

F Your Racist History***

E105: P. T. Barnum's "Greatest Exploitation on Earth"

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Show Notes

Phineas Taylor (P. T.) Barnum is remembered by many as America's "Greatest Showman." An entertainer with enduring ingenuity who could literally make something out of nothing. A so-called friend to the friendless, someone who employed people with physical disabilities in his circus during a time in history when they might not otherwise have been given any other opportunity. A businessman who was endeared and admired for his use of predatory Capitalism; there wasn't a lie he wouldn't tell, a person he wouldn't exploit, or a tale he wouldn't spin to make a buck, and people loved him for all of it. He proved that people didn't mind getting conned as long as they got their money's worth, and that con is still playing out in our memory of Barnum today. In this episode of *F*** Your Racist History*, we break down the real (and soiled) legacy of P. T. Barnum: his profiteering and exploitation of people with disabilities and enslaved people.

EPISODE SCRIPT

This is episode 5 of *F*** Your Racist History: P. T. Barnum's "Greatest Exploitation on Earth"*.

Introduction

Phineas Taylor (P. T.) Barnum: ringmaster, businessman, politician. The Barnum Museum describes him as "the most remarkable entrepreneur and entertainer in 19th-century America."

Today, he's remembered by many as America's "Greatest Showman," a marvelous entertainer who could make something out of literally nothing. A so-called friend to the friendless, someone who employed people with physical and developmental disabilities in his circus during a time in history when they might not otherwise have been given any other opportunity. A businessman who was endeared and admired for his use of predatory Capitalism. There wasn't a lie he wouldn't tell or a tale he wouldn't spin to make a buck. P. T. Barnum proved that people didn't mind getting conned...as long as they got their money's worth.

A shrewd business operator, Barnum became one of America's first millionaires. His legacy and name can still be seen everywhere, even in the modern era: actor Hugh Jackman starred as Barnum in the 2017 Academy Award-nominated musical biopic, "The Greatest Showman." It was a timely release at the end of an era; Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" ran for 146 years until its last circus performance in 2017. But, children can still munch on Barnum's Animal Crackers.

P. T. Barnum became famous during a time in American history when people craved spectacle, they wanted to feel something they had never experienced before. He rose to prominence in the 1840s, during the Antebellum era before the American Civil War, when "Manifest Destiny," the belief that Western expansion of the United States was both justified and inevitable, and a mad rush for gold had taken hold of the country. Average homegrown Americans were growing restless. They wanted excess: more land, more money, more freedom, more control, more fun. It was a time ripe for adventure when Americans began shedding the status quo like a snakeskin. People spread west with breathtaking rapidity while Eastern cities bloomed into maturity. America's germination came with growing pains; internal tensions would boil over by 1861, but the pre-Civil War years were the heyday of the opportunist. With new money to burn,

upwardly mobile Americans were willing to pay for a good time, leaving them vulnerable to silver-tongued grifters. It was here, among the traveling snake-oil salesmen, doomsday preachers, and charlatans, where P. T. Barnum found his niche.

Early Life

Phineas Taylor Barnum came screaming into the world on July 5th, 1810, and it's safe to say the world has not been the same since.

He was the sixth of 10 children born to his father, Philo Barnum, and the first child of his mother, Irena Taylor, his father's second wife.

His maternal grandfather, Phineas Taylor, was a notorious practical joker, and P. T. was named after him. This granddad deeded his namesake a 5-acre piece of property called "Ivy Island" in Connecticut. By the time young P. T. was four years old, Old Phineas besieged his grandson daily with big talk of his generous landholdings; until P. T. was twelve, the whole neighborhood liked to remind him not to get an inflated head when he finally came into his vast fortune. When the time came for young P. T. to survey his future "valuable land," he found 5 acres of virtual swampland, which was almost entirely worthless. His grandfather, parents, siblings, and neighbors all had a great laugh at his expense.¹

In his writings, P. T. Barnum doesn't reflect on this with any particular malice, but it's not difficult to see how this experience could predispose a child to a life of deception and mistrust. Some might even describe Barnum as a pathological liar. In his adulthood, he had no qualms about telling outrageous falsehoods to make money.

Barnum, the future showman, grew up in the small township of Bethel, Connecticut, where the people were known to be pious and hardworking. His father was a man of many trades: farmer, grocer, tailor, and tavern keeper. P. T. did his fair share of farm work as a boy, but hated it:

"...I rode a horse for plowing, turned and raked hay, and in due time handled 'the shovel and the hoe,' as well as the plow; but I never really liked to work."²

¹ P T Barnum, *The Life of P.T.B., Written by Himself* (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Co, 1855).

