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Award-Winning Book Reveals the Untold Story of Richmond Theater Fire

*Jules and Francis Landry Award winner Meredith Henne Baker Provides an
In-depth Study of a Forgotten American Disaster*

“The Richmond Theater Fire is totally engrossing, a real page turner.”

—Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, author of "Celebrate Richmond Theater"

“A solid contribution to early American history.”

—Nancy Isenberg, author of "Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr"

Baton Rouge, LA— On the day after Christmas in 1811, the state of Virginia lost its governor and almost one hundred citizens in a devastating nighttime fire that consumed a Richmond playhouse. During the second act of a melodramatic tale of bandits, ghosts, and murder, a small fire kindled behind the backdrop. Within minutes, it raced to the ceiling timbers and enveloped the audience in flames. The tragic Richmond Theater fire would inspire a national commemoration and become its generation’s defining disaster.

A vibrant and bustling city, Richmond was synonymous with horse races, gambling, and frivolity. The gruesome fire amplified the capital’s reputation for vice and led to an upsurge in antitheater criticism that spread throughout the country and across the Atlantic. Clerics in both America and abroad urged national repentance and denounced the stage, a sentiment that nearly destroyed theatrical entertainment in Richmond for decades. Local churches, by contrast, experienced a rise in attendance and became increasingly evangelical.

In "The Richmond Theater Fire", the first book about the event and its aftermath, Meredith Henne Baker explores a forgotten catastrophe and its wide societal impact. The story of transformation comes alive through survivor accounts of slaves, actresses, ministers, and statesmen. Investigating private letters, diaries, and sermons, among other rare or unpublished documents, Baker views the event and its outcomes through the fascinating lenses of early nineteenth-century theater, architecture, and faith, and reveals a rich and vital untold story from America’s past.

Meredith Henne Baker holds a graduate degree in American History and a museum studies certificate from the College of William and Mary. A former boarding school history instructor and urban public school administrator, she currently writes from Richmond, VA.

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