

THE ADELPHIAN CLUB

By Ellen Knight¹

“To promote a more friendly and intimate acquaintance among its members and to provide a means for their social entertainment and culture,”² a group of Winchester residents met on May 26, 1874 and formed the Adelpian Club, which later became the parent of a second club, the Back Log Club. Their entertainments illustrate typical home-made amusements of the times.

Originally membership was limited to 40 but was quickly amended to 50 and later to 65. After two years, an additional 75 associate (non-voting) members were allowed to attend meetings. It is most probable that membership kept growing because the meetings were great fun.

Meetings, held on alternate Thursdays from October to May, were divided into three parts: business, entertainment, and socialization. The entertainments, in the fashion of the times, were usually diversified, mixing music, readings, recitations, tableaus, and theatricals. A review of the literary choices reveals a taste for the humorous and the sentimental – such as selections from Bret Harte and Mark Twain and Leigh Hunt’s *Abou Ben Adhem*. Only occasionally does a more weighty title, such as a scene from Shakespeare or a reading from *Ivanhoe*, appear in the minutes.



*A Dramatic Evening at Rangeley Hall,
one meeting place used by the Adelpian Club*

Light entertainment also dominated the theatrical offerings. Quite a number of farces were given, with such titles as *Who is Who or All in a Fog*, *A Sea of Troubles*, and *Mysterious Disappearance*, though theatrical presentations also included pantomime, shadow pantomime, operetta (including the six-act *The Queen of Madagascar*) parlor opera (e.g. *College Ned*), pastoral drama, minstrel show, pantomime charade, and acting charade.

The titles of songs, performed as solos, duets, trios, quartets or quintets, reveal a rather sentimental taste in music, for example, *The Last Rose of Summer*, *Childhood Memories*, *My Grandfather’s Clock*, and *I Cannot Sing the Old Songs*. On very rare occasions, a little opera was presented to members.

On the other hand, the titles of identified piano solos, including works by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Wagner, and Weber, reveal classical tastes among the pianists.

A frequent offering was the *tableau vivant* or living picture. Examples include *Quaker Meeting*, *The Two Orphans*, *Dancing Lesson*, *Watching the Old Year Out and the New Year In*, and *Queen Elizabeth*.

Sometimes there were games and dancing. Once a debate was held on the question, "Are the New England people of today happier than the New England people 50 years ago?" On one other occasion, a stereopticon was used to show European scenes and "was received with a great deal of pleasure and interest by the Club, it being quite the novel feature, besides being interesting and instructive."³

Though the surviving meeting minutes (1874-1879) generally give a dry recital of club proceedings, two anecdotes were recorded. The first reveals one of the hazards of staging a play during the nineteenth century.

On Feb. 8, 1877, "During the performances of the play (*Dora*), a screen caught fire from the footlights – but the fire was immediately extinguished through the presence of mind of the president so that the recurrence of a disaster similar in kind to the burning of the Brooklyn Theatre was happily prevented, though the accident did not appear to be noticed a few feet from the stage."

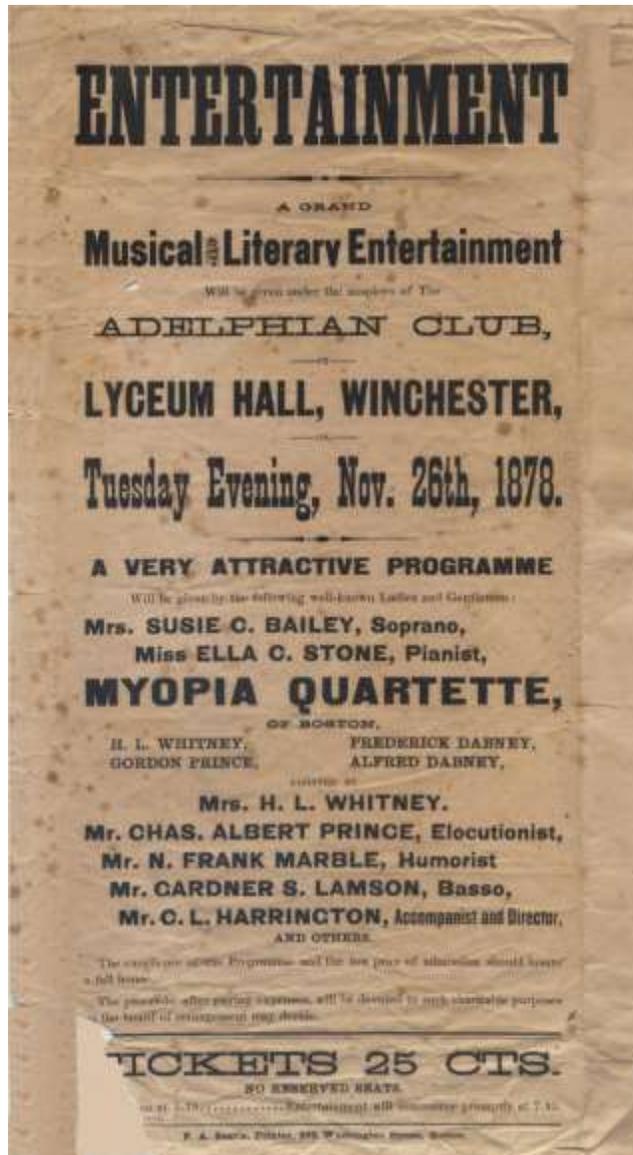
At the next meeting a vote carried to provide immediately some wire screens for the footlights.

The other anecdote, written in January 1878, reveals some club spirit. "At 10 o'clock and at intervals thereafter as the coaches drove up, the Club dispersed for home. Happy they who rode! The secretary only knows that for himself, he floated or sidled long, half in the element water, and half in the element air very much surcharged with water, and ominous elements impending over him. He clasped the records and archives of the Club to his breast, and, imaging himself carrying Caesar, feared not."

DIVISION

The first sign of division within the ranks appears in the fall 1877 minutes. The Club had been meeting at Adelphian Hall in Richardson's Block,⁴ but in 1877 David N. Skillings offered the use of his newly built Rangeley Hall. Although several members firmly wished to stay at Adelphian Hall, the majority eventually voted to use Rangeley for the coming year. However, at the end of the year, it was voted 30-21 to secure "a hall in the village centre." At the second meeting that fall (at Lyceum Hall) 19 resignations were accepted, and more soon followed. In October, it was voted to sell J. P. Skillings the club's curtain, footlights, and other theatrical trappings.





The Adelphian Club did not fold immediately but met through that year at Livingstone Hall. The Back Log Club met at Rangeley Hall, taking its name from the hall's "open fireplace, where a large wood fire burns cheerily winter evenings."⁵

Both clubs met every fortnight and produced similar entertainments. The Adelphian Club sponsored at least one public Grand Musical and Literary Entertainment, as attested by the announcement pictured below. Several surviving play programs from the Back Log Club from 1878 to 1883 attest to that club's keen interest in theatrical productions.

The Back Log Club was active for about 20 years, while the Adelphian Club, whose membership had dwindled to 13, dissolved after its third meeting in the fall of 1879.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 9, 1991. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² Adelphian Club Constitution.

³ Minutes, Oct. 21, 1875

⁴ This building later became the Hotel Winchester.

⁵ *Boston Herald*, March 30, 1881.