

Leaders of Afro-American Nashville

Tennessee Centennial Exposition: The African American Community

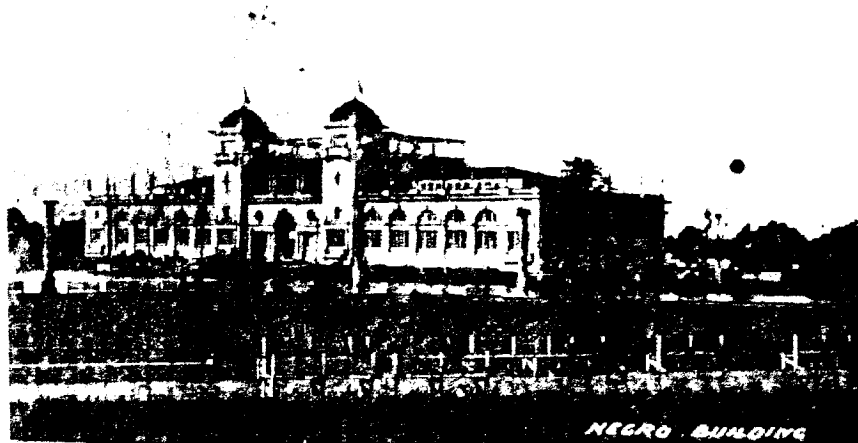
The Tennessee Centennial Exposition opened May 1, 1897, about a year after the U.S. Supreme Court declared that "separate but equal" racial segregation was constitutional. Frederick Douglass and one Negro newspaper editor called the decision "the most damnable outrage."

According to the official history of the exposition, edited by Herman Justi, the Tennessee Centennial Exposition had nothing to do with race. It was staged for inspiration and pure patriotism. The expressed desire was to "advertise and develop the matchless and bountiful resources of Tennessee, to increase its population by inviting desirable settlers, and to increase its wealth by tempting foreign capital was an afterthought and subordinate to the noble objectives of honoring the memory and commemorating the deeds of the pioneers of the great commonwealth."

Although some militant Negroes, like Ida B. Wells, argued that African Americans should not

participate in segregated expositions, others believed that these huge fairs were beneficial to the African-American community and could provide exposure for the post-Emancipation progress made by freedmen and their descendants. Some organizers believed that Tennessee's Negro exhibitions would be superior to the ones included in the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, where in September of 1895 Booker T. Washington made his racial compromise speech.

The all-European American executive committee formed the Negro Department to foster racial cooperation and include some Negro exhibits at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. Attorney James Carroll Napier was selected chief of the Negro Department. On August 31, 1896, however, Napier resigned because of "health and business reasons" and quiet protest about the need for a Negro Building and the "proper" set of exhibits. Napier and the "aristocrats of color" were offended by the Tennessee Exposition's inclusion of slaves picking



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cotton - an exhibit that the European Americans adored. Meanwhile, elite blacks insisted on a Negro Building. John Hope of local Roger Williams University had seen the impressive Negro Building and heard Washington speak in Atlanta. Pictures of Atlanta's Negro Building appeared in *Alexander's Magazine*, edited by elite Negroes. "If you are to have a Negro Building, why has not the plan...been accepted?" said Napier.

Assuming the chair for the Negro Department was a more compromising Negro, Richard Hill, a local public school teacher who owed his job to the city. His father was Jim Hill whose Hill String Band had performed in Nashville since slavery days, when the wealthiest families called on Uncle Jim Hill to play at their balls and dances. Hill's other committee members included men and women who avoided conflict and more easily accommodated the European Americans' conservative racial attitudes: Randal B. Vandavall (minister), M. B. Salter (minister), Evans Tyree (minister), Samuel A. McElwee (attorney), Preston Taylor (minister), S. A. Walker (businessman), J. H. Petway (businessman), F. A. Stewart (physician), W. S. Thompson (businessman), and W. T. Hightower (junk dealer). Hill's organization also included a Negro women's committee.

The more racially accommodationist committee under Hill was able to persuade the Centennial's executive committee to approve the plans for the Negro Building. At noon on March 13, 1897, a cornerstone-laying ceremony was held for a Negro Building. At a cost of more than \$13,000 the Negro

Building was an imposing structure of Spanish Renaissance design, measuring 80 by 250 feet. It had two stories, with a pavilion including a restaurant. Frederick Thompson was the architect for the building.

Every effort was made to display racial cooperation and tranquility in this New South city, Nashville. Professor Hill, already a disciple of B. T. Washington's racial accommodationist philosophy, said: "We (Negroes) are now on trial - the most severe test as to what we have done, and are now doing, since our emancipation." He admonished militant Negroes for focusing on Jim Crow instead of the good in race relations. Hill said that Jim Crow "is for your own good." To quiet rumors about a Negro boycott, the executive committee provided free railroad passes for Hill and his colleagues to tour the state, telling Negroes that the fair was not totally segregated. There were special days for the Negroes, including Fisk University Day, Negro Employees Day, Central Tennessee College Day, Alumni Meharry Medical College Day, National Race Council Day, Emancipation Day, and American Medical Association of Colored Physicians Day. Booker T. Washington was the speaker for the opening Negro Day ceremonies.

By the close of the exposition, October 30, 1897, African Americans were awarded 31 certificates of commendation, 3 gold medals, 5 silver medals, and 19 bronze medals.

- Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.