



## The Circus

Topic Guide for Chronicling America (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>)

### Introduction

Circuses have been entertaining people all over the world since they originated in Ancient Rome thousands of years ago. The modern circus, comprised of a traveling group of performers that might include clowns, trained animals, trapeze artists, musicians and tightrope walkers, was established in 18th century England and made its first appearance in the United States in 1793 when Englishman John Bill Rickets established one in Philadelphia. In the mid-1800s, the American circus was revolutionized by P.T. Barnum with the incorporation of the “freak” or “sideshow,” the introduction of a multi-ringed circus and the use of circus-owned trains for travel. When the circus came to town, citizens would flock to the show to see the elaborate and extraordinary stunts that offered an escape from the monotony of their daily lives. Though the heyday of the circus ended shortly after World War I, today, the circus still attracts interest—and some controversy—in both its traditional and contemporary forms.

### Important Dates

- 1825: The portable canvas tent (or “pavilion”) is first utilized to house performances, allowing circuses to become more mobile.
- 1842: P.T. Barnum purchases Scudder’s American Museum in New York, beginning his long and successful career in the circus business. The museum featured curiosities, live animals, new inventions and a theater.
- 1842: Charles Stratton joins P.T. Barnum’s troupe as General Tom Thumb.
- 1844: Dan Rice, one of America’s first great clowns, gives his first circus performance.
- 1852: Spalding & Rogers Floating Palace, a showboat touring the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, opens in Pittsburgh. The ship was built at a cost of \$42,000 in Cincinnati.
- 1871: P.T. Barnum’s Great Traveling World’s Fair of 1871, the largest overland circus to date, is a great success. To earn more money, Barnum implements the circus train and travels to larger cities.
- 1872: J.M. Gill Car Company in Columbus, Ohio makes the first railroad cars owned by a circus.

### Suggested Search Strategies

- Try the following terms in combination (as an “all” word search), proximity or as phrases: circus, menagerie, animal, Jumbo, freak show, train, Fejee Mermaid, Tom Thumb, Barnum, Ringling, clown, Floating Palace.
- Limit your search to specific papers or states to find news about circuses visiting different locations.
- Limit your search by date to find information about specific shows/performances.

### Sample Articles from Chronicling America

- [“P.T. Barnum on the Fifth”](#) *Fremont Weekly Journal* (Fremont, OH), June 21, 1872, Image 3, col. 4.
- [“This Speaks of the Big Show”](#) *Stark County Democrat* (Canton, OH), June 16, 1881, Image 1.
- [“Barnum’s First Freaks”](#) *New-York Tribune* (New York, NY), May 22, 1904, Image 37.
- [“Random Recollections”](#) *Perrysburg Journal* (Perrysburg, OH), November 30, 1916, Image 1, col. 4.
- [“Impatiently Await Great New Circus”](#) *Democratic Banner* (Mt. Vernon, OH), July 22, 1919, Image 5, col. 3.