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Past and Progress: Producing History at Chicago's 1933-34 World's Fair

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

PAST AND PROGRESS:

PRODUCING HISTORY AT CHICAGO'S 1933-34 WORLD'S FAIR

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

JOINT PROGRAM IN PUBLIC HISTORY AND AMERICAN HISTORY

BY

CATHERINE LIABRAATEN

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2023

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Somewhere during reading for comprehensive exams, my cohort and I became very interested in the acknowledgement sections of scholarly works. Sharing messages with humorous or touching parts we found became a semi-regular practice. I like acknowledgement sections for two reasons. First, they remind us that scholars are human. Books are not produced out of thin air, scholarship does not just spring into being. Knowledge is crafted by real human beings-- people with personalities, loved ones, colleagues, and pets. Being a real human being myself, I find this compelling and comforting. It makes me believe I can produce scholarship, and when I read other scholarship, I can argue with it. After all, I've argued with plenty of real people. Secondly, acknowledgements sections remind us that there are so, so many things that go into writing a book or scholarly work. There are people who provide emotional, intellectual, and sometimes even financial support--and those three categories cover a wide variety of interactions. Acknowledgement sections remind us that we may write alone, but we are not alone.

I have been looking forward to writing my own acknowledgements section for years, and I am thrilled to cultivate this practice of gratitude. Often, writers list the people to whom they "owe a debt" of gratitude. That's fine and all, but given the amount of money I owe to the US Federal Student Aid Office, the word "debt" makes me punchy. (Although perhaps by the time someone is reading this, I will be miraculously free.) I do not owe a debt to the people who have supported me throughout this process--they have given of themselves freely. This makes me even more grateful.

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Now the big one: to Tim. Often, grad students joke that the longer and mushier a scholar is to their spouse in the acknowledgement section the more that scholar was a pain in the neck to live with, and/or the rockier the relationship is behind the scenes. While I've laughed at those jokes, they always made me a little nervous because I could write a whole book about Tim, and it would be way easier than writing these pages. Thank you for always letting me use the big computer. Thank you for reminding me that the work is worth it, the project is worth it, that I am worth it. We're going to have the best life together. You know how I know that? We already do.

For myself, because that's why I did this. But also for my family, since they neither pushed nor hindered, only believed.

"Whatever happens, never happens by itself."

—Sally Rand

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

In the middle of the country's worst economic crisis, Chicago hosted a celebration. The Century of Progress Exposition in 1933-34 was Chicago's second world's fair, widely considered important for revitalizing the local economy as well as encouraging optimism for a better future. The Century of Progress Exposition took up more than 400 acres on Chicago's lakefront, on Northerly Island and what was later designated as Museum Campus. During its two-season run there were more than 48 million visitors. A group of prominent Chicagoans—entrepreneurs, political and community leaders, and military figures—came together to develop the fair. Thousands of people were employed by the fair and contracted with it, but a relatively small group of wealthy white men were in charge of the operation.

The official guidebook to the fair asked visitors to consider “what could be so tremendously important that a city and its citizens should undertake this titian task of building, shoulder these infinite details, merely to invite the world to come to a carnival?”¹ Then, the guidebook, the official faceless voice of fair developers, explained: “Only 100 years ago Chicago was a huddle of huts, hewn of logs, clinging to the shadows of Fort Dearborn for safety from the Indians,” yet “Chicago in a century has climbed to her place as second largest city in America,

¹ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 6.

fourth in the world.”¹ Progress is a temporal concept: there needs to be an origin and also a future. In order to demonstrate Chicago’s progress over a hundred years, the fair needed to display history for context.



Figure 1. The Avenue of Flags was a major thoroughfare on the fairgrounds. Kaufman and Fabry Co., COP_17_0001_00004_002, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

The idea for the fair originated in the 1920s. Even though the scheduled opening was after the stock market crash of 1929, organizers decided to go through with it, which is remarkable. What is more remarkable is that many world’s fairs even in better economic times

¹ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 6.

were unprofitable, yet the Century of Progress Exposition was built at no cost to taxpayers and turned a profit.

Some attractions at the fair were operated by A Century of Progress, Inc. itself, and many were exhibits or concessions operated by other organizations or companies. The major attractions included a cable-car Sky Ride, the General Motors building, the Hall of States, an incubator where premature human babies were treated, and the Streets of Paris, which was not affiliated with the French government and was where dancer Sally Rand performed her infamous risqué shows.

The fair was a mix of the educational, the promotional, and pure entertainment. The 1933 *Official Guide Book to the Fair*, produced by A Century of Progress, claimed that “On the one hand, science beckons to serious interest, and on the other, fun and carnival crook inviting fingers.”² While the fair’s theme officially focused on scientific and technological progress and was intended to be forward-looking, several exhibits featured and dwelt on the past. These historical themed exhibits are the focus of this project.

During the time of economic crisis, Americans looked to their shared past to make sense of their world and to revisit what they envisioned as American values. Depictions of the past that fair organizers and others created at the world’s fair were imbued with ideals and anxieties about the present. Each of the Century of Progress exhibits with a historic theme revealed different aspects of Depression-era American culture.

² *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 5.

The fair guidebook was unabashedly boosterish for the city: “Ride over her boulevards, view her serrated skyline from her 20 miles of lake front, visit her institutions, see Chicago in all her myriad phases of life and activity, and wonder ceases why Chicago, in pride, is stirred to celebrate her own Centennial.”³ Fair organizers wanted to promote the Windy City, but this was not nineteenth-century boosterism. They were deeply aware of the Great Depression and a recent world war. Fair organizers promoted a higher or more noble vision for the fair than simply promoting Chicago: “A Century of Progress intends to bring assurance that the steady march of progress has not, however, swerved aside, nor even been seriously retarded, that so-called ‘recessions’ are temporary, like the receding wave that leaves the shore. History holds the evidence that this is true.”⁴ History was a source of reassurance that there were brighter days ahead.

The organizers of the fair might be considered “leftover Progressives.” While historians generally characterize the Progressive Era as starting in the late nineteenth century and ending in the 1920s, Progressives did not simply disappear when the calendar rolled over to a new decade. Indeed, ideas for the fair were originally developed in the 1920s. While the fair organizers definitely lived in an era with different sentiments and certainly different problems, the lasting values of professionalism, uplift, efficiency, and yes, progress were still on display at the fair. In a way, the fair was a Progressive project: it was optimistic and ambitious, and demonstrated an

³ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*

inherent belief that society had improved in the past century and would indeed continue to get better despite the issues of the Great Depression.



Figure 2. An aerial shot of the fair. Note the towers for the Sky Ride spanning the lagoon. Chicago Aerial Survey Company. COP_17_0001_00003_001, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Historiography

The Century of Progress Exposition needs to be situated spatially and temporally in 1930s Chicago. Included in the context of time and space is the context of world's fairs as their own international occurrences, surrounded by their own body of scholarship. The Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) is the international organization that oversees and regulates “all international expositions that last more than three weeks and are of non-commercial

nature.”⁵ Essentially, these are the people who deem expositions “world’s fairs.” Thirty-one countries founded the BIE in 1928, and is still in operation, overseeing most recently the 2020 expo in Dubai. The organization’s website has a useful description of the nature of world’s fairs:

Since 1851, Expos have helped humanity make sense of change and chart a more progressive future by gathering people and nations under the common banner of Education, Innovation, and Cooperation. As mirrors of their time, Expos have always served to reflect evolving priorities and worldviews, all while anticipating a future shaped by technological progress. From their earliest manifestations as a showcase of industrial prowess to their modern incarnation as platforms for cross-border collaboration, Expos have transformed cities, shaped debates on key issues, and provided unforgettable experiences to hundreds of millions of visitors.⁶

World’s fairs are studied from many different historical perspectives. As both producers and reflections of culture (especially that of the host country) they are extremely useful snapshots of historic moments. Historians often examine the international aspect of world’s fairs to better understand the history of imperialism and colonialism. Many expositions had strong technology angles, and as such are useful to historians of capitalism and science. My work is informed by the work of others in this thriving subfield and adds to it by highlighting a specific fair that, like others, was a product of a particular time. Depression era world’s fairs like the Century of Progress are intriguing because they were mega-events held during an economic crisis. Additionally, focusing on historic exhibits and concessions provides a vehicle to examine what we might now call public history work. The fair attractions that focused on the past are relevant to understanding the Great Depression because they reveal a desire to historicize the

⁵“About US,” Official Site of the Bureau International des Expositions, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/who-we-are>.

⁶“A Short History of Expos,” Official Site of the Bureau International des Expositions, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/past-expos-a-short-history-of-expos>.

contemporary moment and demonstrate a conception of the past that was at once grounding, reassuring, and a foil to make the present seem better, to contextualize the challenges of the era.

The shadow cast by the Columbian Exposition often obscures the Century of Progress. This is historiographically true as well. The scholarship that exists on the 1933-34 world's fair lays a crucial foundation for my work, especially Cheryl Ganz's *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair*. Ganz and other world's fair scholars such as John Findling and Robert Rydell provide excellent overviews of the fair that establish a sense of place and time, largely through discussions of the fair's representations of technology and scientific innovation.⁷ This work branches out from that scholarship to further the sense of place and time by questioning what it meant for Depression-era fairgoers to come to Chicago and to see depictions of both local and national history.

Cultural histories of the Great Depression often focus on escapism: Shirley Temple and grown-up stars of the silver screen, Babe Ruth and major league baseball, dance marathons and celebrations at the end of Prohibition. The Century of Progress Exposition was also a space for escapism. Fair visitors could dive into the past, the future, and an idealized version of the present. Yet, the fair provided more than a temporary distraction from problems; it offered potential solutions.

This project grew out of one about Enchanted Island, the six-acre children's area at the fair. The number of adults who visited the space is intriguing, as is the number of promotional

⁷ Cheryl R. Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); John E. Findling, *Chicago's Great World's Fairs*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

materials that were directed at adult visitors. Adult fairgoers experienced nostalgia for their own childhood and sought to escape into a children's fairyland. At first glance, the historic exhibits at the fair were extensions of simple nostalgia, but, as outlined below, there were more complex draws to representations of the past.

Drawing on inter-organization communications, promotional materials, and newspaper and visitor accounts, this work recreates the places and sites that the fair's millions of visitors experienced, and the ways this spectacle reflects the efforts of Depression-era Americans to situate themselves in history. This work is intended to produce a more nuanced historical understanding of Depression-era culture, one that teases out the intersection of economic crisis and historical memory. This project is about how Americans use the past, and how they overlay their own values and needs on perceptions of history. That itself is the crux: why is history important? How does it sustain us when we need encouragement? How do we draw on it for strength and guidance--even without realizing we are doing so? Understanding how Americans see the past can help explain how Americans see themselves and The Century of Progress Exposition provides a valuable case study.

Fair organizers presented the past in multiple mediums at the Century of Progress Exhibition. Exhibits and concessions were sometimes produced by A Century of Progress, and sometimes by contracted companies and organizations. The Wings of a Century transportation pageant paraded vehicles before viewers in a stream that emphasized the progress from slow, rustic, and outdated to fast, urban, and modern. The Days of '49 attraction recreated a wild west mining town, and the foreign villages projected a vision of quaint and charming days gone by. Especially interesting are textual interpretations of the past: the various leaflets and promotional

materials generated by the world's fair. The space of the exhibits themselves can also be understood as texts. Understanding space is important for this research, as the fair was a space within a space—a contained built environment within the city of Chicago—and the exhibits were further constructed spaces within the fair itself.

While some historical attractions were small and sometimes less deliberately connected to history, four significant areas at the fair emphasized the past and were produced for educational and entertainment purposes. These sites where history was to be consumed were Old Fort Dearborn, the Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group, the De Saible cabin, and the Colonial Village, and these sites-within-a-site make up the chapters of this project.

Chapter 1 sets the framework for the rest of the chapters. It discusses the fair organizers, contextualizes the Century of Progress Exhibition in terms of other world's fairs (including the first one in Chicago), the Great Depression, and local history.

Old Fort Dearborn was a replica of the original fort that had stood at the mouth of Lake Michigan and the Chicago River. This replica was operated by the fair itself and was the first part of the fair open to the public. Chapter 2 explores how this space reinforced a specific vision of American history: the history of the frontier with archetypal pioneers and Native Americans, as well as the United States Army.⁸

Chapter 3 examines fairground shrines to Illinois' greatest son: Abraham Lincoln. The sixteenth president of the United States was a figure that Depression Era Americans found particularly appealing. The economic crisis of the 1930s shook people's belief in the durability

⁸ Fair material use the term "Indians" almost exclusively to refer to North American Indigenous peoples, and the outliers use racial slurs.

of the American experiment, and many reflected on the Civil War as a time when a great leader arose and ultimately saved the country. Presentation of Lincoln in various capacities was symbolic and fair visitors found an almost godlike figure on which to pin rituals of civic religion.

Chapter 4 focuses on the De Saible Cabin, a replica of the early Chicago settler's home. Jean Baptiste Point De Saible (spelled Du Sable today) was a Black man of Haitian and French descent who settled on the banks of the Chicago River in the 1790s, making him the first non-Indigenous permanent resident of the region. Black clubwomen from Chicago's South Side were instrumental in creating this replica cabin at the fair. This exhibit was one of the only spaces for Black self-representation at A Century of Progress. By asserting Du Sable's position as first settler or even founder of Chicago, these women claimed a place in Chicago's history for themselves and their communities—which was part of claiming a place for themselves in the modern city.

Concessionaires and planners changed the fair considerably between the 1933 and 1934 seasons. One of the notable additions to the 1934 season was a group of "foreign villages"—replica idealized communities that reflected the parts of various cultures that tourists tended to find charming. These were separate from official foreign delegations at the fair. Counted in with the foreign villages was the American Colonial Village, the subject of Chapter 5. The Colonial Village demonstrated many understandings Depression Era Americans held about the colonial past. It was at once patronizing and worshipful. This space was also where modern stories about race and gender played out in front of a faux New England backdrop.

Study of these historic-themed exhibits reveals that by featuring Abraham Lincoln, Fort Dearborn, Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable, and a replica colonial village, exposition designers

presented to Depression-era Americans visions of the past intended to help them understand their present. Depictions of the past were imbued with values and anxieties about the present. During a time of economic crisis, Americans looked to history to make sense of their world and to revisit what they perceived as American values. Understanding how Americans saw the past can help explain how Americans understood themselves, and the Century of Progress Exposition is a case study for how Americans have relied on their understandings of the past to sustain them during times of crisis.

CHAPTER 1

“YOU COULD HAVE FIRED A CANON DOWN STATE STREET AND HIT NOBODY”:

CHICAGO HOSTS A FAIR

Introduction

In 1933, a woman named D’Zama Mruielle spent 37 days riding her bicycle the 2,422 miles to Chicago from Portland, Oregon. That same year, teenager Carl Moeller pedaled to Chicago from his home in Denver. These two cyclists were among the millions of visitors to the Second City for the Century of Progress Exposition, and newspaper accounts are full of the creative ways people made their ways to Chicago. Most came conventionally, but some came by dogsled from Alaska and others by watermelon truck from the south. The gimmicky stories about people traveling in creative ways were exciting, and a reminder that the fair was one of the most significant cultural events of the early 1930s. These creative accounts about people arriving unintentionally signpost something else significant: the world’s fair happened at the height of the Great Depression. The Carl Moeller story highlighted that it only took him \$4.50 to travel the distance; another account featured a boy who wanted to see the fair but had no money, so he walked -- from Arkansas. Hitchhiking, boating, and other quirky means of transit were promotional human interest stories, to be sure, but they are also stories of fun stretched over

pain, of creativity outwitting penury—a reoccurring theme of the Century of Progress Exposition.¹

Historian Morris Dickstein’s passage about mobility in the Great Depression is compelling and relevant to the world’s fair:

This is the ultimate irony, that in a world where so many took to the road, so few had any real mobility...the men and boys hopping freights and pitching camp outside towns that didn’t want them; the Joad family on its biblical trek through town and desert, Hooverville and sanitary camp: this is not travel but a way of sanding still or running in place, like the marathon dancers, circling the floor in total exhaustion, almost asleep on their feet, leaning on each other in pursuit of a small prize.²

People traveling to the Century of Progress arrived by a variety of means. Once there they experienced exhibits that emphasized movement: machine-based assembly lines, pavilions hosted by the automobile industry, a transportation pageant, and an entire Travel and Transport Building. The Century of Progress Exposition emphasized a world of movement, even while the Great Depression limited true freedom. Dickstein argues that the “fantasy culture of the thirties...is all about movement, not the desperate simulation of movement we find in the road stories, but movement that suggests genuine freedom.”³ His work focuses on the media culture of the 1930s, but this applies to the world’s fair as well: the fair emphasized daily movement, but also movement in time and space. By visiting the fair, one could glimpse faraway lands, imagined pasts, and hopeful futures.

¹ All the stories featured here are from various newspaper clipping saved in the Chicago Public Library Special Collections Century of Progress Scrapbook collection.

² Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*, New York: (W.W. Norton, 2010), 359.

³ *Ibid.*, 360.

Chicago's second world's fair was a celebration that came at a time when some would say there was little cause to celebrate, and others believed celebration was more necessary than ever. The national trauma that was the Great Depression can easily be understated. The financial crisis of the 1930s impacted and exposed American culture, and the Century of Progress Exposition is a prime case study of emotional and practical coping methods. There are many approaches one could take to understand the reflection and production of American culture at the fair, some of which have been explored by other scholars. One particularly interesting way Americans coped with the devastating present was by finding ways to situate it relative to the past. In the four major historical areas at the fair, the hardship, suffering, and relative lack of technology of the past was highlighted in a way that made the present look positive by contrast. Less explicitly, the difficulties of the past were presented to make the difficulties of the present seem manageable—after all, the nation had pulled through difficult times before.

Like other world's fairs, the Century of Progress Exposition was a mega event that was shaped by its location and era. The Century of Progress Exposition happened during the Great Depression, which is important to bear in mind: the economic crisis shaped the fair even as the fair defied it. Generating income was at the forefront of the minds of fair planners as well as concessionaires, as was minimizing expenses. The messages of the fair—the promotion of science and industrial capitalism, the venerating of select episodes in the past—were framed by the realities of the modern era.

Context is required to unpack meaning from the various historical exhibits at the fair. It has been said in the field of archaeology that without context, all you have is a pile of rocks, and

this is true in history as well as archaeology that context makes the past understandable.⁴ To situate the Century of Progress in space and time, this chapter is divided up into two main sections: “The World of the Fair,” and “The Fair Itself a World.” In the first section, the Century of Progress will be contextualized by a brief discussion of world’s fairs generally, Chicago’s Columbian Exposition, and the Great Depression. “The Fair Itself a World,” will expound on the Century of Progress Exposition to contextualize the historical exhibits that are the focus of later chapters. The challenge here is what order to discuss these topics, as each one is intertwined with the others. The work of this section is to explain who was involved with the fair and its contents, setting, and theme.

Part 1: The World of the Fair

World’s Fairs Generally

World’s fairs, or international expositions, have been a cultural force throughout the modern era. From the first true world’s fair, London’s 1851 Prince Albert-supported Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (known as the Crystal Palace) to Expo Dubai 2020 (held in 2021 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the first world’s fair held in the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia, these megaevents are useful for beginning to understand what people value.

World’s fair scholars Robert Rydell, John Findling, and Kimberly Pelle have argued that it is an understatement to say that world’s fairs have exerted a formative influence on the way

⁴ My friend from Cornell College, Cameron Clark, said this to me in an archaeology class and it has stuck with me for many years. I have lost touch with Cameron Clark, but he was a good guy and I hope he’s doing well.

Americans have thought about the world and their place in it.⁵ World's fairs help us understand the past because they are distillations of it; we can see American culture in a concentrated dose. The values and worldviews of fair organizers are reflected in the exhibitions, and the exhibitions influenced those who visited, making the fairs both mirrors to and producers of American culture. The most difficult aspect of culture to tease out is the meaning-making done by fairgoers. How did they see and understand their experiences, and what influence did it have on their daily life?

Scholarship that exists on world's fairs often falls into six different schools: the cultural hegemony school; the audience-centered approach; the counterhegemony school; world's fairs as modern-day potlatches; a documentary approach to the technology, science, and architecture of fairs; and a focus on world's fair writing and memorabilia collecting.⁶ Each of these presents its own strengths and challenges, and the prevalence of approaches demonstrates that there are many ways to understand world's fairs.

The approach here is a mixture of the first three listed: the hegemony school, the audience-centered, and the counterhegemony school. Firstly, there are several times where the intentions of fair organizers and Chicago community leaders come into play. The men who designed and ran the Century of Progress had very specific agendas they wanted to promote: they wanted to make money for themselves and others and they wanted to restore faith in a vision of an American future where industrial capitalism led the way to better quality of life for

⁵ Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 1.

⁶ Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 5-7.

all. These men were enormously powerful and had the capabilities to make their vision for the fair a reality. Official fair documents naturally are useful for understanding this group's vision. Additionally, the fair ephemera is a useful source: fairgoers had access to over a thousand brochures, handouts, and pamphlets—documents that show the intentions of fair organizers and partnering concessioners.⁷

The audience-based approach focuses on understanding how fairgoers made meaning of what they saw; this can be a way to measure how effective fair leaders were at getting their message across, and it can reveal broader cultural trends. Unfortunately, this is challenging in terms of historical sourcing. While many people experienced the fair and recorded it in some way, these opinions are difficult to track down, and more challenging still to find broader patterns, given that tens of millions of people visited the fair. Where possible, firsthand visitor accounts are used, but largely these take the form of local newspaper reporting. It could, of course, be argued that newspaper writers shape cultural hegemony just as the fair organizers did. Finally, the counter-hegemony school often argues that through performances and displays at fairs, more marginalized members of American society were able to challenge stereotypes.⁸ This approach has often been used in discussion of women's and Native American Indian involvement in world's fairs.⁹

⁷ Cheryl R. Ganz, "Fan Dancing and Fan Belts: Selling Optimism at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 9, no. 1 (January 2008), 80.

⁸ Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

While the work here does not focus necessarily on performances of culture or gender, the counter-hegemony school is appealing because it shows that, just as in broader American culture, there were pockets of world's fairs where struggles for representation and justice broke through. Here, Native Americans and Black and white women fought for a space at the fair and used history as a mechanism to claim modern respect.

In general, there are many ways to understand fairs, which demonstrates the complex and often-contradictory nature of these events.¹⁰ Indeed, what could more clearly represent American culture than something messy, flashy, complex, corrupt, sentimental, virtuous, forward-looking, nostalgic, and contradictory?

Chicago's First World's Fair

The Century of Progress Exposition, the "Rainbow City," was built in the shadow of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, where it remains to this day. Naturally a city's second world's fair would draw comparisons to the first, but the Columbian Exposition was such a cultural behemoth that it could be argued that all subsequent world's fairs were in its shadow, and none had quite as big of an impact. The fair attracted more than twenty million visitors and its classical buildings influenced American architecture well into the twentieth century. It was the most extensive public exhibition in the United States in the nineteenth century.¹¹ The Museum of Science and Industry is the only building from the Columbian Exposition still

¹⁰ Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 7.

¹¹ R. Reid Badger, "Chicago 1893," in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 116.

standing, and its striking caryatids are reminiscent of women's influence on the fair, which had both a Women's Building and a Board of Lady Managers.

The Columbian Exposition represented the maturity of the industrial United States, as well the development of a distinctive American culture. The significance of holding such a massive event in a midwestern city that had a reputation as a frontier town—a frontier town that was extensively burned just over twenty years prior—was huge. Essentially, the Columbian Exposition was the symbolic culmination, the climax, of nineteenth-century America's industrial and consumerist growth and prowess. Given the city's meteoric rise as the country's great industrial powerhouse, it could have been nowhere else but Chicago.

The Chicagoans who organized the Century of Progress Exposition were deeply aware of the legacy of the city's first world's fair, and originally even proposed the title of their exposition to be the humble "Chicago's Second World's Fair."¹²

Instead of avoiding the topic of the Columbian Exposition to limit unfavorable comparisons, fair organizers and publicity agents staged several promotional events and gimmicks that specifically compared the two world's fairs. The Columbian Exposition, only forty years prior, was Chicago's coming out party on the world stage, still well within the living memory of the city, which was promoted officially and celebrated unofficially. For fun and publicity some people rewore the same clothes they or their relatives wore to the Columbian Exposition.¹³ A couple who attended the Columbian Exposition on their honeymoon attempted

¹² Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 77-78.

¹³ Several accounts in the Century of Progress Scrapbooks, Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

to enter the Century of Progress with their tickets from the last fair, older folks were interviewed for their opinions on which fair was better, reunions happened, and there was even a Columbian Day at the fair.¹⁴ Some of these activities were officially promoted by the fair, others were spontaneous acts of commemoration and comparison.



Figure 3. Roberta Nesbin, 7, holds a beer stein her grandfather bought at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. Kaufman and Fabry Co., COP_17_0003_00071_001, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

¹⁴ Several accounts in the Century of Progress Scrapbooks, Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

Fair organizers partnered with university astronomers, scientists, and representatives from General Electric and Westinghouse Electric to link the Columbian Exposition to the Century of Progress at its opening.¹⁵ The fair was officially opened with energy from the light of the star Arcturus, which had, 40 years prior, shone on the Columbian Exposition.¹⁶ The *Official Guide Book of the Fair* promoted this opening ceremony by describing the science that went into it in a way that is at once simplified and impressive: “A simple matter now for science to catch this feeble beam when it arrived on earth, and as it struck the great telescope of Yerkes Observatory in Wisconsin, transform it into electric energy by means of a photoelectric cell, amplify it by the methods of radio and speed it on to Chicago to start the show’s night life.”¹⁷ This description walks two paths at once by trying to impress the general public with the wonders of science and technology, yet to praise the modern era by making the wonders of science and technology seem commonplace. The next paragraph in the *Guide Book* continues this pattern: “A miracle, they would have said 100 or even 40 years ago. But today, the ‘electric eye,’ relays, vacuum tubes, amplifiers, microphones, which respond to the tiniest fluxes of energy, help to do the work of the world in almost routine manner. *Progress!*”¹⁸

Cast of Characters at A Century of Progress

Many people were involved with the Century of Progress Exposition, but the fair was truly run by a handful of people, mostly local community and business leaders. The Dawes

¹⁵ Cheryl Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 67.

¹⁶ It is now generally understood that the light from Arcturus takes 37 years to arrive on Earth.

¹⁷ *Official Guide Book of the World's Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

brothers, Rufus and Charles, and Lennox R. Lohr, were in charge, with Rufus C. Dawes as the President of A Century of Progress, and Lohr as the General Manager of the exposition. These three men had military experience, political backgrounds, and oil money, and their worldview shaped the nature of the fair. Although these men were local leaders, their influence was wide-reaching. Rufus C. Dawes did not serve in the military, though his father (and namesake) was a Union officer and his brother, Charles Dawes, was a World War I general, Nobel prize winner, and the vice president of the United States. Rufus C. Dawes had political experience in the Illinois constitutional convention and by service to his brother as an economic advisor. These are the Daweses of the Dawes Plan for post-World War I reparations. Lennox Lohr was often referred to at the fair as Major Lohr, a title he earned in World War I and thereafter through his service with the Army Corps of Engineers. These men were Republicans during the time the party became the party of capitalism.

The idea for a second world's fair in Chicago underwent multiple phases of promotion and leadership before it actually came into being. Plans began in the late 1920s, with various prominent citizens approaching the mayor's office with the idea. In 1927, under Mayor Bill Thompson, city treasurer Charles S. Peterson was appointed to create a committee on the world's fair, and he immediately approached Rufus and Charles Dawes about the exposition.¹⁹ Allegedly, Charles agreed within five minutes, but Rufus took a half hour of convincing, and another half hour when Peterson pitched the idea of him running it—a story that was later told to highlight

¹⁹ *The Chicagoan World's Fair Book: A Complete History of a Century of Progress International Exposition, in Word and Picture. A Comprehensive Guide to Chicago* (Chicago: Chicagoan Publishing Company, 1933). This book, by the editors of the magazine *The Chicagoan*, covers a lot of the early organizational history of the fair.

the differences in personality between the two brothers. Peterson gathered other prominent men in the city, and in December of 1927, the committee met and applied for a charter, and in January 1928, the state of Illinois granted the charter for the “Chicago Second World’s Fair Centennial Celebration.”²⁰ The fair development was underway, and while the Dawes brothers were part of a group, they received most of the attention.

Rufus Dawes was on the cover of *Time* magazine in May of 1933, and the article that highlighted him and the fair provides an image of a particular type of twentieth-century masculinity: reserved, business-minded, and serious. The article described him as “quiet, retiring, the family scholar,” “a sagely sober counselor and friend to his brothers,” who headed more utility companies over the years than he could count.²¹ He was described as the “only man in the world who could handle” his more famous brother, Charles, who was depicted as a hothead who could “swear picturesquely.”²² Rufus Dawes was described as someone who disliked “society and ceremony” but had become accustomed to them, and who “played mediocre golf, desultory family bridge, and would rather spend an evening reading history or talking international finance.” He took his fair job seriously enough to move from his home on Evanston’s lakefront to an apartment nearer the fair. *Time* described his physical appearance as well: “Tall, long of face and nose, at 65 he is slightly stooped and his grey hair is thinning. His brown eyes twinkle benignly through horn-rimmed pince-nez swung from a black silk ribbon. He picks his suits

²⁰ *The Chicagoan World's Fair Book: A Complete History of a Century of Progress International Exposition, in Word and Picture. A Comprehensive Guide to Chicago* (Chicago: Chicagoan Publishing Company, 1933).

²¹ “Chicago's Party,” *TIME Magazine* 21, no. 21 (May 22, 1933): pp. 14-16.

²² *Ibid.*

carefully and well, wears them neatly pressed and with ties more harmoniously than Brother Charley's.”²³ According to the writer of the profile, Rufus Dawes never spent money until it was in hand and never let the fair's bank balance fall beneath a million dollars.²⁴ The Rufus C. Dawes featured in this article oozed responsibility and competence.

During and after the fair, Rufus Dawes received stacks of letters congratulating him on his success, his competency, and his courage to host a fair in the face of the Great Depression. Dawes represented a very specific type of masculinity that was meaningful to many people during the 1930s: he was a business leader, level-headed and calm, and undeterred by the collapse of the economy. The femininity or masculinity of the New Deal has been discussed by others, including Robert McIlvaine and Philip Abbott, but it is easy to see Dawes as a fatherly or grandfatherly figure who knew that things would turn out all right. In his personal life, his own children looked to him for reassurance in the Great Depression: he wrote his daughter Helen in March of 1933 at the request of his wife, also named Helen, who said he should encourage their daughter about the state of the country. Dawes, a Republican, wrote that “I do think Roosevelt has made a wonderful beginning—his inaugural address was inspiring to me and I am sure it has influence a new courage into the public heart.”²⁵ He explained some banking concepts and closed, “No use worrying in any case—let's worry about our part—a few weeks now will tell the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Chicago's Party,” *TIME Magazine* 21, no. 21 (May 22, 1933): pp. 14-16.

²⁵ Rufus C. Dawes to Helen Dawes, March 9, 1933. Rufus C. and Helen Palmer Dawes Collection, 1870-1941, MS84. Box 4, Folder 4. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

story.”²⁶ Like all his letters to her, he closed by reminding her how proud of her he was. Philip Abbot has argued that the Great Depression called for a reinvention of manhood that focused more on public stewardship than material acquisition, and strength derived from discipline rather than self-assertation—both concepts that allowed the civic-minded and circumspect Rufus Dawes to shine.²⁷ The accolades and the success of the fair were not without their toll on Dawes, though: in an oral history in 1981, his daughter Margaret, recalled that on the opening day of the fair he lost his sight.²⁸ Her story is a bit unclear although she was insistent, and blindness is not mentioned in other descriptions of Dawes, but it appears that at least temporarily the stress of the exposition affected his eyesight.

Lennox Lohr was also a representative of a particular version of interwar masculinity. He gained recognition through his work with the Army Corps of Engineers, and was by all accounts, a skilled manager of both projects and people. Philip Abbot has argued that bureaucrats have never been portrayed as heroically as they were during the Great Depression, and Lohr’s management skills put him in this category.²⁹ Lohr was described as having “a touch of Aristotle and a dash of Barnum,” and even graced the cover of *Opportunity*, “the magazine for salesmen,” in 1934.³⁰

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Philip Abbott, “Titans/Planners, Bohemians/Revolutionaries: Male Empowerment in the 1930s,” *Journal of American Studies* 40, no. 3 (2006), 465.

²⁸ Margaret Dawes Jefferson, interview transcript held at the Evanston History Center. April 11, 1981.

²⁹ Philip Abbott, “Titans/Planners, Bohemians/Revolutionaries: Male Empowerment in the 1930s,” *Journal of American Studies* 40, no. 3 (2006), 475.

³⁰ Lenox Riley Lohr papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Box 1, Folder 2 and Box 20, Folder 200.

Chicago's mayoral politics remarkably bore little influence on the Century of Progress Exposition, which operated fairly separately from the rest of Chicago. Democrat Edward Kelly was the mayor of Chicago when the fair was held, although Anton Cermak would have been the "fair mayor" had he not been assassinated, and Frank Corr would have been had he not resigned after only 29 days in office. Mayor Kelly was a in full support of the fair and largely let the fair management do what they wanted, appearing for ceremonial events. A biographer of his said that Mayor Kelly "took every opportunity to cut a ribbon opening a new exhibit, honor an ethnic group, or welcome a visiting dignitary to Chicago's showplace."³¹ Kelly has been quoted as saying that perhaps "it isn't so healthy being the World's Fair Mayor of Chicago. Two of them have been shot you know."³² This referred to Anton Cermak, whose assassination is widely believed to have been intended for President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Carter Henry Harrison III, who was assassinated in 1893, the night before the Columbian Exposition closed. Kelly was devoted to the New Deal, and frequently gave a campaign speech titled "Roosevelt is My Religion."³³

Historian Cheryl Ganz has claimed that the fair reflected this trio of two Dawes brothers and Lohr's careers with its business-military-engineering model, and she explains that they drew from their own personal-professional networks for fill key leadership roles.³⁴ High-ranking

³¹ Roger Biles, *Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago: Big City Boss in Depression and War*, 1981, 31.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Robert Spinney, *City of Big Shoulders: A History of Chicago*, Online Edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Scholarship Online, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501749599.003.0010>, accessed January 25, 2023.

³⁴ Cheryl Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 2.

Century of Progress staff included people from the military, the White House, and a wide variety of companies.³⁵ Ganz praises fair management's organizational prowess by explaining that their approach "enabled them to host a mammoth exhibition with spectacular educational exhibits from the various disciplines of science as well as to create an atmosphere of entertainment that attracted families, individuals, and conventioners from throughout the United States during the economic crisis."³⁶ Historian Warren Susman has written that it would "be absurd not to see" the importance of corporate and bureaucratic structures in shaping modern world's fairs, which were serious businesses run by "major managers in a corporate America."³⁷ Through business and military experiences, the fair organizers were well accustomed to large operations.



Figure 4. Lenox R. Lohr, General Manager of the exposition (left), and Rufus C. Dawes, President of A Century of Progress (center), pose with Helen Reid (right), the sixteenth million visitor to the fair. Kaufmann & Fabry Co., COP_17_0006_00249_029, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

³⁵ *The Story of a Century of Progress* (Chicago: Cuneo Press, 1952), 26-27.

³⁶ Cheryl Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 2.

³⁷ Warren Susman, "Ritual Fairs," *Chicago History* XII, no. 3 (1983): p. 4-7.

The world's fair was by and large a men's operation. With Rufus Dawes and Lennox Lohr drawing on their personal networks of military and political pals, plus their pulling of leading experts in science and industry (areas from which women were routinely excluded), the masculine leadership was locked in. The 1893 Columbian Exposition had a Women's Building and a Board of Lady Managers, so it might stand to reason that women had an even more prominent role in the city's second world's fair forty years later, but this was not the case. Women had no official representation or delegation at the Century of Progress exposition. There had, of course, been enormous strides made for women's equality in the intervening forty years, most notably the passage of the 19th amendment granting women's suffrage. Even though many women still faced barriers to exercising their right to the franchise, the progress of the first decades of the twentieth century is undeniable.

There are three especially notable exceptions to the "rule" that the fair was a man's operation: Helen Bennett, Martha McGrew, and Sally Rand. Sally Rand's fan dance performances are arguably the most enduring memory of the Century of Progress Exposition. She pops up in every discussion of the exposition, often as a symbol of American ingenuity: she had literally nothing and made a small fortune. Rand's financial success and her rise to fame from sleeping on park benches was almost as enticing to Depression-era audiences as the dancing itself. Journalist Kathleen Nichols highlighted Rand's moneymaking and her business savvy: in an article titled "Sally, Sans Pants, Trims Public to Sweet Tune of \$4,000 a Week."³⁸

³⁸ Kathleen Nichols, "Sally, Sans Pants, Trims Public to Sweet Tune of \$4,000 a Week," *Movienews Weekly*, October 13, 1933, p. 2-8.

The number is indeed staggering; when money was of utmost concern to average Americans, Rand was raking an equivalent of \$83,600 a week in 2021 money.³⁹

Approaching Rand as a heroic figure, American in her ingenuity and skill at making money, is something still done today, including by writer William Elliott Hazelgrove in his book on Rand, which offers little to no critical analysis of the fact that during the Great Depression men were still willing to fork over what little money they did have to consume erotic entertainment and to purchase the viewership of women's bodies. Sally Rand is seen as a powerful creative instead of a desperate young woman with few options. Of course, Rand's humor and candor make people feel comfortable with her career even now. While Rand is certainly an interesting individual and an enduring symbol of 1930s Chicago, it would be inaccurate to say she held any real power in the operation of the Century of Progress, even as her performances drove it to profitability. In fact, Robert Rydell has pointed out that such profitability made it "inconceivable to think of holding a world's fair without women performers dancing nude," as demonstrated by performances at subsequent fairs.⁴⁰

³⁹ Measuring worth - Results, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/relativevalue.php>. There are many ways to measure money amounts in the past against money amounts today. Measuringworth.com is a useful tool, and their essay on different ways to measure relative worth is illuminating. "Choosing the Best Indicator to Measure Relative Worth," Measuring Worth - Relative Worth Comparators and Data Sets, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://www.measuringworth.com/indicator.php>.

⁴⁰ Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 137.



Figure 5. Promotional photo of Sally Rand. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. "Sally Rand." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed November 29, 2022.

Martha McGrew and Helen Bennett were involved in the fair administration. McGrew was Lenox Lohr's assistant, a position that came with more authority than it might seem. Cheryl Ganz argues that McGrew had considerable influence with male fair organizers, who valued her opinion; in fact, some said she was the most feared and courted person at the fair.⁴¹ In the vast piles of correspondence of the Century of Progress records at the University of Illinois Chicago her name comes up frequently.

Helen Bennet was a professional woman who had run the multi-year Woman's World Fair in Chicago in the 1920s. At a Century of Progress, she was in charge of women's

⁴¹ Cheryl Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 22.

representation and activities in the social sciences division.⁴² Surprisingly, the few women who were involved with the fair, including Bennet, seemed to largely adhere to the official fair line that no separate women's space or women's representation was necessary at the fair. The very progress that was made in the past forty years was claimed as the reason: men and women were allegedly equals at the Century of Progress, so distinct representation was not needed.

The leaders of the Century of Progress were concerned with depicting the past at the fair, even though the theme focused on technology and science. A historical committee consulted on historic-themed exhibits, and A Century of Progress, Inc., commissioned a book to be written about Chicago's history. The committee was made up of members closely connected to Northwestern University history professor James Alton James. Many of these members were James's close associates, and several were not professional historians. Many were Methodists and most were Republicans.⁴³ The committee was created to present ideas for "dramatic historical pageantry in keeping with the theme of the Exposition," as well as to "prepare the historical celebration at and in the opening of the fair," as well as other duties.⁴⁴ James wrote Dawes that the men he recommended for the committee were "personal friends and most representative in the field of History."⁴⁵ This is an interesting claim given that many of them

⁴² Cheryl Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 93.

⁴³ This information comes from searching the committee members' individual profiles in Albert Nelson Marquis, *Who's Who in Chicago and Vicinity. The Book of Chicagoans: A Biographical Dictionary of Leading Living Men and Women of the City of Chicago and Environs* (Chicago: A.N. Marquis Co., 1931).

⁴⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Series V, Committees. Box 12, Folder 5-132.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

were involved in history as board members or trustees, not as professional historians themselves. Perhaps the most interesting aspect, or certainly the most surprising aspect of the historical committee is the remarkably small paper trail they left. The official Century of Progress collection at the University of Illinois Chicago only contains documents related to the committee's appointment, not their work.

The book on Chicago history commissioned to be in conjunction with the fair was called *Chicago's Great Century, 1833-1933*, and it was written by newspaperman Henry Justin Smith. Rufus Dawes wrote a forward where he claimed that the purpose of the book was to “inspire new interest in a story which in many ways surpasses in drama that which could be told of any other city” and “to help celebrate a notable anniversary” and to “increase the civic patriotism of Chicagoans.”⁴⁶ These aims demonstrate what Dawes considered appropriate uses of history—namely, history as a celebratory tool to bolster Chicago's reputation. *Chicago's Great Century* is tightly bound to the century at hand—Native American history, the history of early explorers and settlers, and the history of Fort Dearborn were not included. The city's diversity of white immigrants was discussed, but the Great Migration not mentioned. The book was an official telling of the history of the past hundred years, and that same history was told throughout the fairgrounds. In some spaces, fair planners and other groups added to that history or challenged it, largely because additional historical narratives were, interestingly, outside the scope of time and place in Chicago from 1833 on—the Lincoln group, the Du Sable Cabin, Fort Dearborn, and the

⁴⁶ Henry Justin Smith and Rufus Dawes, “Chicago's Great Century, 1833-1933,” in *Chicago's Great Century, 1833-1933* (Chicago: Consolidated Publishers, 1933).

Colonial Village all expanded beyond the tight century and space constraints emphasized in this book.



Figure 6. Crowds gather at the opening ceremony of the Century of Progress, which featured the star Arcturus. Kaufman and Fabry Co., COP_17_0002_00023_017, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Other Related World's Fairs

A few other fairs are necessary to mention in context with the Century of Progress Exposition besides the Columbian Exposition. The fair organizers carefully studied previous fairs to learn from their successes and mistakes. The 1915 San Francisco fair was of particular interest, especially because many of its organizers were still available and had written a detailed

history of their exposition.⁴⁷ Also important for context are the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition in 1926, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and the other world's fairs of the 1930s. The Philadelphia fair was unsuccessful by many measures, and fair expert Robert Rydell has called it the "single worst financial disaster in American international history," which makes the subsequent Century of Progress even more unlikely—afterwards many thought international expos were a thing of the past.⁴⁸ Philadelphia also featured several historic exhibits, which, given its failure, likely led to Chicago choosing to focus less on historic exhibits than on modern and futuristic ones. However, the historic exhibits that existed at the Philadelphia fair had some important aspects in common with the historical exhibits at the Century of Progress: portrayal of the past became a means for people to grapple with the upheavals of modern life.⁴⁹ Another notable aspect of Philadelphia's "Sesqui" was the Ku Klux Klan's plans to hold their annual meeting to coincide with the fair, and the exposition's director of exhibits was a Klan sympathizer who intended to allow such active Klan participation in the fair. Public protests and involvement of Philadelphia's African American community eventually prevented their participation.⁵⁰ While the Philadelphia fair was definitely of the

⁴⁷ Lenox R. Lohr, *Fair Management*, 22.

⁴⁸ Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 5.

⁴⁹ Calista Keller Cleary, "The Past is Present: Historical Representation at the Sesquicentennial International Exposition." Order No. 9953514, University of Pennsylvania, 1999.
<https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/past-is-present-historical-representation-at/docview/304532809/se-2>.

⁵⁰ For more on this, see Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 158-165.

1920s, and the Century of Progress was unquestionably a Depression-era fair, comparing them is useful because much of their planning happened in the same decade.

The Century of Progress was not the only Depression-Era world's fair held in the United States: San Diego (1935-36), Dallas (1936), Cleveland (1936-37), San Francisco (1939-1940) and New York (1939-1940) all held international expositions during the 1930s. Chicago kicked off the trend and built the model, and sometimes these 1930s expositions have been collectively referred to as "The Century of Progress Expositions."⁵¹ Because of the global cultural obsession with New York, the 1939-40 World of Tomorrow Exposition has been the most discussed out of this group. One scholar has proposed that fair, instead of the attack on Pearl Harbor, as the symbolic end of the Great Depression, as the last major collective event of the Depression years.⁵² Along with New York and Chicago, San Diego and San Francisco both held previous expositions along with Century of Progress ones.⁵³ The Golden Gate Exposition was in fact the third international exposition held in the Bay area. In all cases, the Great Depression was formative factor—the fairs were intended to fight it, either economically, emotionally, or both. While New York and Chicago specifically looked to the future and only sometimes looked to the past, the Texas Centennial Exhibition in Dallas focused heavily on the region's past.⁵⁴ The

⁵¹ Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

⁵² Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (W.W. Norton, 2010), 527.

⁵³ Matthew Bokovoy, "San Diego, 1935-1936," in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 282.

⁵⁴ "Welcome to the Fairs, Part 3," *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s*, October 20, 2010, <https://designingtomorrow.wordpress.com/2010/10/19/welcome-to-the-fairs-part-3/>.

historic pageant “The Cavalcade of Texas” was wildly popular. Another notable attraction in Dallas was the Hall of Negro Life, the first official recognition of Black culture at a world’s fair.⁵⁵

Culture in the Great Depression

In some ways, the celebratory attitude of the world’s fairs was incongruous with the grim reality of the Great Depression. However, there were other areas in which American culture in the Great Depression was celebratory, which demonstrates both an American stubbornness and the important role of optimism and distraction in times of crisis. Depression-era culture was two-sided, the melancholic blues music and the bouncy curls of Shirley Temple. Historian John Kasson has referred to the “politics of cheer” and “conspicuous demonstrations of confidence” during the Great Depression, concepts clearly visible at the Century of Progress, where optimism was considered an almost tangible resource.⁵⁶ The Depression has been described as “the scene of a great cultural spectacle against the backdrop of economic misery,” a concept which can be applied even more specifically to the Century of Progress Exposition.⁵⁷ The massive scale of the Century of Progress Exposition makes it seem incongruous with the realities of the Great Depression, but the fair was not an anomaly: during the Depression years, spending on

⁵⁵ “Texas Centennial,” Texas State Historical Association, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-centennial>.

⁵⁶ John F. Kasson, *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America* (New York: Norton, 2015), 1.

⁵⁷ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (W.W. Norton, 2010), xiv.

amusements actually increased, which demonstrates the need for leisure, hope, and reprieve.⁵⁸ The subsequent 1930s world's fairs demonstrate this same concept.

