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World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, Illinois - 1893

--- A SHORT SUMMARY ---

The World's Columbian Exposition (WCE) in Chicago, Illinois, an idea born in the late 1880s, celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of explorer Christopher Columbus and his landing in the Americas. The United States Congressional committee studying the celebration saw it also as a chance to display the burgeoning economic and industrial strength of the United States, bring the best of the world together in one place, and promote trade at the same time. The Paris Exposition of 1889, with its commanding trademark, the Eiffel tower, would not only be emulated; but the plan was to surpass it in every statistic and department.

The site of the fair was debated at length. New York City, St. Louis, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., garnered the most votes in Congress with Chicago the ultimate winner on the eighth vote; President Benjamin Harrison signed the proclamation on April 25, 1890. Chicago's business and government leaders had won the day with ready capital backing from its industrialists, good transportation, and efficient and enthusiastic organization and planning. Having lost the bid to host the fair, New Yorkers felt Chicago should be named "The Windy City" due to long-winded oratory and braggadocio used in securing the site of the world's fair. That moniker stuck. (Well... that's one theory.)

Thus in 1890, Chicago had to get to work and build just as it had done in 1871 after a large part of the city burned to the ground. The Chicago fair's "I Will" was a symbol of that courage, energy, and determination. The city motto in 1893 was "I Will," and it is still in use today. Colonel Kohlsatt of the newspaper Inter-Ocean had devised the contest which created that city motto and symbol. The yellow "Y" represents the three branches of the Chicago River.



The World's Columbian Commission, directed by Thomas W. Palmer, worked with the World's Columbian Exposition Company in Chicago headed successively by Lyman J. Gage, William Thomas Baker, and finally Harlow Niles Higinbotham whose tenure included Chicago Day, October 9, 1893. A Joint Council of Administration smoothed differences in planning philosophy between the two organizations.



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Chicago chose a site from several city proposals: north side near Lincoln Park, southwest at Washington Park, and undeveloped land on the Lake Michigan shore destined to be Jackson Park. Jackson Park was chosen for its shoreline access, availability of 689 acres, and rapidly growing south-side communities. It provided the largest world's fair site to that time. Nearby, the University of Chicago opened in 1892; and Pullman village operated as a model city and passenger railcar factory.

The landscape architects for the fair, Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park in New York, and his young partner Harry Codman, developed the shore property bounded by Fifty-sixth Street on the north to Sixty-seventh Street on the south and stretching west to Stony Island Avenue, which nearly borders the extensive rail lines heading into the city to Dearborn, Union, and other tram stations. Hence, both land and water transportation to the fair could be easily provided; the system, designed to carry 130,000 patrons an hour, was adequate for every day except one - Chicago Day.



The use of lagoons and basins, a uniform cornice height for all twelve of the major buildings, and generally a uniform white or light color to the buildings led to the landscape and architectural success of the Columbian Exposition, the impact of which is still written about today. The "White City" with the world's largest structure, the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, was not only a monumental place to exhibit the products of mankind but also was a pleasing one to the eye and spirit.



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Director of Works (Chief of Construction), Daniel Hudson Burnham, under Director-General George R. Davis, laid out the state and foreign buildings at the north end of Jackson Park and the main buildings around waterways that were dredged from shore bogs and which meandered through the grounds offering many enchanting views.

The Agriculture Building and the Stock Pavilion were on the south end of the grounds and the Transportation and Terminal Station Buildings were fittingly located on the west side with easy spur access to main lines, not only to facilitate the two-year construction phase and the dedication in October 1892, but also to make entry into the fair attractive, easy, and inexpensive. The grand and imposing Administration Building, designed by Richard M. Hunt of New York, greeted fairgoers coming out of Terminal Station and overlooked the Court of Honor's basin and the huge gilt Statue of the Republic sculpted by Daniel Chester French, the whole serving as a focal point for the entire grounds.

A distinctive feature of the grounds was the first-ever-dedicated Woman's Building, designed by Sophia G. Hayden. The promotion of this building, as well as the neighboring Children's Building and two dormitory buildings off the grounds for women and family visitors, by the Board of Lady Managers led to many accolades then as well as positive reviews which are still issued today. The Board was chaired by the indefatigable Chicago socialite Bertha (Mrs. Potter) Honoré Palmer. The removal of suffragette Phoebe Couzins from the Board for inappropriate management of funds did little to dampen the enthusiasm and extensive contributions of women at the fair.

