THE WORLD’S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION OF 1893

BIRD’S-EYE VIEW OF THE WORLD’S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION, CHICAGO, 1893

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Introduction

It is my pleasure to have been able to research and now deliver this paper on the World’s Columbian Exposition that was held in Chicago during the summer of 1893. I offer a sincere thank you to Bill Johnson for having proposed the topic. My father was born in Chicago and was raised just a few blocks from the site of the Exposition. I too was born in the Windy City and spent the first eight years of my childhood there. My academic training and profession is that of a “city planner” and, in so many respects, the Columbian Exposition is one of the historic landmarks of city planning in the United States. Daniel Burnham, who was a seminal figure in the design of the Fair, is generally regarded as one of the early pioneers of the profession. I anticipated enjoying the research, and I certainly was not disappointed.

I suspect that many of you in the audience today have read The Devil in the White City by Erik Larson. It was Quester Karen Goldner who recommended the book to me several years ago. I devoured it then and did so a second time in preparing this paper. But as Cheryl Taylor cautioned, just using the Devil in the White City for background would be way too easy for a Quest paper. I did do much additional reading, but I must admit no one comes close to bringing the Exposition and its characters to life than does Larson and his research was spot on. If you have read his book then much of what follows will sound familiar, but I will save you the gruesome details of the “Devil”, serial killer H. H. Holmes, and that portion of his story!
Putting the United States on the World’s Stage

Expositions, or “world’s fairs” and they are now more commonly described, had their roots in medieval European trade fairs. The modern-day world’s fair began with the London Great Exhibition of 1851, most famous for being contained in Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace. It was the first large-scale prefabricated iron and glass building.¹ There have been at least 94 additional fairs since then, with most being held in the United States, Canada and Europe.² The Columbian Exposition of 1893 stands out as among the most grand, among the most remembered, and among the very best. And to uphold America’s emerging place in the world, it had to be. Paris had hosted the Universelle Exposition in 1889 to great success. It had set a new standard for world’s fairs and is primarily remembered for its landmark structure, the Eiffel Tower designed and built by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel. Besting the Paris Exposition became an obsession with those planning and designing the Chicago World’s Fair.

The four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World came at a time when the United States was about to break through as a major player on the world stage. The country desperately wanted to step out of the shadow of European cultural and economic dominance. The Fair would provide the showcase. And it succeeded in fulfilling this mission. As Columbian Exposition historian Reid Badger notes “… the tangible results, financial or otherwise, were insignificant compared to the value of the fair as a great cultural event. To many Americans at that time, the fair was considered a convincing demonstration of the coming of age of the United States as a

¹ David F. Burg, Chicago’s White City of 1893; The University Press of Kentucky; Lexington, Kentucky; 1976; pp. xi-xii.
world power, the cultural as well as material equal of any of the great imperial powers of the Old World.”

Paris had created the challenge and the United States responded. The 1893 World’s Fair was “larger than any previous exposition and also more elaborately designed, more precisely laid out, more fully realized, more prophetic” than any of the prior fourteen expositions. Not only did the Fair meet these lofty expectations, it also marked the full coming of age of the industrial revolution. Authors of a 2002 review of the fair, Norman Bolotin and Christine Laing summarize this role for the exposition:

Although fair sponsors most likely didn’t realize it at the time, the World’s Columbian Exposition would also be the landmark international event that bridged the nineteenth century to the heavily industrialized twentieth century – ushering in some of the most dramatic changes in lifestyle, in the shortest period of time ever experienced by mankind.

Putting Chicago Front and Center

What the Columbian Exposition did to catapult the country onto the world stage, it also did to move Chicago and the Midwest out from the shadow of the East Coast. But getting there was no easy task. As early as 1876 the Baltimore Sun endorsed the idea that an exposition be held to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage to the New World and in that same year the Chicago Times carried a letter also arguing for such an exposition to commemorate the “discovery” but also that it be held in Chicago because of its central location, physical capacity, and remarkable growth.

In 1882 a St. Louis newspaper called for “immediate preparation for a national observance of the 400th anniversary. Leaders in Chicago certainly felt that their city deserved to be selected as

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4 Ibid., p. xii.
5 Bolotin, p. 8.
6 Badger, p. 116.
7 Bolotin, p. 1.
the location for this celebration. By 1885, the Chicago business community was
beginning to give serious consideration to investing the time and energy necessary to
secure the role as host. But they were not alone. St. Louis, Washington, D.C., and, of
course, New York City all wanted to be in contention.

However, there would be no “world’s fair” in any U.S. city to commemorate
Columbus without the recognition and support of the federal government. This first
formal proposal on the national level originated from Washington, D.C. in 1888 in the
form of a bill introduced into Congress with the official title “A Bill to Provide for a
Permanent Exposition of the Three Americas at the National Capital in Honor of the Four
Hundredth Anniversary of the Discovery of America”. Maybe the preposterous title
doomed the proposal, but most likely it was the negative reaction from all the other cities
that thought they should be considered for the host role.

Pressure was mounting, however, for the United States to sponsor a significant
exposition in 1892. The more it became clear that the Paris Exposition of 1889 was
going to be an outstanding event, the more obvious it became that among U.S. cities only
New York and Chicago possessed the private financial and physical resources required to
match or exceed what the French were about to accomplish. The battle between
Chicago and New York City had begun in earnest. As Reid Badger noted:

“The subsequent battle that was fought out in the newspaper editorials of
the established eastern urban giant and its younger western challenger was
one of the most vitriolic in American history, but it did serve to stimulate
national interest in a prospective fair and to spur organizational efforts in
both cities.”

