

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS: TENNESSEE CENTENNIAL EXPOSITION

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In 1896, Tennessee had its centennial birthday. There was not a better way to celebrate than hosting an international exposition, which were increasingly popular in the United States after Chicago's World Columbian Exposition of 1893. These exhibitions were an exceptional way to showcase a region's history, accomplishments and culture. The Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897 did just that. One may see the grandeur of this exhibition by looking at The Henderson Litho. Co.'s advertisement titled "Tennessee Centennial Exposition, Nashville, Tennessee, 1897."¹ This image demonstrates the importance of this massive event to Nashville as well as Tennessee as a whole. The commissioners, who were most likely the fair's organizers because of its pro-industry aspects, realized the significance of the present as if it were the past and showcased the exposition in a way that highlighted that significance. By comparing and contrasting what the document presents to the events of the 1890s, one can see how the exposition effected Nashville's architecture, its status and its politics. The commissioners attempted to show these aspects; they succeeded, but the fair did not.

Creators at The Henderson Litho. Co. drew on limestone with wax crayons, applied ink to the stone and printed the image onto paper, a process called lithography, in order to make a lithograph. These were very common during this era because of their ability to be mass produced. This lithograph image served to persuade people from all over the nation to attend Nashville's exposition. The mass produced poster seems to have appeared in many forms, in magazines, in color or in monochrome. Image one, which will also be referred to as 'the source,' is in an incredible condition; it is most likely a reprint from more recent years or a copy that was

¹The Henderson Lithography Co., *Tennessee Centennial Exposition 1897*, 1896, chromolithograph, 800 x 553 pixels, Cincinnati, OH, accessed February 20, 2016. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1316>.

held on file at the lithograph company. Image two, three and four are variations of image one; image four appears to be in good condition as it was most likely preserved within the pages of a book or magazine. The old style fonts and art style chosen by the company were common to this era. Although it was printed, it looks almost as if it were painted using watercolors. The bright shrubbery seems to be an overstatement for what the area really looked like, and the lack of visitors seems to be an understatement as it was often crowded. However, it is hard to find other images to which this image can be compared. The commissioners of this image most likely wanted to show how the fair was clean and in order. They wanted to show off the fair's elaborate, large buildings and thought-out landscaping. This exposition was Nashville's opportunity to show that it was a New South city that was worth visiting, modernized and far removed from the Old South ways. The advertisements for the fair had to distort the truth in order to persuade visitors to come and to prove that Nashville was a New South city.

Across the bottom the image reads "Opens May 1st Tennessee Centennial Exposition Nashville, Tennessee 1897. Closes Oct. 31st." The commissioners of this image were aware that they did not need to describe what the exposition would be composed of. The knowledge of what an exposition was and what would occur was common of the public at this time. The author did chose to include three symbols: the American flag, the Great Seal of the US and a *U* over an *S*. These symbols represented the new nationalism that was developing during this era of rapid economic and cultural change.

The argument to have a celebration began in 1892 with Douglas Anderson, a Nashville lawyer, and J. B. Killebrew, an attorney and farmer from Montgomery County, Tennessee.² Known for dishonestly promoting the state, he addressed the Tennessee General Assembly with the speech “The Centennial Exposition: Its Necessity and Advantages,” which were few in the end.³ The centennial anniversary of Nashville’s statehood was quickly approaching as preparations for the fair began. Planners used the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 as a model for architecture and landscaping; each building at the fair was built to show off the achievements in industry, agriculture, commerce, transportation, education and culture. Because of Nashville’s moniker “Athens of the South,” it was decided that an exact scale model of Athens’ Parthenon should be built out of plaster and wood.⁴ It became the Fine Arts Building, holding over 1,175 art objects.⁵ Other significant buildings that were erected include the Memphis Building, resembling the Great Pyramid of Cheops; the History building, modeled after the Erechtheion; and the Commerce Building, measuring 591 x 256 feet, all of which are shown in the source.⁶ These buildings were built to equal, or even surpass, the exquisiteness of the “White City,” Chicago. The neoclassical style of the buildings and the landscaping was done with the Columbian Exposition in mind.

²“Nineteenth Century Agricultural Resources,” Tennessee Virtual Archives, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/agricult>.

³Don H. Doyle, *Tennessee Centennial Exposition. The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, 2 ed., Nashville, TN: Tennessee Historical Society, 2002, accessed February 20, 2016, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1316>.

⁴“Tennessee Centennial Exposition,” Tennessee Virtual Archives, accessed February 21, 2016, <http://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/Centennial>.

⁵Doyle, *Tennessee Centennial Exposition. The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*.

