populace. The activities of the colonial American theatre had become frequent and expected parts of city life by 1752. Many productions were performed on court days when citizens from the countryside would swarm the towns and to see the latest plays from London and assert their connections to England. On these days, the cities must have been buzzing with the excitement of the upcoming

---

entertainments from London, asserting the cultural connection between the British gentry’s tastes and the colonial population.\(^2\)

Indeed, the theatre in the colonies had become, as it was in Great Britain, a successful and flourishing means of artistic expression. This flowering of theatre in Britain, however, came about after a period that, starting with the 1737 Licensing Act, discouraged theatre by giving Parliament “statutory powers to ban all acting and all plays other those expressly authorized.”\(^3\) However, the British theatre continued to progress during this legislation with strength and resolve, maintaining the popularity of theatre among the population. It was this environment in Britain that produced the American theatre and from which its first major contributors such as William Hallam emerged.\(^4\)

In America, theatre, like so many other pursuits, had humble beginnings. Amateur performances on makeshift stages in taverns or barns sufficed until the eighteenth century. No doubt, this resulted from the more pressing need to establish the new colonies and focus first on those tasks which were essential to survival in the new land. Furthermore, the early colonies had no place for art such as the theatre. Virginia for example, was, as Edmund S. Morgan described it, “a crude society, peopled by crude men, but it was less crude and less cruel than that presided over by the labor barons of the 1620s. Only by taking a closer look at it can we perceive how much like England the Virginians made it—and how unlike it nevertheless remained.”\(^5\) Virginia would thus have

to emerge from its crude beginnings before the theatre could take hold in society, and though it did differ from England in many ways, the fundamental similarities between Virginia and England as described by Morgan would soon encourage a theatre very similar to that found in England.

As the years progressed and the colonies developed well-established societies suited to their situations, theatre based on the British model began to emerge in Virginia and to create a unique place for itself in colonial life. This mimicking of the theatrical traditions of Great Britain manifested itself in the many different components of the theatre from the actors to the material culture associated with theatregoing. By attending the theatre, American colonists could, in their own way, keep up with the culture and fashions of the mother country and assert their own cultural sophistication and connections with the British Empire.

The theatrical companies that traveled throughout the British colonies such as the Murray-Kean Company (1749-1752) and the Hallam Company (1752-1755) were composed of British actors performing British plays. The companies themselves were similar to the troupes of actors that traveled throughout the British provincial theatre circuits. Indeed, most of the performers hailed from London, Jamaica, or the British provinces. Many companies, such as William Hallam’s American Company, were composed of players from London or the provincial touring circuit and were accustomed to the life of a touring player. These companies were schooled in British theatrical traditions and brought these traditions with them to America.

---

The players also brought with them the repertoire of plays and authors they had performed in Britain. According to Odai Johnson, “the various colonial companies drew almost entirely upon plays well known to playgoers in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, and throughout the British Empire generally.” Johnson attributes this to the idea that America was in fact “the most distant provincial circuit” and therefore connected logically to the other British theatrical activities occurring in the expanding empire. As a result, audiences in America, as in Britain, were treated to a “mainpiece,” the featured full-length play, as well as a shorter afterpiece, usually a musical performance, farce or a pantomime. In terms of mainpieces, frequently performed plays included the works of Shakespeare and some of the most popular eighteenth century British plays such as *The Beggar’s Opera*, *George Barnwell, or The London Merchant*, *Cato, The Recruiting Officer*, and *The Orphan*. It seems then, that an audience member in Britain would have felt equally at home at a theatrical performance in London or the provinces as he or she might have at a performance in the American colonies in the far distant New World.

As the theatre continued to develop, this became even more evident in the actual theatre buildings that were built in America. These playhouses followed the model of British playhouses in the architectural features of their stages and houses. Archaeological excavations of the 1760 Douglass theatre in Williamsburg revealed a pit and pit passage, strongly supporting the collected evidence that early American theatres followed the pit, gallery, and box format common to British theatres of this period (figure 1). This division of the audience into different parts of the house created a social and economic divide within the playhouse. Box seats were by far the most prestigious and expensive, followed

---

7 Ibid, 62-67.
by the gallery, and finally the pit. Inexpensive bench seating in the pit allowed the theatre to be affordable and accessible to most colonists and created one of the rare environments where different socioeconomic classes interacted in colonial Virginia. Indeed, people came to the theatre as much to see a play as to be seen in society, as was the case in Britain.

These seating traditions were directly inherited from provincial British theatres as evidenced by such extant British theatres from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries such as The Georgian Theatre in Richmond, England and the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, England (figure 2). Even elements of the stage design were results of solutions to problems faced by British theatres. Excavations at the Douglass Theatre in Williamsburg unearthed an iron spike which may have lined the apron of the stage. Iron spikes such as there were a common feature of British stages needed to keep

Figure 1: Sectional drawing of the 1760 Douglass Theatre in Williamsburg. This image was created based on the archaeological data from the excavation of the theatre and extant Georgian era theatres in Europe. Note the three levels of seating areas, the pit being the raked section at the bottom of the drawing. Drawn by Willie Graham, courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
rioting audiences off the stage during performances (figure 3). American theatres did not seem to need these protective spikes, however, because, unlike English audiences, colonial American audiences were a tame, with few reported disturbances and only one known riot.\(^9\) That the theatre buildings nevertheless retained these precautionary spikes demonstrates the resilience of the British traditions and their importance in the American theatre. Thus, once these playhouses were constructed in the mid-eighteenth century, they created material and visual connections to the mother country within the architectural and artistic landscape of the colonies. In the opinion of Odai Johnson, “the presence of the playhouse was a landmark of high culture on the provincial skyline or forested map. It was, like an English garden, an ornament to a town.”\(^10\) Such was the case in Virginia’s capital city of Williamsburg, which boasted a playhouse for most of the eighteenth century.

---


Figure 2: The interior of the restored 1788 Georgian Theatre in Richmond, England. Note the similarities in the design of the seating areas and rectangular shape to the reconstruction drawings of the Douglass Theatre in figure 1. This theatre served as one of the models for those drawing and demonstrates the similarities between American and English theatre design. Photo by Willie Graham, courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Figure 3: *The Laughing Audience*, engraving by William Hogarth, 1733. This engraving clearly depicts the spikes that lined the English and American stages in the bottom left and right corners of the engraving. Image from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
Colonial American theatre, then, held close connections to the cultural, social, and artistic traditions of Great Britain. It can even be asserted that because of the apparent lack of original American theatrical creation, the colonial American theatre was in a way almost an extension of the British theatre of the eighteenth century. Obviously, this created the potential for problems for the Americans colonies when they broke off from Great Britain, for a theatre so closely tied to the traditions of the country that was now the enemy could be a threat to a people fighting to assert their own identity and independence against that same country.

Early American Theatre Outside of Virginia

Before specifically discussing the colonial theatre in Virginia, it is useful to have an understanding of the ways in which the theatre developed in the different regions and colonies beyond Virginia. The regional differences in the American colonies affected the ways in which the theatre manifested itself in those different regions. These distinctions can serve as a point of comparison to Virginia’s theatrical history and will later illuminate the unique aspects of Virginia’s theatre as it pertains to the Revolutionary period.

Unlike the southern colonies, where the theatre gained acceptance at the start of its establishment, the majority of the northern colonies opposed the theatre and its growth within the colonies. As explained by Heather S. Nathans, in “Boston, New York, and Philadelphia…the battle waged between pro- and anti-theatre factions…almost with the founding of the colonies and lasted up until the time of the Revolution.” ¹¹ Religious and political reasons caused this anti-theatre attitude which resulted in various laws meant to restrict its growth. This attitude was particularly predominant in New England. Originally

settled by Puritans, the New England colonies retained Puritan British attitudes regarding the theatre. In England, the Puritans had considered the theatre to be part of the “bawdy and corrupt Restoration culture” that they so hated and felt went against the values of morality that they held so dear.\(^{12}\) Thus, the city of Boston attempted to bar the theatre during the colonial era, even instituting a law in 1750 which imposing a £20 fine on anyone who sponsored or participated in a theatrical performance as well as a £5 fine on those in the audience.\(^{13}\) These measures are significant in that they demonstrate the extent to which the long held negative sentiments against the theatre were implemented in legislation attempting to halt the theatre’s existence in Boston. The New England region, therefore, was not a place conducive to the growth of colonial theatre.

New York City, today a place synonymous with superior theatre, did not immediately possess a strong theatrical scene. Although theatres did open in the city in the 1730s and the opposition to the theatre was not as deeply entrenched as in New England due to internal problems at the start of the eighteenth century, theatre in New York struggled to become properly established. Nathans’ asserts that “New York’s first theatrical endeavors may…have failed to thrive because of the political infighting that engulfed the city” during this time.\(^{14}\) It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the theatre began to prosper and the Murray-Kean and Hallam Companies traveled to the city and performed for its audiences. However, due to many different factors such as bad timing, the conversion of theatres into other buildings, and a family rivalry that tore apart

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 29.
the city, in 1754, New York still did not have a permanent playhouse.\textsuperscript{15} In spite of these factors, in 1758, David Douglass, manager of the Hallam Company, attempted to introduce a permanent theatre in the city. Nathans believes that his “failure to re-establish theatrical entertainments in a city that had previously been willing to support them becomes suggestive. What better way for a pro-Presbyterian, increasingly anti-royalist faction to exert its authority against a pro-Anglican pro-crown party than to deny it its luxuries and diversions?”\textsuperscript{16} The debate over the theatre in New York continued to rage until 1774, when it was sufficiently silenced by the Congressional ban on theatre and the American Revolution.

Moving south from New York, Pennsylvanians also engaged in a fight over the existence of the theatre in their state. Pennsylvania began its fight against the theatre in the seventeenth century when William Penn incorporated an anti-theatre law into the 1682 Frame of Government for the Colony of Pennsylvania, declared play going “an offense against God [which incited] people to Rudeness, Cruelty, Looseness, and Irreligion.”\textsuperscript{17} However, this law could not remain in place while the British government allowed theatre in other parts of the empire. Pennsylvania continued to debate about the theatre well into the eighteenth century with a long series of anti-theatre legislation that was enacted and repealed throughout the years. 1711 marked the third time the Quaker Assembly in Pennsylvania passed a prohibition of the theatre that was once again repealed in London. Johnson traces the opposition to the theatre to “1723 when a troupe

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 32.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 14.
of players in Philadelphia and the mayor of that city found himself at odd with the governor of the colony” over the suppression of the theatre.\textsuperscript{18}

It was not until the mid-eighteenth century and the rise of a new non-Quaker elite in Pennsylvania society that the theatre gained any foothold in the colony. In 1759 and then again in 1766 David Douglass, manager of the Hallam Company built a theatre in Philadelphia and used costumes and scenery from London in his productions. Finally, by the late 1760s, the Hallam-Douglass Company’s performances in Philadelphia allowed the elite classes there to experience the types of popular entertainments that were being enjoyed by their counterparts in England.\textsuperscript{19} Yet, the debates over the theatre in Pennsylvania were by no means finished, and would continue through the coming of the American Revolution.

