



Lincoln Lore

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THE BROOKLYN SANITARY FAIR

A rich but neglected source for the cultural life of the North during Abraham Lincoln's presidency is the accounts of the activities of the sanitary fairs held to raise money for the United States Sanitary Commission. The commission aided the

wounded and sent supplies to the Union armies. In 1863 women began organizing the fairs, gigantic charity bazaars on the scale of modern state fairs. Attractions included captured Confederate battle flags, pickles, plows, lingerie, livestock,



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FIGURE 1. Knickerbocker Hall, Brooklyn Sanitary Fair.

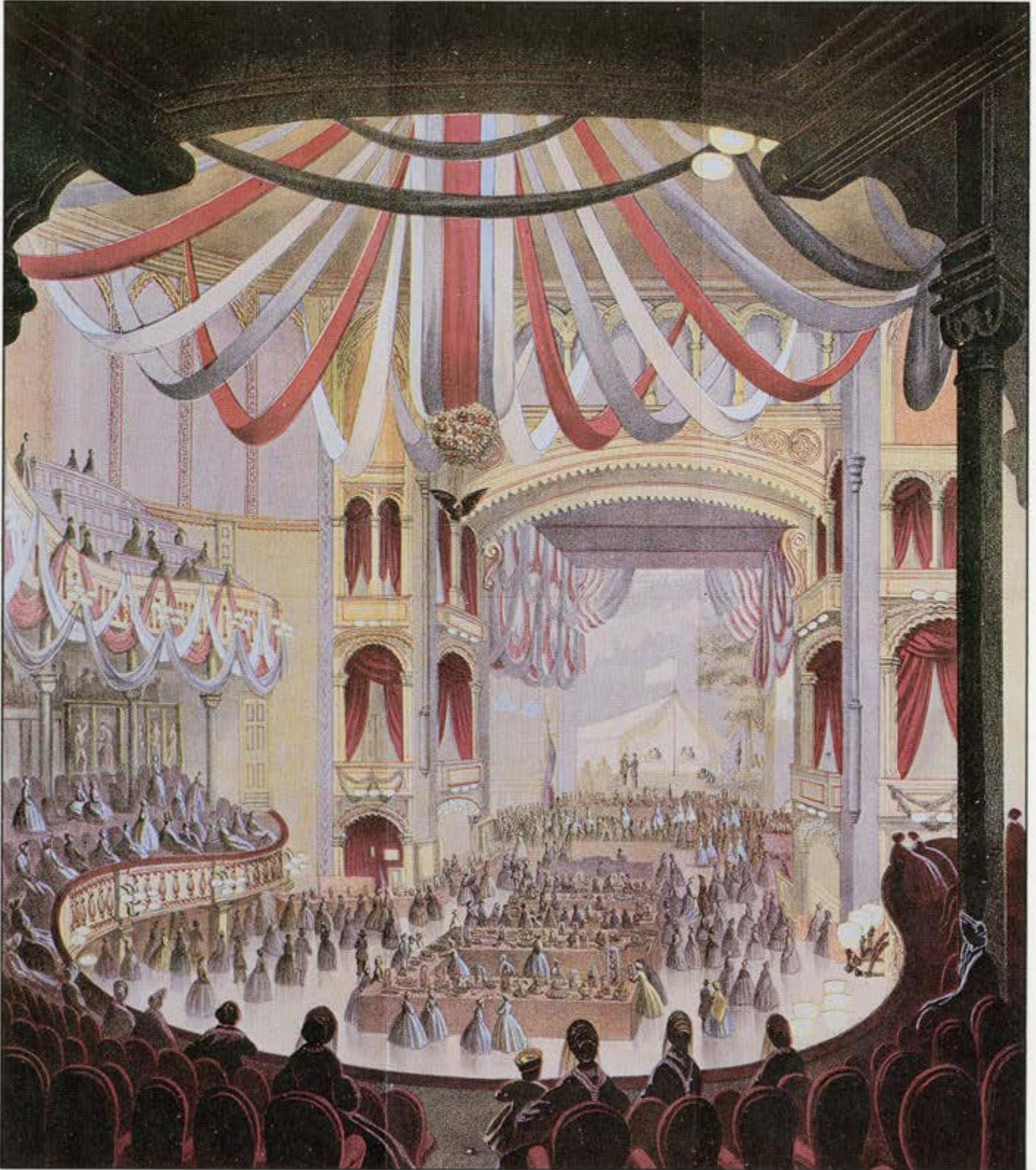
books, prints, photographs, and paintings.

