

[Campbell, John H.]

THE LATE REV. JOHN H. CAMPBELL  
A Clergyman Who Was Most Friendly to Theatrical People  
From the Buffalo Courier.

The death of the Rev. John H. Campbell at Lake View [Erie Co., NY] recently will be mourned not only by those near to him but by thousands of players throughout the country. It is doubtful if any man out of the player's profession had so wide an acquaintance with the actors and actresses of our time and of those palmy days when Forrest was the greatest American tragedian.

Mr. Campbell was born on April 1, 1821, in a house on the Bowery in New York which stood on the ground now occupied by the famous public resort kept by "Steve" Brodie. Whether the fact that Mr. Brodie is an actor of credit and renown had anything to do with Mr. Campbell's early liking for the drama is not known. It may be that the influence of Mr. Campbell hovered about the spot until "Steve" Brodie opened a place there. However that may be, Mr. Campbell while still a lad was greatly interested in everything relating to the drama. He pored over Shakespeare, and had his own notion of how almost every line in the plays should be read to give it its true, full meaning.

He went to school for a few seasons, and then was apprenticed to the trade of making carriage bodies. Meanwhile he had shown marked aptitude for public speaking, and in debates on the great moral questions of the time he achieve so great a reputation that he was urged to study for the Universalist ministry. He followed the advice of his friends and took a course in theology, one of his classmates at the divinity school being the father<sup>1</sup> of Otis Skinner, the fine actor.

Exact details of his later career are wanting. He preached in Brooklyn, New-York, and in or near Boston. While living near Boston he became well acquainted with Alice and Phoebe Cary, and often took tea with them. But his first love and his last was the stage. He knew Edwin Forrest well, and one night after seeing him act Hamlet he went with him to his room, and there they sat the greater part of the night discussing different readings of certain lines. Mr. Campbell found fault with some of Mr. Forrest's readings, and many of his suggestions, it is said, Forrest adopted. On that occasion the tragedian gave to Mr. Campbell his acting version of the play, containing his autograph. Mr. Campbell has always preserved it among his dearest treasures.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Charles Augustus Skinner

[Campbell, John H.]

His players' autograph album was probably the rarest thing of the kind in existence. It contained the autographs and portraits of players who had been famous in America during the last fifty years. Among the most recent additions to it were the names of Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, and Sarah Bernhardt. It is a most valuable book, and will doubtless become, in accordance with his oft-expressed wish, the property of The Players, in New-York. He had besides many trinkets, photographs, and relics of actors and actresses of long ago.

*New York Times*, New York NY, 2 Aug 1896

MR. CAMPBELL'S GIFT

**Player's Club Now Has His Valuable Collection**

IT WAS RECEIVED IN NEW YORK ON TUESDAY, AND IT IS HIGHLY PRIZED FOR ITS INTRINSIC VALUE AS WELL AS FOR THE FACT THAT IT IS A TRIBUTE FROM THE PULPIT TO THE STAGE

The New-York Sun yesterday reported the receipt by the Players' Club of the collection of autographs and photographs of actors made by the Rev. John H. Campbell, who died at his home at Lake View, near this city, about two months ago. On the day after Mr. Campbell's death The Express published an article in reference to Mr. Campbell's collection. Yesterday's Sun contained the following interesting article about Mr. Campbell.

"The Players' Club received yesterday a gift of remarkable value intrinsically, and altogether unique as a material tribute from the pulpit to the stage. It was the bequest of the Rev. John H. Campbell of Buffalo, a Universalist minister.

"Few other men not themselves directly concerned in the theatrical business had as many friends and acquaintances among actors as did the Rev. Mr. Campbell.

"Mr. Campbell possessed a large collection of pictures and autographs of actors, stage relics, and prompt books. It is believed to have been the largest private collection of the sort in this country. It had been his particular care for 50 years. He was not ostentatious about his liking for the people of the stage. Only his most intimate friends knew of his collection; probably few even of these knew that on every night when there was a reputable company in a Buffalo theater the Rev. Mr. Campbell was seated comfortably in the wings chatting with the principals of the cast between [?]. He was by no means a rich man, and with tactful recognition of the fact the freedom of the Buffalo theaters was given him to go in and out and to seat himself where he pleased.

"It was always his wish that his collection should go to the Players' Club at his death. Soon after his death a few weeks ago, at the age of 76, Mrs. Campbell wrote to the president of the club, saying that she had the collection ready to send

[Campbell, John H.]

to the Players' as soon as desired. The collection arrived yesterday. The collection cannot be formally accepted until the directors meet in October. The members are much pleased with the clergyman's gift, and are proud of the friendship it signified.

