“Saving the City’s Reputation”: Philadelphia’s Struggle over Self-Identity, Sabbath-Breaking and Boxing in America’s Sesquicentennial Year

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Before his assassination at Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition in 1901, President William McKinley observed that international fairs were the “timekeepers” of history because they captured a moment in time which chronicled “the world’s advancement.” Between America’s centennial and sesquicentennial years, the country staged thirteen major expositions with more than 100 million persons attending. The first and the last of these were held in Philadelphia, the great city of American independence, which self-consciously prided itself on being the “moral custodian” of that independence. In twice celebrating the nation’s birth, the city invited all people “to assemble at the most sacred spot on the American continent” to commemorate the most important event “since the beginning of the Christian era.” If the Declaration of Independence was man’s most important document, then Philadelphia was his most representative city. “All that this country has been, is, or will be has its fountainhead in Philadelphia,” said the city’s mayor as he prepared to greet the nation on the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of its founding.

Contemporaries considered the fifty years separating Philadelphia’s 1876 and 1926 civic celebrations an often painful period in American life. Willa Cather thought it an era in which “the world broke in two” with a growing gulf separating familiar tradition and fretful modernity. An order that seemed comprehensible appeared to be disappearing and what George Santayana called “a new civilization” was taking its place. A veteran newspaper editor noted that “since the war the public mind has become highly excited. The national nerves have not returned to normal.” Historians have described the anxiety as the conflict between Victorian “certainty” and modern man’s search for “moral order and authority.” To cultural commentators of the Jazz Age, a nation of 110 million that had once known “unity of purpose” and something approaching “spiritual resolve” during the Great War now seemed near a “nervous breakdown.” Philadelphia’s sesquicentennial cele-
bration served as civic forum on these tensions and reflects the distance the city had travelled in the fifty years following its debut as America's centennial city. This study analyzes that sesquicentennial celebration of 1926 in the context of the expositions that preceded it and the controversy which followed it. The fair was plagued by problems common to international expositions. Philadelphia's sesquicentennial commemoration faced construction delays and rain days which dampened crowd size. Event organizers seized on these difficulties in explaining the fair's spectacular failure. But wet weather and construction difficulties were the rule and not the exception during the period Americans showed a passion for "the religion of world's fairs." And although city fathers later claimed the project was "undertaken as a patriotic duty" and was "never intended to be a money-maker," internal documents show the fair was promoted to the city's business community as a way of "advancing the city's material progress" while "confirming for all-time Philadelphia's claim as the great historic city of America."  

Philadelphia's widely publicized sesquicentennial, launched on May 31, 1926 as "a perpetual memorial" to the founding fathers and offering "a hearty handclasp to the nation," closed six months later amid court fights, massive municipal debt and public acrimony. The decision by sesquicentennial authorities abruptly to open the fairgrounds on Sundays and to stage a heavyweight championship bout in order to offset the fair's mounting losses only succeeded in splitting the loose coalition that backed the exposition while exposing the animosities of Philadelphia's divergent communities. Fair organizers attacked festival opponents whose "habit of destructive criticism" had robbed the city of the "glory" that should have come in Philadelphia's "largest undertaking in many years." The bitterness and rancor was a far cry from the civic optimism and energy that marked Philadelphia's centennial celebration of fifty years before.

A New Beginning

The years immediately leading to Philadelphia's commemoration of the nation's centennial marked a new beginning for the city on the Schuylkill. The city's celebration coincided with a building and economic boom, symbolized by the construction of a new city hall, the restoration of Independence Square and the completion of the Girard Avenue Bridge, the world's widest, over the Schuylkill. Philadelphia's industry and commerce as well as its banking institutions survived the Panic of 1873 largely unscathed. Aided by proximity to farm and coal country and the availability of cheap land and a skilled labor force America's second city reached a population of 817,000 in 1876, a six year gain of 143,000, with housing
costs of $1,000 to $2,500 within the reach of many of its textile and garment industry workers.\textsuperscript{11}

