

CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Instructions

You will spend this session working in small groups, examining primary sources connected with the Centennial Exhibition of 1876. Each group will rotate through five stations in the HSP reading room. At each station you will find a selection of sources related to a particular theme. In collaboration with your group partners, you will work to answer the questions provided on that particular station's page in this handout. At some stations, it may make sense to divide up the sources among yourselves, examine them individually for few minutes, and then report back to your classmates about what you've found. In other cases, you may want to look at the sources in pairs or even as a full group. The key is to talk to each other about what you see, what you read, and what you think about the sources, and then to use those discussions to help you answer the questions. HSP staff members are available to assist you at each station.

Please handle the documents carefully and respectfully. Hold papers and books by the edges, and turn book pages with care. You may pick up documents from the table and pass them among yourselves, but remember to put them back in their original locations when you're finished with that station.

Background note

The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 was organized to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of American independence. Planning for the event began as early as 1870, and in 1871, Congress passed an act establishing the United States Centennial Commission. The commission was comprised of one delegate appointed from each state or territory. The commission's function was to plan "an International Exhibition of the Arts, Manufacturers, and Products of the Soil and Mine." In June of 1872, the United States Centennial Commission was incorporated, as was the Centennial Board of Finance. An executive committee of thirteen chose a director-general to whom all bureaus and committees reported. Philadelphia became the chosen site and in 1873, 450 acres of ground in Fairmont Park were set aside for the exhibition. Ground was broken for the exhibition buildings on July 4, 1874.

The exhibition opened on May 10, 1876, and closed on November 10, 1876. It featured five major buildings: the Main Exhibition Building, Machinery Hall, Agricultural Hall, Memorial Hall, and Horticultural Hall. Two additional attractions were the Woman's Pavilion and the United States Government Building. Over 200 buildings were erected for the event, many of which were designated for use by various states and approximately fifty countries. Of all the buildings that covered the grounds, only Memorial Hall and the Ohio House still stand today. Several of the state houses, however, were moved to other towns. Memorial Hall was intended to remain as a permanent museum of art, but the larger Philadelphia Museum of Art opened in 1926

to house the city's art collection. Horticultural Hall had also been intended as a permanent structure, but it was razed in the 1950s due to its condition.

The exhibition provided the country with an opportunity to display for the world its innovations and advances in industry, technology, agriculture, science, and the arts. It also provided spectators an opportunity to view and experience technology, science, art, and culture from around the world. The exhibition was a huge success and attracted upwards of 8,200,000 visitors and 31,000 exhibitors during its six months of operation. Once the exhibition closed its doors, the exhibits were crated away and buildings were disassembled. Forty to eighty train freight cars were loaded with items and hauled to the Smithsonian.

Scope & content of Collection 1544

This collection contains material related to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition held in Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The collection is essentially divided between the papers of the United States Centennial Commission, photographs, and scrapbooks filled with ephemera pertaining to the exhibition. The collection also contains material concerning the planning of the event, including papers of the Centennial Commission and various photographs and images of the buildings and landscaping of the exhibition grounds.

The first series contains papers from the United States Centennial Commission and includes the establishment of the commission's Board of Finance. Many of the papers in the series are form letters and pamphlets from the commission concerning various aspects of the exhibition from its initial planning to the sale of buildings once the exhibition closed. Series II contains seven volumes of documentary material compiled by the centennial commission that contain planning and administrative papers as well as ephemera from the exhibition. Several of the form letters from Series I are found in the volumes of Series II. The third series also repeats some of the materials from the previous two series and contains three scrapbooks of drawings and plans for the buildings and layout of the exhibition. The bulk of the ephemera in Series IV are eighteen scrapbooks that contain an assortment of materials related to the exhibition. Many of these items are trade cards and advertisements from various exhibitors who displayed their wares and services at the exhibition. Other ephemera includes tickets, passes, and broadsides. In addition to the scrapbooks of ephemera, there are several folders of similar materials. Series V begins with nine boxes containing more than 3000 stereo-view images of the buildings, art, and exhibits of the centennial from the Centennial Photographic Company. In addition to the stereo views, there are four boxes of larger photographs. Most of these images are also from the Centennial Photographic Company and are also found in with the stereo-views. A fifth box contains various views of buildings under construction, including several of the Main Exhibition Hall. An additional box contains prints, mostly the size of postcards, of various buildings including the five main halls, the women's pavilion, and the buildings for various states

and foreign countries.

STATION 1: PURPOSES OF THE FAIR

Students will examine boosters' statements about the purpose of the proposed Centennial Exhibition; its purported value to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the United States; and the need for public support, both through government funding and through private contributions.

Item 1

“Memorial of the Select and Common Councils of Philadelphia, the Franklin Institute of Pennsylvania, and the Senate & House of Representatives of Pennsylvania, for the Appropriate Celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of American Independence, at Philadelphia, July 4, 1876,” 24 February 1870); Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Box 1, Folder 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Item 2

William W. Justice, Citizens' Centennial Finance Committee, to the People of Pennsylvania, n.d. (1872-73?); Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Box 1, Folder 7, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Item 3

H.R. 514, 44th Congress, 1st Session, A Bill Relating to the Centennial Celebration of American Independence, 6 January 1876; Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Box 1, Folder 4, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Item 4

“National Bank of Merit” certificate, n.d.; Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Box 1, Folder 6, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

1. What kind of documents are the first two items? Who were the authors? Who were the audiences? What were the purposes of these appeals? Take note of any particularly memorable phrases you find.

