

Lancaster and the American Centennial Exposition of 1876

By John W. W. Loose

To celebrate a century of American Independence, a “world’s fair” or Centennial Exposition was held in Philadelphia from May to November 1876. The “birthday party” for the world’s largest “democratic Republic” was an ambitious undertaking, but it was fraught from the beginning with problems. The nation was just recovering from the Panic of 1873, and the Reconstruction period following the War Between the States was coming to an end although unpleasant feelings continued to divide North and South. A nasty presidential campaign (Hayes versus Tilden) was underway. A cumbersome arrangement of commissioners was appointed to take charge. An architectural competition was held and after much bickering managed to come up with designs for five major structures. The engineer for the Fairmount Park Commission, a young German-American named Herman J. Schwarzmann, studied the matter, and then designed all the “infrastructure” for the 450-acre site, transportation lines, and 34 of the Exposition’s buildings including the Pennsylvania Pavilion, Memorial Hall, and Horticultural Hall, the latter two being designated as permanent structures. (Memorial Hall has survived.)

While the Exposition was intended to celebrate a century of American Independence the gentlemen planning the event did not reckon with American women who were waging a battle of their own for “independence,” or at least

equal rights. A rising chorus of female voices had been heard across the land, from the rostrum and pulpit, and from the humanitarian efforts put forth by women nursing the dying and wounded on battlefields as well as drawing attention to the social conditions and poverty found in city slums. The United States Government had been quite stingy in appropriating funds for the construction of the Exposition, spending most of its half-million-dollar appropriation for the Government Building. Philadelphia's business leaders were supposed to raise funds through the sale of stock, but the plan was a disaster. Finally, Benjamin Franklin's great-granddaughter, Elizabeth Gillespie, was called upon to save the situation. She gathered around her the city's most influential women, and they raised more than \$100,000, an astonishing amount for those days. The women exacted their price for rescuing the Exposition: infuriated when told there would be no room for them in the Main Building, the undaunted ladies raised another \$30,000 and built their own Women's Building, having persuaded Engineer Schwarzmann to design it. The building became a popular place, especially for women and children while the men were gawking at the machinery, all being operated from a gigantic Corliss steam engine weighing 700 tons. Inasmuch as nearly two weeks were required to see everything in Machinery Hall—its dimensions were 1880 feet long and 464 feet wide—the women had plenty of time to talk about their campaigns to come. The Women's Pavilion was opened by the First Lady, Mrs. U.S. Grant, and the Empress Theresa of Brazil, while their husbands were doing the honors at Machinery Hall, and becoming excited over that invention, the telephone.

To show their complete independence, the women had their own engine room with a female engineer in charge!

Not content with raising the funds for the Philadelphia Board of Finance, the women decided the Exposition must be opened with appropriate ceremonies. Obtaining the President was easy—he was available at a moment's notice—but the first day's program must be in keeping with the wave of nationalism that was sweeping the nation. The women were just as nationalistic as the men in those days. The famed German operatic composer, Richard Wagner, had just finished the *Ring* cycle of music dramas. He needed funds badly, and the Women's Committee commissioned him to write the *American Centennial March* for the occasion, paying him 5,000 thalers.

This was to be the first world's fair in the New World. President Grant had invitations sent out to all the heads of state, kings, queens, monarchs, and emperors. Crusty old Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner countermanded the invitations, maintaining the President had no authority to issue invitations to foreigners. Meanwhile the Exposition at Vienna, Austria, was becoming a financial disaster, a fact not lost upon the frugal-minded members of Congress. Fortunately for the Centennial Exposition, Senator Sumner expired from an attack of apoplexy, and the invitations were sent out, the recipients responding eagerly and positively.

While Herman Schwarzmann bustled about, 10,000 workmen rushed to complete the buildings in time for the 10 May 1876 opening. The Pennsylvania Railroad had built a large depot on the Exposition grounds with trackage looped off the New York-Washington mainline to accommodate large movements of cars.

On 10 May 1876 the big day arrived. President and Mrs. Grant welcomed the foreign dignitaries, headed by the Emperor and Empress of Brazil. Theodore Thomas, the leading German-American conductor of the time, waved his baton, and the orchestra, its brass section greatly augmented, played the Wagner *Centennial March*. Although rarely heard after that occasion, it has been released on a compact disc as interpreted by the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble.

