

LOOKING BACK

125 Years After the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

Imagine the Parthenon surrounded by three lakes and dozens of gleaming white buildings full of astounding exhibits and entertainment. In May - October of 1897 Tennessee celebrated 100 years of statehood. In those six months, 1.8 million visitors came to marvel at the elaborate buildings, exhibits, and entertainments. *Looking Back* invites visitors to an immersive experience in remembering the Tennessee Centennial Exposition.

The Parthenon's exhibitions and educational programming are funded in part by:



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Tennessee State Library & Archives

Smithsonian Archives of American Art

Minuteman Press Nashville

Metro Parks Maintenance Staff



Silver Loving Cup

Nashville, 1913

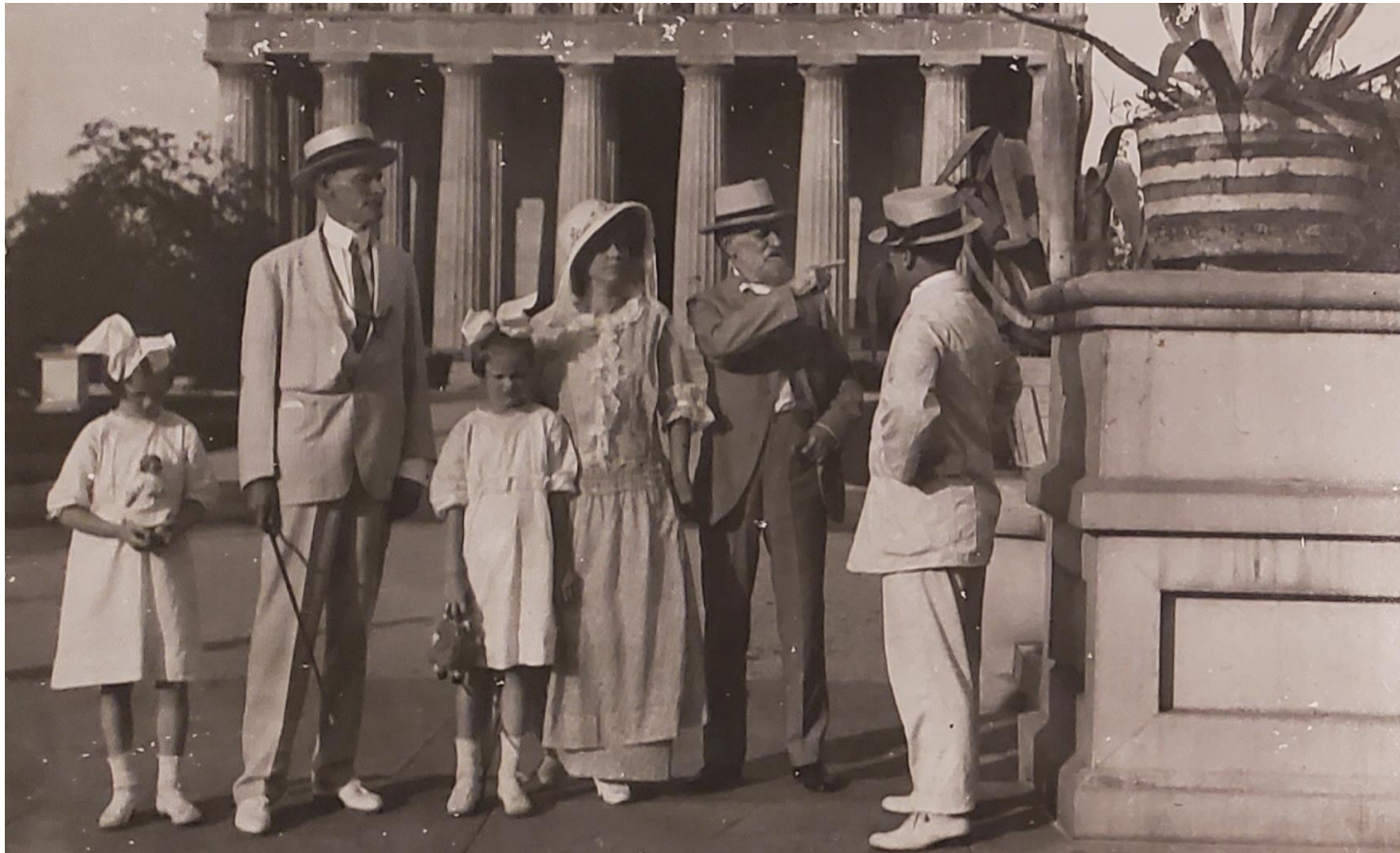
Gift of William Goodale Lewis and Laura McDougald Powell, 2021.2.1

In 1913, two thousand people gathered at the Parthenon to honor Major E. C. Lewis with a Loving Cup. Speaking at the ceremony, Gen. Tully Brown remarked:

The Parthenon was the conception of his own brain, and when he first suggested it the rest of us were amazed for we had not considered such a thing possible. But it was built and here it stands, the envy of every city in the nation. No other city has attempted to erect such a building; it was left for the new city of Nashville in the new State of Tennessee (new in the new Union) to build it and the world has wondered and asked how we did it. We owe it all to Maj. Lewis.

"Loving Cup for Honored Citizen: Unusual Tribute Paid by People of Nashville to Maj. E. C. Lewis."
Nashville Banner, 7 July 1913, p.3.





Major. E. C. Lewis with Visitors in Centennial Park

Nashville, c. 1913

Gift of Mr. Lewis Frazer, 1981.5.1

Major E. C. Lewis served as the first President of the Park Commission and made great contributions to the park system of Nashville. It was Lewis who suggested a Parthenon to represent the city of Nashville at the Exposition. After the Exposition, a western state offered Lewis a large amount to supervise a marble reconstruction of the Parthenon. He declined and said that Nashville was known as the "Athens of the South," and was the only place for a replica of the Parthenon.

Creighton, Wilbur F., *The Parthenon in Nashville: From a Personal Viewpoint*. Nashville (1968): 48.



Stock Certificate of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition Company

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2017.01.64

Eager to celebrate 100 years of statehood, many Tennessee residents purchased stock in the Tennessee Centennial Exposition Company without expecting repayment. Many expositions lost money, but the Tennessee Centennial Exposition made a modest profit even with yellow fever reducing attendance. The Parthenon is featured on this stock certificate along with John Sevier, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, and Andrew Johnson.

Tennessee Poultry, Pigeon, and Pet Stock Association Badge

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.1.21

As early as 1895, Nashville was described as Tennessee's Centennial City. The Tennessee Poultry, Pigeon, and Pet Stock Association met on December 12, 1895, to plan for their upcoming show in January. Among topics of discussion was the design of this badge.

A lively and interesting debate sprung up. Some of the members wanted the words, Centennial City, to head the badge, while others wanted the name, or initials of the association at the top. Quite a long talk and sharp debate ensued! The friends, or rather those most enthusiastically in favor of the Centennial, finally carried their point by a scratch.

"Fanciers Meet Again." The Tennessean, 17 December 1895, p.5





Centennial Guard Badge

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2017.01.37

The heated debate over whether to incorporate the fairgrounds ended in March 1897, with the founding of Centennial City. One of the key factors in the debate was the sale of liquor. As a compromise, Centennial City only sold beer and wine. The new city formed a police department called the Centennial Guard. They kept the merry visitors in check and also served as a fire department.