Leaders of the sanitary commission movement traced its origins to England in the Crimean War, when the scandalously dreadful condition of her armies led to sending volunteers to tend to the sick and wounded and to hear the last words of the dying. The American effort was more vast and better organized, reaching thousands on the battlefields and in the hospitals and gaining support from hundreds of thousands at home. The Brooklyn and Long Island Fair, which opened in

February 1864, was one of the many but perhaps typical.

One of the major attractions of the Brooklyn fair was a piece of nineteenth-century nostalgia, the New England Kitchen, here described by the *Daily Morning Drum-Beat*, the newspaper of the fair:

The kitchen contains four large tables all set out in a delightfully primitive style and most refreshingly free from the effeminate luxuries of this degenerate age: for instance napkins and butter-knives. The viands are set forth on the



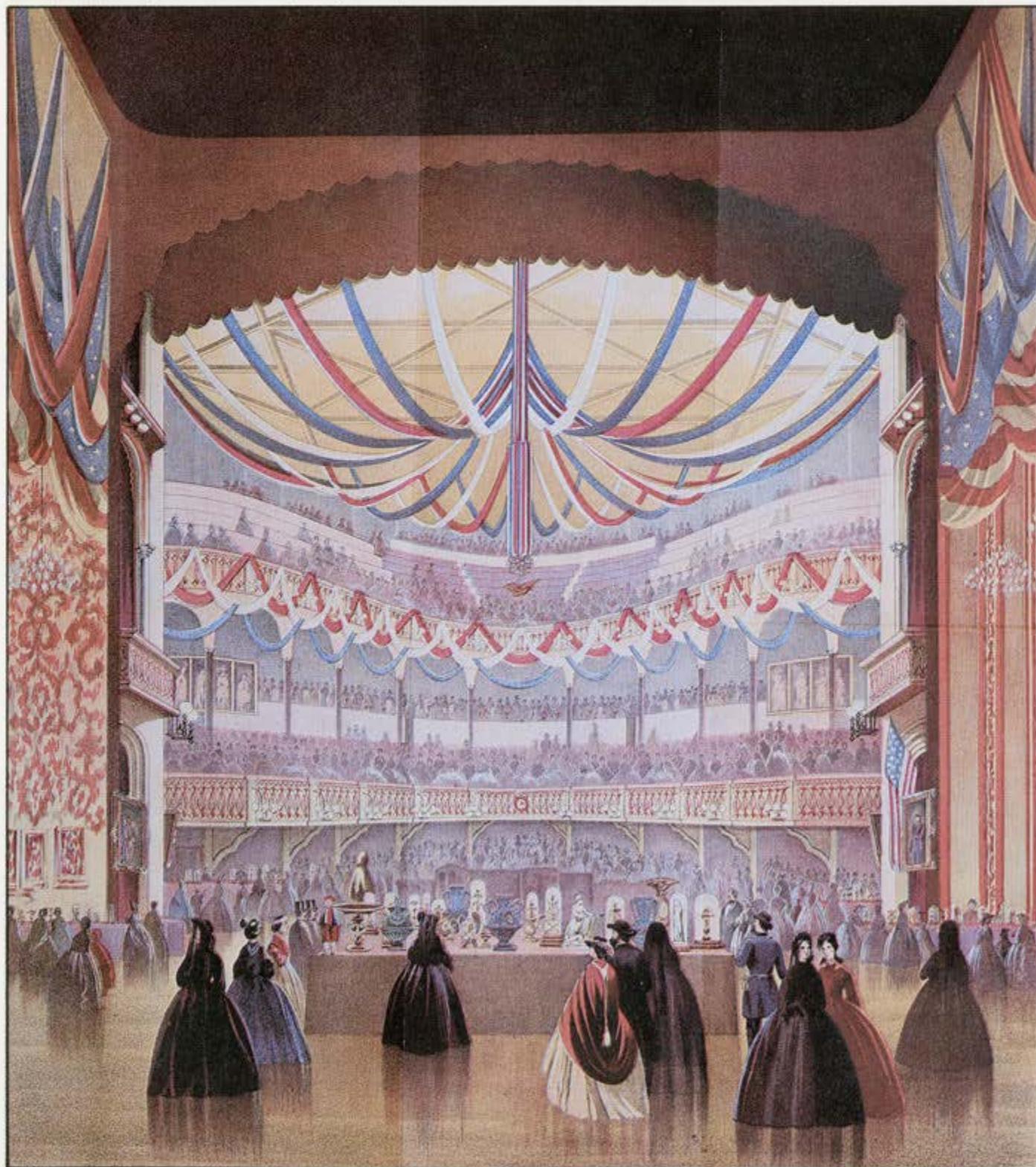
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FIGURE 2. Interior of the Academy of Music from the dress circle.