"One of the prominent members of the Players' Club talked freely yesterday to a Sun reporter about the Buffalo clergyman who was so highly esteemed by actors. He said he did not wish to be quoted, as there might be persons who would accuse him of advertising himself at the expense of Mr. Campbell.

"Mr. Campbell was born in this city in April, 1821," said the actor. 'Steve' Brodie's resort is now on the site of the house in which the clergyman first saw the light. As a boy Mr. Campbell was very fond of the stage, and was a great orator. He knew nearly all of his Shakespeare by heart before he was 15, as was familiar with all the principal modern plays brought out in London. In those days the first nights in New-York were few and far between, and Mr. Campbell had told me often how he used to seek out the English papers on their arrival and read what was said about the plays and players of England. He saved files of all these old papers containing criticisms of plays or sketches of they players and authors, and I have no doubt they are now in this collection presented to the club.

"He became a carriage maker when he was quite young, but his natural ability as an orator took him from his trade. He was never happy unless engaged in an oratorical argument, so the business of carriage making was no doubt sadly neglected. He engaged in several public debates, and was urged by friends to study for the ministry or the stage. He wavered for a time between the footlights and the pulpit, but his mother's advice induced him to enter a theological seminary. He became a successful Universalist preacher, and for a long time was prominent in religious circles in this city, Brooklyn and Boston. By degrees he became acquainted with the people of the stage, and whenever he met players he became their fast friend.

"Two of his life-long friends were Edwin Booth and Edwin Forrest. This friendship was strengthened by the clergyman's great love for the tragedies portrayed by those great actors.

"One time when Mr. Booth was visiting the clergyman at his home in Lake View, near Buffalo, Mr. Campbell saved the actor's life. While they were out rowing the boat was upset and Mr. Booth's legs became entangled in the bow-line so that he was not able to help himself. He was sinking for the third time when Mr. Campbell came to his aid.

"In the clergyman's collection, which I always took great pleasure in inspecting whenever I played in Buffalo, were numerous play manuscripts once owned and used by great actors. Half a dozen or more of these bear Edwin Booth's autograph. They were originals used by the actor himself in the presentation of the tragedies he was [?] in. I am told that both Forrest and Booth availed themselves of some of Mr. Campbell's suggestions in their Shakespearian work. The clergyman was a [?] and intelligent student of Shakespeare. I always thought there was the making of a great actor in him.

"When Edwin Forrest first acted Hamlet, the clergyman and he spent the greater part of the night together after the first performance, discussing the production. It had been witnessed by Mr. Campbell, and he didn't agree with the

[Campbell, John H.]

tragedian's rendering of certain lines. After listening to the clergyman's criticism, the tragedian is said to have at once adopted the suggestions made by his friend, and in remembrance gave him an acting version of Hamlet with an autograph and a neat couplet expressing gratitude for the kindly assistance rendered by the pulpit to the stage. It is said of Mr. Campbell that he once traveled more than 1,000 miles to see a new production by Mr. Forrest.

"In the collection is a huge autograph album, the largest one I ever saw; and I have put my work in many in my day. In this album is the autograph of every actor and actress of any prominence at all who appeared in this country during the last half century. Among the last autographs and photographs added to the collection were those of Bernhardt, Terry and Irving. Henry Irving's autograph is the last in the book.

"Another book contained copies of play programmes. For years my first pleasant task after the production of a new piece has been to enclose a programme with cast to my friend, the clergyman. [The rest of this paragraph was especially difficult to read.] I know [? ?] of other actors who did likewise. In the programme book were dates way back to the '40's. It will be a great prize for the Players.' Many of the programmes bear the autographs of nearly all of the cast people in the presenting company. Mr. Campbell has seen the great actors and actresses of our times [?] up from minor parts in [? ? ?] star parts in great plays. He has told me with what pleasure he used to read the Tuesday's New-York papers during the later years of his life[, as] most of the new productions have been brought up on Monday nights and Tuesday's papers would contain the criticisms and tell of the triumph or the failure of the clergyman's player friends. He used to watch the careers of his friends of the stage as if they were members of his family. He knew all the routes of the company of any character, and whenever a company in which he had friends was nearing Buffalo, there was always sure to be a letter of invitation to dine at the clergyman's home at Lake View sent to them a week ahead. I believe [?] Goodwin and [? ?] were his favorite visitors.

"Mr. Campbell, although a true and ardent minister of the Gospel, never forced his religious views on a guest or friends. He understood the men and women of the stage and their bohemian way of living. He realized their trials and temptations, and, best of all, knew that there are many actors and actresses who lead as upright and as noble a life as men and women off the stage who are devoted to their homes and those who trust and love them. It was this recognition of the good in mankind that endeared this minister of the Gospel to the players."

*Buffalo Express*, Buffalo NY, Wed. 28 Aug 1896

Transcribed on 27 Jul 2009 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY