

The South End Historical Society Newsletter

Spring 2014



Postcard representing Amateur Night at the Columbia Theatre from the South End Historical Society Collections

The Columbia Theatre: A Truly “Varied Career”

by Mara Gregory

Among the many historical postcards in the collection of the South End Historical Society, an undated postcard from “Amateur Night” at the Columbia Music Hall is particularly striking. The illustrated scene, labeled “one of Boston’s odd sights,” is indeed *odd*: an amateur ballerina dances on stage to uproarious applause and laughter, while a gentleman backstage gestures at her to stop and a man in the orchestra pit gleefully points a gun

...an amateur ballerina dances on stage to uproarious applause and laughter, while a gentleman backstage gestures at her to stop and a man in the orchestra pit gleefully points a gun at her ... What really happened at Amateur Night at the Columbia?

at her. This postcard – unexpected and humorous – raises a number of questions. Why would this type of entertainment be advertised on a theatre postcard? What did this image mean to

historical audiences, and why might someone buy and keep such a souvenir? What *really* happened at Amateur Night at the Columbia? An investigation into the broader history of the Columbia Music Hall (also

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for upcoming programs, events,
and walking tours

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South End Soirée!
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South End Historical Society

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The SEHS newsletter is a benefit of membership in the Society; a nonprofit organization dedicated to recognizing, preserving and recording the historical buildings, monuments, parks and artifacts of Boston's South End and through advocacy, documentation and education to preserve them for future generations.

Individual membership is \$25 per year, Family/Dual memberships are \$40, and opportunities to support the Society at the Supporting (\$100), Patron (\$150) and Benefactor (\$250) levels are also available.

The opinions expressed by the contributors to the newsletter are not necessarily those of the SEHS. Ideas for stories and manuscripts are welcome. Unsolicited manuscripts submitted for possible publication and not used will be returned if they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Those interested in reprinting articles must obtain written permission from the editor.

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Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

Let us entertain you! This month's newsletter comes to you with an eye towards popular amusement. With its rich landscape of theaters, galleries, and parks, the South End has many wonderful diversions to offer, something which has been true throughout the neighborhood's rich history. We hope as spring breathes new life into the city, our newsletter will inspire you to explore the diverse entertainments the South End has to offer!

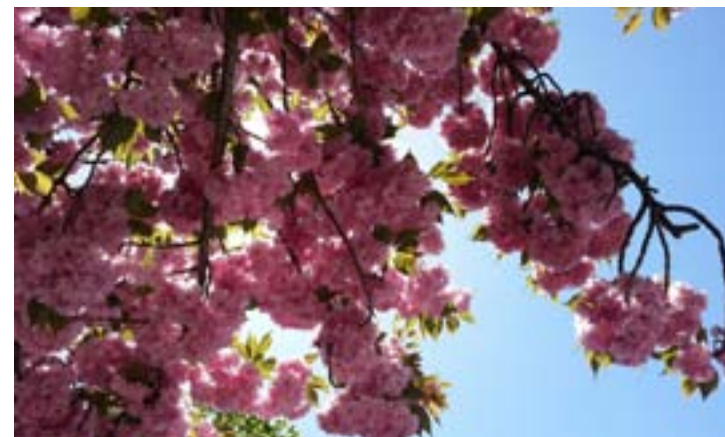
Our featured article, by SEHS newcomer Mara Gregory, takes a fascinating look at the Columbia Theatre, formerly at 978 – 986 Washington Street. Mara took her inspiration from a colorful (in more ways than one!) postcard of the Columbia found in our own collections. She discusses some of the most popular forms of entertainment to come through the theatre, with a close eye on vaudevillian "Amateur Nights."

Next, in honor of our upcoming carnival-themed South End Soirée, we bring you a piece about the origins of the traveling carnival written by SEHS intern Fay Charpentier. As the Soirée approaches, I also encourage you to keep your eyes on our blog, Facebook, and Twitter accounts for additional fun facts about the history of the American carnival.