² P T Barnum, *The Life of P.T.B., Written by Himself* (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Co, 1855). Page 42.

He went to school by age six—a rarity for working-class boys back then, indicating that despite the family's seemingly lean means, P. T. was still relatively privileged growing up. Privileged enough to say he hated physical labor, a cardinal sin in early 19th century America. A decent student, P. T. described himself as "a pretty apt scholar" at the top of his class.

As an early teenager, P. T. started work as a clerk in a drygoods store owned by his father. This position ignited his desire to make money, and when his father died in 1825, money making suddenly became necessary for the 15-year-old.

This was the genesis of P. T. Barnum's rags-to-riches story; his father's estate was declared "insolvent" and virtually worthless. The burden of helping support the family fell heavily upon him, now the oldest of his mother's children. After his father's stake in the family store was liquidated, Barnum went to work as a clerk in a local general store for \$6 a month. There, he proved himself an apt businessman, bartering and trading goods to his new employer's advantage and running a side scam—lotteries with prizes valued at half the cost of the tickets, generating hefty profits.

By the time he was 19, P. T. had jumped around from business to business, taking jobs as a clerk for various store owners, and boarding with their families. He hopped through numerous other sales jobs, cutting his teeth and making a name for himself in New York.

In May 1828, Barnum returned to his hometown of Bethel, Connecticut, and opened a small grocery store, like the one his father had before he died. Within a year, he married his first wife, Charity Hallett, with whom he had four children. For the next five years, Barnum expanded his business and real estate holdings in the area, many of which failed miserably.

Dabbling in local politics in his early twenties, Barnum aligned himself with the Democratic party (the old Democrats; the ones that supported things like the Ku Klux Klan and slavery) and wrote extensively about his views for the local weekly paper. After they refused to publish his pieces, Barnum decided to cut out the "middleman" and created a platform to reach his fellow townsmen directly.

In October 1831, he launched a newspaper called *The Herald of Freedom*, which he used to criticize members of his community he was feuding with. When he called out local church elders

for "usury," (or illegally lending money at inflated rates) he got slapped with a libel suit that landed him a hefty fine and sixty days in jail. He continued to run illegal lotteries until finally moving back to New York state in late 1834—when he left Connecticut with loads of debt and few assets to his name.

Now, in New York City, P. T. needed to create opportunity; a new hustle. He scoured the city for fast money-making schemes, but only encountered other scams and scoundrels. Barnum was desperate. He managed to open a boarding house in May of 1835 and another grocery store soon after, until a fateful day that summer changed his life and career trajectory forever.

Joice Heth

July 1835: While Barnum was working in his New York grocery store, a Connecticut man sauntered in and told Barnum he had just sold his interest in "an extraordinary negro woman, named Joice Heth." According to the fellow, Heth was the 161-year-old nursemaid of President George Washington. The Connecticut man's former partner, a Kentuckian named R. W. Lindsay was exhibiting Heth in Philadelphia. He handed Barnum a copy of an advertisement in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that read:

"*CURIOSITY*: The Citizens of Philadelphia and its vicinity have an opportunity of witnessing at the Masonic Hall, one of the greatest natural curiosities ever witnessed, viz. Joice Heth, a negress aged 161 years...She was born near the old Potomac River in Virginia and has for ninety or one-hundred years lived in Paris, Kentucky, with the [John S.] Bowling family.

All who have seen this extraordinary woman are satisfied with the truth of the account of her age. The evidence of the Bowling family, which is respectable, is strong, but the original bill of sale of Augustine Washington, in his own handwriting, and other evidence which the proprietor has in his possession will satisfy even the most incredulous."³

This was it: Barnum's spectacle. His big break! If he could angle his way into buying a stake in the old enslaved woman and display her for his own gain, he could stand to make a fortune. Barnum hastened to Philadelphia to meet her and her owner right away.

³ P T Barnum, *The Life of P.T.B., Written by Himself* (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Co, 1855). Page 156.

Barnum was delighted with Heth's appearance when they met. She was old, toothless, completely blind, and partially paralyzed. He would have no problem selling the con that she was 161 years old.

On display, Heth chatted up anyone who bothered to listen, regaling crowds with tales of "dear little George," from being present at the birth of America's future first president, to putting the first diapers on his saintly bottom. Her current owner, R. W. Lindsay, showed Barnum the original bill of sale for Heth from 1727, allegedly signed by George Washington's father, Augustine, for the sum of "thirty-three pounds."⁴

Barnum proceeded to buy the exclusive rights to exhibit the old Black woman from Lindsay for one-thousand dollars, five hundred of which he borrowed from a friend. (*Hmm, I wonder if he ever paid it back?*) Within a few weeks, Barnum put Joice Heth on display in a tavern in New York City and papered the town with advertisements for his new human exhibition. He made an average of \$1,500 a week⁵ and soon had Heth traveling all over New York state, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Washington, D.C. When audiences dwindled in one town or city, Barnum simply pulled up stakes and moved to another, making sure to use local press to announce their arrival in the new place loudly. Barnum quickly mastered the art of manipulating the media and honed his skills as a carnival barker as he worked Joice Heth 12 hours a day.

