

Philadelphia Project Status • December 2003

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The first sixteen months of this project focused on gathering programs from the Free Library on Vine St. (Philadelphia), and hand copying John Curtis' typescript from the Pennsylvania Historical Society. There were also major contributions from Harry Saunders, Bill DePeter, and others. During this time I also wrote software that would generate the artist and composer indices.

Transcribing and editing tables from the John Curtis manuscript continues. I was able to photocopy much of the first six hundred pages from the library on Vine St., taking us to the year 1860. The Vine St. version appears to be a carbon-copy made when the original (at the Penn. Historical Society) was typed. The remaining years are only available from the Historical Society — I do not know if Curtis made carbons of these, or what happened to them. The Historical Society has been extremely reluctant to allow their originals to be photocopied, which would allow me to work at home. During the summer of 2003, the Society began to close on Saturdays for financial reasons, making access to their facility impossible for me, since I live and work in New York City. Fortunately I was able to find a photocopy of the Curtis elsewhere and continue to work from that. I have been skipping around in the work — there is a decade between 1865 and 1876 that I have not touched yet. I am presently transcribing the 1890s. The Curtis' work is both a history and chronology of opera in Philadelphia from the beginning to 1922. Mr. Curtis appears not have completed the years 1911 - 1918. I have not been able to learn much about John Curtis, except what he has revealed about himself in the few personal notes of his history... He first attended opera in January, 1886; he then moved to Chicago in May, 1888, but returned to Philadelphia three years later. I do not know when he passed away, or what happened to his notes and unfinished work. There are approximately 1520 pages in his work (Volume I has 648, Volume II has 673, and the unfinished work has 199 pages). He sometimes miscounted the pages, giving the same number to two consecutive pages. The typescript was given to the Pennsylvania Historical Society in 1942, by a John Curtis, who could have been his son, or the gentleman himself. But, if he lived until 1942, it is sad he could not complete his work.

My project only transcribes information found in the tables of Mr. Curtis' history, which consist entirely of common property from newspapers and other public records. These cast-lists have been reorganized and heavily edited by me to adapt them to the style and structure of my existing documents. I am not transcribing his words, narrative, or history, except in rare circumstances... I have quoted him directly with information that bears on a particular performance or situation. It is unfortunate that John Curtis' work has not been published — it deserves to be. If this can not be done in book format as he desired, then I hope it can be made available electronically someday, for it is not only his life's work, but the history of theater in one of America's most important opera cities.

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In April of 2003, I started working at the New York Public Library on 42nd St. and 5 Ave., with microfilm of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I began with the year 1923 (the Curtis document ends in 1922, and I see no reason to duplicate his work), and after taking four months off in the Fall to move to a new home, I have just now begun the year 1930. During a seven hour period on Saturdays, I can normally only cover a three or four month period. Unfortunately, the NYPL does not have the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* on microfilm, which I really need as a second source. Working with the newspapers has been a roller-coaster ride. Sometimes the image is so faint, it can take hours to do two weeks, other times I can fly as fast as my fingers can type on the lap-top that I use. Another problem is the organization of the papers themselves. During the late 1920s, announcements and reviews were always in the same place, but with earlier editions of the paper, one must look at every single page, because they could have been placed anywhere (if they exist at all).

I hope that by early Spring, 2004, I can start with the 1940s on Microfilm, and by this time next year be working in the 1960s. I also hope to be able to find other archives of programs from the Academy of Vocal Arts and Curtis Institute. I still need to do the missing 1865 decade from Curtis, and I need to do microfilm for the years 1911 - 1918, and from 1930 to the present. In addition, I believe there are still many programs to be found at the Vine St. library, and entire companies whose history has not been mentioned, such as the Savoy and Opera North. Later, as the project becomes more complete, I plan to adapt the software to create new documents for each company individually.

— Frank Hamilton
December 24, 2003