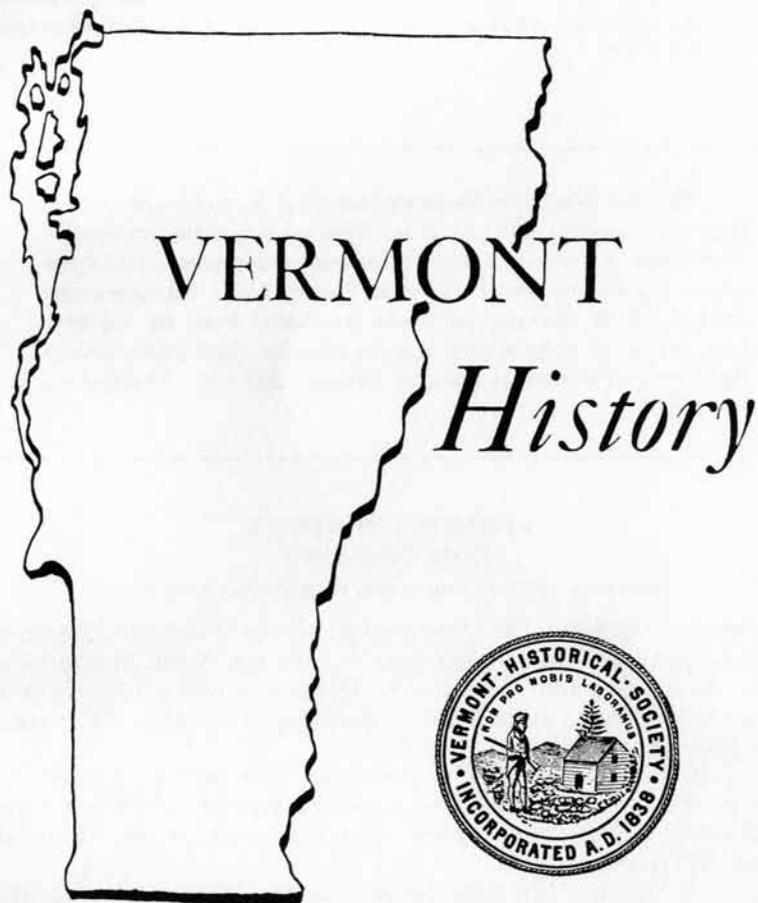
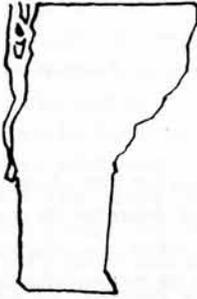


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"Popular entertainment was interdependent with military and political concerns."

The Public Platform and Patriotism in Vermont During the Civil War

By GEORGE B. BRYAN

Vermonters remember the Civil War with pride and dismay. Roughly one man out of every four rallied to defend the Union, and of the 34,328 men of Vermont who answered the call to arms, 5,128 perished in battle and its aftermath. In addition to its lifeblood, Vermont bounteously subscribed its financial resources for the war effort, nearly nine and a half million dollars' worth.¹ Citizens of the Green Mountain State had many reasons for their enthusiastic participation in the internecine struggle. Historians and others have filled shelves with chronicles of their battlefield accomplishments, but the histories which have detailed Vermont's participation in the Civil War remain strangely silent about the day-to-day activities at home during the War. The events on the homefront, especially on the public platform, particularly when the news from the front was adverse, provided an important reinforcement for patriotic feeling in Vermont. Public recreation did not cease when the country went to war; instead it had a palliative, diversionary effect. For that reason, conservative leaders "gave their blessing to patriotic and victory celebrations and the traditional holidays, lecture series, target shoots, adolescents mimicking their soldier brothers, literary entertainments and oyster suppers for soldiers' benefits, and receptions for returning veterans. . . . They raised no serious objection to the further spread of the baseball fad, and tolerated commercial skating rinks, magicians, circuses and exhibitions of war panoramas."² The Civil War entertainments mounted in Burlington, the largest town in Vermont, provide an instructive insight into the contributions of the public stage to the military struggle.



Henry Ward Beecher was already the most famous preacher in the United States when he visited Vermont to fire an oratorical volley against slavery. Courtesy of Vermont Performing Arts Collection, Royall Tyler Theater, University of Vermont.

