

African Americans in 'The White City:' The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893

By David J. Cope

While the United States Supreme Court methodically institutionalized Jim Crow segregation laws in the 1880s (by rejecting the Civil Rights Act of 1875) and 1890s (through its ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson), the nation announced its arrival on the political, economic and cultural world stage through an international exhibition held in its "second city," Chicago. Known as the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the great fair provided an outlet that introduced the United States' fantastic post-Civil War growth to the world. The 400th anniversary of "Columbus' discovery of America" provided the impetus.

Realizing the impact that such a fair could have, New York City, Washington D.C., and Chicago vied as the main contenders to hold the exposition. After a fierce battle, Congress authorized Chicago as the host. Prominent businessmen and civic leaders formed the local organizing committee that successfully established the city's credentials. However, Congress authorized an additional National Commission to aid local supporters, and each state established individual commissions. So, the prospects for any African-American success at the exposition became entwined in a labyrinth of bureaucracy.

Chicago set the stage well for the United States' premier performance before the world. The planners chose a lakefront site for the exposition and proceeded to hire major architectural firms to produce the 12 great exhibition buildings (Sophia G. Hayden, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, won the only architectural competition held for the Women's Building). The fair's architectural committee decided on a coordinated Beaux Arts design for the main buildings, with each painted a basic white to save time. Thus, the fair earned its nickname, "The White City," and, however architecturally true the name was, it regrettably also applied to the general attitude of the fair itself.

African-American Participation

Faced with the increased realization of the Jim Crow era, African Americans established three objectives concerning the Columbian Exposition: acquiring positions on the governing commissions, establishing meaningful employment opportunities, and securing exhibition space to show their advancement since the end of the Civil War. However, African Americans who willing to take up the challenge confronted two major obstacles: the already established Byzantine bureaucracy and a lack of clear goals in relationship to the exhibition space.

Undaunted by the men's lack of success, Hallie Q. Brown of Wilberforce University and Mrs. Lettie A. Trent and Mrs. R. D. Boone, both of Chicago, took the fight directly (but individually) to the head of the Board of Lady Managers, Mrs. Bertha Palmer. Mrs. Palmer, "Queen of Chicago Society" and the wife of local hotel owner and entrepreneur Potter Palmer, headed the Lady Managers with a firm hand. Each requested that an African American be appointed to the women's governing board. However, the Board of Women Managers, dealing with multiple internal problems, at first delayed a decision by appointing an investigative committee, and then finally rejected the request. The failure of the Board to act positively spurred Hallie Brown to urge the black women's clubs throughout the nation to unite, creating an actual political presence. Her vision came true in the establishment of the Colored Women's League in 1894 and the National Association of Colored Women in 1896.

With no chance of serving on the national governing board, the state commissions offered African-American women the only chance for governing influence. In a vain effort to quiet the absence of African-American representation on the Board of Lady Managers, Mrs. Palmer

requested that all Lady Managers sign the following pledge: "As a Lady Manager of the State of _____, I shall do all in my power to further the interests of the colored women of my State, and will take pleasure in giving them all the information and assistance possible." While all participants signed the pledge, few states seriously considered implementing it.

Nonetheless, Pennsylvania did nominate Miss Florence A. Lewis, and Louisiana named Mrs. S. L. Williams. However, the most influential appointment occurred when New York installed J(oan) Imogene Howard, a schoolteacher, as a State delegate. The New York Board of Women Managers authorized Miss Howard to form her own committees and organize an exhibit for the Women's Building. Touring New York during her vacations from teaching, she recognized the extent and importance of African-American women's contributions in all areas since the Civil War. Eventually she corresponded with specially established committees in major cities along the eastern seaboard. Her research filled a printed volume, and a special case within the Women's Building housed the artifacts that she gathered. On June 10, 1893, The New York Times hailed Miss Howard's display as "creditable," calling special attention to the literature, illustration, and printing sections.

The second goal of meaningful employment for African Americans at the exhibition also met with very limited success. Mrs. Palmer made a few futile attempts at hiring African Americans. At the suggestion of Mrs. Fannie Barrier Williams, the wife of a Chicago lawyer, the Commission appointed two clerks in the Installation Department in 1891. Likewise, Mrs. Palmer offered Hallie Brown a position in the Department of Publicity and Promotion. However, Miss Brown already held a well-paying university position and refused the job, even though she protested the lack of responsibility not the low salary. Mrs. Palmer then hired Mrs. A. M. Curtis, another Chicago physician's wife, as the "Secretary of Colored Interests." Her appointment drew derision from the African-American press. The Cleveland Gazette editorialized that, "The scheme is too transparent, however, and will not be worked successfully...." Bertha Palmer's final attempt, hiring Fannie Barrier Williams to a similar position as Mrs. Curtis', also failed.

