



Connecticut Heritage Adventure

Connecticut's Connection to the Evolution of the Broadway Theatre: Four Sites, Four Stories

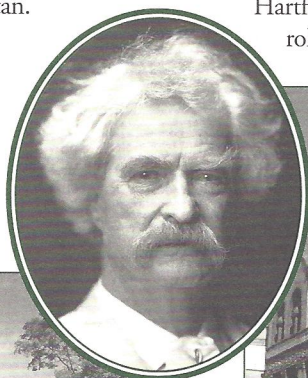
By Michael L. Radice, Ph.D.

For more than 150 years, Connecticut has provided a home base for many Broadway theatre professionals. It has bred some of the country's best writers, actors, and producers, and offered a getaway for fan-haunted stars. Entertainment luminaries from P. T. Barnum to Laura Linney have called Connecticut home.

The relatively short, convenient commute to Manhattan, the industry's center, made Connecticut a popular residential choice for professionals in the performing arts – and also a place to hide from the prying public. But Connecticut's ability to conceal famous entertainment figures also helped obscure their presence in the state after they died. Thousands have called Connecticut home, but so far only four have left shrines the public can visit today: P. T. Barnum, Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), William Gillette, and Eugene O'Neill.

These four men helped build and transform professional theatre. As a group, their work spanned Broadway's childhood and adolescence, from the 1830s to 1930s. Their contributions remain a part of American culture, and we are grateful for the sites left behind that interpret their accomplishments.

Phineas Taylor "P. T." Barnum (1810–1891) was America's purveyor of nineteenth-century pop culture. His work represents Broadway's early years when it was centered in Lower Manhattan. Although Barnum is best remembered for founding what became Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus, he was also a theatrical presenter.



Barnum staged professional dramatic performances between 1841 and 1865 at his Barnum's American Museum, located at Broadway and Ann Street in Lower Manhattan. Popular entertainment, not serious theatre, was Barnum's game. But he was a crafty marketer, and saw theatre as a tool.

Barnum used theatre to try to "rebrand" his museum from a collection of hoaxes and oddities to an institution of real science. He added carriage-trade theatre as a product, in the hope that having the elite walk through the door would tacitly validate his pseudoscientific exhibits. The elite did show up, but their presence did little to upgrade the museum's "brand."

Barnum was born in Bethel, Connecticut, but lived most of his adult life in Bridgeport. His home in that city is long-gone, but there is the Barnum Museum downtown to tell his phenomenal story.

Mark Twain (1835–1910), in addition to his popular novels and essays, wrote ten plays. He also invested in Broadway productions and actors. Of his plays, the most successful was *Colonel Sellers* (1873), a dramatization of his book *The Gilded Age*, which focused on the 1800s era of corruption and exploitation at the expense of the public's welfare.

One of Twain's Broadway investments was the career of a young neighbor from Hartford, William Gillette. Twain secured a role for Gillette, 21, in *Colonel Sellers*.



Later, when Gillette was struggling to establish himself as a playwright, Twain loaned him money to produce his first play, *The Professor*. The comedy about an absent-minded academic was a hit, and Gillette's career took off.

Twain and his wife, Olivia, chose to build a house in Hartford's Nook Farm, a literary enclave. Of the many places he lived, this was Twain's true home.

William Gillette (1853–1937) of Hartford belonged to a new generation of entertainer. His approach to theatre was to give the audience what it wanted. This included presenting realistic acting and staging, rather than the dusty melodramatic fare of the past. Gillette acted in more than eighty stage productions

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The lavish mansion (far left) in Hartford's Nook Farm literary enclave was built in 1874 by author Mark Twain (left), who lived in the house until 1891. Impresario Phineas Taylor "P. T." Barnum (above) is remembered in his home town of Bridgeport in the Barnum Museum (left), which features the new core exhibition "P. T. Barnum: From Bethel to Broadway to Bridgeport."

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and in two silent films. He also wrote twenty plays and starred in most of them.

After graduating from Hartford Public High School, Gillette, in defiance of his father, fled to Cincinnati to become an actor. This bold move inaugurated a sixty-two-year career during which Gillette became an international star.

Gillette is best known today for his 1899 play *Sherlock Holmes*. He wrote the script based on the wildly popular fictional detective featured in a series of short stories by British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It was Gillette, not Doyle, who crafted the indelible image of the lanky sleuth that included the deerstalker hat, Meerschaum pipe, and understated manner. In addition to writing the play, Gillette played Holmes on stage for thirty years.

