



WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME



Henry Gaul, Inductee 2024

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

Henry K. Gaul was one of the earliest cornetists and bandmasters in American circuses. He was active with various circuses prior to the U.S. Civil War.

Gaul, an outstanding cornetist, first appeared as a bandmaster in 1841 with the **Aaron Turner Circus**. As a young man, Aaron Turner did some shoemaking and farmed land he had inherited in Ridgebury, NY sixty-five miles north of New York City. But farming and cobbling were not his calling. At age 30 he was associated with the circus world as part owner of a troupe started by one of the circus families near him. At this time – 1820 -- his 7-year-old son, Napoleon, was already a trick rider in a New York City circus. Eight years later, Aaron had a traveling circus of his own and served as announcer/ringmaster. In 1836, he hired a sixteen-year-old Phineas Taylor Barnum as his ticket seller, secretary, and treasurer. When the Aaron Turner Traveling Circus failed to draw many customers at a stop in Rochester, NY, Barnum suggested they should begin doing a parade to announce their arrival. It worked and many years later Barnum used the circus parade approach extensively with his Barnum Circus and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

In 1830, the iconic circus tent was first used, and Turner was an advocate. He began presenting his show beneath an enormous round tent approximately 90 feet across. The round tent, or “big top,” thus became a recognizable part of the traditional American circus look and feel.



A crowd in Annapolis attacked P.T. Barnum - shown “riding a rail” - after Turner told them Barnum was a murderer.

At a stop in Annapolis, MD, Turner jokingly told a gathering his ticket-taker – Barnum – was a wanted murderer. The crowd believed him, seized Barnum, and began beating him.

Turner then yelled “It was just a joke” and later told Barnum “It’s all for our good. The notoriety will fill our tent.” While P.T. Barnum didn’t start his own famous circus until he was 60 years old, he considered Aaron Turner as his circus business mentor. Likewise, band leader Henry Gaul got hooked on the circus experience under Turner’s guidance.

The 1843 through 1845 seasons found Gaul as band leader with the **Howes & Mabie Circus**, a partnership that began in 1841. This was another tented circus, led by Nathan A. (1797-1864) and Seth B. (1815-1901) Howes and the Mabie brothers, Edmund and Jeremiah. It was one of the first major circuses to operate under various names, including **Mabie-Howes Olympic Circus** and **Howes & Cushing’s London Circus**. While Aaron Turner’s circus also pioneered use of a tent, Seth Howes is often credited as the “father of the American tented circus.” Seth B. Howes retired in 1870 a quite wealthy man. The Mabie brothers are remembered for establishing the circus colony next to Delavan Lake in Delavan, WI. The colony served as the winter quarters for the 17 years they toured with their own circus, and it became the wintering ground for 25 other circuses as well.

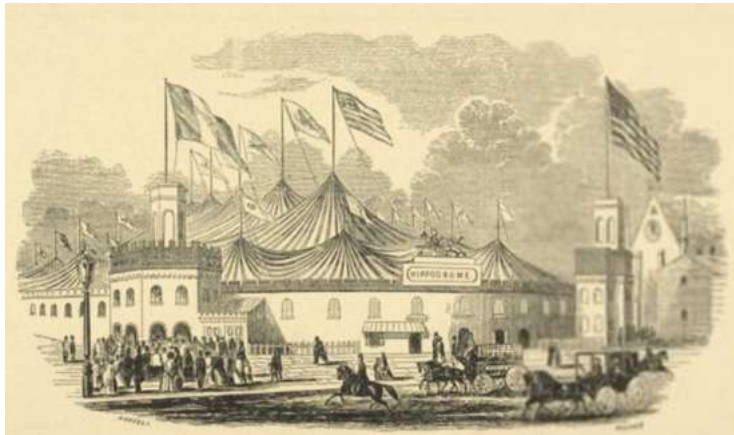
Thomas McCollum (1828-1872) was born in Rochester, NY, and was first mentioned in circus bills in 1837 (at age 9.) At age 18, the equestrian formed his own company called “**Stone and McCollum’s Great Western Show.**”

STONE AND McCOLLUM'S EQUESTRIAN COMPANY

HAS arrived, and will remain for a few nights on Meeting-street. Among the prominent performers are McCOLLUM, BATCHELOR, NEVILLES, LIPMAN, STONE, &c. with HENRY GAUL'S Brass Band. New Scenes in the circle every night.

