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## "Miraculously Saved": Richmond and the 1811 Theater Fire

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**“MIRACULOUSLY SAVED”:  
Richmond and the 1811 Theater Fire**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of History**

**The College of William and Mary in Virginia**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**Of the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**By**

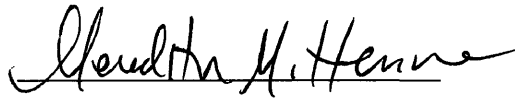
**Meredith Margaret Henne**

**2006**

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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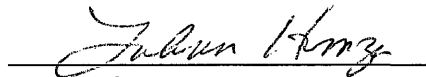
Meredith Margaret Henne

Approved by the Committee, April 2007

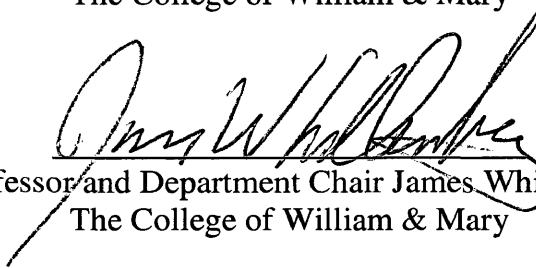


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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Gay and Doug Henne, who, although they would much rather tackle a hands-on project than pick up a book, taught me to love reading and let me take home as many volumes as I wanted from the Wickson Public Library—in multiples of five.

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Heartfelt thanks also go to Andrew Carroll and Louise Wood—as well as Conover Hunt at the Historic Richmond Foundation and Doug Welsh at the John Marshall House in Richmond—for encouraging me to make this a bigger project. I hope it will be.

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## ABSTRACT

The day after Christmas in 1811, the state of Virginia lost her governor and almost a hundred citizens in a grisly nighttime blaze. The disaster occurred at a poorly designed, treacherously flammable, and completely packed theater in Richmond, a Southern city synonymous with entertainment, horse races, and endless balls. Even in a day when destructive fires were frequent, this fatal conflagration stunned and horrified Americans like no event in her young history. This particular fire was of a completely different order—never before had so many American civilians been lost in a single disaster. Considered America’s first great national tragedy, the Richmond Theater Fire became the basis for serious personal introspection and public commemoration. As people sought answers as to why the destruction had happened and what was the right response to it, the fire became a catalyst for religious change in Richmond, spawning a renewed interest in church attendance and evangelical Christianity among the leading members of Virginia’s society that continued for decades. Memorial architecture, copious printed commentary, exchanges of touching personal letters, rancorous newspaper editorials, and a score of sermons show how the fire shaped the way Richmond’s residents interacted with both the theater and the church in the aftermath of the fire. Richmond’s evangelical churches began to play a more prominent role as cultural centers for the gentry and middle classes, and congregations grew in size and number. The theater fire tempered public taste for the theater, as evidenced by reduced attendance, closings, and an upsurge of anti-theater criticism. However, the tragedy did not completely obliterate the performing arts as a favorite Richmond pastime, and Richmond’s theater experienced a return to the realm of acceptable activities in later years.



**“MIRACULOUSLY SAVED”:  
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## INTRODUCTION

The day after Christmas in 1811, Virginia lost her governor and almost a hundred citizens in a grisly nighttime blaze. The disaster occurred at a poorly designed, treacherously flammable, and completely packed theater in Richmond, a Southern city synonymous with entertainment, rowdy contests, and endless balls. Even in a day when destructive fires were frequent, this fatal conflagration stunned Americans. Considered the worst civilian tragedy to befall the young nation, clerics used the fire as a reason to preach repentance and denounce the stage.

Memorial architecture, copious printed commentary, exchanges of touching personal letters, rancorous newspaper editorials, and a score of sermons show how the fire shaped the way Richmond's residents interacted with both the theater and the church in the aftermath of the fire. Richmond's evangelical churches began to play a more prominent role as cultural centers for the gentry and middle classes, and congregations grew in size and number. The theater fire tempered public taste for the theater, as evidenced by reduced attendance, closings, and an upsurge of anti-theater criticism. However, the tragedy did not completely obliterate the performing arts as a favorite Richmond pastime, and Richmond's theater experienced a return to the realm of acceptable activities in later years.

## CHAPTER I

### CALAMITY IN RICHMOND

Although it was drafty and shoddily built, in 1811 the Richmond Theater in Court End consistently drew large audiences, and nearly all seats were taken the day after Christmas. On that dark, windy, Thursday night, a festive holiday crowd flocked to the evening's variety show performance. The curtain rose on nearly six hundred theatergoers, significant portion of Richmond's population to be gathered into a single place.<sup>1</sup> After a newly translated French drama by Denis Diderot entitled "The Father, or Family Feuds" and a few saucy songs, Matthew Gregory Lewis's pantomime "Raymond and Agnes: or, the Bleeding Nun" began.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the melodrama's second act, player Hopkins Robertson spotted flakes of burning scenery gently falling to the stage. A chandelier from the previous act had not been extinguished before a stagehand

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<sup>1</sup> 518 adults, 80 children, 50 blacks in attendance. James K. Sanford, ed., *Richmond, Her Triumphs, Tragedies & Growth* (Richmond, VA: Produced and distributed by Metropolitan Richmond Chamber of Commerce, 1975), 73. In 1810, the free population stood at 5,997 and the slave population at 3,738. U.S. Census Bureau, 1800 and 1810 National Census for Richmond (City), Virginia, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/index.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> "Raymond and Agnes, or the Bleeding Nun" appeared in 1796, and became quite popular as a stage play. The plot was known to Charles Dickens, who mentions it in his 1855 short story "The Holly Tree" or "The Holly-Tree Inn." The narrator recollects his nursery maid telling him a tale with a similar story line in order to terrify him "to the utmost confines of my reason."

raised it offstage. The chandelier swung sideways and set the oil-painted scenery behind the set alight.<sup>3</sup> In astonishment, Robertson watched flames fly up the canvas and wood sets. He turned to the audience and cried, “Fire!” Several, including fellow actor Mr. West, called back that this was a false alarm and to “keep your seats, there is no danger.” As the Committee of Investigation later revealed, fires weren’t entirely uncommon in the candle-lit and cigar-friendly theater, and “little accidents of this description had often taken place.”<sup>4</sup> The peril was tragically real this time. Within one minute, the scenery crumpled in flames and actors evacuated the stage. The curtain dropped, a very bright light emanating from behind.<sup>5</sup> The audience broke into a panic.

Future mayor of Richmond, Robert Greenhow, Sr., later wrote that he sat that night in the third box from the stage with his arms wrapped around his wife Mary Ann, their son beside them. At Robinson’s cry, Mary Ann turned to Robert and begged, “Save my child!” Greenhow recorded his memories of the next moments, “I caught my Son up, and in a minute pressed to Suffocation we were

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<sup>3</sup> “The scenery took fire in the back part of the house, by the raising of a chandelier; that the boy who was ordered by one of the players to raise it stated that if he did so the scenery would take fire, when he was commanded in a peremptory manner to hoist it. The boy obeyed, and the fire was instantly communicated to the scenery. He gave alarm in the rear of the stage, and requested some of the attendants to cut the cords by which these combustible materials were suspended. The person whose duty it was to perform this business became panic-struck, and sought his own safety. This unfortunately happened at a time when one of the performers was playing near the orchestra, and the greatest part of the stage, with its horrid danger, was obscured from the audience by a curtain.” George D. Fisher, *History and Reminiscences of the Monumental Church, Richmond, VA, from 1814 to 1878* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1880), footnote, taken from the *American Standard*, date not provided, 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> “Report of the Committee of Investigation,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 31 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>5</sup> Facts are drawn from the accounts of Thomson F. Mason, G. Huntington Bacchus, and Jedediah Allen. “Statements,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 2 January, 1812. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

Immovably planted in the midst of a pressing, overwhelming throng, where for the space I suppose of 4 minutes we were; then with him in my arms thrown to the floor. While thus prostrate a blast of flame & smoke was inhaled by us both and so great was its Influence that my arms let go their hold, My son in a convulsive throe wrested himself from my grasp & exclaimed, “Oh Father! I am dying!” This roused me from my state of almost Insensibility. My reply was, “My Son, I will die with you!” Dark as midnight, my hand involuntarily seized the skirt of his coat. I got him again in my hold.”<sup>6</sup>

Ticket holders, like Greenhow, in the expensive box seats were the least likely to escape, while most in the cheaper seats escaped unharmed. The audience members in the pit escaped through the outer door, and those seated in the gallery could reach the stairs quickly, but those in the boxes had to cram into narrow hall-like “lobbies” and fight their way toward the staircase to the ground floor. In only three minutes, by some accounts, flames had already roared from the stage to the boxes, and suffocating smoke rolled through the theater.<sup>7</sup> Fed on turpentine, resin, varnish and hemp, it was an opaque, sooty strain of “bituminous smoke” that eliminated all visibility in the upper floors. As the heat rose, a bulls eye window on the uppermost part of the exterior wall supplied oxygen from the fresh night air, sucking in a strong draft through the convection effect and encouraging the

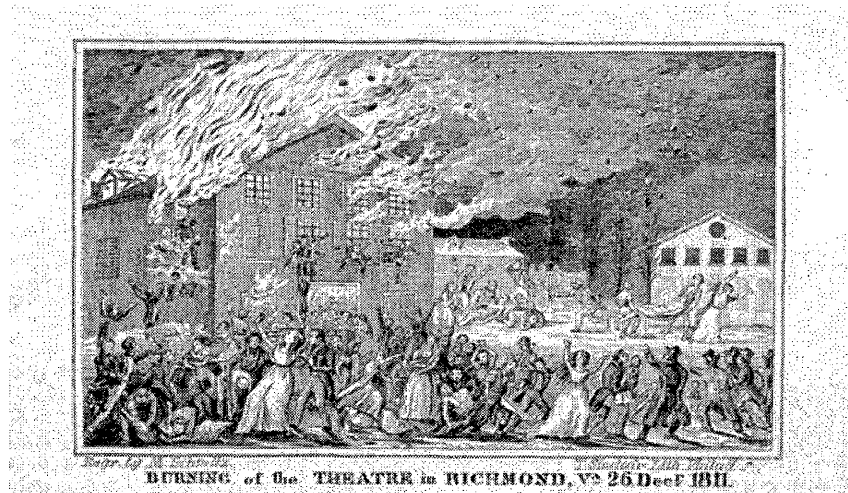
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<sup>6</sup> Robert Greenhow, Sr. to John T. Mason, 7 February, 1812. In Fillmore Norfleet, *Saint-Memin in Virginia: Portraits and Biographies* (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1942), 168-169.

<sup>7</sup> Narrative of M.W. Hancock, “Statements,” *Richmond Enquirer* of 2 January, 1812. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

flames. The fire snarled through the seats and shot up the walls, consuming an entire painted canvas ceiling that was nailed to the underside of the roof.

Those in the box seats alert enough to push through a smoke-induced stupor and the mob in the lobbies found themselves in a narrow stairway, where the hysterical flow of human traffic was completely immobilized. In the attempt to escape, people scrambled over the fainting, stepping on heads and shoulders to fight their way either up or down the stairs. Greenhow relayed, “While we were kicked to the head of the Stair case, finding myself there still prostrate, not being able to rise, I gave my Body a Sudden Impulse that carried us over the Dead & dying Bodies & pieces of flaming wood that the steps were crowded with, and in that manner, with [my son] in my arms, got to the lower floor, when, reanimated by the air rushing in at the Doors, I got up & most miraculously, & unhurt, placed myself & child out of Danger.”<sup>8</sup> Whether caught and trapped by their cumbersome winter clothing, manhandled after passing out, or directly trampled, many other theatergoers were crushed to death within minutes.<sup>9</sup>



<sup>8</sup> Greenhow, Sr. to Mason, 7 February, 1812. *Norfleet*, 168-169.

<sup>9</sup> William Maxwell, *A Memoir of the Rev. John H. Rice, D.D.* (Richmond, VA: R.I. Smith, 1835), 72-73.

As the heat increased and the flames ate away at the wooden supports, the stairs, where the majority of escaping theatergoers had congregated, collapsed, stranding dozens on the upper stories and killing a number of those crammed into the stairwell. In the midst of an “awful horror and desperation that beggars all description,” several people trapped on the second floor groped their way along the side of the building toward windows, deliriously smashed them out, and regained coherence from the fresh air.<sup>10</sup> Pushing toward the open windows, members of the crowd, desperate to escape the inferno, began jumping two stories to the ground below. The resourceful Carter Page “saved his wife by splitting her Pelisse [a coat-like dress typically worn over a longer cotton dress] and tying the dress so as to form a rope by which he got her down from the window and followed her at the expense of a broken leg.”<sup>11</sup> Despairing persons trapped within a mass of humanity several yards from the windows felt the heat surge behind them, singeing their hair and blistering their skin. Eyewitnesses saw them “catching on fire, and writhing in the greatest agonies of pain and distress.”<sup>12</sup> They pushed impulsively, desperately, toward the casements ahead. Their force thrust those in front of them, ready or not, out the windows, and victims fell clinging to each other, slipping on the sill, and plummeting in flames, like comets. It seems from eyewitness accounts that the cause of the most deaths was not burns and fall-related injuries, but carbon monoxide poisoning. One survivor wrote that he collapsed after inhaling the mixture for less than a minute, and only the fact that he fell through the floor into a shaft of fresh air revived him

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<sup>10</sup> Narrative of M.W. Hancock, “Statements,” *Richmond Enquirer* of 2 January, 1812. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>11</sup> John Coalter to St. George Tucker and John Prentis, 29 December, 1811, Special Collections, Tucker Coleman Papers, The College of William and Mary.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, footnote, taken from *American Standard*, undated, 5.

sufficiently to escape.<sup>13</sup> Scores of Richmonders trapped in the theater became dizzy from smoke inhalation and slowly slumped to the floor, senseless. In the space of about ten minutes, the theater became quiet, save the sound of crackling, hungry flames.

Charles Copland was a local lawyer whose Court End home was only stone's throw from the theater, next to the Baptist Church across the street.<sup>14</sup> Four of his children attended the performance of "Raymond and Agnes." In his diary entry for December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1811, Copland wrote:

I was there myself in the early part of the night, but got tired of the play, and came home and was in bed and asleep when the fire commenced. I was awakened by the cries of fire in the street. On opening my eyes the room was illuminated by the fire from the theatre through the one window of my chamber and which faced the theatre. Rising and going to my window I discovered the theatre enveloped in flame, and before I got on my clothes, I heard my daughter Elizabeth who had escaped, coming upstairs shrieking—when I got to my front door going out I found crowds of people in the street coming from the theatre, some of men bearing away their maimed friends who had suffered either from burning or broken limbs.<sup>15</sup>

While most people were standing yards away from the flames, emboldened by his desire to find his children, Copland ran past the crowd and into the burning theater. The lobby he entered was a surreal universe, eerily silent, brilliantly lit, with a deranged woman wandering helplessly about in the foyer and a heap of girls in a tousled pile like maltreated dolls, young women who were first

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<sup>13</sup> Narratives of J.G. Jackson and M.W. Hancock, "Statements," *Richmond Enquirer* of 2 January, 1812. Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days: Being Reminiscences of an Old Citizen* (Richmond, VA: George M. West, 1856) The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925, Library of Congress [cited 10/25/2004] available at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbc02923184>, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Copland, *Diary of Charles Copland*, 26 December, 1811. Archives and Manuscripts. Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.



overcome by smoke and then trampled at the entryway to the stairwell. He suspected that nineteen-year-old Margaret Copland, who had gone to the theater with a group of her best friends, may have been somewhere amidst the pile of silk, wool, and bodies.

My daughter had worn to the theatre a cloth riding dress and ...at the foot of the staircase, I passed my hand over the bodies of the females that lay prostrate before me, with a hope of discovering my daughter by the dress she had worn; for I had not time to examine faces, although there was a sufficient light, as well from the candles that were burning in the tin sconces that hang on the walls, as from the flames above, the glare of which came down the stairway...While I was passing my hand over their bodies looking for a cloth dress, I frequently with a loud voice called my daughter, hoping by loud speaking to rouse her or some one of them, but the power of speech was gone or impeded. None spoke, but other signs of life were not wanting.<sup>16</sup>

Copland conveyed two of the helpless, but sentient, women outside, but he failed to find Margaret or his sons. There were no more accessible places to look. Conflicted and ashamed for leaving the scene when he may have rescued more of the injured, Copland finally, in anguish, “ran home not without a faint hope that my children might have escaped and returned home. I found my two sons but my daughter was no more.”<sup>17</sup> Not long after Copland left the building, the roof crumpled in. Winds blew high, and the flames moved quickly over the wooden building.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. A Mr. Tucker may have followed after Copland, for he described a similar stairwell scene in the *Richmond Enquirer*, 2 January, 1811, and he relayed a number of the women to the door, where men from outside entered and “removed the other ladies” who had reached the lowest flight of stairs. Perhaps Copland’s guilt was finally assuaged when he read of Tucker’s rescues in the paper.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Barrett, *Gilbert Hunt, The City Blacksmith* (Richmond: James Woodhouse & Co., 1859), 29. Documenting the American South Digital Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1999. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/barrett/barrett.html/>

By morning, the theater was reduced to a few blackened, crumbling walls surrounded by piles of charred, entwined bodies and smoking timbers. Over seventy people were dead. The inferno consumed some of Richmond's most prominent and distinguished citizens, including Virginia's governor, George Smith, and former U.S. Senator Abraham B. Venable. Scarcely a single family of social consequence was left unaffected. Greenhow was no exception. While Robert, Sr. and his son eluded death, his beloved wife did not survive. After ensuring his son's safety, Greenhow dashed back to the theater to find Mary Ann, but was repelled by "Death & destruction."<sup>19</sup> In a state of frantic distraction, he paced desperately outside the theater for hours in the darkness, searching for her, even when it was certain there were no more survivors. Copland, consumed with grief, did not emerge from his house for days.

The losses left Richmond—and all of America—in shock. The large cost to civilian life and the importance of the city made this catastrophe worldwide news. For weeks, newspapers from New Hampshire's *Farmer's Cabinet* to South Carolina's *City Gazette* dispatched reports of the fire in exhaustive detail. The city became a focus of international sermonizing, with the theater fire a vivid object lesson of sovereignty and the supposed wages of sin.

In 1811, Richmond was a place of influence and importance. Many of the nation's most prominent and powerful public servants hailed from Virginia and had spent time and established connections there. In 1785, five years after the capital was moved from Williamsburg to Richmond, the state decided to locate the Capitol building, designed by Thomas Jefferson, west of the original settlement on Shockoe Hill. Other government

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<sup>19</sup> Greenhow, Sr. to Mason, 7 February, 1812. Norfleet, 168-169.

buildings were built in close proximity to the Capitol, including the state Court of Appeals.<sup>20</sup> Wealthy Virginia lawyers and their families headed for the new capital, setting up households near the courts in what became known as “Court End.”<sup>21</sup> In those years, Richmond lacked the urban density one might find in Philadelphia or Williamsburg, and even after being the state capital for thirty years, the city retained something of a frontier feel. There were no houses and no city services, so a newcomer could buy an entire city block and fill it with all the farm animals, outbuildings, domiciles, and offices his family might require. Although the homes of the upper classes were fine, even showy, they sat surrounded by streets that were no more than muddy footpaths, and Court End smelled of fenced-in pigs, chickens, and horses. Before the terrain was leveled and bridged, the deep gulches, steep hills, swamps, flooding streams, and cliffs made the city difficult to navigate by cart or on foot.<sup>22</sup> In its early years, an English visitor declared Richmond “one of the dirtiest holes of a place I ever was in.”<sup>23</sup>

The city also had a rollicking social scene. Hundreds of spectators flocked in their finest to see the city’s cockfights, legendary horse races at the Richmond Jockey Club,

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<sup>20</sup> Isaac Weld, Jr. wrote, “The situation of the upper town is very pleasing; it stands on an elevated spot, and commands a fine prospect of the Falls of the river, and of the adjacent country on the opposite side. The best houses stand here, and also the capitol or statehouse. From the opposite side of the river this building appears extremely well, as its defects cannot be observed at that distance, but, on a closer inspection it proves to be a clumsy ill shapen [sic] pile.” *Travels through the states of North America : and the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, 4th ed. (London : Printed for J. Stockdale, 1807) 189; American Notes: Travels in America, 1750-1920, Library of Congress American Memory Collection. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbtn.3770a>

<sup>21</sup> Virginius Dabney writes “Removal of the seat of government from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1780 brought an influx of prominent citizens, especially lawyers, to the new capital. These attorneys were soon to be recognized as spectacularly talented—so much so, that Edward S. Corwin has termed the Richmond bar the most brilliant in America at the period.” *Richmond: The Story of a City* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1976), 31.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Hunter, Jr., from an uncited passage in Dabney, 34.

and theatrical performances. Richmond's frequent "dancing assemblies" and opulent balls upheld Virginia's reputation as a place where the citizens would "dance—or die," in the famous words of Philip Fithian. But Richmond's theater reigned as the premiere space in the capital for public entertainment. The most famous European and American actors and actresses regularly stopped in Richmond, and visiting theater companies could count on full audiences. The theater was an anchor of Court End, in close proximity to the homes of Richmond's wealthiest residents. Attracted to the vibrancy of the urban center, outsiders by the hundreds rumbled into the city to visit during the festive winter months when the legislature was in session and the social season was at its height.<sup>24</sup> The affluent often parlayed a theater performance into an elaborate evening of entertainment.<sup>25</sup> Local gentry would begin the evening with an impressive dinner at a private home. From there, they would walk or ride to the theater, and groups of friends would take over entire boxes of seats, often visiting and socializing with each other while the performers were on stage, as though the play were nothing more than background noise. Richmond's theater was by no means the exclusive province of the wealthy. It attracted all social classes, including slaves, free blacks, common workers, and disreputable types, who were all in on the raucous fun. In Mid-Atlantic theaters, audiences were infamous for their disorderliness. They sang along with performers, puffed on cigars, wandered about the theater to mingle, occasionally hurled things on

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<sup>24</sup> Governmental proceedings could be their own form of entertainment. The city had recently drawn additional crowds and national attention in 1807 as the site of former Vice President Aaron Burr's treason trial. Richmond's most prominent resident, Supreme Court Justice John Marshall, tried the case, and a number of prominent local lawyers sat on the defense and prosecution.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia C. Click, *The Spirit of the Times: Amusements in Nineteenth-Century Baltimore, Norfolk, and Richmond* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1989), 35.

stage (or jumped up themselves), talked or argued loudly with each other, flirted openly, and cheered, whistled at, or heckled the actors.<sup>26</sup>

Traveler's journals from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries usually note two things about Richmond: this jarring mix of roughness and gentility and the lack of churches for a city its size. It was sometimes not evident to visitors that there were *any* churches. Isaac Weld, Jr., visiting in the last years of the eighteenth century wrote, "there is no such thing as a church in the town."<sup>27</sup> This wasn't true. Episcopalians maintained a presence in the seldom-used St. John's Church on "Church Hill," but it was one of only four church buildings in the city.<sup>28</sup> St. John's, known as the site of Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty, or give me death" speech, was in a sparsely populated area east of town. It was nearly inaccessible in inclement weather, so ill-attended services were held there only three times a year between 1789 and 1814.<sup>29</sup> Most churchgoing Episcopalians—and there were few—attended joint services with the Presbyterians in the Capitol Building, and had done so since before 1791.<sup>30</sup> On alternating weeks, Reverend John D. Blair, a

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<sup>26</sup> Click, 40.

<sup>27</sup> 189.

<sup>28</sup> St. John's was built in 1741. The Baptist Church at 14<sup>th</sup> and Broad was constructed in 1802, the Methodist Church was built at 19<sup>th</sup> and Franklin in 1798 or 1799, and the Quakers built a meetinghouse around 1797. Ulrich Troubetzkoy, *Richmond, City of Churches: A Short History of Richmond's Denominations and Faiths, Issued Incident to America's 350<sup>th</sup> Birthday, 1607-1957* (Richmond, VA: Southern Bank and Trust: 1957), 1, 5, 7, 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. Mordecai notes (119), "The population of Church Hill was then very sparse, consisting of only a few families, and the distance to the church, from that part of the city where it was comparatively dense, was too great for worshippers to attend, especially in the then condition of the unpaved streets. The hall of the House of Delegates was the only apartment in the city sufficiently spacious for a place of worship, and to this purpose it was devoted on the Sabbath."

<sup>30</sup> Mrs. Colonel Edward Carrington, an Episcopalian, wrote in 1792 that Buchanan "from sheer benevolence, continues to preach in our Capitol to what we now call the New School—that is to say, a set of modern philosophers, who merely attend because they know not what else to do with themselves. But blessed be God, in spite of the enlightened, as they call themselves, and in spite of Godwin, Paine, and others, we still...endeavor to preserve the religion of our fathers."<sup>30</sup>J.L. Burrows, "History of the Church,"

Presbyterian, and Reverend John Buchanan, an Episcopalian, led services.<sup>31</sup> John Holt Rice, future pastor of Richmond's First Presbyterian Church, noted that in 1811, "There was at least no regularly organized [Episcopal or Presbyterian] church . . . in [Richmond], or none that was visible, but all of both of them who retained any respect for religion went together to hear a sermon, in the forenoon only of every Sunday, in the Hall of the House of Delegates, in the Capitol. . . . On one Sunday the people were Presbyterians, in outward appearance, and the next they were Episcopalians, in aspect; but still all the same."<sup>32</sup> The room could not hold more than a few hundred people and the services were "not largely attended."<sup>33</sup> It is difficult to establish attendance statistics from the early 1800s for the joint Capitol congregation. However, both the Episcopal and Presbyterian denominations formed separate churches after the fire, and their records indicate a probable congregation size of less than two hundred.<sup>34</sup>

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in *The First Century of The First Baptist Church of Richmond Virginia, 1780-1880*, (Richmond, VA: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), 51. Methodist Bishop Thomas Coke addressed the Capitol congregation in 1791 and noted, "I preached in *Richmond* . . . to the most dressy congregation I ever saw in America. . . I spoke for an hour to the *Deists, Socinians, and Arians*." William Sweet, *Virginia Methodism, a History* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1955), footnote, 120.

<sup>31</sup> This was convenient for the famously collegial "Two Parsons," each of whom had preaching obligations outside the city at other rural churches. George MacLaren Brydon, *Historic Parishes: Saint Paul's Church, Richmond* (Reprinted from the Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church, September, 1954), 3.

<sup>32</sup> John Holt Rice to Rev. Archibald Alexander, 17 October, 1810. Maxwell, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Philip B. Price, *The Life of the Reverend John Holt Rice, D.D.* Historical Transcripts no. 1, (Richmond: Library of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1963), 57.

<sup>34</sup> The Protestant Episcopal Monumental Church was erected in 1814. By 1815, it had one hundred and twenty communicants, with some additional non-communicant attendees. Report on the Protestant Episcopal Church Convention, May 23, 1815. Fisher, 68. Richmond's Presbyterians were said to be "few in number" in 1812, when a group of them formed First Presbyterian Church and called John Holt Rice to be their pastor. The records of the church indicate that it began with fifty-eight communicants. B.R. Wellford, "History of the First Presbyterian Church," in *First Presbyterian, Richmond, VA. Proceedings of the Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary of Its Organization, May 1, 1892*, 43-61. (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, General Printers, 1892), 47.

The Protestant Episcopal Church, as a result of religious disestablishment in Virginia and its association with the Church of England, suffered severe setbacks after the Revolutionary War, both legally and in terms of its public reputation.<sup>35</sup> No longer enjoying the privilege of being a state church, the Episcopal church found itself in a new, competitive environment of religious freedom. It did not fare well. In 1805, the *Richmond Enquirer* observed the Protestant Episcopal Church's numeric decline and posited an explanation: "They have been thrown with all the satiety and indolence of old establishments, into a fair and fearful competition with the novelty and zeal of the present sects. What other predictions then could have been formed, than that they would gradually see the proselytes of their church passing over to the communion of more animated though less enlightened ministers?"<sup>36</sup> There were over ninety Church of England clergymen and one hundred and sixty-four churches and chapels in Virginia at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. Only twenty-eight clergymen and seventy-two parishes remained at the war's end.<sup>37</sup> Although the numbers of clergy climbed, by 1811 there were still only forty Episcopal churches in Virginia able to support a minister.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The church was rendered weak not only because of lost membership, but also from new laws. In 1802, a law was passed that forced parishes to give up their glebe lands upon the death or departure of their rector. Additionally, ministerial salaries were made voluntary and the church's incorporated status was rescinded. John Frank Waukechon, *The Forgotten Evangelicals: Virginia Episcopalians, 1790-1876*, Ph. D. diss., 2000 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Dissertation, 2000: University of Texas at Austin), 164.

<sup>36</sup> "Protestant Episcopal Church," *Richmond Enquirer*, 31 May, 1805: page 3. Early American Newspapers: 1690-1876, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA. Accessed 11/19/2004. <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com>>.

<sup>37</sup> John N. Norton, *The Life of the Right Reverend Richard Channing Moore, D.D., Bishop of Virginia*. 2d ed. enl., (New York: General Protestant Episcopal S. School Union and Church Book Society, 1860), 38.

<sup>38</sup> One hundred and seven churches existed, but only the forty mentioned were staffed. Waukechon, 164.

Baptists and Methodists had more sizeable congregations in Richmond, but only compared to the Presbyterians and Episcopalians. Possibly reflecting a desire for greater numbers, Baptist historian Robert Baylor Semple noted that Baptists were “not the most flourishing sect” in 1810, although they surpassed Richmond’s other denominations with five hundred and sixty members, both black and white.<sup>39</sup> In 1812, the Methodist Richmond Circuit had a membership of two hundred and fifty-six whites and forty-seven “colored members.”<sup>40</sup> The membership of Richmond’s churches in total was less than ten percent of the city population.<sup>41</sup> In the Richmond of 1811, religious faith, though perhaps vibrant privately, was not manifested through church attendance or institutional religion.<sup>42</sup> This was ground for great ministerial concern.

Also of concern for some clerics was Richmond’s preoccupation with entertainments like the theater. Many regarded the flaming end of Richmond Theater to be a sign of displeasure from heaven and punishment for a frivolous people. One of the

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<sup>39</sup>J.L. Burrows, “History of the Church,” in *The First Century of The First Baptist Church of Richmond Virginia, 1780-1880*, (Richmond, VA: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), 68; W.D. Thomas, “Deceased Pastors,” in *The First Century*, 119; Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, rev. and ex. by G.W. Beale, (Richmond, VA: Pitt and Dickinson, 1894), 118.

At this point, most blacks attended churches with whites. Slaves “could neither maintain their own churches, nor assemble together for worship except under a white minister. Until 1848 no law prohibited free Negroes or mulattoes from assembling, but the presence of a single slave converted the meeting into an unlawful assembly.” *Inventory of the Church Archives of Virginia: Negro Baptist Churches in Richmond*, Historical Records Survey, Work Projects Administration (Richmond, VA: The Historical Records Survey of Virginia, June 1940), pg. v.

<sup>40</sup> That year, Methodist membership in the state of Virginia grew by forty-three blacks, but declined by one hundred and eighty-eight whites. Bishop Asbury attributed the decline to westward emigration. Sweet, 150.

<sup>41</sup> This under 10% statistic matches national 1780s pre-Second Great Awakening statistics, indicating that Richmond had not experienced great change in church attendance, despite the Awakening. Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI: 1992, Reprinted 1999), 166.

<sup>42</sup> Based on written records, Noll surmises that a “deeply religious spirit imbued much of the American population in this period. It was not necessarily a church-going spirit, for more Americans in this period did not attend church regularly than did.” Noll, *History of Christianity*, 228.



cheap broadsides distributed in Richmond after the fire has a wide black mourning border around a poem, with a crude decorative woodcut of the theater at the top of the page. One verse reads:

May theatres all be done away,  
Thro' all Columbia's shore,  
The buildings put to better use,  
And plays be seen no more.<sup>43</sup>

Thick, jagged lines emanate from the roof, ending in a pair of dark clouds that hover over the theater.<sup>44</sup> It may be read two ways. Perhaps the artist meant to draw flames shooting out of the building, producing billows of smoke. But it looks much more like angry clouds striking bolts of lightning into the theater. This would have been factually inaccurate, but right in line with the inclinations of not a few Christian leaders. Behaviors exhibited in the theater made moralists cringe, and after the fire, critics and clerics took opportunity to disparage stage plays, actors, and their audiences. One historian of the Richmond theater declared that the fire “caused bitter prejudice and violent opposition to the theatre in Richmond” and dealt a “serious blow to theatrical interests throughout America.”<sup>45</sup> Anti-theater sermons circulated widely in the aftermath.

While some ministers volleyed hard against the theater following the fire, even beforehand, pro-theater Virginians in Richmond maintained a defensive position. On December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1811 a newspaper article appeared about the upcoming performance of “The Father; or Family Feuds,” the play that showed at the theater the night of the fire.

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<sup>43</sup> “Theatre on Fire. AWFUL CALAMITY!” Broadside, 1811. Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Staples Shockley, “The Proprietors of Richmond’s New Theatre of 1819.” *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, 2nd Series, Vol.19, No.3 (July, 1939): 302.

The writer went to great pains to prove the theater was an edifying place for children and families, while acknowledging that it could be a place that fostered wrongdoing. After blaming London theaters for causing “degeneracy,” the author responded, “the same cause of degeneracy does not exist here, where our Theatres are upon a smaller scale . . . we should give our warmest support to the true and legitimate Drama.” In his opinion, *Family Feuds* was fit for family viewing and “breathes throughout the whole the purest morality and the most affecting pathos; in short, it is a family picture of masterly design, and exquisite colouring.”<sup>46</sup> He painted the Richmond Theater as a “refined banquet . . . a place of elegant recreation,” and also “a school of morals,” but there is a discernibly defensive tone to the endorsement.

