

6/4/2018 Question of the Week

In the 1790s, a performer from overseas introduced the circus in the United States.

What was his name?

- (a) Edwin Forrest
- (b) Lewis Hallam
- (c) William Dunlap
- (d) John Bill Ricketts

Answer: (d) John Bill Ricketts

When John Bill Ricketts arrived in Philadelphia from the UK in the 1790s, the “circus” was still a relatively young form of entertainment. Ricketts had performed in some of the first managed equestrian shows in England in the 1780s prior to his move to the United States. Once he resettled, he wasted little time expounding upon his special brand of showmanship. In Philadelphia in late 1792, he began training horses for his act. In April 1793, Ricketts’ Circus opened at Twelfth and High (now Market) streets. He found immediate success, so much so that President George Washington paid the circus a visit during its opening month. The circus featured acrobats and equestrian acts as its primary entertainments.

Over the course of its short lifespan, Ricketts’ Circus grew in its scope and supported the community at-large, such as when it served as a quarantine space during the city’s 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic. Ricketts’ Circus burned down in a fire in December 1799 and was not rebuilt.

For more on the history of John Bill Ricketts and the American circus, see *America's First Circus* (call number E 162.E214 vol. 5) and *Father of the American Circus* (call number E 171 .A574) in HSP’s library. Historical circus images are included in HSP’s theatre posters collection (#V06), the Frank Dumont minstrelsy scrapbook (#3054), and the *Specimens of Theatrical Cuts* by George William Childs (Am .8368).
