



Fig. 1: Jumbo's statue is 20 ft (6.1 m) high  
(photo courtesy of F. Michael Bartlett)

# Jumbo the Elephant, St. Thomas, Ontario

by F. Michael Bartlett

## Concrete Commemorative Monuments

The mission of ACI Committee 120, History of Concrete, is to “develop and report information on the history of concrete.” A new initiative of the committee is to write articles about commemorative monuments across North America and around the globe that are constructed using concrete. This article is the first in the series. If you are aware of a concrete commemorative monument that you think should be featured, contact ACI Committee 120 Chair F. Michael Bartlett at [f.m.bartlett@uwo.ca](mailto:f.m.bartlett@uwo.ca).

**T**he City of St. Thomas, ON, Canada, located halfway between Detroit, MI, USA, and Toronto, ON, has a spectacular concrete statue depicting Jumbo the Elephant. It was erected in 1985 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the elephant's tragic death in St. Thomas. This article briefly describes Jumbo's life, the accident that killed him, and the commissioning and creation of the statue.

## The Life and Death of Jumbo

Jumbo, born in Sudan in 1860,<sup>1</sup> was captured in late 1861 or 1862 when he was 3.5 ft (1.1 m) tall.<sup>2</sup> He was exhibited at Jardin des Plantes, a zoo in Paris, France, until 1865, when

London Zoo in Regent's Park received Jumbo in exchange for "a rhinoceros, two dingoes, a jackal, a possum, a kangaroo and a pair of eagles."<sup>3</sup> Although he was "ill, dirty, and emaciated"<sup>3</sup> when he arrived in London, he regained his health with the support of his keeper, Matthew Scott.<sup>3</sup> He was very popular, frequently giving children rides in a howdah on his back. However, he could also be aggressively temperamental, a condition recently attributed to deformed molar teeth.<sup>1</sup>

In December 1881, due to concerns about his temperament, London Zoo offered Jumbo for 2000 GBP (roughly 10,000 USD then, equivalent to 330,000 USD in 2025) to American circus magnate Phineas T. Barnum.<sup>1</sup> The obituary of Barnum's partner, James A. Bailey,<sup>4</sup> indicates that Bailey played a significant role in the transaction, which was officially agreed to on February 1, 1882.<sup>3</sup> In a public relations coup, Barnum's agents in London initiated a letter-writing campaign that resulted in thousands of letters published in London daily newspapers protesting Jumbo's departure<sup>2</sup> and record attendance at the London Zoo before he left.<sup>1</sup> Addressing concerns about Jumbo's transfer to New York, NY, USA, Barnum wrote, "with care, watchfulness, and plenty of chains, we could land him in New York."<sup>1</sup>

In March 1882, a crane loaded a massive crate containing Jumbo onto the deck of the *Assyrian Monarch*. The ship arrived with fanfare in the New York Harbor on Easter Sunday morning, April 9, 1882. A specially built traveling van with iron bracing and a team of 16 horses took Jumbo to Madison Square Gardens.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that Barnum recouped his total expense of 6000 GBP to purchase and transport Jumbo within 3 weeks.<sup>3</sup> The circus toured for 31-week seasons from 1882 to 1885, with Jumbo drawing massive crowds. On May 17, 1884, Barnum paraded Jumbo, 20 other elephants, and 17 camels<sup>5</sup> across the Brooklyn Bridge, which "helped solidify the bridge's reputation as a marvel of engineering."<sup>1</sup>

Jumbo made his first visit to Canada in 1885, arriving at Fairville Station in Saint John, NB, in the circus's 60-car train.<sup>6</sup> The circus toured parts of the Maritimes and central Canada, and in mid-September started a stint in St. Thomas. After a successful first day, the elephants were being reloaded onto the train using a shortcut across the main Grand Trunk Railway line. At 9:30 p.m. on September 15, 1885, Special Freight Train No. 151 collided with Jumbo and Tom Thumb, a smaller elephant, as they were walking along the tracks to reach their cars. Jumbo was "struck on his hind end,"<sup>3</sup> causing the engine and first two cars of the train to derail, and he died within minutes. It required a team of over 100 onlookers to roll the deceased Jumbo off the track bed.<sup>3</sup> The accident received international press coverage and put St. Thomas on the map.<sup>7</sup>

