



The Barnum Museum receives a Grant for \$34,213 from the National Endowment for the Humanities

The Barnum Museum recently received a competitive award from the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) (NEH) Preservation and Access Division. The NEH is an independent, federal agency of the United States that awards grants supporting humanities-based projects in cultural institutions in a wide range of categories. The Barnum Museum is the recipient of a Humanities Collections and Reference Resources (HCRR) grant, a type that supports the essential underpinnings for scholarship, education and public programming in the humanities.

The Barnum Museum will receive \$34,213 to undertake planning for a future digitization initiative. Playing upon P. T. Barnum's famous phrase, the project is titled *Planning for "The Greatest Digitization Project on Earth" with the P. T. Barnum Collections of The Barnum Museum and Bridgeport Public Library*. Housed in a National Register Landmark building currently undergoing restoration and repair after a tornado strike in 2010, The Barnum Museum is one of the City of Bridgeport's anchor institutions and serves the local and regional community as well as visitors from across the country. While restoration is underway, the museum has relocated its collections and offices to the People's United Bank Gallery, where it offers a variety of programs, and is open to the public, free of charge on Thursdays and Fridays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The focus of the grant project is the museum's and Bridgeport History Center's core collections pertaining to the legendary showman P. T. Barnum and his associates, such as Swedish singer Jenny Lind, Bridgeport native "Tom Thumb," Jumbo the elephant and many others.

"The museum receives dozens of inquiries every month about P. T. Barnum and they come from all over the world," notes the museum's Executive Director Kathy Maher. "Some are general inquiries, but more often researchers, authors and filmmakers have very specific questions, or are looking for images. Having our resources digitized is the first step to making our collections more accessible as well as generating broader interest in P. T. Barnum's extraordinary contributions, which go far beyond the field of entertainment."

The Barnum Museum's collections includes numerous artifacts including furniture, paintings, clothing, carriages, posters and broadsides, personal items, photographs, rare books, and letters many of which belonged to or pertain to Barnum, his family, and the people he promoted. Likewise, the Bridgeport History Center at the Bridgeport Public Library has extensive collections pertaining to Barnum, mainly documentary items such as letters, posters and other promotional material.

"The History Center, Public Library and the museum have always assisted researchers both locally and from far away," comments Mary Witkowski, Head of the Bridgeport History Center. "By digitizing the wealth of material in our collections we will not only be preserving these unique items, we will also be opening the doors to our collections to the world. Barnum would have loved it."

Both collections will be reviewed by scholars to determine their value to researchers, students and other interested audiences as well as to help determine digitization priorities. Dr. Katherine C. Grier, Professor of History at the University of Delaware and Director of the Museum Studies Program, will be primarily reviewing the objects, while Dr. Neil Harris, Preston and Sterling Morton Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, will concentrate on documentary materials. Dr. Harris is a noted Barnum scholar and the author of numerous books, including Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum (Little, Brown, 1973). Dr. Grier specializes in the study of 19th century material culture, and is the author of Pets in America: A History (Harcourt, 2007) and curator of a traveling exhibition, *Pets in America: The Story of Our Lives with Animals at Home*. Drs. Harris and Grier will begin their assessments of the collections the week of June 24, 2013, and will return to continue their work over the next few months. Other key components of the project involve consultations with a digital collections librarian; a professional photographer, Paul Mutino of Port Chester, NY; and a digitization specialist, Michael J. Bennett from the Homer Babbidge Library at the University of Connecticut.

The planning project will be managed by Adrienne Saint-Pierre, Curator at The Barnum Museum and will be completed in one year. Its comprehensive scope will prepare the museum and library to seek funding for digitizing the selected materials, and making them accessible via the Internet through an aggregate digital archive. An objective of the planning project is to determine where the digital objects would be placed to make them readily “discoverable” to audiences as well as to ensure that they are preserved long-term.

“Projects of this kind require a lot of careful preparation and planning, but we certainly feel the end result will be well worth it. Barnum’s innumerable achievements are an enduring legacy, and we want to make it easy for people--wherever they are--to find these amazing resources,” concluded Maher.

For more information on the NEH or The Barnum Museum, please visit www.neh.gov or www.barnum-museum.org.