Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891), founder of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, which Barnum himself touted to be “the greatest show on earth,” was also a clever businessman, sometimes politician and professional hoaxter. Barnum made his first foray into the circus at age 61, having spent his life influencing the development of the dime museum, as a uniquely American form of entertainment, and promoting the theatre as moralistic and educational.

Born in Bethel, Connecticut, Barnum started a weekly paper at the age of 29, The Herald of Freedom for which he served time in prison for libeling church elders. When lotteries were banned in Connecticut (1834), Barnum’s main source of income, he moved to New York, where he bought Scudder’s American Museum.

“P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, located from 1841 to 1865 at the corner of Broadway and Ann Street in lower Manhattan, has been long recognized by historians as a pivotal institution in the development of nineteenth-century urban culture... Foreshadowing trends in American commercial amusement, the Museum was the first institution to combine sensational entertainment and gaudy display with instruction and moral uplift.” - The Lost Museum CUNY

Barnum’s first hoax, the ‘Fjee’ Mermaid, went on display at the American Museum in 1842. The creature was actually the tail end of a fish sewn to the top of a juvenile monkey, and displayed as a mummified ‘mermaid.’ Barnum defended the hoax, saying his only intention was to attract attention to his museum.

General Tom Thumb, Charles Sherwood Stratton (1838 - 1883), was a little person, standing at 25 inches tall, and the second act to go on display at the American Museum. At the time Stratton was said to be eleven, however, he was actually four when first put on display in 1842. To amuse visitors Stratton drank, smoked, and did impersonations of Hercules and Napoleon. He would eventually become a good friend to Barnum, and a business partner. Stratton owned his own yacht, a New York apartment and a specially made house on Connecticut’s Thimble Island. Stratton died in 1883 due to a sudden stroke, at which point he was recorded at 3.35 feet tall, having begun to grow very slowly in 1847.

One of Barnum’s greatest successes was the American tour of European sensation, Jenny Lind (1820-52). Lind, known as the “Swedish Nightingale”, was an opera singer and a deeply devout and moralistic personality. As part of her tour Lind performed in the auditorium above the Fitchburg Railroad Station on Causeway Street and at the National Theatre in the West End.

In 1871, at the age of 61, Barnum made his first foray into the business that he is best known for, the circus. Barnum opened his first traveling circus in Wisconsin with William Cameron Coupl, calling it “P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome.” In 1881 the circus name became much shorter, the Barnum and Bailey Circus, after starting a new partnership with James The Barnum and Bailey Circus was bought by the Ringling Brothers in 1907 but the two circuses weren’t merged until 1919.