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9 Bolotin, p. 2.
10 Badger, p. 116
11 Ibid., p. 116
It was during this battle of newsprint that Chicago earned its nickname of the “Windy City” – not because of the howling gusts off of Lake Michigan but because New York Sun editor Richard Henry Dana doubted Chicago’s ability to deliver all it promised as prospective host to the Exposition. It was not the cool breezes of Chicago but rather its hot air that gained it the Windy City moniker.\textsuperscript{12}

Chicago was certainly up to the challenge offered by New York. It had several attributes that made it a strong contender – including a thriving business community, an expansive waterfront on Lake Michigan, a strong system of parks, and one of the largest and most efficient transportation systems in the country.\textsuperscript{13} It also was a very rapidly growing city. In 1889, the inhabitants of 120 miles of surrounding suburbs voted to become a part of Chicago, pushing the city’s population in 1890 to over one million residents.\textsuperscript{14}

In the fall of 1889 local businessmen chartered the World’s Columbian Exposition Corporation. It sold public stock totaling five million dollars with sponsorships including nearly 30,000 individuals and corporations. Pledges varied from as little as one ten dollar share to those purchasing thousands of shares. Members of the corporation were appointed by the Mayor of Chicago and came primarily from its business and professional ranks.\textsuperscript{15}

By the winter of 1889-90 the issue of the Exposition was back before Congress. Chicago secured the host designation on the eighth ballot in the House of Representatives.

\textsuperscript{12} Appelbaum, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{13} Bolotín, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{14} Appelbaum, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{15} Badger, p. 116.
on February 24th, 1890 and the Senate quickly concurred in the joint resolution.\textsuperscript{16} However, before President Benjamin Harrison would sign the measure into law, Chicago was required to raise another five million dollars to demonstrate that it really had the horsepower to bring the Exposition into reality.\textsuperscript{17} Beyond raising the additional funds, the legislation also included a provision to establish a national commission to oversee and approve all significant decisions relating to the choice of physical site Chicago, the design of the grounds, construction of the exhibit buildings, and conduct of the exposition. Clearly doubts remained that Chicago would be able to produce a major international world’s fair that would be both representative and a credit to the entire United States.\textsuperscript{18} There would now be two competing organizations – the local Chicago Corporation and the National or, as it was officially known, the World’s Columbian Commission “charged with the responsibility for deciding what kind of fair it was to be and for putting those decisions into effect.”\textsuperscript{19} Certainly dueling chefs are bound to make cooking in any kitchen difficult. But the show must go on and President Harrison finally acted on April 25th by signing the resolution into law and subsequently issuing an official invitation to foreign exhibitors to participate in the fair.\textsuperscript{20} Unfortunately, the process took so long that it became necessary to postpone the actual fair until 1893, one year after the 400th anniversary of Columbus coming to America. Publicly, the official reason given for the postponement was that it allowed all other American cities to have their own local celebrations in 1892.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 116.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 116.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 117.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 117.
\textsuperscript{20} Appelbaum, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{21} Appelbaum, p. 2.
The delay and controversy notwithstanding, landing the Exposition was a major success for Chicago, and for the Midwest. Historian Badger emphasized the importance of the designation:

For Chicagoans, the fair became a landmark in the history of their city, changing former opinions of Chicago as ‘Porkopolis,’ and opening up a new era of civic commitment and cultural flowering in America’s Midwest.\textsuperscript{22}

It had won the prize but now Chicagoans had to produce, and in short order as only thirty-seven months remained before the scheduled opening of the Fair.

Where in Chicago Should the Fair be Located

Finding a location for the Fair in Chicago was almost as difficult a task as securing the host city nod. There were several options – undeveloped parklands on the western edge of the city; the lakefront near the downtown; and Jackson Park, an unimproved 600-acre site approximately six miles south of the downtown.\textsuperscript{23} Nearly at an impasse on this decision, and with the clock ticking toward a practical deadline for getting started, Chicago leaders turned to renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead for guidance. Olmstead knew both Chicago and Jackson Park well as during the 1860s he had surveyed a number of the City’s park sites and had designed the popular suburb of Riverside.\textsuperscript{24} In the 1870s his firm had prepared plans for turning the Jackson Park property into an attractive and functional park focused on a couple of quaint

\textsuperscript{22} Badger, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{23} Badger, p. 117.
lagoons. Fortunately, at least for the Fair, those plans had not been implemented and the site was available for use.\textsuperscript{25} That was the positive aspect of Jackson Park.

On the negative side of the ledger, the property in its current state offered little else that would deem it as a potential location from something as grand as was envisioned by the Fair planners. Two-thirds of the 600-acre site was described as “a treacherous morass, liable to frequent overflow, traversed by low ridges of sand and bearing oaks and gums of such stunted habit and unshapely form as to add forlornness to the landscape … the surface a quagmire, seeming utterly inadequate to bearing the weight of ordinary structures”.\textsuperscript{26} In fact, the site had originally been designated for park use primarily because it was considered unfavorable for profitable construction.\textsuperscript{27}

But Olmstead saw things from a different perspective – “to the untrained eye it was quite unappealing, but to Olmstead it was a clean slate just waiting for his magic.”\textsuperscript{28} He convinced the Fair leadership that this was indeed the right location and in February, 1891 the Corporation settled finally on Jackson Park. Twenty-eight months remained until opening day and only now could serious work on constructing the Exposition begin.

The Grand Plan

Responsibility for designing the Fair was primarily delegated to four key individuals: Chicago architects and business partners Daniel Hudson Burnham and John Wellborn Root, Olmstead, and Olmstead’s young assistant Henry S. Codman.\textsuperscript{29} Burnham and Root had formed one of, if not the, preeminent Chicago architectural firm. Starting out with designing residences for wealthy merchants, they had progressed to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Ibid., p. 11.
\item[27] Appelbaum, p. 3.
\item[28] Bolotín, p. 8.
\item[29] Badger, p. 117.
\end{footnotes}
such innovative commercial structures as the Montauk Block, the Rookery office block, and the Monadnock Building. In December, 1890 Root sketched a very informal plan on brown paper, showing the principal distribution of landscape elements and of main building sites. The concept focused on two bodies of water - the first being the Great Basin around which many of the key exposition buildings would be situated. This grouping of buildings would later be termed the Court of Honor. The second was the Lagoon which would surround a secluded island and which also would have a series of major structures situated along its shore. It was a very formal layout and one that would require a considerable recontouring of the Jackson Park site. This plan remained the guide for the definitive components of the fair from that point forward.