Once, upon their arrival in Boston, due to low ticket sales, Barnum published an "anonymous" letter in a newspaper suggesting Joice Heth wasn't even a person at all and that P. T. Barnum was a fraud. It read, in part:

"Joice Heth is not a human being. What purports to be a remarkable old woman is simply a curiously constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, India-rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together and made to move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator."⁶

The letter whipped up even more public curiosity around the exhibit and spectators swarmed.

⁴ P T Barnum, *The Life of P.T.B., Written by Himself* (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Co, 1855).

⁵ P T Barnum, *The Life of P.T.B., Written by Himself* (London: Sampson Low, Son, & Co, 1855). Page 161.

⁶ Bernth Lindfors, "P. T. Barnum and Africa," *Studies in Popular Culture* 7 (1984): 18–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23412959?seq=1>.

Not everyone was delighted with Barnum's dehumanizing spectacle, however. The Boston *Courier* newspaper said this about Barnum's exhibition of the old Black woman:

“Those who imagine they can contemplate with delight a breathing skeleton, subjected to the same sort of discipline that is sometimes exercised in a menagerie to induce the inferior animals to play unnatural pranks for the amusement of barren spectators, will find food to their taste by visiting Joice Heth. But Humanity sickens at the exhibition.”⁷

When Heth died in February of 1836, Barnum organized a gruesome finale. He advertised her autopsy in the newspaper and rented out space in a New York saloon that could hold over 1,000 spectators. At 50 cents a ticket, a crowd of over 1,500 people paid P. T. Barnum to watch Dr. David L. Rogers hack Joice Heth's corpse to pieces to see if her anatomy squared with the legend that she was 161 years old. She, of course, was not, and Barnum expressed shock when the doctor revealed to the crowd of awed spectators that Heth was a "fraud" and no more than 80 years old. He made no mention of Barnum's complicity in the scam, though. *Hmm*.

Joice Heth helped launch P. T. Barnum's career as a slick and successful showman, but interestingly, if you go to the Barnum Museum's website today, it fails to mention her at all.

There is also no mention of Heth in the 2017 film about P. T. Barnum's life that features Hugh Jackman. Why not? This exploitation of a living (and dead) human being was the launchpad for Barnum's entire career. Doesn't Joice Heth deserve at least an acknowledgment? Yet another example of the struggle to reconcile America's racist past with an almost pathological need to see ourselves and our predecessors as triumphant heroes of humanity.

Barnum's American Museum

Most quick biographies of P. T. Barnum marked the beginning of his show business career in 1841 when he purchased Scudder's American Museum.⁸ He amplified the existing exhibits of wax figures and “exotic animals” to include hundreds of thousands of so-called “oddities,” and reopened it as Barnum's American Museum. At the time, American “high society” was still skeptical of mass entertainment, seeing it as low brow. Still, Barnum confronted this hesitancy

⁷ Benjamin Reiss, “P. T. Barnum, Joice Heth and Antebellum Spectacles of Race,” *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1999): 78–107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041634>.

⁸ “The Barnum Museum,” The Barnum Museum, 2019, <https://barnum-museum.org/about/the-man-the-myth-the-legend/>.

head-on by packing his museum full of strange attractions to mesmerize his crowds. By filling it with so many strange exhibits, Barnum reasoned that everyone who entered would find at least one thing to give them their money's worth.

He became a master promoter, decorating the outside of his museum to draw in and entice visitors. The facade of the building sported huge floodlights and colorful hand-painted banners advertising the absurdities inside. Barnum even hosted free rooftop concerts to get people on the premises, and then hired terrible musicians to drive them inside to purchase museum tickets to escape the racket.⁹

Barnum stocked his palace of the grotesque with a mixture of fact and fantasy. Exotic animals in cages were mixed with exhibits like the “Feejee Mermaid,” a taxidermied creature constructed from the torso of a monkey and the tail of a fish. In his American Museum, Barnum got his first taste of real success with his “Freak Shows;” after that, there ceased to be a limit to the level of exploitation and debasement Barnum inflicted on women and people with developmental challenges to make money.

He displayed living “curiosities” like the “Bearded Lady,” the “Human Skeleton,” the “Nova Scotia Giantess,” the “Siamese Conjoined Twins,” and countless other human beings with various body-deforming medical conditions.

