

**A City and a Fair:
Nashville, the Tennessee Centennial, and the Negro
Building**

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Introduction

The World's Fair as a Site of Modernity

In the world of the late nineteenth century it is hard to imagine an event that could bring together millions of people. Planes had yet to be seen in the sky and televisions sets were not yet in the home. What could draw millions of people to one place, at one time? The answer is a World's Fair. These fairs brought thousands of people together from all over the globe. They came to see the technological marvels and ethnic villages and to experience the thrill of being a part of something so grand. The world's fairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were monumental achievements. At the Chicago World Fair a single exhibit could have housed the U.S. Capitol, the Great Pyramid, Winchester Cathedral, Madison Square Garden, and St. Paul's Cathedral all at once.¹ They attracted kings, queens, dignitaries, governors, presidents, men, women, blacks, whites, and the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. They were the ultimate symbol of the prosperity and success of the Gilded Age. The brilliance and progress of mankind was both eloquently and stylishly put on display for the awe and wonder of all those who passed through their gates.

These World's fairs were the precursors to the modern day amusement park. Tourists and guests were entertained by the rides, exhibits, parks, restaurants, and other attractions inside the fairs. For the price of admission, guests could spend the whole day exploring the various buildings, have fun at the Chinese village, eat at the restaurants, perhaps see some celebrities of the day, and generally be amazed at the prowess that had built the fair. The fairs were meant to amaze all who came through them; however, they were meant to convey more than the simple

¹ Erik Larson, *the Devil in the White City*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 5.

shock and awe factor. They symbolized many important cultural, philosophical, and scientific movements of the nineteenth century. These movements all found a physical realization at the fairs where ideas such as Darwinism, empire-building, and technological advancement came together.

The driving thrust of many of the fairs was the municipal competition amongst cities for the privilege to hold a fair. The city where the world's fair was held was to be the true recipient of the pecuniary and economic benefits brought about because of the fair. Cities would compete for different exhibitions. There existed at this time a great competition among emerging cities for business, people, and recognition, all of which brought in revenue. City pride was strong, and individual cities wanted to be known as the biggest, most advanced, and most progressive. Hosting a world's fair brought a great deal of attention to the city. One of the biggest rivalries at this time was between New York and Chicago; both competed to be designated the host of the Columbian Exhibition. The businessmen of each city fought hard for the right to hold the exhibition. This contest pitted such men as George Pullman from Chicago against Cornelius Vanderbilt and J. P. Morgan from New York. The tough talk of Chicago Fair is what originally prompted New York editor Charles Anderson Dana to call Chicago "the Windy City."²

The attention that a city would receive helped to stimulate its growth. The prospect of increased growth was another reason cities fought one another for the exhibitions. The fairs would attract thousands, perhaps millions, of visitors to the city, and many of these people at the end of their stay would return home and write about their travels. If they liked what they saw, they would write good reviews of the town and attract more visitors. The fair was also a great opportunity to attract business into the city. Businessmen who visited the city brought with them potential investment opportunities and new development plans. The money spent at the fair

² Ibid, 14.

boosted the local economy. Restaurants and hotels would all profit from the tourism encouraged by a fair. The money spent by visitors would go back into these local businesses and into the local economy thereby profiting the city. The United States Centennial Commission which reported on the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 estimated that for each visitor who went through the exhibition \$4.50 was put into the local economy.³

The fairs were meant to showcase the progress and achievements of the white race. These fairs were essentially a white enterprise. They were held by predominantly white countries, such as the U.S., France, and Great Britain, and were meant to be the ultimate symbol of the achievements of European and white American culture. Other cultures, when brought in, were mainly used as side attractions. They were not given equal representation or treated as equals. One purpose of all these fairs, whether they were in London, Berlin, Philadelphia, Paris, or Chicago, was to promote the superiority of white culture, technology, and science. The huge scope of the fairs proclaimed a clear message, white progress must march on. This left little room for other races outside of the dominant white American/European race. Historian Robert Rydell believed that “for the directors of the fairs, progress was synonymous with America’s material growth and economic expansion, which in turn was predicted on the subordination of nonwhite people.”⁴ For European countries progress and economic expansion meant obtaining colonies and the subjugation of those people living in the colonized lands. The importance of the colonies was advertised in European fairs. For the United States, late to the world colonization game, this meant in a sense “colonizing” the people of color living within its borders. The most obvious example is the subjugation of Native Americans during the second half of the nineteenth century. However, African Americans were victims as well of this type of subordination.

³Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 42.

⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

This question of how to deal with race would confound the creators of Nashville's Tennessee Centennial. There were many predecessors to the Tennessee Centennial, however, that had an important impact on the fair. The world's fair movement can be traced back to the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London. This was the brainchild of Prince Albert, the husband of the long-reigning monarch of England, Queen Victoria. This fair set the tone for the fairs that would follow. Science and knowledge were displayed as the key components of the success of Europe. A *New York Times* article claimed that the fair "gauged the distance from the no-culture of savage life to the highest reaches of civilization."⁵ Civilization was reached by those of the white race while "savage life" was deemed to have "no-culture." The first of its kind, the London Exhibition was truly the grandfather of the fairs that would follow; however, its size would be matched and surpassed many times during the coming years as cities sought to outdo London and each other over and over again.

In 1889 Paris held the Exposition Universelle to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the great French Revolution. It was the grandest fair until that point and captured the imagination of the world. One of the greatest symbols of Paris emerged from this world's fair, the Eiffel Tower. This fair also established the colonial villages which would become staples in the fairs that followed. Upon its closing it was deemed to be so awe-inspiring that its splendor would never be surpassed. However, the men of Chicago were up to the task.

The fair that set the bar the highest for the Nashville fair builders was the Chicago Columbian Exhibition of 1893. It was truly a wonder of its time. 27,529,400 people went through its gates.⁶ The author of a popular book on the fair, *The Devil in the White City*, Erik Larson wrote that the fair was "a single, magical event, one largely fallen from modern

⁵ "What Great Exhibitions Teach," *New York Times*, 1853.

⁶Rydell, 40.

recollection but that in its time was considered to possess a transformative power nearly equal to that of the Civil War.”⁷ It was the Chicago World’s Fair more than any other that the creators of the Tennessee Centennial would attempt to emulate. At the time it was considered the ultimate pinnacle of man’s brilliance and achievement. The fair grounds were known as the White City; this was due to the white alabaster buildings, but it was also a name that reflected the cleanliness of the grounds and overall pristine nature of the fair. It represented what many thought a city should be and was partly responsible for the city beautiful movement that swept the nation. After the success of the Eiffel Tower at the Paris Exhibition, the creators of the Chicago world’s fair wanted to build something that would best the Tower. Many plans were tried and scratched, but what eventually became the most enduring symbol of the fair was the Ferris wheel. The original Ferris wheel was built for the Chicago World’s Fair, but it has been copied thousands of times.

The Columbian Exposition also built upon the idea of colonial villages that were so popular during the Paris Exposition. The Midway Plaisance of Chicago was meant to be the fun, amusement part of the fair; however, there was a definite racial component involved in the creation and display of the Midway Plaisance. Evolutionary principles played a part in the Midway where the most basic of human civilizations, mainly African and Native American, were located farthest from the White City. As one moved closer to the city, one encountered more civilized cultures, first Middle Eastern and Asian followed by Teutonic. Rydell argues that the most important heritage left by the Midway was its living representation of evolution.⁸ The contrast between the Midway and the White City was inescapable. The city with its pristine sidewalks, alabaster buildings, and all-around cleanliness opposed nearly in every way the dirty, messy, crowded, and smelly Midway Plaisance. Rydell quotes a young Miss Berry, a character

⁷ Larson, xi.

⁸ Rydell, 64.

from a contemporary novel at the time, who says that upon leaving the Midway “you’ve passed out o’ the darkness and into light.”⁹

The world’s fairs in the South would build upon this rich tradition. The cities of the South would build world’s fairs for all of the same reasons that northern and European cities would build them. Southern cities were competing against one another in a race to see which city would emerge as the Chicago of the South. Atlanta, Charleston, New Orleans, and Nashville all held large fairs during the latter half of the nineteenth century. They would build on the ideas of the previous fairs but would put a Southern spin on them. These southern fairs would show the progress made in the post- Civil War era and put on display the many resources of the South.

They would also encounter a new problem: how to handle what Robert Rydell calls “Negro question.”¹⁰ The northern fairs had largely ignored African Americans. For example, at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition blacks were almost completely absent from the displays of the fair. There was simply no room for them, nor was there present among whites a desire to make room for African American exhibits. The South could not ignore the problem like the North, however. Thirty years before a bloody civil war had been fought to end slavery in the United States and thousands of men had died. The South was also not at liberty to evade the situation like the North simply because African Americans were present in such greater numbers in the South. African Americans had to be given a voice at the fairs, but the question remained how to do this without granting them too much freedom to do and say what they pleased.

The historiography on world’s fairs is large and varied. Robert Rydell is one of the premiere historians on the subject and has written several secondary sources on world’s fairs. For the most part, the literature seeks to define world’s fairs as an experiment in promoting the

⁹ Ibid, 67.

¹⁰ Ibid, 74.

superiority of European culture, which they certainly were. They were the symbol of their time because they supported the ideas of colonization, empire building, and came to represent the superiority of one culture over another. Little has been written on the Tennessee Centennial directly. It is often discussed in larger works on the history of Nashville, such as Don Doyle's work or in Bobby Lovett's African American history of Nashville. This study will seek to show how the Centennial fits into the larger pattern of world's fairs at the time. This will be done through the use of primary sources such as newspapers like the *Nashville American* and *Nashville Banner* as well as other publications at the time of the fair.

The study will contribute to the existing historiography by describing not only the viewpoint of prominent, white Nashville citizens, but also the thoughts and views of the African American community. African Americans constituted a group that was considered inferior to white Americans/Europeans. By using primary sources such as the papers, letters, and speeches of James Napier at the Fisk Archives, this study will hopefully provide a voice for those who were underrepresented at the fair.

