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VAUXHALL GARDEN\*

By JOSEPH JACKSON

Vauxhall Garden, Philadelphia, like its prototype, Vauxhall Garden, London, during its ten years of existence, was the most beautiful summer amusement resort in the country. London's famed *ridotto al fresco* was passed into history with approving words of Mr. Pepys,<sup>1</sup> Fielding,<sup>2</sup> and Boz,<sup>3</sup> to mention a few who recorded its glories and dazzling lights. Readers of "Life in London" may recall Corinthian Tom's<sup>4</sup> enthusiastic declaration that it "had not its equal in the world" and Sir Roger de Coverley<sup>5</sup> was appreciative. Philadelphia's Vauxhall had not its equal in this part of the world, but unfortunately at the time we had neither diarist, novelist, nor essayist to give it immortality.

Public amusement gardens were not unknown here before the War of 1812, but that period of excitement and sturdy patriotism was the force that increased their number and improved the type. The Columbian Garden was opened on Market Street, East of Juniper,

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<sup>1</sup> *Diary*, Sept. 23, 1666. Pepys always referred to Vauxhall as "Fox Hall", to which there are many references.

<sup>2</sup> *Amelia*.

<sup>3</sup> *Sketches*, Chap. XIV. "Vauxhall-Gardens by Day".

<sup>4</sup> Pierce Egan, *Life in London*, Chap. VII.

<sup>5</sup> *Spectator*, No. 383, May 20, 1712.

in 1813<sup>6</sup> and Vauxhall, begun that year was opened the following summer.<sup>7</sup>

At that time there were fields and wooded plots in the vicinity of Broad and Walnut Streets, and the most attractive tract was that owned by John Dunlap, Jr., son of Captain John Dunlap, who died in 1807. This was bounded by Broad, Juniper, Walnut and George (Sansom) Streets. It contained among other beautiful trees an elm which must have been there when this was part of the Governor's Woods, and it is quite possible that William Penn himself may have seen it.

Captain Dunlap purchased the property, which in 1782<sup>8</sup> consisted of five Broad Street lots of equal size. As they were conveyed to him by William Moore, President of the Supreme Executive Council of the State, it is evident they belong to the confiscated estate of a loyalist, and probably of the Penn family.

Here was the natural setting for a summer amusement garden. Only a short distance from Centre Square public garden at Broad and Market Streets, and at the outer edge of the built-up part of the city, the locality was known and endeared to every summer evening stroller who loved to step into the suburbs.

Laurence Astolfi, who opened the Columbian Garden, which was the finest place of its kind this city had seen, was a French confectioner,<sup>9</sup> who had just arrived in Philadelphia. His garden seems to have inspired John Scotti, an Italian perfumer and hair dresser,<sup>10</sup> to do something of the same kind, so he leased the Dunlap lot in 1813 and had architects, gardeners and builders working upon it during the summer of that year. The improvement was completed in the autumn and it was

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<sup>6</sup> Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Public Ledger*, August 21, 1921.

<sup>9</sup> *Philadelphia Directory*, 1814.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1813.

opened one night to show its capabilities. Scotti who had been in business in Philadelphia for years, understood the desires of its people. His design was for an amusement garden of a superior class, and when the beautiful place was thrown open for inspection it was realized that the city had a resort of which to be proud.

What then was regarded as a large band—they did not call them orchestras—was provided. Professor George Gillingham was the conductor, and Rene Taylor, organist. However, on the opening night, May 11, 1814, Gillingham was absent, and Professor N. De Luce was, what in modern times would be called, guest conductor on this occasion. During the summer, concerts were given several evenings each week, and among the artists heard were Mr. McFarland, an Irish vocalist and comedian, who came to this country about 1812 and had been with the Boston Theatre. Subsequently he was a member of the Chestnut Street Theatre company, as were some of the other vocalists at Vauxhall, notably Mrs. John Greene, and M. Hardinge,<sup>11</sup> both of whom had been well known here for years. Mrs. Greene was a Philadelphian,<sup>12</sup> but Mr. Hardinge was an English actor. Other artists there that season were Mrs. Bastian and Mr. Schuman.

