Dennett, Andrea. Weird and Wonderful; The Dime Museum in Americ
(NYU Press, 1994).

1. The Origins of the Dime Museum, 1782–1840

Come hither, come hither by night or by day,
There's plenty to look at and little to pay;
You may stroll through the rooms and at every turn
There's something to please you and something to learn.
If weary and heated, rest here at your ease,
There's a fountain to cool you and music to please.
—Advertisement for the Western Museum of Cincinnati, 1834

The earliest museums in this country, unlike dime museums, were created in the spirit of the Enlightenment and were meant to be centers of scientific study.[1] Private collections—often called "cabinets of wonders and curiosities"—were generally owned by wealthy citizens or by organizations such as libraries or so-called philosophical societies.[2] Most of the objects in these cabinets were labeled and displayed according to the Linnaean system of classification, which related each object to another in the so-called great chain of being.[3] Cabinets also included paintings and books, and many functioned as libraries.

Postrevolutionary America, however, was not a wealthy country, and philanthropy did not abound. But patriotism and a sense of democracy, coupled with the hope of disseminating knowledge and preserving New World culture, caused many eighteenth-century Americans who had amassed collections of books and objects to invite the public to view their assemblages, sometimes for a small fee. Some began gathering and displaying their collections as a way to earn a livelihood, or at least to supplement a meager income. Unlike the wealthy private cabinet owners, this new breed of museum proprietor depended on ticket sales to maintain his collection. Many museum managers who prided themselves on exhibiting only high-quality items, however, were soon compelled to display sensational novelties to attract crowds and remain solvent. As museums began to compete with one another for patrons, proprietors were driven to concoct gimmicks and create phony relics. The "associated-value items" (artifacts that achieved importance by virtue of their association with a famous person, for example George Washington's shaving brush and night-cap or the bedroom curtains of Mary Queen of Scots) became essential displays. Obtaining the most novel and unusual exhibits, in fact, eventually became more important than maintaining a museum's pedagogical goals.

By the early nineteenth century, such live performers as musicians, hypnotists, and freaks had penetrated scientific museums.[4] Managers justified this innovation by claiming that their museums were repositories of rational amusements, establishments that helped divert pleasure seekers from such vices as gambling, drinking, and prostitution. These managers clearly expected live performers to attract rather than repel the bourgeois public. It was difficult, however, for them to strike the right balance between high-brow scientific exhibits and popular theatrical displays. Some collections, once reputed to be rational amusements, transformed themselves into exhibitions that pointedly favored the amusing over the rational.[5] This shift in emphasis paved the way for a totally new genre of popular entertainment, the dime museum. The raison d'être of the dime museum was the one-of-a-kind live exhibit, and a museum's reputation, popularity, and longevity resided in its diversified program of live performance.

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The rise of the dime museum in the middle of the nineteenth century was a by-product of the enormous expansion of the American urban landscape. Rural migration and European immigration created cities filled with diverse peoples who desperately needed new and respectable forms of cheap entertainment. The clash of nationalities, religions, and classes created feelings of displacement and anxiety in city dwellers. Immigrants had to adjust to a new and alien culture, farm laborers were transformed into factory workers, and white-collar employees like shop assistants, clerks, and sales and office personnel surfaced as the new middle class, uprooting older notions of class and social status. Although heterogeneity gave the modern city its distinctly American character, there was, as Lawrence Levine wrote, a "sense of anarchic change, of looming chaos, and of fragmentation."[6] Traditional forms of culture began to erode and new cultural expressions developed in response to the dynamics of city life.

Demographic growth and industrialization destroyed local communities, produced slums, and threatened to change the structure of the nuclear family. While democratic capitalism promoted faith in the idea that an individual could achieve comfort and success, the realities of life in crowded cities and dingy factories perpetually challenged the validity of this belief. People had to make fundamental changes in their lives, thoughts, and culture.[7] Life became less home-centered, because for many, home was no longer a private house. Quiet family gatherings, where people exchanged stories, songs, and jokes, were no longer possible in the boardinghouses or the dark, airless, and overcrowded tenements of the period, where strangers were forced to live together and disease was rampant. Boardinghouse and tenement life played an important role in the emergence of a new mass culture.

While the domestic chores of tenement apartments—washing clothes, dishes, and floors and preparing meals—kept both employed and unemployed women busy at home, working-class men found many diversions that allowed them to escape appalling residential and working conditions—the most common lure being the saloon. Drink, food, shelter, and companionship could all be found there. Madelon Powers has written that "the primary function of the saloon was to offer the basic amenities of home in a public space." The saloon, Powers claimed, "offered the emerging working class a wide array of facilities, services, and contacts often available nowhere else."[8] Neighborhood saloons with regular patrons fostered a camaraderie, a group identity among working-class men that provided solace during this period of economic and social upheaval. But many families needed several incomes to survive, and working women and children, who had no claim to their own wages, watched helplessly as their husbands and fathers sometimes drank up their pay. Money for food, clothing, and shelter was squandered at the saloon, and women were often beaten or abandoned by their drunken husbands. Alcoholism became a formidable problem for many urban families.

Between 1840 and 1850 numerous antiliquor organizations were formed. They included people from all classes, both sexes, and various ethnic groups. The temperance crusade was by no means monolithic or even roughly unified; advocates looked at the growth of cities and the connection to drink from many different perspectives. They had distinct agendas, but most agreed that intemperance was the great destroyer of the American family.[9] "There seems to be little doubt," wrote Ruth Bordin, "that the Temperance movement developed in response to a social evil that was both real and widespread."[10] While some reformers believed that the abuse of alcohol was fostered by the social forces of industrial capitalism and the problems created by burgeoning cities, historian John Frick has postulated that the hatred of drunkenness and the dread of its consequences for the next generation and the country's future "became a 'symbolic expression of deeper fears about the direction of American Society.'"[11] The drunken husband thus came to epitomize the evils of a fragmented modern society, and, as head of the household, he was often seen as an oppressor of his wife and family.

In the midst of the social and economic chaos of antebellum America, new forms of culture emerged in response to the problems created by the modern city. The working and middle classes needed to form a common urban identity, a shared culture that minimized the housing and labor inequities caused by urbanization and industrialization. One of the functions of the new commercial amusements that got their start before the Civil War was to knit, momentarily, a heterogeneous audience into a cohesive whole by promoting assimilation, patriotism, and temperance, and by diminishing the contrast between the wonders of the machine age and the impoverishment, injustice, and human degradation that accompanied them.[12]

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the theater catered to a wide range of social and economic classes, which were distinguished—within the theater—by where they were seated. According to Robert Toll, each section of a theater formed a society of its own.[13] Box and orchestra seats were reserved for the upper classes and genteel women, while the pit was for mechanics and artisans and the gallery for the lower classes. The third tier, with its separate entrance and bar, was reserved for "unescorted women." Prostitutes did not attend the theater to see a play; their primary business was to make arrangements for the evening, and they either took their clients to a brothel or conducted their trade right in the theater.[14]

An evening's entertainment was not restricted to a five-act play. Between the acts of a full-length drama were variety numbers: jugglers, acrobats, dancers, trained animals, and human anomalies. The heterogeneous theater audience often drank, ate, and smoked during the performance, and it was not unusual for audience members to swear at performers they did not care for. If they enjoyed a performance, they yelled, cheered, and insisted on an encore. American theater had a reputation for condoning prostitution, liquor consumption, and rude behavior and was not considered a respectable form of entertainment. New York's bloody Astor Place Riot of May 1849 confirmed that a single theater could not house culturally and economically different people. Some may argue that the riot spurred the division between what is commonly referred to as high culture and popular culture and marked the moment when the theater divorced itself from variety performers. The boundary between the two cultures, however, is permeable and fluctuating. Lawrence Levine argues that the term "popular" has been used to describe creations that not only command large audiences but also display questionable artistic merit. The use of such imprecise cultural categories, says Levine, has helped obscure the dynamic complexity of American society in the nineteenth century, where for a long time there existed a shared public culture.[15] While the theater no longer functioned as an amusement that embraced all classes, new forms of culture surfaced that had both a respectable reputation and mass appeal.

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In the middle of the nineteenth century, the dime museum—a distinctly American form of popular entertainment—emerged as a novel form of recreation that could divert a heterogeneous audience while supporting the new industrial morality of hard work, temperance, and perseverance. The exhibits displayed in dime museums affirmed the common person's worth and restored his dignity while perpetuating the dream of a better life. Dime museums attempted to bridge the ever growing gap between elite and popular audiences. The museums offered a democratic and ostensibly "educational" form of entertainment in which neither language, literacy, sex, nor the size of one's wallet was an issue.

The dime museum flourished throughout the late nineteenth century. As an entertainment venue it peaked between 1880 and 1900 and was in decline by the following decade. For a low, onetime admission charge, the dime museum dazzled men, women, and children with its dioramas, panoramas, georamas, cosmoramas, paintings, relics, freaks, stuffed animals, menageries, waxworks, and theatrical performances. Nothing quite like it had existed before.[16] No previous amusement had ever appealed to such a diversified audience or integrated so many diversions under one roof.