In 1842, Barnum claimed to have “discovered” Tom Thumb. He marketed the diminutive boy as an eleven-year-old English “dwarf”. In actuality, the character Tom Thumb was Charles Stratton, a distant cousin of Barnum's with congenital dwarfism who was only five years old when he started being exhibited by Barnum. Tom Thumb was an absolute hit with the public, and Barnum even took him on tour in Europe, where he became a favorite of England's Queen Victoria. In 1863, Barnum publicized Tom Thumb's marriage to another little person named Lavinia Warren that became a public sensation.

By some accounts, Charles Stratton's (aka Tom Thumb's) family feared for his future, but Barnum argued that he had essentially become Stratton's savior by taking charge of the boy

⁹ Gregg Mangan, “P. T. Barnum: An Entertaining Life,” Connecticut History | a CTHumanities Project, July 5, 2019, <https://connecticuthistory.org/p-t-barnum-an-entertaining-life/>.

and providing him with a means to make a living. This may or may not have been true, but Barnum's personal gains while exploiting the young man are undeniable.

Before Barnum purchased the American Museum, it had grossed a total of \$34,000. During just the first three years in operation as Barnum's American Museum, it took in over \$100,000.¹⁰

Human Zoos

P. T. Barnum was inspired by the human zoos he came across while traveling the United States and Europe. He saw how much money could be made by exploiting vulnerable people who looked different from his typical clientele, i.e., non-disabled white people with spending cash. Often, proprietors promoted human zoos as "educational" places where "civilized" whites could come to gawk at people of color, "savages," usually from African countries.

At most of these human exhibits, patrons could pay an additional fee to touch the people on display, who were usually scantily dressed (if they were allowed to wear clothes at all). As these gross spectacles grew in popularity, World's Fairs and other large-scale events incorporated similar "exhibitions"; at the height of their popularity, an estimated 1.4 billion people visited an attraction or so-called "family friendly" event that featured humans on shameful display.¹¹

Seeing an opportunity to make money, Barnum searched for others to exploit in the same way.

Living Curiosities

Barnum referred to the people he found for his acts as "living curiosities." But, he also referred to "rhinoceroses, giraffes, grizzly bears, orang-outangs, great serpents, and whatever else...money would buy"¹² in the same category.

¹⁰ Gregg Mangan, "P. T. Barnum: An Entertaining Life," Connecticut History | a CTHumanities Project, July 5, 2019, <https://connecticuthistory.org/p-t-barnum-an-entertaining-life/>.

¹¹ Davis, Judy Foster. "Selling Whiteness? – a Critical Review of the Literature on Marketing and Racism." *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 34, no. 1-2, 6 Nov. 2017, pp. 134–177, www.researchgate.net/profile/Judy-Davis/publication/320905409_Selling_whiteness_-_A_critical_review_of_the_literature_on_marketing_and_racism/links/5f7b5f0692851c14bcb0889f/Selling-whiteness-A-critical-review-of-the-literature-on-marketing-and-racism.pdf, 10.1080/0267257x.2017.1395902.

¹² Barnum, P. T. *Life of P. T. Barnum: Written by Himself.*, Buffalo The Courier Company, 1886, www.google.com/books/edition/Life_of_P_T_Barnum/lHs9AAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=pt+barnum&pg=PA17&printsec=frontcover.

It's interesting to note that the human "oddities" Barnum proudly claimed to exploit in his autobiography were only mentioned by their stage names, not their real names, a further indication of his dehumanization of them.

In one of his fabulous lies, Barnum claimed to have discovered the "Siamese Conjoined Twins," Chang and Eng Bunker in 1860. However, the brothers already had an extensive background, including about 30 years in the sideshow business, before they ever met Barnum. They were born in Siam (modern-day Thailand), conjoined at the sternum. They were originally "discovered" by a Scottish merchant and brought to the United States when they were about 17 years old in 1829. There were rumors that their mother had sold them into slavery, but the merchant and the brothers denied the story.