Some ministers, such as Reverend William Hill of Winchester, Virginia, agreed that a theater might hypothetically be “so ordered and regulated, as to become a powerful auxiliary to virtue, patriotism, and literature,” with the theaters of ancient Greece and Rome as prime examples.<sup>47</sup> Yet he disapproved of the contemporary American stage himself and wrote after the fire, “I view [theaters], at present, as little better than schools of vice. The stage has fallen into the hands of the most abandoned and licentious wretches and prostitutes, with few exceptions.”<sup>48</sup> Missionary Robert May agreed with

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<sup>46</sup> Based on Shockley’s 1811 cast lists, the Placide and Green theater company was very much a family business. Mr. and Mrs. Green as well as their daughter performed as did Mr. and Mrs. Placide with their daughter. The single females in the troupe seem to all be the children of performers. Martin Staples Shockley, *The Richmond Stage, 1784-1812* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 352.

<sup>47</sup> William Hill, *A sermon, delivered in the Presbyterian meeting-house in Winchester, on Thursday the 23d Jan. 1812; being a day of fasting and humiliation, appointed by the citizens of Winchester on account of the late calamitous fire at the Richmond theatre.* (Winchester, VA: Printed at the Office of the Winchester Gazette, 1812), 15 The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925, Library of Congress American Memory Collection. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbc.07229>, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

this conclusion, and wrote, “It has been said, that the theatre is a useful school, in which persons may learn much, if they please. Much of what? Much of evil; much of vice.” The immoral content was too influential to outweigh any good a theatergoer could derive from the plot. “Let it not be said the Theatre *may* be rendered useful,” Watson cautioned.<sup>49</sup> To the contention that “a person may learn as much by seeing a good play, as by hearing a good sermon,” May responded, “Did you ever hear at a theatre that you were poor, lost and guilty sinners; that without a Saviour, without pardon of sin and holiness of heart, you must be miserable forever?”<sup>50</sup> The implied answer: of course not.

Presbyterian Reverend Samuel Miller, in a sermon to his New York City parishioners about the theater fire, asserted that dramatic productions were an unfit pastime for a Christian. He preached, “the Calamity which we lament, ought to be employed, among other purposes, as an occasion of entering a solemn protest against a prevailing, but most unchristian, and most baneful Amusement.”<sup>51</sup> A Baltimore author, in an account of the Richmond fire, described the theater as a “Flesh-market,” where “male and female prostitutes [in] the front boxes rendered the scene of actions fit only for a

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<sup>49</sup> *Calamity at Richmond: Being a Narrative of the Affecting Circumstances Attending the Awful Conflagration of the Theatre, in the City of Richmond, on the Night of Thursday, the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, 1811.* publisher John F. Watson, Philadelphia, 1812. The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925. Library of Congress American Memory Collection. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbc.13289>, iv.

<sup>50</sup> Robert May, *Voice from Richmond, and Other Addresses to Children and Youth*, (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1842) The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925, Library of Congress [cited 10/25/2004] <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbc.28885>, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Samuel Miller, *A Sermon, Delivered January 19, 1812, at the Request of a Number of Young Gentlemen of the City of New York: Who had Assembled to Express their Condolence with the Inhabitants of Richmond, on the late Mournful Dispensation of Providence in that City* (New York: Whiting and Watson, 1812), 15-16. Rare Books, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

brothel.”<sup>52</sup> Moralists sighed that even good women were falling under the theater’s sway of sensualism. The Baltimore writer supposed that “the present prevailing system of *Nudism* [by which he seems to mean scanty clothing] had its origin in the Playhouse, and in the person of a prostitute or a player... Who would have supposed that such a mode of dress, or rather *undress*, would ever have been adopted by virtuous women?”<sup>53</sup> Rees Lloyd, an “independent minister” from Philadelphia, was particularly vitriolic towards both actors and friends of the stage: “It is beyond all dispute that damnation shall be the end of actors on the stage, and gamblers, except they are brought to Jesus by repentance, and true conversion.”<sup>54</sup> He thought the audience was at equal risk. “I am persuaded it is my duty to declare . . . all those who encourage this sinful practice of plays, &c. are not worthy in this respect to be called Christians, because they promote . . . the cause of Satan, and I am sorry to say it, the most of them cast the word of God behind their backs.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “*Particular accou[nt] of the dreadful [fire] at Richmond, Virginia, December 26, 1811. Which destroyed the theatre and the house adjoining, and in which more than sixty persons were either burnt to death, or destroyed in attempting to make their escape. To which is added, some observations on theatrical performances; and, an essay from the Virginia Argus, proving profaneness inconsistent with politeness.*” Printed for and sold by J. Kingston, and all the Booksellers in the United States (Baltimore: B. W. Sower, & co., Printers, 1812), 35. Rare Books, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Rees Lloyd, *The Richmond Alarm: a Plain and Familiar Discourse in the Form of a Dialogue Between a Father and His Son: in Three Parts: Written at the Request of a Number of Pious Persons by an Independent Minister* (Philadelphia: J. Bioren, Printer, 1814), 77. The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925. Library of Congress American Memory Collection. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbcb.16684>.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

THE  
**RICHMOND ALARM;**

A PLAIN AND FAMILIAR DISCOURSE IN THE FORM OF  
 A DIALOGUE

BETWEEN A FATHER AND HIS SON ;

IN THREE PARTS :

- I. Containing introduction, with many instructive hints and observations upon many of the most remarkable occurrences, wonders and curiosities in history; with a short account of the four religions of the world, viz. Pagan, Jewish, Mahometan and Christian religion; and a brief account of the Greek church, Popish church, and Protestant church.
- II. An account of the burning of the Theatre in Richmond, December 26, 1811; with observations upon the nature and effects of Stage Plays, Masquerades, Balls, Puppet Shows, Horse Races, and Gambling.
- III. Reflections upon that conflagration; with a solemn application to people of every rank and character...humbly intended to reform our citizens, and to warn the youth of our country to avoid those sinful vanities by which not only the blooming days of their youth are mispent, but also they are misled into many wretched vices and miseries of this world, and everlasting destruction in the world to come.

WRITTEN AT THE REQUEST OF A NUMBER OF PIOUS  
 PERSONS,

BY AN INDEPENDENT MINISTER,

Who in the course of his ministry upwards of thirty years, took notice of many of the devices and snares of the great enemy of our souls to ensnare and entice the fallen race of Adam from embracing the free salvation through Jesus our blessed Redeemer.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR.

J. BIORN, PRINTER, NO. 88, CHESNUT STREET.

Price 50 Cents.

The theater not only jeopardized a person's virtue, according to many sermons published after the fire. It also absorbed a great deal of money that preachers felt could be better spent. One moralist from England, Ann Tuke Alexander, wrote that "many who, from the pressure of the times, can scarcely maintain their families, and even . . . servants, spend part of their little store in tickets for the play-house."<sup>56</sup> She suggested they were following the example of the "highest classes in society" who should "set the virtuous example, of withdrawing their presence and support from scenes so unworthy of their rank and character."<sup>57</sup> The financial appeals played to existing undercurrents of concern over the amount of money spent on the theater in Richmond. In January of 1810, visiting star John Howard Payne played on the Richmond stage for eight nights. His performances, including the roles of Hamlet and Romeo, garnered him \$1,710. The *Enquirer* exclaimed, "What a blind Goddess of Fortune! There is no disparagement intended to the youth . . . but here is a lad, just springing into life . . . reaping \$1700 in ten days—while our judges of Courts of Appeals, whose heads are almost grey [sic] in the service of their country, who have exhausted the midnight oil in study, and devoted entire days to their accomplishment in their profession, and now unsealing the fountains of sacred justice to their countrymen, are about to receive, *perhaps*, only \$2000 for a tedious year of public service."<sup>58</sup> The author feared that this reflected the Richmond public's

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<sup>56</sup> Ann Tuke Alexander, *Remarks on the Theatre, and on the Late Fire at Richmond, in Virginia* (York, England: T. Wilson & Son, 1812 accessed 25 October, 2004), 19. The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925, Library of Congress American Memory Collection. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/lhbc21908>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 1 February, 1810. Quoting the *Richmond Enquirer*, undated. Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

poor priorities. “Is it because men care more for their amusements than for solid, substantial services?”<sup>59</sup>

The theater was also accused of wasting the public’s time on frivolity. Miller wrote “To spend an hour *unprofitably*, or even in a *less* profitable way, when a mode of spending it more conformably to the will of God, and more usefully to himself and others, is within his reach, will appear to such a one quite as criminal as many of what are called gross sins, and quite as sacredly to be avoided.”<sup>60</sup> May concluded a children’s sermon about the Richmond fire with this poetic admonition:

Think, dear young friends, how much depends  
On the short period of a day;  
Shall time, which Heaven in mercy lends,  
Be negligently thrown away?

Insure your nobler life on high,  
Life from a dying Saviour’s blood!  
Then, though your minutes swiftly fly,  
They bear you nearer to your God.<sup>61</sup>

Ministers held the standard high, maintaining that not a moment should be wasted in a Christian’s life. Presbyterian Reverend James Muir, a Masonic chaplain who presided at George Washington’s funeral, believed the ultimate lesson of the disaster was to be careful with time. “They have suffered, *that we may be warned* by their sufferings. If after such warning, any of you persist to lead unprofitable, careless, dissipated lives; and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Miller, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 32.

thus to murder the few days which God has given you on earth, to prepare for heaven, you must be speechless when you stand before his bar, not having one single excuse to offer for your conduct.”<sup>62</sup> Many ministers believed that if Christians could be convinced to redeem the time, they could make the suffering of the victims redemptive and meaningful, instead of a tragic waste.

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<sup>62</sup> James Muir, *Repentance, or Richmond in Tears. Sermon II*, 1812. *The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925*. Library of Congress American Memory Collection. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/gdc/lhbcb.0722642>, 58.



## CHAPTER II

### TRANSFORMATION IN RICHMOND

That Thursday in 1811 brought destruction, but attempts to bring healing to the situation began the next day. As the sun rose on Friday, December 27<sup>th</sup>, Richmond's residents, haggard and strained, returned to H Street to sift through the rubble of the theater. Lawyer John Coalter was in town and observed "the wretched survivors were all next day engaged in drawing the half-consumed bodies from the ruins, many of which they were able by one means or another, to identify."<sup>1</sup> Thomas Joynes, a delegate to the Virginia House, nearly lost his life in the fire, but was drawn back to the grounds the next morning. Later that evening, he wrote to his brother in Accomack County, "I have this moment returned from the place of this melanchony [sic] catastrophe, where great quantities of human carcasses [sic] are to be seen which were not entirely consumed by the fire."<sup>2</sup>

Richmond's mass funeral for the theater fatalities was the following Sunday. Citizens, clad in black, gathered in the streets on that winter day. The funeral procession began on Main Street and ended at the site of the fire, only two blocks northeast of the Capitol building. The participants followed a prescribed order. The remains, in urns and

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<sup>1</sup> John Coalter to St. George Tucker and John Prentis, 29 December, 1811, Special Collections, Tucker Coleman Papers, The College of William and Mary.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Joynes, to Levin S. Joynes, 27, December, 1811. In *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* LI, no.3 (July 1943): 298.

coffins, were at the head of the line.<sup>3</sup> Clergy followed. “Mourners and ladies” were next, a group that likely consisted of families who had suffered a direct loss. Then came a phalanx of local notables: the city’s Executive Council, the Directors of the Bank, the Judiciary, members of the Legislature, the Court of Hastings, and Common Hall (the town council) members. Those bringing up the rear were “citizens on foot,” and “citizens on horseback” who wished to convey their sympathy and support.<sup>4</sup> Once the whole assembly arrived at the fatal site, they gathered over the area where the theater’s orchestra pit used to be, and Episcopalian parson John Buchanan led a service for the dead. All victims were buried in a common grave on the spot.<sup>5</sup> An observer of the funeral wrote, “The whole scene defies description. A whole city bathed in tears!--How awful the transition on this devoted spot!--A few days since, it was the theatre of joy and

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<sup>3</sup> Although cremation was virtually unheard of in America at this time, crematory urns, which recalled the Roman Republic, were very fashionable as funerary images from the end of the Revolutionary War through the 1820s. They appear on objects from gravestones to needlepoint, and were a generic image of mourning, not typically related to fires. However in this particular case, the urn, a receptacle for human ashes, was a fitting symbol of the holocaust that claimed Richmond’s victims. Charles Shively, *A History of the Conception of Death in America, 1650-1860* (Garland Publishing, Inc: New York, 1988), 192.