The Paradox of Progress

The End of the Civil War and the Fallacy of Progress

On April 9, 1865, General Lee surrendered the Confederate forces at Appomattox Court House in Virginia. This marked the end of a long and bloody struggle between the Southern and Northern United States over the question of slavery. Nashville was a southern city caught up in this tumultuous war. Tennessee seceded from the Union, and as the capital Nashville became a Confederate city. It would not remain one for very long, however. In 1862 Nashville became the first major Confederate city to fall to Union forces. While this brought certain hardships upon Nashville, it also brought many benefits. Nashville never felt the full brunt of violent warfare like another southern city, Atlanta. Also, the occupation of Union forces helped business in Nashville, particularly those businesses that produced military necessities. Railroads also grew as a result of Union occupation, especially the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. After the war, Nashville's place as an important southern city continued to grow as the power of the older port cities like Charleston and New Orleans faded. Railroads grew by leaps and bounds after the Civil War. In 1860 there were fewer than 10,000 miles of track, but by 1900 60,000 miles of track extended across the South.¹¹

This chapter will explore two key developments that were simultaneously occurring during the post-war period. The South at this time was a paradox. One side of the story was the forward march of progress. Progress is a rather ambiguous term as it has several connotations when one hears it. Progress in this thesis is defined by the desire of many in the New South to transform the South from its backward state into something more modern. Modernity was often equated with "the coming of industry, increasing urbanization, and the growing importance of a

¹¹ Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 9.

new middle class made up of business and professional elements.”¹² The South was hoping to embrace industry and technology and other concepts of modernity. In short it hoped to “catch up” to its northern neighbors. It is important to note that this did not necessarily mean the complete denial of everything “southern,” but a southern way towards progress.

Nashville was no exception to this southern notion of progress. The city prided itself on being one of the up-and-coming cities in the South. Nashville became a commercial center because several important railroad lines, like the Nashville, Chattanooga, St. Louis Railway, ran through it. Nashville, along with several other southern cities, was one of the first cities in the country to have electric street railways. In 1880 the city held an exhibition and had to import all the technology needed to run electric lights in the town, and it prided itself on trying to keep to the forefront of technology.¹³

This mindset of urbanization and industrialization created a new group of elites in the South. This generation of “new men,” as Don Doyle refers to them, had different goals in mind for the South than men of the antebellum period. These were business men who sought to emulate the paradigms of success and wealth of the North and West, men such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and Andrew Carnegie. First and foremost on their minds were the investment of northern capital in the South and the growth of business, businesses which they would then control and profit from. In Nashville at the time of the Centennial included among the ranks of these new men were J.W. Thomas and Eugene Castner Lewis, who would become the President of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition and the director-general respectively.

While the South was pursuing progress and economic expansion, socially the land was continuing to struggle with its race problem. The Emancipation Proclamation signed into law by

¹² Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xv.

¹³ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73.

President Lincoln had freed the black slaves from slavery; however, it soon became apparent that this did not free them from the opinions and attitudes of the white majority. This was the paradox of the post-war South. It was a land that marginalized and oppressed its African American minority but, at the same time, dreamed of creating a better South. While this was the age of new technology and business expansion, it was also the age of Jim Crow. Blacks did not have the same opportunities as whites and were often the subjects of white violence. The rise of industry in the South was contemporaneous with the rise of the KKK. This chapter will also discuss the inequalities that blacks faced on a day-to-day basis, and how the idea of southern progress at this time did not extend into the social realm.

In this racially divided time it was decided to hold a world's fair in Tennessee to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Tennessee's joining the Union. This fair, while driven by the forces of progress and development, was also a response to the call for renewal of state pride. The fair placed a strong emphasis on the history of Tennessee and the ancestors of the modern state and their sacrifices. However, despite the claims of motivation from patriotism and pride, it was the desire to "get ahead" that really brought the fair to life. Patriotism would not have paid the bills. The true driving force behind the fair was the desire to showcase the success, modernity, and advancement of the South and in particular the city of Nashville. Nashville and various populous Tennessee cities were competing with other southern cities for northern capital and investment, for wealth, for railroads, for people, and for other prestigious symbols of the "Gilded Age." When Douglas Anderson first proposed the Tennessee Centennial in his letter to *The Chattanooga Times* on August 10, 1892, he said that along with increasing patriotism and state pride, a world's fair would provide a pecuniary benefit to the state, attract visitors, and

sponsor competition among the large Tennessee cities over the responsibility to host the fair.¹⁴ Dr. Robert E. Corlew wrote that “the Exposition was truly Tennessee’s greatest contribution to the gilded age.”

With an emphasis both on progress and state pride where were African Americans supposed to fit into this picture? This was the dilemma of the “Negro question.” The majority of the country’s African Americans still lived in the South and the question was how where they supposed to be showcased and displayed in the southern world’s fairs. They could not be ignored. Also, the South was still struggling with its racial image over forty years after the end of the Civil War. Racism and the belief in the inferiority of African Americans was still a widely held dogma of white southerners. There was much done in the South to hurt their prospects. Blacks suffered from substandard housing, poor education, lynching, poverty, and a general lack of hope for social advancement. It soon was realized, especially after the Atlanta Cotton Exposition, that the Tennessee Centennial would have to address these issues.

Progress in a Southern Way

In 1865 at the end of the Civil War the South’s economy had been dependent upon the plantation system for over a century. The old southern plantation system, for all the notions of tranquility and gentility associated with it, hindered the economy and kept the South from truly growing. One of the most noticeable effects this had on the South was the lack of urbanization it caused. A few port cities like Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans became large urban centers because of their connection to the water and overseas trade; however, most of the South remained largely rural and undeveloped. Cities in the North were growing every year due to

¹⁴ The largest cities in the state of Tennessee at this time were Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Columbia, and Jackson.

immigration and industrialization as people flooded into the urban centers looking for jobs. The plantation class only depended upon a few large port cities to trade sugar, cotton, or tobacco, and then they could retreat to their little kingdoms where they had absolute control over their subjects.

The poor farmers who did not own plantations (the majority of southerners) lived in rural areas and did not participate in a large market economy. They were self-sufficient farmers and laborers who lived off of what they planted. They had no use for towns and cities to process, manufacture, or ship what they grew.¹⁵ The prevalence of slavery also meant that there was a large portion of the population in the South that could not participate in the economy.¹⁶ Chained to their masters and lacking the freedom to control their own movement and actions, blacks worked without payment and without hope of future prospects. The slaves were forced to stay on the plantations, farms, and fields that they spend their lives working on. As a result, there was no African American movement into the cities except by the small minority of free blacks. These factors contributed to a very slow urban growth rate in the nineteenth century. It was not until the 1880s that the South finally had over 10% of its population living in cities.¹⁷

The growth of cities during the post Civil War era truly helped the South enter into the modern era. The cities were the vanguard of New South. They were the homes of southern industrialism and progress. Every city wanted to promote its image as new, modern, and industrializing. Telling of this is the header for all letters from the Knoxville Centennial Commissioners which stated:

We claim for our city that it is progressive, without unhealthy speculation, and conservative, yet abreast of municipal progress among the cities of the Union. Our people are enlisted in the onward and

¹⁵ *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

triumphant march of the “New South,” and they hail the era of industrial advancement among the Southern people, and welcome good citizens from all sections of the republic.

The South saw a rise in business, industry, and population; all of which helped southern cities to grow during the second half of the nineteenth century. In fact, industry actually grew faster in the era of the New South than it had in New England during the industrial period fifty years prior.¹⁸ Don Doyle provides many reasons for why cities grew so rapidly during this time. One was the emancipation of the slaves. The newly freed African Americans for the first time entered the market system as contributors rather than as slaves. An instrumental reason for the growth of cities, like Nashville, during this time was the expansion of the railroads. This more than anything ended the port cities’ monopoly on trade. Inland towns could now be important trade centers.¹⁹

People came to the cities looking for opportunities that simply did not exist in the countryside. During this time in the North, cities like New York were experiencing growth due to immigrant influx. Immigrants from Europe were pouring off the boats looking for opportunities in the New World. Southern cities did not experience this same immigrant influx; however, people from the countryside came to the cities and towns of the South looking for many of the same opportunities and advantages as the immigrants from abroad. The countryside offered little opportunity for an enterprising young man in the late nineteenth century, but cities and towns provided a greater chance for education and for social upward mobility. The cities were home to the professional class of doctors, lawyers, bankers, etc. For a young white male seeking a chance to escape farm life, the city was a land of advancement and opportunity.

¹⁸ Ayers, 22.

¹⁹ *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 8-9.

A Vanderbilt Professor around the turn of the century said that “the most capable business men, lawyers, doctors, and preachers are practically all leaving the country for the town and city. The city is more and more setting the pace of and dominating Southern life and Southern thought.”²⁰ African Americans also found opportunities in the cities that were not available to them in the country. Young black men, like their white counterparts, found themselves migrating to the city looking for jobs and a better standard of living. Cities offered a chance for education that often was missing in the country. In the country life was run by agricultural cycles, and parents often would be forced to take their children out of school after only a short while because they were needed in the fields.²¹

The growth of cities coincided with the rise of business and industry in the South. Before the Civil War the South had not experienced industrialization on the same scale as the North. Again, the dominant plantation and agricultural society stopped the South from industrializing. However, in the years following the Civil War the South became increasingly industrialized. Nashville was an example of a city caught up in the fever of post-war industrialization. Various industries grew and expanded in the Nashville area, such as the meat processing, timber, coal and iron, and cotton textile industries. Because of industrialization, the wholesale and retail grocery market grew as well. In 1880 local flour mills produced \$1.5 million worth of flour, but by 1910 produced \$6 million. Nashville also became one of the largest publishing centers in the South. The large evangelical churches of the South required hymnals, bibles, and other religious texts. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, of Nashville had established a publishing industry back in 1854, but by 1890 its publications were sent out to 1.2 million subscribers.²²

²⁰ Grantham, 5.

²¹ Ayers, 68.

²² Don H. Doyle, *Nashville in the New South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 45-49.

The new cities, businesses, and industries in the New South also brought about the rise of what Don Doyle referred to as “new men.” These men were not tied to the old ideas and ways of the South; they dreamed of a new land that would not be dependent on the agricultural plantation system that had for so long plagued the South. In its stead they wanted to see a new kind of South, one devoted to the gods of business, wealth, and urbanism instead of cotton, slavery, and the plantation. These were the men of the cities of the New South, as the countryside was still trapped in economic and rural stagnation.²³ For example, in the country cotton still remained the dominant crop; it was one of the few crops that the South could grow without competition in the market from other sectors of the country. There was no market for products like flour or corn which found their way into local markets from out west.²⁴ However, this new elite business class emerging from the cities truly helped to create and shape a New South.²⁵ They had no problem with northern capital and investment. They learned to accept outsiders and were willing to work with northern businessmen in order to bring the South into the modern industrial era.²⁶

The South was participating in a much broader, overarching theme of the late nineteenth century. America must take its place beside European countries like Great Britain and Germany as one of the great industrialized countries of the world. Mark Twain satirized this age when he called it the “Gilded Age,” and he criticized America’s zealous and fanatical lust for wealth and prosperity. Everywhere, not just in the South, the old elite class was decaying as the new titans of industry prospered. Men like Andrew Carnegie, J.D. Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt were becoming household names. They were superstars, the dominant players on the business stage.

²³ Ayers, 198.

²⁴ Ibid, 187.

²⁵ *New Men, New Cities, New South*, xvi.