Despite the discrimination they faced based on their race and appearance, the Bunkers made a small fortune allowing others to put them on display. They bought land and several slaves themselves (eventually, they owned 18 enslaved people on their estate in North Carolina, including enslaved children). In 1840, they constructed an expensive home and announced their intentions to marry wives, which they did several years later. Chang and Eng Bunker followed all the rules of polite, upper-class society and felt very much American. Though they weren't considered "white enough" for the ruling classes at the time, they had bought themselves many of the privileges of being white in America. They reportedly treated others, especially the people they enslaved, with ferocious cruelty.¹³

Another of Barnum's "living curiosities" were the "Aztec Wonders." Born in El Salvador, siblings Maximo Valdez Nunez and Bartola Velasquez were taken from their home when they were children. A trader had promised their mother he was taking them to get treatment, as they likely had developmental disabilities. Instead, the would-be trafficker sold them to a sideshow promoter who displayed them as the so-called lone survivors of a long-lost civilization. After over a decade as captives, dragged around the country on humiliating display, P. T. Barnum came along and incorporated the brother and sister into an exhibit at the American Museum.¹⁴

¹³ Joseph Andrew Orser. LIVES of CHANG and ENG: Siam's Twins in Nineteenth-Century America. University of North Carolina Press, 2018,

www.google.com/books/edition/The_Lives_of_Chang_Eng/aexwBAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

¹⁴ Candy, Guy. "J. Tithonus Pednaud." Circus Freaks and Human Oddities, 5 Dec. 2007, www.thehumanmarvels.com/maximo-and-bartola-the-aztec-children/.

Other examples of human beings on display at the American Museum include:

Fedor Jeftichew, or "Jo-Jo The Dog-Faced Boy," a young man with a medical condition that caused an abnormal amount of hair to grow on his face, was just 16 when Barnum pressured him into signing a contract that ensured he would spend the rest of his life being humiliated in front of an audience to line Barnum's pockets.

Chang Yu Sing, "The Chinese Giant," was a man who stood almost eight feet tall and had previously made a living entertaining the Chinese emperor. Barnum exploited him too.

And, there were more.

William Henry Johnson, a Black man who was given the nicknames of "Zip the Pinhead" and the "What-Is-It?" because of a tapered skull deformity, is estimated to have performed as a "human curiosity" for over six decades. Barnum often referred to him as his "most popular African."

Other than allegedly being born to former slaves, Johnson's actual origin story is unclear. One source claims that Barnum purchased Johnson from the Royal Surrey Zoological Garden for \$3,000 in 1846¹⁵, while another claims that Johnson did not make an appearance in Barnum's American Museum until 1859.¹⁶ Posters advertising "What-Is-It?" promoted Johnson as the "missing link" from Africa.

A Currier and Ives lithograph print from the period reads:

"Is it a lower order of MAN? Or a higher order of MONKEY? NO ONE CAN TELL!
Perhaps it is a combination of both. It is beyond dispute the MOST MARVELOUS
CREATURE LIVING. It was captured in a savage state in Central Africa, is probably
about 20 years old, 4 feet high, intelligent, docile, active, sportive, and PLAYFUL AS A
KITTEN. It has a skull, limbs, and general anatomy of an ORANG-OUTANG and the
COUNTENANCE of a HUMAN BEING."

¹⁵ Betts, John Rickards. "P. T. Barnum and the Popularization of Natural History." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1959, pp. 353–368. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2708114, 10.2307/2708114

¹⁶ Lindfors, Bernth. "P. T. Barnum and Africa." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 7, 1984, pp. 18–27. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23412959?seq=1.

Barnum played heavily upon the racist stereotype that Africa was a wild and brutish place filled with uncivilized primitives, gleefully dehumanizing an entire continent in the process. To him, it did not matter where William Henry Johnson came from, or what his story was, as long as he could play the part of a “freak” and keep the paying crowds coming. Reportedly, Johnson's last words in 1926 were, "We fooled 'em a long time, didn't we?"

Barnum was hardly the only person to treat Black men as inferior, suggesting they were more like primates than human beings. In 1906, the New York Bronx Zoo put an African man named Ota Benga on display with the zoo's actual primates. Administrators sharpened Benga's teeth to points and made him interact in cages with the apes. Eventually, after heavy criticism from activist groups and some media, Benga was freed from captivity in the Bronx Zoo. He never fully recovered from the traumatic experience and committed suicide in his early 30s.

Making Racism Fun

So why did P. T. Barnum and offensive exhibitions like his do so well, let alone exist? The quick answer is, they made racism fun for complicit white Americans, so it didn't seem as wicked.

Barnum designed his exhibits to make them mystifying for the non-disabled, white masses. They could show up at his American Museum or attend one of Barnum's traveling sideshows, see his acts being humiliated and dehumanized, disassociate from them as people, and join in on the ridicule with their fellow man. Good times.

Barnum's “freak show” acts were not presented as being normal humans (if they were presented as human at all) and, therefore, guests were given space to treat them with virtually no empathy or humanity. Barnum created the perfect environment for people to entertain themselves and feel better about their own lives at the “other's” expense.