The public platform, the events on the local stage in Burlington, enjoyed a healthy life before the Civil War. In 1855 the seven thousand people of Burlington could attend three public auditoriums—Union Hall, Concert Hall, and the Town Hall—which in that year offered thirty-five entertainments of various types. Lectures, concerts, minstrel shows, and spectacular attractions, such as panoramas, dioramas, and mechanical wonders, served as the staple fare because the General Assembly of Vermont had passed an anti-theatrical statute in 1836. Enforcement of this ban, however, proved difficult, and plays, at first disguised as dramatic readings, moral lectures, operas, and tableaux, appeared openly.³

In January, 1856, C.C. Burleigh spoke in Concert Hall on "Antislavery," only to be refuted in September, 1857, by Frances E. Watkins of Baltimore. The abolitionist cause was also promoted through public lectures by the well-known abolitionists Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, and Henry Ward Beecher, but Burlingtonians soon learned that telling about the evils of slavery proved inferior to showing them. In 1860 a theatrical company presented plays from the standard repertory. Although the plays encountered conservative opposition, the editor of the *Burlington Free Press* repeatedly assured the populace of the high moral calibre of the troupe. The by then legendary *Uncle Tom's Cabin*⁴ had a place in the repertoires of most itinerant companies and made an eloquent statement of the abolitionist case. Even into the twentieth century, the play

based on Mrs. Stowe's celebrated novel was seen in Burlington.⁵ Before the Civil War the public platform helped to mold public opinion by airing the issues which lay behind the impending belligerence.

The outbreak of hostilities in 1861 clearly affected public entertainment in Burlington. Fewer attractions were mounted than in any year since 1855, and the twenty platform events did not include any dramas. On New Year's Day the popular Republican orator, who briefly served as Lincoln's first Minister to Spain and then as a Senator from Missouri (1869-1875) and later as Secretary of the Interior, Carl Schurz (1829-1906), delivered a talk on "American Civilization." Schurz, who was a delegate to the National Republican Convention in 1860, probably praised President-elect Abraham Lincoln and cautioned Vermonters, mostly Republicans, to prepare for hostilities. One week later, on the anniversary of Jackson's victory over the British at New Orleans, one-hundred-gun salutes were fired at noon throughout New England in demonstration of loyalty to the Union. On January 9 Southern forces fired on the commercial vessel "Star of the West" as it ferried supplies to Union troops defending Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. That same evening Burlingtonians listened to a speech by S.W. Cozzens on "New Mexico and Arizona." This apparently innocent subject also hinted at impending alarm, as the federal government had refused the Arizona petition for territorial status. The Confederate Congress, on the other hand, happily complied in 1862, and the U.S. Congress conferred territoriality only in 1863.

By the end of January, 1861, Governor Erastus Fairbanks had issued instructions to ascertain the number of Vermonters liable to serve in the state militia and which of those already in that service would follow the orders of their Commander-in-Chief even if he committed them to national duty. Vermont's military leaders, along with the rest of the country, could no longer take lightly the secession of the seven southern states. As "the remaining days of the winter wore away, with accumulating evidence of the purpose of the South to divide the Union, with rising indignation on the part of the Vermonters without distinction of party, and stern resolve that the Union should not be divided; with abundant conscious and unconscious nerving of purpose to sustain the Government and the flag; but with little open or actual preparation for fighting, and with a lingering hope that the dread alternative of war might yet be averted, growing fainter daily till it was blown to the winds by the hot breath of the guns that opened upon Sumter," Vermonters, in G.G. Benedict's words, embarked on the Civil War.⁶ Those who meanwhile attended the public entertainments heard readings by actor J.C. Fredericks, a lecture by Josiah Gilbert Holland (1819-81) on "Art

and Life," and witnessed a Grand Moving Panorama of the Bible. When C.H. Clarke and the Burlington Female Choir sang the cantata *The Flower Queen* on April 3, the attack upon Fort Sumter was but eight days distant.

The fall of Sumter dissipated all hope that the struggle could be avoided, and President Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops included 780 sons of the Green Mountains. Not to be overshadowed by the state's official response to Washington's call, private citizens assembled in fervid meetings in town halls and swore instant and vigorous retribution for the affront to Union solidarity. Such a demonstration convened in Burlington on April 18, and nine days later the first regiment of Vermont volunteers was recruited.

On June 1 Carlotta Patti sang in Burlington with such success that her company appeared again two weeks later. In spite of Vermont's historic anti-slavery stand and sympathy with the plight of blacks, minstrel shows remained popular; Morris Brothers, Pell, and Trowbridge's troupe appeared on June 7 and again on August 31. The tragedy at Bull Run intervened, and patriotic hearts were stirred by the martial strains of Patrick Gilmore's famous band.

