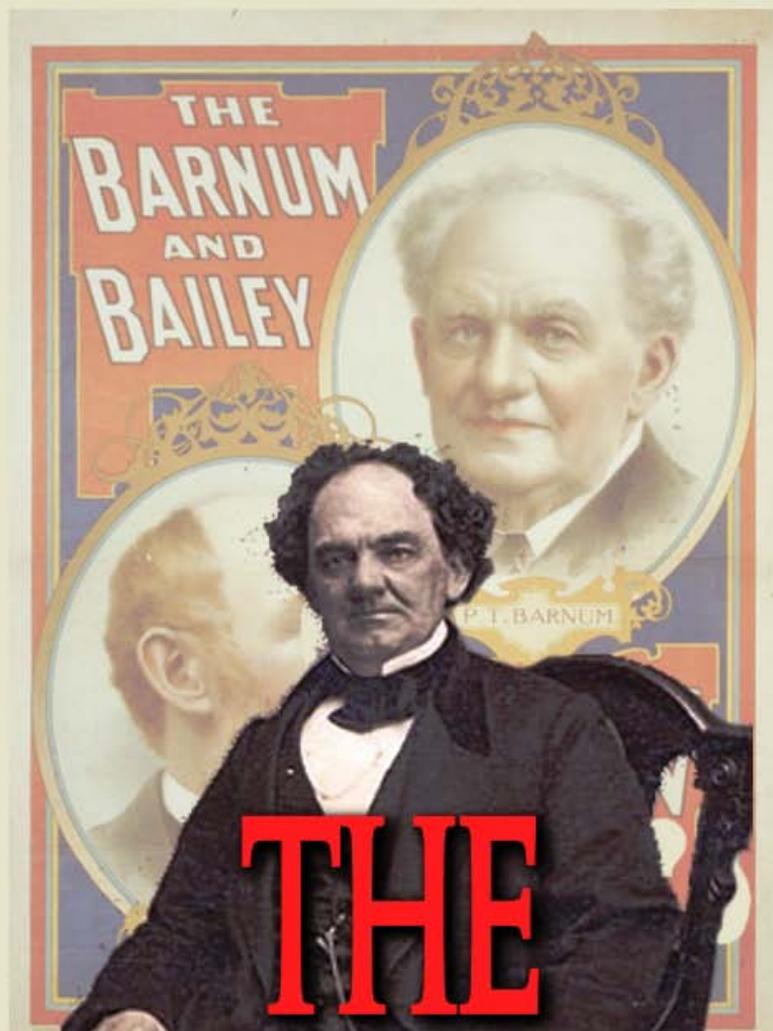


IRVING WALLACE



THE FABULOUS SHOWMAN

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Irving Wallace



MACABRE INK

Digital Edition published by Crossroad Press

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Copy-edited by: David Dodd

Cover Design By: David Dodd

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I
Exhibit One
Gen. Washington's Nurse

On an early August morning in 1835 a literate majority of New York City's 270,000 citizens awakened to learn of a new phenomenon in their midst. A new age was upon them—the age of showmanship.

In the weeks and months before that fateful morning, all classes of New Yorkers—the old-fashioned Knickerbockers, the *nouveaux riches* or Shoddyites, the professional people and artists—had prided themselves on the fact that they possessed and patronized more churches than places of amusement. Laws were blue, and life was gray. Theaters and exhibitions were regarded by most as outposts of the Devil. Sport was confined to intoxication, assault and battery, and discreet fornication.

Newspapers, as yet inhibited, were devoted to chaste reportage: the Democratic Party had nominated bantam cock Martin Van Buren for President; Oberlin College, to dramatize its attitude toward slavery, was accepting Negro students; a British chemist named James Smithson had willed £100,000 to establish an American institute "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men"; the National Trades' Union deplored child labor in the cotton and wool industries; the frigate *Constitution* had recently returned from Europe, bearing as its most distinguished passenger Edward Livingston, United States minister to France; General Sam Houston had been made the commander of the Texan army; the season's best-seller was Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Rienzi*, and *The Letters and Papers of Washington*, edited by Jared Sparks, had just been published.

