

REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF PERFORMING ARTS RESOURCES

“Fireworks, Bonfires, Ballrooms and More:”
New York’s *Palace Garden*.

By John W. Frick
University of Virginia

In the fall of 1858, New Yorkers eager to participate in the city’s burgeoning social scene welcomed a new popular entertainment venue. The new “resort” was a pleasure garden, the Palace Garden, which occupied a sizable plot of land at the current junction of Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street and which offered “standard” pleasure garden fare ranging from band concerts to fireworks and balloon ascensions (Plate 5). In retrospect, the garden on Fourteenth Street appeals to contemporary historians almost as much as it did to Antebellum New Yorkers. Viewed from our current perspective, the Palace Garden and the other late nineteenth century pleasure gardens, caught as they were in a “cusp” between pre-modern and modern entertainments, exhibited characteristics of both. While retaining the Victorian quaintness, relative privacy, and simplicity of pre-electric, pre-modern amusements, mid-century gardens simultaneously served as harbingers of more public venues like central Park and Madison Square Gardens, of mass entertainments like vaudeville and movies, and of what cultural historian David Nashaw has identified as the “wide open,” common commercial culture an entertainment scene of the twentieth century.¹

During the middle years of the nineteenth century (roughly from 1840-1875), the American urban landscape underwent a series of radical changes, both culturally and geographically, as the country made the inexorable transition from a rural, agrarian, pre-modern society to an urban, industrial, modern one. In an atmosphere charged by “an air and movement of hysteria,” Americans, still accustomed to the relative simplicity, isolation and local autonomy of small-town life which typified the colonial era and the first years of the Early Republic, literally reeled from the myriad social changes which confronted them in the middle years of the nineteenth century. In their lifetimes, they witnessed the opening of the American frontier; the emergence of a coast-to-coast rail system which created national markets; a shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial one; urban living, with its attendant dangers and difficulties; an ever-accelerating pace of life; and the creation of a common commercial culture, to name some of the more dramatic developments. During this period, the country’s population increased from 17,068,953 in 1840 to 38,558,371 just thirty years later; while the population of America’s major urban centers swelled correspondingly.² In New York City alone, the population increased by over 250% during the same time period and the city’s center of activity shifted continually, as the populace moved ever northward and new neighborhoods were born almost daily.

In such a turbulent era, popular entertainments were hardly immune from the changes occurring throughout American society. Just as American culture was increasingly lived outside of the home among strangers and in crowds, during the middle years of the nineteenth century, leisure activities, once confined to parlor games like Charades, Dumb Crambo, Hunt the Slipper or Blind Man’s Bluff, family sing-alongs, and

participatory sports like bowling and skittles, were supplanted by more passive recreative endeavors like attending the theatre and lectures. Correspondingly, the venue for entertainment shifted from the privacy of the home, church or club to more public, commercial sites designed specifically to attract large, culturally diverse audiences, as American popular entertainments became increasingly more class and gender inclusive and the select circle of acquaintances with whom one had traditionally sought and found amusement gave way to the audience composed of strangers.³ As summarized by Richard Butsch, “local entrepreneurs who [once] had catered to class-specific markets were displaced by national oligopolies that market[ed] their wares to the ‘masses’.”⁴

At roughly the same time that the entertainment industry was becoming a mass-market, commercial enterprise, the American city was becoming a significantly more complex entity, composed not only of residential neighborhoods surrounding seats of local government, but small clusters of service industries organized into discrete districts. As Gunther Barth has noted, the ordering of urban space into distinct districts identified by specific function and connected by mass transit was a logical development in cities that historically had struggled with the management of their real estate.⁵ In its earliest days, urban expansion was uncontrolled and the cities spread in all directions from a limited number of governmental and commercial centers as topography allowed; but, by mid-nineteenth century, local officials, aware that failure to control the forces of urbanization would inevitably result in chaos, were forced to adopt measures of city planning, and specialization of function, a central characteristic of industrialization, became the model for entrepreneurs interested in founding service businesses.