most uncompromising of earthen ware — blue plates, eight brown bowls and big saucers. A pitcher of molasses takes the place of refined “syrup,” and there is nothing on the table to remind the visitor that he is in a fashionable and wealthy city.

The great monster fireplace has, with a kind consideration its early freaks had given us little right to expect, benignly consented to stop smoking, and acts its part with the quiet gravity of its puritanical progenitors. Before it stands an old-fashioned spinning-wheel, whereat an industrious dame of the olden time may be seen faithfully and patiently at work.

On the high chimney-piece is a pair of quaint old candlesticks, on racks against the wall some rusty old muskets, and depending from the ceiling strings of yellow, dried corn. The chairs in the room, all as Sir Leicester Dedlock would say, “As old as the hills, and vastly more respectable,” are of every shape and pattern. One of them, 150 years of age, was buried in the earth for preservation when the old farmer-owner was suddenly called away to fight and fall for his country. After his death on the battle-field it was exhumed, and again put into practical use at its old home in Stamford, Connecticut. Now it enjoys a green and honorable



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FIGURE 3. Interior of the Academy of Music from the stage.

old age, and is one of the most interesting objects in the Sanitary Fair of 1864.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music was the central attraction of the fair, and there ladies sold thousands of dollars worth of books, flowers, and fancy goods. Like all good fair-goers the ones in Civil War Brooklyn came expecting to be amused, to spend money, and to eat. If they ate at the New England Kitchen, as many did, they sampled "chicken pie, roast beef and veal, pork and beans, white and brown bread, potatoes in various styles, pickles, tea, coffee, cider, puddings, and mince and pumpkin pies." Such fare cost fifty cents. Waitresses were in costume, and the kitchen was the site of various special events like quilting bees and a New England wedding.

The sanitary fairs showed more than the domestic and popular arts. They were important showcases of the high arts as well. Like other fairs, the Brooklyn fair had paintings for sale and paintings on loan for exhibition. Works by John Frederick Kensett, Albert Bierstadt, Asher B. Durand, and Arthur F. Tait were present, and Henry Ward Beecher lent his collection of engravings of works by Italian artists, especially Coreggio. A "curious picture of a Berdan sharpshooter" was offered by one "W. Homer."

Art of a somewhat lower order found its way into the New England Kitchen. There one could find "a very remarkable copy, by Mr. Paine, of the President's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1st, 1863. It is done entirely with a steel pen, and includes the text of the Proclamation, exquisitely written, a good portrait of Mr. Lincoln, and a fancy border, at the foot of which is a spirited picture of the Union soldier on

picket guard. It is intended to have this tasteful article sold by shares and then presented to the President of the United States, as a memorial of the Fair."

Among the more celebrated items for sale at the fair were autographs by famous persons living and dead. The historical autographs included those of Walter Scott, Lafayette, Baron Steuben, Aaron Burr, Benedict Arnold, John Hancock, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and — of all people — John C. Calhoun.

The most famous autograph sold at the fair was that of Abraham Lincoln. A Reverend Woodruff, of the Hanson Place Methodist Church of Brooklyn, went to Washington, procured an interview with the president, and obtained from him this letter:

Executive Mansion, March 2, 1864.

To the New-England Kitchen, connected
with the Brooklyn Sanitary Fair:

It is represented to me that my autograph, appended to this note, may somewhat augment, through the means you are so patriotically employing, the contributions for the benefit of our gallant and suffering soldiers, and for such an object I am glad to give it.

Yours, truly,

A. Lincoln

The letter was announced at dinner in the New England Kitchen and sold "instantly," as the *Daily Morning Drum-Beat* put it, to C. H. Mallory, of Mystic Bridge, Connecticut.

The Brooklyn Sanitary Fair raised over three hundred thousand dollars. Institutions with such great appeal are surely worthy of study and may give some real insights into popular taste in Lincoln's America.



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FIGURE 4. The New England Kitchen