²⁶ Ibid, 91.

Their success only furthered the drive to increase industrialization at lightning speed. The South had its own men who sought success and wealth in the name of the Gilded Age.

The Paradox of Progress and Prosperity

As industry, population, business, and wealth were all growing in the South so too was racism, discrimination, social inequality, and poverty. The world of the South had become more and more hostile to blacks since the end of Reconstruction. Reconstruction sought to establish basic civil and political rights for African Americans after they had been freed. It was at this time that Congress passed the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, all of which granted rights to African Americans that had been denied to them as slaves. Voting, holding office, holding property, the right to marry, and many other basic freedoms were finally granted to them. Schools were built for African American children and illiteracy was greatly diminished. Blacks began to hold public office and were for the first time represented in Congress. All of these achievements began to erode after the compromise of 1877 in which Grover Cleveland basically bought his presidential election for the price of giving up control of the South. Reconstruction had ended and slowly the successes African Americans had made under it would be diminished.

During the time of the Centennial it was possible for an article in a Nashville newspaper titled "New Industries continue to spring up All over the South" to appear just a few days after "Negroes Reported Lynched near Greenville, Ala."²⁷ Racism and discrimination against African Americans was nothing new in the United States. Leon Litwack wrote in his work *Trouble in Mind*, "America was founded on white supremacy and the notion of black inferiority and black unfreedom."²⁸ Slavery had been a part of the United States since its conception and even much before that. The Emancipation Proclamation had given slaves their freedom, and Reconstruction

²⁷ *The Nashville American*, April 26 & 22, 1895.

²⁸ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xvi.

had promised to provide social and legal equality for African Americans. These promises had soon been relinquished in the reality of the post-war South.

African Americans came to realize as the nineteenth century wore on that the freedom of the post-war South was merely a shadow of what had originally been promised. African Americans were still relegated to the status of second-class citizens. Indeed, they were still considered less than human by many whites. The nation was spewing out the ideas of progress and economic growth while much of its citizenry was unable to benefit from this progress and growth. These ideas of the late nineteenth century meant white progress and economic growth. There were many ways in which blacks were kept outside of the system. According to Ida B. Wells, these efforts were an attempt to “keep the nigger down.”²⁹ Blacks were the victims of all different kinds of discrimination during this time period; however, because of the legal inequalities they faced, it was nearly impossible to bring about any real change.

Section 1 of the Fifteenth Amendment states that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It was ratified by Congress in February of 1870. It clearly gives African Americans the right to vote, which had so long been denied to them. This did not stop southern states from finding a way around suffrage for African Americans. For example, many states passed laws that made it impossible to vote if one was illiterate (which affected many African Americans). In her autobiography Ida B. Wells mentions the “Understanding Clause” of Mississippi which attacked African American’s eligibility to vote. This clause stipulated that only those who understood the clause when it was read to them were eligible to vote. Wells went on to say:

²⁹ Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 71.

That law was executed by the very white men who passed it. It was easy for them to decide that very few Negroes understood the clauses of the Constitution which they chose to read to them. Especially when they asked them to define the meaning of the ex post facto law. Of course they saw it that any white man, no matter how illiterate, understood the simple clause which was always read to him. In this way they thought they had gotten around mentioning race, color, or previous condition of servitude.³⁰

African Americans also faced an unjust court system in the South. The courts were extremely biased in favor of white plaintiffs and prejudiced against blacks seeking a just outcome. This especially became a problem in the case of lynching. Lynching was seen by many whites as a way to “discipline” African Americans and to protect white womanhood and childhood against the “moral monsters” of the Negro race.³¹ In the late nineteenth century lynching was occurring quite frequently in both the North and South (although mostly in the South). A Nashville newspaper, the *Nashville Banner*, attests to this fact. On June 3, 1892, an article appeared titled “Lynched in New York” with the subheading “A Negro Brute Strung up by a Mob of Infuriated Citizens.” That August there was another article titled “Hanged by a Mob” with the subheading “A Negro Lynched at Alamo Last Night for Attempted Rape.” October 14 saw the heading “Four Negroes Lynched” with the description “hanged and quartered and the bloody remains piled up and burned, they confessed their crime, they had been guilty of murder, arson, robbery, and rape.”³²

These were simply a few of the reported lynchings from one year alone. The stories told by these articles confirm Wells’ opinion. At the time lynching was seen as a method of justified punishment for those African Americans accused of the rape of a white women or of thievery or various other crimes. Many black males who were lynched were accused of the rape of a white

³⁰ Ibid, 38.

³¹ Ibid, 71.

³² *Nashville Banner*: June 3, August 27, October 14, 1892.

woman. As stated above, rape was not the only crime that could lead to lynching; interracial marriage and dating were seen by whites as criminal acts as well. The *Nashville American* had an article about a young black male from Birmingham who was shot for having an affair with a white girl in 1897, the year of the Tennessee Centennial.³³

While these lynchings were horrible, gruesome events, what made them even more tragic and possible was the inability of the African American communities to take any kind of action against this violence. The court system had no desire to punish any of the whites responsible for the lynchings. Many whites even saw the action of lynching as necessary protection against black crime and violence. On June 14, 1897, the *Nashville Banner* ran an article titled "Epidemic of Lynchings." The article described the call by the black community for stricter anti-lynching laws. Rev. J. Scott of the Zion Baptists Church of Nashville said, "Everything is against the Negro criminal. He is tried by a white jury, sentenced by a white Judge and hanged by a white Sheriff. All that the Negro asks is that the law (be allowed) to take its course."³⁴ Often the whites guilty of the lynching were not even afraid of retribution at all. Of the lynching of Sam Hose, Litwack said the people committing the act did not even wear masks because they were completely unafraid of being identified. In fact, many of the area's most prominent citizens were participators or witnessed the violent crime.³⁵ These lynchings were a symptom of the decline of racial equality and the blatant lack of legal rights African Americans had.

While blacks were considered undeserving of sufficient legal rights, they were also denied social equality as well. Many of the cultural traditions and customs that had been prevalent in the antebellum period remained in South after emancipation. One example was the fact that young black children had to learn how to "properly" speak to whites; whereas, there was

³³ "They Loaded Him With Lead," *The Nashville American*, March 16, 1897.

³⁴ *Nashville Banner*, June 14, 1897.

³⁵ Litwack, 281.

no reciprocal obligation for young white children.³⁶ Blacks throughout the South suffered from poorer housing and education. Everywhere the social inequalities were prevalent. In Nashville's Black Bottom, 1,800 African Americans lived in an area only encompassing one-quarter square mile. Black Bottom and other majority African American areas were huge contributors to Nashville's relatively high death rate at the time. Nine out of ten homes in and around the Reservoir and Trimble Bottom (both black residential areas) lacked indoor plumbing, had inadequate heating facilities, and were badly in need of repairs. In Trimble Bottom alone the number of infant death rates per 1,000 births was twice as high as in affluent white neighborhoods.³⁷

Black children were also the victims of an inadequate educational system. One problem was that blacks still made up the majority of the agricultural labor pool in the South. Once a child reached the age where he/she could enter this labor pool education became impossible.³⁸ One of the biggest impediments to black education in the South was the resentment of whites. It was thought by many whites that blacks did not need to learn in order to do the kind of jobs they were supposed to perform. In fact, many black parents chose not to send their children to school because "keeping a child out of school kept that child out of trouble."³⁹ A black child was less likely to be harassed by whites if he or she remained uneducated or at the appropriate level of education for blacks. What schools there were for black children also were primitive and sparse. For example, in Clayton County, Georgia, in 1902 there were 32 schools for 5,572 white schoolchildren, whereas, there were only 17 schools serving 4,026 blacks.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid, 35.

³⁷ James Summerville, "The City and the Slum: 'Black Bottom' in the Development of South Nashville," Tennessee Historical Quarterly, 183; 191.

³⁸ Litwack, 58.

³⁹ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 62.

Nashville's Own Exposition

Nashville was an up-and-coming city of the New South. Cities were the centers of the New South. The cities were the homes of southern progressivism and the centers of change and growth. Compelled by the success of Chicago and other southern world's fairs in cities such as New Orleans and Atlanta, Tennessee dreamed of putting its own successes on display. Herman Justi the official historian of the Centennial would write in his *Official History*, "Whatever motive may have inspired great expositions elsewhere, the one underlying and overshadowing motive of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition was pure patriotism."⁴¹

Douglas Anderson first proposed the idea in *The Chattanooga Times* on August 10, 1892 in a letter he wrote in to the paper. He wrote that Tennessee should be a part of the fair movement by making its own contribution in the form of a Tennessee Centennial in celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of Tennessee's statehood.⁴² The reasons he gave for the necessity of the fair were as follows. First, Tennesseans should revere the memory of their ancestors who sacrificed much to create the state. Second, he believed that Tennesseans were a progressive people dedicated to making their state the best it can be. Third, it would bring money into the city and the state. Fourth, it would help keep state pride alive. Fifth, the fair would attract visitors to the city and state. Sixth, it would help educate young people and the glories and wonders of Tennessee. And, finally, it would encourage a healthy competition between Tennessee cities for the opportunity to have the distinguished honor of hosting the event. The honor of hosting the Tennessee Centennial eventually went to Nashville.

When it was decided in the early 1890s to hold a Tennessee Centennial, it soon became obvious that it would be necessary to address what the "Negro question." There was an

⁴¹ Herman Justi, *The Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition* (Nashville: Press of Brandon Printing Co., 1898), 3.

⁴² *Ibid.* 13-14.

unmistakable difference in the way that blacks lived in the South versus whites. Problems such as lynching were as prevalent as ever. After the Atlanta Cotton Exposition of 1895 embraced the idea of a Negro Building, the idea of Nashville's own Negro Building began to be discussed. It was not immediately accepted. James Napier, the first director of the Negro Department in Nashville, fought for a building designated for African Americans. He resigned in 1896 partly because no decision was being made on a Negro Building. In his resignation letter to the Executive Committee, he purposefully asked why a decision had not been made regarding the building.⁴³ Napier's replacement, Richard Hill, and the Negro Department soon convinced the Executive Committee that there should be a Negro Building at the Tennessee Centennial.

Why was one man able to convince the Executive Committee to build a Negro Building and the other was not? The Executive Committee supported Hill because they found him more "accommodating" to their wishes and desires. Hill was the type of man who sought to appeal to whites and who would not rock the unstable pillar of race relations in Nashville. In Hill the white directors of the fair found a man willing to give in to their wishes and unwilling to fight for a Negro Building that would promote political and social equality. James Napier, on the other hand, was a man who believed in political equality for blacks. Here was a man willing to rock the boat and who would not easily concede to everything demanded of him by the white Executive Committee.

