

The town that 'freak shows' saved: How the world-famous showman PT Barnum who made his money peddling sideshows revived a Connecticut city by making it the home of his 'Greatest Show on Earth'

- › PT Barnum found Bridgeport, Connecticut, in a state of post-industrial decay before adopting it as his hometown and basing his circus, which he launched in 1870, there during the winter months
- › There's a bronze statue of him in Seaside Park, Barnum Avenue and the Barnum Museum, which he helped establish before he died
- › Barnum served as Bridgeport's mayor, established the city's hospital and cemetery, and provided funding for schools
- › But the master of myth making owes success to Bridgeport native Charles 'Tom Thumb' Stratton, who he met in November 1842
- › Stratton would end up being the star attraction in Barnum's sideshow and elevate his fame to international levels

By [JORDAN GASS-POORE FOR DAILYMAIL.COM](#)

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Bridgeport was but a whisper of the booming Connecticut city it l
Phineas Taylor Barnum came to town.



Barnum's decision to buy land there could have proven to be a bad investment, but he managed to dust off the ashes of post-industrial decay and revived its magic.

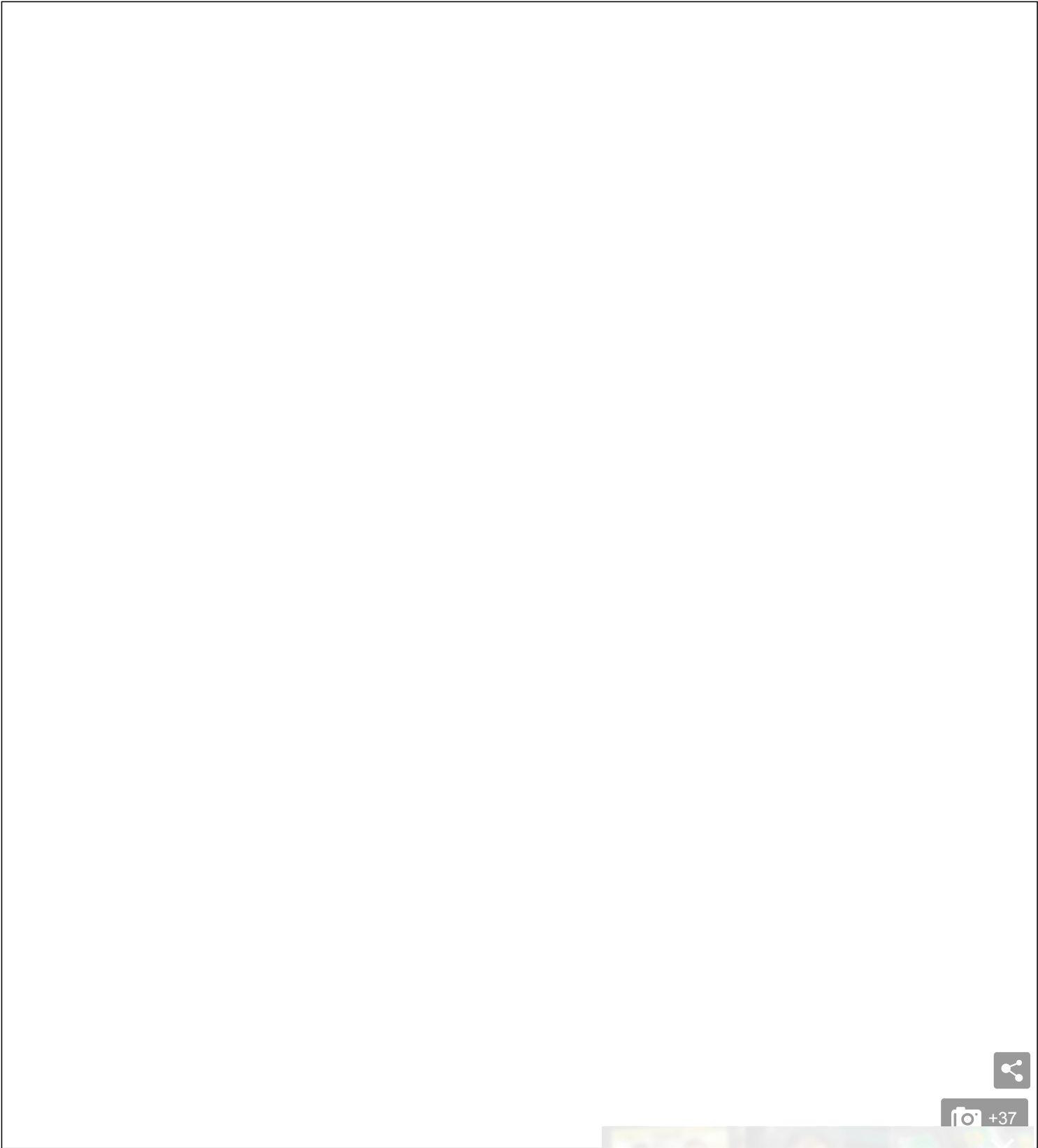
Barnum had spent most of his adult life exploring and exploiting oddities with his New York City museum. He had capitalized on people's fascination with 'freaks'. In Bridgeport, he wanted to take what he had learned to build the city in a way that would equally amaze visitors.

It was in Bridgeport where through a twist of fate Barnum discovered Charles Stratton, the 25 inch tall four-year-old 'extraordinary little boy' he'd heard people in the town talk about.

Stratton would end up being the star attraction in Barnum's sideshow and elevate his fame to international levels. Their friendship will be immortalized and given the huckster treatment on the silver screen in a forthcoming flick: *The Greatest Showman*.

The duo traveled the world in the 1840s and Stratton, known as 'General Tom Thumb', was watched by an estimated 50million people worldwide and counted Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln among his fans.





It was in Bridgeport where through a twist of fate PT Barnum (left) discovered 'extraordinary little boy' who at just 25 inches tall would become Barnum's 'Tommy' with Barnum in this photo from 1850

Stratton could have easily retired as a child, he had earned a considerable partnership with Barnum, but he kept his thumb in the showbiz pie. Stratton enjoyed the stage and although critics questioned whether he wanted to be entirely in control of his career.



In fact, within 14 years of his first European tour with Barnum, Stratton, then a three-foot-tall man, would come to the businessman's rescue when by 1855 he moved to Stratton's hometown of Bridgeport in addition to making a poor financial decision.

Once flush with money from his management of Tom Thumb, Barnum was poor. He had purchased a clock company with the intention of bringing it to the city where his investment was supposed to create jobs and housing. Instead, he unknowingly bought the company and its staggering debt, putting him in financial ruin. Stratton offered to travel as General Tom Thumb again to make enough money to get Barnum back on his feet.

