

FIRE! FIRE!

Fire was an ever-present danger in America's early theaters. No more than a stage curtain brushing against a gas light could ignite the theater's wooden interior. Although theater fires were frequent, most happened after the audience had gone.

When fire struck an occupied theater, the result was tragic.

When it opened, in 1871, on Washington Street, the Brooklyn Theatre was hailed as an ornament to the city. Its architect, Thomas R. Jackson, was one of the country's foremost theater designers.

As the curtain went up on the last act, a stagehand noticed that a corner of the canvas backdrop was burning. He tried without success to knock the fire down. The main curtain closed as the manager tried to calm the audience. But, as smoke began to seep into the hall, panic erupted. Overtaken by fear, the crowd surged toward the exits. The main floor and first balcony had plenty—the Brooklyn was well designed. But in the crowded upper gallery, the cheap seats, the single stairway was too narrow. Frightened people trampled one another in a futile race to safety. Some even jumped into the flames below. Within an hour and a half the theater was but smoldering rubble. Almost 300 had died.



Above: Kate Claxton and the cast of 'The Two Orphans' try to calm the panic as fire begins to take its toll. She would be severely burned and her castmate, H.S. Murdoch, to her left, would perish. Illustration: Leslie's Monthly Magazine, December 23, 1876.
Above, Right: The Brooklyn Theatre fire's horror was published across the nation. Illustration: Harper's Weekly, December 23, 1876.
—Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library



The entire nation shared in Brooklyn's grief. Many of the victims were identified in a morgue set up in a nearby market hall, but over 75 were buried in a mass grave. A tall obelisk in Green-Wood Cemetery honors their memory.

As a memorial service was held at the Academy of Music, no one could know that it, too, would one day be lost to flames.

His Academy of Music in Manhattan was considered the greatest theater in America, and his Brooklyn Theatre a worthy follower. On the night of December 5, 1876, a capacity crowd was assembled in the new theater.

The great fire became the stuff of popular lore as J.W. Turner's song 'Mid Flame and Smoke' attests. Published by Ottorino Ditson Company, 1878.
—Michael Levine Collection

