

**Exhibiting the New South:  
Boosterism, Social Conflict, and Inclusivity at the Tennessee  
Centennial Exposition**

By Matthew J. Meinel

Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History of Vanderbilt University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For Honors in History

April 2013

Faculty Advisors:  
Professor Matthew Ramsey  
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Professor Dennis Dickerson

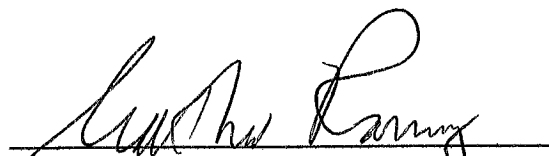
Creating the New South: Boosterism, Social Conflict, and Inclusivity at the Tennessee Centennial  
Exposition

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On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on April 25, 2013  
we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be awarded honors  
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Dedicated to Mrs. Amy Ruff.

## Introduction

"Nashville is going to give a great big exposition, and we have invited every nation on earth to come... and I believe in letting every visitor have what he wants." Director-General E.C. Lewis, speaking with a reporter from the *Nashville American* several months before the opening of the Centennial Exposition, laid out a policy of inclusiveness that would permeate the entire fair:

We are making this an exposition for the South and for the rest of the world, and we should do just as the old-time Southern gentleman did in his home -- let our guests have whatever they want. I believe in the true Southern hospitality... We want everybody to come here and enjoy themselves, and it makes no difference whether he be Christian, or pagan, or what not, they are entitled to a pleasant time.

In this statement, Lewis asserted that a primary function of the Tennessee Exposition would be to represent all Tennesseans, and Southerners more generally, ensuring that all ideologies, organizations, and social groups would find their place in the New South narrative.

By its very nature, the Exposition was to incorporate and reconcile many of the most prominent social controversies at the time. The year 1897 was a liminal point in Tennessee and the South. As the leadership of the Tennessee Exposition sought to embody the progress of the late nineteenth century, they faced many choices regarding what aspects of Southern society to include or exclude. Lewis proclaimed the Exposition's official stance of inclusivity, believing that "it would be beneath a great exposition like this to shut out certain things because some people do not want them... It is an exposition for all the world, and not for any one class... and I think this stand should be taken firmly at the very beginning." However, embracing

and bringing together numerous viewpoints and ideologies in a single endeavor as prescribed by Lewis inevitably brought conflict to the Centennial Exposition.

Exploring what controversies were present, how they manifested themselves, and how the leadership responded during the planning and execution of the Tennessee Centennial will provide unique insights into the turn of the century Nashville.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Story of the Tennessee Centennial***

In order to fully understand the official narrative and its inherent conflicts, the natal story of the Tennessee Centennial must be told. It began in 1892, when Douglas Anderson, a Chattanooga lawyer, wrote a letter to the editor proposing a grand industrial exposition to celebrate Tennessee's one hundred years in the Union. Between 1892 and 1895, many people accepted Anderson's idea to celebrate the Centennial, and the Exposition began to take shape with the help of newspapers and various social organizations. On October 27th, 1892, just a few months after Anderson's proposal, the *Nashville Banner* began actively supporting the "early beginning of preparations to celebrate the anniversary of Tennessee's admission into the Federal Union." This editorial and most other newspaper articles in general presented the Exposition as a tool for city and state promotion. The editors believed that "Tennessee has not taken as prominent a place as she should occupy in the distinguished company of national horn-blowers. If Tennessee doesn't blow her own horn it will not be blown." Thus exemplifying the ideals of boosterism, the

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<sup>1</sup> "Will be a Great Show" *Nashville American*, February 2, 1897.

newspapers and early supporters called on their fellow Tennesseans to aid their state on its path to progress.<sup>2</sup>

The Centennial Exposition initially faced many challenges and obstacles in its formation. The Panic of 1893 and the financial depression that followed played a large role in dampening any enthusiasm for the Exposition due to “an all-pervading despondency in the community.” After several calls to action, W. C. Smith, a prominent businessman proposed the idea to the Commercial Club. On November 17th, 1893 at a meeting of the Commercial Club, he proposed holding an Industrial Exposition in 1895 to boost the general economy and public moral of the city. Smith viewed the Exposition as a primarily commercial event that would happen to coincide with the centennial anniversary of the state, thereby de-emphasizing the historical basis for the Centennial. Smith’s motion was carried by the Commercial Club, and on January 22, 1894, the Club sent a proposal to form a Centennial Committee to the Board of Trade, Tennessee Historical Society, the Tennessee Art Association, State Press Association, and the Southern Engineering Society. Together, these organizations formed a committee, which in turn began work on creating the Centennial Company. By June 19, 1894, the Company had fully organized itself and elected numerous officers and committees. An Executive Committee was appointed on July 24th. During this organizational period, fundraising had begun, but was entirely unsuccessful. Consequently, the Executive Committee planned on procuring the capital they needed by directly seeking

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<sup>2</sup> “Tennessee’s Centennial.” *The Nashville Banner*, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1892.

government funding. However, their appeal for public money also failed, raising the question of whether they would be able to continue the Centennial endeavor at all.<sup>3</sup>

If the Centennial were to succeed, the Company would have to build up an overwhelming amount of public support, which it did. By the summer of 1895, only \$62,000 had been raised for the Centennial, and the Executive Committee was discussing whether or not to cancel the Exposition. This question was made public on July 7, 1895, through articles in the newspapers. In the Nashville American article entitled "The Centennial or Not?" the authors announced that on July 8th a public meeting would be held during which the fate of the Exposition would be determined. At this meeting, "the present management, believing it to be to the best interest of the city, have determined to tender their resignations." The Centennial Company would have completely new leadership elected by any subscribers to the Company, if there were a sufficient amount of the public subscribed to justify the continuation of the project. Thus, the Exposition relied on "the people tomorrow night to come to the front and boldly announce to the world what the people of Nashville propose to do." The public meeting was a resounding success. Hundreds of citizens came to show their support for the Centennial Exposition. Shortly thereafter, the number of subscriptions increased dramatically, and the citizens of Nashville voted by referendum for a tax increase to allow the city council to appropriate \$100,000. New leadership was elected, with J. W. Thomas becoming the Company President. It was Thomas and the new Executive Committee of the Centennial Company who were responsible for forming and enforcing the official

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<sup>3</sup> Justi, Herman. *Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, Opened May 1, and Closed October 30, 1897*. Nashville, Tenn.: Press of the Brandon Printing Company, 1898, 14.



narrative of the Exposition. Thus, the leadership transition proved to be the critical moment in the development of the Centennial, for the new leadership, primarily railroad men experienced in business and logistics, was able to turn the Exposition around while imposing strict adherence to the business and reconciliation goals of the Centennial.<sup>4</sup>

After the summer of 1895, the Exposition had no major setbacks. Money was easily raised from both private and public sources. The new Executive Committee did decide, however, that in order to have sufficient time to plan and construct all the buildings, the Centennial would have to be postponed until 1897, one year after Tennessee's actual centennial anniversary. By most accounts the Tennessee Centennial, greatly benefited Nashville's business connection with the North and provided the blueprint for Tennessee in the New South.

### ***Southern World's Fairs***

The Tennessee Centennial Exposition followed in the tradition of many previous world's fairs. Through industrial fairs and expositions, cities and countries showed off the unprecedented scientific and economic progress occurring during the industrial revolution. The United States began participating in this worldwide phenomenon with the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1892. The Atlanta Exposition of 1895 was the first major Southern world's fair and set many precedents for the Tennessee Centennial, such as the creation of a Negro Building. Additionally, founded in 1780,

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<sup>4</sup> "The Centennial or Not?" *The Nashville Banner*, July 7, 1895. *Official History*, 28.

the city of Nashville had hosted a centennial celebration in 1880 containing many early New South themes that came to maturity during the Tennessee Centennial seventeen years later. Built upon the foundation of these preceding world's fairs, the Centennial Exposition succeeded in promoting Tennessee to the rest of the nation.

Held in Nashville in 1897, the central premise of the Exposition was to celebrate Tennessee's hundredth year in the Union.<sup>5</sup> From May 1 until its close six months later, the Tennessee Centennial Exposition brought over 1.8 million people to Nashville. The importance and popularity of world's fairs during the late nineteenth century is difficult to overstate. According to Bruce Harvey, "World's fairs were wildly popular, almost beyond modern imagination." Likewise, Robert Rydell begins his book on American fairs by noting that they exposed almost one hundred million people to the growth and developments in urbanization, economic markets, consumerism, the arts, architecture, entertainment, and science. The late nineteenth century was a time of rapid change in America, and Rydell posits that the expositions helped "troubled American Victorians... to organize [their] experience" to include the rapid social and scientific changes in their world. Rydell sums up the role of world's fairs in Southern society as follows:

To alleviate the intense and widespread anxiety that pervaded the United States, the directors of the expositions offered millions of fairgoers an opportunity to reaffirm their collective national identity in an updated synthesis of progress and white supremacy that suffused the blueprints of future perfection offered by the fairs.

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<sup>5</sup> Tennessee was admitted into the Union in 1796; however, due to initial difficulties in organizing and fundraising, the Centennial Exposition was delayed one year to 1897.

Thus, expositions served an important role in forming Southern identity by aiding the reconciliation between its troubled past and the progressive future, and the Tennessee Centennial was no exception.<sup>6</sup>

The city of Nashville had already made one attempt at bridging the gap between the Old and New South with the Nashville Exposition of 1880. With the wounds of the Civil War still raw, Nashville sought to present an image of progress to the rest of the nation. The Exposition downplayed the Confederate identity of Nashville and emphasized the social status of blacks. For example, the militias and veterans in the military parade “betrayed nothing of their former allegiance to the Confederate gray.”<sup>7</sup> The Tennessee Historical Society primarily presented artifacts from Tennessee’s early pioneer heroes, such as Davy Crockett and James Robertson, largely ignoring “the late war.” African-American public school exhibits were included in the same building as white school displays, demonstrating both the emphasis on black education and race equality in education. The Nashville Exposition also sought to promote the economic potential of Nashville. The new urban business elite used the Nashville Exposition to boost the image of their city as a business center, emphasizing its abundance of natural resources and industrial capacity. In these ways, the Nashville Exposition attempted to demonstrate to the North that the Tennessee was ready to move past its history and into a new prosperous future.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Harvey, “World’s fairs in southern accent: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, 1895-1902” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1998), 4. And, Robert W. Rydell *All the World’s a Fair : Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 2, 4

<sup>7</sup> Don Harrison Doyle. *Nashville in the New South, 1880-1930*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985, 6.

At the Tennessee Exposition in 1897, the organizers desired to achieve many of the same goals of regional reconciliation and economic boosterism as the earlier Nashville Exposition. In order to reach these objectives, they carefully crafted the “blueprint” of the future that was acceptable to their mission and overcame many obstacles. Run by prominent Nashville railroad men, lawyers, and other businessmen, the Centennial Exposition’s primary goal was the economic development of Tennessee. However, certain dynamic issues, such as Civil War memory, the “Negro” problem, and progressive women’s movements in the rapidly developing South could have severely hampered the Centennial promoters’ quest. Each of these areas seemingly would conflict with the goals of inclusiveness and progress at the Exposition. The current literature on the Centennial Exposition does not seek to understand how the Exposition leadership overcame tensions to reconcile each of these areas to the main Centennial narrative. Through investigating the conflicts that arose from historical memory, race relations, and the role of women, this thesis will develop a fuller understanding of how Tennessee adapted to these issues during this important transitional time period.

### ***The Official Narrative of the Tennessee Centennial***

How the Exposition leadership envisioned and formed the Tennessee Exposition was a direct outgrowth of New South boosterism. Beginning during the 1880s, the New South movement sought to, as defined by Harvey, “renounce slavery conclusively, seek reconciliation with the North, and... pursue more modern lines of

economic development."<sup>8</sup> Far from being discrete goals, however, each goal necessitated the other. In order to accomplish any of the objectives of the New South, its promoters were reliant upon Northern money, for the progressive reformer's objectives required capital only available in the economic powerhouses back East, such as New York. New South advocates necessarily had to engage in boosterism, promoting the reputation of one's city through advertising its benefits and advantages, to attract that Northern capital.

Expositions provided the perfect venue for promoting the economic potential of a city or region to prospective investors. The natural resources and comparative advantages of the South received prominent positions in all promotion for the Southern fairs. "Expositions were commercial endeavors at heart," Harvey notes, "Whatever the broader benefits of world's fairs... they were very serious business endeavors."<sup>9</sup> The expositions wanted to show that "the prosperity of the country as a whole was contingent upon economic development of the South" to facilitate the influx of Northern capital.<sup>10</sup> The commercial nature of the expositions tied them very closely to the Southern host cities. Harvey describes this connection, stating:

Cities were necessary conditions for expositions, but they were also the prime beneficiaries in more ways than financial returns.... Businessmen in the region found much to admire in their new metropolises. Cities would be the hubs of transportation and commerce, the very forces that these businessmen claimed would return the South to prosperity and power. Southern leaders needed both their fellow southerners and fellow Americans to know that the South had credible urban spaces.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Rydell, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey, 23.

Thus, by holding the Exposition, the business leaders of Nashville sought to legitimize Nashville's status as one of the nation's leading "urban spaces" with even further potential for future growth.

However, the primary goal of economic growth was predicated on the ability of the Centennial promoters to demonstrate Nashville's commitment to national unity and social progress. Only thirty years removed from the Civil War and slavery, the Exposition had to demonstrate to the North that Tennessee was ready to move beyond its tainted past and reform its poor track record *vis a vis* many issues important to Northerners. If Northern businessmen believed animosity still lingered in the South after the war, they would be extremely reluctant to send down their capital. Southern expositions sought "to bring the region more in line with the nation."<sup>12</sup> Through the fairs, New South promoters "presented an image of a New South imbued with the spirit of progress and patriotism." Displays of patriotism and "signs of sectional accord abounded at these fairs" in order to prove that the South was now fully a part of the United States.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the South had to mitigate concerns that it was not progressive enough socially. Professor Don Doyle argues that groups such as "women... and blacks... shared in different ways a common history of neglect and unfulfilled potential" and that in order to gain the trust of Northern capitalists, "the exposition would show forward-looking visitors the special role each would play in the future of the South."<sup>14</sup> Overall, led by New South promoters and businessmen, the Tennessee Centennial's primary target audience

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<sup>12</sup> Harvey, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Rydell, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Don Harrison Doyle. *Nashville in the New South, 1880-1930*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985, 146.

was not the citizens of Tennessee and the South but rather progressive- and industrial-minded Northern capitalists.

The problem, however, was that in many ways the reality in Tennessee did not fit the ideals that the Exposition leaders aspired to, and they could not rely on the Centennial to portray their desired New South image organically. There were three areas in particular that presented special challenges to the leadership. First, the leadership had to answer the question of how historical memory and the Lost Cause would be incorporated into the Centennial in a way that mitigated regional tensions. Second, the South's treatment of blacks would be thoroughly examined, and while the white elites wanted to claim everything was all right, in reality the possibilities for racial equality and social progress were rapidly dwindling. Lastly, as women sought to define what their roles should be in public, they were also challenging the established Southern patriarchy, inevitably leading to conflict.

The leadership of the Tennessee Centennial developed strategies to cope with each of these problem areas, and together, these strategies formed the "official narrative" of the Exposition. The nation was still seeking to fully mend itself after the Civil War and Reconstruction while Southerners rallied behind the Lost Cause and Northerners continued to wave the bloody shirt. To achieve reconciliation, the Centennial leadership would seek to reduce the presence of the Civil War, instead emphasizing Tennessee's pioneer history. While real progress towards race equality continued to deteriorate in the South, as segregation became law instead of custom, at the Exposition segregation was prohibited and the Negro Building displayed the progress of African-Americans since emancipation. Driven by Booker T.

Washington's famous Atlanta Exposition address, Centennial Exposition speakers, both black and white, pushed the ideas of white paternalism and black accommodationism, arguing that African-Americans did not need political or social rights immediately. Lastly, while allowing for some demonstrations of more progressive women's issues, such as suffrage, the Centennial focused primarily on the traditional roles of women as mothers and wives. These portrayals defined the official narrative of Southern life that the Centennial leadership endorsed. Through the promotion of this official narrative, the New South boosters believed that they would successfully achieve their goals of procuring Northern capital and securing economic growth for Nashville.

### ***Tensions in the Tennessee Centennial***

Although the Centennial Exposition leadership was united by common goals, many of their important constituencies, that is, groups or social movements within Tennessee who had an interest in how Southern life was portrayed at the fair, had different motivations, thereby causing the potential conflicts. The influence of these groups forced the Exposition leaders to pay attention to them and their viewpoints. Understanding the official narrative and the actions of the Centennial organizers requires an understanding of these various constituencies.