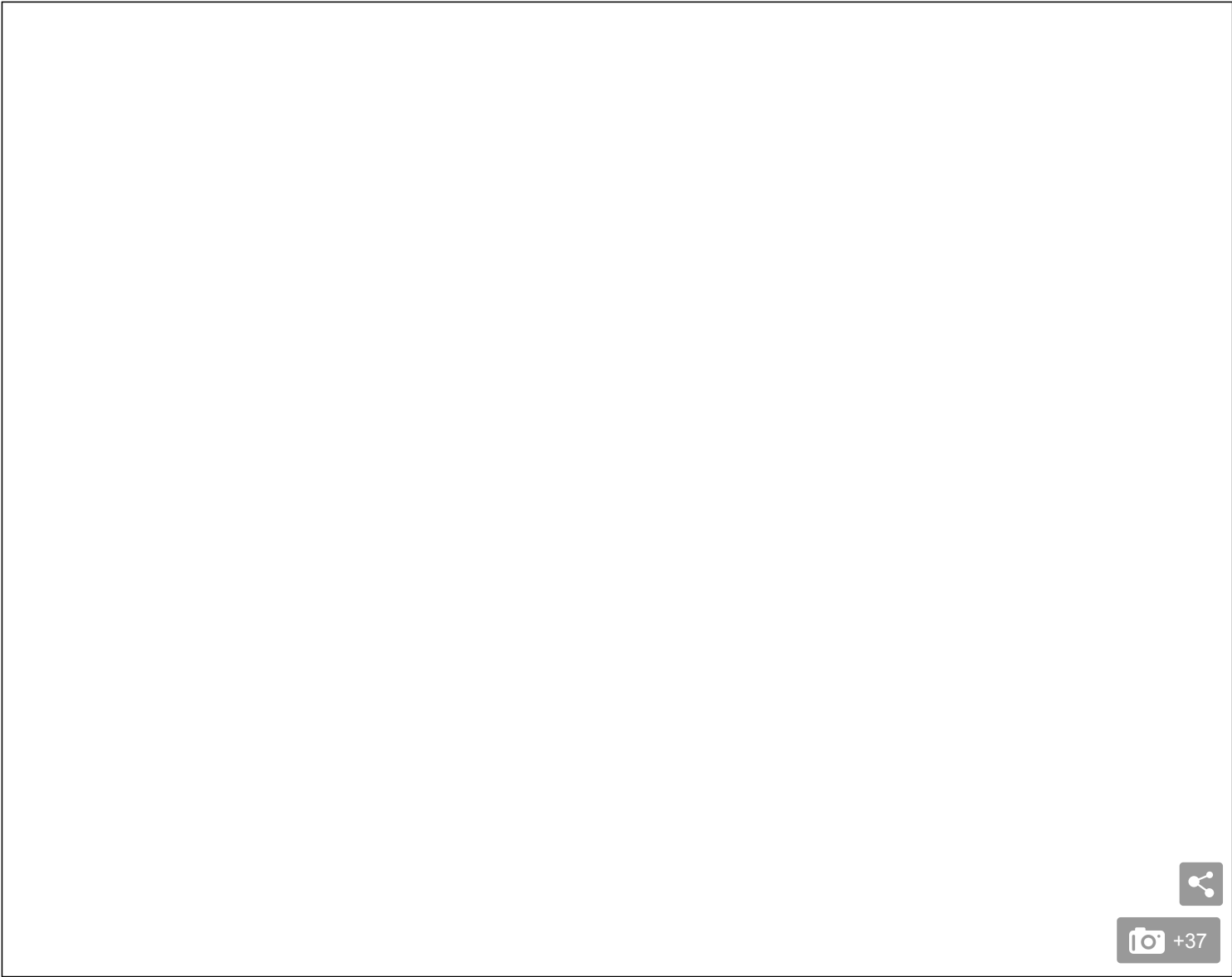
Barnum's next act would be The Greatest Show on Earth.

His circus was a Big Top filled with extremes – from an elephant called Jumbo to the tiny talent nicknamed Tom Thumb. Adrienne Saint-Pierre, Barnum Museum curator, explained that 'Barnum's genius was he understood that people are attracted to the bizarre as much as the beautiful'.

While Barnum traveled to many places, he made his home – and the winter quarters of the Barnum & Bailey Circus - in Bridgeport, ideally located along rail lines and in close proximity to New York. The state's largest city was a great place to foster industry at the time, said Gregg Mangan, manager of digital humanities with the Connecticut Humanities Council.

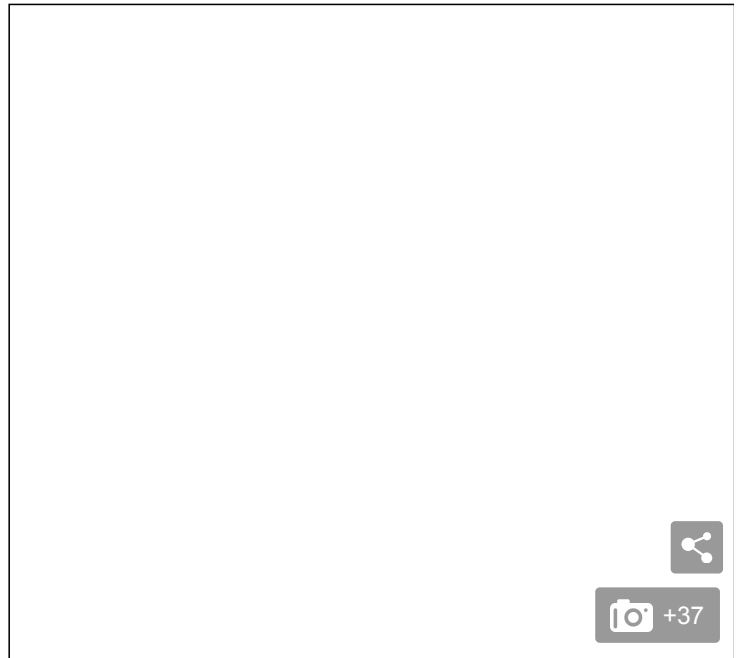
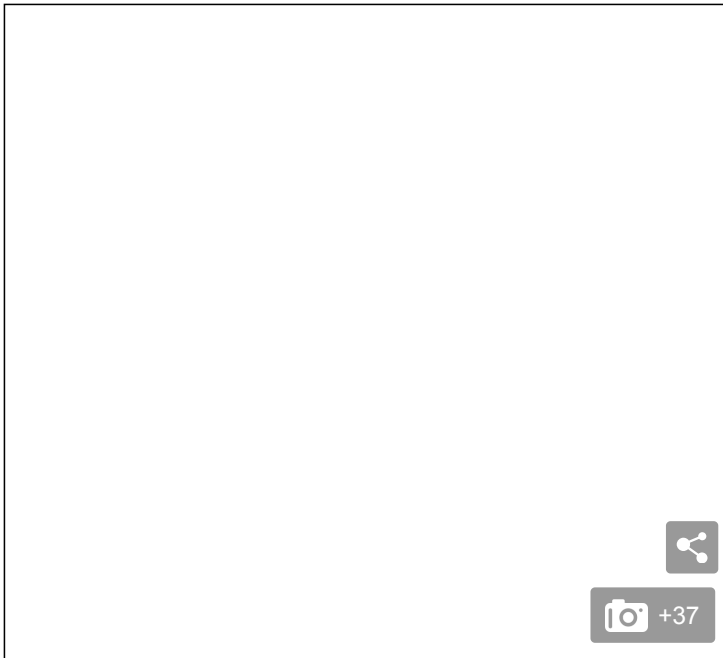
Barnum was heavily invested, both emotionally and financially, in Bridgeport, so it was in his best interest to see to it that the city was developed. Maps and the few remaining photographs of the circus's winter headquarters show the five acres flanked by properties owned by the Seeley family; Barnum's daughter Pauline Taylor Barnum married a Seeley, said 62 year old Gary Payne, circus historian. Family and acquaintances that owned property in the area likely had to do with Barnum's decision to locate the circus's winter headquarters there, he added.





Barnum made Bridgeport the winter headquarters for his circus. It remained the circus's home for more than 50 years, until the venture merged with Ringling Brothers. Pictured are elephants lined up for inspection near the Bridgeport winter quarters in 1922





In 1892, just a year after Barnum's death, The New York Times ran an article describing what a visit to the five-acre winter quarters (pictured) entailed: 'With 1,400 employees and 400 horses alone, the winter scene on today's West Field Park must have been overwhelming'

'I'm astonished at how small it was. In fact, you can go to that very spot today and it is basically unchanged. It's now a city park, and it's amazing to me that they had such a large show in that area.

A lot of the animals would go elsewhere; horses would go to nearby farms, they needed to be fed and exercised. A lot of the animals went to what we now know appears to be a zoo for the winter. So, it's safe to assume that most of the animals did not spend the entire winter in that location,' Payne said.

The circus elephants, however, wintered in Bridgeport under steam-heated tents, said Saint-Pierre. In one building, the human performers had a ring in which to perfect their acts. Additional areas were set aside for training the animals.

Barnum is said to have claimed that 'clowns and elephants are the pegs upon which the circus is hung'. And he pegged his hopes on Jumbo the elephant, who he purchased in 1882 from the London Zoo for \$10,000. Jumbo was seen by an estimated 20million people before being struck by a train three years later.

