

1897 Centennial Exposition

*Essential Questions: What was the purpose of the 1897 Centennial Exposition?
How did it impact the state?*

Following the Civil War, the United States experienced a period of industrialization and modernization. New technologies, including motion pictures were created. Americans were eager to show off their achievements to the rest of the world. The 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris demonstrated to the world that a world's fair could serve as both an expression of national pride and as source of income for the host city. In the United States, World's Fairs were held in Chicago in 1893 and St. Louis in 1904. Those fairs drew millions of visitors to the host cities and were the model for Tennessee's Exposition.

The Centennial Exposition was planned as a celebration of Tennessee's first 100 years of statehood which occurred in 1796. However, due to a recession and disagreements among the divisions of the state, the fair was held a year late. Railroad companies were enthusiastic supporters of the fair. They sponsored special exhibits, offered discount fares and promoted the fair in advertising. The companies viewed the fair as an opportunity to bring potential investors to the state.

The fair followed the model set by the Chicago World's Fair. The event was held in a park like setting which was created for the event. Temporary buildings built in the classical style of ancient Greece held the exhibits. Nashville was known as the "Athens of the South" so a full scale replica of the Parthenon was built to serve as the exhibit hall for the arts. Memphis contributed a replica of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. Other classically styled buildings housed exhibits on agriculture, industry and education. A separate building called the Negro Building housed exhibits relating to African-American history. The log building known as the State Capitol of the State of Franklin was also dismantled, transported to Nashville and reassembled as an exhibit.

The fair also had a section called Vanity Fair which featured rides and games. The centerpiece was a giant see-saw. The see-saw was 75 feet long and lifted 20 passenger cars into the air for a view of the city. The see-saw did not capture the imagination of fairgoers the way the Eiffel Tower or Ferris Wheel had and therefore did not become the symbol of the fair. The full- scale replica of the Parthenon became the image of the fair.

The Centennial Exposition did not meet the expectations of the fair's creators. The fair ran for six months and had over 7.1 million people attend. However, this was much smaller than the expected attendance. The fairs in St. Louis and Chicago had crowds of 20-30 million. The smaller crowds may have been caused by lingering economic worries and an outbreak of yellow

fever along the southeast coast. For whatever reason, Tennessee's Centennial Exposition did not capture the national imagination the way that previous fairs had. Following the close of the fair, the temporary buildings were dismantled and the area returned to being parkland. Interestingly, the State of Franklin capital building was somehow lost and never returned to its original site in Greeneville. However, the fair remained a source of pride for Nashvillians. The Parthenon, the most popular building of the fair, was rebuilt in the 1920's using permanent materials. It remains the centerpiece of Centennial Park and continues to draw visitors from around the country and around the world.

Source: "Tennessee Centennial Exposition." *Tennessee Virtual Archive*. Tennessee State Library and Archives, n.d. Web. 21 July 2014.

<http://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/Centennial>