During the 159 days the Exposition was open officially, nearly ten million visitors toured the numerous buildings and examined the many exhibits. The greatest attendance on any single day was 274,919 persons on Pennsylvania Day — 28 September 1876, a state holiday to celebrate the centennial of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. Lancastrians took advantage of excursion trains to Philadelphia during the entire period, but arrangements were made to handle large crowds on the 28th of September. Owing to the special state holiday, businesses in Lancaster were closed. According to the *Lancaster Daily Express*, many Lancastrians travelled to Philadelphia on Wednesday in order to find lodging. On Thursday, the “big day,” the Pennsylvania Railroad ran two special trains consisting of fifteen passenger cars each from the depot at Chestnut and North Queen streets. Twenty-three hundred Lancastrians gathered at the depot at 6:15 A.M. on Thursday morning for the 2 1/2 hour trip to the Centennial grounds. A fireworks display ended the big day, and the weary but happy Lancastrians left on trains at 11:00 P.M., arriving back in Lancaster between 2:30 and 3:00 A.M. Pennsylvanians were pleased to discover “their day” not only brought in the greatest single day attendance during the Centennial Exposition, but had exceeded single day attendance at all previous world’s fairs in Europe. (Because George Corliss, manufacturer of the huge steam engine that ran all the machinery in Machinery Hall, was a devout Methodist, he refused to have his engine operated on Sunday. As a result, the Centennial Exposition was not open on Sundays, thereby reducing opportunities for many working families to visit the fair. Saturday was a working day in 1876.)

The host state, Pennsylvania, had erected a large building for its purposes, but interest in education and the influence wielded by the state’s educational leaders, headed by James P. Wickersham, required more than an area in another building. Wickersham envisaged a different style of structure than the ubiquitous “Stick Romanesque” architecture of the fair, an eclectic accumulation of half-timbered, carpenter gothic, Queen Anne, Swiss chalet buildings with steep gables, countless dormers, and all the scrollwork filigree so dear to the apostles of Romanticism. What Wickersham had in mind was a structure of classical simplicity that could not be mistaken for anything except an exhibition building

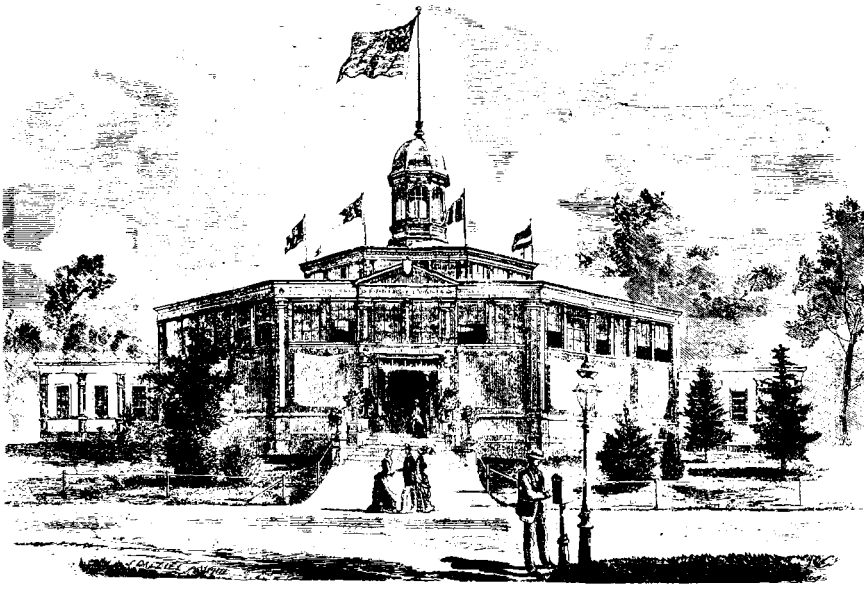
focused on education. The problem was, where to obtain funds inasmuch as the \$15,000 appropriated by the Pennsylvania legislature would cover only the exhibition displays and materials. Wickersham then did what Lancaster Countians have done over the ages (and still do): he sought funds from nongovernmental sources. He approached school directors, college trustees, and vendors of school furnishings and equipment. Before long he had the \$12,000 his Pennsylvania Educational Hall would require for construction.

To erect the structure, Wickersham turned to a fellow Lancastrian whose son had attended the Millersville State Normal School. John Adam Burger, a native of Prussia, was recognized throughout eastern Pennsylvania for his ability to construct large buildings based on sound engineering principles and quality materials. Burger built fifteen Centennial structures, and while his 500-man construction crew was in Philadelphia, he managed also to erect the Broad Street Opera House and a mansion for the superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad. In Lancaster his projects included the Southern, Eastern, Western, and Central Market buildings; the Stevens House Hotel, eight school houses, two banks, two churches, and many commercial structures and large warehouses. Mr. Burger promptly translated Dr. Wickersham's ideas into a unique building that would not look anachronistic at a present-day world's fair.