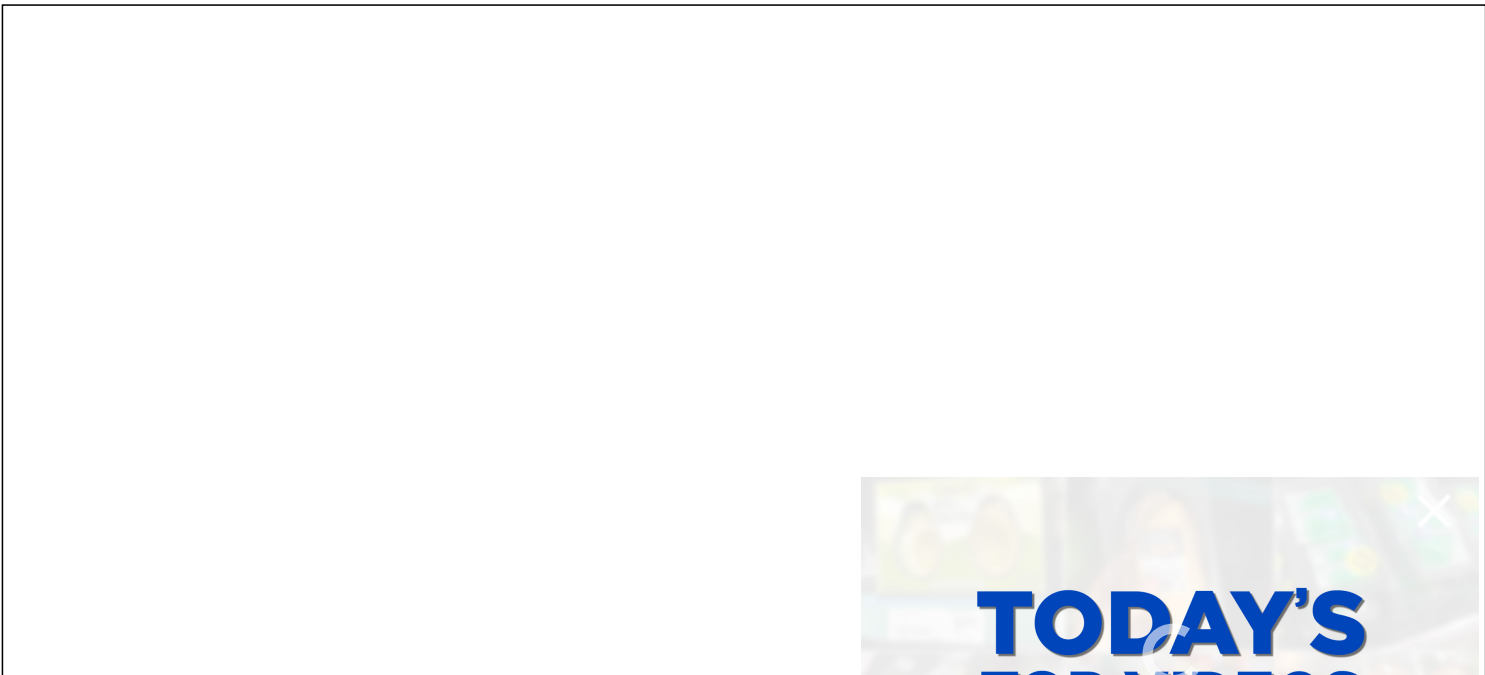
And loathe to see Jumbo's loss result in a loss for the business, Barnum reconstructed the elephant around a wooden frame covered with the creature's preserved 1,500-pound skin. He kept the object on exhibit in his circus until donating the stuffed hide to Tufts University where it stood in Barnum Hall until it was accidentally destroyed by fire in 1975.

Barnum was an early trustee and benefactor of the Massachusetts-based Tufts. The university's mascot is named in honor of the giant elephant, whose name has spawned the common word 'jumbo', meaning large in size.





Barnum purchased Jumbo (pictured), the famous elephant, in 1882 from the London Zoo for \$10,000, or more than \$227,000 today



Animal keeper Matthew Scott succeeds in persuading Jumbo to walk through a narrow tunnel at London Zoo on February 20, 1882. Jumbo traveled to the US in a crate and the elephant had been reluctant to enter the crate and only did so after three





Jumbo was seen by an estimated 20million people before he was struck by a train on September 15, 1885. The elephant's body is seen here in St Thomas, Ontario

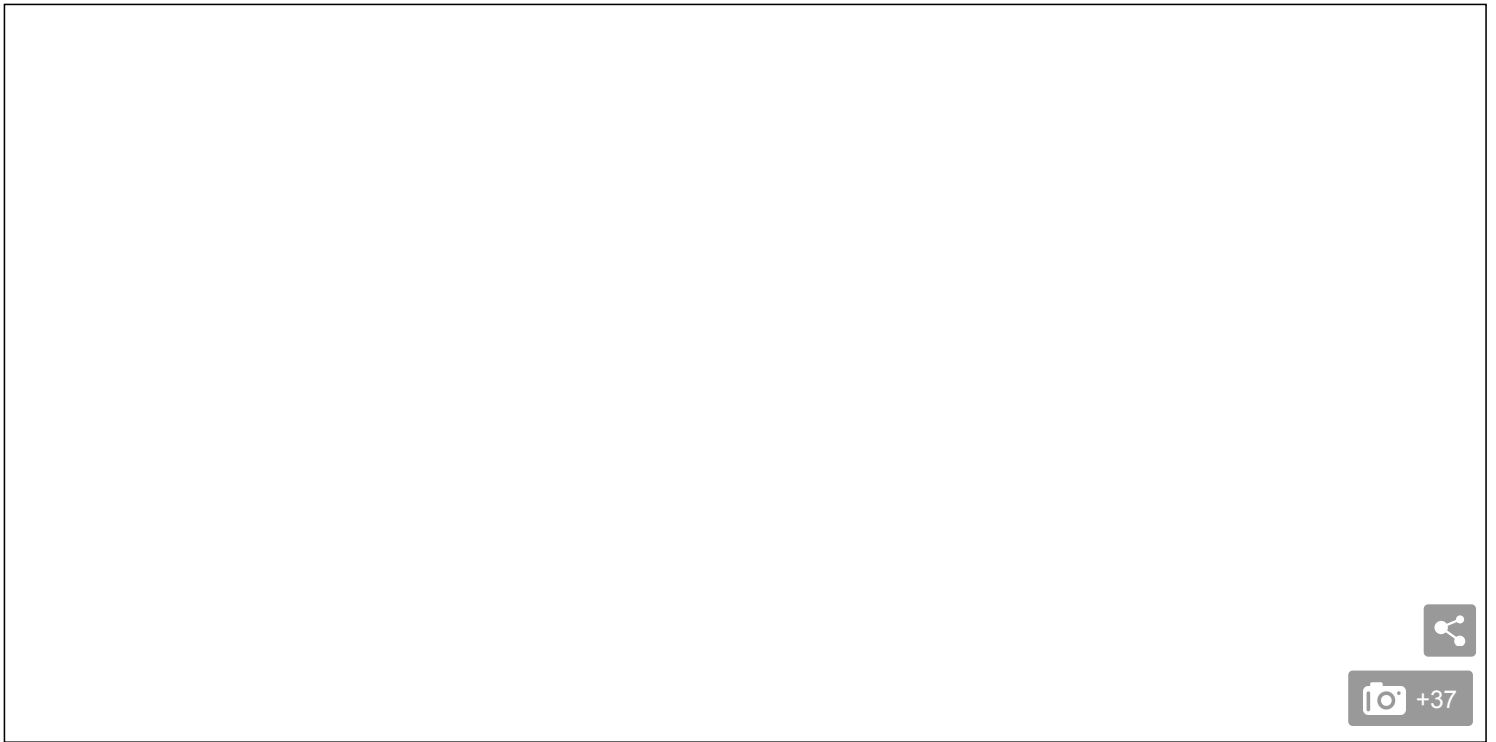
At the end of the circus season, many of the performers would go home, wherever home was. Some of these international acts, who stayed on Barnum's payroll for multiple years, wintered in Bridgeport. Those who left the city would return in the spring before the show entrained for New York. When the weather was warm enough they would lead the elephants a few blocks south of headquarters to Seaside Park to bathe and frolic.

In one instance, Barnum proudly trotted out a dozen of the circus's elephants to test a new bridge over the Pequonnock River. He performed a similar stunt the year after the Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1884 among rumors that it was structurally unsound. On the night of May 17, Barnum marched 21 elephants, including the famous Jumbo, and 17 camels over the bridge from Manhattan to Brooklyn.