The process of uniting individual amusements and marketing them as a single, "walk-through" entertainment, suitable for the entire family, was what made the dime museum novel. In a sense it was a so-called environmental entertainment, among whose fixed exhibits mobile spectators could organize their own journey. The arrangement of space within a dime museum, with its display cabinets set around the periphery and grouped in the center of a room, created an environment in which customers were compelled to see each other as well as the exhibits themselves. In such a space the crowd became part of the performance, an important aspect of the experience.

The atmosphere of respectability—in the larger museums, at least—revitalized many ailing entertainments and introduced new ones to a mass audience. The theater, which by midcentury had become associated with prostitution and decadence, was revived in the family atmosphere of the dime museums, which offered "cheap and comprehensible entertainment that was seemingly accepted on moral and religious grounds."[17] The production of biblical and temperance plays helped the museums establish a reputation for morality and attract patrons with an antitheater bias. Freak shows, once thought to be simply a low form of itinerant amusement, gained a certain respectability and an undoubted popularity in the museums. Ventriloquists, magicians, musicians, and actors could find work opportunities in dime museums, and performers contracted with them for weeks at a time. Many late nineteenth-century spectators were introduced to their first vaudeville shows at a dime museum; others saw their first films there.

Significantly for the evolution of the dime museums, many Victorian Americans believed that leisure time should not be spent in idleness and frivolity but in edifying and constructive activities.[18] Conservative cultural reformers believed that "under enlightened municipal auspices, recreation could serve as a powerfully constructive force in social integration and moral development."[19] The success of the lyceum movement and the public education crusade, whose goals were to improve schools, academies, seminaries, and libraries and to promote the diffusion of useful knowledge, prompted managers to highlight their museums' pedagogical function. Stressing the educational benefits of a visit to a dime museum, however, was largely a simple marketing device. Popular impresarios of the age, such as P. T. Barnum and Moses Kimball, "mastered the rhetoric of moral elevation, scientific instruction, and cultural refinement in presenting their attractions."[20] Whatever learning did in fact take place was almost accidental, for the dime museums were established as family recreation centers, not as temples of learning. Artifacts were purchased not because of their educational merit but for their drawing power. In addition, many of the items on display had been faked, so that what patrons "learned" was often bogus as well.

The historical wax tableaux, for example, were created not to edify but to entertain and to foster nationalism; history was commodified, distorted, and freely falsified to please the public. The retelling of events in these

tableaux suffered from a "historical amnesia" that avoided issues of racism, sexism, and class struggle.[21] In Civil War displays, depictions of the inhumanity of slavery or the horrors of bloody combat were rare. Most Northern museums, for example, simply highlighted the triumph of General Ulysses S. Grant over General Robert E. Lee.[22] The American Revolution was simply recalled by the tableau of "George Washington Crossing the Delaware River." The tragic side of war was almost never illustrated; unthinking patriotism was at the heart of such exhibits, and displays of blood were reserved for the chamber of horrors. Yet while blood was pervasive there, museums' displays of human primitivism promoted egalitarian ideals of modernization: all members of a civilized society, regardless of class or race, were equal in terms of measured progress from the state of barbarism.

Nevertheless, the tableaux functioned like popular newspapers of a sort: celebrities, well-known actors, famous musicians, and local murderers—the headliners of their day—were presented as important stories. Seldom was there anything controversial (except an item's authenticity) or potentially offensive about a dime museum display. Museums avoided such topics as women's suffrage and the plight of immigrants. Dime museums in fact were commercial enterprises, and the ultimate goal of every museum owner was to attract customers and make money.

Amid the formidable challenges of modernization, the dime museum was a safe haven, presenting unthreatening, comprehensible images of the wonders of the human and natural worlds. For those anxious about their own status, exotic freaks and wax displays of barbarism reaffirmed their self-worth and the civility of urban life. Historical wax tableaux and paintings promoted patriotism, and temperance melodramas, presented in the chaste theaters of the dime museums, offered optimistic solutions to the personal anxieties brought about by a rapidly changing society. These dramas promoted the genteel virtues of sobriety, diligence, and frugality and promised good fortune to those who adhered to these principles.

A consequence of industrial capitalism was the promotion of an unequal distribution of wealth. The dime museum, however, was a great economic equalizer. All who could afford the price of admission were treated the same, and for several years, some museum theaters did not charge extra for the better seats. The theaters in the larger museums were quite luxurious. Magic lanterns shows and, later, films offered visions of faraway places to those who could never afford to travel. Unthreatening exhibits of technology and curiosities of human behavior and evolution awed even educated patrons. For little money a spectator could enjoy a variety of pleasures.

However, "the roots of sensationalism," wrote Gunther Barth, "lay not merely in the human craving for thrills, but in the nature of the modern city itself."[23] The city, with its chaotic and ever changing landscape, accustomed residents to the shocking dramas of political scandals, poverty, crime, and the tireless sound of fire alarms.

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American dime museums came in all sizes and many types, from grand five-story buildings that contained theaters accommodating three thousand spectators and curio halls parading upwards of ten thousand curiosities to small storefronts that were converted into exhibition rooms displaying a few old coins, petrified wood, and some living anomalies. "Dime museum," however, is a term used to differentiate all these popular amusement centers from endowed public museums such as New York's American Museum of Natural History (1869) or Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (1876).

Ironically, not all dime museums cost a dime. (Bunnell's New York museum was supposedly the first to lower its price to ten cents in 1876.)[24] Admission generally ranged from ten to fifty cents: the average museum charged twenty-five cents for adults and half price for children under twelve. Usually they were named for their founder, as in the case of Huber's Museum in New York; their street location, such as Philadelphia's Ninth and Arch Museum; or their city, such as the Boston Museum. Very few dime museums actually used the word "dime" in their names: the ones that did came primarily from the post-Civil War era, among them Peck's Great Dime Museum (1881), located in Philadelphia, or the Globe Dime Museum (1885) of New York.

In response to the average worker's growing leisure time in the last quarter of the century, dime museums often were open for ten to twelve hours daily, Monday through Saturday, and most on Sunday as well. Their inexpensive and unrestricted admission policy made them accessible to the masses, and their popularity grew explosively from 1860 to 1900.

Only a small percentage of a major dime museum's collection was ever on permanent display; the majority of its contents were rotated, and managers changed exhibits weekly to encourage repeated visits by patrons. Managers focused much of their attention on seeking out new displays, and some set up a network for exchanging curiosities.[25] P. T. Barnum, the legendary New York museum proprietor, regularly traded exhibits with his friend Moses Kimball, a lesser-known museum impresario who was man-

FIGURE 1. Eden Musée, New York, 1899. (Museum of the City of New York, Byron Collection.)

ager of the Boston Museum. In 1843 Barnum wrote to Kimball, "I *must* have the fat boy or the other monster [or] something new *in the course of this week* so as t[o be] *sure* to put them in the General's place *next Monday*, [?so] *don't fail!*"[26]

But cooperation was less common than competition, which prompted proprietors to advertise heavily in local newspapers, touting their exhibits with a mix of exaggeration and outright lies. Marketing and promotion were essential tools for a museum's survival, and humbugging became standard practice in the dime museum industry.[27] The language of the advertisements was bombastic; each museum was heralded as the grandest, largest, or most marvelous.[28] The facades of museum buildings served as billboards and often flaunted huge canvas banners or posters announcing the latest attraction (see fig. 1). Frequently museum buildings were decorated with flags and festive banners, or painted like huge billboards. Museum managers, well aware of the financial rewards of catering to a mass audience, sent patrons home with illustrated brochures describing the contents of their museums.[29] Additionally, they marketed souvenirs, such as handblown glass, personalized silhouettes, and cheap jewelry. To a nineteenth-century American, museum business clearly meant show business, and throughout the last quarter of the century there was a profusion of proprietary museums, each trying to outdo the other in promoting and exhibiting—and making a profit from—that one special rarity.

The story of the evolution of the public museum out of the American dime museum cannot be told without mentioning the contributions of Pierre Eugène Du Simitière, Charles Willson Peale and his son Rubens, all of Philadelphia; Gardiner Baker and John Scudder of New York; and Daniel Drake and Joseph Dorfeuille of Cincinnati. These men were at the forefront of the emergence of dime museums in America and contributed greatly to the public museum movement.

