Meet Me at the Fair:
Southern State Buildings at American World's Fairs, 1893-1916

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Introduction

Between the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1915-1917 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, a dozen World's Fairs or similar major expositions took place in the United States. Starting in 1893, fair organizers set aside spaces where individual states could erect buildings promoting their history, economy, and culture. In some cases, these buildings were supported with funds from state governments, while in other cases, the funds were raised from private businesses under the auspices of a state commission. At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, there were eight buildings representing states from the South, but none came from the Deep South. The first representation of the Deep South was at the Cotton States Exposition held in Atlanta in 1895. The famed 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis had nine state structures from the South. The crowning achievement of this era came at the Jamestown Exposition of 1907, which is the most important example of southern state buildings at any exposition. In addition to the variety of state buildings, the United Daughters of the Confederacy constructed its own building, and Virginia history took center stage at the fair. After Jamestown, the practice of state buildings declined, so that there are only a few examples from the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition onward.

Historiography

World's Fairs are typically examined as pieces of cultural or social history, and for the South there has been an emphasis on race and these fairs. A variety of scholars, most notably Bruce K. Harvey, Theda Purdue, and Nathan Cardon, have examined world's fairs held in the South. Their focus has largely been on the 1895 exposition in Atlanta and the 1897 exposition in Nashville, with limited attention given to the 1901-02 exposition in Charleston or the 1907 exposition in Jamestown.

Perhaps the preeminent scholar of World's Fairs is Robert Rydell, who has focused on race and empire at World's Fairs. The Smithsonian's book *Fair America* by Rydell, John E. Findling, and Kimberly D. Pelle divides world's fairs into four distinct eras, and Southern state buildings were most prominent during the first two. The first of these eras, the "Age of Industrialism's Advance," included Chicago in 1893 and the fairs in Atlanta and Nashville. Omaha in 1898 inaugurated the "Imperial Era" of fairs, which lasted until World War I.

Scholars studying World's Fairs as a whole, and scholars studying individual fairs, tend to focus on the larger buildings, the foreign exhibits, and the amusement attractions. The smaller buildings covering individual states have received less attention. What sets these buildings apart is how they were created. Individual states worked to create scaled-down versions of themselves for wider audiences. How states chose to depict themselves offers insight into the audiences they hoped to attract and whether they were focused on attracting businesses or tourists.

Research and Analysis

The World's Columbian Exposition was the first fair with dedicated state buildings. Several states from the Deep South refused to participate as a protest against the Lodge Federal Elections Bill (the "Force Bill") of 1890. Only two Southern states would build replicas of historic structures: the Castillo de San Marcos for Florida, and Mount Vernon for Virginia. Other buildings focused on architectural styles representing different periods of the state's history. These buildings sometimes were modeled on residential architecture, but at other times were more fanciful. Period descriptions of these buildings emphasize the products from these states that were on display.

The 1904 St. Louis fair featured a series of historical reconstructions, including replicas of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, Jefferson Davis' Beauvoir, and John B. Gordon's Sutherland. Other reconstructions were at the 1907 exposition in Jamestown and the 1915 exposition in San Francisco. There were also several buildings during this period designed as model homes. Florida at Jamestown built the "ideal Florida home," and displayed photographs of resort hotels, while Arkansas at San Francisco created a bungalow as an exhibit. San Francisco is notable as the only fair on the West Coast to feature a building dedicated to a southern state during this period.

The buildings before 1900 seem to have had a much greater emphasis on the New South's ideas of industrialization, with exhibits on natural resources and economic potential. These themes persist after 1900, but interest in historical reconstruction and model homes marks a shift towards attracting tourists and potential residents to the South.

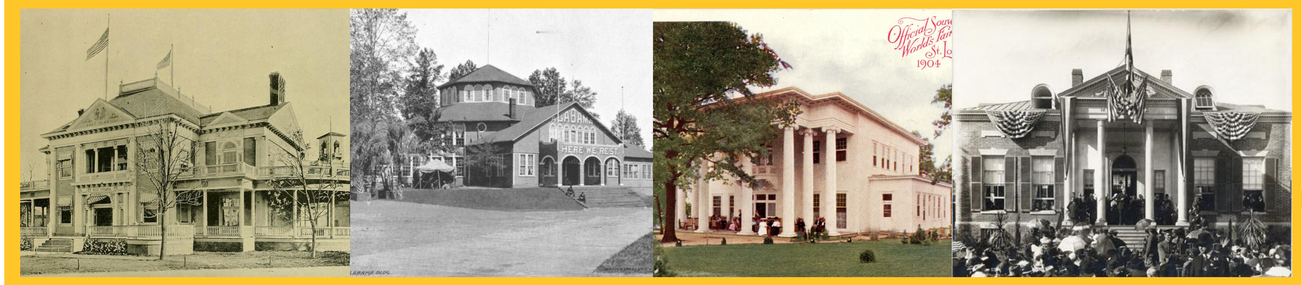


Figure 1: Left to right: West Virginia 1893, Alabama 1897, Georgia 1904, and Maryland 1915

Conclusions

In the 1890s, state governments tended to focus on their natural resources and economic potential to attract business investment. After the turn of the century, there was a much greater emphasis on the history and architecture of the South, with replicas of historic Southern buildings becoming more common. The construction of model houses also indicates a stronger interest in attracting both tourists and new residents.

These buildings offer a unique window into how Southern states (particularly state governments) marketed themselves during the Progressive Era. They reveal what parts of the region were seen as distinct, meaningful, and marketable to audiences outside the South. These products of boosterism were a vital way tourists interacted with the South, both inside and outside its borders.

Questions for Future Research

- Who spearheaded the efforts to build these buildings within these states?
- How were the replica historic sites selected?
- Were these buildings tied to historic preservation efforts?
- This period coincides with the growth of Florida tourism, but that state funded few World's Fair buildings. Why?
- How do these trends map to other states?

References

A full list of references and related materials can be found via this QR code.
https://tinyurl.com/2pynwxue

	1893 Chicago	1895 Atlanta	1897 Nashville	1898 Omaha	1901 Buffalo	1901-2 Charleston	1904 St. Louis	1905 Portland	1907 Jamestown	1909 Seattle	1915 San Francisco	1915-1917** San Diego
Alabama												
Arkansas			The Alamo*									
Florida	Castilo de San Marco											
Georgia							Sutherland (J. B. Gordon)		Bulloch Hall (Mittie Roosevelt)			
Kentucky									Fort Boone			
Louisiana							The Cabildo					
Maryland									Homewood (Charles Carroll)		Homewood (Charles Carroll)	
Mississippi							Beauvoir (Jefferson Davis)					
North Carolina												
Oklahoma												
South Carolina												
Tennessee							The Hermitage					
Texas			The Alamo*									
Virginia	Mount Vernon						Monticello				Mount Vernon	
West Virginia									Blennerhassett Mansion			

* Texas and Arkansas shared a building ** Fair closed on January 1, 1917

Table 1: Southern State Buildings at American World's Fairs, 1893-1916

State building
Replica of historic structure