This was great publicity for Barnum – and Bridgeport, which in effect became, and for 146 years, remained America's circus town. A large segment of the community not directly connected with the show derived much of its income from supplying the circus's needs.

'It was part of the city's gigantity, part of the local economy. I'm su
Saint-Pierre.





In 1888, Barnum paraded elephants to test the strength of the new Stratford Avenue bridge in Bridgeport

Struggles and triumphs: Barnum takes a gamble in becoming a showman

Although Barnum was plagued with financial difficulties, his climb to international superstardom was impressive considering his start as the son of a small businessman from Bethel, Connecticut.

Barnum was born there in 1810, and was influenced by his namesake and maternal grandfather, Phineas Taylor, who was a politician and lottery schemer. At 13 years old, Barnum started working in his father's small country store, where he learned to haggle and use deception to make a sale.

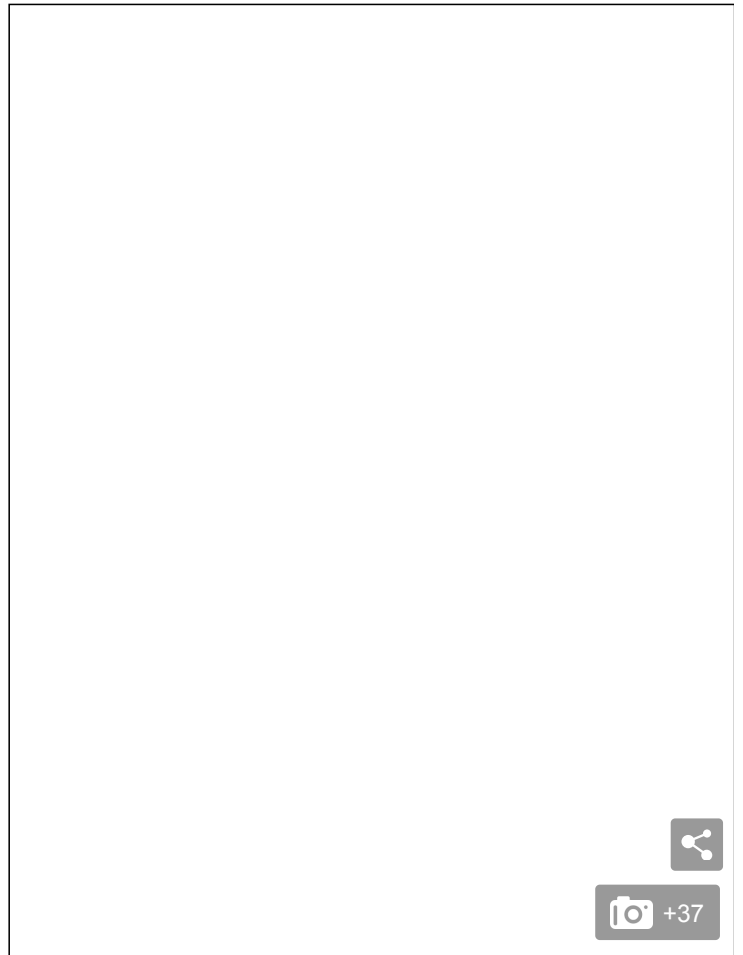
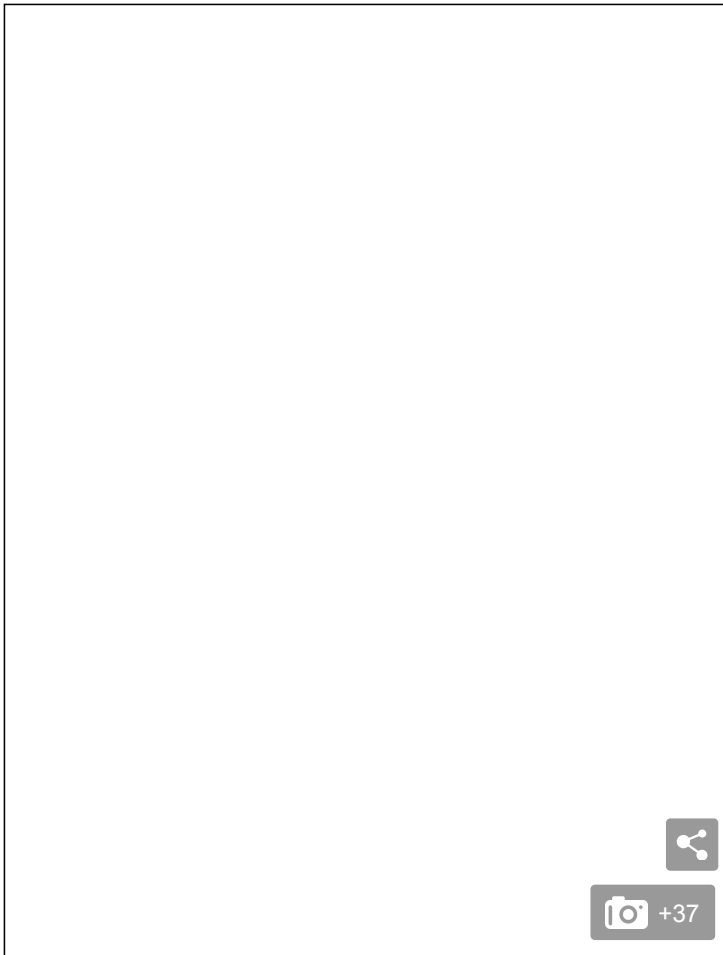
'He did not have a private education or come from money and he certainly achieved a lot in life but had a lot of pain too,' said Saint-Pierre, referring to the deaths of his daughters Frances J Barnum and Pauline Taylor Barnum Seeley, and several grandchildren, including a boy named after him.

At the age of 19 Barnum married his first wife Charity, who many years later he described as 'the best woman in the world, well suited to his disposition, admirable and valuable in every character as a wife, a mother, and a friend' - despite not attending her funeral and remarrying 13 weeks later to 24-year-old Englishwoman Nancy Fish.

Besides being a husband and father, Barnum's juggling act included: a general store, a book auctioning trade, real estate speculation and a state-wide lottery network – just a few of the businesses he engaged his restless attention.

He became active in local politics and advocated against 'blue laws' for religious reasons because they would hurt some of his businesses in Connecticut and cut off his main source of income. So, he moved his businesses but would later begin his life as a showman.