The last of our entertainments is from the world of literature! Former SEHS Executive Director, Hope Shannon, has been kind enough to write her reflections on the process of writing the upcoming book, *Legendary Locals of Boston's South End*. Hope's book has been much anticipated here at the Historical Society and we're sure you're just excited as we are!

May spring bring you much enjoyment!

Stacen Goldman,
Executive Director



Springtime brings beautiful blooms to the SEHS

(continued from page 1)

known as the Columbia Theatre) reveals that this postcard commemorates one popular entertainment among the many diverse examples that were featured at the Columbia between its opening in 1891 and its

Every seat in the auditorium had a good view, and a state-of-the-art asbestos curtain was installed for fire protection. The owner, J. J. Grace, wanted the new theatre to be "the model theatre of the country," where every play would be a grand and elaborate production.

demolition in 1957. Throughout this long and "varied career," the Columbia hosted many emerging forms of popular entertainment, from elaborate vaudeville productions to comical amateur talent contests.

The Columbia Theatre opened its doors on October 5, 1891, on the site of the former South Congregational



Exterior of the Columbia Theatre, from the South End Historical Society Collections

Church at 978 – 986 Washington Street. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* described the new theatre as impressive and luxurious: its "Moorish style" towers rose high above the nearby buildings and its entrance

was crowned by a "magnificent window of cathedral and stained glass." Inside the large lobby, intricate stucco-work covered the walls and a broad staircase led to the balcony, flanked by "beautiful carved newel posts ... surmounted by Arabian figures holding handsomely designed gas fixtures and great bunches of incandescent lights." Every seat in the auditorium had a good view, and a state-of-the-art asbestos curtain was installed for fire protection. The owner, J. J. Grace, wanted the new theatre to be "the model theatre of the country," where every play would be a grand and elaborate production.

In its early days, the Columbia seemed to live up to expectations. Opening night featured "Men and Women," a play by David Belasco and Henry deMille, and attracted a large and "brilliant" audience. Following the initial run, later productions featured popular plays and a talented stock company that included future star Georgia Drew Barrymore. In addition to plays, the Columbia provided a number of other amusements

The grand theatre, with its sumptuous and elaborate surroundings, seemed to be as much a part of the spectacle as the performance itself.

during its first decade in operation. In 1892, Lottie Collins – famous for her rendition of the vaudeville number, "Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay" – sang and danced at the Columbia, and in 1894 the circus-like "Trained Beasts of Hagenback" appeared on stage. In this grand spectacle, pigs performed on a sea-saw, seals played tambourines, and a lion rode on a chariot pulled by tigers. To protect the (likely fearful) audience, a "great steel cage" had been built to surround the entire stage. This was not the only occasion when the Columbia used elaborate props to enhance the audience experience; in the summer months, for example, giant "pyramids of ice" were used to cool the auditorium. The grand theatre, with its sumptuous and elaborate surroundings, seemed to be as much a part of the spectacle as the performance itself.

In 1899, the Columbia was converted into a Vaudeville music hall under the management of G. W. Lederer, who announced that it would operate under "strictly first-class lines of policy." As Vaudeville historian M.

Alison Kibler notes, Vaudeville at the turn of the twentieth century was an emerging form of mass culture that combined elements of high and lowbrow culture onstage. Although Vaudeville had traditionally attracted a male, working-class audience, by the late nineteenth century producers were increasingly catering their performances to a respectable audience

Comedian Fred Allen, well known for his radio and television career, got his start in show business as an amateur juggler and comedian performing at the Columbia and other local venues. In his memoir, Allen recalls that amateur nights were extremely popular at this time, and the Columbia had “the biggest Amateur Nights in Boston.”

that included women. Indeed, the venue continued to attract fashionable audiences after its conversion to a music hall and, in 1901, the Columbia’s manager stated that, “the line of work will be such as to appeal to the great public and vulgarity will never have a footing.”

In 1904, the Columbia changed hands again and became formally known as the Columbia Music Hall, a burlesque and vaudeville house. In a glowing review of an early production, the *Cambridge Chronicle* proclaimed that “the handsome show girls, the talented comedians ... the handsome prima donna; the beautiful costumes and brilliant ensembles all contributed to make the performance a thoroughly enjoyable one.” Amusements at the new Music Hall included farcical burlesques, song and dance, and acrobatic routines.

