

John Wilkes Booth joined which Philadelphia theatre company in 1857?

Answer: The Arch Street Theatre.

April 26 marks the death of John Wilkes Booth, an actor who performed in various venues and even spent some time in Philadelphia performing at the Arch Street Theatre. Opened in 1828, the Arch Street Theatre between 6th and 7th Streets stood at the forefront of the national and local theatre scene. One of the nation's oldest theatres, it competed with the Chestnut Street Theatre and the Olympic (now Walnut Street Theatre) for audiences as well as actors.

In 1857, the theatre hired Booth, then the nineteen-year-old son of America's most celebrated theatrical family. Booth performed with the company under his stage name, "Mr. Wilks," for one full season from August 1857 to June 1858, as well as a variety of roles over the next several years. Booth would become one of America's most infamous characters in 1865, not as an actor, but as the assassin of President Abraham Lincoln.

In 1861, Louise Lane Drew took over as manager of the Arch Street Theatre and it was under her 31-year tutelage that it grew in prominence to become one of the nation's most well-known theatre companies. Drew renovated the theatre in 1863 with all the trimmings of modernity, such as plush seats and crystal chandeliers. After Drew retired, it was reported that the Arch Street Theatre was to be sold and dismantled, but it began a new life as a Yiddish theatre in 1898, before finally being sold in the 1930s.

HSP's collections contain images as well as a large assortment of playbill from several of Philadelphia's local theatres (#3131) dating back to the 1700s. The image of the Arch Street Theatre broadside above is available in HSP's new online digital library.
