

The World's Columbian Exposition as a Microcosm of Gilded Age Class Differentiations

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The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 exemplified Gilded Age class differentiations as demonstrated by the people who took part in creating it, the design and arrangement of its structures, and the attractions of its two distinct venues. Exposition developers created the White City to represent the pinnacle of high-brow culture. Nearby, the Midway Plaisance became the playground of the working class and reflected emerging low-brow trends of the era. To comprehend the duality of the Fair is to grasp the bifurcation of American society during the Gilded Age.



The 1890s had only just dawned when author James F. Muirhead landed the assignment of a lifetime. The Baedeker publishing firm dispatched him to study culture in the United States to produce a travel guide for international guests planning to attend the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. His discoveries perplexed him. He found that the only consistency in American culture was its lack of consistency. The absence of cultural cohesion left him, and other foreign visitors bemused. By the summer of 1893, *The London Quarterly Review* made similar observations about the Exposition itself. The lack of a unifying theme made Europeans wonder if

Americans knew their own culture at all.¹

Since then, little has changed in the literature about the Exposition, popularly known as the World's Fair. Historians continue to promote a disjointed view of the Fair and the culture that created it. Authors such as Rosenberg, Badger, Silkenat, and Valance write about the White City as an icon of the Gilded Age. Others, like Gale, highlight the Midway as a premonition of the future. In truth, the totality of the Fair both anticipated the future while drawing from the present. At once, the Exposition was everything that America was and promised to be. To fill the gap in the historiography of the Exposition historians must analyze the individual elements of the fair and compare them to the whole. At present, Exposition historians narrowly focus on specific components of the fair such as Oldham and Boyle did with women's involvement, as Silkenat and Lydersen did with the experiences of laborers, or as Novak did with the Fair's history-altering innovations in technology and consumer goods. To date, few have advanced a comprehensive view of the Exposition as the sum of its parts. We must compare the seemingly disparate spheres of the Fair to find the underlying themes of continuity. By doing so, historians will reveal that the cohesiveness of the Fair has been found within the context of Gilded Age society. Because the Fair was both a snapshot in time and a promise of things to come, studying the culture that created the Fair has been essential for those who hope to better understand the germ of our own time.²

Gilded Age America was a developing as a tripartite society, with upper, middle and working-class strata. However, the emergent middle class, eager to assume an air of legitimacy, often joined forces with the exclusive set in the struggle for cultural dominance. The alliance widened the chasm between upper and lower classes and created a country with three classes but two cultures. The World's Columbian Exposition served as a microcosm of this societal cleavage. It exemplified Gilded Age class differentiation as demonstrated by the people who took part in creating it, the design and configuration of its structures, and the attractions of its two distinct venues. In its brief life, the fair existed as a chimera—a single entity bearing two unique sets of

¹ R. Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Exposition and American Culture*, (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 119.

² Chaim M. Rosenberg, *America at the Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition* (Charleston: Acadia Publishing, 2008); Badger, *The Great American Fair*; David Silkenat, "Workers in the White City: Working Class Culture at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 104, no.4 (Winter 2011): 266-300; Hélène Valance, "Dark City, White City: Chicago's World Columbian Exposition, 1893," *Caliban: French Journal of English Studies*, 25 (2009): 431-443, <https://journals.openedition.org/Caliban/1726>; Neil Gale, *The Midway Plaisance: At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago* (Bellieville, IL: Lulu Press, 2017); Mary Kavanaugh Oldham, ed., *The Congress of Women: Held in the Woman's Building. World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, U.S.A., 1893*. (Chicago: Monarch Book Company, 1894), accessed August 31, 2018; Rachel Boyle, "Types and Beauties: Evaluating and Exoticizing Women on the Midway Plaisance at the 1893 Columbian Exposition," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 108, no.1 (Spring 2015): 10-31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jillistathistsoc.108.1.0010>; Silkenat, "Workers," 266-300; Kari Lydersen, "Workers in the White City," *Working in These Times*, January 22, 2011, http://inthsestimes.com/working/entry/6879/workiers_in_the_white_city; Matt Novak, "Where the Future Came From: A Trip Through the 1893 Chicago World's Fair," last modified July 12, 2013. 12:32, <https://paleofuture.gizmodo.com/where-the-future-came-from-a-trip-through-the-1893-chi-743942247>.

DNA, each of which was a paradigm for a Gilded Age subculture. Exposition developers fashioned the official site of the Fair, called the Court of Honor, to reflect their highbrow culture. Popularly nicknamed the White City for its uniform color scheme, the Court of Honor was a showcase for liberal arts education and reform. It adopted European art motifs and music as trademarks of refinement. It also trumpeted upper-class faith in capitalism and technological innovation. Among its finer points, it provided a voice for women's advancement. Unfortunately, the Fair was also a platform for nativism and an advertisement for Social Darwinism. The White City's working-class counterpart lay at the west end of the grounds. At the Midway Plaisance, the popular culture of the working class reigned. There, a patchwork of ethnic buildings mirrored the increasingly urban American landscape. Its commercialized pleasure took many common forms of the era.

Amusement park-style attractions and commercialized sex drew crowds as did the exhibitions of blood sport and the mimicry of saloon culture. The popularity of these tokens of low brow culture culminated in an early illustration of mass consumerism. The fair's discourse between upper and working-class cultures reflected the conversation over national identity, making its duality an apt symbol for a binary America.³