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In April 1782, a Geneva-born American named Pierre Eugène Du Simitière announced his intention of allowing the public to view his Philadelphia collection of scientific and natural history objects for an admission charge of fifty cents.[30] With this announcement, the first postrevolutionary museum, the American Museum, was established.[31] Du Simitière earned his living as a painter: he created profile portraits of famous Revolutionary leaders and designed official seals and medals. A respected member of the Philadelphia community, he was elected to the prestigious American Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge.[32]

Du Simitière was concerned with documenting American history and culture and became especially interested in the plight of the American Indian. In addition, for many years he tried to generate funding for a project chronicling the history of the western states. Du Simitière's intention in exhibiting his collection of flora and fauna, Indian and African artifacts, prints, drawings, and colonial newspapers and books to the public was to broaden the artistic taste and attitude of the average citizen.[33] Attendance at his new museum was initially poor, but in June 1782 he advertised the contents of his collection and requested donations of natural history objects. The response was generous.[34]

Charles Coleman Sellers, Charles Willson Peale's biographer, believes Du Simitière's so-called American Museum was not a "museum" so much as a "magpie's nest of historical and scientific rarities."[35] Many scholars dispute this statement and credit Du Simitière with being the first postrevolutionary American to transform a private cabinet into a public museum. They argue that not only did Du Simitière pioneer the creation of an institution that catered simultaneously to popular and elite audiences, a duality unknown in Europe, but he focused his museum on American artifacts. For many, he was the first to try to preserve American culture and history and American Indian ethnography.[36]

As for the criticism that the collection lacked organization, the historian and curator Dillon Ripley points out that it was not uncommon for early public museums to be mere assemblages of curiosities. In fact, some critics of London's British Museum complained that its random displays were unscientific.[37] Kenneth Hudson, in *A Social History of Museums,* supports this argument, noting that "old-fashioned chaos had a strong appeal for children and other unsophisticated people, for whom a museum was, more than anything else, a chamber of wonders, a romantic place which scientific arrangement could and did only spoil." He claimed that only in rare instances was the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collector an "orderly, systematic person. The more he acquired, the better pleased he was, and since space was expensive, museums and art galleries tended to be crowded places."[38]

Du Simitière's museum was open only for two years (1782–84), but it maintained a high level of integrity, apparently never integrating popular amusements into the exhibitions, and never catering to cultural tastes at their lowest. Since postrevolutionary America had no museum history, it was natural for Du Simitière to look to Europe for his model. European museums, such as Spain's Prado and England's British Museum, were indeed for the elite, and entrance to them was seen as a privilege, not a right. Most European collections were originally the "cabinets" created by royalty, the nobility, or gentry, and many continued to operate under royal patronage or government subsidy and were open only to a select few.

The contents of the British Museum, for example, which opened in 1759, had belonged to Sir Hans Sloane, a prominent physician who died in 1753. He bequeathed his collection to the city of London. When the new museum opened, only a limited number of people were given access to it. The museum was open Monday through Thursday; Friday was reserved for especially select visitors. Tickets were obtained by written application, and it took anywhere from two weeks to several months for museum authorities to check references and issue tickets. The museum operated on the "tour system," which meant that only a limited number of people could visit the collection at a given time. Ticket holders were asked to arrive between eleven and noon, and only 120 people were allowed in at a time. Tours were rushed. Kenneth Hudson believes that financial problems created a shortage of museum personnel, which "made it necessary to hustle visitors through the galleries."[39]

Du Simitière supposedly wanted to do away with the elitism of private cabinets, but when he opened his American Museum to the public in 1782, he also was hoping to supplement his income. While an open admission policy made his collection theoretically accessible to all, the museum remained in fact elitist and was not, in practice, available to all citizens equally. The fifty-cent admission charge was extremely steep, and although entrance to the public museum was theoretically a citizen's right, it was a right he could exercise only if he could afford the admission price. There was no government sponsorship for public museums, so unless an owner was wealthy, ticket sales were the only means by which he could maintain and expand his collection.

Since the museum imitated the European tour system, Du Simitière's ticket sales were necessarily limited; no more than eight spectators were admitted at a time and the museum was open only on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Hourly tours were restricted and visitors were not allowed to wander or view the collection at their leisure. In fact, the receipts from the American Museum did not solve Du Simitière's financial problems. He died in October 1784, at the age of forty-seven, apparently of starvation.[40] His experiment had been a failure, and although his museum attracted many visitors, it did not appeal to a broad spectrum of people. The museum's receipts had been insignificant, and Du Simitière died a pauper. The administrators of his estate failed to prevent the collection from being scattered; and all the objects in Du Simitière's possession at the time of his death were sold at public auction.

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Charles Willson Peale's Philadelphia museum, on the other hand, operated for nearly sixty years (1786–1845). During that time it was forced to incorporate elements of popular entertainment as part of a larger trend; its owner had to become a showman to survive. When Peale first requested donations, people sent all sorts of bizarre objects. Realizing that donors would come to the museum just to see their private curiosities on public display, he began to exhibit such items as "a chicken with four legs and four wings, an 80-pound turnip, the trigger-finger of a convicted murderer, and a tiny piece of wood from the Coronation chair in Westminster Abbey."[41] Peale, also an artist and Philadelphian, opened his American Museum in June 1786 at Third and Lombard Street.

In the pre-endowment era of museum history, the immensely patriotic Peale devoted his life to the promotion of cultural nationalism and popular education. His museum offered authentic scientific displays, experiments, and lectures to an audience comprising both scholars and ordinary citizens. He wanted his museum to appeal to all classes, the illiterate and the scholarly, adults as well as children, and both men and women. The motto of the museum, inscribed above the building's entrance, was "Whoso would learn Wisdom, let him enter here!"[42] As a painter he encouraged the merging of art with natural history. His artistic displays of stuffed animals, depicted in their natural habitats, with painted skies and backgrounds, paved the way for the dioramas of later nineteenth-century natural history museums: "By showing the nest, hollow, or cave," claimed Peale, "a particular view of the country from which they came, some instances of the habits may be given."[43]

Like Du Simitière, Peale began his museum in an attempt to supplement his income as a painter. He succeeded, and in the process changed the way proprietary museums functioned. One of Peale's sons, Rubens, persuaded his father to employ live entertainers in order to tap into a wider audience.[44] Live performers added an element of levity to the museum, and the elder Peale began to feel that there was nothing essentially wrong with a touch of diversion. For his part, Rubens believed that the museum's heavy didactic and moralistic tone repelled those Philadelphians who wanted to attend the place for relaxation and enjoyment. After his father's retirement from managing the museum in 1810, Rubens began shifting its emphasis from scientific instruction to popular amusement.[45] Although he tried to maintain the museum's scientific integrity, he introduced distorting mirrors, live animals, and human prodigies. Rubens Peale felt that scientific lecturing was an important function of the museum, but he interspersed his symposiums with acts by musicians and magicians. The public liked Rubens's alterations; in one year he doubled the American Museum's revenue. The struggle for Rubens was how to keep the museum's probity and its high-quality displays while attracting a large enough audience to keep profits up. This was a battle he fought throughout his museum career.

The popularity of live performers and light amusements was such that when Rubens opened Peale's New York Museum in 1825, it was closer in spirit to a late nineteenth-century dime museum than to his father's museum. According to an 1827 guidebook, the museum had four floors: the first housed natural history objects; the second, paintings and miscellaneous curiosities; the third, wax figures, fossils, and cosmoramas; and the top floor, a lecture room and a terrace. But Rubens knew that it was the outrageous curiosities that brought visitors; in early May 1828, for example, Peale's New York Museum exhibited "a calf with two heads, six legs, two tails, two distinct hearts and backbones."[46] Rubens also placed on exhibition a boa constrictor, an anaconda, and a so-called diamond snake—all together in a wire cage—and a "learned dog" named Romeo, who entertained by barking answers to questions.[47]

To increase revenues further, Rubens Peale offered museum discounts to schools and students, a policy already established at the Philadelphia museum. In 1830, however, he lost the New York museum to his creditors, and in the early 1840s Barnum purchased it and turned it into a full-fledged dime museum.[48] Although Rubens no longer was involved with Peale's New York Museum, he did operate Peale's Baltimore Museum, which he had inherited from his brother Rembrandt, who was not as skilled a showman. By 1843, Rubens was trying to generate new excitement in Baltimore; he wrote to his rival, Barnum, in the hopes of borrowing one of his most famous prodigies, General Tom Thumb.[49]

It was clear that the average citizen wanted diversion, favoring fun over education. The efforts of men like Charles Willson Peale were not in vain, however; his legacy has in fact been a rich one. The elder Peale's vision of attracting both scholars and ordinary citizens to a place of scientific learning, with authentic displays imaginatively presented, was later realized in the Smithsonian Institution (1846).

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Attempts to open a public museum in New York began in 1789, when the Tammany Society formally opened a chapter of its organization in New York. Tammany, which began in Philadelphia in 1772, was an outgrowth of a seventeenth-century fishing club named after the celebrated Delaware Indian chief Tamenend, who welcomed William Penn on his arrival in America. John Pintard, a Tammany organizer and later a founding father of the New York Historical Society (1804), wanted one of the society's prime functions to be the establishment of a museum that would preserve and display all types of American artifacts.