According to the *New York Sun*, by 1867 New York, the country’s most distinctly modern and American city, was already divided into discrete districts: Wall Street was associated with finance; stock trading had settled between Hanover and William Streets; wholesale grocers occupied Front Street; leather goods had settled on Ferry Street; tailors and small clothing shops lined Cherry and Catherine Streets; fur dealers claimed Water Street; and fashionable women’s shops were situated on a stretch of Broadway dubbed “Ladies’ Mile,” which began at A.T. Stewart’s mammoth emporium between 9th and 10th Streets and ended at Madison Square.⁶ Even the infant entertainment industry boasted its own district, Union Square, known as The Rialto and composed of some of New York’s most prominent theatre and concert halls surrounded by the businesses (costume houses, props shops, scenery studios, theatrical printers, stage photographers, script sellers, agents, and theatrical hotels and restaurants) which existed to serve the theatre.

During the late 1840s, decades before Union Square became New York’s theatrical center and when the area was still one of the city’s most exclusive residential neighborhoods, popular entertainments were located primarily on Broadway and the Bowery below 8th St. At Barnum’s Museum on the corner of Broadway and Ann St., the curious could view a practically unlimited selection of oddities, attend moral lectures or witness the skills of jugglers, sword swallowers, trained animals, magicians, and ventriloquists, all of 25 cents. Those New Yorkers who were eager to escape the chaos of city streets could find both refuge and entertainment at either Vauxhall Pleasure Garden (on Broadway between 4th and 8th Streets) or at Niblo’s Garden (at Broadway and Prince St.), where the entertainment ranged from drama to lectures to minstrel shows.

Circuses also flourished in the 1840s, utilizing any space large enough to house their operations. In one year alone, 1848, three major circuses were attracting large

audiences: the New Broadway Circus, starring English riding master Harry Whitby and American clown Alexander Rockwell, occupied the Alhambra near Spring St., the Sands, lent and Company Circus pitched a huge tent, holding 5,000 spectators, at 8th St. near Astor Place opera House; and Van Amburgh's Circus entertained at the Zoological Hall, 35-37 Bowery.

Those interested in panoramas, which were becoming the rage in the 1840s, could view countless yards of painted canvas. Brunetti's Panorama of Jerusalem was on view at 598 Broadway; Banvard's giant panorama of the Mississippi, featuring three miles of canvas, occupied the Panorama Building adjoining Niblo's Garden; Harrington's Sacred Diorama of the Creation of the World and the Deluge was at 396 Broadway above Stoppani's baths; and Barnum's Museum housed several different panoramas during the decade. By the beginning of the next decade, the panorama had moved to within a block of Union Square, becoming the first popular entertainment form to invade the future Rialto. Satler's Panoramas (also advertised as Satler's Cosmoramas and Satler's Dioramas) opened in 1851 at Broadway and 13th St. and continued operation until 1853.

In the late 1850s, vacant lots near the square were occasionally converted into circus grounds for the summer months. On June 1, 1859, Harry Whitby and Company's Circus pitched its tent in a lot at the southwest corner of 6th Ave. and 15th St. Five days later, Joe Pentland's Circus, started several years earlier by Pentland, a well-known clown of the era, began a summer of performances at Broadway and 13th St. In a building at 39 Union Square, a circus of a different sort was presented – Signor Bertolotto's exhibition of educated fleas. Bertolotto's flea circus featured diminutive “performers” dancing a polka, drawing miniature carriages and street cars, and impersonating Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The following year, P.T. Barnum and James M. Nixon, an established ringmaster and circus entrepreneur, created an exhibition called The California Menagerie on the lot occupied the previous year by Pentland. The exhibition featured a collection of wild beasts and trained animal acts, with J.C. Adams, “the California Trapper of '49,” putting the animals through their routines. Each circus played for only one season near Union Square and then moved to another location in the city.