The Fair was conceived on April 30, 1890, when Congress authorized an agency to oversee the preparations of a world exposition celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. President Benjamin Harrison appointed two members from each state and territory to the organization called the World's Columbian Commission, popularly known as the National Commission. Armed with an appropriation of \$1.5 million from Congress that was to be repaid upon the completion of the Fair, the Commission was tasked to oversee plans for the celebration. In the same month, Chicago's City Council authorized the formation of the Chicago Company to promote the city as a site for the World's Fair and to fund the event. The corporation quickly raised \$5 million in capital (nearly \$143 million in today's dollars), divided into 500,000 shares of \$10 each. Subscriptions were sold to business moguls such as Charles Schwab, Marshall Field, Phillip Armour, Gustavus Swift, Palmer Potter, and Cyrus McCormick. Unwieldy at two hundred and fifty members, the Company elected an executive committee called the Board of Directors to manage routine business. The roster of this forty-five man committee included Lyman Gage, Vice President of the First National Bank of Chicago; Potter Palmer, co-founder of what would become Marshall Field department stores and owner of Chicago's famous Palmer Hotel; Andrew McNally, publishing magnate; Charles Schwab, steel tycoon; O.W. Potter, President of the Illinois Steel Company; Carter Harrison, the popular but famously corrupt mayor of Chicago and John Whitfield Bunn, financier, industrialist and railroad capitalist. New York City responded to Chicago's offer by pledging \$10 million. The Board of Directors matched the pledge without conferring with stockholders. They swiftly raised the funds and the stakes. When Chicago successfully won the bid to become host to the World's Columbian Exposition, the Board of

³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 225-226,68, ProQuest Ebook Central; Valance, "Dark City, White City," 436.

Directors became the local governing body. In an attempt to avoid friction between the two organizations, the National Commission took on an advisory role while the Board of Directors assumed the duties of planning and executing the Fair. Despite the division of labor, tensions erupted from the beginning. The Commission envisioned the Fair as an educational venue. The Board of Directors, feeling pressure from the stockholders, was more motivated by profitability.⁴

When the Fair was nothing more than a rumor, Susan B. Anthony circumspectly began lobbying Congress for the inclusion of women in the Fair's governance. She garnered over one hundred signatures of influential women married to men in the highest offices in Washington. Because of her petition, Congress passed legislation authorizing the creation of the Board of Lady Managers in April of 1890. Congress left the appointment of members to the National Commission. In all the Commission named one hundred fifteen women to the Lady Managers to oversee the Women's Department.

They were responsible for the Woman's Building and the exhibits therein. The Lady Managers were presided over by Bertha Palmer, wife of Potter Palmer. Like many of the other women on the board, she was married to a wealthy businessman and was a reliable supporter of the arts. The Lady Managers parlayed their social influence into ground-breaking leadership roles.⁵

Collectively, these men and women represented the "upper ten"—the industrial upper class that was defined by its malignant individualism and conspicuous consumption. College-educated and largely Protestant, the elite represented just over one percent of the population, yet commandeered the vast majority of the country's assets.

Unrestricted capitalism enriched them beyond all scope of imagination. They attributed their astronomical success to superior character. Personality flaws, they contended, were responsible for the plight of the poor, not the inherent partisanship of unrestricted capitalism. Breaking with the Victorian work ethic, this new leisure class pursued unfettered consumption and pleasure with vigor. The immense wealth and self-serving values of the affluent insulated them from the rest of American society, opening a vast chasm between their culture and that of the

⁴ George R. Davis, "The World's Columbian Exposition," *The North American Review* 154, no. 424 (March 1892): 308-309, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25102341>; "The Inflation Calculator," Morgan Friedman, accessed November 3, 2019, <https://westegg.com/inflation/>; Harlow N. Higinbotham, *Report of the President to the Board of Directors of the World's Columbian Exposition. Chicago, 1892-1893* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1893), 4,7-8, 14; Badger, *Great American Fair*, 18, 59-60, 51; Julie K. Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair," *The World's Columbian Exposition: Idea, Experience, Aftermath*, 1996, accessed September 1, 2018, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma96/wce/legacy.html>; Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), 278; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair* (Chicago: The Bancroft Company, 1893), 70, Paul Galvin Library; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair"; Brian Connelly, "Expo: Magic of the White City," DVD, Directed by Mark Bussler, Inecom Entertainment Company, 2005; Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 61,70; Connelly, "Expo."

⁵ Badger, *Great American Fair*, 79; Rosenberg, *America at the Fair*, 75; Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 84; "Sophia Hayden 1868-1953," *Distinguished Women of Past and Present*, accessed September 7, 2018, <http://www.distinguishedwomen.com/biographical/hayden-s.html>.

masses.⁶

It is no wonder then that their White City would look so different from the Midway. Few Columbian Exposition historians directly address the significance of the physical appearance of the buildings at the Fair, but they imply it. The architecture and grounds of the White City were unmistakable expressions of highbrow culture. In her article, “Dark City, White City: Chicago’s World Columbian Exposition, 1893,” Helene Valance touches on this topic. She approaches the event as a series of contrasts and paradoxical themes, among them the White City as the antithesis not only to the slums of Chicago’s Black City without, but to the Midway within. Though Valance competently concludes that the shining white buildings of the Court of Honor represented the lofty ideals of high society while the Midway mirrored the exotic patchwork of urban areas, her suggestion that Burnham chose the color white as symbolism for a rarified atmosphere, unsullied by common influences, is myopic. As Erik Larsen lays out in his work, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*, the color scheme of the White City was largely due to the time crush the chief architect found himself in. Burnham did not use color, or the lack thereof, to express high-brow culture. He used classical forms. The French Beaux-Arts buildings arranged artfully around a lagoon were meant to evoke images of Venice. The Ionic features of White City buildings mimicked Roman temples and were adorned with Grecian inspired statuary. If a paradox existed in the architecture of the White City, it was that America’s temple of self-aggrandizement was singularly devoted to the appropriation of European aesthetics.⁷

Situated in the middle of the Court of Honor’s complex, the Manufacture and Liberal Arts Building reigned over the White City. Burnham’s magnum opus served as the showcase for mechanical inventions and as the hub for the White City. It was an outsized manifestation of the elite’s industrial and technological aspirations. Technology represented a polarity of fascination and fear for upper and middle classes. Gilded Age Americans embraced the mobility and freedom that innovations such as the safety bicycle brought them. They marveled at the immediacy of new forms of communication such as telephone or the Marconi radio. While they accepted technology that afforded them more leisure time into their homes, the cohabitation was an uneasy one. Modernization brought with it uncertainty and concerns of instability. Reformers worried that large-scale industrialization would result in the loss of America’s moral compass. Upper and middle classes harbored a luddite-like fear that the frenetic pace of industrial society would incite a pandemic of psychological disorders. Eventually, industrial magnates overtook the trajectory of affairs as their profit-churning machines became more and more integral to the national economy.⁸

⁶ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-7, 11-12.