The city noisily welcomed the centennial year with a light show at Independence Hall that could be seen 18 miles away. A mood “of complacency if not civic pride” was promoted by a city press that spoke in behalf of capital. The \textit{North American} claimed that Philadelphia prized prudence and moderation and that the city’s labor force was the least “radical” in the nation.\textsuperscript{12} The Panic of 1873 had left a legacy of soup kitchens and fuel associations, but the city’s skilled tradesmen and independent artisans made a good enough living to sustain a Republican political machine that emphasized “order and cohesion.” The city’s failure in 1871 to prosecute hoodlums who killed three blacks trying to exercise their vote demonstrated the limits of civic justice in the city’s centennial year. Instead, city fathers supported an eight week evangelistic crusade led by Dwight L. Moody that brought more than one million Americans to the city. The meetings in the months preceding the centennial celebration were coordinated through John Wanamaker, Philadelphia’s leading clothing merchant and president of its Young Men’s Christian Association, and was promoted as representing the city’s “moral mission” to lead the nation in its second century.\textsuperscript{13}

Church bells throughout the city rang out on the morning of May 10, 1876 as 186,272 persons, the largest crowd ever assembled on the North American continent, gathered in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park to open the city’s centennial exposition. The fair’s 200 buildings, including a central exhibit hall of 21 and a half acres, making it the largest building in the world, had not been ready at the festival’s scheduled opening in April. Hot, muggy weather and ongoing construction initially kept crowds small. Only 12,720 persons came on May 12 and the month’s 36,000 average attendance reflected little gain in June and an actual drop in July. Two hundred six deaths from heat stroke and contaminated food exacerbated the fair’s early problems. But word of mouth eventually saved the show, leading to a doubling and tripling of attendance in the late summer and early fall. By the time the fair’s “school for the nation” closed on November 10, daily attendance had shot to 115,000. Total attendance topped 10 million, one fifth the population of the United States.\textsuperscript{14}

Railroads ran special trains at lower rates and temporary hotels were erected to accommodate crowds who came to see what fair organizers billed as a working model of an “American mecca,” a physical embodiment of the nation’s moral and material progress. Spiritual and patriotic themes abounded. A giant Moses stood
atop a granite mass in the midst of Centennial Fountain. A twenty foot tall statue of Religious Liberty was raised by B’nai Brith to celebrate “the genius of liberty” while American Presbyterians honored John Witherspoon and Catholics commemorated church fathers with heroic-sized memorials. The star of the show, however, was the machine. Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone, Thomas A. Edison’s quadruplex telegraph, George Westinghouse’s air brake and George Pullman’s palace car drew great crowds, and the Corliss engine, “an athlete of steel and iron,” left onlookers with “an emphatic sense of the exposition’s majesty.” Pastors likened Philadelphia’s fairgrounds from which the whole of the city could be seen to the greatest of European cathedrals, leading the Philadelphia Press to suggest fairgoers should “bare their heads and take off their sandals” while treading on “holy ground.”

Philadelphia’s centennial celebration was a triumph for the city. The fair had been fashioned as an evocation of America’s most enduring institutions, its homes, churches and instruments of self-government, which had held the nation together through its recent civil strife. The city’s Episcopal Bishop could claim that “people from all parts of our recently divided country” had met “around the old family hearthstone of Independence Hall” renewing bonds of brotherhood. The partnership of the city with 100 of Philadelphia’s wealthiest businessmen and thousands of smaller contributors seemed satisfied. Exhibits from fifty nations and spectators from across the nation had made Philadelphia the object of international attention while affirming the city’s sense of its unique place in American culture.

The success of Philadelphia’s centennial celebration presaged enormous fairs in other American cities, most notably, Chicago’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition of 1901 and St. Louis’s Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. Chicago beat New York in a heated competition to commemorate the four hundred year anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage to America. Rising from the ashes of a disastrous fire and the bloody Haymarket Square massacre, Chicago put its best face forward in building a neoclassical wonderland out of a series of swamps and marshes seven miles south of the city’s center. Daniel Burnham’s “White City,” seen by a record 27 million fairgoers, was a self-conscious affirmation of the power of civic planning. It sustained in its urban imagery, as did subsequent fairs, a Victorian era faith in self discipline and order.

Buffalo’s “rainbow city” and St. Louis’s “ivory tinted” towers shared Chicago’s struggles in staging successful expositions. Cost overruns and construction delays served as backdrops for ongoing community-wide debate over the ultimate mean-
ing and scope of these spectacles.\textsuperscript{18} Anselm Strauss has observed that America’s preoccupation with fairs and international exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a way of making sense out of “the sheer vastness of civic enterprise.”\textsuperscript{19} It was an urban landscape buffeted by waves of immigration and cycles of rapid industrialization and economic depression. The Great War and its aftermath, moreover, intensified strains in urban America along lines of race, income and religion.

