

Circus Research at the Bridgeport History Center



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Conducting circus research at the Bridgeport History Center

Circus material represents one of the major collecting areas of the Bridgeport History Center, due to both the city's history as the adopted hometown of P.T. Barnum and the Winter Quarters that were housed in the city until the 1920s. A robust combination of archival collections and secondary works offer a wide variety of lenses into circus history, with a particular emphasis on the late 19th century.

Much of the archival material relates to P.T. Barnum and his life dates of 1810-1891, but photograph collections represent roughly the 1900s into the 1950s. Secondary works share this particular time frame. Finding aids for our manuscript collections are located [here](#).

Archival Circus Collections

The materials within the archival collections are primarily manuscripts and ephemera, with a particular focus on circus handbills. Photograph collections are present, and there is a small selection of 3D objects as well.

P.T. Barnum Research Collection (BHC-MSS 0001)

The P.T. Barnum Research Collection focuses on the life dates of P.T. Barnum, and contains not only circus material, but material from his American Museum days, as well as items that relate to those in Barnum's orbit such as Jenny Lind and Charles Stratton (General Tom Thumb.) Handbills and couriers from the 1870s to the 1890s are particularly well represented. The bulk of the collection has been digitized and [is available online](#).

Papers of James McCaddon (BHC-MSS 0008)

James McCaddon served as a business manager for the Barnum and Bailey Circus in the 1890s and into the 1900s. As the brother-in-law of James Bailey (he married James' sister Ruth), McCaddon's connection to the circus was deeply personal. The material primarily includes a draft of his memoir and scrapbooks of personal trips. Note that this is a very small fraction of archival material McCaddon left behind. The bulk of it is owned by Princeton University and [can be viewed here](#).

Skutel Collection MSS (BHC- MSS 0009)

John Skutel was an individual collector with a particular interest in P.T. Barnum. There are a number of early circus programs and couriers in the collection, and most importantly, the original contract that signed Lavinia Warren to Barnum's management.

Gordy Collection of Circus Photographs (BHC-MSS 0010)

The Gordy Collection of Circus Photographs features a wide array of images from mostly the 1900s to the 1940s, documenting circus life. It focuses primarily on the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus, and shows not only animal and human performers, but features behind the scenes images that give a greater view into what life was like for those who traveled with the group every year.

Schneider Collection (BHC-MSS 0011)

Focusing primarily on artifacts from the Barnum and Bailey Circus, the Schneider Collection contains material from the circus after the death of P.T. Barnum and into the 20th century. Photographs of the Barnum and Bailey Circus abroad also feature heavily, giving insight into what the shows were like. The Schneider Collection also features a number of 3D objects including a set of veterinary dental tools and a pair of tights supposedly belonging to Eliza Dockrill (Madame Dockrill).

Raymond Fletcher Collection of Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Programs (BHC-MSS 0012)

Raymond W. Fletcher is perhaps best known as a local Bridgeport artist, self-taught and prolific. His deep connection to Bridgeport also meant that from an early age, Fletcher was surrounded by the circus. This small archival collection is mostly Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus programs from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1970s, along with a few pieces of circus fan organization material.

Circus Photographs taken by William Day (BHC-MSS 0013)

The William Collection of Circus Photographs featured a wide array of images from mostly the 1940s to 1970s, documenting circus life. It shows not only animal and human performers, but features behind the scenes images that give a greater view into what life was like for those who traveled with the group every year.

Norwood Collection of Circus Photographs (BHC-MSS 0015)

The Norwood Collection of Circus Photographs featured a wide array of images from mostly the 1900s to the 1940s, documenting circus life. It focuses primarily on the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus, and shows not only animal and human performers, but features behind the scenes images that give a greater view into what was life for those who traveled with the group every year.