The presence of a large number of Confederate veterans and the corresponding development of the Lost Cause ideology strongly influenced the portrayal of historical memory at the Exposition. After the Civil War, Southerners quickly created the idea of the Lost Cause, a literary and intellectual movement that



attempted to reconcile white dominated society in the South with the loss of the Civil War. Since the War, Southerners had built this pro-slavery, pro-Confederacy view of recent Southern history largely through amateur history; yet, by the 1890s, professional and objective history had developed, triggering a concerted effort by Lost Cause proponents to ensure that the objective history of the South would be theirs. As a result of this increased activism, many of the historical organizations that would become known for their staunch support of the Lost Cause, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), were founded during the 1890s. Because of the large amount of support for the Lost Cause ideology within Tennessee, it would necessarily be included in the Exposition to some degree.

The problem lay in the fact that Tennesseans did not universally accept the Lost Cause, much less by liberal Northerners. During the Civil War, East Tennessee was staunchly Unionist, even after the state seceded. Claiming to represent Tennessee as a whole, the Exposition had to find a way both to meet the demands of the Lost Cause advocates and to give representation to the Unionist East. Furthermore, the Lost Cause narrative, by unrepentantly claiming the South was justified for its rebellion, conflicted with the over-arching goal of appealing to the North. Reconciling the Lost Cause and official narratives of history constituted a significant challenge that the Exposition promoters had to overcome.

On the issue of race relations, the Centennial's New South promoters faced the challenge of presenting the degrading state of African-American rights as at least stable, if not improving. African-Americans in the 1890s South were increasingly oppressed and without many protections. New tensions had arisen between the

white ruling class and the new generation of Negroes who were unwilling to accept the *de facto* segregation and discrimination that existed after the Civil War. In an article, Leon Litwack quoted a visitor to Richmond in 1866, who noted that the Negro knew "how far he may go, and where he must stop" and that "habits are not changed by paper laws." In contrast, Litwack notes, "In the 1890s whites perceived in the behavior of uppity (and invariably younger) blacks a growing threat or indifference to the prevailing customs, habits, and etiquette."<sup>15</sup> The result was a move by the white ruling elite to restrict African-American rights by all means necessary, legal or extra-legal. Jim Crow was crystallizing in legal form, and the rights of the South's Negroes were being actively and consistently restricted. Lynchings in Tennessee became commonplace, as they did throughout the South. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that the notion of "separate but equal" was indeed constitutional, empowering white Southerners to implement segregation in full force. Despite thirty years of emancipation, African-Americans in the South had gained few actual rights and made little social progress, yet these were the two points that were to be displayed by the Exposition. The growing tensions between the races in the South gave rise to concerns about more social volatility and upheaval in the South's future. Northerners, especially liberal Republicans, were concerned about the state of blacks, and this was a concern that the leaders of the Exposition sought to mitigate. The leaders of the Centennial did not have a choice as to whether or not they would include African-Americans in some prominent way; the question, rather, was how they would be included.

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<sup>15</sup> Leon Litwack, "Trouble in Mind," *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, ed. McMillen, Sally, et al. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012), 192-193.

As their rights deteriorated throughout the 1890s, blacks were divided on how to define their role in an increasingly segregated society. More progressive African-Americans, such as Fredrick Douglas and W.E.B. DuBois, believed that in order to counter the degradation of black social status, they must protest and take political action towards gaining civil rights. On the other hand, a conservative camp, led by Booker T. Washington, who came to national prominence as a result of the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, called for Negro moral and economic development, believing this would eventually lead to political rights. African-Americans faced a choice of whether to boycott the Tennessee Centennial or to embrace the Exposition as an opportunity to display their progress since emancipation.

The traditional role of the Southern lady required women to be restricted to the home and specific womanly duties, yet as this traditional view was increasingly pressured with progressive ideas about women in the public sphere, Southern society had to adapt. Utilizing opportunities through pre-existing connections and roles, women mobilized in their social circles and gradually expanded the boundaries of their public influence. Women began entering business, writing books, and becoming doctors. Additionally, many women rallied to the burgeoning suffrage movement. However, the expansion of women's roles could not simply be divided up into different camps, for it was just as possible for a prominent progressive woman to be an anti-suffragist as a traditional homemaker to be campaigning for the vote. Furthermore, the changes in women's roles came into conflict with the Southern patriarchy. The Exposition leadership thus faced the

challenge of defining the increasingly blurry distinction between the public and private spheres.

Each of these three issues constitute a potential conflict with the official narrative that the Exposition would be forced to address in some way. Because of the salience of Civil War memory, the “Negro problem,” and gender roles, ignoring any of these areas would in itself detract from a convincing portrayal of the New South. Thus, the Centennial leadership had to incorporate these controversial or contradictory viewpoints into the Exposition.

### ***Strategies of Inclusivity at the Tennessee Centennial***

The challenge faced by the Centennial leadership was how to have an open and inclusive Exposition, yet still control the narratives of New South promotion. The Centennial leadership desired to have a fair that attracted as many groups and individuals as possible, for the greater the number of people attending the Exposition, the greater the number exposed to their official booster narrative. However, if the organizers were to allow exhibits and speakers at the Exposition that countered their official narrative, visitors to the Centennial would begin to question the validity of that narrative, and there were many groups and ideals that did not fit within the official narrative. Constituencies such as Confederate veterans, liberal African-Americans, and suffragist women did not align with the New South’s ideal society. Yet, because of their outspoken dedication to inclusiveness and the salience of these groups, the Exposition leaders could not simply publically ban organizations and viewpoints from the fair. Throughout the planning of the

Exposition, the organizers would work subtly to preclude other narratives from mixing with their portrayal of Southern society.

The special days, or “red letter days,” at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition provided the primary means for the Exposition leadership to include and represent many different special interest groups, individuals, and historical commemorations. During the time the Centennial was open from May 1st to October 31st, there were only thirty-one days that were not designated as special days, and thirty-four days were designated as red-letter days for two or more different purposes.<sup>16</sup> The sheer breadth and variety of the interests and viewpoints presented at these days formed an essential part of the Exposition strategy of boosterism and regional reconciliation. As the *Official History* stated,

The Republican and the Democrat,... the Christian and the Jew, the Catholic and the Protestant,... the Northern statesman and the Southern statesman, the ex-Confederate veteran and the ex-Federal soldier, the white man and the black man, the advocate of woman’s rights and her contented sister – met and had their day and their say without let, hindrance or protest.<sup>17</sup>

Since Centennial leaders desired to present the nation with a cohesive narrative of social progress and harmony, special days allowed each individual interest group to celebrate their beliefs, ideals, and values, without potentially conflicting with the official narrative or other opposing groups. For example, by giving women suffragists special days in which to present their views, the Exposition avoided criticism of not having any suffragist representation in the Woman’s Building. Likewise, by separating groups such as the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) and the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) the Centennial leadership was able to appeal

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<sup>16</sup> *Official History* 437-440.

<sup>17</sup> *Official History*, 220.

to each group discretely. Using special days as a tool, the leaders of the Tennessee Centennial significantly reduced the potential for conflict in many of the most controversial areas of the New South narrative.

However, many themes were notably excluded from the official narrative or the Exposition altogether, lest they disrupt the projection of unity and progress to the North. The Civil War was recognized in the History Building and during relevant special days, but it received no attention at key commemorative events such as Opening Day. When speaking about history, Exposition leaders always chose to discuss Tennessee's pioneer history and key national figures such as Andrew Jackson, both of which joined Tennessee into a national narrative of progress. Similarly, only blacks who agreed with white paternalism and accommodationism were allowed to have special days or representation at the Negro Building, for inviting dissenters from the official narrative would have ruined the image of unity necessary for the perception of good race relations. On the other hand, some viewpoints, such as woman's suffrage, were suppressed due to their controversial nature within the South as opposed to the North. While suffragettes such as Susan B. Anthony were able to speak during special days, they were not afforded exhibit space in the Woman's Building nor were they included in the official narrative. Overall, the Exposition leadership allowed viewpoints at the Centennial that matched their official narrative only if those ideas were unavoidable or could be easily relegated to a minor role, and if neither of those options were possible, they would choose to break from the principle of inclusivity and deny that viewpoint representation at the Centennial

## Chapter 1

### **Remembering the Lost Cause & the Union: Bringing together North & South**

The organizers of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition faced a major hurdle in their quest for sectional reconciliation: the ongoing fight for the collective memory of the Civil War. This battle had the potential of directly impeding the Exposition's goal of regional reconciliation and the acquisition of Northern capital. Yet, as the fair was, at its core, a celebration of Tennessee's history, it was impossible to simply ignore the Civil War and its aftermath entirely. How the Tennessee Exposition incorporated the competing ideologies and the interest groups that represented them was thus central to the overall goals of the Centennial.

### ***Southern Memory***

In her book, Barbara Gannon offers the following definition of historical memory: "Memory... refers not to an individual's personal memory but a group's, a generation's, or a nation's collective understanding of, or agreement on, a shared interpretation of its past."<sup>18</sup> Rather than being based strictly on historical facts, collective memory is filtered through the priorities and values of society, forming a historical interpretation that best fits the time in which it was created. In his book *The Southern Past*, Fitzhugh Brundage states "Collective or historical memory is not simply the articulation of some shared subconscious, but rather the product of

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara A. Gannon, *The Won Cause : Black and White Comradeship in the Grand Army of the Republic*. Civil War America. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011, 3.

intentional creation.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, historical memory is susceptible to, or rather defined by, the manipulation and propaganda of interest groups and scholars, each with their own agendas.

In the post-bellum United States, Civil War memory was of the utmost importance. The advent of large veteran’s organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and United Confederate Veterans (UCV) as well as history-focused organizations such as the Tennessee Historical Society (THS) and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) ensured that history would have a prominent place in the public discourse around the turn of the century, especially in the South. During the 1890s, this discussion was dominated by Confederate groups promoting the Lost Cause to the exclusion of any other versions of historical memory. Defying the cliché that history is written by the victors, former Confederates rallied around the Lost Cause and sought to fashion a new social hierarchy based on their interpretation of the Civil War. Brundage asserts that the Lost Cause “provided crucial ideological ballast for white supremacy by rooting the contemporary racial hierarchy in a seemingly organized historical narrative... [these groups] rendered idyllic the institution of slavery.” By promulgating a history in which the Civil War was not about slavery and the Southern white landowners were paternalistic guardians of the former slaves, these groups provided the justification for the Jim Crow laws being enacted across the South. Thus, far from being simply an academic exercise, historical memory played a crucial role in the development of the New South. The Exposition and similar events brought together thousands of people for

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<sup>19</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage. *The Southern Past : A Clash of Race and Memory*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, 4.



the purpose of commemorating the past, and, therefore, these events were essential in the formation of these narratives of the South that would shape the course of public policy for decades to come.<sup>20</sup>

### ***The United Confederate Veterans***

As the numbers of Confederate veterans themselves began to decline, the necessity for intentionally preserving Confederate history became readily apparent. Local groups of veterans sprang up all over of the South, and in 1889, many of these local groups joined together to form the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), which grew into the largest veterans organization in the South. Organizations, such as the Tennessee Association of Confederate Soldiers (TACS), remained independent, but there were no major divisions among these organizations as they each espoused the same goals and missions, “to perpetuate [Confederate] memory and guard well the archives of the past.” The members of these organizations feared that the cause to which they had sacrificially devoted their lives would be tainted in historical memory, and to preempt this they sought “to bring up our children so as to honor the dead past and its heroes, and to transmit to them the inheritance of our Southland with all its glorious memories.”<sup>21</sup> These groups further sought to advance the “correct” history of the Southern states: one that honored the work of the Confederacy.

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<sup>20</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage. *Where These Memories Grow : History, Memory, and Southern Identity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 16, 32.

<sup>21</sup> *Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Association Confederate Soldiers Tennessee Division*, (Nashville, TN: Foster & Webb, 1893), 10, 5.

Far from being passive participants in the development of the South's collective memory, the veterans understood their role in actively forming it, and they boldly pursued their mission to instill the "true" history of the South into future generations. Most white Southerners believed that Northern Reconstructionists were unsympathetic to the Confederate cause, and had unjustly vilified the South writing history with pens "dipped in the poison of passion and prejudice and the desire to do wrong."<sup>22</sup> Southern orators and writers lambasted these histories, written "under the bayonet and the carpet-bagger,"<sup>23</sup> for their "inaccurate" portrayal of the South and its Lost Cause. One officer of the TACS summarized the Confederate veterans' relationship to Civil War memory as a duty "to stamp out the prejudices daily being instilled in the minds... of the South through partial history. We are making history, and Confederate Veterans the chief factors."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the UCV and other Confederate groups actively sought to shape the history of the South.

The Confederate veterans' narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction can be summed up in three points. First, the South was wholly and morally justified in seceding. There was no Lost Cause, only a just cause for which it was still fighting. The Confederate groups steadfastly maintained that the South acted patriotically and in defense of its fundamental rights when it seceded. Because they were fighting for an ideal, not strictly for independence, the supposed Lost Cause

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<sup>22</sup> *Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Minutes of the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Association Confederate Soldiers Tennessee Division*, (Nashville, TN: Foster & Webb, 1894), 58.

<sup>24</sup> *Minutes of the Sixth Annual Meeting*, 6.

was not lost, but rather would continue on until eventually all of America recognized that the Confederacy was in the right.<sup>25</sup>

Second, the veterans' organizations romanticized the feats and character of their soldiers. All of the speeches and articles were replete with stories of Confederate "gallantry," achievements of war, and even martyrdom. For instance, the execution of Sam Davis, who sacrificed his own life rather than betray valuable information about the Confederate Army, was even described as equivalent to that "of the Galilean."<sup>26</sup> Davis continued to be venerated for many years, and miniature busts of him were even sold during the Centennial Exposition. The collective character of the Confederate Veterans was unimpeachable, their response to the call of duty exemplary, and their dedication to the cause in the midst of overwhelming odds unprecedented. The Confederate army was often compared to the Spartan three hundred, who despite facing an insurmountable foe seeking to enslave them, fought to their last breaths defending their rights and their homes. This was the heroic legacy Confederate veterans were desperate to secure.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly to the Centennial Exposition, the veterans' organizations denied that there was a New South, because nothing had significantly changed after the war. Although the veterans claimed that they had egregiously been denied citizenship and self-governance during the Reconstruction period, they were able to retake their rightful place in leading the Southern states shortly thereafter. With help from the Ku Klux Klan, among others, society was then restored to its antebellum ideals of independence, freedom, and order. Confederate

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<sup>25</sup> *Seventh Annual Minutes*, 8-9.

<sup>26</sup> "How shall Samuel Davis be Honored?" *Confederate Veteran*, August 1895, 240.

veterans argued that these principles were the crux of the Civil War, not slavery as Northern Reconstructionists asserted. Once the war had come to a close, the veterans had sacrificed heavily to rebuild their war-torn land. In the views espoused by the veterans' organizations, the Old South and its citizens were once again ready to lead the United States as they always had.<sup>27</sup>

As the Confederate veterans began solidifying and promulgating their collective memory, they profoundly shaped the writing of US history for the next half century. By mandating the acceptance of their historical views as a precondition for regional reconciliation, the Confederates won the battle for Civil War memory in the South. The Confederates' claim that slavery was not a primary cause of seceding was never widely accepted in the North, but the other tenets of the Lost Cause, such as the noble sacrifice of Southern soldiers, were largely espoused. Lost Cause ideology remained the prominent viewpoint on Southern history through the 1940s and 50s, when historians such as C. Vann Woodward were able to successfully challenge the Civil War and Reconstruction historiography. Events such as the Tennessee Centennial thus provide us a crucial window into the time period when the Lost Cause was still on the rise and thereby shed light onto the controlling force of Southern society preceding the civil rights movement.

### ***The Grand Army of the Republic***

Founded immediately after the Civil War, the Grand Army of the Republic served as the unified voice of the Union veterans throughout the latter half of the

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<sup>27</sup> The uncited information in the three preceding paragraphs can be found in almost any speech in the UCV minutes or any article in the *Veteran*.

nineteenth century. Serving both social and political functions, the GAR allowed veterans to come together in reunions as well as lobby for the pensions they felt they rightly deserved. Similar to the UCV, GAR members were also concerned that their sacrifices be accurately remembered through the recording of “correct” history. They saw themselves as the saviors of the nation from the seditious Confederacy. Likewise, during a patriotic boom in the 1890s, they believed it was their duty to promote nationalism while stamping out any vestiges of Confederate pride. The GAR especially focused on schools, often successfully lobbying for the flying of the American flag, recitation of the pledge of allegiance, and the singing of the Star-Spangled Banner. On the contrary, the flying of the Confederate flag or the singing of “Dixie” brought sharp reprimands from the GAR.