During the month of October, 1861, the first Vermont cavalry brigade was formed, and temperance lecturer John Bartholomew Gough (1817-86) twice promoted sobriety. Alcoholic consumption became a secondary concern when Professor Orson S. Fowler, on November 6, delivered a talk on "Human Life." The subject was not atrocities of war but human sexuality by the author of *Amativeness, or Evils and Remedies of Excessive and Perverted Sexuality* (1844). Until this point, the war's influence upon popular entertainment remained largely implicit, but on November 11 Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87) exhorted Vermonters to patriotic frenzy and abhorrence of slavery. His lesson was underscored the next two days by concerts of patriotic music called "The Festival of Beauty." There followed a panorama of "Ancient and Modern Palestine" and a lecture by journalist-traveler Bayard Taylor (1825-78) entitled "Our People, Socially and Politically." Christmas entertainment was provided by the Cushman, Bennett, and Bolitho Concert Company. Many Vermonters continued to hope the war would soon be over and their menfolk would return home.

Army recruiters were active in the Burlington area; by January 14, 1862, the Seventh Regiment was mustered. Prof. Jonathan Harrington and Wood's Minstrels performed in the last half of January, and newspaperman J.G. Holland delivered a lecture on "Working and Striking." The war was discussed and illustrated on January 31 by a Dr. Westbrook, who also provided a panorama of the war. Mortimer Thompson of New

Posters advertising two characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Courtesy of Vermont Performing Arts Collection, Royall Tyler Theater, University of Vermont.



York expounded on "Pluck" on February 14, and Elizabeth Greenfield ("The Black Swan") and Blaisdells' Campanalogians (bell-ringers) provided musical diversions early in March. The "Monitor's" defeat of the "Merri-mack" occurred in the interim.

Artemus Ward [Charles Farrar Browne (1834-67)] talked of "The Babes in the Woods" on March 14 and Mr. and Mrs. J.E. Frobisher gave dramatic readings from Shakespeare and other authors on April 11 and 14. A musical interlude provided by Duprez and Green's Original New Orleans Minstrels later in April preceded the first wartime appearance in Burlington of an actual dramatic troupe, that of J.H. Allen's Tableau Company, which presented the normal metropolitan repertory including *Camille* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Vermont authors contributed two plays to Allen's group: *The Doom of Deville* ("by a Gentleman of the Woodstock Bar") and *May Martin* (a dramatization of Daniel Pierce Thompson's novel). On June 4 Ossian Euclid Dodge (1820-76) presented a concert, but the realities of war were omnipresent. Lincoln called for 300,000 more troops on the first of July. The next day Vermont Senator Justin S. Morrill (1810-98) watched as the President signed into law the bill creating land grant colleges. The phenomenal pianist-composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-69) took the stage in Burlington the next day.

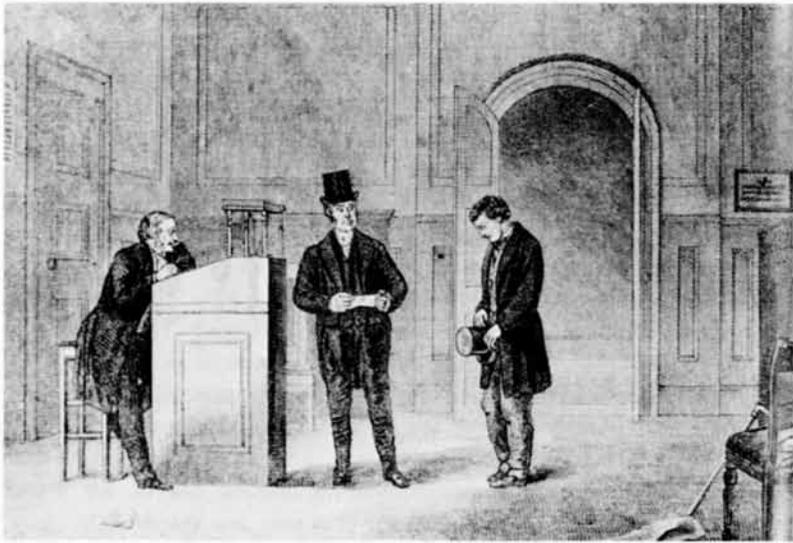
Music, magic, and medicine dominated the scene in August and September of 1862. First there was a concert by the Boston Mendelssohn Quintette Club, then "The Wizard of the North" John Henry Anderson appeared. Mrs. H.B. O'Leary, M.D., addressed the female contingent

on such topics as "Dissection of the Manikin" (an anatomical lecture), "Utero-Gestation," and "Throat and Ear." Gentlemen were discouraged from attending these sessions. In September Frank Rivers's Melodeon Troupe preceded a concert by singer Anna Bishop (1810-84). Another minstrel company played a two-day engagement. While people in Burlington paid to see a military panorama called "The Gigantic Rebellion," young men enlisted in the Thirteenth Vermont Regiment.

