

Nothing Was General About General Tom Thumb

An Early American Celebrity from Connecticut

John Plant, GKS Library Committee, January 2025

His real name was Charles Stratton, and he was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1838. His father was a native of Bridgeport, his mother was from West Haven. Doctors at the time had no idea why, at five months old he stopped growing. Today growth hormones can be administered in such cases.

He was perfect in appearance, had an ideal boyish face and a well-proportioned handsome body. In short, he was a perfect human but in miniature. His brain had the smallest recorded size estimated for an intelligent and sane person. At four years of age, he was two-feet tall and weighed 16 pounds. That's when he was brought to New York for four weeks by P. T. Barnum – the master promoter, manager and advertising genius. Immediately. Charles' natural talent for wit and comedy impressed Barnum who invested long hours of training and transformed his protégé into "Tom Thumb", later adding the title "General".

Celebrity Status

Many "dwarfs" were on display in America and Europe before him, but he emerged as a child prodigy, a popular entertainer who could sing and dance, and act confidently on the stage with thousands of eyes upon him. We are reminded of other child



General Tom Thumb and his wife Lavinia.
Carte de visite photo on card stock, circa 1881,
GKS Collection (P-3000-393 colorized).

superstars, such as Shirley Temple of the 1930s. Freak shows were criticized and held in disrespect at the time but underwent rehabilitation after the public saw Tom Thumb. He was loved for his charm, humor and quick wit.

Tom Thumb traveled with Barnum on several tours of Europe starting 1844 and captured the hearts of European aristocracy, and the rich and famous. To name a few: King Leopold of Belgium, Baroness Charlotte De Rothschild, Queen Victoria, Tsar Nicholas of Russia, Emperor Louis Napoleon III. He was barely 6 years old, but everyone believed he was 12, as Barnum had cleverly advertised him.

He became one of America's first international celebrities. Before Tom Thumb, American figures known worldwide were statesmen, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, or literary figures, such as Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper. But Tom Thumb proved unique and wildly popular.

He sold-out theatres, concert halls, circuses, even churches until his sudden death in 1885. He gave over 20,000 official shows in a span of 40 years. More than 50 million people saw him perform in two dozen countries around the globe.



Mr. & Mrs. General Tom Thumb (center couple), Commodore Nutt (left), Minnie Warren (right) and P. T. Barnum.
Carte de visite photo on card stock, circa mid-1870s.
GKS Collection (P-3000-237 colorized).

The Thimble Islands

At one point in his career, Tom Thumb earnestly wanted to settle down and get married. There are Branford stories that he built a house on the Thimble Island “Cut-In-Two East”, and that he courted a little person – Emily Smith, who worked for P. T. Barum in New York and summered on the island, but she was dropped when he met his future wife, Lavinia. However, Branford’s town historian, Jane Bouley, believes Tom Thumb was merely a guest of the Smith family and that the rest is rumor.

His Wedding

His wife, Lavinia Warren, born in Middleborough, Massachusetts in 1841, was like him a “perfectly developed person in miniature”. She was working on a museum riverboat, a “floating palace of curiosities” that travelled the Mississippi, when P. T. Barnum invited her to New York. Instantly, Tom Thumb fell in love, and they were married in New York in 1863. The wedding was a spectacle beyond compare. President Lincoln held a honeymoon party for the newlyweds in the East Room of the White House.



Wedding photo of Charles Stratton (Tom Thumb) and Lavinia Warren Stratton (Mrs. Tom Thumb) (center couple). Commodore Nutt (left) and his “wife” Minnie Warren (right) acted as groomsman and bridesmaid. Minnie was Lavinia’s shorter and younger sister, actually she was never married to Commodore Nutt. The assertion was another advertising ploy of P. T. Barnum.

Carte de visite photo on card stock, circa 1863, GKS Collection (P-3000-243 colorized).

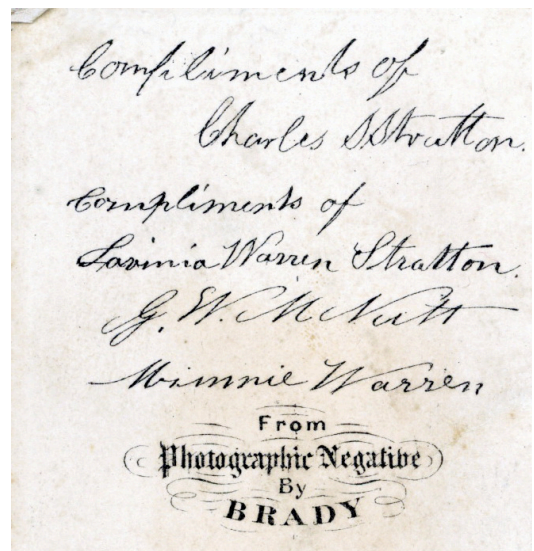


Playing cards. Minnie and her sister Lavinia (Mrs. Tom Thumb) on left side, Commodore Nutt standing and Tom Thumb on right. The four toured together for many years.
Carte de visite photo on card stock, circa 1881, GKS Collection (P-3000-190 colorized).



Playing chess. Minnie Stratton & Commodore Nutt. It's said that she usually won.

Carte de visite photo on card stock, circa 1870s, GKS Collection (P-3000-187 colorized).



Reverse side of above with printed signatures:
 "Compliments of Charles S. Stratton,
 Compliments of Lavinia Warren Stratton,
 G. W. M. Nutt,
 Minnie Warren"

“Tom Thumb Weddings”

The wedding captivated the public so greatly that even after 100 years the event would continue to be reenacted as a performance play. All the roles, that of the bride and groom, the members of both families, fathers, mothers, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins, were all represented by local children.

Tom Thumb’s weddings were held in Madison on several occasions in 1916 with Carlo Lupone as Tom Thumb; in the Branford Baptist Church in 1918 and again in 1934; in the North Haven Congregational Church in 1951 with repeat performances; in 1937 in Guilford’s First Congregational Church with Barry White as the bridegroom and Marjorie Ann Gorden as bride, both 5-years old.



A “Fairy Wedding” performance held in the auditorium of Guilford’s old Town Hall. Pete Lazarevich played Tom Thumb.
Photo print from GKS Collection (P-1762 colorized).

The wedding would often be a theme for a float in the Guilford Fair parade: in 1946 a float was put together by the children of Graves Avenue; in 1958 one was organized by Melissa Jones School children; and there was another such float in 1965.

Most anything to do with Tom Thumb was popular. In 1905, Mrs. Eva Leete’s antique shop on Fair Street presented a baby cradle (it actually looked like a chariot on rockers) in which Tom Thumb was rocked as a baby. Madame Jarley’s marvelous wax figures of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Thumb could be seen locally on display at the Congregational Church of North Haven in 1918. Guilford toy stores in the 1950s sold Tom Thumb typewriters, which were designed for children.