The GAR’s chief concern during the 1890s was with the preservation of the correct memories of the war. The organization did not promote hostility against the South or former Confederates inherently, for “as long as ex-Confederates did not question the moral lessons of the war, they were treated cordially.” But, the GAR members wanted to ensure that the Confederate Veterans, and society at-large, understood that the Union “[was] eternally right and... [the Confederacy] were eternally wrong.” When a “Blue and Gray Day” was proposed for the Columbian Exposition, the GAR was opposed to the event because it would put the Union and Confederacy on an equal platform.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, a controversy arose when a textbook publisher listed the justifications used by both the Union and Confederacy for the war. The GAR was furious at this “attempt at neutrality and nuance,” demanding

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<sup>28</sup> Stuart Charles McConnell. *Glorious Contentment : The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, 189-192.

that the textbook be rewritten to demonize the Confederacy.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the GAR's position on historical memory sat in direct opposition to that of the UCV, making any attempts at appealing to both through a historically themed world's fair difficult at best.

Another problem facing the GAR in the South was its generally positive relationship with the African-American community. Gannon emphasizes the relatively inclusive nature of the GAR regarding blacks at the time, especially in the South. In fact, Southern GAR chapters were not only usually integrated, but they also had more African-American officers than their Northern counter-parts.<sup>30</sup> However, Stuart McConnell points out in his book, *Glorious Contentment*, that the relationship between colored veterans and the GAR never fully developed because of Northern veterans' views on the reasons for the War. The majority of the GAR espoused the belief that the war was fought to preserve the Union, not to free the slaves, and, thus, "they felt no compulsion to change their views of blacks once the war ended."<sup>31</sup> While the GAR was not actively agitating for rights for African-Americans, the relatively integrated nature of the organization was enough to create another hurdle for the GAR's broad acceptance in the South.

### ***History & Memory at the Centennial***

#### *The Centennial as a Patriotic Historical Celebration*

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<sup>29</sup> McConnell, 226

<sup>30</sup> Gannon, 32-33

<sup>31</sup> McConnell, 215.

The historical narrative used at the Exposition had its roots in the first proposal for the Exposition and developed throughout the process of organizing the Fair from 1892 through 1897. The idea of having an exposition to celebrate Tennessee's one hundred years in the Union was first proposed in August of 1892 by Douglas Anderson, a young Nashville lawyer, in a letter to the major newspapers of the state. In this letter, Anderson laid out several themes that persisted throughout the entire course of the Centennial Exposition. The letter gave several reasons, including commercial, for having such a celebration, but it mostly focused on the importance of Tennessee's pride and history:

Tennessee will be 100 years old on June 1, 1896. Tennesseans should celebrate the occasion by holding a centennial exposition. They should do this because, being a patriotic people, they love and revere the memory of their brave ancestors who suffered privation, endured great hardships, and endangered their scalps for the benefit of their descendants.<sup>32</sup>

Anderson opened his letter with what became the central theme of the historical Tennessee narrative at the Centennial: the founding of the State by pioneering frontiersmen as the focal point of Tennessee history. Anderson argued all Tennesseans should be compelled to celebrate the lives of these early settlers, but leaves out any references to the Civil War in his proposal. The later leaders of the Exposition would continue this method of focusing on the unifying aspects of Tennessee history to the exclusion of the Civil War. As the newspaper began promoting the idea of the Centennial, many citizens wrote in expressing their desire to have a historical themed exposition that would honor the memory of Tennessee's

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas Anderson, "Conception and Early Growth of the Centennial Idea," *The Nashville American*, May 1, 1897.

earliest inhabitants. For example, a letter from Gen. Laps McCord, former adjunct-general of Tennessee, argued, "We owe it to our fathers and the brave pioneers who laid the foundations to celebrate the wonderful results of their labors and prophecies." Therefore, a strong consensus existed early on about the necessity of putting on the Centennial Exposition as well as making its focus the state's early history.<sup>33</sup>

The next important step in the historical narrative of the Exposition was the involvement of the Tennessee Historical Society (THS). On November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1893, a proposal to hold an industrial exposition was passed at a meeting of the Commercial Club. On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1894, the Club sent a proposal to form a Centennial Committee to various groups, including the THS. Together, these organizations formed a committee, which in turn began work on creating the Centennial Company, the entity that would be responsible for the Exposition. The Tennessee Centennial was the only American world's fair to have a dedicated history department. Since history constituted the primary theme in the promotion of the Exposition, a close look at the history department is in order. The Tennessee Historical Society (THS) was responsible for managing the history department, and their minutes yield important information regarding its development.

### *The History Building & Other Exhibits*

The history department was the physical manifestation of the unique historical nature of the Tennessee Exposition. In no other world's fair did history

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<sup>33</sup> "Tennessee's Centennial." *The Nashville Banner*, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1892.



play such a central role in the promotion and motivation. Each of the exhibits at the history department would have a role in either aiding or hindering the broader Exposition's goals of increasing commercialism.

The different groups involved each contributed something unique to the history department. The THS presented many items from Tennessee's early days. On display were the "Original Records of the State of Franklin," which predated the state itself. The portraits and personal items of many early Tennesseans, such as David Crockett, Sam Houston, Daniel Boone, and Governor Sevier, were available for the public to see. Although the THS's exhibits were the most diverse, it still reflected its interest in the early antebellum history of Tennessee.

The Confederate sections, however, provided the Civil War exhibits that could potentially cause controversy. During the early phases of the Exposition, the UCV created a Centennial Committee that was specifically tasked with designing a building to be known as Confederate Memorial Hall. This building was to be permanent, "to perpetuate the memory of our fallen heroes, and preserve the identity of those living who took part in the memorable struggle of '61 to '65."<sup>34</sup> This was the first proposal for a separate history building at the Centennial, predating the proposal from the THS by a full year. Despite the early proposals for a separate history building, however, the historical organizations faced an uphill battle to secure the finances needed from the limited funds of the Exposition. Eventually, in December 1896, the Executive Committee of the Centennial Company authorized the construction of the history building, although it was much smaller than the UCV

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<sup>34</sup> *Seventh Annual Minutes*, 29; also see, "Indigent Tennessee Confederates." *Confederate Veteran*, September 1894, 262.

had desired and they had the share the building with the GAR and other groups.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, despite the grand intentions for a Confederate Memorial Hall, the actual records of the exhibits in the history building tell us little about what visitors to the fair learned about the Confederacy.<sup>36</sup>

Even though the Confederate Veterans and the ladies' Confederate societies received just under half of the exhibit space in the history building,<sup>37</sup> Thruston and the *Official History* gave the Confederate exhibits very little coverage and attention.<sup>38</sup> The *Official History* does note the significance of the exhibit, stating "It was probably the most valuable and important collection of relics and mementoes of the late war that has been placed upon exhibition in the South." Portraits of Confederate heroes, such as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, covered all the walls, while battle artifacts such as swords, pistols, cannon balls, and more were on display in cases throughout. Some items had direct connections to well-known individuals, such as many of the personal items of General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Overall, these items were consistent with the goals of the Confederate societies. However, because the Exposition leadership sought to minimize the influence of the Civil War on the historical narrative of Tennessee, precedence in the promotional material and publications was given to relatively smaller exhibits, such as the Andrew Jackson

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<sup>35</sup> "Get out your curios: History and Antiquities Building Now a Certainty." *Nashville American*, December 7, 1896.

<sup>36</sup> In the September, 1895 issue, the *Veteran* describes a large confederate memorial being planned for the Centennial Exposition in addition to the Confederate Hall. The memorial would have been a large Corinthian column, also intended to be permanent. However, no other mention of this memorial has been found.

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of the Tennessee Historical Society, March 15, 1897.

<sup>38</sup> "Get out your curios: History and Antiquities Building Now a Certainty." *Nashville American*, December 7, 1896; and, *Official History*, 130, 133.

displays, that better fit into Tennessee's pioneer story, thereby making the true influence of these Civil War exhibits difficult to determine.

Several other exhibits were present in the History Building. The Ladies Hermitage Association specialized in Andrew Jackson materials, including the "gold-mounted sword presented by the people of Tennessee to General Jackson in 1825, in memory of New Orleans" as well as busts and portraits. Lastly, the Archeological Section, sponsored primarily by Thruston, contained various Native American artifacts from Tennessee as well as Mexico and South America. Thus, the exhibits at the history department represented a wide range of topics, and not just those that fit into the promotional story of Tennessee's history. The majority of items did further the claims for Tennessee's glorious history, but a significant number of Civil War artifacts were also present at the Exposition.

### *The Tennessee Historical Society*

The primary leader of the historical exhibits at the Tennessee Centennial was the Tennessee Historical Society (THS). The THS was a group of amateur historians who met on a regular basis to discuss and collect items of interest regarding Tennessee history.<sup>39</sup> Its membership consisted primarily of Nashville businessmen, although it had members from all across the state from a variety of professions. Unlike other Southern historical organizations during the 1890s, the THS was not a proponent of the Lost Cause, nor did it spend much time discussing the Civil War at

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<sup>39</sup> For more information on the THS, see Tom Kanon. "Material Culture and Public Memory in 19th Century Historical Societies: A Case Study of the Tennessee Historical Society." Middle Tennessee State University, 2010.

all. Rather the THS focused on topics such as the Revolutionary War, the Mexican-American War, Andrew Jackson, and Indian "antiquities." When the Commercial Club organized the first Centennial Committee in February 1894, the THS was invited to send delegates to ensure that the historical aspects of the Exposition were fully and correctly incorporated. Given the THS's disposition to focus on the early days of Tennessee, it was able to construct a patriotic narrative of Tennessee history while countering any perception of the Lost Cause or anything else that might put off Northern visitors.

At a regular THS meeting on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1894, Centennial Company Executive Committee and THS member, Dr. J. P. Dake, suggested that they contribute their knowledge and resources to making the Exposition a success. He informed the THS that they "had a great opportunity and a great and urgent duty [in] reference to future generations." This was the opportunity for the THS to showcase the work of its members by answering the following questions: "What did Tennessee do in her first hundred years? Was there anything worthy of note?" Dake asked the THS to present a history of Tennessee that Tennesseans would appreciate. Remaining consistent with the proposed historical emphasis, Dake posited that the value of the Centennial Exposition would be in portraying the notable people and events of Tennessee's first century, which in turn would increase the patriotism of Tennessee's citizens. For Dake, patriotism alone gave sufficient reason for the THS to aid the Exposition. The minutes record him stating, "there could be no occasion

for him to say a word as to the propriety of celebrating such an event. Love of home and country would prompt every citizen to do something in commemoration of it."<sup>40</sup>

After discussing why the THS should support the Exposition, Dake moved to what he thought should be in the History Department. In doing so, he outlined what he believed were the important aspects of Tennessee history. He mentioned topics such as the Native Americans and pioneer settlements of Tennessee, but did not suggest any war topics at all, much less the Civil War. Again, his proposal was consistent with the strategy of not suggesting anything that might offend Northern investors.

The THS agreed with Dake's proposal and appointed three representatives to attend the planning meetings for the Centennial: G.P. Thruston, R.T. Quarles, and W.R. Garrett. All three would later serve as leaders of the history department through the close of the fair, with General Thruston taking the most prominent position. Thruston was the Vice-President of the THS and served as Chairman of the Committee on Histories and Antiquities for the Exposition.<sup>41</sup> A former Union general and GAR member who settled in the Tennessee after the War, Gen. Thruston earned the respect and good will of his fellow Nashvillians. By the time he became involved in the Centennial Exposition, he had published several highly praised works on the Native Americans of Tennessee.

On September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1894, the THS under the direction of Dake sent out a bulletin outlining THS's plans for the History Department and asking for donations

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<sup>40</sup> Tennessee Historical Society, Minutes of Meetings on the Centennial of 1896, Meeting of May 22, 1894. Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<sup>41</sup> *Official History*, 129.

of artifacts. The THS was not “attempt[ing] a connected or systematic history of Tennessee,” which allowed them to partition history however they desired. Tennessee history was divided up into nine areas, such as “The Indian-Pioneer and the Colonial Period,” “Manufactures,” and “Agriculture.” In the bulletin, the THS stated they “are looking for any information that gives life and interest to the annals of a hardy, brave and liberty-loving people.” The Civil War was specifically de-emphasized, having been relegated to sub-section four of an area entitled “Military History.” The THS gave the Civil War attention equal to that given to the Revolutionary War, the Mexican War, and such insignificant things as the founding of asylums and the drawing of county lines. Thus, the original plans of the THS for the history department maximized the pioneer narrative while minimizing the Civil War.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the next few years, the THS received regular updates on the progress of the history department. On November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Thruston reported that the Parthenon, where all the historical exhibits were to be, would be fireproof, and thereby suitable for housing the rare items of the THS collections. By December 10<sup>th</sup>, however, the THS members realized that they would not have enough room in the space allocated them in the Parthenon, and requested of the Centennial Company’s Board of Directors their own separate history building. The space issue became even more urgent when on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1896, “the society resolved to cooperate actively with all kindred societies in making the historical exhibit and the historical features at the Tennessee Centennial a success, vis: Confederate Veterans,

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<sup>42</sup> Tennessee Historical Society, Office Files. Bulletin Dated September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1894.

Sons of Confederate Veterans, Grand Army of the Republic, etc.” Now the THS would be sharing the space in the history building with several Confederate groups as well as the GAR, which could potentially alter the historical narrative promoted at the Exposition. Similarly, on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1896, the THS invited the United Confederate Veterans, the only national Confederate Veterans organization at the time, to have its next annual reunion at the Centennial Exposition. The presence of such groups complicated the otherwise simple strategy of just ignoring the Civil War. While the Lost Cause did not play a large role at the Centennial, it could not be ignored entirely, and the Confederate groups had a significant representation in the history department itself.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Confederate Participation at the Centennial*

The largest manifestation of Civil War memory during the Centennial Exposition was the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) Annual Reunion, which took place June 22-24<sup>th</sup>, 1897. Specifically, June 24<sup>th</sup> was officially Confederate Veterans Day at the Exposition and was celebrated with various parades, speeches, and other activities. Over fifteen thousand veterans and members of various Confederate groups came from all over the South to remember and commemorate the Lost Cause.<sup>44</sup> The UCV, the Tennessee Association of Confederate Soldiers, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy had been actively working for years to ensure the noble deeds of the Confederacy were presented at the Exposition.

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<sup>43</sup> Tennessee Historical Society, Minutes of Meetings. Dates: November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1895; December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1895; February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1896; June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1896;

<sup>44</sup> "All Road Lead to Nashville." *Nashville American*, June 21, 1897.

The TACS was an early supporter of the Exposition, recognizing the event as an opportunity to promote the history of the Confederacy to a large audience. On September 12th, 1894, during its annual convention, TACS formed a large centennial committee to organize their preparations for the Exposition and ensure that "The Confederate soldiers of the State [were] fully represented."<sup>45</sup> The *Nashville American* characterized the speeches given at the convention as some "of the strongest appeals yet made on behalf of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition." Connecting the Centennial with the broader goals of the TACS, the speakers argued the audience must support the Tennessee Exposition in order "to preserve the history of a remarkable people, that *has been too poorly kept*" and to continue "molding public opinion."<sup>46</sup> Thus, from the outset, the TACS saw the Exposition as an opportunity to further its goals of controlling the public memory of the Civil War.

Following the lead of TACS, the UCV also decided to play an important role in the Centennial. In January 1897, the UCV decided to hold their annual convention in Nashville to correspond with Confederate Veterans Day (June 24th) at the Exposition. The UCV convention was already a well attended and highly promoted event, as can be seen through its publication the *Confederate Veteran*. In February 1897, the *Veteran* contained several articles regarding the reunion and the Centennial itself, strongly encouraging all veterans to attend. Because of the huge numbers of veterans expected, "An Executive Committee on entertainment [was] appointed and [worked] at making such preparation as we [the UCV] hope will

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<sup>45</sup> *Seventh Annual Minutes*, p26.

<sup>46</sup> "Heartily Indorsed." *Nashville American*, October 2, 1894. Emphasis in original.



make the re-union a success."<sup>47</sup> This committee organized and provided many services for the tens of thousands of traveling veterans, such as very low-rate train fares and housing in Nashville.