Among the attractions at its inception, New York's first theatrical center included a pleasure garden, the Palace Garden, at the northwest corner of 6th Avenue and 14th Street. This particular pleasure garden was one of the last examples of an entertainment form that had maintained a presence in New York since the beginning of the eighteenth century, but was near extinction by the end of the Civil War.⁷ It was, like its more famous predecessors in lower Manhattan, Vauxhall and Niblo's, also closely patterned upon British models, especially London's Cremorne Gardens.

According to Thomas Garrett, the concept of a pleasure garden was a British creation which had its genesis in the Tudor era. Just as historians of theatre architecture have considered the “bearehouses” of Southwark to have antecedents of Shakespeare's Globe and other public theatres of the Elizabethan era, Garrett has identified traits in the bear gardens which indicate that they might have been the prototypes for British pleasure gardens as well. To support his claim, Garrett points to the bearehouse at Horseleydown which featured “an enclosed ground with an arched entry, trees, walks, and two buildings,” and a precinct in the Bankside, called the Paris Garden, that closely resembled

later pleasure gardens in its provision of refreshments and entertainments in an outdoor, natural setting.⁸

The early pleasure garden matured and increased in popularity during the reigns of James I and Charles I, offering more attractions and becoming popular sites for clandestine sexual meetings, so popular, in fact, that during the Commonwealth period the gardens were able to withstand repeated attacks by the Puritans. It wasn't until the restoration of the crown in 1660, however, that the pleasure garden attained a popularity that ensured its continued existence. During that ebullient period, "the beau monde ... found it an ideal place for meeting, gossiping, and strolling," not to mention the occasional romantic liaison.⁹

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the British pleasure garden had acquired the characteristics that were to define and identify it throughout its existence. The "mature" pleasure garden was an outdoor, pastoral resort, situated in an urban landscape which offered many of the natural features the city-dweller normally associated with a rural existence: trees, lawn, shrubbery, ponds, running water, and seclusion. It was a retreat where Britons of all classes could find space and privacy in which to relax after the rigors of the work day or, if they chose, socialize with their neighbors or co-workers.

In addition to providing an environment for both relaxation and socializing, the pleasure gardens offered an abundance of refreshments and a vast array of entertainments for both the participant and the passive spectator. The latter included: concerts, puppet shows, plays, variety shows, dancing, bowling, circuses, juggling, exhibitions of horsemanship, balloon ascensions, burlettas, fireworks, masquerades, transparencies, illuminations, rope dancing, and on occasion, gambling.¹⁰

Ironically, when citizens in the American colonies sought to establish pleasure gardens in their new country, they seemingly ignored British precedents. As a result, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the establishment of American pleasure gardens followed a pattern from primitive to sophisticated which mirrored the evolution of English gardens in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Garrett points out, it was almost as if Americans, albeit furnished with the blueprint for a finished resort, wished to reinvent the concept of the pleasure garden themselves.¹¹

The colonists were quick to create decorative gardens throughout New York, but there is no evidence of food, drink and entertainment being offered until 1672 when Richard Sackett, a brewmaster and tavern owner, opened a resort named the Cherry Garden near Pearl and Cherry streets which featured among its attractions, drink and bowling. The Cherry Garden was joined in the first decades of the eighteenth century by three additional gardens which added music, dance, eating, and sports and games – all standard offerings of later pleasure gardens – to their list of featured attractions. These first pleasure gardens were relatively "simple" creations which were generally attached to existing taverns and were viewed as adjuncts to these establishments.

It was during the subsequent decades (the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s) that pleasure gardens began to flourish in New York and to more closely resemble British models. Possibly in response to a perception that the city was becoming overcrowded and open land was disappearing with increasing rapidity, the "middling-classes," who were rapidly becoming a dominant element in New York social policy, tacitly encouraged the establishment of pleasure gardens. Not coincidentally, during this period, New York

pleasure gardens added programs of entertainment to their bill of offerings, the American concept of a pleasure garden reached maturity, the number of gardens mushroomed, and some of the city's more famous resorts (namely Vauxhall Gardens and Ranelagh Garden) were opened. By mid-century, pleasure gardens were regarded as routine features on the urban landscape, and it was this natural and expected that a pleasure garden would be one of the initial entertainment venues to be opened in New York's first theatre district.