But of curiosity and wonder and sensation there was little until that early August morning when New Yorkers awakened to read in press advertisements, on street posters, in pamphlets hawked at six cents a copy, that a colored woman 161 years of age, who had been President George Washington's nurse and nanny was being placed on public exhibit in Niblo's Garden. The ancient's name was Joice Heth, the name of her sponsor Phineas T. Barnum.

The advertisements read: "The Greatest Natural & National Curiosity in The World. Joice Heth, nurse to General George Washington, (the Father of our Country). . . . Joice Heth is unquestionably the most astonishing and interesting curiosity in the World! She was the slave of Augustine Washington (the father of General Washington), and was the first person who put clothes on the unconscious infant, who, in after days, led our heroic fathers on to glory, to victory, and freedom. To use her own language when speaking of the illustrious Father of His Country, 'she raised him.' Joice Heth was born in the year 1674, and has, consequently, now arrived at the astonishing Age of 161 Years. She weighs but Forty-Six Pounds, and yet is very cheerful and interesting. She retains her faculties in an unparalleled degree, converses freely, sings numerous hymns,

relates many interesting anecdotes of *the boy* Washington, and often laughs heartily at her own remarks, or those of the spectators. Her health is perfectly good, and her appearance very neat. She is a Baptist and takes great pleasure in conversing with ministers and religious persons. The appearance of this marvelous relic of antiquity strikes the beholder with amazement, and convinces him that his eyes are resting on the oldest specimen of mortality they ever before beheld. Original, authentic, and indisputable documents accompanying her prove, however astonishing the fact may appear, that Joice Heth is in every respect the person she is represented."

The announcement was oddly electrifying. It was something different in the drab monotony of everyday routine. Here was a living link to the first President, already in his grave thirty-six years and an austere deity to a new generation. Here was a hoary human whose croaking voice had cooed to the infant Washington and whose wrinkled hands had caressed him. To view this relic excavated from the dim past would be strange fun and even patriotic. And because the advertisements promised that she was a True Believer who chanted "hymns" and took pleasure in "conversing with ministers," a visit to this historic freak would certainly not offend the clergy or break its edicts against frivolity and hedonism.

Even as thousands of New Yorkers, titillated, prepared to invade Niblo's Garden for a day's diversion, thousands more considered the attraction and wondered if it was authentic. After all, who was this P. T. Barnum anyway? Was he reputable enough to stand behind his fantastic find?

Renown and repute P. T. Barnum had not in that late summer of 1835. He was, indeed, a nonentity — almost for the very last time in what was to be a most notorious and spectacular life. Later, of course, he would amass a fortune of four million dollars, and in so doing become a household name in America and throughout the world. He would become the personal friend of Queen Victoria and Abraham Lincoln, of William Ewart Gladstone and Mark Twain, of William Makepeace Thackeray and Horace Greeley. He would introduce to America the modern public museum, the popular concert, and the three-ring circus, all forerunners of vaudeville, motion pictures, and television. He would invent modern advertising and showmanship. And he would make himself an international legend. Once, meeting General Ulysses S. Grant, he would say: "General, since your journey around the world you are the best-known man on the globe," and Grant would honestly reply: "No, sir, your name is familiar to multitudes who never heard of me. Wherever I went, among the most distant nations, the fact that I was an American led to constant inquiries whether I knew Barnum."

But this was 1835, and P. T. Barnum was as yet unsuccessful and unknown. At the time when he promoted Joice Heth, he was only twenty-five, a Connecticut Yankee six foot two inches in height, a bundle of massive energy, with curly, receding hair above wide ingenuous blue eyes, a bulbous nose, a full, amused mouth, a cleft chin, and a high-pitched voice. Until this moment, he had been Jack-of-all-trades and master of

none. He had served as a clerk in several retail shops, had conducted legal lotteries, had been proprietor of his own fruit store, had edited a liberal weekly, had sold hats and caps on commission, and, finally, had opened a small grocery store in New York with one John Moody as his partner, supplementing this income by running a boardinghouse with his wife. Not until his discovery of Joice Heth had he found himself. But in his flamboyant exhibition of this wizened and repulsive nursemaid, he would later admit: "I had at last found my true vocation." Equally important, his eager, waiting public had at last found a way of having fun without the fear of fire and brimstone.

