Circuses and Family History
David A. Norris looks at records left by the once-popular form of entertainment

TRAVELING CIRCUSES HAVE ENTERTAINED AND DELIGHTED audiences in Europe and North America since the late 1700s. Many researchers have compiled reference books and databases with names and information about long-ago circuses. Today, these sources have two areas of great potential value to the family historian. If you had ancestors who worked for a circus, you might find information on them, or the circuses they were part of. Even if no one in your family actually worked for a circus, it's likely many of your ancestors saw one of these colorful and entertaining traveling shows when they came through their hometowns. We'll see a few sources of information about circus history and look at a few old-time circuses to see some of the traces they left in historical and genealogical records.

Employees of W. C. Coup's Circus were listed on three pages of the 1880 Census in Wheeling, West Virginia. (Chronicling America)

Many colorful antique circus posters are available in online collections. (Library of Congress)

The first circus opened in London in 1768. Philip Astley, a retired British cavalry sergeant and riding instructor, started an outdoor equestrian show. Astley performed stunts such as riding two horses by standing with one foot in each saddle. At first, Astley's wife sold tickets and pounded a drum to accompany the act. Later, she joined her husband in daring horseback stunts. Gradually, Astley added musicians, jugglers, and other performers. He added a roofed grandstand to shelter the public from the weather. Then, in 1772, he constructed "Astley's Amphitheatre," a large wooden building, to house his shows. Astley traveled to Dublin and Paris, and his success inspired several new circuses.

In the U.S., English-born John Bill Ricketts put on circus performances in Philadelphia in 1793. At the time, Philadelphia was the national capital, and President George Washington came to see the circus.