<sup>4</sup> “Interment of the Dead,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 31 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/) We see the mourning pattern of procession/day of prayer/corporate church service repeated in most of Richmond’s principal towns. On January 5<sup>th</sup>, the ship flags over Norfolk, Virginia’s harbor were lowered to half-mast. Norfolk’s citizens, dressed in “weeds of mourning,” crowded the Market Square and adjoining streets to honor the dead. Never had so many of the city’s own gathered, and with the exception of George Washington’s funeral observance, never had the city seen so somber an assembly. Featuring prominently in the procession was a large handsome urn engraved “In MEMORY of the Citizens who were victims of the conflagration of the Theatre at Richmond, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of Dec. MDCCCXI.” Eight citizens bore the urn down the city streets accompanied by a “solemn dirge.” Bells clanged across the city while artillery fired into the sky. The procession first stopped at the Presbyterian Church where a Rev. Symes delivered a “truly impressive and orthodox discourse.” Following this, the procession went to Christ Church (which was itself destroyed by fire fifteen years later) and deposited the urn there. “Funeral Procession,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 9 January, 1812. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>5</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, 31 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/) Also Fisher, 13-14.

merriment--animated by the sound of music and the hum of a delighted multitude. It is now a funeral pyre! the receptacle of the relics of our friends!”<sup>6</sup>

The Common Council’s original plan was that the deceased would lie in rest in the public burying ground at St. John’s Church after a procession originating at the “Baptist Meeting-House” near the Theater site.<sup>7</sup> The plan was scrapped because the proposal was inconvenient on a few accounts. First, it would mean a 10-block march eastward on Broad Street, part of it up a steep hill.<sup>8</sup> Second, after a few days, it became clear that the quantity of ash and body parts was impossible to move, and attempting to do so would steal from the victims’ dignity. The Common Council reported, “the remains of their unfortunate fellow-citizens who perished...cannot with convenience be removed from the spot on which they were found, and some of them were so far consumed as to fall to ashes.”<sup>9</sup> No matter how workers sifted through the debris, they were bound to leave human remains on the site or accidentally discard them with the rubble from the building. City leader William Marshall, brother to Chief Justice John Marshall, testified on December 28<sup>th</sup>, “It would be more satisfactory to [the victims’] relations that they should be interred on the spot where they perished, and that the site of the Theatre should

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<sup>6</sup> Tuke Alexander, 34.

<sup>7</sup>“All the remains of persons, who have suffered, which shall not be claimed by the relatives... [shall] be removed to the public burying ground, with all proper respect and solemnity.” “Common Council of the City of Richmond Ordinance, passed at 11 o’clock, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1811.” *Richmond Enquirer*, 28 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.Infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.Infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>8</sup> Tuke Alexander, 33. This would be about a 10-block march eastward on Broad Street, part of it up a steep hill. Dabney (17-18) reports that St. John’s churchyard was the burial place of early citizens and it contains the bodies of over 1,300 people.

<sup>9</sup> Amended ordinance, entitled “An Ordinance Concerning the conflagration of the Theatre, in the City of Richmond, 28 December, 1811,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 31 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.Infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.Infoweb.newsbank.com/)

be consecrated as the sacred deposit of their bones and ashes.”<sup>10</sup> The city would later purchase the ground and convert the theater site into a burial place and memorial.

Religious commemorations began that week. Richmond’s City Hall made a public call for Wednesday, the first of January, 1812, to be an official day of humiliation and prayer. Stores were shuttered and all churches were opened. Other cities also observed a day of “fasting and humiliation,” after the Richmond fire. In his address to his state legislature, a Virginian said, “The sympathy which was excited was as general as the calamity was awful. It drew forth the feelings of a nation. It caused us to feel that we were all of one family—from Boston to Savannah, the sentiment spread with a rapidity, unprecedented in the American Annals.”<sup>11</sup> Civic groups and state governments in Ohio, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina, New York, and Pennsylvania offered Virginians official expressions of sympathy and solidarity.<sup>12</sup> In Winchester’s Presbyterian meetinghouse, Reverend Hill gave a message during their day of fasting and prayer explaining why spiritual exercises were necessary after a catastrophe: “If when God sends judgments upon others we do not take the warning; if, when instead of reflecting upon ourselves, and trying our own ways, we turn our eyes from the sight, and shut our ears upon the voice: then we leave the Almighty no other way to awaken us, and bring us to the consideration of our evil ways, but by pouring down his wrath upon our

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “To the Members of the Virginia Legislature,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 6 February 1812. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>12</sup> In Virginia, the cities of Norfolk, Falmouth, Fredericksburg, Smithfield, Winchester, and Alexandria offered resolutions as did the legislatures of Ohio and Massachusetts and the judges of North Carolina’s Supreme Court. Citizens of Raleigh, North Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina sent condolences as well as young men’s groups in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. Fisher, 15-16.

own heads, that so he may convince us that we are sinners, by the same argument from which we have concluded others to be so.”<sup>13</sup>

Although Richmond City Hall’s ordinance requested that Buchanan and Blair deliver the New Year sermon at St. John’s on Church Hill, after the proclamation was issued, it became evident that the building would not be sufficient to host the crowds.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, every place of worship was opened. Services were held both morning and evening in the Capitol building and the old Methodist church, at St. John’s, and at the Baptist meeting house and the new Methodist church. Every service was “filled to overflowing.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps to emphasize the ecumenical and corporate nature of the observances, the preachers and priests did not necessarily speak at their own churches.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the location, all church services on the day of fasting and prayer included a hymn penned for the occasion:

Borne down with age, disease, in war,  
Or famine, tho’ we fall;  
All conq’ring death, how dreadful are  
Thy visitations all!

But arm’d with fire that mocks our flight,  
Eludes our force to quell,

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<sup>13</sup> Hill, 15.

<sup>14</sup>Not that it usually saw crowds. St. John’s was in a sparsely populated area of town and was nearly inaccessible in inclement weather, so ill-attended services were held there only three times a year between 1789 and 1814. Troubetzkoy, 2.

<sup>15</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, 2 January, 1812, Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>16</sup> For example, Presbyterian James Blair offered the sermon at Episcopal St. John’s. Rev. Courtney, a Baptist minister, spoke at the new Methodist church. W. A. Christian, *Richmond: Her Past and Present*, (Richmond, VA: L.H. Jenkins, 1912), 79- 80.

What tongue thy terrors can recite,  
 Thy horrors who can tell!

Dear victims of its recent rage,  
 How wretched was your end,  
 Were Jesus not, in Truth's fair page,  
 Proclaimed the suff'ers friend!

But tho' to frail untimely dust,  
 Your fleeting forms are given—  
 Array'd in glory, HE, we trust,  
 Has placed your souls in heav'n.

The wailings of weak nature, Lord,  
 In mercy now forgive,  
 And more obedient to thy word  
 Inspire us hence to live.

Then may we hope above the bourne,  
 Of sublunary woes,  
 Again to meet the friends we mourn,  
 Where bliss eternal flows.<sup>17</sup>

The hymn's sentiments summed up what appears to have been the clerical emphasis for the day: Death is near. Live rightly so as to join the victims in heaven. It would seem that the message was being considered, and a renewed interest in the church resulted.

In a letter to a friend in Williamsburg after the fire, Dr. Philip Barraud of Norfolk noted the turn in Virginia's religious climate and asked a friend, "How does it happen,

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<sup>17</sup> James E. Goode, *Full Account of the Burning of the Richmond Theatre, on the Night of December 26, 1811* (Richmond, VA: J.E. Goode, 1858), 66.

my Dear Sir, that in all deep and awful afflictions, Man looks to a Divine Author for Succor and for Safety? His appeal in the highest moments of Terror and Dismay is made to the God on High! Nature has planted this in our Bosoms, let Casuists say what they may.”<sup>18</sup> In the months following the fire, newspaper articles and personal accounts confirm that Richmonders began attending Christian services in greater numbers. The fervor lasted for months. Ministers in Virginia relayed to friends that the people of Richmond displayed a renewed interest in religion and the church, and it seems that Christian evangelists and clerics made special trips to Richmond in early 1812. The Roman Catholics of Richmond held one of their first services in a classroom at Mr. Doyle’s school on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1812, presided over by a visiting priest.<sup>19</sup> The February 6<sup>th</sup> Enquirer announced that Methodist ministers would hold a conference in Richmond at the end of the month, and on February 20<sup>th</sup>, about seventy-five preachers gathered for the first meeting of the Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, with Bishop Francis Asbury presiding.<sup>20</sup>

In May of 1812, John Holt Rice, future minister of First Presbyterian in Richmond, arrived in town as an evangelist. He wrote to his friend, Reverend Dr. Archibald Alexander of Princeton University, “I was surprised to observe the very great numbers who attend church in this place. Every house of worship was crowded; and I was told that not less than five hundred went away from the Mason’s Hall (where I preached,) unable to find seats. A spirit of reading, and of inquiry for religious truth, is

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<sup>18</sup> Phillip Barraud to St. George Tucker, 31 December, 1811. Tucker-Coleman Papers, 1664-1945, 1770-1907. Swem Library Special Collections, The College of William and Mary.

<sup>19</sup> Christian, 82.

<sup>20</sup> 6 February 1812 Enquirer, Christian, 82.

spreading rapidly among our town folks.”<sup>21</sup> This is the same minister who lamented two years previously of Richmond, where “Presbyterian congregations are decreasing every year, and appear as if they would dwindle to nothing. The Baptists and Methodists are at a stand. A strange apathy has seized the people... As to religion, the very stillness of death reigns amongst us. I can find no resemblance to this part of the country but in Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones.”<sup>22</sup>

Religious institution building began in earnest in the year 1812. Before then, fledgling movements to organize independent Episcopal and Presbyterian churches in Richmond were in play, but lacked momentum and finances. However, the theater disaster acted as a catalyst that suddenly “startled and stirred [citizens] towards this desirable consummation.”<sup>23</sup> It spurred Presbyterians to “assume the aggressive” and establish an independent congregation in Richmond, separating themselves amicably from the Episcopalians in the capitol congregation.<sup>24</sup> Presbyterian minister Moses Hoge described a “wonderful quickening in the spiritual life of the few scattered Presbyterians in the city” following the fire.<sup>25</sup> According to him, it awakened “a deep conviction of the necessity of an organized church under the care of a pastor who could devote himself to

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<sup>21</sup>John Holt Rice to Archibald Alexander, 14 May 1812, in Maxwell, 79-80.

<sup>22</sup> Rice to Alexander, January 28, 1810. Maxwell, 50-51.

<sup>23</sup> John N. Norton, *The Life of the Right Reverend Richard Channing Moore, D.D., Bishop of Virginia*. 2d ed. enl., (New York: General Protestant Episcopal S. School Union and Church Book Society, 1860), 57.

