Living History of Illinois and Chicago®
Living History of Illinois and Chicago® – Facebook Group.
Digital Research Library of Illinois History®
Living History of Illinois Gazette - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.
Illinois History Store® – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

Marshall Field Funds and Battles for "The Columbian Museum of Chicago"

(The Field Museum)

The Field Museum was primarily an outgrowth of the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. The first published suggestion that a museum should be formed as a result of the exposition was, in the opinion of Frederick J.V. Skiff, first Director of the Museum, an article by Professor F.W. Putnam in the Chicago Tribune of May 31, 1890. In that year and the following one Putnam also addressed local bodies on this subject and his views were duly reported in the newspapers.

In 1891, Dr. G. Brown Goode, then in charge of the United States National Museum, while in Chicago to consult with the exposition directors regarding government exhibits, emphatically pointed out to J.W. Ellsworth, a member of the foreign affairs committee, the opportunity afforded by the Exposition to establish a great museum. Mr. Ellsworth became an enthusiastic advocate of the plan, and he was able to interest other committee members, including William T. Baker, chairman.

As a result, purchases made abroad by this committee, and those of equipment for some departments, were viewed partly in relation to their usefulness for a future museum. Early in 1892 an organization called the Columbian Historical Association was formed, at the suggestion of members of this committee, to take advantage of the privilege granted scientific societies to import exhibits free of duty. Funds contributed to this society by various individuals were regarded by Director Skiff as being the first actually given in behalf of the Museum.

In July 1893, a letter by S.C. Eastman, published in the Tribune and followed by strong editorials in other newspapers, called attention anew to the desirability of a museum and aroused much public interest. In recognition of this interest, a committee of three of the directors of the exposition called a public meeting “to adopt measures to establish in Chicago a great museum that shall be a fitting memorial of the World’s Columbian Exposition and a permanent advantage and honor to the city.” This meeting, held on August 7, 1893, was attended by about one hundred leading citizens. As a result of the meeting a committee was appointed to incorporate an institution such as had been projected.

Under the name of “The Columbian Museum of Chicago” application was made for incorporation, with sixty-five leading citizens as incorporators and fifteen as trustees. On September 16, 1893, a charter was applied for and granted. The object of the corporation was stated to be “the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge and the preservation and exhibition of objects illustrating art, archaeology, science and history.”

Meanwhile, officials of the exposition had become actively interested in the plan for the Museum, and began to solicit and procure from exhibitors gifts and transfers of desirable exhibits. Response to the requests generally was hearty, and material for the new Museum accumulated rapidly, On September 14 a communication from A.W. Manning of the Evening Post suggested that holders of exposition stock donate their shares to the Museum, and this suggestion brought ultimately, from about 1,100 persons, gifts of certificates totaling $1,500,000 in par value.

Thus, seemingly, progress was being rapidly and successfully made toward the establishment of a great museum. As time went on, however, and exhibits accumulated

in large amount, it began to be realized that an adequate endowment to insure permanency to the institution was as yet far from being obtained. The countrywide financial stringency which developed to alarming proportions in 1894 was already beginning to be felt. Strenuous efforts which were made to raise the amount needed failed to give the hoped for results. By the middle of October, in the words of Director Skiff, “a period of discouragement came upon those at work for the Museum. Nothing but the faith, devotion and courage of a few men prevented the disintegration of the preliminary organization and the practical abandonment of the Museum enterprise.”

Among Chicago’s citizens in 1893 none stood higher in the confidence and esteem of the public than Marshall Field. Born in Conway, Mass., in 1835, Mr. Field in early life had come to Chicago. Here he advanced rapidly, until he had largely created and become the head of a great business which occupied a leading place in the city and attained world-wide fame.

Mr. Field was known to be favorable to all plans for increasing the cultural and educational facilities of Chicago. Moreover, it was known that any enterprise to which he set his hand would be given wholehearted and permanent support.

Therefore, on October 24, 1893, Edward E. Ayer, a member of the museum association finance committee, who later became the first President of the Museum and throughout his life remained one of its most ardent and able supporters, called up Mr. Field and set forth the peculiar opportunity which the World’s Columbian Exposition afforded to establish a great museum in the city. He called attention to the fact that no such institution as yet existed in Chicago, and pointed out that the opportunity to create through the acquisition of exhibits of the exposition was one that should not be allowed to lapse. At the end of the interview Mr. Field remained noncommittal but promised to consider the matter. It was evident that he wished to assure himself of the need, importance and desirability of the plan before committing himself to its support. His consideration quickly resulted in a favorable decision, and on October 26 he announced that he would contribute the sum of $1,000,000 for the establishment of the proposed museum.

The gratification of the committee on receiving this announcement can well be imagined. Everyone knew that it meant the success and permanence of a great

museum for the city. It is doubtful if, up to that time, any museum had ever received so munificent a gift. As a single gift for museum purposes it shattered all precedents.

The establishment of the Museum this being assured, other contributors promptly appeared. George M. Pullman and Harlow N. Higinbotham each subscribed $100,000. Other contributors of funds included Mrs. Mary D. Sturges, the McCormick Estate, P. D. Armour, Martin A. Ryerson, R. T. Crane, A. A. Sprague and many other leading citizens. Their contributions, together with donations of exposition stock, totaled nearly one-half million dollars by the end of the following year.