The northern colonies, then, for religious and political reasons were not especially receptive or welcoming of the theatre, a mindset that would continue into the Revolutionary Era. In contrast to this attitude, the southern colonies seemed like a haven for thespians as the south warmly welcomed the theatre into its burgeoning colonial culture. Starting with the Chesapeake, the southern colonies were home to many playhouses and enthusiastic audiences. In Maryland, both Annapolis and Baltimore provided urban theatrical venues for the traveling companies of players to utilize. As an important and thriving colonial capital, Annapolis was privileged to enjoy many theatrical performances throughout the year and especially during the fall racing season. In the pre-Revolutionary theatre, three theatres were known to have been erected and the

\textsuperscript{18} Odai Johnson and William J. Burling, \textit{The Colonial American Stage, 1665-1774: A Documentary Calendar} (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 2001), 76.

city hosted the Murray-Kean Company, the American Company of Comedians, and the Douglass Company in the years before the Revolution. Annapolis dominated the early Maryland theatrical scene for as the capital city, much like its Virginia counterpart at Williamsburg; it attracted large groups of visitors and citizens interested in taking in the theatre. Thus, it remained a mainstay on the colonial theatre circuit throughout the eighteenth century.

Beyond Annapolis, Marylanders could sometimes find theatre in other parts of the colony such as Baltimore and Upper Marlboro, a less urban area which briefly hosted David Douglass’ company. Though Baltimore probably hosted sporadic performances earlier, Johnson’s *Documentary Calendar* cites it as “being far less important during the eighteenth century than its nearby neighbor Annapolis, Baltimore did not attract theatrical attention until very late in the colonial period…the first hard data consists of a playbill dated 10 July 1772.” Performers in Baltimore used various buildings as makeshift theatres such as stables and warehouses, demonstrating that their desire for theatre overcame their lack of a sufficient venue. Thus, as evidenced by David Ritchey, a historian of the Baltimore Theatre, Maryland seems to have accepted and encouraged the growth of theatre within the colony and, “in contrast to many theatrical centers in America in the eighteenth century, the citizens moral and religious attitudes never hampered the development of the theatrical activities in Baltimore,” and indeed, Maryland as a whole.

---

21 Ibid, 11.
Moving south to the colonies below Virginia, this pattern of urban theatrical encouragement continues, with theatres appearing in North and South Carolina. In the case of North Carolina, the theatre in the town of Halifax, a country seat, represented a provincial theatre perhaps not unlike those found in the outlying provinces of Great Britain. The Halifax theatre is thought to have been built sometime not long before 1769 during the tenure of Governor William Tyron who aimed to civilize this backwoods colony. Certainly, to a man recently arrived from Britain, the addition of a playhouse would have been a way to help heighten the cultural development of the colony.

This playhouse must have become a significant part of the town of Halifax, as a European surveyor brought by Tyron to map the town thought the playhouse important enough to depict on his map of the town. Though there is little known about the Halifax theatre and any other theatres that might have existed in colonial North Carolina, the mere presence of any playhouse in this colony demands attention, for, even in the 1760s, North Carolina was not as well developed as Maryland or Virginia. Johnson describes how “in the feral, underdeveloped colony of North Carolina, a material amenity, like a playhouse, a book-seller, Josiah Wedgewood dinnerware, or even a proper English garden was a thing to be proud of indeed,” making a theatre one of those treasure outposts of sophistication.\(^{24}\) Despite the inherent factors of North Carolina’s colonial position that could have prevented the development of the theatre, the theatre instead managed to blossom enough to prompt the building of a playhouse.

---

In contrast to the slowly growing cultural scene in North Carolina, by the start of the eighteenth century, South Carolina boasted a colonial society bursting with refinement. Indeed, “wealth and new-found leisure prompted an interest in the arts” in that colony.\textsuperscript{25} Even before the opening of the Queen Street Theatre in 1736, Charlestonians could enjoy performances at the Court Room and other temporary venues.\textsuperscript{26} Throughout the years preceding the Revolution, the Queen Street theatre would be replaced by three others, ensuring that the city continued to contain a playhouse within its boundaries. Charleston used the theatre as a way to assert the sophistication of the city, a sophistication modeled on that of Great Britain’s and meant to display the caliber of cultural and artistic expressions found in the newly forged colonies.

Rivaling the other southern cities, Charleston remained one of the foremost stops on the southern theatre circuit in the colonial era and enjoyed visits from the major acting companies. David Douglass, in the manner he had previously used in Charleston and in other cities, raised the funds for another replacement theatre in Charleston in 1773 through a subscription system that sought donations from local citizens in exchange for season tickets to performances. Charleston’s theatre must have had the support of the city’s population if they were willing to contribute monetarily to the construction of a new playhouse.\textsuperscript{27} In 1773, despite a weakened economy, Douglass’ aspirations for a new playhouse overcame economic problems and pressures from competing entertainment industries to build the theatre, not a surprising feat in Charleston, a city devoted to the

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Colonial American Stage, 1665-1774: A Documentary Calendar} (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 2001), 47-48.
\textsuperscript{27} Odai Johnson, Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli’s Plaster (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 82-83.
theatrical arts. “Furthermore, Johnson states, “no one was about to tell Charleston they could not enjoy their pleasure. Charleston would have its theatre because it represented something to them; an idea of Georgian order, of a certain civilizing force…the role of the fine arts in this generation was no small one.”

The southern colonies, then, supported the rise of the theatre for reasons of cultural identification with Great Britain as well as the assertion of the sophistication of their colonies and an honest love of the theatre. The religious and political forces adversely affecting the theatre in the northern colonies were not at work in the south. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, these regional differences in the colonies’ outlook on the theatre would be exaggerated by the rising political tensions in the colonies and would affect the actions of the colonies as they prepared for war with the mother country.

Virginia: The Birthplace of American Theatre

Virginia’s theatrical history forms a key part of any examination of early American theatre as it is where the theatre in American first began when in 1702 students from The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia performed “a Latin “pastoral colloquy” for Frances Nicholson, the Royal Governor of Virginia.” 29 Williamsburg is also thought to be the location of the first purpose-built theatre in America when between 1716 and 1718 William Livingston constructed a theatre on a parcel of land off the Palace Green. 30 From this time forward until the start of the

28 Ibid, 84.
American Revolution, Williamsburg and Virginia became bastions of the American theatre and a city that led the way for the development of the American theatre.

After Livingston’s theatre was converted into a court building in 1745, a new Williamsburg playhouse was built in 1751 behind the capitol building. Livingston funded this playhouse with money raised through a subscription system. In this way, the community became involved and invested in the creation of the playhouse. The fact that sufficient funds were raised through the subscription system demonstrates that the theatre must have been an important pastime to many people in the Williamsburg community for they were willing to invest financially in its future in the city.

By 1757, this theatre too needed to be replaced as it had been torn down. Located once again behind the capitol, its replacement, constructed in 1760, was also paid for by subscription through the work of David Douglass, manager of the Hallam Company, or The London Troupe of Comedians. This playhouse, excavated by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in 1996, became the most important theatrical institution in Virginia in the years preceding the American Revolution. It was here that George Washington and Thomas Jefferson regularly attended the theatre when they were in Williamsburg. Indeed, the theatre of 1760 played an important role in the activities of Williamsburg during this time, as is indicated by its location behind the capitol building. Analyzing the importance of the theatre’s position in Williamsburg, archaeologists Lisa Fischer and Tom Goyens conclude that “after the capitol was rebuilt following the fire of 1747, it formed a pivot around which various extra-political activities revolved:

commerce in stores and squares, socializing in taverns and the coffeehouse, and soon entertainment in the playhouse.”

As the capital of Virginia, Williamsburg was in a prime position to have a theatre. Its streets were regularly swamped with citizens from the far reaches of the colony that came for Court days, trading, shopping, and the sophisticated urban environment of the city compared to the countryside. These attractions gave the acting companies a continuous supply of audiences and incentive to make Williamsburg a main stop on their touring circuits. Likewise, the playhouse benefited the city as it elevated its cultural status and made it an appealing and enticing travel destination for Virginians, most of whom had little amusement in their rural homesteads.

Theatre in colonial Virginia faced little religious and legal opposition. It seemed that people from all levels of society attended and enjoyed the theatre, with such figures as Washington and Jefferson openly displaying their love for this art and perhaps setting an encouraging example for the rest of the colony as a result of these affections. Government officials were supportive of the theatre, allowing the companies to play in the colony and encouraging their ventures (figure 4). Advertisements for performances in The Virginia Gazette publicized the government’s endorsement and authorization of the theatre and named the official allowing them to perform. For example, an advertisement for a performance by the Virginia Company in 1768 read:

By permission of the Worshipful the MAYOR of Williamsburg,
At the old Theatre, near the Capitol,

---

By the VIRGINIA COMPANY OF COMEDIANS,
On Monday the 4th of April will be presented a TRAGEDY called DOUGLAS.  

This advertisement, one of many still in existence, clearly demonstrates the harmony existing between the theatrical players and the government (figure 5). The Governor of Virginia even wrote a recommendation to the town of Newport, Rhode Island for David Douglass, affirming his company’s “constant practice to behave with prudence and discretion in their private character.” Thus, Virginia became a haven for thespians and fans of the theatre alike, providing a supportive environment for the theatre’s development.

Figure 4: Playbill from the June 20, 1770 American Company production of The Clandestine Marriage and Thomas and Sally of the Sailor’s Return. Note the official Royal Seal at the top and the phrase “By Authority” publicizing the Virginia government’s official endorsement of the production. Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Despite the prominence and popularity of Virginia’s theatre, like the theatre in all the colonies, it had few characteristics defining it as uniquely Virginian. It could more properly be described as British drama performed in Virginia, for there were no plays published by Virginian writers and no material concerning Virginia itself to be performed. Some parts of the material being performed were altered for the Virginia stage, such as prologues and epilogues which in the eighteenth century were typically aimed at the specific audiences of each playhouse. A portion of one such prologue, for a September 22, 1752 performance of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Anatomist* by the “Company of Comedians from England” in Williamsburg provides an example of the way these pieces were aimed toward Virginians:
In this politer Age, on British Ground,
The sprightly Scenes, with Wit and Sense abound,
The brilliant Stage with vast Applause is crown’d,
And Shouts of Joy thro’ the whole House resound;
Yet not content to bear so great a Name,
The Muse still labour’d to encrease her Fame;
Summon’d her Agents quickly to appear,
Haste, to Virginia’s Plains, my Sons, repair,
The Goddess said, Go, confident to find
An Audience Sensible, polite and kind.
We heard and strait obey’d; from Britain’s Shore
These unknown Climes advent’ring to explore:
For us then, and our Muse, thus low I bend,
Nor fear to find in each the warmest Friend;
Each smiling Aspect dissipates our Fear,
We ne’er can fail of kind Protection here;
The Stage is ever Wisdom’s fav’rite Care:
Accept our Labours then, approve our Pains,
Your Smiles will please us equal to our Gains;
And as you all esteem the Darling Muse,
The gen’rous Plaudit you will not refuse.\(^{35}\)

This prologue mentions Virginia and makes a nod to its “polite and kind” encouraging audiences and ideal conditions for theatre within the colony, a place where the acting companies “ne’er can fail to find kind Protection.” However, it emphasizes the British heritage of the performances and performers who strayed “from Britain’s shore” to bring Virginians their talents. Thus, the players themselves were admitting that their performances, as with all the performances in Virginia and the other colonies, were transplanted from Great Britain to be performed for a colonial audience.