In May 1791, under the patronage of the Tammany Society, the leadership of John Pintard, and the direction of Gardiner Baker, the Tammany Museum, better known as the American Museum, opened to the public.[50]

In June the following statement of intent was published in a museum pamphlet: "The intention of the Tammany Society . . . in establishing an American Museum is for the sole purpose of collecting and preserving whatever may relate to the history of our country and serve to perpetuate the same, as also all American curiosities of nature and art."[51]

At first the museum was not especially egalitarian; only Tammany members and their families were admitted. There was no charge. This policy, however, was changed, and the museum's doors were opened to the general public on Tuesday and Friday afternoons with an entrance fee of two shillings (about twenty-five cents). To reduce the admission price further, the management offered nonmembers the option of buying a yearly pass for one dollar.[52]

The first home of Tammany's American Museum was in New York's City Hall. Since Congress was in the process of relocating to the nation's new capital in Philadelphia, the society petitioned to use one of the building's upper rooms. By 1793, however, the collection had greatly expanded, and the museum moved to a larger room on the second floor of the Exchange Building on Broad Street, a block from Battery Park. The thirty-by-sixty-foot room had a twenty-foot-high arched ceiling that "was elegantly painted a sky blue, and intermixed with various kinds of clouds," as well as a thunderstorm and flashes of lightning.[53] The walls were adorned with murals featuring trees from all over the world, as well as all sorts of animals, from flamingos to lions. Pintard had wanted to limit the collection to Americana, but Baker sought to diversify, and the museum now included wax figures, Indian, Chinese, and African relics, and preserved animals. There also were freakish curiosities: in 1793, Baker claimed to have in his possession "a perfect horn, . . . about 5 inches in length," allegedly taken from the head of a New York woman (see fig. 2).[54]

Baker was a good businessman; knowing the value of publicity, he often placed advertisements for the collection in the daily papers. On March 31, 1794, for example, he shrewdly announced in the *New York Columbian Gazette* that the museum was exhibiting two guillotines, one of which was to be displayed "complete with a wax figure perfectly representing a man beheaded!"[55] With news of the French Revolution occupying most of the paper's front page, the perfectly timed exhibition aroused the public's morbid curiosity. Baker continued to hunt for scintillating and novel exhibits, and in the same year the museum occupied a second room in the Exchange Building, which now housed its menagerie. This was one of New York's first permanent animal exhibitions; it included a mountain lion,

FIGURE 2. Broadside, American Museum, 1793. (New-York Historical Society.)

raccoons, groundhogs, birds, and snakes.[56] The museum was now open every day except Sunday, and the use of candlelight enabled the collection to remain open until 9 P.M. three nights a week.[57]

In the meantime, Pintard had begun to separate himself from the project. He had grown unhappy as he witnessed the transformation of his vision: the museum, he felt, was losing sight of its pedagogical function and becoming simply an assemblage of curiosities, a place of lowbrow amusement. In addition, Pintard was an avid Hamiltonian, and he severed his ties with the Tammany Society in part because of the society's strongly Jeffersonian views. Around this time also he lost most of his money in a stock speculation and was sent to debtor's prison for two years.[58]

After Pintard's departure the leaders of the Tammany Society realized that the museum was an expensive failure. It was neither a powerful nor a profitable institution, and the society was reluctant to continue to support it. In 1795 the Tammany Society relinquished the collection to Baker, with the proviso that society members could still attend the museum free.[59] Without Tammany's support, of course, Baker had to rely solely on ticket sales to fund his museum. He immediately extended its hours and increased the admission charge to fifty cents. To encourage patrons to return again and again, he continually added new curiosities to the collection. In addition, he began to manufacture automata, opened a print shop on the first floor, and over the years established one of the finest menageries in the world. In spite of the proprietor's efforts, however, the museum was not very profitable.

In 1798 Baker died of yellow fever. After his death, his wife attempted to run the museum, but she died in 1800, leaving four children and no will. The museum was bought intact by William I. Waldron, a grocer who tried unsuccessfully to sell the collection at auction. While awaiting a buyer, he temporarily set up his own museum at 69 Broadway. Eventually, in 1802, the Baker collection was sold to Edward Savage, a historical painter, inventor, and showman. Savage owned what was in essence an art gallery, known as the Columbian Gallery, located at 80 Greenwich Street.[60] He acquired the Baker collection with the aim of creating an institution similar to Peale's Philadelphia museum. He renamed his new combined institution, which opened May 11, 1802, the Columbian Gallery of Painting and City Museum.[61]

Shortly after Savage obtained the contents of the American Museum, he hired twenty-six-year-old John Scudder, a naturalist and amateur wildlife mounter, to curate the neglected collection. Several years of working for Savage proved tedious for Scudder, however; he was disappointed with his boss's apparent lack of interest in the collection and believed that Savage was more devoted to his picture making and machine designing than turning the museum into a first-rate institution.

Scudder devised a plan: he would leave Savage's employment and find a better job, save his money, and one day buy the Columbian Gallery. He found a job as a seaman aboard ships that traded along the northeastern coast. It is not known how long Scudder was a sailor, but by 1809 he had accumulated enough capital to purchase Savage's museum.[62]

In March 1810, Scudder opened his American Museum at 21 Chatham Street. His true-to-life displays of stuffed animals and collections of shells and fossils satisfied those devoted to natural history, and he often gave natural science lectures at his museum. But Scudder expanded the waxworks department to include "Sleeping Beauty with Her Baby" and "King Saul with the Witch of Endor and Samuel's Ghost."[63]

The War of 1812 and economic hard times took their toll on museum going. By a stroke of luck, however, in 1816 Scudder was given the opportunity to house his collection rent-free on the second floor of the old almshouse in City Hall Park, which had been renamed the New York Institute (see fig. 3). He was to pay the traditional annual peppercorn for his new quarters in this new civic center, which he shared with the New-York Historical Society, the New York Society Library, the American Academy of Fine Arts, the Deaf and Dumb Institution, the Literary and Philosophical Society, the Lyceum of Natural History, the Board of Health, and the Bank for Savings.[64] The prestige of being a part of the New York Institute helped Scudder lure many municipal leaders and prominent patrons to the American Museum.

With the help of his friend John Pintard, Scudder redesigned the space to accommodate the display of six hundred varieties of natural history specimens. All the items displayed were classified according to the Linnaean system and labeled in Latin as well as English. He hired lecturers, who illustrated their talks with items from the collection. Demonstrating a parallel flair for showmanship, he hired strolling musicians to entertain visitors as they wandered from case to case. In June 1819, Caroline and Edward Clarke, lilliputian singers, were engaged for almost three weeks to amuse the spectators.[65]

Scudder's collection continued to grow until the American Museum occupied four large rooms. It now displayed "live mud turtles, a Baltimore oriole, an iguana, various minerals, and the bed curtains belonging to Mary Queen of Scots."[66] Scudder died on August 7, 1821. According to his will, the museum trustees, all of whom were his close friends, were to continue to operate the establishment until his only son, John Jr., was old enough to manage the collection.

Initially, John Scudder Jr. was not interested in following in his father's footsteps; he wanted to be a doctor, or so he thought. After dropping out of medical school in 1825, however, he mortgaged his inheritance, rebelliously setting up his own place of entertainment, called Scudder's New York Spectaculum, on July 1, 1825. He was thus competing directly with Peale's New York Museum and the American Museum, which was

Figure 3. American Museum, City Hall Park, 1825. (New-York Historical Society.)

then under the direction of Cornelius Bogert, an attorney. His Spectaculum failed, however, probably not because of mismanagement but because even a metropolis like New York could not support three similar museums. Although John Scudder Jr.'s Spectaculum did not succeed, he did demonstrate a flair for showmanship; later he made his mark running his father's museum.

By 1826 the American Museum claimed to possess 150,000 natural and foreign curiosities. To attract more paying customers it began to provide variety acts and freak shows.[67] Four years later, the large and noisy crowds that paraded daily through the corridors of the New York Institute on their way to the museum forced the institute to evict the collection from its rent-free accommodations. On December 24, 1830, the museum moved into a five-story building on the corner of Broadway and Ann Street, opposite St. Paul's Church.[68]

The new American Museum earned an average of seven thousand dollars annually, a healthy sum for that time. Much of its success was due to the showmanship of John Scudder Jr., now the manager.[69] Scudder hoped to lure patrons away from Peale's establishment; under his direction the museum's daily program included variety acts, minstrel shows, and displays of freaks. The new American Museum managed to survive the crash of 1837, and the receipts for both the 1839 and 1840 seasons totaled more than eleven thousand dollars.[70] The museum was making a good profit. In 1841, it was purchased by a small-time showman named Phineas Taylor Barnum, and the great age of American dime museums began.

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The Western Museum of Cincinnati (1820–67) was the first of its kind in the Midwest. Like its sister institutions in the East, it followed a pattern of transformation from a center for scientific study to a place of entertainment.[71] Daniel Drake, the museum's founder, was a physician and, like Du Simitière and Peale, a member of all the appropriate intellectual organizations. By 1815 he had amassed a sizable collection of minerals, metals, fossils, and organic remains. Between 1820 and 1840, he founded many of the cultural and educational institutions in Cincinnati and was known to his contemporaries as the "Ben Franklin of the West."[72]

During the summer of 1818, Drake announced that he and an associate, a Cincinnati merchant named William Steele, would open a public museum. The collection was to encompass all aspects of science from archaeology and geology to zoology and natural history. The two collaborated with Cincinnati College, hoping that the two institutions could form one of the most comprehensive science libraries in the United States.[73] On June 10, 1820, the museum was opened to the public. Dr. Robert Bets of Cincinnati College was hired as chief curator; one of his assistants was John James Audubon, who worked at the museum as a taxidermist for a year.