This environment and period in history was prime for racist, sexist, and ableist sentiments. Barnum began his shows when moralist politics and extreme religion were starting to gain footing in the United States. Where one robust set of values emerges, an opposing side always appears in resistance. The swing of public opinion towards abolition, early women's rights, disability rights, mental health care, and other initiatives saw fervent resistance. Barnum's shows gave people fuel to oppose these more-progressive movements.

And, this sort of opposition and these preconceived notions have stuck with us. A quick internet search of "P. T. Barnum's living curiosities" will pull up hundreds of thousands of web results. Articles entitled "P. T. Barnum's Most Famous 'Freaks'" and "Barnum's 13 Most Famous and Incredible Oddities" pop up at the top of the list. They contain image after image of the genuine people that Barnum exploited (or, who are still arguably being exploited) and push the false narrative of Barnum as a hero of American ingenuity.

Political Career

Already a successful showman, Barnum then decided he would make an appearance on a different stage in 1865 when he ran for and was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly. He pursued a newfound role as a repentant Republican (who at this time were the abolitionist party pushing for a more liberal agenda) rather than with the pro-slavery Democrats, whom he had supported up until this point. He also admitted to some of his past indiscretions (sort of):

"I whipped my slaves. I ought to have been whipped a thousand times for this myself. But then I was a Democrat—one of those nondescript Democrats, who are Northern men with Southern principles."

But wasn't that exactly what Barnum was? He spun it well enough to stay in office for four terms, despite a failed bid for Congress in 1867.

The political contribution that Barnum is most remembered for is his sponsorship of (get this) an anti-obscenity and anti-contraception bill. Aside from his stance against obscenity (which is just an obscene notion in and of itself given his track record of inhumane showmanship), he lobbied for and helped pass a stricter set of laws that prevented the use of "any drug, medicine, article, or instrument" for the "purpose of preventing conception" and criminalized anyone who provided information about birth control methods or literature about abortion. He effectively helped make women's lives in Connecticut miserable for almost a century until these laws were overturned in the 1960s after they were cited as privacy issues.

Anti-Semitism

Another aspect of his bigoted life that is not well-publicized is P. T. Barnum's rampant anti-Semitism. Barnum wrote about once hiring a Jewish doctor to remove his foot corns, whom

he described as "a portly quack Jewish doctor with keen, piercing eyes, jet black shining hair, and the usual Israelitish countenance." Suspicious at the outset of the procedure, Barnum described being ready for this Jewish doctor to con him purportedly due to his heritage. Barnum claimed he discovered the doctor trying to pass off kernels of actual corn as "evidence of a successful procedure," then proceeded to kick the man down the stairs before deciding to forever warn others about "Jew doctors."

Another incident occurred while Barnum was Mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut. A newspaper reported that he went before the Board of Commissioners to accuse Jewish saloon keepers of violating the Sabbath, aka, they were open on Sundays when they shouldn't have been according to Jewish Law, and called them "miserable Jews."¹⁷

Legacy

Despite being best known for the circus that bears his name, P. T. Barnum did not start the traveling show that became his legacy until he was in his sixties in 1870. It would be another eleven years until he brought James Bailey on board as an investor and partner in the affair. Although skeptical at first, Bailey made his investment back in one season.

In 1888, after several name changes and tours worldwide, the two dubbed it "Barnum and Bailey: The Greatest Show on Earth." The Ringling Brothers purchased it shortly after Barnum's death in 1891 and kept the show running for 146 years until 2017.

Before he died, Barnum published at least seven additional editions of his memoir, *The Life of P. T. Barnum*, or *Barnum's Own Story* (and any number of other names it was also published under), and he was constantly called out over his stated inaccuracies and fallacies. Facts do not line up from edition to edition, and he released the rights to his autobiography while he was still living to allow anyone to publish their own version of his story. Therefore, it is challenging to separate fact from fiction when discussing P. T. Barnum. Not letting criticism of any kind deter him, he also published *The Art of Making Money* in 1880, and *The King of the Animal Kingdom: How He Caught, Tamed and Ruled His Subjects; Natural History from a New Standpoint* in 1889.

¹⁷ Saul Jay Singer, "P. T. Barnum: Legendary Showman, Virulent Anti-Semite," [thejewishpress.com](https://www.jewishpress.com/sections/features/features-on-jewish-world/p-t-barnum-legendary-showman-virulent-anti-semite/2017/05/17/), May 17, 2017, <https://www.jewishpress.com/sections/features/features-on-jewish-world/p-t-barnum-legendary-showman-virulent-anti-semite/2017/05/17/>.

