

# **Guide to The Brooklyn Theater Fire Relief Association Records, 1876-1879 1977.049**

**Finding aid prepared by Robert Sink**

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This finding aid was produced using the Archivists' Toolkit

July 31, 2009

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Third Edition.

Brooklyn Historical Society  
1978  
128 Pierrepont Street  
Brooklyn, NY, 11201  
718-222-4111  
[library@brooklynhistory.org](mailto:library@brooklynhistory.org)

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	Brooklyn Historical Society
<b>Creator</b>	Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association.
<b>Title</b>	Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association Records
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1876-1879
<b>Extent</b>	1.0 Linear feet in 2.5 Document Boxes
<b>Language</b>	English

**Language of Materials note** Materials in English.

**Abstract** The Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association Records document the efforts of a voluntary charity organization to provide relief to the families of the victims of the tragic fire in 1876 that killed more than 300 people in the Brooklyn Theatre. The collection is mainly comprised of the investigations conducted into the claims made by surviving relatives of those killed in the fire and the financial documents of the association.

### Preferred Citation

Identification of item, date (if known); Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association Records, ArMs 1977.049, Box and Folder number; Brooklyn Historical Society.

## Historical Note

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The Brooklyn Theatre at the corner of Washington and Johnson Streets was one of Brooklyn's first successful legitimate theaters. On the night of December 5, 1876, approximately 1,000 people were watching a popular melodrama, "The Two Orphans." Many were crowded into the modestly-priced upper gallery seats. At 11:15 PM, shortly after the opening of the last act, a fire broke out, apparently caused by scenery touching the gas lights. The actors urged the audience to remain in their seats, but as the flames grew more noticeable, many rushed for the doors. There were few exits from the galleries, and panic ensued as hundreds rushed for the two narrow stairways. Many were trampled or collapsed, further jamming the stairs. The theater was destroyed within fifteen to twenty minutes and neither police nor observers at the scene were aware of the large number of people trapped in the building. Firemen were unable to enter the theater until the next morning, when they discovered the large number of bodies. More than 300 lives were lost, and many of the bodies could not be identified. It was the worst common disaster in Brooklyn's history, and the city went into a period of mourning. On Saturday, December 9th, the City of Brooklyn held a public funeral for 100 of the victims who were buried in a mass grave atop Battle Hill in a plot donated by Green-Wood Cemetery. Three crowded memorial meetings were held simultaneously around the city on the following day, with hundreds of mourners unable to enter the meetings.

A relief committee took shape as soon as the extent of the tragedy became known, with Mayor Frederick A. Schroeder appointed to receive contributions. Schroeder was assisted by Daniel Chauncey, treasurer, and the Reverend Dr. Alfred P. Putnam as secretary. The Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association raised \$47,455.47 to aid the families of the victims, contributions coming from across the nation as the disaster became publicized through newspapers. A committee of prominent citizens dispensed assistance after volunteers visited the homes of families in need and certified their worthiness for assistance. Aid went to 800 individuals in 188 families. Families were removed from the rolls as they no longer needed assistance, and the committee also reduced levels of aid at its discretion. Bi-weekly stipends continued until March, 1879, at which time the funds became exhausted.

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## Scope and Contents note

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The Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association Records contain 849 items, all from within the period 1876-1879. They consist chiefly of correspondence directed to either Mayor Frederick A. Schroeder, chairman of the committee, or to the Reverend Putnam, secretary of the committee, and internal documents, including account books and investigative forms filled out by those who visited and vetted relief applicants.

The relief association records are a unique historical resource. The volunteer visitors to the homes of recipients filled out forms giving the name, age, address, occupation, and wages of the victim along with

information as to family size, rent, health, and other factors that could influence the request for assistance. These reports provide information about an under-investigated Brooklyn population, many of whom were of working class or lower middle class background.

There are two major categories of material in this collection: investigations and finances. Nearly two-thirds of the collection consists of items collected during the investigations of the sufferers. These include the forms filled out by the volunteer visitors as well as correspondence from the recipients or others pleading their cases. Approximately one-third of the collection details financial matters of the relief association. Of these one-half concern the contributions that were received by the association, and the rest involve the expenditure of the funds. Also included are 85 items from the undertakers who buried the victims of the fire. In addition, a few items relate to the internal operations of the relief association.

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## Arrangement note

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The Collection is divided into four series: Series 1. Administrative and Financial Documents; Series 2. Burial Records; Series 3. Case Notes; and Series 4. Correspondence. Within each series, the folders are arranged alphabetically and then chronologically.

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## Administrative Information

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### Publication Information

Brooklyn Historical Society 1978

### Conditions Governing Access note

Open to researchers without restriction.

### Conditions Governing Use note

Materials in this collection are in the public domain.

### Immediate Source of Acquisition note

The records came to the Long Island Historical Society at the request of the Reverend Alfred P. Putnam, minister of the Church of the Savior/First Unitarian Church on Pierrepont Street and secretary of the

Relief Association. The intention to donate them is indicated in the Executive Committee's Final Report, Mar. 25, 1879.

### **Processing Information note**

The bundled records were accessioned in 1977 by Brooklyn Rediscovery as ArMs1977.049 and processed by Robert Sink in September, 1978. Further processing by Marilyn Pettit in 2006 and Katherine Christensen in 2009.

