

THE NASHVILLE PARTHENON

Background

The 1897 Centennial Exposition, held in Nashville, Tennessee, celebrated the state's centennial and showcased advancements in industry, agriculture, and culture, attracting nearly two million visitors.

It took place from 1 May to 30 October, 1897 in Nashville, marking the 100th anniversary of Tennessee's admission to the Union. Although the actual centennial occurred in 1896, the exposition was delayed due to economic conditions and disagreements among the state's divisions. The event was officially opened by President William McKinley, who activated the Fair's machinery from the White House via telegraph

That was quite an event in itself!

The exposition was held in what is now Centennial Park, covering approximately 200 acres. The grounds featured neoclassical architecture, a man-made lake (Lake Watauga), and elaborate landscaping, inspired by the Chicago World Exposition of 1893.

A full-scale replica of the Parthenon was constructed as a centrepiece, symbolising Nashville's nickname as the "Athens of the South."

Where did that nickname come from? Just as Athens in Greece was recognized centuries ago as the centre of learning, so Nashville was accredited from its very beginning as a community where the attributes of learning, and the appreciation of the fine arts were reflected in the leadership of its' men and women in all walks of life.

(This is the first parallel with Edinburgh which is often referred to as The Athens of the North due to its' rich cultural, intellectual, and architectural heritage, which also draw parallels to ancient Athens.)

The exposition featured over 100 buildings and numerous exhibits showcasing Tennessee's leading industries including agriculture, commerce, education, fine arts,

history, machinery, minerals and forestry, and transportation. Others had special exhibits related to children, women and the United States Government. Many cities and organizations built buildings and exhibit halls on the Exposition grounds.

The City of Memphis featured a large pyramid in its exhibit – a replica of the Great Pyramid of Cheops - in honour of its' Egyptian name. The Parthenon and the Pyramid were located next to each other on the shore of Lake Wautaga. Both the exhibits were lit at night. The separate Egyptian Pavilion featured belly dancers which were said to be very popular. During the exposition, Italian-style gondolas plied the lake, carrying tourists by water between exhibits.

It attracted nearly two million visitors, although it fell short of its goal of three million due to factors like the yellow fever outbreak in the Gulf States, which deterred some potential attendees.

The total attendance was 1,786,714, of which the total paid attendance was 1,166,692. The total receipts were \$1,101,285 (equivalent to \$35.6 million in 2024), and the disbursements \$1,101,246 (equivalent to \$35 million in 2024)

Unlike most World's Fairs, it did not lose money, but the final accounting showed a direct profit of less than \$50.

The Centennial Exposition was a great success and is still considered one of the most notable events ever to be held in the state. It helped to promote Nashville as a cultural and industrial centre in the New South.

The Ideas Men

So, whose idea was it to build a replica of the Parthenon?

The Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railroad played a central role in the promotion and success of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, and carried tourists to the event. John W. Thomas, who was president of the Railroad at the time, served as president of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition.

Major Eugene Castner Lewis, who was the chief civil engineer for the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railroad, served as the director general of the Exposition. It was Lewis who suggested that a full-scale replica of the original Parthenon in Athens, should be built in Nashville as the centrepiece of Tennessee's Centennial Celebration to highlight the city as the "Athens of the South".

He was responsible for constructing the exposition buildings but his involvement extended to the design of the landscape, reflecting pools and the planting.

Interestingly, he never actually served in the military, he simply adopted the title of Major.

The Architect

The Parthenon was a full-scale replica of the original in Athens, Greece. It was designed by the architect William Crawford Smith (1837 – 1899). He was an interesting man - he designed many buildings in Nashville, including Kirkland Hall, the first building on the campus of Vanderbilt University. He served in the Confederate States Army during the American Civil War and in the United States Army during the Philippine- American War.

