

# **Lewis Hallam, Sr. and Jr. Biography**

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# Biography

Lewis Hallam, Sr. (ca. 1705-1755), and Lewis Hallam, Jr. (1740-1808), actors and theatrical managers, were members of America's first important theatrical family.

The elder Lewis Hallam was a moderately successful London actor when he decided to lead an acting company to the New World. Their production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Williamsburg, Va., in 1752 marks the beginning of truly professional theater in America. But strong opposition to stage plays existed, especially among the Puritans and Quakers, who considered drama irreligious. Hallam had difficulty getting licenses in New York and Philadelphia; he did not even try in Boston. He argued that his company could provide the drama of "the greatest geniuses of England" and could support "its dignity with proper decorum and regularity."

During 1753-1754 Hallam justified his assertion, for his actors were well trained, and he paid all his debts. In addition, his talented company provided a repertoire of almost all the important plays offered in London, including tragedies of Shakespeare and Joseph Addison and comedies of William Congreve and Richard Steele. Because of the elder Hallam's ability and integrity, Americans gained a trust in theater they had never known before. However, after the 1754 season the elder Hallam died and the group disbanded.

Though Lewis Hallam, Jr., was not so talented a manager as his father, he was a better actor. During his 50 years on the stage he was successful in most of the important roles of his time. He helped to reorganize the American Company in 1758, when at 18 he became its leading man. Up to the time of the American Revolution he was sovereign of the American stage as star and manager. When the theater was "outlawed" shortly before the Revolution, Hallam moved to the West Indies. In 1784 he revived the old American Company. He sought, unsuccessfully, to prosper as a manager. Finally, in 1796, he resigned managership, though he continued as an actor until shortly before his death. In his time he had acted in the first American play (Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia*, 1767) and the first successful American comedy (Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, 1787), and his company had fostered a drama of high quality.