

## Art Imitates Life: 210-year-old drop curtain depicts a PVD moment in time



“I call it a curtain, but it’s, of course, a drop scene,” says Richard Ring, deputy executive director for collections and interpretation at the Rhode Island Historical Society, as he unveils the broad swath of fabric. “This would have been dropped onto the stage between acts.”

The recently restored curtain shows a view of 1809 Providence, painted by John Worrell. It’s a quiet scene, almost unrecognizable save a few surviving buildings. Ring points out the First Baptist Church, University Hall and the First Congregational Church. He gestures to a brick building near the top left of the curtain. “This is the theater in which this hung — it’s where Grace Church is now, Westminster and Mathewson.” That theater, built in 1795, was the first in Rhode Island.

It was not without controversy. “Theater in New England at the time is still a no-no,” says Ring. “It’s still a Puritan culture right up to the early 19th century.” Ring says historians have speculated that the scene of Providence was meant to show skeptical citizens that the theater valued their community: If you went to the show “you could see your house on the stage.”

He also tells a story, possibly apocryphal, of how the theater came to be built. It didn't look like the building would be finished by the date of the opening performance, so "carpenters dropped what they were doing and, without pay, finished the theater." It may be a legend, Ring says, but "it's a fun story. There were elements in the town that wanted this place."

According to George Willard's *History of the Providence Stage*, plays produced in the early years of the theater included *Macbeth*, a play called *Highland Reel*, attended by then Vice-President Aaron Burr, and a phantasmagoria, or horror show, at which Providence audiences booed the ghost of Napoleon Bonaparte with "an emphatic hiss of contempt and detestation."

The theater survived until 1832, and the Rhode Island Historical Society acquired the curtain the next year. According to Ring, it's the oldest surviving piece of American theater scenery. "At some point, hopefully, we'll digitize the whole thing, digitally restore it and make it interactive." The Society is proud of this remarkable piece of theater history. Its display kicks off their showcase of Performing Arts selections, the Society's theme for 2020.

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