

## **Barnum Museum receives National Endowment grant for P. T. Barnum historical resources**

*Continued ...*

Among the thousand items included in the project are Barnum's letters and business records, large-format photographs of his homes' interiors, clothing and personal articles, and bespoke furniture featuring the fanciful carving he favored. Also included are examples of custom-made furniture, clothing, and carriages owned by "General Tom Thumb," a Bridgeport native whom P. T. Barnum discovered and made famous in the 1840s. Items pertaining to Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, whom Barnum brought to America in 1850, Jumbo the elephant, who arrived in New York from the London Zoo in 1882, are also part of the project.

As a history resource for students and scholars, the combination of documents and artifacts owned by the two institutions makes for an extraordinarily rich and diverse array of material to explore. Virtually all the items are rare and in many cases they are unique.

Barnum Museum Curator Adrienne Saint-Pierre notes that the opportunity to link artifacts with documents is rewarding because it can lead to new insights. "Barnum's personality can be a bit elusive—he was involved in so many things, and had such a far-reaching and diverse career. It is helpful to have tangible artifacts that speak to his many achievements, including those that are lesser known, like his Temperance speeches and his years serving in the State Legislature." A magnificent gold medal presented to P. T. Barnum by Father Theobald Mathew of Ireland is testament to Barnum's influence in promoting Temperance in an era when drunkenness was a widespread and deep-rooted problem.

One of the most unusual items is a souvenir slice of wedding cake, dating to the 1863 marriage of Charles Stratton (a.k.a, General Tom Thumb) and Lavinia Warren Bump. "This was a traditional brandy-soaked cake, dense with dried fruit, so it was "self-preserving" because of the liquor," Saint-Pierre comments. "In those days, it was a custom to give your wedding guests a little box containing a slice of the cake, which they were to eat one year later. Apparently this piece didn't get eaten!"

A unique piece is a finely tailored navy and scarlet wool jacket worn by General Tom Thumb, its style mimicking a military tailcoat jacket. It was donated to the museum in 2014 by a gentleman in Milford whose father had received the jacket as a gift in the 1950s; it was then put away in the family's attic for years. "A few moths nibbled at it, but otherwise it is in very good condition for a garment more than 150 years old," Saint-Pierre noted.

Conservation treatments are now underway on several objects requiring work before they are professionally photographed.

Cataloging and scanning of archival material will begin this summer. The vendors for the projects include the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, MA; the Textile Conservation Workshop in South Salem, NY; Christopher Augerson Fine Arts in Millbrook, NY; and photographer Paul Mutino of Port Chester, NY. Humanities scholar Dr. Katherine C. Grier, Professor of History and Material Culture Studies at the University of Delaware, will be contributing her expertise in the cataloging portion of the project.

#### **ABOUT THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES**

*Created in 1965 as an independent federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities supports research and learning in history, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities by funding selected, peer-reviewed proposals from around the nation. The Endowment awards grants to top-rated proposals examined by panels of independent, external reviewers. NEH grants typically go to cultural institutions, such as museums, archives, libraries, colleges, universities, public television, and radio stations, and to individual scholars. Additional information about the National Endowment for the Humanities and its grant programs is available at: [www.neh.gov](http://www.neh.gov).*

#### **ABOUT THE BARNUM MUSEUM:**

*Bridgeport's Barnum Museum is one of P. T. Barnum's many philanthropic gifts. Completed in 1893, the architecturally significant building boasts a unique combination of styles and terra cotta ornamentation, and is listed on the National Register. Today the museum proudly shares the history and legacy of the world-famous entrepreneur, showman, and museum proprietor, who was also a state legislator, mayor, real estate developer, and philanthropist. The museum is home to thousands of artifacts, many pertaining to Bridgeport native Tom Thumb and his wife, as well as the P. T. Barnum Family, and Nathaniel Wheeler Family. Their furniture, carriages, artwork and other items are currently displayed, along with a centaur and mermaid. Since 2010, the historic building has been undergoing repair and restoration due to a series of weather events that compromised the structure. The Museum is currently open for visitors in the People's United Bank Gallery located behind the historic building, open for viewing and tours from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays year round. There is no admission charge but donations are welcome.*