Around this time, amateur nights also became popular events at the Columbia. Comedian Fred Allen, well known for his radio and television career, got his start in show business as an amateur juggler and comedian performing at the Columbia and other local venues. In his memoir, Allen recalls that amateur nights were extremely popular at this time, and the Columbia had “the biggest Amateur Nights in Boston.” More than an informal gathering of local talent, these nights were actually quite a business in Boston. According to Allen, this business was dominated by Sam Cohen, a talent agent with a grungy office on Court Street where hopeful amateurs crowded the waiting room. Those

selected by Cohen were booked at various amateur nights throughout Boston, and the best were taken to the Columbia.

While some amateurs had talents in singing, dancing, or juggling, Allen remarks that many employed other strategies to appeal to the audience. Knowing that audiences enjoyed the “sympathy act,” some performers would cut holes in their socks or pants to appear impoverished. Other performers, intentionally or not, were known as “lemons.” These amateurs appealed to the audience for their comical lack of talent. Sam Cohen played off of these poor performances with numerous gags and practical jokes. He often used “The Hook,” a long pole with a large hook at the end, to snare bad performers and pull them offstage. Other times, he would pop out from behind the curtain to slap a performer’s backside with a wooden slapstick or wallop him with a giant stuffed fish. Allen remembers that such antics often had the audience in hysterics, and the auditoriums on amateur night echoed with “screaming, whistling, or raucous laughter.”

Could this explain the image on the postcard from Amateur Night? It seems likely that this illustration depicts the performance of a “lemon,” with the audience reacting favorably to the ridiculous antics surrounding



The Marquee at the Columbia Theatre framed by the Washington Street El, from the South End Historical Society Collections

the dancer: the gun pointed in jest; the harried stage manager gesturing at her to stop. Viewers of the postcard likely knew of the Columbia’s famous Amateur Nights and understood that the image was a comical depiction of the oddity and hilarity that occurred on these nights. While the scene on the postcard is certainly not one of highbrow theatre, it is significant to note that the audience is fashionably dressed and includes women. This type of popular entertainment, the postcard image suggests, was appropriate for respectable audiences. In fact, the audience on the postcard takes up more visual space than the performer, implying that much of the fun of Amateur Night was due to the participation and reaction of the spectators.

The history of the Columbia theatre is not all glitz and gaiety, however. The building itself faced a number of challenges. In 1901, the Washington Street elevated railway opened adjacent to the theatre, and, according to the *Boston Daily Globe*, the loud passing trains made it difficult for audiences to hear the performers. Then, in February 1917, the Columbia was damaged in a large fire. The venue reopened after repairs as the New Columbia Theatre (then part of the Loews theatrical syndicate), and featured vaudeville performances and motion pictures. Although the theatre’s heyday was over by the end of the first decades of the twentieth century, the Columbia continued to run burlesque, vaudeville, and motion pictures for many years. In the late 1930s, the theatre became a last-run movie house, and it was ultimately demolished in 1957.

The postcard of Amateur Night, for whatever reason it may have been originally bought and saved, preserves for us today a glimpse into the spectacle, the laughter, and the variety provided by the Columbia Theatre to a multitude of patrons over the years. ❁

Mara Gregory recently completed a master’s degree in the history of medicine at the University of Warwick in Coventry, England. She is interested in many aspects of nineteenth and twentieth century social and cultural history and currently enjoys learning about local Boston history.