Selecting the architects for the fourteen major exhibition buildings was the next step in the process and was not without considerable controversy. In late 1890, Burnham provided the Exposition Corporation with alternatives for selecting the designers: work could be assigned to either a single architect or to a number of architects in either an open or an invited competition or they might be selected by the Exposition officials outright without competition. Burnham favor the later approach, both for its expediency and for the control it would provide in facilitating a more uniform appearance for all the buildings. He won the day and was granted the ultimate responsibility for their selection.

Burnham was under considerable pressure to select most, if not all, the architects from Chicago. He and Root decided that if they had the responsibility as consulting

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30 Appelbaum, p. 2.
31 Ibid., p. 3.
32 Ibid., p. 3.
33 Ibid., p. 3.
architects for supervising and coordinating the overall plan, then they should not design any of the individual buildings. But that still left more than an ample number of local architects from which to select, should they go that route. Yet Burnham also knew that if the Columbian Exposition was to be a truly national effort, he needed to recapture the enthusiasm and buy-in of the East Coast establishment. Five out-of-town firms with national reputations were selected for the first five buildings: Richard M. Hunt of New York; McKim, Mead, & White of New York; George B. Post of New York; Peabody & Stearns of Boston; and Van Brunt & Howe of Kansas City.  

To balance the scorecard, five Chicago firms were subsequently selected to design five other major buildings: Burling & Whitehouse; Jenney & Mundie; Henry Ives Cobb; S.S. Beman; and Alder & Sullivan.  

All ten firms selected were of high reputation. It took considerable persuasion by Burnham to get all to participate but he was ultimately able to convince all.

The ten major architects met as a group in Chicago in January, 1891 for the first time. It was clear from all of the readings that egos were not in short supply at this and future meetings. It was decided that although each building would be designed by a different architect, and each architect was given liberal rein in designing a structure to reflect the theme within, the planning committee had suggested that all be of a classical design, with uniform cornice heights and other measurements. While this choice of a neoclassical style would later become one of the chief points of criticism of the Fair, primarily from Chicago architect and member of the “team”, Louis Sullivan, not a single

34 Burg, p. 77.
35 Ibid., p. 77.
36 Ibid., p. 77.
37 Bolotin, p. 16.
participant spoke in objection during the meeting. All of this was, however, overshadowed by the sudden death from pneumonia of John Root on January 15th. This was a huge loss to the emerging effort in terms of creative capacity.

The group dispersed, worked on preliminary sketches for their respective buildings, and reconvened the following month to share their progress. Also in attendance at the second meeting was American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, who would subsequently become the general advisor on sculpture for the Fair. He was so impressed at the assembled collection of talent that he told Burnham it was “the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century”.

The “White City”

Some of the material I reviewed also indicates that an early design decision dictated that all, or nearly all, of the key fourteen “great buildings” would be of the same color – white – to give a unified, pristine appearance to the grounds. Other references suggest that this decision was based on a far more pragmatic reason – they simply ran out of time to paint the buildings in anything other than a single color. The white paint was applied by compressed-air squirt guns, which were used here for the first time on a major project. Regardless of the real reason, the gleaming appearance of the buildings, and the ethereal effect they created, led to the Fair’s commonly used nickname – the White City. It also slips off the tongue far easier than the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893!

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38 Muccigrosso, p. 64.
39 Ibid., p. 67.
40 Bolotin, p. 16.
41 Appelbaum, p 5.
Construction Begins

Readying the site for building construction would be no small task. More than one million cubic yards of earth were dredged. More than sixty acres of waterways were created. The entire surface of the ground upon which the buildings would be constructed was raised several feet. The entire lakefront was paved and all areas that would be subsequently landscaped were covered with loam. 90,000 feet of railway track was laid, much of which was temporary to facilitate construction of the buildings and the moving in of exhibits. Actual construction of the first buildings began in July, 1891.

To facilitate the quick construction of the buildings and in recognition that most would have a very temporary life – the fair was expected to be open for only six months and nothing was planned for the major buildings after the exposition closed – the exterior of the buildings would be completed in “staff”. This was a combination of powdered gypsum and fibers, with alumina, glycerine, and dextrine. It would be trolled onto the wooden lathe that formed the exterior of the buildings. Staff had first been used for the same purpose at the 1889 Paris Exposition, where it gained its more common name – Plaster of Paris. More than 30,000 tons of staff would be used at the Chicago Fair.

At the peak of the Fair’s construction there were more than 40,000 workers on site. They worked through the extreme heat during the summer of 1892 and the bitter cold through the following winter. The fourteen Great Buildings, designed like train sheds to hold most of the exhibits, would contain total floor space of 63 million square

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42 Bolotin, p. 17.
43 Appelbaum, p. 3.
44 Burg, p. 152.
45 Bolotin, p. 20.
46 Ibid., p. 17.
feet. There would be an additional 200 other buildings constructed for the Fair.\textsuperscript{47} As opening day approached and major construction had ended, a ban was placed on burning coal as an energy source on the fair grounds so that the White City could remain white for the duration of the Exposition.\textsuperscript{48}

**The Summer of 1893**

Opening Day finally arrived on May 1, 1893. The day started out with rain but cleared off by mid-morning. The celebration began with a procession from downtown to Jackson Park. Included among the dignitaries were newly inaugurated President Glover Cleveland, elected to a second though nonconsecutive term, Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison, also newly elected, and Daniel Burnham.\textsuperscript{49} The caravan entered the Fair from the west and came to a stop at the Administration Building. After the requisite invocation, poems, music and speeches, President Cleveland struck a golden electric key which activated an electronic circuit to a huge engine in Machinery Hall.\textsuperscript{50} Fair historian Robert Muccigrosso described that moment:

> Immediately the flags of the United States and Castile, along with the ancient banner of Ferdinand and Isabella, ran up different masts, while flags of other nations simultaneously unfurled. Water began to gush from the expositions many fountains; the shroud fell from the Republic, the huge statute that dominated one end of the basin; guns from warships on Lake Michigan boomed their salute. The World’s Columbian Exposition had officially opened.\textsuperscript{51}

During the opening festivities many women fainted and Jane Adams had her purse snatched.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. p. 20.
\textsuperscript{48} Appelbaum, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{49} Muccigrosso, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{50} Bolotin, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{51} Muccigrosso, pp. 79-80.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 84.
A Quick Tour of the White City

It would take at least the rest of our afternoon to properly present all that the Fair entailed, and that would be a cursory review at best. The formal grounds covered over 600 acres – four times that of the 1889 Paris Exposition. The Fair contained over 65,000 exhibits which, in turn, included millions of individual items on display.\(^{53}\) Every state and territory of the United States was represented at the fair, many with their own buildings. Forty-six foreign nations participated in the fair, with nineteen constructing separate governmental buildings on the grounds.\(^{54}\) On-site restaurants had capacity to feed 30,000 people per hour.\(^{55}\) Admission to the Fair was fifty cents for adults and twenty-five cents for children. Very few exhibits in the formal part of the fairground charged any additional fee. Over twenty-seven million attended over the six months that the Columbian Exposition was in business. Paid attendance of more than twenty-one million produced $11 million in revenues, exceeding the projection of $7.5 million.\(^{56}\) As Reid Badger proclaimed: “…the ‘White City’ was the most elaborate and extensive public exhibition produced by the United States in the nineteenth century. It was unquestionably one of the greatest world’s fairs of all time.”\(^{57}\)

Recognizing the inability to due justice to all that was the White City, allow me a few minutes to cover some of the high points and a bit of the trivial. I encourage you to make reference to the map of the Fair on your tables. Let’s imagine that we have taken a steamer from downtown Chicago and traveled south along the lakeshore for the forty-five minute leisurely cruise to the fairgrounds. This was the most popular means to get to the

\(^{53}\) Bolotín, p. 73.
\(^{54}\) Appelbaum, p. 2.
\(^{55}\) Bolotín, p. 20.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 4.
\(^{57}\) Badger. P. 116.
Fair, at least for those whom could afford it. As we approached the Casino Pier we passed the full-sized working model of the battleship Illinois. While the massive ship certainly appeared to be floating alongside the Naval Pier, in reality it has been constructed just for the Fair and was built on a series of pilings. The real ship could not have been moored in such shallow waters.

Our steamer docked at the 2,500-foot long pier and we departed, joining the other 100,000 people whom daily arrived at the White City via Lake Michigan. We are in luck as today is one of those unusual days when the Moveable Sidewalk is properly functioning. We avoid the nearly half-mile walk along the pier and rather are able to sit in comfortable chairs and enjoy the ride. Such convenience was not the norm for the 1890s and reminds us of twenty-first century travel in today’s airports.

The first structure we encounter is the massive Peristyle – forty-eight Corinthian columns stood 150 feet tall – one pillar for each of the then forty-eight states and territories - and the grand entrance to the fairgrounds stretched 500 feet across. It was designed by Charles Atwood, a Chicago architect. This will not be the last we hear of Atwood. We proceed due west along the southern edge of the Great Basin. This manmade lake was 350-feet wide and 1,100-feet long and certainly was a focal point of the Fair. It was surrounded by several of the “great buildings” known as the Court of Honor. The layout was undoubted inspired by the Paris Exposition of 1889 – yet another of the many influences that event had on the Chicago Fair.

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58 Bolotín, p. 31.
59 Appelbaum, p. 74.
60 Burg, p. 119.
61 Ibid., p. 119.
To our left was the Agriculture Building, designed by the New York firm of McKim, Mead and White. Massive in its own right, being 500-ft. by 800-ft., it was overshadowed by several other nearby structures. The building was topped by the statue of Diana, originally sculptured by one of the premier artists of the day, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, as a weathervane for the Madison Square Garden in New York City. One story has it that the statue was too large for the roof of the Garden and was brought to the Fair as an alternative location.\(^6\) The building itself served as home to many unique and unusual displays of food products, including an 18-ft. by 24-ft. map of the United States made entirely of pickles, vinegar and spices.\(^6\) San Diego fruit growers contributed a Liberty Bell made from oranges, lemons and grapefruit.

Ahead of us was the grand Administration Building, another focal point for visitors. Designed in the French Renaissance style by one of America’s leading architects, Richard Morris Hunt, the building contained no exhibits – rather serving as offices for fair management. The dome on the Administration Building exceeded in height that of our nation’s capital. The bank located inside was closed midway through the Fair as a result of the economic depression that began to grip the country in 1893.