Grander and larger in scale than anything that had come before it; the Negro Building essentially ignored the more controversial race topics of the day such as lynching and voting rights. The building became a way for whites to include African Americans in the notion of "southern progress" but separately, and it also became a symbol of black acceptance of

⁴³ James Napier, Letter to the Executive Committee of the Tennessee Centennial, Fisk University Library Special Collections.

segregation and the status quo. Issues such as lynching, voting restriction, educational inequality, and others were glossed over in favor of exhibits that showed black successes since the end of the Civil War. The fair wanted to show how well the blacks were getting along in the South, instead of the reality of black poverty and inequality.

The Tennessee Centennial Takes Shape

A Centennial with a Question

May 1, 1897, was the opening day of the Tennessee Centennial. Visitors thronged in to see the various attractions, buildings, exhibits, and amusements, including a giant See-Saw, where from the top, one could see the whole fair as well as Nashville. President McKinley pushed a button in Washington D.C., and hundreds of miles away a cannon and an electric dynamo were set off. As Doyle says, "Nothing could have demonstrated quite so dramatically the new age of progress Tennessee set out to celebrate that day."⁴⁴ Construction had begun the year before on June 1, 1896, (the official date of the one hundredth anniversary of the entrance of Tennessee into the Union) with elaborate ceremonies and speeches commemorating the event. Brick by brick and stone by stone the Centennial began to take shape.

The Nashville American and *The Nashville Banner* were filled with stories concerning the building of the fair. Everyday Nashville citizens could find out the latest news of the progress of fair, which buildings were being constructed, or which cities were interested in being a part of the fair. On March 15, 1897, readers of the *Nashville American* were informed that "great progress" had been made in the Machinery Building. This building was of particular importance to Nashville because it would be the home of an exhibit of the Chattanooga Louisville railroad.⁴⁵ A few months prior, readers of the *Banner* would have learned that Cincinnati, one of the great cities of the North, wanted a place in Tennessee's fair. The *Banner* stated, "The great importance of the Tennessee Centennial is becoming as well understood there as it is here."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Nashville in the New South*, 144.

⁴⁵ "Great Progress Made in Machinery Building," *The Nashville American*, March 15, 1897.

⁴⁶ "Cincinnati All Right," *The Nashville Banner*, January 6, 1897.

The South was caught in a difficult situation. In a culture of fairs that was defined by the desire for “racial dominance” and “economic growth”⁴⁷ the South struggled to find its own voice amidst the crowd of great imperial and industrial powers. The South was unique in that it had the largest population of African Americans in the country. The white leaders of the South could not deal with African American representation the way the fairs in northern states had. Blacks had simply too great a presence in the South to be ignored. This combined with its less than clean record concerning African American rights and civil equality meant that it needed to do something different, something to show that African Americans in the South were making economic and cultural progress.

The solution to this dilemma came in the form of the Negro Building. There were several of them built in the various fairs throughout the South that served to help solve “the Negro question.” The first of these buildings was erected during the Atlanta fair of 1895. New Orleans had a “Colored Exhibit;” however, the scale and size of this exhibit paled in comparison to the show Atlanta created. The Atlanta exhibit in turn was not as grand as the Negro Building in Nashville. With each passing fair the South strove to outdo itself in terms of showcasing the success and progress of its “negroes.”

Were these buildings true paradigms of equality and progress or simply window dressing to try to appease northern whites? The truth is they were located somewhere in the middle between the exemplary and worthless. By creating these Negro Buildings and alongside them Negro Departments, the South was trying to show that it did not treat its African Americans with total hostility and antipathy. However, the promise of these buildings was never fulfilled. They became simply another version of segregation, this time with the added concept of white benevolent paternalism.

⁴⁷ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 8.

Don Doyle argues in *Nashville in the South* that progress was dependent upon the rise and success of the less fortunate, such as women, children, and blacks.⁴⁸ However, southern whites did not feel that their progress should be measured by the achievements of African Americans since slavery. Instead, their achievements should be separate, measured by a different standard than the progress of the white race. The Negro Building gracefully accomplished this feat by clearly defining the boundary between white and black, but at the same time met the need to show blacks in a positive light.

The Struggles of Creating the Centennial City

The fair was named the “Centennial City” after the Tennessee centennial it was built to celebrate. In 1894 Centennial City was granted its own charter from the Tennessee State Legislature,⁴⁹ and the fair actually was its own city complete with its own municipal government. Construction of the Centennial City began on June 1, 1896, the one hundredth anniversary of Tennessee entering the Union, on the grounds of what is today Centennial Park in Nashville. On this June day there was a large celebration commemorating the anniversary as well as marking the occasion of the start of construction.

Once Douglas Anderson sent his letter to *The Chattanooga Times* calling for a celebration of Tennessee’s statehood centennial, talk began surrounding this event; however, the fair itself was slow to come to fruition. One reason for this was the depression of the early 1890s which afflicted Nashville along with the rest of the country at this time. The depression in Nashville started with the Panic of 1893 which hurt banking in the city. Nashville had become an important banking center for the South; however, the Panic of 1893 caused a few small banks,

⁴⁸ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 146.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 146.

such as the Commerce National, to close.⁵⁰ The Panic was the first symptom of the severe depression that would follow. Architect Captain W. C. Smith argued that the depression was so severe that the times called for an event to help people forget about it.

“The financial depression and shrinkage in values in this city and throughout the country, which seem to have produced a condition of so much apathy and inactivity in commercial circles, suggests and demands that an organized effort be made to divert the attention of our own people, if possible, from the general depression, by setting on foot some enterprise that will interest them especially in behalf of our own State, and that will tend to enlist their aid and cooperation in furthering the interests of the city of Nashville in particular...”⁵¹

The depression of the early 1890s was not the only reason why construction for the fair was delayed. The idea for the Tennessee Centennial was proposed at a time when the South was at war with itself over whether or not progress was even a good thing for the South. The New South had arrived in the late nineteenth century with all of its industry and business but also with rapid change and unrest. Many men welcomed the change as a healthy divestiture from all that was old, antiquated, and unjust in the Old South. Henry Grady once said, “Try to live in the Sunshine. Men who stay in the shade always get mildewed.” There was a fear that the South would become “mildewed” if it did not modernize.

There existed another idea in the New South that saw the need for the South to reform and modernize, but believed that it should do so while still staying true to old values and traditions. Many men were not willing to accept progress if it meant abandoning the heritage of the Old South.⁵² According to William H. Nicholls, an economist, southern tradition constituted “the persistence of agrarian values, the rigidity of the social structure, the undemocratic political

⁵⁰ *Nashville in the New South*, 52.

⁵¹ Justi, 15.

⁵² Grantham, 421.

structure, the weakness of social responsibility, and conformity of thought and behavior.”⁵³ This was a group less inclined to favor social change because it coincided with a rise in instability.

In Nashville this debate surrounded the creation of the Centennial. Should the fair be homage to the past? Or, should it focus on the progress of the New South? The fair tried to appeal to both sides of the debate and present the South as a land of both progress and patriotism.⁵⁴ An interesting building, which came to be known as the History Building, arose from this debate. No other American world’s fair had housed a building specifically oriented towards showcasing the history of the state in which it was taking place.⁵⁵ Surrounding the fair was a unique aura of “pure patriotism”⁵⁶ in which Tennessee took pride in its history.

In spite of the depression and the questioning over the purpose of the fair, the idea of holding a Centennial would not leave the people of Tennessee. A General Committee was formed in February 1894 by the Commercial Club and the Board of Trade which included some of Nashville’s leading citizens, such as John W. Thomas and Herman Justi. From this General Committee also spawned a Centennial Company which sought to procure funds for the event as well as to augment local and state interest.⁵⁷ The idea really took shape after Tully Brown spoke to a meeting called by the Centennial Company in July 1895. He delivered a fiery speech in favor of the Centennial, calling on Tennessee to remember its state pride. His oration garnered much praise, and the speech (along with the fact that the Nashville City Council had just approved funds for the Centennial) created a renewed interest in the Tennessee Centennial. That night businessmen throughout the city pledged an additional \$12,680 in stock.⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid, 421.

⁵⁴ Rydell, 73.

⁵⁵ “The History Building O.K.,” *The Nashville American*, March 16, 1897.

⁵⁶ Justi, 3.

⁵⁷ Bruce G. Harvey, “World’s Fairs in a Southern Accent” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1998), 51-52.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 54.

The dream of creating the fair by the actual centennial year, 1896, was lost, and so it was decided that the fair would be pushed back one year. Money remained a problem throughout the period of construction, and at one point future gate receipts had to be mortgaged.⁵⁹ The majority of the Centennial City was constructed in the first half of 1897 with individual companies, cities, and specialty groups all lobbying for a place in the fair. The two main newspapers of the time, *The Nashville American* and *The Nashville Banner*, kept constant tabs on the progress of the buildings as they steadily rose out of the ground.

The Negro Building began construction on March 13, 1897, with a ceremonial lying of the cornerstone. According to the *American*, over 8,000 people were in attendance to watch construction begin.⁶⁰ The Negro Building was constructed in a Spanish renaissance style and was situated in a pleasing part of the fair overlooking Lake Watauga. It cost about \$12,300 to build.⁶¹ The construction of the Negro Building was followed closely by the papers with curiosity over its development high in Nashville. The Negro Building was a unique aspect of the fair; no other race was given such attention. Other ethnicities were given exhibits at the Vanity Fair, but these served more to amuse than to inform or educate. For example both the Mexican and Chinese Villages were located in the Vanity Fair. The Negro Exhibit, however, was not meant to be amusing but impressive and in the words of Herman Justi “imposing.” The Negro Building was not completed by May 1, and so the official opening date of the building was June 5, about a month after the gates opened for business at the fair.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid, 60.

⁶⁰ “Cornerstone of the Negro Building,” *The Nashville American*, March 14, 1897.

⁶¹ Justi, 198.

⁶² Ibid, 199.

The Negro Building and the Dilemma of the South

The Negro Building showcased black progress, black art, and black culture but separately from all things considered white or Anglo-Saxon. At the same time, the exhibit was looked at by whites almost as a parent looks at their children. A child is young, immature, and not as developed as the older more responsible adult. The child is in a completely different world than the parent; however, the parent still must check up on the child to assure that he or she is developing the way the parent wants. This metaphor can effectively describe one attitude whites had toward African Americans. The Negro Building was the perfect manifestation of this attitude. Historian Bobby Lovett calls this belief “racial accommodationism” in which both whites and blacks had to make accommodations for each other to get what they want. Blacks had to concede to segregation and white supremacy in exchange for some benefits and concessions. Lovett claims that the Negro Building at the Tennessee Centennial was “racial accommodationism” put into practice.⁶³

Upon the end of Reconstruction, Nashville, like other areas in the South, experienced a slow decline of societal and legal equality. For example between the years 1885 to 1951 no African Americans held office in the city.⁶⁴ In the 1880s there had been a brief attempt at non-prejudicial biracial politics. A group of reformist Democrats took control of the city during the early 1880s, and they passed reform legislation benefitting African Americans. One such law created an all black fire company in east Nashville; many of the laws were geared towards reforming schools and education for African Americans. However, the reform- Democrats were experiencing two different gravitational pulls: trying to maintain black votes while also trying to keep the support of non-reformist Democrats. Doyle states, “The reformers were caught in the

⁶³ Bobby Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville* (Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 235.