The Palace Garden [see photo] was the first "resort" near Union Square devoted exclusively to popular entertainment to achieve any recognition or longevity. The garden was opened in 1858 by Cornelius V. Deforest and a partner simply known as Mr. Tisdale on a 200 by 300 ft. plot leased from the heirs of John Tonnele, a prominent merchant during the 1820s and '30s. When Deforest and Tisdale established their pleasure garden, the original Tonnele home near 6th Ave. and 15th St. was converted into a restaurant called the Mansion House.

As depicted in written descriptions and an 1856 lithograph by the firm of Sarony, Major and Knapp, the Palace Garden included a two-level octagonal pagoda for orchestras, a platform for staging fireworks displays, a large fountain that doubled as a fish pond, and a 100 by 75 ft. tent used as a salon. Throughout the garden, "serpentine gravel walks ... passed under elaborate cast-iron arches enriched with colored-globe gas lamps. Along the walks and throughout the grounds [were] placed 'statues of heroes or heroines of mythology and modern time' and transparent or illuminated 'scenic pedestals' done in stained glass."¹²

When the Palace Garden opened on July 1, 1858, Deforest and Tisdale hoped that it would become the "resort of the refined, fashionable and the intellectual," and their evening *promenade concerts d'été* were made up of musical selections designed to appeal to upper-class patrons. The garden's regular orchestra, conducted by Thomas Baker, was supplemented by Harvey Dodworth's Band, Wallace's Brass Band, and Robertson's Military Band. The highlight of the first summer was the appearance of Carl Formes, a favorite of New York opera fans.

During the first season, however, it became apparent that the Palace Garden was not destined to be a resort attended exclusively by the upper classes. The garden became a favorite place during the day for housemaids and their infant charges and attracted the working classes from other parts of the city in such large numbers that "by the neighbors it was looked upon as the blemish in [an] otherwise impeccable habitation."¹³ Sensitive to the wishes of their clientele, Deforest and Tisdale dutifully provided children's matinees which included ventriloquism, magic, and Indian dances. At the same time, they publicly announced that the "masses" were welcome and that the Palace Garden would provide "cheap entertainment" for their enjoyment.¹⁴

Deforest and Tisdale increased their appeal to the working classes, not by replacing the promenade concerts, but by augmenting them with proved variety acts many regarded as traditional fare for pleasure gardens. Routinely, fireworks displays, balloon ascensions, magicians, and "authentic" exhibitions of Indian life were presented on the same program with waltzes, quadrilles, and gallops. In their first season, the proprietors also offered free gifts to the ladies who patronized the garden, a gimmick commonly attributed to Tony Pastor. In a departure from its London counterparts and earlier New York gardens, the management of the Palace Garden steadfastly refused to serve liquor on the grounds, most likely a concession to temperance activists who were

influential at the time and perhaps an indication that a middle-class (rather than a working-class) ideology predominated in the running of the garden.

At the end of the first summer, Deforest and Tisdale, evidently encouraged by the season's profits, erected an amphitheatre with wooden sides and a canvas top that covered the portion of the garden abutting 6th Ave. The new amphitheatre accommodated 1,600 spectators, contained a center ring or "equestrian" roughly 30 ft. in diameter, was lit by "an enormous chandelier suspended over the center of the ring, and ... was heated by steam pipes run beneath the seats."¹⁵ With its "equestrian" and steam heat, the building quickly became popular with local circus managers looking for a winter home. In the first few months of its existence, the amphitheatre housed Pentland's, Whitby's, J. Van Amburgh's, and Nixon and Kemp's circuses, as well as Professor Starr's Menagerie and Side Show.