⁶“Tennessee Centennial Exposition,” Tennessee Virtual Archives.

The president of the exposition was John W. Thomas, who was also president of the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway. Some say that Thomas was chosen to oversee this important event in order to appease public discontent with railroad monopolies. The railroad companies offered discounted fares, began to build new railways and staged exhibitions, few of which are shown in the source. Many exhibitions contrasted old technology with new technology in order to show off new technology. There was an exhibition for women, which showed the ever changing role of women at this time. The New Woman Building featured an exhibition showing off their skills in domestic arts and home economics and had lecturers like Jane Addams. The New Negro Building and Negro Days celebrated black progress, but they were still separated from whites throughout the fair. Most of the clubs that formed in order to produce these exhibitions continued to meet after the fair's end; the women of The Centennial Club continued to fight for municipal and political reform for many years after the fair's end. These groups would become the voice of the Progressive Movement in Nashville in the following years. Even the grounds of the fair, known as Centennial City, became an ideal city for the Progressive Era because of its cleanliness, grand architecture, planned landscaping and urban planning.⁷ This advertisement is a symbol for the wide cultural, Progressive impact that this fair had on Tennessee and the Progressive Movement. It shows what an ideal, clean and well planned city should look like

Like other international expositions, the Tennessee Centennial Exposition's goal was to attract ticket sales and visitors from all social and economic classes as well as from diverse locations throughout the world. The image portrays the magnificence of the temporary,

⁷Doyle, *Tennessee Centennial Exposition. The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture.*

neoclassical buildings, which would appeal to the wealth, as well as the necessity for factories and manufacturing buildings on the fair grounds, which would be familiar to the poor. There is also no price on the advertisement, although some sources suggest it cost 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for children.⁸ Price often sets the precedent for who can or cannot attend an event. If there is a high price shown, only the wealthy can afford go; when there is a low price shown, the poor may go as well. The economy had almost complete control over the fair. Because of the Panic of 1893, the exposition opened in 1897 when the actual anniversary was in 1896. The advertisement does not show this panic at all. The fair looks lush, extravagant and beautiful. However, when one compares this image to the “Bird’s Eye View of the 1896 TN Centennial Exposition,” it can be seen that this ad is a complete exaggeration compared to the reality of fair. The pathways are not as intricate as pictured in the advertisement, there are far less buildings than how many are pictured in the advertisement and the buildings are not as grand or elaborate as shown in the earlier advertisement. There are far less decorations, flowers and detail. The possible causes of these differences are that either the authors of the advertisement made it more extreme than it was in order to get more business or that the advertisement was the original plan and the commissioners created it off that plan, but that plan was not finished to its entirety.

When comparing the Tennessee Centennial Exposition to other expositions, the Tennessee Centennial Exposition seems like a failure. The Chicago World’s Fair attracted over 20 million people and became important milestone in the histories of those cities. Tennessee’s exposition failed to do that as it only had an attendance of about 1.8 million. Many historians

⁸“1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition,” Historic Memphis, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://historic-memphis.com/memphis/expo-1897/expo-1897.html>.

claim that this was due to a yellow fever epidemic that was rampaging the Gulf Coastal states, but it was still the largest exposition that took place in the South. This event was supposed to be the hallmark of the New South Era. Because of this lack of success, it is most likely that a mix of the two possibilities occurred: the advertisers were promoting the event as much as possible before it became an absolute failure because it was unable to be completed according to the design before opening. Despite this failure, the fair did have a significant impact on Nashville's urban planning. The site eventually became a permanent park, and the Parthenon replica was rebuilt using concrete, opening in 1931. This building became the permanent landmark of Nashville's "Athens of the South" reputation. It was an important event for city planning, and followed the City Beautiful movement of Chicago. The neoclassical movement was still prominent. The man-made lake was impressive as was the new architecturally designed landscape.

This lithograph began as a simple advertisement for an event but became a symbol for this period of change in Nashville. "Tennessee Centennial Exposition, Nashville, Tennessee, 1897" showcased the city planning fads that were emerging, like neoclassical architecture, planned landscaping, the City Beautiful movement and White City ideals. It shows the culture of Nashville in the late 1890s as well. Citizens fell in love with the Parthenon as it emphasized the city's scholarly title "The Athens of the South." The buildings dedicated to the New Woman and blacks was a sign of Progressivism and liberalism, which would become a trademark push of the New South reformers. Even signs of the economy's state were shown on this image by the lack of a price and the depiction of factories and a railroad. The commissioners of this image

succeeded in presenting an advertisement for a worldly, cultural fair that embodied the social, cultural and economic movements of this era.

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