Microfilmed Circus Route Book Collection (BHC-MSS 0023)

Circus route books list the performance locations and show details for each show in a given year, with Adam Forepaugh and Barnum circuses represented here. These early route books provide useful information to early circus ventures in America, starting in the 1870s and going into the 1890s. These materials have been consulted frequently, and sustained damage as a result. They have been microfilmed, and the material may only be viewed in microfilm format. Those seeking only dates are advised to consult the Circus Historical Society's [route book collection](#).

Circus Route Book Collection (BHC-MSS 0024)

Circus route books list the performance locations and show details for each show in a given year, with various Barnum circuses represented here. Those seeking only dates are advised to consult the Circus Historical Society's [route book collection](#).

Circus Collection (BHC-MSS 0034)

In addition to the above archival collections, the Bridgeport History Center (and the Bridgeport Public Library in general) has always acquired individual pieces of circus related items. BHC-MSS 0034, simply called the Circus Collection, represents all of those collecting habits over the decades. Present are a large number of late 19th and early 20th century handbills, as well as mid-20th century circus programs and other ephemera. VanAmburg, Ringling Brothers, and Adam Forepaugh circuses are particularly well represented in this collection.

Circus Poster Collection

Lithographed circus posters are always of interest to researchers and circus historians. The Bridgeport History Center's circus poster collection comes primarily from the 1880s-1960s and features both advertisements for Barnum and London shows as well as Barnum and Bailey, all done by the Strobridge Lithograph Company. The posters [are available online](#).

Secondary Works

There are countless books on the history of the circus in all forms. The Bridgeport History Center is not a dedicated circus archive, meaning that the secondary works available are carefully selected. Listed here are general comprehensive circus histories, with highlights of major topics that connect to those histories. Please refer to the library catalog for additional books.

American Experience: The Circus, Parts 1 and 2. DVD. Boston: PBS, 2018.

The recent PBS documentary on the history of the circus includes extensive material provided by the Bridgeport History Center itself. It focuses on the history of the circus from the 19th century into the 21st, and is highly useful for comprehending how popular entertainment shaped the circus through the 200+ years of its history in America.

Connecticut State Library, Subject guide to the Hartford Circus Fire, July 6, 1944

(Hartford, Conn. : Connecticut State Library, 2000) D/St292ara/Sugu/circ

Created by Connecticut State Library, this subject guide features the best archival resources for those interested in the Hartford Circus Fire. The guide is also [available online](#), and the Bridgeport History Center has several of the secondary works featured.

Ernest Albrich, From Barnum and Bailey to Feld: the creative evolution of the Greatest Show on Earth (Jefferson, North Carolina : McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014) HC 791.3 Albrecht

Written before the closing of Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus in 2017, this book features the history of that particular circus up into 2010. It does not focus on any other circus, but it is highly useful for scholars who wish to research on one of the longest enduring circuses.

Fred Bradna, *Big Top: my forty years with the Greatest Show on Earth* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1952.) HC 791.3 B81b

Written by a circus professional, *Big Top* lets the reader understand the circus from the perspective of someone who worked there during its hey-day. Again focused on Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey, it covers the late 19th century into the 1940s.

John and Alice Durant, *Pictorial History of the American Circus* (New York : A.S. Barnes, 1957) HC 791.3 D9p

While this text is older and excludes recent circus developments, such as Cirque de Soleil, this work is comprehensive and an excellent resource. It features not only the history of Western European circuses, but traces the development of the concept back to ancient Egypt and the Minoans.

Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: presenting human oddities for amusement and profit* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1988) HC 791.3 B674f

For those who have a special interest in sideshow culture, *Freak Show* is the seminal text that has since launched an intense field of study on the matter. It has held up well, and compliments the material found primarily in the P.T. Barnum Research Collection.

Tom Ogden, *Two Hundred Years of the American Circus: from Aba-Daba to Zoppe-Zavatta Troupe* New York, NY, USA : Facts on File, 1993) HC 791.3 O34t

A large dictionary that covers all aspects of the circus, this book offers a quick insight into various histories of circus terms, troupes, and many other aspects of circus life.