

Misc. Tidings of Yore

Forgotten Lore & Historical Curiosities

Ballerinas On Fire (1861)

The Dead Bell / November 21, 2014October 26, 2015 / accidents, fire, funerals, work-related



(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/ef826-frank2blesliee28099s2illustrated2bnewspaper2c2bseptember2b282c2b1861.jpg>)

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 28, 1861

Philadelphia's Continental Theater on Walnut Street was the site of a handful of deadly fires in the late 1800s, the first of these tragedies being the subject of this entry. At least eight, but possibly nine

ballerinas perished in an inferno ignited after one of the dancer's gauzy green costumes came into contact with flames from a gas tube backstage.

A crowd of fifteen hundred watched William Wheatley's production of the first act of *The Tempest* on the evening of September 14, 1861. The show was interrupted by strange lights from behind the scenery, followed shortly by screams, stage carpenters rushing onto the platform and the appearance of a young dancer engulfed in flames. This dancer, Zelia Gale, screamed and waved her arms frantically as her costume and skin melted away. She finally fell beneath the stage where a carpenter covered her in a sea cloth from the set design.

As the curtains dropped the screams of other dancers backstage became more audible. Initially the manager tried to calm the crowd but when the magnitude of the situation became clear he told them that the show would not continue and evacuated the building. Meanwhile, a horrific and chaotic scene continued in the dressing room part of the theater.

Zelia (also called Cecilia) was one of four English-born sisters, all ballerinas. The Sept. 18, 1861 issue of *The National Republican* reported that as the Gale sisters readied themselves for Act II Zelia (age 18) reached down to adjust her costume near a gas tube. The gauzy material ignited and within seconds the flames also reached her underclothes and leggings. When her sisters came to the rescue their dresses also caught fire, terribly burning their upper bodies. In the panic the dancers, flaming and not, either ran screaming throughout the theater, swatted at the fire where they stood or leaped from the window onto Sansom Street. Clara Clifton, whose clothing didn't catch on fire jumped from the window and fortunately survived uninjured. Hannah Gale (20), already severely burned, landed on the street below on her back. Anna Nicholas jumped ten-twenty-five feet from a platform to the stage, shattering a plate of glass and lot of mirrors used in the production. *The National Republican* had little hope for her at the time that article was printed. The injured dancers were initially taken to Greer's Tavern, nearby homes, or a hotel where they were treated with brandy by druggists and doctors as they continued to scream in agony. Finally the ballerinas made it to Pennsylvania Hospital.



(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/dbce8-harper27s2bweekly2b1861.jpg>)

Harper's Weekly, 1861

Other than those already listed the injured included Mrs. Mary Herman, Anna McBride (20), Phoebe Forbes/Norden/Forden (20), Abby Carr, Ruth Gale (15), Adeline (Abeonia) Gale (18), Kate Harris and Anna Phillips. The stage carpenter who wrapped Zelia in the canvas was also burned. (Some of the names vary by accounts. I've included what information I could locate in other papers and genealogical records.)

The confirmed dead from the tragedy were the four Gale sisters, Mary Herman, Phoebe, Annie Phillips and Anna McBride. Mr. Wheatley was not held liable for the tragedy and he and his wife held some of the dancers' funerals from their home and paid for those arrangements. I dug up

records from the Brighthurt & Co. Funeral Home itemizing the costs and showing which funerals took place on the same days. I've included those, as well as the Gale sisters' death certificates, below.

The Gales are buried in Mount Moriah Cemetery (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=101122436&ref=acom>). Anna McBride was interred at Old Cathedral Cemetery based on the Brighthurt records. Phoebe, who'd been boarding in Philadelphia, was shipped back to Bristol for burial. Presently I don't have burial information for the other ballerinas.

At the Gale sisters' graves is a weathered monument which according the New York Clipper was inscribed as follows:

IN MEMORIAM

*Stranger, who through the city of the dead
With thoughtful soul and feeling heart may tread,
Pause here a moment – those who sleep below
With careless ear ne'er heard a tale of woe:
Four sisters fair and young together rest
In saddest slumber on earth's kindly breast;
Torn out of life in one disastrous hour,
The rose unfolded and the budding flower:
Life did not part them – Death might not divide
They lived – they loved – they perished, side by side.
O'er doom like theatre let gentle pity shed
The softest tears that mourn the early fled,
For whom – lost children of another land!
This marble raised by weeping friendship's hand
To us, to future time remains to tell
How even in death they loved each other well.*

*With a mother's tearful blessing They sleep beneath the sod,
Her dearest earthly treasures Restored again to
God!*

The National Republican, Sept. 18, 1861:

Terrible Accident at the Continental Theatre.