Tennessee Centennial Exposition Season Tickets

Lent by David S. Ewing, Ticket No. 1799 (open) L2011.3.31; Ticket No. 1918 (closed, front) L2017.01.04; Ticket No. 4671 (closed, back) L2013.12.73

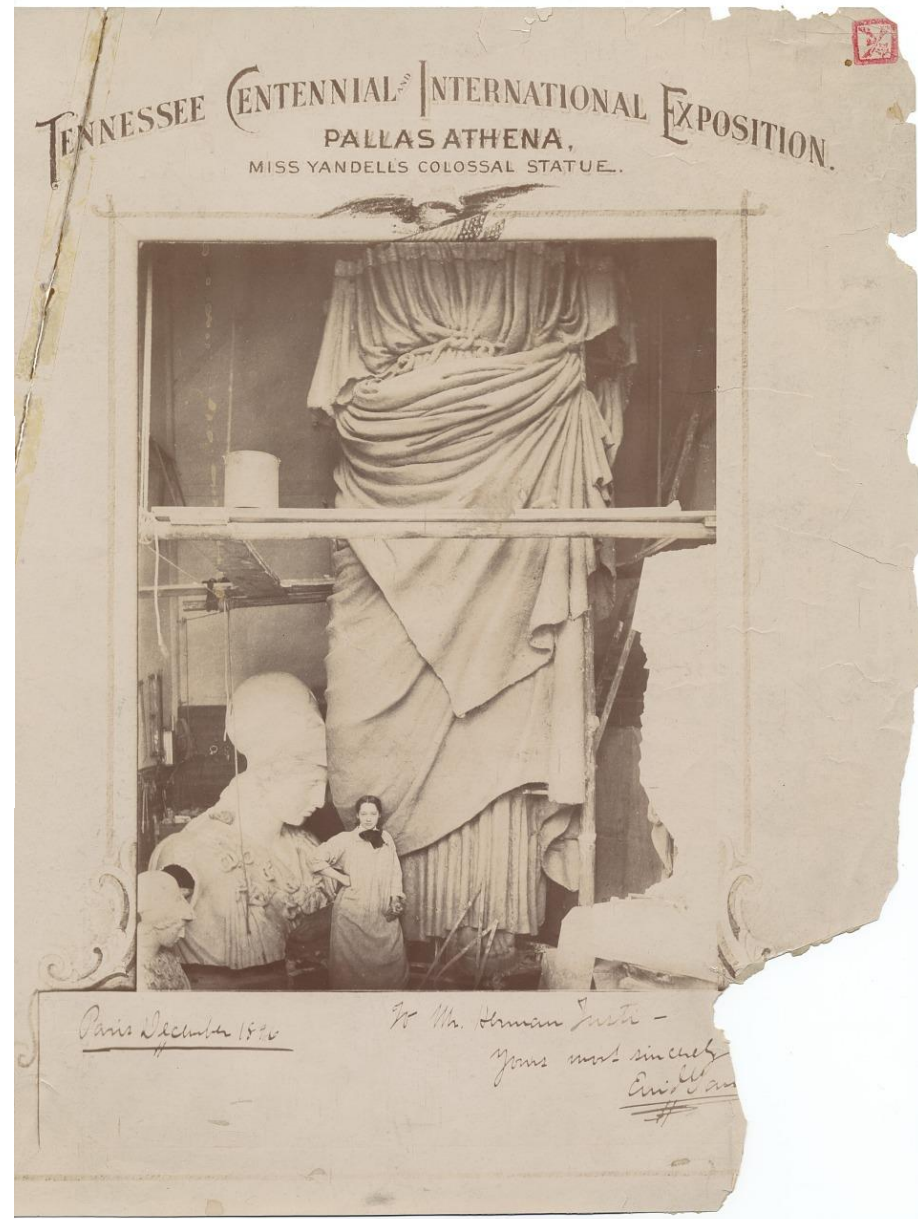
Season tickets with a photograph of the owner were a novel innovation for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. Orders of the first 2,500 season tickets began in March 1897 with a second printing of 1,000 following the opening in May. Each season pass cost \$10 (approximately \$340 today) and contained 100 tickets to use during the six months of the fair. Some Exposition workers were granted a sleeping permit that was attached to the back of their season pass.

Advertisement Featuring Enid Yandell's *Pallas Athena*

Image from Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Digital ID 3916, H: 16.14 x in. x W: 13 in.

Early on, the word "International" was included in the title for the Exposition. Unfortunately, foreign support was not as strong as hoped.

In this photograph, Enid Yandell poses with her statue of *Pallas Athena* in her studio in Paris, France. Once installed on its pedestal, the sculpture was approximately 43 feet tall and was declared the largest sculpture ever commissioned from a woman.



front

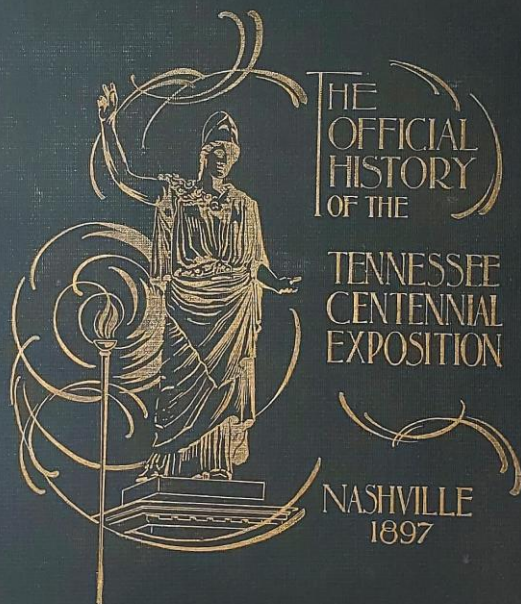
back



Gold Medal

Lent by Speed Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. John J. Trask, 1941.14.16 B 15

In addition to *Pallas Athena*, Enid Yandell had multiple sculptures on display in the Parthenon and Woman's Building. A statuette of Katie Kirkman, President of the Woman's Board, was created during Yandell's visit to Nashville in 1897 and displayed in the Woman's Building main hall.



The Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

Parthenon Collection, 2009.0.10

Editor Herman Justi chronicled the details of the Exposition and its organizers in this popular book. Decorating the cover is Yandell's *Pallas Athena* which was located in front of the Parthenon.



View a digital copy

Official Catalogue of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

Gift of Col. Robert and Mrs. Ann Lovier Dennison, 2012.5.17

Enid Yandell's *Pallas Athena* became an icon for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. As with the buildings of the Exposition, the sculpture was made of plaster and was never intended to be permanent. The popular statue is on the cover of this official guide to the exhibits on display.



View a digital copy



Special Days



Special Days honored conventions, professions, organizations, ethnic groups, activities, and locations throughout the Exposition. These days were a celebration and an opportunity to attract visitors. Herman Justi, Editor of *The Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, commented on the wide variety of groups that,

met and had their day and their say without let, hindrance or protest; and who will say that, besides giving a splendid example of tolerance, average human intelligence was not raised or the cause of right not advanced? One thing, however, is certain, thousands have been convinced that their neighbors were neither so bad nor so ignorant as they before affected to think them.¹

Visitors purchased souvenir pins, medals, or ribbons to wear with pride and support their cause. Booklets and programs commemorated special days and detailed events taking place.



View a list of the Special Days

¹ Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition Nashville and Herman Justi. *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*. Brandon Printing Company, 1898.



Stenographers Day Pin

Nashville, August 3-5, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.3.29

8th Annual Meeting of the Bankers' Association Pin

Nashville, May 19-20, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2016.01.19

4th Annual Meeting of American Society of Municipal Improvements Pin

Nashville, October 5-10, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2016.01.20





Alabama Press Association Day Pin

Nashville, June 10, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.3.17

United Typothetae of America Pin

Nashville, October 6-8, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.105

THE TENNESSEE
CENTENNIAL

NEW YORK STATE DAY
BROOKLYN DAY

***A Souvenir of the Trip Taken by the Brooklyn Party and
the New York State Commissioners to attend the
“Brooklyn Day” and the “New York State Day” Exercises
at the Nashville Exposition***

Nashville, October 8-15, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.1.156



View a digital copy

BROOKLYN DAY
AT THE
TENNESSEE CENTENNIAL
EXPOSITION



Exercises in Auditorium Building, eleven A. M.

Reception in New York State Building, eight to ten P. M.