Since the war diminished the ranks of entertainers as well as the audiences, companies of elderly performers came into vogue. The Knickerbocker Old Folks' Concert Company appeared on October 10, 1862; the following July brought Grandfather Pike's Troupe of Old Folks to Town Hall. The intervening months were rich in musical programs. Twelve-year-old, twenty-six-inch high Dolly Dutton, "The Little Fairy," arrived and "excited pity and terror by singing." In steady procession Duprez and Green's Minstrels, Ossian E. Dodge, the H.I. Proctor Concert Company, G.P. Christy's Minstrels, L.M. Gottschalk, T.P. Collins' Exhibition of Laughing Gas, and King the Wizard paraded their talents in Burlington. An old favorite, the Peak Family of Bell Ringers, clanged on July 11 and seemed to accompany a period of renewed hope as to the outcome of the war. The Battle of Gettysburg, generally conceded to be the turning point of the war in favor of the Union, had begun on the first of July.

Summer gave way to the autumn of 1863 and the usual variety shows appeared in Burlington. There were Morris' Minstrels, the Mendelssohn Quintette Club, H.I. Proctor's group, the Broadway Minstrels, and the Denier Brothers. The new year of 1864 brought the Hutchinson Family Singers to Burlington as well as a return engagement of Duprez and Green's Minstrels. By the time Ulysses S. Grant was given command of the Northern armies in March, adducing lessons from the terrible conflict became a popular diversion. In March abolitionist Wendell Phillips (1811-84) lectured on "Reconstruction," and Burlington's own military historian G.G. Benedict delineated "The Battle of Gettysburgh." The next week James's Great Tableau of the War was exhibited in Town Hall. In juxtaposition, "The Great Comic Genius," William B. Brown, cavorted later in the month.

Although occupied with the fight to save their Union, Vermonters were also interested in the fate of Ireland. A Dr. Cahill spoke on the subject of "Ireland" in May, 1862, and twice in April of 1864 Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher (1823-67) discussed the life and career of Gen. Michael Corcoran (1827-63), an Irish-American who refused to parade his troops before the Prince of Wales. In spite of being court-martialed, Corcoran served with distinction during the Civil War, was



Tom Taylor's The Ticket of Leave Man was first seen in Burlington in 1864, only one year after its introduction in London. Courtesy of Vermont Performing Arts Collection, Royall Tyler Theater, University of Vermont.

taken prisoner at Bull Run, and died from a riding accident in 1863. Meagher also outlined the exploits of the Irish Brigade, which pleased Burlington's large Irish population.

Ministers attracted audiences, too, in these waning days of the war. William Henry Milburn (b. 1823), a blind preacher, spoke on "What a Blind Man Saw in England" in March, and Universalist clergyman Edwin Hubbell Chapin (1814-80) exhorted the next month. The spring months brought several kinds of shows to town, including L.M. Gottschalk, John B. Gough's temperance fulminations, several minstrel combinations, dramatic readings by N.C. Forrester, and the company of General Tom Thumb. The Washington Panorama of the War provided the attraction on June 30. The Peak Bell Ringers and P.S. Gilmore's Band returned in August and October, and while the band of Confederates raided St. Albans, Farnsworth's Minstrels sang and joked in Burlington. Dramatic performances were mounted in October by Forrester's Grand Constellation, including *The Ticket of Leave Man* and *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. Ireland received its share of attention as Forrester produced two Irish plays; a variety piece called *The Hibernian, or a Tour in*

Ireland played in November; and the local Brougham Amateur Dramatic Club acted *Ireland as It Is* and *Robert Emmet* in December.

