

DANBURY FAIR ESSAYS

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I. Project and research

For this summer, I was tasked with digitizing ephemera in the Danbury Museum's archives, and organizing and preserving media from the Danbury State Fair. After launching in 1869, this annual event became one of the largest county fairs in the country and remained relatively well-attended until its closure in 1981. My mother, working as a job coach for the Town of Bethel, took a group of transition students to the Charles Ives Birthplace, one of the Museum's properties. Here she met the director of the Museum, who asked if I, a history major at UConn Stamford, would take an internship.

I began the project in the last week in May 2024 and finished it by mid-July, about one month early. Since the Danbury Fair ran for a little more than a century, there was a tremendous amount of material to reorganize and digitize—however, I was eager to have everything ready for the public as soon as possible. The material therein had long since been amassed, with donors and residents of the city pitching in to add to those of the Stetson Museum, at which they were initially kept.

Most of its history I received about what drew people to it was found in commemorative newspapers (published during the Fair's last year) and the auction list (containing all of the wares and props needing to be sold) from its last year. I correctly figured there had to be a little more than that. When I was first introduced to the Museum's assemblage, I found that nearly everything about the Fair had already been cataloged, so I focused on rescanning documents and rearranging them by file type or time period. In some instances, some of the media was grouped together by paper clips or staples; for the latter, they had to be removed to prevent them from rusting the volumes closed. Much of the material consisted of photocopies, printed within the last several years, to severely-dessicated newspapers.

In order to help with this undertaking, I felt that including more 'tabs' would be useful in finding certain newspapers or booklets—these I brought several pads of sticky notes, on which I wrote what I was scanning, my name, and the date on which I went through the folder or bound work. For example, an essay or statement already stapled or clipped together (more than 30-40 pages long) would have the metal removed, and in its place, sticky notes would demarcate this work from all the others in the file cabinet. If a document or photocopied record was already in a sheet protector, I adjusted the iPad (and the incredibly efficient GeniusScan camera) so that sunlight and overhead lighting did not obscure print or images too much.

Very quickly, I had to come up with a regimen for ensuring quality work that could be fulfilled at a satisfactory pace. Keeping the file folder I took papers out of was incredibly helpful, as well as creating multiple lists of what I wanted to accomplish. Separating standalone documents from records consisting of many pages also ensured that I could have information spanning more than one sheet together.

Occasionally, I ran into multiple copies of the same newspaper, clipping, premium list, or piece of memorabilia, so I made sure to have at least one uploaded to the Museum's Google Drive account, sometimes noting the number of copies as part of the file name—to save myself time and energy. Every piece in the archives, to the best of my ability, was slipped into sheet protectors for safekeeping. Even though I had to focus my essays on the Danbury State Fair, I was given some liberty in what I wanted to write about; as such, I helped my research with drafting a brief chronology, the fondly-remembered attractions, and how it changed under J. W. Leahy, as I describe later on.

II. Background and origins

More than two centuries ago, the vast part of Connecticut was agricultural, and its economy very much the same. Danbury itself was settled and plotted primarily by families from Norwalk and Stamford, who entered the settlement of Pahquioque by 1684. This place, set back in the county's hilly interior, found itself at the crossroads into New England, and retained a reclusive identity following the British raid in 1777. Close to both the New York State border and its namesake City, proximity proved vital for trade and population growth. Not long after the Revolutionary War, hatting began to take off, forefronted by Zadoc Benedict by 1780. This production dominated the region well into the next century.

In supplying the greatest number of woolen hats by the turn of the nineteenth century, the issue of transporting these materials remained a challenge. As attested by Ezra Mallory (of the noted hat factory), travel by wagon to South Norwalk and by sloop to New York was not an easy venture from Danbury, potentially taking days to reach markets. Samuel H. Rundle and George White, two notable White Street hatters, purchased a half-mile track of land and cleared it for their recreational horse track. As such, the Danbury Farmers and Manufacturer's Society was formed, its convent being held in 1821 - their pact with the hatters .

Wool was a crucial resource in a hatting town. Local tradition states that two smuggled Merino sheep arrived from Spain in 1809, and went on to inspire every county fair in the country. Farmers at the time were uncertain about the sale and introduction of foreign livestock breeds. So, the sheep's new owner, Elkanah Watson of Pittsfield, proposed an event that would spark interest in agricultural methods from elsewhere. By 1821, Danbury held its first agricultural fair.

