

## When the Circus Came to Cranford

It was Thursday, April 27, 1871, and the circus was coming to Cranford!

Well, not really. But at least it would be passing through. And what a circus it was! It was the circus of P.T. Barnum.

Barnum, America's world-famous showman and proprietor of Barnum's American Museum in New York, appeared on the circus scene in 1871 when he joined forces with W.C. Coup to form the "P.T. Barnum Traveling Exhibition and World's Fair on Wheels," which Barnum himself proclaimed to be "the largest group of wonders ever known."

On April 10, 1871, Barnum's circus opened in Brooklyn. Its tent was the largest ever used for a circus, covering nearly three acres and holding 10,000 spectators. The ensuing tour covered the United States from the Atlantic Coast to Kansas in the Wild West.

But today it was on its way from Plainfield to the city of Elizabeth. There it would give two performances, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. It was a wagon tour. The grand tent shows had not yet graduated to travel by railroad. Barnum said it took 500 men and horses to transport the circus, but Barnum had been known to exaggerate.

The caravan had left Plainfield at 1:00 am and reached Cranford about 6:30 pm. As the caravan entered Cranford along the road from Westfield, it had to cross the tracks of the Central Railroad of New Jersey near the residence of Mr. N.G. Foster (present-day Lincoln Avenue between South and North Avenues).

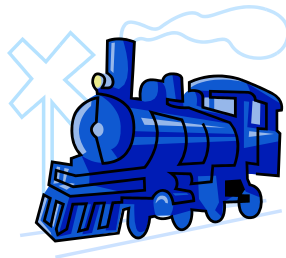
There were 22 wagons in the caravan. The first twenty proceeded over the tracks with no difficulty, but the last two wagons lagged behind. Before the last wagon got across, Jersey Central train from Somerville bound for Elizabeth came roaring down the tracks. According to the *New York Times*, "The grade at this place is very heavy, and trains bound toward New York pass down it at an exceeding rapid rate."

The next-to-last wagon, drawn by four white horses, got over the railroad tracks safely. The driver saw the approaching train, however, and frantically signaled the last of the caravan, a supply wagon drawn by four "magnificent black Spanish mules" to stop, as did several other eye witnesses.

Perhaps, as some witnesses said, the driver was inattentive. Perhaps, as one newspaper saw it, “the mules were high spirited...and impatient to catch up with the rest of the caravan,” and the driver was unable to restrain them. The wagon did not stop.

The Jersey Central locomotive smashed into the wagon tearing it to pieces. Theodore Conklin, the wagon driver, and Edward Dyer and George Sickles, both cooks, were killed. Three other men were critically injured. The *Elizabeth Daily Journal* described the horrific scene: “Blood was spattered over the smoking car nearly its entire length.”

The “force of the collision” cut the traces of the two forward mules, and they were uninjured. The two mules at the poles were killed instantly and carried four hundred yards before the train could be stopped.



The conductor of the train ordered three men to go with a hand car to Westfield for a doctor. A Dr. Martin, the surgeon of the Central Railroad Company, and Dr. F.A. Kinch of Westfield arrived at the accident scene within an hour and treated the injured persons. Hannah Shea, who lived nearby, lifted one of the injured from the wreck and had two of them taken to her nearby home.

Coroner Gibbs of Elizabeth impaneled a jury almost immediately and held an inquest in the County Courthouse. It took the jury about two hours to reach a verdict. It found that the deceased were killed “accidentally and by misfortune” and that no blame was “attached to the employees of the New Jersey Central Railroad Company.”

The train apparently did not linger at the accident site. According to the *Elizabeth Daily Journal*, the train was only “about half an hour” late arriving in Elizabeth.

The following year, in 1872, Barnum’s circus embarked on its first railroad tour. It used three engines and nearly eighty cars.

In 1926, after years of controversy and numerous fatalities, the State of New Jersey ordered the Jersey Central to elevate grade crossings at Lincoln and Union Avenues. The tracks were elevated over a period of three years. The project was completed by January 1930, altering the face of Cranford forever.