Eighteen sixty-five brought a concentration of military programs. On January 6, L.L. Dutcher talked on "June Training," and J.H.D. Taylor read a poem entitled "The Yankee and the War." The Rev. J.N.C. Abbott spoke on "The War and General Grant" later in January. The General Assembly of Vermont adopted the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution on March 9, 1865, and exactly a month later Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox. Ex-Governor Joseph A. Wright delivered the valedictory to the war on June 9 by talking on "The State of the Country and the Duty of the Citizen." Thereafter the schedule of attractions expanded to include diversions of many kinds. After 1865 theatrical productions grew increasingly popular, while other types of entertainment, except the lecture, appeared less frequently. Table I reflects these changes year-by-year until 1870. (The figures for 1880 and 1890, years in which Burlington boasted one of the finest opera houses in New England, indicate that very few major differences characterized the theatres of 1860 and 1890—except the much larger number of theatrical performances in the later year.)

The public platform in Burlington during the Civil War suggests that daily life transpired according to predictable patterns; while the war and its ramifications were not ignored, public recreation tended to be diversionary rather than polemical. As in military matters, 1863 was a watershed year in the local theatre. Whether fewer entertainments were available in that year or whether Vermonters had less taste for distraction from the war is debatable. During the war plays appeared less regularly than other types of program, perhaps because of the anti-theatrical legislation as well as the unavailability of young men to play roles. Occasional readings were available in every year except 1863, but the popularity of concerts continued virtually unabated, and the appeal of lectures remained undiminished. Minstrel shows grew in popularity, then declined. (Was there a realization of the basic antipathy between minstrels and the Thirteenth Amendment?) During the years of the worst Union reversals, amateur performances disappeared, possibly because of the absence of young men and the attention of young women to war work. Until late in 1863, the war-time public platform was only sporadically used as an educational device; thereafter the number of war-related programs increased markedly, when the news from the front improved. Popular entertainment was interdependent with military and political concerns. War-related attractions, in particular, helped to create public opinion, bolster patriotism, and emphasize the enervating influence of war

TABLE I

	1855	1856	1857	1858	1859	1860	1861	1862	1863	1864	1865	1866	1867	1868	1869	1870	1880	1890
Number of attractions	35	34	27	31	26	29	20	35	14	37	44	40	42	29	63	56	44	58
Number of dramas	0	0	0	0	2	15	0	10	0	6	16	26	23	6	36	25	37	44
Number of readings	2	7	0	2	2	0	1	2	0	2	2	0	0	1	3	2		
Number of concerts	11	7	8	6	16	3	7	8	7	8	8	5	4	5	5	4	5	6
Number of lectures	13	9	9	13	1	5	8	8	0	10	9	2	9	8	8	20	0	5
Miscellaneous	4	4	5	4	1	4	2	4	3	6	7	1	1	2	4	3	2	4
Number of minstrels	3	3	1	0	2	2	2	3	4	5	2	5	0	5	2	2		
Number of amateur shows	2	1	3	6	2	0	2	0	0	2	1	1	2	3	5	0		
Number of war-related shows	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	7	5	0	3	0	3	2		

and slavery. The non-military programs provided an equally useful fillip to the horrors and deprivations of war. This symbiosis lies behind Walter H. Crockett's conclusion about Vermont's role in the Civil War that "of all the conflicts in which Vermonters have participated, the Civil War took the heaviest toll. Every hamlet had been stricken and there was hardly a family which had not been bereaved by the loss of a relative. Vermont had done its duty in preserving the Union. The soldiers of the Green Mountain State had won a nationwide reputation for their fighting qualities, and the record they made is a priceless heritage of valor, to be cherished by their children and their children's children, to the remotest generation."⁷ The state's social and artistic history is not served by his silence about life on the home front.

NOTES

¹ Walter Hill Crockett, *Vermont: The Green Mountain State* (New York: Century History Co., 1921), Vol. III, 627-638. Much of the raw material of the article was laboriously culled from the entertainment columns of the *Burlington Free Press* by Gail E. Gauthier, who worked as a research assistant for the author.

² T.D. Seymour Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont, 1840-80," Unpublished Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1952, p. 517.

³ For a fuller discussion, see George B. Bryan, "Theatre and Drama in Vermont: An Historical Overview," *Theatre Studies*, No. 24 / 25 (1981).

⁴ The special relation of Vermont and this drama is detailed in George B. Bryan, "Uncle Tom's Cabin and Vermont," *Vermont History*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Winter, 1977), 35-37.

⁵ A list of Burlington's favorite presentations appears in George B. Bryan, "The Howard Opera House in Burlington," *Vermont History*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Fall, 1977), 218-219.

⁶ George G. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War* (Burlington: Free Press Association, 1886-88), vol. I, 7.

⁷ Crockett, *Vermont*, Vol. III, 628.