⁷ Valance, “Dark City,” 431-443; Larson, *Devil*, 147.

⁸ *Indexed Guide Map and Key to World’s Fair Buildings, Grounds and Exhibits*, 1893, scale 610 feet to 1 inch, “New Indexed Standard Guide Map of the World’s Columbian Exposition,” Geographicus Rare Antique Maps, <https://www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/worldscolumbian-mcnally-1893> (September 1, 2018); McGerr,

The Manufacture and Liberal Arts Building reflected this course of action. It showcased emergent technologies that would go on to propel the marketplace such as gas engines, calculating machines, turbines, meat packing equipment, and electric garment cutting machines that revolutionized the textile industry. The Fair even displayed neon signs and a precursor to the fax machine. Several buildings in the complex featured the new Otis Hale Elevator, which allowed new-fashioned skyscrapers to reach ever further upward. The earth-shattering innovation that irreversibly changed the face of the industry, however, was the electric light. It allowed for a twenty-four-hour manufacturing cycle. Taking their cue from industry, the Directors seized the opportunity to extend hours of operation by pursuing a massive electric lighting plan. Though electric streetlights were still an emergent technology, the fair was illuminated by more than 120,000 incandescent lights, using three times the amount of electricity as the entire city of Chicago. The Fair signaled America's irrevocable transition from human-powered industry to a mechanized one with electricity blazing the path. The largest building in the world at that time, the Manufacture and Liberal Arts Building was more than just a warehouse for machinery, it was the Directors' homage to free enterprise and the prosperity it afforded them.⁹

The number of people who enjoyed the full benefits of free enterprise in the 1890s was, of course, small and the Fair remained true to this principle. One such example was the opulent British Victoria House. It occupied one of the most prominent lakeshore parcels of the Fair. Its ornate ceilings and elaborately paneled walls covered an expanse of more than 500,000 square feet. And it was off-limits to the public. The Victoria House was home to the exclusive British and Canadian Exchange Club, where members enjoyed its gentlemen's reading and smoking rooms or ladies' luxurious drawing and reception rooms. Admittance to the Victoria House was by invitation only. Only guests of a certain social rank were permitted to enjoy its benefits. That the Victoria House was the epitome of grandeur and off-limits to the masses was symbolic of Gilded Age class struggle.¹⁰

In other areas of the Fair, exclusivity was more subtle but still a persistent theme. Nativist backlash to the country's inability to achieve immigration restriction worked its way to the White City. By 1890 Chicago was more than forty percent foreign-born.

Roughly 78 percent of the country's second-largest city was either immigrant or first-generation American. With the constant influx of foreign-born residents, the elite felt their grip on

Fierce Discontent, 227, 233, 234; Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the "Gilded Age" 1865-1905*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 46; McGerr, *Fierce Discontent*, 247; Edwards, *New Spirits*, 48, 50.

⁹ Badger, *Great American Fair*, 104; Matt Novak, "Where the Future Came From: A Trip Through the 1893 Chicago World's Fair," Paleofuture, last modified July 12, 2013, <https://paleofuture.gizmodo.com/where-the-future-came-from-a-trip-through-the-1893-chi-743942247>; Rosenberg, *America at the Fair*, 101; Connelly, "Expo: Magic of the White City"; John Patrick Barrett, *Electricity at the World's Columbian Exposition: Including an Account of the Exhibits* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1894), 2, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015013735876;view=1up;seq=9>; Rosenberg, *America at the Fair*, 269.

¹⁰ Moses P. Handy, *The Official Directory of the World's Columbian Exposition. May 1st to October 30th*. (Chicago: W.B. Conkey Co., 1893), 124-125, 127, Internet Archive; Connelly, "Expo"; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair"; Connelly, "Expo".

political and economic dominance slipping away. The elite began to promote policies and customs that favored native-born citizens. Their plan was three-fold. They isolated themselves from the masses. They created public spaces, such as the Fair, that conformed to their cultural standards. Lastly, they endeavored to assimilate newcomers to their culture.¹¹

The upper ten's nativism at the Fair manifested itself in a profusion of patriotic displays, just as it did in the outside world. In his work, *All the World's a Fair*, history professor and author Robert Rydell recounts how the Fair debuted the Pledge of Allegiance at the opening ceremonies. It was recited by young girls dressed in red, white and blue costumes which were arranged to create a flag. Rydell rightfully asserts there was a nativist undercurrent at the Fair as further evidence confirms. In his Opening Day remarks G. Brown Goode, head of the Fair's Council of Administration and leader of the Smithsonian Institute, assured the public that the exhibition promoted good citizenship and that good citizenship was crucial for civilization's progress. He delivered his address in the shadow of Daniel Chester French's patriotic colossus, *Statue of the Republic*. Shortly thereafter, the crowd spontaneously burst into choruses of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in the absence of a national anthem.¹²

As the Fair progressed, nativist demonstrations continued. In her presentation to the Women's International Congress, "The Making of Citizens," Mrs. Harriet Earhart Monroe expressed a nativist attitude when she urged Americans to aspire to a higher order of citizenship, emphasizing the need to closely monitor and manage the technical education of immigrant children. Like Monroe, Goode's coded language implied that the only way to preserve cultural hegemony was to inculcate newcomers. Contemporary accounts of visitors demonstrated how pervasive nativist sentiment had become. In his excursion from the White City to the Midway, a minister recorded that he was repulsed by the unfamiliar music and singing of "non-American girls". Classical European music dominated the White City where Chopin and the recitals of violinist Joseph Douglass were a fixture. At the Midway, however, it was common for musicians and vocalists to perform folk music in the sideshows and the streets of their villages. To nativist elites, such ethnic presentations were raucous, peculiar, and disquieting.¹³

Nativism was a by-product of the era's prevailing scientific thought. From its inception, the fair was designed to promote the ideology of Social Darwinism, the infamous idea of survival of the fittest in economic endeavors promoted by spokesmen for the upper class like Yale professor

¹¹ Melita Marie Garza, "The 1890 Census and the 'Second City,'" *Chicago Tribune*, December 18, 2007, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/chi-chicagodays-1890census-story-story.html>; Badger, *Great American Fair*, 34; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 228, 177.