During the American Civil War he returned to Virginia, joined the Confederate States Army and served as a sergeant and ensign in the 12th Virginia Infantry. He fought in the First Battle of Bull Run (which was the first major battle of the Civil War), the Battle of Richmond, the Second Battle of Bull Run (which marked a turning point in the war and allowed the Confederate General Robert E Lee to gain momentum), and the Battle of Gettysburg. He was wounded twice in the war effort.

Smith quit his architectural career to serve in the Philippine-American War, where he commanded the 1st Tennessee Infantry Regiment of the United States Army in 1898–1899.

Smith died of heat exhaustion during the Battle of Manila in the Philippines in February 1899. His body was shipped back to San Francisco, where it received a Masonic service. Shortly after, it was returned to Nashville, where it lay in the Nashville Masonic Temple. He was buried at the Mount Olivet Cemetery

Timeline

The timeline for this Parthenon is quite interesting

1895 Tennessee Centennial organisers lay the first foundation stone of the Nashville Parthenon. The Parthenon, made of plaster, wood and brick, is the first building to begin construction for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition.

1897 The Tennessee Centennial Exposition is held between May and October 1897. Like a world's fair, all the exhibit buildings are temporary and made of inexpensive materials.

1898 The majority of the Centennial buildings are moved or destroyed but the Parthenon remains the centrepiece of the empty fair grounds. The Parthenon was not intended to be permanent, but the cost of demolishing the structure combined with its popularity with residents and visitors alike resulted in it being left standing after the Exposition.

It was so popular that it continued to be used for plays and pageants.

1901 The Nashville Board of Parks is created (Chaired by a familiar face - John W. Thomas, who served as president of the Tennessee Centennial Exposition)

1902 Centennial Park is established out of much of the Tennessee Centennial grounds. The Parthenon stands at the centre of the new municipal park.

1915 The temporary nature of the Centennial Parthenon is obvious. The pediment sculptures – or porticos - are removed for safety reasons.

1920 The city of Nashville decides to make the Parthenon a permanent structure to be created from brick, stone, structural reinforced concrete, and cast concrete aggregate. Local architect Russell Hart is hired for the reconstruction on the exact same site. He had previously designed the Tennessee Governor's Mansion.

1925 The exterior of the newly reconstructed Parthenon is complete.

1927 From 1927 – 1929, James Cowan donates 63 paintings to the city of Nashville with the understanding that they will hang in the newly renovated Parthenon and he will remain anonymous until his death. Cowan was a Scots/Irish philanthropist who had made his money in insurance. He had a vast art collection of about 700 paintings but this donation was all American artists and mostly impressionist. You can still see this collection today.

1931 The interior of the replica is complete. The Parthenon re-opens to the public as a city museum on May 20, 1931 10 years after the decision to rebuild;. It cost approximately \$1,000,000.

1982 Alan LeQuire is commissioned to re-create Athena Parthenos in Nashville to scholarly standards. She is wears armour and a helmet, carries a shield on her left arm, she has a 6-foot-high statue of Nike (Victory) in her right palm, and stands 42 feet high, gilded with more than 8 pounds of gold leaf; an equally colossal serpent rears its head between her and her shield.

According to the sculptor she is the largest indoor sculpture in the western hemisphere.

1987 – 1988 Interior renovation of the lower level is completed, providing improved galleries, art storage, exhibit prep areas, a new gift shop, and expanded restroom facilities.

1990 The Nashville Athena Parthenos is unveiled to the public on May 20, 1990.

1991 A fence surrounds the Parthenon as further restoration begins.

2001 The restoration of Nashville's second Parthenon is complete and the official unveiling celebration is held on December 31, 2001.

Interestingly, the Parthenon in Athens which was carved out of Pentelic marble took the Athenians approximately 10 years to construct; so, a very similar timeline to Nashville! If you were to try and build an exact replica of this today, using the same materials, the cost would be between 500 million and 1 billion euros.