Vauxhall reopened in 1815 with a great Peace Ball.<sup>13</sup> The advertisement for the event on May 4th, referred to it as an occasion of double celebration—The Peace, and in honor of General Jackson's victory at New Orleans. Extraordinary efforts were taken to make the occasion memorable, and, according to the advertisement, the ballroom was illuminated "in the Italian style with 6000 lamps", and it was designed to give the festival the appearance of an Italian *ridotto*. The ball was opened "by the whole music together with

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<sup>11</sup> F. C. Wemyss, *Chronology of the American Stage* (1852).

<sup>12</sup> T. A. Brown, *History of the American Stage* (1870).

<sup>13</sup> *The Aurora*, May 4, 1815.

two overtures, one by Chimarosa, and the other by David, at 8 o'clock in the evening''. Tickets were one dollar each. The regular summer season at the garden did not begin until May 17th, when chief among the vocalists was Mrs. Thomas Burke, a lady who was the first of American birth who travelled as a star, without any knowledge of the science of music. Her voice is said to have possessed much power and sweetness. Mrs. Burke, having married a second time became the mother of Joseph Jefferson, famed as Rip Van Winkle. What was called a Chinese Temple was introduced in the garden about this time.

Although Mrs. Burke was born in New York City,<sup>14</sup> her parentage was French, and she was taken to Santo Domingo, where her father owned an estate. The family narrowly escaped massacre when the blacks revolted in 1803. Her father, M. Thomas, lost his fortune; and when his daughter, Cornelia, was just in her teens, she became a member of the Park Theatre Company, New York. At first she was in the ballet, but her voice soon gave her a place in singing rôles. While very young she married Thomas Burke, an Irish comedian. Mrs. Burke, then Mrs. Jefferson, died in Philadelphia in 1849, and was buried in Ronaldson Cemetery.

During the summer season of 1816 the greatest personality was James Fennell, the tragedian, who is said to have made his last public appearance there soon after the garden was opened.<sup>15</sup> A week or two later he died. He had made his last appearance on the stage in the preceding autumn. Fennell was an able elocutionist, and if he did appear at Vauxhall it must have been to give a reading. Other artists seen at the garden that summer were Twibill, Jones, Allen, Robinson, from the Charleston Theatre, and Mrs. Bastian. Con-

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<sup>14</sup> William Winter, *The Jeffersons* (1881); Wemyss, *Chronology*.

<sup>15</sup> Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*.



MRS. THOMAS BURKE

*as Jessica*

From the painting by John Neagle. This portrait, which was owned by her son, the actor, Joseph Jefferson, was destroyed by the fire that ruined his home, "Crows' Nest," Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts, in 1891



certs were given on Thursday evenings,<sup>16</sup> and a great subscription ball was held on June 12.

Scotti & Co. had another successful year in the summer of 1817, which was inaugurated with a display of fireworks. This exhibition probably did not attract so much attention as did the appearance of "a strange person named John R. Jewitt",<sup>17</sup> who presented himself in the dress of a Nootka Indian, and sang Nootka songs. Jewitt, who was an armorer on a New England whaler, was the only survivor of the crew, the remainder having been massacred by Indians in Nootka Sound. He was held captive for three years, but having made his escape returned to Boston, where he published his "Journal" in 1807. This was later converted into a narrative, and has been republished three times. In March, 1817, he appeared three nights at the Chestnut Street Theatre in a play he wrote, or had written for him, dramatizing his experiences. It was entitled, "The Armorer's Escape", and Jewitt appeared in the title rôle. At the time he was a reigning personality, and the management of Vauxhall capitalized this vogue. The artists at Vauxhall this season included Mr. and Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Hewson, Mrs. Mills, Ferdinand Durang, who was one of the first persons to sing "The Star Spangled Banner" in public, Madame Knittel, and Mrs. Bastian.

In the summer of 1818, when Scotti seems to have retired from the management, the only bright spot was a concert by Thomas Garner, a tenor<sup>18</sup> who had established himself as a favorite here by his appearances at the Olympic Theatre. He gave a concert in the Pavilion, and on this occasion the leader of the band was John B. L'hulier.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Aurora*, June 12, 1816.