Near the Woman's Building stood the largest state building, Illinois. The only building intended to be permanent was just to the north, the Fine Arts Palace designed by C. B. Atwood of Chicago. Most of the buildings were constructed of iron beams, wood, glass, and lathe; and the larger ones were coated with inexpensive "staff," a kind of temporary stucco made of hemp fiber, plaster-of-Paris, cement, and water, which was then quickly painted with the pneumatic spray gun invented at the fair during construction. Frank D. Millet, noted artist, was Chief of Decoration for the buildings.

In the case of Fine Arts, ultimate safety from fire and other damage was required to attract the best works for display from around the world. Hence, unlike the other buildings, brick, mortar, and marble were used in its construction. After the fair, this building became the Columbian (Field) Museum, housing for display many of the



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exhibits shown at the world's fair. In 1937 the Field Museum, renamed for benefactor and department store mogul Marshall Field, moved north to its present site on Lake Shore Drive; and the original Fine Arts Building became the home of the Museum of Science and Industry. Continuing value from the fair and the fairgrounds after the celebration was part of the original plans for south Chicago.

Despite so called '*common knowledge*' (you've been misinformed) there were NO gold medals, silver medals, or any type of ribbons, blue or otherwise, officially given to any contestant, organization, company, co-op or entity at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. The world's fair organizers decided to judge the contests and the prizes a little differently. Instead of competing directly against each other, the exhibitors, in all categories, were judged against a list of criteria that represented a standard of excellence for that category. Bronze medallions was the only award. Each recipient also got a large 'Certificate of Achievement' on parchment. >>> [the whole story](#) ...

The first amusement midway originated at the World's Columbian Exposition (WCE claims the birth-right of the amusement park). The [Midway Plaisance](#), a strip of land south of Fifty-ninth Street, 600 feet wide and just short of a mile long, was connected to the west end of the main grounds near the Woman's Building. Originally designed by Frederic Ward Putnam as a living ethnology exhibit, promoter Sol Bloom took over the Midway and ran it as a show ground for amusement, relaxation, diverse foods, entertainment, and knowledge. Unlike the exhibits on the main grounds, many of the exhibits on the Midway required an entrance fee; and many concessions sold arts, crafts, and souvenirs.

Exhibits ranged from technologies, such as Zoopraxographical Hall where Eadweard Muybridge showed his moving horse and dog images and the Working Man's Home, to commercial, such as the Libbey Glass works, the Ostrich farm from California, and Hagenbeck's Zoological Arena for trained animals. Ethnology concessions covered living exhibits of Esquimaux from Labrador, Egyptians in the Street in Cairo, Dahomey natives from West Africa, Javanese, the Chinese Theater, and the popular Viennese, Irish, and German Village pavilions. Many exhibitors lived on the Midway. Amusements included the Ice Railway ride and the captive hydrogen-filled balloon ride, described later. Today we would say there was something for everyone.



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The most famous amusement ride was developed by engineer George Washington Gale Ferris. His contraption involved two 250 foot wheels which in-between he hung 36 enclosed passenger cars, each the size of a streetcar -- 27' long, 13' wide and 9' high -- with large observation windows barred by iron safety gratings, each car was fitted with 40 swivel chairs and had room for twenty more standing passengers for a total of 60 passengers. The wheel rotated on a 71 ton, 45.5-foot axle comprising what was, at that time, was the world's largest 'hollow forged' axle weighing 89,320 pounds, together with two 16-foot-diameter cast-iron spiders, for the spokes, weighing in at 53,031 pounds.



Ferris Wheel at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

Each car weighed 13 tons. Stepped platforms at the base of the Wheel enabled six cars to be loaded and unloaded at a time. Fully loaded, the Wheel's maximum capacity was an astounding 2160 passengers. Each car carried an employee to keep an eye on the passenger's health and wellbeing.

Your 50¢ ride (It also cost 50¢ to enter the World's Fair.) on the Ferris wheel took about 20 minutes to make the two revolutions for your ride. The first revolution involving six stops to allow passengers to exit and enter and the second was a nine-minute non-stop rotation.

It was instantly hailed as the "eighth wonder of the world." With skyscrapers in their infancy, the 264 foot tall Ferris wheel stood just a bit shorter than the tallest building in North America at that time, Chicago's Masonic Temple. Outlined at night by 1400 light bulbs, the Wheel reportedly could be seen from 50 miles away. Indeed, a Ferris wheel is a common and popular attraction on today's midways and in touring carnivals.