How had the age of showmanship come about?

On an ordinary working day in the latter part of July 1835, young Phineas T. Barnum was morosely tending his grocery store and consulting advertisements of the penny *New York Sun* in the hope of finding some golden opportunity, when an old neighbor and customer named Coley Bartram, of Reading, Connecticut, came calling.

As Bartram made his purchases, he related some of his recent activities, and then, remembering the proprietor's unceasing interest in speculative investments, he told Barnum of the latest project that he had discarded. Bartram explained that recently he and one R. W. Lindsay had purchased a curiosity as a business investment, a slave woman thought to be 161 years old and formerly the nurse of President Washington. They had been exhibiting her at the Masonic Hall in Philadelphia. But Bartram had soon wearied of the project, and had sold his interest in the woman to Lindsay. And now Lindsay, homesick for his native Kentucky and feeling that he had little ability as a showman, wanted to get rid of the woman and was casting about for a buyer. Was this something that might interest Barnum?

At once Barnum was attentive. He vaguely recalled having read several paragraphs about the exhibit in the New York press. Could Bartram refresh his memory? Bartram could, indeed. He handed Barnum a clipping from *The Pennsylvania Inquirer*, dated July 1, 1835:

"CURIOSITY.—The citizens of Philadelphia and its vicinity have an opportunity of witnessing at the Masonic Hall, one of the greatest natural curiosities ever witnessed, viz., JOICE HETH, a negress aged 161 years, who formerly belonged to the father of General Washington. She has been a member of the Baptist church one hundred and sixteen years, and can rehearse many hymns, and sing them according to former custom. She was born near the old Potomac River in Virginia, and has for ninety or one hundred years lived in Paris, Kentucky, with the Bowling family.

"All who have seen this extraordinary woman are satisfied of the truth of the account of her age. The evidence of the Bowling family, which is respectable, is strong, but the original bill of sale of Augustine Washington, in his own handwriting, and other

evidence which the proprietor has in his possession, will satisfy even the most incredulous.

"A lady will attend at the hall during the afternoon and evening for the accommodation of those ladies who may call."

Something stirred inside Barnum. He must see this oddity for himself. At the earliest opportunity, he made off for Philadelphia by stagecoach, sought out Lindsay at the Masonic Hall, confirmed the fact that Joice Heth was for sale, and then asked to meet her.

He was solemnly ushered into the presence of the extraordinary ancient. "She was lying upon a high lounge in the middle of the room," he later reported in his autobiography. "Her lower extremities were drawn up, with her knees elevated some two feet above the top of the lounge. She was apparently in good health and spirits, but former disease or old age, or perhaps both combined, had rendered her unable to change her position; in fact, although she could move one of her arms at will, her lower limbs were fixed in their position, and could not be straightened. She was totally blind, and her eyes were so deeply sunken in their sockets that the eyeballs seemed to have disappeared altogether. She had no teeth, but possessed a head of thick, bushy gray hair. Her left arm lay across her breast, and she had no power to remove it. The fingers of her left hand were drawn so as nearly to close it and remained fixed and immovable. The nails upon that hand were about four inches in length, and extended above her wrist. The nails upon her large toes had also grown to the thickness of nearly a quarter of an inch."

Gazing at her, Barnum reflected that she could as easily be "a thousand years old as any other age." He began to converse with her. He found her at first "sociable" and finally "garrulous"—especially when she reminisced about her servitude under George Washington's father and her duties in raising "dear little George" to maturity. Eventually she discussed the Baptist Church, and she sang a hymn.