Fourteen Persons Dreadfully Burned.

DEATH OF SIX OF THE VICTIMS.

FRIGHTFUL SCENES AND INCIDENTS.

The following interesting details of the terrible calamity which occurred at the Philadelphia Continental Theatre, on Saturday night last, we copy from the *Press* of that city:

An accident of frightful fatality occurred at the Continental Theatre, in Walnut street, on Saturday night. Since the destruction and accompanying casualties of the National Theatre, some years ago, we have had no theatrical matters so terrible to recount; and Rumor, with her thousand tongues, has been busy since the event spreading far and wide the particulars of the accident.

The Continental was formerly the "National Circus." Its name was changed some time after the decease of General Welch, and since that time it has been used for displays of negro minstrels, ring performances, and occasionally theatrical entertainments. A few weeks ago, Mr. William Wheatley, an old and favorite actor and manager, leased and refitted the place. At great expense he produced the stage edition of Shakspeare's *Tempest*, and devoted unusual means to perfect the scenic and mechanical arrangements. The ballet corps was numerous, and many of the dancers beautiful and talented. The rare ingenuity of an English machinist was employed to make gorgeous exhibitions of color and shadow, and the closing scene was said to be unparalleled for munificence and beauty.

During the week the houses were excellent, and on Saturday night, about fifteen hundred persons were assembled to enjoy the entertainment. The play had proceeded as far as the close of the first act. Prospero had related his misfortunes, and the wretched Ariel had been

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/66d0e-gale2bthe2bnational2brepublican-2bwashington2c2bd-c-2b1860-18622c2bseptember2b182c2b1861.jpg>)

his misfortunes, and the pretty Ariel had been instructed as to his master's behests; had stirred up the elements, and the lightning and thunder exhibited to the delighted people, the tattered shrouds, and torn spars of a doomed ship. The waves were rolling, and the vessel began to sway. All eyes watched the assumed terror of those on board; the jester Trinculo, (Chapman,) who found time for joking in the pauses of the storm, and Stephano, the drunken butler, who swore and rollicked with seaming death in his face.

All at once, those accustomed to witnessing show pieces saw an unnecessary light glaring over the top of the rear scene. Before they had time to speculate upon it, a number of men in shirt sleeves (stage carpenters) ran upon the stage, and, while the confusion grew momentarily, a sharp scream, that seemed to pierce the heart, rang upon the ears of the people, and a woman in ballet costume, with her dress on fire, emerged from the side scenes, waving her arms above her head. In a moment she fell in the abyss where the ship was riding. At the same time a succession of screams ensued. Trinculo suddenly ceased to joke, and dropped into the waters, while Stephano forgot to be drunk, and became as sober as a judge.

The young woman who had fallen into the waves suddenly re-appeared, and the waves all at once assumed the guise of a bit of green cloth, that was folded round the young woman, and while the screams went on faster and faster, the curtain dropped upon the stage and hid the scene from the audience. Some symptoms of alarm had appeared by this time, and one lad in the gallery cried "fire," whereupon he was at once choked by a big-fisted man beside him. Two or three women said "O, Lord!" and endeavored to edge their way out of the house, but these slight manifestations were

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/8ebc4-gale2b2.jpg>)

quelled by Manager Wheatley, who appeared in front of the curtain and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, be kind enough to remain in your seats, and make no unnecessary disturbance. If anything has gone wrong, I will return in a moment and state the occurrences."

The screams were prolonged and thrilling in the interim, but directly Mr. Wheatley reappeared and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the performers are somewhat excited, and we cannot go on with the play until we discover the extent of the

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accident. "You will, therefore, go out quietly." [A voice—"Was the young lady, whom we saw just now, much burned?"] Mr. Wheatly—"I cannot tell." There is a great deal of confusion behind the curtain. Please go out!"

The people disbanded quietly. Some one described their orderly dismissal as resembling a funeral. But a scene far otherwise went on upon the stage.