Modernization during this time could not be staved off for long. The construction of the Danbury and Norwalk Railroad was beneficial to local commerce. Originally planned in 1835 as the Fairfield County Railroad, its charter was revived in 1850 and the line was laid by 1852—expanding the reach of heavy industry which had begun along the coast—and eliminating Danbury’s isolation amongst the Berkshire foothills. Ambitions of businessmen in the Pleasure Park Association and Savings Bank president John W. Bacon organized the first formal Fair in the first days of October, 1869.

A wide selection of wares, both agrarian and otherwise, rose to compete with fairs erected in Norwalk and Ridgefield, exhibiting the interests of industrialists and farmers alike; they were further promoted in premium lists, offering \$1,500, roughly \$25,000 at present. Products sold in the first five years of the Fair’s existence included millinery supplies, crops, leatherwares, farm tools, livestock, and clothing. To accommodate the increasingly-popular horse races, a tent was rented from the Barnum & Bailey Circus, which was then used to house produce, instruments, stoves, quilts, flowers, and furniture. During the next five years, attendance soared to more than half of the town’s population.

III. Attractions and exhibits

From its 142-acre tract at Pleasure Park, the ideals of hatting, entertainment, and banking converged through the Rundle and Jarvis families, who reenvisioned the Fair by the early 1910s. George Mortimer Rundle, fourth mayor and son of hatter Samuel H. Rundle, oversaw its operations for over half a century, while the Jarvises introduced a hotdog stand and steamboat from the Hudson; their Lake Kenosia fairground burned down after four generations. They became known as “stake men,” organizing and demarcating the wide arrangements of stands, concessionaires, and acts.

Livestock competitions, a long-time staple of the Fair tradition, were joined with the inclusion of several enclosures. At the airport gate were the oxen barns (for yoke contests), the Swine Show building and the Pavilion, all of which reeled in attendants with premium lists and auctions.

No doubt the most referenced portion of the Fair was the Big Top, in which were kept the biggest displays of floral assortments and freshly-grown produce. They were housed in the building’s Main Hall, and were often featured in the premium lists with the products for sale.

Up to the Fair’s last year, the Danbury Racearena, which had been redesigned and repurposed from its years as the Rundle & White horse track, remained its most popular attraction. A grandstand, constructed in the 1920s to accommodate larger crowds, seated those who could travel from even greater distances following the completion of Interstate 84 in 1969. It was also the most expansive section near the western edge of the fairground, between the New Netherland Village and Big Top.

Inspired by the business ventures and extraordinary nature of Phineas Taylor Barnum's circus, the namesake museum (not to be confused with Barnum's American Museum, the former business in New York) was another circus-themed exhibition, sourced from John Leahy's admiration for the showman. This facet of the Fair served as more of an biographical and informative installation.

Just to the north, past the Transportation Museum and sheep pen was the "New England Main Street" showcase, a replica of a colonial village complete with a row of period houses and Congregational church. On the western end of the property, the New Netherland Village displayed the Dutch settlement at Lower Manhattan as it looked in the seventeenth century. These two features were erected as interest in early American history was revitalized, the second erected close to the Fair's 100th anniversary.

At the time Leahy became the manager of the Danbury Fair, the Western genre was reaching its peak in American media. Seeking to keep up with the times, he commissioned the Gold Town exhibition, situated near the Music Hall and Big Top and modeled after an 1849 mining commune.

Staged performances were also well-attended at the Fair, and a number of summer plays were hosted at the bandstand, on the northern part of the property. A live orchestra and voiceover narration accompanied informational productions, the latter of which was used primarily for operettas.

IV. John Wilbur Leahy and the Great Danbury State Fair

Many of the aforementioned exhibitions were devised and introduced by John W. Leahy, a Danburian whose passion for showmanship and entertainment reformed the Danbury Fair after World War II. As a local, he opened his office at 130 White Street, frequently corresponding with vendors and governors alike – he was later known in newspapers as the "next" P. T. Barnum. Teamed with his wife, Gladys Stetson, and successor Charles Irving Jarvis, they expanded the Fair's attractions to include entertainment via replica towns, boat racing, and education; the first inspiration for the 1961 New Amsterdam came from a visit to an Albany, New York cafe many years earlier.