Across the Great Basin from the Agricultural Building stood the absolutely massive - and I mean it this time - Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building. The 787-ft. wide by 1,687-ft long structure contained 31.5 acres under roof and was 245 feet tall. It was the largest enclosed building in the world at the time.\(^6\) It was designed New York architect George B. Post and was constructed at a cost of 1.8 million dollars\(^6\). Once

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\(^6\) Appelbaum, p. 28.
\(^6\) Bolotín, p. 76.
\(^6\) Appelbaum, p. 51.
\(^6\) Ibid., p. 51.
again the influence of the 1889 Paris Exposition resurfaces as the Manufacturers Building was modeled after the Galerie des Machines, just bigger!\textsuperscript{66}

Visitors could reach the roof promenade of the building by elevator, a twenty-five cent ride, to obtain one of the best views of the Fair.\textsuperscript{67} Among the amazing number of exhibits contained within was the Yerkes telescope, at the time the largest telescope in the world at 64-feet in length. Costing $500,000 to build, the telescope had been donated by millionaire Charles Yerkes – a well-noted “supporter” of Chicago politicians. After the Fair closed, it had to be rescued from the building as it burned to the ground and was subsequently given to the University of Chicago.\textsuperscript{68} The Tiffany exhibit in the building housed the most costly display of jewelry and precious stones ever open to the public up to that point in time.\textsuperscript{69} The Manufactures Building was truly a world's fair in its own right, documenting and displaying the progress of mankind in every section of the globe.\textsuperscript{70} “It was said that a fairgoer could spend ten hours a day for a month inside the cavernous structure and still not see it all.”\textsuperscript{71}

To the west of the Manufacturers Building was the Electricity Building. The structure was designed by architects Van Brunt and Howe of Kansas City. It contained in excess of 40,000 panes of glass, more than any other structure at the Fair.\textsuperscript{72} It featured Thomas Edison’s \textit{Tower of Light}, an eight story tall exhibit strung with 18,000 lamps which produced an amazing kaleidoscope effect that dazzled visitors.\textsuperscript{73} The Chicago’s Fair was indeed an exposition of electricity. The Fair used three times the electric

\begin{multicols}{2}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 51.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 52.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Bolotin, pp. 92-93.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p. 93.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 53.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p. 48.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p. 54.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p. 80.
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lighting power in use in Chicago at the time and more than ten times that used at the 1889 Paris Exposition.\textsuperscript{74} It was also a battleground in the war for commercial electrical dominance between Edison’s General Electric and Nikola Tesla’s Westinghouse Company. General Electric reportedly invested more one half a million dollars in displays at the Electricity Building,\textsuperscript{75} yet it was the Westinghouse Company, utilizing alternating rather than direct current, that underbid G.E. to become the chief supplier of electricity to the rest of the fairgrounds.\textsuperscript{76}

North of the Electricity Building is the Lagoon, a key feature of Root’s and Olmstead’s original layout for the Fair. On its western shore is the Transportation Building. Designed by Louis Sullivan, of the Chicago firm of Adler and Sullivan, in a basilica format common to Roman architecture with ornamentation of Islamic and Byzantine roots, the Transportation Building represented the boldest departure from the neoclassical style which the dominated the Fair. It was the only one of the Great Buildings not to be painted in white – with a base color of light, delicate red, accented with approximately thirty other shades of reds, oranges and yellows.\textsuperscript{77} The building’s Golden Doorway was the most ornate of all building entrances at the Exposition, featuring a series of receding arches entirely overlaid in gold leaf.\textsuperscript{78} “In many regards, the Transportation Building was one of the most important of the fair. This was the first time that a world’s fair had devoted such time, energy, and space to the subject. Inside every mode and devise of transportation known, from baby carriages to locomotives, was

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 20.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{76} Muccigrosso, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{77} Appelbaum, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{78} Bolotin, p. 57.
Displays inside included great railroad engines of the past – the Pioneer of 1833 that ran between Chicago and Galena, Illinois; the DeWitt Clinton from 1831 from the Mohawk and Hudson line; and the Lord of the Isles from Britain’s Great Western Railway, which had also been exhibited at the London Crystal Palace in 1851.  

Lying in the middle of the Lagoon was Olmstead’s Wooded Island. This was his intended place of refuge and seclusion for the overwhelmed Fair visitor. While Olmstead resisted attempt after attempt to put the island to a more active and commercial use, he finally succumbed to Burnham’s pressure and a Japanese exhibit was allowed. The Ho-o-den was a collection of three buildings representing Japanese architectural styles of the twelfth, sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The buildings were connected in such a way as to form the shape of a Ho-o, a mythical Japanese bird that could not be destroyed by fire. The Ho-o-den represented what was the first introduction of Japanese architecture to the Midwest and possibly the United States. It was admired by the young Chicago progressive architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, and many have drawn a connection between the Ho-o-den and the “prairie-house” style of Wright. The structures were built on site by Japanese workers and were donated to the City of Chicago as a permanent gift at the end of the Fair. 

The Palace of the Arts was located north of the Lagoon. This structure was also designed by Chicagoan Charles Atwood. Located within were priceless displays of art from around the world, including a mile of hanging space for paintings. No light from

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79 Ibid., pp. 55-56.
80 Appelbaum, p. 58.
81 Muccigrosso, p. 70.
82 Appelbaum, p. 74.
83 Bolotín, p. 106.
84 Appelbaum, p. 74.
85 Ibid., p. 74.
the outside was permitted to enter the building.\textsuperscript{86} Due to the value of its contents, the Palace was the one Fair building constructed with fire-proof materials.\textsuperscript{87} It is one of only four buildings from the Fair that remain today and the only one still on the original site. It was to become the Field Museum of Nation History and then – and today – the Museum of Science and Industry.

The White City was certainly was not without stunning statuary. Two of the most prominent and famous anchored the east and west ends of the Great Basin. In front of the Administration Building and within the Basin was Frederick William MacMonnies \textit{Columbian Fountain}. It “represented a female figure Columbia riding on a barge – with Fame at the bow and Time at the stern – that was rowed by allegories of the arts, sciences and industries; many marine creatures adorned the fountain area.”\textsuperscript{88} The fountain was nearly 150 feet in diameter and was illuminated at night – creating yet another spectacular visual takeaway for visitors to the Fair. Historians have compared it to chief monumental fountain from the 1889 Paris Exposition designed by Jules-Alexis Coutan.\textsuperscript{89} However, some of the Chicago Fair’s internally generated literature claimed the Columbian Fountain “closely resembles a symbolic design said to have been sketched by Columbus.”\textsuperscript{90} Fair promoters missed no opportunity for hyperbole.