¹² Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions 1876-1916*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 46; Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 69; Judy Sund, "Columbus and Columbia in Chicago, 1893: Man of Genius Meets Generic Woman," *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (September 1993): 440, 450; Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 44; Larsen, *Devil*, 239.

¹³ Oldham, ed., *The Congress of Women*, 311-312; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair"; Caldwell Titcomb, "Black String Musicians: Ascending the Scale," *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no.1 (Spring 1990): 107-112, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/779543>.

William Graham Sumner. One aspect of Social Darwinism was its belief in a hierarchy among and within societies. G. Brown Goode, hired by the Commission to manage the content of the exhibits, explained in his *First Draft of a System of Classification for the World's Columbian Exposition* that the exhibits of the White City were to be a demonstration of such societal hierarchy. F. A. Putnam, Council of Administration member and head of the Ethnology Department at Harvard University, was responsible for the arrangement and messaging of the exhibits. His assistant, Harlan Ingersoll Smith, declared that each department would be arranged to teach fairgoers about the evolution of society. The displays then were meant to illustrate the societal scale of Social Darwinism. In explaining the anthropological presentations, famous ethnologist and author Hubert Howe Bancroft summed up his findings of the exhibits as “living representatives of savage, civilized, and semi-civilized nations.” According to Bancroft, the journey began with the pinnacle of barbarism and the very lowest caste of humanity, the African Dahomey Village. From there, visitors ascended the rungs of social evolution until they reached the apex of humanity’s progression— American and European culture. According to musical director Theodore Thomas, even the music was to be presented from lowest to highest evolutionary progress, culminating in compositions from the most enlightened cultures. That is, musical presentations would begin with folk pieces and culminate in classical European music. By purposeful design, social stratification provided the framework for the Fair.¹⁴

Classical music and the scientific theories of Social Darwinism were building blocks of the liberal arts education that became one of the hallmarks of the White City. From the very beginning, the Commission's primary goal was to impart knowledge to those who attended. In her M.A. thesis project, author Julie Rose notes that one of the Fair’s official imperatives was to “encourage popular education.” Goode himself stated that each installation was carefully designed to serve an instructive purpose, and he was convinced that the fair held tremendous educational value. At the dedication ceremony, Commission President Potter Palmer praised the educational nature of the fair, and the media agreed with him. The May 13, 1893 issue of Harper’s likened the fair to a great university. Liberal arts education was paramount to the elite. It was a means to preserve and promote their culture.¹⁵

Liberal arts education was but one of the two tenets of the White City. The other was social reform. In describing the objectives of the exhibition, Hubert Howe Bancroft began with “As the work of social reconstruction proceeds... we must henceforth look to social power for our greatest benefits, political power having already bestowed upon us its best.” In other words, because of the continuing struggle between upper and lower classes, political powers had come to an impasse at

¹⁴ Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 62; G. Brown Goode, *First Draft of a System of Classification for the World's Columbian Exposition* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893), Library of Congress; Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 70; Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 58-59; Friends of the White City, “A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance,” last modified March 7, 2015, <http://www.friendsofthewhitecity.org/architecture/buildings/the-midway-plaisance>; Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*,” 84.

¹⁵ Rose, “The Legacy of the Fair,”; Connelly, “Expo: Magic of the White City,”; Goode, *First Draft*, 650; Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 44, 46; Rose, “The Legacy of the Fair.”

improving society. It was necessary to deploy social reform organizations to continue society's progress. The middle class had become frustrated with the self-serving individualism of the wealthy and the moral lapses and violent outbursts of the working class. In their most significant break from their alliance with the upper class, the middle class took up the mantle of reforming society. The Fair typified this transition from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era.¹⁶

Most of the Lady Managers had been involved with reform movements before the fair advocating for better pay and safer work environments for women. They carried their reformist goals to their work with the Exposition. Embracing the Sabbatarian movement of the day, these reform-minded women initially pressed for the fair to be closed on Sunday. Workers resisted, arguing that Sunday operation of the Fair would allow the working class to enjoy the event on their day off. When the profit-seeking Chicago Directors convinced them that in the absence of a wholesome venue on Sunday, visitors to the area would frequent bars and brothels, women's groups then actively petitioned to repeal the Sunday closure provision. This wrangling thrust the Fair into the epicenter of the national debate. Protestants viewed the Sunday Question as a moral cause. Unions embraced it to limit work hours. Together they opposed industrialists who resisted any disruptions to commerce. Initially, the Fair's Sabbatarian forces' efforts were successful and Congress passed the first Sunday closing legislation. The Directors appealed the case in a U.S. district court. The fractured and weakened Sabbatarian alliance proved to be no match for the upper ten's determination and the law was repealed. As with many other social reforms of the day, the Sabbatarian movement at the Fair and beyond represented the middle-class attempt to exert control over the personal lives of the working class.¹⁷

In general, women took a lead in the reforming message of the White City, as was evident in Women's Congress presentations such as "The Advantages and Dangers of Organization" in which Reverend Anna Garlin Spencer explored the relationship between the individual and social organizations. The spirit of reform was by no means restricted to the Woman's Building, however. Numerous World's Congress Auxiliary presentations featured moral and social reform causes. An entire department of the congress was devoted to the perennial favorite cause of middle-class reformers, temperance. The Fair gave Progressives a platform to spread their message and to advance the process of institutionalizing their reforms.¹⁸

Emboldened by their success with reform movements, many middle-class women began to explore opportunities beyond their domestic roles. The Gilded Age saw the beginnings of

¹⁶ Bancroft, *Book of the Fair*, preface.

