

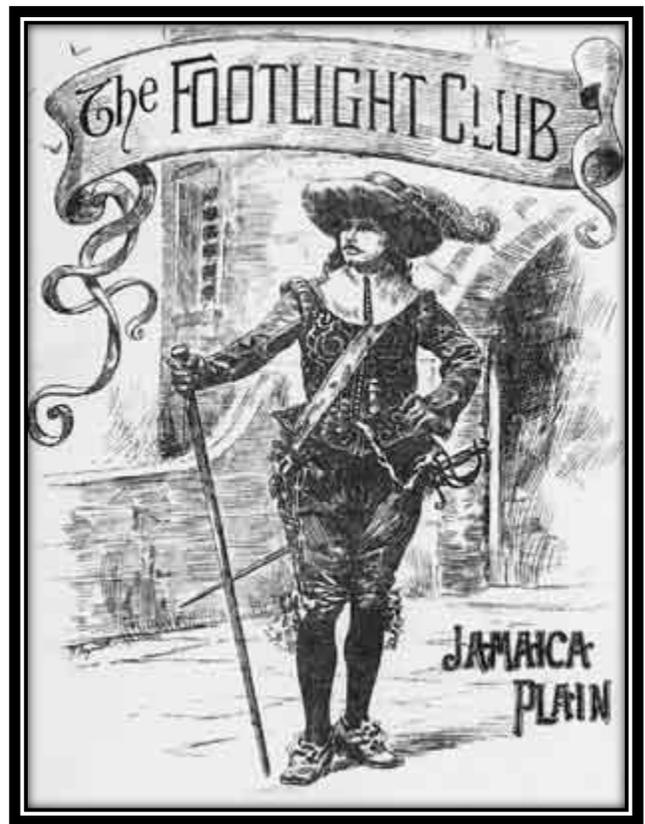
The Footlight Club at 125 Years

Thursday, January 1, 2004 at 07:40PM

Jamaica Plain Historical Society

1877 was a good year for the founding of lasting institutions in Boston. That spring, the Swan Boats were introduced to the lagoon in the Public Garden. Earlier in the year, on February 9th, Trinity Church in Copley Square had been dedicated. Given the scope and size of the congregation at that ceremony, it is logical to assume that some of them would be attending that evening's premier performance of a new theater club they had been elected to join. The Footlight Club had been organized on January 4, 1877.

The topic had come up around the previous Thanksgiving. In December, Miss Caroline Morse, 19, of Pond Street, at a meeting at her home, proposed starting a theater club of serious intent. On January 4th "the meeting was called to order by Mr. Ticknor at eight o'clock. The report of the Committee appointed to take into consideration the definite organization of a dramatic club was presented. The Committee reported that the movement seemed to be well received and justified definite action. After a thorough discussion, the constitution and bylaws were amended and adopted."



The founders were well-off, well-connected, educated, and probably had known each other for years. Many were from long-established local families. The Frothinghams traced themselves to Thomas, who arrived in New England before Boston was established (you don't get much more Brahmin than that). All but one (Parkman Dexter) lived in Jamaica Plain. The twenty-five founders of the Footlight Club were:

Thomas B. Ticknor
Wm. P.A. Brewer
Mary C. Swett
Edmund M. Wheelwright
C. Louise Johnson
James W. Walker
John Tyler Wheelwright
Robert W. Guild
Parkman Dexter
Harold C. Ernst
Ellen L. Frothingham
Hettie R. Goodwin
George A.O. Ernst

Jennie C. Bynner
Wendell Goodwin
Richard H. Gorham
Lillie P. Wender
Frances Goodwin
Frank W. Reynolds
Anna K. Morse
Grace Gorham
Edith Weld
Lillie H. Morse
Harrison B. Hodges
Caroline Morse

The object of the Club was "to promote friendly and social intercourse, and to furnish pleasant and useful entertainment by the aid of the drama". The group committed itself to produce a play by the fourteenth of February.

They had no play, no theater, and no audience. By their next meeting on January 19th, however, they had chosen a play and assembled a list of names of friends and neighbors to be asked to become Associate Members (the audience for their productions).

But the members still could not decide on a name for their group, given the choices of "Footlight", "Jamaica Plain" or "Jabberwocky". By the meeting on January 29th, a hall had been found and rented and by the end of the evening, a name was finally decided upon. It was "Footlight" (8 years, 1 nay). Boston theatrical and social history was on its way.