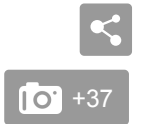
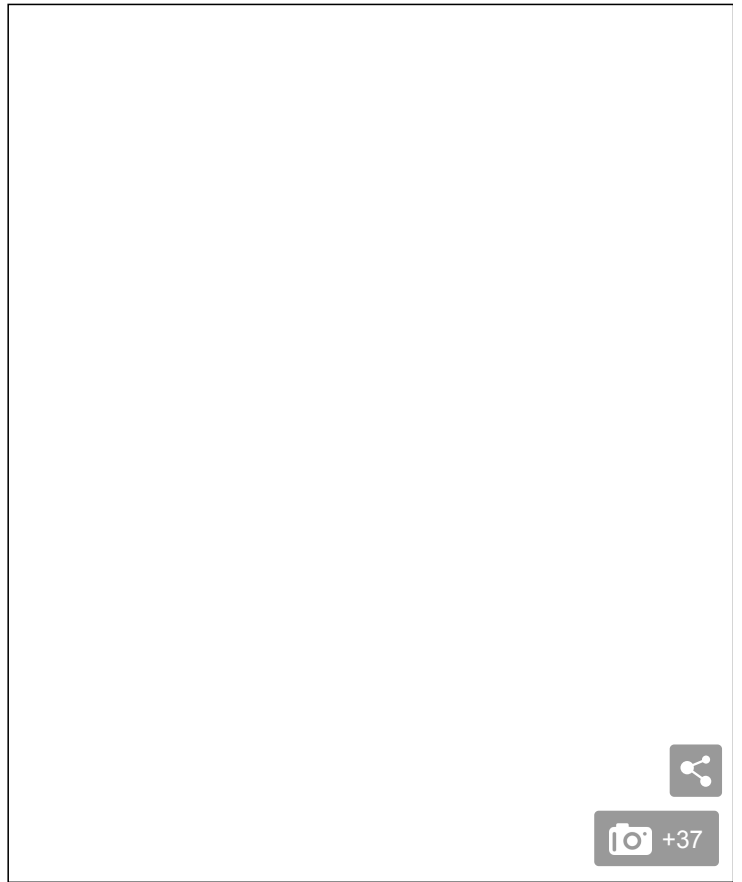
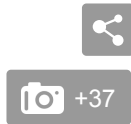
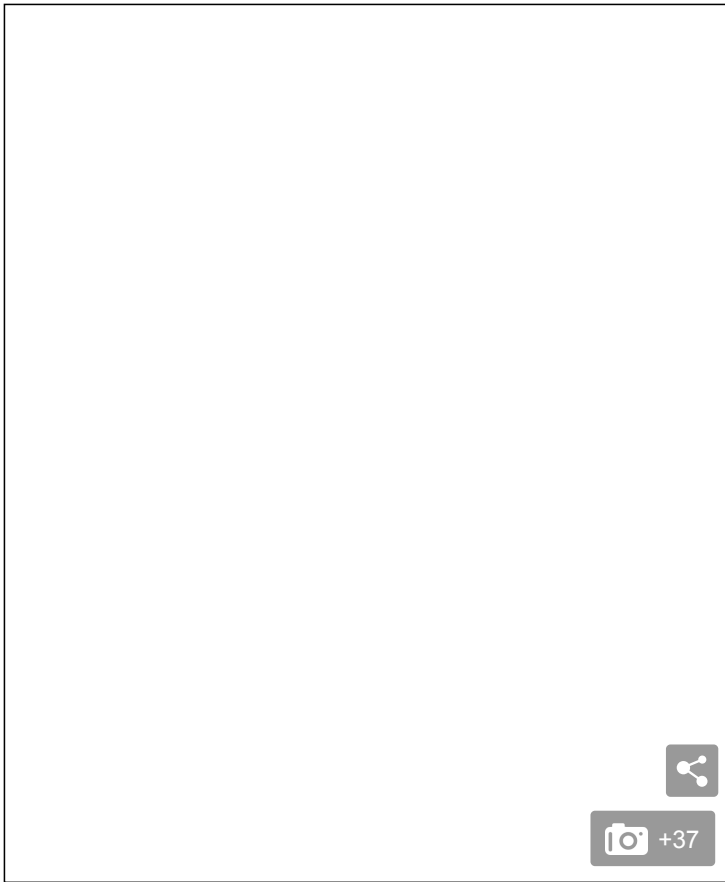
Barnum married his wife, Charity Hallett, when he was 19. They had four daughters together: Caroline Cordelia Barnum Thompson, Helen Maria Barnum Buchtel, Frances J Barnum and Pauline Taylor Barnum Seeley

The 'Prince of Humbugs': Barnum draws crowds and headlines with his shameless hoaxes, skilled deal making and over-the-top personality

Often referred to as the 'Prince of Humbugs', Barnum saw nothing wrong in using hype, or 'humbug', to promote entertainers, as long as the public was getting their money's worth. He's widely, but erroneously, credited with coining the phrase: 'There's a sucker born every minute.' That was a statement by a reporter that he disliked attributed to him, Payne said.

'The fact is that Barnum had the utmost respect for his patrons,' said Payne. 'He might attract them with a humbug but always gave them a hell of a show and something to talk about.'





Joice Heth was an African-American former slave who was exhibited by Barnum. He portrayed her as being 161 years old and the former nurse to founding father George Washington, as seen in this printed handbill from 1835

Barnum’s career as the self-proclaimed ‘Prince of Humbugs’ began at the age of 25 when traveling showman Coley Bartram entered the New York City grocery store Barnum had cofounded. Bartram knew Barnum had a weakness for speculative investments, and he was looking to sell a human ‘curiosity’ for \$1,000, about \$26,417 today.

Joice Heth was a blind and almost completely paralyzed African-American woman claimed to be 161 years old and the former nurse to founding father George Washington.

Circumstances of Heth’s life before meeting Barnum are unclear, though she is believed to have been a former slave in Kentucky and by 1835 had been exhibited at the Louisville Museum and in Cincinnati where her stage act began to take shape. Her life didn’t get any better.

That year she was sold to RW Lindsay and Bartram, but they failed to profit on their attraction. So, Bartram sold the right to show her to Barnum, who was impressed with her rapport with visitors but more intrigued by her ‘grotesque’ appearance. The New York Evening-Star described her appearance as being ‘very much like an Egyptian mummy just escaped from the Sarcophagus’.

With a blizzard of handbills and posters, Barnum convinced thousands of curious onlookers to step right up and pay for the chance to see and hear her almost entirely fabricated story. Their attendance earned

The curious case of the 'Feejee Mermaid': The hoax that gripped New York City in the summer of 1842

In July 1842, an Englishman named 'Dr J Griffin' arrived in New York City bearing a remarkable curiosity. A real mermaid supposedly caught in a glass near the Fiji - or 'Feejee' - Islands.

PT Barnum tried to convince Dr Griffin to display the mermaid at his American Museum but the doctor was unwilling to do so.

Instead, Dr Griffin agreed to exhibit for



about \$1,500, or about \$39,000, per week.

When she died a year later in 1836, he even sold tickets to her autopsy, at which she was judged to have been not more than 80 years old. The tour of Heth under Barnum's management got him out of the store business, Payne said.

Barnum had already harnessed the new engine of the tabloids, and his staged events continued to pick up steam. He developed new forms of performance and display, but the Heth hoax dogged him throughout his career as a showman. He actively distanced himself from the whole affair, claiming to the press he was just as much a victim of the hoax as anyone.

Nearly 30 years later, during his successful run for the Connecticut Legislature in 1864, he argued that African Americans should have the right to vote. He served with the Connecticut Legislature for four terms and was a one-term mayor of Bridgeport, where he became an important antislavery voice in politics.

Barnum was a man of contrasts and loved being in character. Several of his biographers have concluded that there was no such thing as a 'private' Barnum - that like all of his attractions he was himself his own show.

The Yankee entrepreneur formally put himself on display with his variety troupe Barnum's Grand Scientific and Musical Theater. After a year of mixed success, Barnum purchased Scudder's American Museum, an impressive five-story building on the corner of Ann Street and Broadway in Manhattan. He improved the attraction and renamed it Barnum's American Museum.

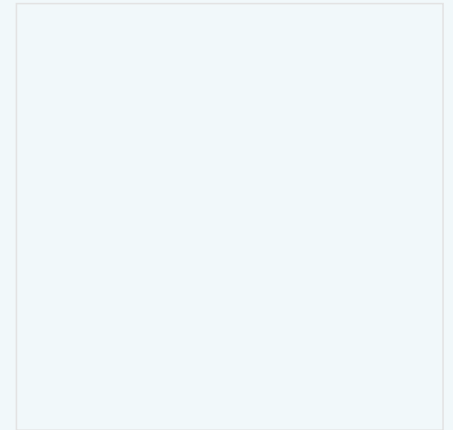
At this time the concept of public entertainment was perceived as inappropriate as Americans aspired to the highest standards of moral and civil behavior but Barnum's museum changed people's attitudes.

Thanks to Barnum, sideshows are a New York City art form, said Dick Zigun, Bridgeport native and 'unofficial mayor of Coney Island'. The 64 year old considered the Brooklyn neighborhood to be the present-day home of sideshow culture. He grew up in Bridgeport surrounded by the city's circus legacy: Tom Thumb's house was next to his grammar school and his family's furniture store was on Barnum Avenue.

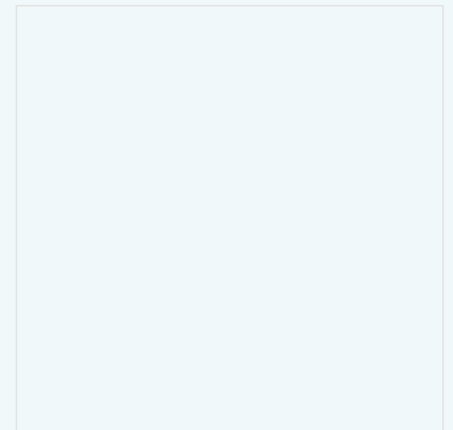
Zigun's respect and admiration for the circus stemmed from his unique childhood in Bridgeport, where he had the esteemed honor of being named a 'Barnum Scholar' and counted 'midgets' as heroes.