Barnum was enchanted. He took Lindsay aside. Only one point remained to be discussed: proof of her age. Lindsay said that he had this proof. He explained that before George Washington's birth Augustine Washington had sold Joice Heth to his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Atwood, who also lived in Bridges Creek, Virginia. When George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, his father borrowed Joice Heth back from his sister-in-law and retained her to raise the future President. The proof itself was encased in a glass frame. It was a yellowing document, greatly creased and worn, a bill of sale from Augustine Washington to his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Atwood, for "one negro woman, named Joice Heth, aged fifty-four years, for and in consideration of the sum of thirty-three pounds lawful money of Virginia." The document was dated February 5, 1727, and it had been witnessed by William Washington and Richard Buckner.

Barnum was satisfied. Only one more question disturbed him. Why had the existence "of such an extraordinary old woman" not come to light years before? Lindsay had the answer. He replied "that she had been lying in an out-house of John S. Bowling of Kentucky for many years, that no one knew or seemed to care how old she was, that she had been brought thither from Virginia a long time ago, and that the fact of her extreme age had been but recently brought to light by the discovery of this old bill of sale in the Record Office in Virginia by the son of Mr. Bowling, who, while looking over the ancient papers in that office, happened to notice the paper endorsed Joice Heth."

Lindsay, a neighbor of the respectable Mr. Bowling, had heard of the living antique and purchased her, and now he was prepared to dispose of her to Barnum for \$3,000. Barnum, always at his best in a horse trade, reacted unfavorably to the price. The two men haggled, and when they were done Lindsay had agreed to accept \$1,000 for his exhibit.

Barnum had only \$500 to his name. He took a ten-day option on Joice Heth, and then returned to New York to raise the rest of the money. It was not easy. Barnum convinced his wife that though, true enough, there was the definite risk that Joice Heth might die and they would lose their full investment, the venture held enough promise to warrant gambling their entire savings. Then, dazzling a friend with the marvel of his freak, he borrowed the remaining \$500. And finally, because he needed cash for living and incidental business expenses, he sold his half interest in the grocery store to his partner, Moody. Then he rushed back to Philadelphia, paid off Lindsay, and overnight became showman and slaveholder.

The site chosen for the exhibition was all-important. Barnum selected Niblo's Garden. This attractive open-air saloon or refreshment center, profuse with flowers and trees, featured a musical floor show. Once Barnum had applied to William Niblo, the proprietor, for a job as bartender, and now, presenting himself again, he was grateful that Niblo did not remember that occasion.

While Niblo had no desire to display Joice Heth in his saloon, he was agreeable to leasing Barnum a large apartment in the building next door. In return for renting this room, paying for all printing and advertising, and furnishing a ticket-seller, Niblo was promised one half of the gross box-office receipts. Barnum next proceeded to hire an assistant, someone who would help him in promotion and serve as master of ceremonies. The assistant was Levi Lyman, a onetime attorney who had practiced in Penn Yan, New York. "He was a shrewd, sociable and somewhat indolent Yankee," Barnum said, "possessed a good knowledge of human nature, was polite, agreeable, could converse on most subjects." The stage was set for "Aunt Joice," as Barnum liked to call his investment.

Barnum filled the newspapers with advertisements and flooded the metropolis with provocative posters. Levi Lyman wrote a learned pamphlet on Washington's nurse, and this, too, was added to the barrage of publicity. In a single week, New York was made

As the Hugh Jackman movie *The Greatest Showman* was about to be released I was interested in learning more about P.T. Barnum and his adventures. I enjoyed learning about his life and the choices he made. 1 person found this helpful. *The Greatest Showman* is an original musical that celebrates the birth of show business. Hugh Jackman, Michelle Williams, Zac Efron and Zendaya all star in this tale about ringmaster PT Barnum. It's all-singing, all-dancing and all-out entertaining. A Most read in fabulous. No kidding. Don't let your kids play in the park - mine got coronavirus & were hospitalised. Besides the towering figure of Barnum himself, this book's cast of characters includes not only Jenny Lind, Jumbo, and Tom Thumb, but also such ill-assorted figures as Chang and Eng (the original Siamese Twins), Queen Victoria herself, captive white whales, 'The Feejee Mermaid,' and Abraham Lincoln. This is far and away the best biography of one of the most fascinating of all Americans.