October Eleventh, Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-seven

Brooklyn Day at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

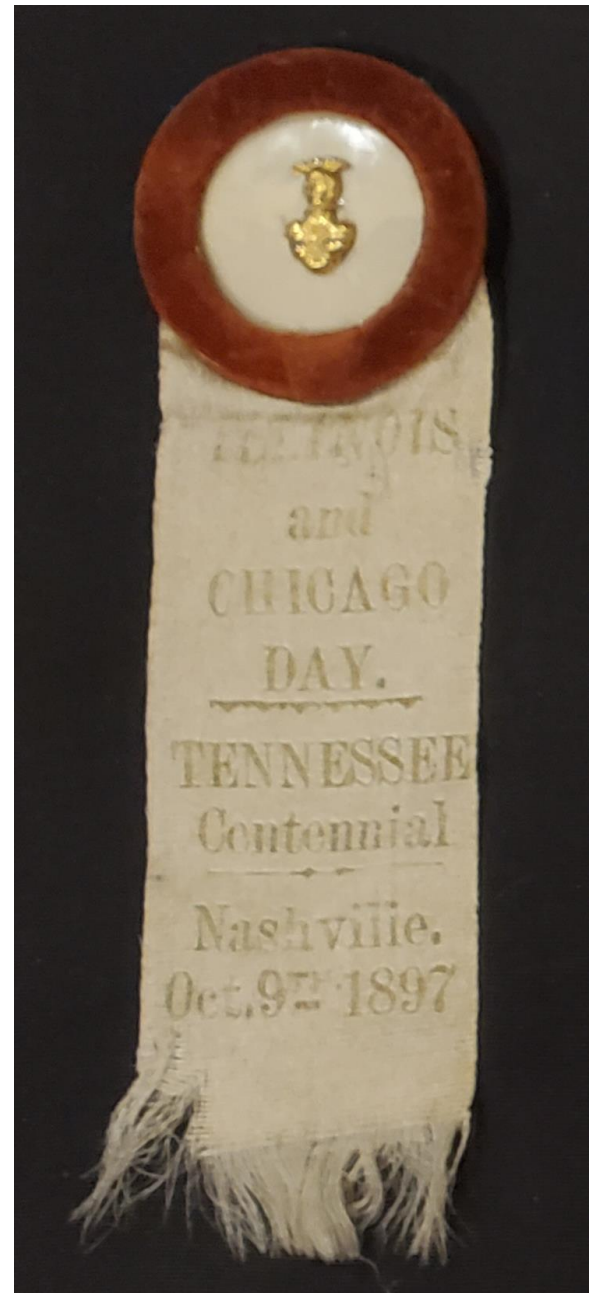
Nashville, October 11, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2014.1.5

Illinois and Chicago Day Pin

Nashville, October 9, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.3.28





Massachusetts Delegation Pin

Nashville, September 23, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2017.01.34

Brooklyn Day Medal

Nashville, October 11, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, Medal L2016.04.04

Brooklyn's motto, "Een Draght Mackt Maght," translates from Old Dutch into English as, "In Unity There is Strength."



German American Day Pin

Nashville, October 6, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.101

German American Day at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

Nashville, October 6, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2017.01.14

Spectacles and Souvenirs



An opportunity to shake the hand of President McKinley was one of many special events that created an incentive to visit the fair.

Visitors enjoyed a range of daily entertainment from athletic competitions to concerts. By day, speeches, lectures, and demonstrations educated them and celebrated progress. At night, the electricity and fireworks illuminated the fairgrounds and imagination.

A wide variety of souvenirs were available for purchase from razors and purses to spoons and coins. One of the most popular items was delicate ruby colored glassware that was personalized when purchased. Mussel shell boats were charming keepsakes that may have reminded visitors of displays in the Children's Building. Commemorative portraits were made on site with the relatively new art form of photography.



Heart Shaped Box

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.98

Mussel Shell Sailboat

Gift of Col. Robert & Mrs. Ann Lovier Dennison
2012.5.2





Teacup and Saucer

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2015.01.31.a.b



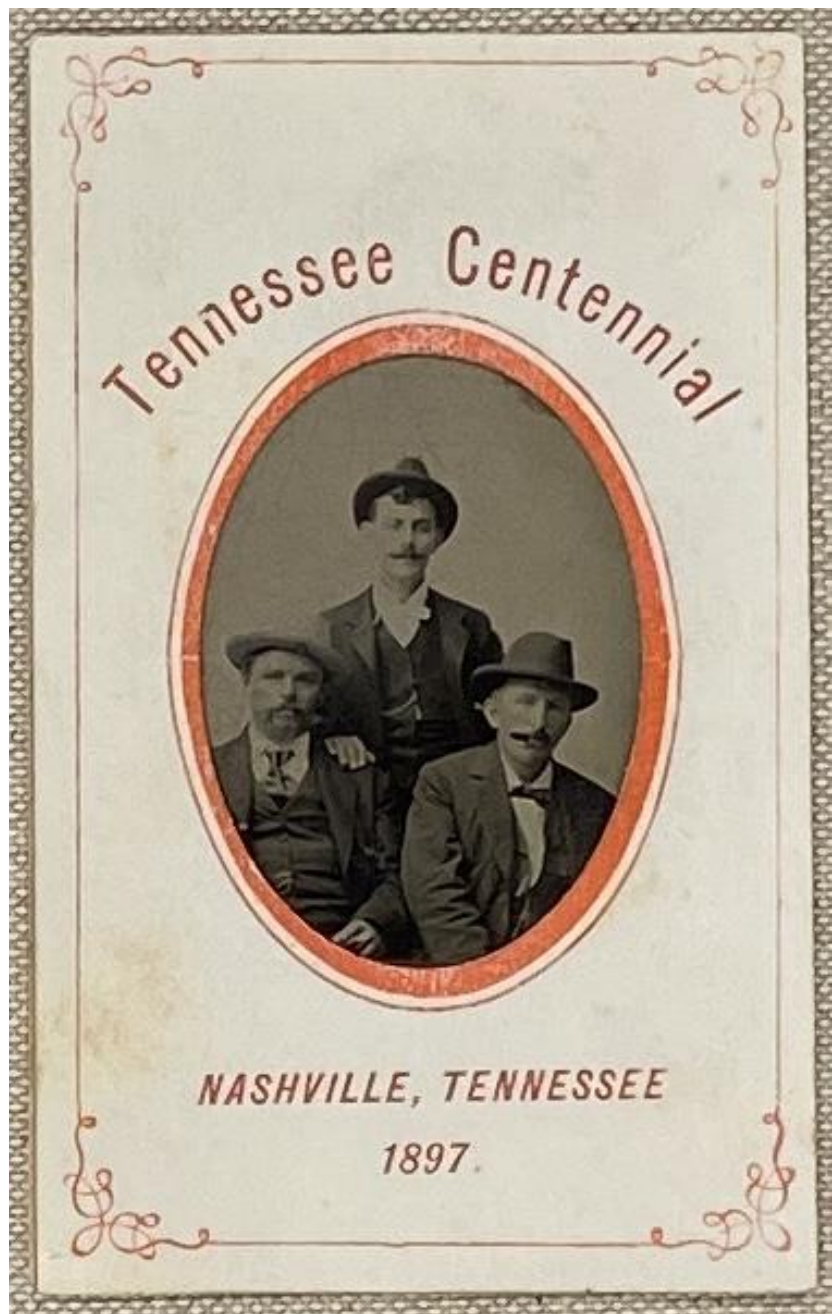
Coin Purse

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2016.04.12

Ruby Flash Glass

Lent by David S. Ewing





Portrait of Three Men

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2014.03.1

Advertisement for Railroads and Pyrotechnical Displays

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.1.153

Half Fare on all Railroads!

GRANDEST DISPLAY OF FIREWORKS
EVER ATTEMPTED IN THE WORLD

PYROTECHNICAL DISPLAYS
OF MAGNIFICENT PROPORTIONS

SEEN IN NASHVILLE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AMERICA
New Japanese Inventions.—Also the New and Marvelous Day Fireworks
on Floral Parade Day.—Grand Symbolical Representation of Dewey's
Victory at Manila.



ENTIRE CENTENNIAL GROUNDS ILLUMINATED
BY COUNTLESS THOUSANDS OF COLORED LAMPS

Making scenes that rival Fairy Land. First time in the South for these Fairy Lamps. Indescribably Soft
and Beautiful Effects, incapable of adequate description. IF YOU DON'T SEE IT,
YOU'LL BE SORRY WHEN YOU HEAR ABOUT IT.