In the winter of the following year, Deforest, then sole proprietor of the Palace Garden, made additional improvements on the property. He razed the amphitheatre and salon and erected a permanent structure which measure 50 by 200 ft. The new hall, dubbed the Palace Garden Music Hall, was located on the western border of the property and could comfortably seat 3,000. While the construction of the new hall did little to elevate the class level of his patrons it did allow Deforest to continue concerts during the winter. In 1860, the hall was redecorated with a profusion of flowers, trees and shrubbery and at the same time a new salon and an aviary were added.¹⁶

In July of 1861, James M. Nixon assumed management of the garden, with Colonel T. Allston Brown servicing as his business manager. Baker's orchestra was retained and the garden continued to present concerts, but Nixon added pantomime to his programs and permanently installed Nixon's Royal Circus and Menagerie of Living Animals in one of the pavilions. Since Nixon planned to pattern his operation after London's Cremorne Gardens, he changed the name of his establishment to Nixon's Cremorne Gardens.

During his first winter as proprietor, Nixon undertook a massive renovation of the grounds and buildings. The Music Hall was transformed into a 2,000-seat theatre called the Palace of Music, complete with "a spacious and handsome stage, new scenery, curtains, proscenium, chandeliers and a balcony at the rear of the auditorium."¹⁷ The salon was converted into the Hall of Flora, which was attached to a new 2,000-seat amphitheatre for equestrian exhibits. The renovations also included a complete restructuring of the grounds and erection of a second pagoda for orchestras.

The level of entertainment during Nixon's first full season as managed (the summer of 1862) matched the grand scale of the renovated garden. Pantomimes, added the previous season, were increased in importance, and Commodore Foote and Colonel Small appeared in the garden, riding in a beautiful chariot, drawn by Lilliputian ponies. Susini, Carolotta Patti, and Isabella Cubas gave concerts; and clowns Tony Pastor, William Lake, Signor Blitz, and W. Donaldson (who billed himself as "the black clown" and who was a former member of Charles White's Serenaders) regaled the crowd with their antics. Especially enticing to pleasure-seeking New Yorkers was a 25 cent admission ticket, which entitled the patron to partake of all of the attractions and entertainments the garden offered.

For reasons never made public, Nixon did not open the gardens in 1863. While the most plausible explanation for the closing was Nixon's realization that it was

impossible to operate the garden at a profit on the scale he had envisioned and that he was involved in a fiscally unsound venture, it is also conceivable that he sensed that the pleasure garden was already an anachronism and envisioned the day when the form would be supplanted by the public park, the vaudeville hall and such entertainment venues as Luna Park and Coney Island.

Notes

¹ See also David Nashaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

² *World Almanac and Book of Facts* (Mahwah, NJ: World Almanac Books, 1997).

³ Nineteenth century amusement sites were more public in the sense that they were more accessible and belonged to no particular social group.

⁴ Richard Butsch, *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990). See also Nashaw, *Going Out*, and Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607-1940* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940).

⁵ Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 28-57.

⁶ Newspaper clipping, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷ Thomas M. Garrett, "A History of Pleasure Gardens in New York City, 1700-1865," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1978. Garrett considers the Federalist Period (1796-1825) to have been the heyday of the New York pleasure garden. After the Civil War, Garrett maintains, "although there were resorts in the city designated pleasure gardens, their final evolutionary development had eliminated the garden" and spectators had become passive receptors of the entertainments presented, rather than active participants, as they had been in times past.

⁸ Garrett, 12-14.

⁹ Garrett, 21.

¹⁰ Garrett, 1-2; Warwick Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books) V-VI; Alan Delgado, *Victorian Entertainment* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971) 29-41. As Garrett defines it, a pleasure garden was "a privately owned (as opposed to governmentally owned) enclosed ornamental ground or piece of land, open to the public as a resort or amusement area, and operated as a business." [4]

¹¹ Garrett, 55.

¹² Garrett, 579.

¹³ Newspaper clippings, "The Union Square of Old," and "The Evolution of Union Square." n.d., New York Public Library.

¹⁴ Garrett, 579, and *New York Herald*, 3 November 1858.

¹⁵ Garrett, 580.

¹⁶ Garrett, 582-3, and *New York Herald*, 13 July 1859.

¹⁷ Garrett cited in John W. Frick, *New York's First Theatrical Center: The Rialto at Union Square* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985) 80-81.