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## **Related Materials**

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### **Related Archival Materials note**

Toedteberg, Augustus. The Brooklyn Theatre Fire, December 5th, 1876. Brooklyn Historical Society Libraries and Archives. ArMs 1991.046, facsimile call number Folio 129.B7 B768 1876p.

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## **Controlled Access Headings**

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### **Corporate Name(s)**

- Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association.

### **Genre(s)**

- administrative records
- Correspondence
- forms (documents)

### **Geographic Name(s)**

- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.)

- Green-Wood Cemetery (New York, N.Y.)

### **Personal Name(s)**

- Putnam, A. P. (Alfred Porter), 1827-1906
- Schroeder, Frederick A.

### **Subject(s)**

- Brooklyn Theatre (New York, N.Y.) -- Fire, 1876
- Charity organization
- Demographic surveys
- Memorial service

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## **Physical Characteristics Note**

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The leather on the spine of all of the ledgers is flaking and the front board on the checkbook dated Oct. 17-Dec. 1, 1877 is almost detached.

## Series 1. Administrative and Financial Documents

## Collection Inventory

### Series 1. Administrative and Financial Documents 1876-1879

#### Scope and Contents note

The first series contains a variety of information covering the administration and finances of the Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association. There are two ledgers, the first of which lists payments to recipients with a name index, and the second of which includes two alphabetical lists of contributors, the first having contributed to the Mayor's Office, and the second having contributed to the Office of the Treasurer, Daniel Chauncey. There are four checkbooks, each of which present information on the check-stubs regarding the payments and running balances on the back of the stubs. The first Financial Committee folder contains receipts, statements, and lists of payments. The second contains two records of allowances to the dependents of the deceased, a list of contributions, and two reports from the Financial Committee to the association. There are additionally one handwritten set of minutes from a meeting in April of 1877 and two printed copies of the Executive Committee's final report.

	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Account Book 1876-1878	1	1
Checkbooks January 10-March 21, 1877 and March 21-October 17, 1877	1	2
Checkbooks October 17-December 1, 1877 and June 16, 1878-March 19, 1879	1	3
Contribution Book December 1876-December 1878	1	4
Executive Committee Final Report March 25, 1879	1	5
	<b>Box</b>	<b>Drawer</b>
Finance Committee Receipts and Statements 1876-1877	1	6

**Series 2. Burial Records**

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	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Finance Committee Records 1876-1877	1	7
	<b>Box</b>	<b>Drawer</b>
Minutes April 18, 1877	1	8

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**Series 2. Burial Records 1876-1877****Scope and Contents note**

This series comprises information about the burials of those killed in the fire. The first folder lists those to be buried at the expense of the city, the second is a printed record of the three memorial services held concurrently at different locations on Dec. 10, 1876, and the third folder holds the city's receipts from undertakers.

	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Memorial Services December 10, 1876	2	2
List of Persons to be Buried at the Expense of the City of Brooklyn December 1876	2	1
Undertakers Receipts 1876-1877	2	3

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**Series 3. Case Notes 1876-1877****Scope and Contents note**

The Case Notes section is in three formats. The main body of the series are alphabetically filed forms about the families completed by volunteers and correspondence from applicants. This correspondence

**Series 4. Correspondence**

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is differentiated from that in Series 4 as it is composed of applications for assistance. There are also two ledgers, one of which includes information on applicants and a name index, and the other of which includes notes on visits to recipients and amounts paid to them. The final folder is predominately alphabetical lists of notes compiled for Mayor Schroeder, but some correspondence is also included.

	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Case Notes (A-B) December 1876-June 1877, undated	2	1
Case Notes (C-D) December 1876-April 1877, undated	2	2
Case Notes (E-G) December 1876-June 1877, undated	2	3
Case Notes (H-K) December 1876-May 1877, undated	2	4
Case Notes (L) December 1876-June 1877, undated	2	5
Case Notes (M) December 1876-May 1877, undated	2	6
Case Notes (N-Q) December 1876-February 1877, undated	2	7
Case Notes (R-S) December 1876-February 1877, undated	2	8
Case Notes (T-Z) December 1876-February 1877, undated	2	9
Case Notes (Ledger) 1876	2	10
Case Notes (Ledger) 1876-1877	2	11
Schroeder, Mayor Frederick A., Case Notes and Contributions December 1876	2	12

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**Series 4. Correspondence 1876-1878**

**Series 4. Correspondence**

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**Scope and Contents note**

Although there is some correspondence mixed in with the case notes, the majority of the correspondence is in this series. It is primarily divided between the two key recipients: the Reverend Dr. A. P. Putnam, the Secretary of the Association, and Mayor Frederick A. Schroeder, chairman of the association. The Miscellaneous Correspondence folder contains letters written to others. This series includes letters following up on applications for assistance, notes enclosed with donations to the association, and correspondence from members of the association regarding meetings and individuals receiving aid.

	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Miscellaneous Correspondence November 1876-January 1878	3	1
Putnam, Rev. A. P., Correspondence 1877-1878	3	2
Schroeder, Mayor Frederick A., Correspondence December 6- December 15, 1876	3	3
Schroeder, Mayor Frederick A., Correspondence December 16-December 31, 1876	3	4
Schroeder, Mayor Frederick A., Correspondence January-June, 1877	3	5
Schroeder, Mayor Frederick A., Correspondence July-December, 1877	3	6

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