<sup>24</sup> B.R. Wellford, “History of the First Presbyterian Church,” In *First Presbyterian, Richmond, VA. Proceedings of the Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary of Its Organization, May 1, 1892*, 43-61. (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, General Printers, 1892), 47.

<sup>25</sup> Moses D. Hoge, “Portraits of Four Pastors,” in *First Presbyterian, Richmond, VA. Proceedings of the Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary of Its Organization, May 1, 1892*, 15-28. (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, General Printers, 1892), 18-19.



the development of all that makes such an organization strong by its corporate unity and wisely directed zeal and systematic efforts toward the extension of Christ's kingdom."<sup>26</sup>

Fourteen members started the independent congregation on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1812, led by Reverend Rice, who was installed as full-time pastor of the Presbyterian Church in the City of Richmond in October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1812.<sup>27</sup> By April of 1813, there were fifty-eight communicants, and during Rice's twelve-year pastorate, the First Presbyterian Church received 263 new members.<sup>28</sup>

The fire played a part in reestablishing the struggling Episcopalians as a strong presence in the religious life of the city, although the death of Virginia's Bishop James Madison in March of 1812 also paved the way for denominational changes. Critics claimed that "Despondency [on his part] led to an entire remission of effort" during his twenty-two year tenure, and that his inattention to church affairs was partly responsible for the declining fate and numbers of Virginia's Episcopal church.<sup>29</sup> In May of 1812, a remnant of Episcopalian leaders called an emergency convention in Richmond. In an earlier general Protestant Episcopal convention in New Haven, Connecticut, national Episcopal leaders declared the "mortifying words" that the Virginia branch of the church was "so depressed, that there is danger of her total ruin, unless great exertions, favored by

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. To support his large family, Blair was the Presbyterian rector of several churches outside of the Capitol congregation as well as a schoolteacher, so he was spread quite thin.

<sup>27</sup> *Manual for Members of the First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Va: compiled by order of session, Oct. 1833* (Richmond: Printed by T.W. White, 1833), Rare Books, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>28</sup> Wellford, 47. Records also show that the small community of Roman Catholics in Richmond petitioned their bishop, the Rt. Rev. John Carroll of Baltimore, for a resident priest in 1812. They did not get their wish, but they had a short-term priest, John McClory, in 1813, and otherwise must have relied on traveling ministers. The Roman Catholics did not have a permanent church until St. Peters was built in 1834. Troubetzkoy, 3, 25.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Madison called a single convention of clergy during his term. Norton, 44.

the blessing of Providence, are employed to raise her.”<sup>30</sup> Hoping to “rescue her and themselves from the imputation,” the Virginia convention chose a new bishop, The Rev. Dr. John Bracken, rector of Bruton Parish and president of The College of William and Mary. When he turned in his resignation after only a year, a special committee chose as bishop Rev. Richard Channing Moore of New York. Moore’s arrival in June of 1814 introduced an evangelical period of Virginia Episcopalianism that lasted for the next seventy years.<sup>31</sup> In those years, Richmond’s Episcopal Church Annals recorded steady (though not explosive) growth. Moore also became the rector of Richmond’s new independent Episcopal congregation at Monumental Episcopal Church, the hybrid church and memorial completed in 1814 to commemorate the fire.

A Court-End church was the dream of the *Association for Erecting a Church on Shockoe Hill*. This inter-denominational community organization raised funds for years to establish a church in an accessible and populated part of Richmond, closer to the Capitol. After years of nominal donations, they began making serious headway in the aftermath of the fire. Sacred purpose joined secular purpose in February of 1812, when the association combined with the City Council appointed committee, headed by John Marshall, that was “appointed to receive contributions, and to make such arrangements . . . as may be necessary for erecting the monument [to the victims of the fire].”<sup>32</sup> The

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<sup>30</sup> Appeal from John Bracken and James Henderson (reporting on the proceedings in New Haven) who were surviving members of the Standing Committee, Williamsburg, April 14, 1812. Fisher, 51-52.

<sup>31</sup> “Virginia, as a diocese, was certainly one of the strongest bastions of the Evangelical party in the American Episcopal Church.” Waukechon, 53-54. “The religious atmosphere had changed tremendously under the powerful Evangelical preaching of Bishops Moore and Meade, and the great number of strong Evangelical preachers who gathered in Virginia under their leadership.” Brydon, 6.

<sup>32</sup> “City of Richmond in Common Council Report,” *Richmond Enquirer*, 28 December, 1812. Archive of Americana, America’s Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

motivation for merging the projects may have been financial; it was more economical to have one structure serve both purposes and more efficient for the two groups to work toward one goal. After officially joining, they merged their funds and split the cost of the property.<sup>33</sup> The amalgam church and monument would be Richmond's grand, permanent memorial to the fire—a magnificent headstone for the dead.

The committee raised funds by accepting subscriptions and soliciting buyers for pew boxes.<sup>34</sup> The joint committee began selling pews well before the blueprint for the building was decided upon. Desiring the finest memorial possible, the committee solicited submissions for the best design, and competition was keen. The joint committee decided on the design of South Carolinian architect Robert Mills, a student of architects Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Thomas Jefferson.<sup>35</sup> It was a key career opportunity for Mills, who later designed other civic monuments, most famously the Washington Monument in the District of Columbia.<sup>36</sup> Under the management of builder Isaac Sturdevant, the cornerstone for the monument was laid on August 1, 1812.

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<sup>33</sup> One third of the expense to purchase the ground went to the Common Hall committee, and the church association covered the other two thirds. From the "City of Richmond in Common Council Reports," *Richmond Enquirer*, 17 February, 1812 also 7 March, 1812, Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/) This can also be found in Fisher, 21-23.

<sup>34</sup> This was customary and a way to insure choice seating for one's family. A number of the pew deeds recorded in the clerk's office of the Hustings Court belonged to families who lost loved ones in the fire. Charles Copland purchased pew twenty-eight for \$420. In the front of the church on the eastern side, Robert Greenhow and James Gibbon, Sr. bought the first two boxes, numbers sixteen and seventeen. One of Richmond's leading lights and lifelong residents, Chief Justice John Marshall, also purchased a pew. Marshall was on the monument committee, and later the theater enthusiast headed up the committee to build a new theater for Richmond. Fisher, 35-36.

<sup>35</sup> Latrobe, the director of Washington's public building program, submitted a plan as well and suffered the indignity of losing to his own protégé. Latrobe was not a good loser, and this incident meant the end of his and Mills' working relationship. Korene Greta O. Wilbanks, "Robert Mills and the Brockenbrough House, Richmond Virginia, 1817-1822." (M.A. Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1999), 15. Proquest Dissertations & Theses Document ID: 734719441

<sup>36</sup> Mills also created the U.S. Treasury Building and the U.S. Patent Office. "City of Richmond in Common Council Report," *Richmond Enquirer*, 17 February, 1812, Archive of Americana, America's

Mills was an evangelical Christian himself, and his design expressed the intentions of Christian clergymen for Richmond. The church, constructed directly over the destroyed theater's footprint, was intended to cleanse the site of its horror. A monument to the dead, placed in the church's portico, would honor the lost.<sup>37</sup> It was also Mills' hope that the building would further Christian activity in the state capital. Mills wrote to friend Sarah Zane in Philadelphia in December of 1812, "You will feel interested to know how the Monumental Church progresses, as through divine providence I trust its use to the sacred duties of religion will be advanced."<sup>38</sup> He shared his plan for a altar painting that would portray the redemption he wished for Richmond.

In front [of the painting will be] the church crumbling to ruins, and amid the fallen fragments, a crowd ascending. In the distant view of the picture, appears the City of Richmond, every object exhibiting signs of the final desolation of all things. While this gives to persevering relatives the prospect of the resurrection of . . . their deceased connections & friends, it will call home to their thoughts of all the congregations the necessity of a preparation of their own souls for this solemn & final event. Alas! What shall it profit a man [if] he should gain the whole world & lose his own soul . . . I humbly pray, that the awful visitation with which he has visited R[ichmond] may redound to his glory in the salvation of all its inhabitants.<sup>39</sup>

The building was rich in symbolic meaning, and incorporated symbols of death and eternity from several ancient cultures. Constructed of white Aquia sandstone (also

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Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/) It can also be found in Fisher, 20-23. For more about Benjamin Latrobe's contributions to Richmond, see "An Architect Looks at Richmond," *Virginia Cavalcade*, 16, no. 3 (1967): 28.

<sup>37</sup> The project was also a very personal one; the Richmond fire claimed the grandfather of Mills' children—his wife Eliza Barnwell Smith's father was none other than Governor George Smith. Mills and Smith married in 1806.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Mills to Miss Sarah Zane, 13 December 1812. Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>39</sup> Mills to Zane, 13 December 1812, Virginia Historical Society.

used on the White House), it resembled a mausoleum.<sup>40</sup> The church, a rather squat building, was in the shape of a modified cross, with four short protrusions emerging from an octagonal core. A Delorme domed roof, like that found at Monticello, crowned the construct, and a stately main portico served as an entryway for special services and the site of the victims' memorial. Inside, the building was spacious, with simple federal style altarpieces and benches. Four exquisitely constructed cantilevered staircases appeared to float to the balcony, where rows of free benches overlooked the auditorium-style sanctuary.<sup>41</sup> The three-part windows, a Latrobe trademark, were tall and lean and resembled sarcophagi. Portions of Scripture appeared inside the building. One parishioner, the Right Rev. Bishop Dudley, remembered the impression these Scriptures made on him. "Dear old Monumental! How vividly fresh is the recollection, and must ever be, of the Sundays spent within thy walls, where the levity of childhood was solemnized into thoughtful reverence by the legend in great letters above the chancel—" "Give ear, O Lord!"<sup>42</sup> Design elements in the interior also articulated the Christian theme of light emerging from darkness, certainly a relevant analogy to Richmond's emergence from misfortune. Light from unexpected sources occurred frequently in the design; inside the church, Mills illuminated the building by means of a concealed skylight. Outside, he topped the building with a lantern, an otherwise odd touch for a church. The building was

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<sup>40</sup> A steeple may have provided a more standard church-like appearance, but Mills' plans for a steeple (and rooftop statue of a mourner amidst the ruins) never materialized. The basement is full of supportive and fireproof brick arches that surround the raised crypt, which is centered on the footprint of the theater where the orchestra pit used to stand.

<sup>41</sup> Monumental is the prototype for the auditorium-style church, where the focus is on the preacher instead of music or ritual or Eucharist. The acoustics are specially designed to project sound from the pulpit. The sides of the church are acoustic dead zones.

<sup>42</sup> Fisher, xiii.

completed within a year and a half. It was not until the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 1814, that the subscribers finally voted for Episcopal consecration.<sup>43</sup> The process was devoid of contention. On Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1814, the Reverend Buchanan consecrated Monumental as an Episcopal Church. Although citizens still had to navigate Richmond's dreadful roads to get there, the building of new churches in more convenient locations made frequent church attendance possible and attractive for more Episcopalians and Presbyterians. Richmond's leading citizens became more diligent in attending regular church services.<sup>44</sup>



An early depiction of Monumental Church, before it was constructed. The steeple and statue were never built.

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<sup>43</sup> Philip B. Price, *The Life of the Reverend John Holt Rice, D.D.* Historical Transcripts no. 1 (Richmond: Library of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1963), 70.