The Pennsylvania Educational Hall was a two-tiered three-story building constructed in the shape of a very large octagonal schoolhouse. The main part was 100 feet by 100 feet across the "flats" of the octagon, and was two stories high. On top of that was a smaller octagonal section surmounted by a classical cupola and a flagpole. Around the first floor the walls were solid to permit wall-type exhibition spaces of advanced design. The exterior first floor walls contained on each "flat" huge representations of open books on which were reproduced quotations extolling the virtues of an educated citizenry in a free democratic society. Extending from the main portion were two wings, 40 feet by 24 feet. This unusually handsome building was near the Memorial Hall or Art Gallery, and it attracted many visitors.

The exhibits consisted of the work of kindergartens, systems of graded schools, county schools, academies and seminaries, universities and colleges, technical schools and teacher preparation schools then known as "normal schools." Schools of art and design were represented. An innovation that attracted much attention were the instructional institutions for the deaf, blind and muted students. Orphans and soldiers' orphans were instructed in special schools provided by the state.

Plans, drawings, and models of the latest designs of school buildings and equipment were exhibited. Other exhibits showed textbooks, charts, maps, certificates, forms, drawings, paintings, specimens of penmanship, photographs, school laws, courses of study, curricula, methods of teaching, scientific apparatus, and examples of student work. Contributors of materials to the educational display were in the following categories:



PENNSYLVANIA EDUCATIONAL HALL.

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| Kindergartens, 7 | Soldiers' Orphans Schools, 21 |
| School Districts, 28 | Institutions for Blind and Retarded, 2 |
| Cities and Boroughs, 20 | Schools of Design and Oratory, 2 |
| Academies and Seminaries, 15 | Sunday School, 1 |
| Colleges, 15 | American Literary Union, 1 |
| Normal Schools, 8 | Department of Public Instruction, 1 |
| Manufacturers of School Furniture, 4 | Book Publishers, 8 |
| Makers of Scientific Apparatus, 13 | Miscellaneous, 5 |

Dr. Wickersham's policy on acceptance of students' work was simple: All should be accepted regardless of quality so that the examples would be representative. (We may be certain the teachers of the students exercised some discretion in which examples to submit!)

Sixteen other states mounted educational exhibits in the Main Exhibition Hall, but none approached the depth and scope or the quality of the Pennsylvania exhibits. Dr. Wickersham and the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction received lavish commendations for their efforts. Pennsylvania was described as being in the vanguard of educational progress.

Six Pennsylvania normal schools (Bloomsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Millersville, Shippensburg, and West Chester) entered exhibits. As might be expected, the State Normal School at Millersville (now Millersville University) at whose

birth Dr. Wickersham presided, entered a vast amount of material. The exhibit was singled out for an award, the only one among the teacher-training institutions. The Centennial Exposition catalogue lists these categories of the Millersville display:

STATE NORMAL SCHOOL, Millersville. — 1. A six feet Model of the Buildings. 2. Large descriptive Chart, giving the date of organization, growth and cost of the buildings, names of the Trustees and Faculty, course of study, and methods of professional training. 3. Four large Drawings, showing the internal arrangements of the buildings, and a number of Drawings by the Students. 4. Sixteen vols. Examination Papers, embracing Rhetoric, Letter-writing, English Grammar, Constitution of the United States, Analytical Geometry and Calculus, and Mental Philosophy. 5. Twelve vols. Theses selected from the classes of each year. 6. Thirty Theses bound in pamphlet form of the classes of 1874 and 1875. 7. Two bound vols. Catalogues from the beginning of the school in 1855 until the present time; and two vols. of "The Normal Monthly," edited by the principal. 8. Copies of Wickersham's "School Economy" and "Methods of Instruction;" Brooks's "Outlines of Professional Training," "Mathematical Works," fourteen volumes; Westlake's "3000 Practice Words," and "How to Write Letters;" Lyte's "Book-keeping," and "Institute Glee Book;" and several volumes by students and graduates of the school. 9. Other Text Books used in the school, and an old work on Mathematics published in 1676. 10. Text-Books used in all the Normal Schools of the State.

Other Lancaster County schools that were represented in the Pennsylvania Educational Hall were:

Children's Home of Lancaster, South Ann Street. Photographs
 Franklin & Marshall College, College Avenue. Map of the Buildings
 and Campus
 Lancaster County Schools, B.F. Shaub, Supt., (Award). Photographs,
 drawings, maps, students' work
 Mount Joy Soldiers' Orphans School (Award). Photographs of buildings,
 students' work
 Linden Hall Seminary, Lititz. Photographs

Other Lancaster County Entries at the Centennial Exposition

John Best (Award), Lancaster. Steam engines, agricultural machines
 Colin Cameron (Award), Marietta. Horses
 Conestoga Steam Cotton Mills (Award), Lancaster. Dyed Canton
 flannels and tickings
 (John Farnum & Co. of Philadelphia also received an award for its tickings
 produced in the Conestoga mills.)