“Theatre’s Varied Career,” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 22, 1917.
“The Columbia: Some Facts About Boston’s Newest Theatre,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, September 14, 1891; “The Columbia Theatre: Will Open October 5,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, September 22, 1891.
“Columbia Theatre: Opens Monday Night with ‘Men and Women,’” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, October 3, 1891.
“At the Theatres,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 12, 1892.
“Trained Beasts of Hagenback at the Columbia Theatre,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 1, 1894.
Advertisement, *Boston Daily Globe*, June 16, 1900.
“Columbia Theatre to be Converted into a Music Hall,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, April 29, 1899.
M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*, University of North Carolina Press, 1999, p. 7-8.
“Real Estate,” *Boston Daily Globe*, May 15, 1901.
“Columbia Music Hall – Vaudeville,” *Cambridge Chronicle*, October 29, 1904.
Fred Allen, *Much ADO about Me*, Little, Brown & Co., 1956, p. 53, 63.
Ibid., p. 54-63.
Ibid., p. 62.
Ibid., p. 63-73.
“Old Columbia and Four Houses Burn,” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 22, 1917.
Ibid.
“New Columbia Theatre,” *Boston Daily Globe*, September 16, 1917.
J. Paul Chevanne, “Victorian Theatres of the South End,” based on a talk to the South End Historical Society, January 20, 1981.



MEMBERSHIP REMINDER

Our membership year runs from January 1 to December 31. If you have not yet renewed for 2014, please do so soon. Individual memberships are \$25 and family/dual memberships are \$40. Additional opportunities to support the Society include the supporting membership at \$100 (\$60 tax-deductible), the patron membership at \$150 (\$110 tax-deductible), and the benefactor membership at \$250 (\$210 tax-deductible). Checks for membership payments can be made out to South End Historical Society and sent to the same at 532 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA 02118. Or you may visit our website at southendhistoricalsociety.org/membership and renew online with a credit card.



The Origins of the American Traveling Carnival

by Faye Charpentier, SEHS Intern

On May 10, the South End Historical Society will host its annual spring fundraising event: the South End Soirée. This exciting gala event incorporates history with dinner, dancing, and exciting activities. This year, the Soirée supports historic preservation and education in the South End while celebrating the history of the American carnival. The 2014 South End Soirée is not just about supporting the South End Historical Society through a night of food, dancing, and carnival games, but also about engaging the South End community with the electrifying history and legacy of carnivals in the United States. Start preparing for this exciting event by learning about the traveling carnival's origins.

Carnivals have their roots in medieval agricultural fairs and festivals, yet the traveling carnival as we know and love it today did not emerge until the 1890s. The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago captured the imaginations of people throughout the country and

The Chicago World's Fair was neither the first nor the last large-scale fair in the United States, but its timing and unique spectacles still distinguish it from other events of its kind.

the world and paved the way for American traveling carnivals. The Chicago World's Fair was neither the first nor the last large-scale fair in the United States, but its timing and unique spectacles still distinguish it from other events of its kind. Marking the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas, the fair aimed to celebrate western civilization's progress over those centuries.



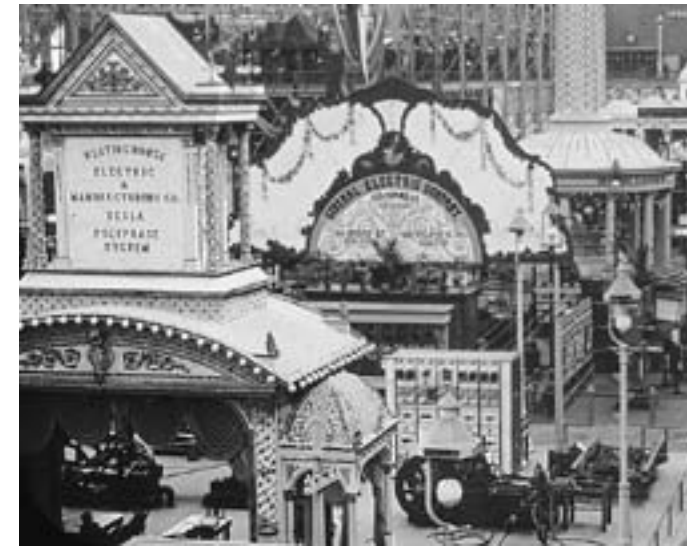
The Ferris Wheel at the World's Columbian Exposition, via Wikimedia Commons

Due to its timing, the fair focused heavily on recent technological advances, namely the advent of electricity. The Chicago World's Fair's Midway Plaisance, a mile-long strip of parkway featuring mechanized rides including the world's first Ferris Wheel, games of chance, sideshow attractions, and food vendors, set the precedent for the traveling carnivals that followed in the Fair's wake. The varied spectacles of the Midway Plaisance were heavily covered by media outlets throughout the country, drawing the eyes of Americans, who in turn desired to see these spectacles in person. Following the World's Fair closure in October 1893, traveling shows and carnival companies began popping up throughout the United States, latching on to the popularity of the Chicago World's Fair's Midway Plaisance, and hoping to deliver electrified excitement to communities throughout America by literally bringing the show to them.