The Western Museum of Cincinnati was operated initially as a private stock company. Shareholders were allowed to view the collection free; the general public paid the standard twenty-five cents, half price for children. By 1823 the museum was doing poorly. Its large collection of birds, shells, coins, mummies, and prehistoric bones was not enough to engage the average citizen's curiosity. After a political battle during which Drake was fired and then rehired, he resigned in 1822. Interest in the museum continued to decline. In fact it was so minimal that the stockholders could not even sell the collection. Instead they gave it to Joseph Dorfeuille, the new curator, on the condition that stockholders still be admitted free.

Dorfeuille, who had contributed many items to the museum, realized that the truths of natural science were not as compelling to viewers as the

"occasional errors of nature."[74] Although he apparently tried to maintain the museum's scientific credentials by giving lectures, his format was unusual: at the conclusion of his talks he sometimes offered his audience a sniff of laughing gas (nitrous oxide).[75] Dorfeuille's intention was to engage the emotions, not the intellect, and the Cincinnati museum quickly became a place of popular entertainment.

Dorfeuille was much drawn to the grotesque and sensational. On entering the museum, spectators were assaulted by moving skeletons; an organ grinder played appropriate atmospheric music. Dorfeuille also created a wax tableau of a local ax murderer named Cowan, who was convicted of killing his wife and two children. He preserved in a jar the head, right hand, and heart of another local murderer, Mathias Hoover. Rather feebly, Dorfeuille attempted to justify this horrifying display as righteous and instructive. In an advertisement in the *Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette,* dated July 4, 1837, Dorfeuille claimed that before his execution, Hoover had willed his body to the museum "for the express purpose of its being exhibited publicly, as a warning to others of the awful risk, attending a departure from the paths of virtue."[76]

The museum was best known for its Chamber of Horrors and its elaborate depictions of Hell, better known as "The Infernal Regions" or "Dorfeuille's Hell." (This spectacle, which became one of the most talked-about exhibits of the pre–Civil War era, will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on waxworks.) After Hiram Powers, the sculptor who created the original mechanical wax figures in "The Infernal Regions," left Cincinnati in 1834, the museum began to deteriorate. Powers's successor was not as skillful an artist, and the museum had to struggle to maintain the quality of the wax collection. Dorfeuille eventually sold his share of the museum for $6,500, keeping "The Infernal Regions" exhibit, and left for New York in the hope of discovering a fresh audience for his spectacle. (A version of "The Infernal Regions" remained at the Western Museum for years, and there was some dispute about which was the original.) In 1839 Dorfeuille opened his new museum just a stone's throw away from Scudder's American Museum. Within a year, however, Dorfeuille's New York museum was destroyed by fire. Its owner died a few months later, on July 23, 1840.

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In the early years of the nineteenth century, an American museum was typically a miscellaneous collection of curiosities, a development of the European notion of the "cabinet of wonders." Most museums attempted to be instructive civic institutions, exposing the public to a wide variety of historical artifacts, natural history specimens, and instructive paintings—"colleges for America's culturally neglected Everyman."[77] Since these establishments also operated as businesses in a democratic society, however, they needed to be cheap enough to attract a wide audience, as well as sufficiently diversified in terms of what they displayed. In appealing to a mass audience, museums came to incorporate different categories of amusements. By midcentury they had become venues for all sorts of popular entertainments, and their educational agenda virtually had vanished. The dime museum was the result.

2. Barnum and the Museum Revolution, 1841–1870

Luck is in no sense the foundation of my fortune; from the beginning of my career I planned and worked for my success. To be sure, my schemes often amazed me with the affluence of their results.

—P. T. Barnum

Phineas Taylor Barnum was the quintessential showman; by organizing individual amusements and placing them within the confines of a single environment, he afforded hours of pleasure to those with little in their pocketbooks. Barnum adopted the early nineteenth-century concept of the proprietary museum and transformed it into the dime museum.

Some might argue that Barnum's American Museum functioned chiefly as a place of popular education—his natural history exhibits were illuminating and his guidebooks informative. By virtue of his years of collecting artifacts and his global searches for novel freaks, Barnum did assemble spectacular geological, ornithological, zoological, and ethnographic displays. But it was not his underlying intention to be didactic. Although he was a temperance advocate and a local civic leader, Barnum was fundamentally a showman who devoted his life not to scientific accuracy but to entertainment.

Barnum's museum guidebooks were published chiefly as maps of his museum, as popular diversion, and for the purposes of publicity. Barnum wanted his museum to be respectable, and he attempted to reject anything that might be repugnant to a conservative Victorian audience, but his "operational aesthetic," to borrow a phrase coined by Neil Harris, was not to instruct but to amuse.[1] Even though the melodramas performed in his lecture room could be defined as moral, virtuous, and somewhat didactic, the theater's slogan was "We Study to Please," not "We Study to Teach."[2] Barnum himself claimed that his museum was "educational," but this was a buzzword designed to attract business from a variety of social classes and to placate puritan consciences. Barnum wrote in his autobiography that he wanted his patrons to "think, talk and wonder," and he used showmanship to achieve this goal.[3]

• • •

New York City, with its prosperous shipping, railroad, and real estate industries, soon became the dominant industrial center of the Northeast. This expanding commercial city provided many job opportunities for both the working class and the modern middle class. By 1834, New York had over a quarter of a million residents; by 1850 the figure hovered around one million. Nearly 60 percent of these residents had been born elsewhere, either in America or Europe.[4] Many midcentury New Yorkers lived in tenements or boardinghouses because they could not afford to either own or rent homes. Without the pleasures of the parlor entertainments and family gatherings of the traditional home, boarders were forced to seek amusement in public places. David Nasaw claimed that "recreation and play were not luxuries but necessities in the modern city."[5] The entertainment-seeking population was growing rapidly, and entrepreneurs were spurred to find new enterprises. While restaurants, hotels, churches, concert and lecture halls, pleasure gardens, and saloons provided a certain amount of recreation and entertainment, none could offer the range of amusements of the dime museums. These establishments, where, for a onetime admission, pleasure seekers could be amused for hours by a variety of organized popular entertainments, were slowly becoming New York institutions.

P. T. Barnum purchased Scudder's American Museum in 1841. At the time, the proprietors of already established proprietary museums, in a desperate attempt to remain solvent, had already begun to embrace the idea of developing entertainment centers, jettisoning their loftier goal of the dissemination of scientific and historical knowledge. During the 1840s, Peale's New York Museum (Rubens Peale lost the museum to creditors in 1830, and the museum was now owned by a showman named Harry Bennett) advertised a "magician, a mind-reader and an anaconda that swallowed live fowl twice a week in front of a crowd of gaping patrons."[6] Under Bennett the museum even began opening its doors to the performances of "Ethiopian melodists and serenaders."[7]

It did not make much difference, however, who or what appeared at Peale's New York Museum, or for that matter at any similar New York establishment; Barnum's American Museum was to eclipse them all. By 1843, its proprietor had forced Peale's New York Museum out of business and had purchased its collection for $7,000.[8] But, believing that any competition was good for business, Barnum kept his acquisition quiet and continued to run the Peale museum as a separate enterprise.

Through his expert showmanship, his adroit business sense, and his unequivocal gall, Barnum turned the American Museum into a national attraction for all showmen to emulate. By the 1850s it was already considered unthinkable to visit New York without seeing it, and by 1860 the museum was on the itinerary of the well-publicized visit of the Prince of Wales to New York.[9]

The five-story white building (see fig. 4), located on Ann Street and Broadway, opposite the prestigious Astor House hotel, contained the remains of John Scudder's collection, once valued at $25,000. Barnum, however, had purchased the building and the collection in 1841 for less than half that amount. The story is truly Barnumesque in its complexity. Then an impoverished showman with only extraordinary dreams, Barnum required considerable financial backing. He sought the help of Francis W. Olmsted, the building's owner, who agreed to buy the collection for him and then issue him a ten-year lease, charging him an annual rent of $3,000.[10]

Ironically, while Barnum was making the financial arrangements that would enable him to purchase Scudder's American Museum, its board of trustees sold the collection to the Peale Museum Company for $15,000. The museum company paid a $1,000 down and agreed to provide the remainder by December 26, 1841. Barnum was convinced that the museum company was purchasing the Scudder collection on speculation, in order to manipulate its stock value, and he wrote to various newspapers, hoping "to blow that speculation sky-high."[11] Angered by all the adverse publicity, the Peale Museum Company, in an attempt to subdue him, hired Barnum to manage the soon-to-be-acquired Scudder collection at an annual salary of $3,000.