A changing series of live acts and a menagerie of animals were at the popular showplace, which in a few years earned Barnum a fortune. Thousands of visitors handed over 25cents each - \$7.53 in today's money to see his bizarre mishmash of technology, taxidermy and human oddities. This is where he introduced his first hoax, the 'Feejee' mermaid - a baboon, an orangutan and a fish sewn together - the trunk of a tree that supposedly sha

'without extra charge'. Museum tickets promptly tripled.



The Feejee Mermaid, as depicted in Barnum's 1842 autobiography



Thousands of visitors forked over a quarter to see the museum's bizarre mishmash of technology, taxidermy and human oddities. This is where Barnum introduced his first hoax, the 'Feejee Mermaid' - a baboon, an orangutan and a fish sewn together, similar to the one pictured here

The public, though, had been deceived. Advertisements for the exhibit showed the mermaid to have the body of a young woman. The actual object was far less attractive. It had the torso and head of monkey sewn to the back half of a fish.

Dr Griffin himself was a sham. His real name was Levi Lyman - Barnum's accomplice in the hoax. They knew

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Jesus's disciples, new scientific instruments and a flea theater, among other exhibits.

The outspoken Barnum was a cultural force who understood that people craved to be 'humbugged'.

For the next 20 years, the mermaid split its time between New York and Moses Kimball's museum in Boston. Kimball's museum burned down in the early 1800s and it's unclear whether the mermaid was destroyed.

In 1897, Kimball's heirs donated a fake mermaid to Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology that some have speculated might be the original Feejee Mermaid.

Although the Feejee Mermaid may be gone its memory lives on in popular culture as a catch-all term for fake mermaids.





+37

Barnum's American Museum (pictured) opened in an impressive five-story building on the corner of Ann Street and Broadway in Manhattan in 1841 and preceded his circus

Barnum's big break: Chance meeting led him to hire 'extraordinary' four-year-old to entertain crowds for \$3 a week under th

Barnum's big break was his chance meeting with four-year-old 25-
Bridgeport while returning home to Albany, New York, in November

Not much is known about how Barnum discovered Stratton, but g
probably word of mouth, Payne said. There were rumors that Barn
much of the showman's writings exaggerate and distort facts to d



'I don't know of anyone who ever studied the family tree to determine if this idea had merit, and since it came from a half cousin many times removed I believe the idea is usually dismissed and never verified,' he said.

Regardless of the circumstances, Barnum managed to convince the boy's parents Sherwood and Cynthia Stratton, who were of average height, to let him hire their son for four weeks at the rate of \$3, or about \$86, a week, plus room, board and travel for the boy and his mother to New York City.

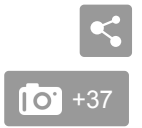
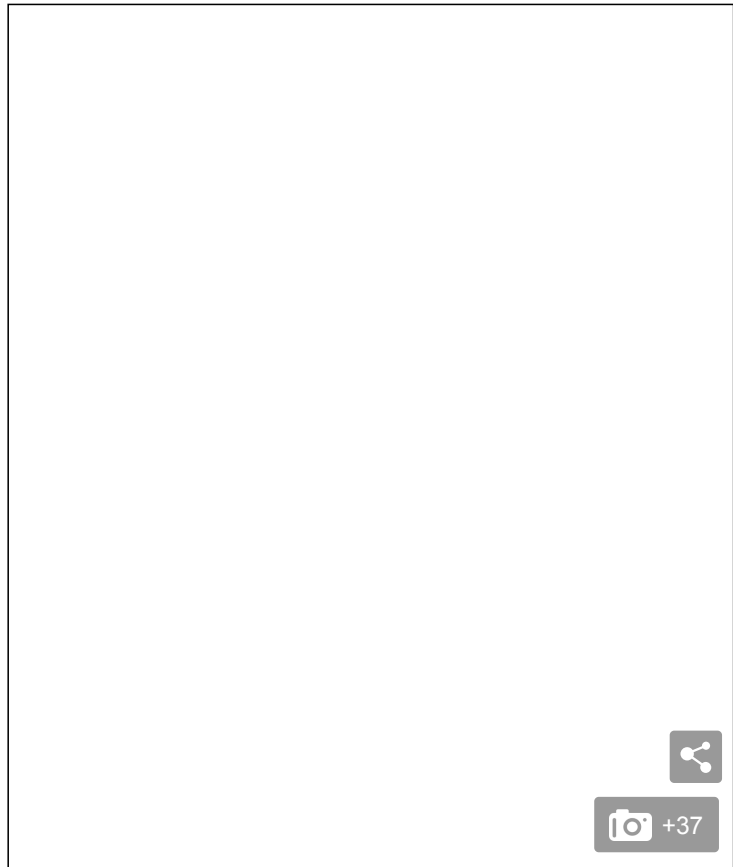
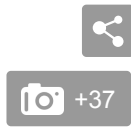
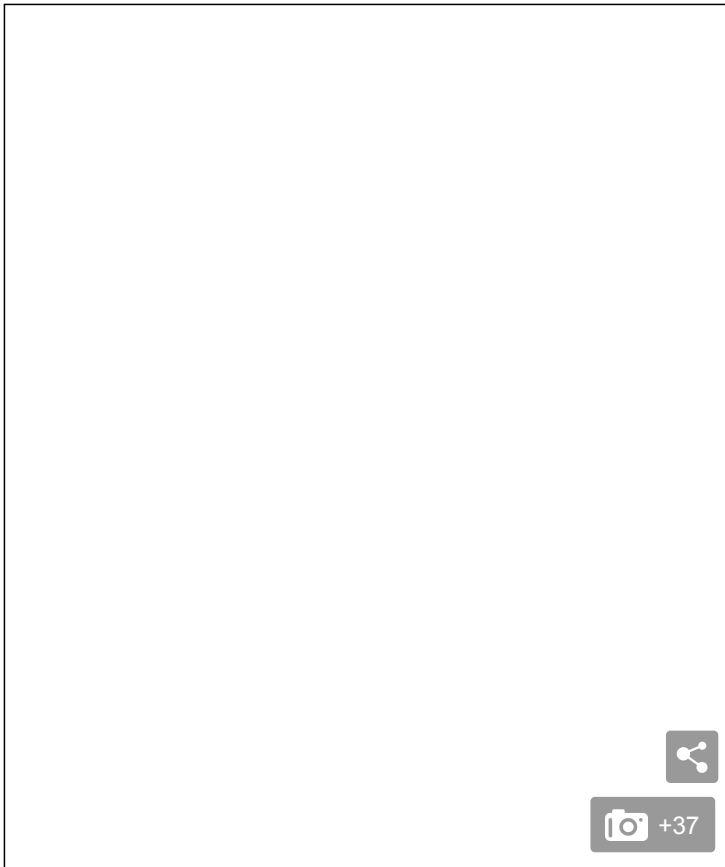
They agreed, and Barnum taught the boy to sing, dance and impersonate famous people at his newly-opened museum, where he entertained in a tiny doll house. Barnum called him Tom Thumb, after the fairytale where a boy no taller than his father's thumb becomes a member of King Arthur's roundtable and marketed him as an 11-year-old English child in order to exaggerate his short stature.