Gillette was the aristocrat of Broadway, and his career spanned the industry's physical move from Madison Square to Times Square. He also helped redesign the product, pushing it into modernity by creating realistic theatre with an American – rather than a European – touch. As a theorist, he offered “the illusion of the first time in acting,” a concept that ensured a fresh, believable performance every night.

From 1919 until his death in 1937, Gillette lived at his retirement home, Seventh Sister, which he designed himself in a style reminiscent of a medieval castle. Situated atop a hill in East Haddam with a breathtaking view of the Connecticut River, the house, known popularly today as “Gillette Castle,” features an interior with many ingenious elements dreamed up by Gillette.

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) was born in a Broadway hotel, but Monte Cristo Cottage in New London, built in 1840, was his boyhood home. He grew up in a theatre family – the cottage was named for his actor father's signature role, the Count of Monte Cristo – and followed that field himself as a playwright. Of the forty-nine plays O'Neill wrote, two of the most memorable were *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1941). The latter play is set at the Monte Cristo Cottage.

O'Neill was one of the greatest dramatists in our country's history, and remains the only American playwright to win the Nobel Prize. His plays are in the same vein as the work of Jacob Riis and John Steinbeck, which



Monte Cristo Cottage

ignore the demands of the social order and address the difficulties of human society. O'Neill's plays taught audiences that modern American drama could deal with sad or even tragic endings. He also proved to Broadway that it could make money by taking risks on serious works.

Monte Cristo Cottage was O'Neill's home through 1917. In addition to seeing the house, visitors can take a walking tour of “O'Neill's New London.”

Barnum, Twain, Gillette, and O'Neill shaped both Broadway theatre and American culture. Visits to their homes can be enhanced by consulting the following works, which delve in depth into the work of these men, their eras, and the Broadway theatre:

Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, by Andrea Dennett (1997)

Sherlock Holmes and Much More, by Doris Cook (1970)

Mark Twain's Neighborhood, Nook Farm, by Roynn Simmons (2001) (video)

The City and the Theatre, by Mary C. Henderson (1973)

Barnum Museum, 820 Main St., Bridgeport; (203) 331-1104; www.barnum-museum.org

Gillette Castle, 67 River Rd., East Haddam; (860) 526-2336; <http://dep.state.ct.us/stateparks/parks/gillettecastle.htm>

Mark Twain House, 351 Farmington Ave., Hartford; (860) 247-0098; www.marktwainhouse.org

Monte Cristo Cottage, 325 Pequot Ave., New London; (860) 443-0051; www.theoneill.org/prog/monte/montprog.htm

Dr. Michael Radice is an entertainment historian and freelance writer who lives in West Hartford.

Family & Friends

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After retiring from state service in 2003, Peter started Document Management Systems, which provides consulting services to municipalities.

A graduate of Marist College, Peter has a long and deep commitment to Connecticut history and the materials that document it. He is currently president of the Farmington Historical Society, and a governor of the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington. He serves on the Mortensen Library Board of Visitors at the University of Hartford, and on the Steering Committee of Catalyst at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

Cornelius P. “Con” O’Leary served for two decades in the Connecticut General Assembly – four in the House and 16 in the Senate – during which he served as both the Minority Leader and Majority Leader of the Senate. Con has been an educator since 1967, a career that includes 13 years as a teacher in the Windsor Locks school system and his current positions as an adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut School of Law, an adjunct faculty member in constitutional law at Central Connecticut State University, and associate vice president emeritus at Central.

A graduate of Williams College, Con earned a master of arts degree from Trinity College and a J.D. degree from the University of Connecticut School of Law. He is currently president of the New England Air Museum in Windsor Locks.

Life-long Hartford resident **Charles A. Teale, Sr.**, has been chief of the Hartford Fire Department since 2000. A lover of his native city's history, his first contact with A&L came while he was conducting research for the creation of a memorial to the victims of the tragic 1944 Hartford circus fire. That memorial was recently dedicated at the North Hartford site of the fire, where the Fred D. Wish School now stands.

Charles earned an associate of science degree in fire technology, a bachelor of science degree in human services, and a master's degree in public administration. He has been a member of the Hartford fire department for nearly a quarter of a century. His community activities have included service on the boards of directors of The Connecticut Historical Society Museum, the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Hartford, the Salvation Army, and the Coalition to Strengthen Sheldon-Charter Oak Neighborhood.