Part 2: The Fair Itself a World

How the Fair Came to Be and Funding

The fair was not funded through government subsidies, making it the first 'corporate' fair, a model which all American world's fairs followed throughout the twentieth century.⁵⁹ Starting in 1928, the public could purchase membership in the Chicago World's Fair Legion for five dollars and ten guaranteed admissions to the fair; a bond issue was a much more important source of start-up revenue for the fair, and allowed other private individuals to buy-in to the exposition.⁶⁰ Contracts with food, entertainment, and transportation vendors also supported the fair.⁶¹ Government money did come into the fair, although A Century of Progress itself was not taxpayer-funded; the federal government spend \$1 million on a pavilion and a government exhibit, and 18 states paid to feature their own exhibits.⁶² The fact that the fair did not rely on city of Chicago or state of Illinois taxes was a point of pride for fair officials and locals, and helped many feel justified in the city's hosting of a celebration during the Great Depression.

⁵⁸ John F. Kasson, *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America* (New York: Norton, 2015), 2.

⁵⁹ William Elliott Hazelgrove, *Al Capone and the 1933 World's Fair: The End of the Gangster Era in Chicago* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 114.

⁶⁰ John E. Findling, "Chicago 1933-1934," in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 269-270.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

The fair was a capitalistic venture more than a civic project like previous ones, ironic given its timing when, in many ways, capitalism had failed. Fair organizers and industry leaders who participated in the fair would not have seen the irony however and considered the exposition an opportunity for industry to redeem itself in the eyes of the public. Historian Cheryl Ganz has said the fair offered an opportunity for science, industry, and invested capital to tell their own stories—tales of service to the public, which helped to position (or reposition) themselves as national leaders who were looking forward.⁶³

The Century of Progress is unique among fairs in that it turned a profit. A Century of Progress, Inc. was a not-for-profit organization, yet surplus money existed at the end of the second season. At the end of the first year, the fair was considered a success by many metrics, yet not enough money was raised to pay bondholders in full.⁶⁴ This, along with the other successes and experience gained through 1933, was the primary reason for the fair's reopening in 1934.⁶⁵ At the end of the 1934 season, the Exposition turned a profit of \$160,000, which was divided up between the Museum of Science and Industry, The Art Institute, the Adler Planetarium, and other organizations.⁶⁶ Dancer Sally Rand's erotic performances and other risqué shows drew visitors and massive amounts of money to the fair. These numbers say nothing of the smaller financial successes for smaller companies and concessioners who were

⁶³ Cheryl R. Ganz, "Fan Dancing and Fan Belts: Selling Optimism at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 9, no. 1 (January 2008), 81.

⁶⁴ John E. Findling, "Chicago 1933-1934," in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 276.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

involved in the fair, other Chicago businesses—especially hospitality-- nor for the significance of employment at the fair on local families. Overall, the sound financial management and the fair's attractions ended up with an almost unimaginable feat: a megaevent that was profitable—during the Great Depression.

At the Fair

The fair was indeed a world unto itself, or at least a city within a city. Along the lakefront, the Rainbow City was both part of Chicago and apart from it. For visitors to the city, they departed and arrived twice: they departed from their homes and arrived in Chicago, and then left Chicago and entered into the fair. Fair organizers thought that the fair would drive tourism to other parts of the city and state, as evidenced by a “See Illinois” pamphlet that highlighted Lincoln sites. Performer Sally Rand humorously summed up the lack of appeal the rest of the city had to visitors and locals alike: “They planned this fair to bring business to Chicago, into the Loop. But you could have fired a cannon down State Street and hit nobody, because everybody was out at the fair.”⁶⁷

The fair was held on Northerly Island, a manmade peninsula just east of downtown, jutting into Lake Michigan. The South Park Commission, a public body independent of the city loaned the land to the fair corporation for free, and received it returned filled, landscaped, and paved.⁶⁸ The fair occupied more than 400 acres, and forty-eight million visitors attended. Unlike the Columbian Exposition, the fair ran for two seasons, and some buildings, like the Fort

⁶⁷ Louis Terkel, *Hard Times; an Oral History of the Great Depression by Studs Terkel* (New York: Pantheon Books Co., 1970), 173.

⁶⁸ “Chicago's Party,” *TIME Magazine* 21, no. 21 (May 22, 1933): pp. 14-16.

Dearborn replica, were open for even longer. Some advertisements promoted the 1934 season as a “new fair,” but two seasons is a better way to conceptualize the fair, even though there were several changes in concessions and attractions. The fair officially opened on May 27, 1933.⁶⁹ The first season ran until November 12, and then the second season ran from May 26, 1934, to Halloween of the same year.

Fair buildings were temporary, and as such were built from asbestos, gypsum board, and plywood.⁷⁰ Unlike the 1893 exposition, architecture was modern instead of imitating classical forms. The architectural commission said they were trying to show not what had happened in the past, but “what is being done in the present, and what may be done in the future.”⁷¹ Architectural innovations, including those in paint and lighting, gained significant attention. Notable structures included: the Hall of Science, which featured exhibits on mathematics, chemistry, physics, and geology, as well as medicine, life sciences, and an exhibit on science in industry; the Radio and Communications Building, where visitors could learn about how telegraphs and telephones worked, along with a “communications garden” with a memorial to Thomas Edison; eleven model homes of “today and tomorrow” that featured innovation in building materials and furnishings to show “progress in architecture, comfort, and technology,” the Hall of Religion, which “told the story of man’s rise through religion,” by exhibiting a variety of faith traditions; the Federal Building and Hall of States where various bureaus and agencies promoted their own

⁶⁹ 83 years before the author’s wedding day.

⁷⁰ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 14.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

work and states demonstrated their unique culture and economic contributions; the Travel and Transport Building with its distinctive dome and demonstrations of various vehicles; and the Hall of Social Sciences, which, with anthropological exhibits, presented “the history of man” and “the stages of his development.”⁷² All of these educational exhibits were accompanied by promotional displays from multiple industries, especially the automotive industry, as well as places for food, drink, and leisure. The Midway featured less uplifting recreation than the museum-like halls and was intended to mimic the popular Midway at the 1893 fair—it was an “area of spectacles and sideshows, strange and unusual attractions, and circus cacophony.”⁷³

National pavilions were sponsored by foreign governments to display their country’s historic culture and current international status. Some foreign participation consisted of countries developing their own pavilions--China, Czechoslovakia, Japan, Ukraine, Sweden, and fascist Italy all took this approach—while other countries had exhibits in the Hall of Nations within the Travel and Transport Building.⁷⁴ The Belgian delegation created a model village, which was so successful that in the 1934 season there were several other model villages, mostly created by companies instead of nations—the American Colonial Village concession was one of these imitators.

Two main types of attractions at the Century of Progress were concessions and exhibits, although the distinction is not always very important. Typically, concessions were attractions

⁷² These descriptions can be found throughout the 1933 *Official Guide Book*.

⁷³ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 78.

⁷⁴ John E. Findling, “Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions,” in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 272.

operated by contracted companies or vendors, and they cost an additional charge beyond the fair admission cost of fifty cents. Concessions included a wide range of businesses, some of which were likely started for the fair, such as Exposition Fruit Company of Chicago, which hosted fifteen fruit and nut stands throughout the grounds.⁷⁵ Other concessions included cigar sales, an alligator wrestling show, magic shows, operation of a bathing beach, umbrella rentals, the Belgian village, souvenir shops, a Wild West show and Rodeo, and the Lincoln Group.⁷⁶ Essentially, anything one could imagine being sold for the comfort and satisfaction of guests, as well as various entertainment enterprises. The names of several of these companies imply that they were either offshoot businesses of other companies or they were created specifically for the fair, for instance: Century Griddles, Exposition Fruit Company, Century Pastimes and Games, Inc., and Progress Amusement Corp.⁷⁷ Some attractions were sponsored by larger corporations, most notably big names in the automobile industry. Businesses contributed funds vital to the fair's operations in return for a spot to promote themselves and to restore the respect and credibility that corporate leadership had lost in the stock market crash of 1929.⁷⁸ Indeed, American industry invested \$32 million by their participation in the fair, which can be understood as approximately \$530 million in 2022.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *Official Guide Book of the World's Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 111.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 110, 111.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 110-113.

⁷⁸ Cheryl R. Ganz, "Fan Dancing and Fan Belts: Selling Optimism at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 9, no. 1 (January 2008): 80.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Measuring Worth - results, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/relativevalue.php>.

Exhibits, unlike concessions, often did not have an additional fee, and were frequently educational and not necessarily hosted by companies. Exhibits in the Hall of Science, for example were created or hosted by organizations as varied as the Illinois Health Department, the Field Museum, the Buffalo Museum of Science, The Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research, the Canadian Geological Survey, Loyola University Chicago, and the National Parks Service.⁸⁰ Of course, some attractions did not fit quite comfortably into either category—for instance, the Lincoln Group was a concession, but also framed as an educational experience. Concessions and exhibits are imperfect categories but can be understood generally.

More than fifty buildings were included in the general admission cost. These were mostly fair and government-sponsored buildings, such as the Hall of Science, the Travel and Transport building, the General Exhibits building, and the Hall of States.

Many world's fairs have a signature iconic structure. The Eiffel Tower debuted in 1889 to show the world that France was a country of engineers, not only poets. The Ferris Wheel in Chicago in 1893 was developed with a single-minded intention of outshining the Eiffel Tower.⁸¹ In 1962, the Space Needle captured Seattle's "Age of Space" theme and became a treasured part of the Emerald City's skyline. The signature structure of the Century of Progress Exposition was the Sky Ride, which did not rise to as much fame as these other three. Essentially, the Sky Ride was an overgrown cable car system that went over Northerly Island. For forty cents, passengers

⁸⁰ *Official Guide Book of the World's Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934, 115).

⁸¹ While not nearly as iconic, it has been replicated more times, which surely counts for something. The original Ferris Wheel puts modern versions to shame, however: each cart or gondola could hold up to 60 people, for more than 2,000 riders at a time.

could survey the area at 5 miles per hour.⁸² While the Sky Ride provided impressive aerial views of the fair and a lovely west-facing perspective of the Chicago skyline, it had little lasting impact on the community.

Given the theme of science and technology, industrial exhibits were a major part of the fair's appeal. Originally, organizers talked of having cooperative thematic exhibits for industries, but eventually corporations such as General Motors, Sears, Roebuck, and Company, and in 1933, the Ford Motor Company, simply had their own pavilions.⁸³

The list of attractions at the fair is almost staggering. Major educational spaces included the Radio and Communications Building, the inspiring and promotional Homes of Today and Tomorrow, foreign participation including an Italian pavilion "vibrant with the heroic deeds of Fascism," and a six-acre children's play area, Enchanted Island.⁸⁴ These spaces, and so many more, were augmented by various promotional events and celebratory days at the fair. An abundance of beauty, popularity, and charm contests existed for young women to enter, as well as other promotional contests. The fair celebrated Farm Week, Chicago Day, Constitution Day, and many more, including days for a variety of white ethnic Chicagoans.

The fair coincided with several other events in the city. The Art Institute of Chicago held a special exhibition in conjunction with the fair, called "A Century of Progress in American Collecting," which featured a variety of American art, and in 1934 the Art Institute held an

⁸² "Chicago's Party," *TIME Magazine* 21, no. 21 (May 22, 1933): pp. 14-16.

⁸³ John E. Findling, "Chicago 1933-1934," in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 269.

⁸⁴ *Official Guide Book of the World's Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 57.

exhibit called “American Art.” Multiple professional and social organizations opted to have their annual conferences in Chicago during the fair years. Major League Baseball’s first All-Star Game was held in 1933 at Comiskey Park, in loose connection with the fair, in fact, the game was referred to as “The Game of The Century,” and was expected to be a one-time event.⁸⁵ Five college football games and several other sporting events were held at Soldier Field, which was next to the fairgrounds.⁸⁶ In some ways the fair was a place unto itself, but in other ways it was definitely still part of the larger Chicago Community.

The Century of Progress Exposition was officially a world’s fair, but in many ways, the fair was specifically focused on the United States. Between the Federal Building, the Illinois Host House, and the Hall of States, official governmental power was well represented. Of course, American businesses were represented from Ford and General Motors down to local concession stands. Thematic materials focused on technology and progress used broad global language but with the goals of emphasizing successes of the American system and promoting local and regional business, the fair definitely had an American flair more than a fully international one. Host countries of world’s fairs are always well represented, naturally, and this is very true of A Century of Progress. In the Great Depression, American arts and culture were turned inward; the era was characterized by a seeking of America itself. Historian Morris Dickstein describes this fascination with America itself as a key feature of the cultural life of the era, with emphases on

⁸⁵ My husband’s Grandpa Bingham was at attendance at the first All-Star Game.

⁸⁶ John E. Findling, “Chicago 1933-1934,” in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 274.

American history and geography and folk culture.⁸⁷ The fair lifted up American culture and history in front of a worldwide audience. The 1933 *Official Guide Book* demonstrated an emphasis on American history through its word usage: “history,” “historical,” and “past” (in terms of history) appear 120 times throughout the book, while “tomorrow,” “future,” and “futuristic” appear only 38 times.

The Fair’s Theme—Science, Technology, Progress

The fair’s official theme was focused on science and industry, and the motto was: “Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms.” This is a little strange, because it erases human hands from science and industry and makes those fields actors in their own right, and it also does not mean that people shape the products of science and industry to their own use, rather than simply adapting themselves to these new things.⁸⁸ Perhaps science and industry are more easily tied to the overarching concept of progress than social sciences or humanities; certainly scientific achievements and advancements are easier to measure than ones in the humanities, yet there were many social science and humanistic educational attractions, including the historical exhibits. Non-scientific exhibits were promoted as themselves a way to measure scientific progress. Guidebooks and other materials removed human actors from science and industry and gave the fields themselves agency when explaining how progress could be measured, as demonstrated in this quote from the *Official Guide Book*: “And the story is made complete, its sequence a running narrative, by the exhibits of social science, which show you how Man has

⁸⁷ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (W.W. Norton, 2010), xxii.

⁸⁸ *Official Guide Book of the World’s Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 8.

come up from the caves of a half a hundred thousand years ago, adapting himself to, being molded by, his environments, responding to each new thing discovered and developed.”⁸⁹ Here, the 1930s were situated on the edge of the future, the pinnacle of human progress, as the paragraph continues: “You see man’s march upward to the present day, where, in a home of 1933, he uses and enjoys all the multitudinous benefits with which science and industry have endowed him.”⁹⁰

Not only do science and technology make progress easier to measure, but they are also more easily tied to the promotion and uplift of corporate America. The *Official Guide Book of the Fair*, with no official author yet published by A Century of Progress and likely compiled or at least overseen by Dawes and Lohr themselves, asserted that few people “realize that in virtually everything we enjoy a gift of science,” and that the fair undertook “to clothe science with its true garb of practical reality.”⁹¹ The fair championed corporate capitalism, even though, or perhaps because, many Americans blamed that model for the current crisis; the idea of progress was tied to science’s development of consumer goods.⁹² Fair planning began before the New Deal started, but in a way, the fair and the New Deal had attitudes in common: a dream of a

⁸⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁰ *Official Guide Book of the World’s Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 9.

⁹¹ Ibid., 8.

⁹² Cheryl R. Ganz, “Fan Dancing and Fan Belts: Selling Optimism at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 9, no. 1 (January 2008): 79.

better world based on community and interdependence—in the case of the fair, through corporations.⁹³

Progress

Emphasizing science and technology at the primary drivers of progress attributed agency to those fields. Historian Cheryl Ganz argues that the way in which fair organizers, many of them military leaders, conceptualized progress was a philosophical break from other visions of progress: that is, they did not present humankind as the prime mover of progress, but science and technology themselves.⁹⁴ Ganz argues that this perspective broke with the intellectual tradition going back to the Enlightenment of humans as the prime movers of progress, of “humankind’s dynamic role in civilization’s gradual climb toward a more perfect world.”⁹⁵ In this departure, humankind’s role in progress was limited to consumerism: desires for material goods drove innovation.⁹⁶ Ganz attributes this intellectual departure to “twentieth-century distrust of humankind’s capacity to produce a better world,” especially in the wake of World War I, and she argues that the leaders of the fair, as participants and leaders in the war, lost their faith in humankind’s ability to “direct social advancement,” through any institution, state, religious, or otherwise.⁹⁷ Ganz links this post-war disillusionment with the experience of the Great

⁹³ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (W.W. Norton, 2010), 523.

⁹⁴ Cheryl R. Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World’s Fair: A Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 2-3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

Depression by claiming that fair organizers spoke “to an economically depressed population’s most fundamental notions of progress” by insisting on exhibits that demonstrated technology’s power to improve daily life,⁹⁸ In this context, Ganz argues that this philosophical conceptualization of progress was not something cooked up by Dawes and his circles independently of any larger cultural movements, but was in fact a reflection of a 1930s-era departure from faith in humanity. Later, though, she does concede that not everyone who wanted their voice to be heard at the fair had fully abandoned ideas of progress that included “social justice, recognition of ethnic and gender-related accomplishments, and personal freedom.”⁹⁹ Indeed, many of the people behind the exhibits discussed here emphasized the human side of progress over science and technology. The historical exhibits focused on the accomplishments of individuals and communities and the goals behind claiming space to tell history were unrelated to the official theme of science and technology, although they were still dedicated to an idea of progress. The historical exhibits are reflective of the fair’s overarching themes and certainly are examples of Depression-era culture. While they sometimes stood in more than just visual contrast to other parts of the fair, sometimes they overlapped with it. Ganz has argued that at the fair, the idea of progress was used to “sell products, corporate brand images, and nationalistic visions.”¹⁰⁰ So too, were the historic exhibits sometimes used in the service of these goals.

⁹⁸ Cheryl R. Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World’s Fair: A Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 3.

⁹⁹ Cheryl R. Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World’s Fair: A Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 3.

¹⁰⁰ Cheryl R. Ganz, “Fan Dancing and Fan Belts: Selling Optimism at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 9, no. 1 (January 2008), 82.

The *Official Guide Book of the Fair* claimed that the Columbian Exposition “awoke a nation of 65,000,000 people from a lethargic material-mindedness and turned its thought eagerly to cultural and spiritual striving.”¹⁰¹ The organizers of the Century of Progress had no intention of turning people away from material-mindedness. Instead of a “lethargic material-mindedness,” they endeavored to direct people to a more vigorous material-mindedness and packaged that as a form of cultural and spiritual striving. Consumerism was tied to progress, and therefore to the overall good of humanity. In the midst of the Great Depression, the Century of Progress provided a ray of hope for the future not by turning aside from the failures of industrialism and capitalism, but by doubling down on the promises of those twin giants. Indeed, the themes of science and technology were inextricable from capitalism and industrialism in the eyes of these organizers who argued that these very forces were responsible for all that humanity enjoyed and would enjoy in the future.

The Depression itself suggested that science and industry under the arm of capitalism might not be the panacea that fair organizers promoted. Another clear flaw with this ideology of progress is the fact that people do science, people make technology. These fields are not removed from the machinations of humans, and thus all their victories and failures are still human victories and failures. This removal of the human hand from technology, this erasure of human agency, continued past the fair through the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first where a false idea of neutral, progressive technology has people discussing “the algorithms” as if people did not write them and thus embed their own biases and worldviews.

¹⁰¹ *Official Guide Book of the World's Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 9.

Yet, even with this significant theme, this powerful belief that “Science Finds, Industry Applies, and Man Conforms,” the Century of Progress attractions dedicated to history focused on human actors. It focused on a “great men” theory of history, one that displayed a remaining faith in humanity, a faith in individuals that other parts of the fair denied. The people who created the historical exhibits—the ones devoted to Lincoln, Fort Dearborn, Du Sable, and the Colonial Village-- had their own agency and power to create attractions that displayed a particular understanding of the past and a particular understanding of progress. In the case of Fort Dearborn and the Lincoln exhibit, these were the very same fair organizers who, in promotional materials, ceded the power of humans to drive progress to a faceless “Science.” In the case of the De Saible cabin and the Colonial Village, the tellers of history were not part of the powerful official fair narrative. This makes it difficult to tell just how much the average fairgoer bought in to the ideas of a progress that was driven by inhuman actors, even though Ganz argues that was the Depression-Era public’s most fundamental understanding of progress. Of course, measuring not only the impression that of progress that fairgoers arrived with, but the ways in which that changed or stayed the same over their course of their visit to the fair is impossible.

Labor and the Fair

The fair required a considerable amount of labor, both in construction and operation—significant in an era when so many were out of work. The fair required a large workforce, and in more difficult to measure ways, promoted other aspects of Chicago’s local economy, especially in the travel and hospitality industries. By opening day in May 1933, the fair employed 5,500 people, not counting those employed by concessionaires or for pre-fair construction.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Cathy Cahan and Richard Cahan, “The Lost City of the Depression,” *Chicago History*, 1976-77, 235.

According to one report, the 1934 season saw 6,777 people employed by the fair itself and 15,000 by exhibitors.¹⁰³ Another report stated that when concessionaires, exhibits, and services were all included, 25,000 people were employed by the fair.¹⁰⁴ Even though the Century of Progress generated many jobs, it was not enough to end the problem of unemployment in the city—it was not possible for everyone who wanted a world’s fair job to get one. Chicago’s Depression-era unemployment statistics were staggering: in 1931 officials counted 624,000 jobless persons.¹⁰⁵ With all of the people seeking jobs in Chicago, fair management enacted a rule where only one person per family could be employed by the fair.¹⁰⁶ As discussed in Chapter 4, Chicago’s African American community found the fair extraordinarily disappointing in terms of job opportunities. White women had more job opportunities than African Americans of any gender, but sometimes these came with caveats, such as a job listing for someone to work at a food exhibit in the Colonial Village that required applicants to submit their age, height, and weight.¹⁰⁷

Fair organizers took a special pride in their relationship with labor unions—both Lohr and Dawes mentioned successful cooperation as successes after the fair. Lohr wrote that he was pleased many of their contractors had cordial relationships with labor unions and two of the greatest days of the 1933 season were Labor Day and the Sunday preceding it, for both turnout

¹⁰³ “World’s Fair Employment,” *The Montreal Star*, January 16, 1934, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ “Employment and Pay Rolls Up,” *The Chicago Tribune*, June 30, 1933, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87.

¹⁰⁶ Cathy Cahan and Richard Cahan, “The Lost City of the Depression,” *Chicago History*, 1976-77, 234.

¹⁰⁷ “Executives and Managers,” *The Chicago Tribune*, May 6, 1934, p. 52.

and events.¹⁰⁸ At one time, almost every union electrician in the city of Chicago who had work was employed working at the fair.¹⁰⁹ Contrary to what one might expect given Chicago's history of a political patronage system, Lenox Lohr could boast at the end of the fair that "certain politicians had been unable to influence the employment department of the Fair in obtaining positions for their followers," and that many people were impressed by the fair keeping itself removed from political entanglements.¹¹⁰

It has been argued that the world's fairs of the 1930s were actually considered significant for preventing the country from "going Bolshevik"—fair organizers believed the jobs generated as well as the amazing exhibits would impress upon people the successes of the American way.¹¹¹ As the fair wound down, officials issued a press release attempting to find continued employment for their staff elsewhere—they promoted their hard work in the fair and the variety of skills possessed.¹¹² Essentially, they wrote a letter of recommendation for all fair employees.

Detractors of the Fair

There were challenges to the fair, and these can be framed in terms of questions: Should this be done? How can this be done? Will anyone come? The "how" was answered through the unique funding model but funding the fair during the Great Depression was still a considerable

¹⁰⁸ Lenox Riley Lohr papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Box 20, Folder 200.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Lenox R. Lohr, *Fair Management*, 149.

¹¹¹ Robert W. Rydell and Robert Bennett, *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), 6-7.

¹¹² Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, October 19, 1934.

challenge, and the question of funding likely played out on a different scale for every concessioner who decided to risk setting up shop in the Rainbow City.

Chicago's reputation has long been an issue to contend with in terms of drawing visitors to the city. In fact, one of the primary reasons Chicago boosters lobbied so hard for the Columbian Exposition was to demonstrate to the world that Chicago was not a frontier backwater. World's fair historian John Findling has argued that doing away with the lack of respect Chicago felt from the rest of the nation (and indeed, the world) was a primary driver of the fair itself.¹¹³ Not only did Chicagoans have a self-imposed pressure to host a fair that would gain them respect, they felt a pressure to outshine the City of Lights: the grand goal was to be better than the 1889 Paris exposition—the same one that featured the debut of the Eiffel Tower. Chicago's frontier reputation along with stories of the 1871 fire caused Americans to doubt that the city could successfully pull off a world's fair, which convinced Chicagoans that success was absolutely necessary. They rose to the occasion, with the fair being the most famous and influential exposition in American history. Historian R. Reid Badger described it as “the most extensive public exhibition produced by the United States in the nineteenth century,” and “unquestionably, one of the greatest world's fairs of all time.”¹¹⁴ Throughout the next forty years, much changed in Chicago and the world, but the city's reputation was still rough, or rather, was rough again, even though the successes of the Columbian Exposition were still well within living memory.

¹¹³ John E. Findling, *Chicago's Great World's Fairs* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994), 12.

¹¹⁴ R. Reid Badger, “Chicago 1893,” in *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 116.

Author William Elliott Hazelgrove has written that Al Capone and the Great Depression were equal antagonists to the fair, and while this overstates the consideration fair organizers had specifically for Capone, it highlights the real challenges of finances and Chicago's reputation.¹¹⁵ Some Chicagoans doubted the prudence of throwing a giant party on the lakefront when people starved throughout the city. Possibly, some were confused about the funding model for the fair and were disturbed by the idea that the city would be spending tax money on the fair instead of relief measures. Others, like a man named Herman O. Duncan, were critical of the founding principle of the fair, the notion that Americans were experiencing the benefits of science and technology and living in an age of progress at all. Duncan published a booklet titled "Chicago on Parade" which featured photographs of squalor of Depression-era Chicago—men sleeping on newspapers in Grant Park, families picking through garbage heaps looking for edible scraps—with captions that were quotations from Rufus Dawes, Governor Henry Horner, and other leaders about the luminous present that was presented at the fair.¹¹⁶ Little information about Duncan is available, and this pamphlet likely had a small circulation, but it appears to have been made in connection with the Worker's Film and Photo League, an organization dedicated to using their cameras to bring about social change.¹¹⁷

Chicago's reputation was a challenge as well because leaders doubted whether tourists from outside the city would visit the fair. The reputation was a problem on two fronts: ideas

¹¹⁵ William Elliott Hazelgrove, *Al Capone and the 1933 World's Fair: The End of the Gangster Era in Chicago* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 56.

¹¹⁶ Herman O. Duncan, "Chicago on Parade," August 18, 1933. Century of Progress Records, [Box 5, Folder 17], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library

¹¹⁷ Barnaby Haran, "'We Cover New York': Protest, Neighborhood, and Street Photography in the (Workers Film and) Photo League," *Arts* 8, no. 2 (October 2019): p. 61, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8020061>.

about the city's relief efforts (or lack thereof), and the still-sizzling 1920s gangland violence. William Elliott Hazelgrove vividly contextualizes the difference between the 1893 world's fair scandal that has come to be considered America's first serial killer with the world in which the Century of Progress opened: "The intervening years had rendered Holmes's crimes quaint by comparison with the mechanized slaughter of World War I and gangsters duking it out over the fruits of prohibition in the streets of Chicago."¹¹⁸ Charles Francis Coe, author, attorney, motion picture executive, and promoter of prize fights, wrote Rufus Dawes a letter where he explained that he had been at a social event where talk turned to the fair, and one prominent unnamed guest said, "Those Dawes boys will put on the greatest Fair the world ever saw. But for the life of me I can't see how the hell they'll get anybody to go and see it, so long as it's held in Chicago!"¹¹⁹ This quote is compelling because it combines the respect people had for the Dawes brothers' leadership with the criticisms and concerns many people had about Chicago's reputation as a violent and dangerous city. Charles Francis Coe pressed the guest on his comment and received "rather expansive and somewhat incoherent remarks upon murder, machine guns, gangland, rackets, and oceans of poison whiskey tainted to the hue of claret by the unsuspecting blood of innocent bystanders." Coe's further explanation of people's preconceived notions about Chicago took a humorous tone: "Chicago's public parks are now exclusively devoted to target practice; its police force ex-members of the pickpocket's union who have been banished for petty graft; its public works department a most expert organization devoted entirely to the manufacture of

¹¹⁸ William Elliott Hazelgrove, *Al Capone and the 1933 World's Fair: The End of the Gangster Era in Chicago* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), ix.

¹¹⁹ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series IX, Confidential Files, Box 1, Folder 19. Charles Frances Coe to Rufus Dawes, 1930.

explosive pineapples and its mayor a fascinating sort of organism, which, under the cultivating influences of time may attain the proportions of a full blown wen.”¹²⁰ Coe himself disagreed with these notions and offered his services in promoting the fair through his writing and public speaking. Perhaps he felt somewhat guilty, given that much of his writing had been gangster crime novels.

One of the issues with the city’s Depression-specific reputation was the challenges with Chicago Public Schools’ teacher’s pay. During the early years of the Great Depression, the Chicago Board of Education laid off teachers, cut their pay, and simply would not pay teachers for months at a time, among many other indignities. Eventually teachers went on strike, which included an event sometimes known as the “Chicago Teacher’s Revolt.” The teacher’s grievances were sometimes directed at the Century of Progress exposition, even though the fair’s private funding model was widely publicized. Striker signs included “A Century of Progress since our last paycheck,” “Beautify the Lakefront and Hide the Starving Teachers,” and concisely, “Dawes—Boo!”¹²¹ One of the defining moments of the teacher’s strike took place when the teachers entered the bank of which Charles Dawes was president---which had recently received a major bailout. In May of 1933, just before the fair opened, approximately 5,000 schoolchildren gathered in Grant Park and burned an effigy that bore a resemblance to Charles Dawes.¹²²

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Herman O. Duncan, “Chicago on Parade,” August 18, 1933. Century of Progress Records, [Box 5, Folder 17], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

¹²² “Chicago’s Party,” *TIME Magazine* 21, no. 21 (May 22, 1933): pp. 14-16.

Teachers from around the country wrote Dawes that they would not be attending the fair and spending their money in Chicago when fellow teachers were not paid. The exact goals of the letters of protest are unclear; perhaps the teachers wanted Dawes to exert his considerable influence upon the Board of Education, perhaps they believed that the Century of Progress was actively diverting money that would otherwise be going to the teachers. One teacher wrote: “We would admire Chicago more if it paid its workers and we schoolteachers who are receiving our pay certainly do not intend to spend money at your Fair while this treatment of your city's employees exists.”¹²³ Another showed off her own education by writing with verbosity: “The sympathy of a nation goes out to the longsuffering army of teachers in the great metropolis of the West, and especially do we of the same profession feel a deep solicitation in their plight.”¹²⁴ Poet, literary critic, and author Harriet Monroe had a letter published in *The New Republic* in response to teacher’s criticisms of the fair. Monroe wrote that the teachers “certainly have a bitter grievance,” but it has “nothing to do with the World’s Fair or with the group of men who have carried that hazardous and fate-buffed enterprise to what seems to be a successful climax.”¹²⁵ Monroe argued that the crisis of teacher pay and the success of the world’s fair were unconnected realities, but it was the “present fashion to endow all bankers with cloven hoofs,” so the Dawes brothers were criticized harshly—enough to constitute a “wholesale conviction without trial,” which was “rather Hitlerish.”¹²⁶

¹²³ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series IV, Box 2, Folder 4-14.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Harriet Monroe, “Defending the World's Fair,” *The New Republic*, July 19, 1933, p. 265.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Criticism of the fair came from another group as well: communists. Given the fairs blatant championing of corporate capitalism, this is hardly surprising. The communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* ran several articles in opposition to various aspects of the Century of Progress. In November of 1933, Joseph Freeman wrote in *The Daily Worker* about his experiences visiting the fair. He described it as a “fitting monument to capitalist culture in America,” which may have been taken as a compliment by organizers, and as “garish, tawdry, vulgar,” which certainly would not have been.¹²⁷ He decried the experience of being asked to buy “Coca Cola, Chrysler automobiles, Camel cigarettes, and the other million and one products of privately owned American industry.”¹²⁸ Indeed, the fair was a mecca of consumerism. Freeman further described the fair as “vicariously infantile commercial ballyhoo,” filled with “vicariously infantile pornography.”¹²⁹ Other articles from the same paper lobbed similar complaints. On the fair’s opening day, writer Samuel A. Herman argued that the fair’s scientific theme disguised the enterprise as being “divorced from the class struggle and completely devoid of any political aim,” which of course it was not.¹³⁰ He listed the names of several board of trustees members and called them “a veritable Who’s Who of the ruling class of Chicago,” “nationally known capitalists and their henchmen.” He called the name, A Century of Progress, a “snare and delusion” since the only substantial progress in the last hundred years was the seizure of power

¹²⁷ Joseph Freeman, “What A World!” *The Daily Worker*, November 15, 1933, p. 5.

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Samuel A. Herman, “World's Fair Is Monument of Capitalist Exploitation,” *The Daily Worker*, May 27, 1933, p. 5.

by Russian workers.¹³¹ This article and others criticized the labor conditions of fair workers. Herman called reports of increasing employment “fairy tales,” because of the many unemployed people who were not able to find work at the fair.¹³² A “Worker Correspondent” wrote that, instead of more people being hired to do all the work that needed to be done, fair employees often worked 84-hour weeks.¹³³ People involved with *The Daily Worker* made the fair a central part of their campaign to increase readership, since visitors to the “extravaganza” were mainly workers.¹³⁴ “Red Builders,” staff whose status as volunteer or employee is unclear, sold copies of the paper at the gates of the fair from bags emblazoned with the hammer and sickle.¹³⁵

Chicago’s reputation as a dangerous and unfair city was a problem, but in the end, the fair did not suffer from it (although, maybe there would have been 50 million visitors if the city seemed safer).

The Cultural Work of the Fair

The Century of Progress Exposition as a place and an event did some heavy cultural lifting for the country during the Great Depression. It can be easy to relegate that work to simply escapism—an accurate but incomplete understanding. Fantasy culture of the Great Depression, in movies and other art forms, as well as the fair, can be seen as a denial of the crisis, but can

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ 8“An 84-Hour Week Among Features of Chicago 'Century of Progress' Fair,” *The Daily Worker*, May 24, 1933, p. 3.

¹³⁴ “World's Fair to Be Drive Concentration,” *The Daily Worker*, June 27, 1933, p. 1.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

more usefully be viewed as a response to it, as an antidote.¹³⁶ After all, the world's fair gave people a break when they visited, but it also had real impacts on Chicago's economy and unmeasurable impacts on faith in American science and industry.

In 2010, the National Building Museum opened an exhibit called *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s*. The museum's executive director, Chase W. Rynd, wrote that as the memories of first-hand visitors to these fairs disappear, expositions are often dismissed as "mere escapism," and he urges the challenging of the "mere"—escapism was not a foolish distraction, but a way of moving through the crisis.¹³⁷ Rynd and his collaborators were focused on the architecture of these world's fairs and specifically their introduction of Modernism. They argue that the architects and designers conceived of their displays as modern and linked them to an image of a better future. Rynd says that "In the midst of the Great Depression, it would have been just as reasonable to escape into the past. Instead, they imagined tomorrow."¹³⁸ This is true, and especially appealing in terms of architecture. However, sometimes people in the Great Depression *did* escape into the past. And like imagining the future, that escape was not a mere fantasy, a simple break, but imagining the past was a vital way of coping, an approach useful for seeing a way through. Focusing on imagined versions of the human, and more specifically the American past helped Depression-era Americans draw on their own resilience and cultural resources. Lincoln struggled as a young man but through his honesty

¹³⁶ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (W.W. Norton, 2010), 362.

¹³⁷ Robert W. Rydell and Laura Schiavo, eds., *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), ix.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

and self-reliance became President and led the country through its biggest challenge. Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable braved the wilderness and created a prosperous home for himself, a story that resonated with Black Chicagoans. Each of the historic stories told at the fair served a purpose for Americans in the Great Depression. By spending time visiting a past world—at the fair or in other media—Americans were encouraged by resourceful and resilient people who they understood to be their cultural ancestors.

Cultural historian Morris Dickstein has said that the 1930s serve as an “incomparable case study for the function of art and media in a time of social crisis.”¹³⁹ Many escapist works of art from the 1930s were stories of other hard times, sometimes ones set in the past, like *Gone With the Wind*, and other times set in fantasy worlds, like *The Wizard of Oz*.¹⁴⁰ This concept, that of art and media of the era being a case study for their own function, can be applied to history as well: the visions of the past, present, and future presented at the fair demonstrate the cultural uses of history in challenging times.

Conclusion

The fair was about the past, present, and future. The past was a foil for the present—to contrast and to serve it, and the present was essentially the future: the depictions of modern living and technology presented a future that was already happening. The past served many purposes: it provided a contrast to the present to make it look better, it provided honorable roots and values that explained a glorious version of the present and provided bright hopes for the

¹³⁹ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (W.W. Norton, 2010), xvii.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

future, and sometimes it provided a contrast for the present that called for a return to simplicity. Most of all, though, the past was deployed to show positive change over time, to emphasize progress. Progress cannot exist without an origin, somewhere to have progressed *from*. This past in service of the present then was an argument for the inevitable nature of progress, something that was very appealing during the crisis of the Great Depression. Envisioning the past in specific ways not only made the present look better, but it provided confidence in progress itself, and in a future that was ever brighter.

The past popped up in several places at the fair. The popular Wings of a Century pageant was an extravaganza that depicted modes of transportation from the last hundred years. This was the “great show” of the world’s fair, a spectacular event with three performances in a three-thousand seat amphitheater every evening.¹⁴¹ Wings of a Century was held on an open-air stage and promoted as a “great, thrilling, and unforgettable show.”¹⁴² The *Official Guide Book of the Fair* described the pageant in an exciting way: “Here we do not see the old covered wagons, the old vehicles and other means of transportation in a museum-like manner but here is the life of America, here is the drama of progress with all the tragedies and all the humor, performed in a unique way.”¹⁴³ The unique way included live music with a dramatic lecture accompanying the actors, horses, vehicles, and train cars. For 40 additional cents, fairgoers could see this show that

¹⁴¹ *Official Guide Book of the World’s Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 144, and Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World’s Fairs in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2000), 83.

¹⁴² *Official Guide Book of the World’s Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 144.

¹⁴³ *Official Guide Book of the World’s Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 144.

displayed a variety of historic vehicles and also displayed an idea about how historical information was to be conveyed—not in a “museum-like manner,” but in motion.



Figure 7. Wagons parading down the Avenue of Flags. This may have been a promotion for the Wings of a Century Pageant. COP_17_0009_00293_010, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Another area of historical interest at the fair was the cabin that stood in tribute to Father Jacques Marquette. Chicago Catholics advocated for a representation of the cabin Father Marquette wintered in on the banks of the Chicago River in 1674-75. Surely this story of a community advocating for its particular vision of the past and pet historical event is just as important as the others examined in the following chapters. The Century of Progress records at the University of Illinois Chicago contain stacks of letters written to Rufus Dawes by Catholic Chicagoans (especially young women) explaining the need for a memorial to Marquette to be

featured at the fair. One writer explained, “In a way Father Marquette represents the Catholic denomination and overlooking him is to fail to recognize the Catholics of the city.”¹⁴⁴

The Century of Progress Exposition remains a topic rich for study. Each exhibit, concession, event, and attraction could warrant further research. The four historical-themed attractions explored in the next chapters each reveal different ways Americans used the past to make sense of the present and to situate themselves in history.

¹⁴⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series IV, Box 2, Folder 4-7.

CHAPTER 2

“ALMOST UNBELIEVABLE TALES OF HARDSHIP AND SUFFERING”:

INTERPRETING FORT DEARBORN AT THE FAIR

Introduction

In early 1932, performers Eddie Cantor and George Jessel visited the Century of Progress fairgrounds, which were still under construction. Both multihyphenates well before Jennifer Lopez became a dancer-singer-actor or Jay-Z became a rapper-producer-entrepreneur, these jokesters sang and danced on Broadway, in vaudeville acts, on the radio, and in movies. Their visit promoted the fair. Jessel made a few comments to an audience about the exposition and “rhapsodized” that “The Exhibition will be the greatest thing Chicago has ever put on! It will be the quintessence of progress!”¹ Cantor, the “Apostle of Pep,” chimed in, “You mean it will be some show!”² The pair visited the replica of Fort Dearborn, and Jessel, apparently playing the straight man this time around, asked, “This is a replica of the original fort that was burned after the massacre. Do you know what a massacre is, Eddie?” This set Cantor up to quip, “Sure, it’s what they did to me in the stock market!”³

¹ “Comedians Jest Surveying Fair,” *Progress* 2, no. 3 (January 20, 1932). *Progress* was the pre-fair promotional publication. Bound versions can be found at the Harold Washington Special Collections at the Chicago Public Library and Chicago History Museum.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Parts of A Century of Progress opened to the public before the fair officially began. As early as 1931, visitors from Chicago and the rest of the world could tour a replica of Fort Dearborn at the fair site. In August of 1931, the fair's promotional offices issued a press release to drum up excitement for events surrounding the 119th anniversary of "Chicago's first major disaster." The description of the celebration was whiplash-inducing:

The hand-hewn log replica of the original Fort Dearborn, which is the first exhibit building of A Century of Progress-Chicago's 1933 World's Fair--is being put into the exact form it had on that fatal August day of 1812 when its sixty-odd occupants marched out into the wilderness to meet death. Presiding at the observance will be Miss Fort Dearborn, who is to be chosen tonight out of a hundred winners in preliminary contests, as best typifying the spirit of Chicago which rose out of the ashes of the massacre. Attending her will be four other prize winners. The five young women will be dressed in the fashions as far as possible like those of the five women who set out from the fort 119 years ago.⁴

The same press release illuminated the importance of the anniversary, explaining: "The Dearborn massacre is an event as sacred to Chicago and the middle West as was the Battle of Bunker Hill to the seaboard. It was one of the tragic episodes in the struggle of the newborn nation against a hostile natural environment, and savage foe."⁵ Cantor and Jessel's Depression-era humor made light of the 1929 stock market crash and used a historic tragedy to set up a modern punchline. The replica Fort at the fair was also a setup for a modern story; a bloody past was used both seriously and lightly to understand and make sense of the difficult present.

Fort Dearborn was the first public building constructed at the fair because fair organizers saw it as fundamental to the Chicago story, considering the Fort to be the first iteration of the

⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 6, Folder 12-67.

⁵ Ibid.

city. Engaging with a vision of the pioneer past was especially compelling during the Great Depression, because people sought reassurance that they were living in advanced (i.e. modern) times, and they took comfort in stories of humble lives and triumphant suffering. The story of Fort Dearborn at the fair is about deliberate and accidental comparisons and juxtapositions between the past and the present. These played out in the space of the replica Fort Dearborn and in the objects housed there.



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Figure 8. Aerial view of Old Fort Dearborn. Note this was taken before other nearby exhibits, like the Du Sable cabin, were built. COP_17_0026_00000_026, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Three categories of nouns are useful for understanding Fort Dearborn: people, places, and things; or, to be more precise, people, location/space, and objects. These categories are useful for understanding both the original Fort Dearborn and the replica at the fair. In particular, they help to reveal the relationship between the two, along with understandings and presentations of the past. It is all too easy to look at the space at the fair and forget that it was deliberately created by twentieth-century people—men who had their own understandings of the past and the present and their own reasons for creating the attraction. These fair organizers created the replica Fort during the Great Depression for the same reason that they created the entire fair: to make money and to boost Chicago’s image. The fact that the leaders chose a replica Fort Dearborn as one of the ways to do this is revealing; they knew that people would come and visit the replica Fort even before the rest of the fair was open, that a story of pioneer hardship and ultimate triumph would play well with their audience. The success of the fair and the Fort Dearborn exhibit shows us that they were right. Rufus C. Dawes and other fair planners were, after all, successful businessmen, political leaders, and Chicago boosters—they knew what they were doing, and they applied this elsewhere in the fair setting.

Background of the Original Fort

The events surrounding Fort Dearborn have often been called “Chicago’s first tragedy.” Indeed, the first star on Chicago’s flag represents the Fort, and when modern Chicagoans say “Fort Dearborn,” the phrase means both the Fort itself and the events that were known as the “Fort Dearborn massacre,” now more commonly called the Battle of Fort Dearborn. While Du Sable, Kinzie, Marquette and Joliet duke it out over “first” settler status, and Native groups

undoubtedly have claim to an earlier “first” status, Fort Dearborn represented a different kind of first: the presence of the United States federal government in what is today called Chicago.

While much has been written about the original Fort Dearborn, only a brief introduction is necessary to understand the meanings of the replica Fort at the Century of Progress Exposition.⁶ The story of the Fort is part of the larger history of the Old Northwest or Great Lakes region. After years of conflict, the land that became Chicago was ceded to the United States government by a confederation of tribes through the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. In 1803, Captain John Whistler was in charge of building a fort where the Chicago River and Lake Michigan meet, and the structure was named after President Thomas Jefferson’s secretary of war, Henry Dearborn. The fort housed soldiers and civilians, and other Americans moved nearby, just outside its boundaries.

During the War of 1812, some Native Americans in the Great Lakes region allied with the British. This led to the Fort’s most famous violent incident. In August of 1812, the Americans evacuated Fort Dearborn with plans of heading to Fort Wayne. The group was attacked by Potawatomi people along with small numbers of Sac, Kickapoo, and Winnebago people, who then burned the fort. In 1816 the United States Army returned to the area to rebuild the fort. This summary description was part of an ongoing war and even longer-ongoing conflict between the American government and indigenous peoples. Historian Ann Durkin Keating’s

⁶ There are many sources that provide more information about the historical Fort Dearborn. The *Encyclopedia of Chicago* is a good place to start, as are Ann Durkin Keating, *Rising up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019) and CPN Public Information Office, “War of 1812 and the Bloody Battle of Fort Dearborn,” Potawatomi.org, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://www.potawatomi.org/blog/2019/08/21/war-of-1812-and-the-bloody-battle-of-fort-dearborn/>.

scholarship provides more context. Keating writes that soon after the event, the word “massacre” was being used and, “The use of the word ‘Massacre’ made great sense, as it assigned the blame for the event squarely at the feet of a savage enemy, neatly ignoring the fact that it was a battle lost by the United States.”⁷ At the 1930s Century of Progress Exposition, the battle was exclusively referred to as a massacre. The attack was on the U.S. Army, which might lead one to consider it a battle, but women and children were evacuating with them and also killed, which could make it a massacre. The rebuilt Fort was an important space during the Black Hawk War in 1832 and was not demolished until the mid-nineteenth century. Because of this rebuilt Fort, sometimes the replica at the Century of Progress was referred to as the “third Fort Dearborn.”⁸

A few historical figures from the early Fort appear frequently in world’s fair materials. Captain John Whistler, who was in charge of building the Fort, was an ancestor of the artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler, whose portrait of his mother was on loan to the Art Institute of Chicago from the Louvre during the Century of Progress Exposition, and it was the only work not owned by an American museum or collector that was put on display at the time.⁹ Captain Nathan Heald took over from Whistler and became the commander of Fort Dearborn in 1810. He was the officer in charge of the evacuation, which he survived, and then surrendered to the British at Fort Detroit. John Kinzie was also connected to the replica Fort. Kinzie was not a

⁷ Ann Durkin Keating, *Rising up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1.

⁸ “The Cradle of Chicago: Building the Third Fort Dearborn,” Robert Sipchen, November 2, 1931. A Century of Progress records, [Box 7, Folder 25] Special Collections, Chicago Public Library, and elsewhere.