FAIRY ILLUMINATIONS, FIREWORKS AND MUSIC EVERY NIGHT

Half Fare on all Railroads



Bicycle Day Cyclist's Cup

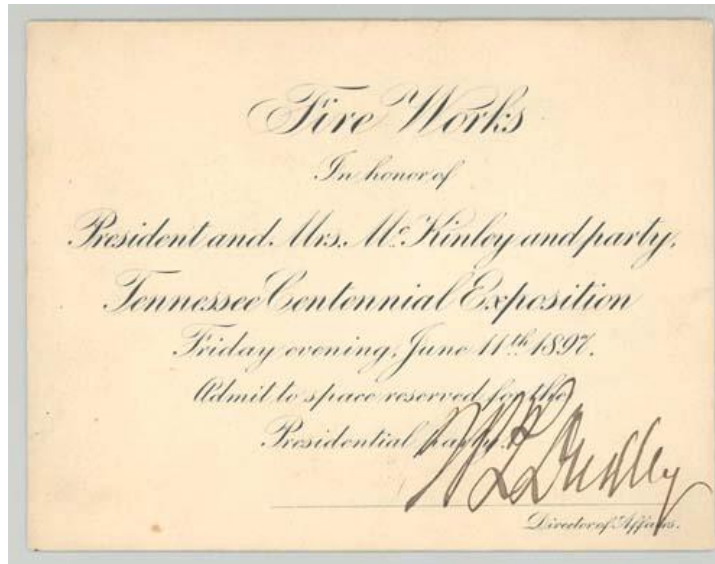
Nashville, September 23, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing

Portrait of a Girl Wearing a Hat

Lent by David S. Ewing





Cincinnati Day Pin with Buckeye

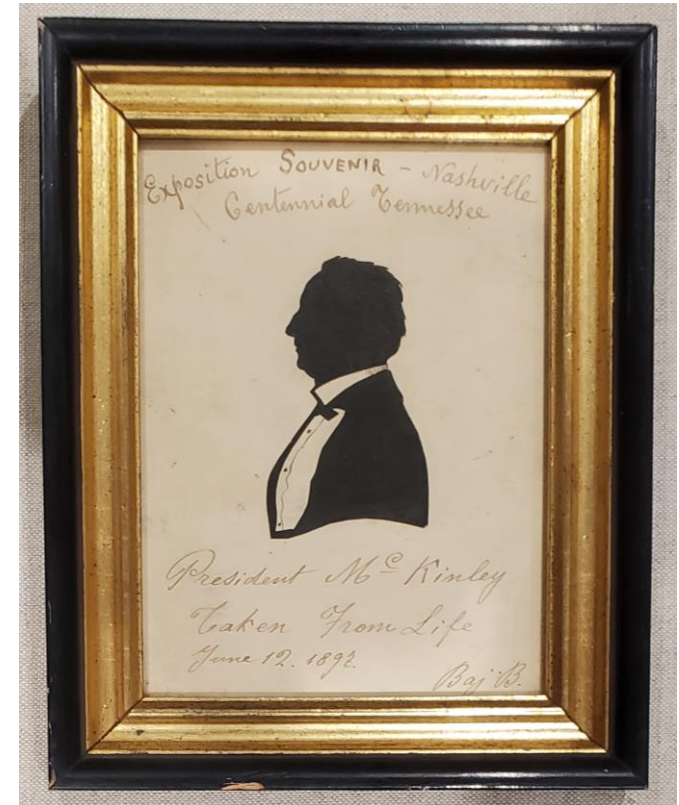
Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.3.27

Silhouette of President McKinley

Lent by David S. Ewing

Admittance Card

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.64



President McKinley visited the Exposition with great fanfare on June 11, 1897. The Centennial Chimes rang as his carriage entered the fairgrounds. The Cincinnati Building was dedicated in honor of his home state of Ohio. The Fisk Jubilee Singers gave a special performance at the Negro Building for the President. While the gentlemen met at the Club, the First Lady attended a luncheon at the Woman's Building. The public were invited to a reception in the Government Building at 3 p.m. to shake the President's hand. An impressive display of fireworks concluded the evening.



Bicycle Day Scorer Ribbon

Nashville, September 23, 1897

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.3.19

Portrait of a Woman with a Chair

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2017.01.39



Spectacles and Souvenirs



An opportunity to shake the hand of President McKinley was one of many special events that created an incentive to visit the fair.

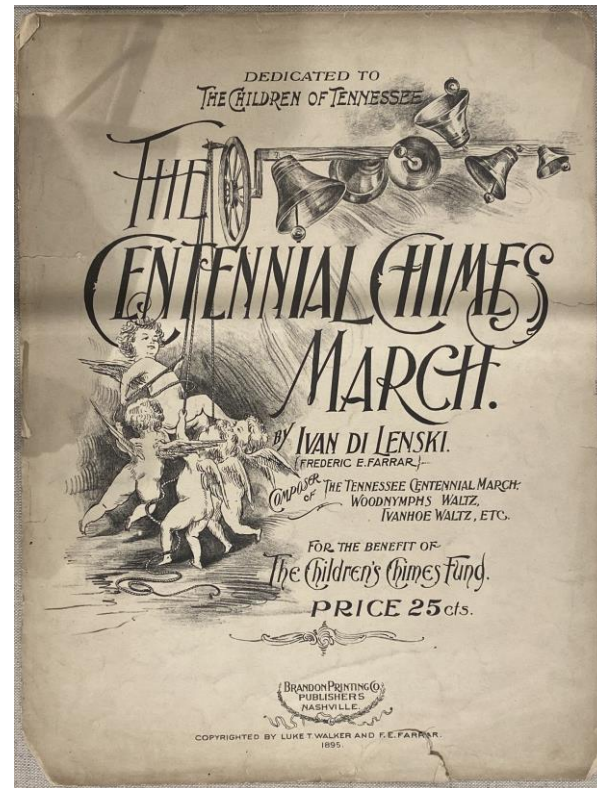
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Centennial Chimes Pin

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.1.13



In addition to raising funds for their building, the children of Tennessee were also hard at work securing money for a large set of chimes. The sale of commemorative sheet music and medals contributed to The Children's Chimes Fund. The chimes were installed in the tower of the Auditorium and rang joyfully at special events throughout the Exposition.

The Centennial Chimes March

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.1.72



View a digital copy of this sheet music

Listen to Music from the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition



LOOKING BACK

125 Years After the
Tennessee Centennial Exposition



View the sheet music
and play along at home

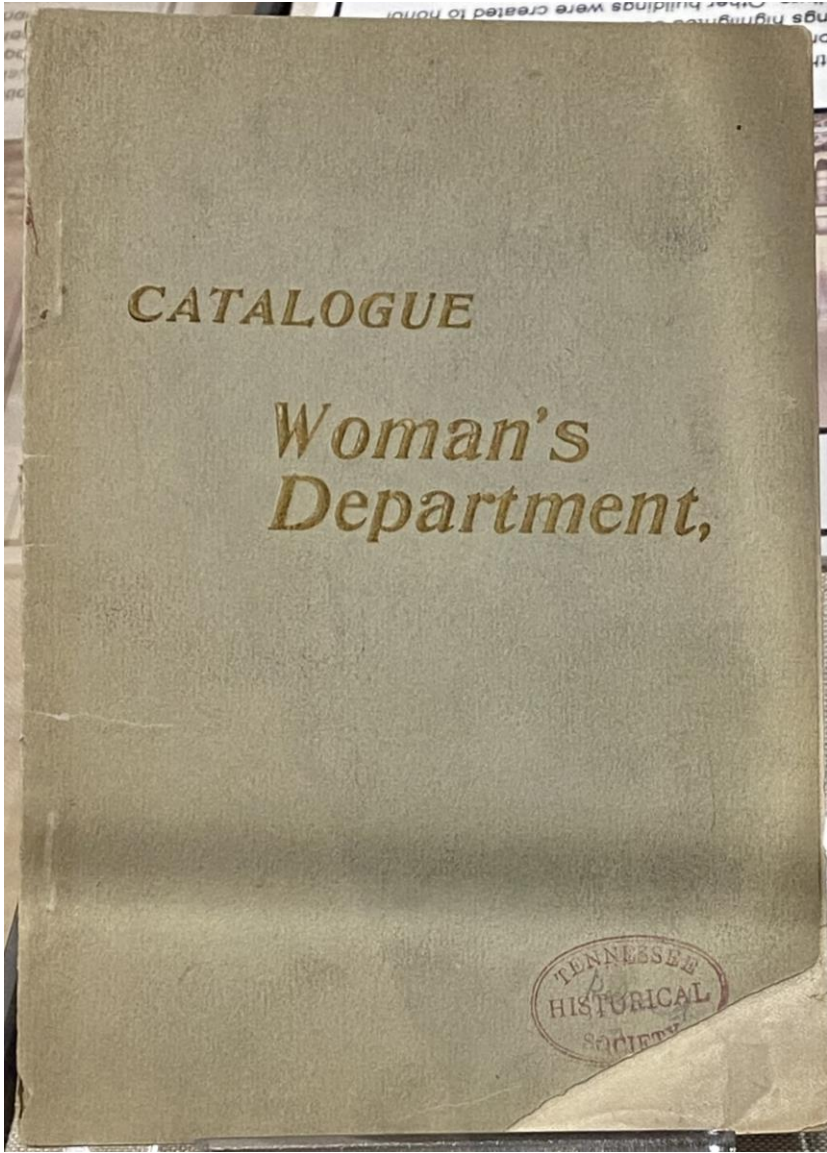
Also available on [YouTube](#).