F. A. Diffenderffer, Lancaster. Dogs
 E. R. Edwards, Columbia. Axle rolls
 H. M. Engle & Son (Award), Marietta. Fruits
 Eureka Bark Mill Co., Lancaster. Bark mills
 Thomas B. Farbing (Award). Pointer dogs

Pearson E. Gruger, Lancaster. Marble carving
 Harrauff & Engle, Elizabethtown Tobacco
 Amos Hollinger (Award), Lancaster and Columbia. Oak harness
 leather
 Charles M. Howell, Lancaster. Marble monuments
 Huber and McCarter, Lancaster. Steam meat chopper
 Lancaster County Horticultural and Agricultural Society
 (Award), Lancaster. Apples
 Israel L Landis (Award), Lancaster. Leaf tobacco, gates and
 fencing models, step ladder
 H. Landis (Award), Lancaster. Safety swingle tree
 T. K. Landis, Lancaster. Models of fencing
 Philip Lebzelter (Award), Lancaster. Spokes, felloes and shafts
 for wagons
 J. A. Leippe (Award), Lancaster. Rims and shafts, bent woods
 Charles E. Long (Award), Lancaster. Poultry
 Henry Martin, Lancaster. Brickmaking machines
 John Matthews (Award), Pleasant Grove. Butter pressing machine
 Hattie E. McPherrin, Millersville. Wax cross
 Lloyd Mifflin, Columbia. Oil Paintings
 Henry S. Neff, Manheim. Detacher
 J. G. Pfautz (Award), Lititz. Horses and dogs
 Jeremiah Rohrer, Lancaster. Refrigerator-water cooler combination
 D. Root & Son, Mount Joy. Iron and steel plows
 John P. Schaum (Award). Copper kettles and copper ware
 Philip Schum, Lancaster. Coverlets and counterpanes
 I. Frederick Sener (Award), Lancaster. Peaches
 Daniel Smeryech (Award). Fruits
 George Speihlman, Lancaster. Meat chopper
 P. M. Stackhouse, Lancaster. Agricultural sundries
 Sarah M. Stoner and S.G. Porter, Lancaster. Grain fans
 S. M. Stone, Lancaster. Grain
 Isaac Yost, West Earl. Horses

Epilogue

Although the Centennial Exposition was supposed to close 10 November 1876, an effort was made to create a permanent exhibition park. The effort was not successful. On 1 December 1876, an auction was held to dispose of most of the buildings. Only Memorial Hall and Horticultural Hall were to be retained. The others had to be removed. Some were disassembled and moved to other locations, such as the Maryland building which was reerected in Druid Hill Park in Baltimore; and the Centennial Catalogue Building which was hauled out to Strafford on the Mainline where it continues to serve as the railroad station. Memorial Hall still stands in Fairmount Park on its original site, and

during the 1960s it was restored at a cost of \$1,500,000—the original cost to build it! Horticultural Hall was not maintained well, and after Hurricane Hazel battered it badly, it was torn down in 1955. The 247 “temporary” fair buildings were constructed primarily of wood, and covered with a plaster or mastic coating to resemble stone. Timbers salvaged from the wrecked buildings were used to build hundreds of residences in the Philadelphia area. The Corliss engine was bought by the Pullman Company for its car manufacturing shops.

Dr. James Pyle Wickersham was born in Chester County, 5 March 1825. After studying at the Unionville Academy, he became a teacher, and soon took a position as principal of the Marietta Academy, where he remained for ten years. From this post he moved to the superintendency of Lancaster County schools, and then to develop the teacher training institution that became Millersville State Normal School, which he headed from 1856 to 1866. Wickersham was appointed Superintendent of Public Instruction for Pennsylvania by Governor Curtin, serving from 1866 to 1881, after which he held the post of Minister to Denmark for a year. He was a Republican and was Master of Lodge No. 43, F.&A.M. 1876 to 1877. He died 25 March 1891.

James Adam Burger, the builder of the Pennsylvania Educational Hall, was born in Allendorf, Prussia, on 20 December 1828. After serving an apprenticeship as a carpenter, he came to the United States in 1849, and later that year became associated with B. B. Martin in Millersville. By 1869 he was one of Lancaster’s major building contractors. He was a Republican and member of First Reformed Church. He died 19 November 1903.

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