Performances such as this one continued regularly throughout the colonial era in Virginia. Though theatre occurred outside of Williamsburg in such places as Petersburg

and Fredericksburg, Williamsburg appropriately remained the center of theatrical activity. All this changed with the departure of the Virginia Company of Comedians in 1775 for Jamaica as a result of the impending war and the 1774 congressional ban on theatrical activity. Here ended the heyday of theatre in Williamsburg. The playhouse would remain dark during the Revolution and never again see a performance within its walls. The actual building was destroyed at least by June of 1780 when, as discovered by the team researching the 1760 theatre in Williamsburg, “a deed which conveyed a 30 foot by 35 foot parcel in the northwest corner of the Davenport/Draper lot in block 8 made reference to the acreage as the land ‘whereon the old Play House lately stood.’”36 The playhouse would remain in shambles underground until its discovery by Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists in 1996.

Virginia, having acted as a colonial leader in the theatre arts, would be hit particularly hard by the effects of the American Revolution and most importantly the Continental Congress’ ban on theatre. The era of encouraged and open theatrical expression would come to a close in Virginia by 1775, but would nonetheless leave a legacy of a vibrant theatre that would survive—at least in memory—until the end of the Revolution.

---

Chapter 2. The Darkened Theatre of War: The American Revolution and the Stalemating of Theatre in Virginia

Introduction

Society, culture, and art are always impacted by the events taking place in the nations in which they are present. During the American Revolution, the United States was being born through a conflict of military, political, and ideological aggression against Great Britain. Needless to say, this war impacted the artistic endeavors of the former British colonies in serious ways. In terms of the theatre, the American Revolution interrupted the growth of what was quickly developing into a strong, widespread, and growing network of theatrical activity. Virginia, one of the colonies with the longest presence of the theatre, combined with a population that adored this art form, felt this abrupt loss most keenly. Indeed, the departure of David Douglass’ Company of Comedians was deemed important enough to be announced in two statements (see figures 6 and 7) in The Virginia Gazette in 1775. The first, from January 28 stated that:

The company of Comedians, with Mr. Douglass, the manager, are preparing to embark for the island of Jamaica, and they will not return to the continent, until its tranquility is restored.37

The news was reported in the Virginia Gazette again on February 17, giving a more detailed explanation of the troupe’s departure:

This day will embark in the ship Sally, Capt. Bruce, for Jamaica, the American Company of Comedians, under the direction of David Douglass, Esq; where they intend exerting their justly applauded talents for the entertainment of the Ladies

and Gentlemen of that polite and opulent island, until the unhappy differences that subsist between the mother country and her colonies in America subside.\footnote{Dixon and Hunter, eds., “February 17, 1775, Page 4 Column 1: The Virginia Gazette,” Colonial Williamsburg Digital Library: Virginia Gazette by Issue Date, 2008 <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/VirginiaGazette/VGImagePopup.cfm?ID=4905&Res=HI> (29 March 2008).}

From these two announcements, it seems that the Douglass Company and the editors of the *Virginia Gazette* considered the news of the company’s departure to be important enough to publish twice. The theatre in 1775 thus formed an important part of Virginia’s colonial culture, even when the colony was on the brink of rebellion. It is therefore necessary to examine why and how such a popular art failed to continue in Virginia during the American Revolution.

Figure 6: January 28, 1775 *Virginia Gazette* statement announcing the departure of the Douglass Company from North America. Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Digital Library.
There were many reasons that the theatre in Virginia fell victim to the onset of the war for American Independence. Examining these reasons helps to illuminate not only the course of the theatre in Virginia, but also the course of Revolution in Virginia. It is beneficial in this study to compare Virginia’s experience of the Revolution and Revolutionary period theatre to the other rebelling regions in order to gain a better perspective of the unique intricacies of the Virginia experience in the context of the other twelve states. To begin, the main reason and most plausible explanation for the halting of theatrical activities in Virginia and the other states was the ban on theatrical activities enacted by the Continental Congress first in 1774 and again in 1778, which will be investigated further below.

However, the bans are not the sole explanation for Virginia’s theatrical hiatus. The political climate of a colony rebelling against its colonial government is not the ideal atmosphere for the production of plays directly inherited from the culture of that government. The British roots of the American theatre created a strong cultural
connection to Great Britain which may have been perceived as either threatening or detrimental to the patriot cause.

Furthermore, wartime activities were consuming much of the theatergoing population and distracting them from such pleasurable pursuits as the theatre, a situation that surely helped to convince the professional acting companies such as the Douglass Company to leave North America at the outbreak of the war. Without paying audiences, they had little incentive to stay in North America, as they had no work. Powerful past patrons of the theatre such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were occupied with leading an army and governing Virginia, respectively, and probably had very little time to spend in playhouses despite their previous frequent theatergoing habits.

Moreover, the economic effects of the war prevented potential audience members from being able to afford ticket purchases. With the states estranged from Great Britain and cut off from the British imports they had depended upon as colonies, the economy took a downward turn. The states struggled to supply themselves and feed their soldiers, especially as the heavy fighting in the north exhausted supplies there and a blockade of the coast hindered trade. Though Virginia initially benefited economically from the war by supplying the other states from their bountiful harvests and creating new manufacturing enterprises to replace both the British and Northern suppliers of the colonial era, Virginia eventually struggled just as much as the other states. Therefore, American citizens in all thirteen states found themselves toiling to survive the war, both on the home front and as part of the military, making theatergoing difficult to afford and

---

certainly unnecessary for survival. Hence, wartime conditions during the Revolution discouraged professional theatre.

This may seem to be a strange turn of events for modern audiences to come to grips with. Today, while in the midst of an ongoing war, our culture has continued to produce art of all kinds because internal and external political conflicts have not forced a hiatus upon these pursuits. However, life in eighteenth century America—especially while in the throes of a war being fought on American soil—was more deeply and more widely affected by such conflicts than any America is today, or has been in any other military conflict save the American Civil War. As a result, the context of the American Revolution itself helps to explain the demise of Virginia’s theatrical activity.

Changing conditions in Virginia during the war hindered the theatre’s continuance there. The capitol moved from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1780 and the new capitol city could not incorporate theatrical activity immediately into its society during the war. As a result, Virginia lost Williamsburg as its theatrical center just as it lost the touring companies of players at the start of the war. Accordingly, professional theatrical activity was stalemated during the war. However, this does not mean that theatre was entirely absent in Virginia during the revolution, though its playhouses were certainly inactive for the majority of the war. There were a few specialized and isolated occurrences of theatre during the revolution. However, the inactivity and general lack of theatre will prove to be an important part of the analysis of Revolutionary era theatre in Virginia. A lack of theatrical activity is just as significant as an abundance of theatre would be in the context of Virginia’s theatrical history. There is very little that is known concretely about theatre in Virginia during the American Revolution; little documentation of the subject survives.
and much of what is known is incomplete. As described by Odai Johnson, the unofficial record of these activities has not survived and there is little trace of what actually happened. However, just because we do not know about it, does not mean that more did not happen with the theatre in Virginia during the revolutionary period.  

40 There may certainly have been much more happening with the theatre than we know about; however, the practicalities of history force us to study only what we know and form our opinions based on that knowledge.

The 1774 Congressional Ban

1774, the year during which the first ban on theatre was passed by the Continental Congress, formed a turning point in Virginia and the other colonies’ progress toward Revolution. In that year, Parliament passed the Intolerable or Coercive Acts, which, among other things, closed the port of Boston, prompting Virginia to respond by holding a day “fasting humiliation, and prayer.”  

41 Also in Virginia, the Governor, Lord Dunmore, dissolved the House of Burgesses, inspiring many of Virginia’s now former lawmakers to “form an association to boycott tea and other British imports and issue a call for a Continental Congress.”  

42 This call was met in September with the formation of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia, the governing body that penned the ban on theatre. Virginia took a leading role in the rebellious events of 1774 leading to the formation of the Congress, the formal declaration of independence from Great Britain, and the official start of the Revolution. A hotbath of patriots and performance, though


42 Ibid.
perhaps with not enough room for both, the theatre started to fade from the forefront of Virginia life as calls for Revolution began to drown out the sounds of the stage.

By 1773, it seems that performances were taking place less and less frequently in Virginia. Johnson and Burling’s *The Colonial American Stage, 1665-1774: A Documentary Calendar* cites no performances in Virginia for 1773 and only one unidentified performance in Richmond for 1774. The performing companies had not stopped performing altogether, but were rather performing more frequently in other colonies than Virginia, especially South Carolina. A notice from the *Virginia Gazette* dated July 7th, 1774, mentions the performances occurring in South Carolina and suggests that the troupe performing there would soon be coming to Williamsburg:

> By letters from Charlestown we are informed that...the theatre in that city was closed after performing 51 plays, and that Lewis Hallam, Miss Hallam, and Mr. Woolls, were embarked for England the rest of the company are expected very soon in this city.

However, the documentary record shows no appearance by the Hallam Company in Williamsburg again, the next mention of them being the 1775 announcements of their departure, leading to the conclusion that the company most likely never played in Williamsburg as this notice predicted. Indeed, by the summer of 1774, Virginia, and the colonies in general, were quickly becoming a far from ideal place to practice theatre. By the time of the Congressional ban, there was little theatrical activity taking place in Virginia to prohibit. Nevertheless, the ban certainly affected any future theatrical endeavors in Virginia, discouraging the production of plays and encouraging theatrical

---


44 Ibid, 473.
companies to leave Virginia and the colonies altogether to wait out the duration of the impending war elsewhere.

The ban itself was a product of the first Continental Congress, a gathering of representatives from twelve colonies formed through an agreement of the committees of correspondence that created lines of communication between the separate colonies. Virginia and Virginians played a large role in the formation of the Congress, leading “the way in the use of a colony-wide convention to garner power away from the legislature” and inspiring the other colonies to do the same and eventually form a united congressional governing body. Once this governing body—the Continental Congress—had formed on September 5, 1774, it began to work together and unite amidst the growing rebellion against Britain.

The legislation comprising the ban was not an independent declaration by the Congress. Rather, it was tucked away in the eighth point of the Articles of Association. The Articles of Association were created in response to “those grievances and distresses, with which his Majesty’s American subjects are oppressed” in an attempt to “obtain redress of those grievances.” The different points of the Association included “non-importation, non-consumption, and non-exportation” agreements among the twelve states (Georgia did not send delegates to the Congress) and focused on economics. The theatre gained attention in the Association within the eighth point, alongside other activities and customs that the Congress decided to abstain from.