But what historical message were the UCV and other Confederate groups in attendance promulgating? Both the UCV convention minutes and the articles from the *Nashville American* demonstrate that the Confederate organizations stayed true to their historical goals during the Confederate reunion. Judge John Reagan, the keynote speaker for the UCV reunion, fully developed the narrative of Civil War history desired by the veterans. He argued that the North was in fact responsible for Southern slavery, for they were the main proponents of the slave trade and had forced the South to be dependent on slaves. When the North subsequently attempted to remove slavery, the South acted upon its inalienable right to protect itself from an over-encroaching government. After winning the war, the North sought to "deprive [veterans] of all political rights, put them under military rule, and suspend the writ of habeas corpus." This did not last long, however, and the veterans were able to regain control and restore the South to its current glory.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Reagan maintained that the South was fully justified in all its actions, and anyone who denied this should be censored.

An article in the *American* written by the UCV Committee on History further portrayed the strong emphasis the UCV placed on developing the correct history for future generations.<sup>49</sup> The committee believed that "it was painfully evident... that

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<sup>47</sup> "Confederate Re-Union, June 22-24 1897" *Confederate Veteran*, February 1897, 71.

<sup>48</sup> *Minutes of the UCV, Vol 1, 1897, 27-32.*

<sup>49</sup> "History Committee." *Nashville American*, June 24, 1897.

the writing of history had been left mainly to Northern historians, showing sectional bias in favor of the North, and none of them presenting the true motives of the South." The primary goal of sifting through historical books and arguments was to ensure that the children in schools were being taught correct history. Once again, the Confederate groups showed a desire to control the long-term memory of the Civil War through education. Now, "The effort to secure truthful teaching of history is founded in no desire to perpetuate bitterness," but rather to increase sectional harmony by forcing everyone to adopt the same version of history. In summary, the Confederate organizations maintained their principles of the defense of the South and the promulgation of its history.

Overall, the UCV convention and associated Exposition days were a rousing success for all involved. For the UCV, the majority of the first two days of the convention were spent on actual business and internal issues. Having completed their business, the third day was devoted to enjoying the various attractions of the Exposition. The highlights of the day included a parade, in which over ten thousand veterans marched, countless rousing speeches, and fireworks. The *American* described the events of June 24th as "a glorious red-letter day... of memories, of emotions, of pathos, and of pride; a day when the heart held universal sway and all the faculties yielded to the rule of its generous impulses. It was a day never to be forgotten."<sup>50</sup> In the end, June 23rd and 24th both set records for attendance at the

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<sup>50</sup> "A Glorious Day" *Nashville American*, June 25, 1897

Exposition, demonstrating the overwhelming popularity of these days in reference to other days at the Centennial.<sup>51</sup>

### *The GAR at the Centennial*

The participation of the GAR at the Tennessee Exposition was significantly less than that of the Confederate Veterans, yet simply its presence was significant. Before the Centennial actually opened, General Clarkston, Commander-In-Chief of the nationwide GAR, visited Nashville to view the fair grounds and speak to the local chapter. After touring Centennial City, Clarkston discussed the significant interest that existed in the GAR towards the Centennial and its desire to donate “large displays” that would “tax the generosity of the management for space.” Clarkston’s meeting with the Tennessee GAR groups later that evening, although independent of the Centennial, portrayed the various values and issues important to the group. Emphasizing the importance of patriotic education, Clarkston strongly argued for “teaching patriotism in the public schools so that the children might grow up as a rock of defense for the republic.” The following speakers, all from Tennessee, stressed that Southerners were indeed a patriotic people and were in full support of the Stars and Stripes should they again come under attack from any “traitorous hand.” Interestingly, the president of Fisk University, E. M. Cravath, spoke to the group as well, reinforcing the connection between African-Americans and the GAR in the South.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Vast Attendance on Jun 23.” *Nashville American*, June 24, 1897; and, “The Jubilee of Johnny Reb.” *Nashville American*, June 25, 1897.

<sup>52</sup> “Spent Yesterday in Nashville” *Nashville American*, March 9, 1897

The majority of the GAR's participation during the Exposition occurred on June 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, which were the official GAR days. Unlike the UCV, who had their national convention in Nashville, only the Tennessee GAR chapters were present at the Centennial. The first day was primarily spent conducting business, most notably creating a plan to stem the rapid reduction in the size of the organization. Also of note, the New York State delegation passed a resolution to give the GAR the privileges of using their building instead of the much smaller one they were going to use.

The next day, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, several speakers elucidated the GAR positions regarding reconciliation and Tennessee's role in the nation. The first speaker, using the Tennessee Exposition as an example, spoke about "the fact that the entire United States was now in perfect unity and sympathy, and... that the great Tennessee Centennial Exposition could not have been had it not been for the conditions which were wiped out with the blood of the sixties." The speaker here believed that the Civil War was about the preservation of the Union first and foremost, citing that the work of reconciliation was done during the 1860s, and that any remaining prejudice would have precluded the creation of the Centennial. Another speaker, responding to the question of why the GAR was at the Centennial at all, answered that such reunions allow the various people of the country to mix together, fostering patriotism and nationalism. He "urged those present not to be ashamed to wear their GAR buttons, and said that all the GAR men stood for nation with a big N." Overall, these speeches show that the GAR at the Centennial focused on the reconciliation aspects of the Exposition rather than any historical controversies.

They did not make references to the “correct” history of the Civil War, nor did they make any attacks on the displays of Confederate patriotism. They did assert the importance of nationalism, but not in any way overtly controversial.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Overall, the historical narrative presented at the Tennessee Centennial complemented the overarching goals of reconciliation at the Exposition. While the Civil War was obviously the most crucial event in Tennessee history up to that point, the Exposition’s focus on Tennessee’s pioneer phase greatly aid its overall mission. By giving more weight to Tennessee’s early history, the Centennial leaders dispelled tensions between historical memory and New South progressivism, developing a narrative that promoted national harmony and union. Moreover, both Confederate and Union veterans were still represented during the Exposition, achieving the goal of inclusivity. Therefore, instead of being a significant hurdle, historical memory at the Centennial thereby provided a significant boost to Tennessee’s New South image.

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<sup>53</sup> “The GAR Gathering” *Nashville American*, June 4, 1897

## Chapter 2

### The “Negro Problem”: Reconciling Progress and Race

The issues surrounding race relations constituted the primary obstacles to the image of unity and progressiveness that the Exposition organizers hoped to convey. Southern whites had a deservedly poor reputation for their treatment of the former slave population. While leaders wanted to display the commercial and industrial development of the South, they were also forced to face the reality of growing racial discrimination and inequality. Tennessee had had segregated train cars since 1891, but, according to historian Bobby Lovett, due to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, “the enactment of racially discriminatory legislation reached a peak in the New South after 1896.”<sup>54</sup> The Tennessee Centennial was the first major exposition in the South since *Plessy*, and thus served as an important testing ground for race relations moving forward. The white leaders of the Centennial needed to demonstrate the progress of the African-American community without any major voices of discontent if they did not want racial issues to detract from the New South narrative. It was imperative for promoters of the New South to convince Northern businessmen and investors that the South was politically and socially stable. The exposition would hopefully provide the New South promoters a platform to advance a version of race relations that could potentially satisfy both the African-American community and Northern investors without sacrificing Southern white supremacist

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<sup>54</sup> Bobby L. Lovett *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930 : Elites and Dilemmas*. Black Community Studies. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999, p234.

objectives.<sup>55</sup> The reality of the situation was that blacks were not likely to progress from their position, and the white supremacists of Nashville had no desire to see African-Americans empowered socially or politically beyond what was absolutely necessary. The challenge before the Centennial Company was how to balance these forces within the Exposition.

The African-American population likewise had great incentives to demonstrate the capabilities of their race, although some blacks viewed the Negro Building and the accompanying fanfare as too accommodationist and contrary to racial progress. Constantly plagued by accusations of inferiority, African-Americans saw the Tennessee Exposition as a means for displaying their educational, industrial, and social progress. Many correctly believed, however, that nothing would change as the result of the Exposition and chose not to participate and implicitly endorse segregation. Nonetheless, both the white and black populations of Nashville had strong incentives to present the most positive image of the Negro possible at the Centennial.

### ***The Negro Building***

The centerpiece of the African-American presence at the Centennial was the Negro Building. Designed by a local African-American architect, Frederick Thompson, the Negro Building was one of the most imposing at the fair. Its sheer size, unique architecture, and visible placement next to Lake Watauga made the Negro Building a prominent monument to the progress of the Negro at the

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<sup>55</sup> Rydell, 72.

Centennial. At thirty thousand square feet, the Negro Building was one of the larger buildings on the grounds.<sup>56</sup> Both blacks and whites believed the Negro Building served as a declaration of good race relations in Nashville.

Throughout the Exposition, the white leaders pushed the objectives of white paternalism, which was the belief that the former slave owners cared deeply about their former slaves and were best equipped to aid them in racial progress. That resources would be prioritized for the Negro Building over others, such as the History Building, was, in the words of the official report of the US government, "one of the finest evidences that could be given of the feelings of the white men of the South for their former slaves."<sup>57</sup> Whites often claimed overall black satisfaction with the Negro Building. After the opening day of the Negro Building, the *American* reported that "the verdict of all prominent colored people at the Negro building yesterday was that the Exposition is a grand success as a whole, and all are much pleased with so much of the negro exhibit as is up."<sup>58</sup> The Centennial leadership used the grandness of Negro building as well as all other Negro activities throughout the Exposition to promote the idea that they were heavily invested in the future of African-Americans.

The Negro Building was to represent the achievements and progress of African Americans not only in Nashville but also throughout the whole country. The Negro Department, under the direction of its chief, Richard Hill, brought together over three hundred exhibits from eighty-five different cities in the United States.

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<sup>56</sup> In comparison, the History Building was approximately forty-two hundred square feet.

<sup>57</sup> *Report on the United States Government Exhibit at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, Nashville, 1897*. 56th Cong, 2d Sess House Doc. Washington,; Govt. Print. Off., 1901.

<sup>58</sup> "Fisk Students are Entertained." *Nashville American*, May 02, 1897.



Created primarily by educational institutions, the exhibits emphasized the educational advancements of African-Americans in commerce, art, science, agriculture and a variety of other areas. Through displays such as a library filled with books written by blacks, the Negro Department heavily promoted the academic achievements and future benefits of African-American education. The emphasis on education as the most promising tool for racial progress permeated black rhetoric at the time. The values of racial progress and white paternalism that shaped the Negro Building and were represented in its exhibits also found expression in the Negro special days.

### ***Paternalism and Accommodationism: The Path of Progress?***

The numerous Negro special days during the Centennial Exposition provided a platform for both blacks and whites to promote their visions for the African-Americans. Negro Day, the best attended of the special days, was the official celebration of the opening of the Negro Building on June 5<sup>th</sup>. Other days such as Fisk University Day (June 12<sup>th</sup>), National Race Council Day (September 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup>), and Meharry College Day (October 16<sup>th</sup>), were also very successful in attracting attendance by both blacks and whites. On these days, white leaders, as well as black leaders amenable to the fairs message, had many opportunities to share their opinions on various race issues, praising the progress of African-Americans and the good state of race relations in order to present an image of stability and unity. However, there were many black voices outside of the Exposition who criticized and highlighted the discrimination witnessed at the Tennessee Centennial.

### *White Paternalism and Supremacy: The Only Way Forward*

The most important goal of the Centennial leaders was to first ensure that Tennessee's black community was presented to the rest of the country as contented and progressive, for if significant levels of civil unrest or mistreatment were revealed within the African-American community, Northern investors would be extremely hesitant to send money south. Their other priority, however, was to ensure that the black population of Nashville understood that they should follow the dictates of the white elite. Both of these objectives were vigorously pursued throughout every aspect of the Exposition.

The importance of the Northern opinion of Southern race relations is evident in the following examples. In an article on June 6th, 1897, the *American* reported on the potential business problems contained in the race issue. The article reported that there were rumors in the North that African-Americans who visited the fair were being mistreated and experiencing discrimination by being denied access to buildings or not being allowed to drink from the public water fountains. While the *American* informed its readers that these "astounding" assertions should not be given a second thought, it was more than likely that some segregation policies were in place at the fair unofficially. While Jim Crow had not fully manifested in Tennessee yet, it is very believable that, bolstered by *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, socially and culturally enforced segregation was present. These charges were taken seriously enough in Illinois to delay its appropriation for an exhibit in the Negro Building. The *American* reported that a commission sent from Illinois to investigate "found the

rumors absolutely false. They learned that the Negro is given every privilege at the Centennial that a white man enjoys... [and] the Centennial company has done everything for the race collectively and the colored person individually that it could possibly do." The Illinois exhibit for the Negro Building was shipped the next day. The same article presented similar doubts about racism from the Minnesota delegation, who "found it almost impossible to get any one to send exhibits to the Centennial because of the absurd ideas prevailing up there [in Minnesota] of [the] treatment of the negroes down [in Tennessee]." Yet, after reading the reports of the good treatment of African-Americans, Minnesota sent so many exhibits that the Exposition was "compelled to refuse many of them."

This article succinctly demonstrates the importance of perceived race relations to the Centennial leaders. Both state delegations were limiting contributions to the Exposition because of their beliefs about the treatment of African-Americans in the South. Thus, countering this perception was vital, not only to the success of the Exposition, but also, more importantly, to the future commercial success of the South. While these beliefs were most likely largely accurate, the Centennial leadership believed they had successfully overturned what were, in their own eyes, "the utterly absurd rumors afloat in the North" and spread the belief that "the Centennial is offering many advantages for conventions and meetings... which are being utilized by the colored people."<sup>59</sup>

In addition to convincing the Northern delegations of the harmony between the races in the South, the white elite highlighted the benefits of paternalism and

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<sup>59</sup> "False Rumors Out." *Nashville American*, June 22, 1897.

white supremacy for the southern African-American community. Justi summarized the Exposition leadership's view on blacks in the conclusion of the *Official History's* primary section on Negroes: "The natural home for the Negro is in the South; its climate is best suited to his physical nature, and its people, though once his master, are his natural friends. None other understands him so well, or so readily win his affection and respect."<sup>60</sup> The white elites argued that the African-Americans needed to remain in the South under the guidance of their benevolent former masters, because no one else was capable of truly understanding and helping them.

Nashville's white leaders their used platform at the Negro building and during special days to promote their vision for African-American progress, designed to limit true black advancement but satisfy criticism of the South's treatment of blacks. Nashville's white leaders emphasized the "magnificent" overall progress of African-Americans since emancipation, and their overcoming of great obstacles in the process. According to Herman Justi's account in the *Official History*, the black's post-emancipation struggle "was complicated by political obligations for which it was not prepared by previous experience," and by the "short-sighted policy of exaggerating the importance of the political problem."<sup>61</sup> Here the assertion was that the Reconstruction-era policies enacted by Northern Republicans, not the actions of the Southern whites, impeded the progress of African-Americans after the war. Justi's statement epitomized the white view on African-Americans seen throughout the Centennial: African-Americans needed to focus not on political rights, for which

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<sup>60</sup> *Official History*, p204

<sup>61</sup> *Official History*, p193.

they were still unprepared, but on development through industrial hard work until they arrived at some unstated standard of achievement and progress.

By romanticizing the Southern past, white speakers at the African-American special days emphasized that if blacks wanted to better themselves, then they needed to embrace the conditions of white supremacy rather than fight them. The Centennial leadership used exhibits such as the Old Plantation building to dictate the historical memory of ante-bellum Tennessee. Although a relatively small exhibit, the Old Plantation established important context for the rest of the Exposition. The *Nashville American* advertised that visitors could come to learn about the “good antebellum days.” In addition to seeing the plantation home of a white slave owner, the guest would find “African maidens, ‘happy as a big sunflower,’ dance the old-time breakdown, joined in by ‘all de niggahs.’” The Old Plantation thus painted the picture of the ideal plantation home, where even the slaves were happy and content. In this way, the white elite illustrated their false claim that it was only after the Reconstruction-era that the blacks in Middle Tennessee became discontented and the claim that only the Southern white elite truly knew how to take care of the Negro and facilitate their development.<sup>62</sup>

During an extemporaneous address on Negro Day, Centennial Company President John W. Thomas, reinforced the claim that only the Southern white elite had the long-standing relationships necessary for black progress. He told the story “of his ‘black mammy’ and, as he spoke of her devotion, the tears came in his eyes... He said that some one had attempted to buy her from him, ‘but... I [Thomas] told

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<sup>62</sup> “The Old Plantation.” *Nashville American*, May 01, 1897.

them I would as soon sell my wife." His story, as recounted in the *American*, emphasized the special symbiotic bond between whites and blacks in the South. He went on to endorse "the negro... [as] the best laborer we have."<sup>63</sup> Thomas's patronizing speech thus not only focused on white paternalism, but also reinforced the historical memory of a mutually contented relationship between the slave and slave-owner in order to persuade the predominantly African-American audience to continue living a subservient, "laborer" life.