Leahy was born in Danbury on June 5th, 1895, to parents of Irish and German descent. Before his involvement at the fairgrounds, he was a former owner of a fuel company that still exists today. Early in his life, and probably due to the proximity of Bethel to his home city, he took inspiration from its most famous entrepreneur; he purchased the Fair's property in the 1930s, by which point the enterprise had suffered two fires (1897 and 1916), the influenza epidemic of 1918, and required to a loan in order to remain in business. His aim was to update the venue from agricultural to contemporary.

By 1943, he began purchasing shares to cover expenses for a new Big Top, the centerpiece of the Fair since its inception in the nineteenth century; the first one had burned down and no such building was there until he ascended to power. Since it was the place where the greatest quantity of wares were sold, it was here that Leahy's vision of a nationwide spectacle took root. Displays of flowers, crops and

other paraphernalia were joined by statues and props of people from varying cultures (themed after Native Americans, pirates, nursery rhyme characters, etc.), signifying the Fair's transition.

Though the Fair was sustained by lower-than-average attendance through the 1930s, the United States' entry into World War II caused admissions to drop and supplies to be rationed for affairs abroad. With the war's end in 1945, Leahy ran and was elected for the position of general manager; his wife, the former Gladys Stetson, was appointed treasurer of Danbury Fair, Incorporated. He was able to convince Mortimer Rundle to hand over most of his shares in the fairgrounds, and by 1946, with the help of Gladys and assistant manager Irving Jarvis, began to have his lifelong dream realized.

As the number and kinds of exhibits diversified, Leahy remained committed to adapting the Fair, which he had admired since childhood. Some of the property's machinery, such as pipe systems and water wells, had dried up and fallen into disrepair, and were repaired by a specially-hired crew of handymen and painters. He desired to extend his philanthropy, for which he was known at his fuel oil company, and was remembered for his invitations to his endeavors. Described favorably by attendees and partners, his kindness was preserved in many letters from government officials and schoolchildren.

V. Closure and legacy

Nestled amongst the hills, the Great Danbury State Fair enjoyed decades of success, unrecognizable from the agrarian convention it began as in the early nineteenth century. Rollercoasters like the Tilt-A-Whirl and the Diver careened above a multitude of pitched striped tents and suspended streams of pennants. The Racearena succeeding Rundle & White's horse track sounded with roaring race car engines and enormous crowds occupying the Grandstand. At the junction of I-84 and Route 7, its color-designated parking lots were generally filled, even on opening day; the first days of October were marked by patrons pouring in from Danbury, as well as by train and car from far beyond.

But this was not to last. Assistant general manager Irving Jarvis suffered a heart attack and died shortly before the Fair's 100th anniversary in 1969. This was the first instance of the Fair's representation beginning to dwindle as the twentieth century wound to a close; despite its prolonged prosperity and diversification on the part of Leahy's incorporating popular culture, the United States' economy had shifted in the wake of students protesting the Vietnam War and *rising estate taxes*.

John W. Leahy's death in 1975 resulted from two years of an illness, and marked the end of an era. Management, then in the hands of his widow Gladys, was then transferred to John Howard Stetson and vice president Frederick George Fearn. These two men would eventually compile their own histories of the Danbury Fair (chiefly a book Stetson written with Gladys Stetson Leahy), and release a documentary on its runtime in the 1990s, which included interviews from many seasoned fairgoers.

However, the spirit of the Fair remained strong even after Leahy's thirty-year career. During Gerald Ford's presidency, a scaled replica of the White House—the only one of its kind displayed—was exhibited in recognition of the bicentennial. Famed race car drivers made frequent appearances in Southern New York Racing Association magazines, continuing to mention the Fair and maintain interest for an already-engaged demographic—though the mode of racing had changed decades before.

In 1979, Danbury Fair, Incorporated entered into an agreement with the Wilmorite Company of Rochester, New York, for the \$25 million-sale of the grounds for the building of a “regional mall.” The last Danbury Fair was held in October 1981, closing for the last time on the 6th. At its conclusion, the pastoral scene at Pleasure Park once again morphed to suit the interests of the times.

Once the Fair had closed, all of its props, animals, and equipment were auctioned off in March-April 1982; from here, memorabilia and pieces from its various attractions were purchased and dispersed across the country. Most of them were transferred to upstate Vermont, though many features are now mounted elsewhere in Danbury; the largest statue of Uncle Sam now stands at the corner of White Street outside the Railway Museum, and the Carousel is now in the Danbury Mall food court.

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