---

8. We will, in our several stations, encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts, and the manufactures of this country, especially that of wool; and will discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibitions of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments; and on the death of any relation or friend, none of us, or any of our families, will go into any further mourning-dress, than a black crape or ribbon on the arm or hat, for gentlemen, and a black ribbon and necklace for the ladies, and we will discontinue the giving of gloves and scarves at funerals.48

The wording of this point in the Association gives as the justification for the encouragement of the prohibition of “shews, plays and other diversions” the promotion of “frugality, economy, and industry.” Therefore, according to the Congress, theatre was detrimental to the promotion of these aspects of society. It is significant that these reasons are primarily economic reasons and not ideological reasons. The purpose of the Association was to counter the Intolerable Acts and to promote economic independence from Great Britain by disassociating the colonies from Britain’s economic pursuits. The Association would also make the Congress’ voice both heard and felt as it would be economically damaging to Great Britain to lose its trade and business from the colonies. In the Association, theatre was being evaluated economically and was determined to be harmful to the economic and political goals of the Association, thus leading to its inclusion in this list of injurious activities. This economic reasoning is an important difference between the 1774 and 1778 ban, as will be examined later.

The Association was agreed upon unanimously and signed by all the delegates of the Continental Congress. The Association’s success depended upon the agreement and participation of all the states and delegates. There were of course, many Virginians who signed their name to the Association such as Peyton Randolph, President of the Congress,

and the six Virginia delegates who included George Washington. Though these Virginians—certainly Washington at the very least—may have disagreed with the point that prohibited the theatre they could not allow this disagreement to affect their support of the Association itself. An important statement by the Congress, the Association represented a strong united action by the colonies to make their voices heard in Britain, and the part discouraging theatre was insignificant in contrast to the larger, more significant goals of the Association. It is not surprising then that the Virginians present did not fight for the theatre’s right to continue: they had bigger issues to fight for, no matter how much they loved the theatre, they had to act in solidarity with the other delegates on the issue of the Association.

This sense of solidarity certainly affected the creation of the ban on theatre and other pleasurable pursuits, as a society abstaining from such activities would seem better suited to form a united front in its political mission. Though the Continental Congress was not able to enforce this banning of the theatre, it had a made a very strong statement about its opinion of the theatre in the Association, an opinion that certainly influenced the states and citizens and perhaps convinced them to follow it for the good of the cause of liberty. Thus, a recommendation by Congress had strong resonance in the colonies participating in the Continental Congress, thus putting a temporary end to theatrical activities in those colonies and Virginia.

---

The 1778 Congressional Ban

On October 12, 1778, the Continental Congress, as they did four years before, moved to suppress theatrical entertainments and other extravagances in the states. The resolution stated that:

On Motion, That Congress come to the following resolutions:
   “Whereas true religion and good morals are the only solid foundations of public liberty and happiness:
   “Resolved, that it be, and is hereby earnestly recommended to the several states, to take the most effectual measure for the encouragement thereof, and for the suppressing of theatrical entertainments, horse racing, gaming, and such other diversions as are productive of idleness, dissipation, and a general depravity of principles and manners.
   “Resolved, That all officers in the army of the United States be, and hereby are strictly enjoined to see that the good and wholesome rules provided for the soldiers are duly and punctually observed.”

There are several significant words and phrases in this resolution that expose the thinking of the Continental Congress and the atmosphere in the fledgling United States at the time. First, the opening statement of the resolution describes “true religion and good morals” as the reasons behind the resolution and the path to the “public liberty and happiness” as the goals the Revolution aimed to achieve. This statement thus frames theatre and entertaining pursuits as not only immoral but also detrimental to the cause of liberty being so ardently fought for by the states. Those supporting these activities, then, were deemed to be hurting the cause of patriotism and encouraging immorality. Religion and morality justified the resolution with the idea that theatre is irreligious and immoral. Such an idea aligns directly with the colonial views on the theatre expressed by much of the North in the colonial era.

This attitude and the justifications for the ban on theatre stand in contrast to the justification given for the 1774 ban on theatre in the Association. The 1774 measure cited economic reasons and made no mention of religion or morality. Certainly, as part of the larger Association, the 1774 ban had little reason to discuss morality or religion as the Association focused on economics and the voicing of grievances to the British government, whereas the 1778 ban was written for the American people as an independent nation. The goals and audience of the Congress had changed and the delegates were now focused on governing their people and running the war. They were presently concerned with the morality and religious views of the people and how these factors would affect the success of the war and the character of the new American people. Ann Fairfax Withington, in her historical analysis of the moral code imposed by the Congress, states that “the particular restrictions that Congress imposed, seemingly so anomalous and arbitrary, worked as a political strategy. Colonists gave their sanction to certain values, related political resistance to moral resistance (the resistance to temptation), projected personal emotions onto a political cause, brought the world of constitutional grievances into everyday life” and connected politics, morality, religion, and art all in the name of the success of American independence.  

The attitudes of the 1778 legislation regarding the morality of the theatre seem to be more in line with the views of the colonial north rather than the south. The New England states and Pennsylvania opposed the theatre for religious reasons. This ban seems to be the victory in their fight against the theatre, more easily achieved and accepted in a time of war and in the name of the greater good of the cause of

---

independence. Johnson asserts that “what Congress passed was a political expedient for the New Englanders” for the opinions of the northern states were overriding the opinions of the southern states whose previous support of the theatre was no longer deemed acceptable by the northern states.\textsuperscript{52}

Next, the theatre is not seen as a productive part of society for it is described as being part of the group of entertainments called “productive of idleness, dissipation, and a general depravity of principles and manners” in the resolution. These activities were portrayed as wasteful and insignificant, especially to a nation at war. Once again, this matches the opinions of the colonial north but certainly not those of the colonial south, where the theatre was adored by all levels of society and considered necessary by those who paid for subscriptions to build theatres in their communities. The northern viewpoint of theatre seems to have overridden the southern viewpoint in the Congress as demonstrated by this ban. The attitudes expressed in the resolution reflect a northern biased view of the theatre as well a long held view inherited from Europe that the theatre was a lewd part of society.

With this resolution, the Congress seems to be encouraging the states to focus on the war effort and cut out all extravagances that did not directly advance the course of the war. Of course, with this attitude, the Congress was forgetting the importance of morale, especially on the home front and in the military camps, and how that morale could be maintained by the occasional theatrical entertainment to lighten the lives of the citizens and soldiers. The resolution did not and could not completely prevent theatre from occurring in the states.

\textsuperscript{52} Odai Johnson, <odai@u.washington.edu> “Question regarding theatre in VA during the American Revolution,” 24 March 2008, personal email, (24 March 2008).
Many people directly involved in the war effort, from officers in the military to figures as prestigious and powerful as Washington and Jefferson had a predilection for the theatre, and would be involved with the theatre during the war in spite the law. Indeed, that leads to the final point in the resolution “that all officers in the army of the United States” should encourage morality among their soldiers. According to the previous statements in the resolution, this meant that officers had to discourage theatre and entertainments among their troops as those activities represented a “general depravity of principles and manners.” This section of the resolution is significant in light of the events that took place at the encampment of the Continental Army at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania beginning in December 1777 and lasting through the spring of 1778. During their stay at Valley Forge, as will be discussed further below, Washington’s soldiers put on a performance of the play *Cato*.\(^{53}\) Perhaps, then, this final part of the ban was intended to prevent such performances by the officers and soldiers of the Continental Army and criticize Washington and his army for such immoral and unproductive activities. It is telling that the ban was revisited in the same year as the Valley Forge performance and in October just before the start of the next season of winter to spring army encampments. It may have been re-instituted in the hopes of preventing similar performances in the military camps.

Thus, the Continental Congress worked to eliminate theatre from America during the Revolution. Congress, however, did not have the authority to truly enforce the ban on theatre, nor any other legislation they passed. Withington clarifies this, explaining that “the Continental Congress had no legal authority. Nor did it operate as a government. It

---

did not legislate, adjudicate, collect revenue, or allocate resources. The legally constituted governments of the colonies still consisted of the governors, the general assemblies, and the courts.”

Nevertheless, even if it could not be technically enforced, such a statement by the united body representing the states still held sway over the activities of Americans and guided them in their actions. It acted as a strongly worded recommendation to the states to follow the advice of the Congress for the good of independence and can therefore still be considered a ban of a great degree of influence, even if it was not technically enforceable in each of the states.

An Examination of the Voting Record from the 1778 Ban

In evaluating the reasons for the 1778 ban and Virginia’s participation in this piece of legislation, it is useful to examine the voting record of the Continental Congress on the resolution (figure 8). Although this voting record holds several surprises in terms of which states voted for the measure in light of their colonial theatrical history, it also supports the idea that Virginia held the theatre in high regard and was not completely convinced of the evils that the Congress attributed to it.

In accordance with their colonial views that condemned the theatre, the delegates of the New England states and New Jersey all voted for the measure; New York did not appear on the voting record.

Three out of the four Pennsylvania delegates voted in support of the measure making Pennsylvania the northernmost state with any delegates voting no. In accordance with the popularity of colonial theatre in Maryland and North Carolina, these states voted unanimously in opposition of the measure; however, with

---

55 Note: The Journals of the Continental Congress cites no reason for New York’s absence from the voting record.
Maryland having only one delegate and North Carolina only two, their support of the theatre could hold little sway. Surprisingly, South Carolina, once a stronghold of the theatre, voted unanimously for the bill and Georgia had only one of its three delegates vote against it.

Virginia represents the only state with the vote divided equally among its four delegates. Given its colonial predilections for the theatre, it is surprising that Virginia's delegates did not vote unanimously against the ban. However, it is important to take into account that war must have changed the perspectives of those leading Virginia and forced them to perhaps put their personal and cultural preferences to the side in order to do what was best for the greater good of the revolution. Thus, the fact that even two of Virginia’s delegates voted against the measure demonstrates their support of the theatre even in troubled times and their willingness to split from their other home state delegates and vote as they saw fit. Despite the forces of war, Virginia, as represented in the Continental Congress, tried, at least partially, to prevent the reissue of the ban on theatre and speak up in support of the theatre’s existence during the Revolution. Virginia, to some extent, despite the theatre’s current absence and the wartime situation, still regarded the theatre as a positive cultural and artistic institution.
American Military Theatre and the Motivations for the 1778 Ban

By 1778, the American Revolution was well underway and Virginia was fully embroiled in its furious course towards independence. George Washington and the main part of the Continental Army under his command began the year with the grueling winter encampment at Valley Forge. The war continued through the year with most of the major engagements occurring in the north and middle-Atlantic. This left Virginia mostly untouched by the scars of battle until May 8, 1779 when the British Navy appeared off Norfolk. However, Virginia, along with the other states, was entirely focused on the

---

war effort, an effort that was gradually draining each of the states of its men, money and food, though Virginia was fortunate enough to be one of the last states to suffer greatly. The nation was still in the learning process of democratic self-governance and, as historian Harry M. Ward observes, “the emergency conditions of wartime and the decision for independence tested the liberties that Americans had secured under their colonial governments and the British Constitution…the regularly constituted authorities experimented to some extent with measures infringing upon civil liberty.”

The constitutional ban on theatre could be considered one of these minor infringements during this experimental period of government. Since the ban’s creation in 1774, the tense state of affairs in North America had dramatically increased, perhaps convincing the Continental Congress of the need to remind the states of the 1774 regulations concerning the theatre in these times of greater hardship during which idle entertainments may have seemed even more dangerous to the Congress. Certainly, the text of the ban emphasizes the need to prevent “idleness” in the population as a result of theatre. The 1778 ban can be seen as a reminder to the population to focus their efforts on the war, using the power of the Congress to suggest the suppression of entertainments deemed detrimental to this cause. Though perhaps not a full infringement on liberties, the ban, once again, represented the ways in which the young government was using its power to manipulate the states into following their own agenda for success in the Revolution.