¹⁷ William A. Mirola, "Shorter Hours and the Protestant Sabbath: Religious Framing and Movement Alliances in Late-Nineteenth-Century Chicago," *Social Science History* 23, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 421, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1171604>; "To Urge Sunday Opening of the Fair," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 10, 1893; Mirola, 420, 422, 396.

¹⁸ Sund, "Columbus and Columbia," 447; Connelly, "Expo: Magic of the White City,"; Oldham, *Congress of Women*, 170; *The World's Congress Auxiliary of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, Department of Temperance* (Chicago: World's Columbian Exposition, 1892), unnumbered, <https://archive.org/details/worldcongressau:00worl>, accessed August 31, 2018.

women's transition from home to public spheres and demonstrations of this were bountiful at the Exposition. The establishment of the Board of Lady Managers marked the first-time women were given leadership roles in a world's fair organization.

Some of their first priorities were to sway public opinion in favor of equal pay for women and to improve women's access to technical training. To promote women as competent white-collar leaders, they hired MIT graduate Sophia Hayden as the architect for the Woman's Building. Mary Hicks was chosen to create the architectural friezes. Beyond the building, female sculptor Mary Lawrence found professional success when her *Columbus on San Salvador* was selected by chief sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudans, to grace the Court of Honor. The Fair proved to be an important vehicle for launching women into public roles.¹⁹

Women did not fully agree on what their transition from private to public life should look like, however. The speeches of the International Congress of Women illustrated the conflict women across the country felt between their traditional roles and the New Woman. "Complete Freedom for Women" by Miss Agnes M. Manning promoted female suffrage. "The Glory of Womanhood" by Madame Hanna K. Kornay clung to the separate spheres ideology. Like so many women, Mrs. Caroline K. Sherman vacillated between the two with her address, "Characteristics of the Modern Woman." Scientific achievement and educational advances, she said, had granted women unprecedented opportunities for self-improvement and meaningful employment. The reformer dismissed popular fears that professional women might abandon their domestic responsibilities and jeopardize the family as the building block of society. Sherman felt that women would not be ready for the workplace however until they had tamed their taste for luxury and vice. Until that time, she suggested, women should improve themselves and society by engaging in social reform efforts and remain steadfast in their roles as the backbone of the church. Her speech was typical of the ambivalence that many women shared.²⁰

The introduction of women into the workplace was only one facet of labor's upheaval in the Gilded Age. Though little has been written about the workers of the World's Fair, evidence suggests that they shared common tumultuous experiences and similar working-class attributes with their industrial counterparts. Scant information about them exists because most records on Exposition laborers were lost or destroyed if they were kept at all. It has been generally accepted that a portion of the workers were itinerant laborers. Using two journals of White City workers and the remnants of the files maintained by the Board of Lady Managers, David Silkenat pieces together the experiences of the laborers of the Columbian Exposition in his article, "Workers in the White City: Working Class Culture at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893." He claims that although many of the workers who participated in the construction and operation of the fair were not part of Chicago's three traditional working-class institutions, i.e., labor unions, artisan

¹⁹ Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 72; Distinguished Women, "Sophia Hayden," "Miss Amy Hicks Design," *The World*, April 8, 1893, https://www.newspapers.com/clip/13198810/miss_amy_hicks_design_the_world_new/lxs181; Sund, "Columbus and Columbia," 463, 452-453.

²⁰ Oldham, ed., *Congress of Women*, 111, 359, 764, 767, 765, 770.

organizations, and ethnic immigrant neighborhoods, they emulated the working-class culture of Chicago's industrial laborers due to their common experiences. Dr. Silkenat successfully substantiates his claims by recounting the various strikes carried out by Fair workers, the hazardous working conditions, and the use of the Columbian Guard (the Fair's private security forces) to extend capital's power over labor, but his assertion that the workers of the World's Columbian Exposition were devoid of ethnic affiliations is extrapolative and overstated. The workers of the Exposition were likely representative of typical working-class, immigrant stock and may have maintained their ethnic affiliations. By 1891 approximately twenty-five thousand itinerant hopefuls were pulled to a congested labor market by the continual wave of reconstruction after the Great Fire of 1871 and pushed to the industrial and transportation center by a foundering economy. Certainly, many of them sought work on the Exposition job site. But since most were likely overlooked in the 1890 census due to their high mobility, it is difficult to ascertain much about them either inside or outside of the Fair.

Dr. Silkenat cites the Lady Managers' files in his claim that the workers of the White City were segregated from their ethnic environments. He writes, "Of the 776 employment applications listed in their records, less than a quarter were from Chicago." Seven hundred seventy-six was a small fraction of the four thousand who worked in Jackson Park alone cited by Larsen or the broader group of twelve thousand accounted for by Chaim Rosenberg in his work *America at the Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition*. The sample was too small to effectively determine the origins or ethnic affiliations of the entire White City labor force.²¹

Consider the memoir of Laura Hayes, a laborer employed in the production of architectural ornaments in the White City. Her description of the workforce insisted that only one in one hundred were considered natural-born Americans. Hayes's first-hand account implies that most White City laborers did maintain ties to their ethnic affiliations. It was impossible to determine how many within Silkenat's sample group were native-born and how many were foreign-born. But given that seventy-eight percent of the city was either immigrant or first-generation American, it has been reasonable to assume that those who were foreign-born had access to the robust cultural enclaves of Chicago.

Beyond the White City, Norman Bolotin makes a rare observation about ticket agents and other non-construction employees in his *Chicago's Grand Midway: A Walk Around the World at the Columbian Exposition*. He found that most concessionaires preferred to hire locals. As we know from Hull House maps, the laborers drawn from the surrounding areas were primarily of Italian, Polish and Chinese descent. Ethnicity debate aside, Fair workers were representative of the Gilded Age working class.²²

²¹ Silkenat, "Workers," 266-300, 271; Larson, *Devil*, 121, 153; Rosenberg, *America at the Fair*, 73.