At the other end of the Great Basin stood the \textit{Statute of the Republic}, intended to be the main emblem of the Exposition.\textsuperscript{91} It was designed by Daniel Chester French, perhaps more well-known for his creation of statue of Abraham Lincoln in the

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\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., p. 75.
\textsuperscript{87} Bolotin, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{88} Appelbaum, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., p. 21.
Lincoln Memorial at our nation’s capital. The Republic stood 65 feet from its base and a full 100 feet above the water level. It was an immense figure representing liberty with an eagle resting on a globe in one hand and a staff supporting a liberty cap in the other. It was frequently compared with the Statue of Liberty.

Internal transportation within the fairgrounds included electric launches that carried visitors across the Great Basin and connected ponds. Individuals could also rent rolling chairs for $6.00 per day with a guide. The chairs were pushed by college students, so many of whom were theology majors that the conveyances came to be known as “gospel chariots”. Of most interest to me was the Intramural Railroad – perhaps the forerunner of the monorail at Disney World. The sixteen trains of the railroad traveled six and one-half miles through the fairgrounds; it was elevated to provide separation from pedestrians; and was powered by an electric third-rail. You could ride on it forever for a mere twenty cents.

I have omitted descriptions of many other notable buildings and features in the “formal” portion of the Fair. No time to discuss the reproductions of the Nina, Pinta and the Santa Maria they were built in Spain and towed to Chicago. No time to describe the reproduction of a 1,000 year-old Viking ship from Norway, purported to be an exact replica of a vessel commanded by Leif Ericson. Does it strike any of you as a bit ironic that the World’s Columbian Exposition would host a reproduction of Ericson’s ship? No time to fully discuss the Fisheries Building which contained ten huge aquariums and many smaller ones with a total capacity of 140,000 gallons of water. Although elaborate

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92 Bolotín, p. 59.
93 Burg, p. 120.
94 Appelbaum, p. 5.
95 Ibid., p. 5
96 Bolotín, pp. 67 and 104.
aquariums are fairly common today, the fisheries exhibit was considered unique by
nineteenth-century standards.97 “The 80,000 gallons of saltwater used in some of the
aquariums were obtained from the Atlantic Ocean, evaporated to reduce both its quantity
and weight for transportation, and then, once at the fairgrounds, restored to its proper
density with freshwater from Lake Michigan.”98 Time does not allow further explanation
here but if I were at the Fair, I would still be gawking.

The Midway

But there was more to the Columbian Exposition than the great structures,
statuary, and water features – there was, of course, the Midway! If the official grounds of
the Fair were all about formal style and neoclassical architecture, then the Midway
Plaisance was the exact opposite. Fair officials had expected from the beginning to allow
for amusements, recent experience had shown their value in drawing crowds and
providing revenue.99 “Long before the exposition was formally announced in December,
1890, the Chicago Corporation had begun receiving requests from vendors, restaurateurs,
circus acts, musical troupes, and spectaculars of all sorts for space on the grounds.”100
However, as the plan for the Fair developed with its emphasis on formal, classical design
of buildings and grounds, what to do with the amusement components became a real
conundrum. The solution was to locate the amusement features along the narrow strip of
land called the Midway Plaisance that connected the one-mile distance between Jackson
and Washington Parks.101 Plaisance, a French word for pleasure, says it all. While the

97 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
98 Ibid., p. 41.
99 Badger, p. 119.
100 Ibid., p. 119.
101 Ibid., p. 119.
Midway was technically not a part of the Exposition proper, it was by all standards an integral part of the Fair – from both a financial and an experiential perspective. The Midway was quite a collection of eclectic groups of exhibits, carnival-like acts, and rides. Two Irish villages, the Barre Sliding Railway, a village of Laplanders, the Bernese Alps Electric Theatre, the Dahomey Village, the Balloon Ride, the Ice Railway, and Hagenbeck’s Zoological Arena are but a few examples of the entertainment available along the corridor. “Under the supervision of a young entrepreneur Sol Bloom, the Midway at Chicago became one of the most successful and famous amusement areas of any of the world’s fairs, and it established a pattern for mass entertainment that soon found application in such independent parks as Coney Island.” This was the first time such entertainment had been included as part of a world’s fair.

Two attractions on the Midway stood out above all others. *A Street in Cairo* offered a realistic look at how the people of Cairo lived, worked, and enjoyed life. It included Fahreda Mahzar, aka “Little Egypt” performing the *danse du ventre* – the belly dance – performed to the sounds of the “Hootchy-Kootchy”. As you can image, reaction to *danse du ventre* was mixed, ranging from the seventy-four year-old Julia Ward Howe’s “it’s simply horrid, not a touch of grace in it, only a most deforming movement of the whole abdominal and lumbar region” to a much more receptive welcome from the thousands of unnamed male visitors who collectively made Little Egypt “the most memorable person in the Midway and thereafter a legend.”

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102 Bolotin, p. 45.
103 Badger, pp. 119-120.
104 Bolotin, p. 127.
105 Ibid., p. 139.
106 Muccigrosso, pp. 165-166.
The second landmark attraction of the Midway, and perhaps of the entire Fair was an engineering marvel intended to rival, if not surpass, the impact the Eiffel Tower made four years earlier in Paris. “Early in the planning for the fair, Burnham and other organizers had conducted a nationwide contest for ideas on what Americans could build that would outshine the Eiffel Tower as the crowning glory of the exposition.”

Burnham made clear what was desired - “Mere bigness is not what is wanted, something novel, original, daring and unique must be designed and built if American engineers are to retain their prestige and standing.”

No designers came forward with anything extraordinary until George Ferris presented his design for a giant wheel. Scoffed at for months, Ferris finally convinced planners that his idea would not only work but would become the highlight of the Fair. He was right. More than 1.5 million people paid the princely sum of fifty cents to ride the giant wheel 264 feet into the air for one of the finest bird’s-eye views of the fair.