The military situation in 1778, however, was not the only motivation for the revival of the ban on theatre. Theatrical activities had continued to take place even under the 1774 ban. Though the professional acting troupes were no longer in residence in North America and most theatres seem to have shut down, plays were being staged in the American states in military camps by officers and soldiers, both British and American. Theatre historian Jared Brown traces this tradition back to the colonial period when “plays were good for morale and gave opportunity for camaraderie …even back during the French and Indian War, at the frontier Fort Cumberland in Maryland, Washington’s officers of the Virginia regiment had put on Nicholas Rowe’s *Tamerlane* for their own amusement.”\(^58\) Thus, military theatre was not a new occurrence in 1778 and its development should not have surprised the Continental Congress.

The most famous instance of American military theatre during the Revolution before the reissue of the ban did not take place in Virginia, but involved one of Virginia’s most prominent figures—George Washington—during the encampment of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge. Although Washington was well aware of the 1774 ban on theatre—he had signed it into existence as a member of the First Continental Congress—he allowed theatrical productions at Valley Forge as that miserable winter melted away into spring. There are two known performances that occurred, one on April 15 of an unknown play and another on May 11 of Joseph Addison’s *Cato*, Washington’s favorite play.\(^59\) The plays were presented in the Bakehouse, a multi-purpose stone building which became the


camp’s makeshift playhouse in a manner not unlike that of the early colonial period when purpose-built playhouses were an exception.\textsuperscript{60}

In going against the congressional decree against the theatre, Washington was surely influenced by his own personal devotion to the theatre, and even more than that, a hope that the theatrical entertainments would please his weary soldiers. It has even been suggested that Washington sponsored these activities to increase morale after the hard winter at Valley Forge. He may have decided to relax any objections he may have had to going against the wishes of Congress in order to give his army a few hours of rare pleasure.\textsuperscript{61} By condoning and possible encouraging the plays at Valley Forge, Washington harkened back to his Virginia roots and the importance of the theatre in his home, recreating his favorite Virginia pastime in the Pennsylvania camp and asserting the theatre’s necessity even when declared “immoral” by himself and the Congress.

Perhaps then, the 1778 renewal of the measure against the theatre represented a response to the theatre at Valley Forge and Washington’s decision to disregard the previous 1774 measure. Indeed, Washington was personally informed of the intentions of this congressional measure through a letter sent to him by Henry Laurens, President of the Continental Congress and father to his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens.\textsuperscript{62} On October 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1778, one day after the re-issue of the ban, Lauren wrote to Washington that

“within the present inclosure Your Excellency will receive the undermentioned Papers. 1. An Act of Congress of the 12\textsuperscript{th} Inst. Strictly enjoining all Officers in the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\end{thebibliography}
Army of the United States to see that the good and wholesome Laws provided for the preservation of Morals among the Soldiers be duly observed.”

It cannot be determined whether Laurens intended to simply pass along the news to Washington or personally reprimand him for the theatrical events at Valley Forge the winter before and remind him not to allow such occurrences again. However, it is clear that news of the ban’s revival in Congress and its intentions were considered important enough for the President of the Congress to personally tell the commander in chief. Washington, after receiving this letter, certainly realized the seriousness of Congress regarding this issue and could not misunderstand their opinions of the theatre. Thus, Washington, perhaps the most powerful Virginian in the nation and a lifelong friend of the theatre, was told by the Continental Congress that this pastime was immoral and it was his job as commander of the armed forces to prevent, not promote it among his officers and army.

Things had certainly changed for Washington, who once frequented the Williamsburg playhouse as regular member of the audience several nights a week before the war. The war had cost him, as well as his army, his people, and his state, the privilege of enjoying an art he once adored while residing in Virginia. Although the performances at Valley Forge did not take place in Virginia, they are significant in that they involved a prominent Virginian who became a de facto representative of Virginia, and who, in going against the ban on theatre while at Valley Forge, stood up for his —and Virginia’s— belief in the theatre arts even in the midst of war.

---

Theatre Outside of Virginia During the American Revolution

The theatre in the twelve states besides Virginia experienced a reduction in theatre during the American Revolution similar to the reduction experienced in Virginia. The experiences of these other states during the Revolution help to put Virginia’s experience into perspective. The congressional ban, approved wholeheartedly by most of the states, successfully prevented the proliferation of theatre during the war just as it did in Virginia. Most of the theatre performed in the other states was associated with the British military, save a few special exceptions. Therefore, it is useful to examine British and American theatre outside of Virginia separately in order to distinguish the two from each other.

The British military had a particular fondness for the theatre and spared no time or expense in pursuing their theatrical activities even in the midst of a war on unfriendly soil. Nathans points out how “the colonists, wearied by the privations of the war, regarded this as the ultimate insult—that the British should take such a casual approach to the war as to spend more time painting scenery and putting on plays than fighting!”64 In Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Savannah, the British staged plays during their downtime between campaigns and engagements. They used whatever buildings were available and even took over dormant theatres such as the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia, used by General Howe’s army in 1778. The British military—both officers and enlisted men—intending to make their time in America more pleasurable, ranked the replication of the English theatrical tradition high among their off-duty objectives. For example, in Boston, Brown argues that although “Burgoyne’s troops may not have been as worldly as their general, but they missed the joys of England no less. Accustomed to

---

the delights of the British theatre, it is not surprising that the officers, led by Burgoyne, wasted no time in turning historic Faneuil Hall into a theatre.”

Under no obligation to the congressional ban, the British participated in theatre throughout the war, while the Americans remained starved of theatre during their quest for independence. These military performances served to further connect the theatre to Great Britain, an extremely negative connection while the Americans were fighting the British. The American theatre already closely resembled the theatre of the enemy, and now the enemy was publicly stressing this resemblance by performing theatre themselves. This led the American government and people to deepen the association of the theatre with the British and supply yet another reason to discourage it.

The theatrical activities of the British on American soil, however, did have some positive effect on the American theatre. British productions reminded the Americans of the pleasures of the theatre even if they could not indulge in it themselves. Even though they were produced by the British military, these performances still served to keep the theatre alive in America, for even though this was not technically ‘American’ theatre, it still succeeded in keeping the theatre in the awareness and memory of the Americans. Thus, the British military theatre during the war ultimately benefited the creation of an American theatre in the new republic.

‘Proper’ American theatre remained mostly inactive during the war years with the exception of rare events such as the American military performances at Valley Forge. There were other rare occasions of American military theatre during the war, primarily before the passage of the 1778 ban. It is thought that, based on the suggestions in the

---

66 Ibid, 170.
poetry of Jonathon Sewall “American officers may have acted in several plays in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1778, although it is possible that the performances were by civilian amateurs.” While it is possible that there were performances by the American military at Portsmouth, like much of the Revolutionary theatre in America, there is no definite proof, only speculation based on rumors.

It is not until 1781 that there is any evidence of the American military again attempting theatrical performances. In that year in Reading, Pennsylvania, an officer named Lieutenant Enos Reeves described in a letter some performances that were given by himself and other American officers. In discussing this letter, Brown notes that “Reeves’s letters do not betray any feeling of guilt that the performances were given despite Congress’s disapproval. Nor do they indicate that Reeves was even aware of Congress’s attitude. The commanding officer must have known that they would have been frowned upon, however: Presumably he decided to permit them regardless of the disapproval by Congress.” Perhaps by 1781, officers were no longer fearful of punishment for going against the ban. Also in Pennsylvania in 1781, Philadelphians saw performances of a one-man show at the Southwark theatre—lately used by the British military—by the minister of France presented for the enjoyment of George Washington. After more than six years without theatre, Americans of all kinds were probably theatre-starved and willing to take risks to enjoy a performance, especially as the war came to a close.

Other types of known performances during the course of the war outside of Virginia include performances by college students. Students are known to have

---

67 Ibid, 65.
68 Ibid, 136.
69 Ibid, 138.
conducted performances at Yale, Harvard, and the College of New Jersey. These performances included plays as well as performances disguised in name as dialogues and dramatic representations.\textsuperscript{70} Theatre historian Jason Shaffer explains that “although the Revolution put a damper on both the amateur and professional theatres, American college students proved tenacious in their desire to continue acting plays. In 1781, for instance, students at Harvard produced several propaganda plays recounting important events of the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{71} These students were willing to defy Congressional opinion in order to continue their dramatic performances and education in the midst of the Revolution which had virtually cause the annihilation of the American theatre.

Theatre in Virginia during the American Revolution

Between the congressional measure banning theatre, the war, and the reasons previously discussed, the theatre remained largely inactive in Virginia during the course of the Revolution. The touring companies had fled, the playhouses were dark, and the theatre seemed to be at a standstill. There is very little documentary evidence regarding what, if any, theatrical activities took place. For obvious reasons, the ban by Congress must have dissuaded people from advertising any theatrical activities that may have occurred. In her analysis of the code of behavior created by the Continental Congress, Ann Fairfax Withington makes the point that “banned activities, like empty holes, cannot be seen. We can, however, get around the invisibility by roaming through the tracts of moral condemnation…and by dissecting the activities themselves.”\textsuperscript{72} An absence of theatre has much meaning because even without an abundance of facts and evidence it

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 133.
can shed light on the theatre’s place in eighteenth century Virginia and Virginia’s participation in the Revolution.

Fortunately, there are a few known theatrical events to discuss, and speculation can also shed some light on this elusive wartime activity. To begin, theatrical events in Virginia during the Revolution were not necessarily associated with the rebels. The patriots’ British brethren, being great lovers of theatre and under no obligation to the Continental Congress, participated in the theatre throughout the war in the various colonies, Virginia included. Indeed, there are documented performances by British and Hessian troops in Virginia beginning in the spring of 1779. After the defeat of General John Burgoyne—himself a playwright and thespian—at Saratoga in October of 1777, some of Burgoyne’s British and Hessian officers and enlisted men were held prisoner in Virginia. As prisoners of war, the British troops entertained themselves with amateur theatrical productions, a common practice in the British army.

Burgoyne’s troops were held prisoner in Charlottesville in Albermarle County—home of Thomas Jefferson—and its neighboring counties. The prisoners at these camps erected playhouses and arranged their own amateur performances as had been their custom all through the war so far. These performances were perhaps the only performances occurring in Virginia at the time, and if they were not the only performances they were probably the most professional performances. Former American Company actor Thomas Wall and his wife, who had decided to remain in North American when the rest of the company departed before the war, had joined the amateur theatrical group established under Burgoyne while the general occupied Boston in 1775.