In few places were social tensions more evident than in Jazz Age Philadelphia on the eve and in the aftermath of the nation’s sesquicentennial celebration. Sam Bass Warner has noted that Philadelphia in the 1920’s was essentially a “private city” that lacked “a meaningful community life.”\textsuperscript{20} A corrupt city administration, indebted to southside political boss William S. Vare, hoped to repeat the city’s centennial success by staging a sesquicentennial celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. However, the civic quarreling and a court fight prompted by the big show suggest the distance the city had travelled in fifty years and the failure of fair organizers to fashion a unifying vision of the future to bring together the city’s diverse and diverging communities.

A Divided City Prepares to Greet the Nation

In the years leading to the sesquicentennial, Henry James thought the private life of most Philadelphians had become separated from their public responsibility, permitting the city’s political machine to “blow the city up.”\textsuperscript{21} Bank failures, a building and loan scandal and the sudden closing of three brokerage houses served as backdrop for Philadelphia’s flirtation with Prohibition. A “pounce policy” engineered by a coalition of religious and civic groups padlocked 1,000 city speakeasies, while uncovering a network of corruption involving city police, its courts and Philadelphia’s Republican machine. By the end of 1925, this outburst of “Quaker conscience” receded and the city’s liquor trade fell back into the hands of ward leaders, who took their cut and their orders from William Scott “Boss” Vare. Vare was the surviving member of a dynasty of three brothers whose grass roots support stretched from the city center past South Street. Through W. Freeland Kendrick, the machine’s hand-picked mayor with a gift of showmanship, Vare succeeded in tightening his grip on Philadelphia as it prepared its sesquicentennial celebration.\textsuperscript{22}

Instead of returning to Fairmount Park, the site of the city’s successful centennial celebration, the city’s forty member sesquicentennial commission decided to
stage the 1926 celebration in Boss Vare's backyard. More than 400 contracts for streets, sewer and water service and mosquito extermination were funneled through Vare's organization with the stated purpose of transforming a marshy swamp into "a doorway to untold wonders." Construction delays and chronic budget problems led to the resignation of the project manager on October 29, 1925. Over the strong objection of sesquicentennial controller E. L. Austin and the city council, Kendrick on November 22 declared the sesquicentennial would open on schedule. That left barely six months to construct the fair's 83 buildings and 84,000 seat stadium. Governor Gifford Pinchot, defeated by Vare in a bitter primary race for the U.S. Senate, refused to provide sesquicentennial authorities emergency funding. Kendrick, however, remained determined to open the fair on May 31, 1926, the date Shriners began their national convention in Philadelphia.23

On the eve of the sesquicentennial, the mayor's office continued to predict that 50 million visitors would see the fair during its six month run, a figure quadrupling the turnout in St. Louis and doubling Chicago's totals. The estimate was based on Philadelphia's accessibility to the big cities of the Northeast, Midwest and Mid-Atlantic. Twenty million persons lived within a 150 mile radius of the city and 50 million within a 500 mile radius. Projections called for 11 million motorists to make the trip, an average of 20,000 cars daily. Motorists would be whisked from eight carports and tent cities to the sesquicentennial gladway at the rate of 1,000 per minute by Philadelphia Rapid Transit. Four new trolley terminals and six miles of new roadway were constructed to speed the journey.24

Ten days before the exposition's scheduled opening more than 200 newspapermen from Boston, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Washington and points in between were guests of the city and the sesquicentennial commission. Amid the noise and mud of construction work, they toured the sesquicentennial grounds and Sesquicentennial Stadium. They were given 36 page booklets, the first of a million and a half produced by the fair's publicity department designed to plug the sesquicentennial as patriotic pageant and chronicler of human progress. Six hundred thousand eight-color lithograph posters and six million newspaper supplements would tell the same story. So would the national distribution of D. W. Griffith's one-reeler "Lest We Forget" and the forty ten shows dispatched to state and county fairs all across the country. The fair's publicity mill was prepared to move five hundred photographs daily and would extoll through a 40-station nationwide radio network the blessings of a brief summer's stay in America's most patriotic city.25
Huge Exposition Building Nearing Completion