The girls were dressing for the ballet. The dressing room adjoin Sansom street, and in a dressing room at the northwest corner of the building the Misses Gale—amiable and talented danseuses—were adjusting themselves for the ballet for Act II. Miss Zelia Gale, one of the sisters, stood upon a settee to reach her dress, and, when in the act of handing it down the flame of gas from an adjacent tube set it on fire, the flame communicated to her underclothes, and she was all ablaze in an instant. Her sisters rushed up to extinguish the fire, and they too were ignited. The fire mounted to their arms and breasts, inflicting terrible burns, and panic-stricken, they ran from the room, through a narrow passage-way into the next dressing room, filled with ballet ladies. The gauze dresses of these blazed up directly, and screaming, struggling, writhing, the poor creatures either turned and leaped from the windows into Sansom street, or ran hither and thither calling for assistance.

Miss Zelia Gale, with her clothing on fire, and uttering loud screams, ran down stairs and upon the stage, falling below the stage level where she was caught in the arms of Mr. Thomas Bayard, the carpenter of the theatre. Mr. Bayard, in attempting to extinguish the fire with a "sea cloth," was himself burned about

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/c403b-gale2b4.jpg>)

the hands and arms.

Miss Clara Clifton was caught in the arms of the bystanders, having leaped down and escaped unhurt, her clothing not having taken fire.

Miss Hannah Gale did not jump from the window until she was badly burned, and when she leaped she fell to the ground upon her back, and sustained severe injuries from the fall, as well as from her burns. She was carried into Greer's tavern, near by, where she lay in an almost hopeless condition at a late hour. On Sunday, at ten o'clock, she expired at the hospital, in great agony.

Miss Anna Nicholas in her fright jumped from a platform to the stage, a distance of about ten feet. She will not recover.

The burned and wounded young ladies were carried into the neighboring houses, where every attention that humanity could suggest was bestowed upon them. Several were carried into the house of Mr. Robbins, nearly opposite the theatre, in Sansom street. Others were taken to a French hotel adjoining, while Miss Gale was taken to Greer's tavern. Several of the sufferers were afterwards taken to the Pennsylvania Hospital. Miss Abby Carr was burned about the breast and waist. Phoebe Forbes died in the morning at nine o'clock. Miss Anna McBride died at six o'clock in the morning. Misses Adeline Gale and Ruth Gale are badly burned. Their cases are not hopeless. Mrs. Mary E. Hermon will not live. Her husband watched her up to a late hour last night. Miss Anna Phillips died during Sunday afternoon. Kate Harris was burned slightly.

The Misses Gale were young ladies of prepossessing appearance. They were excellent dancers. They were English by birth, and they

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/f56d9-gale2b5.jpg>)

first appeared professionally in this city in the Ronzani troupe, at the time "Faust" was brought out as a ballet at the Academy of Music.

Miss Forbes is about twenty years of age. She has no relatives in this city, her friends residing in Bristol, Bucks county. She has boarded for a year past in Vanhorn street, above Germantown road. The lady with whom she boarded was at her side during her dying agonies.

When the disaster first occurred, the scene was most harrowing, the sufferers screaming in agony and in terror, and there was some delay before medical aid could be obtained for them. Several physicians and druggists hurried to the spot, and did all in their power to afford relief. Several physicians, who were appealed to, refused to leave their homes. They deserve to have their names exposed to the community. We were assured that, at a fashionable hotel, in the vicinity brandy prescribed by the physicians was refused.

The event spread uniform gloom throughout the city. The place was besieged up to a late hour, and the theme was upon every lip yesterday.

Six of these burned women had died up to mid-night last night, and four more are not expected to survive the next twenty four hours. All of them suffered terribly, calling for water most piteously, and maintaining their senses unimpaired to the last. Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley were in the hospital throughout, ministering to their necessities, and doing all in their power to make their last moments peaceful. The matter was purely accidental, and no stigma can in any way be cast upon the management.

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/365be-gale2b6.jpg>)

From the *Richmond Dispatch*, October 1, 1861:

"The recent terrible accident at the Continental Theatre in Philadelphia.

An unfortunate accident occurred at the Continental Theatre, in Walnut street, on Saturday night, by which the building for a time was imperilled, and a number of dancing girls so badly burned that some have since died. Wheatley leased and refitted the "Continental," (formerly General Welch's National Circus,) and produced the "Tempest," on Monday night, in splendid style. On Saturday night more than fifteen hundred people were present. The first act had gone forward uninterruptedly, and the dancers were busily preparing in the dressing room to appear in the ballet at the opening of act second. Prospero (Wheatley) was about retiring from the stage, when the audience perceived several men, apparently stage carpenters, running backward and forward in their shirt sleeves. Directly those adjacent to the stage saw a young lady all on fire run hurriedly to the side scenes, and at the same time a succession of piercing screams, from imperceptible localities, disturbed the repose of the audience, and brought half the people to their feet. The cry of "fire" was started from the galleries, and the flitting lights and confusion upon the stage left no doubt that some awful actuality was transpiring. Manager Wheatly directed the people to be quieted, while he retired to learn the extent of the accident.