The wheel carried thirty-six cars, individually measuring 27-feet wide and 13-feet wide, capable of carrying sixty passengers each for a total entire ride capacity of 2,100 passengers at any point in time. It most successfully filled Burnham’s need for that “one big thing” and was indeed the “jewel” of the Fair. After the Exposition closed in October, Ferris’ Wheel was reconstructed in northern Chicago and ultimately put into service at the St. Louis Exposition of 1904. Two years later it was dismantled and sold for scrap.

107 Bolotin, p. 21.
108 Ibid., p. 23.
109 Ibid., p. 29.
110 Muccigrosso, p. 176.
111 Ibid., p. 177.
The People

No event the magnitude of the Chicago World’s Fair occurs without the leadership and toil of many individuals. Perhaps no one individual is more closely identified with the Chicago Fair than is Daniel Burnham. As a child he moved to Chicago with his family in 1855. He unsuccessfully tried to gain entrance to Harvard and never did obtain formal education training in architecture. Burnham was, however, able to obtain an apprenticeship with the Chicago architect, engineer and builder William La Barron Jenny. By 1873 he and John Root had formed a partnership in the architectural firm that shared their names. The two made a great team with complimentary skills. Burnham had a genius for organization and the ability to organize and implement large-scale projects. Root was the creative artist. Burnham would find, cajole and convince the potential client and Root would provide the product. As the Exposition was moving from dream to reality the firm of Burnham and Root had established themselves as one of the premier architectural firms in Chicago and the nation. They were named the consulting architects to the Fair. Only the untimely death of John Root on January 15, 1891 – in the midst of the fundamental design stage of the Fair – was able to break up the partnership. Root’s demise left even an even greater role for Burnham.

By 1890 the Fair had come at the right time for Burnham’s career and he was right for the Fair. He was appointed Director of Works by the Exposition Corporation in 1891. His organizational skills were well-tested in the run-up to the Fair. He had to handle the strong wills of both the New York architects such as Richard Morris

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112 Appelbaum, pp. 2-3.
113 Muccigrosso, p. 52.
114 Ibid., pp. 52-53.
115 Ibid., p. 54.
Hunt, whom he also greatly admired, and his local peers such as Louis Sullivan, whom would much later become one of the strongest critics of the Exposition. Burnham essentially had two overseeing bodies for which he was accountable – the National Commission and the Chicago Exposition Corporation. He had the constraints of time working against him with there never being adequate time to design and build in advance of the May, 1893 opening. And he had the incredible expectations of what the Fair could and should be resting squarely on his shoulders. By all accounts, he most successfully met these challenges. Author and historian Robert Muccigrosso summarized it well:

> The Columbian Exposition, like any grand enterprise, resulted from the contributions of many; architects and engineers, painters and sculptors, skilled and unskilled workers, promoters and investors. Above all, it took the executive talents of one man, Daniel Burnham, to coordinate their efforts, adjudicate disputes, reject or hold fast to plans, offer compromises, understand finances, react to unforeseen occurrences, kindle enthusiasm among both those involved in the project and the outside public, and mange his own moods – in short, to play the role of a man for all seasons, or in this instance, one long season. In his capacity as majordomo, Daniel Burnham, who spent most of his days and nights in a shanty on the fairgrounds, with a telephone connecting his office there with his office downtown, succeeded admirably.¹¹⁶

Burnham’s career in architect and urban planning certainly did not end with the Fair, as he went one to become arguably the nation’s leading figure in the City Beautiful Movement with his most famous contribution being the Chicago Plan of 1909.

John Root likely would have played as prominent a role in the making of the Fair as did Burnham should he have lived. It was his initial outline for the grounds sketched in December of 1890 that remained the blueprint which was followed thereafter. Root’s path to prominence was quite different than

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 67.
Burnham’s. He was born into a prosperous family from Georgia, spent time in England during the Civil War, and returned to the United States to study at New York University. He graduated with a degree in engineering in 1869. Root moved to Chicago in 1872 primarily to take advantage of the business opportunities apparent as the city rebuilt from the great fire of the previous year.\textsuperscript{117} He married Mary Walker, the daughter of a client. Unfortunately, she had contracted tuberculosis before the marriage and died just six weeks after the wedding. Two years later, Root remarried – this time to the bridesmaid in his first wedding – Dora Monroe.\textsuperscript{118} Dora’s sister was Harriet Monroe, the poet and author of the \textit{Columbian Ode} – of which portions had been read on the Fair’s Dedication Day and as today’s invocation.\textsuperscript{119} Root’s presence on the Fair was still felt well after his death – many times during debates among the architects on the design details for the layout and the great buildings his name would be invoked “Root would have done it this way”.\textsuperscript{120}

If the Chicago World’s Fair helped transform Burnham’s career to even greater heights, it was perhaps the crowning achievement for Frederick Law Olmstead. By Opening Day Olmstead was already seventy-one. He could count among his accomplishments the design for the capital grounds in Washington, D.C., Central Park in New York City, as well as parks in several other U.S. cities.\textsuperscript{121} He was widely acknowledged as the leader in his profession of

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\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p. 52.
\textsuperscript{118} Erik Larson; \textit{The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America}. Vintage Books; United States of America; 2003; p. 22.
\textsuperscript{119} Appelbaum, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{121} Bolotin, p. 5.
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landscape architecture. He had a deep-seeded concern that the urbanization of America was robbing its residents of the psychological values and comforts that had been gained with close association with the countryside. He strove to compensate, at least partially, by naturalizing the urban scene with parks and open spaces.\textsuperscript{122} His influence on the layout, design and landscaping of the Fair cannot be understated. He was doing much of this work while also being involved with the construction of the Biltmore mansion for George Vanderbilt II in Asheville, North Carolina and suffering from physical ailments.\textsuperscript{123} He relied heavily on his assistant Henry Codman for implementing the plans in Chicago. However, just as Burnham had lost his creative partner with Root’s untimely death, so too did Olmstead as Codman died in January, 1893 just four months before the Opening Day. Olmstead had been close to Codman, both professionally and personally – and his death at age twenty-nine came as a tremendous blow to Olmstead.\textsuperscript{124}

