

— HISTORY —

Windham was hometown to one of the stage's greatest

Windham was the hometown of one of America's greatest stage and screen actors. Charles Smith Abbe, pronounced "Abbey," was born in South Windham in 1859, into one of Windham's oldest families. The name "Abbe" is memorialized locally by Abbe Road, and by the old "Abbey Manor" nursing home, now known as Douglas Manor. The nursing home was built on the site of an Abbe family homestead, known as the "manor house."

Charles S. Abbe was sent to a boarding school in Providence, where his artistic abilities came to the fore. At age 19 he was accepted by the New York Academy of Design, but instead of focusing upon studies he spent hours visiting Broadway theatres, particularly the Park Theatre to see his favorite comedy duo, Robson and Crane.

An Irishman in the Robson play made a great impression on Abbe, and soon the art student was giving imitations of this player's brogue to his friends. He decided that his future lay in the theater.

He returned to Windham and took acting lessons while working in the office of the Smith and Winchester Co., his uncle's paper plant at South Windham.

In 1881 a Boston theater company hired Abbe as a supporting actor, and he served an apprenticeship playing a series of Shakespearean characters. He then embarked upon tours that took him across the United States, and one particular tour brought him back to his hometown, to Willimantic's Loomer Opera House in 1887, where he played a leading role in the play, "Joan of Arc." His homecoming filled the theater.

Abbe's big break came in 1890 when he was hired by the famous theater impresario Charles Frohman, destined to be killed on the Lusitania when it was sunk by a German submarine in 1915. By



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then Frohman controlled six theatres in New York, more than 200 throughout the rest of the United States, and five in London. He personally managed the careers of 28 leading stars and paid out more than \$35 million a year in salaries to the 10,000 people on his payroll.

Abbe's connections with Frohman launched his acting career, and this son of Windham starred in the most popular plays produced in the United States during 1890s. Abbe's dark, good looks won him many parts as a romantic and leading man. In 1892 he came back to Windham and took part in the town's 200th anniversary celebrations. At the end of the ceremonies he took part in an imaginary walk and conversation across the town green with John Cates, the town's first settler, comparing the changes Cates had observed since he first arrived in the "howling wilderness" in the 1680s.

Charles Abbe did not entirely abandon art, and he often entered the dressing rooms of his fellow

actors to capture their likeness in caricature and watercolors. His artwork often appeared in popular magazines such as "Life and Puck," and in 1890 his paintings were published in a volume entitled "Our Great Actors; Portraits of Celebrated Actors in Their Most Distinguished Roles."

By the early 1900s Abbe was a nationwide celebrity, and particularly famous in his proud hometown. In 1905 he was a member of the famed Annie Russell Co. of actors, and when they opened in a play at Norwich's Broadway Theatre, over 50 members of Willimantic's leading families went to welcome him home.

Charles Abbe broke into the movies late in life. Many of his productions were filmed in New York City, so in 1905 he settled at Darien. Abbe cornered the market in playing, preppy, irascible old men, but many of those early one reelers have been lost. However, between 1915 and 1924, he appeared in nine silent movies.

Abbe also became one of Mack Sennett's favorite character actors,

and during shootings Abbe photographed many of Sennett's leading actors. Abbe's most acclaimed film role was as the lead in "Cappy Ricks" (1921), and his last film appearance was in "West of the Water Tower" (1924). The actor was appearing in a Broadway play when he contracted blood poisoning from an ulcerated tooth. He died at his Darien home on June 14, 1932.



Charles Abbe, 1895.

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