With the capture of Burgoyne’s army at Saratoga in October 1777, the Walls became prisoners of war. As they were captured along with Burgoyne’s troops, they were taken to a prisoner of war camp in Charlottesville, Virginia and can be assumed to have participated in the camp theatre there, giving the amateur group a more professional edge.74

In a twist of irony demonstrating that the American Revolution was in some ways a civil war pitting former friends, colleagues, and brethren in arms—and in this case actors and audience members—against one another, a prominent former audience member of the Wall’s and now an enemy of their present theatre company received an invitation to see one of their performances. Thomas Jefferson, now governor of Virginia, received a letter dated August 12, 1779 from William Phillips, a British General inviting him to attend a performance by the prisoners. “The British Officers intend to perform a play next Saturday at the Barracks. I shall be extremely happy to have the honour to attend you and Mrs. Jefferson in my Box at the Theatre should you or that Lady be inclined to go.”75 Thus, Jefferson was invited to attend a performance of his favorite pastime by his enemies and two actors whom he once frequently saw in Williamsburg before the war, all prisoners of war in the state he now governed. It is unknown whether Jefferson attended or not as there is no surviving response from him to Phillips, but this invitation is still significant in that it demonstrates how Jefferson’s fondness for theatre was well-known and that he and many other Virginian’s still shared a love for theatre even under the congressional ban. Had he attended, his presence certainly would not have

set a good example for Virginia’s citizens who were supposed to be refraining from such immoral activities even as audience members, and especially because the performers in this case were captured British troops. However, this anecdote reveals how despite the congressional measure, the theatre remained a common cultural connecting thread in Virginia during the Revolution, no matter if the British troops, the loyalists, or prominent American Patriots were the ones partaking in theatre.

While they being held at Charlottesville, because of space and housing constraints, some of the prisoners were quartered outside of Charlottesville, “forty English miles further inland to Staunton, the capital of County Augusta” though they lived in barracks said to be “thirty English miles” outside of the actual town. The experience at Staunton was documented by a Hessian officer called Brunswick in a letter dated June 1, 1779. Brunswick described the activities he witnessed among the English soldiers, most notably their theatrical endeavors:

A group of English soldiers has put up a Comedy House, where plays are given twice a week, and in which there are already three sets of scenery. On the curtain is painted a harlequin who points with his wooden sword to the words: Who would have expected this here?” [Seats in the] parquet cost four, [in the parterre] two dollars paper money. The officers lend the actors the necessary articles of clothing; drummers are transformed into queens and beauties. Very good pieces are performed, which, because of their satirical additions, do not always please the Americans, wherefore they are forbidden by their superiors to attend these comedies.

Brunswick’s description seems to suggest an elaborate outpost of theatre in a place such as a prisoner of war camp. The British troops must have strongly believed in the

---


77 Note: In *Letters from America 1776-1779: Being Letters of Brunswick, Hessian, and Waldeck, Officers with the British Armies During the Revolution* the names of the officers are not known and are thus denoted by terms associated with the text of the letters. In this case, the officer is called Brunswick for the German town he is sending his letters to.

78 Ibid, 151.
usefulness of plays to their experience in the hinterlands of Virginia and made it a priority to have performances, with even the officers assisting and supporting the efforts. Indeed, Brunswick stated that “the soldier wanted to show that he can rise above everything and find within himself aids in making his life tolerable and comfortable.”

It is important to note that the Americans at the camp were aware of the makeshift “Comedy House” and had formed an opinion of its activities that were expressed publicly enough for Brunswick to notice. Of course in their performances the soldier-actors must have taken the opportunity to comment—presumably negatively, crudely, and critically—on their situation as prisoners, their American enemies, and the war in general. Not surprisingly, their American captors were displeased with this and probably the whole notion of ‘camp theatre’ in a prisoner of war camp while free Americans were prohibited to practice theatre themselves. That the Americans officers forbade their own men to attend the performances reflects their disdain of the performances, their content, and the theatre in general. However, the fact the soldiers had to be forbidden to attend suggests that they had attended or tried to attend the performances at one point, thus causing their “superiors” to forbid them from attending. The American soldiers were probably craving theatrical diversions and envied the ability of the British prisoners to partake in the theatre. In a state that once welcomed theatre, the war had so changed the perceptions and goals of the people and government that soldiers were now prohibited from attending what were probably the only performances in the state.

As there is no documentary evidence proving the occurrence of other performances in Virginia during the Revolution, it is necessary to speculate about what, if any, other types of theatre took place during this conflict. These may have included

---

79 Ibid, 151.
college theatricals, performances by the American military and small-scale local or private theatrical activities. Useful comparisons to previous theatrical events in Virginia as well as events in other states during the Revolution give a degree of likelihood to these speculations. It is safe to assume that there were certainly no open and active playhouses during this time. Indeed, the popular Williamsburg Playhouse was no longer in existence by 1780. Whether its destruction resulted from natural wear and tear on a poorly constructed building, a lack of upkeep, or purposeful removal, it was not thought important to restore or rebuild the playhouse. There was no point as there were no actors to play in it and an open playhouse had no place in a society condemning the theatre and fighting a war. Thus, the assumption that Virginia’s playhouses remained dark and derelict during the Revolution is evidenced by the example of the Williamsburg playhouse.

It is reasonable to assume that there were perhaps performances of some kind by the students at The College of William and Mary during the war. Theatre in Virginia began at the start of the century with performances by the students at The College of William and Mary and college theatrics later developed into a common tradition in the colonies, and as already discussed, performances frequently occurred at other colleges in the colonial period. Therefore it is not unreasonable to suspect that there may have been small, private, unadvertised performances at The College of William and Mary in during the Revolution. There are no records or evidence of any productions, but that does not rule out their possibility especially as it would have been unwise to advertise theatrical

activities. Such performances would have gone against the congressional recommendation against theatre, but when have college students ever followed the rules or abided by the laws? Likewise, even if they held no performances themselves, the students at The College may have been studying works of dramatic literature in ways that did not involve performances.

As the American army is known to have performed at Valley Forge, and as military camp performances were a common tradition in the British army, there may have been recreational performances by the American military while in Virginia during the Revolution. However, as a result of the direct statement by Congress discouraging such activities, it is unlikely that there were many and if they happened at all there are no known records of any performances. Such performances, if they occurred, have slipped through the historical cracks and escaped our knowledge. In the same way, there is no way to know whether any of the citizens of Virginia were staging plays privately in their homes or other buildings during the war. Though these performances would have gone against the moral code set out by the Congress, it is not unlikely to suppose that citizens in isolated locales far from the seat of government would not have feared punishment for a few hours entertainment in the bleak war years.

These are no more than speculations however, and the fact remains that the theatre in Virginia remained mostly inactive during the American Revolution. As discussed previously, the Congressional bans on theatre were not legally enforceable in the states, but were rather strong suggestions as to how the states should act. Examination of the journals of the Virginia House of Delegates for 1774 and the Council of Virginia in for 1778 does not reveal adaptation of these measures by Virginians. However, this does
not diminish the importance of these measures. It seems evident that the theatre was at a standstill during the war. The bans must have played some part in this, even if they were not adopted by the Virginia legislature. Furthermore, perhaps the conditions in Virginia and the lack of theatre made bans by the Virginia legislature unnecessary. Whether or not the bans were legalized in Virginia, the combined factors of their existence, the struggles of the war, and the departure of the professional acting companies, successfully ripped apart Virginia’s thriving theatrical scene and put it on hold until the conclusion of the American Revolution.

Besides these few known instances of theatre during the American Revolution, theatrical activity had come to a relative standstill in Virginia. Throughout the thirteen states, theatres remained dark and dramatic activity, once thriving and popular in various regions of America, became a taboo activity relegated to the status of immoral behavior during the war. As Americans focused on the wider conflict of Revolution and independence, they sacrificed their artistic freedoms and theatrical development. The congressional bans of 1774 and 1778 spearheaded the movement away from the theatre and were helped by the inevitable effects of wartime to leave America without significant theatrical activity for the duration of the war for independence.
Chapter 3. Post Revolutionary Theatrical Restoration and Renewal

With the siege of Yorktown in 1781, Virginia became the stage for the ending act in the drama of the American Revolution. As the curtain fell on the American victory, it rose again for the reemergence of the American theatre in the newly won American Republic. Virginia in particular eagerly embraced the release of the wartime restrictions on society and the opportunities that would soon be available for the revival of its favorite pastime: the performing arts. However, the theatre’s return to Virginia would not be as quick as its exit; just as the United States struggled to ground itself during its’ infant years, so too did the theatre in Virginia and the other states. The Revolution had abruptly cut off the development of the theatre in Virginia and destroyed the systems of theatres, touring companies, and repertoire that had become well established during the mid-eighteenth century. It would take a process of rebuilding, discovery, and experimentation to restore the theatre in Virginia to some semblance of the position it held before the Revolution.

The Start of the Theatrical Reconstruction

With the departure of David Douglass’ American Company before the onset of the Revolution, the states were left without professional thespians to produce theatre. Some individual itinerant strolling players as well as amateur performers may have remained, but there was not a cohesive commercial performing group. There were certainly a handful of professional players who remained during the war such as Thomas Wall and his wife. These players would lead the efforts to create a broader professional theatre community after the conflict had ended and as other actors immigrated to the United
States after the American victory. Nevertheless, for the first several years after the conclusion of the Revolution, theatre remained mostly dormant in Virginia.

Thomas Wall and his wife had been performing in Maryland immediately after the war, forming the Maryland Company of Comedians by September of 1782. They were soon joined by Dennis Ryan and his wife Ann, who came from the West Indies. Dennis Ryan became the company’s manager, and, eager to expand their circuit out of Maryland, he changed the company’s name to the New American Company and began to tour with his actors. “Perhaps at the suggestion of Wall, who had played in Virginia before the war, Ryan wrote a letter to Governor Benjamin Harrison, asking for permission to play in that state. Benjamin Harrison readily granted permission and beginning in March of 1784, Virginia was once again treated to a tour by a professional theater company.” The company played in Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Bath, Dumfries, and the new capitol at Richmond.

The performances in Richmond were the first in what would be become a thriving urban center of theatre towards the end of the eighteenth century. Just as the former capitol city of Williamsburg had appealed to players and audiences alike, Richmond held a similar appeal. Though still in the process of development in 1783, it presented the players of the New American Company with the opportunity to perform in a city with an audience of important officials, wealthy citizens, a growing population, and a multitude of visitors. Establishing themselves in Richmond during the city’s early days would give the New American Company access to what would become an important economic, political, and artistic center with audiences eager to take in theatrical diversions.

---

82 Ibid, 43.
Quesnay’s Academy Theatre

Ryan’s new American Company had the stimulated Virginia’s appetite for theatre and served as a reminder of the pleasures to be found in play going. Although Ryan died in 1786, his company continued to perform throughout the middle and southern states, despite the lack of playhouses in most of their main venues, Richmond included. The new capital had no purpose-built theatre, one of the attractions of the former capital at Williamsburg. The time was now ripe to introduce Richmond to an array of different artistic ventures to suit its needs as a growing city. Chief among these would be Alexander-Marie Quesnay’s proposal of an “Academy of Arts and Sciences,” described by Quesnay as comprising lessons in French, dancing, dramatics and other refined pursuits. Quesnay, a French dancing master, had grandiose dreams for a connected network of such schools in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York with affiliations in Europe, but never seemed to outline a specific curriculum for his academy. However, he did emphasize “the importance of dramatic entertainments in relation to the Academy,” for the buildings of his Academies would contain theatres.83 Productions in the theatre’s of the Academies would help to fund the schools and enrich the cultural experiences of the students and community.