Barnum peddled his rags to riches story as the ultimate "American Dream," which became baked into his legacy, but it isn't exactly all true. He wasn't born into abject poverty like he claimed, and he died wealthy because he exploited countless people along the way. While his political career eventually developed in support of abolition, his actions before (and, even after) demonstrated he did not believe in equality. To say otherwise is simply perpetuating an idyllic view of the man, ignoring his overt racism, sexism, and ableism for the sheer pleasure of nostalgia.

Films like *The Greatest Showman* are not the only pieces of popular culture to portray P. T. Barnum in a more favorable light than he arguably deserves. The movie *Freaks* debuted in 1932 and exploited characters with disabilities similar to those found in Barnum's sideshows. Likewise, FX Network's *American Horror Story: Freakshow* recently found inspiration for several characters for its television series from Barnum's acts. While he is not solely responsible for creating this brand of human exploitation, Barnum popularized it and made it more accessible to everyday Americans to consume. He is very much responsible for perpetuating harmful stereotypes and causing undue harm for over a century, not only to the people he was in direct contact with but countless others over multiple generations.

That is a lot to put on one person. But, it also wasn't just him.

If the American public at the time had not been more than willing to pay to exploit such racist and ableist exhibitions, Barnum wouldn't have continued to put on his shows (that's not an excuse for him, but he was after profits first and foremost, and consumers obliged). Our actions and treatment of one another matters. Where we spend our money and who we choose to support matters, and once we know better, we must then do better.

Because if we don't, there will just be another racist sucker (and more innocent victims) born every minute, as well as plenty of new P. T. Barnum's to take his place.

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 - Feb 25, 1836- P. T. Barnum has Joice Heth autopsied in an NYC Saloon. He sells tickets to 1,500 spectators for 50 cents apiece.
 - Dr. David L. Rogers performed the autopsy.
 - He “determined” Heth was a fraud; she was not the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington.

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 - Summer 1835- 25 y/o Barnum hears about a black woman on display in Philadelphia as “the Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in the World;” her owner claimed she was the 161 y/o nursemaid of George Washington. Her owner wanted to sell her and return to Kentucky, so Barnum went into debt to buy her (debt=\$500) for \$1000.
 - “Anonymous letter” written by Barnum and published in a Boston newspaper:
 - Joice Heth is not a human being. What purports to be a remarkable old woman is simply a curiously constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, india-rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together and made to move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator. The exhibitor is a ventriloquist, and all the conversations apparently held with the ancient lady are purely imaginary, so far as she is concerned.” (p. 19)
 - “The point that is significant about this first venture... is that he apparently regarded Joice Heth as an immense practical joke, someone about whom he could make extravagant and contradictory claims, thereby whetting the curiosity of the scientifically inclined as well as the gullible.” (p. 19)
 - “Humbug”- Essentially, Barnum believed it wasn’t wrong to misrepresent things as long as his audience got bang for their buck.
 - “The American people like to be humbugged.”
 - Dec 1841- Barnum takes over the American Museum in NYC.
 - A mixture of true and false
 - Feejee Mermaid
 - The Woolly Horse
 - The Cardiff Giant
 - The Petrified Serpent
 - The Nova Scotia Giantess
 - The Living Skeleton
 - The Bearded Lady
 - Tom Thumb
 - The Siamese Twins

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 - Displayed in the American Museum in NYC in 1842, and then disappeared.
 - Destroyed by fires? Apparently, many fires destroyed Barnum's collection over the years.
 - 1976/77- Staff at the Peabody Museum of Anthropology found what might have been the Feejee Mermaid.
 - Created by a Japanese fisherman in the early 19th century. Sold to a Japanese sailor who sold it to Captain Samuel Barret Edes for \$6,000.
 - Edes embezzled money from his ship's firm Perkins & Company to buy the mermaid, and in 1822, they sued him. Edes kept the mermaid, and P&C would collect the debt owed to them, either through proceeds from Edes exhibiting the mermaid or by captaining their ships for free.
 - After Edes died, his son sold it to Moses Kimball of the Boston Museum in 1842.
 - Kimball showed it to Barnum, and Barnum displayed it in the American Museum after it was declared a fake.
 - Barnum schemed to add credibility to the mermaid. He staged a major publicity stunt. He wrote to various NYC newspapers that a "Dr. Griffin" had just returned from South America with a mermaid. This "Dr. Griffin" was actually Levi Lyman, the lawyer Barnum worked with to get the Joice Heth hoax off the ground. Lyman checked into a hotel in Philadelphia and showed the mermaid to the landlord, who was sufficiently impressed enough to show his friends. This made its way back to the press, and before Barnum knew it, everyone wanted to see this Feejee Mermaid.
 - Barnum deployed a massive advertising campaign by releasing 10,000 illustrated pamphlets depicting topless mermaids.
 - In the press, Barnum depicted "Dr. Griffin" as being reluctant to display the mermaid, which piqued public curiosity.
 - Barnum displayed the mermaid at the Concert hall and then to the American Museum, doubling Barnum's monthly profits for the first month she was on display. Shortly after, the mermaid was "dropped from sight."