The Children's Building

Lent by David Ewing

Tennessee was the first of the expositions to have a Children's Department, and it was among the first buildings to be approved by Exposition management. Children throughout Tennessee helped raise money and received membership cards to the building. The interior held a Kindergarten Department, model school room, and exhibits to educate and amuse children. At the request of the Public School Officers' Association, the work of children was prominently displayed. Local papers praised it as "The Little Gem of the Exposition."



Woman's Building Souvenir Book

Lent by David Ewing, L2016.1.23

Catalogue Woman's Department

Lent by David Ewing, L2015.01.05

Many of the buildings offered commemorative items for sale. The Woman's Building, for example, offered this commemorative pin, a catalogue of all items on display in the building, and a souvenir album among other items.



Man with Woman's Building Pin

Lent by David Ewing, L2011.3.70

Woman's Building Pin

Lent by David Ewing, L2011.1.15

Composite of 17 Buildings at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

Image from Tennessee State Library and Archives, Image ID 4579

Over 30 major buildings were constructed for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition.

1. The Parthenon - the Fine Arts Building
2. The History Building
3. The Auditorium
4. The Woman's Building
5. The Children's Building
6. The Commerce Building
7. The Transportation Building
8. The Education and Hygiene Building
9. The Railway and Terminal Building
10. The Pythian Building
11. The Agriculture Building illuminated at night
12. The Agriculture Building
13. The Machinery Building
14. The Negro Building
15. The Rialto Bridge
16. The Transportation Building
17. The U.S. Government Building





Pythian Headquarters Pin

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2017.01.35

Unlike the other buildings, the Pythian Headquarters avoided total demolition. After the Exposition, Joseph Parks purchased the building and moved it to Franklin, TN where it was reassembled as his residence.



The Pythian Headquarters, now known as the Carlisle House photo by Skye Marthaler

Frederick Douglass Souvenir Coin

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2011.1.7 and L2016.01.28

This souvenir coin and any items related to the Negro Building are exceedingly rare.

front



back



Buildings



Though they looked both durable and elegant, the Exposition buildings were made from simple and temporary materials. Large wood and plaster buildings highlighted commerce, transportation, government, and agriculture. Other buildings were created to honor states and cities. Several buildings were designed to showcase groups of people such as the Negro Building, the Woman's Building, and the Children's Building. Each building was filled with exhibits to educate and delight, celebrating achievements and the progress to come.

The Parthenon served as the Fine Arts Building and held the largest art exhibit the South had ever seen. To protect the valuable artwork from fire, only the Parthenon was built of bricks before being covered with plaster.

Image: The Memphis-Shelby County Building, Lent by David S. Ewing

Please admit to the Chutes,
(2)
E. W. McConnell. July 20
Circuit of Cycloramas,
United States, Canada,
Australia, Japan.
E. W. McConnell.
Cyclorama



Tickets for Shoot the Chutes

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.5-7

Request to Admit Two to Chute the Shoots

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.47

The Chutes were a thrilling contrast to the serene ride of the Giant See Saw. Boats splashed down an incline to a pool of water in a matter of seconds. Vanity Fair ride owners and operators occasionally requested passes to other rides for friends.



The Giant See Saw

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2017.01.41

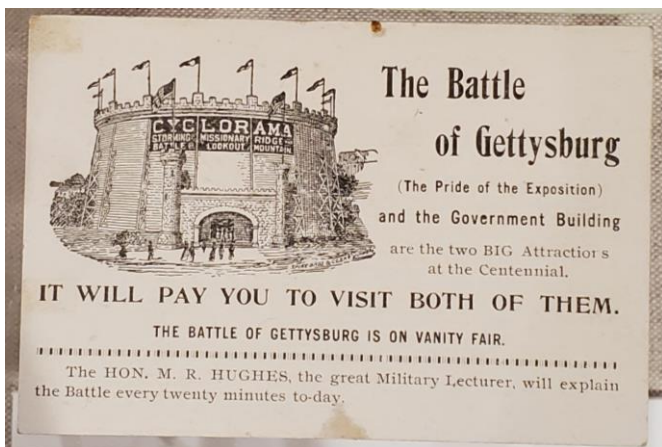
Complimentary Tickets from the Giant See Saw Co.

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.66

The Giant See Saw was a ride unique to Nashville. It allowed people a rarely seen bird's eye view from 200 feet above a hill overlooking the Exposition. Each ride, lasting approximately 5 minutes, operated without incident through the entire run of the fair.

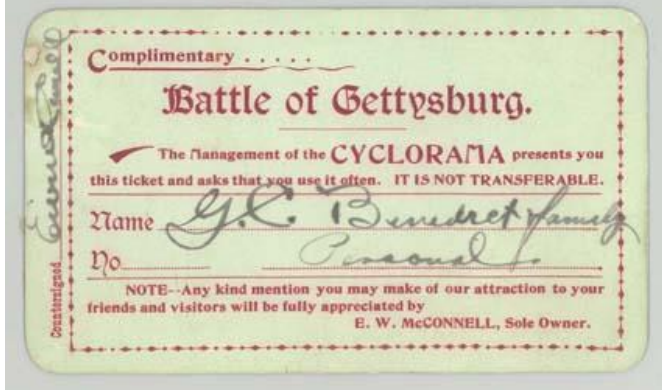
Ticket for the Battle of Gettysburg Cyclorama

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.48-49



Complimentary Ticket to Battle of Gettysburg

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.60



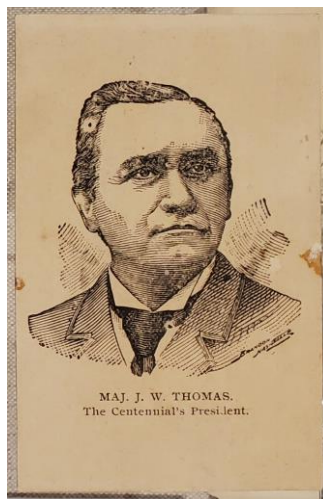
Newspaper Article on Cyclorama – Battle of Gettysburg

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2011.1.152

The Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg surrounded viewers with images from the battle nearly 35 years ago. Herman Justi in the *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition* noted:

This stupendous work is said to have required sixteen months' labor by thirteen artists to complete it, and seven tons of paint were used before it was all on the canvas.

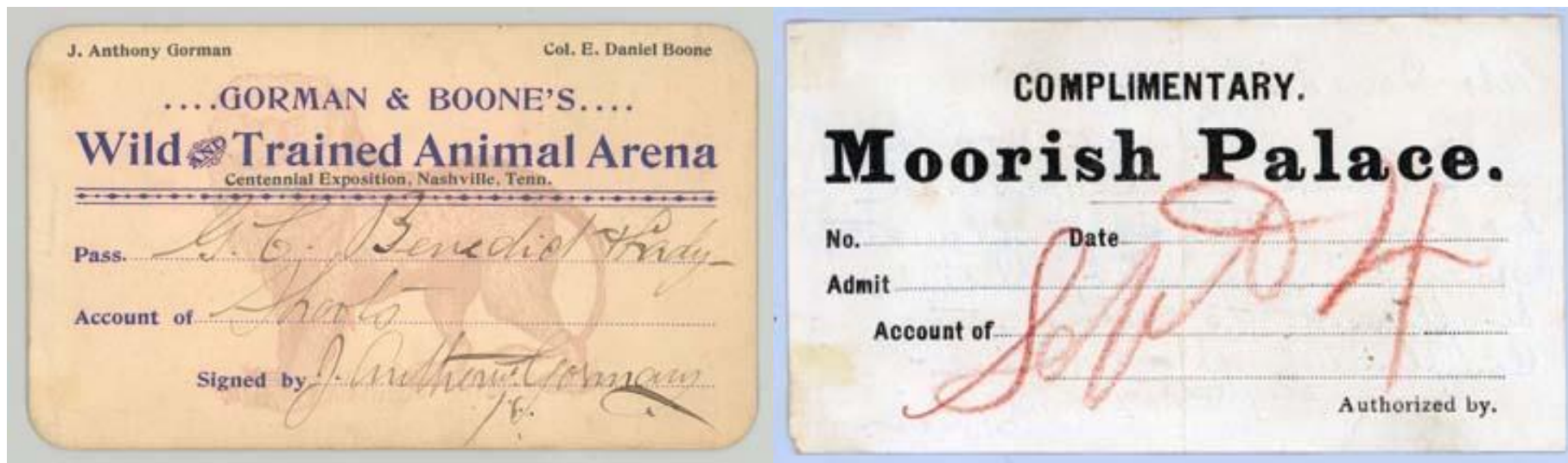
Justi, Herman. *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition*, Press of the Brandon Printing Company, 213