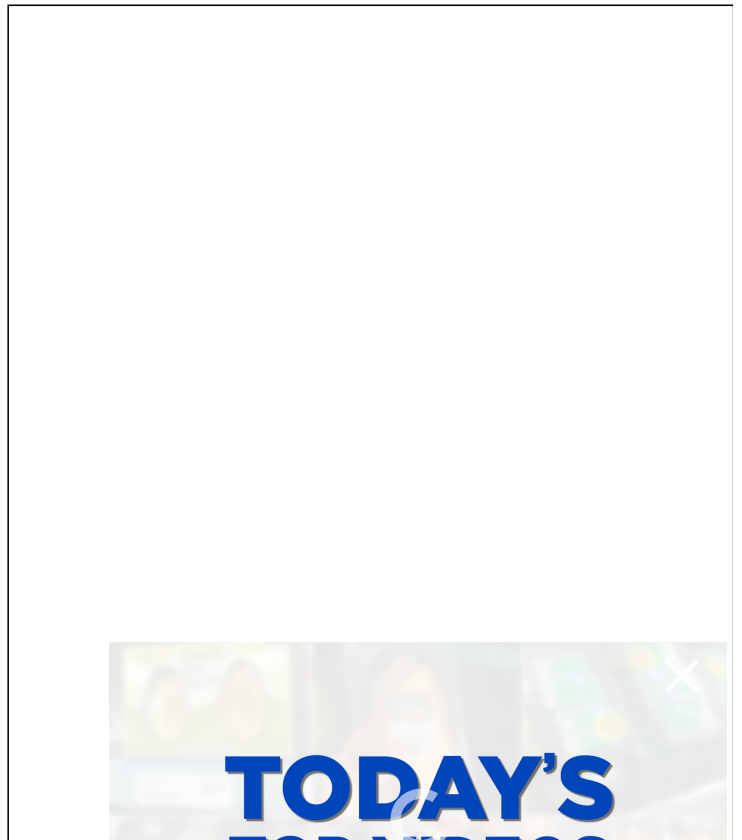
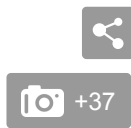
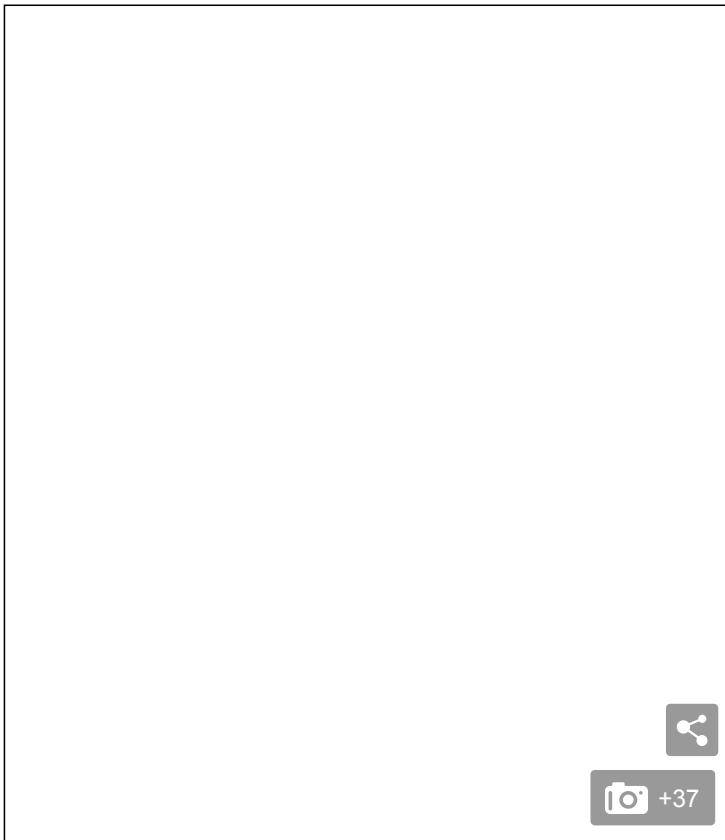


Barnum taught Stratton (pictured in 1848 at 10 years old) to sing, dance and impersonate famous people at his museum, where he entertained in a tiny doll house



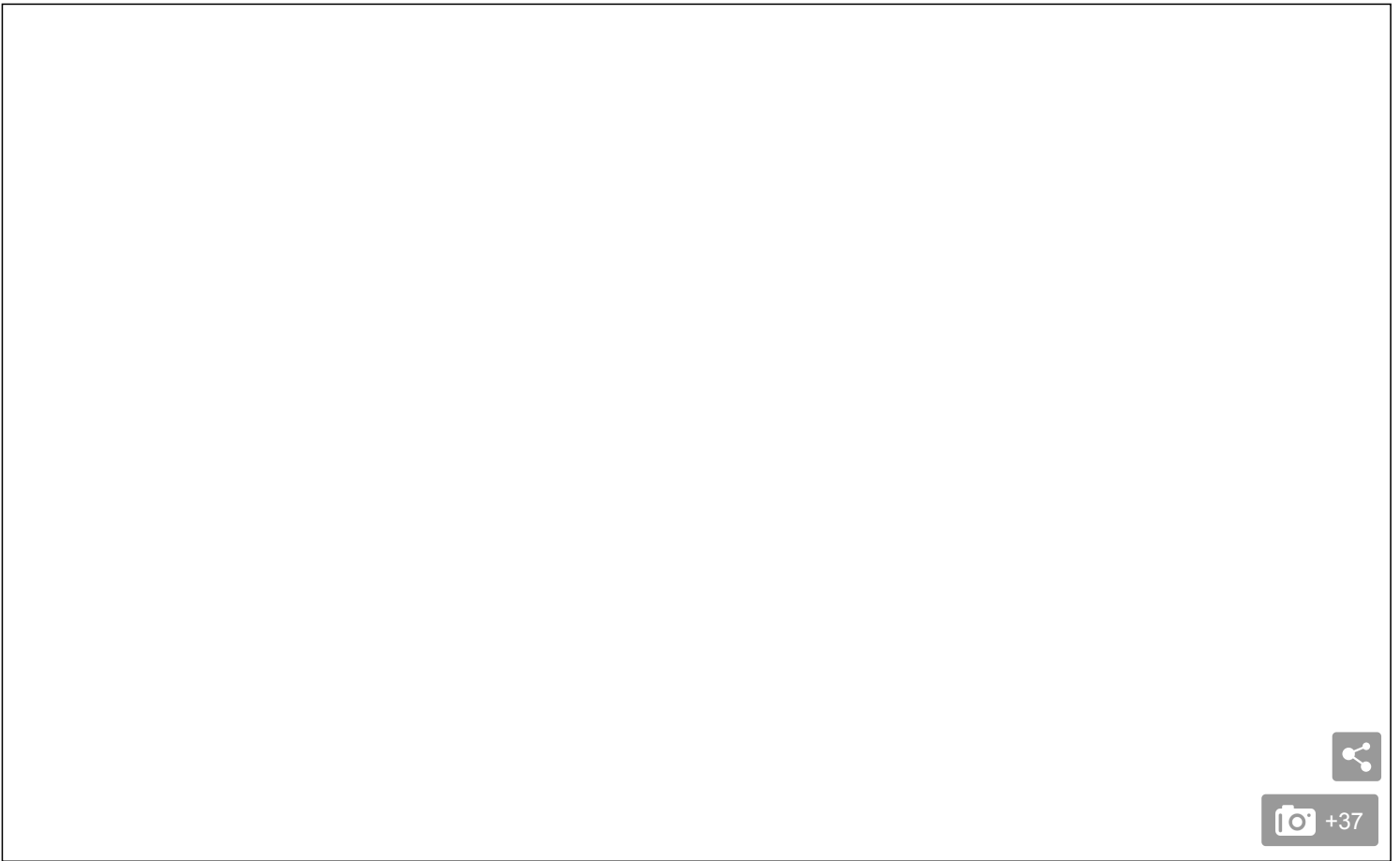


Stratton, by today's standards, made millions off his act. He's seen in this 1875 portrait at 37 years old standing on the hand of a guardsman to exaggerate his short stature



The 58 year old continued to earn fame as a promoter for his touring per museum (left) until it burned down in 1865. One of Barnum's acts there w claimed to be nearly 8ft (right)





The museum's attractions made it a combination zoo, museum, lecture hall (as pictured in this 1853 drawing), wax museum, theater and 'freak show'

People who came to perform at the American Museum felt like part of a family, Saint-Pierre said. '[Barnum] did not refer to them as freaks. He called them natural wonders,' she said. 'He was respectful of them as individuals, and they were quite loyal to him. And he was really giving good employment to people who would probably otherwise struggle to survive in a cruel society.'

Job opportunities for little people were slim in the 19th century. Either they took low-paying work that kept them out of the public eye or joined a sideshow. But Stratton's relationship with Barnum put him in a unique position.

'I would go so far as to say that Stratton was his best friend because when Barnum was down-and-out it was Tom Thumb that came to his rescue financially,' Payne said.