Barnum wasted no time in capitalizing on the tragic circumstances. He "immediately arranged for Jumbo to be skinned" and charged onlookers five cents each for the opportunity to watch those final acts.<sup>6</sup> He also invented and publicized a new story for Jumbo's death, calling him a hero for bravely throwing Tom Thumb out of the path of the

approaching train. He had Jumbo's hide preserved and stuffed for exhibition at Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA, where Barnum was a founding trustee,<sup>8</sup> and he sold Jumbo's skeleton to the American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that Barnum made over a million dollars from Jumbo (equivalent to 33 million USD in 2025) after his death.<sup>1</sup>

## Commissioning and Creating the Statue

The City of St. Thomas decided to commemorate the centennial of Jumbo's death by commissioning a large statue of the elephant (Fig. 1). A "Jumbo Monument Committee," created by the Kiwanis Club of St. Thomas, successfully raised sufficient funds to commission Winston Bronnum, a sculptor based in Sussex, NB, to create the statue.<sup>9</sup> The initiative eventually cost 100,000 CAD and received no public funding.<sup>10</sup>

Bronnum (1929-1991) grew up in New Denmark, a rural area of western New Brunswick, Canada. He relocated to Ontario after the Second World War to work in construction, "where he quickly advanced to supervising rigging...due to his innate engineering skills."<sup>9</sup> He returned to New Brunswick in the 1950s and opened a studio, first in Grand Falls and later in Fredericton, where he sold his wood carvings, typically of local woodland creatures. By the 1970s, he was creating "durable sculptures using portland cement reinforced with steel, designed to endure harsh weather conditions."<sup>9</sup>

Bronnum's statue consists of a 6000 lb (2700 kg) steel frame that supports 34,000 lb (15,400 kg) of concrete.<sup>9</sup> It is 20 ft (6.1 m) high, and the distance between the outstretched ear tips is 10 ft (3 m), making the statue roughly twice as big as Jumbo was.<sup>11</sup> The hollow body is 7 in. (180 mm) thick, and "the skin texture was achieved by trowelling on three-quarters of an inch [19 mm] of colored cement and sand plaster."<sup>12</sup>

The 38 ton (35 tonne) monument was fabricated in two parts to be loaded on flatbed trucks for the 1200 mile (1900 km) trip from Sussex to St. Thomas. The sight of the concrete elephant's massive head and torso would have been quite surprising to other road users, so the option of covering the statue to limit the potential distraction was considered.<sup>11</sup>

About 3000 people lined the main street of St. Thomas to welcome the arrival of the statue in their city. "It didn't matter that Jumbo wasn't all there—he was separated at the knees to fit under bridges along the Trans-Canada Highway—or that the flatbed trailer carrying the legs came first in the homecoming parade. Nor did anyone complain that their first glimpse of the 4.9 m (16 ft) concrete statue was—the back end."<sup>10</sup> The next day, a crowd of about 500 watched the erection of the statue at a prominent hilltop site at the south end of what is now the St. Thomas Elevated Park, about 1.5 miles (2.5 km) from the site of the accident.

Retired local politician Steve Peters remains very enthusiastic about the statue. "With the erection of the monument 40 years ago, it has become a great roadside attraction for the community," he said in 2025. "If I have

out-of-town friends coming to St. Thomas, there's no trip to St. Thomas that's complete without a visit to Jumbo, so he has really become a significant tourist draw for the community.”

If you are visiting St. Thomas or nearby, you can find Jumbo at GPS coordinates 42.778900, -81.208182. And while you are in the city, you might try a glass of “Dead Elephant Ale,” an IPA produced by Railway City Brewing Company, a local microbrewery.

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Selected for reader interest by the editors.



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