Some of the first post-Chicago World's Fair traveling carnivals and shows grew directly out of the Chicago area.

Due to its timing, the fair focused heavily on recent technological advances, namely the advent of electricity. The Chicago World's Fair's Midway Plaisance, a mile-long strip of parkway featuring mechanized rides including the world's first Ferris Wheel, games of chance, sideshow attractions, and food vendors...


For instance, Otto Schmidt, who worked as a showman at the Fair, founded the Chicago Midway Amusement Company following the Columbian Exposition. His traveling show, which toured the Northeastern United



Electric exhibits at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, via Wikimedia Commons

States, was comprised of thirteen different acts, including some that performed at the World's Fair. From 1902 to 1936, the number of traveling carnivals in the United States increased from 17 to over 300.

At the same time, towns and cities increasingly established permanent fairgrounds to host their own as well as traveling events and attractions. Streetcar companies monopolized on the popularity of electrical rides and attractions by funding the construction of America's early amusement parks, promoting the use of public transportation to reach leisure activities. Based on similar foundations as the traveling carnival, amusement parks offered thrilling rides, bizarre attractions, enthralling shows, and addicting games to an emerging middle class with newfound time for leisure activities. Amusement parks, however, were able to take their electric rides and flashy lights to a higher level than traveling carnivals, as they had permanent locations.

Leading up to the South End Soirée in early May, we will continue to share carnival history through our blog, Twitter, and Facebook. Be sure to check these out to learn more about carnivals before the event! For more information about the South End Soirée, please visit the Soirée website at www.southendhistoricalsociety.org/soiree 



Pictures from SEHS Collection Available for Reproduction

Pictures from the South End Historical Society's collections are available for reproduction. Fees vary depending on the photograph and the intended use.

Most reproduction requests ask for images from our popular 1972 South End Streets Survey. The Streets Survey includes approximately 3,000 images taken by the Historical Society in 1972 documenting every extant South End building. These images were used in the Historical Society's application to place the South End on the National Register of Historic Places, which was successful. Image reproductions from the South End Streets Survey carry a fee of \$30 each for a 300 dpi digital copy.

If you are interested in reproducing a SEHS image for personal, commercial, or research purposes, please contact us at 617-536-4445 or admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org for more information about our image collection, fees, and policies.



Image from the 1972 South End Streets Survey



Reflections on Writing about the South End

by Hope Shannon

I am thrilled to announce that my new book, *Legendary Locals of Boston's South End*, will be released on May 5th. Part of Arcadia Publishing's *Legendary Locals* series, which has profiled residents of neighborhoods, towns, and cities across the country, *Legendary Locals of Boston's South End* features both former and current South End residents and spans nearly two hundred years of neighborhood history.

In preparation for writing the book, I spent several months researching local residents, business owners, inventors, and passersby. I immersed myself in both the recent and distant pasts and enjoyed the interesting juxtaposition of nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century South End residents. Over time, I found that I preferred studying the lives of twentieth-century South Enders and, when possible, I met with them or their families and heard stories about friendships, crime, children, tragedy, and struggle. Though many are now scattered between city and suburb, I was struck by the strength of their devotion to the neighborhood and the ties that have survived decades of change.