The Footlight Club, at its beginning, was a classic Victorian club. Almost half the members came from just four families. The men in the Footlight Club were establishing themselves as prominent members of their communities, although in the Wheelwright brothers the club had two men who had already inaugurated a lasting and significant cultural institution by helping to found the Harvard Lampoon several years earlier. J. T. Wheelwright became a prominent Boston attorney. His brother, Edmund M., an architect of significance in the Boston area, would design the Boston-Cambridge (salt- and pepper-shaker) bridge, Horticultural Hall, and the Harvard Lampoon castle. Geo. A. O. Ernst was a lawyer and political reform candidate involved in educational issues and known as "a thorn in the paw of Mayor John 'Honey' Fitzgerald". Doctor Harold C. Ernst was a pioneering bacteriologist and was the first head of that department at Harvard University. Thomas Ticknor, the first Footlight Club president, was a scion of the Ticknor publishing family, whose father published Nathaniel Hawthorne and introduced Charles Dickens to America. These five men were Harvard grads and the connection to Harvard, Boston publishing, and architecture lasted well into the next century. Others became prominent Boston businessmen and professionals. Of course they were friends and in the great tradition of theatrical pairings, Miss Jennie Bynner became Mrs. Geo. A. O. Ernst and Miss Frothingham became Mrs. Harold Ernst. As you pass by the Monument or Curtis Hall (built by the Guild family); as you travel down Weld, Ernst, Brewer, or Bynner streets or walk by Frothingham Cove at Jamaica Pond today, you can appreciate the prominence of the families behind the founding of the Footlight Club.

The Club's first six performances were held at the German Club, "a little hall used as a theater in the rear of the Boylston Street (Jamaica Plain) railway station". Associate membership was limited to sixty-five because that was how many people the hall could hold "by close packing".

The enterprise was such a success that interest in Associate Membership immediately swelled and by their first Annual Meeting in June, 1877, the Club was considering a move to Eliot Hall should certain repairs be made.

The following year, on October 15, 1878 the Footlight Club debuted in Eliot Hall, a well-established local landmark owned by the First Parish Church (across Eliot street). There they spent the next eleven years growing and improving their space. By March 1884 their popularity demanded a second performance of each production. In that same year, the platforms (the same ones we use now) were introduced to provide raised seating.

In 1889 the Church decided to raze the hall and put the property to better use. Friends of the Club formed a committee who sold 1000 shares of a trust in Eliot Hall and bought the hall for the Footlight Club. Major renovation was done to convert the hall into a true theater and on January 9, 1890 the Club's 50th production played in the new Eliot Hall, home of and owned by the Footlight Club, as it still is.

Electric lights were installed in the Club in 1896 for the cost of \$160 (!). No more would the Ladies of the Club need the small metal fence placed far downstage by the gas footlights to warn them that their skirts were drifting dangerously close to the flames. The Footlight Orchestra appeared on December 3, 1893 and for over twenty years members were entertained with three or four selections before each performance. A selection of interest by the Orchestra in one evening's program was a waltz authored by the conductor, Roger L. Scaife, entitled "Footlight". Somewhere out there we have our own theme song; research may turn it up yet.

The Club continued to grow, and by the turn of the century there was a waiting list of over 200 names just to become an Associate member. The Annual Report of 1905 reported the average cost of production to be \$525 (a very significant amount in then-current dollars). Production costs, by the way, included the costs of coach rentals to take ladies to and from rehearsals. Dues were \$3 for an Active Member and \$8 for an Associate Member.

Mr. Ticknor, who was President of the Club for its first twenty years, through his professional association with the Riverside Press, must have been responsible for the wonderful artwork that we see on early programs and tickets. His membership in the Hasty Pudding Society at Harvard surely led to the puckishness of the historic plea printed on our tickets: "Ladies will please remove their bonnets". While that phrase appeared on the back of tickets with "All are particularly urged to be in their seats by 8:00 p.m." on the front, by March 12, 1889 "Ladies will please..." appeared on the front of the ticket, where it still proudly reigns.

The "club" ideal satisfied two major desires for the Victorian mind. The first was to "order things", to establish and acknowledge guidelines for life and the world. The second was to fill non-work related time with meaningful occupation. Note that the object of the Footlight Club was to "...promote... useful entertainment by the aid of the drama". The Footlight Club's emergence was due to a variety of social factors. The first and principal factor was the middle- and upper-middle-class character of the western part of Jamaica Plain in the 1870's. Jamaica Plain had been annexed to the City of Boston in 1874 and was benefiting from a great deal of civic improvement. The rebuilding of the commercial heart of Boston, which had been destroyed in the fire of 1872, was speeding the rise of a large professional class, who, with much improved transportation, no longer needed to live near their place of business. Old farms and estates were being developed into substantial homes for the new white-collar elite who were joining the older, established Roxbury families in the area around the pond, which had long been a country house community for the wealthy (such as John Hancock) of Boston.