In 1786, it seemed that Quesnay’s dream of his Academy would be realized in Richmond, as the cornerstone of his Academy was laid in June 24th of that year. Presented in a ceremony by the Masons and other important Richmond officials, the

laying of the cornerstone of the theatre was an important event for the city.\textsuperscript{84} The theatre, a wooden structure, was said to contain sixteen hundred a seats, an unreasonably large size for a theatre in a young city such as Richmond. Appropriately, the theatre would be used by Lewis Hallam of the Old American Company, one of the most prominent theatre companies in Virginia that fled to Jamaica before the Revolution. Upon their return to Virginia, Hallam’s Old American Company came into competition with the New American Company started by the Walls and the Ryans, but Hallam was granted the right to perform in the Academy’s theatre for four years beginning in January of 1786 (figure 9).\textsuperscript{85} Perhaps fond memories of Hallam’s company in the pre-war years and a sense of loyalty to him from the Virginia theatergoing community convinced Quesnay to bestow this honor upon Hallam’s company.

The Old American Company struggled at the start of its run of performances at Quesnay’s new theatre. The theatre, according to historian of the southern stage Susanne Ketchum Sherman, had a “potential audience at once eager and penniless in an agricultural community. Trade was very dull in Richmond in the fall of 1786, expenses

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 39.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 39 and 50.
were high and money scarce; Quesnay therefore offered” to accept produce in lieu of money to pay for tickets.  

The economy was not the only thing that affected the success of the Academy theatre. The idea of having a learning institution connected to a theatre did not please some of the families of potential students at the Academy who considered the theatre, full of vice and described so immorally by the Continental Congress during the war, as inappropriate to be attached to a school. Combined with the large seating capacity of the house, the struggling economy, and the attitudes of some citizens, the Academy and its theatre swiftly failed. The Academy never lived up to what Quesnay envisioned it to be, and according to Sherman, “the disillusionment of those who had contributed their support for the establishment of an Academy of Arts and Sciences probably made them less hospitable than they would otherwise have been to the actors.”

By December of 1786, the entire project had failed, with Quesnay leaving America and the Old American Company leaving Virginia. It seemed that this first grand attempt to establish a theatre in Richmond had not taken hold strongly enough to survive. However, Richmond had been given a taste of the benefits of a resident theatre and had been re-introduced to the joys of theatergoing. Though it would still take several years to repair the destruction done by the American Revolution to the theatre in Virginia both physically and philosophically, the first steps had already been taken to bring this art back into prominence in the Old Dominion.

88 Ibid, 64-65.
Thomas Bignall and the Virginia Company

After Lewis Hallam’s Old American Company left Richmond, they went to play in Philadelphia, and in that city they met new players who had recently arrived in America in search of new theatrical opportunities. These players, Thomas Wade West and his family, including his daughter Ann and her husband John Bignall, approached Hallam seeking positions with his company. They were displeased to find that his offer was not much of an improvement over the offers they had received in England, and instead of simply accepting the offer or returning home, proposed the alternative of forming their own company.\(^{89}\) They chose to pursue this alternative, and traveled from Philadelphia to Baltimore and eventually Richmond, collecting more players along the way to form their company. They settled upon Richmond as the starting place for their company and purchased Quesnay’s theatre/Academy building for their company, now named the Virginia Company.

After making adjustments to the theatre’s interior, the Virginia Company began utilizing it for performances beginning in October of 1790. “The New Theatre on Shockoe Hill,” though inferior to those they were accustomed to in England, was the best playhouse the Virginia Company had performed in so far in America. However, the Company was not to stay in Richmond permanently (figure 10).\(^{90}\) By nature a touring company, they graced Richmond with their presence, left them wanting more, and moved on to perform in Fredericksburg, Alexandria, Annapolis, Baltimore, and Norfolk.

---


\(^{90}\) Ibid, 85-89.
Norfolk had recovered well from the Revolution and “by 1790…had risen from the ashes of the Revolution to become a bustling, growing, cosmopolitan city” able to rival Richmond.”⁹¹ It soon became the key city in the newly established touring route of the Virginia Company. Sherman asserts that “Norfolk was an obvious center for such a circuit, for it lay like the hub of a wheel from which the thoroughfares radiated.”⁹² The Wests purchased land for a home in Norfolk, and the West-Bignall clan settled enough in Norfolk to consider it their home base. Accordingly, they built a theatre in the adjacent lot to their property there in 1793, enabling them to present plays to the city in the proper manner.⁹³ The playhouse in Norfolk, though still part of the larger circuit of the Virginia Company which often extended south to Charleston, became a much used and thriving theatrical venue in Virginia.

With their growing success, the Virginia Company opened theatres in Petersburg, Alexandria, and Fredericksburg, enabling them to gain recognition and respect for the

---

seriousness with which they undertook the rebuilding of Virginia’s theatre circuit. They must have been positively received in the various distant parts of Virginia’s society in order to believe it necessary to erect playhouses in five cities. Theatre was, therefore, finally gaining the momentum it needed to recover from the losses of the Revolutionary period and the anti-theatrical sentiment that infected the state during that time.

Indeed, the theatre gained enough support to capture the attention of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the British architect lately arrived in Virginia in 1796. Latrobe, Sherman explains, took on the task of designing a proper playhouse for Richmond. Latrobe “began work on a combination playhouse, hotel, and assembly room to be built on Shockoe Hill on the site of the present theatre, the inconvenient and combustible Quesnay’s Academy…The plans, when finished, were proof that Latrobe had an intimate and exact knowledge of the special requirements of the Virginia Company in Richmond.” 94 Unfortunately, Latrobe’s theatre was never erected. In 1798, the current Richmond theatre burned to the ground, and with so many theatres being built, the monetary loss prevented the Virginia Company from following through with the plans.

Although never realized, Latrobe’s designs still survive and an examination of them demonstrates the Americanization that was being attempted in the rebirth of the American theatre. On the center of the proscenium arch of his design for the interior of the proposed Richmond theater, Latrobe placed a large bald eagle to symbolize the United States (figure 11). This eagle took the place of the British coat of arms which often appeared in this position in British theatres. One such example is the Theatre Royal in Bath, England, built in 1805 and reconstructed in 1863 that prominently features the British Coat of Arms on the top of the proscenium.95 This bold statement by Latrobe, created by manipulating a British tradition for the United States, emphasized the importance of nationalism in the new country and its manifestation in the theatre. Since

---

the colonial period, the theatre had traditionally been a British import and even after the war, American theatre still resembled the British theatre. This was not especially appealing to a nation recovering from a war with Britain and eager to create its own identity. Latrobe understood these sentiments even in his first years in the United States and represented them clearly in this visual nod to the new American Republic.

The Post Revolutionary Repertoire

During the colonial period, the experience at Virginia’s theatres closely mirrored the theatrical experiences in Britain, allowing the colonists to forge an artistic and cultural connection to the mother country. After achieving independence, such a connection was no longer desirable, especially as the United States worked to create its own identity and autonomy during its formative years. Patrice Higonnet, in his study of American nationalism, maintains that “between 1765, when the stirrings of American separatism began to find political expression, and 1783, when the War of Independence came to an end, Americans had moved from a largely fantasized British patriotism to their own national consciousness. The national idea now became the focus of American public life.”

Though the theatre that would re-emerge in Virginia after the war would still be based on the British model as this was the accepted and expected tradition in North America, as a result of the new political situation, Virginia’s theatre would have to find ways to insert an American identity into theatrical pursuits.

The physical aspects of the theatre remained mostly the same, with the costumes, settings, and architectural stage designs continuing to follow the British model with the addition of some small, uniquely American details such as Latrobe’s bald eagle.

---

proscenium arch decoration. The touring circuit and acting companies picked up where the Revolution cut them off and by default were directly descended from the British provincial theatre circuits. Nevertheless, these larger similarities to British theatre were the accepted norm for the Americans and did not conflict with the need to assert their “Americanness.”

One way that this American identity was timidly investigated on the stage was through the texts that were performed. Almost all of the plays performed in eighteenth century America, especially before establishment of the United States, were by British authors or were British editions of European plays popular in Britain. Despite severed ties with Britain, Americans still had deep connections to that island as they had only just separated from Britain and still retained much influence from their colonial master. American audiences could still connect to British plays because of their British heritage, ethnic identification, or career.97 British plays therefore continued to be a major part of the canon performed on the post-revolutionary stage.

As the theatre became more securely established in post-Revolutionary Virginia, the theatre companies began to attempt to perform American works or “Americanize” British texts to appeal to their audiences. Many British plays had nationalistic parts which could be changed for American audiences by replacing words or locations.98 However, it was now time to begin to incorporate American plays into the repertoire as Americans began experimenting with the arts in their own way. As Higonnet points out, “in the newly independent America, no aesthetic domain was left untouched. Because art and liberty had always traveled together in history from the Ancient Greeks to republican

---

Florence…it stood to reason that art would now move to America.” At the time there were a select few American authored plays and these were only just beginning to be performed. One of the places where these plays were experimented with was in the theatre in Norfolk. West’s Company and its successor made some efforts to perform American material as indicated by their production of Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* in Norfolk on July 4, 1795, an American authored play being an appropriate choice for Independence Day. The process of producing plays by Americans eventually began to catch on in Virginia theatres by the 1790s as Virginians began to desire a theatre that reflected their own nationality.

This is evident in a specific example of a play authored by one of Virginia’s own residents, Colonel Robert Munford. A member of the gentry class residing in Mecklenberg County, Munford authored two known plays: *The Candidates* in 1770 and *The Patriots* in 1777. Although written by a Virginia native, these plays were not produced or published until after Munford’s death in 1783. In the case of *The Patriots* it is obvious that this play was not produced because of the effects of the Revolution in Virginia as discussed in chapter two. *The Candidates*, however, penned before the war had obliterated theatre from Virginia, did not even receive publication let alone production until 1798. It is significant that this play was finally published when the Virginia Company was incorporating American plays into their repertoire. Virginia and its theatre had finally gotten back on its feet enough to incorporate Virginia itself into its

---

theatrical endeavors. It is not known if these plays were performed after their publication, but even if they were not, their publication still represents an interest and belief in the creation of a uniquely Virginian dramatic tradition, if only in literary form at first. That these two plays, written by a Virginian about matters related to Virginia, had to wait until the end of the eighteenth century to made public and found relevant to the theatrical activities in Virginia demonstrates that for the first time, Virginia’s theatre was starting to move ever so slightly away from British influence toward the development of its own aesthetic and repertoire.\textsuperscript{102}

Recovery from the Revolution

In Virginia, the effects of the attitudes of the Congressional ban on theatre did not outlast the war. The Congress’s views of the theatre being immoral and detrimental to the wartime effort had little value in a society no longer engaged in war and yearning for the theatrical entertainments enjoyed in the colonial era. The attitudes expressed by Congress were never strongly held by Virginia even during the Revolution and were followed more because of solidarity, wartime restrictions, and peer pressure from the other states than from an outright belief in the evils of theatre that some of the northern states held. Though some of the northern states did retain that mindset after the Revolution, the moral compass of Congress pointing the states away from the theatre broke down for the most part at the close of the war. Withington contends that “the moral movement of the