Barnum wrote in his autobiography that he was convinced that the Peale Museum Company was in effect buying his silence in order to keep its stock value high. As straight-faced as ever, he agreed to their terms and consented to begin his tenure after the first of the year. Barnum then went back to the Scudder trustees and negotiated an agreement whereby, if the Peale Museum Company failed to pay the $14,000 balance by December 26, he would be permitted to buy the collection on December 27 for his original $12,000 offer. After hiring Barnum, the museum company, unaware of any other bidders, decided to wait until all the notoriety had subsided before actually purchasing the collection—as Barnum had imag-

Figure 4. P. T. Barnum's American Museum, Broadway and Ann Street, 1851. (New-York Historical Society.)

ined they would. As a result, they failed to make their promised payment on December 26, and on the next day Barnum acquired the museum for himself.

With his business ability, his talent for collecting a dazzling array of attractions, and his "devotion to . . . gigantic posters and colored inks," Barnum was able to pay back Olmsted's loan in fifteen months.[12] He buttressed the neglected Scudder collection with freak shows and novelty performers, and he changed exhibits constantly. Three years after he took over the museum, Barnum claimed to possess thirty thousand exhibits. He featured Siamese twins, fat boys, bearded ladies, rubber men, legless wonders, and an array of midgets. In addition, he held baby shows in which he awarded cash prizes to the fattest, smallest, tallest, and prettiest babies. He held flower, dog, bird, and poultry shows. Barnum enlarged the museum's lecture room and eventually turned it into a full-fledged and "thoroughly reputable" theater for the production of "moral" dramas.[13] His 1849 production of William H. Smith's play *The Drunkard,* in fact, was the first play to run for a hundred uninterrupted performances in New York.

The showman proudly described his American Museum as an "encyclopedic synopsis of everything worth seeing in this curious world."[14] An 1849 program claimed that the museum housed 600,000 curiosities. By 1864 the American Museum boasted a collection of over 850,000 items. Barnum's acumen for show business proved extremely profitable. As early as 1842, the American Museum earned $28,000, which was $17,000 more than the previous year, when the museum had been operated by the Scudder Museum board of trustees.[15]

Sensational exhibits and spectacular freak shows, as well as Barnum's penchant for business, all aided in the success of his establishment. Beyond that, the proprietor understood and respected his paying patrons, believing that he never really cheated them, since he offered so many diverse entertainments. If a patron felt disappointed by one exhibit, there was always another in the museum that would make the admission price worthwhile. Through massive advertising campaigns, which inflamed the potential customer's expectations, topped off by a little controversial "humbug," he discovered the combination needed to lure paying patrons back to his museum for a third and fourth time. Barnum did not discover most of his most famous curiosities. He merely acquired exhibits and marketed them in such a powerful way as to devise sensational crowdpleasing exhibitions. He created a place where one could exchange money for wonder, and "he knew that it is the story above all else that makes the object interesting."[16] In the twenty-three years that Barnum operated his first American Museum, from 1842 to 1865, he sold more than thirty million tickets.[17]

In 1843, for example, Barnum carefully manipulated the publicity for his infamous Fejee Mermaid exhibit in order to attract a huge viewership. The Fejee Mermaid was a manufactured curiosity. It had once belonged to a Boston sea captain who, in 1817, anticipating that the curiosity would someday make him a fortune, stole $6,000 of his ship's money to buy the creature. The mermaid failed to excite much interest, however, and it passed into the possession of the captain's son. Moses Kimball, the proprietor of the Boston Museum, bought the mermaid from the son and immediately contacted Barnum.[18] The two men entered into an agreement to share in the expenses and profits of the mermaid, which was to remain the permanent property of Kimball, although it was Barnum's task to create the notoriety. Without Barnum's imagination, the Fejee Mermaid might just have been a minor exhibit stashed away on a shelf in the Boston Museum.

In fact, Barnum did not display the mermaid at once but engineered a publicity campaign to insure that people would have to see his latest acquisition. He printed enticing stories about the discovery of the mermaid near the Fejee Islands (Hawaii) by the fictitious Dr. J. Griffin from London's "Lyceum of Natural History." (Griffin was, in fact, a longtime Barnum collaborator named Levi Lyman.)

The stories claimed, however, that the fictitious English scientist was to be in the United States with the Fejee Mermaid only a short while before sailing for Europe. For weeks the press was filled with Fejee Mermaid anecdotes, and New Yorkers anxiously awaited the fake scientist's visit as he supposedly ventured north from Montgomery, Alabama, to New York. As Dr. Griffin's visit drew near, Barnum circulated pamphlets about the mermaid and duped three local papers into printing engravings of the curiosity. The tension mounted until finally the Fejee Mermaid arrived in New York and was exhibited for a week in early August at the Concert Hall, 404 Broadway. When the week ended, Barnum took possession of the mermaid and exhibited it at his American Museum. Controversy and word of mouth enhanced the public's curiosity, and he pulled in a thousand dollars during that week, three times his normal revenue.[19]

Many viewers were disappointed. The mermaid was described as small (only eighteen inches long), black, and extremely shriveled. The upper part of its body was hairy, tapering off twelve inches below the head to scales and the sort of tail generally associated with a mermaid. The manufactured curiosity was so cleverly constructed, however, that it was difficult for anyone not to believe that it was real. And the public came in droves. Barnum later admitted to Kimball in an 1848 letter that even he felt a little guilty about becoming rich off this particular "humbugging" of the public.[20]

From Barnum's point of view, however, good publicity, controversial publicity, negative publicity—all of it helped generate customers. When Barnum received word that President Abraham Lincoln was to visit his establishment on February 19, 1861, he quickly sent a note to an editor urging him to "notice this fact & oblige."[21] During his exhibition of Joice Heth, George Washington's supposed nurse, Barnum himself sent anonymous letters to various newspapers denouncing Heth as a fraud. He even went so far as to claim that she was an automaton and that he was the ventriloquist. This brought people flying to his exhibit to find out whether the attraction was in fact real or mechanical.

When he exhibited Mme. Josephine Fortune Clofullia, his Swiss bearded lady, in the early 1850s, Barnum planted statements in the papers claiming

that "she" was really a "he." In order to heighten the dramatic conflict and provoke his audience, he paid a spectator to publicly challenge Josephine Clofullia's true sexuality. The matter ultimately landed in court, where the allegation that Clofullia was a man masquerading as a woman was refuted, not only by her husband but by several doctors as well. The case was dismissed, and Barnum made a huge profit from all the publicity.

Several years later, Barnum capitalized on the publicity a second time by exhibiting Clofullia with her two-year-old child, the "Infant Esau," whose body was covered with hair. Once again Barnum had been successful in encouraging scores of people to visit his museum. Press agentry of this inflammatory sort made people want to see for themselves what all the controversy was about. Barnum found that if, on their first visit, pleasure seekers were under the impression that an exhibit was real, but later became inclined to believe that it was a fraud, they would return to appease their curiosity and try to determine how the deception had been achieved.[22] Thus, he made deceit a game and an integral part of his museum exhibits, and he used the press as bait.

In spite of—or because of—dubious management and promotional practices, millions of people visited the American Museum. But as Arthur Saxon has suggested, "Barnum was not the only entrepreneur to fool Americans in the nineteenth century."[23] Humbugging, Barnum wrote in 1866, was "an astonishingly wide-spread phenomenon—in fact universal." In particular, "the most stupendous scientific imposition upon the public that the generation with which we are numbered has known," Barnum wrote in *The Humbugs of the World*, had been the so-called Moon Hoax, which had nothing to do with him.[24] It was conceived by Richard Adams Locke and was published in the *Sun*, a nineteenth-century penny tabloid that specialized in human interest stories, in August and September 1835. Locke's tales described how astronomer John Herschel was able to view life on the moon through a high-powered telescope. The paper printed detailed descriptions of moon vegetation, lunar animals, and winged inhabitants. So spectacular was the story that the *Sun* soon found itself with a fifty-thousand-reader increase in circulation.[25]

The increasing pace of nineteenth-century technological development had created an atmosphere in which people could reasonably believe almost anything. Modernization taught that the unimaginable was possible, and technology made material reality of ideas that had existed only in the realm of the imagination. In his biography of Barnum, Neil Harris noted that nineteenth-century hoaxing was a kind of intellectual exercise. For those who delighted in learning, there were many challenging and delightful aspects to a hoax. The discovery of the deception and of how it had been accomplished was sometimes even more enjoyable than the trick itself.[26] Barnum was the first showman who understood this innate attraction to the hoax and was able to turn it into a profit-making venture. "Everyone is open to deception," he wrote, "people like to be led in the region of mystery."[27]

"The Great Model of Niagara Falls, with Real Water," was a Barnum banner headline sure to entice anyone who had heard of this natural wonder but had not seen it. The scale model of the falls, complete with rocks, trees, and neighboring buildings, was only eighteen inches high. Yet those enticing words on the banner, as Barnum wrote them, were threatening to the Board of the Croton Water Commissioners, who felt that Barnum's exhibit might dry up the city's water supply. Real water was indeed used, but it was recycled; a mechanical pump enabled Barnum to reuse the same pool endlessly. He had not blatantly lied in his advertisement, but he had manipulated the language in order to make it attractively ambiguous.