⁹ “A Century of Progress: Loan Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture (1933),” The Art Institute of Chicago, accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/5626/a-century-of-progress-loan-exhibition-of-paintings-and-sculpture-1933>.

military man, nor did he live within the Fort, but he was a prominent trader in the region. Kinzie has a lasting reputation as the first white settler in Chicago—a reputation where “white” has been used to designate Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable as a precursor, to exclude Du Sable and simply mean “non-Indian,” and more simply as a shorthand for “civilized.” Ann Durkin Keating has used John Kinzie’s life as a touchstone to “orient the reader through a world that was far more complicated than we might imagine” and calls him a “reluctant American” who “put his life on the line to mitigate the violence” at Fort Dearborn, although he was “not a likeable fellow.”¹⁰

Black Partridge, also known as Mucktypoke, was another significant figure in historical depictions of Old Fort Dearborn. He was a Potawatomi village leader who became an American ally and part of the Potawatomi contingent at the Treaty of Greenville in 1795.¹¹ It is possible that he decided to negotiate with the Americans after witnessing the destruction they brought in the 1790s.¹² At the Battle of Fort Dearborn, he protected the Kinzie family by claiming them as his prisoners, and he also protected at least one other white woman by acting as if he was drowning her. At the world’s fair, Black Partridge was depicted as an honorable and brave man, often in a way that contrasted him with other Native people in the story. Some of the reenactments of the battle at the fair were held by a company called Black Partridge Pageants, Inc.¹³ During the 1933 season, however, the operators of this company decided that not enough

¹⁰ Ann Durkin Keating, *Rising up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), xix–xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 139.

¹³ Century of Progress Scrapbooks [Box 1, Folder 1], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

people were interested in their shows, and successfully petitioned fair organizers to change their name and business to a show called “Havana Rhumba.”¹⁴

The Replica Fort

Fort Dearborn was already part of Chicago’s memory before the fair, and it remained so afterwards. Businesses, locations, and chapters of patriotic groups are named after the fort, and there were Fort Dearborn Day activities years before and after the fair. At A Century of Progress however, the replica fort made a particularly big impact and could be considered a zoomed-in view of ongoing stories about the past.

The Fort Dearborn replica set the stage for the rest of the fair. The fair was clearly about progress, but progress implies that there is somewhere from which to have come. Fort Dearborn offered visitors a stark contrast from the exhibits featuring recent technological advances and, indeed, from the modern city of Chicago itself. The fair was frequently promoted (both before and after its opening) with images of the replica Fort in the foreground and the modern Chicago skyline in the background. One newspaper account referred to the silhouette of the fort in front of the skyscrapers as a “romantic contrast.”¹⁵ In *Progress*, the pre-fair magazine that tracked the exposition’s development, the Fort Dearborn replica was a highlight. In the first 40 issues of *Progress*, 37 articles mentioned Fort Dearborn. Its status as the first building open to visitors was special and provided something specific for writers to promote—even as the Fort promoted the fair as a whole.

¹⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Secretary’s Files, #10, Box 80.

¹⁵ “Thousands Attend Pageant Opening of Fort Dearborn,” *Liberty Bell*, June 11, 1931, p. 6.



Figure 9. Exterior of the Old Fort Dearborn replica. COP_17_0025_00000_046
Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives,
University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

At the opening, the replica Fort was dedicated “to the entertainment and instruction of the people,” which is appropriate given the mixture of historical content and 1930s showmanship present at the exposition.¹⁶ The Miss Fort Dearborn contest was an encapsulation of the mixed experiences of the fair. Numerous “popularity” or beauty contests were hosted at the Century of Progress Exposition, and some of the prizes were considerable, especially given the hardships of the Great Depression. Young women flocked to these contests: more than 200 aspired to be Miss

¹⁶ *Progress* 1, no. 8 (May 20, 1931).

Fort Dearborn.¹⁷ Because the contest happened before the fair was officially open, it is possible that the Miss Fort Dearborn pageant was the first of these held at A Century of Progress. This is clearly a part of the “entertainment” aspect of the Fort: the girls were judged on “refinement, education, poise, personality, as well as beauty of face and figure.”¹⁸ Even though the Fort was not dedicated to “promotion,” the early opening made it a vanguard of the fair, and the Miss Fort Dearborn contest surely helped; there were six judges and three were newspapermen, with a fourth who was a radio publicist.¹⁹ Miss Fort Dearborn did have a tie to the historical content of the concession, albeit tenuous: she was to be the central figure of a pageant held on the anniversary of the battle and was required to be the “reincarnation of the unconquerable spirit of pioneer Chicago.”²⁰ How, precisely, Miss Maria Middleton of Wayne, Illinois, embodied that spirit is unclear in the historical record.

The replica fort was a space visitors could enter as part of their fair visit, and there were various events at the fort and fair-wide to commemorate the battle. Some events and demonstrations were held semi-regularly, as is common in what are today called living history sites. Other events, like opening ceremonies and Fort Dearborn Day commemorations on August 15, happened intermittently. These events demonstrate that the fort was part of the larger

¹⁷ *Progress* 1, no. 21 (August 19, 1931).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Progress* 1, no. 20, (August 12, 1931) and no. 17, (July 22, 1931).

recreational and promotional megaevent that was the fair; for example, in 1933, Fort Dearborn Day coincided with the promotional Farm Women's Day at the exposition.²¹

Many of the attractions at the Century of Progress Exposition were concessions. These were commercial operations that had contracts with A Century of Progress, Inc. and operated for-profit. Sometimes they had a separate admission cost from that of the fair entry itself, making concessions different from exhibits, which were included in fair admission. The Fort Dearborn replica was unique because it was a concession operated by A Century of Progress, Inc. Open for visitors before the fair opened, and by November 1931 it had already raised \$21,102.01 in admission fees, almost breaking even on construction costs.²² Once open, the fort continued to be a popular attraction, even with the additional cost. School groups attended the fort, as did other groups, such as the Daughters of 1812, a service and patriotic organization for women whose ancestors rendered "civil, military, or naval service" to the United States from 1784-1815.²³

It is difficult to tell exactly when and by whom it was decided that the Fort Dearborn replica would exist or that it would open before the rest of the fair. Clearly, the executive powers of A Century of Progress, Inc. were on board with the idea. It is unclear if this was really the "third" Fort Dearborn, because some sources hint that there might have been other replicas, including one at the Columbian Exposition.

²¹ "World's Fair Program," *Chicago Tribune*, August 14, 1933, p. 4.

²² "Reports Income of Six Millions To World's Fair," *Chicago Tribune*, November 14, 1931. Lenox R. Lohr, *Fair Management: The Story of A Century of Progress Exposition: A Guide for Future Fairs* (Chicago: The Cuneo Press, Inc., 1952), 68.

²³ "Home," National Society United States Daughters of 1812, November 11, 2022, <https://usdaughters1812.org/>. "Daughters of 1812 Hold Assembly at Fort Dearborn at the Fair," *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1933, p. 34.

Authenticity was important for the fair organizers and their promotion of the replica. Visiting the Fort was supposed to be a step back in time for fairgoers, and there were expectations of authenticity—something that could be created by the built environment (that is, the Fort itself) and the people and objects within the space. The replica Fort was built based on the plans for the original Fort Dearborn, something that was much touted and emphasized. The buildings may have not been original, but they came from original drawings. Horses were used in the construction of the replica Fort out of expediency for the type of work being done, and this was occasionally touted as an additional source of authenticity.²⁴ The pre-fair promotional magazine *Progress* reported that “the beginning of the actual log work made it clear that there exists no modern equipment for the economical handling of logs. The workers fell back on the same motive power used a century ago—old Dobbin.”²⁵ The *Official Guide Book to the Fair* (1933) promised that the experience of visiting the replica Fort would have guests “carried back 100 years and more,” with “a century spanned in a few short steps, and with little need for imaginative aid.”²⁶ This experience was “Old Fort Dearborn as it actually was, faithfully reproduced in every detail.”

²⁴ Lohr, *Fair Management*, 234 and “The Building of Fort Dearborn,” *World's Fair Weekly* 1, no. 5 (June 3, 1933): p. 28. A bound version of *World's Fair Weekly* can be found at the Harold Washington Special Collections at the Chicago Public Library.

²⁵ “The Building of Fort Dearborn,” *World's Fair Weekly* 1, no. 5 (June 3, 1933): p. 28.

²⁶ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 81.



Figure 10. A man works with a draft horse to construct the Old Fort Dearborn replica. COP_17_0025_00000_033, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Not everyone agreed that the replica was a faithful reproduction, however. At the end of the decade, arguments raged over what should be done with the replica; the park board wanted to raze it, but several patriotic groups wanted the building to remain.²⁷ Naval architect and retired army officer H.A. Musham appeared before the park board and argued that the fort should be razed, citing errors in reproduction including the orientation, the quality of log hewing, and the location of the blockhouses among other grievances.²⁸ Musham said, "If any soldier had built a

²⁷ "Cites Mistakes in Plea to Raze Fort Dearborn." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug 23, 1939.

²⁸ "Cites Mistakes in Plea to Raze Fort Dearborn." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug 23, 1939.

fort like that they would have laughed him out of the service...that thing isn't a link with the past; it's a link only with A Century of Progress, when it was built."²⁹

People

Both the original and replica Fort were spaces of interaction between white and Indigenous people. While there are some historical stories of collaboration and allyship between Native Americans and the white representatives of the American federal government at the original Fort Dearborn, the site is most well-known for the battle between them. Additionally, the existence of the original fort itself was an act of aggressive U.S. encroachment into Indian Country. It is sometimes easy, due to popular depictions of frontier forts, to imagine them merely as trading posts and stopping points for weary travelers, but crucially, they were military bases. Civilians lived in and around the historic Fort Dearborn, but the space was first and foremost an outpost for the United States Army.

The replica fort was not a site of violent conflict, but a place for a biased retelling of past conflicts. The replica Fort Dearborn was a physical form of storytelling and a public history site: the space, objects, events, and promotional materials were all part of an effort to tell a particular story about the past. When thinking about storytelling, it is necessary to consider both the tellers and the content of the story itself.

The people involved in the planning of the replica Fort Dearborn were almost all white men affiliated with A Century of Progress. Unlike many other concessions, this was operated by the organization of A Century of Progress instead of a contracted third party. However, a third-

²⁹ Ibid.

party construction company was hired to build the replica fort. This company, Erskine-Sipchen, was led by Robert Sipchen, who also owned a company called Robert Sipchen Amusements Corp., which operated other concessions at the fair, including the wildly popular Black Forest Village, a German-inspired area with a regular figure skating show. The Black Forest figure skating show even toured the country briefly.³⁰ His involvement at A Century of Progress kicked off a career that kept him busy through the Great Depression—Sipchen Amusements Corp. had a presence at the Dallas Texas Centennial in 1936 and the New York World of Tomorrow in 1939 and 1940. Instead of the German-themed Black Forest Village, in New York he operated a Utah ski-themed area called Sun Valley: A Winter Wonderland. It is likely that considerable building materials from the Black Forest Village were reused; in fact, in 1938 a reporter for the *New York Times* wrote that Sipchen contracted with the fair to create an Alpine village, Swiss-themed and complete with “ski and toboggan slides and a daily snowstorm.”³¹ The same week, *Billboard* reported that the “Sipchen Winter Wonderland” would be a “winter sports show resembling a Swiss village,” with “usual inside concessions besides expensive displays of winter sports.”³² Germany transitioned to Switzerland and Switzerland to Utah. The Winter Wonderland was a much more involved proposition than the Fort Dearborn replica, as Sipchen estimated it would cost about \$600,000 to produce. Sipchen’s business savvy in jumping on world’s fairs concessions as a business might not have spread to all of his dealings, however; in 1938

³⁰ “‘Black Forest’ Ice Revue Slated for Extended Tour,” *The Billboard*, November 6, 1937, p. 31.

³¹ “Daily ‘Snowstorm’ Planned for Fair,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1938, p. 19.

³² “More Concessions Cinched for N.Y. Fair Fun Zone,” *The Billboard*, August 6, 1938, p. 1.

International Musician listed him among those who defaulted on payments to the American Federation of Musicians.³³

Many of the men operating the fair who ended up developing and running the replica Fort Dearborn had military affiliations themselves. At first, this might seem like coincidence; for, they were also business and community leaders. Yet, considering their involvement with the United States military illuminates some of the reasons why the Fort Dearborn exhibit was opened first and highlighted as such a significant part of Illinois and Chicago history. The military men organizing the fair unsurprisingly felt a connection to and sympathy for military history. Rufus C. Dawes, the president of A Century of Progress, was closely tied to the United States military, even though he did not serve himself. His father and namesake was a Union officer in the Civil War, and his brother Charles Dawes was a World War I general, vice president of the United States, and Nobel Peace Prize winner. Rufus C. Dawes was deeply personally tied to the American state, as well: he was a delegate to the Illinois constitutional convention, an economic advisor to his brother, and had helped to draft the “Dawes Plan” of German post-WWI reparations. He even had a World War II Liberty Ship named after him. Lennox Lohr, the fair’s manager, was often referred to by his title “Major Lohr,” from his time in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before and after World War I. Colonel J. Franklin Bell, Chief of the Applied Sciences and Industry Division, exchanged several letters regarding the Fort Dearborn replica and also had a career in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He retired from the Army after 31 years of service and was involved in the New York World of Tomorrow World’s Fair

³³ “Unfair List of the American Federation of Musicians,” *International Musician*, October 1938, p. 28. “Defaulters List of the American Federation of Musicians,” *International Musician*, September 1947, p. 27.

immediately following his involvement in *A Century of Progress*.³⁴ The manager of the Fort Dearborn concession, Captain Morris S. Daniels, was a member of the U.S. Cavalry and sent to South America in 1932, possibly because he was still an active military member.³⁵ Daniels used his military connections to seek advice and cull artifacts for the replica Fort.

The replica Fort had connections to the United States military beyond the overlapping service of the organizers. As mentioned above, the reconstruction was built specifically using the original plans, which were loaned by the United States War Department. This fact reappears multiple times: in the guidebook, press releases, newspaper articles, and Lennox Lohr's book on fair management.³⁶ Lohr explained, "The entire group of buildings was reconstructed from old maps in the office of the War Department and data from the Chicago Historical Society and they were faithful to the smallest detail."³⁷ The connection with the War Department was a source of pride for the organizers, offering both proof of authenticity and a connection to military authority. Two brass cannons that were at the original Fort in 1803 were part of the replica, having been loaned by the United States Military Academy at West Point. Both the Army and the Navy also loaned artifacts for display.³⁸

³⁴ Not to be confused with Major General J. Franklin Bell of Spanish-American War note, who died in 1919.

³⁵ *A Century of Progress* records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 65. Letter January 18, 1932.

³⁶ Lohr, *Fair Management*, 174.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 82.

White masculine authority was not only connected with the military at the site, however, and neither was the space purely a carnival attraction; there was also the authority of the academy in the person of Northwestern University history professor James Alton James. James was a well-respected educator and historian who taught at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, before his lengthy career at Northwestern. James served on A Century of Progress's History Committee, ensured that adequate attention to historical detail was incorporated into the concession, was diligently consulted on the appropriate flag to fly over the replica Fort Dearborn, and gave a lengthy speech at the opening ceremony. James had studied with another historian deeply connected to a Chicago world's fair, Frederick Jackson Turner. James was much beloved by Northwestern and Evanston, as evidenced by the many well-wishes submitted to him upon his retirement.³⁹ His involvement at the replica Fort Dearborn lent a particular seriousness to the enterprise, along with academic authority: his speech was eight pages long and rife with formality. James also wrote a booklet called *The Story of Old Fort Dearborn and its Connection with A Century of Progress International Exposition, Chicago, 1933*. This work addressed both the historical Fort Dearborn and the replica, boasting that "no fear of desperate Indians, no battle with the wilderness, no slow and tedious struggle with ineffective tools and crude materials impeded the progress of this building."⁴⁰

The academic stance on Native American people that James demonstrated was complicated. His historical understanding did not include contingency. As he said, "War between

³⁹ James Alton James (1864-1962) Papers, 11/3/16/4. Northwestern University Archives.

⁴⁰ James Alton James, *The Story of Old Fort Dearborn and Its Connection with a Century of Progress International Exposition, Chicago, 1933* (Chicago, 1933).

the Americans and the Indians was inevitable,” and as for Fort Dearborn, “War! There could be no other outcome!”⁴¹ *The Story of Old Fort Dearborn* was intended to be an informative history text for visitors to the replica, so it included context for the original Fort and the conflicts in 1812. James described Native people as “the Red Men, grim in their purpose to keep their homes—to maintain their tribal independence.”⁴² Descriptions of Native people in James’s works revealed a racial stance that is common in the tropes of the Noble Savage and the Vanishing Indian: that Native people were destined to lose to make way for real civilization, but there was some nobility in their fight.

Native were people involved in the fair’s version of Fort Dearborn as well. As with the white people, it was mostly men. Native involvement was not executive or administrative, but more performative. For example, Native representatives who demonstrated dances at the opening of the replica. Nine Menominee people came from their reservation in Wisconsin with a 70-foot long tree to serve as a flagpole.⁴³ The flagpole was important to the builders of the replica. Contractor Robert Sipchen wrote that it became “a fitting climax to one of the most unique and interesting contracting jobs ever undertaken,” and seeking it out became “a labor of love, an object of pride.”⁴⁴ It is unclear who decided that the flagpole must be 70-feet tall, but Sipchen wrote, “We don’t imagine you have ever observed a stick of wood that size around Chicago, and

⁴¹ James Alton James, *The Story of Old Fort Dearborn and Its Connection with a Century of Progress International Exposition, Chicago, 1933* (Chicago, 1933), 4–5.

⁴² *Ibid*, 5.

⁴³ “Indians Bring Flagpole for World’s Fair Building,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 4, 1930.

⁴⁴ “The Cradle of Chicago: Building the Third Fort Dearborn,” Robert Sipchen, November 2, 1931. Century of Progress Records, [Box 7, Folder 25] Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

none of us had—so we were forced to go outside of the local market to satisfy that requirement.”⁴⁵ The flag that would fly above the replica Fort Dearborn was hotly debated by fair officials in order to have the most accurate image. There were some challenges in figuring out exactly which flag would have flown at Fort Dearborn, and it was settled that the replica would fly the same one that flew at Fort McHenry.⁴⁶ Accuracy and impact for flag and flagpole were more important to replica builders than accuracy of peoples’ involvement, as Menominee people were not involved in the original battle of Fort Dearborn. Sipchen noted this in a comment that exemplified the fair organizers’ views toward Native people. He begins with some understanding of Native cultures and ends with slurs: “While strictly and ethnologically speaking, they were not the right kind of Indians, being Menominees; still they were Indians, and we prevailed upon several bucks, squaws and one Indian boy to escort the pole on its ride to Chicago.”⁴⁷ He also says that their dance lent a touch of “by-gone atmosphere to the scene.”⁴⁸ The record remains unclear as to how the Menominee people involved were compensated for their participation in the fair.

On-site interactions also included performative reconciliation. Red Sun (Pottawatomie) and John Manson participated in a ceremony on the anniversary of the 1812 Battle that involved peace pipe smoking and hatchet burying. *Progress* described the event: “Symbolic of the peace

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 61. Inter-office correspondence May 12, 1931.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

between white and red man was the burying of the tomahawk and smoking a peace pipe between Red Sun, Pottawatomie Indian and descendant of those who took part in the massacre of Fort Dearborn in 1812, and John Manson, direct descendant of the builder and commandant of the original fort.”⁴⁹ The language that Red Sun used during this ceremony is intriguing: “Our fathers were enemies of your fathers. Many of our people were killed in warfare and your fort burned to ashes many moons ago. Now peace has descended upon our people. We are brothers. We unite to pay honor to the victims of the massacre of those of your fort. . . .”⁵⁰ Red Sun used passive language here: our people were killed, your fort burned, and peace descended. This limits blame—there is no “you killed our people,” “we burned your fort,” or peace is a non-human actor here. Worth noting, too, is Red Sun’s use of the term “massacre” himself instead of describing the event as “a battle” that was ultimately a victory for his people. This ceremony on the anniversary of the battle also included a representative from the mayor’s office who designated August 15 as Fort Dearborn Day, George W. Dixon, vice president of the Chicago Historical Society, who gave an address, and participation by other groups including Boy Scouts, Daughters of the American Revolution, Daughters of 1812, members of the Fort Dearborn post of the American Legion, and Native Americans the *Tribune* failed to name.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Progress*, vol. 1, no. 17. August 19, 1931, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “Indian Brings Pipe of Peace to Ft. Dearborn,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1931, p. 3.



Figure 11. A Native American man in traditional clothing and a historical reenactor dressed as a soldier shake hands inside the replica fort. COP_17_0009_00296_010, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

A press release issued from the Century of Progress headquarters described another event where Native people performed reconciliation at the fort—the report was no doubt intended to be humorous: “Bau-na-ga-mik’s Pottawatomie ancestors must have rolled over in their mounds Sunday afternoon (July 15) when that worthy brave raised the Colonial flag over Fort Dearborn at the World’s Fair. On August 15, 1812, the Pottawatomies went to considerable trouble, and found it necessary to massacre thirty or forty whites to tear down a similar flag from the original

Fort Dearborn in Chicago.”⁵² This report not managed to not only minimize the experience of modern Indigenous people’s involvement at the world’s fair, but to also diminish the violence the historic battle.

Throughout the course of the fair other events were perhaps less heavily symbolic than the hatchet burying done by Manson and Red Sun but were also moments of performative reconciliation by simply having a visible Native American presence. For instance, a replica flag was presented by the American Legion and *Progress* reported that “paleface and redskin stood at attention while a bugle sounded.”⁵³ At one memorial event, members of Sioux, Winnebago, and Navajo tribes who were participating in the fair’s Indian Village joined in a parade on Michigan Avenue; it is unclear whether they were compelled by their own opinions or by contract to participate.⁵⁴ The archival record makes it difficult to know the thoughts and feelings of the Native people in attendance, but it is clear that for white people their presence lent both a historical flair and reinforced a vision of a united and supreme American government.

Throughout the four years that the replica Fort Dearborn was open to the public as part of A Century of Progress, fair organizers had multiple discussions about the role of Native people on site. Historic documents show that ideas were proposed, but it can be difficult to discern whether they were actually implemented. For instance, a document with the anticipated payroll for the 1934 season lists “Indian Staff” without clarifying their tasks or whether they were

⁵² Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, July 15, 1934.

⁵³ *Progress*, vol. 1, no. 17. July 22, 1931, 3.

⁵⁴ Century of Progress Scrapbooks [Box 2, Folder 2], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

actually hired.⁵⁵ One idea was to have “an Indian, in Indian costume, be secured to work on trinkets of some kind and sell them.”⁵⁶ This man would serve double duty, also being a guard.⁵⁷

Although the replica Fort Dearborn was for entertainment and instruction, at root it was a moneymaking venture. One Native man, Evergreen Tree, spoke at the opening ceremony, and Captain Morris Daniels later considered hiring him but was concerned about negotiations, describing: “He is a good talker but doesn't seem to know his price. If not too high I thought it should be tried using him on Sundays.”⁵⁸ In another letter, Daniels writes, “If there is any possible way of making money at the Fort through the use of Indians, I do not see why we could not put some Indians on our payroll on a daily or weekly basis.”⁵⁹

American Indians did seek employment at the world's fair, something historian Abigail Markwyn discusses. She examines the hundreds of letters from Native people around the country who wrote seeking work at A Century of Progress, mostly asking for exhibit or performance space.⁶⁰ Markwyn argues that this demonstrates that the fair was a truly national event, that

⁵⁵ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 64.

⁵⁶ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67. Interoffice Correspondence, May 18, 1931.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 67. Interoffice Correspondence, June 3, 1931.

⁵⁹ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 64. Interoffice Correspondence, April 21, 1934.

⁶⁰ Abigail Markwyn, “‘I Would like to Have This Tribe Represented’: Native Performance and Craft at Chicago's 1933 Century of Progress Exposition,” *American Indian Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2020): 329, <https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.44.3.0329>.

Indian communities were integrated into American mass culture, and that there was a national Indian performance circuit in the context of the early 1930s.⁶¹ Native people reached out to seek involvement and, more specifically, employment, at the Fort Dearborn concession.

One Chicago attorney, J. Edward Clancy, even wrote to fair officials asking for employment for his cousins. He wrote that one of his cousins, Agnes Robinson Brothers, was a granddaughter of Indian Chief Alexander Robinson, “who was chief of several Indian tribes in the early days of Chicago.”⁶² Clancy wrote that his cousin and her daughter Marie D. Kleinkoff met with John Manson. Clancy recounts that meeting, explaining that Manson was impressed with them, and they remembered the early days of Fort Dearborn. The attorney clarified that Chief Robinson was friendly to the whites and in fact rendered assistance during the Fort Dearborn massacre. Clancy reached out on their behalf for the same reason that so many others turned to the Century of Progress: it was, after all, the Great Depression, and they were “native Chicagoans...at the present time...in very poor circumstances.” Clancy did not pitch these women as cultural performers but as bloodline descendants of people relevant to the story of Fort Dearborn and as modern women knowledgeable about the past. He specifically mentioned that Miss Kleinkoff, Chief Robinson’s great-granddaughter, was a graduate of Marquette University and former president of the Wisconsin Dental Hygienist’s Association.⁶³ Clancy’s letter was met

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 70. J. Edward Clancy to William Dawes, May 11, 1933.

⁶³ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 70. J. Edward Clancy to William Dawes, May 11, 1933.

with a response stating that only men were wanted at Fort Dearborn, and they were already well-staffed.

Native American men were involved in the Fort Dearborn replica as tour guides. Roi Clearwater and Mose La Mere were both listed in payroll documents as Indians and lecturers.⁶⁴ In 1934, Evergreen Tree was listed in a proposed payroll document.⁶⁵ In the first years of the concession, Evergreen Tree conducted a “juvenile education program, ‘Lone Wolf Tribe,’” and was noted for his animal and bird imitations.⁶⁶ The distinction between tour guide and performer is sometimes blurred, but Native tour guides avoided the trap of being seen as living relics that sometimes befell those who performed traditional cultural practices.

One white visitor to the fair, Anna Walters, a teenager from Portage High School, gushed over her visit to Fort Dearborn and especially her encounter with a Native American tour guide. She wrote a letter to the manager of Fort Dearborn, Captain Daniels, describing how a live and skillful guide enhanced her visit to the site: “He...described each building so vividly that I just imagined myself their (sic), and as he described the war I could imagined myself there with them.”⁶⁷ Here, too, is an important example of storytelling—Walters does not clarify whether the “them” she imagines herself with were the white settlers, the Indians, or both.

⁶⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 75. May 25, 1933, and elsewhere.

⁶⁵ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67. Interoffice Correspondence, May 18, 1931.

⁶⁶ *Progress*, vol. 1. no. 32. November 4, 1931, back page.

⁶⁷ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 70. Anna Walters to Morris Daniels, March 9, 1933.

Walters frankly discussed the positive experience of meeting a Native person, and this example of cross-cultural interaction could have been repeated by many other visitors. She wrote:

Pa da we dum is a very nice guide, and I thought at first when I seen (sic) him that I would be afraid of him, but when we were through all the buildings, I did not like to leave, he seemed to be a very nice friend, and I hope that he will be their (sic) when the World's Fair begins. I never knew that Indians were so nice, but I think the white people have to learn more. I will always remember him as one of my friends. He also was very nice to give us his autograph, which we all are going to keep as a remembrance of him.⁶⁸

Because of the kindness and humanity of the storyteller, Walters left with a positive impression of Native Americans as “friends,” as “nice,” and as people from whom whites could learn, even though she arrived with an impression of Indians as people to fear, having heard a story about violence. Even though the men planning and promoting the Fort Dearborn replica frequently used derogatory words and spoke of violence when describing past interactions between whites and the Potawatomi people, they did not hire Native people to scare or threaten visitors. The Native people who were hired were largely there as set dressing—to add atmosphere and an ‘old time feel’ to promote a picture of a unified and reconciled (although ultimately white triumphant) modern Chicago. Changing white youngsters’ impressions of modern, living Native people was certainly not a top priority for the fair organizers, but it could have been higher up on the list for Native guides like Pa Da We Dum and Evergreen Tree.

One important way that historical stories were connected to the present was through family lineage. Fair organizers thought that having descendants of people involved with events at the first Fort Dearborn helped to make a strong connection to the past. A woman identified as

⁶⁸ Ibid.

“Mrs. Nathan Heald Ottofoy,” granddaughter of Captain Nathan Heald, who commanded Fort Dearborn, represented the Daughters of 1812 and laid a wreath at a site affiliated with the battle in a 1931 commemoration affiliated with the fair.⁶⁹ In 1932, descendants of Nellie Kenzie, the first white child born in Chicago, planted an elm tree in her memory near the Fort Dearborn replica.⁷⁰ The city was proud of Nellie Kinzie, and even had a Nellie Kinzie Club, which was present at the 1932 event and at a 1933 “Nellie Kinzie Day” at the fair.⁷¹ The 1932 event in her honor featured boy and girl scout groups.⁷² Scouting groups were present at many fair ceremonies, but are of particular note here because Kinzie’s daughter, Juliette Gordon Low, was the founder of the Girl Scouts of the USA.

The most prominent figure at the fort who embodied this value of family lineage was Captain John J. Manson, the custodian of Fort Dearborn and a linear descendant of two figures associated with it and early Chicago: Captain John Whistler and John Kinzie (father of the abovementioned Nellie). John Manson was both knowledgeable of local history and a novelty because of his ancestry. Even without his ancestry, he would have known and been capable enough to serve in his position, although it is likely that his ancestry is what led him to become so interested in early Chicago history. Manson, then, embodied in blood and person the eventual triumph of white settlers over the region’s wilderness and previous inhabitants. For fair visitors,

⁶⁹ “Indian Brings Pipe of Peace to Ft. Dearborn,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1931, p. 3.

⁷⁰ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 6. From Press Division, May 31, 1932.

⁷¹ “Nellie Kinzie Day Observed in Fort Dearborn at Fair,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1933, p. 8.

⁷² A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 6. From Press Division, May 31, 1932.

meeting him was like meeting a piece of history. However, unlike Native performers, Manson was seen as a living link to the past, not as a relic. In the *Progress* articles that referenced Fort Dearborn, several specifically mentioned that Manson would be working at the site and that he had a bloodline connection to the original Fort.

Manson and his wife lived at the replica Fort and were deeply involved in its day-to-day operations.⁷³ He gave talks and greeted visitors, participated in ceremonies and special events (such as smoking the peace pipe with Red Sun), and worked on various tasks that kept the concession functioning for guests. Manson was clearly interested in early Chicago history, as well as the genealogy of those involved. In May 1931, Manson wrote to the Chief of the Applied Sciences and Industry Division, J. Franklin Bell, and listed some of the descendants of the Fort Dearborn story. He humbly suggested that there might be a closer relative than him to Captain John Whistler: Leo Whistler of Straud, Oklahoma, who was Captain Whistler's great grandson.⁷⁴ Manson pointed out that he might be a good fit if the fair was looking for a descendant that shared the Whistler name. Leo Whistler was 75 years-old and was an "Indian of the Sac and Fox tribe."⁷⁵ The historic record reveals no response to Manson. Perhaps this is because Leo Whistler's age made fair organizers decide not to reach out to him, or it could be because of his

⁷³ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67. Interoffice Correspondence, May 18, 1931.

⁷⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67. John Manson to J. Franklin Bell, May 5, 1931.

⁷⁵ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67. John Manson to J. Franklin Bell, May 5, 1931.

tribal affiliation, that they were satisfied enough with Manson, or that they had reached out to him and he declined.

At least three groups of people were involved in the Fort Dearborn replica: official employees and leaders of the fair, contractual or contingent employees, and fairgoers. Each of these groups had distinct relationships to the space and made meaning from their experiences. For the official fair leaders, who were military men with successful careers, the Fort was a moneymaking venture that happened to also be a story of people with whom they identified. For contingent employees, like the Native people who were tour guides, the space was also an opportunity to make money while participating in storytelling. Fairgoers, meanwhile, were mostly white but came from many countries. International visitors, especially those who were not white, were held up as evidence that they fair put Chicago on the global stage. A press release from August 1931 boasts about international visitors to this precursor of the fair: “From Timbuctoo and Siam, from Malay and far Japan, and scores of strange places between, a constantly growing stream of pilgrims has been pouring into the rude portals of old Fort Dearborn to pay their respects to the replica of Chicago's first permanent building.”⁷⁶ Museum professionals today understand visitors to seek enriching and educational experiences, but they also hope to enjoy their limited free time. Fairgoers, and especially those who visited Fort Dearborn and other historical exhibits, can be thought of in the same context.

⁷⁶ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67. Press Release August 25, 1931.

Many visitors attended Fort Dearborn without any say in the matter. Archival records include stacks of passes for teachers bringing children on field trips.⁷⁷ Some of these children might have had significant moments of historical awareness and cultural understanding, much like Anna Walters, but others may have absorbed little from the experience. In either case, the meaning they did make from their experience was largely shaped by the storytelling done by the official fair leaders and their perspective on historical events. This is true of children who came to the fort with family members instead of school groups as well, with the added layer of prescription from those adult family members. The *Tribune* ran a series of columns aimed at children where a fictional brother and sister, Robert and Peggy, visited the fair with their Uncle Jack and had a splendid time. One column focused on their imaginary visit to Fort Dearborn, which conveyed meaning to potential child visitors: the writer of the article claimed that Robert and Peggy “spent a great deal of time inside the fort,” listed some artifacts they saw, and said that they were “deeply interested in the account of the Fort Dearborn Massacre,” which was intended to both entice and instruct children in regard to their visit.⁷⁸

Location and Space

The story of Old Fort Dearborn and its twentieth-century replica is a midwestern story, but it is also a story of the United States dispossessing Indigenous people, which means it could have happened almost anywhere on the continent, given the shifting nature of frontier spaces and

⁷⁷ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12.

⁷⁸ “Robert and Peggy in a Century of Progress: Early Days of Chicago,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 18, 1933, p. 77.

territorial boundaries. Even though the story *could* be from anywhere, however, it is not; this story is deeply tied to the Old Northwest and the industrial development of Chicago after the Civil War. Place does matter here. Situating the replica Fort spatially is one way to understand the role it played at the fair. The replica Fort was not built on the foundations of the original, but instead on the fairgrounds at Northerly Island. The original Fort was built at the mouth of the Chicago River—that is, where the Chicago River meets Lake Michigan. This is approximately where the luxury hotel London House sits today, near the Du Sable Bridge on Michigan Avenue.⁷⁹

The original Fort Dearborn sat near these waterways that were so vital to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travels. The replica Fort Dearborn was positioned almost directly on the Lake, which, at A Century of Progress, was primarily considered to be a recreational amenity. The fair featured boat rides and had a bathing beach for people to enjoy the Lake. One visitor to the fair wrote that the Fort Dearborn exhibit could be greatly improved by developing features that more closely resembled the mouth of the River in 1803. Lifetime Chicagoan Otto G. Eilrich visited the fair sixteen times and wrote to Rufus Dawes,

I have a suggestion to submit to you in regard to the Fort Dearborn replica, which in my opinion is a dead and cold affair as it now stands and could be greatly improved upon with little expenditure. I would suggest, if it be in order, that you reproduce as nearly as possible the surroundings of the Fort, placing a miniature Chicago River connecting with Lake Michigan, as the site it occupies is very appropriate for this change.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ If you're thinking, "But Michigan Avenue isn't where the Lake meets the River," you're correct, but this was in 1803, and the land was only filled in later. For more information, see: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/3713.html>

⁸⁰ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department, #12, Box 7, Folders 12-70, Letter March 2, 1934.

The story of Old Fort Dearborn was dependent on this geography; the meeting of the River and the Lake was a strategic location for transportation. The old Fort was part of a larger story of the fur trade and the expansion of the United States, as well as U.S. military history. The marshy land on which the Fort was built bore little resemblance to downtown Chicago today, but so too has downstate Illinois' farmland been altered from the tallgrass prairie.

The replica Fort was a space within a space; that is, part of the world's fair, which was both within and apart from the rest of the city of Chicago. A visitor could retreat from the Great Depression by visiting the fair and then further retreat from the stresses of modern life by visiting the Fort Dearborn replica. Given the intentional messaging that visitor would experience, likely they would emerge from the exhibit more satisfied with the present and leave the fair with a greater faith in modernity.

Place, or geography, is really about the relationship between people and the land. In both the case of the original Fort Dearborn and the 1930s replica, the understanding of "empty land" is important. Describing land with words like "empty," "free," or worst of all, "virgin," needs to be examined critically. Today, in circles critical of settler colonialism, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century white settlers appear to have been idiots. Could they not see the land was already occupied? Of course they could—the people living at Fort Dearborn were very aware of a real Indian presence in the area. The land itself was called "Indian Country," after all. The phrasing of free and empty land both reveals justifications for actions and understandings of who "counted."

Contractor Robert Sipchen was in charge of building the replica Fort. He composed a document about the process of building the replica, in which he detailed various construction

challenges. The most striking part of this document is the parallel Sipchen draws between the original Fort and the replica's construction in terms of occupied land: "Somewhat analogous to the sensation of the Indian upon the invasion of his lands by the white man in that far gone day was the feeling of a group of homeless men who had established themselves on the smooth sands of the fill—in a village of shacks built of stone, driftwood, and boxes."⁸¹ Sipchen does not discuss the circumstances of the Great Depression that likely led these men to form an encampment on Northerly Island, but instead continues his comparison:

One could not help but send his thoughts hurtling back a hundred years, picturing these squatters as Indians of that day, their makeshift habitats akin to the tepees of the savage, and their nude bodies, for we happened upon them on a washday, when their sparse garments were drying on improvised clothes lines, much like the naked aborigines. And when we easily made peace with these strange settlers by extending overtures of cigarette packages, instead of powder and beads, the parallel was complete. In return for the gifts they 'ceded' us the lands on which they were living and moved their makeshift village a few blocks north along the lake front.⁸²

Sipchen was not the only one who made note of the people living in the site of the future world's fair, but he was the one who made a connection to the original Fort Dearborn. At the end of the fair, organizers drafted a history of the exposition, which covered the early days of the fair's development. In one draft, this group living on Northerly Island was highlighted as a "tin can population," whose "quiet expulsion was a tribute to tact and efficiency" of the police.⁸³ The report said that several hundred individuals made up the encampment, and they were naked and

⁸¹ "The Cradle of Chicago: Building the Third Fort Dearborn," Robert Sipchen, November 2, 1931. Century of Progress Records, [Box 7, Folder 25] Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Fair History #15, Box 4, Folder 39.

lived in tin can shacks.⁸⁴ In 1970s, an older Martha McGrew was interviewed by Cathy and Richard Cahan about her memories of working at A Century of Progress. McGrew spoke positively of the experience and with pride in its success, and she also mentioned this population on the lakefront. She said “One of the big problems after the Depression struck was people who had no place to go picked up tin cans and made roofs to put over the rocks on the shore and they were living out there. We had to put them out. It was often heartbreaking, but we had to remember that what we were being paid to do was built a fair, not look after every unfortunate.”⁸⁵

The replica Fort was situated on the fairgrounds on Northerly Island, and that location lent itself particularly well to the dramatic juxtaposition with modern Chicago, which was often remarked upon. The site of the original Fort was occupied by skyscrapers and, even if it had been possible to place the replica on this original site, it would have been impossible to see it from most areas of the city. Northerly Island protrudes into Lake Michigan, giving one the unique experience of looking back onto Chicago’s skyline from the east, something that is usually only possible by boat. Visitors to the replica Fort Dearborn could see the modern city behind it; an anachronism, of course, but striking nonetheless.

Northerly Island was a bit removed from the rest of the city, and when it was first being developed for the fair, the area lacked infrastructure and was essentially a mini wilderness. In fact, there were several transportation problems in the pre-fair days, making difficulties for staff

⁸⁴ Ibid., Box 42.

⁸⁵ Cathy Cahan and Richard Cahan, “The Lost City of the Depression,” *Chicago History*, 1976-77, p. 234.

punctuality. The most dramatic experience that happened because of this lack of infrastructure was a blizzard stranding guards at the Fort Dearborn replica and cutting them off from the rest of the world for four days.⁸⁶

Now a prairie restoration center, the sense of mini wilderness has returned, along with what is perhaps an even more remarkable juxtaposition of a pre-settler Illinois with Chicago in the background. Like the striking contrast with Fort Dearborn, this is manufactured; Northerly Island is man-made. The space may boast native flora, but standing there today is not the same as it was in the days before Old Fort Dearborn. One would have been in the lake.

Material Culture

The University of Illinois Chicago's Archives and Special Collections is home to the official records of A Century of Progress. What is immediately striking when combing through the documents there that are related to the Fort Dearborn replica is how many of them are lists of objects. There are lists of objects borrowed, lists of objects to be borrowed, and lists of objects to be returned. Objects were registered as they arrived—and they arrived in waves. The objects showcased at the Fort Dearborn replica are material culture—one might even say that they are double material culture. As objects from the nineteenth century, they had uses and meanings for their makers and were a physical manifestation of the values and practicalities of the culture that created and used them. In the twentieth century, these same objects were reused, this time imbued with meanings about the nineteenth century that had significance for the twentieth. The

⁸⁶ Lohr, *Fair Management*, 181.

items represented a specific vision of the American past that was presented at the Fort Dearborn replica.

The archival documents make it challenging to discern whether the same objects were covered in multiple lists, or if the replica Fort was practically overflowing with historic objects. One thing that is clear is that the men in charge of developing the Fort Dearborn replica thought that historic material objects were necessary for visitors to have a fulfilling and “authentic” experience. Perhaps the objects were considered particularly important because the building itself was not “real,” even though it was declared “authentic.” Perhaps the objects were seen as being more important because the location was historically inaccurate.

The objects listed in the official records also appear in newspaper accounts of the Fort, along with in official guidebooks and *Progress* magazine. Kathleen McLaughlin, of the *Chicago Tribune*, highlighted the fact that visitors could see reenactors wearing “coonskin caps, buckskin shirts, and leggings.”⁸⁷ This clothing would be expected and lent to the air of authenticity. Philip Kinsley, also of the *Tribune*, also highlighted the coonskin caps and deerskin jackets, along with interiors where “spinning wheels, candles, and beds made of rope gave an authentic setting of the past.”⁸⁸ The organizers clearly believed that these lists of items would entice visitors as much as, or more than, the building itself. The building was a replica, after all, but the objects were *real*—they had actually existed in the past. The objects were part of the promotion of the experience.

⁸⁷ Kathleen McLaughlin, “Fort Dearborn Replica to Be Dedicated Today,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 16, 1931.

⁸⁸ Philip Kinsley, “Towering City Salutes a New Fort Dearborn,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 1931.

The *Official Guide Book* (1934) devoted a large portion of the section featuring Fort Dearborn to describing the many objects visitors might see:

Here are hand-made chairs, hand-hewn benches, spinning wheels, warming pans for the century-old beds and children's trundle beds that were pushed under the big beds in the daytime, open fireplaces, with long handled frying pans, spits and big iron kettles, wooden meat grinder, horn lanterns, and iron candle sticks, maple-wood churn and dough tray, big as a baby's crib. Flint-lock rifles hang on the walls with skins of animals.⁸⁹

A space with such a strong military emphasis displaying a particular affection for the small items of daily domestic life is unusual, perhaps reflecting the setting of the fair as a mostly family-friendly experience. Some of the objects on display were historic objects from the Pottawatomie people, although it is difficult to discern whether they were donated by tribal members or white collectors. One report of the objects' presence demonstrates a promotional showmanship rather than an anthropological or historical interest by saying: "Pottawatomie Indian relics, some of them undoubtedly the very weapons which the warlike tribe used to perpetrate the Fort Dearborn massacre over a hundred years ago, are ironically enough going to be placed on display at the World's Fair replica of Fort Dearborn."⁹⁰

The objects lent to fair organizers provided visitors with an authentic experience. Even though the buildings could not be the real ones from the early-nineteenth century, the objects inside could be. Building something to simply look like the past does not make it actually connected to the past, but having real historic items offered visible and tangible connections. Historians Rachel Maines and James Glynn have written about "numinous objects" in museums

⁸⁹ *Official Guide Book of the World's Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 122.

⁹⁰ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, July 1934.

and historic sites; artifacts with psychological rather than material significance.⁹¹ They borrow this term from Roman paganism and discuss objects as being inhabited by a spirit that calls forth awe and reverence.⁹² Certain objects are valued not for their material or aesthetic qualities, but rather “for their association, real or imagined, with some person, place, or event endowed with special sociocultural magic.”⁹³ The objects at the replica Fort Dearborn were not necessarily connected with the original Fort (or the rebuilt one), but were still associated with it by virtue of their origin in the same era. The officials in charge of the Fort Dearborn replica insisted that they wanted historic objects, but they did not want to make the space a “museum.” This suggests that their expectation of museums was low and included static displays and exhibits—something they wanted to counter with the “step back in time” experience of Fort Dearborn.⁹⁴ These men were shaping public history work into what they thought it should be and blending it with their desires for profit and showmanship.

Some parts of the Fort Dearborn replica, however, were modern. Photos show modern cars parked outside the Fort, the space illuminated by electric lights, and at least one entrance with turnstiles. These concessions to modernity were for the comfort of visitors, much as historic

⁹¹ Rachel P. Maines and James J. Glynn, “Numinous Objects,” *The Public Historian* 15, no. 1 (January 1993): 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378030>.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 66. C.H. Thurman to W. A. Winter, January 18, 1932. And Concessions Department #12, Box 68. John Stephen Sewell to J. Franklin Bell, January 31, 1931.

buildings and museums today have air conditioning and smoke detectors. You can “step back in time,” but you can’t truly step back in time. Who would really want to anyway?

Not all of the historic objects at the replica stayed exactly where organizers intended, which says something about the modernity of the replica space as well. After the exhibition ended, the items that were borrowed for Fort Dearborn were returned, or at least most of them were. Despite diligent recordkeeping, some items were lost in the shuffle of a large but temporary bureaucracy. After the fair, people who loaned items that were eventually lost were given notice, and while some received replacement money, others did not. They instead received notes to the effect: “We wish also to assure you once more of our keen appreciation for your cooperation in connection with the Fort Dearborn exhibit, and express deep regret that part of your exhibit was lost.”⁹⁵ In one particularly frustrating situation, a Miss Vesta R. Simmons from Indiana loaned six pewter spoons to the exhibit, as well as a book. After the fair, she received the book but no spoons. Upon contacting fair officials, she was sent six spoons that were not hers. After contacting them again, she received notice that the spoons were lost and that the possibility of incidents like this was why A Century of Progress, Inc. had suggested she take out insurance, as they assumed no liability for lost artifacts. Apparently, it was thought that she would either be too the amount of money was small enough, or it would be the right thing to do, and Miss Simmons received five dollars.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 70. A Century of Progress to Vesta R. Simmons, April 1, 1935.

⁹⁶ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 70. A Century of Progress to Vesta R. Simmons, April 1, 1935, and Vesta R. Simmons to A Century of Progress, March 21, 1935.