Also on Negro Day, the *American* printed a description of a speech by Booker T. Washington in Boston to compare the acceptance of African-Americans in the North to that in the South. The article commended Boston for attempting to appreciate Washington, but states that "this exultation of the Bostonese was both meaningless and silly, for when the occasion was over they went back to their homes and will not come again in contact with six Negroes in the next six months." The *American* thus sought to counter the view that the North was much friendlier to African-Americans with the argument that Southern blacks and whites had a special understanding because of their mutual history. The article concluded that appreciation for blacks "is shown in the South more substantially in a day than in Boston in a year."<sup>64</sup> This further established the paternalistic idea that African Americans had the best opportunities for acceptance and progress in the South.

At Meharry College Day on October 16th, Governor Robert Taylor argued that "the first lesson they [blacks] had to learn was that they must live in the South

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<sup>63</sup> "Crowned with Success: An Unbounded Triumph Was Negro Day at the Centennial." *Nashville American*, June 06, 1897.

<sup>64</sup> "A Boston Ovation." *Nashville American*, June 05, 1897.

with the white people, and it was necessary to the progress and happiness of the race that they live in harmony with the white people of the South." In short, not only was the South better for African-Americans, it was the only place in which they could progress. Furthermore, the whites had been working diligently to address the "negro question," but now it was up to "those who were the leaders of the race... [to address] the question of mental slavery."<sup>65</sup> Taylor thus believed that the only thing holding back Negro progress was the blacks themselves, not the whites. Once the African-American community accepted its place in the South and stopped burdening itself with unrealistic goals, only then would they be able to move forward from slavery, as they ought.

Overall, the Centennial Company sought to elicit African-American passivity and to present a positive image of racial relations to the rest of the country. The race message at the Tennessee Centennial was specifically crafted to emphasize the supposed good nature of current race relations as well as the vast potential for black development if they chose to accept their place in Southern society. The official narrative of the white elite, which was also largely accepted by the African-American community, successfully navigated the potential minefield of race relations at the Centennial.

#### *Accepting Social Inequality: African-American Accommodationism*

Before the Centennial Exposition even opened, black speakers were fully accommodating to the official narrative of white supremacy. One such speaker was

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<sup>65</sup> "Meharry College Day." *Nashville American*, October 17, 1897.

Professor William Hooper Councill, President of Alabama A&M. On March 13, 1897, at a special ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone of the Negro Building, Councill went as far as to state the following: "I am not slow to recognize the fact that we received much more from slavery than did the slave-holders."<sup>66</sup> The African-American community was divided on how to respond to policies of the white elites. Some activists called for more aggressive action to gain political and civil rights, while others, led by Booker T. Washington, "the Great Accommodator," called for the non-violent acceptance of white paternalism in hopes that through industrial education and hard work blacks would earn equality, albeit still not full equality. Councill, who historian August Meier describes as having "had become widely known for his unctuous sycophancy" towards the Southern white elite, often fell at the far extreme of the accommodationist.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, having Councill as a primary speaker at the Negro Building ceremony demonstrated the extreme racial narrative to which the Centennial leadership was aspiring. The African-American speeches at the special days followed the pattern of accommodation with its emphasis on education and submission to white supremacy. The African-American speakers at the Exposition events often embraced the narrative of the white elite, even in the extreme.

The conversation within the African-American population had two distinct sides. Since emancipation, blacks had often sought equal rights through government processes and political agitation, engaging in what historian August Meier calls the

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<sup>66</sup> Official History, 197

<sup>67</sup> August Meier. *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915; Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington*. Ann Arbor,: University of Michigan Press, 1963, 77.



“protest tradition.” Under the direction of men such as Frederick Douglass, this ideology desired immediate civil rights and access to higher education. However, throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the growing accommodationist movement began to emphasize moral and economic development over immediate civil rights. This philosophy was appealing to the Southern white elite, for it could help them exert social control over African-Americans. At the Atlanta Exposition, accommodationist proponent Booker T. Washington defined the tenets of the movement in the Atlanta Compromise. Washington believed that, as summarized by Meier, “through thrift, industry, and Christian character Negroes would eventually attain their constitutional rights.”<sup>68</sup>

The mechanism for the moral and economic progress of the Negro was industrial education. Whereas traditional higher education focused on liberal arts training, industrial education, exemplified by schools such as the Tuskegee Institute, attempted to build upon blacks’ “natural advantages” to give them the necessary skills for employment in hard labor industries. While accepted among whites, accommodationism and industrial education were controversial topics among blacks. The majority of African-Americans never accepted the principles of accommodationism, and those who did were in the South, where adopting such an ideology garnered favors from the white elite. Fisk University and Meharry Medical College, both founded during reconstruction with money from Northern philanthropists, the Freedman’s bureau, and churches, served as important forums for the educational debate. Because these schools were not wholly reliant on

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<sup>68</sup> Meier, 103.

Southern white patronage, they were able to embrace stances on social issues, yet they were not immune from the social pressures of Southern culture that pushed for accommodationism. As president of a Southern black college, Councilll was wholly dependent upon the patronage of wealthy whites, causing him to fully embrace the official narrative of accommodationism.<sup>69</sup>

While not as radical as Councilll, the other African-Americans allowed to speak at the Centennial all endorsed the official narrative of white paternalism. On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, while Emancipation Day was celebrated at the Exposition, Booker T. Washington himself gave a speech arguing that “as bad as slavery was, it prepared the way for the solving of this problem by this method: For two hundred and fifty years slavery taught the Southern white man to do business with the negro,” furthering the notion that the former slave-owning class was uniquely qualified to help the former slaves in the New South.<sup>70</sup> This was again reiterated on October 16<sup>th</sup>, Meharry College Day, when the speaker stated that, “the white people south of the Mason Dixon's line can do as much or more for the colored people than had been done by the Northern people.”<sup>71</sup> Through promoting the acceptance of white superiority and black inferiority, the African-American speakers imitated the rhetoric and narrative of the whites.

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<sup>69</sup> For discussion of the different school of Negro thought at the turn of the century, see Meier, August. *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915; Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington*. Ann Arbor,; University of Michigan Press, 1963. For more information on the role of Fisk and Meharry, see Bobby L. Lovett *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930 : Elites and Dilemmas*. Black Community Studies. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999; and James Summerville. *Educating Black Doctors : A History of Meharry Medical College*. University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1983.

<sup>70</sup> Official History, 202-203

<sup>71</sup> “Meharry College Day.” *Nashville American*, October 17, 1897.

Just like the whites speakers, these African American leaders argued that the fight was not for immediate political rights. On Negro Day, Charles Anderson, an African-American from New York, argued that the battle was not for political rights but rather for favorable public opinion, and this could not be influenced through courts, public office, or any other formal positions. Positively affecting public opinion could only be achieved through being good citizens and contributing to society.<sup>72</sup> The Negro Department Chief Hill built upon this, arguing that no law can "force an ignorant and timid people to maintain an equality with a superior race. Neither races nor nations can be legislated into that type of superior manhood that characterizes the white race."<sup>73</sup> Hill believed that getting involved in the political arena was not the prerequisite for racial equality that many thought. Some groups at the Centennial took this one step further, discounting the notion of equality altogether. At its conference on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, the National Race Council, chaired by Professor Council, formed a permanent organization called "The American Negro Union," which issued a resolution stating that "we are not clamoring to ride in the same car with the whites, nor do we desire social equality."<sup>74</sup> The Negro Union believed that maintaining peaceful race relations by being completely conciliatory was more important than striving for equality. Washington, in his Emancipation Day speech, summarized the relative futility of political change with this statement: "In working out a solution of this problem it is well to bear in mind that the mere fiat of law could not make a dependent man an independent man, could not make an

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<sup>72</sup> Official History, 200

<sup>73</sup> "Crowned with Success: An Unbounded Triumph Was Negro Day at the Centennial." *Nashville American*, June 06, 1897.

<sup>74</sup> "The American Negro Union." *Nashville American*, September 03, 1897.

ignorant voter an intelligent voter, could not make one citizen respect another."<sup>75</sup> Thus, at the Centennial, the African-American leaders avoided rhetoric regarding immediate political and social equality, allowing for the Exposition leaders to include them without causing unseemly controversy and harming the desired image of race relations.

The black speakers also earnestly promoted the teaching of trade and industrial skills to allow African-Americans to succeed in agriculture and industry. During the March 13<sup>th</sup> cornerstone laying celebration, Professor Councill pointed out African-Americans already had many natural advantages in these areas, for "the South owes her industrial significance largely to the negro. King Cotton sits on a throne of goods held aloft by the strong black arms of the Negro."<sup>76</sup> By focusing on building skills and talents that former slaves already possessed, the African-Americans would be able to increase and prove their worth to society, thereby earning all the political and societal rights desired. This was the path to progress, but it would only be accomplished by embracing white paternalism. In his June 5<sup>th</sup> Negro Day address, Charles Anderson of New York, having discussed how the former slave-owners have helped to advance the blacks since the Civil War, reminded his audience that while "as a race we have done much...we must not forget how much more there still is to do... To some extent we have been given opportunity, but we must not cease to remember that no race can be given relative rank, it must win equality for itself."<sup>77</sup> The American Negro Union, after their

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<sup>75</sup> Official History, 202

<sup>76</sup> Official History, 200

<sup>77</sup> Official History, 201

convention at the Exposition on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, published a resolution, stating “that the negro, to be in harmony with the white race, must work out for himself a lofty and substantial civilization before he shall be entitled to an equal rank in the category of the enlightened nations.”<sup>78</sup> The speakers at the Exposition thus fully endorsed the official narrative, that political liberties were not inherent rights, but something that African-Americans must achieve on their own through the opportunities for education and hard labor.

#### *Debating the Centennial: Outside Black Opinions on the Exposition*

While the speakers at Exposition functions largely toed the official line, blacks unaffiliated with the Tennessee Centennial voiced many different opinions regarding it. Organizations and Negro news coverage of the Centennial debated the efficacy of the Exposition and reported on several conflicts with Centennial management. The *Official History* and *Nashville American* only provide the white perspective on the race issues confronting the Exposition, but these independent voices draw a more complete image of how the race question was actually addressed at the Centennial.

One such voice was the students of Fisk University, whose debates, captured by the *Fisk Herald*, reflected the controversial nature of both the Negro Department and educational issues. Fisk University focused largely on classical education, as opposed to Washington’s template of industrial education, and many of its students were inclined against the accommodationist policies of the time. The editorial board

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<sup>78</sup> "The American Negro Union." *Nashville American*, September 03, 1897.

of the *Herald* consistently offered support for the work of the Negro Department, although other articles also indicated underlying turmoil and debate. In the March 1897 issue of the *Herald*, a debate on the following topic was advertised to the student body: "Resolved, that Negro departments in connection with Centennials and expositions should not be patronized." The articles indicate that the student concern was that the Negro Department at the Tennessee Centennial would simply abdicate the responsibility for promoting African-American progress and instead capitulate completely to the white supremacists. However, the Negro Department was consistently attempting to assuage the fears of the students through letters and bulletins. One such bulletin assured the students the Exposition "will convince visitors to the Centennial that the Negro has the capacity to *do*."<sup>79</sup> The students wanted the current capacity of black education and work on display as well as progressive steps made immediately in political and social policy, yet they realized that they must take the opportunities presented to them, stating "while we cannot overlook the injustices, in the midst of these we venture the assertion that there never was a time anywhere when the Negro was accorded as great opportunities for self-improvement as he has at present in the South."<sup>80</sup> The Fisk student body as represented through the *Herald* thus demonstrated a somewhat reluctant yet open view towards the Negro Department. Despite their suspicion of the overall agenda of the Negro Department, the Fisk students believed that the opportunity presented by the Exposition was worth the risk.

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<sup>79</sup> *Fisk Herald* Archive, March 1897. Fisk Special Collections Library. Nashville, TN. Emphasis in original.

<sup>80</sup> *Fisk Herald* Archive, April 1897. Fisk Special Collections Library. Nashville, TN.

Another prominent African-American group that was interested in the Centennial was the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. The Tennessee AME church began planning to attend the Exposition relatively early, with the first mention coming in March 1896. By January of 1897, the Joint Methodist Tennessee Centennial Commission had been formed as a cooperative effort between black and white Methodist denominations to hold a conference during the Centennial. Although this joint group appeared well organized and was even able to persuade other Methodist groups from outside of Tennessee to join, there is no mention of any special days or conventions for the AME associated with the Exposition.<sup>81</sup> Since there was a very high likelihood that the AME participated somehow in the Centennial, it is very interesting that they did not receive any attention by the press or the *Official History* while most other organizations were recognized.

The black newspapers from around the nation produced significant criticism of Nashville and the Centennial itself. While many of the papers simply reprinted the advertisements distributed by the Negro Department and the railroads, others, such as *The Freeman* (Indianapolis, IN) and *The American Citizen* (Kansas City, KS) provided much critical commentary on the Exposition. Overall, the newspapers presented varied opinions of the Centennial that reflected the internal debate among African-Americans. The newspapers concluded that even though the Exposition was inherently and unavoidably flawed in its presentation of the Negro, it still constituted the best vehicle for Negro promotion available at the time.

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<sup>81</sup> "A Call." *The Christian Recorder*, February 20, 1896. "Notes and Comments." *The Christian Recorder*, January 28, 1897. "Climbing the Ladder." *The Christian Recorder*, June 10, 1897.

Before the Exposition, many black newspapers were replete with declarations of the unprecedented opportunity that the Centennial offered the Negroes. In the months leading up to the Centennial, the *Enterprise* (Omaha, NE) ran an article several consecutive weeks proclaiming the great duty of every colored person to “enter heart and soul” into the Exposition, for unless there was “harmonious and unified purpose,” the race would be labeled as “incapable” instead of “in the foremost ranks of workers who have made American industries and achievements the envy of the world.”<sup>82</sup> This article exemplifies many other such articles from Negro newspapers demonstrating how blacks from around the country, not just Tennessee or the South, viewed the Exposition as central in the pursuit of African-American progress, and it reinforced the idea that presenting to the world the achievements of the blacks through exhibits was sufficient to substantially improve Negro standing in society.

On the other hand, many black newspapers also contained strong warnings against attending or participating in the Tennessee Centennial. Leading up to the Centennial, the *American Citizen* strongly criticized the Exposition because of the expected segregation. It asked its reader whether they had “stopped to consider whether or not, they will be forced to patronize the jim-crow cars” while traveling to the Centennial. It went on to demand that blacks “ought to be treated as other American citizens” since they will be spending millions of dollars on train fares during the Exposition.<sup>83</sup> The segregation of train cars, a direct result of *Plessy vs. Fergusson*, was the single most cited objection to attending the Exposition. Later, the

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<sup>82</sup> “Tennessee Exhibit” *Enterprise*, Omaha, NE, January 23, 1897.

<sup>83</sup> “The Tennessee Centennial” *American Citizen*, Kansas City, KS January 29, 1897.



*American Citizen* reported that within the Negro Building there would be separate dining rooms for whites. The fact that even the Negro Building was to be segregated prompted the *American Citizen* to recommend that "colored people had better leave the Tennessee Centennial alone."<sup>84</sup> Likewise, the *Cleveland Gazette* declared that "the Afro-American visitor from the northern states must leave all self-respect behind and be prepared to yield to every degree of insulting discrimination" from Nashville's hotels and restaurants as well as at the Exposition itself.<sup>85</sup> Although copies of the *Nashville Citizen* could not be located, many references from the other black newspapers indicated that it was strongly opposed to the representation of African-Americans at the Exposition, calling for a complete boycott.<sup>86</sup> Thus, even before the Exposition began, the country's African-American newspapers had voiced opinions both supporting and denouncing the Tennessee Centennial, further demonstrating the divide within the black community.

As the Exposition took its final form, however, the vehemence of the opposition steadily diminished and more newspaper embraced the purported opportunities the Centennial provided. By April, one month before the Exposition opened, the *American Citizen* had received enough reassurances "that equal railroad accommodations have been secured for all alike" to endorse the plan to "lay aside prejudice, and take advantage of the opportunity offered to show what the Negro race really can do."<sup>87</sup> First, this reveals that at least parts of the African-American community were appeased simply by the promises from the Centennial leadership,

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<sup>84</sup> No Title – *American Citizen*, Kansas City, KS, March 12, 1897.

<sup>85</sup> "Tennessee Centennial" *Cleveland Gazette*, Cleveland, Ohio, April 10, 1897.

<sup>86</sup> No Title – *American Citizen*, Kansas City, KS, March 12, 1897.

