

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
1776 ↔ 1876
CENTENNIAL INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION

120th Anniversary Souvenir Card - 1996

There was only one Centennial International Exhibition ever held in the United States of America! It was the first major event of it's magnitude ever to be held in America, and would establish many precedents, trends and formats adopted by future expositions and fairs. That historic event celebrated opening day, May 10, 1876 on 285 acres of redeveloped fields and ravines in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. President, and Mrs. Grant along with Emperor Dom Pedro II, and the Empress Theresa, of Brazil, the first reigning monarchs to visit the United States, presided at opening ceremonies where, lacking a national anthem, "Hail Columbia" was played.

Speeches, music, parades, a 100 gun artillery salute, and a procession proceeded from the grand stand at Memorial Hall to Machinery Hall. It was here, amidst a vast array of mechanical wizardry that the President and Emperor threw a silver-plated switch on a giant steam powered engine, starting all machines in the hall. The great Centennial International Exhibition was underway!

Dozens of countries from around the globe, along with virtually all of the then 37 States, in addition to western territories were represented at the Exhibition in some 294 structures. At least one structure, the Main Building, encompassing a site enclosing 20 acres (the equivalent of almost twenty-seven football fields) housed nearly 14,000 product exhibits of almost every description! Each exhibitor showcased the latest industrial, agricultural, scientific, educational and artistic achievements of the day. Of the original 294 structures erected for the event, only one permanent structure remained, the Ohio Building, which was constructed of stone.

The Centennial International Exhibition was indeed an achievement of historic proportions. America, like other nations, was then suffering through a world-wide business depression as a result of the 1873 "Black Friday" stock market crash. The "West" was struggling to settle itself, and General George Armstrong Custer would suffer a great massacre at Little Big Horn only forty-six days after opening ceremonies, an event which overshadowed Fourth of July festivities in this, our Nation's 100th Year, and sealed the fate of Native Americans struggling to survive in their homeland. 1876 was also an election year with both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates taking full advantage in addressing Exhibition crowds.

Many Americans considered a visit to the Centennial Exhibition their "patriotic" duty. It was educational, accessible and besides, it was fun! Best of all, the price of admission was only fifty cents! After all, where else could one see such wonders as the towering arm and torch of the soon to be erected "Statue of Liberty". To accommodate anticipated crowds, the Pennsylvania and Reading Railroads laid new tracks and built Centennial stations. In a little over 5 months, they ran over 66,000 trains, transporting nearly 6 million visitors to the event.

In all, the Centennial International Exhibition ran 159 days, officially closing on November 10, 1876. It was attended by over 9 million visitors, breaking all previous international exhibition records. Following the Exhibition's closing, many exhibitors found it cost effective to leave their exhibits at the site "donating" them to the U.S. Government rather than pay return shipping costs. Upon closing, more than 40 railroad freight cars transported various objects from Philadelphia to Washington, DC in what was to be the foundation of the Smithsonian's National Museum collection.

In the early planning stages of the event, the Centennial Commission determined that the fifty-cent note (currency) or piece of money issued by the National Government should be the recognized "ticket" of admission. The idea of printing an actual "admission ticket" appears to be somewhat of an after-thought. It soon became apparent to Commission officials, however, that the concept of making "fifty cents" in currency the admission "ticket" did not serve the needs of area businesses wishing to buy advance "tickets" to the event for distribution to employees or customers. Thus, the concept of a printed "admission ticket" became a reality. This proved to be a wise decision, even though, initially, the promotional value and subsequent residual revenue benefit of the printed ticket concept was not fully appreciated. It was soon discovered, however, that printed tickets served to satisfy the collector interests of Exhibition visitors, with many tickets remaining unused and held as "souvenirs" of the historic event. This precedent would be successfully copied and exploited in the planning of future events such as the 1892 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, as well as other expositions and fairs.