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A few years after the Columbian Exposition, the wheel was reconstructed on the north side, in the Lincoln Park neighborhood, right in the middle of a heavily populated residential area. Named [Ferris Wheel Park](#) it opened at 1298 N. Clark Street (2645 N. Clark St. today), Chicago, IL in 1896. The park ran for a very short time and fell into state receivership, and finally got dismantled in 1903.

The next and last stop for the World's Columbian Exposition's Ferris wheel was at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, informally known as the St. Louis World's Fair, in Forest Park, St. Louis, Missouri. But when the fair ended, the giant wheel — the biggest ever — was dropped with 100 pounds of dynamite. Local legend says the Ferris wheel, or what was left, (71 ton - 45 foot axle) was buried with the rest of the fair's rubble in makeshift landfills at Forest Park. Archaeologists now hunt its remnants in St. Louis.

The Midway Plaisance in 1893 would not hold all the shows and vendors who wanted to be at the fair; snack and souvenir shops lined the west side of Stony Island Avenue, and the Model Sunday School Building was located there also. Buffalo Bill Cody held his immensely popular Congress of Rough Riders "Wild West" show a block from the main grounds. The popularity of the fair and the midway later spawned the "White City" amusement park in south Chicago, which was modeled after the beaux-arts architectural theme of the original.

Congresses on hundreds of subjects were featured at the Columbian Exposition and constitute another fine and enduring "first" legacy from 1893. The World's Congress Auxiliary, promoted and led by Charles Carroll Bonney, rapidly grew in popularity, ultimately bringing the finest minds and dignitaries to Chicago to discuss the state of mankind. Bertha Palmer led the women's sections of the congresses.

A new building on Michigan Avenue, a joint effort of the Exposition Company and the Art Institute, was used as a multi-room auditorium for speeches and oratories on all aspects of human endeavor. After the fair, the building reverted by plan to become the new Art Institute-its present home, though now much expanded. The first Congress of Religions and Parliament of Religions, ably led by John Henry Barrows, were ideas that continued after the World's Columbian Exposition, including a successful centennial Parliament held in Chicago in 1993. The Congress of Representative Women was held



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at the Art Institute, and the Congress of Women was held at the Woman's Building on the fair-grounds. This concept of airing achievements and needs in a central forum was an early realization of the growing interdependence and diversity of people on a small and fragile planet.

This fair, held from May 1 to October 30, 1893, was an important part of "the gay '90s." It evolved into a historical event because of the people who supported it, the wealth of information disseminated, clever promotion, enduring symbols, glittering architecture, and the ideal park-like setting. The overall success in all departments, including financial, was tempered by some disasters and failures. Impressionist painters, considered too radical, were not exhibited. The Cold Storage Building with its efficient but dangerous ammonia cooling plant burned to the ground on July 10, costing lives and, temporarily, the peace of mind of fair attendees. The grounds were at times closed on Sunday to observe the Sabbath; when they were opened, after pleas from working men and children to experience this educational opportunity and requests from exhibitors trying to pay their costs, many exhibits were closed, and facilities-such as piped-in Hygeia water-were not available.

Carter H. Harrison, popular four-term mayor, was assassinated on October 28, 1893, after spending a day at the fair just two days before it closed. The ultimate disaster was the worldwide financial "[Panic of 1893](#)" which caused bankruptcy for many, labor unrest, and strikes. Several fires in early 1894 destroyed large portions of the once proud and beautiful, but closed, World's Columbian Exposition; many exhibits had already been removed; but many were lost; and anticipated revenue from salvage operations changed to a loss within a few hours' time. The idealism exemplified by the fair gave way to the need to improve the lot of many groups. Entrepreneur George M. Pullman feared for his life at the hands of distraught workers at his railcar assembly plant; President of the national commission, Thomas W. Palmer, had a nervous breakdown due to the constant attention the Exposition required.

In spite of setbacks and criticisms, the overwhelming list of firsts at the fair, the financial and organizational successes, the large number of people who gained notoriety such as energetic prominent journalist Moses P. Handy, Head of Publicity and Promotion, and George Washington Gale Ferris, leave us with a feeling of awe, respect, and curiosity to



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know more about this grand microcosm of national and international life which contains lessons for us today.

The [Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#), the foremost digital repository of Chicago World's Columbian Exposition books, documents, research papers and photographs, researches little known fact about the fair. The '[Pledge of Allegiance](#)' was created for the Columbian Exposition, the first "Columbus Day," to honor of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the new world in 1892. Debunking world fair myths; [Pabst won a Blue Ribbon](#); the [Battleship 'Illinois' was a fake](#) and, they found the [last 7 surviving structures of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition](#).

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Annotated by Neil Gale, Ph.D.