These funds enabled purchases to be made of large collections or important exhibits that had been shown at the exposition. Such purchases included those the War natural history collection, the Tiffany collection of gems, the collection of pre-Columbian gold ornaments, the Hassler ethnological collection from Paraguay, collections representing Javanese, Samoan and Peruvian ethnology, and the Hagenbeck collection of about 600 ethnological objects from Africa, the South Sea Islands, British Columbia, et cetera.

A spirit of generous cooperation was aroused on all sides, and donations of exhibits and collections of great value were received in large numbers. Mr. Ayer presented his large anthropological collection, chiefly devoted to the ethnology of the North American Indian. The Museum acquired by purchase and by gift almost all the extensive collections made by the department of anthropology of the exposition. The technical and special collections made by the department of mines, mining and metallurgy of the exposition were presented, together with the exhibition cases, as were also collections from 130 exhibitors in the same department. From exhibitors in agriculture, forestry and manufactures departments of the exposition collections of timbers, oils, gums, resins, fibers, fruits, seeds and grains were contributed in so large quantity and variety as to insure for the first time in any general natural history museum the formation of an adequate department of botany.

Now comes the battle of a life-time.

Fights broke out that involved bitter differences of opinion over the city's lakefront: Should it be left pristine or dotted with cultural amenities?

Two local moguls squared off: Marshall Field, who made State Street the city's shopping rialto, on the side of a proposed museum, against Montgomery Ward, who made Chicago the hub of the mail-order industry and was a staunch protector of the city's lakefront as a public space.

Lawsuits involving arcane legal principles were accompanied by insults worthy of a guttersnipe. Ward's attorney accused Field of building a monument to himself, facetiously adding: "And being a poor man, he could not afford to pay for a site. Now it is proposed to secure a site from the city of Chicago by violating a trust."

That battle, which would ultimately outlive one of the combatants, began Oct. 27, 1893, when Field pledged to contribute $1 million toward a museum to permanently house exhibits from the World's Columbian Exposition, which was about to close. Field didn't court publicity.

Others involved in the project recognized that a famous name attracts others with money. So a year later, the museum was renamed the Field Columbian Museum, subsequently shortened to The Field Museum, changes that lived up to their promise. John G. Shedd, the second president of Marshall Field & Co., would endow the aquarium that sits alongside the Field Museum. Max Adler, vice president of Sears, Roebuck & Co., would do the same for the nearby planetarium.

More immediately, it put Field on a collision course with Ward, the self-described guardian angel of Chicago's lakefront.

The Field Museum was originally sited for the lakeshore at Congress Parkway, and upon its announcement, Ward filed a lawsuit. He claimed that when he purchased nearby property, "he relied on plats ... in which appeared the words: 'Public ground, a common to remain forever open, clear and free from any buildings or other obstruction whatever.'" Still, Ward was open to compromise, tired after years of hectoring and suing the city to clean up what is now Grant Park, which was then little more than a dumping ground. If guaranteed that the museum would be a unique exception, Ward would drop his opposition.

But developers were rushing proposals to the park's commissioners, who turned down Ward's offer. The game was on.

The combatants were very different types. Field had a broad circle of friends, business associates and fellow philanthropists to support his fight for the museum. Ward was a loner who shunned social gatherings.

Ward had one critical ally, however: time. Like a sports team, he could win by running out the clock.

Field, who died in 1906, left an additional bequest of $8 million for the museum, but his donation was contingent upon the city providing a site, free of charge and within six years of his death. Ward knew that if he could keep the project tied up in the courts until midnight Jan. 1, 1912, he would win.

Accordingly, the legal papers flew back and forth, accompanied by a war of words. Field's supporters played on the public's heartstrings.

There were oddball legal maneuvers. The Illinois legislature passed a bill in 1903 enabling the park board to void Ward's easement on Grant Park, his legal right to have it free of buildings. "You can pass all the state legislation you want to," an aide to Ward responded, "but it will not be constitutional if Mr. Ward complains." Indeed, the Illinois Supreme Court sided with Ward, as it did on several occasions.

Stymied, the museum's partisans offered ways out of the deadlock. Stanley Field, Marshall Field's nephew and successor, lobbied the state legislature in 1910 on behalf of a bill that would grant the museum submerged land in Lake Michigan to fill in and build on the resulting island. The project was dubbed the Atlantis museum, but Ward vetoed it.

The park board offered a site in Garfield Park, and then an alternate one in Jackson Park, the site of the World's Fair that gave birth to the museum project. The clock was ticking down, and the museum trustees were about to settle for the latter offer. But at the last minute, the Illinois Central Railroad offered land at 12th Street upon which it had planned to build a terminal.

That is where the Field Museum finally came to be built, starting in September 1911.

The battle of the Titans had ended in something of a draw. Field got his museum, albeit posthumously. Ward, who died in 1913, lived to see his lakefront still largely unspoiled. Chicagoans got both: a world-class museum and an incomparable shoreline.

Perhaps balancing the exhausting struggle that accompanied its birth, the Field Museum opened without fanfare May 2, 1921.

"The doors were simply opened at 2 o'clock, and the first of the 8,000 guests entered," the Tribune observed. "Speeches and music would have been superfluous."