**I Have “Shot the Chutes” at
Vanity Fair Badge**

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.10 and
L2013.12.10

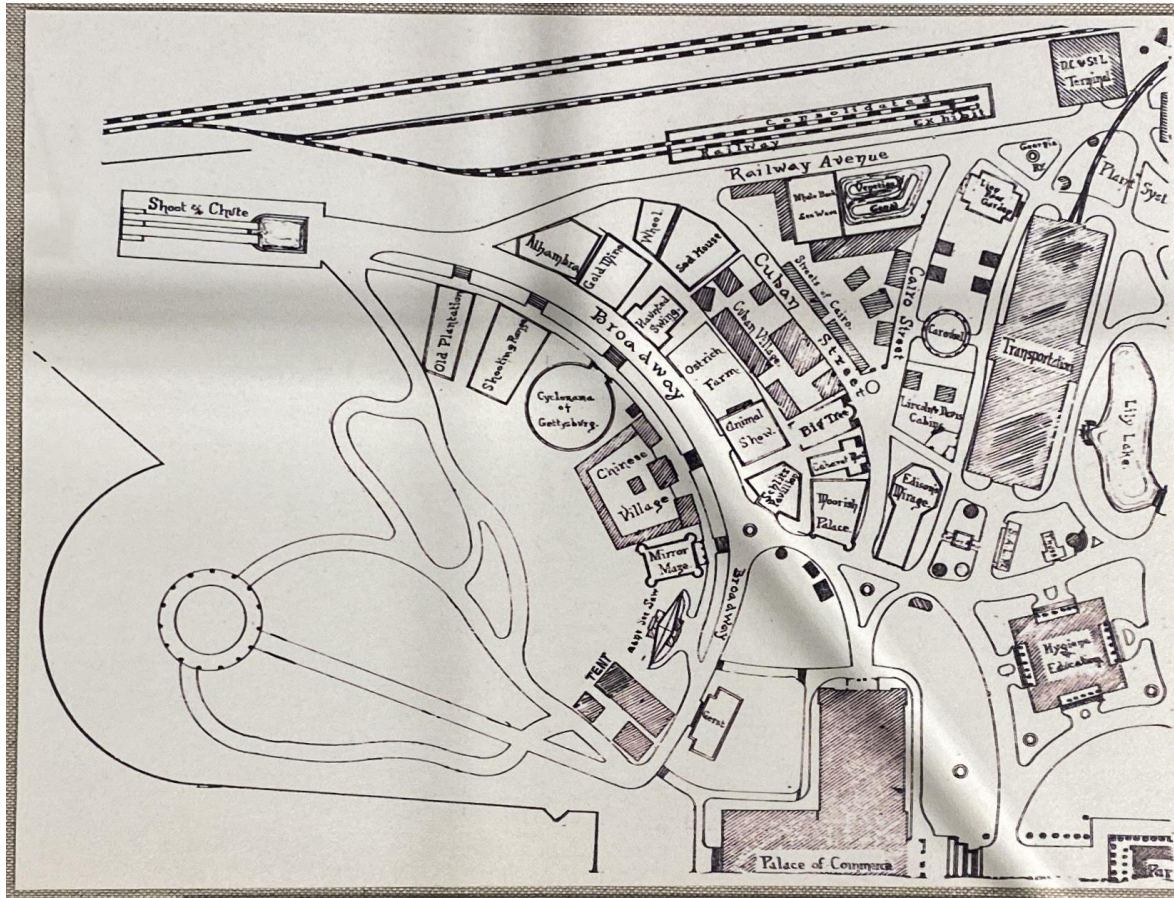


Complimentary Ticket to the Moorish Palace

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.13

Complimentary Ticket Gorman & Boone's Wild & Trained Animal Arena

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.13



Map of Vanity Fair from *Six Days of Delight a Week at Tennessee Centennial*

Image lent by David S. Ewing, L.2011.1.132



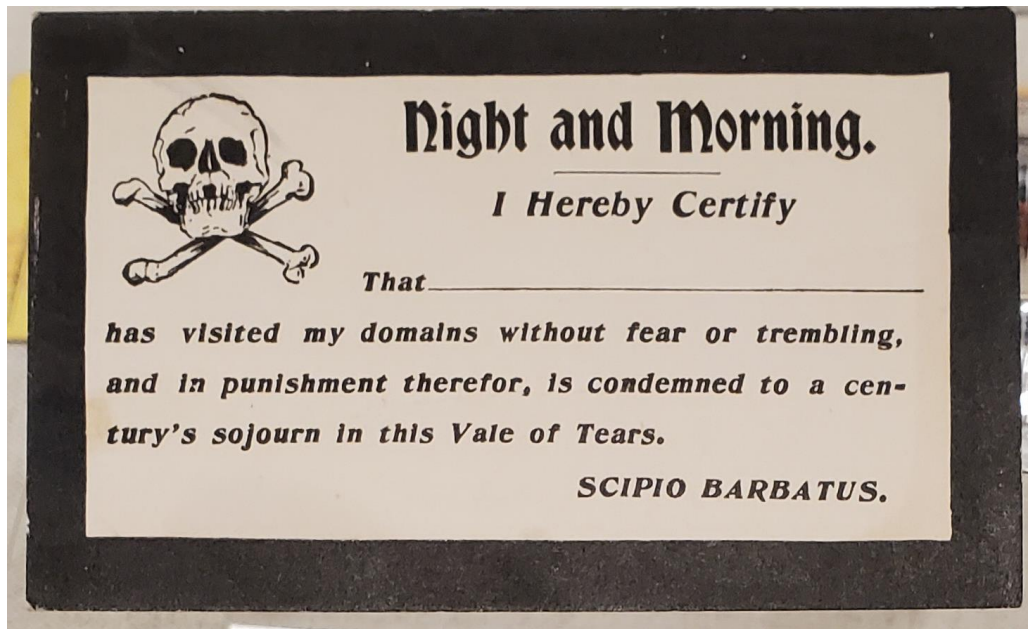
View a digital copy of this book

Vanity Fair



As evening approached and the exhibit buildings closed, Vanity Fair welcomed crowds seeking thrilling rides and foreign delights. It was a riotous blend of people from all ages, races, and classes. There was music from many cultures, roaring lions, delicious foods, and amazing sights.

Themed buildings offered different architectural styles such as Spain's Palace of Illusions, the Streets of Cairo, and the Moorish Palace reproducing what many visitors only knew through illustrations. However, the interiors were filled with mirror mazes and exhibits with no connection to the exterior architecture or the diverse cultures they represented.



Night and Morning Souvenir Card

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.34

Night and Morning was styled on the Café of Death which had been such a success in Paris. Servers dressed as undertakers supplied refreshments on black-edged tablecloths covering coffins below skull and bone themed chandeliers. A guide dressed as a priest led visitors to a hall where one from the party would enter a coffin. Here, the visitor's "human bones" were revealed and danced as if by magic. Next, visitors entered a room decorated with scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. Then, a skull-lined grotto led to the darkest room where a door opened with a great flash of light, revealing Morning. White satin covered the walls and ceiling of the

Morning room and calmed the terrified visitors with music and comfortable seats. All illusions were revealed with a beer and souvenir cards.