Other items were stolen. Shortly after the replica Fort opened, a skunk skin went missing. The skin was in its proper place in the morning, but by the afternoon: gone.⁹⁷ In 1933, right before the official fair opening, two flintlock pistols were stolen from Fort Dearborn. These were loaned to the exhibition by the Smithsonian Institution, and their theft caused some commotion: the Pinkerton Detective Agency was involved, as was an insurance company. The Smithsonian used the insurance money to purchase two new (old) pistols, and then loaned those to the exhibition.⁹⁸ These stories are not resolved, and we do not end up with motives. Was the skunk skin stolen by a young person as a prank? Were the guns stolen because they were weapons by someone with a violent tendency? Perhaps the items were stolen as souvenirs of the world's fair itself, or out of a misplaced appreciation for the items' historical significance. Situating this within the context of the Great Depression could provide another possibility, at least for the guns. They could have been stolen by someone who was facing financial difficulty and thought historic weapons could change their situation. A month after the pistols went missing, interoffice correspondence called for the payroll termination of two Pinkerton watchmen, and their replacement with an overnight janitor who would also keep the night watch.⁹⁹ It is unclear whether the Pinkertons were only temporarily employed because of the pistol incident, whether

⁹⁷ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67.

⁹⁸ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 64 and 65, and Secretary 10, Box 159.

⁹⁹ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 7, Folder 12-75.

they were let go because of the pistol incident, or whether they were let go because payroll for a janitor was only forty cents an hour.

Another event requires similar contextualization. On November 13, 1931, two cashiers from the Fort Dearborn concession left the Fort at a little after 10:30pm. When they reached the Inner Drive, parallel to the Illinois Central Railroad tracks, they heard whistles and saw “a man shifting his position to a point where the two parties would pass.” The two cashiers sped up but kept their course steady. When they came to the middle of the freight tracks they saw another man running, stooped over, in an attempt to cut them off before they reached the lighted portion of the freight yard. The cashiers’ “highly increased speed ruined the flanking tactics” of the holdup men: when they reached the lit area, they heard a call, “Let them go, they’re in the light.”¹⁰⁰

Another holdup was attempted the same night between 1:25 and 2:00am.¹⁰¹ The man leaving Fort Dearborn had barely started driving when he saw “man No. 2” running towards him with his left hand in his hip pocket. He immediately tried to open the car door when he reached it, and the Fort Dearborn employee tried to hold the door closed but was losing the battle when the watchman arrived. The Fort Dearborn employee honked the car horn, followed the would-be robber after he ran off, and reported it to a policeman who happened to be standing near the 23rd

¹⁰⁰ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Street Bridge. The police officer did not make an arrest but sent the would-be robber west across the bridge away from the fair.¹⁰²

The reports of these incidents leave several questions unanswered, but they are still useful for thinking about the fair space before the official opening. This was a massive event that required large amounts of money up front, and it happened in the middle of a major economic crisis in a city that was suffering. The space makes sense as a target for desperate people. Perhaps, maybe even probably, these two foiled robberies were orchestrated by the same men because they took place on the same night. However, there were easily more than two desperate men in the city that night. Fort Dearborn was a symbol of the rise of Chicago to modernity but was also a symbol of a prosperous version of 1930s Chicago that was inaccessible for many.

Meanings of the Replica Fort Dearborn

There were many meanings that people in the 1930s took from the Fort Dearborn story, indeed, many meanings that they made as they told the story. The story of the incidents that occurred in 1812 was used for a variety of purposes. At a Fort Dearborn memorial event in 1930, before the fair's opening, the Republican Governor of Illinois, Louis Lincoln Emmerson, broadcasted a statement where he said, "It is especially appropriate at this time when there seems to be apparent carelessness in obeying the strict letter of our laws, to pay tribute today to the heroic dead of Fort Dearborn massacre, and pledge ourselves to meet the challenge that is our heritage from them." The link between the residents who evacuated Fort Dearborn and law-abiding in Depression-Era Illinois is weak. This demonstrates the malleability of the story and its

¹⁰² A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 67.

many uses for specific causes. Gov. Emmerson further claimed that the men, women, and children who “died so bravely did not die in vain,” because they left to “Chicago for all time a challenge to respond to the call of civic duty.”¹⁰³

Fair leaders used the space of the replica Fort Dearborn to tell a two-part story: one was the story about the frontier experience for white settlers and military members, the other was about the deadly encounter near the Fort in August of 1812. The story of suffering related to violence is focused mainly on “Indian as savage foe,” and the daily life part is focused more on landscape and objects, especially in comparison to the landscape and material culture of Depression-era Chicago.

The official fair leaders’ story of historical events at old Fort Dearborn was deeply biased in favor of white settlers and the United States military. The violence was deemed a massacre instead of a battle, and although the experience was a defeat for the United States in the ongoing conflicts with Indigenous nations, the story was told as if the mere existence of the Fort was a triumph. The use of the term “triumph” here instead of “victory” is deliberate because there was never any debate as to which side won or lost the battle. However, more than a hundred years after the violence, those telling the story had won the power and privilege of history-making and chose to frame the event as one to be commemorated in a way that bordered on celebration. This is an American tradition that dates at least to the Boston Massacre in 1770: using stories of defeat or suffering to galvanize public opinion and national identity. Although each incident was different, the Boston Massacre, Fort Dearborn, the Alamo, Pearl Harbor, and the terrorist attacks

¹⁰³ “Bugle’s Notes Recall Days of Fort Dearborn,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1930, p. 7.

on September 11, 2001, were all violent incidents—defeats, even-- that, over varying amounts of time, have become commemorated for the bravery of those involved to the point where the suffering itself has become noble or triumphant.

Official fair storytelling relies on assumed shared understandings of American history: that the past was difficult but American civilization was ultimately triumphant, and that there is a shared racial bias against Indigenous people. Materials vary; some assume that visitors will be familiar with the story of the battle of Old Fort Dearborn, and some tell the story as if they would not. This makes sense because the world's fair was certainly a local event, but it also drew visitors from around the globe.

Promotional materials for the replica Fort Dearborn commonly engage in othering Native people. While some fair materials are neutral or positive in discussing Native Americans and the Indian Village, those surrounding Fort Dearborn fall back on a vision of Native people as enemies. For instance, one press release that promotes the concession as a step back in time invites guests to imagine themselves in the early nineteenth century and goes too far by using a racial slur: “Yes, and a short distance away will be the Indian villages where real Redskins will live...let us hope quietly.”¹⁰⁴

Native people were cast as others in several promotions, including one that claimed Indians always took the side of the British, immediately characterizing them as enemies. One notable promotion of the replica Fort Dearborn was a radio production by WHAQ, the *Chicago Daily News* station on October 8, 1932. The broadcast included a conversation with John

¹⁰⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 66, Undated Press Release.

Manson and then a staged scene with an imagined conversation between Captain Heald and John Kinzie. The Kinzie character speaks in an “old time dialect” and is introduced as a “friend to all,” establishing him as credible and relatable to white audiences. The Kinzie character says, “I know the Indians are unfriendly but they have no reason to be,” establishing an imaginary world where United States aggression toward Indigenous people does not exist and the federal government means no harm. The Indians in this story are belligerent towards would-be friends. Black Partridge features prominently in this skit as a “good Indian,” and in fact, the *only* “good Indian.” Kinzie tells Heald, “Black Partridge is the only Indian you can count on, and don’t you forget it.”¹⁰⁵ An actor playing Black Partridge does have a few lines in this promotional sketch, and they are delivered in the broken English of a stereotypical “Indian.” The words put in Black Partridge’s mouth in this sketch portray a man who wanted to avoid war but knew it was inevitable: “Plenty danger. Plenty fighting. White man...dead...Black Partridge Know. Linden birds sing to Black Partridge. Tell him Red Man on war path. I do nothing. I try. No Good. Young men want war.”¹⁰⁶

Newspaper articles that discussed the replica Fort Dearborn were much like fair organizers when it came to how the story of the violence should be told. In the *Tribune*, Philip Kinsley reported that Mr. Dawes and others praised the spirit of the pioneers who “held the early frontier against the Indians and smoothed the pathway for the covered wagon and the coming

¹⁰⁵ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Concessions Department #12, Box 65, Transcript of Radio Show, October 8, 1932.

¹⁰⁶ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Concessions Department, #12, Box 6, Folder 65.

civilization.”¹⁰⁷ Professor James Alton James of Northwestern, whose speech and booklet were discussed earlier, also told the story of Fort Dearborn from a perspective slanted in favor of white settlers and the United States military. He wrote of Native people “vanish[ing] with the approach of modern civilization.”¹⁰⁸

Daily life at the Fort before the violent conflict was also described in terms of triumph and suffering. One *Progress* article linked the artifacts at the Fort and a picture of a grim historical reality: “We look at the hard springless beds in the fort, the crude pots and pans, the laborious candle-molds, the guns ready to snatch because of the constant threat of danger. Would we have the courage or the strength for such a life today, we ask ourselves.”¹⁰⁹ James Alton James’s speech at the opening day ceremonies describes the residents of the old Fort as “men and women of self-reliance and grim determination.”¹¹⁰ The comparison of daily life to the past is a mix of examining how “soft” people have gotten and showing relief that modern conveniences have moved beyond such a bleak existence. This manifested in an admiration for past peoples along with an emphasis on progress and improvements, although more emphasis is put on admiring the hardy pioneer people than berating soft modern people. After all, the main point of the exposition itself was to showcase a bright present and hopeful future. A press release described the history of Fort Dearborn as “extremely interesting” and “filled with almost

¹⁰⁷ Philip Kinsley, “Towering City Salutes a New Fort Dearborn,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 1931.

¹⁰⁸ James, *Old Fort Dearborn*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ “The Building of Fort Dearborn,” *World’s Fair Weekly* 1, no. 5 (June 3, 1933): p. 28.

¹¹⁰ James Alton James (1864-1962) Papers, 11/3/16/4. Northwestern University Archives, and elsewhere.

unbelievable tales of hardships and suffering.”¹¹¹ In a city where Grant Park was filled with men sleeping under newspapers, tales of hardship and suffering were not new. A story of triumphing over them was what compelled visitors.

Constructing the replica Fort took eight weeks, even “with all of the modern, highly organized, highly mechanized society to draw upon.”¹¹² *Progress* reported that the original Fort took eighteen months, and “its first builders had nothing but pioneer grit and ingenuity to draw upon.”¹¹³ This is a fairly typical depiction of the characteristics of people living at the original Fort Dearborn, with “grit” and “ingenuity” used to describe them. “Sturdy” and “hardy” are also used to describe the settlers, emphasizing the challenges they faced in their frontier home. Daily life at the Fort was depicted as challenging and dangerous, with crude or substandard amenities—something that people would have had to be hardy to survive. The past depicted here was not charming or quaint. This type of representation served a dual purpose of making the present look good in comparison and more subtly connecting the challenges of the past to those of the Great Depression—meaning that people in the 1930s could embody this pioneer spirit to make it through difficult times.

Conclusion

A press release promoting the replica Fort Dearborn, and thus promoting the opening of the fair, claims that “No more vivid example of the progress of the American people can be

¹¹¹A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Concessions Department, #12, Box 66, Undated Press Release.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

found than this Fort, once comprising practically the whole, now lost in the vastness of Chicago.”¹¹⁴ Part of the reason that Fort Dearborn was seen as the heart of Chicago’s history was that it provided an excellent foil to the modern Chicago of steel and glass. The radio production described earlier touted the fair as “a marvel of brilliant and baffling contrasts” and claimed, “But in all that magic city, we are sure, there will be no contrast more sharply drawn nor more universally interesting than the log replica of Old Fort Dearborn...”¹¹⁵

The appeal of Old Fort Dearborn’s story was that of a romanticized white pioneer past—one with struggles and undeniable hardship but also ultimate triumph. The struggles were clearly depicted by the so-called massacre, and the eventual triumph was evidenced by the thriving metropolis of modern Chicago, and specifically its architecture. One publication used the comparison to introduce the city’s history: “A crudely-built fort in a pathless wilderness of savage men, expands against the obstacles of nature, disease and fire, into a scintillating city of endless rows of giant skyscrapers, where industry, art, literature, and science thrive among 3,500,00 inhabitants. All this in a century. The city is Chicago.”¹¹⁶

Parallels between the difficulties of pioneers and of those in the Great Depression were not clearly drawn—the present was presented as a time of victory, not of pain and suffering. A *Chicago Tribune* article commenting on the opening day ceremonies said, “It was the opinion of

¹¹⁴ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Concessions Department, #12, Box 66, Undated Press Release.

¹¹⁵ A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Concessions Department #12, Box 65, Transcript of Radio Show, October 8, 1932.

¹¹⁶ *Chicago and Her Two World's Fairs, Depicting a Century of Progress* (Chicago: Geographical Pub. Co, 1933).

the orators of the day... that one would have to look far even in this age of material wonders to find men equal in things of the spirit to the pioneers, who held the early frontier against the Indians and smoothed the pathway for the covered wagon of the coming civilization, the men and women who made Chicago possible.”¹¹⁷ The present was not depicted as a time of deprivation but as a time of material wonders. The ancestor worship here is interesting, too, because modern men and women were not equal to the pioneers, yet they were still heirs to their victory over the wilderness and the victory of civilization over savagery. As late as the 1970s, those who would stand against Fort Dearborn were considered uncivilized, as is revealed in Suzanne Hilton’s book about world’s fairs where she wrote that, after the exposition, “Fort Dearborn remained, but, like the original fort, it was also burned down by savages (vandals this time) during the summer of 1940.”¹¹⁸

Journalist and biographer Ida M. Tarbell visited Chicago in 1932, before the fair officially opened. After, at a lecture at a women’s university club, she expressed optimism for the future and displayed a dismissive attitude towards the Great Depression. She assured her audience that the country was not “going to the dogs even though the stock market has” and pooh-poohed it altogether, saying, “The entire east, with Wall Street included, could be dropped into the Atlantic ocean tomorrow and the country would survive.”¹¹⁹ This was not someone who ignored economics, either—she had written on the subject for almost forty years. Her trip

¹¹⁷ Philip Kinsley, “Towering city Salutes a New Fort Dearborn,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 17, 1931.

¹¹⁸ Suzanne Hilton, *Here Today and Gone Tomorrow: The Story of World's Fairs and Expositions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).

¹¹⁹ “Noted Woman Optimist,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1932.

through the middle west impressed her very much, both the houses “crammed from cellar to garret” with food and the people, from whom she did not hear a note of discouragement.¹²⁰ She reported that she “knew that the people had courage, but it is amazing to discover how much.”¹²¹

The Fort Dearborn replica was part of what helped her to display this attitude:

The most dramatic contrast I ever saw was on the lake front at Chicago. There stands an exact replica of old Fort Dearborn, the wooden stockade from which the garrison went out one day early in the last century in obedience to injudicious orders and were massacred by Indians. And rising high behind this small stockade that once was Chicago are some of the most beautiful city buildings in the world. The contrast is amazing, dramatic. Out of the brutality, the grasping, the greediness, the arrogance, violence and ignorance of the years beauty has come—a real beauty, fitting a country such as this one that is alive, courageous, growing. There is something in us working to express us and it will win over the depression and everything else.¹²²

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

“THE MOST SATISFACTORY HUMAN SAMPLE PRODUCED BY MODERN TIMES”: FAIRGROUND SHRINES TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Introduction

In August of 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas went toe-to-toe at a debate in Ottawa, Illinois as they vied for the same United States senate seat. Lincoln addressed the influence that Douglas exerted by explaining, “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.”¹ Seventy-five years later and almost ninety miles away, Lincoln had public sentiment on his side: he was a popular figure at the Century of Progress Exposition.

Depictions of the past at the world’s fair were imbued with values and anxieties about the present. Each of the Century of Progress exhibits with historic themes revealed different aspects of Depression-era American culture. Examining the ways in which Abraham Lincoln was represented at the fair reveals what he meant to Depression-era Americans, which in turn illuminates the values they sought to sustain them through challenging times. Representations of Abraham Lincoln at the Century of Progress Exposition depicted a leader that was particularly suited to a Depression-era audience. The Great Depression was a financial crisis, but because of

¹ “First Debate: Ottawa, Illinois,” National Parks Service, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate1.htm>.

the interconnections of American government, economics, and values, it became a cultural crisis as well. Americans were worried about their own money, the financial situations of others, and the entire American economic and governmental system. Abraham Lincoln, viewed as the hero of the Civil War, was retrofitted to serve as a hero of the Great Depression. The poverty he experienced as a youth and his integrity during a crisis reassured people experiencing a financial crisis and seeking strong leaders. The Great Depression was arguably the second-most difficult period of American history behind the Civil War, so it makes sense that people living through it would have looked to the Civil War for perspective and context. The ways in which people have interpreted Lincoln often reveal more about their own times than about Lincoln's.

Abraham Lincoln was one of the most significant historical figures to appear at A Century of Progress. While only loosely connected to Chicago, and not directly tied to the city's one-hundredth birthday, Lincoln's presence was an important marker of the past, and representations of him at the world's fair were steeped with various meanings. Several versions of Lincoln found a place at the 1933-34 fair, and they together reflected a perceived shared and heroic past that gave people pride and fortitude during the Great Depression. Lincoln's Chicago ties are not as strong as other places in the state, and the milestones of his own life (1809-1865) do not fit neatly within the century theme (1833-1933), yet he was heavily featured nonetheless.

Two areas were devoted to Lincoln at the Century of Progress Exposition. The Illinois Host Building had Lincoln exhibit rooms, as the state has long held tightly to a vision of Lincoln as a native son. Additionally, an entire area of the fair was known as the Lincoln Exhibit Group, was a collection of reconstructed buildings from different stages in Lincoln's life. The Group

was, in effect, an achronological scrapbook rendered in wood. The Lincoln group was located on the southern part of the fairgrounds, on the midway near Old Fort Dearborn.



Figure 12. Aerial photograph of the Lincoln Group at the fair. Note the sign above the entrance is Lincoln's signature. COP_17_0001_00001_002, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Each Decade Makes the Lincoln they Need

Since his own time, Lincoln has been a symbol as well as a man, and the meanings associated with him have changed with each passing generation. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton's pronouncement at Lincoln's deathbed that he "belongs to the ages," has proved true time and again. Every decade creates the Lincoln they need. One writer described the long-lasting fascination with the sixteenth president by writing, "for a century or more, generations of

Americans were taught to be like Lincoln—forbearing, kind, principled, resolute—but what we’ve really wanted is for Lincoln to be like us.”²

Scholarship on both Lincoln and Lincoln memory abounds. More books about Lincoln exist than any other president. Sociologist Barry Schwartz has explained that Lincoln’s prestige hit a high-water mark in the early 20th century, writing, “The 1930s were at once progressive and tradition-minded, preoccupied with immediate problems and attuned to the past.”³ This combination of looking forward and backwards made Lincoln a perfect fit for the A Century of Progress Exposition. He represented both triumph in the past and values that could be applied to present challenges, which would ostensibly lead to a brighter future. Historian Nina Silber explains that the 1930s “ushered in a moment when Abraham Lincoln acquired an unusual emotional and political resonance that made him broadly appealing and accessible to a wide range of people.”⁴ Silber deftly demonstrates how Americans of various political inclinations, including New Dealers, claimed Lincoln for their own and that Lincoln’s legacy was contested during the Great Depression. Lincoln was pliable—for instance, scholar John Dean has described how in the 1930s Lincoln was portrayed as a supporter of labor unions, while in fact he had a record of opposing them.⁵ In the 1930s and 1940s, Lincoln went from a “predictable staple in

² Andrew Ferguson, *Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe’s America* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xiii.

³ Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 21.

⁴ Nina Silber, “Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture: Abraham Lincoln and the Political Culture of New Deal America,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 3 (2015): 365.

⁵ John Dean, “The Social and Cultural Construction of Abraham Lincoln in U.S. Movies and on U.S. TV,” *American Studies Journal* 53, no. 6 (2009), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18422/53-06>.

Republican Party propaganda” to a hotly contested figure claimed by New Deal Democrats, Black civil rights activists, and left-wing groups.⁶ Importantly for the story about Lincoln at the world’s fair, Silber argues that Lincoln achieved a “cultural resonance” in these years, as stories of his childhood and youth became popular—documents from the fair demonstrate this as they expect a certain amount of Lincoln-literacy from their readers.⁷

The past was present in the 1930s. The Civil War past held an important place in the Depression-era American mind, as evidenced by the overwhelming popularity of Margaret Mitchell’s Pulitzer prize-winning *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and its subsequent film adaptation (early 1940), which was both a box office smash and a critical success, claiming eight Academy Awards. Historian Lawrence Levine asks why, during the Great Depression, were so many Americans attracted to a story about the Civil War?⁸ He argues that popular culture in the Depression often emphasized “traditional values” that one was responsible for one’s own position in life.⁹ In *Gone with the Wind*, a society full of hope and energy was reduced to chaos and destruction, something that resonated with people who moved from the 1920s into the 1930s. Scarlett O’Hara emerged as a tough and resilient figure who survived through it all.¹⁰ Although there was no Abraham Lincoln cameo in the movie, his name is mentioned fourteen times in the

⁶ Nina Silber, “Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture: Abraham Lincoln and the Political Culture of New Deal America,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 3 (2015): 348.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lawrence Levine, “American Culture and the Great Depression,” *Yale Review* 74 (1985): p. 208.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lawrence Levine, “American Culture and the Great Depression,” *Yale Review* 74 (1985): p. 209.

book and a few times in the movie; Ashley Wilkes mused ironically on Lincoln's rail-splitting youth after the war reduced him from his genteel lifestyle to one of manual labor. Rhett Butler sarcastically referred to Lincoln as "the merciful and just," and Scarlett O'Hara claimed she wanted to dance so badly she would dance with Lincoln himself.

Several other films and plays from the 1930s featured Lincoln in various capacities. In 1935 he shook hands with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and shared an apple with Shirley Temple in *The Littlest Rebel*. Many of Shirley Temple's films were historical, and the role of history in American film broadly in the 1930s, as well as Temple's career are their own areas of cultural study of the era. Filmmaker D.W. Griffith, known for his racist, anti-Semitic, and pro-Klan *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), directed a biographical film called *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) that covered Lincoln's life from rail-splitter to assassination. This film was the first full-length bio-pic of the sound era.¹¹ Film scholar Melvyn Stokes writes that many political movies in the 1930s used Lincoln as a "means of uniting and encouraging a people who, because of the Depression, appeared to be losing faith in the American democratic experiment...Lincoln...provided an example of strong executive leadership and had helped preserve the American republic at a time of great upheaval."¹² Lincoln at the fair was very similar to Lincoln in the movies. In fact, at one point a Lincoln at the fair was the same as Lincoln in the movies: Charles Edward Bull, judge, actor, and lecturer, was engaged at the fair's Lincoln-themed spaces after having played the

¹¹ Melvyn Stokes, "Abraham Lincoln and the Movies," *American Nineteenth Century History* 12, no. 2 (2011): p. 212.

¹² *Ibid.*, 214.

sixteenth president in multiple Hollywood movies.¹³ The fair's unofficial mission of restoring faith in the American system was buttressed by Lincoln's presence; both as a political figure and as a contributor to the American economic system with the representation of the Lincoln-Berry store.

From 1936-1938 the Works Progress Administration sent out-of-work writers to several states to interview Americans as part of the Federal Writers' Project. One of the most significant collections to come out of the Federal Writers' Project is known as the Slave Narrative Collection and is comprised of first-person accounts of formerly enslaved Americans. This collection is a rich historical resource, even though it has its own limitations. Although the endeavor to collect these first-person accounts has no direct correlation with the Century of Progress, it is worth noting because of the significance of the Civil War in American culture in the 1930s, and specifically the fact that the war was still within living memory, although the population of people who personally remembered it was shrinking rapidly.

The fact that Lincoln loomed large in 1930s American culture helps to explain why he was featured so prominently at a world's fair where he did not fit the technical theme. While Democrats and Republicans squabbled over who could claim Lincoln later in the Depression, at A Century of Progress he belonged to everyone. The Lincoln of the world's fair was supposed to be a quintessential American—or rather, less an American man himself and more of a corporeal embodiment of American values and ideals.

¹³ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, July 1934.

Lincoln and the Great Depression and Chicago

Lincoln was present in Chicago during the Great Depression even outside of the fair. Before the Chicago Historical Society realigned its mission to focus on telling local city stories, it had extensive Lincoln exhibits. The Chicago Historical Society was founded in the mid-nineteenth century and opened a new museum in Lincoln Park in 1932, designed by the prominent architecture firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst, and White. This firm was the successor to Daniel Burnham and Son, notable for planning the Columbian Exposition in 1893. The Chicago Historical Society promoted the fact that the museum was privately funded. They had never accepted “tax support,” which was surely a point of pride during the Great Depression, as well as a convenient way to remind Chicagoans of the usefulness of membership and donations.¹⁴ The museum featured recreated rooms from Lincoln’s life, as well as one of Lincoln’s distinctive hats and several artifacts. One of the rooms was arranged as a living room space and featured Lincoln’s furniture including chairs whose wear indicated his height.¹⁵ The organization had purchased an extensive Lincoln collection in the 1920s whose prize artifact was the bed on which Lincoln died.¹⁶

The Chicago Historical Society was involved in the fair’s Lincoln displays. Charles Pike, president of the Chicago Historical Society, was to be present with the committee when they

¹⁴ The Chicago Historical Society, Lincoln Park, Chicago, 1934. Box 12, Folder 1b. Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹⁵ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, July 30, 1934.

¹⁶ “Museum History,” Chicago History Museum, December 13, 2016, accessed April 7, 2021, <https://www.chicagohistory.org/about-the-building>.

reviewed the rooms to be dedicated to Lincoln in the Illinois Host Building.¹⁷ Charles Pike was listed in the 1931 *Who's Who in Chicago and Vicinity* first and foremost as a “capitalist,” but he was also the longtime president of the Chicago Historical Society, and oversaw their opening of the Chicago History Museum in Lincoln Park.¹⁸ He was credited with innovation in museums by deciding to arrange the rooms chronologically.¹⁹ The *Tribune* promoted the Chicago Historical Society's Lincoln collection in June of 1933 as well, just after the fair had opened. One article declared that the museum was not just a “storehouse” of local and statewide history, but a “memorial of national significance, a place to tread in reverence.” Another from the same issue extolled the Lincoln collection as “probably the most precious in the United States” and highlighted the “actual bed in which he lay after the bullet struck him, with blood stains on the sheets,” along with the coins that were placed over his eyes post-mortem.²⁰ Although the blood stains were kept covered, their presence was known and promoted as part of the attraction; one could hardly get closer to Lincoln than his blood. The Lincoln collection was just one part of the Chicago Historical Society's new museum. In 1934, the museum issued a promotional leaflet for itself, as well as for the colonial village at A Century of Progress. This leaflet highlighted some of the museum's attractions, representing the four essential eras of American history: Spanish

¹⁷ “Appeal for Lincoln Relics for Exhibit at World's Fair,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 13, 1933.

¹⁸ “Charles Pike Dies, Leader in Chicago,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1941, p. 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Historical Body Presents Story of New World,” and “Chicago Society in New \$1,000,000” *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 1933.

exploration, colonial America, pioneer days, and Lincoln. For many Chicagoans, and indeed many Americans, “history” was almost synonymous with “Lincoln.”²¹

Lincoln and the Great Depression in New Salem

New Salem, a small town in central Illinois where Lincoln lived during the 1830s, was the subject of renewed interest and appreciation during the Great Depression. Lincoln only lived in New Salem for six years, and the town itself was not long-lasting. However, the site looms large in the historic memory of Lincoln. New Salem was his first home away from his family and the site of his transition from youth to manhood. Coincidentally, not long after Lincoln moved away, the community dissolved. While early Lincoln biographers romanticized his time in New Salem, it was not until the 1920s that plans for restoring the town as a historic site began. It would not be until even later that restoration was completed as a Civilian Conservation Corps project.

Lincoln’s years in New Salem bridged the gap from his fabled frontier youth to his days as a Springfield lawyer and politician. At A Century of Progress, this time period featured heavily: the short-lived Lincoln-Berry store and the Rutledge Tavern were prime attractions of the Lincoln Group. New Salem was and continues to be surrounded in Lincoln myth. Popular stories, especially about Lincoln’s courtship of Ann Rutledge, have roots in New Salem legends. While many of the stories surrounding New Salem are considered historically unreliable, they captured the imagination of fairgoers, and fair organizers took little pains to separate myth from fact. New Salem was connected to the Lincoln group of the fair in the person of Susanne Onstott,

²¹ Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Box 12, Folder 1B.

who visited the fair and was honored at a luncheon for her bloodline connection to Lincoln. Her grandfather was a cooper in New Salem who had connections with Lincoln, including putting letting the future president board with him for a time. Onstott had a collection of Lincoln materials that were displayed at the fair.²²

The anthropologist Edward Bruner argues that, “The key theme is that Lincoln spent his formative years at New Salem, was forged there, and that somehow, mysteriously, the village existed for the divine purpose of forming Lincoln.”²³ Architectural historian Barbara Burlison Mooney has pointed out that since the 1860s, “numerous writers have found the village of New Salem, Illinois, a convenient discursive site on which to graft theories of Lincoln’s personality, the American character, and historical simulacra.”²⁴ These analyses are aligned with the way Lincoln’s life was interpreted at the Lincoln Group area of A Century of Progress. The buildings that were featured told a story that culminated in his nomination for the presidency, not the course of his presidency itself. The Rutledge Tavern and Lincoln-Berry store were part of this narrative, while the Springfield years were featured only in the Illinois Host Building. The New Salem years fit just within the century that the fair was marking, but the birthplace and boyhood home were outside of it, and the Springfield years were certainly within the period being commemorated.

²² “New Salem at Chicago Fair,” *The Dispatch*, Moline, Illinois. October 18, 1932, p. 6.

²³ Edward M. Bruner, “Lincoln’s New Salem as a Contested Site,” *Museum Anthropology* 17, no. 3 (1993): 15.

²⁴ Barbara Burlison Mooney, “Lincoln’s New Salem: Or, the Trigonometric Theorem of Vernacular Restoration,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 1, no. 1 (2004): 19.

During the Great Depression, Lincoln was not alone in experiencing increased popularity; historic preservation was as well. The restoration of New Salem is an important part of the twentieth-century story of historic preservation. Other sites, such as Colonial Williamsburg, in Virginia, might have been more ambitious in their plans, but New Salem was decidedly Illinoisian. This site connected Lincoln to state history in a way that was removed from national politics; he was, after all, a local boy.

The Century of Progress Exposition was not Lincoln's first time at a world's fair, nor was it his last. Just as every generation has had its own Lincoln, many fairs had their own Lincoln. A cabin affiliated with the Lincoln family was brought to Chicago for the 1893 Columbian Exposition, although it never made it back to Coles County, Illinois, and its fate remains a mystery (as too, does some of the information surrounding its arrival at the Exposition). The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis featured another "Lincoln Cabin," as well as a Lincoln museum. The Philadelphia Sesquicentennial had Lincoln artifacts in the Illinois State Building in 1926. And in 1964, well after the Century of Progress, New York's second world's fair featured an animatronic Lincoln—simultaneously both robotic and lifelike—created by Walt Disney himself for the Illinois state pavilion. Animatronic Lincolns still exist in Florida and California at Disney theme parks.

The Century of Progress Exposition featured Lincoln more heavily than any other fair, which demonstrates how world's fairs reflect culture. Lincoln was an especially meaningful figure during the Great Depression because of his association with the most difficult time in American history, and in times of crisis people often look to the past for comfort and perspective. During the Great Depression, many people invoked the Civil War because it was more

challenging still than the economic crisis, and yet the nation had survived, thanks in no small part to Lincoln himself. Lincoln was also especially meaningful for Illinoisians.

Lincoln at A Century of Progress: Host Building and Lincoln Group

Lincoln was featured in two significant areas at the Century of Progress Exposition. The Illinois Host building was designed for the “specific purpose of hospitality” and was described as a “little palace, shrine of Illinois’ regimental flags and memorial to Abraham Lincoln.”²⁵ This space included lounges, restrooms, an auditorium, and offices. Significantly, part of the Host Building was dedicated to exhibit space, and specifically “A Lincoln Shrine.”²⁶ The 1933 guidebook to the fair described the exhibit as an “unusual showing” of items related to Lincoln’s life, including a reproduction of the living room in Lincoln’s Springfield home, a replica of the Lincoln statue by Lorado Taft, and “fine relics from private collections,” including those from Governor Horner and the Illinois State Historical Society.²⁷ Three rooms were devoted to an exhibit of “Lincolniana.”²⁸ One account of the Illinois Host Building recounted that “the whole building was vocal with Lincoln” when describing the gold lettering on the walls with phrases from the Gettysburg Address, the second inaugural, and his Springfield farewell.²⁹ The Lincoln-related features of the Illinois Host Building were incredibly popular with fairgoers. Even though

²⁵ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 56. Illinois Office of the Secretary of State, *Illinois Blue Book, 1933-34*, ed. Edward J. Hughes, Secretary of State, 261.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Century of Progress Scrapbooks [Box 1, Folder 1], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

²⁹ Illinois Office of the Secretary of State, *Illinois Blue Book, 1933-34*, ed. Edward J. Hughes, Secretary of State, Paul Demos, 362.

the rooms required visitors to pass through in a single file, more than eight million people came between May and November of 1933.³⁰



Figure 13. The Illinois Host Building Kaufmann and Fabry Co., COP_17_0002_00027_003, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

The Illinois Host Building’s Lincoln sections were operated by a “Lincolniana committee.” The chairman of this committee was Jules Cornelius, a local realtor. Cornelius was involved in many cultural and civic organizations in Chicago, including Rotary, the Uptown Chicago Civic Music Association, and Kiwanis. Cornelius was also the head of the Illinois Academy of Fine Arts and was appointed to the Illinois State Museum board of advisors by Gov.

³⁰ Illinois Office of the Secretary of State, *Illinois Blue Book, 1933-34*, ed. Edward J. Hughes, Secretary of State, Paul Demos, 362.

Emmerson. Beyond general community involvement, it is difficult to tell whether Cornelius had any particular affinity for or expertise in Lincoln beyond what was held by most white Republican Illinoisans in the Great Depression. Unfortunately, it is also unclear how Cornelius came to hold his position as chairman, or what precisely his responsibilities were in that role. Cornelius was involved in another major area of the fair as well: he was in charge of the Indian Village in partnership with University of Chicago anthropologist Fay-Cooper Cole. In recognition of his participation with the village, Cornelius was received into the Winnebago tribe by adoption as a brother.³¹ Another major player in the Lincoln group was Lawrence O. Heyworth, president of the Continental Construction company which built and owned the buildings. Heyworth was known for the development of the South Shore Country Club, now known as the South Shore Cultural Center—a site known for hosting many notable gatherings throughout the years, including Barack and Michelle Obama’s wedding reception. Heyworth was a Lincoln memorabilia collector and considered enough of an expert on the sixteenth president to give a radio lecture on the topic on WGN—part of the promotion of the Lincoln Group.³²

The work of the Lincolniana committee and others who promoted Lincoln at the fair, was supported by the state government. Gov. Henry Horner’s interest in Lincoln was a good example of the ties between Lincoln and the state of Illinois. A biography of Horner explained that “it is not uncommon for seekers of public office in Illinois, and elsewhere for that matter, to cultivate an attachment to Lincoln,” but Horner was a “serious student and collector of Lincoln for thirty

³¹ June Provines, “Front Views and Profiles,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1933, p. 17.

³² “Heyworth Will Talk on Lincoln on W-G-N Today,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 12, 1933, p. 44.

years, predating by far his political career.”³³ A good deal of Horner’s governorship centered on preserving and perpetuating Lincoln’s memory in the state.³⁴ One of the most significant ways Horner granted his support to the fair’s depictions of Lincoln was by lending items from his personal collection to be displayed in the Illinois Host Building. Horner collected more than 6,000 items related to Lincoln, which he kept in the governor’s mansion, so there were plenty of documents to lend.³⁵ Horner’s collection later became the foundation for the Illinois State Historical Library and then the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

Henry Horner’s admiration of Lincoln reveal a certain Depression-era understanding of the former president. For instance, Horner described Lincoln as “about the most satisfactory human sample produced by modern times,” when measured “by the intellect, by the heart, by the soul.”³⁶ Elsewhere, Horner argued, “No man can know Lincoln too well, and no man can know him all without becoming better for that knowledge,” demonstrating an opinion which is in alignment with Horner’s support of Lincoln’s presentation at the fair.³⁷ Horner wanted more people to know about and to experience Lincoln. This uncritical opinion was similar to other Depression-era depictions that venerated Lincoln.

Visitors to the Illinois Host Building heard lectures on Lincoln in addition to viewing the exhibits. The primary lecturer was Andrew Torrence, a Black attorney who became a Republican

³³ Thomas B. Littlewood, *Horner of Illinois* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 7.

³⁴ Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 262.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Littlewood, *Horner of Illinois*, 8.

³⁷ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 262.

State Representative in Illinois in 1939. A reporter for the *Defender* said that “Andrew Torrence is still proving by his lectures that the great emancipator was right.”³⁸

Fair organizers developed an entire area of the fair dedicated to Lincoln, beyond his space in the Illinois Host Building. Not only was Lincoln’s leadership during the Civil War of interest to Americans during the Great Depression, they employed his life before the presidency to demonstrate American values and triumph over adversity. The Lincoln Group consisted of five buildings, each representing “an epoch in the upward struggle” of Lincoln’s life.³⁹ The five buildings were replicas of the cabin of his birth (to demonstrate the lowliest of origins), his boyhood home (considered a “bit luxurious” to someone who had only known “the bitterest poverty”), the Rutledge Tavern (a “tragically tender reminder” of his romance with Ann Rutledge,) the Lincoln-Berry store (where Lincoln “read law, and many of the books that broadened his eager mind,”) and the Wigwam (connecting Chicago to the launch to the White House).⁴⁰ Each of these sites were purported to be faithful reproductions of the original, except for the Wigwam, which was scaled down. The selection of these five buildings to represent Lincoln’s life are significant because they represent certain themes or perceptions of him. The rustic exteriors of these buildings presented a more unified exhibit aesthetic than would have a miniature White House or reproduction of the Lincoln home in Springfield.

³⁸ “Seen and Heard at the Fair,” *Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1933.

³⁹ *Official Guide Book*, 1933, 83.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Unlike the exhibit space in the Illinois Host Building, the Lincoln Group operated as a concession. Admission cost a small fee beyond that of the fair and was run by the Continental Concession Company, which was also in charge of other outfits, such as the Old Mexico restaurant and nightclub, King Solomon's Temple, a bathing beach, a beach house restaurant, and a "Voodoo Freak Animal Mechanical Circus."⁴¹ The buildings in the Lincoln Group were surrounded by a log stockade, and the sign over the entrance read "A. Lincoln" in the script of Lincoln's signature, as if the man himself had signed off on this enterprise. The Lincoln Group was open to visitors before the fair officially opened. Unlike the Illinois Host Building, the Lincoln Group was located on the midway, which was the entertainment center of the fair. Even though the Lincoln group was intended to be educational, it was definitely also about fun.

The Lincoln Group and the Illinois Host Building were the most significant areas of Lincoln's presence, but he did appear in other spaces as well. Claire Lieber Crews, a young girl who attended the fair and kept a diary of her experiences, listed Lincoln as part of a show in the Colonial Village where "5 dead presidents" talked, with Washington, Jefferson, Cleveland, and Roosevelt as the other "very real-like" dummies.⁴² The Daughters of the American Revolution sponsored the recreated Mount Vernon in the Colonial Village with the intention of raising

⁴¹ *Official Guide Book, 1933*; *Official Guide Book of the World's Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934); A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series 10, Box 149, Folder 10-432.

⁴² Claire Lieber Crews Diary, Newberry Library, Chicago [Midwest MS 163, Box 16].

money, not for a Washington statue, but for a Lincoln monument for the state of Illinois.⁴³

Possibly there were other representations of Lincoln beyond these examples as well.

Lincoln's presence in the Illinois Host Building and the Lincoln Group tied him to both the state and the country. If America's claim is obvious, however, Illinois's is more tenacious. The Illinois Host Building was a governmental and educational space, while the Lincoln Group was a commercial recreational space with an educational theme. A pamphlet for the Lincoln Group explained Lincoln's presence at A Century of Progress as "entirely fitting," because "without the Great Emancipator and an undissolved Union," there was a question as to whether the Century of Progress Exposition would exist at all: "Without the splendid administration of President Lincoln would our country have become a world power—or a pair of minor republics?" This uncritical take on Lincoln's administration was reinforced by the explanation that "it is singularly appropriate that this great Exposition celebrating a century of America's progress, should commemorate Abraham Lincoln by reestablishing some of those buildings that figured prominently in his career."⁴⁴

Lincoln impersonators were part of the fairgoer's experience of the Lincoln group. At least two men portrayed Lincoln at the fair, but it is difficult to discern their exact roles or employment contracts. Charles Edward Bull, who portrayed Lincoln in multiple movies, was engaged at the fair to represent Lincoln, as well as Maurice Beem of Hinsdale, Illinois. Beem

⁴³ "The Colonial Village," 1934, Box 17, folder 7, Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁴⁴ "Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group," Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

won a lookalike contest, along with Marion Bidderman, who won the contest as the “most likely” Ann Rutledge.⁴⁵ Bidderman and Beem posed for photographs with visitors to the fair, but it is unclear whether they were compensated and for how long they participated. Maurice Beem impersonated Lincoln in other events before the fair, and likely afterwards.⁴⁶

Model for Five Ways of Looking at Lincoln

Within the fair, Lincoln, a lanky bearded stand-in for American values, took many forms. The ways in which Lincoln can be understood in American culture is flexible, indeed—there was little demand for the historical Lincoln and the symbolic Lincoln to be identical, even though at the fair they were presented without distinction.⁴⁷ Historian Merrill D. Peterson offers five categories describing the ways Lincoln has been remembered: the Savior of the Union, the Great Emancipator, Man of the People, First American, and the Self-Made Man. These images are helpful for thinking about Lincoln at the fair, where five other perspectives were emphasized: a frontier youth, a lover, a statesman, a saint, and as in Peterson’s work, a self-made man.

Each of these identities encapsulates a different value that Lincoln was chosen to represent. American visitors to the fair were familiar with seeing Lincoln in these forms, and developers and promoters expected some amount of historical literacy from the public. Descriptions of various aspects of Lincoln’s life, especially his courtship of Ann Rutledge, were referenced as if they were well-known events. Historian Nina Silber writes about Lincoln’s role

⁴⁵ “Lincoln and Ann Rutledge for Fair,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1933, p. 6.

⁴⁶ “Pose as Lincoln and Douglas at Historic Tavern,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 14, 1932, p. 61.

⁴⁷ John Dean, “The Social and Cultural Construction of Abraham Lincoln in U.S. Movies and on U.S. TV,” *American Studies Journal* 53, no. 6 (2009), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18422/53-06>.

in the Great Depression, and she argues that by the time of the Depression, “Lincoln had emerged as a figure with whom twentieth-century Americans felt a personal connection: they knew the tale of his impoverished origins and the emotional turmoil he experienced, especially at the death of his first love, Ann Rutledge.” Lincoln’s first love’s loss captured the imagination even more than other painful personal events in Lincoln’s life, such as the loss of his two sons.

These perceptions of Lincoln were anticipated by the Lincoln Group exhibit guidebook, which explained his rise: “These years have witnessed the ascent of “Honest Abe,” rail-splitter and circuit-riding lawyer, Congressman and War President from a secluded Kentucky log cabin to an immortal and consecrated place in the annals of the Republic.”⁴⁸ Lincoln began as a baby in a cabin, and for Depression-era Americans, his story ended as an immortal figure—which means it never ended.

A Frontier Youth

Even though Lincoln is associated with the White House and the Lincoln Memorial, and even though he lived in a two-story home in Springfield, the architecture most often associated with the sixteenth president is a log cabin. The organizers of the Columbian Exposition and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition had both chosen to feature cabins as part of their tributes to Lincoln. So did the Century of Progress Exposition and Continental Concession Company. Replicas of both Lincoln’s birthplace cabin in Kentucky and his boyhood home in Indiana were

⁴⁸ “Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group,” Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

featured in the Lincoln Group.⁴⁹ Lincoln's mythical past as a folksy, backwoods rail-splitter has long been revered as a reflection of American values of hard, honest work, self-reliance, and the hope of social mobility. These buildings were described as "closely authentic, structurally and historically" and "exact replicas (with one or two exceptions) of original Lincoln buildings still standing."⁵⁰ Indeed, the log cabins were described as "old ones which have been brought up from the Lincoln country downstate. They all date back to the early part of Lincoln's life and are precisely like those Lincoln lived in during his youth."⁵¹



Figure 14. The replica of Lincoln's boyhood home in Indiana. Kaufmann and Fabry Co., COP_17_0001_00001_003, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

⁴⁹ The cabins were reproductions, not actually affiliated with Lincoln's life. However, the 1934 guidebooks indicate that the birthplace cabin was an actual historic structure moved from southern Illinois.

⁵⁰ "Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group," Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Two different groups, the Abraham Lincoln Fellowship and the Abraham Lincoln Log Cabin Association, lobbied on behalf of having an exhibit representing Lincoln at the fair, and both specifically mentioned that the exhibit should feature a log cabin. The fair organizers also came up with this idea and notified the groups of the plans that were already in the works. The Abraham Lincoln Fellowship was made up of people who had seen, heard, known, or met Lincoln—anyone could join if they fit the qualifications of contact with Lincoln himself, and met a minimum age requirement. As a patriotic group organized around perpetuating Lincoln’s legacy, their purpose was to put forth a “supreme effort to glean and preserve for all time to come every incident obtainable from the personal contact of its membership with one of the greatest men in the history of the world.”⁵² The group had an age minimum of 78 for membership, in addition to having a Lincoln connection. Aware that their numbers would continue to shrink, the group also had auxiliary membership options for people who wanted to keep Lincoln’s memory alive but could not officially join the fellowship of those who had interacted with him directly.⁵³ The Fellowship was small, comprised of only 72 members in 1933, and the oldest member was automatically deemed the honorary president of the organization, and anyone who heard the Gettysburg Address in person was an honorary vice president.⁵⁴ The Abraham Lincoln Fellowship wrote to the fair organizers proposing a replica log

⁵² Letter from The Executive Secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Fellowship to Louis A. Warren, Director of the Lincoln Historical Foundation in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. May 26, 1932. A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series 1, Box 297, Folder 1-9362.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Winnebago County Veteran Becomes a Member of Abraham Lincoln Fellowship,” *The Oshkosh Northwestern*, February 15, 1933, p. 3.

cabin as an exhibit that they were certain would be one of the fair's most popular attractions for patriotic Americans.⁵⁵

The second group that saw the log cabin as an ideal way to honor the sixteenth president was the Lincoln Log Cabin Association. This organization was involved in the transportation of Thomas and Sarah Lincoln's Coles County cabin to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, where it was put on display for visitors. The cabin was never seen after that, and the details of its disappearance are murky. The Thomas and Sarah Lincoln cabin currently on display as part of the Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site is a reproduction built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression.