It appears that Miss Cecilia, one of four talented and handsome sisters, was about robing herself in ballet costume. She stood upon a settee to reach her dress, and somehow flung it into a jet of gas, when it was instantly ignited. Before the young lady could recover from her fright her clothing was all ablaze, and her sisters and several of the ballet girls from an adjoining dressing room, rushing up to assist her, were in turn set on fire. About a dozen of these helpless girls were thus burning at once, and the fire ran over their gauze and among their underclothes, making fast to their close leggins or 'tights,' and literally burning to the bone. Their screams were thrilling, and no scene of horrors that the stage ever witnessed may be compared to the terrible picture behind the scenes, where the fire from the burning dresses blazed up to the ceiling and singed the lashes and hair of the affrighted women. Miss Cecilia Gale, writhing and still in flames, darted down the stairs as stated, and was caught by Mr. Bayard, a stage carpenter, who at once tore up the sea cloth, a sheet of canvas used to make

waves, and wrapped it around her. He was much burned while doing this. The young lady was removed to the hospital soon afterwards.

Several girls leaped into the street, through the second story windows, and Miss Hannah Gale, already badly burned, fell upon the pavement, bruising her back and head so that her case is considered hopeless.

Miss Phœbe Norden, of Bristol, Pennsylvania, inhaled the flames and was shockingly burned. She was at the point of death last evening.

Miss Annie Phillips died on Sunday morning.

Miss Anna McBride was burned in the breast, arms and legs, and taken to the Pennsylvania Hospital. She suffered the most excruciating pain during Saturday night; but towards morning her delirium abated, and she died in the arms of Mrs. Wheatley.

Miss Annie Nicholas was somewhat burned, but in the panic which ensued after the accident she jumped from the head of the flies to the stage—twenty-five feet—and breaking through a lot of mirrors and plate glass used to represent a lake, her hands and cheeks were lacerated.

Ruth and Adeline Gale were burned in the hands and breast.

Mrs. Mary E. Herman suffered exceedingly.

Abby Carr, Margaret Conway, Thomas Bayard, Kate Harrison, and a young man, name unknown, were more or less badly burned. The last named inhaled the fire and his lungs have since been bleeding.

The audience meanwhile was addressed by Mr. Wheatley, and told to vacate the house without unnecessary confusion. A number of ladies fainted on retiring, and there was a great deal of trepidation and alarm in the halls and exit way.

The scene in the rear of the theatre, on Samson street, was most piteous and agonizing in its character. Half-dressed ballet girls ran up and down, and poor women, whose daughters took part in the precession and show scenes, were screaming their names amid confused sobbing, execration and fear. Carriages and cabs were driven up and down, and as each sufferer was placed upon the cushions and taken away, the crowd pressed up and touched her sores.

The excitement continued to spread throughout the city, and all Saturday night and Sunday morning the theatre was surrounded by curious crowds. The Gale sisters were beautiful and finely formed girls, English by birth, and they traveled through the country, some time ago, with the Renzani troupe. The management cannot be blamed in any way for the occurrence. The theatre will open as usual on Tuesday, and on Wednesday the sufferers will receive a benefit. The event has spread gloom and sorrow throughout the city.

The telegraph has announced the death of the sixth of the sufferers—one of the Misses Gale."

RETURN OF A DEATH,
IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA.
PHYSICIAN'S CERTIFICATE.

1. Name of Deceased, Ruth Gale
 2. Colour, White
 3. Sex, Female
 4. Age, 15 years
 5. Married or Single, Single
 6. Date of Death, September 17, 1861
 7. Cause of Death, Burnt

Edward Sivezey M. D.
Residence, Penn. Hospital Phila^{da}

UNDERTAKER'S CERTIFICATE, IN RELATION TO DECEASED.

