



# Alexandria Times

*Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### Novelty and attractions at the Lyceum

*Alexandria Times, January 24, 2019*

Image:

The Lyceum Company, founded in 1838 to promote education in Alexandria, partnered with the Library Company to build Lyceum Hall in 1839. Lyceum Hall, now the Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum, hosted lectures, debates, concerts, meetings, scientific displays and occasional variety shows combining magic, acrobatics, and plate spinning through the 1840s and 50s. How such variety shows happened at all is a bit of a mystery, as they were initially banned by the Lyceum Company.

In early January 1841, ads in the Alexandria Gazette promised a “GRAND EXHIBITION!!!! COMBINED NOVELTY & ATTRACTION!” at Lyceum Hall. The show would feature “for three NIGHTS ONLY” a grand concert by the Four Tyrolean Brothers, magic and legerdemain by Monsieur De Courcey, plate spinning and slack-rope walking by Mr. Fredericks and a final grand concert.

Fredericks was billed as an “Equilibrist” and De Courcey as “the Wonderful Magician and Necromancer.” On Jan. 9, however, the ad changed. It began, “The Director of the Exhibition ... regrets being compelled to inform the public that, owing to a misunderstanding with regard to the terms ... by which Feats of Legerdemain, &c. are excluded from being exhibited in the Hall, The Director is, therefore, only enabled to present the following entertainment ...”

The “following entertainment” consisted only of the Tyrolean Brothers concert with none of the other acts included. The following night, the director moved the show to The Theatre, which permitted slack rope walking and legerdemain, for the remainder of the show’s run.

The Lyceum Company also placed an ad that started on Jan. 9 stating that “Notice is hereby given that the Lyceum Hall will not be rented for the purpose of exhibiting Jugglery, Slack or Tight Rope Dancing, Feats of Agility, &c. &c. It may always be had ... for holding meetings, delivering Lectures, giving Vocal or Instrumental Concerts, &c. &c.”

Hence the change in the previously advertised variety show. But just a few months later, on March 4 and 6, the Masters Hughes, a youthful singing group, performed with Mr. Young, “the Great Eastern Magician and Chinese Balancer.”

Something had changed in the few months since January. Perhaps the loss of revenue to a rival hall led the Lyceum Company to adjust its standards?

Other magicians and acrobats followed in the ensuing years. The English magician Signor Blitz performed for four nights in 1843. Ads for his shows at Lyceum Hall mention that “Interesting Illusions will be introduced. To conclude with Ventriloquism and the Dance of the Six Dinner Plates on a Common Table.” Of his time in the District of Columbia – he also performed at Carusi’s Saloon and the Union Hotel on the other side of the Potomac – Signor Blitz noted the audiences’ “upturned faces beamed with surprise and laughter. The more intelligent class of the community took a reasonable, common sense view of my feats, while others looked upon me as an emissary from the dark shades of Hades, sent to tantalize and deceive poor humanity with my deeds of sorcery.”



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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John Wyman, aka Wyman the Wizard, who lived for a time in D.C., also performed at Lyceum Hall in 1847 and 1849. His act consisted of “Ventriloquism, Natural Magic, Speaking and Dancing Figures.” Both Signor Blitz and Wyman the Wizard performed often in Alexandria into the 1870s, though primarily at Sarepta Hall and Liberty Hall.

Another notable magician to perform at Lyceum Hall was Monsieur Philippe, who gave two shows in April 1846. His show included, “GRAND SCIENTIFIC ILLUSIONS, consisting of various surprising and amusing experiments in Chemistry, Pneumatics, Optics, Natural Philosophy, and Magic.” His show also included a “splendid band of music.”

The following month Haskell, “the unrivaled Magician and Laughable Ventriloquist” gave two shows sharing “astonishing Experiments, Rites, Tricks, and impostures of the Pagan and Persian Astrologers, with the Impositions practiced by the Priests and Fakirs of Bhuda [sic] and Vishnou [sic].” He performed with Signor Veronias whose “laughable and grotesque” Italian marionettes concluded the evening. The ad also notes “No intoxicated persons admitted.”

So, while banned at first, magicians and their ilk did appear at Lyceum Hall in the 1840s, entertaining Alexandrians with variety shows of magic, ventriloquism, scientific experiments, feats of dexterity and musical accompaniment.

*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*