Hopes for edifying jobs for any African Americans at the exposition vanished quickly. The Columbian Guard, the fair's internal police force, announced 2,000 openings for positions within its ranks. While many African Americans applied, none were selected. William J. Crawford became the most noted exclusion, as the local press reported his difficulties: staff physicians failed twice to pass Crawford, a seven-year resident of Chicago, and two letters of protest fell on deaf ears. Only traditional servile jobs opened up, with 100 African Americans employed as janitors or as rolling-chair men, guides who pushed visitors around the fair for a nominal fee. (Many also acquired positions in the downtown restaurants and on the Pullman trains as a result of the fair.)

African Americans' third objective, securing exhibition space to show their advancement since the end of the Civil War, seemed doomed from the start. Individuals and organizations seeking the space fought at cross-purposes. One faction demanded separate African-American facilities, while another faction sought integrated exhibits. Yet, neither side won. And, the lack of a cohesive policy destroyed all hopes of any extensive displays. Only within the larger exhibits were individual accomplishments recognized; for instance, Iowa college student George Washington Carver won an award for his drawing of the yucca gloriosa plant and a display of artist Henry Ossaw Tanner's work.

Perhaps the greatest African-American presence at the fair was Frederick Douglass. President Florvil Hippolyte named Douglass and Charles A. Preston (whose father served as Haiti's minister to the United States) Commissioners Plenipotentiary "to represent Haiti among all the civilized nations of the globe...." As the former U.S. ambassador (1889-1891) to that island country, Douglass viewed his Haitian appointments as the "crowning honors to my long career and a fitting and happy close to my whole public life." Douglass took up a daily vigil at Haiti's

pavilion, and, from this position, he drew attention to not only the accomplishments of the tiny island nation but also the lack of participation by African Americans at the fair.

Ida B. Wells noted Douglass's stature as a recognized American icon when she wrote that, "Whenever he went out into the grounds or visited one of the other buildings...he was literally swamped by white persons who wanted to shake his hand." Douglass used his national standing to great effect in the two most dramatic occurrences involving African Americans at the fair: the printing and distribution of "The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition " and the ceremonies held on "Colored People's Day."

While the fair's basic rejection of their three basic objectives discouraged many African Americans, the popular press failed to recognize the issue. Rather, newspapers throughout the country printed glowing reports, issued by various commissions and committees, urging people from all over the United States and the world to attend. In response, Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass published a pamphlet that would inform both domestic and foreign visitors of the advancements and the plight of African Americans in the United States in 1893.

The 81-page pamphlet contained six chapters: an introduction by Douglass, essays on the problems of class legislation, the institution and abuse of the convict lease system, the increasing occurrences of lynchings, a chapter by I. Garland Penn on "The Progress of the Afro-American Since Emancipation," and a concluding essay by Ida Wells' future husband, F(erdinand) L(ee) Barnett, entitled "The Reason Why." This last essay detailed the grievances of African Americans towards the fair's boards.

Initially, Wells and Douglass planned printings in English, French, German, and Spanish. But once again, the African-American community divided, this time in response to the pamphlet. Many newspaper editors took the stance that Booker T. Washington would take in 1895 at the Cotton States and International Exposition. They urged that the best course was accommodation, showing African-American advances through less irritating means. The Washington Bee editorialized, "What the race wants is money, real estate, education, and good manners. The Negro is more in need of the above than he is of pamphlets to be printed in English, French, German, and Spanish. In the first place, what benefit will that be to the Negro?" (sic) Likewise, The Freeman argued, "... must we become disillusionists, and with our own hands, rend the veil that blinds them [foreign visitors] to many things unpleasant and sad....we are opposed to this contemplated issue of a 'nigger' pamphlet"

Unable to raise but \$500.00, Wells and Douglass printed 10,000 copies with only the preface translated into French and German. Not to be forestalled, Wells wrote, "Every day, I was on duty at the Haitian building where Mr. Douglass gave me a desk and spent the days putting this pamphlet in the hands of foreigners."

