

## The 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis

### **Overview of the Fair:**

On April 30, 1904, Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company President David R. Francis officially opened the Louisiana Purchase Exposition—also known as the 1904 World's Fair—with the call, “Open ye gates. Swing wide, ye portals.” A magnificent spectacle greeted the opening day crowd of 200,000—a dazzling city stood on what had been a woodland park. Fair organizers had erected nearly 1,500 buildings—including several grand “palaces”—across 1,200 acres of a newly redesigned Forest Park. That magnificent fairground equated America's expansion westward since the Louisiana Purchase with the nation's cultural and economic progress.

For the next seven months, St. Louisans and travelers from across the globe experienced the latest achievements in technology, fine arts, manufacturing, science, civics, foreign policy and education. The Fair boasted extravagant exhibits from fifty foreign countries and forty-three of the then forty-five states.

Of course, the 1904 World's Fair offered more than lofty, noble ideas; fair-goers had ample opportunity to indulge in popular culture and entertainment on the mile-long arcade known as the Pike. Considered the carnival side of the Fair, Pike visitors could enjoy fifty different amusements, including contortionists, reenactments of the Boer War, babies in incubators, the *Dancing Girls of Madrid*, *Jim Key the Educated Horse*, and *Hagenbeck's Zoological Paradise and Animal Circus*—which featured an elephant water slide. Although not on the Pike, the most spectacular concession was the Observation Wheel; from the top of the wheel—265 feet above the Fair—riders enjoyed the best aerial view of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition.

By the time the Fair closed on December 1, 1904, an estimated 20 million people had reveled in the wonders of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. In 1904, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition thrust St. Louis into the global spotlight.

### **Constructing the Fair:**

The opening of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition followed several years of preparation that included the development of surrounding neighborhoods, improvements to the city's water supply, and the clearing of parkland. The great enterprise that unfolded in St. Louis in 1904 brought together the achievements of science, art, and industry that helped define the advent of the twentieth century. The story behind the construction of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition is one of human perseverance—a testimony to the energy, investment, and commitment of the citizens of St. Louis. The Fair was a highly orchestrated event, with its designers joining ranks with civic planners and an army of more than 10,000 laborers to transform over 1,200 acres of thickets and swamps in Forest Park and Clayton into a grand landscape filled with classically inspired buildings, waterways, gardens, and avenues. While the 1904 World's Fair celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, the renovated parkland told a story of American progress since 1804.

### **Nations on Display:**

More foreign nations participated in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition than in any preceding World's Fair. Whether from Western Europe or the Far East, delegations from each country designed their exhibits to stress technological and cultural advances, as well as pride in their national history. Examples of handcrafted and manufactured goods, many ready for export, were also featured, reinforcing the prospect of a new global marketplace. During the summer of 1904, St. Louis became the heart of a consumer world market, the forefront of technological and educational advancement and a museum for international history.

### **People at the Fair:**

People came to the World's Fair for a variety of reasons: to visit and marvel, to work, or to be displayed. The variety of groups created a vast global village, where people's appearances often defined their place within a presumed hierarchy of civilization. American Indians, Filipinos, and other "primitives" from the Far East and South America were invited to participate as "living displays." They provided fairgoers with a rare, firsthand encounter with peoples from far-off lands.

Although understood today as an expression of the Fair organizers' blatant racism, at the time the

Anthropology Department's "living displays" reaffirmed the basic belief in the superiority of industrial civilization, which lay at the core of the Exposition's appeal.

### **The 1904 Olympics:**

The 1904 World's Fair served as host to the 1904 Olympic Games—the first Olympics to be held in the United States since the ancient event's 1896 revival. The official games took place August 29 through September 3, 1904, predominantly at Francis Field, the stadium on the campus of Washington University. Throughout the course of the World's Fair, numerous other athletic events and contests occurred under the guise of the Olympics in order to boost the public's interest and participation. More than simply competitive events, the 1904 Olympics served as a demonstration of the health benefits of physical exertion both for individuals and nations.

**Source:** [http://www.mohistory.org/exhibits/Fair/WF/HTML/index\\_flash.html](http://www.mohistory.org/exhibits/Fair/WF/HTML/index_flash.html)

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- 1) What was the purpose of the 1904 World's Fair?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) What was the purpose of having foreign countries on display at the Fair? How might this reflect American imperialism in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) What was the purpose of the "living displays" at the Fair? How do you think these displays reflected American imperialism?