²² Laura Hayes, *Three Girls in a Flat* (Chicago: Bright, Leonard & Company, 1892), 142-143, <http://digitallibrary.upenn.edu/women/hayes/flat/flat.html>; Bolotin Norman and Christine Laing, *Chicago's Grand Midway: A Walk Around the World at the Columbian Exposition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), "Dahomey Village," Kindle; *Nationalities Map No 1-4, Polk St. to Twelfth*, 1895, no scale,

Despite differences in their origins or ethnicity, Fair laborers shared many commonalities between themselves and with workers outside the gates. Fair employees across several departments used collective action to redress workplace abuses. In January of 1893, the temperature plummeted to twenty degrees below zero and stubbornly stayed there. Having endured the oppressive heat of the summer just months before, workers' morale suffered. Working conditions were not only uncomfortable, but they were also dangerous. Frigid temperatures made fires a necessity, and an omnipresent hazard. The roof of the behemoth Manufactures and Liberal Arts building caved under the weight of accumulating snow. Though no one was injured during this event, in later incidents three men died of fractured skulls and two were electrocuted. Those who did not work in the elements were not exempt from workplace hazards. Toxic mold had invaded one of the shipping rooms. In all, over seven hundred workers were injured. Fifty more died, condemning their families to poverty.²³

Falling wages exacerbated the situation. Initially, working on the Fair site was lucrative, but as construction costs mounted and the treasury hemorrhaged capital, Burnham attempted to rein in costs by cutting the workforce and slashing wages. Documentarian Brian Connelly states that some of these laborers were paid only ten cents per day or about \$2.86 in 2019. Hull House maps indicate that those living in the areas adjacent to the Fair (and those most likely to provide a ready labor pool) were among the city's poorest, occupying the lowest end of the pay scale of zero to five dollars per week. Capitalizing on national labor unrest such as the Haymarket Riot seven years earlier and the Homestead Steel Works strike the year prior, in April of 1893 the Fair workers responded like many other workers of their generation. In a series of six strikes, as many as four thousand carpenters walked off the job, demanding a minimum union wage. With Opening Day looming large on the horizon, an anxious Burnham conceded the minimum wage and offered a conciliatory overtime bonus to carpenters and ironworkers.

Columbian Guards undertook their collective actions to protest low wages and consignment to distant outposts in the bitter temperatures. In the strike that occurred just a week before the Fair's opening, approximately twenty percent of the force quit over escalating duties and anemic wages. After Opening Day, the Rolling Chair Guides (predominantly seminary students who chauffeured weary customers about the Fair in wheelchairs) engaged in their own highly publicized strike. Over two hundred chair pushers demanded restitution for a reduction in hours and a pay cut that violated their contracts. In all, Exposition workers participated in more than two dozen strikes during their tenure at the Fair. The Fair's workers confronted the same grievances as other laborers in the Gilded Age and they responded in similar expressions of collective action. The root causes, organizational development, and the results mirrored many

<https://dcc.newberry.org/collections/chicago-workers-during-the-long-gilded-age#wages-and-nationalities-in-a-chicago-neighborhood>, accessed August 28, 2018; Badger, *Great American Fair*, 34.

²³ Larsen, *Devil*, 192, 196; Silkenat, "Workers," 281; Larsen, *Devil*, 145, 218, 154; Silkenat, "Workers," 281.

collective actions across the nation.²⁴

The strikes alarmed the elite managers. Director Charles Schwab, prior superintendent of Homestead Steel Works, knew how costly and volatile strikes could be. To ensure stability, Exposition planners employed the Guard as a private law enforcement agency using the widely known Pinkertons as a template. Though Directors took the auxiliary measures of arranging for an expansion of the Chicago police force and the installation of a National Guard unit nearby, they primarily relied on the Columbian Guard (which was larger than the police forces of both New York and Chicago) to maintain order. Not content to simply quash uprisings, the planners also used the Guard to exert control over laborers who were off the clock. Like Pullman's company town, the Directors erected barracks on the grounds to house construction workers and dormitories to house the Columbian Guard. The Guard was used to enforce smoking and drinking bans on the grounds and in employee's living quarters. Just as in the outside world, workers resented the intrusion into their personal lives.²⁵

The living quarters on the fairground were not the only buildings at the Midway that paralleled national trends. The architecture of the Midway was representative of America's transition to a more urbanized, and ethnically diverse landscape. Putnam's vision called for an evolutionary promenade of cultures. To accommodate the plan for his collection of foreign villages without spoiling the magnificence of Burnham's White City, the Directors diverted the ethnographic display to a narrow stretch of land due West of the Exposition. It was one mile long and six hundred feet wide, running perpendicular to the main grounds. The isthmus was called the Midway Plaisance. An eight-foot fence ran the perimeter, crowding the attractions in and preventing the rambunctiousness of the Midway from contaminating the White City. Behind that fence, a cacophony of cultural attractions crowded into the tight enclosure. In contrast to the White City, the infrastructure there was a modestly scaled kaleidoscope of ethnic design that suggested the compressed urban ghettos of the working class. The thatched watchtowers and huts of Dahomey (modern-day Benin) bore a resemblance to the forty thatched bamboo structures of the Johor (part of modern-day Malaysia) and Java in the South Seas Village. The Moorish palace featured a traditional onion dome and the Streets of Cairo had a pair of minarets. The castles of Ireland looked timeworn and Lilliputian compared to the White City. The stucco Aztec Village was ornamented with Aztec murals and Tunisia showcased colorful mosaic tiles. Flamboyant pagodas in the Japanese and Chinese villages competed for space with the half-timbered houses of Vienna and Germany. At the far end sat a low-slung structure that held the East Indian Bazaar. From gate to gate, the compacted Midway was reminiscent of the congested tenements of metropolitan areas. Likewise, it echoed urban America as a composite of diverse cultures. Like

²⁴ Silkenat, "Workers," 279; Connelly, "Expo: Magic of the White City,"; *Wage Map No 1-4, Polk St. to Twelfth*, 1895, no scale, <https://dcc.newberry.org/collections/chicago-workers-during-the-long-gilded-age#wages-and-nationalities-in-a-chicago-neighborhood>, accessed August 28, 2018; Rosenberg, *America at the Fair*, 17; Larsen, *Devil*, 218, 223; Silkenat, "Workers," 283-284; "Won't Stand the Reduction," *Chicago Inter Ocean*, August 16, 1893, <https://worldsfairchicago1893.com/2018/09/03/labor-strike/>; Silkenat, "Workers," 283, 285.