The fair's coordinating board made only a half-hearted attempt to integrate African Americans into the fair by setting aside August 25th as "Colored People's Day." The African-American press almost unequivocally rejected the idea. The Freeman worried that "it would serve to draw a lowering and invidious attention to the Negro from 'the representatives of the civilized world....'" Ida Wells warned that, "The horticultural department has already pledged itself to put plenty of watermelons around on the grounds with permission to the brother in black to 'appropriate' them." She urged African Americans not to attend. While Douglass shared many of these same concerns, he continued to participate nonetheless.

On the morning of the 25th, many in the press raced to the Haitian pavilion to interview Douglass, especially regarding the apparent poor attendance by African Americans. However, Douglass wasn't to be found; arriving at the fairgrounds earlier in the day and finding the feared watermelon vendors in place, Douglass retreated to the home of Fannie Barrier Williams. Instead, the

reporters interviewed Douglass' assistant, budding poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, who rejected all questions until Douglass made his appearance at the afternoon ceremonies. As the time for the formal observance approached, African Americans flooded through the turnstiles and into Festival Hall. While the program consisted of numerous recitations and musical presentations, the highlight was Douglass' impassioned speech.

The aged Douglass, who would die within two years, rose before the packed auditorium and read from a prepared speech. Within minutes, rowdies at the back of the audience began to heckle him. Seizing this unforeseen opportunity to address the nation directly on the African-American situation of the day, Douglass discarded the typed pages and declared, "Men talk of the Negro problem. There is no Negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own Constitution." For the next hour, the audience sat enthralled as Douglass set forth his case, taking great pride in the progress of African Americans during the past 30 years while chastising white Americans for limiting that progress. The speech impressed everyone, including Ida Wells who later visited Douglass at the Haiti pavilion and expressed her admiration for his leadership.

While the managers of the World's Columbian Exposition frustrated African-American participation at every turn, they unknowingly provided a national sounding board for the larger issues of the day. The reaction of many African Americans to the fair's restrictive policies showed that the gains of the previous 30 years were but a prelude to future activism and leadership. These African Americans of 1893 let it be known that they would not go gently into that dark night of the hateful Jim Crow era.

Resources

For lesson plans using this essay, follow the links, below:

- **"Why The Colored American Is Not In The World's Columbian Exposition"**
- **"Stereotypes At the World Fairs"**
- **Exhibiting at a World's Fair Lesson Plan**

For other resources, see the following:

- "Boom-De-Ra." The Cleveland Gazette. March 18, 1893.
<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/ibw/doc7.htm>.
- Burg, David F. Chicago's White City. Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1976.
- Douglass, Frederick. "Frederick Douglass's Speech At Colored American Day."
<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/ibw/doc20.htm>
- "George Washington Carver."
<http://www.africanpubs.com/Apps/bios/0736CarverGeorge.asp>.
- "Hale G. Parker." The Cleveland Gazette. May 23, 1891.
http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?ID=17114&Current=01_02B.
- "How Did African-American Women Define Their Citizenship at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893?"
<http://womhis.binghamton.edu/ibw/page1.htm>.
- McFeely, William S. Frederick Douglass. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.
- "No 'Nigger Day,' No 'Nigger Pamphlet!'" The Freeman. March 25, 1893.
<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/ibw/doc9.htm>.
- "Our Afro-American Representatives at the World's Fair."
http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm9729/@Generic_BookTextView/2266.
- "Our World's Fair Representation." The Cleveland Gazette. March 18, 1893.
<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/ibw/doc8.htm>.
- Reed, Christopher Robert. "The Black Presence at 'White City.'" Paul V. Gavin Library Digital History Collection.
<http://columbus.gl.iit.edu/reed2.html>.
- "The Colombian (sic) Exposition Concert." The Schiller Institute.
http://www.schillerinstitute.org/music/rev_10_9_95_dhs.html.
- "The Work of Afro-American Women."
http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm9729@Generic_BookTextView/2266.
- Weimann, Jeanne Madeline. The Fair Women. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981.
- Wells, Ida B. "Preface to the Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition."
<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/ibw/doc21.htm>.
- Wells, Ida B. "To Tole With Watermelons." The Cleveland Gazette. July 22, 1893.
<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/ibw/doc19.htm>.
- "Work of Colored Women." New York Times. June 10, 1893.
- "World's Fair Appeal." Washington Bee. April 15, 1893.
<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/ibw/doc10.htm>.
- "World's Fair Pamphlets." The Cleveland Gazette. April 22, 1893.

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