⁶⁴ *Nashville in the New South*, 141.

difficult position of trying to award sufficient political favor to maintain black support without alienating Democrats, who out of racism and partisan antipathy, resented a close alliance with black Republicans.”⁶⁵ In 1885 when the big political boss, Thomas Kercheval, again won the mayoral position, those reform-minded Democrats ended their brief attempt at changing the political structure of Nashville. This turn away from reform meant that white dominance would not be questioned again in Nashville for a long time.

In this hostile atmosphere African Americans began lobbying for a Negro Building in the Centennial and a Negro Committee to head it. W.T. Davis and J.L.S. Travis spoke in front of the State Educational Conference of Southern Teachers in June 1895 calling for an exhibit blacks could claim as their own.⁶⁶ The Cotton Exposition in Atlanta had a Negro Building, providing an example of what African Americans could accomplish at a southern fair. The great African American orator and leader Booker T. Washington had even been invited to speak at the opening ceremony. Blacks in Nashville felt compelled to achieve something of this stature for themselves. Members of the executive committee agreed early on to have a Negro Department; however, the department would be subordinate to the official executive committee on all things.

The first head of the department was James Napier, a prominent African American of Nashville.⁶⁷ He was forced to resign on account of his ill health, although Lovett argues, rightly, that the true reason for his resignation was the fact that he could not get the executive committee to approve plans for a Negro Building.⁶⁸ In his letter of resignation to the executive committee, Napier stated, “We are confronted on every hand at home and abroad by the inquiry: If you are to have a Department, why has not the plan for your building been accepted? Why has not the

⁶⁵ *Nashville in the New South*, 138-139

⁶⁶ Harvey, 321.

⁶⁷ Justi, 193.

⁶⁸ Lovett, 235-236.

erection of your building been commenced?”⁶⁹ In a show of power, after Napier’s resignation, the executive committee selected the much more accommodationist Richard Hill as the new head of the department. The Executive Committee was to have complete control over the Negro Building and its committee. The Negro Department was not even allowed to pick its own members or leadership.

In true paternalistic fashion the executive committee chose to surround itself with blacks who would not contradict or go against the desires of the whites, like Richard Hill the second director of the Negro Department. In particular this meant supporting the segregationist aspects of the fair without question and acknowledging the paternalistic and watchful eye of the white community. Justi claims that the main reason for even having a Negro Department and a Negro Building was so that “we” (being the white race to which Justi belonged) could “measure their strides and determine their progress.”⁷⁰ Those African Americans chosen to be in the Negro Department or to speak at the Centennial believed in or at least pretended to believe in white paternalism and segregation. Hill gave a speech on March 13, 1897, the day that cornerstone of the Negro Building was laid. He stated that it would be the “everlasting shame” of the African American race if they failed to create a worthy building. “Everything that could be done for us has been done.” In this speech he acknowledged the benevolence of the white race in providing the necessary tools needed to create the building.

Charles Anderson, who gave the principal speech on the opening day of the Negro Building, stated his belief in the limitations of African Americans. He said that as a race they have much more to do and even acknowledged in an indirect way that they had accomplished very little so far. He tried to justify this lack of progress, however, by saying that African

⁶⁹ James Napier, Letter to the Executive Committee, Fisk University Library Special Collections.

⁷⁰ Justi, 193.

Americans had simply not had enough time compared with the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon races for they had only been free for thirty years. He concluded his speech with the remark that hopefully one day “the negro shall take his place by the side of the other great races of men.”⁷¹ Major J.W. Thomas echoed these sentiments in an address he gave about the Centennial. He stated that African Americans deserved white “sympathy” for their plight and co-operation in all their endeavors to advance themselves and to further their progress.⁷²

The message clearly given by these men was that the black race was inferior, but hopefully one day the race can achieve a higher level of civilization under the guidance and tutelage of the white race. As Major John McCann, a white member of the Tennessee Centennial management team, worded in his speech on March 13, 1897, blacks had only just reached the “first grand step in the scale of human progress.”⁷³ They were on the scale, however, and the Negro Building was meant to show the successes of the race since its release from the bonds of slavery. Contributions from such schools as Tuskegee and Fisk increased the prestige of the exhibit. The image presented by the building was one of prosperity and progress; also the speeches given in its honor prayed for mutual respect among the races and expressed a longing for the day when the African American race could take its place among the great civilizations of the world. The white south was made out to be a kind and generous parent always looking out for its tender footed child. This idyllic image was a fallacy; African Americans lived in an increasingly hostile South confronted with white violence, lack of suffrage, poor education, and other social problems that kept the dream of equality out of reach.

⁷¹ Ibid, 196; 200-201.

⁷² The Nashville Banner, “Address by Major J.W. Thomas,” August 14, 1886.

⁷³ Ibid, 196.

“Potemkin Villages” in the South

By the time of the Tennessee Centennial the Civil War had been over for thirty-two years, and the wounds that had run so deep a generation before were nearly healed. A man named Frank S. Colburn from the North had sent a letter to the *Nashville American* expressing his dismay that he would not be able to attend the Centennial because he was abroad. The fair, he believed, would be a wonderful success for the city of Nashville and the state of Tennessee, and he expressed his love for his brethren in the South. Mr. Colburn included an original poem in his letter appropriately titled “Union of the Blue and Gray.”

Years have gone, the clouds have rifted,
 Light and love have come at last;
 Pride and anger both have drifted
 On the chaos of the past.
 Once their homes and hopes defending,
 Brothers met in bitter fray;
 Now this sweet and glorious ending-
 Union of the blue and gray.

Let us not dispute the laurel,
 Lovers only know the bliss
 That results from just the quarrel,
 Then the make-up with a kiss.
 Peace, good will! No more contending;
 Hand in hand we stand today.
 Emblems brighter by the blending-
 Union of the blue and gray.⁷⁴

The past was just that, the past. But, the South still felt the need to try and hide the truth about its race relations. The truth was not really known in the North or abroad according to Ida B. Wells. She stated in her autobiography, “Before leaving the South I had often wondered at the silence of the North. I had concluded it was because they did not know the facts, and had accepted the southern white man’s reason for lynching and burning human beings in this

⁷⁴ *Nashville American*, “Around the World He Walks in Vain,” March 15, 1897.

nineteenth century of civilization.”⁷⁵ Northern whites were seduced by the white media of the South. The inequalities of the South, including lynching, were blamed on the immorality of the black race, particularly black men who were described as the “despoilers of white womanhood and childhood.”⁷⁶ The South was very interested in maintaining this opinion inside the North; northern capital was extremely important to the continued development of southern industry and business. If the South again became the land of prejudice, inequality, backwardness, discrimination, and every other negative description possible, northern support and investment could be threatened.

The Negro Building in Nashville became a way for the city to solve its public relations nightmare. Let’s prove to the world that things are not so bad for the Negro in the South; that he was respected and supported by his white compatriots. Robert Rydell states that the southern directors of the fairs formed Negro Departments and built Negro Buildings in order to show the compatibility of blacks and whites in the South.⁷⁷ The Negro Building was to be a beacon of the progress and success achieved by African Americans in the South; art, literature, and inventions filled the auditorium along with contributions from Tuskegee and other black universities. The building was to proclaim the achievements of African Americans and to discredit the idea that those members of the black race were treated as second class citizens and not granted full rights.

The building, filled to the brim with literature and art, contained no mention of the atrocity of lynching, the lack of voting rights, or the inequality of education that was ever present. Of course, it must be said that the purpose of holding an exposition was to “put one’s best foot forward.” The Exposition was not created to show the less seemly aspects of its municipality. However, the fact remains that a portion of the reality of African American life

⁷⁵ Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 77.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 71.

⁷⁷Rydell, 74.

was purposefully being omitted from the Negro Building. In a building designed to highlight African Americans in the South, not mentioning such truths as the lack of voting rights or the horrors of lynching seems a conspicuous absence. The Negro Building obscured the truth from the casual observer by the awesome display of African American successes and progress. This was one reason why many African Americans chose not to support Negro Buildings and exhibits, including African Americans in Nashville.

This act of hiding the truth by displaying to the world another reality is often referred to as a "Potemkin Village." These were supposedly villages, meant to create a façade of prosperous peasants and neat, organized towns, built by Gregory Potemkin to impress Catherine the Great during her tour of the Crimea.⁷⁸ "Potemkin villages" display a false reality and are often meant to hide a more sinister or complicated truth. Perhaps the most famous "Potemkin Village" was the Nazi concentration camp called Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt was a model camp which was shown to members of the Red Cross and other groups that came to inspect the rumors of Nazi terror. Theresienstadt projected an image of clean and hospitable surroundings with relatively happy inmates who were given generous freedoms. This fairy tale ignored the gas chambers, mass executions, and work camps that told the real story of Nazi oppression. A man who spent time in Theresienstadt wrote of his experience there, "Terezin was the worst hell of German hells because delusions and hope and macabre pretensions were nourished there....in Theresienstadt the prisoners were required to smile as if they were in a photographer's studio."⁷⁹

The phenomenon of the Negro Building was the South's own "Potemkin Village." Like Russian minister Potemkin trying to hide the harsh realities of peasant life or the Nazis trying to

⁷⁸ Thomas Seifrid, "Illusion and Its Workings in Modern Russian Culture," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 205, American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3086324>.

⁷⁹ Mirko Turma, *Memories of Theresienstadt*, *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 1976), 14, The MIT Press on behalf of the Performing Arts Journal, Inc. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3245031>.

conceal the truth about their death camps, the architects of the Tennessee Centennial sought to create an illusion of peace and prosperity for African Americans while leaving out the facts about what it means to be black in the South. A Negro Building consistent with the reality of inequality would have displayed the truth about white violence, education, and suffrage instead of sugar-coating these problems with a grand gesture aimed at awing and not educating. This tactic worked amongst whites who for the most part raised no objection to the building; however, it helped to fuel the debate amongst the African American community between two rival opinions on how to further the race.

