



NHL Executive Summary



Name of Property: Barnum Institute of Science and History
City, State: Bridgeport, CT
Period of Significance: 1893–1934
NHL Criteria: 2
NHL Theme: III. Expressing Cultural Values
1. Educational and intellectual currents
6. Popular and traditional culture

Previous Recognition: National Register of Historic Places, 1972

National Historic Context:
XXVII. Education
G. Adjunct Educational Institutions
1. Museums, Archives, and Botanical Gardens
XXXIV. Recreation
B. Spectator Pastimes
4. Circuses
5. Zoos, Aquariums, and Planetariums



NHL Significance:

- The Barnum Institute has exceptional merit in American history through its association with nationally renowned, innovative, self-made businessman Phineas T. Barnum (P. T. Barnum) (1810–1891).
- The period of significance for the property begins with the Barnum Institute’s opening in 1893, extends through 41 years of operation under three organizations as Barnum arranged, and ends in 1934 when the City of Bridgeport assumed ownership.
- P. T. Barnum made outstanding contributions to the shaping and expression of American cultural values throughout his illustrious career, but also is and was a controversial figure. Barnum’s career as a showman built upon exploitative practices that took advantage of many people whose social status was vulnerable because of their race, gender, physical characteristics, or country of origin.
- His cultivation of instructional entertainment on a mass scale from the 1830s to the 1880s defined American popular and museum culture in the nineteenth century and influenced its development throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.
- Barnum presented speculation within a world of curiosity to encourage people to derive their own opinions and truths, explore the irrational, and examine imaginative possibility. At the same time, the shows and exhibits that he presented and popularized reinforced racist ideologies and represented people with physical and mental disabilities as abnormal.
- The Barnum Institute, established at the end of Barnum’s career and completed in 1893 after his death, embodies the mature and culminating vision of entertainment and education that Barnum successfully pioneered and developed throughout his remarkable life and work.

Integrity:

- The Barnum Institute was the last of several public buildings that Barnum conceived for the purposes of intellectual exchange and public instructional entertainment. He intended it to be a research library, museum, and lecture hall and to serve as an architectural landmark in the city of Bridgeport, Connecticut.
- This is the only surviving building with architectural integrity associated with this American cultural icon.
- Located on its original foundation, the building retains the architectural form, appearance and character dating to its original Barnum design and subsequent construction.
- The Barnum Museum has undertaken a massive restoration and re-envisioning effort to restore the building to full operational capacity following a series of natural disasters.
- The Barnum Institute collection began with the individual collections of the Bridgeport Scientific Society, the Fairfield County Historical Society, and the Bridgeport Medical Association and with items donated by P. T. Barnum before his death in 1891 and by his family. Approximately one-third of the current 60,000 artifacts were donated by Barnum and these organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Owner of Property: City of Bridgeport

Acreage of Property: 0.15



Origins of Nomination: This nomination was initiated by the Barnum Institute and Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: This nomination will highlight the importance of a well-known nationally significant American figure.

Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program: None known.

Public Comments Favoring Designation (received as of August 21, 2023):

- Mary Dunne, Connecticut State Historic Preservation Officer
- Jenny Scofield, National Register and Architectural Survey Coordinator, Connecticut SHPO
- Kathleen Maher, Executive Director, Barnum Museum

Landmarks Committee Comments:

- Define “Jeffersonian Democrat” in the nomination.
- Nomination should be more direct about Barnum’s actions, opinions, and speech throughout his life. He was a product of his Jim Crow times and his legacy is complicated. More nuance and editing of the text would help with explaining the whole man.
- Mention that the modern building wrapping around the museum was built as a revitalization project and check the terminology used to describe the museum’s style.

Landmarks Committee Recommendation:

The Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board recommend to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Barnum Institute of Science and History in Bridgeport, Connecticut, as a National Historic Landmark, with any additions and corrections as noted by the Committee being made prior to the nomination being forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for action. [NHL Program note: Revisions were completed prior to the National Park System Advisory Board meeting.]

Advisory Board Recommendation: The National Park System Advisory Board recommends to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Barnum Institute of Science and History in Bridgeport, Connecticut, as a National Historic Landmark.