<sup>87</sup> "Review of Current Events" *American Citizen*, Kansas City, KS, April 9th, 1897.

who were also the leaders of the railroad companies, that they would not follow the now legal segregationist policies. After the *American Citizen* had received these assurances, it was ready to support the Centennial. Second, this article also demonstrated that the Centennial leadership cared enough about black participation in the Centennial to listen and respond to criticism it received from the black newspapers. Whether they were attempting to quiet opposition to foster an image of contentment and equality or they were attempting to bolster ticket sales, the fact that the Exposition management went against the trend of increasing segregation was significant. While these and other responses by the Centennial Company effectively mitigated the most vocal opposition to the Exposition, there remained at least some animosity towards the fair, most notably from the *Nashville Citizen*. The *Freeman* was strongly criticized by the *Nashville Citizen* after having printed a first-hand report recommending the Centennial to visitors. The *Nashville Citizen* asserted that the *Freeman* reporter was “under Chief [Richard] Hill’s thumb,” implying that the *Nashville Citizen* was against Hill and the Negro Department even after the Exposition opened.<sup>88</sup> Thus, while many of the newspapers that initially opposed the Centennial changed their views as Opening Day approached, this did not reflect an acceptance by the African-American community as a whole.

While most of the newspapers either fully supported or completely opposed the Exposition, one paper, the *Freeman*, offered a nuanced view of the Tennessee Centennial. The *Freeman*’s coverage of the Exposition was much more consistent and comprehensive than other African-American newspapers, providing much

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<sup>88</sup> “Knox in Tennessee” *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1897.

information not found in other sources. One of the first articles in the *Freeman* regarding the Centennial appeared in February 1896, when they praised then Chief of the Negro Department James Napier, “who refused to accept the undesirable location set apart for the Negro Building on the exposition grounds.”<sup>89</sup> The Centennial Company had not originally given the Negro Building the prominent place on Lake Watauga it eventually received, but rather it was only after the protest of Napier that they gave the Negro Building this honor. Considering how often the white leadership cited the location of the Negro Building as evidence of their concern for blacks, the fact that Napier had to fight for that preferred location significantly weakens the white claims.

The *Freeman* encouraged blacks to attend the Centennial, although it also did not deny that segregation and discrimination were present, as other papers that endorsed the Exposition did. Leading up to the Centennial, the *Freeman* viewed it as “a repetition of the Atlanta affair” and an “opportunity for emphasizing the good impression made manifest at Atlanta.”<sup>90</sup> In this way, the *Freeman* was both endorsing Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta compromise and hoping that the Tennessee Centennial would follow in Atlanta’s footsteps. Additionally, the article more generally supported the notion that the Centennial was a great opportunity for African-Americans that must be embraced. In an article published on opening day, the *Freeman* helped explain its reasoning for supporting the Centennial. The *Freeman* argued that segregation was certainly not in line with America’s values and spirit, “but there is no sense in putting up a fictitious front and insisting that things

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<sup>89</sup> “No title - The *Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, February 8th, 1896.

<sup>90</sup> “The Tennessee Exposition” The *Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, November 28th, 1896.

are as they should be. The treatment being accorded the race relative to its building for exhibits at Nashville is all that could be expected."<sup>91</sup> Here the *Freeman* presented a more practical view than other papers that supported the Exposition. Those newspapers only spoke of the opportunities for and good treatment of blacks, completely ignoring the segregation and any other negative racial aspects of the Centennial. For its balanced view, the *Freeman* received criticism from the other side of the issue. The *Nashville Citizen* asserted that the *Freeman* was simply parroting Exposition rhetoric, in spite of the many reservations about the Centennial expressed by the *Freeman*.<sup>92</sup>

In its Negro Day coverage, the *Freeman* again recognized the discrimination present at the Exposition, but also explained why boycotting the Centennial, as called for by the *Nashville Citizen*, was not a good option. The *Freeman* stated,

It wouldn't be fair to expect the Negro management to accomplish in six months an evil which has been prevalent for 200 years. The stand taken by the opposition from this standpoint, while just and deserving, is an impracticable one. Prejudice has been recognized from the incipiency of the Centennial, because the managers decided to have a Negro Building, and the former Negro management accepted this condition as well as others.<sup>93</sup>

First, the article argued that it was unreasonable to expect there to be no discrimination at the Exposition, for such a task would require instantly reversing centuries of Southern history. The issue of practicality was central to the *Freeman's* justification for participating in the Exposition. By recognizing that opposition to the Centennial was "just and deserving," however, the *Freeman* pointed out that the

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<sup>91</sup> "The Tennessee Centennial" *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1897.

<sup>92</sup> "Knox in Tennessee" *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1897.

<sup>93</sup> "The Negro Day" *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1897

Centennial was less than ideal. The African-Americans should keep in mind what true equality looked like and should not, in the long run, settle for the prejudice of the Exposition. By citing the mere existence of a Negro Building as an example of discrimination and segregation, the *Freeman* set a very high standard for future equality. Thus, the *Freeman* presented a middle road for blacks who, recognizing the inherent prejudice in the Exposition, still saw it as the best opportunity for themselves to advance in society.<sup>94</sup>

Overall, both the white leaders of the Exposition and the African-American leaders who participated espoused the same accommodationist views on race relations. The white New South elite, desiring to present a tranquil and mutually beneficial view of Southern racial tensions, succeeded in tightly controlling the official message heard at the Exposition. The Tennessee Centennial endorsed the terms of the Atlanta Compromise, thereby further advancing the discriminatory policies that would last for over half a century. Yet, this did not stop many African-Americans not affiliated with the Centennial from voicing their opinions and objecting to the ill treatment of African-Americans in Nashville.

### ***Controversies at the Exposition***

The goal of the Centennial Company leadership was to work with Nashville's African-Americans in order to project an image of race relations that would avoid conflict and satisfy Northern sentiments. For this reason, President Thomas took the task of suppressing racial discrimination seriously, appointing a committee who was

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<sup>94</sup> "Attend the Centennial" The *Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, May 8<sup>th</sup> 1897

to report any discrimination directly to him so that “he would see that the offense was not repeated.”<sup>95</sup> Any complaint of repeated injury would severely hamper the Centennial. However, several incidents during the Tennessee Centennial revealed the true nature of race relations in Nashville.

James Napier, a very prominent African-American Nashville politician, was the original Chief of the Negro Department. Napier was a strong advocate for political rights and definitively did not fall in the accommodationist camp. However, on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1896, soon after the new Centennial Company leadership took over, Napier resigned as Chief due to health reasons. Historian Bobby Lovett believes that the more likely cause for Napier’s resignation was pressure from the Executive Committee of the Exposition, as they sought someone “more pliable” to work with them. Hill, an accommodationist, was chosen to replace Napier and lead the Negro Department in a direction more in line with the priorities of the white elite.<sup>96</sup> The Centennial leaders would not tolerate any deviations from their narrative of good race relations, defined by white paternalism, nor were they willing to risk overly controversial racial topics, such as Negroes in the military. The Negro Department had many sub-committees to prepare exhibits and events for specific subjects, such as agriculture, art, and education. Initially, there was a Military Committee. However, the entire committee resigned before the Exposition opened.<sup>97</sup> Although direct evidence is lacking, it is reasonable to assume that the Executive Committee of the Exposition, fearful of the public backlash from having any exhibits or events

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<sup>95</sup> “The Negro Day” *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1897

<sup>96</sup> Lovett, p235-236.

<sup>97</sup> Daniel Wallace Culp. *Twentieth Century Negro Literature; or, a Cyclopedia of Thought on the Vital Topics Relating to the American Negro*. Naperville, Ill., Toronto, Can. etc.: J. L. Nichols & co., 1902.

involving armed Negroes, coerced the Negro Department to disband its military committee. Through these examples, the desire of the Centennial leadership to preclude any controversial material from the Exposition led them to strictly enforce their vision on the Negro Department. In this way, they avoided the public appearance of controversies.

However, accusations of discrimination arose on the very first day of the Exposition. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1897, the *American* reported that many Negroes had reported being removed from the floor of the Auditorium during the opening exercises and told they were only allowed in the gallery. Chief Richard Hill was reported to be "very much discouraged over the situation," citing that "he had been assured by the Centennial management that no vexatious discriminations would be allowed on the grounds."<sup>98</sup> While it was clear that the removal of African-Americans had occurred during the opening ceremonies, Lewis told to the *Nashville Banner* that no discrimination had been authorized by Centennial management. In fact, Lewis claimed that the police force had been explicitly ordered the night before to let all individuals, regardless of race, have full and equal access to the facilities.<sup>99</sup> The fact that this incident was covered in both major Nashville newspapers speaks to the magnitude of the incident at hand. While the Centennial Company certainly took additional steps to preclude such overt segregation from occurring again, there were still several other incidents of discrimination.

On June 12, 1897, the *Chicago Tribune* reported how a visit to the Exposition by the Illinois Centennial Commission "began with an unfortunate drawing of the

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<sup>98</sup> "Negroes Feel Much Injured" *Nashville American*, May 04, 1897.

<sup>99</sup> *Nashville Banner*, May 04, 1897, 7.

color line." Major Buckner, an African-American member of the Illinois House of Representatives and of the Centennial Commission, arrived at the Maxwell House, only to be denied entry to the building due to his race. Despite much indignation from the rest of the Illinois Commission, the hotel would not yield on its policy. Incidents such as these were exactly what the Centennial leadership hoped to avoid: specific confirmations to Northern businessmen of the racism present in Nashville in 1897. Yet, despite their best efforts, they could not completely cover up the reality of race relations in Nashville.<sup>100</sup>

After the Exposition closed, the *Freeman* ran an article entitled "A Fair City Disgraced: By Its Strict Adherence to the Color Line." The article described how,

During the Exposition season there hung in the streetcar transfer station two conspicuous signs, one of which read "Soda Water served to Whites Only," and the other read "Lunches Served to Whites Only" ...and any one who could read between the lines knew their full meaning.

Segregationist policies, legally and culturally, were undeniably taking root in Nashville. After the Exposition, however, the author was surprised to find that the signs had been taken down, yet the author noted it would only be a matter of time before the signs came out again. The author pointed out another segregated service, the laundry wagons, which had the words "Positively No-Negro Washing Taken" inscribed on the side. The *Freeman* writer remarked, "It is not reasonable that a white man's clothes are easier washed than the clothes of a colored man, for there are just as many white men who need soap and water as there are colored men who need the same thing?" Sound business practice would predicate being open to all

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<sup>100</sup> "Turns Out Maj. Buckner – Nashville Hotel Refuses to Lodge the Illinois Legislator" *Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1897.



potential customers, not just a few, the author argued. Many in the African-American community, such as this writer for the *Freeman*, while supporting the Exposition, still saw the true status of Southern race relations. While the Centennial may have promised progress and equality to the New South's blacks, the signs that denied African-Americans access to the same services as whites said otherwise.<sup>101</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The Tennessee Centennial came at a transitional time during the history of Southern race relations. The Jim Crow era had in many ways already arrived and was there to stay; yet the Exposition leaders realized that they still had to at least appear to oppose increasing discrimination. The controversies over any manifestations or accusations of segregation show that while such practices were a growing reality in Nashville, the Centennial Company still believed that allowing segregation would bring shame to the image of the New South that they were creating. However, the Exposition leaders did nothing alter the steady march towards Jim Crow, instead choosing to endorse only those African-Americans who agreed with the policies of accommodationism. Dissent from Southern blacks was ultimately ineffectual in altering the promulgation of this official narrative. Much like the Atlanta Exposition, the Tennessee Centennial represented another step towards the acceptance of the Jim Crow policies of the early twentieth century.

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<sup>101</sup> "A Fair City Disgraced" *The Freeman*, Indianapolis, IN, December 11<sup>th</sup> 1897

### Chapter 3

## Acknowledging Women's Progress: Finding the Balance Between Tradition and Progressivism

Demonstrating the economic and social progress of Nashville constituted the overarching goal of the Centennial's New South leadership. Thus, the Woman's Department, its exhibits, and the various women's special days played a vital role in displaying women's status in Southern culture. Doyle compares the importance of women's progress to that of children and Negroes, for "to progressive minds these three components of society shared in different ways a common history of neglect and unfulfilled potential. The exposition would show forward-looking visitors the special role each would play in the future of the South."<sup>102</sup> Women had played key roles in all previous world's fairs, specifically in curating the historical exhibits. However, in the Tennessee Centennial, the History Building and its Board were largely responsible for this area, leaving the Woman's Board to define its own role. The Woman's Building and Woman's Board portrayed the required progressiveness yet still functioned within Southern social constraints.

The image of the traditional woman was at odds with the "radical" new woman of the burgeoning feminist movement. Anne Scott described the stereotypical Southern lady of the 1890s "as a submissive wife whose reasons for being were to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household."<sup>103</sup> At the time, gender roles in society dictated that the public sphere was for men, and women were to operate within the

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<sup>102</sup> Don Doyle. *Nashville in the New South*, 146.

<sup>103</sup> Anne Firor Scott. *The Southern Lady : From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*. Expanded pbk. ed. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, 4.

private sphere of home and family. In the South, middle- to upper-class women were placed on a pedestal of virtue in the belief that they deserved not only to be protected from the hardships of life but also to be honored. The primary aim of this logic, though, was to justify keeping women out of public life. Thus, it was culturally difficult for the progressive women's movements to gain much acceptance in the South.

More than just a cultural shift, the women's movements directly challenged the pre-existing power structures of the South. Anastatia Sims, writing about the early Woman's Suffrage movement in Tennessee, discussed how it confronted the entrenched Southern patriarchy, severely handicapping the movement from the start.<sup>104</sup> The public sphere women were, however, a varied group. A woman who may be in leadership in a social group may be an anti-suffragist or a suffragist, significantly complicating any attempts at creating a unified message. Thus, the women at the Centennial found themselves in a similar position to that of African-Americans: the Centennial organizers desired to demonstrate the progress and success of the women and the Negro, but they also wanted to ensure that they stayed in their proper social sphere. While the women's movement did not face the same degree of resistance as African-Americans did, the Exposition would have to walk the tightrope of including various controversial viewpoints while remaining within the conservative constraints of Southern society.

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<sup>104</sup> Anastatia Sims. "'Powers that Pray' and 'Powers that Prey': Tennessee and the Fight for Women's Suffrage." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. Winter (1991): 203-225.

### ***The Changing Role of Southern Women***

"If talking could make it so, antebellum southern women of the upper class would have been the most perfect examples of womankind yet seen on earth."<sup>105</sup> Scott opens her book, *The Southern Lady*, with this statement to emphasize the prevalence of the ideal woman rhetoric in Southern society. While other societies and cultures had put women on a pedestal, Southern men "were 'fanatical' in idolizing and idealizing southern women." Southern men usually "emphasized the softness, purity, and spirituality of women while denying them intellectual capacity."<sup>106</sup> In contrast, however, the Exposition organizers of the Centennial chose instead to emphasize the character and fortitude of Tennessee's pioneer women. Tales of heroism in the face of privation and danger pervaded the Exposition. For instance, President Thomas would often tell the story of how "his grandmother sat in the field and held [his] mother, then an infant, in her lap, guarding with a rifle while her husband was following the plow."<sup>107</sup> As demonstrated here, the Exposition, in its attempt to look back at the historical Tennessee woman, unintentionally challenged the traditional view of women's roles.

Like many other aspects of Southern society, the role of women was indeed changing as the New South brought new opportunities. By couching the preservation of history and public memory in terms of educating the next generation, women were able to procure more public roles for themselves, such as curating historical sites. Organizations such as the Daughters of the American

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<sup>105</sup> Scott, 4.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>107</sup> *Official History*, 8.

Revolution (DAR), United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), and Ladies Hermitage Association (LHA) rapidly grew as women flocked to participate in the history movement. The influence and public platform that women gained through various memorials and historical celebrations allowed them to make strides into the public arena that otherwise were blocked at every entrance. Brundage argues that, in this way, the women of the New South were able "to fashion new selves without sundering links to the old." Yet women generally did not see their role in the history movement as simply an extension of one of their old roles, but rather "white women claimed for themselves the work of recording and narrating the progress of civilization, thereby laying claim to a new source of cultural authority." Many women viewed this new societal power as a valid means to influence society without requiring suffrage.<sup>108</sup> In summary, the progress women made into the public sphere was through a direct expansion of their private roles from educator to cultivator of public memory.

Despite this expanding public role, many Southern women were not content to stand by passively and observe the woman's suffrage movement rapidly spreading throughout the rest of the country. The first woman's suffrage organization in Tennessee was formed on February 20th, 1894, at the same time that the Centennial Exposition was being formed.<sup>109</sup> One of the first members of the Nashville Woman's Suffrage Association was Bettie Donelson, who would later serve as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Woman's Board for the Centennial.

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<sup>108</sup> Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 14-17.

<sup>109</sup> Elizabeth Taylor. *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee*. New York: Bookman Associates, 1957, 17.