Image: Illustration of Night and Morning from *The Tennessean*, May 02, 1897, page 14

Complimentary Ticket to the Chinese Village

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.20

With approximately 450 native Chinese workers, the Chinese Village at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition was the largest of any prior fair. A tea house, barbershop, theater, temple, and gambling house combined with shops and restaurants to resemble an operating Chinese town.



Cultural villages were popular at expositions of the 19th century and did offer insight into other cultures and places. Though Tennessee tried to show the best of village culture, there were reports of horrible treatment toward Chinese people. By today's standards, the cultural villages can be seen as racist, encouraging abuse and exploitation.

Image: The Chinese Village from *Images of America Tennessee Centennial Nashville 1897* by Bobby Lawrence





Ticket for the Cuban Village

Lent by David S. Ewing, L2013.12.15

The Cuban Village entertained visitors with dancers in “abbreviated skirts,” Spanish guitar performances, and fencers. Bad management and creditors caused the Cuban Village to close by the end of the first month. The site remained closed until two months before the end of the Exposition. After renovations, a Wild West Show opened in September. Native Americans were brought to the Exposition from a reservation to sleep “in regular Indian style,” perform on horses. The famous Spanish dancer Carmella and the remaining performers of the Cuban Village entertained audiences on a second stage.

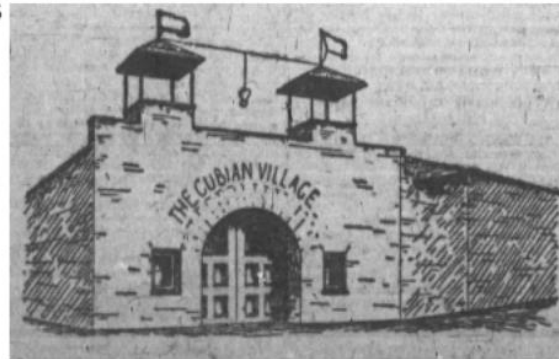
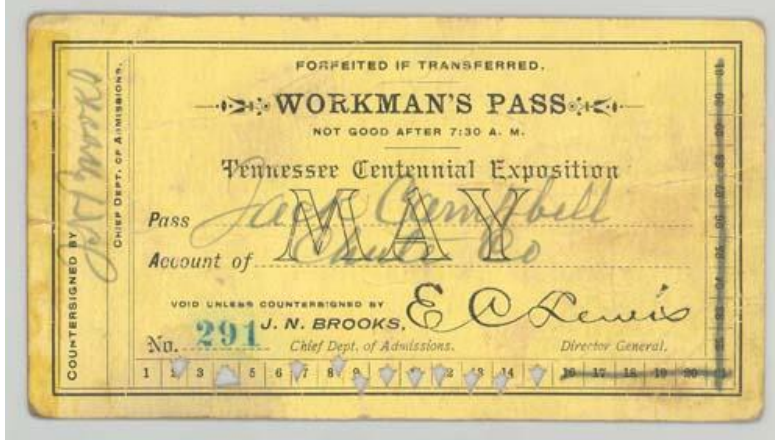
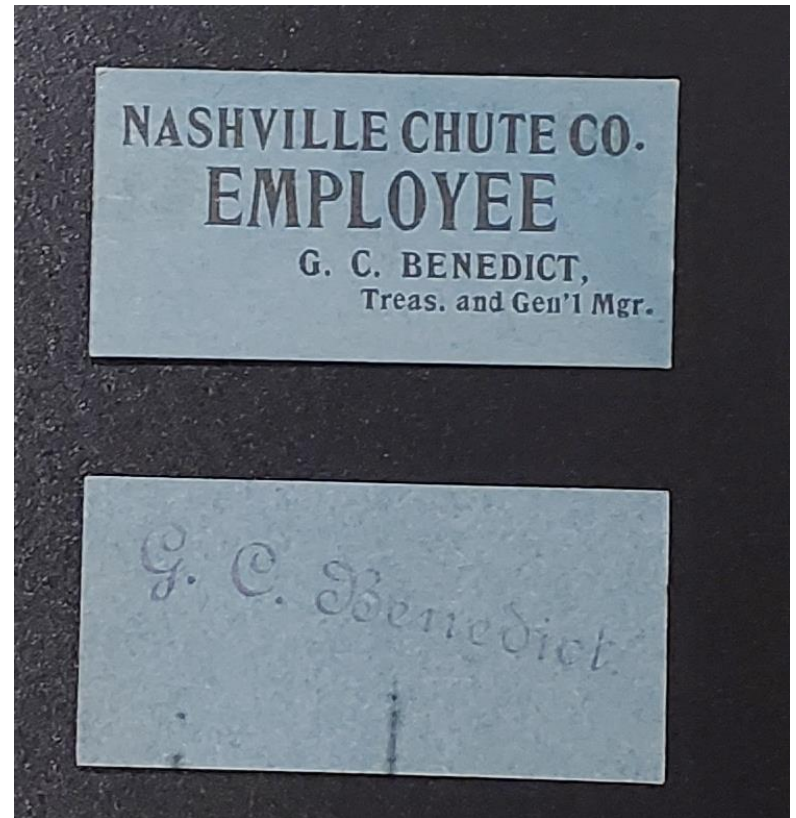


Image: Cuban Village, *Nashville Banner*, 1, May 1897, p14.



Nashville Chute Co. Employee Ticket

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.8-9

Workman's Pass for Jack Campbell of the Chutes

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.62

Employee Pass for Nashville Chute Company

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.54

Workers and Living Exhibitions



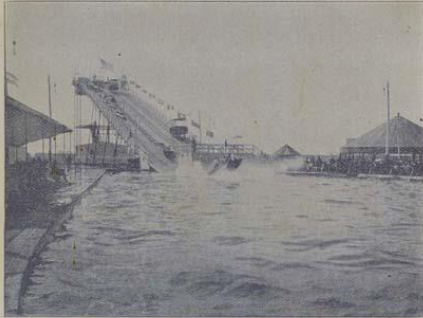
The Vanity Fair workers were an essential part of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. They kept the rides operating safely and the attractions clean and orderly. Although the workers often went unnoticed by the public, job creation was an important part of organizing the Exposition.

Attractions like the Old Plantation, the Chinese Village, and the Cuban Village were a popular part of world fairs and expositions at the time. They offered encounters with the romanticized past and exoticized people of different nationalities. Today we recognize that this was an expression of the belief in white superiority and industrialization.

J. W. PRICE,
President.

MAY OVERTON,
Vice-President and Secretary

GEO. C. BENTON,
Cashier and Gen'l Mgr.



NASHVILLE CHUTE CO.,

OWNERS OF

Paul Boyton's
Popular
Amusement

Shooting the Chutes

Every requisite for the Convenience,
Comfort and Entertainment of Visitors

Chutes Located West End
Vanity Fair, Tenn. Centennial Grounds.