The role played by Richard Morris Hunt should not be overlooked. By the time of the Fair, Hunt was considered the “grand old man” of American Architecture. He had been the first American architect to be trained in Europe at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The American Institute of Architects was founded in his office in 1857.\textsuperscript{125} Burnham certainly admired his work and the leadership role he played in rallying other architects to the cause of Chicago’s Fair. Hunt’s role in unifying the relationships of the East Coast and Chicago architects in support

\textsuperscript{122} Muccigrosso, pp. 49-50.
\textsuperscript{123} Larson, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. p. 194.
\textsuperscript{125} Burg, p. 8.
of creating a grand platform in the form of the Columbian Exposition to present to the rest of the world was critical to the success of the effort.

If Burnham, Root, Olmstead, Codman, Hunt and many others were critical to the design of the more formal components of the White City, then Sol Bloom must be recognized for his role in bringing the Midway Plaisance to life. The twenty-three year old Bloom had been born in downstate Illinois but moved to San Francisco with his family looking for better economic conditions. There he gained a reputation for financial skill and the support of newspaper publisher Michael de Young. The Exposition Corporation had originally hired a Harvard ethnology professor to run the Midway.126 With little progress made, they replaced him with Bloom who had a vision of what the Midway could, and should, be. What a success he made of the opportunity. Later in his career Bloom would remake that hiring the professor for the task was “tantamount to placing Albert Einstein in charge of a circus.”127 After enjoying professional and financial the success from the Fair, Bloom would later spend twenty-eight years serving New York in Congress.128

The Fair Ends on a Sad Note

October 9th was Chicago Day at the Exposition. It was the highlight of the year. More than three-quarters of a million people attended that day. Enthusiasm and attendance were building through the summer and into the fall. On Saturday, October 28th Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison welcomed a delegation of visiting mayors, proudly proclaiming that he would live to see his city become the largest

126 Muccigrosso, pp.155-156.
127 Ibid., p. 156.
128 Ibid., p. 155.
city in the United States. Later that evening he would be shot and killed in his home by Patrick Prendergast, a disgruntled and unstable individual who thought Harrison should name him the City’s corporation counsel. The Closing Celebration had been set for October 30th. Rather than a celebration, the mayor’s murder had placed a sad pale over the affair. Chicago mourned Harrison’s death with what one writer suggested was “the greatest show of grief since the assignation of Lincoln.”

The Legacies from the Fair

With the perspective of 118-year hindsight, what legacies do the Fair leave for us today? The list could be long and my time is very short. Beyond the Ferris Wheel; Little Egypt; the introduction of Cracker Jacks, Shredded Wheat, and Juicy Fruit gum; and the building that now houses the Museum of Science and Industry there are a number of significant contributions to society. First, the Columbian Exposition was groundbreaking in its inclusion of women in its planning, management and participation. As Fair chroniclers Norman Bolotin and Christine Laing noted:

“Women played a more visible and active role in the Columbian Exposition than in any previous world’s fair. Not only was there the Women’s Building, housing exhibits demonstrating women’s accomplishments in education, the arts, science, and industry, and a separate Women’s Department, but also a 115-member national commission (labeled the Lady Board of Managers) was established.”

“The World’s Columbian Exposition helped advance the cause of women’s suffrage and launch careers for women in fields previously considered taboo. But more than anything else, the fair helped position women as a force to be reckoned with in all arenas as the world crossed into the twentieth century.”

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129 Ibid., p. 181.
130 Ibid., p. 182.
131 Ibid., p. 182.
132 Bolotin, p. 121.
133 Ibid, p. 43.
While not without controversy, the Fair certainly advanced the professions of city planning and landscape architecture. It helped propel the City Beautiful Movement, with Daniel Burnham as a leader. In the two decades that followed, many individuals and groups fought to make aesthetic considerations a much more integral part of urban life.\textsuperscript{134}

Talbot Hamlin noted in a 1952 article in *Forms and Functions of Twentieth-Century Architecture*:

…it was the compelling effect of its formal plan, rather than the accident of its superficial style, which was largely responsible for this popularity. For the first time, hundreds of thousands of Americans saw a large group of buildings harmoniously and powerfully arranged in a plan of great variety, perfect balance, and strong climax effect. This vision of harmonious power was such a contrast to the typical confusion of the average American town that the visitors were almost stunned, and the enthusiasm of their admiration bore witness to the success of the plan.\textsuperscript{135}

Certainly, the Fair’s architecture had its detractors, most notable perhaps being Louis Sullivan, the designer of the Transportation Building. Later in life he would claim that “the damage wrought by the World’s Fair will last for half a century from its date, if not longer.”\textsuperscript{136} Yet, from my research all indications are that Sullivan’s appears to be a minority opinion. Author David Burg of Chicago’s White City if 1893 summed up the prevailing opinion well: “It was believed at the time, and it has been believed since, that the combined architecture, sculpture, and landscape design of the exposition were its most compelling and influential features.”\textsuperscript{137}

Lastly, there was the impact of the Columbian Exposition on America and its place in the world in 1893. It has been called the “quintessential event of the 1890’s.

\textsuperscript{134} Muccigrosso, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{136} Muccigrosso, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{137} Burg, p. 296.
The White City was the primary representative event of the era that has been designated as the watershed of American history."\textsuperscript{138}

To conclude again from author David Burg:

> Four hundred years after the arrival of Columbus, America stood upon the threshold of her final destiny. The past as preparation was already history. The future had arrived. The American eagle, wings wide spread, had left its perch and was about to soar heavenward. Enter the ‘White City’\textsuperscript{139}.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., p. 42.
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