African Americans Respond to the Fairs

The Debate amongst African Americans and Nashville

Many visitors acknowledged the Negro Building to be one of the most beautiful buildings in the whole fair.⁸⁰ It was built near Lake Watauga, a scenic spot for fair-goers. It was a large building that housed exhibits showcasing the progress of African Americans since the time of slavery. As Herman Justi stated in his *Official History*, the building was meant to be a way to check on the “industrial status” of African Americans in the South.⁸¹ As seen earlier, the Negro Building for the Executive Committee of the fair was a way to celebrate and promote the progress of the African American community while at the same time expounding the necessity of segregation.

Inside the Negro Building was a vast array of different types of exhibits. African American schools and universities, such as Fisk University, provided a great many of the exhibits. Other schools that contributed were Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, Roger Williams University, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and Central Tennessee College. There were many other displays besides those provided by schools; Tennessee counties contributed as well as cities and states. Many of the exhibits in the Negro Building actually won medals for best overall displays at the Centennial.⁸²

The Negro Building in Nashville was much more than just a collection of various exhibits and displays. It served as a symbol of the much larger debate occurring among African Americans throughout the country. Two different schools of thought emerged in the late

⁸⁰ Diane Davis, “Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition Building, Nashville (1897)” in *African American Architects A Biographical Dictionary 1865-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 400.

⁸¹ Herman Justi, *The Official History of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition* (Nashville: Press of Brandon Printing Co., 1898), 193.

⁸² Davis, 400-401.

nineteenth century about the path African Americans should take in order to achieve the desired equality with the whites of America. The Negro Building in Nashville was a victory for Booker T. Washington's accommodationist belief. The Negro Building was an acceptance by the Executive Committee of the Negro Department of the status quo. It is important to note that these leaders of the African American community were not opposed to equality, but they saw the need to promote a slow pace of change. And so, the Tennessee Centennial's Negro Building exemplified the accommodationist belief of the blacks of the South.

By the time of the Centennial, the South was becoming even more hostile to its black population. This increased radicalization was represented by men like James Vardaman, governor of Mississippi. He believed that the black man was unredeemable; the Negro was lazy and slothful and his place was as a farmhand and nothing else.⁸³ White violence grew during the years after Reconstruction. The extremism of the KKK and the epidemic of lynching assured that the white South remained hostile to its blacks. It was in this atmosphere that the black community was trying to figure out how to further the race. As mentioned above, the Negro Building exemplified one way trying to survive in the increasingly hostile South, accommodationism.

The man responsible for spearheading this belief was Booker T. Washington, known as the "Wizard of Tuskegee." He epitomized the "acceptance" belief of the black South, what Lovett had referred to as "accommodationism."⁸⁴ The belief glorified the industrial education of Tuskegee and deemphasized the need for suffrage and political equality. The key to respect was through economic success, for a man cannot ignore the language of money. The way to gain wealth and to accumulate money was through the work that the black man already knew; this

⁸³ David Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 2009), 156.

⁸⁴ Lovett, 235.

was essentially the work of the slaves: agriculture, domestic service, and labor. Washington solidified this belief with his Atlanta Speech at the Atlanta Exposition of 1895. In this speech he made clear his belief in economic achievement as the way to equality, but he also downplayed the role that politics would have in shaping the future of African Americans. The power of the ballot, which W.E.B. Du Bois would find so important, Washington considered to be a non-factor in determining the status of the southern Negro. Booker T. Washington was a giant in the African American world; however, he would have several prominent black critics who viewed his beliefs as self-deprecating.

The most prominent of Washington's critics was W.E.B. Du Bois. Raised in the North, Du Bois saw the South as an alien world until he came down to Fisk University in Nashville to study. Whereas Washington had proclaimed the superiority of industrial education like at institutions such as Tuskegee, Du Bois believed strongly in the importance of intellectual education. For Du Bois, change would come from those black men and women who represented the best of their society. These men and women came to be known as the "Talented Tenth." Washington's easy dismissal of intellectual education plagued Du Bois, and he consistently sought to provide a voice of opposition to Washington's seemingly dominant influence over African American thought. Booker T. Washington for Du Bois spoke about giving in to the way things were, about not defending the right to political or educational equality. Du Bois himself was a very educated man, and he disagreed with Washington's lack of belief in the importance of intellectual education.

In Nashville a small local version of this debate was occurring. Two men, both successive chairmen of the Negro Department of the Tennessee Centennial, represented, for the most part, the two sides of the Negro question. One was Richard Hill. The second director of the Negro

Department, he was the son of an old slave who was known amongst white families as "Uncle Jim Hill." He acquiesced to the demands of the whites of the Centennial Executive Committee and modeled the perfect specimen of a complaisant leader to the black community in Nashville.

On the other side was James C. Napier, a prominent black Nashville lawyer who was originally selected to be the head of the Negro Department. He was a friend of Booker T. Washington, but never found himself a believer in the ideas expounded by Washington. He resigned the commission of the Negro Department, and throughout his following years he would assert time and time again the importance of intellectual education and of political participation. The two represent how in one southern city there were many different opinions among an African American community about how best to secure the progress of their race. This debate among African Americans, the men who took part in it, and the role the Negro Building played will be the analysis of this chapter.

"Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are"

In trying to appease southern whites Washington has earned the title "The Great Accommodator." He understood the southern white man and knew how to play the game so as to achieve the goals he wanted for Tuskegee and blacks in the South. In his speeches and writings he never proposed anything too radical and sought to calm whites by arguing that segregation and political inequality should be temporarily accepted for the Negro since he had not achieved economic independence. He also always tended to acknowledge the contribution of whites in helping the blacks of the South. At the opening address of the Atlanta Exposition, Washington remembered to say, "We do not for a moment forget that our part in this exhibition would fall far

short of your expectations but for the constant help that has come to our educational life.”⁸⁵ He was acknowledging that without white help both “from the Southern states” and also “Northern philanthropists” the education of the southern Negro would not have been possible. The exhibits in the Negro Building in Atlanta could not have happened without white contributions.

There were essentially two parts of Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist belief: industrial education and the denial of political rights. These beliefs Washington would lay out in his great Atlanta Speech at the opening ceremony of the Atlanta world’s fair. The Executive Committee invited Washington to come and speak at the Tennessee Centennial as well. The speech he gave in Nashville served as a reminder to all those in the South of what he had said in Atlanta. In Nashville Washington would again argue that the promise of the southern Negro lay in the fields and factories, not in Congress.

Tuskegee was Booker T. Washington’s world. He was a king in this small corner of Alabama. Tuskegee also happened to be the most prominent example of industrial education for the black man. At Tuskegee students learned industrial and agricultural skills. These men would become the producers of iron, ore, and coal. They would become farmers and laborers, agriculturists and factory workers. These were the kind of jobs that Washington believed were necessary for the economic success of the masses of black men and women in the South. A place like Tuskegee taught these men and women how to perform their jobs to the best of their ability, taught them to use their skills, and to use their brains in order to best accomplish the task they have been given. In Nashville, speaking at the Emancipation Day of the Tennessee Centennial, Washington stated, “Industrial education is not meant to teach one how to work so much as to teach him how to make the forces of nature- horse power, steam, and electricity- work for him. It

⁸⁵ Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition Address”, September 18, 1895, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan. Vol. 3 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 584-87.

is the ignorant, unskilled man who toils from day to day with his hands, while the man with education and trained hands makes the forces of nature do work for him.”⁸⁶ Industrial education would bring about the prosperity that would in turn bring about the desired equality for blacks in the South. Washington believed that no one can ignore the man with money. He commented that no race throughout history that had achieved economic prosperity, whose members had become doctors, inventors, lawyers, and intellectuals, had been looked down upon as inferior.⁸⁷

Washington believed that African Americans must learn that might through industrial work is not shameful. In Atlanta he said, “There is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.”⁸⁸ Intellectualism is not necessary, at least not yet, for gaining respect and prosperity for the black man in the South. Professor W. H. Council of the State Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes was another proponent of this type of industrial education. Like Washington he did not find fault with intellectualism, which he equated with fields such as medicine, science, linguistics, or art and invention;⁸⁹ however, he believed that the Negro did not need it at this time. African Americans needed to learn to “smelt iron ore, build locomotives, ships, telescopes, microscopes, steam-engines of every class, all kinds of mechanical engineering, farming machinery and appliances, and do all work in glass, brass, gold, and silver.” Washington in his Nashville speech even went so far as to wish that after the war “some of the time spent in trying to go to Congress and making political speeches had been spent in becoming the leading real estate dealers, or carpenters, or in starting dairy farms and truck gardens.”⁹⁰

The second aspect of Washington’s accommodationism was his lack of support for the immediate political rights of African Americans. He denied the necessity of having political

⁸⁶ Herman Justi, *The Official History of the Tennessee Centennial* (Nashville: Press of Brandon Printing, 1898), 203.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ “The Atlanta Exposition Address”

⁸⁹ W. H. Council, Speech at the Tennessee Centennial.

⁹⁰ Justi, 203.

rights in order to solve the problems of the race. Again, industrial education would lead the way in helping blacks achieve economic prosperity and by extension the respect of the white race which has already achieved economic prosperity. Then political rights will follow for no one can ignore the power money brings. African Americans, he believed, were not ready for the responsibility of full suffrage which was being denied to them by many of the prejudicial laws of the South. He claimed in Nashville that “the mere fiat of law could not make a dependent man an independent man, could not make an ignorant voter an intelligent voter, could not make one citizen respect another.”⁹¹

The lack of political equality would mean the lack of a reliable way to express the grievances of the African American race. Without representatives in government, how is the race to make changes? Washington had an answer for this as well. The answer was to accept the status quo, and this was another reason why he had so many white supporters. He was not proposing radical ideas, revolution, or the overthrow of societal conventions; in fact, just the opposite, Washington believed in maintaining the status quo of the South. Segregation and other societal inequalities were alright for the Negro. He angered many blacks in the South when he essentially condoned segregation with his speech in Atlanta in 1895. The progress of the nation may depend on both the efforts of blacks and whites, but “in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers.”⁹²

Washington was not a political instigator. His speech in Atlanta (which Du Bois called the “Atlanta Compromise”) came to be known as the “cast down your bucket” speech because of the language which he used in order to condone the status quo. He was speaking to every African

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Atlanta Exposition Address”

American in the South when he gave the order to “cast down your bucket where you are.”⁹³ He told the black community that they must not seek refuge in a foreign land and that they must stay in the South and prosper for it is in the South that the black has a chance to achieve success in business and commercialism. However, the line can also be interpreted to mean accept the way things are. “Cast down your bucket” in the land of segregation, white violence, and inequality because if you achieve economic success things will get better.

