One hundred years before the Ringling Brothers opened at the Boston Garden (1872), an equestrian circus with jugglers, acrobats and clowns performed at the Stewart's American Amphitheatre on the corner of Teas­seven and Portland Streets in the West End. The story of the American circus begins with a long history of itinerant performers in Europe. For centuries, clowns and acrobats traveled through­out Europe entertaining every class of people. But, it was not until 1770, that a diverse set of per­formers organized under one name, performed together, setting the stage for the modern circus.

In 1770 Philip Astley (1742-1814), a British war hero, and ‘father of the modern circus’, opened his own riding school in London, Astley’s Amphitheatre, which learned acrobatic horse riding. As he became more popular and his talents more lucrative, Astley began to hire numbering, acrobats and performing dogs to play in between his acts, the first circus troupe.

Twenty years after Astley opened the first circus in London, Bill Ricketts brought the circus to America (1792), hiring John Darin, who would become a famous circus professional and stage owner. Be­fore Ricketts, however, precursors existed in many different forms. In America, as early as 1729, exotic animal acts like the African Lion, were exhibited for entertainment, a dramatic departure from everyday life in Boston.

‘At the South End of Boston...to be seen The Lyon... He is not only the Largest and most Noble, but the Tame­st and most Beautiful Creature of his Kind, that has been seen, he goes daily, and is the wonder of all who see him. Constant attendance is given to all Persons who desire to satisfy themselves with the sight of him.’ - Boston Gazette, 1729.

In the same year a canal was brought to Cold Lime in the West End their renamed Portland Street.

‘Just arrived from Africa, a very large Camel being about Seven Foot high, and Three Foot long, and is the first of its Kind ever brought into America to be seen at the bottom of Cold Lane where daily Attendance is given.’ - Boston Gazette, 1729.

By the 1770s, military horsemen and travelling clowns were a common sight at fairs and fairs. Even in present Boston, Thomas Pocock was permitted to write an equestrian archway set in 1765 on the Boston Common.

‘A Fool would mount a single horse at full speed, with his right foot in the stirrup, and his left extended at a consider­able distance from the horse, then two horses in full speed, with a foot in the stirrup of each saddle, and in that position leap a line to mount a single horse at full speed, and ride a point.”

The circus quickly became an acceptable form of entertainment. George Washington was a great fan of Bolso’s circus, legitimising the dramatic theatre through comedy. The performance of plays, deemed to be a “low” form of entertainment and unacceptable for the devoutly puritan town, had been outlawed in Boston before the 1770s. As circuses became more popular in the late 1770s and early 1800s, the town began to open itself up to dramatic theatre. Exemplifying this change, in the West End, the American Amphitheatre, built for an equestrian circus, would eventually become the National Theatre for the pursuit of dramatic performance.

Built in the Bull finer Triangle in 1811 by T.L. Stewart’s Circus Co., the American Amphitheatre was constructed only three years after the Mill Pond was finally filled in the corner of Traverse and Portland Streets. The Bullfinch Triangle, was originally designed by Charles Bulfinch in 1803 as a residential area.

‘It still took some time for more streets to be laid out, and the Bullfin Triangle itself never developed as a residential area as it was originally planned; instead, the area grew around facilities.”

Although the American Amphitheatre was intended to house the Stew­art’s Equestrian Circus during the winter, Stewart quickly leased the building to William Pocock who operated a linemen’s Pocock created a stage for dramatic theatre instead of a ring for equestrian performances, and renamed it the Warren Theatre (1832-1858). Soon Pocock bought the building and surrounding property, building a larger and outdoor. different theatre in 1846, the National Theatre, which stood until 1851. Among the many notable performers to take the stage at the National Theatre were Jenny Lind, who performed at the theatre in 1851, James June (1847), and the remarkable trick rider James Robinson (1851).

National Theatre

The Bullinching Triangle, was originally designed by Charles Bulfinch in 1803 as a residential area...