One of the most significant members of the Lincoln Log Cabin Association was author Nora Gridley, who held various positions in the Association including secretary and literary manager. She was so involved in the organization that when it dissolved all of its collections became her private property.⁵⁶ Gridley traveled to Coles County in 1891 "for the purpose of collecting Lincoln relics and obtaining such authentic and historical facts as might be gathered from relatives, neighbors, and associates of the martyred President."⁵⁷ In addition to being involved with the 1893 world's fair and cabin, Gridley wrote a book about Lincoln's life titled *The Story of Abraham Lincoln: Or the Journey from the Log Cabin to the White House*. In this

⁵⁵ Letter from The Executive Secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Fellowship to Louis A. Warren, Director of the Lincoln Historical Foundation in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. May 26, 1932. A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series 1, Box 297, Folder 1-9362.

⁵⁶ Eleanor Gridley. Letter to Ida Tarbell, January 8, 1935. Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Pelletier Library Allegheny College.

⁵⁷ Eleanor Gridley, *The Story of Abraham Lincoln: Or the Journey from Log Cabin to White House* (1900; repr., Chicago: M.A. Donohue & Co, 1927), "Statement to the Public."

work, Gridley focused on Lincoln's hardscrabble upbringing, with log cabins serving as symbols of hard work and noble poverty.

Gridley wrote to Rufus Dawes in 1932 suggesting that no exhibit would be more "appropriate and desirable" for a world's fair than "the reproduction of buildings and rooms, commemorating the life of Abraham Lincoln," and that such an exhibit would be attractive and popular.⁵⁸ Dawes did not respond, but the Assistant Director of Exhibits C.W. Fitch did, telling Gridley that there was already a Lincoln exhibit underway. He also alluded to the possibility of her serving as an advisor to the Continental Construction Company.⁵⁹

For American fairgoers during the Depression, the log cabins took on additional significance: the mighty Abe Lincoln had been poor. The 1933 guidebook described the Indiana cabin as larger than the one where he had been born and explained that to a "boy who had known only the bitterest poverty," it was "a bit luxurious."⁶⁰ The 1934 guidebook stated that the Lincoln Group highlighted his "early life and struggles;"⁶¹ not only was Lincoln poor, he had been "bitterly" so, to the point where a modest cabin was considered luxurious. Here, not only was the log cabin experience wholesome and homey, but it was also representative of hardship. Lincoln experienced poverty and hardship, but there was no shame in those experiences. A souvenir

⁵⁸ Letter from Norah Gridley to Rufus Dawes, March 15, 1932. A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series 1, Box 297, Folder 1-9362.

⁵⁹ Letter from C.W. Fitch, Assistant Director of Exhibits to Norah Gridley, March 24, 1932. A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series 1, Box 297, Folder 1-9362.

⁶⁰ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 83.

⁶¹ *Official Guide Book of 1934*, 124.

informational pamphlet about the Lincoln Group describes the birthplace cabin as “chiefly remarkable for its size—or lack thereof. Inside there is scarcely room to change your mind.”⁶² Perhaps the folksy and humorous description was intended to be reminiscent of Lincoln himself—good natured in the face of difficulty. The image of Lincoln, the frontier youth, experiencing pecuniary challenges was both a representation of dignity in poverty, as well as hope for an escape from it through hard work and education.

In Caroline Fraser discusses a similar circumstance in her book, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*.⁶³ When Wilder published the first book of *The Little House on the Prairie* series in 1932, she presented Depression-era readers with a story about nineteenth-century poverty that was uplifting. Wilder chose to reinvent her past and actively participate in myth-making, finding that writing about poverty as a noble experience actually helped her to distance herself from it. Lincoln, however, did not choose to have his likeness and early life experience displayed for Depression-era Americans. Instead, fair organizers made this choice. Wealthy men seeking to make a profit sold an idea of virtuous poverty to fairgoers. This could seem an insidious plan but given the fair’s secondary objective of generating confidence in the future, as well as the pervasiveness of the Lincoln cabin image, fair organizers likely truly believed in the image of dignified, rural poverty in the nineteenth century. Stories like Wilder’s

⁶² “Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group,” Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

⁶³ Caroline Fraser and Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Farmington Hills, MI: Large Print Press, a part of Gale, a Cengage Company, 2019).

and Lincoln's were something to cling to after years of rampant consumerism and materialism came crashing to a halt: a recalibration of values.



Figure 15. An unnamed Lincoln impersonator at the Lincoln Group. Kaufmann & Fabry Co., COP_17_0001_00001_001, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Much could be said about representations of Lincoln and masculinity, at the fair and elsewhere. Some depictions of Lincoln focus on his frontier ruggedness and storied wrestling prowess to emphasize his manliness, while others have emphasized his melancholy and close male friendships with an intention of portraying a much more sensitive Lincoln. Others have written on Great Depression's impact on masculinity: men's identities often were impacted when

they lost their livelihoods or breadwinner roles. Suffice it to say that at the fair Lincoln was a man's man without any cartoonish masculinity. Both the challenges of a frontier lifestyles and a sensitivity towards his alleged first love were portrayed.

A Lover

One of Abraham Lincoln's most fascinating world's fair identities was that of a heartbroken young lover. The Rutledge Tavern was a location where fairgoers could eat (with a Lincoln impersonator serving as host), but it was also billed as a faithful reproduction of the spot where a young Lincoln wooed Ann Rutledge and was eventually devastated by her untimely death.⁶⁴

The Rutledge Tavern was a popular restaurant, and in the 1934 season it was taken over by Chicago restaurant and cabaret operator Abe Raynor.⁶⁵ Raynor also operated an Old Mexico-themed restaurant while his wife managed the tavern concession.⁶⁶ Raynor decided to push the theme from rustic midwestern tavern into a southern-style restaurant space. A press release issued by A Century of Progress to promote the change in ownership and theme was heavy-handed on the southern theme—both racially insensitive and oblivious to the ironies of this approach in a space dedicated to the Great Emancipator. Raynor was quoted as speaking in a “practiced southern drawl that might have been practiced in South Chicago,” when he said, “This yeah it’s all gonna be different, Ah Sweah,” and reemphasized that the restaurant would serve

⁶⁴ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 84.

⁶⁵ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, February 28, 1934.

⁶⁶ “Century of Progress Notes,” *The Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1934, p. 6.

“pot kickah and co’n pone, an’ the nearest thing we’ll have to muscle dances is bustle dances. Yeh, man!”⁶⁷ The Century of Progress described the atmosphere of the reinvented tavern as having “all the quaint and quiet cham of a plantation in the Old South,” with “dreamy plantation melodies that have lived and ‘growed’ for years and years below the Mason Dixon,” and visitors would be served by “dainty southern misses in the costumes of another day” who would “‘you-all’ customers with real southern hospitality.”⁶⁸ A floor show would consist of “the delightful naivete of old plantation square dances.”⁶⁹ This shift in theme is a bit baffling—was featuring something southern-themed at the Lincoln site an act of reconciliation? Was it to paint a more accurate picture of Civil War era culture? Was it to emphasize that Lincoln himself had roots that could be considered more southern than northern? Perhaps it could have been an attempt at any of the above, but given the commercial nature of the space, an offhand remark by Raynor answers the question: “the southern states probably sent more visitors here last year than any other section of the country.”⁷⁰

Mentions of Lincoln’s alleged fateful romance with Ann Rutledge abound in materials related to the Lincoln Group and assume historical literacy—the expectation that almost every American would be somewhat familiar with this tragic story. In some materials, the tavern is

⁶⁷ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, February 28, 1934.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, February 28, 1934.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

referred to as the Ann Rutledge tavern.⁷¹ Again, Lincoln at the fair is associated with an ennobling adversity.

The 1933 fair guidebook describes the location and the story of the ill-fated affair in dramatic terms: “a tragically tender reminder of his early romance, the Rutledge tavern, where he wooed and won Ann Rutledge, only to suffer so greatly that he contemplated suicide when she died of pneumonia.⁷²” The story of Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge’s relationship is largely a legend, and the actual facts can be challenging to sort through because no letters or documents from Rutledge are known to exist; her name is never mentioned in Lincoln’s extensive writings.⁷³ William Herndon, Lincoln’s first biographer and erstwhile law partner, first popularized the Ann Rutledge story after Lincoln’s death. By the 1930s, the story was considered less than airtight, but the Century of Progress Exposition presented it as a fact—a romantic and dramatic fact, but a fact nonetheless.

Ann Rutledge is mentioned in promotional materials far more frequently than Mary Todd Lincoln, who is almost entirely absent. The living room of the Lincoln family home in Springfield was featured in the Illinois Host Building, but even that domestic scene was about Lincoln himself, not his family. In the 1934 Guidebook, the “betrothal stone” carved with “Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge were betrothed here July 4, 1833” is mentioned as a featured item in the Lincoln Rooms at the Illinois Host Building, but nothing from his later

⁷¹ “Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group,” Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

⁷² *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 83.

⁷³ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 57.

family life is described.⁷⁴ The tavern concession in the Lincoln group even hosted a look-alike contest that searched for the “most likely” Lincoln and Ann Rutledge, the winners of which posed for photos with visitors during the fair.⁷⁵ Framing Lincoln’s romantic life around a girl he courted who died during their engagement, while leaving out the woman who became his wife, the mother of his children, the First Lady of the United States, and his widow is strange because Mary Todd Lincoln was clearly a more significant figure in Lincoln’s life and American history than Ann Rutledge, but Mary Todd has never been a convenient part of the Lincoln story.

With the story of Lincoln’s personal and private life focused on a tavern girl instead of a Kentucky socialite, Lincoln was further humbled and displayed as a tragic figure. Lincoln’s personal depression or melancholy has long been discussed by scholars and admirers, as well as his sometimes-challenging relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln, who experienced mental and physical health issues, and has been portrayed as tumultuous and difficult for years. Advances in mental health fields might have led to more understanding of Mary Todd Lincoln’s life, but gaps and losses in the historical record make the line between her personality and mental health just as challenging to define today as it was in her lifetime. In 1932, doctor and mental health professional William A. Evans published a book titled *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln: A Study of Her Personality and her Influence on Lincoln*, wherein he discussed Mary Todd Lincoln’s mental health and personality. Evans wrote about the relationship between intellect and personality and

⁷⁴ *Official Guide Book of 1934*, 21.

⁷⁵ “Lincoln and Ann Rutledge for Fair,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 1933.

argued that Mrs. Lincoln had an unfair reputation based on things outside of her own control.⁷⁶ Evans devoted a considerable amount of space arguing that the Ann Rutledge story was a myth generated by Herndon. A 1932 reviewer in the *New York Times* wrote that Evans deemed Mary Todd Lincoln “a pathological case” and that his book was a “plea for justice.”⁷⁷ This review also discussed Evans’s assertions about Herndon and Rutledge. Either Lincoln’s relationship with Ann Rutledge or his wife could have been used by fair organizers to humanize Lincoln, yet Mary Todd was almost completely erased, even with the very recent publication of Evans’s book. Perhaps a lost young love was considered a tragedy more palatable for fairgoers than the more complicated issues of mental health. William Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner, famously cast Mary Todd in a negative light in his work—something that influenced subsequent scholarship for generations. More recent scholars such as John Y. Simon believe that Herndon popularized the Rutledge story specifically to spite Mary Todd Lincoln. Simon argues that Herndon “used Ann Rutledge for an irrelevant and baseless attack on Mary Lincoln which provoked counterattacks by her defenders; he had mingled the evidence with speculation; [and] he had insulted Lincoln’s memory by exaggerating his grief to the point of madness.”⁷⁸ Historian Catherine Clinton explains that Herndon was the “most persistent and damning critic of Mary Lincoln,” and the reverberations of his work are still with us, with us; the personal animosity

⁷⁶ W. A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, a Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln* (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1932), 7.

⁷⁷ “Writes in Defense of Lincoln's Wife,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1932, p. 17.

⁷⁸ John Y. Simon, “Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge,” *Journal of The Abraham Lincoln Association* 11, no. 1 (1990), p. 13-33. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0011.104>.

between Herndon and Mary Todd Lincoln is well-documented and scholarship on the first lady has been deeply impacted by this.⁷⁹ In terms of Ann Rutledge, Herndon was successful in creating a legend, especially considering how prominently the story was featured at the Century of Progress Exposition. Many newspaper reports and official fair publications referenced Ann Rutledge with a tone that implied that it was expected for readers to already be somewhat familiar with Rutledge. One publication promoted the Lincoln group and describes the Rutledge Tavern as the space where he “wooed the girl of his choice,” implying that Mary Todd was not his first choice, or maybe even his choice at all, but she bullied him into marriage.⁸⁰

One other area worth considering in the depiction of Ann Rutledge at the fair is Depression-era beauty standards. As mentioned earlier, there was a contest held for Lincoln and Rutledge lookalikes—not Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln lookalikes. The Century of Progress held a staggering number of beauty, charm, and popularity contests with eye-popping numbers of contestants. Unlike the much-photographed Mr. or Mrs. Lincoln, the historical record holds no images of Ann Rutledge. By having a contest focused on finding a lookalike for someone for whom there were no images, whoever organized this left it open for pretty young women to enter.

For Depression-era Americans, a melancholic, tragic Lincoln had a particular poignancy. He, too, knew loss. By focusing on the loss of a young lover, instead of Lincoln’s two sons, or the personal grief he felt at the loss of American life during the Civil War, Lincoln remains

⁷⁹Catherine Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln: A Life* (New York: Harper, 2010), p. 334-335.

⁸⁰ Century of Progress Scrapbooks [Box 1, Folder 1]. Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

apolitical. The Civil War was shrouded in vagueness in the Lincoln Group, but discussing his loss of Ann Rutledge was neat, romantic, and tragic. This was sorrow without any hint of politics, race, or personal failings. Republicans like A Century of Progress President Rufus Dawes could claim Lincoln as a party member, while New Dealers like Illinois Gov. Henry Horner claimed to be heirs to Lincoln's intellectual legacy. At the fair, though, Lincoln was separated from partisan politics. The portrayal of the Ann Rutledge story is apolitical to maximize the number of fair visitors who could have a meaningful experience.

Ann Rutledge was a popular part of Lincoln consciousness in the 1930s outside of the fair as well. For example, the 1930 film *Abraham Lincoln* features their courtship. Created by the controversial filmmaker D. W. Griffith, *Abraham Lincoln* portrays a delicate and saintly Ann Rutledge helping a rough and unmannered Lincoln with his reading. At the fair, however, Rutledge herself was hardly portrayed at all, except as a prop or plot point in Lincoln's life.

Perhaps some of this Depression-era fascination with Lincoln's love of Ann Rutledge can be traced to a 1928 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. Historian Merrill D. Peterson retells the unusual story of this particular publication in his book, *Lincoln in American Memory*, which describes the Ann Rutledge "legend" as a story started by Herndon himself that became stretched over time.⁸¹ Given his personal animosity towards Mary Todd, this story could have been made up almost entirely out of spite. Peterson explains that the Rutledge affair became a classic tale of lost love and was perceived as a turning point for Lincoln—something that made the story an inviting

⁸¹ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 291.

subject for forgers in the burgeoning world of Lincoln scholarship.⁸² A woman named Wilma Minor owned several letters allegedly between Lincoln and Ann Rutledge, and *Atlantic Monthly* published work the letters and her writing claiming to explore theretofore unseen communications. Initially, both prominent Lincoln biographers Carl Sandburg and Ida Tarbell were drawn to the letters, but Paul Angle, a member of the Abraham Lincoln Association, exposed them as forgeries based on handwriting analysis.⁸³ In a surprising twist, the hoax was not perpetuated by an unscrupulous scholar out for fame, but rather by a medium who claimed that Lincoln's and Rutledge's spirits wanted her to tell the story.⁸⁴ The irony of spiritualism haunting the Lincoln story in the twentieth century is particularly strong given Mary Todd Lincoln's interest in spiritualism and mediums during the 1860s and later in her life. Although the work published in the *Atlantic Monthly* was debunked, it is likely that this story simply pushed Ann Rutledge and her tragic end further into public consciousness.

The picture of Lincoln as a young man suffering from the loss of a lover resonated with Americans in the 1930s. Perhaps it compounded the story of honest and shame-free hardship of his youth. Perhaps the descriptions of Lincoln contemplating suicide after Rutledge's death but choosing to go on living were also inspiring at a time of vastly increased suicide rates. Fairgoers could imagine Lincoln hurting, and they too were hurting because of the many challenges facing

⁸² Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 291.

⁸³ "Our History," The Abraham Lincoln Association, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://abrahamlincolnassociation.org/about-us/our-history/>.

⁸⁴ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 397–98.

their country and families. The idea of Lincoln falling in love and then losing that love certainly humanized someone who often felt larger than life.

A Self-Made Man

Lincoln as a self-made man was a persona that grew naturally out of Lincoln the frontier youth. The buildings in the Lincoln group were described in the official guidebook of the fair as each marking an “epoch in the upward struggle of Abraham Lincoln.”⁸⁵ The concept of “upward struggle” is intriguing because even though Lincoln’s rise to greatness was considered a struggle, Lincoln remains free from any taint of overly unpleasant ambition.

Lincoln made his living in a few different ways, but the Lincoln-Berry store in New Salem was the business venture featured at the fair despite it being a short-lived and unsuccessful operation. Outside of the Illinois Host Building, Lincoln was not associated with Springfield; instead, the buildings were chosen to represent New Salem, Chicago, Kentucky, and Indiana. It is intriguing that the Lincoln Group featured a depiction of a failed grocery store instead of Lincoln’s Springfield law office. Lincoln and William F. Berry took over an existing general store and then moved into the building of another store that was closing down, but Lincoln did not start the store from scratch, nor did he construct the building.⁸⁶ Unlike some of Lincoln’s other professions, however, the store had a physical form that was possible to reproduce for the fair. Additionally, it was significant to have Lincoln featured as a small business owner (and an unsuccessful one at that) during the Great Depression. The Lincoln-Berry store was also where

⁸⁵ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 88.

⁸⁶ Donald, *Lincoln*, 47.

Lincoln read law in his downtime, which prepared him for a more successful later career. The store itself might have been unsuccessful, but that hardship and the downtime provided Lincoln with an opportunity for upward mobility.

The economic crisis of the Great Depression is required for context of the Century of Progress Exposition. Far from being limited to those working in financial institutions, the crisis deeply shaped American culture. However, the Great Depression was not the only significant cultural phenomenon of the 1930s. The Century of Progress Exposition opened during Prohibition, but the 18th amendment was repealed (courtesy of the 21st) on December 5, 1935. The fair's second season thus operated in a post-Prohibition United States. Much like Lincoln's position on religion, his feelings about alcohol have been contested by those who would claim him as their own. While it is safe to say that Lincoln drank rarely and was cautious about the ill effects of alcohol, it would be inaccurate to claim him as a proto-Prohibitionist. Lincoln's almost godlike status in the 1930s was used by some at the fair to legitimize alcohol consumption, while others claimed him for temperance.

In July of 1933, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article discussing a Lincoln relic that would be displayed at the Wigwam in the Lincoln group. This item was not a letter or document, and it was also not a representation of Lincoln the backwoods boy, nor Lincoln the saint; it was a whisky bottle. The description of the article was brief. The bottle was a "white, thick container of diagonally fluted glass."⁸⁷ Something like this could have belonged to anyone and should have been garbage. The *Tribune* reported that it was left in the barn of Coleman Gaines, a neighbor of

⁸⁷ "Century of Progress Notes," *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1933.

the Lincolns, when they moved from Springfield to the White House and had “since been a treasured possession of the Gaines family.”⁸⁸ What would it mean for Americans living at the end of Prohibition to see a whisky bottle that allegedly belonged to Abraham Lincoln?

Associating one of the greatest Americans with alcohol (and hard liquor at that) lends an air of legitimacy and respectability to booze.

Two of the buildings at the Lincoln Group connected Lincoln to alcohol: his store and the Rutledge Tavern. Lincoln and William F. Berry bought a general store in New Salem in the early 1830s. Business was slow enough to give Lincoln time to study law. The country store sold various commodities of little note, but the sale of alcohol was significant. Why would the Century of Progress choose a little unsuccessful store to replicate instead of Lincoln’s law office, especially when the Rutledge Tavern already represented the New Salem years? It could be because it was a frontier-type building that fit the general aesthetic of the fair (although the Wigwam did not), or it could be because the operation itself was a failure—something that could have resonated with Depression-era visitors. However, it also might have been because the store was associated with alcohol. According to tradition, William F. Berry may have been a heavy drinker, and the store’s sale of alcohol was the only branch of the business that showed any profit.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ “Century of Progress Notes,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1933.

⁸⁹ Donald, *Lincoln*, 49.

Illinois state law allowed stores like theirs to sell larger quantities of alcohol without a license, and in 1833 Berry applied for a license to sell liquor by the drink.⁹⁰ Stephen Douglas later described Lincoln as a “flourishing grocery-keeper,” implying the sale of alcohol by the drink.⁹¹ Whether or not Lincoln himself sold alcohol for consumption on the premises is up for debate, but the store was in no way “flourishing.” The fair’s decision to depict the Lincoln-Berry store could have been to connect Lincoln to the Prohibition repeal movement. In the early twentieth century, bars and saloons hung framed reproductions of the Lincoln-Berry store liquor license on their walls.

The Rutledge Tavern was another place where alcohol and Lincoln were associated. First of all, the word “tavern” is much more closely associated with alcohol than either “restaurant” or “inn.” Secondly, the Rutledge Tavern was a fair restaurant site, and it served Atlas Special Brew in 1933.⁹² This was a beer allowed by the City of Chicago even during prohibition, with just 0.5% alcohol content. Atlas advertisements promoted their beer as “real beer,” as opposed to “near-beer,” and reassured customers that all of their reasons for wanting to drink beer were legitimate and could be satisfied by the special brew.⁹³ Repeated descriptions of Lincoln’s romance with Ann Rutledge leave one imagining him spending extensive time at the tavern. This

⁹⁰ Donald, *Lincoln*, 49.

⁹¹ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 247.

⁹² This information comes from a menu that was produced by the operators of Rutledge Tavern. I saw a version of it on eBay in Spring 2021, but it has since been purchased, and I continue to look for another copy. The fair produced so much ephemera that some items do not exist (or are very hard to find) in museum and archival collections and are only available from private collections in the lively World’s Fair memorabilia circles.

⁹³ “Prohibition Beer,” Chicagology, March 16, 2019, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://chicagology.com/breweries/prohibitionbeer/>.

gives us a picture of Lincoln, the everyman, flirting with a barmaid—a far cry from some of his other depictions of nobility. At Rutledge Tavern, we have Lincoln the teller of bawdy stories, Lincoln the unsuccessful businessman relaxing. This is Lincoln as the “man’s man”: fairgoing white men would have been reassured that the great Lincoln was one of them.

Across the fair, in the Hall of Social Sciences Building, the Women’s’ Christian Temperance Union had a booth staffed with representatives from their Department of Scientific Temperance Instruction. The women distributed information about the effects of alcohol on the body, and by extension, on society. While prohibition was still in effect in early 1933, the women still felt the need to educate and persuade people to abstain from alcohol. The temperance movement had claimed Lincoln as one of their own since he gave a speech on the topic in Springfield in 1842. The WCTU had used Lincoln’s image to promote ratification of the 18th amendment. A billboard advertisement featured Lincoln’s face and quoted him stating, “Don’t drink, my boy; great armies of men are killed each year by alcohol.”⁹⁴ Frances Willard, the formidable nineteenth-century leader of the WCTU, wrote to Lincoln biographer Ida Tarbell congratulating her on her work but also pointing out that Lincoln’s temperance record should be highlighted.⁹⁵ For WCTU women and other supporters of prohibition, the Century of Progress Lincoln at Rutledge tavern seemed foreign and inaccurate.

⁹⁴ Artist unknown, photograph by Carolyn P. Lindsay. “Lincoln Quote Billboard,” Albany, NY, circa 1918-20. Booths folder, WCTU Photograph Collection, Frances Willard Memorial Library and WCTU Archives, Evanston IL.

⁹⁵ Frances Willard, letter to Ida Tarbell, January 4, 1896. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection of Lincolniana, Allegheny College.

Lincoln's relationship with alcohol was tied to his depiction as a self-made man. Was Lincoln a "regular guy" who drank and sold alcohol and rose to greatness without any ill effects of drink? Or was Lincoln able to rise to greatness because he avoided the corrupting forces of alcohol? Was Lincoln someone who Depression-era Americans wanted to have a beer with?

Debates about Lincoln and alcohol started far earlier than Prohibition and have lasted past it. However, in this particular historic moment at the fair, associating Lincoln with alcohol was certainly a deliberate choice on the behalf of the concessionaires. The version that associated Lincoln with alcohol was not too far removed from them: he was a self-made man. Lincoln rose from poverty through his hard work and plain, traditional values. For the men presenting this version of Lincoln, those values did not preclude one from enjoying a bit of booze from time to time. Fairgoers could visit the Lincoln Group and see a man who had humble beginnings but rose to greatness; surely that was a hopeful vision for them.

A Statesman

While direct mention of the Civil War was limited, Lincoln's presidency was central to his depictions at the fair. Lincoln was, after all, president, and his role as a statesman and political leader was one of the ways he was portrayed. The Illinois Host Building exhibits emphasized Lincoln as a political leader; the Lincoln exhibits were in the same building as Gov. Horner's private suite, and this was the official building of the state. Lincoln was certainly associated with the government by being represented in a building that had the state seal in mosaic linoleum and was at the end of the Avenue of Flags.⁹⁶ In addition to the replica of

⁹⁶ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 120.

Lincoln's Springfield living room, visitors to the Host Building could view documents and newspaper clippings from Lincoln's life.⁹⁷ There was considerable portraiture, statuary, and photos of statues.

As for the Lincoln Group, the only one of the replica buildings associated with Lincoln's political career was the reproduction of the Wigwam, the Chicago convention center where Lincoln became the Republican Party candidate for the presidency. Built along the Chicago River expressly for the purpose of the Republican convention, the Wigwam had the capacity for about 12,000 people. At the fair, the Wigwam was three-fifths the size of the original, held exhibit space, and was the site of informational lectures.⁹⁸ The exhibits featured Lincoln artifacts and documents, as well as a collection of political cartoons.

Nineteenth-century political gathering spaces were frequently referred to as "wigwams," and other wigwams existed at the Century of Progress Exposition as well. The Indian Village section of the fair featured Native American groups who displayed their culture and various architectural types, including an unspecified woodland tribe who had a wigwam and displays of their agricultural methods.⁹⁹ This display was both anthropologically educational and a handy foil for fair organizers to contrast Indigenous dwellings with "The Modern American Home."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 120.

⁹⁸ "Century of Progress Notes," *Chicago Tribune*, July 31 and June 2, 1933. *Official Guide Book of 1934*, 125.

⁹⁹ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 39.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

The Native American imagery did not stop with architecture: visitors to the Lincoln Group were informed that the erstwhile Whig was called the “Sangamon Chief.”¹⁰¹

No replica of the Capitol (in either Springfield or Washington) and no scaled-down White House were featured, so the Wigwam was the only structure representing Lincoln’s political career. Informational literature from the Lincoln Group depicts Lincoln’s Republican nomination in breathless terms, describing it as an “emotional stampede.”¹⁰² The reproduced Wigwam was the physical representation of Lincoln’s political career—Lincoln as a statesman. Why? The moment captured and displayed was a triumphant one, of Lincoln’s nomination; no messy war, no questions about his leadership, and no cloud upon his memory. The same document calls Lincoln’s nomination a miracle while praising his leadership (that had really yet to be seen at the time of his nomination): “It was a miracle, all of it. Lincoln’s spectacular rise from log cabin to the Presidency; above all his selection as executive just at this critical time in our history when only the wisest counsel and the most unflinching courage could hope to untangle a social and economic snarl unprecedented in the annals of the nation.”¹⁰³ The description of a “snarl” connected to both social and economic life surely rang familiar with Depression-era Americans. Leadership was needed then, just as it was needed in 1860. Nina Silber argues that Americans in the 1930s became accustomed to thinking of Franklin D. Roosevelt as another Lincoln, and in fact, Roosevelt and other New Dealers embraced the

¹⁰¹ “Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group,” Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

analogy.¹⁰⁴ For one thing, Franklin Roosevelt made a Ford Lincoln into the official presidential vehicle.

A Saint

The most prominent publication of the Century of Progress Illinois Host Building was the “See Illinois” pamphlet, which highlighted some of the state’s most significant attractions for fair tourists. The cover of this document did not feature the Illinois Host Building itself, nor the state capitol, nor any natural scenery; it featured Lincoln’s tomb. The caption for this image on the cover of “See Illinois” read: “The Lincoln tomb at Springfield—a national shrine, where lies the mortal remains of Illinois’ Greatest Son.”

In the Century of Progress promotional materials, religious language was consistently used to refer to Lincoln. Depictions of him as a secular saint reflect both a deep respect for the man, as well as his elevation beyond individual great man status and into a category of symbols and meanings. The religious imagery with Lincoln is by no means exclusive to representations of him at the Illinois Host Building and the Lincoln Group. In fact, the inscription on the Lincoln Memorial itself (completed in the early 1920s) refers to the memorial as a “temple.” While “temple” is a nondenominational word, the rest of the inscription is distinctly Christian. It reads, “In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.” The image of Lincoln living in hearts parallels Jesus, who in the book of Ephesians (and elsewhere) is described as making His home in His follower’s

¹⁰⁴ Nina Silber, “Lincoln and Political Culture,” 364, 355.

hearts, and is believed to be the Savior of Mankind.¹⁰⁵ The Lincoln tomb in Springfield, Illinois was reconstructed in the early 1930s, and the site was described in state governmental records as a “place of pilgrimage,” where “all is right,” and “all is meaningful.”¹⁰⁶

Religious connections to Lincoln would not have surprised Depression-era fairgoers, but it does seem to contrast with the heavily science and industry-based theme of progress elsewhere. Yet, saintly depictions of Lincoln abound. The Illinois Host Building had stained-glass windows that depicted state history, and the *Chicago Tribune* described them as “Lincoln windows.”¹⁰⁷ A Century of Progress pamphlet about the Lincoln Group describes Lincoln’s place in American history as both “immortal” and “consecrated.”¹⁰⁸ The Illinois Host Building booklet of Illinois tourist attractions describes Lincoln’s tomb in Springfield as “a national shrine,” where lie the “mortal remains of Illinois’ Greatest Son.”¹⁰⁹ Here, the capitalized “Son” suggests the Son of God, while the term “shrine” naturally implies worship. A leaflet describing Lincoln’s Hoosier youth also plays on the idea of Lincoln the son and Christ the Son—Lincoln’s father’s carpentry work is discussed.¹¹⁰ The parallels can be stretched even further, with

¹⁰⁵ Ephesians 3:17.

¹⁰⁶ Illinois Office of the Secretary of State, *Illinois Blue Book, 1933-34*, ed. Edward J. Hughes, Secretary of State, 564.

¹⁰⁷ “Century of Progress Notes,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1933.

¹⁰⁸ “Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group,” Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

¹⁰⁹ “See Illinois,” A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Series 16, Box 26, Folder 16-346.

¹¹⁰ “Lincoln’s Indiana Boyhood Home,” Century of Progress Records, [Box 5, Folder 7], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

consideration of Lincoln’s childhood cabin as the site of a lowly birth. The official guidebook of the fair describes the Rutledge Tavern in the Lincoln Group as a space “hallowed by the memories” of Lincoln—even though the building was a reproduction.¹¹¹

Lincoln’s “sainthood” matters for several reasons. Lincoln was a secular figure who was venerated in the same terms as religious figures, which demonstrates and reinforces his elevated status among political leaders. For Depression-era fairgoers, seeing a secular saint was unifying. Conveniently, Lincoln the man had no strong affiliation with any single church or Christian denomination, so all could claim him, and in fact Lincoln was also claimed by those who were not Christian. Gov. Henry Horner was Illinois’ first Jewish governor, and he described himself as a “devoted worshipper at this shrine to Illinois’ greatest son” at the dedication of the restored New Salem.¹¹² Historian Merrill Peterson has argued that Lincoln’s lack of ties to any one particular Christian church contributed to his popularity with American Jews and that by his death he had won a “special place in Jewish affections.”¹¹³ Peterson also discusses Lincoln as a Jewish folk hero and sometimes a depiction of a modern Moses.¹¹⁴

The idea of powerful spiritual leadership was appealing to Americans for whom the Depression was overwhelming. Like Moses, Lincoln showed Americans a promised land and a brighter future. Like Jesus, Lincoln was both a man and the savior of a people, and both were killed on Good Friday—a parallel that was difficult to overlook. Lincoln’s humanity, as explored

¹¹¹ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 84.

¹¹² Littlewood, *Horner of Illinois*, 8.

¹¹³ Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 230.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

in sections on his youth, was significant because it grounded him in empathy and relatability while making his eventual godlike status all the more impressive.

Lincoln's murder undoubtedly compounded the similarities drawn out between him and Jesus. Lincoln paid for the unification of the country with his life (and naturally, the lives of thousands of others), and it is easy to see how his death was symbolically sacrificial. Lincoln as martyr directly feeds into Lincoln as saint. Unlike actual saints and martyrs, however, it is a little more challenging to pin down the cause for which Lincoln was killed. For some, of course, it was attributed to the end of slavery; for others, it was the unification of the states. In this context, however, Lincoln was portrayed as dying "for the country"—a vague description, open to interpretation, and devoid of controversy. This portrayal is necessary for his many meanings in the 1930s, for Lincoln had led the country out of crisis at the cost of his own life. As mentioned above, the urge to compare Franklin Roosevelt to Lincoln relates to this picture of Christlike leadership—heroic, noble, and sacrificial. Americans saw both Roosevelt and Lincoln as straightforward leaders who "tackled problems without dispensing platitudes."¹¹⁵

In this case, referencing the past was intended to be comforting. The examples of Jesus and Lincoln provide reassurance that the country can be led out of its present crisis. Lincoln's place in history was secured by his untimely death; as the famous Edwin Stanton quote goes, "He belongs to the ages." Each age has done with his image what they needed to do, and in the 1930s we see Lincoln portrayed as a unifying figure, a sacrificial leader whose personal values were rooted in a humble, human upbringing, yet whose experiences transcended that of a typical

¹¹⁵ Silber, "Lincoln and Political Culture," 349.

Midwestern farm boy. The 1933 fair guidebook praises the Lincoln exhibit group by explaining: “The story of his life and memorable actions is told in a splendid series of exhibits as an act of reverent homage.”¹¹⁶ These fair spaces were for education and entertainment, but also a bit of worship.

Lincoln’s Purposes at the Fair

For all of the things that Lincoln was in his stint at the Century of Progress Exposition, there were several things he was not. First and foremost, Lincoln was not divisive. At the world’s fair he was neither a Republican or Democrat. Historian Nina Silber has expertly explored the “fiercely contested space” that Lincoln occupied in the 1930s, arguing that he was not “a simple mirror of cultural and political trends.” Instead of being a “bland figure of reconciliation,” she suggests that he was a figure both the left and the right wanted to claim as their own.¹¹⁷ However, the Century of Progress Exposition was both part of larger Depression experiences and separate from them. In fact, in the specific case of the fair Lincoln was indeed a mirror of cultural trends instead of occupying the contested space that Silber discusses. This is in part because the fair was a major commercial operation, and fair organizers sought to bring the widest possible audience and wanted visitors to have a positive, reassuring experience—not an intellectually complicated one.

Several visions of Lincoln were presented, but overall, the Lincoln at the fair was not used to display specific partisan values. Lincoln was depicted in ways that were appealing to

¹¹⁶ *Official Guide Book, 1933*, 83.

¹¹⁷ Silber, “Lincoln and Political Culture,” 348.

Americans who were struggling because of the Great Depression, no matter their political opinions or their ideas about how to turn the economy around. At A Century of Progress, Lincoln was hardly even the Great Emancipator. A few promotional materials that refer to him by that title, but most avoid discussing slavery and hardly mention the Civil War. One document that described the Illinois Host Building spaces broached the topic of slavery, but only briefly: “The slave question, which was a dominant factor in bringing on the Civil War, is presented to the visitor by original bills for sale of negro slaves, by reward notices printed by plantation owners to apprehend runaways and other papers common to the traffic.”¹¹⁸ While minimal credit is due for the acknowledgement that slavery was “a dominant factor” in the Civil War, this exhibit’s documents were entirely from slaveholder’s perspectives—no Fredrick Douglass portraits or documents, no narratives of formerly enslaved people are mentioned here, and it is likely that there were few interpretive materials to accompany the documents.

In the 1930s the Civil War was quickly slipping past living memory. Few commemorative events tied the war to the Great Depression in Chicago: in February of 1933, before the fair was fully opened, 30 Grand Army of The Republic Veterans were saluted as part of a Lincoln birthday commemoration. Dr. Charles W. Gilkey, dean of the University of Chicago chapel gave a speech where he argued that the troubled times of the Great Depression made it easier for people to understand Lincoln, easier to “understand that sort of national situation

¹¹⁸ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, July 1934.

which confronted Lincoln, and out of which he emerged, some time later, as a hero.”¹¹⁹ A Confederate general, James Luckie Driver, visited the Century of Progress and brought “fraternal greetings” from Confederate veterans to members of the Grand Army of the Republic.¹²⁰ He participated in a Memorial Day parade and said that “Georgia’s confederate veterans, like the rest of the boys in gray, while they do revere their old flag sentimentally, are second to none in loyalty to our stars and stripes.”¹²¹ Driver was also quoted as saying that the Century of Progress was the “biggest thing since the civil war.”¹²²

Lincoln’s ties to Illinois in the Host Building and elsewhere are significant. He was certainly an Illinoisan and a Midwesterner, and the Midwest was emblematic of certain values of the country as a whole. As much as the fair was Chicago-centered, Lincoln was not a Chicagoan and was never portrayed as one, even in spaces like the Wigwam. Finally, Lincoln was not the tyrant that John Wilkes Booth and others claimed him to be. This was not a space for radicalism, nor was it a space for critical discourse; this was a place for veneration and celebration.

At the fair, Lincoln was who Great Depression Americans (especially white ones) needed him to be. He was an emblem of the past with a promise of the future. The spaces devoted to Lincoln at the Century of Progress Exposition are connected to American exceptionalism. The legend of Lincoln proved to Depression-era Americans that there *was* still something good about

¹¹⁹ Kathleen McLaughlin, “Lincoln’s ‘Boys’ Pay Tribute to Departed Chief,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 14, 1933, p. 8.

¹²⁰ “Leader of Dixie Vets Flies Here to Greet G.A.R.,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 29, 1933, p. 7.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

America. Lincoln embodied the values of hard work, honesty, leadership, and sacrifice that Americans needed to be reminded existed and wanted to believe made their country worth saving. If there was something about America worth saving during the Civil War, certainly there was still something worth saving during the Great Depression.

Conclusion

In a world's fair focused on scientific and technological innovation, it almost seems incongruous that a president from the previous century was a major character. However, Lincoln was at the Century of Progress Exposition because the Exposition was in Illinois. Prominent collectors like Gov. Henry Horner and the involvement of organizations like the State Museum, the Illinois Historical Society, and the Abraham Lincoln Society attest to this, but so too do the millions of visitors who filed through the Illinois Host Building. The Lincoln Group exhibition pamphlet admitted that Chicago could not claim him as a native son but reiterated that "Illinois was his home state, and then Chicago was, after all, sort of an Austerlitz where political victory in the form of the Republican nomination was conferred upon him in 1860." The same document also insists on Chicago's relevance to Lincoln's life by explaining that Chicago was the home and burial place of Lincoln's "doughty antagonist," Stephen A. Douglas.¹²³ The 1933-34 Illinois Blue Book says that Illinois "far more than his native state" gave Lincoln to the nation.¹²⁴

¹²³ "Abraham Lincoln Exhibit Group," Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Lincoln Collection L2 A1581.

¹²⁴ Illinois Office of the Secretary of State, *Illinois Blue Book, 1933-34*, ed. Edward J. Hughes, Secretary of State, 564.

A press release produced by the Century of Progress and focused on the Illinois Host

Building claimed that:

To the visitor who sees this collection, Lincoln becomes more than a dim figure of history. He is seen as a statesman whose great labors welded together differing elements of a great nation. But even beyond this, he becomes the simple, kindly man whose love of his people ascended far above mere triumphs of state and made him one of the world's immortals.¹²⁵

Lincoln was at the Exposition because it focused on the last century, and it would have been inconceivable to consider the last century without Lincoln. The values that Depression-era Americans chose to have Lincoln represent were the values they needed to sustain them: hard work, humbleness, dignified suffering, and the importance of strong and honest leaders. The elusive concept of progress requires two things: something to have come from, and something to be headed towards. Lincoln, as a stand-in for American values, gave Depression-era Americans both.

¹²⁵ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, July 30, 1934.

CHAPTER 4

“INTRENCHED LIKE A CHANGELESS ROCK IN THE STORY OF CHICAGO”:

BLACK CHICAGOANS AND JEAN BAPTISTE POINTE DU SABLE

Introduction

The Century of Progress Exposition deliberately showcased American culture, but it also did so inadvertently. Examining the exhibits and spaces at the fair, as well as the individuals and groups who organized, promoted, and visited them, reveals a picture of the United States in the 1930s. One area where this is particularly relevant is race. The history of world’s fairs is inextricably connected to the history of racism and imperialism, but what is different about the Century of Progress Exposition are the successes Black women had in fighting racism at the fair. While racial discrimination was present at A Century of Progress—something both Black fairgoers and would-be fair employees experienced—Black history was deployed to make a statement about modern African Americans. That is, that they contributed to and belonged in Chicago.

One of the most compelling stories of the fair involved a group of African American women from Chicago who worked to earn recognition for Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable, a mixed-race Black man and Chicago’s first settler, by forming the National De Saible Memorial

Society.¹ One of the most important early goals for this organization was installing a replica of Du Sable's first cabin in the Century of Progress Exposition so that they could share his story with millions of fair visitors. One woman wrote in the African-American newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, at the end of the fair that the exhibit "meant so much to us racially, for it snatched Jean Baptiste Point De Saible, historic giant, from the realm of the forgotten and made him live and breathe and walk once more in our midst."² This is a story about the power of history, about what telling and claiming historic stories meant for a specific community.

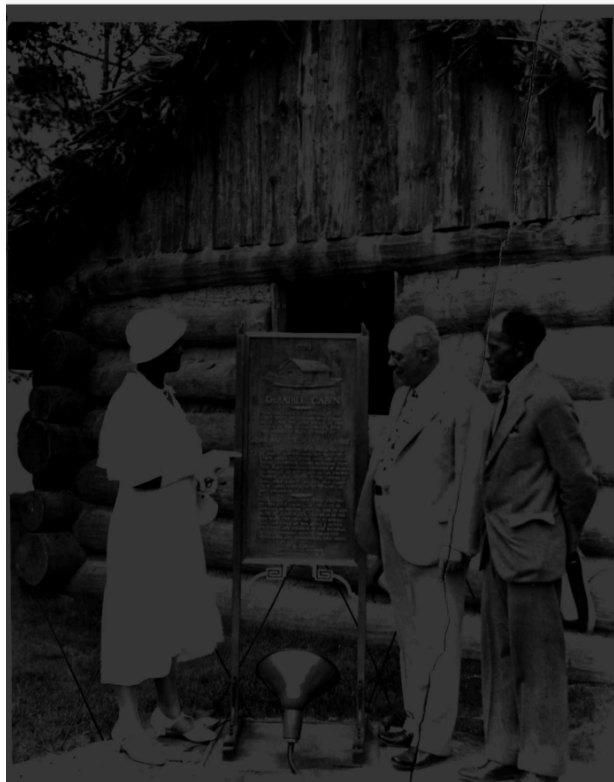
Examining these women--Annie Oliver and the National De Saible Memorial Society--and how they lobbied and organized to have a replica of Du Sable's cabin installed on the fairgrounds, makes it easier to understand why this history was so important to them. It also makes clearer the experiences of Black women in the 1930s.³ It would be remiss to discuss the

¹ There have been multiple spellings of Chicago's first settler's name. The most popular version during the 1930s, and the one used by the National Memorial Society, was De Saible. Today, Du Sable is the most accepted version of his name, and it is the one used here unless in a quote or in reference to the Memorial Society. The renaming of Wendell Phillips High School in 1936 standardized the spelling as Du Sable, and multiple accounts say this is because of concerns over the school's new name sounding similar to "disabled." Additionally, "Black" is capitalized here, according to recent changes in established publishing practices, but most secondary source quotations leave it lowercase. Formatting here follows the sentiments established by the Associated Press, explained here: <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-cultures-race-and-ethnicity-us-news-ap-top-news-7e36c00c5af0436abc09e051261fff1f>. By and large, I will be using Black and African-American interchangeably, however, due to Du Sable's historic era and geography, it is unclear whether he would have considered himself an African American—in any case, Blackness was something that linked Du Sable to African Americans in the 1930s.

² Mrs. Charles S. Duke, "World's Fair Helped to Make Known De Saible's Place in Our History," *Defender*, November 17, 1934.

³ While there are technical differences between replicas and reconstructions, in this document (and in historic records) they are used mostly interchangeably. The cabin at the fair was not constructed from any original materials, making it technically a replica. One of the challenging aspects of this chapter was sourcing. There are limited sources that provide direct insight into the minds of these women, and it has been difficult to find historic sources that feature their own voices. Further complications have arisen due to access issues: the Annie Oliver papers as well as the Esther Parada papers at the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature (part of the Chicago Public Library), are unprocessed collections, meaning their availability to researchers has been extremely limited. I was able to examine the Annie Oliver papers once and had no access to the

Century of Progress Exposition without considering these women, the legacy of Du Sable, and Black experiences of the fair. This story demonstrates what it means know and to claim history. Historian Cheryl Ganz has described these women's work by writing "achieved at the fair what black male community leaders could not: a pavilion of self-representation....Though political infighting and the inability of male organizations to raise funds of a major exhibit limited the black community's representation at the fair, the National De Saible Memorial society managed to produce as stellar exhibit."⁴



Esther Parada papers. Hopefully future processing projects will mean that researchers can access these historic documents, which will make this story more complete.

⁴ Cheryl R. Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 115.

Figure 16. Annie Oliver and two unidentified men outside the De Saible Cabin at the fair. Photo courtesy of the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

The many intersecting facets of this story make it challenging to find where to begin.

This case will start with an introduction to Du Sable himself, and then discuss Annie Oliver and the Memorial Society—who they were, the replica cabin, and how the group presented the historic Du Sable story as a means to claim Chicago history. These activists and this project will then be contextualized in a larger story about Jim Crow at the world’s fair.

“Some Historical Facts about Jean Baptiste Point DeSaible”

Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable himself is a crucial character in this story. As scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has said, the story of Du Sable is both the story of his fascinating and contradictory life, and the story of how he became a legend—a lost and recovered icon of Black history.⁵ Most of the account of Du Sable at the fair falls into the latter category, but some background on Du Sable’s life is still necessary. Considerable information about Du Sable’s life remains a historical mystery today, although different texts present competing theories as fact.

He arrived in what is now called Chicago in the late eighteenth century, and he stayed there for about twenty years before moving south. He was a free Black man who spoke French. The most common interpretation is that his mother was either an enslaved or formerly enslaved woman and his father was white. Most likely, Du Sable came to the Great Lakes region from Haiti (in the 1930s, he was often described as being from Santo Domingo). He is generally understood as having been a fur trader and trapper, but he later engaged in other enterprises as

⁵ Henry Louis Gates and J. A. Rogers, *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017), 190.

well. Du Sable had friendly business relations with neighboring Pottawatomi peoples, as well as familial ones: he married a Native American woman. He became quite prosperous; even though his residence was depicted as a cabin at the fair, he developed it into a full-fledged, multi-building homestead.