American Revolution had a brief existence…The morality of negation is too insubstantial to build a lasting structure on."\(^{103}\)

Therefore, the restoration of the Virginia theatre did not suffer from the anti-theatre sentiments expressed during the Revolutionary period. Though it did take several years to regain its strength, the theatre in Virginia sprang back to life by the end of the eighteenth century. The other states also experienced periods of theatrical reconstruction which highlighted the different issues plaguing the theatre’s of each state before and during the war. In the North, where the theatre faced moral, religious, and political opposition, the reconstruction encountered many more obstacles than in Virginia. The religious opposition that the theatre battled in the colonial era, though still affecting the sentiments of some parts of the population, had eased enough to allow debates over the return of the theatre to occur in Boston, Philadelphia and New York. The theatre faced other problems though, particularly political ones related to the British connotations of the theatre. “In Boston and Philadelphia particularly, theatre became an issue which ignited a violent “republican” backlash. In New York, it was a reminder that the city had harbored loyalist fugitives.” Furthermore, “the negative example of British wartime entertainments had inspired a strong anti-theatre opposition among devout republicans, who viewed play going as incompatible with civic virtue.”\(^{104}\) Eventually, the theatre in each of these cities would gain footing once the city itself had fully recovered from the Revolution and come to terms with its colonial heritage, participation in the Revolution, and new American identity. The process was certainly more challenging than that of


Virginia’s, but eventually the theatre of the New Republic set the course of the next century of American theatre with the establishment of playhouses and the encouragement of American-written dramas.¹⁰⁵

In the other southern states, theatre followed a rebuilding process much like that in Virginia. Maryland, already containing the Maryland Company of Comedians by 1781, had a thriving theatrical establishment that was closely connected to Virginia’s; indeed the two states were often combined into one touring circuit. Theatre remained popular in Maryland and such cities as Annapolis and Baltimore were among the first to rebuild their playhouses after the war. The Maryland Company of Comedians had even begun performing as early as 1781 in the state. The other southern states, much like Virginia, found that the end of the Revolution allowed them to restore their devotion to the theatre. For example, Charleston became, once again, an important stop on the southern theatre circuit and a close cousin of the Virginia theatre, with many of the same companies performing there. Therefore, the southern states came together in a network of connected theatres and audiences eager to indulge in the pleasures of the playhouse once more at the end of the eighteenth century.

Virginia’s post-revolutionary theatre renewal greatly resembled that of the other southern states. Compared to the northern states, however, renewal in Virginia followed a much smoother course that was fraught with fewer obstacles. Though it was certainly not a seamless resurgence, Virginia experienced less cultural and political opposition to the theatre than the northern states. Furthermore, Virginia’s population provided enthusiastic audiences in multiple locations in the state that fostered the growth of the theatre more than in the northern states. These audiences helped to encourage the acting companies to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 170.
continue their efforts in the state, for Virginia provided ample audiences yearning for performances and therefore prospects of economic success.

Virginia’s post revolutionary theatre exemplifies the overall course of theatre in the state. It emerged from humble beginnings after the Revolution and though it struggled along the way, the supportive population delighted by the theatre and desiring its revival in their towns and cities, aided its reemergence. By the end of the eighteenth century, the theatre in Virginia had regained most of its pre-war status as an essential aspect of the state’s cultural and artistic activities, though it certainly was no replica of the colonial theatre. The theatre, much like Virginia, began to explore its place in the newly independent United States as the eighteenth century came to a close and the nineteenth century opened up new opportunities for the development of American theatre.
Conclusion

Beginning in the colonial period, Virginia developed a theatrical tradition that gained popularity with the population and endorsement from the government. Performing in accordance with the conventions of the British theatre from whence they originated, the acting companies playing in Virginia delighted their audiences and established the theatre as a coveted art in Virginia society. However, the theatre was not as fondly received in the Northern colonies; these colonies would later assert their negative opinions on the theatre during the Revolutionary war. As the war began and the colonies came together at the Continental Congress in 1774, the theatre suffered as a result of the Articles of Association which restricted theatre in the colonies in the name of “frugality and economy.” Put this way, the theatre was depicted as detrimental to the fight to voice the grievances of the colonies to Britain, and began to lose its supporters in all of the colonies, including Virginia.

With the more specific 1778 ban on the theatre, the theatre fell even deeper into the disregard of America, now fighting an outright war with Britain. Despite its former support of the theatre, Virginia had to focus on the wartime effort and the cause of independence and could not fight also to preserve the theatre when it was so fervently opposed by the strong-opinioned northern states. Furthermore, because of the restrictions and effects of wartime, the departure of the touring companies, and the theatre’s close connection to Great Britain, the theatre was faring badly even before the congressional bans. The forces against it too strong to resist, the theatre even in Virginia became effectively silenced during the Revolution.
Though there were scattered instances of performance during the Revolution in Virginia, the theatre as it had existed in the colonial era came to a standstill. It was not until several years after the end of the Revolution that any attempts were made to rebuild the theatre in Virginia. Once this reconstruction began, however, Virginia’s love for the theatre was reignited, and theatre returned in full force to the Old Dominion. Touring companies visited Virginia’s towns, once again delighting their audiences and creating a special niche for the theatre in Virginia. The companies built new playhouses and experimented with ways to make their plays suitable for the citizens of the state of Virginia who were no longer part of the British Empire. Just as Virginia was changed after the Revolution, the theatre had also changed and struggled to find its identity in Virginia, now part of the newly independent United States of America.

The American Revolution had a harmful effect on the development of theatre in Virginia and the other states. The nature of the war and its effects on the states so fervently fighting for independence deeply hurt the American theatre. However, it was the legislation enacted by the Continental Congress that, even though it was not technically enforceable in each of the states, had the most destructive effect on the theatre. With these recommended bans, the northern states that opposed the theatre were able to manipulate the situations and goals of the war to depict the theatre as an enemy of a free America. Their views overrode the views of the theatre’s supporters, who, in a choice between doing what was best for the cause of independence or what was best for the theatre, of course chose independence. Despite the passion felt for the theatre in Virginia, the theatre could not stand up to such hostility since it was already deteriorating
as a result of the impending war. Thus, the theatre in Virginia during the Revolution fell victim to the cause of American independence.

This situation demonstrates the regional differences among the thirteen states and how these differences resulted in actions during the Revolution that were not representative of all the states. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the serious extremes to which the states went in order to achieve success in the fight for independence. They even sacrificed what little entertainment they had in the hopes that it would aid the greater cause of American liberty. For Virginia, this meant giving into the beliefs of the other states and allowing their beloved theatre to fall to the wayside.

Once their freedom was won, however, Virginia ached to restore the theatre. The trajectory of Virginia’s theatrical history in the eighteenth century demonstrates Virginia’s ardent love for the performing arts. Though thwarted by the American Revolution, after the war the theatre sprang back to life and once again began to please the eager audiences in Virginia. With the revolution past and a revival begun, the theatre could look ahead to its bright future in Virginia and prepare to perform for Virginians indefinitely.
Following the documentary trail of the eighteenth century theatre proved to be a difficult task from the outset of this thesis. The remaining documentary evidence of the theatre during this period is especially scarce and often times non-existent. Therefore, sources outside of the theatre were used in the research for this thesis. Most important were the records of the Continental Congress. Published in the Journals of the Continental Congress: 1774-1789, these documents provided the evidence, context, and voting records of the official governmental suppression of the theatre during the American Revolution. Similarly, the Journals of the Council of the State of Virginia, which lacked any evidence of the passing of similar legislation in Virginia, provided proof of the lack of anti-theatre legislation in Virginia and added to the investigation and analysis of the effects of the anti-theatre legislation in Virginia.

Next, the Virginia Gazette provided important documentation of the activities of the players in the colonial and Revolutionary period, as well as announcements and advertisements publicizing performances. These newspapers, as found on Colonial Williamsburg’s digital library webpage, offered a valuable window into the way in which news of theatrical activity was disseminated in the eighteenth century. Similarly, many documents such as playbills and tickets found at Colonial Williamsburg’s John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library supplied additional evidence of colonial performances.

Finally, private letters provided information regarding the actual theatrical situation in Virginia during the Revolution. The letters of the Hessian soldier Brunswick contributed information on British military theatrics in Virginia and the reactions of the
American military to these activities. The letter from William Phillips to Thomas Jefferson connected these activities to an important Virginia leader and lover of the theatre, deepening the story of Revolutionary theatre in Virginia as told in Chapter Two. The letter from Henry Laurens emphasized the connection between George Washington and the Valley Forge performances and the Latrobe drawings offer an idea of what post-Revolutionary theatre in Virginia aspired to become. Therefore, these primary sources helped to solidify the work of this thesis in the face of so much mystery and unavailable documentation.


**Secondary Sources**

A wide array of secondary sources were consulted during the research for this thesis ranging from general histories of the American theatre to very specific studies of eighteenth century theatre. William Dunlap’s *A History of the American Theatre From Its Origins to 1832* provided a general introduction to American theatrical history while Glynne Wickham’s *A History of the Theatre* and George Winchester Stone’s *The London Stage* did the same for British theatre. Hugh F. Rankin’s *The Theatre in Colonial America* represented the first attempt to study the colonial American theatre. In contrast, Odai Johnson’s works *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli’s Plaster, The Colonial American Stage, 1665-1774: A Documentary Calendar,* and
“Thomas Jefferson and the Colonial American Stage” represented the most recent examinations of the colonial theatre with a special emphasis on Virginia.

The research report from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation by Lisa Fisher and Tom Goyens as well as the report by Dwayne W. Pickett, Margaret W. Cooper and Martha McCartney supplied the latest conclusions regarding the Douglass theatre excavations as well information regarding the history of theatre in Williamsburg. Susanne Sherman’s extensive work on the theatre in the south and specifically Virginia presented critical information on the theatrical activities taking place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century southern theatre circuit.

The chapters on the Revolutionary era theatre could not have been completed without the help of several recent works. These include Jason Shaffer’s *Performing Patriotism National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theatre*, Jared Brown’s *The Theatre in America During the Revolution*, and Heather S. Nathan’s *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson*. Likewise, Jeffrey H. Richards’ *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic Into the Hands of the People* presented the situation of the theatre in the immediate post-war era. Ann Fairfax Withington’s *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics* provided an examination of the anti-theatre legislation in the context of the larger trend toward morality imposed by the Continental Congress during the war. Patrice Higgonet’s examination of the development of American nationalism in *Attendant Cruelties: Nation and Nationalism in American History* aided the analysis of the post-war theatre in chapter three.
Many general sources examining the political, military, and civilian aspects of the American Revolution were consulted during the research process. Don Higgenbotham’s works *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* and *War and Society in Revolutionary America: The Wider Dimensions of Conflict* assisted in understanding the Revolution outside of the theatre. Charles Royster’s *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and the American Character, 1775-178*, Harry M Ward’s *The War for Independence and the Transformation of American Society*, and Bruce Selby’s *The Revolution in Virginia: 1775-1783* also added to this knowledge base. Consequently, a broad spectrum of secondary sources was utilized in the creation of this thesis.


Pickett, Dwayne W. and Margaret W. Cooper and Martha McCartney. ““The Old Theatre


