

F.F. Proctor

(1851 - 1929)

A talented circus performer who became a successful theatre and vaudeville circuit manager, Frederick Freeman (Francis) Proctor left a part of his theatrical legacy in Schenectady.

Frederick was born the youngest of five children in 1851 in a small town near Dexter, Maine. His father, a country physician, died suddenly when Frederick was only 9 years old. His mother was forced to move the near-penniless family to her parents' farm in Lexington, Massachusetts. At age 14, young Frederick had to leave school to contribute to the family income. He worked as a bundle boy at R. H. White's Dry Goods Store in Boston, where he spent his days wrapping packages, his evenings delivering them, and his lunch breaks in the basement practicing his avid interests - acrobatics and juggling.

As a teenager, Proctor met and teamed up with George Mansfield, another talented juggler. Together, they formed an act called "The Jeweled Barrels," named after the props they used for juggling routines. In the 1870s, the two young men were discovered by the L.B. Lent Circus, and were hired for a five-year tour of the United States and Europe. While on tour, Proctor adopted the last name Levantine, and performed as "The Great Levantine - Equilibrist of the 70s." During this time, Proctor met and married Mary Ann "Polly" Daily, a young vaudeville performer.

The Proctors settled in Nassau, Rensselaer County in 1880, and began a family. He was 29 years old, and intent on a career as a theatre manager. He leased The Gayety, a small and rather decrepit theatre on Green Street in Albany. Proctor changed both the name and the ambiance. Calling it the Levantine Novelty Theatre, he and his wife spruced the place up, secured a better class of acts for the small stage and, in time, brought in a better class of patrons as well. He saved money by becoming the janitor, ticket seller, entertainer (along with his wife, singer-dancer Polly) and manager. Over the next few years, financial success allowed him to buy or lease more theatres in the area. By 1884, now certain he would not dishonor the Proctor name, he dropped the Levantine pseudonym. Because he disliked his middle name, Freeman, he chose instead to be known as Frederick Francis Proctor.

In 1889, Proctor moved his family, which included a son (F. F. Jr.) and two daughters, to New York City, where he continued to expand his theatre chain. Soon to be hailed as the "Dean of Vaudeville Managers," he eventually owned, leased or rented over 50 theatres from Delaware to Canada, and from Boston to Cleveland. When Polly unexpectedly died in 1901, Proctor remarried at age 53 to a young vaudevillian, Georgena Mills.

Proctor's success continued to climb, and his novel idea of "continuous vaudeville" brought thousands more people to his theatres. With this method of presentation, patrons could pay admission once at any point in the day and stay for as long as they desired, while the acts continually performed. One popular theatre advertisement of 1904 reads, "After Breakfast Go to Proctor's -After Proctor's Go to Bed." Proctor was also the first major theatre manager to play a "pic-vaude" combination, which included a feature film booked alongside four or five vaudeville acts. He also implemented ideas that few other theatre managers had, including full orchestral accompaniment, improved dressing rooms, insurance and profit sharing for employees, and discount tickets for morning shows.

Proctor's success and wealth allowed him to build a beautiful house in Larchmont, New York. The estate, known as Proctoria, included a grand house for the family, as well as one house for each of his children.

He had two lakes on the property, Lake Georgena and Lake Frederick, with beautiful waterfalls and luxurious sand beaches. (In recent years, Proctoria has lost most of its lustre, and the majority of the property belongs to Westpoint, which uses it for military maneuvers.) Proctor also owned a grand apartment in New York City, which he visited often.

Proctor seized the opportunity in 1911 to invest in Schenectady's economic prosperity and population explosion caused by the phenomenal growth of the General Electric Company and the American Locomotive Company (ALCO). At this time, Proctor was able to lease a new vaudeville house in Schenectady, which opened to great fanfare in April 1912. However, the popularity of the theatre and an ever-expanding population led Proctor to buy real estate on State Street, where he planned to build a bigger, more grandiose vaudeville theatre. This new theatre at 432 State Street became the best-selling theatre of the era.

In mid-1929, just three years after opening Proctors, an ailing F.F. Proctor, 78, sold nearly all of his theatres to the Radio Keith Orpheum (RKO) Corporation for an estimated 16 million dollars. In September of that year, he died of congestive heart failure at his home in Larchmont, NY. George M. Cohan and John S. Ringling were among the pallbearers. Proctor remembered over 300 people (including employees) in his will, and gave generous amounts of money to the Actors' Fund, which provided financial assistance to retired actors. Interviewed in 1986 on WGY radio, a grandniece of F.F. Proctor, Marjorie Proctor Merrow of South Carolina, described her "Uncle Freddy" as "very quiet, reserved—extremely clever—and devoted to his employees, as they were to him."

A New Englander with a hard work ethic, a promoter of good family entertainment, and an astute businessman, Frederick Freeman (Francis) Proctor rose from well-known circus performer to become one of the wealthiest theatre owners in the world. Schenectady was fortunate to have caught his attention, and Proctors on State Street continues to flourish as part of his legacy.

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Proctors is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) cultural, educational and charitable organization that delivers exciting shows, excellent educational programming and community events to the extended Capital Region.

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