<sup>44</sup> Dabney, 99

The church construction atop the site of the fire was intended to change a place of chaos into a place of ordered calm and a site of revelry into a place of reflection. But the new tenant had some of the same qualities of the old theater: it became an active place for socializing and the sermons were dramatic in their own right. After the community's devastation, Reverend Rice was "most anxious that so much distress should not be suffered in vain . . . But one cannot expect that this will be the case unless proper measures are adopted for this purpose. And what more suitable than Evangelical preaching?"<sup>45</sup> Methodists and Baptists had perfected evangelical preaching—emotive, convicting, dramatic, gospel-centered, and personal.<sup>46</sup> However, in the early nineteenth century, this kind of preaching began to spread into Presbyterian and Episcopal churches, churches that had long held themselves in contrast to the overly enthusiastic, lower class Methodists and Baptists. This was certainly the case in Richmond with the introduction of evangelical preachers Rice and Moore. Moore, coming from New York State, introduced practices like prayer meetings and the use of extemporaneous prayer in services.<sup>47</sup> While his biographers are careful to clarify that he did not "stoop to the sensational," they also report that he "hardly ever preached without moving his whole congregation to tears. There was no effort to produce this result . . . the power of the preacher and the melting mood of the people seemed to be the most natural thing in the

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<sup>45</sup> John Holt Rice to Mrs. Judith Randolph, 17 January 1812, in Maxwell, 75.

<sup>46</sup> And they could emote; at the turn of the century, rowdy Methodists even had their permission to meet at the Henrico County Courthouse withdrawn on account of disturbing the peace with their loud singing and shouting. After this censure for disturbance of the peace, they moved to a stable on Main street. Troubetzkoy, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Waukechon, 57.

world.”<sup>48</sup> Moore believed that people must experience the transforming power of conversion and his sermons centered on a gospel message. He furthered evangelical preaching even beyond the bounds of Richmond by appointing young traveling ministers as missionaries to the unchurched Virginia countryside.<sup>49</sup>

Moore and Rice encouraged the creation of multiple societies and organizations that directed parishioner energies toward charitable activities, linking evangelical faith to public life.<sup>50</sup> They promoted religious education, local charity, and missionary work. A short list of the religious Richmond societies formed between 1811 and 1820 indicates their rate of proliferation, prevalence, and influence. Less than a year after arriving in Richmond, Rice helped to organize the Bible Society of Virginia in 1813, and the auxiliary Female Bible Society followed in 1817 or 1818.<sup>51</sup> The Episcopal Church formed a prayer book and tract distribution society in 1816 and an Education Society in 1818.<sup>52</sup> The February, 1818 issue of Rice’s evangelical magazine, the *Pamphleteer*, reported that Richmond’s Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians all had active Sunday Schools by that year.<sup>53</sup> Moore promoted the Female Humane Association

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<sup>48</sup> Fisher, xiv; Norton, 53.

<sup>49</sup> Norton, 120, 92.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Noll, *The Work We Have to Do: A History of Protestants in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61.

<sup>51</sup> Price, 65, 91.

<sup>52</sup> Norton, 56, 57.

<sup>53</sup> J.D.K. Sleight, “The Sabbath School,” in *First Presbyterian, Richmond, VA. Proceedings of the Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary of Its Organization, May 1, 1892*, 36-42. (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, General Printers, 1892), 36. See also Norton, 90. Presbyterians may have had the first; some records indicate it began in 1816.



in 1815, which aided elderly women and orphans.<sup>54</sup> Women interested in helping poor youth prepare for the ministry could join the Female Cent Society of Richmond and Hanover in 1818.<sup>55</sup> Mission-minded Presbyterians founded the Auxiliary Missionary Society and an associated female organization around the same time.<sup>56</sup> In 1819, Rice initiated the founding of the Young Men's Missionary Society of Richmond.<sup>57</sup> Men could also participate in the Amicable Society, a men's benevolent society with the object of aiding those "for whom the law made no provision," instituted in 1788. From 1811 to 1813, the society added an unusually sizeable number of members.<sup>58</sup>

Some of the city's leading women became agents of religious change. Rice's biographer notes, "Many persons (especially ladies) of all churches, *heard him gladly*. Some of those, more particularly, who had lost relatives or friends in the late disaster, *and whose hearts the Lord had thus opened to attend to the things which were spoken of him*, waited upon his ministry with earnest affection."<sup>59</sup> Respectable society women began to engage in activities that were profitable to the community and provided a sense of purpose as evangelical feminine ideals of behavior slowly began to influence the ideal

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<sup>54</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, May 6, 1815 quoted in Fisher, 67.

<sup>55</sup> Price, 91.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>58</sup> Mordecai, 184. Robert Greenhow, Sr. joined in 1813. Following his escape from the fire, Greenhow's activities reflected a dedicated engagement in Richmond society. He served as the Mayor of Richmond in 1813, became a founding vestryman in Monumental Church in 1814, and served on a city Committee of Vigilance both of those years. In 1817, he married Elizabeth A. Greenhow, an officer of the Monumental Church Sunday School. Norfleet, 168-169.

<sup>59</sup> Maxwell, 79.

vision of womanhood in Virginia society.<sup>60</sup> The Boston writer of a nearly thirty-page “Monody on the Victims and Sufferers by the Late Conflagration in the City of Richmond, VA” admonished:

No more on pleasure let your hopes depend;  
 A sweet companion—but a faithless friend!  
 These fev’rish joys that now so brightly bloom,  
 Alas, too shortly of themselves consume.  
 Some sudden cloud may blot their little day,  
 Think but of Richmond; think—and haste away!<sup>61</sup>

Some women did “haste away” from the Loo games and dances popular among those of their social set, and pastimes like card playing, once so popular among women, practically disappeared, according to contemporaries. Mordecai wrote, “the disaster at the theatre gave a better tone to society and a death-blow to female gambling, and, perhaps, to some of its votaries. May it never revive!”<sup>62</sup> Changed behaviors did not begin and end with women, either. He added, “The reformation of female society of the vice of gaming, tended no doubt to diminish it in the male ranks also.”<sup>63</sup> Positive changes in Richmond morals were not a wish but a reality. Between 1811 and 1819, the years when Richmond

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<sup>60</sup> Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia, and Its People* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, for the Valentine Museum of the Life & History of Richmond, 1994), 86. During the years 1810-30, benevolent societies “generated their maximum energy” according to James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1998), 111. See also Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 88.

<sup>61</sup> Samuel Gilman, *Monody on the Victims and Sufferers by the Late Conflagration in the City of Richmond, Virginia* (Boston: Charles Williams, T.B. Wait & Co. Printers, 1812), 19. Swem Library Special Collections, The College of William and Mary.

<sup>62</sup> Mordecai, 195-196.

<sup>63</sup> He suspected that after the fire, gambling was mostly confined to “the frequenters of the Tiger’s den, or to a portion of those who enact laws against it, and themselves test the futility of their own enactments.” *Ibid.*, 197.

was without a theater, the city experienced a decline in crime rates, which would probably have been used to corroborate theater critics' belief that stage plays contributed to a city's corruption.<sup>64</sup>

In 1858, young author Phillip Barrett wrote a biography for "the meritorious old Negro" Gilbert Hunt, who became a hero the night of the fire.<sup>65</sup> The enslaved blacksmith rescued numerous citizens from the flames by catching them as they leapt from the windows. In Barrett's account, Hunt recalled the carnage of the next morning and sighed, "I thought, after this, *there would not be any more theatres.*"<sup>66</sup> Richmond went without a theater for eight years, until 1819, when a new one opened just a few streets west of Monumental Church on 7<sup>th</sup> and H (now Broad) streets. The theater's hiatus began with an 1811 ban. On December 27<sup>th</sup>, the city council advised Richmonders to "abstain from all business" for the forty-eight hours following the passing of the ordinance, and citizens were not permitted to "exhibit any public show or spectacle" or "open any public dancing assembly" within the city limits for the space of four months. Violators of the moratorium would incur a fine of "six dollars and sixty-six cents" for each hour of disrespectful revelry they hosted.<sup>67</sup>

The council's four-month prohibition on public entertainment in early 1812 prevented the Placide and Green Theater Company from pursuing their only means of

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<sup>64</sup> Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2003), 98.

<sup>65</sup> Barrett, 4, quoting the *Richmond Whig*, May 13th, 1859.

<sup>66</sup> Barrett, 31.

<sup>67</sup> "Common Council of the City of Richmond Ordinance, passed at 11 o'clock, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1811," *Richmond Enquirer*, 28 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/) In terms of today's purchasing power, those six dollars and sixty-six cents would have a value of nearly one hundred dollars. \$98.47, to be exact. Consequential, but not entirely prohibitive. <http://eh.net/hmit/> [accessed 10/1/06].

livelihood. This after the fire had already truncated one of their most successful seasons, destroyed their venue, and took from them the life of young Nancy Green, a talented member of the troupe and the manager's daughter. A month after the fire, before leaving town, the company penned an impassioned farewell letter to the populace of Richmond. Confessing they were an "innocent cause" of the fire, they grappled with the turn of sentiments against them and wrote sadly in the *Enquirer* of their pariah status. "From a liberal and enlightened community we fear no reproaches, but we are conscious that many have too much cause to wish they had never known us...In this miserable calamity we find a sentence of banishment from your hospitable city."<sup>68</sup> The troupe had previously received nothing but "favours liberally bestowed" from the people of Richmond, most recently in the outpouring of support for the petite young troupe member Elizabeth Arnold Poe.<sup>69</sup> During her fatal illness (thought to be pneumonia) in the winter of 1811, citizens "shed a ray of comfort on the departed soul of a dying mother."<sup>70</sup> The company held profitable benefit performances to raise money for her assistance, and the actress was the recipient of "[heart-] melting charity."<sup>71</sup> After her death on December 8, 1811, mere weeks before the fire, the Richmond family of Mr. and Mrs. John Allan generously

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<sup>68</sup> "To the citizens of Richmond," *Richmond Enquirer*, 31 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Shockley, *Richmond Theater*, 351. Also the *Richmond Enquirer*, 21 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

took in Elizabeth's son Edgar Allen Poe, then aged three or four. The Mackenzies, another prominent Richmond family, took in his younger sister Rose.<sup>72</sup>

Although it would not be surprising if it were the case, records do not indicate that Richmond's leaders held the theater company responsible for the fire. The Committee of Investigation exonerated the company from all blame, declaring, "We cast not the slightest imputations upon the Managers or any of the regular Comedians of the stage—their positions at the moment as well as other circumstances, forbid the idea, that the order [to raise the lit lamp] ever passed their lips; yet the act was done."<sup>73</sup> Their fate sealed by the dictates of the ordinance, the Placide and Green Company sailed to

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<sup>72</sup> Research on the Poes can be a bit perplexing, as there are a number of inconsistencies in reports. While some state conclusively that she was twenty-four, others report that she was young-looking thirty with a "round, childish face," and actually several years older than her husband. Susan Archer Weiss was connected to the families that took in the Poe children and knew them well. While Edgar's age is given as anywhere from two to four years, Weiss reported that her great-aunt lived next door to the family of four in Norfolk, Virginia (in November of 1811, which seems problematic itself, as it would seem she was in Richmond from newspaper reports), and she reported that Rosie was two and Edgar four, the first having been born in 1810 and the second in 1808. The editor of the *Independent* acknowledges that Poe's traditional accounts and UVA records conflict with this. There is also confusion regarding the father and his death. Some sources seem to indicate that the two were separated and he died later. Weiss quotes a letter from Mrs. Byrd who grew up in the same house as Rose Poe, and Byrd claims "Mr. Poe, died first, in Norfolk, I think. It is certain that Mr. Poe died in Norfolk; where the company with which they were playing (Mr. Placide's) were compelled to leave him on account of his illness, while they went on to Richmond." At any rate, the children were not legally adopted, but "taken in" as was not uncustomary. The *Independent* editor again offers contrary "indubitable evidence" in the form of an unpublished letter written by Poe that his father died several weeks after the mother. Susan Archer Weiss, "Reminiscences of Edgar Allan Poe." *The Independent* 57 (Aug 25, 1904): 443-448. American Periodicals Series, Proquest. //proquest.umi.com/

<sup>73</sup> "Report of the Committee of Investigation," *Richmond Enquirer*, 31 December, 1811. Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/) According to the committee's report, the "Property-man of the Theatre," Mr. Rice, even spoke to one of the carpenters and thrice ordered the lamp put out before he was called to another part of the stage. The unseen man who gave the insistent order to raise the lamp was never identified, but he issued the order repeatedly with such an authoritative voice that the stagehand apparently never thought to question the directive. It may have been a member of the audience, anxious for the next act to begin. Perhaps it was another member of the theater company, although the stagehand "[did] not pretend positively to recognise [sic] him." The citizens of Richmond may have suspected that the theater company was trying to cover itself and not expose the perpetrator to the justice he deserved.