Washington’s Great Opponent

Washington was a giant in the African American community; however, he was by no means the only black voice speaking out at this time. His great opponent was W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois disagreed with many of Washington’s facets of industrial education. In an obituary Du Bois wrote for Washington he declared, “We must lay on the soul of this man a heavy responsibility for the consummation of Negro disenfranchisement, the decline of the Negro college and public school and the firmer establishment of color caste in this land.”⁹⁴ Du Bois was an extremely educated man. Born in the North, he came down to Fisk University in Nashville to get his college degree. Afterwards he attended Harvard and also spent some time studying in Berlin where he met Max Weber among others. A man of extreme intellectual depth, he disagreed wholeheartedly with the lack of importance Washington put on education for the Negro that was not industrial. David Lewis, author of a Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Du Bois, wrote “When the Great Accommodator derided Latin and philosophy and French on platforms across the country, Du Bois felt mocked in the very center of his considerable self-significance.”⁹⁵

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 326.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 182.

Du Bois and Washington were not immediate antagonists. Du Bois was still a fairly young man during the 1890s and had not firmly established himself as a leader in the African American community. It was during his time in Philadelphia that he really began to fashion his central beliefs because it was here that he was writing his dissertation on the Philadelphia Negro. It was while writing this long and in-depth look into the lives of the black community of Philadelphia that he formed his ideas about race. If the African American was considered to be lazy, slothful, base, and problematic for society, the white community of Philadelphia (and others elsewhere) had made him this way. The race factor meant that blacks could not escape from their situation. Their race despite their accomplishments, intelligence, or success would always prevent them from achieving the full measure of their potential. This was not the fault of the black man but of those in the community that kept him down. Du Bois wrote, "How long can a city teach its black children that the road to success is to have a white face?"⁹⁶

After Philadelphia, Du Bois moved to Atlanta where he took a post at Atlanta University in 1897. Here his antagonism towards Booker T. Washington grew more substantial and defined. He realized that nothing regarding the situation of African Americans in the United States would change without a political impetus. After publishing *The Philadelphia Negro* Du Bois hoped that the truth would help to bring about change, but it did not. Lewis writes that Du Bois came to believe that "it was not enough to determine truth scientifically; it had to be implemented politically."⁹⁷ The two main points of Washington's belief system seemed wrong to Du Bois: education was not simply a way for African Americans to learn industrial and agricultural skills and blacks in America did not need to accept the status quo. Change could be brought about through education and through political means.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 147.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 162.

The core of Du Bois's belief system was his notion of the famous "Talented Tenth" of the African American race (of course Du Bois himself was a member of this Tenth). The "Talented Tenth" was the core elite of African Americans. They were the educated African Americans, like those who had graduated from Fisk with Du Bois, who were going to be responsible for the fate of African Americans. The key to producing this "Talented Tenth" was education and not only the kind proposed at Tuskegee, but education in languages, philosophy, law, and other academic fields. This education would allow them to lead African Americans. It was incomprehensible to deny equal rights and privileges to this "Talented Tenth" in Du Bois's mind.

Du Bois believed Washington was using education as a way to appease southern whites by proclaiming that the Negro did not need to have any education other than that essentially of his ancestors. Industrial and agricultural skills were all he needed to know. Du Bois did not see education as a way to appease whites, but as the cornerstone of the betterment of the race. Washington sold out true education in exchange for white tolerance in the face of hostility in the South.⁹⁸ This was Washington's Faustian bargain that was unacceptable to Du Bois. The displays of African Americans at the world's fairs, like in Nashville and Atlanta, were seen by Du Bois as a mark of the acceptance of the ideas of Washington. They were nothing more than the acceptance of the bucket where it was cast down.

The Debate in Nashville

Keeping the Status Quo

In 1897 the Negro Building of the Tennessee Centennial opened for visitors. It was the ultimate symbol of Booker T. Washington's beliefs. It promoted industrial education and the acceptance of the status quo. In control of the Negro Department of the fair was a man who was

⁹⁸ Ibid

a proponent of this Washingtonian system, Richard Hill. As stated earlier, Richard Hill took charge of the Negro Department for the Tennessee Centennial after James Napier resigned in 1896. Like Booker T. Washington, Hill was a man who did not seek to anger or displease the white majority in the South.

Richard Hill and the Negro Department that he had working for him were very agreeable to the desires and wishes of the Centennial Executive Committee. These were men who were willing to “cast down their buckets where they were.” Besides the men in the Negro Department, the men chosen to speak on behalf of the Negro Building all represented the accommodationist viewpoint, and their words helped to solidify the image of the Negro Building as the symbol of Booker T. Washington’s industrial education and acceptance of the status quo.

W.H. Council spoke at the laying of the cornerstone for the Negro Building. He was president of the Agricultural and Mechanical at Normal, Alabama, which was a school that, like Tuskegee, supported industrial education. In his speech in Nashville he did state that intellectualism and professionalism were needed for any race to achieve equality. However, these things were not what African Americans needed right now. Imperative to the future success and happiness of African Americans was industrial education. Imbedded in the speech was also a message of complacency. Council implored African Americans to not give in to violence and to wait for justice to come through the law. There was something almost sacrificial in the way that Council urged African Americans to avoid giving in to hate and violence. He stated that “it is better to be persecuted than to persecute.” God will judge all races one day, and African Americans must keep their hands untarnished.⁹⁹ He gave out a peaceful message and favored a world where African Americans were non-confrontational.

⁹⁹ Justi, 198.

Charles W. Anderson of New York was the principal speaker at the inauguration day of the Negro Building in Nashville. His speech, like Council's, boasted of the merits of industrial education. He believed that the hope of the black race relied on industry and the ability of African Americans to master it. Anderson surely appeased whites when he spoke of the work ahead for African Americans if they ever wanted to step onto the plane of great civilizations. He hoped that one day African Americans will take their place alongside other western civilizations of the world.¹⁰⁰

All the speakers also hint at the idea of progress by the efforts of the race alone. Council said, "The race must make itself."¹⁰¹ Richard Hill in his speech during the laying of the cornerstone felt the need to even claim that if the Negro Building fails it will be the fault of the Department and the African Americans of Nashville.¹⁰² This was condoning segregation, albeit in a round-about way. If the Negro Building was not a success, the fault alone lied with the African American community, for the building was separate. Conveniently, there was no mention that the architect of the Negro Building was a white man named Frederick Thompson.¹⁰³

Finding Fault with the Negro Building

James Napier was the original leader of the Negro Department. He was a prominent African American lawyer and was well-respected by both the African American and white communities of Nashville. It was Napier who originally fought for a separate Negro Building at the fair. After the department was established, it was not initially guaranteed that the fair would have a building, despite the success of the building in Atlanta. Napier resigned his position as

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 201.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 198.

¹⁰² Ibid, 196.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 198.

Chief of the Negro Department in 1896¹⁰⁴ calling for the Executive Committee to fund a Negro Building. He wrote in his resignation letter, “We are confronted on every hand at home and abroad by the inquiry: ‘If you are to have a Department, why has not the plan for your building been accepted?’”¹⁰⁵

Napier was something of a paradox. He was a friend of Booker T. Washington; however, his actions and letters made him seem more of a Du Bois man. Napier was clearly what Du Bois would have considered a member of the “Talented Tenth.” He was a college graduate and a successful lawyer in Nashville. Despite being a friend of the Washington, Napier often put himself on the other side of the argument. Napier resigned as head of the Negro Department in 1896, and we will never know how the building would have been different if he had not resigned. One thing was made clear, however, by Napier’s actions. He was not willing to simply accept the wishes and desires of the Executive Committee. He was willing to fight for what he deemed important for African Americans in Nashville.

In a letter dated July 1898 Napier said to Washington, “Your idea of the relations of the races in this country seems to be the popular one and takes well wherever it is expressed.”¹⁰⁶ Napier said “your idea,” not “our idea.” There was always a tendency in his speeches and writings to separate himself from Washington despite their personal friendship. In a speech on race relations he gave in 1900 Napier clearly stated Washington’s side of the argument: African Americans needed to acquire wealth in order to achieve equality. He called the work of Booker

¹⁰⁴ Lovett, 235

¹⁰⁵ James Napier, Letter to the Executive Committee of the Tennessee Centennial Committee, Fisk University Library Special Collections.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from James Napier, July 29, 1898, Booker T. Washington Papers, University of Illinois Press.

T. Washington and W.H. Council “masterful.” However, Napier went on to deny that this was the right way to achieve equality. According to Napier, “The Negro should surrender nothing.”¹⁰⁷

There were tensions amongst the African American community in Nashville regarding the Negro Building. President Cravath of Fisk visited Tuskegee University in March 1897 and wrote in an article that appeared in the *Nashville American* “when I reached Tuskegee last week the sentiment seemed quite strong against making an exhibit.” He went on to say that “they had heard of dissensions among the colored people of Nashville which seemed to endanger the success of the Negro Department.”¹⁰⁸ The black Nashville community was struggling whether or not to accept the Negro Department and its large, imposing Negro Building.

Finding the Middle Ground

Nashville was finding itself caught in the struggle amongst African Americans about how to better the race. Should they accept industrial education, segregation, and the status quo (the Booker T. Washington approach)? This meant accepting the Negro Building which stood for all of these things. Or, should they condemn the building and its accomodationist message? The answer proposed by Fisk University, which had an exhibit in the Negro Building, was why can we not have both? The Fisk University *Herald*, the school newspaper, was obsessed with this question of industrial education versus higher education. Fisk, the Alma Mater of W.E.B. Du Bois, however did not refer to industrial education as irrelevant, unimportant, or detrimental to the black race. Instead, the message given was one of mutual dependence by industrial and higher education. Of the Fifth Annual Tuskegee Negro Conference (which Fisk attended) the

¹⁰⁷ James Napier, Race Relations speech, 1900. Fisk University Library Special Collections.

¹⁰⁸ “The Beautiful Negro Building,” *The Nashville American*, March 7, 1897.

Herald wrote, “We see nothing in Industrial Education which is antagonistic to higher education, but we recognize their mutual dependence.”¹⁰⁹

Many articles in the *Herald* even lauded the idea of small changes and taking baby steps towards a better future. Eugene Harris wrote an article titled “A Hopeful Future in the Negro’s Progress” in which he argued that the greatest hindrance to the race came from within. He proposed that African Americans must seek to help the down-trodden of their race. These were the “rag-clad, husk-fed, unwashed disease breeding, immoral colored people” whose greatest crime against the race was their ignorance. Harris proclaimed that they could not even tell their left hand from their right. The message here was to focus on problems within the African American community first, before attempting to achieve political and social equality. The educated, successful and “far-sighted” man should not be concerned with “midnight lynchings” and “separate theatre galleries.”¹¹⁰ Booker T. Washington would have approved.