Services of the Philadelphia Bank Note company were engaged for the purpose of printing tickets, invitations and "tax stamps" used in connection with the Exhibition. Only one basic variety of admission ticket is known, with several minor varieties designated as first, second and third issues. The first issue contains a pink tinted background on the reverse side of the ticket. The second issue ticket's reverse side retains a white background and the third issue contains a green tinted background on the reverse. Second issue tickets contain the letter "A" and third issue tickets contain the letter "H" on the face side. A quantity of second issue tickets also bear the open face-text "FIFTY CENTS" overprinted in red on the face side. All tickets were intaglio printed in black ink on both sides, on white card stock, and serial numbered either in red (even numbers) or blue (odd numbers) on the face side. All admission tickets share the same common design elements with the front employing a design consisting of text related to the Centennial Exhibition, and the reverse featuring a central vignette of a seated allegorical female figure.

Original tickets to the event are relatively common. Even today, 120 years after the Exhibition, they can often be found at collectible shows for several dollars each, a relative bargain considering their attachment to such a historic event. Tickets were originally printed in sheet format (subject size unknown) then cut into the familiar individual ticket format and numbered. To accommodate this process, transfers would have had to been made from the original die to create the multi-subject printing plate(s).

Over the past century, the original die lay dormant, and only now, on the occasion of the Exhibition's 120th Anniversary has it been used, for the very first time, to print a Limited 200 Edition Souvenir Card. The card, was carefully designed by SCCS member, Rich Brinton, in a victorian motif with an accompanying text and vignette format typical of the Centennial era and character. The limited edition souvenir cards were printed by both the intaglio and offset printing process by Bureau of Engraving and Printing plate printer, Mike Bean. Each card required eight separate press passes, and are individually numbered #001 through #200. The Liberty Bell and Eagle vignettes are intaglio printed in brown, with the Centennial admission ticket's reverse design intaglio printed in green from the original die. Text, lettering and border design are printed by both the intaglio and offset process in black. Edition numbers appear in red at the bottom of each card, which is printed on cream-color stock measuring 10" wide by 8" high. Single cards are priced at \$20 each with several individual numbered cards in the edition priced slightly higher. Card #001 is priced at \$150 and is surely to be prized by that specific collector.

A limited edition of 10 "Progressive Proof" sets were also printed, each containing eight individual cards that highlight the various stages of production. The completed final card in each of these sets bears an edition number of #000. Progressive Proof sets are relatively scarce in the collector market and serve as an educational reference for interested collectors. Progressive Proof sets are priced at \$195 per set.

A separately printed set of two offset "Collector Cards" has also been produced for the purpose of mounting actual examples of original Centennial Admission Tickets along with the minor varieties known to exist. Collector Cards are similar to the "Limited Edition" Souvenir Cards and contain appropriate text related to original admission tickets. They lack the intaglio vignettes present on the Limited Edition cards. They are priced at \$3 per set, with no order limit on quantities. (Collectors may desire several sets to mount their personal Centennial admission ticket collection.)

Requests for cards may be directed to Rich Brinton at P.O. Box 922, Union, New Jersey 07083. Phone (908) 964-4724 evenings. A maximum of 5 Limited Edition cards and 1 Progressive Proof set per order may be requested while supplies last. (Collectors are asked to send a separate check for Progressive Proof sets when ordering, as these sets are extremely limited and are subject to prior sale.)

ARTICLE SOURCES: "United States Centennial Commission - International Exhibition 1876 - Report of the Director General Including Reports of The Bureau of Administration" (Washington, DC. Government Printing Office 1880)

"1876 - A Centennial Exhibition" by Robert C. Post, Editor. (The National Museum of History and Technology - Smithsonian Institution. (Washington, DC 1976)

World's Columbian Exposition - "Report of The President to the Board of Directors of the World's Columbian Exposition" - Chicago 1892 - 1893. (Chicago - Rand McNally & Co. 1898)

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