Charleston, South Carolina in late January of 1812. In a stroke of additional misfortune, their ship wrecked on the way. None were lost.<sup>74</sup>

Some of the city's most influential citizens put up the forty thousand dollars necessary to construct a new theater, including judge John Marshall, lawyer William Wirt, and editor Thomas Ritchie. The theater even had the financial support of several people deeply affected by the first fire: William F. Wickham, whose daughter Julia barely survived; Carter Page, who badly broke his leg during his escape with his wife; and Gurden H. Bacchus, another survivor.<sup>75</sup> The *Richmond Enquirer*, as might be expected, since newspaper editor Ritchie was a shareholder in the new theater, evenly noted the coming of new shows and wished for the theater's prosperity. In an 1819 article, it commended the new theater's manager, Charles Gilfert of Charleston, South Carolina, for being "extremely liberal in providing both novelty and talent to gratify the theatrical taste of our town . . . It is to be hoped that his success will equal his liberality."<sup>76</sup> No scathing editorials followed the reopening, and the theater resumed its place as an appealing spot to socialize. Young Frances Taliaferro visited Richmond with her mother in 1820, after the new theater had been open for a year. During her visit, she attended both the church and the theater, and her letter conveys that both were important stops for a tourist.

"Yesterday we went to the Monumental Church and heard Mr. Lowe deliver an excellent sermon, he took his text from the sixteenth chapter of Matthew 24<sup>th</sup> verse he explained it

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<sup>74</sup> *Virginia Patriot*, 24 January, 1812, quoted in Shockley, 376.

<sup>75</sup> Page and Marshall have the interesting distinction of being both backers of Monumental Church's construction and the building of the new theater. Records of Deeds of the Hustings Court of Richmond, XVIII, 333-6, 20 June, 1820. Quoted in Shockley, "The Proprietors of Richmond's New Theatre of 1819," 303.

<sup>76</sup> "The Theatre," *Richmond Enquirer*, 28 May 1819. Archive of Americana, America's Historical Newspapers. [www.infoweb.newsbank.com/](http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/)

admirably well, and is I think the most persuasive speaker I ever heard...Lucy Ann and myself intend to Richmond this Evening to go to the Theatre, I have not heard what Play is to be performed but I will tell you in my next.”<sup>77</sup> It seemed to matter little what was showing—the point was to go.

Although the evangelical brand of Christianity was gaining a strong foothold in Richmond, it did not completely displace the traditional cultural views on entertainment.<sup>78</sup> Although evangelicals discouraged gambling, horse racing, dueling, dancing, and theatergoing, attending the theater was not a pastime that would easily be dislodged from the public’s affection. This proved to be the case even after Richmond’s great losses in the theater fire, when many Virginians, particularly in the upper classes, easily dismissed vitriolic sermons and condemnatory editorials that circulated after the fire as “Yankee cant.”<sup>79</sup> Irritated ministers all over America berated their congregations for not abandoning the theater. One preacher in Pennsylvania wrote, “To the shame of this populous city and to the astonishment of every reflecting mind, whilst the burning ashes of our brethren at Richmond are presented to our view . . . the citizens of

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<sup>77</sup> Frances Amanda (Booth) Taliaferro to Hester Eliza (Van Bibber) Tabb, 28 August, 1820. Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>78</sup> Waukechon, 36. Some changes did occur, although it was an uphill struggle. Noll describes the Southern culture in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as “confrontational, violent, self-possessed, and driven more by personal honor than by personal religion” and recognizes that by offering alternatives to this hostile cultural climate, Evangelicalism did succeed in empowering women, the lower classes, and blacks. Noll, *A History of Christianity* 226.

<sup>79</sup> William H. Gaines, Jr., “The Fatal Lamp, or Panic at the Play,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 2, no. 1 (1952): 8.

Philadelphia are rioting in mirth and dissipation, and the Theatre groaning under the weight of its attending votaries.”<sup>80</sup>

The propensity for Richmonders to follow fashion, even when it was perceived as offensive to evangelical Christian morals is evidenced in an editorial from the *Virginia Argus* newspaper attacking profanity—an accepted part of the Virginia vernacular. The writer, after acknowledging that “the practice of common cursing and swearing” was “an insult to the majesty of God” went right to the point: “I request the reader’s particular attention to another view, and a view seldom taken of this practice. It is contrary to politeness; directly and strongly contrary to the principles and manners of a gentleman.”<sup>81</sup> The *Argus* article shows that in the Early Republic, what was morally questionable could often be socially acceptable, and not in conflict with a person being considered a “gentleman” or a “lady.” If an appeal to one’s piety failed, the trump card was an appeal to one’s gentility. Evangelical clerics could pronounce horse races, the theater, and dancing sinful, but if it was “fashionable” at the time, the community would support it and the upper classes would be there in droves.<sup>82</sup> Theatergoing was too much a part of the social fabric to easily discard.

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<sup>80</sup> *Concise Statement*, preface. The social season in the winter of 1812 and 1813 was, although without theatrical entertainment, one of “greater festivity” than at any time previous, according to local Thomas Rutherford. Dabney 92

<sup>81</sup> Undated article from the *Virginia Argus* entitled “Profaneness inconsistent with Politeness” in *Particular accou[nt] of the dreadful [fire] at Richmond, Virginia, December 26, 1811. Which destroyed the theatre and the house adjoining, and in which more than sixty persons were either burnt to death, or destroyed in attempting to make their escape. To which is added, some observations on theatrical performances; and, an essay from the Virginia Argus, proving profaneness inconsistent with politeness* (Printed for and sold by J. Kingston, and all the Booksellers in the United States. Baltimore: B. W. Sower, & co., Printers. 1812), 48. Rare Books, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>82</sup> Click, 96-97.



Despite the support of prominent families and the encouragement of the *Enquirer*, reports seem to indicate that while Richmond's passion for theatrical spectacle was still present, it was significantly tempered for years.<sup>83</sup> Speculating that it was because of the "deep impressions which [the fire] produced," the *Southern Literary Messenger* of February 1835 noted, "the taste for theatrical exhibitions [in Richmond] has not kept pace with the increase of wealth and population." Despite the new theater's safe construction and location in "a far more eligible situation," it was "only occasionally patronized, when the appearance of some attractive star, or celebrated performer, is announced."<sup>84</sup> In the ten years after its construction, shares to the theater sold cheaply, inferior acting companies occasionally ambled through, and the theater sunk into a dilapidated condition. Besides the doubtlessly extant prejudices that contributed to the theater's financial troubles, greater economic factors also played a role. The theater construction coincided with the Panic of 1819 and the ending of a real estate bubble.

The theater became not only a financial failure, but a fire trap yet again. In 1836, the *Richmond Whig* called the attention of the shareholders, remarking that it was necessary to take "some measures to secure it from the designs of incendiaries. It contains large quantities of combustible [sic] matter, and its taking fire would prove disastrous to adjacent property. It is believed to be marked for conflagration by incendiaries."<sup>85</sup> But although it went through some pendulum swings, resistance lessened

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<sup>83</sup> This "New Theatre," sometimes called the "Marshall Theatre," was not referred to as such until 1838 when it was rebuilt after significant deterioration. Shockley, "The Proprietors of Richmond's New Theatre of 1819," 302.

<sup>84</sup> "Virginia Gazetteer," *Southern Literary Messenger* 1, No. 6 (February 1835): 259. American Periodicals Series, Proquest. <http://proquest.umi.com>.

<sup>85</sup> 1 April, 1836, in Shockley, "The Proprietors of Richmond's New Theatre of 1819," 306.

over time. Nearing the mid-century mark, Richmond was well on its way to resuming its place as the “entertainment capital of the Upper South,” with the theater an important feature.<sup>86</sup> By mid-century, most famous American actors again made Richmond a regular stop, and the city became a trial ground for plays before they went on stage in New York.<sup>87</sup>

Those with memories of the Richmond fire could probably enter neither church nor theater with the same outlook that they held before December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1811. The tragedy closed theater doors and for years overshadowed Richmond’s enthusiasm for public performances. Conversely, interest in religious activities began to grow significantly, as did church attendance and construction. While the theater entered a period of irrelevance and substitute entertainments were found in the years of its absence, the church took on a new relevancy in the lives and practice of Richmond’s Christians. In the thirty years after the fire, the population of Richmond doubled, but the number of churches quadrupled and benevolent societies multiplied.<sup>88</sup> It took the confluence of the theater fire, the introduction of evangelical ministers, and the construction of permanent church homes to transform Richmond from a privately spiritual town, reputedly indifferent to organized religion, into Virginia’s “city of churches.”

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<sup>86</sup> Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 2002), 1, 3.

<sup>87</sup> Sanford, 110.

<sup>88</sup> Richmond’s population was 20,153 in 1840, including slave and free. <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1840.htm> There were 16 churches by 1843, three Episcopal, three Presbyterian, three Baptist, three Methodist, one Friends, one Unitarian, and a synagogue. Daniel Haskel and J. Calvin Smith, *Complete Descriptive and Statistical Gazetteer of the United States with an Abstract of the Census and Statistics for 1840* (New York: Sherman & Smith, 1843), 568.

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## VITA

### Meredith Margaret Henne

Meredith Henne grew up outside of tiny Frankenmuth, Michigan on a sprawling farm. Despite being held back in Kindergarten, she graduated from high school a year early in 1997, successfully evening out the score. After living in downtown Tokyo with her family for a year, she returned to Michigan and graduated summa cum laude in History and Christian Studies with a B.A. from Hillsdale College in 2002. Her academic awards included the Willisford Prize in New Testament Scholarship, The Arlen K. Gilbert Award for Outstanding History Major, the Velma Knight Scholarship for Christian Leadership, departmental honors in Christian Studies, and membership in the national classics honorary Eta Sigma Phi and the national history honorary Phi Alpha Theta. Non-academic honors include being named Outstanding Senior Woman by the staff and students at Hillsdale, a Tower Light award for photography, and the Sigma Alpha Iota undergraduate scholarship for piano performance.

Meredith relocated to Virginia to join the history faculty at an all-girls boarding school on the Rappahannock where she taught for two years and learned to like crab cakes and crew. In the fall of 2004, she began her M.A. coursework at the College of William and Mary, where she worked for the Historic Campus as an architectural research assistant and was awarded a Graduate Research Grant from the College for her thesis research. She is currently working on the administrative staff of a public charter school in beautiful Washington, D.C.