In May 1897, Donelson helped form a statewide suffrage organization, the Tennessee Equal Rights Association. In October 1897, the National Council of Women chose Nashville as the site for their annual convention, with the keynote address given by Susan B. Anthony herself. In spite of the pivotal role Tennessee would later play in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, between 1900 and 1906, all records of woman's suffrage activity in Tennessee cease.<sup>110</sup>

Although Tennessee's early failure at the suffragist movement was consistent with the experiences of other Southern states, it is important to note that the Centennial did not provide any apparent benefits to the movement. It would be logical to assume that a progressive world's fair seeking to put forth the best image of its stance on woman's issues would have provided greater assistance to the movement short-term, yet this did not happen. If the Exposition had aided the movement, the primary suffragist organization should not have died only a few years later. Through the coverage of the women's days and speeches, one can ascertain how women were involved in and influenced the Exposition overall and at how specific issues, such as suffrage, were represented and their differences were reconciled to produce the desired official Exposition image of Nashville in the New South.

### ***Tennessee Women at the Exposition***

Women played a central role in the Tennessee Centennial from its inception. The early support of the Woman's board is well documented in several different

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<sup>110</sup> Taylor, 15, 18, 22, 24.

sources. The *Nashville American* noted, "It is the patriotic women of Tennessee that must be accorded the honor of holding up the enterprise when it was young, and of sustaining it while it was struggling for a bare existence."<sup>111</sup> Indeed, when the Centennial was struggling to raise money and garner any support whatsoever during 1894 and early 1895, it was the women who were able to bring in revenue and build the infrastructure of the Centennial.<sup>112</sup> The *Official History's* chapter on the origins of the Exposition singled out the work of the Woman's Board:

From the first inception of the Exposition to its brilliant close, they [the women] cheered by their presence and inspired by their example the men who enlisted in the cause... Insensible to the danger of defeat, indifferent to rebuff, unmindful of their own comfort, practicing the noblest self-sacrifice and self-effacement, the women stood as a wall between the Exposition and the possibility of failure.<sup>113</sup>

Without the support of the Woman's Board during the Centennial's fledgling years, it is very likely that the Tennessee Exposition would not have occurred at all.

Two prominent women's organizations that quickly began to support the Exposition were the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and the Ladies Hermitage Association (LHA). The Tennessee DAR, founded only a few years before the Centennial was proposed, decided on May 10, 1894, that it would have representation at the Centennial, and appointed Bettie Donelson, who came from a prominent and wealthy Nashville family, as the Centennial Chair for the organization.<sup>114</sup> Founded in 1889, the LHA's primary goal was to preserve and restore the Hermitage, President Andrew Jackson's home. In November 1895,

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<sup>111</sup> "Women had the Floor." *Nashville American*, May 04, 1897.

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Donelson to Thomas August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

<sup>113</sup> *Official History*, 35.

<sup>114</sup> Meeting Minutes, Cumberland Chapter of the DAR, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1894, Daughters of the American Revolution Tennessee Society Records, Box 4 Folder 1, TSLA.

Donelson was also appointed as Centennial liaison for the LHA. Both organizations would spend much time seeking relics, furniture, and other historical items from their respective time periods to display at the Exposition, greatly contributing to the exhibits in both the History and Woman's Buildings. The DAR was able to acquire many important items relating to Tennessee history, such as relics from the Watauga settlement, Tennessee's first permanent settlement. The LHA provided furniture, portraits, and other items from the Hermitage as well as Andrew Jackson's personal stagecoach. By January 1895, these groups had successfully come together to form the Woman's Board and were working on promoting the Exposition around the state. The Board engaged in activities such as lobbying the Tennessee General Assembly for an appropriation and attempting to organize a Centennial Chapter in every county in Tennessee.<sup>115</sup> Due to the coordinated planning and early work by the women's groups involved, the Woman's Building was the first building erected at the Centennial site.<sup>116</sup>

During the Exposition, women were represented in two different ways. First, the Women's Building itself provided insight into the priorities of the Women's Board who controlled it. Second, the special days and speeches included a variety of women's groups who were able to share their visions for Tennessee in the New South.

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<sup>115</sup> Letter from Donelson to Thomas August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

<sup>116</sup> Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 146-147.



## *The Woman's Building*

The question of what exactly to put into the Woman's Building posed a challenge to the Woman's Department. In Atlanta, the Woman's Building, as Harvey notes, "was the focus of historical and educational activities." In Nashville, however, History and Children each had their own departments and buildings.<sup>117</sup> The Nashville Woman's department thus had to define itself within the unique context of this world's fair. To fill the Woman's Building, the leadership primarily relied on outside groups and individuals to make proposals regarding what they desired to donate. Women in most counties in Tennessee had formed Centennial Clubs. Each club was asked to create an exhibit with whatever it believed to be important about Tennessee women. In this way, much of the exhibit space presented a representative, grassroots image of Tennessee women. One such exhibit was a log cabin commissioned by the women of Bedford County to represent the living conditions of pioneer women, while the Carter County women supplied antique furniture and household items for the cabin. They placed it in a prominent position to purposely contrast the "old times" with the modern Woman's Building.<sup>118</sup> Hundreds of historical relics were given to the Woman's Building for display, necessitating the construction of the Annex building to house various Indian artifacts, colonial furniture, and old portraits. The Building also contained the Mount Vernon Room and the Colonial Bed Room, both of which further emphasized the importance of Revolution-era history. Thus, while the History Building contained the most important historical exhibits related to state history, the Women's Building

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<sup>117</sup> Harvey, 265.

<sup>118</sup> "In the Woman's Building" *Nashville American*, May 04, 1897.

presented a practical, day-to-day history of the lives of the early Tennessee women and their families.<sup>119</sup> The largest single room in the Women's Building was the Decorative and Applied Arts Room. While the Parthenon officially housed all of the fine art at the fair, the Woman's Art room gave Tennesseans the opportunity to view "the work of women in decoration, whether china, painting, water color work, oil painting, and the kindred arts" on a more amateur level.<sup>120</sup>

The exhibits of the Women's Building stretched the understanding and boundaries of the traditional woman. Cheatham County created a Model Kitchen in the building, and while the kitchen still unquestionably fell within the traditional view of the woman's sphere, the emphasis was on modern new tools, utensils, and cooking techniques that would free women from some of the more laborious tasks performed in the kitchen. The Model Kitchen thus served as a bridge between standard woman's work and the ever-increasing technological advancements of the era. Likewise, the Woman's Library, organized by Mrs. Thomas, wife of the President of the Centennial Company, contained three thousand volumes, all written by women. The library contained not only novels but also several non-fiction works by women in scientific fields, demonstrating the expansion of women into new areas hitherto excluded to them.<sup>121</sup> Further exemplifying this growth was the Patents and Inventions room, filled with technological achievements created by women throughout the country. The *Nashville American* declared, "There will be no more interesting department in the Woman's Building... than the room devoted to the

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<sup>119</sup> "In the Woman's Building" *Nashville American*, May 04, 1897.

<sup>120</sup> "Decorative Art Work" *Nashville American*, August 18, 1896.

<sup>121</sup> "In the Woman's Building" *Nashville American*, May 04, 1897.

inventions of women." The *American* recognized the stretching of gender roles implied through this exhibit: "Formerly women were satisfied to make improvement in the kitchen and nursery, but to-day woman's handiwork is seen in mechanical devices and in the scientific world."<sup>122</sup> The library and inventions room went directly against the notion that Southern women lacked intellectual curiosity, thereby encouraging women to expand their social role.

It is important to note, however, that while the Woman's Building did embrace expansion in regard to female education and in some cultural areas, there were no exhibits pertaining to the question of suffrage. The leaders of the Woman's Department did not want to take a political stand on something so divisive as suffrage, and therefore, it received no place in the Woman's Building. Yet, the Woman's Building was not, as argued by historian Don Doyle, "a showcase of feminine domestic decoration"<sup>123</sup> but rather an expansion of women's potential roles in society. The Women's Board was able to embrace some progressive notions yet was careful not to cross the line into more divisive issues such as suffrage.

The special days dedicated to women and women's organizations provided platforms to reinforce the ideals found in the exhibits and allowed more radical or minority groups to be involved in the Centennial. During the official women's days, many of the same ideas espoused through the Woman's Building were put forth in speeches and presentations. However, the women's exhibit's emphasis on traditional women's roles served, in Doyle's words, as a "deceptively conservative

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<sup>122</sup> "What Women Invented" *Nashville American*, June 11, 1896.

<sup>123</sup> Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 148.

veil" behind which "the Women's Department planned a series of events that expressed more clearly the aspirations of progressive-era feminists."<sup>124</sup>

Kate Kirkman Day, celebrated September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1897, was the dedicated "woman's day" at the Exposition.<sup>125</sup> Katherine Kirkman, wife of Van Leer Kirkman of the Centennial Company Executive Committee, was the well-liked and influential leader of the Woman's Department. From a wealthy Confederate family, Kirkman was the archetype of a Southern lady.<sup>126</sup> The Women's Department, as a gesture of gratitude towards their leader, had voted to name woman's day after Kirkman. Because of the official nature of Kirkman Day, the traditional ideal woman was proclaimed in every speech and publication. In the *Official History*, Justi emphasized how the traditional role of the homemaker and the pioneer history of Tennessee framed the celebration: "Every home of that pioneer day was a home, a school, and an altar. There were inculcated the virtues which made the sons of these women men in the truest and highest sense, made the daughters of these women like their mothers, and made the homes of Tennessee for generations after the happiest on which the sun in all his journey stopped for a moment to smile." Moreover, the events of the day were purposely designed to reflect the roles of the woman in society. As Justi explained:

There was much consideration of the form which the celebration should take, and numerous suggestions were made, from which three were adopted as the special features of the day. These were a great baby show in the morning, an elaborate flower festival in the afternoon, and a splendid reception at night, thus exemplifying the three great missions in woman's life -- the

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<sup>124</sup> Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 148.

<sup>125</sup> The Executive Committee of the Woman's Department had previously voted to name the day after their president, Katherine Kirkman.

<sup>126</sup> William Waller. *Nashville in the 1890s*. Nashville,; Vanderbilt University Press, 1970, 106.

mother, or woman at home; the artist, or woman in the studio; and the belle, or the woman in society.<sup>127</sup>

The Woman's Department was thus consciously mirroring the desired social role for women in how they celebrated women. The Baby Show was extremely popular and fiercely competitive. Over 500 children were entered into the competition, and awards were given out for the best children in each age group. The floral parade by all accounts was one of the grandest spectacles of the entire Centennial Exposition. Carriages were completely decorated in exotic flowers imported from across the world. Overall, Kate Kirkman Day served to reinforce the traditional social role of women.

Another very important day for the Woman's Department was the opening of the Woman's Building on May 3, 1897. The speeches on this day dealt largely with the issue of what defined the modern woman and her place in society. Mrs. Kirkman gave the opening speech, in which she connected the current positions and dispositions of Tennessee women to their ancestors. Speaking of the early pioneer times in Tennessee, she stated "it is worthy of note that our pioneer mothers developed the highest traits of womanhood in these perilous times: they moulded the bullets and loaded the guns for the gallant defenders of their home altars, and lent a tender charm to the rude hut and rough toil of pioneer life." She pointed to the log cabin next to the Woman's Building to emphasize the contrast between then and now, stating that even though Tennessee had advanced into modernity, its roots were still with the settlers and the lessons they had learned. Near the end of her

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<sup>127</sup> *Official History*, 265.

speech, she implicitly addressed the issue of suffrage by offering context for and a definition of women's role in society:

If in the pagan past [a] woman was denied her inherent rights under the benign influence of our Christian religion she stands, at the close of the nineteenth century, not only panoplied in her full rights, but resting under equal burdens of responsibility, and if ever we are to attain the highest ideals of civilization, it must be by the persistent and united efforts of man and woman each toiling in their own God-appointed sphere. But it may be asked, 'what is woman's work?' I unhesitatingly answer, anything and everything that may be necessary to preserve the sanctity of the home and the freedom of the State.<sup>128</sup>

First, Kirkman claimed that, compared to women throughout history, women in 1890's Tennessee already had all their rights and equal responsibility with men, and she then reinforced the idea that each gender should stay within their sphere. In these statements, she established a moderate position for women in society.

Although women should stay in their sphere, her definition of women's work seemingly opened the door to more progressive ideals. By asserting women's role was "anything and everything" regarding the home and freedom, Kirkman provided the basis for future expansion of woman's role. In her conclusion, she was thus able to skillfully appease both the traditional and progressive camps. This appeasement exemplifies the special days at the Exposition, for while traditionalism was officially endorsed most strongly, many progressive organizations were also able to voice their opinions.

During September, the Woman's Suffrage Association met on September 3<sup>rd</sup> to promote their cause at the Centennial. Many different arguments were presented as to why the audience should join the suffragist cause. The first speaker was Mrs.

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<sup>128</sup> "Women Had the Floor" *Nashville American*, May 4, 1897.

Evans, a Tennessean, who noted that while there was “no life better for a woman than a good home provided by a good husband... [and] good husbands do not grow on bushes,” and women needed to have some other way to guarantee their influence in the political process. Moreover, it was not unprecedented for women to hold political power, with the most obvious example being Queen Victoria, the contemporary monarch of Great Britain. Likewise, she argued strongly for the right to vote, seeking to refute the most common arguments against suffrage.

Mrs. Evans thus called for the extension of suffrage to women without calling for or implying any other necessary changes in society.

The next speaker, Mrs. Clara Lyons Peters, came onto the stage and immediately removed her hat, defying the cultural norms of the times. Mrs. Peters stated that getting the ballot should be the top priority of all women, for once they obtained “that greatest of all American weapons, then women will be invincible.” She interestingly concludes her statement with the statement that “Uncle Sam needs a house-keeper and our State governments all the way down need one.” In this statement, she draws upon the stereotype of women’s work in the private sphere, implying that government needs the positive influence of women to clean up the government. Mrs. Peters called for a more radical progressivism for women regarding the vote and social norms, yet still couched her argument in terms of traditional housekeeper rhetoric. Finally, Mrs. Helen M. Gougar, President of the Indiana Suffrage Association, spoke, often directly confronting the Southern patriarchal establishment. Speaking against a common objection that as women became greater participants in the public sphere, they will leave a void in the home

sphere, she stated "if giving woman the right to vote would keep the men at home rocking the cradle, she would advocate it with more zeal than ever, if possible." She went on to say that she "believe[s] in universal suffrage, white and black, ignorant and learned, without regard to sex." In two of her statements, Mrs. Gougar went against the pillar of Southern society: white male dominance. In these three speeches, the wide range of arguments within the Suffrage movement was revealed.<sup>129</sup>

September 15<sup>th</sup> was Business Woman's Day at the Exposition, during which many different women spoke about their personal business successes as well as about economics in general. Kirkman opened the day by stating that only a few years ago, women were very limited in the professions available to them, but now "A wide pathway has been cleared of the underbrush of false sentiment, logic, and rhetoric, which intertwined with law and custom, so long blocked all effort." Women from a variety of disciplines discussed issues relevant to them that had traditionally been left to men. The *Nashville American* noted how unusual this seemed in an editorial comment:

Despite the masculine idea of charm being foreign to the woman in business, it would have been difficult to have gathered together a more attractive set of women than appeared at yesterday's convocation, and each was gowned in exquisite taste. It really seemed strange for women discussing grave financial questions, to be arrayed in frills and laces, but such was the case, and it did prove an argument frequently brought up that femininity can preserve its charm even when it has passed under the chisel of labor.

As with the inventions and patents in the Woman's Building, women in business constituted an area traditionally outside of the woman's sphere that was now being

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<sup>129</sup> "Ballots for the Ladies" *Nashville American*, September 3, 1897.



more fully embraced by society.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, the Federation of Woman's Clubs, which focused on the promotion of education for women, had their convention on October 21<sup>st</sup>. A theme throughout the speeches was that if women truly wanted to advance themselves in society, they needed to focus on universal education more than suffrage. As one speaker said "University extension was the most significant step yet taken in the world's great general advance towards democracy."<sup>131</sup> Overall, many different issues regarding women in Tennessee were represented during special days at the Centennial.

### ***Conflict with the Executive Committee***

With this significant range of opinions on many social problems, it was inevitable that conflicts would arise. From the fall of 1895 into the spring of 1896, a major conflict arose internally within the Woman's Board that then spilled over to a conflict with the Centennial Company Executive Committee. The issue was primarily regarding the re-organization of the Woman's Department and the parliamentary maneuvers used to achieve it. Many of the records of the conflict are vague and very likely biased. Many scholars give little note to the conflict among the Centennial Company Executive Committee, the Woman's Board, and Bettie Donelson. However, the resulting leadership turnover in the Woman's Board undoubtedly affected the goals and priority of the Woman's Department going forward.