2002 The Athena statue is placed back in scaffolding as the gilding process begins. The statue is being gilded in gold to more closely resemble the original Athena Parthenos

2016 Tennessee Woman Suffrage Monument revealed outside of The Parthenon. The piece, created by Nashville sculptor Alan LeQuire (who also created Athena), was commissioned to commemorate the importance of Tennessee's pivotal role in granting women the right to vote.

Le Quire specialises in large scale work – he also created a life size sculpture of Jack Daniels which is located at the distillery in Lynchburg.

2025 The Parthenon celebrates the 35th anniversary of the unveiling of the Athena Parthenos statue

Facts and Figures

Each Parthenon is 65 feet high at its apex

Each has 46 Doric columns - 17 on each side, six on each end

All the exterior columns incline slightly inward. Scholars disagree on the precise reasons for these refinements, but they seem to enhance the aesthetic functions of the building.

The columns of the buildings differ in diameter from the ones beside them and they are all spaced slightly differently.

The interior of each Parthenon is divided into two rooms. The east room is called the Naos and it houses the statue of Athena. The west room is called the Treasury. In the Classical period, this room housed the treasure of the Delian League, a prominent alliance of between 150 and 300 city-states with Athens at its helm, which was set up to defend against Persian aggression.

Today

Today, the Parthenon, which functions as an art museum, wedding venue, concert hall, movie set, blood donation venue, and meeting space stands as the centrepiece of Centennial Park, just west of downtown Nashville. Alan Le Quire's 1990 re-creation of the Athena statue is the focus of the Parthenon, just as it was in ancient Greece. You can visit it for \$15.

The Parthenon served as the location for the political rally in the climactic scene of Robert Altman's 1975 film Nashville.

Since the building is complete and its decorations were painted in colours as close to the original as possible, this replica of the original Parthenon in Athens serves as a monument to what is considered the pinnacle of classical architecture. The plaster replicas of the Parthenon Marbles found in the Treasury Room (the west room of the main hall) are direct casts of the original sculptures which adorned the pediments of the Athenian Parthenon, dating to 438 BC. The surviving originals are housed in the British Museum and at the Acropolis Museum in Athens.

I'm guessing that the builders had to come to London to make the casts!

Edinburgh's Disgrace

Here's another parallel between Athens, Nashville and Edinburgh.

In 1822 work began in Edinburgh to construct a National Monument to commemorate the men of Scotland who had lost their lives during the long years of war with France. Calton Hill had been purchased for the people by Edinburgh's Town Council in 1724, making it an early example of a public park in Britain, and the elevated site was chosen for the new monument. After considering various forms the city decided to erect a replica of the Parthenon, giving Edinburgh its very own Acropolis.

Charles Robert Cockerell was asked to design the building along with William Henry Playfair.

Cockerell was an English architect who had looted some Greek Marbles during his Grand Tour.

William Henry Playfair was a Scottish architect who had designed much of Edinburgh's New Town, Old College of the University of Edinburgh, the National Gallery of Scotland and the Royal Scottish Academy. The killer steps up to the Mound are named after him.

A committee of nobleman and local grandees had been tasked with raising the funds, and they were confident that the cost would not exceed £40,000. The Earl of Elgin was one of those involved and helpfully offered some of the mementoes he had 'brought home' from Greece as models during construction. His 'specimens of the Entablatures' of the Parthenon would of course become known as the Elgin Marbles.

The foundation stone was laid on 27 August 1822 but work was slow – a team of horses and 70 men were required to haul each of the large stones up Calton Hill - and the money soon ran out. Playfair wrote to Cockerell in London in June 1829 to report that 'Our Parthenon is come to a dead halt... and what is to be done next I know not. I suppose, Nothing!'

Playfair was right: building ceased and the monument was soon dubbed 'Scotland's Folly' and 'Edinburgh's Disgrace'. Although there have been numerous proposals to complete the structure over the centuries it remains a roofless shell, albeit a very handsome one.



OPENS MAY 1ST

TENNESSEE CENTENNIAL EXPOSITION
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE,
1897.

CLOSES OCT. 31ST

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