With increasing amounts of leisure time enjoyed by this new class of citizens (throughout the urban United States) came an increased interest in socially enriching activities. The late 1870's and 1880's are now referred to as "urban joiner" decades. The Footlight Club certainly falls into this category. Also, and obviously, the enthusiasm for "parlor theatricals" which historically had swept American polite society during the 1850's came to a head with this educated young group of friends. In fact, in 1859 "Parlor Theatricals or Winter Evenings Entertainments", a handbook for parlor theatricals (I think of it as a 19th century 'Home Theater for Dummies') had been published. It was filled with sketches, vignettes, and advice on how to build a small stage and hang curtains (usually between the double doors which connected a living room with a dining room or double

parlors). The introduction to this wonderfully quaint volume states:

"Few amusements will be found more agreeable for small parties than Parlor Theatricals. They have long held a favored place among the more cultivated circles in the old world and only need to be more widely known to gain equal popularity here. As an educational agent the amateur drama can hardly be too highly esteemed".

The Club's structure was no more strict than that of most clubs of the era. To become an Active member, a candidate had to be nominated by an Active member, seconded by two others, and unanimously approved by all other Active members. One "nay" vote kept a prospect off the roles. The same rules applied for Associate members except that two negative votes were needed to deny membership. Members were encouraged not to join any other theatrical group and were expected to answer the Club's call to any task.

The first meeting on January 4, 1877 saw Thomas B. Ticknor elected President. Miss Caroline H. Morse was elected Vice President. W. P. A. Brewer was elected Secretary and Treasurer. R. H. Gorham and H. C. Ernst were elected Directors. These five were entrusted with the creative and business operations of the Club. They selected plays, chose directors, and cast the plays with the talents of the Active members and the pleasure of the Associates in mind. The Secretary/Treasurer handled all associate member business from ticket distribution to budget approval and disbursement of funds. As in all clubs the number of members was restricted, with the number of Active members being limited to 25 and the number of Associates to 65. By the first semiannual meeting in June 1877 the Active member allotment had been raised to 30 and the Associates to 100.

By the time the Club moved to Eliot Hall in October of 1878 the Associates maximum had been reached and a waiting list for membership existed until well after the turn of century. At one point the waiting list totaled over two hundred names. These numbers, along with an interest by the owners of Eliot Hall in having the Club move their performances to Eliot Street, demonstrate the immediate success of their enterprise.

Like any human endeavor, the Footlight Club has not been without its trials. On the lighter side, and illustrating the strictures of Victorian society, the first major challenge to the Club came in its first year when the Board of Directors, of its own accord, invited a lady (not a resident of Jamaica Plain) to become an active member. At the time it was understood that there were many candidates available for membership among the ladies of Jamaica Plain and that only gentlemen were to be considered from beyond the neighborhood (still a familiar story: not enough men). The lady was rejected as a member, which brought major embarrassment to the Board, enough to still be noted with regret in a memoir over twenty years later. More seriously, the club suffered a severe setback with the death in April 1878 of Caroline Morse, generally credited as being the major impetus behind the founding of the Club. The death of this young lady, only twenty-one at the time, who had just appeared in their March 5th production, was a serious blow to this small band of friends and neighbors. The office of Vice President was suspended in her honor and not re-instituted until 1958. After a mere four years (1881), and with only twenty-three Active members, "the right kind of members were hard to find", and the Board offered to resign with a recommendation to "stop now with a good record behind us". Only after a positive vote and "a pledge... to the most earnest and faithful performance of their self imposed task" did the crisis pass. Again, even more seriously, in 1913 the Club had seemed to hit a wall. With only two men having been President in thirty-three years and older members, with the Club since its founding, ready to retire, a movement to disband the Club gained strength. A few stalwart souls, headed by an influential woman member (we have not been told who) met for tea. There were only two or three men present; the rest were women who had never held office in the Club. While the men in attendance vacillated, "the women announced that the Club would go on and they

intended to see that it did".

They "outlined the method of procedure, suggested a new slate of officers, encouraged and fired (up) the doubting men, drank tea and adjourned." The Club had been saved. This anecdote comes to us from the memoir of MacGregor Jenkins, the club's third President, who not only tactfully omitted the name of the influential lady but also modestly neglected to report that he was the nominee for new President, an office he held for three years. The fragility of the Club is illustrated in the minutes of a Board meeting in February 1936, when a donation of new apron lights and tormentor irons by Steven Paine (who went on to found WCRB) was accompanied by a "stipulation that if and when anything happens to the Club, they be returned to him". And this happened in a period we consider the Club's heyday. Mr. Parkman Harding, who was President and Treasurer of the Club in the 1950's and 1960's, reported sending many pleading letters to various utilities asking them to wait for payment. And Miss Souther (who ran the Eliot Hall dance classes for so many decades) was called upon even as late as the early 1970's to come to the Club's rescue with her generous checkbook. Even at the Centennial in 1977 President Sam Messina was talking of having to shut the doors due to lack of funds to heat the hall. But still Club members persevered.

The self-confidence and success of the Footlight Club today presents a bracing contrast to these stories of the past. Surely, it reflects the founders' commitment and enthusiasm in today's membership.

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