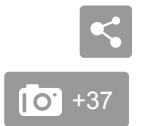
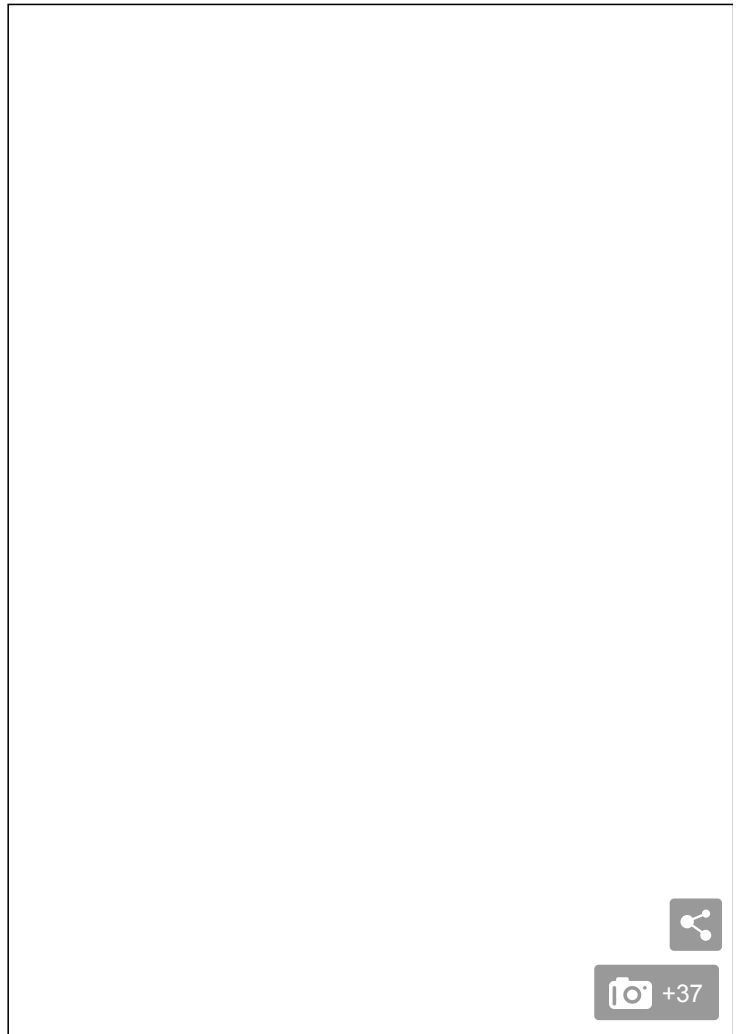
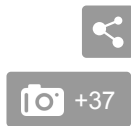
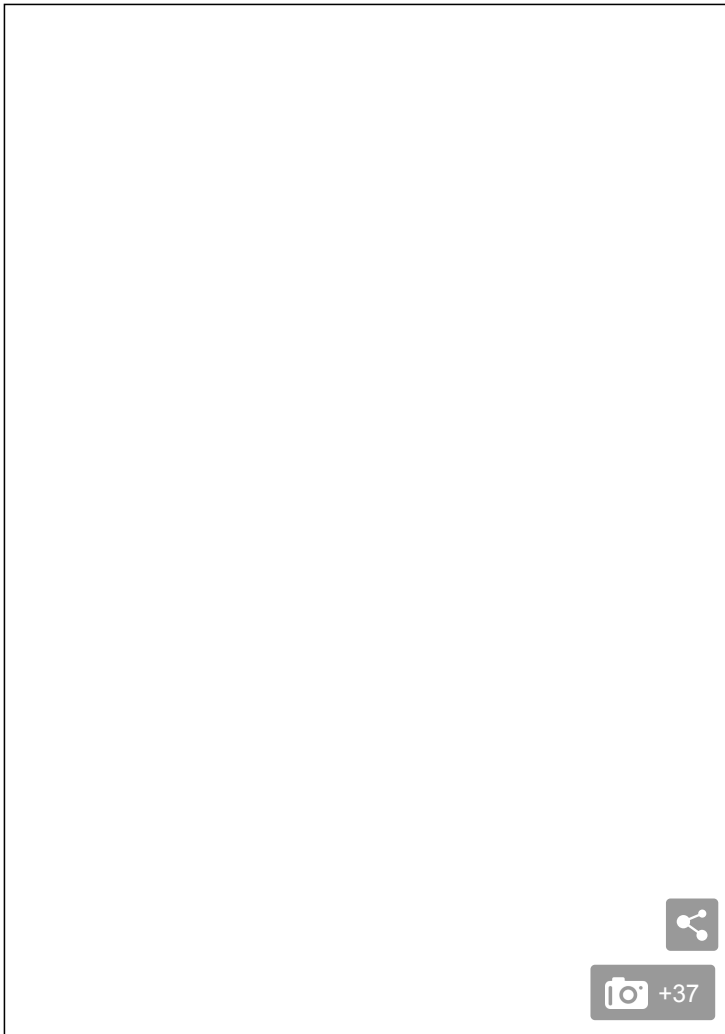
Barnum may have been quick with a quip but he wasn't always good about paying back his loans. Although his American Museum was successful, he had a habit of borrowing money from anyone who would open their wallet for him. He'd use these funds to help foster industrial development in Bridgeport. Unfortunately, he went too far, and in 1855, he filed for bankruptcy. But he didn't give up.



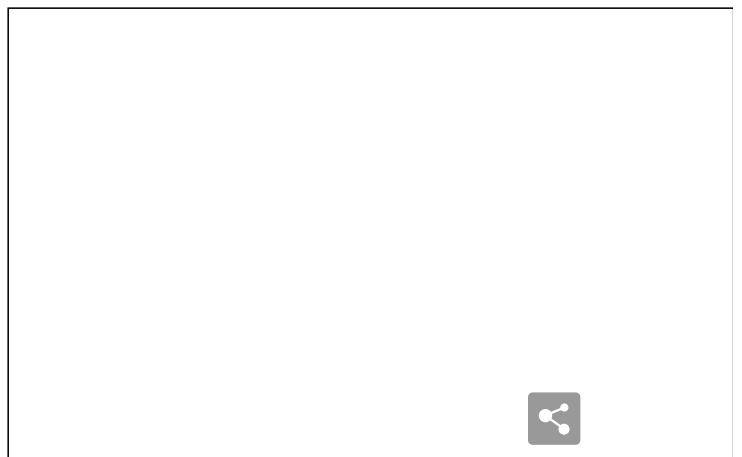
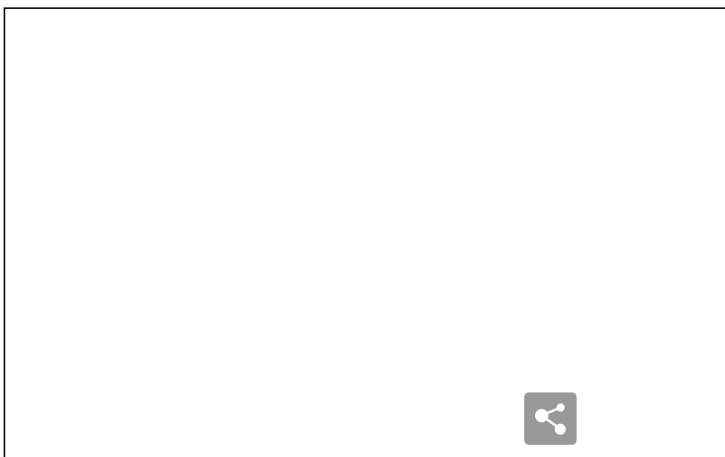


Stratton (pictured here in 1860 at 22 years old), better known as General Tom Thumb, poses in Highland dress for the appreciation of two young ladies. Barnum gave him the nickname after the legendary member of King Arthur's round table





It was on a successful European tour with Stratton that Barnum became aware of Jenny Lind, 'the Swedish Nightingale' (pictured left in her prime and in 1870, right)



Barnum helped make Castle Clinton famous in 1850 when he staged performances (pictured is the landmark's main gate today) with Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind

With the help of Stratton, who came out of retirement, they went on a tour of Europe. During this tour, Barnum became aware of Jenny Lind 'the Swedish Nightingale'. Although he had never heard her sing, Barnum, who was a successful showman, decided to perform in America for \$1,000 a night for 150 nights, all expenses paid. This was an unprecedented public relations campaign in the months leading to her debut that year at Castle Clinton is perhaps the most legendary of all.