The primary character in the conflict was Bettie M. Donelson, Acting Secretary of the Woman's Board and Chairman of the Woman's Executive

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<sup>130</sup> "American Business Woman's Day" *Nashville American*, September 16, 1897.

<sup>131</sup> " Federation of Women talk about Education and Science " *Nashville American*, October 22, 1897.

Committee. Donelson was a very early suffragist in Nashville, one of the five women to join the fledgling Nashville Woman's Suffrage Association in 1894. Her family connections and social status were very well established. She was married to the son of President Andrew Jackson's personal secretary and confidant, and she would later become the dominant figure in the Ladies Hermitage Association. Most of the existing records from the early Woman's Board are in Donelson's personal papers, and it is from her that we know of the reorganization of the Woman's Department. Two other important actors in the conflict are Mrs. Lizzie Craighead and Mrs. Katherine "Kate" Kirkman. Craighead had been the leader of the Woman's Board since 1894, but she would eventually end up resigning instead of fighting against the politics of the re-organization. Kate Kirkman was the wife of Centennial Vice-President Van Leer Kirkman and was a member of the anti-suffragist Southern Rejection League, thereby providing a potential source of conflict with Donelson.

The first signs of trouble occurred not internally on the Woman's Board, but in its external relations with the Executive Committee.<sup>132</sup> On August 8th, 1895, the Woman's Board passed a resolution "That the Chmn. of the [Women's Board] Executive Com. [Donelson] be instructed to furnish the Centennial Company with a written statement of the efforts, energy & paidless work of the members of the Woman's Board to secure City, County, & State aid as well as sentiment for a grand Centennial Exposition." By August 10th, Donelson sent President Thomas and the rest of the Executive Committee a letter complaining that they, and specifically the Executive Director in charge of reimbursements, were not giving due honor and

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<sup>132</sup> For disambiguation, all references to the "Executive Committee" refer the Executive Committee of the Centennial Company, not of the Woman's Department, unless otherwise noted.

respect to "the women who had labored incessantly... through discouragements & disadvantages." Donelson then recounted how, when the Exposition was all but failing, the Woman's Board continued to actively lobby the legislature for public funds, plan and execute public events with ten thousand people in attendance to promote the Centennial, establish county-level Centennial Clubs in almost every county in Tennessee, and write hundreds of newspaper editorials advertising the advantages of the Exposition. Yet, the Woman's Board felt that it was not even being recognized for its achievements during a time "when the clouds were so dark that not a ray of Centennial light could scarcely be seen," much less being reimbursed for their simple expenses, such as stamps for the mailings done. The Woman's Board desired the appropriate recognition and compensation relative to other groups in the Exposition.<sup>133</sup>

The Executive Committee responded with a resolution on August 20th, simply stating:

Resolved, That we appreciate most highly the onerous, patriotic and successful work of the Womens' Board of the Tennessee Centennial, worked out on such commendable lines of economy, and earnestly request them to continue their effective efforts, for, we recognize the work of the women in all celebration as a prime factor in leading to abundant success.<sup>134</sup>

The Woman's Board quickly responded on August 22nd with another resolution asking that the Executive Committee do more than just give praise, but actually appropriate the money that the women believed had been promised them.<sup>135</sup> During

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<sup>133</sup> Letter from Donelson to Thomas August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

<sup>134</sup> Letter from Thomas to Donelson August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 4, TSLA.

<sup>135</sup> Letter from Donelson to Thomas August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

their meeting on September 5th, the Executive Committee agreed to appropriate the Woman's Board money to cover their expenses, which they received on October 23rd. Once they had received this "more substantial recognition" instead of just "sentimental official recognition," the Woman's Board passed a resolution fully re-committing themselves to the Exposition and its leadership on November 1st, 1895.

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However, this proved to be the calm before the real storm. By November 4th, 1895, the Woman's Board had heard reliable rumors that the Executive Committee would dissolve the Woman's Board and instead would replace it with a Woman's Department.<sup>137</sup> This had several implications for the women involved. First, there was no guarantee that any of them would continue over into the new organization. Second, departments were under the direct control of the Executive Committee, while the Woman's Board had been semi-autonomous. The Executive Committee would be responsible for appointing the new Department Chief, other officers, and general membership.

Unfortunately, the existing Executive Committee records begin only days after this event occurred, and thus the reasoning behind their dramatic shift against the will of the Woman's Board is ultimately unknown, although there are several plausible reasons. First, the Executive Committee may have been seeking to both acknowledge the importance of the contribution of women to the Centennial and to simplify expense and appropriation issues, thereby precluding the previous year's

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<sup>136</sup> Resolution by Woman's Board, November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

<sup>137</sup> Resolution by Woman's Board, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

appropriation problems from reoccurring. On November 7th, the Executive Committee issued a public resolution declaring that all expenses made on behalf of the Centennial Company must be approved beforehand by the Executive Committee, further reducing the possibilities of the early conflict with the Woman's Board being repeated.<sup>138</sup> Second, they may have sought more control over the priorities and image of the Woman's Building and programming, because woman's issues were such an important part of the overall goals of the Exposition. Third, the actions of the Executive Committee may have been driven by a scheme to replace the leadership of the Woman's Board for personal reasons. This scheme may have been motivated by the aforementioned desire to further control the Woman's Board or, may have been a power grab orchestrated by Kirkman, who had good connections with the Executive Committee and ultimately became Chairman of the Woman's Board. Whichever of these motivations actually affected the Executive Committee, the result was a reorganization that became mired in procedural confusion.

The Woman's Board reacted immediately and decisively in response to the rumors, which did indeed prove to be true. In a resolution issued on November 4th to the Executive Committee, the Woman's Board first stated that if they would be appointing new officers, then "the Woman's Board most respectfully request and urge [the Executive Committee] to appoint Mrs. Craighead 'Chief' of the [Woman's] department, for we fully appreciate her services, her sacrifices during... our success and harmony." Second, the resolution argued that the actions being taken were against the by-laws of the Centennial Company, which specifically stated that "a

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<sup>138</sup> Meeting Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Centennial Company, Nov 7<sup>th</sup>, 1895, TSLA.

woman board" would exist "who shall elect their own chairman." Changing the board to a department and changing the elected chairman to an appointed chief was thus outside the scope of the Executive Committee's power.<sup>139</sup>

The Woman's Board offered a compromise demand, however, which stated that if the Executive Committee were to dissolve the Board and replace it with a Woman's Department, all of the current Board members must be members of the Department, all the previous actions of the Woman's Board must remain valid, and the Department must be autonomous and independent from the Executive Committee regarding its internal affairs. More specifically, the Woman's Department should be able to decide when it meets, create its own by-laws independent of, but not in contradiction to, the Centennial Company's by-laws, and fill all vacancies in the Department. For the women leaders, especially Donelson, independence and self-determination were essential to proving the abilities of women as well as setting more precedents of women voting. The women were unwilling to give up their autonomy, and they would continue to fight plans for the department at every step. On November 8th, the Executive Committee secretary wrote to Craighead, who was still President of the Board, that all of the requests that the women put forward had been accepted on the motion of Mr. Van Leer Kirkman.<sup>140</sup> Thus, it appeared as if both sides would be content moving forward.

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<sup>139</sup> Resolution by Woman's Board, November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

<sup>140</sup> Letter from Executive Committee to Woman's Board, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 4, TSLA. Interestingly, this motion does not show up in the November 7<sup>th</sup> meeting minutes of the Executive Committee, despite the fact that it was an official action.

Yet once again, it did not take long for conflict to resurface. On November 21<sup>st</sup>, Craighead resigned her position as President of the Woman's Department, creating a vacancy and requiring an election following the previous Executive Committee resolution.<sup>141</sup> Donelson, however, must have been aware that uncertainty or confusion still existed regarding the new department's right to elect its own leadership. On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, Donelson wrote to Thomas stating in no uncertain terms that they would elect their new President per the power invested in them.<sup>142</sup> But, when Thomas responded the next day, he did not acknowledge the previous concession, stating:

While I think the Ladies should have the privilege of electing their own President, and conducting the Womens' Department as they may see proper, I am not prepared to give any definite answer as to what views the Executive Committee will take with reference to the matter, but will have your communication read at the next meeting of the Executive Committee and advise you.<sup>143</sup>

Fortunately for the women's board, this issue was short-lived, as on November 27<sup>th</sup> the Executive Committee reaffirmed the responsibility and power of the Woman's Department to elect its own officers.<sup>144</sup> This exchange, although quickly resolved, was indicative of some underlying tensions between the Woman's Board or Donelson and President Thomas.

These events, however, paled in comparison to those of the following spring. On February 20, 1896, the Woman's Department held elections for president of the Department. Mrs. Kirkman, exploiting a parliamentary ambiguity, used "proxy

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<sup>141</sup> Meeting Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Centennial Company, Nov 21<sup>st</sup>, 1895, TSLA.

<sup>142</sup> Letter from Donelson to Thomas November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 5, TSLA.

<sup>143</sup> Letter from Thomas to Donelson November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1895, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 4, TSLA.

<sup>144</sup> Meeting Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Centennial Company, Nov 27<sup>th</sup>, 1895, TSLA.

votes,” which were votes from official members who were not actually present, to win the election against the candidate supported by Donelson and Craighead. Although the proceedings were challenged, the temporary presiding officer, Mrs. Thomas, the wife of Centennial Company President Thomas, upheld the election, and the results were sent to the Executive Committee, who approved them unanimously. Donelson wrote several letters of appeal, signed by many other leaders of the Woman’s Department, to the Executive Committee and the newspapers, detailing what they believed to be the parliamentary irregularities that had occurred during the election process.<sup>145</sup> Donelson reached out to the former officers of the woman’s departments at the Atlanta and Chicago Expositions desiring to know if they dealt with a similar issue. The responses from both organizations stated that they never used proxy votes.<sup>146</sup> By April 1<sup>st</sup>, the General Counsel of the Centennial Company had issued a statement that the use of proxy votes was legally done, thereby fully validating the election.<sup>147</sup> By this point, Bettie Donelson, who had been an ardent supporter of the Centennial since its inception, resigned from her position in the Woman’s Department and did not serve in a leadership position through the duration of the Exposition.

In conclusion, despite there not being direct evidence that this conflict constituted anything more than a genuine disagreement over an ambiguity in the by-laws and rules of order, several other theories as to the motivations of the proxy

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<sup>145</sup> Pamphlet written by Donelson, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Scrapbook of the Woman’s Board of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, TSLA.

<sup>146</sup> Letters to Donelson on April 1<sup>st</sup> and April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1896, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 4, TSLA.

<sup>147</sup> Letter to Kirkman from S.A. Champion, General Counsel of Centennial Company, April 1<sup>st</sup> 1896, Bettie Mizell Donelson Papers, Box 1 Folder 4, TSLA.



vote conflict are supported circumstantially. Most likely, a combination of the desire to exert more control over the Woman's Board and individuals interested in increasing their power caused the difficult transition of leadership in the Woman's Department. Ideologically, the Executive Committee and/or a strong contingent of the Woman's Board could have desired Donelson removed because of her activism regarding suffrage, a theory that is bolstered by Kirkman's known strong anti-suffrage views. Regardless, Donelson believed herself to be in a hostile enough environment to retire from the venture that she had dedicated so much time to. Ultimately, the series of conflicts culminating in the election of Kirkman demonstrates an unusual amount of interference by the Executive Committee in the Woman's Department, yet gives few clues as to why this interference occurred.

### ***Conclusion***

In summary, the role of women in the Centennial Exposition was very diverse. The Woman's Board was a steadfast early promoter that ensured the venture would succeed when it appeared that it would not. Women continued to play large roles in their department, as well as several of the other aspects of the Exposition, such as the History Building. The discussions during the special days and the exhibits at the Women's Building portrayed women's role in society as firmly rooted in the traditional past, but ever increasingly moving towards a progressive future. The Centennial Company sought to minimize the conflict regarding the competing views of women, yet in doing so likely suppressed the more outspoken

voices in its own leadership. The Centennial Exposition thus managed to walk the fine line between progress and culture necessitated by its mission.

## Conclusion

The Tennessee Centennial Exposition sought to promote a new vision for what the South could and would be. Riding the wave of New South boosterism, Tennessee's commercial leaders formed this world's fair to establish the capabilities of Nashville. By demonstrating the economic potential of the New South, the Centennial organizers hoped to attract the attention of Northern investors, who would provide much needed capital. The New South promoters desired that the city present a united front to the rest of the country, constructing a narrative of Tennessee as rooted in tradition yet looking towards the future. However, they faced the challenge of bringing together disparate groups in society, often with conflicting goals.

At the forefront of this struggle was the issue of Civil War memory. As former Confederates struggled to form a new identity after War, Northerners were ever wary of any vestiges of rebellion. The Exposition used the rhetoric of reconciliation, with an emphasis on a common pioneer heritage, to mitigate concerns over the New South's loyalty to the Union. Tennessee's early historical characters such as Davy Crocket and Andrew Jackson provided a unifying official narrative at the Centennial.

Similarly, ever-present doubts regarding the South's treatment of the Negroes had the potential to derail the Centennial. However, the Exposition leaders successfully incorporated the progress of the black population into its official narrative. By securing the co-operation of many African-Americans, who were themselves interested in showing their progress to the nation, the Centennial Company manufactured a picture of good race relations in Nashville. The Negro

community was seen as the beneficiary of industrial education and white patronage, able to improve itself through hard work and patience.

Lastly, as the role of women in society was changing, the Exposition leadership had to balance the progressive nature of New South women while still respecting the traditional views of Southern society. By officially embracing some aspects of progressive feminism, such as recognizing women scientists and authors, and unofficially allowing numerous other voices to be heard, the Exposition was able to find the balance between these competing concerns. In each of these cases, the Centennial Company provided an official, inclusive narrative carefully crafted to meet the concerns of both its Southern constituents and Northern clients.

While other researchers have looked at the message of the Centennial Exposition, few have looked at what groups were involved, or notably not involved, in the creation of these narratives. The Exposition leadership had to actively preclude and conceal conflicts, lest those disruptions negatively affect the image of New South Nashville. The Tennessee Centennial was a finely tuned boosterism campaign. The balance between allowing inclusivity and crafting a tightly controlled message was difficult to create and maintain. While promoting regional reconciliation, the Centennial Company sought to limit the presence of Civil War memory in the historical narrative presented at the Exposition by limiting its presence in prominent speeches and the history displays. However, thousands of Confederate veterans were still allowed to participate and commemorate the Lost Cause through special days.

The Exposition also sought to reverse the South's infamous reputation for poor treatment of blacks through the Negro Building and special days, yet many within the African-American community were not persuaded by the proposals of the white Centennial leadership. The white elite desired to more firmly establish the tenets of the Atlanta Compromise, and all the exhibits and speeches regarding Negroes at the Exposition pressed for further segregation, discrimination, and white patronage under the guise of industrial education. The acceptance, or lack thereof, of this narrative by the black community is often overlooked. African-American universities and newspapers were the forum of contentious debate, as the black community deliberated whether to accept the discrimination at the Exposition in the hopes of gradual progress or boycott it altogether. Lastly, despite attempts by the white leaders to eliminate or hide segregation and discrimination at the fair, the increasingly prevalent policy of "separate but equal" was clearly on display in the city. Overall, the underlying race tensions in Tennessee were downplayed through the official image of racial harmony.

While the Exposition tried to cover up the true nature of race relations, the Centennial leadership fostered a combination of traditional and progressive views of women in society. Instead of taking a very traditional or very progressive stance on women's issues, the Exposition avoided conflict by being inclusive. Women in the public sphere, such as businesswomen and women inventors, were allowed to have their own special days and exhibits in the Woman's Building, and events such as those on Kate Kirkman Day reinforced traditional woman's roles. However, even in the relatively inclusive women's arena, individuals fought for control of the

Exposition's official narrative. The conflict between Donelson and the Executive Committee of the Centennial Company demonstrated that sometimes achieving a compromise to an issue involves conflict, and the Company leadership was eager to do whatever was necessary to achieve the desired message.

The importance of the Tennessee Centennial to the historian lies not in the event itself, but rather in the window it provides into a liminal moment in Southern society. In 1897, many of the movements and social policies that would shape the South were still forming. The Lost Cause, Jim Crow, and Women's Suffrage movements each would reach their peak in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The Exposition presented a unique opportunity to view social changes in the South during a crucial moment of their development. The Centennial is a snapshot of the conflicts, debates, and narratives surrounding three of the most influential issues of the early 1900s. In that picture, we see a society holding on to its treasured past yet adapting to and defining a New South in which to live.

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