

Whatever Happened to Henry Whale?

By Jonathan L. Hoppe, guest contributor & former Historical Commissioner

Seventy-five-year-old Henry Whale didn't stir in his little frame house off the Wilmington Plank Road the morning of January 9, 1879. This wasn't too unusual; he had been living a hermit's life for many years and always had kept odd hours. But when there were no signs of life whatsoever within by late afternoon, his neighbors grew concerned. Two teenage boys, Frank Coburn and Wilfred Cheever, took it upon themselves to check on the recluse. Finding his windows locked and doors barred, they took a ladder and entered the home through a second-story window. There they found him collapsed, dead on the threshold of his bedroom; he suffered a heart attack in the night.

At a public auction of his estate after his death, Ebenezer Faucett purchased a violin that belonged to the old man for \$1.06. Faucett would spend a great deal more than that putting the fiddle back into good repair, for it was said to be the favorite instrument of its departed owner—a former child star, musical prodigy, and at one time the most famous teacher and master of dance in the United States.

How could a man of such renown meet such a lonely and ignominious end in Westtown Township?

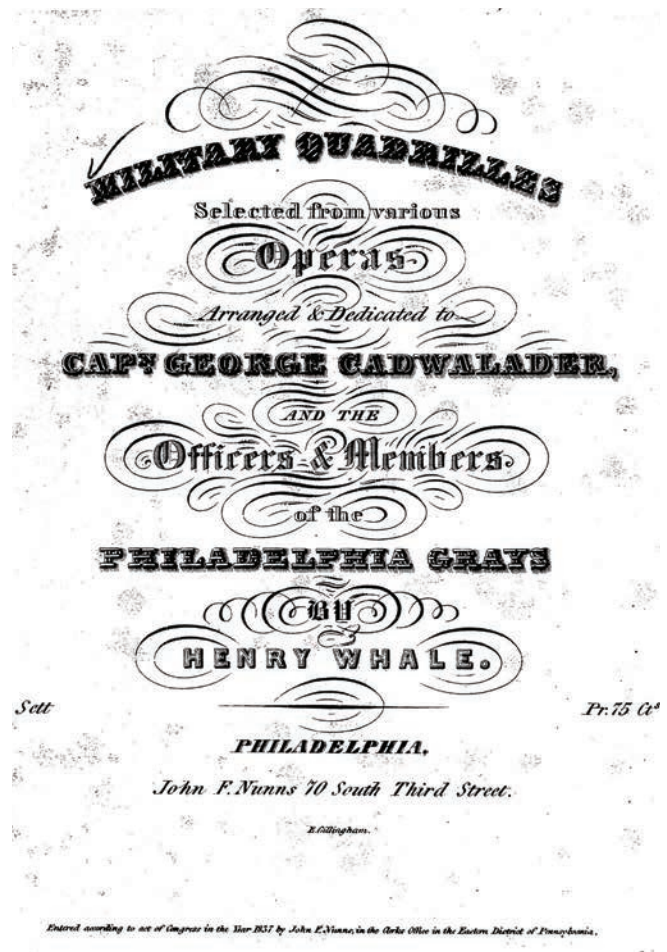
Henry Whale was born on July 14, 1803 near Bath, England, son of dancing master Thomas Whale. When Henry was a young child, his father moved his family to Philadelphia, then the second-largest city in the United States, in search of better opportunities. There, Thomas opened up his own dancing school. Shortly after their arrival, Henry was attached to the New Theater on Chestnut Street—one of the largest and most elegant theaters in the country—as a dancer. He was given the stage name "The Infant Vestris," after the famed French ballet dancer Gaétan Vestris who had died the previous year. Henry became an overnight sensation after his debut. A popular theatrical tabloid, *The Tangram*, said of the young prodigy,

"Considering that Englishmen are not reputed for the elegance and grace of their movements, he promises fair to be the head of his profession, for, laying aside the gentility of his address and the politeness of his phraseology, he powders his hair, which is at least respectably, if not elegantly, done."

In a short time, the child prodigy became a smash hit in the City of Brotherly Love. "Master Whale" would become such a sensation that publishers would print music from the shows in which he had danced, such as "The Shawl Dance, as danced at the New Theater by Master Whale, the infant Vestris."

By 1810, he and his dancing brother had made his father one of the highest-paid performers in the city; by January 1812, Henry had his own starring ballet solo in a production of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* performed at the Olympic Theater. He would continue to perform on the theater circuit throughout his teenage years in New York City.

In September 1825, notice was given in the Philadelphia papers that "Henry Whale, known some twenty years ago as the Infant Vestris, - having danced on the Philadelphia stage with much e'clat, though very young then, - now proposes to open a dancing academy." That he did, and it would continue for over two decades. So great was he in the arts that he was said to have inspired his pupils with a sense of pride that they had been accepted as his students.



Henry Whale Sheet Music

Such was his popularity and talent he grew quite rich. Like many wealthy Philadelphians, fearing the annual yellow fever epidemics the warmer months brought to the City, he built his own summer house in West Chester on Miner Street (today known as Fontgarth Hall). During the summer season, he gave dances and recitals in the borough and taught classes to local residents.

But then, something broke in him. Some blamed a lost love; perhaps years in the spotlight had finally taken their toll. No one could say for certain. He sold his home and worldly possessions and disappeared from the public eye into a small frame house in Westtown. The formerly trim and polished man who many had once known became unkempt and slovenly - recognizable, it was said, only by his polite and impeccable manners. He lived the last 25 years of his life in that simple way.

Today, the Westminster Presbyterian Church sits where his little house once stood. All that is left to mark Henry Whale is a simple stone monument in Oaklands Cemetery that belies the heights of fame he once attained.
