

# Charleston's big fair was a pack of trouble

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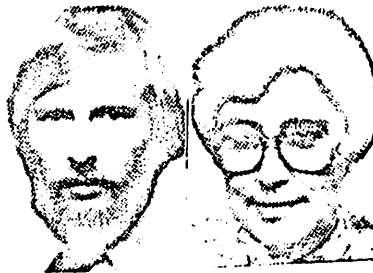
At the beginning of the 20th century, Charleston decided to hold an exposition. Its purpose was to attract industry, money and attention from the outside world. In recent years, Charleston had slipped in importance as a port city, and the exposition was an effort to regain its former position.

The idea of an exposition was nothing new. Such regional expositions were then in vogue, inspired by the 1851 London Crystal Palace and the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial expositions. The Charleston enterprise, which became known as the South Carolina Interstate and West Indian Exposition, lasted from December 1901 until May of 1902. To get the project started, F.W. Wagener, a public-spirited citizen, gave money and a large tract of land. A corporation was established and money solicited.

The exposition was plagued with financial troubles from the start. Although the promoters of the exposition had billed it as a world's fair, there was little support outside of Charleston. Sen. Ben Tillman had introduced a bill in Congress asking for \$25,000 in support of the exposition, but it was defeated.

Even the money given to the project by Charleston was mainly provided by a few individuals. Many prominent people in the community who had money failed to get involved with the project.

## South Carolina's story



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While the exposition was in progress, labor troubles almost ended the affair. Then there was bad weather and rumors that the exposition was closing. This caused many potential visitors to cancel their visits.

Still the exposition managed to go on. An illustrated yearbook prepared in advance to publicize the occasion claimed that exhibits from every state in the Union and the principal islands of the West Indies would be featured. In reality only South Carolina, North Carolina, Louisiana and Missouri had notable exhibits.

There were many wonderful sights available to make one gaze about in wonder. The yearbook described it as a "fairy land of palaces, towers and gardens, which are springing up there like magic

under the trunk of 20th century wizards." There was an electrical palace, a machinery building, a lake, a "Cotton Palace" and a "Negro Building."

The "Negro Building" caused some controversy. Elaborate statuary was built in front of the building. The exposition yearbook called the statuary "the Negro Group" and said its purpose was "to embody as nearly as possible that side of the race which its able representative Booker T. Washington had provided so long and successfully." However, many of the blacks who viewed the artwork considered it an insult. There was even a threat to destroy the statuary.

Although the exposition was not as successful as its planners had hoped, some good was derived by Charleston and South Carolina. Even with all the problems, throngs of people came. This brought in money, creating work for many people. Attention was indeed drawn to Charleston and the state, showing the industrial and commercial potential that was available.

Whether or not industry came to Charleston as a result of the exposition is debatable. With the exception of the United Fruit Company, which opened a branch office, the American Cigar Company and the Oyster Canning Establishment, there is little evidence to show any relocation of industry to Charleston after the exposition.

When the exposition closed, the corporation was badly in debt. A reluctant Congress eventually appropriated \$60,000 to help out the backers of South Carolina's "World Fair."