8. Occupation, Actress
 9. Place of Birth, England
 10. When a Minor, } Name of Father, _____
 } Name of Mother _____
 11. Ward, 8th Ward
 12. Street and Number, Pennsylvania Hospital
 13. Date of Burial, September 18, 1861
 14. Place of Burial, Mount Moriah Cemetery
 10th & Springhurst UNDERTAKER.
 Residence, No 22 North 4th Street
 Date of Certificate, September 18th 1861

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/11841-ruth2bgale2bdeath.jpg>)

RETURN OF A DEATH,
IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA.
PHYSICIAN'S CERTIFICATE.

1. Name of Deceased, Zelia Gale
 2. Colour, White
 3. Sex, Female
 4. Age, 16 years
 5. Married or Single, Single
 6. Date of Death, September 25th 1861
 7. Cause of Death, Burnt

Edward Sivezey M. D.
Residence, Pennsylvania Hospital

UNDERTAKER'S CERTIFICATE, IN RELATION TO DECEASED.

8. Occupation, Actress
 9. Place of Birth, England
 10. When a Minor, } Name of Father, _____
 } Name of Mother _____
 11. Ward, 8th Ward
 12. Street and Number, Pennsylvania Hospital
 13. Date of Burial, September 29th 1861
 14. Place of Burial, Mount Moriah Cemetery
 10th & Springhurst UNDERTAKER.
 Residence, No 22 North 4th Street
 Date of Certificate, September 26th 1861

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/a3ac9-zelia2bdeath.jpg>)

THIS CONSTITUTES ONE CERTIFICATE TO BE RETURNED TO THE HEALTH OFFICE, ON SATURDAY OF EACH WEEK, BEFORE 12 M.

RETURN OF A DEATH,
IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA.
CERTIFICATE OF THE
PHYSICIAN'S CERTIFICATE.

1. Name of Deceased, *Abena Gale*
 2. Colour, *White*
 3. Sex, *Female*
 4. Age, *18 years*
 5. Married or Single, *Single*
 6. Date of Death, *Sept 15..1861*
 7. Cause of Death, *Burns accidentally received*
Anthony Conrad M.D.
 Residence, *London*

* UNDERTAKER'S CERTIFICATE, IN RELATION TO DECEASED.

8. Occupation, *Artist*
 9. Place of Birth, *England*
 10. When a Minor, } Name of Father,
 } Name of Mother,
 11. Ward, *8th Ward*
 12. Street and Number, *Pennsylvania Hospital*
 13. Date of Burial, *September 18th 1861*
 14. Place of Burial, *Mount Moriah Cemetery*
Robt. R. Bingham UNDERTAKER.
 Residence, *60 38 North 11th Street*
 Date of Certificate, *September 16th 1861*

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/69202-adeona.jpg>)

THIS CONSTITUTES ONE CERTIFICATE TO BE RETURNED TO THE HEALTH OFFICE, ON SATURDAY OF EACH WEEK, BEFORE 12 M.

RETURN OF A DEATH,
IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA.
CERTIFICATE OF THE
PHYSICIAN'S CERTIFICATE.

1. Name of Deceased, *Hannah Gale*
 2. Colour, *White*
 3. Sex, *Female*
 4. Age, *20 years*
 5. Married or Single, *Single*
 6. Date of Death, *Sept 15..1861*
 7. Cause of Death, *Burns accidentally received*
Anthony Conrad M.D.
 Residence, *London*

UNDERTAKER'S CERTIFICATE, IN RELATION TO DECEASED.

8. Occupation, *Artist*
 9. Place of Birth, *England*
 10. When a Minor, } Name of Father,
 } Name of Mother,
 11. Ward, *8th Ward*
 12. Street and Number, *Pennsylvania Hospital*
 13. Date of Burial, *September 18th 1861*
 14. Place of Burial, *Mount Moriah Cemetery*
Robt. R. Bingham UNDERTAKER.
 Residence, *60 38 North 11th Street*
 Date of Certificate, *September 16th 1861*

(<https://tidingsofyore.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/925b9-hannah.jpg>)

Published by The Dead Bell

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1 Comment

1. **Chase** says: [May 22, 2015 at 2:21 am](#)

Thank you for this article! I'd never hear of this incident, though I have enjoyed reading up other, similar accidents. Two worth knowing are Emma Livry and Clara Webster. You can find out about their mishaps in newspaper databases, but Clara is a tricky one to read about because almost everything I can find about her is in French.

Luckily, someone has made Wiki articles about both:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_Livry

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clara_Webster

Please post more if you find them!

Comments are closed.

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