²⁵ Connelly, "Expo: Magic of the White City,"; Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 84; Silkenat, "Workers," 272, 280.

many Gilded Age American cities, the Midway was not an amalgamation of various cultures, but an assemblage of racially segregated precincts.²⁶

Shoehorned among the ethnic villages were shops and entertainment attractions. The Midway was originally intended as an ethnological exhibit. However, the Directors, who felt a responsibility to shareholders, and the Commission, who felt a mandate to repay Congress, desperately needed the Fair to turn a profit. They quickly abrogated the responsibility of the Midway to Sol Bloom, an acolyte of legendary showman P.T. Barnum. Bloom was not a typical Chicago crony. He was hired specifically to make money. Drawing on lessons learned from Barnum, Bloom proved to be a marketing genius, extracting admission fees from thousands of curious onlookers with his Algerian village a year before the Fair's opening day. In March of 1890, Barnum had recommended that the planners create a spectacle that highlighted the "diversity of human life." Inspired by Barnham's philosophies, Bloom swiftly charted a new course for the Fair's addendum. Still wrapped in a thin veneer of anthropological education, the Midway emerged as the standard-bearer of working-class amusement park entertainment. The May 1893 copy of *The Century* ridiculed the masses who chose Midway entertainment over education. The magazine frowned upon the millions of working-class fairgoers who couldn't seem to get enough of the Coney Island-style attractions. Guests rode carnival-type rides like the Ferris Wheel and the Ice Railway, an eight hundred seventy-five feet long ride reaching speeds of forty miles per hour. The Moorish Palace was a prototype funhouse with a hall of mirrors and a maze. The Midway's Zoopraxiscope was the first recognized movie theater that became a staple of working-class neighborhoods. The September 1, 1893 issue *The Dial* lamented that commercial concerns had completely ransomed the Midway. Borrowing Barnum's approach, Bloom created populist entertainment that was pragmatic and beneficial to the working class. His commercialized pleasure produced a vigorous revenue stream and offered laborers a panacea for harsh urban living.²⁷

Much of this commercialized pleasure dovetailed into Americans' unfurling preoccupation with commercialized sex. The attractions of the Midway were emblematic of working-class rejections of Victorian middle-class sexual mores. The Congress of Beauty more commonly referred to as The Beauty Show invited public voyeurism. The Harem room at The Beauty Show titillated male guests, and on occasion, the Columbian Guard was called to usher them from the building for inappropriate behavior. Nearby, contemporary photos show how the scant costumes of the Samoan men drew raised eyebrows from female patrons. The exotic Samoans along with Algerian, Javanese, South Sea Islander, Hungarian, Persian, Neapolitan, and Brazilian dancers stirred the passions of many observers. A dancer nicknamed Little Egypt roused men with a scandalous new form of entertainment called the belly dance. It was common for other female

²⁶ Bolotin, *Chicago's Grand Midway*, "Walking the Plaisance," Kindle; Gale, *Midway Plaisance*, 3; Bolotin, *Chicago's Grand Midway*, "Walking the Plaisance," Kindle; Badger, *Great American Fair*, 12, 36.

²⁷ Badger, 54; Neil Gale, *The Midway Plaisance: At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago* (Belleville, IL: LuLu Press, 2017), 3; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair," *The World's Columbian Exposition*; Boudreau, "Greatest Philosophy," 20, 13; Friends of the White City, "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance,"; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair,"; Friends of the White City, "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance,"; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair."

dancers to accompany her further conjuring images of the harem. The Moorish Palace left little to the imagination. It flagrantly depicted a harem with a sultan surrounded by his concubines. The popularity of these attractions illustrated the working class's resistance to the values of Progressivism.²⁸

The Moorish Palace offered fairgoers much more than harem girls. The Palace and other Midway attractions satisfied the working-class lust for blood sport with an assortment of violent and dangerous amusements. The fortress in Germany held an enormous collection of medieval weapons. There were sword fights in the Streets of Cairo and the Bedouins staged thrilling mock battles. In the Algerian village, attendees could revel in sword swallows, fire eaters, glass eaters, and snake charmers. Its village theatre ran performances of a Torture Dance. Syrians ran knives through their tongues while a young Erik Weisz (later known as Harry Houdini) swallowed needles. The Moorish Palace presented a wax museum with dioramas of Lincoln's assassination, a Moorish execution, and the execution of Marie Antoinette featuring the original guillotine used. One scene portrayed punishment in the Middle Ages while another called A Ride on the Razor promised to be particularly gruesome. If none of that satisfied patrons, there was a bleeding statue. Bloodsports venues such as these gave the working class a welcome relief valve for their mounting workplace and social frustrations.²⁹

The sensational blood sport, ribald dancing, and compressed villages could lead to sensory overload. Patrons needed a reprieve from the constant stimulation. Fortunately, the Midway was also an extension of working-class saloon culture. Beer flowed freely in the biergartens of the German and Austrian courtyards. The gardens in the German pavilion alone could seat eight thousand guests. In addition to its beer garden, Vienna also held several taverns. It even had a shop where customers could purchase a hollowed-out cane designed to hold a half pint of alcohol to tide them over to the next tavern.