While Du Sable has been credited with being the first non-Indigenous Chicagoan, he is rarely counted as the founder of the city. What difference lies in that distinction? The difference is a permanent, lasting legacy. Even the De Saible Memorial Society infrequently use the term “founder.” Was it too big of a claim? What distinguishes someone from being a founder and being a first settler? Even today, Du Sable is rarely called the founder of the city; he is instead given the clunky, careful title of “first permanent, non-indigenous resident of what is now Chicago.” The Du Sable Memorial Society’s pamphlet for distribution at the fair was titled “Jean Baptiste Pointe De Saible: The First Permanent Settler,” not “the founder.”⁶ However, upon Annie Oliver’s death, the Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art expressed condolences to her family and was insistent on the use of the term founder. The museum recognized her life’s work to gain “recognition and respect for Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable, and his rightful role as the founder of Chicago,” and later stated that a memorial to the “Founder of Chicago” would also be a memorial to Oliver.⁷ Lorraine Passovoy, a Du Sable scholar, wrote in some detail about the distinctions between these titles in her master’s thesis.⁸

⁶ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 3], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

⁷ Ibid, Box 1, Folder 32.

⁸ Lorraine Passovoy Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

“Mrs. Oliver and Her Band of Faithful Women”

In 1928, Annie Oliver, a beauty culturist and active clubwoman who had moved to Chicago from Tennessee during the Great Migration, founded the National De Saible Memorial Society. Oliver was involved in various groups and worked diligently to bring recognition to the Du Sable story. While Annie Oliver is almost unknown today, and historical accounts of the fair barely mention her, she was well known locally, and her work was highly publicized during her lifetime.

Oliver’s involvement in clubwork and civic engagement was reflected in her many accomplishments, including a “Citation for Public Service” from the Chicago Urban League, who gave her the title of “Useful Citizen.”⁹ She also held multiple officer positions with the Illinois Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, served as the Most Ancient Matron of the Royal Eagle Court, and taught Sunday school at Quinn Chapel. In addition to her extensive activism, club involvement, and the responsibilities of motherhood, Annie Oliver was also a career woman. She had worked as a teacher in Tennessee and was also a beauty culturist who worked as a National Organizer for Poro Beauticians, a company with a beauty college and hair and beauty products for Black women.¹⁰

Annie Oliver was interested in Black history outside of Du Sable. She was a life member of the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association (an affiliate of the National Association of Colored Women, Inc.), and perhaps some of her ideas about the memorial society

⁹ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 1, Folder 16], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

¹⁰ Ibid, [Box 1, Folder 33].

she founded came from her involvement with this organization.¹¹ Oliver was also involved in her church. An African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, Quinn Chapel was the first African American congregation in Chicago, the oldest African American church in the city. Historic photos show her participating in events at the chapel, and both her first wedding and second marriage after widowhood took place there.¹² Through Quinn Chapel, Oliver worked to provide Depression relief, and she was elected president of the Silent Relief Board.¹³ The church was the center of her life and community and was a launchpad for the rest of her activism.

Even though Annie Oliver was a crucial player in the Du Sable cabin story, many historians of World's Fairs do not spend much time examining her life or story; she is usually mentioned only in passing, or the Memorial Society might be mentioned. For example, in *World of Fairs*, historian Robert Rydell spends several pages discussing African American involvement at Century of Progress, only to say "fair authorities installed a replica of the cabin constructed in 1779 by Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, a black Frenchman and Chicago's first settler."¹⁴ Rydell is one of the most preeminent world's fair scholars, but this not only omits Annie Oliver and the National De Saible Memorial Society; it attributes their work to "fair authorities" and refers to Du Sable as a "Frenchman," even though he was French-speaking but not from France. The

¹¹Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 1, Folder 16], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

¹² Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 1, Folder 2], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. Unfortunately, due to collections policies, it is not possible to include these images at this time.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 166.

Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions entry for the Century of Progress mentions the cabin, but nothing of those who organized it, referring to it as “a focal point for some mild protests against racial discrimination.”¹⁵ Even historian Christopher Robert Reed minimizes the significance of it being a woman-led public history project. Reed writes: “Also during the 1920s, a group of Black women from Chicago's southside organized the National De Saible Memorial Society under the leadership of Annie Oliver.”¹⁶ In *The Depression Comes to the Southside*, Reed mentions Oliver simply as the “wife of a local physician.”¹⁷ Only Cheryl Ganz has given Oliver the recognition she deserves.

From the 1920s up until her death in 1962, Annie Oliver led the De Saible Memorial Society (hereafter referred to as ‘the Society’) to rally for a public statue of Du Sable, the renaming of a high school after him, and a public park space in his honor. The society’s first big project, though, took place during the Great Depression. The National De Saible Memorial Society’s initial goal was to have a reconstruction of Du Sable’s cabin at the world’s fair. While this might seem like a modest endeavor, negotiating with fair organizers and raising funds for the site were challenging. Fair authorities originally thought that having the Du Sable display was unnecessary or even harmful; they argued that it emphasized racial divisions over unity, and it duplicated what would be done at the replica Fort Dearborn space. One letter from Hellen Bennett, a white fair organizer in the Social Sciences Division, described the hesitations of other

¹⁵ John E. Findling, Kimberly D. Pelle, and Vicente Loscertales González, *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), 272.

¹⁶ Christopher R. Reed, “In the Shadow of Fort Dearborn,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 4 (1991): 402.

¹⁷ Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 126.

white authorities: “My understanding is that they felt in view of the Fort Dearborn reproduction, the De Saible project being merely a one-room cabin with nothing in itself very distinctive would not have enough popular appeal to warrant it.”¹⁸ The Acting Director of Concessions in 1932 wrote, “We feel that there will be other and perhaps more interesting ways in which Colored people of Chicago can participate in the Exposition.”¹⁹ As early as 1931, Director of Exhibits John Stephen Sewell wrote to Annie Oliver that the cabin would not be desirable” because “it might be interpreted as an emphasis on race differences, which we desire to avoid.”²⁰ This rationale is similar to the arguments fair organizers made against a women’s building—that there had already been a lot of progress towards women’s equality, and emphasizing one gender would cause division. Nevertheless, Oliver and the Society were persistent and eventually successful: not just in having a space for self-representation at the fair, but for having a space that was specifically dedicated to this one historic story.

Annie Oliver and the members of the Society were part of a vibrant legacy of earlier Black women’s activism in Chicago, a story explored by historian Anne Meis Knupfer. One unfortunate issue with these historic sources is that there is much more written about Annie Oliver that is not in her own words. In her private collections, she kept her correspondence instead of her own writing, and other archives hold little of her work. The activities that Annie

¹⁸ A Century of Progress records, Series 1: General Correspondence, National De Saible Memorial Society, Box 343, Folder 10957, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

¹⁹ A Century of Progress records, Series 1: General Correspondence, National De Saible Memorial Society, Box 343, Folder 10957, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

²⁰ A Century of Progress records, Series 1: General Correspondence, National De Saible Memorial Society, Box 343, Folder 10957, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Oliver and the other women of the Society engaged in would today be called public history work: they were presenting a local history story in a public space to a global audience of millions of people. They used the power of the Du Sable story to generate support and enthusiasm for their project when their community was suffering from economic crisis. They negotiated successfully with fair organizers like Rufus Dawes, who were far more socially and financially powerful. These women were overtly discriminated against, yet they fought negative stereotypes while presenting a historical story; they used their space at the fair to fight both gender and racial biases and argued for their space in the city's history.²¹

A crucial part of this story is that many, if not most, African Americans in Chicago during the Great Depression had not been born there. Annie Oliver and thousands of others had moved to the city during the Great Migration. Chicago was one of the cities most shaped by this widescale movement of African Americans from the South to urban areas in the North in the early to mid-twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, African Americans comprised only about two percent of Chicago's population, but by the end of World War I that number had more than doubled, to a population of about 100,000 people.²² By the end of the second wave of the Great Migration in 1970, African Americans made up more than one-third of the city's population.²³ In a *Defender* article promoting the fair (and specifically the *Chicago Defender* "World's Fair Shopper's Guide"—an undoubtedly rich document filled with

²¹ Ganz, 1933 World's Fair, 115.

²² "Chicago and the Great Migration, 1915-1950," Digital Collections for the Classroom, March 14, 2013, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://dcc.newberry.org/?p=14436>.

²³ Ibid.

endorsements that has been impossible to track down), the editorial staff asks whether readers have “written to the folks back home and told them what’s going on in Chicago,” because there were, of course, folks back home: Black Chicagoans had family ties outside the city—many of whom would be visiting for the fair.²⁴ By claiming part of Chicago’s history through the Du Sable story, and indeed, the beginning of Chicago’s history, these migrants laid claim to their new home city.

The Cabin at the Fair

African Americans faced obstacles in setting up the Du Sable cabin at the fair. The first was gaining permission from fair organizers, and the second was raising funds to recreate and install it. The Society circulated a form requesting money for their organization. This form was addressed to “Every Loyal Citizen” and introduced Du Sable as follows: “Do you know—that Jean Baptiste Point De Saible was the first settler of Chicago? That he was a Negro! That he was the first pioneer, trader, and business man of Chicago? That he built the first home at the mouth of the Chicago River?” After this introduction, the document briefly describes the organization’s aims: “We...have banded ourselves together for the purpose of establishing a memorial to the honor of this distinguished FIRST CITIZEN of Chicago.” The plea for joining calls up a mix of identities: “Would you, as a loyal American citizen, a resident of Chicago, and an advocate of

²⁴ Nahum Daniel Brascher, “Let’s Go Chicago’ Is Slogan of City for World’s Fair,” *Defender*, June 3, 1933.

race pride, want the World's Fair to assemble here without a fitting monument in honor of this great pioneer? Of course not!"²⁵

The cabin was a tangible site and part of the space and fabric of the exposition, even as it was a symbol of Black success, rights to Chicago, and progress. Outside the cabin a sign said, "Oldest Chicago Building," which was probably enticing to visitors who were on their way to stop at Fort Dearborn, which they likely expected to be the oldest Chicago building.²⁶ The cabin site is described in both of the official guidebooks of the fair, written by white fair organizers, and the 1933 and 1934 editions have notable variations. The 1933 guidebook describes:

Near Old Fort Dearborn you can see a reproduction of the cabin of Chicago's first citizen, Jean Baptiste Point de Saible, who lived on the north bank of the Chicago River, and traded in furs, even before the fort was built. He was a prosperous, educated Negro of French extraction, the Cabin gave way to what then was considered a mansion, and in it he collected Chicago's first art collection and library. It is thought he established his first cabin in 1777 and left in 1800, to go further south in Illinois.²⁷

This is a flattering and largely positive account, and though its author is unnamed, Annie Oliver and her colleagues were likely pleased with this message. The description establishes Du Sable as the first, and it highlights his education, prosperity, and sophistication. Here we again see Du Sable referenced as the first citizen, not the founder of the city. However, the pioneer story is highlighted before the "reveal" that Du Sable was Black.

²⁵ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 16], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

²⁶ Scrapbook, "The World's Fair, 1933 and 1934," Evanston History Center.

²⁷ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933* (Chicago, A Century of Progress, 1933; repr., Lynn Allyn Young, 2004), 82.

The 1934 guidebook has some differences: “Reproduction of the cabin of Jean Baptiste Point DeSaible, which was the first permanent building on the site of the City of Chicago. DeSaible was a Negro of San Domingo who came to the United States in 1779 as a trapper and Indian trader.”²⁸ Many entries in the 1934 guidebook are brief, so the length itself is not the most significantly different part of this description. Instead, this depiction does not call Du Sable the first settler, and certainly not the founder; the building is designated as first, which removes that honor from Du Sable the man. Unlike the vast majority of accounts about Du Sable during the Exposition, nothing here references Du Sable’s education or prosperity. The differences in these two sources’ descriptions are jarring, and the explanation for them is elusive.

Charles S. Duke and his wife, Estelle Taylor Duke were additional players in this story. Charles Duke was an African American architect and engineer, and the first African American to earn a bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Harvard. He would later earn a master’s degree in civil engineering.²⁹ Like Oliver and thousands of others, the Dukes were not originally from Chicago; they had moved there in 1913, when Charles became the first Black engineer draftsman in the Department of Public Works.³⁰ In 1926, Duke was appointed to the Chicago Zoning Commission by Mayor Big Bill Thompson, and he was later appointed to President Herbert Hoover’s Commission on Public Housing, where he secured funds to build the first housing

²⁸Official Guide Book of the World’s Fair of 1934 (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 125.

²⁹ “Charles Sumner Duke (1879–1952),” Encyclopedia of Arkansas, March 19, 2019, accessed July 7, 2021, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/charles-sumner-duke-7794/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

project in Chicago, the Ida B. Wells Homes.³¹ Somewhat less famously, he designed the Du Sable cabin reproduction at the Century of Progress Exposition. One interesting aspect of the reproduced cabin at the fair is that it was far humbler than Du Sable's eventual homestead. Christopher Robert Reed's writings display frustration with this, arguing that "somehow in the course of the project all notion of architectural accuracy was lost."³²

At the fair, the replica cabin was small and located quite literally in the shadow of the Fort Dearborn replica. One building celebrated triumphant suffering and the eventual subjugation of Indigenous people, while the other celebrated a man whose racial group had been subjugated. Members of the Memorial Society acted as hostess at the cabin, providing information and a pamphlet published for the space. Choirs sang at various events, along with occasional guest speakers. The space was technically operated as a concession, not an exhibit, although it was educational and free to visit with fair admission. Annie Oliver's extensive letter-writing campaign and other organizing won not only the opportunity to have a cabin on the fairgrounds, but for the Chicago city council to cover the cabin's \$1,500 erection costs.³³ Estelle Duke wrote several articles in the *Defender* under the name "Mrs. Charles S. Duke" about the De Saible Memorial Society and the cabin attraction. She was involved with the Society herself and worked on the pamphlet that was distributed at the fair. Her *Defender* articles praised the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side: Protest and Politics in the Black Metropolis, 1930-1933* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 139.

³³ Ganz, *1933 World's Fair*, 119.

difficult and important work the society did and described the responses that various visitors had to the exhibit.

Presentations of Du Sable

The Du Sable story was special to Black Chicagoans for several reasons. First, and most importantly, he was The First. Americans have long been interested in the history of firsts, and early settlers' stories are a staple feature of local history. To have a story about a first settler who was also the first Black man in the area was significant; in Chicago there is not a distinction between "first settler" and "first Black resident." Many newspaper articles that discussed the building of the cabin briefly introduced Du Sable himself and claimed his spot in history; it is possible that many Black Chicagoans had never heard of him before the fair.³⁴



Figure 17. Members of the National De Saible Memorial Society, 1933, outside the replica cabin and Fort Dearborn. Esther Parada Papers, Vivian G. Harsh

³⁴ For example, "DeSaible Excursion Next Big Affair for Chicago," *The Chicago Defender*, July 29, 1933.

Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Chicago Public Library.

Another special part of the Du Sable story is that it is a Black history story that is not connected to the history of slavery. Instead, it is a pioneer history. In the few areas of the fair where Black history was represented, it was tied to slavery. Concessionaires ran a show called the Old Plantation show, which promoted the Lost Cause ideology of happy slaves, and an elderly formerly enslaved woman was part of the Georgia state exhibit.³⁵ While slavery is obviously a considerable part of the African American and global Black history experience, the Du Sable story was distinct because Du Sable was free and his life as a trapper and trader in the Great Lakes region was removed from histories of slavery. Stories conflicted as to whether his mother was free. When Chicago's African American women took an opportunity to tell Black history, they told a local story that was not focused on slavery. This reminded visitors that while Black history inextricably tied to the story of slavery, slavery is not the entire story of Black history. The members of the National De Saible Memorial Society chose a local story to claim a place in United States history for their community—a place in history that was not exclusively tied to slavery. Instead, the story was tied to settler colonialism.

Like all public historians, the De Saible Memorial Society took care when presenting their story. The history of Du Sable was pioneer history, and in some ways the story was told similarly to white pioneer histories: Du Sable was rugged, lonely, brave, resourceful, and friendly with Native Americans. Du Sable's education and prosperity were also emphasized, making his story something of which to be even more proud. The 1933 fair guidebook, for

³⁵ Century of Progress Scrapbooks [Box 2, Folder 1] Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

example, which was produced by the main fair organizers, describes Du Sable as “prosperous” and “educated,” discusses his art collection and books, and explains that his cabin eventually became a “mansion.”³⁶ Other descriptions of him emphasize his trapping ability, such that he amassed “a considerable fortune from the plying of his trade.”³⁷

Estelle Duke and Blanche V. Shaw were two members of the De Saible Memorial Society who worked alongside Annie Oliver to promote the story of Du Sable. Duke was especially involved in writing about the cabin and had multiple articles in the *Defender*. Duke and Shaw were appointed by Annie Oliver to “assemble and arrange” a pamphlet for distribution at the fair. This pamphlet is useful for considering how the Society understood the Du Sable story and wanted to present it. The introduction humbly explains that the facts presented were “assembled from certain historians mentioned elsewhere,” and that it was the hope of the committee that “readers will be able to form an adequate picture of this ‘mysterious’ first citizen of Chicago and be inspired to look further into his story.”³⁸

In the pamphlet, Shaw and Duke cite several scholars who had written about Du Sable, including historian Milo Milton Quaife, the author of Chicago histories, including *Checagou: From Indian Wigwam to Modern City, 1673-1835* (1933), a book that established Du Sable as

³⁶ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933*, 82.

³⁷ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 3], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

³⁸ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 3], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

the first settler. Quaife argued that Chicagoans should be proud of Du Sable.³⁹ Of course, citing sources is good responsible history, but for these women, it also offered an added layer of credibility. Not all historically-themed spaces at the fair had such citations, especially in the Lincoln Group, where stories were presented as if everyone knew them and legends were treated as fact. Shaw and Duke emphasized the legitimacy of the Du Sable story by referencing a historical consensus, writing, “It is an interesting fact that writers, past and present, have united to give honor to this first pioneer.”⁴⁰ The importance of citations for credibility is especially important here, since the research they used was done by white male scholars. The *Chicago Defender* includes stories of visitors to the cabin challenging the hostesses and claiming the Du Sable story could not possibly be true.⁴¹ With cited sources from known white scholars, the clubwomen were better able to present themselves as knowledgeable and the Du Sable story as factual. Likely, they knew they would be challenged and wanted to be prepared to demonstrate the truth—and they understood that some people would only listen to white men.

The pamphlet was intended to tell the story of Du Sable to all. The writers were nevertheless careful not to upset white sensibilities too much; the bragging is gentle, and the stories comply with white Chicagoans’ understandings of their own city’s history at the time. The women knew that most of the fairgoers would be white, and some of the history was

³⁹ Milo Milton Quaife, *Chicagou: From Indian Wigwam to Modern City, 1635-1835* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933).

⁴⁰ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 3], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

⁴¹ Mrs. Charles S. Duke, “World’s Fair Helped Make Known De Saible’s Place in Our History.” *Defender*, November 17, 1934.

presented with that clearly in mind. For instance, John Kinzie, who was among the first white settlers of the area and has erroneously been given the “first settler” or “founder” titles that more rightfully belonging to Du Sable, was spoken of respectfully. At the end of the pamphlet, a few notable facts about the cabin were presented, emphasizing the site’s importance over the legacy of Du Sable the man. These notable facts were related to mid-twentieth century ideas about civilization and modernity, as well as to meanings of being a pioneer. The facts listed about the cabin are: “1. The first white child was born there. 2. The first marriage was solemnized there. 3. The first election was held there. 4. The first court was held there.”⁴²

In addition to presenting Du Sable as a prosperous and educated man (who also happened to fit the rugged pioneer archetype), he was also characterized as worldly, and even sophisticated. The Society’s pamphlet describes Du Sable as gracious host: “For years, this cabin was the only house in the region and became a refuge and center for the entertainment of all who traveled that way; for DeSable was a genial host and treated his guests royally, although, except for the Indians, not many passed that lonely way.”⁴³ The emphasis on sophistication and culture was especially notable in references to Du Sable’s art collection, such as in the 1933 *Official Guide Book to the Fair* and in other places.⁴⁴ Du Sable was presented as a dignified and civilized man, even though the meaning of civilized is somewhat complicated.

⁴² Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 3], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Official Guide Book of the Fair, 1933*, 82.

Historian Christopher Robert Reed has examined the development of Du Sable memorialization in Chicago. He argues that Black Chicagoans tried to deemphasize Du Sable's race in order to promote the historic figure as a father to all Chicagoans.⁴⁵ According to Reed, this was an attempt to avoid emphasizing race difference, and to elevate Du Sable to his rightful status as first settler, full stop. Reed addresses a variety of important details about the evolving campaign for recognition of Du Sable, and helpfully unpacks the variety of challenges that activists faced. While it is difficult to argue with Reed about the attempts to promote Du Sable purely on his civic accomplishments, his telling of the story minimizes just how important it was for Black Chicagoans to see Du Sable as one of their own, and importance of tying Blackness to ideas about civilization.

“The First White Man in Chicago was a Negro”

Du Sable was presented as a historical paragon in order to justify Black participation in and ownership of the modern city. Additionally, clubwomen used him as a figure showing that Black people were foundational to United States history, which was especially important during the Great Depression because Black people were experiencing greater challenges and marginalization. Du Sable as a person and symbol of Black history could have been useful for Chicagoans to claim at any time; however, this became especially important during the Great Depression when Chicago's African American community was experiencing significant economic challenge, as well as the crumbling of institutions built during the Great Migration. Du

⁴⁵ Christopher R. Reed, “In the Shadow of Fort Dearborn,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 4 (1991): p. 400, 403.

Sable was significant because of his association with pioneer history and his “first-ness;” that is, he became a “we have always been here” symbol.

As this kind of figure, there are related ideas about whiteness and civilization that require untangling. Du Sable was a biracial Black man, and the exhibit organizers and others played with the idea of whiteness and civilization without emphasizing that Du Sable had white parentage. His biracial parentage was not hidden, but it was also not used as a metaphor for racial harmony; in other words, he was presented as a “Negro,” not a “mulatto.”

However, a measure of cultural whiteness was granted to Du Sable when it came to promoting him as civilized; that is, supporters of the Du Sable history often used Native Americans as a foil to display his status as a civilized man. One story—a joke, really—was repeated frequently, with variations in the language: the Indians always said that the first white man in Chicago was a Negro. This story appears in many documents, including the pamphlet printed by the Memorial Society and distributed at the cabin.⁴⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has described how this was originally used in overtly racist (anti-Black) ways, and points out that “far more impressive than this insulting and wrongheaded slur was the way future generations of black Chicagoans picked up the thread and turned it into a tapestry of pride.”⁴⁷

Whether or not Pottawattamie locals actually called Du Sable the first white man is impossible to say. The journal *Indian Life* published a brief article about Du Sable that recounted

⁴⁶ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 3], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. Also, for example: “Point De Saible,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1927, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Henry Louis Gates and J. A. Rogers, *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017), 193.

the story, saying it “was a popular witticism about town in the 1930s, and it says a lot about the attitudes of the time.”⁴⁸ The article confirms that Du Sable married a Potawatomi woman, became a member of the tribe, and was known as “The Black Chief.”⁴⁹ The story of local Native people referring to Du Sable as the Black first white man appears multiple places, and it positions Du Sable in three ways. First, it establishes him as the original outsider (that is, non-Native person) to stay permanently in the area. Secondly, it designates Du Sable as “white”—in this case, and others, meaning not light in skin tone, but ‘civilized’—again, as non-Native. Thirdly, it labels him as Black—not really a white man after all, and again, not Native. The story also acknowledges that Indigenous people lived in the area already, but Du Sable still gets to be the first Chicagoan because they do not “count.”

Other stories and depictions of Du Sable’s relationship to and with local Native American people existed. They were, after all, his neighbors, business partners, and customers, and, eventually, his family by marriage. Several of the stories of Du Sable’s relationship to Native people emphasize his positive relations—in subtle contrast and a more positive light than white people’s encounters. Many of these depictions, however, tend to contrast the “civilized” Du Sable with “uncivilized” Native people in a way not unlike how white people often referred to their pioneer forefathers. The Chicago Urban League’s description of Du Sable was succinct, and

⁴⁸ “Jean Baptiste, the Black Chief, Was a 'Father' of Chicago,” *Indian Life* 32, no. 2 (2011): 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

the point was clear: “Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable was the first civilized human to settle in what is now Chicago.”⁵⁰

One of the most perplexing accounts of Du Sable, showing the entangled ideas of whiteness and civilization, appeared in another *Defender* article:

'This is the spot,' he said in pure French, and the handful of Indians who had come from their forest teepees to witness the strange arrival, looked at each other in bewilderment. Here was a man, brown like them, with features not unlike theirs, but was dressed in the habiliments of their enemies, the white man, and who spoke a language unfamiliar to them. But there was something friendly in the expression of the man--something that invited trust and confidence. There was also, in his bearing, that quality and courage which all brave men respect and admire. It was these aspects of the lone traveler that gave him an entry among the Pottawatomie Indians which had been denied to other white travelers.⁵¹

This creative depiction of Du Sable’s arrival has at least three intriguing points. First, Du Sable is described as speaking “pure French,” perhaps in contrast to Creole, and certainly lends him some sophistication. Secondly, the Indians were described as living in “forest teepees,” which of course they did not. While popular depictions of Native Americans show tipis as ubiquitous, only Plains tribes used them. Additionally, they likely would have heard “pure French” before. While it is true that Du Sable had friendly relations with local Native people, and perhaps at least some of the reason for that was built on “features not unlike theirs,” this is an imagined account. The account depicts a Du Sable with immediately recognizable positive pioneer qualities of strong bearing, trustworthiness, and courage. Finally, though, the most perplexing line of all in this description is the last phrase, which states that this entry had been

⁵⁰ Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 138.

⁵¹ “De Saible Excursion Next Big Affair for Chicago,” *Defender*, July 29, 1933.

denied “to other white travelers.” It does not say “other travelers, who were white,” which would make sense in the context of this story; instead, Du Sable is grouped with these white travelers. Du Sable is depicted as a Black white man—that is, as “civilized.”

The *Defender* and the Society used Du Sable and other early Black settlers to claim that most quintessential part of American history: the pioneer story. Often this happened by positioning Black settlers as aligned with white settlers and in contrast to Native Americans. This is evident, for example, reporter Dewey Jones relied on common racial slurs: “They [Black settlers] helped fight the Indians when necessary and traded with them when the red skins were friendly. They helped carve out of a wilderness the marvelous metropolis which we now look upon with pride.”⁵² This language of “carving out of a wilderness” pairs with other language used to reference nature, such as another *Defender* article that described Du Sable arriving in the area “long before the first white man dared to venture into the wilds.”⁵³ Here, African Americans claimed another typical American pioneer story: brave, civilized man versus the wilderness. The latter quote is also so eager to claim Du Sable as “the first” that it erases the history that white Frenchmen were in the Chicago area before him.

Jesuit Jacques Marquette had arrived before Du Sable and had camped for the winter in what is today Chicago. He was the first non-Native to stay there, but Du Sable’s claim is for long-term residency.⁵⁴ Other articles, like the one considered above, also reference European

⁵² “The Story of Old Settlers Reads Like Fiction,” *Defender*, May 3, 1930.

⁵³ Dewey R. Jones, “Race Represented as Fair Opens in Blaze of Glory,” *Defender*, June 3, 1933.

⁵⁴ “Jacques Marquette,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Marquette>.

explorers and imagine a Native point of view that contrasts them with Du Sable. For example, an article in the fair's publication, *World's Fair Weekly*, focuses on the romanticized drama of Du Sable's pioneer life and accepts him into American pioneer history. This is accomplished, again, by contrasting him to Native Americans when describing the bed in the cabin's living space: "safety demanded sleeping high, for prowling animals, maybe sometimes hostile Indians could sneak up on a man while sleeping."⁵⁵

Chicago historian Theodore Karamanski has argued that "the story of a man of African ancestry building a business here and raising a mixed-race family is attractive to contemporary sensibilities." Indeed, it was attractive to the sensibilities of Depression-era Black Chicagoans as well.⁵⁶ The tale makes sense for the founding of a city so diverse, and also so business-oriented, as Chicago. However, as Karamanski points out, and as becomes clear in the documents related to the cabin, promoting the Du Sable story often comes at the expense of Native Americans. That is, Du Sable was indeed part of the pioneer history of the region: a history of settler colonialism that framed fur traders like Du Sable as "the advance guard of the international capitalist market and invasive settlement."⁵⁷ Karamanski points out that "the scant historical record of DuSable's life suggests he enjoyed good relations with the Potawatomi living in the Chicago area, but those

⁵⁵ "Chicago's First Citizen" *World's Fair Weekly*, August 12, 1933, 27. (available in a bound volume at the Chicago History Museum, vol 2, qF38MZ 1933 B1C4).

⁵⁶ Theodore Karamanski, "Columbus, Du Sable, and the Myth of the 'Founder,'" *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 25, 2021, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2021/6/25/22549507/columbus-jean-pointe-dusable-founding-father-myth-patriarchal-theodore-karamansky>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Indians had no illusions as to the danger posed by the spread of American settlement,” and “Chicago rose to urban greatness from the burial grounds of its native and true founders.”⁵⁸

The Du Sable cabin was intended to celebrate the history of a courageous and visionary man—and thus also the contributions of a racial group to Chicago’s history. Unfortunately, however, attempts to promote Du Sable sometimes came at the expense of Native Americans. None of this is to say that promoters of the Du Sable story had the active intention of harming Native Americans with their rhetoric. Instead, Black Americans were Americans in that they bought into predominant ideas about Indigenous people, specifically when it came to depictions of “civilized” culture. Essentially, African Americans were telling a Black pioneer story in the same way they had heard white pioneer stories, where a lone individual was pitted against the wilderness and “savages”—sometimes noble, sometimes not. Du Sable was real, of course, and he lived a unique and remarkable life. This was not just putting a Black face on a white story; proponents of the Du Sable cabin wanted to craft American history as the narrative of a Black man, which reveals how they understood American history.

Experiences and Reactions

A variety of reactions to the Du Sable cabin quickly appeared, and these are well recorded in the *Chicago Defender*. The *Defender* ran multiple articles praising Annie Oliver and her “band of faithful women” for their hard work in creating the cabin site.⁵⁹ Estelle Duke

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Mrs. Charles S. Duke, “De Saible Cabin: A Study in Contrasts,” *Defender*, October 1933: Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 3, Folder 4], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. Mrs. Charles S. Duke, “World’s Fair Helped Make Known.”

reported that “thousands of people have gone away with a new concept of us as neighbors and brothers.”⁶⁰ Despite this positive message, stories of white visitors included responses that were condescending and outrightly hostile. She quotes visitors saying, “Are you quite sure a colored man did this? How proud you must feel!” Or, more resentfully: “You don't know what you're talking about when you make a claim of this sort! It's impossible!”⁶¹ The responses ranged from “marveling” to “cursing,” and many white people were “not glad or reconciled to the idea that the cloak of the first permanent settler of Chicago, the greatest city in the world, should fall about black shoulders.”⁶²

The “Rambling Reporter” wrote in his reoccurring *Defender* column “Seen and Heard at the Fair” that many white visitors saw the Du Sable cabin as a joke: “‘Now here’s something that will amuse you,’ a white man was heard to say to a group of eight white women Tuesday as the party approached the cabin. ‘The first house built in Chicago was this De Saible cabin—and Jean De Saible was a Negro. There’s a laugh for you.’ And everybody laughed heartily, although...for the life of me, I could not see the joke.”⁶³ In another article, Duke recounted other responses, generalizing based on the visitor’s place of origin: “If they are from Texas, as they often are, they may start as though stung, answer the gentle question of the hostess in a loud, angry voice, and stifled by the very thought that a black man has had the nerve to do this thing, rush out of the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Duke, “A Study in Contrasts,” and “World’s Fair Helped Make Known.”

⁶² Duke, “A Study in Contrasts.”

⁶³ “Seen and Heard at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 10, 1933.

cabin into the sunshine.”⁶⁴ Virginians reportedly responded slightly differently from Texans: “with more kindness, though with manifest unwillingness, ‘Well, your people did a great deal for Chicago when they built the first house, didn’t they? It is hardly believable!’”⁶⁵ One story depicted “an old white gentleman” who “rushed into the cabin crying: ‘You have no right to claim that the first settler was a Colored man!’ Miss ----- of the Chicago Historical society told me only yesterday that there is absolutely nothing to sustain such a claim.”⁶⁶

In one installment of a reoccurring *Defender* column, “A Day At the Fair,” Dewey R. Jones reported visiting the Du Sable cabin and seeing a white boy “holding the fort” and telling some of his schoolmates who had built the cabin. Jones recounts that the boy described Du Sable as follows: “he was not all Negro—not like the American Negro at all—he was French and even spoke the French language.”⁶⁷ Instead of this being a simple clarification of Du Sable’s origin, language like this loosened the claim of African Americans on Du Sable’s accomplishment. Jones reported asking the boy where he learned that information: “He told me proudly that he learned it in school. It should be interesting to dark Americans to know what is being taught in some of our schools, especially the distinction between American Negroes and Negroes (who have achieved something) from other countries.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Duke, “A Study in Contrasts”

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “A Day at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 9, 1934.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Since the Century of Progress Exposition was a World's Fair, plenty of visitors to the Du Sable cabin were neither white nor African Americans. Interestingly, Estelle Duke fell back on some cultural stereotypes in depicting responses from foreign visitors, specifically from Germany and Japan: "Or if they hie from Germany, they stand stolidly about, muttering 'So! A Colored man! The first haus! Ach!' Or if they are charming maids from far Japan, they listen earnestly; say in unison, in voices soft as a summer breeze: 'Oh! Col'd man? Oh! Col'd Man!' and pass swiftly from the cabin, leaving you rubbing your eyes and wondering whether they have really been there."⁶⁹

The Century of Progress's publication, *World's Fair Weekly*, ran an article on the Du Sable cabin in August 1933, just before the "Negro Day" event. This article, published by the fair organizers themselves, presents a different perspective of the fair. Written by white fair promoters, the visitors they most likely had in mind was their audience, who were also white. The article title gives Du Sable credit as "Chicago's First Citizen," but not as the city's founder. The opening sentence was probably felt to be gracious: "A quiet, dignified pride, indulged in by a people who have something very dear to cherish, is expressed in the replica of the home of Chicago's first Citizen—a Negro—Jean Baptiste Point de Saible."⁷⁰ This does not mention of who put on the exhibit, or who was present if one was to visit it; there are also no mentions of the women who served as hostesses. The emphasis is largely on the cabin itself as a pioneer site, with plenty of information about the animal skins in windows and logs used for construction.

⁶⁹ Duke, "A Study in Contrasts."

⁷⁰ "Chicago's First Citizen" *World's Fair Weekly*, August 12, 1933, 27. (available in a bound volume at the Chicago History Museum, vol 2, qF38MZ 1933 B1C4).

While there were many variations on the spelling of Du Sable's name, this article refers to him as "Point Sable," demonstrating that the writer likely did not listen carefully to the hostesses. The document conceded that "Point Sable" "prospered," and built a trading center, out of which Chicago grew.⁷¹ Quotes from white historian Milo Quaife constitute almost half of the article, and while the selected quotes flatter Du Sable, notably there were no statements from any of the exhibit's designers or creators, and no mention at all of the National De Saible Memorial Society.

The cabin was nonetheless deemed a success. Duke explained that "While one is being badgered, on the one hand by the constant denial of DeSaible's cabin, one is upheld, on the other hand, by the manifest friendliness of many thousands of white friends who visit the cabin."⁷² Perhaps even more important than influencing the opinions of white people was the effect that seeing the cabin had on Black visitors, especially children: "our own blessed youngsters by the hundreds have felt the inspiration of this story."⁷³

Duke was aware of the potential legacy of the cabin at the fair. She expressed a desire that "his story will continue to unfold until he is intrenched (sic) like a changeless rock in the story of Chicago! How earnestly do we hope that his memory may not be allowed to gradually fade until it is covered by the sands of time even as his house was slowly covered by the shifting sands of Lake Michigan." The De Saible Memorial Society was not disbanded after the fair.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Duke, "A Study in Contrasts."

⁷³ Duke, "World's Fair Helped Make Known."

They continued to work on increasing recognition for their patron saint by lobbying for a statue, a high school renaming, and a park.

Predecessors in Black Self-Representation at Expositions

The Du Sable cabin at the fair was notable as one of the very few areas of Black self-representation at the Century of Progress, and because it was developed by women when male community leaders struggled to develop an exhibit. The cabin focused on a historical figure and a historic building—positive community representation based on the past. However, this was not entirely without precedent. At the Columbian Exposition in 1893, the Haitian delegation discussed the possibility of having a monument dedicated to Du Sable.⁷⁴ The Columbian Exposition's exclusion of African Americans and subsequent activism by Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass and others is well known. Historian Mabel O. Wilson has recently published an excellent work on Black Americans in world's fairs and museums, and she discusses Black participation in mainstream world's fairs as well as the development of Emancipation Expositions held on anniversary years throughout the twentieth century.⁷⁵ The significance of other expositions where Black Americans organized to promote their culture, history, and experiences does not diminish the significance of the Du Sable cabin, it contextualizes it as part of a broader movement towards inclusion on the national and world stage.

⁷⁴ Virginia W. Julien, "A Critical Re-Interpretation of the Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable Story: A Problem in Black Socio-Historiography" (Master's Thesis, 1972). Held in the Lorraine Passovoy Papers, [Box 1, Folder 1], Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

⁷⁵ Mabel Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

Jim Crow and the World's Fair

Chicago's African American community was never a monolith. Citizens had a wide variety of experiences and lifestyles, and while some generalizations can be made about motivations and responses to the Century of Progress Exposition or the Great Depression, there were also variances in the community. Historian Anne Meis Knupfer has written about Black clubwomen in Chicago and argues that there was not one African American community in Chicago, but many.⁷⁶ One generalization about African Americans in Chicago that is important to remember is that they were the hardest-hit group by the Great Depression, and it has been written that "the truthfulness of the old economic adage depicting the precarious position of the black worker in the American labor force as being the 'last hired, first fired,' began to take its toll within the Black Metropolis and throughout the surrounding black enclaves."⁷⁷ Historian Christopher Robert Reed writes that the historical impact of the Great Depression has not frequently been examined in terms of the Black Metropolis.⁷⁸ The Black Metropolis here refers to Chicago's South Side, and specifically Bronzeville, which was the cultural and economic capital of the Black community. The Century of Progress Exposition occurred lows of the 1930s, just after the highs of the 1920s. Chicago's South Side had been a celebrated example of Black political economy, of vibrant businesses and Black-owned banks in the 1920s, but when the

⁷⁶ Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-century Chicago* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

⁷⁷ Christopher Robert Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side: Protest and Politics in the Black Metropolis, 1930-1933* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, xi.

Depression hit, Chicago's African Americans experienced a decline in their quality of life, along with the rest of the city.⁷⁹

Multiple groups were affiliated with the Century of Progress Exposition: the first being Black male business and community leaders, such as banker Jesse Binga, publisher Robert S. Abbott, and others. These men's stories have been examined by many historians of the era. Black male civic leaders met with Rufus Dawes early on in fair planning and came away hopeful for positive representation and inclusion, but they were disappointed.⁸⁰ The second group to consider, and the most fascinating, is the group of clubwomen discussed above: mostly middle-aged women whose husbands were professionals. Some of these women were college-educated professionals themselves. Annie Oliver, as founder and president of the National DeSaible Memorial Society, was the main character because she was both a quintessential example of these women's experiences, and an exceptional woman and leader. The final group considered here is the *Chicago Defender*. While the *Defender* was a newspaper, it is almost a character in itself as the leading voice for Black Chicago. Not all articles have bylines, and there was an overarching editorial stance, but differing opinions were included.

The *Chicago Defender* was a local newspaper distributed nationally.⁸¹ The paper was founded in 1905 by Robert Abbott, who, as a young man, heard Frederick Douglass speak at

⁷⁹ Christopher Robert Reed, *The Depression Comes to the South Side: Protest and Politics in the Black Metropolis, 1930-1933* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 1.

⁸⁰ Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 83.

⁸¹ While the *Defender* still exists as a digital news outlet, the past tense is used here to discuss the historic print edition.

Chicago's first world's fair in 1893.⁸² Abbott was a Republican through and through, and in 1936 authored a series of articles critical of the New Deal and its effects on African Americans.⁸³ The paper was self-nicknamed "The World's Greatest Weekly" and is one of the most crucial primary sources for understanding the experiences of Black Chicago during the Great Depression. The *Defender* has been credited with drawing African Americans to Chicago during the twentieth century, as well as giving voice to those experiences, both shaping and responding to the Great Migration.⁸⁴ At its height, the paper was published daily and had a readership of more than 500,000, making it the largest Black-owned newspaper in the country.⁸⁵

Like the rest of the city, Black Chicago viewed the Century of Progress Exposition in light of the Columbian Exposition, which was a disappointment for African Americans, as even menial jobs were scarce. Reed explains that "memories of negative experiences from the previous fair permeated the black community, even for those too young to have experienced the real and imagined slights of yesteryear."⁸⁶ Just before the Century of Progress fair opened in spring of 1933, Albert G. Barnett, wrote in the *Defender*, "Race had No Part in Chicago Fair of 1893," meaning African Americans were not involved; he reflected on the fair of 40 years prior,

⁸² Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America: From the Age of the Pullman Porters to the Age of Obama* (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸⁴ "Remembering the *Chicago Defender*, Print Edition (1905-2019)," National Museum of African American History and Culture, August 15, 2019, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/remembering-chicago-defender-print-edition-1905-2019>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 126.

pointing out that “members of the Race” had only been twenty years removed from slavery then.⁸⁷ Albert G. Barnett was the son of Ferdinand and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who were involved in the Columbian Exposition. Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Frederick Douglass had collaborated and disagreed about African American participation, something that was still well within living memory. While some Black community leaders had hoped the Century of Progress Exposition would be different, by the time the *Defender* published this article, it was clear that there were many similarities. Another *Defender* article noted that if the fair were to truly cover progress over the century of Chicago’s founding, African American stories were necessary, because “without doubt the greatest stretch of progress made in Chicago during its first century was that made by its Negro people.”⁸⁸ The article described the many successes and forms of progress despite systemic racism, explaining that “It is these extra miles to travel and these extra handicaps to carry, which make the progress of the Negro race in Chicago, and in America, so remarkable.”⁸⁹ The memory of the Columbian exposition mattered to Black Chicagoans.

Originally, hopes for the Century of Progress Exposition were high, and Reed explains that the fair “was to be a litmus test for how far the nation had advanced in its treatment of its darker brethren.”⁹⁰ Black civic leaders met with the Century of Progress President Rufus Dawes in the early planning stages and felt hopeful that discrimination would be absent from the fairgrounds, specifically in terms of access to public accommodations and services. The Black

⁸⁷ Albert G. Barnett, “Race Had No Part in Fair,” *Defender*, May 13, 1933.

⁸⁸ “100 Years of Race Progress in America,” *Defender*, August 18, 1934.

⁸⁹ “100 Years of Race Progress in America,” *Defender*, August 18, 1934.

⁹⁰ Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 125.

establishment also endorsed the fair early on.⁹¹ In fact, the white fair leadership reached out to the African American community regarding collaborating on funding the exposition, but the Black Metropolis's "financial titans" Robert S. Abbott, founder of the *Defender*, and banker Jesse Binga declined due to other strains on their resources at the time.⁹² However, Historian Christopher Robert Reed describes this event as an ostensible recognition of these leaders as members of the general Chicagoland business community.⁹³

Reed also argues that Chicago's Black community had three main goals for the fair: representation in fair exhibits that portrayed their heritage and contributions to the world fairly and accurately, full enjoyment of their rights as citizens, and an equal share in employment opportunities generated by the fair.⁹⁴ These three objectives are clearly backed up in writings from the period about the fair. Annie Oliver and the other women who lobbied for the Du Sable cabin were celebrated for their success in self-representation, even though there were few other successes. Discrimination toward fairgoers was a real problem, but there were some real victories, and the lack of jobs continued to be a sore point for the duration of the fair.

Dawes himself retained a positive reputation as racially progressive, even though the fair itself turned out to be disappointing. He spoke at the De Saible Day ceremonies in 1934 and *Defender* City Editor Dewey R. Jones said he gave a "straight-forward and brilliant tribute to the

⁹¹ Robert W. Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 83.

⁹² Reed, *The Depression*, 125.

⁹³ Reed, *The Depression*, 125.

⁹⁴ Christopher Robert Reed, "A Reinterpretation of Black Strategies for Change at the Chicago World's Fair, 1933-34," *Illinois Historical Society*, vol. 81, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 3.

Race,” offering Du Sable his “rightful place” in history and speaking on the “‘adaptability of the Negro to changing conditions and climes,’ a fact which has made him so important a cog in the development of this country.”⁹⁵ After the opening week of the fair, the *Defender* ran a piece titled “Race Represented as World’s Fair Opens in Blaze of Glory,” which struck a far different tone from subsequent articles. City Editor Dewey R. Jones wrote glowingly about the recently-opened fair, addressing the rumors that had flown around—from boycotts to the potential barring of African Americans from the fairgrounds altogether.⁹⁶ Jones wrote that “Rufus C. Dawes, president of the Century of Progress Exposition, in a letter to A.L. Foster of the Chicago Urban League last summer declared that the fair would be what its name indicated—A Century of Progress—and that there would be no racial bias in one way or another.”⁹⁷ While Chicago’s African Americans saw some progress at the fair, it was certainly not what should have constituted a full century’s worth.

One reason Chicago welcomed the idea of the fair so warmly was its potential as a jobs-creating machine during the Great Depression. Indeed, the fair provided thousands of jobs for Chicagoans, along with visiting performers and concessionaires, not to mention the positive impact on the local tourism industry. Like the rest of the city, Black Chicago hoped to obtain employment and economic benefits from the Century of Progress. Across the country, African Americans were among the hardest hit by the Great Depression, and Chicago was no different. In

⁹⁵ Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at the Fair: Would You Like an Orange Crush?” *Defender*, August 4, 1934.

⁹⁶ Dewey R. Jones, “Fair Opens in Blaze of Glory,” *Defender*, June 3, 1933.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

addition to the widespread job loss that affected them disproportionately, African American communities suffered hits to the institutions they had worked hard to build throughout the early twentieth century. Chicago's Black political machine and the political economy of the Black Metropolis's banks and businesses had disappeared.⁹⁸ While unemployment was widespread across the country for all races, African Americans faced the additional challenges of workplace discrimination and unofficial policies. One activity Chicagoans organized to promote Black jobs was a "Don't Spend Your Money Where You Can't Work" campaign, which Reed explains had the simple objective of making "every hard-earned dollar spent in the Black Metropolis return an additional benefit of job creation."⁹⁹ While this policy was not officially enacted at the Century of Progress, the thinking behind it is clear in some of the concerns Black Chicagoans had about participating in the fair. A Century of Progress was widely touted as a jobs creator, yet African Americans were sorely disappointed by the lack of job opportunities available to them.