Similarly, Barnum's famous "To The Egress" sign was put up not to show the customer where to view an "egress," whatever that might be, but rather to control the crowds that poured into his museum. Barnum's autobiography is filled with similar anecdotes about how he humbugged his customers by using provocative language, theatrics, and creative marketing. His "What Is It?" for example, became the quintessential "Is It Real or Is It Not?" exhibit (see fig. 5). Capitalizing on the ever growing interest in theories of evolution and the origin of man, Barnum exhibited several versions of this "missing link," or half-man–half-monkey attraction. His earliest missing link was Mlle. Fanny, an orangutan that he exhibited in the 1840s.

Perhaps his most successful "What Is It?" was William Henry Johnson, a small, retarded black man (he stood between four and five feet tall), with a large nose, protruding eyes, and no hair except for a little tuft at the center of his pointed head. This tuft soon became a trademark.[28] Johnson was first displayed in 1860 and most later exhibits of the "What Is It?" genre looked strikingly like Johnson: they were generally endowed with only a single tuft of hair, costumed in a monkey or other animal coverall, and positioned in front of a jungle background. Barnum marketed his contrived curiosity with his usual creativity. Because of the ambiguous exhibit title "What Is It?" Barnum was able to set the spectator up, placing all alleged "misrepresentations" squarely in the lap of the viewer, who was forced to form his

Figure 5. Barnum's "What Is It?" exhibit, c. 1860. (Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.)

own opinion as to whether the exhibit was a man, an animal, or a combination. In addition, by connecting this freak with "scientific" theories of evolution, Barnum avoided making a racial statement about blacks in 1860 America. While a Northern white audience surely was curious about slavery, Barnum masterfully averted the politically charged discourse of the status of African Americans with the ambiguity of the "What Is It?" title.

During the early years of his career, Barnum had been proud to be called the "prince of humbugs," and he rationalized his perpetual trickery by insisting that he gave the paying patron more curiosities for his twenty-five-cent admission charge than any other amusement institution. It was customary for Barnum to offer an opening address at the beginning of each season. In 1861, he supposedly gave the following rhymed speech in his lecture room, defending his penchant for humbugging. It began,

> That Prince of Humbugs, BARNUM, so it appears
> Some folks have designated me for several years—
> Well, I don't murmur; indeed, when they embellish it,
> To tell the truth, my friends I rather relish it.[29]

• • •

In the 1850s Barnum made renovations costing fifty thousand dollars. At the entrance to the high white building, decorated with banners announcing prize exhibits, panels depicting animals and birds, and posters illustrating scenes from moral dramas, visitors were now confronted by a grand staircase that led to the second floor. If they chose to continue rearward, however, they would find the First Saloon, better known as the Cosmorama Department.[30] The walls in this room were fitted with peepholes with lenses, through which could be seen brilliantly colored views of "St. Marks Church, Venice," the "Crystal Palace, London," a "General View of Naples," and the "Tuilleries, Paris." Before going upstairs, spectators could choose to descend to the basement to a rifle and pistol gallery.[31]

The grand staircase led spectators up into a large hall known as the Second Saloon (see fig. 6). Scattered throughout the room were glass cases housing natural history specimens such as "Red-headed Ducks of North America," and the "African Ostrich and Ant Eater." The Third Saloon, located next to the second, contained specimens of bows and arrows, a variety of stuffed birds, wax figures, and such miscellaneous paraphernalia as "the court dress Tom Thumb wore when he was presented before Queen Victoria," a machine for testing strength, and a collection of famous autographs.

The Aquaria Department was located in Saloon Four, to the right of the Second Saloon. The first public aquarium had been displayed in London at the Regent's Park zoo, and after visiting the zoo in the late 1850s, Barnum immediately launched his own imitation. In addition to the fish tanks, the Aquaria Department also had cases displaying varieties of shells, oysters,

Figure 6. Interior View of the First Grand Hall, known as the Second Saloon, Barnum's American Museum, 1853. (New-York Historical Society.)

and stuffed fish. Barnum's catalog provided the visitor with historical information on aquatic exhibits; a pike on exhibition, for example, was said to be the largest and oldest ever discovered. It had been caught in Mannheim, Germany, in 1497, Barnum claimed, was nineteen feet long, and weighed 350 pounds.[32]

The Fifth Saloon, occupying the third floor, contained paintings, including landscapes, portraits of famous people, and engravings of flags from around the world. Stuffed animals, among them a bear, a kangaroo, and a giraffe, were also housed in this saloon. Directly above was the Sixth Saloon, a large chamber where one could find such curiosities as snowshoes from Norway, a three-thousand-year-old Egyptian mummy from Thebes enclosed in a case of sycamore wood, a ball of hair found in the stomach of a sow, and a collection of shoes and slippers.

One more flight up was the Seventh Saloon, where visitors could see not only more paintings but also the museum's fantastic skeleton collection and live animals. It was also in this chamber that Barnum housed his famous exhibit called "The Happy Family," in which sixty or more different animal species lived "harmoniously" in one cage. A guidebook claimed that each was "the mortal enemy of every other," and that the miracle was that in this cage, all were found to be "contentedly playing and frolicking together without injury or discord."[33]

Entrances to the museum's Lecture Room were located on the third, fourth, and fifth floors. In the eighteenth century, so-called lecture rooms hosted natural history lectures and science demonstrations. Later these spaces had gradually become the home of more popular presentations, such as magic lantern shows and musical acts. Choosing to maintain the Lecture Room title was presumably a deliberate attempt on the part of Barnum (and later museum showmen) to entice puritanical visitors who would not willingly attend a performance in a conventional theater. "My plan," wrote Barnum in 1850, "is to introduce into the lecture room highly moral and instructive domestic dramas, written expressly for my establishment and so constructed as to please and edify while they possess a powerful *reformatory* tendency."[34] Barnum, who was a reformed drinker and a temperance advocate, used his Lecture Room as a pulpit. After each performance of *The Drunkard* (1847), a popular temperance melodrama, audience members were urged to go to the box office and sign a pledge against drinking.

The Lecture Room was expanded and renovated several times. "Originally narrow, ill-contrived and inconvenient," by 1850 it was enlarged to a seating capacity of three thousand, and, wrote Barnum, was "to remind us of the like erections in the palaces of European sovereigns and nobles."[35] Spectators could be seated in the gallery, the first balcony, the parterre, or the proscenium boxes. The parterre and the stage were on the same level as the second floor of the building. Admission to the Lecture Room was included in the museum entrance fee, with the exception of the better seats, which cost extra. At first, performances were given in the evenings and on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. Soon, however, these hours were expanded to include a daily matinee schedule, although performances never took place on Sundays.

The proscenium arch contained stage doors and boxes situated between white and gold Corinthian columns, and the auditorium was furnished with rich crimson wallpaper and velvet-covered seats. Sixteen "medallion compartments" on the ceiling contained portraits of famous Americans, from General Lafayette to President Andrew Jackson. Lamps fitted with glass globes were positioned all around the balcony and gallery fronts to provide light, and two magnificent chandeliers were placed on either side of the proscenium. The theater's motto, "We Study to Please," was emblazoned across the arch. Barnum hired a stage manager, Francis Courtney

Wemyss, to help select plays and to commission original works and adaptations of popular novels. Spectacle and fantasy abounded in Barnum's Lecture Room, but the museum was known mainly for its moral dramas, among them William H. Smith's work *The Drunkard* (1847), T. P. Taylor's play *The Bottle* (1847), and Royall Tyler's *Joseph and His Brethren* (c. 1859). Over the years, Barnum presented no fewer than half a dozen productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[36] Such moral dramas, together with melodramas, spectacles, novelty acts, and farce afterpieces, all provided family entertainment that conservative Christians could watch safely in the knowledge that no indecencies would affront them.

Before Barnum enlarged his Lecture Room, the auditorium had been the site of occasional freak displays. After 1849, however, when it was transformed into a workable theater, the museum began to employ a stock company to perform its dramas, comedies, and farces. Living curiosities were generally displayed only between acts or as an afterpiece. Freaks became primarily platform entertainers, shown in various saloons during the day and evening.[37]

Barnum provided his visitors with the opportunity to purchase souvenirs at concession stands located strategically throughout the building. They could take home a carte de visite photograph of a freak, with a biography printed on the back, or they could buy a trinket from the Bohemian glassblowers who sold their wares in the museum. Spectators also could drop off the remains of a departed pet at the resident taxidermist's shop and, after completing a tour of the museum, take home a nicely stuffed and mounted animal. Fish tanks in a variety of shapes and sizes were sold, at prices ranging from ten to thirty-five dollars.[38] Fortune-tellers, clairvoyants, and phrenologists offered their services to the public. If pleasure seekers worked up an appetite, there were various food concessions, including an oyster saloon and "aerial garden" on the roof, where visitors could eat a homemade picnic or buy such snacks as cake and ice cream.