2. What was the purpose of the third item, the January 1876 bill in the U.S. House? Why was it necessary? Again, note any especially striking passages.

3. What do you think was the purpose of the “National Bank of Merit” certificate? Who was its intended audience?

4. Taken together, what do these sources suggest about the purposes of the Centennial Exhibition? Why did its boosters think it was so important? What did they think it would accomplish?

STATION 2: BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS

Students will examine images of the Exhibition’s buildings and grounds, focusing on the fair’s massive scale, its architectural and landscape design, and its visual impact on visitors. Students will also consider how these particular documents may have served as souvenirs of the fair.

Item 1

“The Centennial – Balloon View of the Grounds,” Harper’s Weekly, 30 September 1876; Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Flat-file 14, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Item 2

Centennial Portfolio, 1st Series, Eight Views of Centennial Buildings (Thos. Hunter, n.d.); Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Box 13, Folder 11, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

1. Take a few minutes to really look at the “balloon view” of the Centennial grounds. Which particular elements of the architecture and landscape strike you the most? What overall impression does the print convey about the Centennial?

2. The “balloon view” originally appeared in Harper’s Weekly, a popular national magazine that printed many images of the Centennial Exhibition throughout 1876. If you were a reader of Harper’s Weekly, how might you have reacted to this image?

3. *Examine the “Views of Centennial Buildings.” What strikes you the most about these images? How do they portray the buildings, landscapes, and visitors at the Centennial?*

4. *The “Views of Centennial Buildings” were designed and sold by Thomas Hunter, a Philadelphia printer. Who might have purchased these prints? Why?*

STATION 3: DISPLAYS OF INDUSTRY

Students will browse through several guides to the Centennial, considering how visitors might have used them when exploring the fair. More specifically, they will look at each guide's treatment of Machinery Hall and the famed Corliss Engine, examining themes of industrialism and nationalism.

Item 1

Magee's Centennial Guide of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: R. Magee & Son, 1876)

Item 2

Barnes' Centenary History. One Hundred Years of American Independence (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1876)

Item 3

What Is the Centennial? And How to See It (Philadelphia: Thos. S. Dando, 1876)

Item 4

Something for the Children, or Uncle John's Story of His First Visit to the Centennial (Philadelphia: Campbell Press, 1876)

1. First, flip briefly through the guidebooks. What purpose did they serve? Who was the likely audience?

2. Then, concentrate on the marked sections, which focus on Machinery Hall. Note how the Hall is described in words and in photographs. What messages do these texts and images convey about the machinery exhibits at the Centennial?

3. Look specifically at the descriptions and images of the famed Corliss Engine. Why do you think this engine became such a popular attraction at the Exhibition?

4. Taken together, what do these guidebooks suggest about the importance of industrialism and nationalism at the Centennial Exhibition?

STATION 4: ENCOUNTERS WITH OTHERS

Students will analyze how the Centennial framed encounters with “others,” including both foreign peoples and minorities within the United States. Students will pay particular attention to variations across lines of race and ethnicity, especially in the context of the emergent “new imperialism.”

Item 1

United States Centennial Commission, Official List of Foreign Commissions, Accredited to the International Exhibition of 1876; Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Box 1, Folder 18, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Item 2

The Centennial Exposition Guide (Philadelphia: Hamlin & Lawrence, 1876)

Item 3

Walter F. Brown, “Our Artist’s Dream of the Centennial Restaurants” [*Harper’s Weekly*, 1 July 1876]; Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Box 13, Folder 11, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

1. Glance over the “Official List of Foreign Commissions.” What strikes you about the list of nations represented at the Centennial? What does this list suggest about the United States’ position in the world in 1876?

2. Read the marked sections in the Centennial Exposition Guide about the Spanish Building (p. 9) and the Japanese Building (p. 19). What are the similarities and differences in the descriptions of these buildings? What do these passages suggest about American views of foreign peoples?

3. Read the marked sections in the Centennial Exposition Guide about the United States Government Building (p. 12, mainly the last few lines about American Indians) and “The South” restaurant (p. 16). What do these passages suggest about American attitudes toward racial minorities in the U.S.?

4. Study the cartoon, “An Artist’s Dream of the Centennial Restaurants.” What message is the artist conveying about the different cultures represented at the Exhibition? How might readers of Harper’s Weekly have reacted to this image?

STATION 5: A VISITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Students will browse through one New Jersey woman's Centennial scrapbooks, which feature news clippings, souvenir images, train tickets, and other keepsakes. Students will consider how these scrapbooks might illustrate visitors' perceptions of and experiences at the Centennial.

Item 1

Annie Britton, scrapbooks; Centennial Exhibition, Collection 1544, Volume 23, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

1. Why do you think Annie Britton (an ordinary woman from New Jersey) kept these scrapbooks about the Centennial? What purpose did they serve? Who was the likely audience?

2. What different types of materials about the Centennial can you find in these scrapbooks? Do those materials tell you anything about Annie Britton's experiences with the Exhibition?

3. Why do you think Annie Britton was so fascinated with the Centennial Exhibition that she organized these enormous scrapbooks? Do you think other Americans might have kept similar scrapbooks?

4. Can you think of any contemporary practices that are similar to Annie Britton's scrapbooking? How do today's Americans keep track of and remember important events?