<sup>17</sup> Durang. *History of the Philadelphia Stage*; William B. Wood, *Recollections* (1855), p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*. Chap. LX.

Several managers tried their hands at conducting amusements at Vauxhall, in 1819, although Charles Magner, who lived opposite to the garden,<sup>19</sup> at the southwest corner of Broad and George Streets, was the proprietor. It was a season of novelty and excitement. Early in the summer, James Hewitt,<sup>20</sup> who had been orchestra leader in the old John Street Theatre, and the Park Theatre, in New York, took the garden, and organized what was called a vaudeville company. In his troupe he had John Dwyer, an Irish comedian; Lamb, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Durang, dancers; and Mr. and Mrs. Michael Monier, both connected with Philadelphia Quaker families. Charles Durang claimed to have been one of the first persons to sing "The Star Spangled Banner" in public, an achievement he shared with his brother Ferdinand. The company produced such light pieces as "The Liar", and "Three Weeks After Marriage". Their season is said to have been a successful one. Early in September of that year Professor De Luce gave several concerts, having as vocalists, Keene, Edward Brenau, and Mrs. De Luce, who was famed for her beauty and her voice.<sup>21</sup>

A projected balloon ascension and parachute leap, by a French aeronaut known as Monsieur Michel, caused the beautiful Vauxhall Garden to be looted and burned by a mob on the evening of September 8, 1819.<sup>22</sup> The ascension had been well advertised and, although tickets of admission to witness the process of inflation were placed at a dollar, the garden was nearly filled. But the crowd outside was tremendous, because there were vacant lots and fields all around the resort where it could gather. It was estimated that as many as thirty thousand persons were assembled. Vendors of things

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<sup>19</sup> *Philadelphia Directory*, 1819.

<sup>20</sup> Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*. Chap. LX.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, I. 598.





JOHN R. JEWITT  
Survivor of the Nootka Sound Massacre  
Reproduced from the Catalogue of Goodspeed's Book Shop



eatable and drinkable abounded and the scene was described as not unlike a Fourth of July celebration.

A high board fence enclosed Vauxhall Garden, and although two-thirds of the inflated balloon could be seen above it by those in the streets and lots, the mob became impatient at delay. Many in the crowd were drunk, for vendors sold strong drink as well as other things. Finally a boy tried to climb the fence but was struck by an attendant of the garden. Rumor had it that he had been killed. The mob muttered and someone hurled a stone at the balloon making a rent in it. This damage was not discovered at once and the process of feeding gas to the bag was continued. Three hours passed and the balloon was only half filled. A mob leader appeared, shouted for attack, and the unruly mass went forward in a determined manner, tearing down the fence, ripping the balloon to shreds, sacking the wines and liquors in the garden, and completing the ruin by setting fire to the pavilion or theatre. In fifteen minutes the beauties of Vauxhall were a memory.

After the destruction of the amusement park, Dunlap offered it for sale and it was purchased by the Rev. James Cummiskey,<sup>23</sup> an assistant priest of St. Mary's Catholic Church, at the instance of Bishop Conwell, for the site of an Ursuline Convent. Some dissatisfaction was expressed at the purchase by persons who regarded the situation too far out of town. In 1822, the tract was again sold, and this time the property was bought by Edward Shippen Burd.

For a few years only the ruins and the trees which had escaped the mob's fury remained to remind Philadelphians of a glory that had passed. In 1824, Palmer Fisher and W. Jones took over the place.<sup>24</sup> They re-

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<sup>23</sup> *Public Ledger*, August 21, 1921.

<sup>24</sup> Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*; F. C. Wemyss, *Life of an Actor and Manager* (1847); Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management* (1868).

constructed the Pavilion, renewed the garden, and on July 1st opened the resort for a season of plays. The opening bill on July 1st was "The Soldier's Daughter", and "The Hunter of the Alps". The company was a reputable one, and included Mr. Sill, Mr. Morrison, Lewis Mestayer, Mrs. Battersby, Mrs. William B. Pelby, and Miss A. Mestayer. The manager's little daughter, Miss Oceana Fisher, "only four years of age", was one of the attractions. The company had seceded from the Tivoli Theatre, and the New Vauxhall Garden Theatre, as it was called, was said to have been a more tasteful house than the establishment the company had abandoned.