Merchandizing was a by-product of industrialization, and the female spectator played an important role in the evolution of urban culture and the dime museum. Transatlantic immigration separated many families, and young women were often sent to America to find work. Many of them found jobs as domestic servants, seamstresses, or factory workers; they lived with relatives or alongside other working men and women in tenements or boardinghouses. With the breakdown of the traditional home and without their fathers' control over their time and earnings, single women were free to enjoy whatever diversions pleased them.[39] The collapse of familial and communal influences, the hard working and ugly living conditions, and bouts of homesickness intensified their need for escapist entertainment. After work or during a free afternoon, single women needed pleasant and appropriate places to go. Although there were a host of amusements that catered to an all-male clientele, there were few deemed respectable enough for unchaperoned women. Barnum's museum represented a new concept in chaste entertainment, and it provided women with a safe and easily accessible meeting place for lunch, conversation, and amusement, free of rowdy or drunken men. To further insure the safety of his female patrons, Barnum hired undercover detectives who escorted back to the street all patrons whose behavior was unacceptable. As customers, women were "icons of decency," and as an audience, they guaranteed respectability; "a mixed audience was by definition a respectable one, a male-only one, indecent."[40] Women flocked to Barnum's, and soon his museum theater began presenting matinees for its female audience. The American Museum was both affordable and fashionable, and women of all classes were attracted to the wholesome atmosphere stressed by the pedagogical rhetoric of Barnum's museum.

This was also a period of upheaval for the middle-class American woman. New ideas about womanhood, sexuality, and leisure were being debated, and modern technological advances such as running water and interior plumbing provided middle-class women with more personal freedom. They soon became involved in philanthropy, reform, and politics.[41] In addition, the advent of department stores in the 1850s brought many women of moderate means into downtown areas during the daytime. As Gunther Barth wrote, clean and orderly sidewalks became an extension of the department store, and "women came downtown purposely to see and be seen."[42] Broadway soon became the most fashionable street in New York. Even wealthy women, driven in private carriages, came not only to "see and be seen" but to shop for the latest fashions, home furnishings, and jewelry in downtown Broadway, known as "Ladies Mile."[43]

Barnum strove to maintain his respectability and shied away from the tableaux vivants that were common in New York in the 1840s. But he substituted his slightly titillating Gallery of Beauty, filled with displays of "female pulchritude." This exhibit had sexual undertones, but because the scantily clothed women were fat, they were seen as freaks and could thus be displayed not as erotic but as scientific objects.

There were many transgressive elements that slipped through, especially in the freak displays, but incongruity, elements of surprise, and the erotic and exotic were all skillfully manipulated to attract without repulsing. There was, in fact, something for everyone at the dime museum. Barnum had invented a type of democratic popular culture that was to be very much in demand. He allowed his guests to become exhibits themselves, in a way, and he made his patrons feel they personally were a vital part of his museum environment.

During the summer of 1855, Barnum sold the contents of the museum to his assistant manager, John Greenwood Jr., and his partner Henry D. Butler for $24,000 plus an annual rental fee of $29,000.[44] More successful than he ever imagined, Barnum had sought an early retirement from the museum business in order to pursue other ventures, and even to dabble a bit in local politics. He became passionately involved in the development of the East Bridgeport community.[45] In an effort to enhance the new community's commerce, he became embroiled in a scheme to convince a New Haven–based clock manufacturing company to relocate to East Bridgeport. The Jerome Manufacturing Company agreed to move, and Barnum promised to lend it up to $110,000 to finance the move and take care of any outstanding debt.

Because of faulty accounting and blatant incompetence on Barnum's part, he eventually signed half a million dollars' worth of promissory notes. In the end, the clock company never moved to East Bridgeport and Barnum was ruined financially.[46] As a result, he was forced back into show business to recoup his losses. He began a series of lectures on the art of making money, and after a highly successful European tour with Tom Thumb, he was back on his feet again. It was no coincidence that the American Museum did not prosper during Barnum's absence, and in March 1860, after all his debts had been paid, Barnum repurchased his museum.

Five years later, on July 13, 1865, the American Museum burned to the ground. The fire started in the building's engine room and spread quickly. Luckily, no one was killed. All the visitors escaped easily, but the freaks and the animals had a more difficult time since most were lodged on the upper floors. Anna Swan, the "Nova Scotia Giantess," who stood seven feet eleven inches tall, had the most dramatic escape. She could not fit through the damaged doors inside the building, and firemen had to create an escape hatch by breaking through the outer walls on either side of a window. In all, eighteen firemen were needed to lower her to the ground. Many animals died, and those that were able to flee the building created havoc in the nearby streets.[47]

Barnum had only $40,000 worth of insurance, and the estimated total damage to his collection was some $400,000. Once again he was ruined, but he did not give up. During the spring of 1865 he took over an entire institution, the Great Chinese Museum, located on Broadway between Spring and Prince Streets, and by the fall of that year he had transformed the collection into Barnum's New Museum. This was never as successful as its predecessor, however. In 1866 Barnum entered into a partnership with the famous lion trainer Isaac Van Amburgh, the "Lion King," and the museum became known as the Barnum and Van Amburgh Museum and Menagerie. Van Amburgh owned 60 percent of the operation; Barnum owned 40 percent and was named president of the museum company. He was also general manager, though in name only, and he gradually withdrew from an active role in its day-to-day operations.[48]

The Barnum-Van Amburgh enterprise was very similar to the old American Museum, with a wax figure room, a picture gallery, three "cosmoramic rooms" with two hundred changing views, and a rifle and pistol gallery. The Lecture Room, with its parquet, balcony, and private boxes, was almost as opulent as that of the first museum. Reserved seats cost an extra thirty cents beyond admission to the museum, and private boxes cost sixty cents. The stage was large, measuring fifty by forty-six feet. The auditorium could hold some 2,500 spectators and was decorated in a patriotic motif, with an act-drop depicting the capitol beneath the ever present slogan "We Study to Please." There was also a bust of George Washington surrounded by American flags, as well as the flag of France, a tribute to that nation's aid during the American Revolution.[49]

In the new Sixth Saloon was a resident photographer who was available for portraits. An astrologer and a fortune-teller could be retained for consultations, and "artistically carved ornamental ivory jewelry" was for sale on the second floor.[50] On March 2, 1868, the new museum was in turn destroyed by fire. Barnum never owned and operated a museum of his own again.

Barnum did, however, lend his name, reputation, and expertise to help promote other dime museums, among them George Wood's Museum and Metropolitan Theatre, which opened on August 31, 1868, on the corner of Broadway and Thirtieth Street and which housed the surviving part of Barnum's collection (see fig. 7). In return for his aid and the drawing power of his name, Wood paid Barnum 3 percent of the museum's gross receipts.[51] In 1869 Wood changed the museum's name to Wood's Museum and Menagerie. Eventually it became known as Wood's Museum. The

FIGURE 7. George Wood's Museum and Metropolitan Theatre, New York, c. 1868. (Museum of the City of New York).

building operated as a dime museum until 1876, when John Banvard took possession and renamed it the Broadway Theatre. By 1879 it had been transformed into the famous Daly's Theatre.[52]

In November 1876 Barnum entered into yet another partnership, this time with George Bunnell, an itinerant showman who operated a traveling museum and circus. Barnum, who by now had a prosperous career as a circus operator, furnished half the capital Bunnell needed to establish a permanent museum. Bunnell opened his New American Museum at 103–105 Bowery in 1876 and later purchased the Wood collection for his establishment. Barnum remained a silent partner in the business venture, since his circus collaborators wanted his name associated with their operation alone.

In the 1880s Barnum attempted to establish a new museum in New York, which he planned to call simply Barnum's Museum. It was to be located on the former site of Madison Square Garden between Twenty-sixth and Twenty-seventh Streets and to cover the area between Madison

Avenue and Fourth Avenue. This five-story museum-to-end-all-museums was to be two hundred feet wide by four hundred feet long and was to sprawl over an entire city block. Its interior floor space was estimated at eleven acres.[53] Largely because of the enormous complexity of the concept, the museum never came to fruition. As the project began to slip away from Barnum, he returned his attention to his career as a circus showman.

As Barnum aged, he became uncomfortable about his reputation as the "prince of humbugs," and he began to be increasingly civic-minded, participating in local politics and, in the early 1880s, establishing a Museum of Natural History at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. Obviously he *did* understand the difference between a true museum of natural history, whose underlying principles are scientific accuracy and education, and a popular dime museum.

It is not enough merely to look at the artifacts housed in Barnum's museums, of course. One must also consider who produced the show, who created the special dime museum atmosphere, and who established its purpose. The answer is clear: Barnum conceived his extraordinary museum for the purpose of entertainment—not education—and with profit as his central concern. "I must confess," he wrote in his autobiography, "that I liked the Museum mainly for the opportunities it afforded for rapidly making money."[54]