

## Grandeur, Progress, and Innovation for Some: The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition

By Julius L. Jones

To find oneself in Chicago in 1893 is to be engulfed in a whirlwind of activity. Founded as a town in 1833 and incorporated as a city in 1837, Chicago was the fastest-growing city in the world by the end of the nineteenth century, attracting thousands of migrants and immigrants annually. Industrial heft made the city a global leader in manufacturing, and monied interests made it the world's epicenter of commodity trading. Serving as the nucleus of the nation's railway system, Chicago was cementing its place as the crossroads of the United States.

With its opening on May 1, 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition was a bold and definitive statement that America and its then-most dynamic city had arrived on the global stage not merely as a bit-part player, but as a cultural, political, and economic powerhouse. The director of works for the exposition, Daniel H. Burnham, wanted a symbol for the fair that would put Paris's Eiffel Tower to shame. To achieve this, he selected a simple but radical design for a revolving observation wheel using steel tension construction created by civil engineer George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. Perhaps the clearest embodiment of Chicago's—and by extension America's—technical superiority at the fair, the Ferris Wheel dominated the Midway Plaisance and became a beacon for visitors traveling to the fairgrounds.

The unrivaled speed and scale at work in Chicago at the time often made it difficult for urban dwellers to understand the ever-changing geography of the city and their relation to one another. The curiosity to grasp the scope and grandeur of the city, and find one's place within it, made the Ferris Wheel a smashing success. At 262 feet, it was the tallest structure for miles around. The attraction offered the chance for passengers to behold the city's shape and scale and gain a greater visual comprehension of Chicago and the fairgrounds from the vantage point of the Midway. By the fair's end, visitors had purchased 1.4 million tickets to ride the Ferris Wheel.

In the background of such an engineering feat, racial tensions still loomed heavy in the city. The very definition of who was a Chicagoan—and to an even greater extent, an American—was in flux. Different groups of European men and women would ultimately be bound together by whiteness, and the fair itself further entrenched such notions of white supremacy. Cultural exoticism and what were deemed oddities sold in the Midway's attractions reflected and promoted racist notions of whiteness as superior that would define the development of American cities for the foreseeable future. Riders of the Ferris Wheel, anxious and uncertain, may have been assuaged by receiving a visceral message of America's progress and ingenuity, as well as the supremacy of the white, Eurocentric world over the "other" cultures collected below.

The World's Columbian Exposition was a remarkable feat for Chicago. Just two decades

prior, the city was leveled by fire, and its rapid recovery came to represent the resilience of its residents and of the nation. The world's fair marked the celebration of what Americans had and would accomplish. But the fair's legacy must be attentive to the those who it failed to include in its celebration of the Eurocentric world's past, present, and future. Notions of racial inferiority remained entrenched in the collective consciousness going forward. Along the Midway, Arab, Asian, and African villages were commercial ventures conceived by white entrepreneurs masquerading as ethnological exhibits featuring live humans. Organizers presented these cultures as inferior, primitive, and barbaric—examples of the lowest levels of cultural development. Thus, the legacy of the 1893 world's fair is complex. It was an event that both brought people together and set apart those considered outsiders to mainstream society.

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