Nearby, the crowd favorite French cider press sold hard cider that ranged from 2.5% to 4% alcohol. Beer was even available near the nominally Islamic Turkish concessions. In contrast, only wine was available in White City's Horticulture building as an introduction to the agricultural products of California. While temperance was in vogue for the White City's zealous reformers, it was thoroughly rejected by the working class.³⁰

The ubiquity of alcohol was welcomed by the working class but perhaps the Directors more

²⁸ Friends of the White City, "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance,"; *Glimpses*, "In the Samoan Village,"; Connelly, "Expo: Magic of the White City,"; Friends of the White City, "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance,"; *Glimpses of the World's Fair*; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair,"; Ives, *Dream City*, unnumbered; Friends of the White City, "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance."

²⁹ Gale, *Midway Plaisance*, 14; "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance," Friends of the White City, "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance,"; Gale, *Midway Plaisance*, 10; *Glimpses*, "Damascan Swordsmen- Street in Cairo,"; Bolotin, *Chicago's Grand Midway*, "Moorish Palace," Kindle.

³⁰ Connelly, "Expo: Magic of the White City,"; Friends of the White City, "A Trip Through the Midway Plaisance,"; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair,"; Gale, *Midway Plaisance*, 15; Bolotin, *Chicago's Grand Midway*, "Old Vienna," Kindle; Bolotin, *Chicago's Grand Midway*, "At the Center of the Midway," Kindle; *Glimpses of the World's Fair*, "Street of Constantinople"; Connelly, "Expo."

so as its loosened wallets. In a reflection of the emergence of Gilded Age mass consumerism, the producing class made the Fair an economic success. In his PBS video "Expo: Magic of the White City," filmmaker Brian Connelly studied the relationship between the Midway's diversions and the fair's financial success. Unlike the White City, the attractions of the Midway were not included in the price of admission.

Concessions there generated all the proceeds realized from the event. The Midway was the most popular venue by far and drew the largest crowds. Throngs of customers enthusiastically paid the equivalent of \$21.45 to ride a camel, \$14.53 to ride the Ferris Wheel or a staggering \$57.19 to ride in the tethered hot air balloon at a time when bacon was the equivalent of \$2.57 per pound. The Ferris Wheel itself, which turned a considerable profit, was credited with carrying the fair's ledgers into black ink. The highest-grossing attractions can be separated into four categories: risqué dances, mechanical rides, beer gardens, and funhouses. The only thing that outsold alcohol was commercialized sex. To enjoy every attraction the Midway had to offer, a visitor would have to pay \$371.72 in today's money while entrance to the White City was only \$14.30. The fair was an early expression of mass consumerism as guests learned to associate enjoyment with spending money. The financial success of the Midway makes it clear that Americans were shucking their Victorian thrift and welcoming the age of the consumer.³¹

Perhaps the Midway was so profitable because it gave wage earners more than just a respite from the difficulties of urban life. It gave them the engagement they had been yearning for. In *The Midway Plaisance: At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago*, historian, author, and blogger Dr. Neil Gale's observations that White City machines were untouchable marvels while Midway customers rode machinery as entertainment are astute because further research shows that this was part of a broader pattern. The attractions of the White City were cerebral in nature and the Midway was, at its core, participatory. In the first half of the nineteenth century, audience participation in theaters varied according to class. Those in the more expensive box seats sat stoically, internalizing the entertainment. Working-class members who filled the cheap seats in the galley threw vegetables, hissed, stamped their feet and created a glamorous atmosphere.

And so it was with the Columbian Exposition. The 50,000 anthropological relics on exhibit in the White City were lifeless, carefully preserved behind pressed glass. In contrast, the sensual dancing, ethnic music, colorful costumes, exotic foods, camel rides, and performances made anthropological attractions of the Midway a more interactive experience. In the White City, where temperance held court, the wine was sipped only as a primer in agricultural products. Meanwhile, visitors heartily drank beer with hundreds of other fairgoers in the beer gardens of the Midway. The participatory nature of the Midway was a remedy for the marginalized working class.³²

The Midway then had been a paragon of consumerism, profiteering, exuberance, pleasure,

³¹ Connelly, "Expo"; Rose, "The Legacy of the Fair"; United States Bureau of Animal Industry, *Annual Report of the Bureau of Animal Industry*, Vol 20, (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 1904), 309, <http://books.google.com>; Gale, *Midway Plaisance*, 43, 37.

³² Gale, *Midway Plaisance*, 36, 42; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 26; Rosenberg, *America at the Fair*, 253, 255.

and salaciousness. Running perpendicular to the Court of Honor and intersecting only on the fringe, the Midway Plaisance reflected the common experience of the Gilded Age working class. The cramped, modest, and ethnic installations of the main thoroughfare mirrored life in working-class ghettos. Its attractions were a perfect example of the reprieve from urban life and workplace strife that laborers pursued through commercialized pleasure, commercialized sex, blood sport, saloon culture, and mass consumerism. Its counterpart, the White City, was as ostentatious as its planners and as transitory as their cultural supremacy. Imitating upper and middle-class society it lauded education and reform. The latter especially allowed women to experiment with new roles. Its gargantuan centerpiece was a celebration of technology and capitalism in equal measure. Its artistic and musical motifs adopted classical European art forms even as the upper classes ironically rejected southern European immigrants. Such nativist subtext was the product of Social Darwinism, the underpinning of the exhibition. The White City's *Statue of the Republic*, symbolizing highbrow uplift and the Midway's Ferris Wheel symbolizing lowbrow entertainment were appropriate icons for the bisection of Gilded Age society.

By comparing the discrete venues of the World Columbian Exposition we see that the quintessential cultural norms of the era provided continuity for the Fair. The characters, complexes, and attractions of the World's Columbian Exposition indeed formed an ideal microcosm of Gilded Age class differentiations. The Fair was the collision of two progressively divergent cultures and reflected their sustained campaign for cultural authority. It was not that Americans did not know their culture. They were painfully aware of their multiplicity. Travel author Muirhead was simply an unwitting eavesdropper on a national discourse that was not yet finished.