Stone and McCollum's show existed for five years (1846-1850), and Henry Gaul was their band leader throughout. On January 17, 1850, an ad in the *Charleston Mercury* proclaimed Stone and McCollum's Equestrian Company had arrived, with Henry Gaul's Brass Band among the prominent performers. It also promised "New scenes in the circle every night," no doubt a special challenge for Gaul's band. Dan Rice, the celebrated American Clown and Shakespearian Jester also appeared at that venue. McCollum was famous for his jockey act and was considered the best rider of his day. In 1845, like Henry Gaul, McCollum was performing with the Howes & Mabie show, so that made Gaul's transition to McCollum's show easy.

Gaul was bandmaster in 1851 and 1852 with **George B. Johnson People's Circus**, and then with **Franconi's Colossal Hippodrome** in 1853.



Franconi's Hippodrome

Antonio Franconi was an Italian equestrian. Franconi's Hippodrome show opened at Madison Square at the intersection of Broadway, Fifth Avenue, and 23rd Street on May 2, 1853. The Hippodrome was based on a Roman structure. It was a two-story brick building with a canvas roof. In many ways, it was a precursor to the modern circus. One thousand gas lights provided illumination. Seating could accommodate 6,000 and the facility featured a 1/6th mile open-air track for horse and chariot races, gymnastic feats, ostrich races, and performing animals. Other circus-like acts would take place inside the track. Franconi's Hippodrome was the largest circus in the United States at the time. At its final performance on November 12, 1855, it featured General Tom Thumb (later made famous by P.T. Barnum) and a menagerie.

P.T. Barnum felt compelled to write the following letter to the editor of the *New York Daily Times*, May 26, 1853, page 2:

*To the Editor of the New-York Daily Times:
Notwithstanding I have some half-dozen times contradicted in the public prints the reports of my being interested in the Hippodrome, I observe that your Correspondent from New-Haven reiterates the old story and insists that Franconi*

and Barnum in this country are synonymous terms. Will you permit me once more to state that I have not the slightest interest, nor never had, in any Hippodrome in this or any other country; and that I am not interested to the amount of a farthing, nor never was, in the Crystal Palace, The Tower, or in any lot or lots, building or buildings in the vicinity of either. Yours Truly, P.T. Barnum."

Perhaps it is with some irony that in 1871, Barnum established "P.T. Barnum's Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome."

With the closing of the Hippodrome late in 1855, newspapers noted "*neighbours are not sorry*" to see it closed and removed.

With Franconi's closing, Henry Gaul landed with Washburn's Circus. A March 24, 1856 promo in the *New Orleans Crescent* for **Wahburn's Colossal American Circus** noted "Henry Gaul, leader of Brass Band" and "Overture by Gaul's Bugle Band." Some years later, **Leon W. Washburn's Allied Shows** featured minstrel performances by live cats. (See back cover for poster.)

Next up for Gaul was **Flagg & Aymar's International Circus**, owned by William Thorne Aymar (1830-1883), a famous bareback equestrian rider and circus clown. Soon after, that circus was purchased by John Robinson, Sr. and renamed the **John Robinson Circus**, which operated 1856-1931.

In 1859, Henry Gaul was leading the band with the **Spalding & Rogers' Circus and Great European and American Ampitheater**, famous for its lavish circus showboat, the **Floating Palace**. It was particularly active on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, but toured other rivers as well. The showboat featured a full circus ring, a museum, and seated up to 3,400 people.

The Spalding & Rogers company toured extensively across the United States. For example, records show performances for the "Floating Circus" in 1858 and a "New Orleans Circus" in late 1860. Gilbert Reynolds Spalding (1812-1880) was the first circus owner and innovator to own his own showboat. His was the first showboat to contain an entire circus. Further, in 1856 he was the first to send an entire circus on tour in its own railroad cars, a few years ahead of P.T. Barnum who usually gets credited with "inventing" the railroad circus.

It turns out that there are many Henry Gaul's in the U.S. and what our Hall of Fame Laureate Henry Gaul was up to after 1859 is a mystery. Charles Conrad, WJU #1525, who did the research to identify the circuses Gaul was with, hypothesizes that perhaps Gaul became a Civil War bandsman or bandmaster.