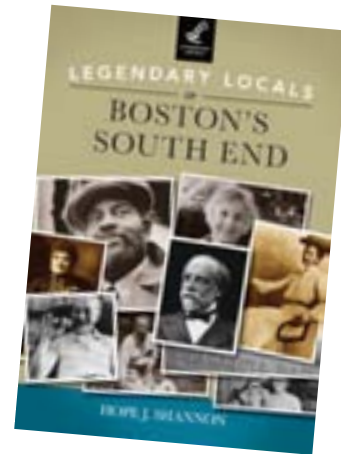
All research projects have hiccups and setbacks, and this was no different. I struggled to find pictures for many of the profiled residents and, in some cases, searched several repositories until I finally found an acceptable image. In addition, I selected too many people to profile and the information that I wanted to include in the book far exceeded the maximum word count I was allowed. Deciding which profiles to shorten and which to cut from the book was a painful process. Who am I to decide whose story is more or less interesting or significant than another's?

These experiences contain important lessons about researching the history of the South End. It's filled with people whose stories are important, either to friends, families, or those beyond the neighborhood's boundaries. I hope that this book will encourage South Enders to talk to each other about their lives and memories and that it will inspire them to dig into historical materials and seek the South End's many pasts. By collecting and building histories, we help to create a more diverse and valuable historical record.

For more information about the book, please email me at hopejshannon@gmail.com or visit the website at www.southendlegendarylocals.com.

Hope Shannon was the Executive Director of the South End Historical Society from August 2009 until August 2013. She holds a B.A. in history and archaeology from Boston University and a M.A. in history from Simmons College. She left the SEHS in August 2013 to pursue her doctorate in the Joint Doctoral Program in American History and Public History at Loyola University Chicago.

Join us for the launch of
Legendary Locals of Boston's South End!



Friday, May 16th, 6:30 PM

The Harriet Tubman House,
566 Columbus Ave.

We're thrilled to host author Hope Shannon as she discusses and reads from her new book, *Legendary Locals of Boston's South End*, to be followed by a reception and book signing!



Join us for the South End Soirée!

An exciting gala event
Dancing, Drinks, Dinner, Carnival Games

Saturday, May 10th
from 8 PM to Midnight!

The Ben Franklin, 41 Berkeley St.

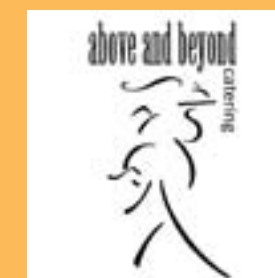
Catered by Above and Beyond
Music by Unity

For more details and to purchase tickets,
please visit www.southendhistoricalsociety.org/soiree
or call 617-536-4445

General Admission \$125

All proceeds from this event benefit the South End Historical Society

Event generously underwritten by
Above and Beyond Catering
and Gibson Sotheby's International Realty



South End Then and Now



41 Worcester Square
Then: The Colonial Luncheonette (1972)
Now: Subway Sandwich Shop (2014)



160 Appleton Street
Then: Abandoned cleaners (1972)
Now: Residential Addition (2014)

Charlie's
Sandwich
Shoppe...
some
things
never
change!



429 Columbus Ave
Then: Charlie's Sandwich Shoppe (1972)
Now: Charlie's Sandwich Shoppe (2013)



115 West Springfield Street
Then: The Dwight School (1850s)
Now: Back of the Hurley School (2014)



84-94 West Dedham Street
Then: Assorted commercial and residential buildings (1972)
Now: Plaza Betances at Villa Victoria (2013)



393 Mass Ave.
Then: Empty facade over commuter rail tracks (1972)
Now: Entrance to Southwest Corridor Park, Mass Ave T stop visible on the right (2014)



407 Shawmut Ave
(Royal Arcanum Building)
Then: Boarded up Salvation Army Harbor Light (1972)
Now: Construction on "The Royal" condominiums (2014)

Volunteer Opportunities

Want to be more involved with the SEHS?

We always need new volunteers! We have opportunities for volunteers in: the SEHS newsletter, fundraisers (Spring Ball and/or House Tour), collections, office tasks, preservation, history related projects, programs and events

Interested or have questions?

Call Stacen Goldman at 617-536-4445 or

email her at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org.



Cast Iron Questions?

Need help restoring, repairing, or replacing your cast iron fence? The South End Historical Society can help! Call or email us at 617-536-4445 or admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org for more information.