Naturally, the Tennessee Centennial became a matter of debate for Fisk students. The question of whether or not to support the Negro Department was actually a topic for a debate between Beta Kappa Beta and the Union Literary Societies of Fisk. The winning side of this debate was actually those opposed to supporting the department. The final conclusion was “that Negro departments in connection with Centennials and expositions should not be patronized.” Eventually, Fisk did come out in support of the Negro Building and the department that made it possible. Fisk had 2,000 feet of space in the Negro Building.¹¹¹ Anything that had the potential to better the race or to break down social barriers was seen as a positive thing by Fisk. The April 1897¹ edition of the *Herald* said, “We cannot overlook the injustices, [but] in the midst of these

¹⁰⁹ *The Fisk Herald*, March 1896, Vol. XV No. 5, 11. Fisk University Library Special Collections.

¹¹⁰ *The Fisk Herald*, March 1896, Vol. XV No. 5, 12.

¹¹¹ *The Fisk Herald*, March 1897, Vol. XVI No. 5, 15.

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.”¹¹²

The black media spin on the event for the most part seemed to be positive. Like Douglas Anderson, Fisk even lauded the patriotic spirit of the Centennial saying it will stimulate pride amongst Tennesseans as well as “material growth” and “prosperity.”¹¹³ In the *Nashville American* a letter written to Chief Richard Hill from a Mr. Wiley appeared in the March 10, 1897, edition. Mr. Wiley wrote of the duty that was placed upon African Americans because of the Centennial, a duty to “show what they have been doing, what they are doing, what they are going to do- to demonstrate by a magnificent display his value as a factor in the world’s civilization.”¹¹⁴

There was dissention among blacks in Nashville regarding the fair. Men like James Napier and those proponents of higher education and political and social equality struggled with the idea. As stated in Chapter 2, the Negro Building was a symbol of the accomodationist black South. It supported the status quo through its denial of the social and political problems of the day in favor of more appealing and less unpleasant themes. However, the Negro Building in Nashville was a big success. African Americans came out en masse to support the fair. On Negro Day the attendance reached 21,000 (which was a record for the fair) with 15,000 of those people being black.¹¹⁵

Nashville accepted the Negro Building and even Fisk, which was a premier site of higher education for African Americans in the country, chose not to come out against the fair. Fisk instead lauded the finding of a middle ground. According to Fisk, there was nothing wrong with having both higher education and industrial education. In fact, the two were mutually dependent

¹¹² *The Fisk Herald*, April 1897 Vol. XVI, No. 6, 3-4.

¹¹³ *The Fisk Herald*, Dec. 1895 Vol. XV, No. 2, 2.

¹¹⁴ *The Nashville American*, Letter from Mr. Wiley to Chief Hill, March 10, 1897.

¹¹⁵ *The Fisk Herald*, July 1897 Vol. XVI, No. 9, 2.

upon one another. Fisk's moderate attitude led to the acceptance of the fair which did promote the ideas of industrial education, segregation, and the maintaining of the status quo.

The Negro Building as a Symbol

The Negro Building of the Tennessee Centennial was a symbol of a large debate occurring amongst African Americans. How should African Americans embrace the new century? Booker T. Washington espoused industrial education compounded with slow but steady economic growth. But, W.E.B. Du Bois believed in the need to achieve political and total equality now. Industrial education was not enough. The Negro Building was caught in the crossfire of this debate; however, the all-white Executive Committee saw to it that the building would be an example of maintaining the status quo and ensuring the acceptance of segregation by the African American community.

The Negro Department that was in charge of the Negro Building was made up of men who did not want to stir up trouble. They were men who accepted the status quo and sought to appease their white counterparts on the Executive Committee. However, there were elements in Nashville that disapproved of the Negro Building based on the grounds that it denied certain key issues of African American rights. Based on the outcome of the debate at Fisk, clearly there must have been a portion of the student body there that did not approve of the Negro Building. However, the Negro Building assured a temporary victory for the Washington camp, but the time would come for those African Americans who sought to alter society.

Conclusion

The Ending of a Centennial Celebration and the Dawn of a New Century

In October of 1897 the Centennial Fair closed its doors for the last time. Today, the only building from the Centennial that is still standing is the Parthenon. But, even the Parthenon is not the original one from the 1897 fair. The original Parthenon was made of wood and plaster, and by 1920 it was beyond repair.¹¹⁶ However, it had become a symbol of the city, a true living representation of Nashville as the “Athens of the South.” Nashville architect Russell E. Hart was commissioned to create an exact replica of the Greek Parthenon; he was later joined by Wilbur F. Creighton, the son of the original architect of the Centennial’s Parthenon.¹¹⁷ The new structure was rebuilt in concrete, a more permanent material.¹¹⁸ The architects even used techniques from the ancient Greeks in the new Parthenon. For example, the columns inside the sanctuary are tilted inwards, just like those of the original Parthenon. It is to counter the illusion of leaning-outwards which the Parthenon would have otherwise.¹¹⁹

When the fair closed, thousands upon thousands of visitors had wondered through its gates. Author Andrew Morrison described the success of the Tennessee Centennial “of such surprising magnitude as to give the whole state a new conception of its own importance and possibilities.” He continued by saying that the fair introduced the people of Nashville to new cultural ideas and views as well as new industrial and technological advancements of the day. The fair left a mark on the city and more importantly “on the consciousness of the people of the

¹¹⁶ Louise Littleton Davis, “The Parthenon and the Tennessee Centennial: The Greek Temple That Sparked A Birthday Party” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 349.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 349, 351.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 349.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 352.

city.”¹²⁰ Each visitor had his or her own stories to tell and memories to cherish. The Nashville Public Library has an entire oral history project done in the 1970s in order to collect the precious, fading memories of those elderly Nashvillians who could still recall the fair. The stories that emerge from these collected oral interviews are often funny and endearing reminders of a time-long past. And, indeed, the interviewees usually speak with a hint of nostalgia when they refer to the fair. The fair to them had become a symbol of an age that was perhaps more innocent than the present. The fair had been a symbol of modernity, but a more pleasant modernity. The modernity of the fair was unscarred by the wars and horrors of the twentieth century. The technology presented at places like the Centennial did not yet have the blood of millions of people on its hands.

Margaret Thompson, an interviewee, remembered when Mrs. McKinley fainted. An interview with Douglas Ginn, Lillian McGlothlin, Ruth McNish, and Lera Moore, conducted on July 9, 1976, brought forth the story of a set of lost teeth on the chute. Someone opened his or her mouth coming down the chute, and when the lake below the chute was drained a set of false teeth was found in it. Mrs. Ursula Greene recalled the different fashions for women at the time of the Centennial. For example, it was inappropriate to show your ankles! Many remembered the more exotic sides of the fair. Jeanette Acklen Noel recalled the belly dancers in the Egyptian section and how she wanted to keep a camel. One of the Arab men working at the fair had promised to stay and let her keep a camel. She said that she could just see herself riding to school the next year riding on a camel. However, her father had to insist that the camel and the Arab man could not stay. “No Arab, no camel.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ Andrew Morrison, *The City of Nashville* (Nashville: Geo. W. Engelhardt), ix.

¹²¹ Nashville Public Library, Tennessee Centennial Project. <<http://digital.library.nashville.org/browse>>.

The Centennial remained a part of popular memory for a long time after its closing day. Today, as stated earlier, the Parthenon remains the last reminder of the long-gone Centennial. Centennial Park is aptly named after the grand fair that once captivated Nashville. There were also what Louise Littleton Davis called “intangibles never to be calculated.” She commented on the “romances begun on the Centennial grounds” that “united many Tennessee families” and also on the Centennial Club which became Nashville’s premier women’s group. It began because of the “women who had been drawn together during the summer’s cultural activities at the Women’s Building.”¹²² The fair created more than just an opportunity to put Tennessee state pride, ingenuity, and progress on display; it created a place of memory. Major General Lewis fought to keep the old fairgrounds from becoming a subdivision, and as a result of this effort, the Board of Park Commissioners was created.¹²³ Today, Nashville has as a memorial to the once great Exhibition, Centennial Park.

The Tennessee Centennial helped to end the depression of the previous years in Nashville. The fair brought about an economic boost for the city that would bring Nashville safely into the twentieth century. The depression of the late nineteenth century had been overshadowed by the successes and glories of the Centennial. And the Centennial was a success. As Davis wrote, “The Centennial Exposition had paid all the bills and actually come out a few thousand dollars ahead.” Over one million people visited the fair which brought revenue and tourism into the city. The Centennial actually ended up making a slight profit. This profit only grew when materials from the dismantled buildings were sold. Perhaps more importantly in a time of depression, the Centennial provided jobs for local Nashvillians.¹²⁴

¹²² Davis, 348.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 349.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 348.

The fair was seen as a success by the African American community as well. It certainly did not bring about an immediate change in the prevailing attitudes of the day, but African Americans in Nashville believed that the fair had been the best opportunity provided by the South thus far to promote their own culture and heritage. If nothing else, the fair also had encourage mingling amongst blacks and whites. As stated above, a record-breaking 21,000 people had attended Negro Day, and 6,000 of them were white.

The debate continued after the close of the Centennial about how African Americans should look to the future. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois still stood as two opposite pillars of African American thought at the time. However, African Americans in Nashville, as a result of the fair, had discovered a middle ground in which to live their lives. Fisk promoted the mutual dependency of higher and industrial education and saw no reason why a place like Fisk and Tuskegee could not exist side-by-side. Just like Fisk University accepted industrial education as a positive thing, so too it accepted the Negro Building as positive. The *Herald* applauded the contributions made by the Negro Department and the Negro building to the race. Fisk must have also been pleased at all of the African American leaders, such as Booker T. Washington and W.H. Council, who came to Nashville because of the Centennial.

The story of how best to achieve equality and success for African Americans continued for many years to come. The Tennessee Centennial forced both African Americans and whites in Nashville to confront racial issues of the day. How both groups dealt with this confrontation has been the one of the main purposes of this thesis. The Centennial brought racial issues to the forefront. Along with racial issues, the fair also brought forth the notion of southern progress. Should the South modernize just like the north? Or was it possible there was a more southern

route to modernity? Nashville, like other prominent southern cities at the time, faced this challenge.

Perhaps, that is where the Centennial (along with other world's fairs) achieved their greatest success. The fairs propelled forward a host of ideas, questions, and themes of the day. They forced the people of various cities to confront modernity and all of the problems associated with it. The South searched for a way to bring itself into the twentieth century while still remaining loyal to some of the older values and traditions. Some of the older traditions and values, however, involved the subjugation of African Americans and the denial of certain freedoms and rights to a whole group of people. The southern world's fairs forced the South to solve this dilemma. At the same time they forced African Americans to either accept the ideology of the day and work within the system, or to rebuke the system and find another path to equality. Nashville, in this sense, is a small case study, but it is one worth understanding in order to understand the greater dilemmas and problems faced by the South at large.

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