Most of the relatively few jobs available to Black Chicagoans at the World's Fair were janitorial, specifically as toilet cleaners. World's Fair expert Robert Rydell describes the situation in his book, *World of Fairs*: "In 1933, only seventy-five African Americans found employment at the Century of Progress Exposition; in 1934, following the strenuous protests of the African-American community, the numbers increased to about three hundred."¹⁰⁰ He continues: "But with the exception of Rufus Dawes's private secretary, a handful of women who

⁹⁸ Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 1.

⁹⁹ Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 166.

worked as maids in the model home exhibits, a smattering of African-American policemen, and African American demonstrators in the Ford Motor company exhibit and in the Du Sable cabin, the overwhelming majority of African-American employees worked as toilet cleaners.”¹⁰¹

The one significant and highly visible exception mentioned by Rydell was Adam Beckley, an African American who served as secretary to Rufus Dawes, chairman of the exposition board and president of the Century of Progress International Exposition. Beckley was enslaved at birth and had more recently retired from being a postal worker.¹⁰² Beckley was described as the “major domo” of the fair, and he was one of the first people that visitors to Dawes’s office would have encountered.¹⁰³ Several *Defender* articles about the fair mentioned Beckley’s job as a point of pride and interest, including one in 1934 that held, “If you want to see Mr. Dawes, you had better make an appointment with Mr. Beckley first, or you may find yourself left out. Many important dignitaries found that out last year and others are finding it out this year as the fair progresses.”¹⁰⁴ While Beckley was seen as person of whom to be proud, it was unfortunate that he was essentially solo. One article describes the situation by praising him: “Mr. Beckley has done more than his fair share toward helping the Race maintain its self respect,” but it points out that, of course, he was only one person.¹⁰⁵ After the fair, Beckley described his experience in positive terms, saying he was “leaving this great drama with as much

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² “Adam Beckley Dies at 83: Nation’s Notables Knew Ex-Slave,” *Defender*, September 13, 1947.

¹⁰³ “Adam Beckley Has World Fair Post,” *Defender*, January 28, 1933.

¹⁰⁴ Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 9, 1934.

¹⁰⁵ Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 23, 1934.

pride and joy as I feel that I have again fulfilled my duty as a public servant and am now entitled to a well earned rest.” He also praised Dawes, saying that to have served under him was an honor, and he was the “most remarkable character” Beckley had ever known.¹⁰⁶ Beckley also praised Annie Oliver and said that anyone connected with the fair should feel proud of it.¹⁰⁷

The Urban League had a presence at the fair, and there were a few other instances where African Americans represented themselves, including in musical groups and through affiliations with a few universities. The *Defender* praised the Florida State exhibit for its representation of Black progress, but the Du Sable cabin was seen as the truest and most important space for self-representation at the fair. The cabin was successful because of the unity of vision of the women involved and their ability to obtain funds for the project.¹⁰⁸

World’s Fair scholars like Rydell and Ganz often discuss the fair’s “Negro Day” when considering race and the Century of Progress, and for good reason: the event highlights gaps between white fair organizers’ ideas about what they thought African Americans wanted and what African Americans actually wanted. Additionally, the story highlights differences in opinion between African American male community leaders. Several historians have thoroughly examined the “Negro Day” event, and it is often considered to be the best example of the story of African Americans and the Century of Progress Exposition. These scholars provide a

¹⁰⁶ Adam Beckley, “I Did the Best I Could,” *Defender*, November 10, 1934.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ganz, 1933 World’s Fair, 109.

comprehensive analysis of the event, so it is not the primary focus here, but some context is necessary.

Ganz outlines some of the planned activities of the day: a parade, a track meet featuring Jesse Owens, Robert Metcalfe, and other Black athletes, and a selection of Miss Bronze America.¹⁰⁹ *The Defender* characterized the day as a flop—members of Chicago’s African American community did not support the event and essentially ignored it.¹¹⁰ The day should not completely be designated as unsuccessful, though, because even though the turnout numbers were low, there is little way of knowing the reactions of people who did attend. Several Black professional athletes and performers agreed to be involved. Studying this day is a good reminder that while the *Defender* may have been the most prominent voice of Chicago’s Black community, the editorial perspective cannot possibly speak for all Depression-era Black Americans. Historian Christopher Robert Reed discusses the longstanding ideological challenge of racial representation: balancing an American nationality (and citizenship rights) with a racial identity revolving around a cultural base in West African traditions.¹¹¹ This ideological tension accounts for some of the issues surrounding “Negro Day.” Because several white ethnic groups had their own days, some African Americans felt a day would be a good way to celebrate a distinct racial (and cultural) identity, while others felt it excluded them and set them apart, instead of being fully recognized as American citizens.

¹⁰⁹ Ganz, 1933 World’s Fair, 114.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 137.

Ironically, this debate mimicked the debate between Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells about “Colored American Day” at the Columbian Exposition. In the end, “Negro Day” was held and featured a parade, a beauty contest for “Miss Bronze America,” and other events both on and away from the fairgrounds.¹¹² Due in part to controversy and divisions about whether to attend or to boycott, attendance was low, and the *Defender* labeled it a flop: one article headline read: “It Came, and Thank Heavens, It Went.”¹¹³ The day was all anyone could talk about for several weeks, and there seemed to be some relief once the event was over. “Negro Day” is often contrasted to the *Defender*’s annual Bud Billiken Day, held just one week later, which was a great success, as usual, especially as measured by crowds. Bud Billiken is a fictional character created by Robert Abbott who represents Black Chicago, and he has been viewed as a protector of children. Billiken Day is a community celebration that is most famous for its large parade, and the 1933 Billiken Day parade was viewed by approximately fifty thousand people, more than ten times the number of people who bought tickets for “Negro Day.”¹¹⁴ In the 1934 fair season, a pageant was held at Soldier Field called “O, Sing A New Song,” which included participation by several prominent African-American performers and musicians and highlighted progress for Black people.¹¹⁵ This event was much more enthusiastically received by Black communities than

¹¹² Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America*, 85.

¹¹³ Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at The Fair,” *Defender*, August 26, 1933.

¹¹⁴ Ganz, *1933 World’s Fair*, 115.

¹¹⁵ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, August 24, 1934.

Negro Day.¹¹⁶ After the pageant, audience members could visit the fairgrounds for a special reduced rate.¹¹⁷

Not only was there limited representation in fair exhibits and pavilions, some attractions were overtly racist, most notably one in particular where balls were thrown at a lever that dunked an African American man into a tank of water. “African Dip,” as the dunk tank attraction was known, was a familiar game to Depression Era Americans, and a version of it existed at Chicago’s Riverside amusement park until the late 1950s.¹¹⁸ The “African Dip” at the Century of Progress was closed by fair management after protests.¹¹⁹ Black Chicagoans had protested similar attractions at amusement parks both before and after the Great Depression, although an interesting point is that in those criticisms, equal blame was put on the men who would take such demeaning jobs as on white participants. *Defender* articles were harsh and called the men “good-for-nothing heathens” and worse.¹²⁰ During the Great Depression, the men tended to be seen as objects of pity trying to make what living they could. Outside of this period, the *Defender* was more critical. The “Rambling Reporter,” author of the reoccurring *Defender* column “A Day at

¹¹⁶ “Prepare for Gay Pageant at World's Fair,” *The Black Dispatch*, Oklahoma City, August 9, 1934, p. 8.

¹¹⁷ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, August 24, 1934.

¹¹⁸ “African Dip Carnival Game - February 2007,” African Dip Carnival Game - 2007 - Questions of the Month - Jim Crow Museum - Ferris State University, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2007/february.htm>.

¹¹⁹ Ganz, 1933 World’s Fair, 112.

¹²⁰ “The World’s Greatest Flying Balbo Sees the Fair,” *Defender*, July 29, 1933. “Protests Riverview ‘Dip,’” *Defender*, July 6, 1946. “Men in Statue; Babies in Courage,” *Defender*, July 27, 1912. “African Dip,” *Defender*, October 4, 1913.

the Fair,” wrote that “the inevitable ball dodgers are here too, I saw several of them get ducked in the water tanks this week and but for the fact that I knew the depression was on and people are doing many things today they wouldn’t do yesterday, I would have enjoyed seeing them fall in the cold water.” This may well have been implying that, in other circumstances, men who would accept this degrading job deserved the dunking.¹²¹

Another racist attraction on the fairgrounds was the Old Plantation Show, which depicted mythical happy slaves and included white performers in blackface. This production provided a few Black Chicagoans with jobs, but it was also “an opportunity for bigoted fairgoers to keep negative racial images alive.”¹²² The Sky Ride, the Century of Progress’s answer to the Columbian Exposition’s Ferris Wheel, had two towers and cable cars, and the towers were named Amos and Andy, after the main characters in a popular but racially stereotyped radio program.¹²³ The “Rambling Reporter” reported that “for some reason unknown,” the ride had taken on a “‘Race’ complexion.”¹²⁴

Another racist exhibit was “Darkest Africa,” which Century of Progress historian Cheryl Ganz has described as a midway attraction that was “anthropology-as-entertainment.”¹²⁵ The attraction was presented by long-time white showman Louis Dufor, with the help of African American showman Bob Lucas and a troupe of “Ubangi” people who had traveled extensively

¹²¹ “Seen and Heard at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 24, 1933.

¹²² Reed, *The Depression Comes*, 128.

¹²³ Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America*, 84.

¹²⁴ “Seen and Heard at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 24, 1933.

¹²⁵ Ganz, *1933 World’s Fair*, 112.

throughout the United States.¹²⁶ While the term “Ubangi” can reference a region in Chad, in this case (and many others from the mid-twentieth century) it was used to denote women with lip plate body modifications, making the term a misnomer and obsolete.¹²⁷ “Darkest Africa” type exhibits had existed at other World’s Fairs, including Buffalo in 1901. The exhibit was intended to be titillating, with portrayals of Africans as “brutal, sadistic savages.”¹²⁸ Cheryl Ganz recounts that fair officials debated whether to include an African American component in the exhibit. In addition to the “Ubangi” people, Nigerian royalty and Belgian Congo pygmy people performed, and officials eventually decided that expanding the exhibit would not, in fact, emphasize the progress of African Americans, but would instead make it a race exhibit.¹²⁹ The mixed reviews of the exhibit from African Americans, as well as protest, caused organizers to decide against inclusion.¹³⁰

What is challenging to unpack is African Americans’ reactions to the “Darkest Africa” exhibit. Ganz explains that it did attract a large African American audience, “many curious about their own history.” This is an interesting phrase because it equates anthropology with history in an almost social evolutionist manner.¹³¹ Likely, many fair visitors of all races sincerely wanted to

¹²⁶ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 167.

¹²⁷ Leonard J. Hoenig, “The Ubangi Misnomer,” *Clinics in Dermatology*, August 8, 2019, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0738081X19301488>. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Ubangi.”

¹²⁸ Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America*, 84.

¹²⁹ Ganz, *1933 World’s Fair*, 112.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

learn about other cultures but held assumptions that their own was superior—that is, an example of progress. In this way, “anthropology-as-entertainment” was also “anthropology-as-history.” In a less racially charged way, this conflation of culture with the past can also be seen in the foreign villages of the 1934 season, where Belgium, Germany, England, and other places were presented as picturesque villages suspended in a bygone era.

Several contemporary accounts do not read the exhibit in the same way historians do, with the depictions being of “brutal, sadistic savages.”¹³² There was a feeling of pride and interest in the continent, as described by Henry Brown, lead cartoonist for the *Defender* and head of the art department for *Abbott’s Monthly*, who wrote in a *Defender* article: “Once you visit it at the World’s Fair, you will come away with the thought that Africa is not dark after all, not beset with cannibalism, not ignorant altogether of western civilization, but brilliant and sparkling like the unpolished gems found in its regions.”¹³³ This complicates understandings of the exhibit as inherently offensive and, as Rydell puts it, “disgusting.” Henry Brown also wrote a description of the visiting Crown Prince of Nigeria’s confidant and advisor, who was a witch doctor, with a mix of fascination and respect.¹³⁴ Brown, he discussed the “many new features” added to an “already attractive program” in the Darkest Africa exhibit and claimed that additional attractions will “lend all the blend and harmony of the jungle.”¹³⁵ One Chicago newspaper reported on National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) activities surrounding

¹³² Rydell, Findling, and Pelle, *Fair America*, 84.

¹³³ Henry Brown, “‘Darkest Africa’ At A Century of Progress,” *Defender*, July 29, 1933.

¹³⁴ Henry Brown, “Crown Prince Guarded at World’s Fair by Witch Doctor,” *Defender*, August 19, 1933.

¹³⁵ Henry Brown, “A Day at the Fair,” *Defender*, September 9, 1933.

the fair and quoted the organization as saying, “the African Savage concession on the Midway has a number of southern Negroes posing as savages.”¹³⁶

Black fairgoers experienced discrimination as customers, as well. Their visits to the fair were marred by concession owners and vendors who did not want to comply with official fair policies regarding nondiscrimination in providing services to fairgoers. One tactic that was used by racist concessionaires was extremely poor service, i.e., officially complying by allowing Black patrons but making their experiences unpleasant.¹³⁷ For example, one convenience at the fair were roller chairs; essentially, visitors could pay for college boys to push them the long distances of the fair and provide information as they went. Rydell describes this practice as another area of discrimination, with white roller-chair pushers refusing to take Black patrons around the ground. Rydell quotes a concessionaire’s reasoning: “We have many southern boys here earning their way through school, and we don’t want to force them out of livelihood because certain things are against their customs.”¹³⁸

The NAACP fought many of these discriminatory practices with lawsuits and did not lose a single case out of the hundreds filed for individuals denied services in restaurants, theaters, and the fairgrounds during the fair period.¹³⁹ Similar to the World’s Columbian Exposition, African Americans disagreed on the appropriate level of involvement; some boycotted the fair, but others

¹³⁶ Century of Progress Scrapbooks [Box 2, Folder 1] Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

¹³⁷ Ganz, *1933 World’s Fair*, 112.

¹³⁸ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 166–67.

¹³⁹ Ganz, *1933 World’s Fair*, 113.

“aware that the fair was attempting to chart a roadmap to the future, determined to use the exposition to change the direction America was heading.”¹⁴⁰

One of the great triumphs of the NAACP was a partnership with a few African American state legislators who held up legislation authorizing a continuation of the fair for the 1934 season until exposition management included wording that forbade fairground discrimination.¹⁴¹ President Roosevelt urged the Century of Progress to reopen the fair for another year, and fair officials “found themselves in the awkward position of needing the support in the Illinois legislature from a handful of African-American representatives to reauthorize the private Century of Progress corporation to continue to use public land for the 1934 fair.”¹⁴² The world’s fair was a site of civil rights activism. In the 1934 season, Sally Rand and the wild animal showman Frank Buck appeared at an NAACP fundraiser. Rand explained that she got hundreds of requests to perform at charity events, but this was the only one she wanted to participate in, and in fact it would be her only appearance outside the fairgrounds in 1934.¹⁴³ Rand was quoted in the *Defender* as saying, “I am coming because I want to and I desire to help. Not only on the night of the affair, but from now on you may count on me to help in any way I can.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Encyclopedia of Chicago, s.v. “Century of Progress Exposition.”

¹⁴¹ Encyclopedia of Chicago, s.v. “Century of Progress Exposition.”

¹⁴² Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 170.

¹⁴³ “Sally Rand, Fan Dancer, at N.A.A.C.P. Midnite Show,” *Chicago Defende*, August 4, 1934, p. 21.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

World's Fairs have often been rightfully associated with the history of racism and imperialism. The Century of Progress Exposition has, in addition to a history of racism, a history of people fighting against racism. Black involvement in the fair was limited, especially for employment numbers, but the fairgrounds were also a contested space. Black Chicagoans, especially the women of the National De Saible Memorial Society, saw the benefits of using the fairground space to reach a wider audience. While the lived experience of fairgoers might have still included discrimination, the difference was the increased power to challenge it. This was the first time in the history of world's fairs that a group of African Americans successfully challenged the hegemony of fairs—bulwarks of white supremacy—and used the fair as a forum for promoting civil rights.¹⁴⁵

The *Chicago Defender* recognized that there was not supposed to be discrimination on fairgrounds, but it still might happen nevertheless. Multiple articles encouraged readers to report any discrimination they encountered both to “the world’s greatest weekly” and to “CALL A COP!”¹⁴⁶ Additionally, visitors were directed to “permit no one to Jim Crow you,” especially Southern Black visitors who might “feel backward in demanding their rights.”¹⁴⁷ The “Rambling Reporter” explained the situation in Chicago to out-of-towners: “Incidentally for those who do not know it Illinois also has a law which makes it a criminal offense to discriminate against citizens on basis of race or color, so if you should be refused service, and the person who refused

¹⁴⁵ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, 171.

¹⁴⁶ Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at The Fair,” *Defender*, September 22, 1933.

¹⁴⁷ “Demand Your Rights,” *Defender*, May 13, 1933.

you is dumb enough to state that he did so because of your color, go to the nearest police court and get a warrant for his arrest.”¹⁴⁸

The *Defender* also criticized fair-adjacent businesses like hotels and argued that it was high time to lower the “color bar,” especially because so many foreign visitors to the fair would be people of color.¹⁴⁹ The *Defender* argued that “Segregation in all its aspects is unjust and wrong, but there is nothing more vicious than the insult that may be offered to the ‘stranger at our gates,’ Chicago cannot afford to offer that insult and the only way that can be avoided is to remove all barriers and allow all men to stand on their merits.”¹⁵⁰ At the same time, there was a measure of pride that Chicago was a more progressive city than some of those in the south, as evidenced by a *Defender* story that mocked a young man from “Bam” who asked if he could be served at a fair café.¹⁵¹ That story is not alone in its criticisms of Black fairgoers; another reporter asked, “Why do dark people look so lonesome and so frightened as they walk through the grounds? Why do they sneak up to a restaurant, look hungrily through the plate glass at vacuous waiters serving vacuous customers, and then slink furtively away to end up at a hamburger stand?”¹⁵²

Reporter Dewey Jones who assessed the status of the fair’s second season in early 1934 described seeing “dark faces everywhere I see white ones” and explained that he “couldn’t help

¹⁴⁸ “Seen and Heard at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 24, 1933.

¹⁴⁹ “City Hotels Must Lower Color Bar,” *Defender*, December 10, 1932.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ “Seen And Heard at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 1, 1933.

¹⁵² Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 23, 1934.

but wonder what would have been the case had this fair been in session in Atlanta or Birmingham or Baltimore—or even Washington.”¹⁵³ In another installment of “A Day at the Fair,” the same reporter, Dewey Jones, recounted a conversation he had with a white college girl from Georgia who expressed pleasant surprise at seeing “Coloreds and whites playing tennis together” at Washington Park.¹⁵⁴ Jones was pleased the woman used the term “Coloreds” and avoided other terms, and he recounted discussing interracial activities in Chicago as a point of pride. The young woman had heard of the *Chicago Defender* because her family chauffeur read it “all the time.”¹⁵⁵

The *Defender* ran articles that were both hopeful and critical, and much like other Chicago newspapers, it could not help but talk about the fair constantly. By the end of the 1933 fair season, *Defender* writers were pulling no punches. Dewey Jones argued that the fair was “a white man’s proposition, and the white man ran it to suit himself.”¹⁵⁶ A 1934 article reported on a formerly enslaved elderly man who was visiting the fair and used that story to criticize the ongoing continuation of Jim Crow:

the ex-slave is Uncle Will Butler, born 1813, as the slave of George L. Trenhol. He is attending the Fair as the guest of M. S. Porter, of Nashville. Uncle Will Butler, though now free, could not ride from Atlanta on a Pullman like other free persons: he had to take a Jim Crow car to come to the Fair to see how far the men who had enslaved him had

¹⁵³ Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at the Fair,” *Defender*, June 9, 1934.

¹⁵⁴ Dewey R. Jones, “A Day at the Fair,” *Defender*, September 2, 1933.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Dr. D. A. Bethea, “The 1934 World’s Fair,” *Defender*, November 25, 1933.

advanced. Uncle Will carried in his hand a Confederate soldier's hat. This was no doubt the penalty he had to pay for being allowed to come to the Fair.¹⁵⁷

The history of slavery, in other words, was not far behind them.

Nearly all critical articles still gave credit to what little self-representation did exist, such as the work of the National De Saible Memorial Society. The cabin space, the pamphlet for visitors, and the Memorial Society Hostesses made a very favorable impression on Black fair visitors. A retrospective pointed out: “The representation that we had was very creditable, as far as it went, but like your pay check, it did not go far enough.” It went on to discuss employment issues and concluded with: “Aside from the DeSaible exhibit, which was very fine, it is doubtful if the average visitor saw any other Race display.”¹⁵⁸

Balbo Story

One particular story of the Century of Progress Exposition links American racial politics with international politics in a significant way, reminding modern audiences that Depression-era Black Chicagoans were both a part of and excluded from the rest of American society. Italian general Italo Balbo visited the World’s Fair in an aviation feat that impressed Chicagoans and the rest of the world, and *Defender* reporters recounted the visit. Balbo was a fascist party leader and a close associate of Benito Mussolini.¹⁵⁹ He led the Italian Formation Flight of 24 seaplanes from Rome to Chicago during the fair, and he was welcomed warmly. This transatlantic flight was the first of its kind and was technically challenging: the team had trained one year for the

¹⁵⁷ “Ex-slave, 121, Here to Visit World’s Fair,” *Defender*, June 30, 1934.

¹⁵⁸ Dr. D. A. Bethea, “The 1934 World’s Fair,” *Defender*, November 25, 1933.

¹⁵⁹ *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, s.v. “Who is Balbo?” 1933.”
<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11184.html>.

trip.¹⁶⁰ Balbo's visit to the city was much-touted and Chicago's Italian Americans were relieved to have someone of which to be proud; indeed, fascism's modernizing effect on Italy was seen as impressive and positive in 1933. Balbo gave the city a monument: an ancient Corinthian column which was dismantled, divided amongst the 24 planes, and reassembled in Chicago.¹⁶¹

Chicagoans were thrilled with the visit. Balbo was much feted in the city, and a street was named after him.¹⁶² Not everybody was on board—anti-fascist groups did threaten to “blow Gen. Italo Balbo and his 24 seaplanes out of the lake,” according to one report, but by far the reception of the fascists was positive.¹⁶³ A *Chicago Tribune* image of the planes flying over New York en route to Chicago is captioned with the idea that it looked like the Statue of Liberty was giving a fascist salute—the romance of aviation made Americans less than critical at this stage.¹⁶⁴

Balbo's visit to Chicago is related to the city's African American population because of a story recounted in the *Defender* about the general visiting a racist exhibit at the fair: the previously-discussed “African Dip.” The article discusses the general's schedule and tour of the midway: “when the party arrived at the spot where you hit a Negro with a baseball, thus

¹⁶⁰ This column is Chicago's most ancient outdoor monument, and it remains controversial because of the gift-giver. Chicago Park District, “Balbo Monument,” Chicago Park District, accessed July 7, 2021, <https://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/parks-facilities/balbo-monument>.

¹⁶¹ Chicago Park District, “Balbo Monument,” Chicago Park District, accessed July 7, 2021, <https://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/parks-facilities/balbo-monument>.

¹⁶² At the time of writing, Balbo Drive retains its name despite years of protest against a street named after a high-ranking fascist in the middle of the city. Lake Shore Drive has just been renamed the lengthy Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable Lake Shore Drive. It is this author's opinion that Balbo Drive should be renamed Du Sable Drive as a way to recognize Du Sable while also ridding the city of a street named after a fascist leader.

¹⁶³ Century of Progress Scrapbooks [Box 1, Folder 3] Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

dropping him into a barrel of water, he seemed bewildered. But the game was explained to him and he soon grasped the idea. He laughed uproariously when, on his third throw, he dropped one of the Negroes into the water.”¹⁶⁵ The white Americans who scheduled Balbo’s tour intended to convey racist messages to him:

That might have been fun for the general—fun only—but for the Americans who planned that part of the trip it was a subtle carrying out of a preconceived plot. From the time General Balbo and his 99 compatriots arrived here until they left they were allowed to meet no ‘Negroes.’ They were told nothing about the dark population of Chicago. They were not shown any evidence of our progress or our efforts to overcome the handicaps which white America has placed about us. But they were shown three men trying to earn a measley (sic) living by being doused in a barrel of water. And, according to the news report, the general ‘got the idea.’ He probably did—they usually do.¹⁶⁶

What was notable about this story was that the *Defender* reporter makes no particular statement about Balbo’s politics or prejudices before he arrived. Like many white reporters of the time, the *Defender* reporters were not necessarily bothered by Balbo’s fascist ideology itself. Instead, this was recounted as an instance where a famous foreign dignitary visited, and African Americans were not only denied self-representation to greet them, but the visitor was promptly introduced to American-style racism. In terms of World’s Fairs representing culture, the Century of Progress Exhibition proved that Chicago was no racial utopia.

Conclusion

Throughout her life Annie Oliver worked to organize her community for a variety of causes. Her work in various women’s clubs and organizations was extensive and revealed a deep belief in the power of women working together to create a positive impact. She once said, “One

¹⁶⁵ “The World’s Greatest Flying Balbo Sees the Fair,” *Defender*, July 29, 1933.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

woman is helpful. 100 women are forceful; 1,000 women are powerful; 1,000,000 women—UNITED—are invincible.”¹⁶⁷ Upon Oliver’s death in November 1962, the African-American Heritage Association wrote a resolution commending her work. The document was filled with praise:

Let the name of Annie E. Oliver ring throughout Chicago among all peoples who ought to be, grateful. Let her name be held high as an inspiration to our children, as a noble example that perseverance and resoluteness, in spite of difficulties, are the sure way to achievement, to freedom and to dignity. Annie E. Oliver is not dead. She lives on among the citizens of Chicago, wherever the name of Du Sable is mentioned and the story of his recognition as Chicago’s First Settler is told.¹⁶⁸

Many historians mention Oliver’s work only in passing, but it was, and continues to be, deeply meaningful to Chicago’s African American community. This resolution summarizes the importance of her and her associates’ work in recognizing and commemorating Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable. A portion of the document reads:

Let no one minimize how important is the recognition of Afro-American Du Sable as Chicago’s First Settler. Such recognition is part of the very struggle for the recognition of the very humanity of Africans and of American citizens of African descent. Such recognition is an essential part of the fight for equality and equal opportunity. Thus, Annie E. Oliver, and her associates, in the unflinching and sustained work for recognition of Du Sable, fought in real for the rights and opportunities of American citizens of African descent.¹⁶⁹

Oliver’s work to expand recognition for Du Sable, at the Century of Progress Exposition and beyond, was a claiming of history and of humanity. The African-American Heritage Association concluded, “Moreover, in her fight for truth about the First Settler of Chicago, Annie

¹⁶⁷ “100 Federated Clubs Is Goal of Organizer,” *Chicago Defender*, September 10, 1938, p. 17.

¹⁶⁸ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 1, Folder 31], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

E. Oliver, with the Du Sable Memorial Society, fought not just for Afro-Americans; she fought for America; for the need and urgency of truth knows no color line.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Annie E. Oliver Papers, [Box 1, Folder 31], Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional Library, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature.

CHAPTER 5

“THIS IS NOT MOUNT VERNON, VIRGINIA”:

THE CENTURY OF PROGRESS’ COLONIAL VILLAGE

Introduction

In July 1934, a young Chicago boy wrote to Sally Joy Brown, wish-granter of the *Chicago Tribune*, hoping to win a trip to see the reopened world’s fair. Sally Joy Brown had led children on sponsored events in the city throughout the Great Depression. The boy explained that he understood that most “ladies like girls better than they do boys” (especially given boys’ proclivities for tearing their pants and getting black eyes), but he hoped she was different and would consider him as a candidate for the trip.¹ He expressed interest in the Midget City and the “dandy” Black Forest, but one portion of the fair got two mentions: the Colonial Village. His teacher had recommended seeing it, and he was particularly interested in the Colonial Village if it had “something about Abraham Lincoln,” with whom he shared a birthday.² Fortunate for this letter-writer, Sally Joy Brown took 100 children, with an even split of girls and boys;³ also fortunate, he would have had a chance to see something about Abraham Lincoln even without visiting the Lincoln Group. Another youthful attendee of the fair recorded in her diary that the

¹ “Boy Tells Why He Wants to See the Fair,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1934.

² Ibid.

³ “The Next Sally Party to Be at World's Fair,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1934.

village had a show where “five dead presidents” talked, including Lincoln.⁴ The Colonial Village was not tightly bound to historical accuracy.

The Century of Progress Exposition’s second season was frequently billed as a new fair. It was said that seeing the fair in 1933 was not the same as experiencing it in 1934. One of the most significant changes from the first year was the addition of several “villages.” Inspired by the success of the Belgian Village in 1933, multiple parties opened new sections of the fair as concessions. Generally, these spaces were referred to as “the foreign villages,” although one of them was not foreign at all, unless one calls to mind L.P. Hartley’s statement: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”⁵ The American Colonial Village was one of the most popular attractions at the fair’s 1934 incarnation, with more than 1.4 million visitors.⁶

The Colonial Village was considered an educational site, and children’s tours became a regular feature at the request of their parents and other adults.⁷ If Sally Joy Brown and her horde of letter-writing children entered the Colonial Village through its main entrance, they would have likely passed through a gate guarded by young women on horseback.⁸ The women were dressed in late eighteenth-century style clothing, but they probably would not have worn such clothing

⁴ Claire Lieber Crews Diary, Newberry Library, Chicago [Midwest MS 163, Box 16].

⁵ L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (England: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).

⁶ Lydia Mattice Brandt, *First in the Homes of His Countrymen: George Washington’s Mount Vernon in the American Imagination* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 150.

⁷ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁸ Chicago History Museum, Abakanowicz Research Center, topical files: Events--Exhibitions--Illinois--Chicago--Century of Progress--Villages—Colonial.

had it actually been the eighteenth century; they were dressed in men's attire, and specifically in soldier's uniforms. Several photographs of young female reenactors in the colonial village exist, but archival evidence is scantier when it comes to who they were or why they were dressed as men. Images captured by official fair photographers Kauffman and Fabry do not have captions that clarify matters. These young women performed on the open space known as the village green, and at least half of them changed into women's clothing at some point during their performance.⁹ A magazine that was unofficially affiliated with the fair listed "Village Girls," likely referring to these women, but provided no further clues as to their organizational affiliation, whether they were hired or volunteered, or how they got involved at the fair.¹⁰ The Chicago chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) has kept several scrapbooks, one of which includes newspaper clippings that reference the Colonial Village at the fair. A few of these clippings picture costumed women listed by name, but none of them (aside from the replica Mount Vernon hostesses) can be found on the membership lists of the DAR. Unfortunately, the process of elimination does not help to solve this mystery; just because they are not in the DAR membership lists does not mean that they were not DAR members. The DAR records reflect their members' last known names and state of activity, meaning that if any of these young women got married and took their husbands' last names, that is how they would be

⁹ Claire Lieber Crews Diary, Newberry Library, Chicago [Midwest MS 163, Box 16].

¹⁰ "Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer's Tiny Magazine," October 1934. (Box 15, Folder 1c). Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

listed. American marriage customs have obscured the historical record of women's involvement at the Colonial Village.



Figure 18. Women dressed as historic soldiers in the Colonial Village. COP_17_0001_00008_004, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

These mysterious women exemplify the idea that the Century of Progress's Colonial Village was just a historic set dressing for modern stories, especially stories about race and gender. Would Sally Joy Brown's visiting schoolchildren have noticed that Black history was absent from the Colonial Village, just as Black businesses were largely absent from the rest of the fair? Would they have wondered why Native Americans performed on the village green but had no homes or buildings within the village? They might have enjoyed seeing women dressed as Pilgrim-style witches, but they would have had no way of knowing about the work modern

women were doing to preserve colonial buildings. The past was a contested space. In the Colonial Village, Depression-era Americans considered what it meant to be American, tried to understand what the past was actually like, struggled to claim the past for themselves, and fought for recognition in what was actually a modern space dressed up as the past.

Sociologist Diane Barthel's conception of "staged symbolic communities" is a useful model for understanding the fair's Colonial Village. Barthel explores staged symbolic communities; that is, staged representations of past communities, or spaces that serve a symbolic function for society by performing the role of community.¹¹ She describes these communities as "cultural form[s] through which the objective past receives collective subjective interpretations."¹² This certainly applied to the Century of Progress Colonial Village, where the objective setting and events of colonial America were interpreted subjectively at the space at the fair by multiple stakeholders. The Colonial Village was a concession, meaning that it was owned and operated by a company other than A Century of Progress. Colonial Village, Inc. was owned by Chicagoan Joseph Beuttas, who was also owner of the B-W Construction Company. Details about Beuttas are difficult to track down, but it is clear that using his building company to construct the Colonial Village was a money-making enterprise. As the Great Depression wore on and the fair was a success in its first year, it made sense for him to get involved in this business venture.

¹¹ Diane Barthel, "Nostalgia for America's Village Past: Staged Symbolic Communities (*International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 1990), 80.

¹² *Ibid.*

Other stakeholders included Thomas Tallmadge, an architect who worked with Beuttas and was known for his own designs and writings on American architectural history. Tallmadge's architecture firm was responsible for the plan of the village, but another Chicago architect, Benjamin Marshall, served as the village's manager. The architecture that Marshall designed still stands throughout Chicago, and some of his works have become iconic, like Chicago's Drake Hotel and the pink Edgewater Beach Hotel. But another one was more infamous: the Iroquois Theater.

The Iroquois Theater burned shortly after its opening in 1903, even though it had been promoted as fireproof. More than 600 people died in the fire—more than double the number of people who died in the Great Chicago Fire. Because the inferno started during a matinee, many of the victims were children. The Iroquois Theater fire remains the deadliest single building fire in American history, and it is the second most deadly incident in Chicago history after the *Eastland* disaster. Immediately after the disaster, Marshall (and others—theater employees and city officials) was arrested but posted bond. Marshall was found not guilty in the subsequent hearings because the law “could not distinguish among the hundreds killed by smoke and fire and those killed by the panic-stricken crowd in their desperate efforts to survive.”¹³ His career was largely undamaged by this, and his *New York Times* obituary did not mention the Iroquois Theater (or the Colonial Village) at all.¹⁴ Even though Marshall's professional career was not

¹³ James A. Pierce, “An Important Epitaph for the Victims of the Iroquois Theatre Fire,” *Marquee* (Washington, D.C.) 48, no. 2 (2016): 7–14. For more information about the Iroquois Theater, see Nat Brandt, *Chicago Death Trap: The Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ “Benj. H. Marshall, Leading Architect,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1944. Coincidentally, when the theater was rebuilt it was renamed the Colonial Theater.

ruined by the tragedy, it is difficult to imagine that anyone could be personally unaffected by that experience. Marshall has been referred to as a “scandal-free real life Gatsby,” but perhaps his playboy lifestyle became restricted when the Great Depression hit, which might have led him to get involved in the Colonial Village after his firm went bankrupt in 1934.¹⁵

Women’s patriotic and historic organizations were involved in the Colonial Village too, with the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association both claiming a replica Mount Vernon, George Washington’s plantation home. Even more hands shaped this space: some of the businesses within the Colonial Village operated as sub-concessions. The other key stakeholders were the visitors who toured the site, processed their experiences, and added to their understandings and perceptions of early America. Barthel discusses myths as stories that resolve contradictions, and considering this example of America’s mythic colonial past can be useful for understanding the contradictions of modern life that it attempted to smooth over. In particular, there were tensions about sex, race, and gender.¹⁶

Some might say that American colonial architecture has been in a continued state of revival for years. During the 1930s, however, the world (and especially the aesthetic) of colonial America received special attention—not only in the development of new homes inspired by colonial architecture, but also through several historic preservation projects, and most notably

¹⁵ “Doc about the Windy City Architect Regarded as a ‘Scandal-Free Great Gatsby’ Premieres next Week at Siskel Center,” Reel Chicago - At the intersection of Chicago Advertising, Entertainment, Media and Production, November 16, 2019, <https://reelchicago.com/article/benjamin-marshall/> and Blair Kamin, “Chicago Architect Benjamin Marshall’s Work Highlighted in New Book,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/ct-benjamin-marshall-book-kamin-met-0401-20160331-column.html>.

¹⁶ Barthel, “Nostalgia,” 83.

Colonial Williamsburg. Architectural historian David Gebhard explains that the colonial style was the most prevalent architectural image of the 1930s, and it had already been in revival for more than fifty years.¹⁷ Gebhard notes that the colonial “always ended up commenting on both the past and the present.” This is also true for the Colonial Village at a Century of Progress.¹⁸ Gebhard points out that all three of the major 1930s exhibitions (Chicago, New York, San Francisco) referred to the colonial architectural tradition, even though they were all committed to “the modernist cause.”¹⁹

Pan-colonialism, Myth, and Commercialism

Immediately within the gates, past the mounted sentry, visitors to the Colonial Village concession saw a replica of Paul Revere’s Boston home on their left and the Virginia Tavern on their right. This pair is fitting, because the two core aspects of the Colonial Village were myth and commercialism. The space presented a vision of the American past that visitors expected to see, and that they were willing to pay an additional fee on top of the general fair admission.

The Paul Revere story continues to mix history and legend. The Revolutionary-era silversmith remembered for his 1775 “midnight ride” to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock of the British regulars’ approach. Many 1930s Americans would have been deeply familiar with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s depiction of the American patriot, and subtle references to him are visible in various fair materials. Longfellow’s poem, “Paul Revere’s Ride,” was published in

¹⁷ David Gebhard, “The American Colonial Revival in the 1930s,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 22, no. 2/3 (1987), 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

1860 and transformed a “relatively obscure, although locally known, figure into a national folk hero.”²⁰

Revere was one of the most prominent figures of the founding generation at the Colonial Village. Ads promoting Revere Copper and Brass, Inc. were distributed at the Revere House, and souvenirs rolled advertising and storytelling into one.²¹ In a way, this was fitting for Paul Revere, who created an engraving of the events that came to be known as the Boston Massacre and was a veritable “spin doctor” of the American Revolution.²² The engraving has been called one of the most effective pieces of propaganda in American history.²³

Revere was revered at the fair, with one publication describing the famous midnight ride as “immortal.”²⁴ A descendant of Paul Revere visited the village for “Revere Day” on September 11, 1934, and the *Chicago Tribune* reported the story of Paul Revere as “one of the most stirring events in the history of the United States.”²⁵ Revere’s great-grandson posed for photographs with

²⁰ “Biography,” Paul Revere House, April 15, 2022, <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/biography/>.

²¹ “Paul Revere House” and “The Secret of Paul Revere” [Box 15, Folders 1 and 1a] Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

²² A tour guide at Independence Hall referred to Revere as a “spin doctor” when I visited in Fall of 2021, and I loved it.

²³ “The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Advanced Placement United States History Study Guide,” Paul Revere’s engraving of the Boston Massacre, 1770 | AP US History Study Guide from The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, March 24, 2012, <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/resource/paul-revere%27s-engraving-boston-massacre-1770>.

²⁴ “Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer’s Tiny Magazine,” October 1934. [Box 15, Folder 1c] Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

²⁵ “Recall Paul Revere’s Ride,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 12, 1934.

Century of Progress fair president Rufus Dawes. Dawes happened to be a descendant of William Dawes, who less famously but more successfully participated in the midnight ride.²⁶ Male reenactors, Al Elz and Gerald Stearns, posed with the great-grandsons, and a mounted detachment and fife and drum corps paraded through the fairgrounds.²⁷ The day also included a recital of the Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," complete with the familiar "one if by land, two if by sea."²⁸ A Century of Progress publication claimed that William Dawes was not as well-known as Paul Revere because Longfellow found Revere easier to rhyme than Dawes.²⁹ The Revere house was sponsored by the Revere Copper and Brass Co., which exhibited their products and conducted silversmithing demonstrations.³⁰ The parts of the Colonial Village dedicated to Revere show what was probably an outsized appreciation for him relative to his impact on the American Revolution; no one but George Washington was featured more. The spaces and events devoted to Revere were (perhaps a fitting) mix of myth, patriotism, and commercialism. Much of the Colonial Village was similar to the Paul Revere story: people largely saw a historical story they were familiar with, could celebrate, and already believed to be true.

²⁶ "Recall Paul Revere's Ride," *Chicago Tribune*, September 12, 1934.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, and Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, September 11, 1934.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, September 8, 1934.

³⁰ "Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer's Tiny Magazine," October 1934. [Box 15, Folder 1c] Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

The Virginia Tavern, across the “High Street” from the Paul Revere House, was an operating restaurant—a reminder that the Colonial Village claimed to be educational but was first and foremost a commercial operation. People at the fair needed to eat, and there is always money to be made on hungry tourists. A “colonial themed” restaurant fit the spirit of the village perfectly. The entire village was a direct result of the commercial and popular success of the Belgian Village in the 1933 fair season. Shops in the colonial village sold “copper and brass, woven rugs, Colonial dolls, miniature Mayflowers, spinning wheels,” and other souvenirs.³¹ The Benjamin Franklin press sold souvenirs, almanacs, and postcards.

Opposite the Virginia Tavern was the Wayside Inn, another site inspired by Longfellow, but this time because of his poem, “Tales of A Wayside Inn.” The restaurant was also a commercial enterprise and the site of a mid-twentieth-century story, which had much older roots. Chicago’s prominent African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, chronicled an incident of discrimination at the restaurant. A prominent bishop of the AME Zion Church and a companion were refused service at the Inn, on Constitution Day no less.³² State legislators, along with the NAACP, had worked to include anti-discriminatory language in the legislation that permitted the Century of Progress’s second season, but white fairgrounds staff still employed various tactics to annoy, inconvenience, and humiliate African American visitors. These also occurred in other sites around the fair and included delayed service, missing silverware and

³¹ “Chicago Fair Enchants Those Who Visit It,” *The Central New Jersey Home News*, September 30, 1934, p. 7.

³² “Bishop Denied Service at Fair Inn,” *Chicago Defender*, September 29, 1934.

water glasses, and protestations of misunderstandings.³³ The bishop finally discussed the matter with the restaurant hostess and asserted that he “thought the matter had been cleared up by the state legislature.”³⁴ The pair were eventually served their food, but not without a firm reminder of their actual era.

The two restaurants and the Paul Revere house illustrated the combination of mythmaking and moneymaking that characterized the Colonial Village. They also demonstrate a disregard for distinctions in time and place. The Colonial Village might be described as “pan-colonial.” The fairground buildings represented more than a century of time and hundreds of miles of space as a single village. Colonial America was represented as both a time and a region: a double space. This anachronistic community featured Mount Vernon and Pilgrim homes near each other as if they existed side-by-side. Perhaps fairgoers could discern different time periods and geographical regions, or perhaps they could not. Even with this “pan-colonial” presentation, however, the emphasis was on the thirteen British North American colonies that became the early United States and did not include all colonial settings in North America. For instance, the Spanish colonies of the southwest were not represented.

If a visitor was to stand near the two restaurants and the Paul Revere house, they would have the option of heading to the village green and Mount Vernon or continuing south down Meeting Street to the rest of the village. Meeting Street served as a main street for the imagined village, lined with a colonial governor’s mansion (perhaps inspired by the one at Williamsburg,

³³ “Bishop Denied Service at Fair Inn,” *Chicago Defender*, September 29, 1934.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

which was undergoing extensive revival); Wakefield, the birthplace of George Washington, a village smithy; Boston's Old North Church, a Pilgrim settlement; and spaces dedicated to two Philadelphians, Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross. This is the area where the "pan-colonial" image of the past is most apparent.

One word that repeatedly appeared in regard to the Colonial Village was "authenticity." The fair organizers and Colonial Village concessionaires were selling an experience, along with candy, food, and various souvenirs. Because the Colonial Village had an additional admission fee on top of the one to enter the Century of Progress, visiting it had to be worth something to money-conscious 1930s visitors. By highlighting a concept of historical authenticity, the organizers were selling "the real deal" version of Colonial America, even though the Colonial Village was entirely a twentieth-century conception and construction. Can a historic village be authentic if none of the buildings are original? One press release stated that "builders of the American Colonial Village have captured the atmosphere of Revolutionary days—and make characters who lived then seem to return to walk in the shaded old streets. And, walking with them, the modern visitor quickly becomes part of the scene."³⁵ This advertisement for the space unironically invokes heroic figures returning to a space that had only just been built, where the streets were barely shaded and hardly old.

A few statements by village manager Benjamin Marshall revealed contradictions regarding authenticity. He told the *Tribune* that everything would be as "authentic as possible to carry out the illusion of early American days." Here we have authenticity in the service of

³⁵ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. June 22, 1934.

illusion.³⁶ He also claimed that all of the souvenirs would be “authentic reproductions” of colonial materials.³⁷

The architect for the Colonial Village was Thomas Tallmadge, who Lydia Mattice Brandt introduces as follows: “The Chicago-based architect was on the Advisory Committee of Architects for Colonial Williamsburg and the author of one of the earliest survey histories of American architecture.”³⁸ Tallmadge thought that if the buildings were faithful replicas of historic buildings, that made them authentic (although there was some controversy over whether the buildings were actually faithful replicas, especially Mount Vernon).³⁹ Joseph Beuttas or other organizers likely did not stress too much over what authenticity actually meant here, even as they touted the space as possessing that attribute. Or, if there was stress, it was resolved in favor of modern need over authenticity. For instance, the *Tribune* reported on a humorous incident during the village’s construction: “It seemed wrong to have a telephone in the Colonial village at the World's Fair; too much of an anachronism in an early American scene. It bothered the architect and the contractor quite a bit, since they felt a telephone was almost a necessity. Then Mr. Joe Beuttas finally figured out a way to ameliorate the offense. Telephone officials cooperated, and now the number is 1776...Calumet.”⁴⁰

³⁶“A Quaint Addition to ‘Main Street’ at the 1934 World's Fair,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 1934.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Brandt, *First in the Homes*, 148.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Century of Progress Notes,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 1934.

A unique aspect of the various foreign villages at the fair, including the Colonial Village, was that they were constructed spaces within a space. The city of Chicago grew up on the shore of Lake Michigan over one hundred years, but the World's Fair was a space both apart from and a part of the city, constructed deliberately and rapidly. The Colonial Village, then, was an additional space within that space of the World's Fair, added deliberately and even more rapidly to that. By entering the Century of Progress Exposition, fairgoers left the city of Chicago behind. When they entered the Colonial Village, they briefly left the Century of Progress Exposition behind to inhabit yet another removed space. This space-within-a-space of the Colonial Village was removed from the rest of the exposition, which highlighted modern life and the future.

The Colonial Village was a jumble of both time and space. In this case, the past was a place, a specific place that one could visit. With reassurances that the Colonial Village was authentic in promotional materials, time travel became almost possible: one could truly visit the past. One could feel that their desire to have an authentic experience was fulfilled even when none of the buildings were original. None of the buildings were more than one year old, much less centuries, and they were hundreds of miles away from the originals on which they were modeled. Yet, the American Colonial past was seen as a place that one could visit, much like Belgium or the Black Forest—and certainly as much as the Belgian and Black Forest Villages at the fair.