47

Nashville, Tenn. 189

J. B. & John & May Overton Swing
H. Rollan night & morning Mirror

Ed. Moore Dept Jardin de Paris
450 Davis Big Tree

C. Skous } Street of Cairo
Chas. A. Dye } Annual Show

G. F. Johnson }
A. F. Johnson } Snow & Palace

Don't Sugar
W. P. Spain Mirror Maze

Lee O'Connell Blunder V.
Pm H. Bell

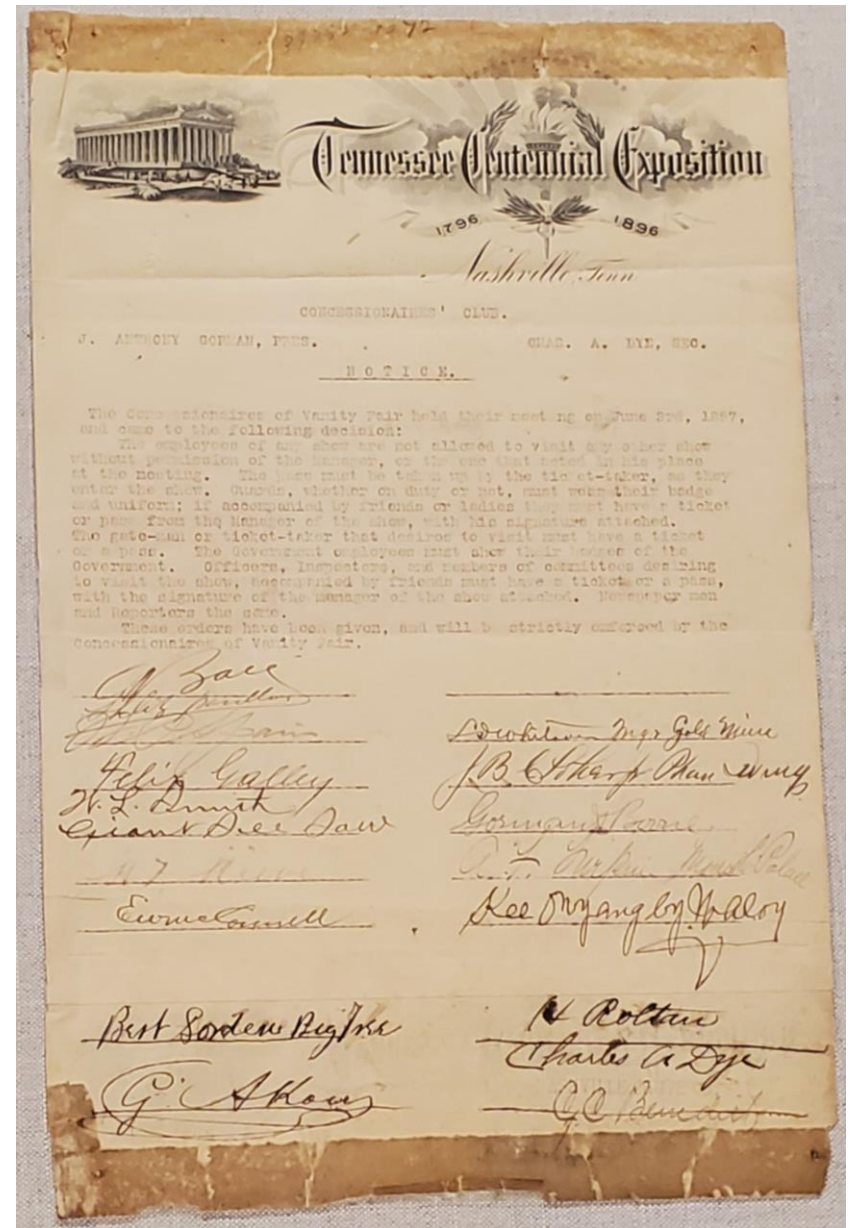
Evans & Co. Cyclorama
Fred. S. Miller in Old Plantation

Signatures of Vanity Fair Managers and Ride Owners

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.66

Notice with Members of the Tennessee Centennial Concessionaires Club

Lent by David S. Ewing, L.2013.12.72





Negro Building Cornerstone

Lent by Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E.
Franklin Library, Special Collections, Nashville, TN

The Negro Department of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

Nestled in Centennial Park on the eastern bank of Lake Watauga, the Tennessee Centennial Exposition's Negro Building stood as a mark of Black achievement and as a weapon of white New South propaganda.

Designed by white architect Frederic Thompson, who would later co-design Coney Island's Luna Park, the 20,000 square foot two-story structure was Spanish Renaissance in design. It cost about \$13,000 to construct and featured handsome towers, a red roof, a rooftop pavilion restaurant, and a medical facility with an all-Black staff to serve Black attendees.

The picturesque building stood as a striking monument to Black possibility. In the three decades since the Civil War, African Americans, despite the persistence of terroristic racism and white supremacy, had made great strides in many fields of endeavor. Black higher education was among the most remarkable of their achievements, and Nashville was home to three of the nation's most respected Black colleges, Fisk University, Central Tennessee College, and Roger Williams University.

Enshrined in Plessy v. Ferguson, segregation informed all interracial interactions, including planning the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. As New South boosters, the exposition's white planners viewed the Exposition as an opportunity to reassert white southern sovereignty over the region's race matters. Consequently, they were reluctant to allow the city's Black citizenry to display their achievements in a building of their own.

Unsurprisingly, Black planners had different ideas. Led by Nashville's most powerful and influential Black citizen, lawyer, and politician James Carroll Napier as Negro Department chief, they viewed a Negro Building as their chance to challenge white images of blackness. In protest, Napier's dissatisfaction led him to resign, claiming ill health, in August 1896.

Black schoolteacher Richard Hill succeeded Napier as Negro Department chief. White planners had viewed Hill as an accommodationist due to familial ties and dependence on a public salary. However, at the laying of the Negro Building's cornerstone on March 13, 1897, Hill stood before an overwhelming-Black crowd of 10,000, triumphant. He declared, "We are now on trial—the most severe test as to what we have done, and are doing, since our emancipation...We boast our enterprising spirit and progressivism. Our varied accomplishments have been proclaimed in flaming tones and painted in beautiful colors. Now is the time to prove all this."

The day's achievements did not belong alone to Hill. While the Exposition's Executive Committee was exclusively white, the Negro Department's leadership was owed to the city's leading Black citizens. Among the committee's members were the lawyer and three-time Republican member of the Tennessee General Assembly Samuel A. McElwee, businessman William T. Hightower, physicians William Abrums Hadley and Samuel A. Walker, school principal S. H. Sumner, and businessman and religious leader Preston Taylor. Added to them were the Negro Woman's Board members and an army of Black skilled and semi-skilled tradespeople who contributed to constructing the Exposition's buildings and infrastructure.

The Negro Building boasted over 300 exhibitors from 85 cities. Its diverse displays ranged from education and art to banking, technology, and science.

Celebration of its construction was widespread but not universal. Some Black Tennesseans called for a boycott of the Tennessee Centennial, but Hill and other enthusiasts focused on the Exposition's good. In addition to supposedly not being rabidly segregated, they touted the Exposition's calendar of special days for Black patrons. Negro Day, for example, drew more than 19,000 visitors, and others including Fisk University Day, Negro Employees Day, Central Tennessee College Day, Alumni Meharry College Day, National Race Council Day, Emancipation Day, and American Medical Association of Colored Physicians Day were leveraged as efforts to honor the "free, educated, aspiring new Negro."

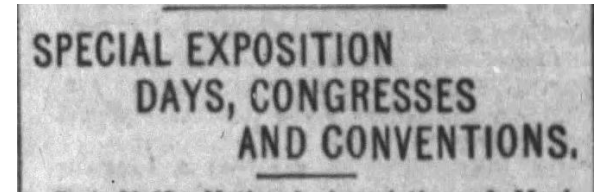
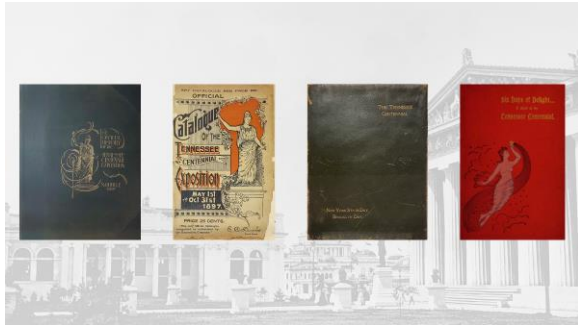
When the Exposition closed on October 30, 1897, African Americans had won thirty-one certificates of commendation, three gold medals, five silver medals, and nineteen bronze medals.

Today, the cornerstone of the Negro Building is on display in the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library at Fisk University.

Crystal A. deGregory, Ph.D.
March 2022

Looking Back 125 Years After the Tennessee Centennial Exposition

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Virtual Symposium

Monuments and Men: How Black Tennesseans Leveraged The Tennessee Centennial Exposition to Organize The Negro Department, Raise the Negro Building, and Demonstrate their Enterprising Acumen

by Dr. Crystal A. DeGregory

[Watch on YouTube](#)



About the Symposium:

Nestled in Centennial Park on the eastern bank of Lake Watauga, the Tennessee Centennial Exposition's Negro Building once stood as a mark of Black achievement and as a weapon of white New South propaganda. In her talk, Dr. deGregory will chronicle the raising of the picturesque building—and the organization of The Negro Department that powered it. She contends that the event's white planners hoped to leverage the exposition to reassert white southern sovereignty over the region's race matters. But Black Nashvillians had different ideas. They were determined, despite white opposition, to display their enterprising acumen. This talk is the story of the Black men and women behind the Negro Building as a monumental achievement.

Symposium Sponsors:

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The Centennial Park History Tour: 1897 Exposition features stories of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition shared at specific locations in the park to help you picture the past.

This tour features archival photographs and images of artifacts.

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