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- <https://connecticuthistory.org/p-t-barnum-an-entertaining-life/> by Gregg Mangan- this article relied on the Irving Wallace Biography of P. T. Barnum
 - Died a multi-millionaire
 - Friends with Lincoln, Queen Victoria, and Mark Twain
 - Worked when blue laws were prevalent throughout the US.
 - Father, Philo Barnum: farmer, tailor, tavern keeper, grocer

- P.T. was the 6th of 10 children to Philo and two wives. His mother was Irena, his father's second wife.
 - Grandfather was a practical joker who taught his grandson his tricks. Phineas became the "Prince of the Humbugs."
 - Good student
 - P.T.'s father died in 1825, and Barnum liquidated his assets and went to work for a general store in Grassy Plains.
 - Marries first wife, Charity Hallet, at 19.
 - 1841- He purchased Scudder's American Museum and reopened it as Barnum's American Museum.
 - "Barnum was relentless both in tracking down oddities and in promoting his museum. He set powerful floodlights and giant flowing banners atop his building. He advertised free roof-top concerts and then supplied the worst musicians he could find in hopes of driving crowds away from the noise and into the relative peace of the museum."
 - " In the three years leading up to Barnum's purchase, Scudder's American Museum had grossed \$34,000. In the first three years of its operation under Barnum, the newly renamed museum grossed more than \$100,000."
 - 1842- Barnum "discovered" Charles Stratton, aka General Tom Thumb." Stratton, who was a four-year-old boy with congenital dwarfism, was marketed by Barnum as an eleven-year-old dwarf from England. Americans and Europeans loved the Tom Thumb attraction.
 - Early 1850's- Barnum managed a concert tour for Jenny Lind, "the Swedish Nightingale."
 - 1st retirement followed: he lived in his Bridgeport Connecticut mansion with his wife and three daughters for a time.
 - 1855 Autobiography- received severe backlash because he talked about conning audiences.
 - "The backlash from its release in 1855 was severe, and readers felt betrayed and swindled by Barnum's deceitful practices. *The New York Times* accused Barnum of obtaining success through "the systematic, adroit, and persevering plan of obtaining money under false pretenses from the public at large," as quoted in the foreword to a 2000 edition of Barnum's autobiography. Barnum spent years rewriting and attempting to control the damage from his book's revelations."
 - 1858 - The Art of Money-Getting, or Success in Life: a London Lecture series by Barnum that turned out to be popular. He published it in book form.
- Barnum, P. T. *The Life of P. T. Barnum: Written by Himself*. London: Collins Classics, 2017.
- Barnum was born Phineas Taylor Barnum on July 5, 1810, in Bethel, Connecticut. Named for his grandfather, said grandpa gifted PT 5 acres in Bethel. This contradicts the "rags to riches" story he perpetuates for years.

- <https://www.jewishpress.com/sections/features/features-on-jewish-world/p-t-barnum-legendary-showman-virulent-anti-semite/2017/05/17/>
- May 22, 2017- Barnum & Bailey Circus closed after 146 years
 - Barnum is credited with the phrase, “there is no such thing as bad publicity.”
 - Founded America’s first aquarium.
 - Instituted afternoon matinees
 - Barnums feelings about Jews:
 - “For example, in one incident Barnum writes that he was called upon by “a portly quack Jewish doctor with keen, piercing eyes, jet black shining hair and the usual Israelitish countenance” who wanted to relieve his (Barnum’s) foot corns. Barnum grudgingly agreed to permit the “Jew doctor” to perform the procedure, through which he kept a “sharp lookout for some trick.”
As Barnum tells the story, the doctor pretended to remove “the seed of the corn” and fraudulently showed pre-planted material to his patient as evidence of the successful procedure; when Barnum discovered the sham, he kicked the doctor down the steps and warned others about “Jew doctors.”
 - While Mayor of Bridgeport in 1875, “he was accused of maligning the city’s Jewish Community.
 - “The uproar began when the German-language newspaper Die Zeitung reported that Barnum accused Jewish saloon keepers of violating the Sunday Law and that before a meeting of the Board of Commissioners he had referred to these alleged violators as “miserable Jews.”
 - He also wrote a letter to his property manager about an apartment that needed some repairs, then instructed him to let it for \$6 per month. He makes a note that *Though rather than to have a Jew or too large a family of children [as tenants], she would rather let it to decent quiet folks for \$60 per annum if necessary...*