Fisher had been manager of the Theatre in Vincennes, Indiana, and Jones had been in the company there. The former was the father of Alexina Fisher Baker; and Sol Smith said the Fisher family was numerous enough to cast some plays by themselves. Palmer Fisher and his family had been connected with the Tivoli, but probably retired for the reason that other players deserted that garden. It was nearly impossible to collect salaries. When Fisher opened Vauxhall he improved a little on that procedure. He paid salaries, but the actors were compelled to accept tickets marked "Good at the bar for one drink". Sol Smith<sup>25</sup> played a brief engagement there and relates that when he asked for his salary, which was to have been eight dollars a week, he was handed two hundred and sixty-six of these drink checks, which he declined to accept, and consequently became separated from Fisher's company.

The managers then secured F. C. Wemyss, an English actor, and he began on August 4th, in "The West Indian". Frederick Brown,<sup>26</sup> from the Boston Theatre,

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<sup>25</sup> Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*. Second Series, Chap. XXI.

but originally known in his native England as "The Liverpool Roscius", appeared in a round of tragedies and dramas. He opened in "Richard III." For her benefit Mrs. Battersby<sup>27</sup> appeared in the part of *Rollo*, in "Pizarro", to the astonishment of Philadelphians. She was a handsome woman but of tremendous proportions, and when she played *Rollo* in fleshings and a short white tunic theatre-goers gasped. The incongruity of the performance did not end here, for the stage was small, and by comparison the actress appeared to be all the more huge. A grand fireworks display, in which set pieces included "The Eruption of Mt. Etna," and the "Balloon Independence," closed the season on August 24th. As a place of amusement Vauxhall also ceased to exist, for the following year, 1825, Joseph Diackery, or Diacre, became proprietor and conducted it as an outdoor restaurant. While some histories refer to the final display of fireworks having been witnessed by Lafayette, the fact is that the Nation's guest did not arrive in Philadelphia until a month later. Palmer Fisher and his company, whose short season was a failure, were given a benefit at the Tivoli to enable them to leave the city. Under Diackery's management the garden was open daily until 10 o'clock in the evening.<sup>28</sup> He made several improvements among them a building he called "Lafayette Retreat," erected in the centre of the lot; and planted attractive flower beds. On the opening night the garden was brilliantly illuminated, and there was a band concert. The attractions were repeated once or twice. After this season Vauxhall was not in evidence as a resort. On March 15, 1828, Mr. Burd sold the Broad Street front and, in 1838, James Dundas<sup>29</sup> began the

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<sup>27</sup> William B. Wood, *Recollections*, p. 300; Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*.

<sup>28</sup> *American Daily Advertiser*, May 20, 1825.

<sup>29</sup> *Public Ledger*, August 21, 1921.

erection of his stately house, known later as "The Yellow Mansion," which for many years was a landmark at the northeast corner of Broad and Walnut Streets.

Vauxhall Garden during its prime was conducted in a very orderly manner, and attracted the fashionable elements of the city<sup>30</sup> to its concerts and entertainments. Efforts to revive this interest after the mob scenes of 1819 were not altogether successful. The character of the garden's architecture was changed more than once. Originally the pavilion, and the other structures were Moorish in style. Afterwards there was a tendency to have the architecture Chinese in character, and finally a touch of French was given by the Lafayette Retreat.

Charles Durang has given us the only word picture of Vauxhall Garden we have, and he wrote of it when it was fresh and attractive. "This garden", he wrote "with its forest of trees (one of them yet standing, spreading its mammoth branches over Walnut Street, near Broad), serpentine walks, flowered shrubbery, and the oriental theatre which though small, was a perfect gem, with its delightful retreat for the busy classes of the people who cannot leave home in distant excursions. Philadelphia now has no garden or summer entertainment to compare with Vauxhall in 1819. This place was always quiet and decorously kept."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Durang, *History of the Philadelphia Stage*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*