Figure 19. Reenactors parade in the Colonial Village. COP_17_0001_00008_006, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

Cockloft Lane and Edutainment

Long before children’s museums and other historic sites grappled with Disneyfication and the balance of education and entertainment in edutainment, the Colonial Village struggled to find that balance. For all the talk of authenticity and uplifting civic education, Beuttas, Tallmadge, and other interested parties wanted to draw in visitors and make money. Their competition at the fair was decidedly more titillating—from the thrilling demonstrations of modern technology to the salacious and still infamous peep shows on the Streets of Paris.

To draw crowds, make money, and bill themselves as a space for adults to visit on their own (without children or maiden aunts in tow), people used the Colonial Village space to grapple with an important question about the past: was it sexy? Mixed messages about the frumpiness or

allure of the colonial past show up in a couple of places. First, in the society pages, *Tribune* writer Judith Cass devoted multiple articles in the spring of 1934 to promoting the high-class parties that took place on the fairgrounds to kick off the fair's second season. Multiple villages held their own balls, with the Colonial Village hosting a "Martha Washington Ball," sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution. The *Tribune* promised that the event would be a "lovely, glamorous affair with the charm of old Virginia combined with the Puritanism of New England."⁴¹ Guests attended in colonial costume and, ostensibly, comport themselves with the dignity of the Puritans. This event was originally described as a bit tamer than the ones held elsewhere: "Many who are planning to enjoy the Streets of Paris gayety late Saturday night and early Sunday morning intend to go to the Martha Washington ball in the Colonial Village first, for of course Colonial Village festivities will be over long before those of the Streets of Paris will end. Not that the Colonial Village won't be gay and festive Saturday night, but dancing into the wee small hours of the morning hardly would fit in with the authentic colonial atmosphere that Tom Tallmadge has insisted upon having in the village."⁴² This nod to authenticity belies an expectation of a more subdued, tamer colonial past: everyone knows that the Founding Fathers did not party into the "wee small hours" of the morning.

Just before the event, a reporter clarified that the Colonial Village would indeed be open until dawn. Perhaps the Daughters of the American Revolution bristled at the idea of their ancestors as stodgy, or maybe they just wanted Chicago society to let loose, because the reporter

⁴¹ "Three Parties at Fair Opening to Lure Society," *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1934

⁴² "Society Will Have Gay Time at Fair Party," *Chicago Tribune*, May 22, 1934.

explained: “It seems that those who thought the Colonial Village inaugural ball would be an early affair were wrong for it is to last until dawn and those who are in charge of it promise that it will have more of the atmosphere of elegant and gay old Virginia than of Puritan and austere New England in its early days.”⁴³ Besides this ball, the question of historical spiciness came up in Cockloft Lane. Another reporter covering the Colonial Village as a highlight of the fair’s second year quoted architect Thomas Tallmadge as stating that the village, though “so ostensibly Puritan,” would have a “seamy side.”⁴⁴ He detailed Cockloft Lane, narrow, cobblestoned, and lit with “fitful oil lamps,” and warned visitors to be careful, because this area hosted a pirates’ gaol, the Witches’ House, a haunted house, and a grog shop.⁴⁵ Surely this area was more spooky than sexy, although he also alluded to Hester Prynne and other “pretty wenches” ready to entertain visitors.⁴⁶

Thomas Tallmadge’s booklet about Colonial Village also advertised Cockloft Lane. Tallmadge detailed the various buildings and their significance, before informing visitors that Cockloft Lane was where they could see the “frailties of Colonial life,” with a reminder that the founding generation was “human as are we.”⁴⁷ Cockloft Lane was named after “an old locality”

⁴³ “Popular Twins Mark Birthday at Paris Ball; Colonial Village Open Until Dawn,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1934.

⁴⁴ “A Quaint Addition to ‘Main Street’; at the 1934 World’s Fair: Colonial Village Will Turn Clock Back 2 Hundred Years,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 1934.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “A Quaint Addition to ‘Main Street’; at the 1934 World’s Fair: Colonial Village Will Turn Clock Back 2 Hundred Years,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 1934.

⁴⁷ “The Colonial Village: A Guide to the Buildings of Historical Interest,” Century of Progress Records, [Box 2, Folder 16], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

in Knickerbocker, New York. It is unclear whether the street name was intended to be a double entendre.⁴⁸

Cockloft Lane was also the location of a theatrical production that winked at the past. Tallmadge described it as a “playlet” that was both “amusing and authentic.”⁴⁹ The topic was bundling, but Tallmadge provided no clues about what precisely bundling is, other than saying that “it is curious that the idea of ‘bundling,’ so shocking to the Victorians, was approved by the stern moralists of the Puritan days.”⁵⁰ Either Tallmadge assumed that the fair audience was already familiar with the historic cultural practice, or he wanted to entice them by leaving a bit of mystery. Bundling, as an early American practice, varied, but essentially referred to a shortage of beds or heating fuel resulting in a visiting courting young man being permitted to sleep in the same bed as a young woman in her family home. The two would have material barriers between them: extra layers of clothing, a “bundling-bag,” or even a board down the middle of the bed. Journalist Lloyd Lewis called the playlet a “Puritan Peep Show” and said that the fair had “shaken off the ancient shackles of New England” and allowed “the spirit of carnival and charivari to make a belated revival.”⁵¹ Lewis connected the bundling show to Sally Rand and other performer’s dances by saying that there was even a “peep show of and for puritans,

⁴⁸ “The Colonial Village: A Guide to the Buildings of Historical Interest,” Century of Progress Records, [Box 2, Folder 16], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

⁴⁹ “The Colonial Village: A Guide to the Buildings of Historical Interest,” Century of Progress Records, [Box 2, Folder 16], Special Collections, Chicago Public Library.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lloyd Lewis, “Chicago Looks at Bundling at World's Fair,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, August 25, 1934, p. 11.

themselves!”⁵² Lewis described the show and said that even more uptight modern visitors would enjoy it: “Secure in the knowledge that what they see here is historical, puritanic visitors to the fair may see it, and, I am confident, escape untarnished.”⁵³ Surely historic-themed shows must be somewhat educational and tame compared to other exhibits at the fair.

The surprise that Tallmadge expressed over bundling being shocking to the Victorians but approved by the Puritans belies an understanding of the past as a linear march of progress (in keeping with the fair’s theme). Fairgoers assumed that surely each generation was less prudish than the ones before it, yet bundling must have been an outlier. The *Tribune* writers, like Tallmadge, thought the show was authentic, because they described the subject of the play as “true colonial fashion.”⁵⁴ The past blurred with the present a bit more in one publication explaining that bundling was practiced in New York state as late as 1804 and in Pennsylvania until 1845. The editors believed that bundling could still be seen in “several” (presumably backward) parts of the U.S. and the “old country,” although which old country was not specified.⁵⁵

Tallmadge seems to either have expected readers to know what bundling was, or to have believed that saying the Victorians frowned upon it was enough to entice visitors to the show.

⁵² Lloyd Lewis, “Chicago Looks at Bundling at World’s Fair,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, August 25, 1934, p. 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ “Century of Progress Notes,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 1934.

⁵⁵ “Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer’s Tiny Magazine,” October 1934. [Box 15, Folder 1c], Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

The *Tribune* similarly does not give too much of the show away, but the reporter cheekily describes bundling as a “great-grandfather’s equivalent of a petting party,” a ritual that was quite familiar to an audience so recently removed from the 1920s.⁵⁶ These spaces and events at the fair drew from the past. Sure, the colonial folks had some fun, but not as much as twentieth-century folks knew how to have.

Women’s Claims to Mount Vernon

At the far end of the long and narrow Colonial Village, just past a village green, sat the crown jewel: the replica Mount Vernon. The village green was the site of many of the village’s events and activities, and Mount Vernon was, like the real plantation, a contested space. Just as both the North and the South tried to claim George Washington and the imagery of Mount Vernon in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century two groups laid claim to the replica Mount Vernon: the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association (MVLVA). Modern women were very much involved in the presentation of the colonial past, and Depression-era women were involved in the Colonial Village, most notably through their involvement with DAR and MVLVA. Women were the vanguard of the early historic preservation work throughout the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, specifically beginning with the preservation of George Washington’s plantation Mount Vernon.

One publication described the Mount Vernon fair attraction as follows: “North of Village Green is eight-ninths size of Washington’s Virginia Home. It is owned and maintained by the

⁵⁶ “Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer’s Tiny Magazine,” October 1934. [Box 15, Folder 1c], Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, founded in 1853. Mount Vernon has been presided over at the Fair by Illinois members of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Admittance fee goes to help finish the Lincoln Monument being erected by Illinois D.A.R. at Lincoln Memorial Bridge.”⁵⁷ This somewhat confusing description reveals layers of ownership over the past, which led to conflict between DAR and MVLA. While the actual Mount Vernon was preserved and operated by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, the replica at the fair was managed by hostesses affiliated with the Illinois Daughters of the American Revolution. The Illinois Daughters of the American Revolution had many members who were involved in the Chicago chapter and the Fort Dearborn chapter, which was based in the nearby suburbs. Many local notables were involved in the DAR, including Helen Dawes, wife of fair president Rufus Dawes, who was active in the Fort Dearborn chapter. The Chicago chapter was the first DAR group in the nation, a point of great pride for the state organization then and now and was founded by notable charter members such as temperance leader Frances Willard. The DAR was involved with Chicago’s first World’s Fair in 1893 and held their 42nd anniversary meeting at the Century of Progress in 1933. They also had a headquarters on the fairgrounds.

With the DAR highly involved in the fair and especially the Colonial Village, the MVLA was snubbed: they were not invited to host the fair replica, even though they were experts on the plantation’s history and had the sole mission of saving and preserving the original space since their founding in 1853. To make matters worse, one newspaper article gave the DAR full and

⁵⁷ “Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer’s Tiny Magazine,” October 1934. [Box 15, Folder 1c], Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

incorrect credit for the MVLA's public history work. The *Chicago Daily News* reported that "Mount Vernon without the Daughters of the American Revolution is as incomplete as a colonial village without Mount Vernon," and "It was not enough for the D.A.R.'s to restore the historic home of George Washington into a national shrine, complete and authentic. They are now doing it all over again for the visitors to a Century of Progress."⁵⁸ The DAR did not, of course, restore George Washington's Mount Vernon; that was the work of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. The DAR was interested in the legacy of the first president, and they continue to celebrate him with a "George Washington Tea" during their February meeting. However, they were not involved in the historic preservation of his home, other than through members who also happened to belong to the MVLA.⁵⁹

How, then, did the DAR get involved at the fair? Architect Thomas Tallmadge and other members of the concessionaire groups asked them to serve as hostess.⁶⁰ This conflict arose because businessmen did not understand the boundaries and responsibilities of the two women's organizations. MVLA leadership privately claimed that Tallmadge ought to have known better, because he was a member of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Commission for the restoration of Williamsburg.⁶¹ One of the men, architect Frank T. Kegley, claimed that it was his idea to ask

⁵⁸ "D.A.R. To give 1934 Fair Replica of Mount Vernon," *Chicago Daily News*, Chicago Chapter NSDAR Scrapbooks, Vol. 21, pg. 33. "Chicago Chapter NDSAR Collection."

⁵⁹ Courtenay Wood, Chicago Chapter National Society Daughters of the American Revolution Regent, conversation with the author, January 7, 2022.

⁶⁰ Meeting notes, April 23, 1934, The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World's Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington [hereafter Washington Library], Mount Vernon, Virginia.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the DAR to hostess in order to generate publicity for the village: he wanted to interest a large body of women.⁶² By not doing his research, he got an even larger body of women interested than he had expected. The MVLA suggested that another building be turned over to the DAR while they took care of Mount Vernon; however, Kegley said there was no other building available.⁶³ Both the DAR and the MVLA wanted to claim ownership of the past, but they both (and especially the MVLA) also wanted to be recognized for their professionalism, work, and expertise. The MVLA vice-regent Harriet Carpenter was in touch with “Mrs. Julien Goodhue,” the Illinois regent of DAR, after the publication of the incorrect *Chicago Daily News* article. Carpenter reported that Goodhue was helpful and “seemed a little frightened at the mistake” and must have “realized the serious discourtesy of the concessionaires in not asking the MVLA to hostess, as well as the fact that “she herself had been precipitate in accepting.”⁶⁴

The Illinois DAR accepted the position of hostesses for the Colonial Village Mount Vernon because they wanted to share the past of the revolutionary era, and they displayed exhibits inside the replica. However, they also had a financial arrangement where their organization could profit from the income generated by visitors to the space. They specifically raised money for a sculpture of Abraham Lincoln. While obviously not a member of the revolutionary generation, Lincoln was deeply tied to Illinois—a state light on revolutionary

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Meeting notes, April 23, 1934, The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World’s Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington [hereafter Washington Library], Mount Vernon, Virginia.

⁶⁴ Letter from Mrs. Carpenter to Regent, April 13, 1934. The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World’s Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Washington Library.

history and heavy on Lincoln history. The statue was created by sculptor Nellie V. Walker, who happened to also be a DAR member. The Illinois DAR quite possibly already owed money for the statue and was trying to raise money to pay their debts.⁶⁵ Many newspaper articles from the era used the term “sponsor” to describe the DAR’s relationship with Mount Vernon, when instead of the organization contributing financially to promote the space, they were profiting from it.

The Century of Progress and DAR partnership angered the MVLA for several reasons. First, they were the longtime stewards, rescuers, and owners of the actual Mount Vernon, so it would have made more sense for the men affiliated with the Colonial Village to invite them to host the Mount Vernon replica (and perhaps invite the DAR to participate elsewhere in the Colonial Village). Other replicas of Mount Vernon were made at various events with the MVLA’s permission, or, as Carpenter said, “at least received some gracious jesture [sic] of consultation in building.”⁶⁶ Second, the *Chicago Daily News* article that mistakenly gave the DAR credit for the MVLA’s work at the actual Mount Vernon was the cause of further upset. While Carpenter reported that Goodhue was working to correct the newspaper article, “if anyone can ever correct a newspaper mistake,” a good deal of damage was done to the MVLA’s morale.⁶⁷ Many newspaper articles reported on the DAR’s involvement with the Colonial

⁶⁵ Courtenay Wood, conversation with the author, January 7, 2022.

⁶⁶ Letter from Mrs. Carpenter to Regent, April 13, 1934. The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World’s Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Washington Library.

⁶⁷ Letter from Mrs. Carpenter to Regent, April 13, 1934. The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World’s Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Washington Library.

Village. Although these focused on the fair and were more accurate than the one that said the DAR operated the real Mount Vernon, the DAR was consistently and prominently linked with the replica Mount Vernon throughout 1934. Articles mentioned the DAR “sponsoring” Mount Vernon and did not mention the MVLA at all. Because the MVLA was not involved at A Century of Progress, there was really no need to mention them in many of these articles, unless one was intending to specifically distinguish the two organizations. One reporter wrote that “DAR members will have complete charge of the Mount Vernon exhibit. The replica will be identical with the national shrine, except it will be smaller... fetes and costume affairs will be held under DAR sponsorship.”⁶⁸ Although articles like this did not specifically link the DAR with Mount Vernon in Virginia, the lines were blurred, and it is easy to imagine readers confusing the two organizations.

The incorrect information in the specific newspaper article, paired with the DAR hostessing, was too much for Carpenter: “...All this means that Five D.A.R.s a day for six months will be hostessing the Mount Vernon building at the Worlds Fair---Totalling more than seven hundred individuals! Oh Gosh! And there will be An average of sixty thousand visitors per day passing though the Fair and untold thousands of them will get a wrong impression of Mount Vernon. More gosh! This is really serious.”⁶⁹ Public misconceptions about the stewardship of Mount Vernon, Virginia grew at alarming rates with the number of fair visitors. The third reason

⁶⁸ “Mount Vernon, Colonial Village, at World's Fair,” *Lanark Gazette*, May 23, 1934, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Letter from Mrs. Carpenter to Regent, April 13, 1934. The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World’s Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Washington Library.

for MVLA's frustration had to do with development and construction: Tallmadge replicated Mount Vernon without their permission, and he did so loosely and without consultation for measured drawings. He effectively ignored MVLA's ownership and expertise.⁷⁰ Lydia Mattice Brandt, scholar of Mount Vernon, argues that for all the talk of authenticity at the Colonial Village, there was no attempt to "faithfully replicate Washington's house inside or out. For Tallmadge, the Colonial Village was a playful means of educating a wide public on the country's early history and material culture."⁷¹

The final reason for the MVLA's frustration was the commercialization of the space. On the one hand, they were upset that a national shrine was being used as part of a moneygrubbing enterprise. Yet, on the other hand, they were upset that they were unable to profit from it. After Carpenter found out that the additional ten-cent fee to enter the first president's mansion would be split by the DAR and the concession, she sent a telegram asking, "Is this not a new and more offensive phase of our problem?" and "Are they not illegally trading on our name?"⁷² While the MVLA objected to the for-profit nature of the "so-called Mount Vernon," they originally came to an agreement where they would sell postcards and a few other small items to ensure accurate information was presented.⁷³ Additionally, some signage was added to the replica Mount Vernon

⁷⁰ Brandt, *First in the Homes*, 148.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Telegram from Mrs. Carpenter to Mrs. A.H. Richards, April 23, 1934. The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World's Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Washington Library.

⁷³ Letter from Mrs. Carpenter to Regent, April 13, 1934, The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World's Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Washington Library. Brandt, *First in the Homes*, 147, 149.

indicating the original mansion's proper ownership. One MVLA member expressed concern about this arrangement: "Are we laying ourselves open to still more misunderstanding and unjust criticism in the future for making money out of this copy of Mount Vernon, whereas it is really the D.A.R. who will deserve such criticism—if it arises? In other words, are we not liable to be contaminated by this association with money-getters?"⁷⁴

Despite Carpenter's originally optimistic impression of Goodhue's good faith efforts, a few other positive interactions, and the postcard and signage arrangement, the MVLA was never quite satisfied with how the situation ended. The snub was seen as a "more flagrant infringement on our rights than has hitherto occurred."⁷⁵ MVLA members decided that they were "quite mistaken" about Goodhue.⁷⁶ Minutes from a meeting between MVLA and DAR members discussing the postcard sales arrangement are captivating: the MVLA was under the impression that only their materials would be sold, but the DAR had plans to sell other items as well. The DAR instructed the MVLA that they were not to be present to sell the materials, but that was arranged for a young man to sell them. The DAR attempted to reassure the MVLA that nothing would smack of commercialism.⁷⁷ The particular young men who would be selling the items were Goodhue's sons. When Carpenter suggested a commission arrangement instead of a

⁷⁴ Meeting notes, April 23, 1934, The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World's Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Washington Library.

⁷⁵ Letter from Mrs. Carpenter to Regent, April 13, 1934, The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World's Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Washington Library.

⁷⁶ Meeting notes, Ibid.

⁷⁷ "Personal Notes" from "11 o'clock Conference," April 28, 1934, Ibid.

consignment arrangement, Goodhue responded that her sons were doing this to finish their college education, which immediately led the group into another discussion about the misleading newspaper article.⁷⁸

In this meeting, MVLA members argued that many of the “Daughters of rank and file will say that the D.A.R.’s own Mt. Vernon,” demonstrating that they not only lacked faith in fairgoers’ understandings of the Colonial Village site, but they also doubted the understandings of non-leadership DAR members who would be participating and thus likely spreading misinformation.⁷⁹ MVLA leaders reiterated their shared belief that they should control the mansion and expressed concerns that sales of a cookbook would give a false impression.⁸⁰ Goodhue responded: “THIS IS A COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISE.---This is not Mt. Vernon, VIRGINIA.”⁸¹ Another DAR member agreed, “The public will be interested in the Mount Vernon they are looking at...not so much the Mt. Vernon in VIRGINIA.”⁸²

This issue was about ownership of the past and women getting credit for their work (and literal ownership of a historic site). In one set of minutes, a Mrs. Towner was credited with saying “the more we do to make them realize WE ARE AUTHORITIES ON THE SUBJECT, the more respect they will have for us.” Here, she is referring not to the DAR, but to the men in

⁷⁸ “Personal Notes” from “11 o’clock Conference,” April 28, 1934, .

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

charge of the Colonial Village.⁸³ The women of the MVLA “rescued the home of Washington from ruin and decay” and wanted credit for their work, as well as their expertise.⁸⁴

One of the questions at play here is about who controls the parameters of public history. The MVLA members were experts on Mount Vernon, having restored and cared for the plantation for years. The DAR was a much larger and more prominent organization, with many interests in the colonial past. The male fair organizers, architects, and concessionaires had the power to designate who would tell historic stories in their space, and they chose the DAR, likely because of the organization’s prominence. Once the DAR was chosen, it seems they had quite a bit of power in what we would call the programming of the space. They organized lectures and events, gave tours through the Mount Vernon replica, and greeted dignitaries and special guests who visited the Colonial Village. When they were given the opportunity to host Mount Vernon, they took the opportunity to be deeply involved in the whole Colonial Village. One noteworthy distinction between the MVLA and the DAR is that the DAR is based on proof of bloodline relation to revolutionary-era ancestors, and the MVLA is a voluntary membership organization founded as the first national historic preservation. The DAR’s membership requirements are strict and providing proof of ancestry can be challenging. At the Colonial Village, the right to present the past to the public was won by those who had a bloodline connection to it rather than those who had a more generalized patriotic and semi-professional interest in it.

⁸³ “Personal Notes” from “11 o’clock Conference,” April 28, 1934.

⁸⁴ Letter from MVLA Regent to Mrs. Magna, President General of DAR, April 17, 1934, The Papers of the Superintendent and Resident Director, Series 2. Subject Files, World’s Fair – Chicago, 1934, Archives of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Washington Library.

The replica Mount Vernon depicted a version of the past that was at once tied to the masculinity and power of George Washington yet was also a domestic space. Visitors entered the central hall and saw the “Music Room” on their right, and other rooms with historic furniture. Similarly, to the Fort Dearborn replica, the space was promoted by listing the historic items that could be found inside, and many of them were domestic home goods: one promotional item listed “authentic pieces of Colonial furniture, gracefully fashioned by master craftsmen of that day...quaint embroidery frame, bearing an embroidered fabric, imported from France by some dame or maiden of the household.”⁸⁵ The same document promotes the Banquet Hall, the settings of “formal dinner’s [sic] attended by those who knew Washington’s warm hospitality,” and lists various furniture items in the room.⁸⁶ The concept of domesticity and hospitality appear in terms of how the DAR was represented—they were termed “hostesses.” This is a gendered term, of course, and tied to the fact that the replica historic site was a house. DAR members were stationed in various rooms throughout the Mount Vernon replica, further emphasizing the idea of the plantation as a domestic space; these women claimed men’s history as universal history but they did through a man’s home—perhaps making a women’s sub-sphere of a men’s sphere.

Spaces for Historic Women

At the fair, twentieth-century women fought to claim a past that was men’s history. The history of famous individual men was long considered universal history, but these women’s

⁸⁵ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, June 22, 1934.

⁸⁶ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, June 22, 1934.

organizations were so focused on patriotism, and history as a means to patriotism, that they often prioritized historic men instead of historic women. The women of the MVLA and the DAR were not working to further women's history specifically—they were not arguing over space for Betsy Ross or Molly Pitcher or Deborah Sampson or the founding father's wives. They were debating ownership of a male past. In fact, the Betsy Ross replica house at the fair was managed by a man—Vexil Domus, who happened to be born in the original Betsy Ross house and was the secretary of the Betsy Ross memorial association.⁸⁷

On one hand, the MVLA and DAR's focus showed an appreciation for military and political history, and an argument could be made that these women were stepping beyond what might be considered "theirs" in terms of history. On the other hand though, these twentieth-century women did not claim women's history in any meaningful way—historian Gerda Lerner's argument that women's history is a primary tool for women's emancipation was still years in the future. The MVLA had a specific organizational focus on George Washington and Mount Vernon, but the DAR's organizational mission was broader. In other arenas, the DAR did work to promote women's history, but not as a means of emancipation—their work did emphasize women's roles in the struggle for American independence, but specifically the role of mothers in producing national loyalty.⁸⁸ At A Century of Progress, the debate over female historical commemoration work was focused on Washington.

⁸⁷ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. June 12, 1934.

⁸⁸ Simon Wendt, *The Daughters of the American Revolution and Patriotic Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021), 27.

It is worth considering which roles were afforded to women in this Great Depression vision of Colonial America, both by the DAR and MVLA and by the developers of the Colonial Village. Few roles for women existed: mainly the patriotic goodwife and the witch, as evidenced by the Betsy Ross house and the “witch’s house.” The role of the patriotic goodwife was important to the DAR, and the organization’s interwar period work elsewhere emphasized female patriots and “Pilgrim Mothers” as a way to fight perceived feminist threats to the American family and to promote gendered principles that existed in Colonial America.⁸⁹ Betsy Ross was honored at the Colonial Village with a pageant that included minuet dancing.⁹⁰ Yet, the DAR involvement at the fair was specific to the Mount Vernon replica so the vision of the goodwife and the witch as dual options for colonial women was promoted by the male organizers of the concession. If the patriotic goodwife failed to live up to expected standards, she might be locked in the stocks or a ducking stool, which the fair guidebook described as being for “scolding women.”⁹¹ A playfulness surrounded this representation of public punishment and shaming—something depicted in a promotional photograph of three young women who were finalists in a “national charm smile contest,” where two women crossing their fingers in “shame” gestures at a third, who is cheerfully perched with feet in the stocks.⁹² All three women happily

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁹⁰ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁹¹ *Official Guide Book of the World’s Fair of 1934* (Chicago, Cuneo Press, 1934), 118.

⁹² A Century of Progress records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago, Iconographic #17, Box 4, Folders 112-179.

display their prize-winning assets. This playfulness surrounding stocks continues to this day, as jolly tourists pretend to be locked up for photographs at Colonial Williamsburg.⁹³



Figure 20. Finalists in a “national charm smile competition” pose with stocks in the Colonial Village. Kaufmann & Fabry Co., COP_17_0004_00177_001, Century of Progress Records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

A paradox of America’s colonial past, and indeed the Enlightenment, are the contrasting emphases on reason and superstition. Early colonial Americans are often seen as rational, pious, and diligent workers; yet the fear of witchcraft caused harm to many women who were

⁹³ The author herself has one of these photos, of course.

marginalized or lived on the edges of society. Depression-era fairgoers engaged with colonial fears of witchcraft (that is, colonial fears of strange, difficult, or different women) in a playful and patronizing manner: a memory of a time when people were not as advanced or as educated as in the current era. This interpretation of the past is prevalent in popular culture today—most infamously through the incidents in Salem, Massachusetts—but others are treated as almost charming: a spooky story with a colonial backdrop, akin to *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, instead of a dark, true story of sexism and fear of difference. Promotional materials about the village mention the witches' house as if it was a given. Of course, the space would include references to witches—this was about the fun side of history, after all.

Unpacking the history of the fear of witchcraft and the memory of colonial witchcraft must include a consideration of gender, and to be responsible, a consideration of race. Fears of witchcraft are based on othering, and perhaps no category of distinction has been more used for othering in the United States than race. The story of witchcraft at the Colonial Village was tied to race, but in a way that was perhaps subtle. Promotional materials referenced “mystic seer” Alice Evangeline, who provided her services in the village. Alice Evangeline was Black, but she was not advertised as such. Is it likely that white fairgoers would have been surprised to enter her place of business without “warning”? Or, is it more likely that they would have felt that a Black fortune teller “made sense”? Was it more forward-thinking for her race to not be indicated, or less? What does it mean that the services Alice Evangeline provided were considered harmless entertainment, maybe spooky, but not actually scary? Other (presumably white) mediums were at

the village, but they shared a space with each other and were not promoted individually as Alice Evangeline was.⁹⁴

The Colonial Village space was dramatically white. What does it mean, then, that the main space for African Americans in this imagined past in the form of a practitioner of mysterious arts? White fair organizers probably deemed slavery's history too unpleasant to be brought up, and it is indeed still rendered invisible in many public history places today. Free people of color were not depicted, either: the colonial America presented was far less multicultural than historical reality. The Colonial Village was a space where white Americans told white American history, and this history was presented as universal to the American experience. As in other historic stories, people of color were present at the Colonial Village, but they are a bit harder to find in archival sources. Given the archival evidence, it is impossible to know whether white fairgoers would have been surprised to see Alice Evangeline when they came to have their fortunes told. The African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender* claimed Alice Evangeline as a "member of the race" and featured her alongside Annie Oliver in a wrap-up article highlighting the ways Chicago's African American community had helped to make the Century of Progress a success.⁹⁵ Given the nature of Alice Evangeline's profession as a mystic seer and the lack of clarity around her name—was Evangeline a surname or an extension

⁹⁴ "Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer's Tiny Magazine," October 1934. [Box 15, Folder 1c], Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁹⁵ "A Day at the Fair," *Chicago Defender*, July 7, 1934, and Dewey R. Jones, "Race Aided in Making Fair History," *Chicago Defender*, November 10, 1934, p. 11.

of her given name, was this a professional name—it has been almost impossible to find more archival information about her life or experiences at the fair.

People of Color in the Colonial Village

African Americans were present in at least two other spaces in the Colonial Village, and both were related to the arts. Twenty-three-year-old artist Calvin C. Bailey was popular in the Artists' Colony—a space tucked into the Colonial Village where artists worked and sold their pieces. The *Chicago Defender* reported on his popularity in drawing portraits of fair visitors.⁹⁶ Claire Lieber, a young white girl who visited the fair and recorded her observations in a journal recounted a “very enjoyable” show on the village green where “colored boys come out and tap dance and play pieces on crazy instruments such as a wash trub for a drum and a wash board.”⁹⁷ The archival record remains unclear as to whether this performance had any relevance to the colonial era, or if the village green was simply being used as a public performance space at the fair.

Although slavery was an economic driver of colonial America and a part of daily life, it was erased from the era's (and region's) remembered past at the World's Fair. Not only were the experiences of enslaved people never examined or portrayed, there was also no apology or glorification, no “benevolent master” myths—only erasure.

This space pretended to be from the colonial era; but it really represented the 1930s. At least one well-documented story of twentieth-century racial discrimination occurred in the

⁹⁶ “They All Like Bailey at The Fair,” *Chicago Defender*, October 27, 1934.

⁹⁷ Claire Lieber Crews Diary, Newberry Library, Chicago [Midwest MS 163, Box 16]. I have been unable to find any other mentions of this show or who these boys might have been.

village, the story of the church leader at the Wayside Inn referenced earlier. About a month before this incident, *Defender* writer Dewey Jones responded to an inquiry as to “where one might secure a meal without being humiliated,” by recommending the Colonial Village for more “pretentious meals.” He described it as “costly, yet courteously served.”⁹⁸ This was contrasted to some of the other dining locations at the fair, where outright denial of service to African American visitors was banned but other methods of humiliation persisted: “Even some of the hot dog vendors act as if they were doing you a favor when they hand you a mongrel on a bun and rake in your dime in return. A glass of beer is forthcoming in the Schlitz bar, but you are made to feel like a sneak thief as you drink it.”⁹⁹ The bishop’s experience at the Wayside Inn must have been even more frustrating given that the Colonial Village had previously enjoyed a positive reputation.

Native Americans were visible at the Colonial Village, but unlike in other parts of the Century of Progress Exposition, they did not have any physical space of their own. In 1933 there was an Indian Village at the fair, a space that deserves its own study and has received it in some places—there is a complex history of Native American involvement in shows, fairs, and expositions. At A Century of Progress, Native exhibits were considered educational for visitors to learn about other cultures, however, sometimes fair organizers used these spaces and these people to present a specific view of progress. That is, white people considered Indigenous cultures the predecessor of their own—somewhere from where to have come. Historian Cheryl

⁹⁸ “A Day at the Fair,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 25, 1934.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Ganz argued that the Indian Village was developed by University of Chicago anthropologist Fay-Cooper Cole with the intention of showing fairgoers how far society had already come, especially genetically.¹⁰⁰ One *World's Fair Weekly* put a thought into the minds of readers: “‘What a distance we have come!’ you say to yourself as you watch this remarkable Indian show, with its primitive dignity and zest, in the midst of all that is new in our life today.”¹⁰¹

While white people used Native American culture as a foil to the present and imagined it as a glimpse into the past, Native American people had their own reasons for participating in the fair: many were hoping to preserve and display their cultural heritage in a positive light, and as historian Abigail Markwyn has discussed, many were hoping the presentation of their culture and their bodies would help them survive the economic challenges of the Great Depression.¹⁰²

Different Indigenous groups performed traditional dances on the Colonial Village's village green, but without a settlement or lodging space within the village, their presence in the Depression-era imagination of the past was ephemeral.¹⁰³ They were part of the colonial era but not the imagined colonial village. The organizers of the Colonial Village participated in a long American tradition of seeing Indigenous people as living relics and part of the past. The “Ceremonial Dancers” were affiliated with multiple tribes: Cheyenne, Winnebago, Cherokee,

¹⁰⁰ Cheryl Ganz, *The 1933 Chicago World's Fair: A Century of Progress* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2012), 534.

¹⁰¹ “‘Indian Chants and Indian Footfalls,’” *World's Fair Weekly*, August 5, 1933.

¹⁰² Markwyn, “‘I Would like to Have This Tribe Represented’: Native Performance and Craft at Chicago's 1933 Century of Progress Exposition,” *American Indian Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2020): p. 329.

¹⁰³ “Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer's Tiny Magazine,” October 1934. (Box 15, Folder 1c) Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

and Pueblo, yet ostensibly performed together.¹⁰⁴ Most of these tribes' ancestral homelands had little geographic overlap with the section of the continent that was defined as "colonial." Because several tribes were represented at the fair, it is surprising that a mixed group performed on the village green, instead of distinct tribal performances on different days. One fair document listed five Native American men who were at the Colonial Village and some of performance and commercial activities they participated in, but many questions about these men and their experiences in the Colonial Village remain:

Down in the Colonial Village are five Indians. They are: Chief Big Storm, college graduate, football player, and member of the Western Cherokees; Chief Thunder Cloud, an Ottawa, great grandson of Pontiac, Indian Napoleon; Richard Bluebird, son of a head chief of the Pueblos, Visiting-In-The-Clouds and White Wing, Winnebagos. These Indians make tom-toms, baskets, beadwork, moccasins and bows and arrows. They give exhibitions in archery, dance, and sell their products.¹⁰⁵

The presentation of Native Americans as both a part of and apart from the history of the American nation-state was common. Indigenous people were interpreted as part of the past, with modern tribal members viewed as living relics. The Daughters of the American Revolution themselves had a complicated relationship with Native people, described as a "fascination" by historian Simon Wendt.¹⁰⁶ In the early twentieth century, the DAR supported citizenship status for the "original Americans" and promoted legislation for federal aid for Indian welfare. Wendt

¹⁰⁴ "Colonial Village Number of Unk Ebenezer's Tiny Magazine," October 1934. (Box 15, Folder 1c) Century of Progress International Exposition Publications, Crerar Ms 226, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

¹⁰⁵ Century of Progress International Exposition Press Releases, Crerar Ms 225, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, August 27, 1934.

¹⁰⁶ Simon Wendt, *The Daughters of the American Revolution and Patriotic Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021), 7.

argues that the DAR wanted to integrate American Indians into their nationalist ideology.¹⁰⁷ He further argues that the organization's attempts to commemorate a triumphant (and white) pioneer past merged poorly with their efforts to include modern Native Americans in their patriotic projects, leading them to emphasize historical stories of white-Indian collaboration and friendship, along with images of Native Americans supporting white nation-building.¹⁰⁸

Although the DAR at the Colonial Village was mostly focused on the Mount Vernon replica, the performances on the green in front of the building indicate that other fair planners had similar mindsets. They wanted to make sure that American Indians were included in the telling of the American past, but no one came to the Colonial Village to learn about racialized violence and systematic oppression. Native American performers lobbied to find employment and performance space at the fair, and their presentations were often a blend of cultural demonstrations and visions of "Indianness" that reflected what white viewers expected to see.¹⁰⁹ Scholar Abigail Markwyn has written about Native American involvement at the Century of Progress Exposition and the twentieth-century performance economy by examining the experiences of "hundreds of Indians from across the nation who sought work at the fair by writing to fair and city officials to ask for exhibit or performance space."¹¹⁰ This is an interesting way to position the fair in the 1930s, and it is relevant to the Fort Dearborn exhibit as well.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Abigail Markwyn, "I Would like to Have This Tribe Represented': Native Performance and Craft at Chicago's 1933 Century of Progress Exposition," *American Indian Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2020): 330.

¹¹⁰ Abigail Markwyn, "I Would like to Have This Tribe Represented': Native Performance and Craft at Chicago's 1933 Century of Progress Exposition," *American Indian Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2020): 329.

Conclusion

Sociologist Diane Barthel describes part of the appeal of staged symbolic communities as their ability to offer two “social goods that are usually seen as contradictory”: new experience and security.¹¹¹ If much of the point of the Century of Progress Exposition was escapism (and money-making), the Colonial Village was certainly no different. However, instead of offering mere diversion, escape to a fantasy land, or visions of a hopeful future, the Colonial Village offered a form of escapism that was safe while also being novel. One could visit a place to which they had never been, but still feel that the place was familiar.

The thirteen North American British colonies were separated from the Century of Progress Exposition in both time and space, but fair organizers wanted to provide an experience where visitors could imagine themselves in the past (or at least in a non-controversial version of it). White women and African American fairgoers struggled to claim the past and participate in an interpreted version of it. The Colonial Village was dressed as the eighteenth century, but it was fully set in the twentieth.

Like those they imitated, the buildings of the Colonial Village were preserved. Generally, World’s Fair buildings are torn down at the end of the exposition. Sometimes buildings live on in host cities, but those are the exception. Several buildings from the Colonial Village survived beyond the fair, thanks to real estate businessman Robert Bartlett. At the end of the fair, Bartlett purchased sixteen buildings from the Century of Progress Exposition: six model homes and ten buildings from the Colonial Village. He arranged for these buildings to be moved to Beverly

¹¹¹ Barthel, “Nostalgia,” 87.

Shores, Indiana—some by barge, and some deconstructed and brought by road. Beverly Shores was dune land originally developed by Frederick H. Bartlett, Robert Bartlett's brother. After the 1929 crash, plans for developing the community were scaled back, but Bartlett thought the Century of Progress buildings would entice people to his constructed community.¹¹²

Some of the buildings became homes, others became businesses, and the Old North Church operated as a church. Today, it is privately owned and the last building in existence from the Colonial Village. Beverly Shores has a recognized Century of Progress Architectural District, and these buildings are an important part of the town's history.¹¹³

¹¹² "Beverly Shores, Indiana," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, accessed April 20, 2022, <http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/133.html>.

¹¹³ Special thanks to Ed Kleese of the Beverly Shores Museum and Art Gallery Group for answering my emails and directing me to their digital exhibit: "Colonial Village Homes at 1935 Century of Progress Fair Photos/Homes Moved by Barge to Beverly Shores," Beverly Shores Depot & Gallery, August 13, 2021, <https://bsdepot.org/colonial-village-homes-at-1935-century-of-progress-fair-photos-homes-moved-by-barge-to-beverly-shores/>.

CONCLUSION

If someone visited Chicago to see remaining structures from the Century of Progress exposition it would be a disappointing trip. Nothing remains. Some of that disappointment might be eased by hopping on the South Shore Line or driving a little more than an hour to Beverly Shores, Indiana. Five model houses from the Century of Progress stand within the Indiana Dunes National Park. The Old North Church from the Colonial Village stands in the town, the last of ten buildings from the Colonial Village brought to Beverly Shores. The houses and the church are private residences now, but the houses are open to visitors once a year in a weekend extravaganza hosted by Indiana Landmarks, the largest statewide preservation organization in the country.

The tour weekend has been going on for about 20 years, and every year the tickets sell out in a matter of hours—about 675 people come annually to tour the homes.¹ Throughout the year, visitors drive by and take photos of the outside of the homes. Todd Zeiger, Director of Indiana Landmarks' Northern Regional Office, states that people are attracted to the Century of Progress homes not necessarily because of any specific interest in the world's fair, but because “they’re nosy.” Since the homes are in a National Park, people have driven past them for years and developed a curiosity about the unique grouping of strange-looking houses. Zeiger also says

¹ Information about the home tours and Indiana Landmarks comes from my personal experience attending the tour as well as a phone conversation with Todd Zeiger, on October 3rd, 2022. Quoted phrases here are Todd Zeiger's words.

that there are a few people who recall parents or grandparents visiting the fair, and they have had a few fairgoers themselves visit, but it has been a while. The homes are leased as part of a unique preservation agreement where lessees foot the bill for restoration in exchange for residing in the homes rent-free for 50 years. Restoration has been expensive and laborious. People currently live in four of the houses, but the House of Tomorrow is still gutted and undergoing extensive restoration. Even though the homes are the “ultimate Century of Progress collectible,” the people currently living in them are not necessarily world’s fair enthusiasts. First, the lessees are people with the capacity to restore a home that is, for most, their second home. These residents do have a desire to be a part of a unique project to save historic structures, and they were attracted to both the challenge of the job as well as the prime lakefront location.

The memory of the Century of Progress Exposition is held tangibly outside of buildings—the fair was a “juggernaut of stuff,” and many souvenirs exist today. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, the World’s Fair Memorabilia Show was held in Chicagoland annually. Rick Rann and Bob Conidi, two Century of Progress collectors, started the show in 1995.² The shows feature other fairs besides the Century of Progress, and tend to draw anywhere from 300-600 guests—some collectors, some just curious folks—with 15-25 vendors of antiques and collectibles. One show highlight has been the display of home movies and newsreels, especially of the Century of Progress fair. This collectors show is the closest thing to a reunion that the Century of Progress has had in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Rann says that they have had people come to the show whose parents visited the fair or who worked at the fair,

² Information about the World’s Fair Memorabilia Show comes from a series of personal email conversations with Rick Rann throughout September 2022.

he met a woman who was in the baby beauty pageant at the fair when she was four years old, and he even had a couple who were babies in the infant incubators. In the earlier years of the show, Rick met a few people who visited or worked at the fair themselves.

Throughout the course of the years spent working on this project, people have consistently confused the Century of Progress Exposition with the Columbian Exposition. Many have asked me questions about the original Ferris Wheel, about H.H. Holmes, the “Devil in the White City,” and numerous other aspects of the 1893 fair. I have been offered advice and recommended sources about the Columbian Exposition. Some folks have never heard of the Century of Progress, others have heard and understandably gotten features or attractions confused. In Chicago, “world’s fair” is synonymous with the Columbian Exposition.

The shadow of the Columbian Exposition is long, even though the Century of Progress ran two years, had more visitors, and is only just now slipping out of living memory. Why is the Columbian Exposition so much more famous? In part, it had a head start. The Columbian Exposition was already significant and notable at the start of the Century of Progress and was revered throughout the second fair. The Columbian Exposition produced huge amounts of ephemera and was widely written about during its time. After the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, it truly was the city’s global coming out party. The consumerism and colonialism on display made the fair an encapsulation of the nineteenth century. The illuminated neoclassical buildings made a huge impression, especially for the many visitors who had never seen electricity in use before. The Museum of Science and Industry stands on the South Side today as a testament to the scale of the buildings that once filled Jackson Park. The gruesome stories of H.H. Holmes’s violence, and his infamy as the first American serial killer has captured imaginations. The answers for the

Columbian Exposition's fame come easily, but the reasons for the Century of Progress being overlooked are more difficult to find.

Even though the Century of Progress is less famous, its legacies are still important, and not just for collectors and the people involved with Indiana Landmarks. The exposition statistics are notable—the visitors, the people employed, the profit turned and distributed to local museums. Whether or not the fair helped Chicago or the country pull itself through the Great Depression, people who visited believed it would and it did. The fair was a beacon of hope; many of the letters of congratulation to Dawes use metaphors of light in darkness. The courage to hope for a brighter future, the audacity to believe that industrial capitalism would bring that brighter future, and the stubbornness to celebrate in a time of misery are all undeniably American responses to the Great Depression that were on display at A Century of Progress.

When considering the Century of Progress Exposition, we are looking at past visions of the future: the technology exhibits displayed the cutting edge—things that were of the present but also of the future. This project has focused on the visions of the past at the fair—now these are past visions of the past. Considering the Century of Progress Exposition is a way to ponder how Americans in the Great Depression situated themselves in the continuum of time, to attempt to understand how they understood themselves.

The people who developed the fair looked at the past as well as the future. The future, and an idealized version of the present, received the most attention. The past was used in service of the present and future. It grounded the present, like through bloodline connections at the Fort Dearborn replica and in the Colonial Village. Visitors were able to feel directly connected to the past by witnessing the living bodies of others and the historic items on display. Perhaps this was

even more important given that the buildings themselves were not authentic to the past. The objects and people had to be.

People found the past usable—they got things out of it, and shaped historic narratives for their own purposes. It was important for the past to be reassuring and to be somewhere from which to have progressed. They got a sense of permanence, of continuity—something especially appealing in a time of massive economic instability. They got examples of how to triumph in difficult times, especially at the Lincoln group. They got a reassurance that their own time was quite comfortable and not so bad in comparison to pioneer days of log cabins without electricity—a reminder that they had already come so far. They got reassurance that what they believed to be American cultural values were important and would bear them through their own times into a brighter future: values like resourcefulness, toughness, graciousness, education, and somehow both individualism and community.

Various groups at A Century of Progress claimed the past as their own and used it to convey their ideals. Some of these ideals were conservative, such as the emphasis on bloodline relations to history, especially at the Colonial Village and Fort Dearborn. At the Du Sable cabin, Black activists used the past to make the present more inclusive. At Fort Dearborn, the Lincoln group, and the Colonial Village, people told histories they already basically knew. They reminded themselves of a version of the past where Americans, especially white ones, triumphed over enemies, the wilderness, and difficult times. Even at the Du Sable cabin, the core story of settler colonialism, of a rugged, lone man, was familiar. History was--and is--something that could be claimed and told with an agenda for affecting change (or maintaining systems of power)

in the present, even when the producers of historical content did not realize they were shaping the past in their own image.

The story of the Century of Progress Exposition is a Chicago story, but it is an American story. The story of the historical exhibits at the Century of Progress Exposition helps to make our understanding of the culture of the 1930s a bit clearer. During the Great Depression, people were suffering, and they were afraid. It is easy for people to look backwards when they are suffering and afraid, but what is so remarkable about this exposition is that history was used as a launchpad, not a comfortable retreat. The fair was a reminder of how far Americans had come, which proved to them that the setbacks of the Great Depression were temporary. The ways in which Americans had coped with past challenges, and the values that had served them then, would be useful to serve them in the present challenges. The fair presented visions of a hopeful imagined future, but, surprisingly, it also presented visions of a hopeful imagined past.

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VITA

Catherine (Cate) LiaBraaten earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from Cornell College in 2012. In 2013, she took graduate level courses in history at the University of Missouri-Kansas City while working as a museum educator at the Johnson County Museum. LiaBraaten left UMKC to enroll in a more public history focused program and received a Master's Degree in Historical Administration from Eastern Illinois University in 2014. In 2017, she began pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy degree in American History and Public History at Loyola University Chicago. At Loyola, LiaBraaten was a teaching assistant, teacher of record, History Graduate Student Association member and Vice President, a conference organizer, and recipient of the Crown Fellowship for the Humanities.

Dr. LiaBraaten is also a practicing public historian with a career that includes working with institutions including the Chicago History Museum, Historic Wagner Farm, the Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History, the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, and the Francis Willard House Museum.