View of the Palace of Agriculture and Food Products as It Will Look When Finished

On August 20th Mayor Kendrick Awarded Contract for the Palace of Agriculture and Food Products, which is to cost $850,000 and to be completed in Seventy-five Working Days. Work has already Started upon the Second of the Large Structures, the Palace of Liberal Arts. All of the Principal Buildings will be in Course of Erection before the Winter Months
The efforts of publicity director Odell Hauser, a veteran reporter and political writer for the Philadelphia press, were vigorously endorsed by Philadelphia's business leaders and Chamber of Commerce President Philip H. Gadsden, who targeted 250 organizations nationwide with the message it was their "patriotic duty" to come to the sesquicentennial. Each delegate would spend an average $100 in Philadelphia, Gadsden's office estimated, and Philadelphia would be promoted as "the nation's industrial and business center." If 200,000 American Legionnaires and 150,000 Ancient Arabic Nobles could be induced to come, he speculated, it would mean $35 million to the local economy.2

By order of Mayor Kendrick, every church bell, car horn, factory and steamboat whistle in Philadelphia rang out three minutes before noon on May 31, 1926. Religious and civic organizations obediently stood at their posts in the fair's rambling visitor's center at Fifth Street and Chestnut, prepared to greet an estimated 80,000 visitors daily. At high noon, 100,000 spectators watched as Kendrick led dignitaries beneath a 60 foot replica of the Liberty Bell that spanned Broad Street near the Exposition grounds, a symbol of the city's celebration and the sesquicentennial's pledge "to ring the Liberty bell in every human heart." The grounds were immaculate. The Civic Club for a Cleaner Philadelphia had seen to that. After viewing the fair's gladway, framed by Assyrian and Babylonian columns and friezes, and pavilions from 31 states, four territories and nine foreign nations, Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover proclaimed that no event had so captured "America's progress in science, industry, art, education, social life and morality."27

Hoover may have been overly optimistic. One week into the pageant, paid admissions were only one-third of projections. Sixty percent of the event's exhibit booths remained under construction, as well as several of its largest pavilions. Exposition promotion had promised "the world will meet on the Sesquicentennial gladway," but wet weather helped keep crowds below expectations. Expo veterans, remembering Philadelphia's slow start in 1876, and construction delays in Chicago, Buffalo and St. Louis urged calm. They suggested the city would make up its investment as the summer wore on. But sesquicentennial planners, whose reputations were at risk, were in no mood to be patient. After eleven days operation, the exhibition was $2 million in the hole.28 It was then that fair organizers unexpectedly took a step that alienated the alliance that had supported the spectacle and set the stage for a front page fight for the future of Philadelphia.
Philadelphia's advantages in density of population over other cities. Their are shown in this chart.

The growing urban population within the area from which the city is shaded is shown in the inner circle, in the outer circle in the comparative population table showing figures of Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Philadelphia.

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Saving the City's Reputation

The abrupt decision to suspend Philadelphia's 132-year-old "Blue Laws" and to open the sesquicentennial on Sundays succeeded in reopening divisions that had increasingly been apparent within the city. To evangelical Protestants, who had failed to keep the city dry, a seven day sesquicentennial represented not only contempt for the sabbath, but the victory of a dangerous secularizing tendency in municipal life. That was why many of Philadelphia's Presbyterians and Methodists, joined by fundamentalist Baptists, evangelical Lutherans, Moravians, Reformed Episcopalians and Congregationalists opposed Sunday opening. The idea had been proposed by city manufacturers and defeated by their coalition fifty years before. Now the growing struggle within the church between modernists and traditionalists made the battle all the more crucial. Two-thirds of the colonists at the outbreak of Revolution were Calvinists, sabbatarians pointed out. That was why a celebration staged to honor them must "keep faith with the sabbath." They noted the city's own rhetoric in advertising the sesquicentennial had said the same. "Never has it been more necessary," promoters claimed, "to look back and see the way that we have come to guide the way that we must go."

The debate dominated the Philadelphia press in advance of a June 27 vote by the Exposition Board on Austin's Sunday opening proposal, with sabbatarians winning an important ally in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin. The paper's half-million circulation was the city's largest and publisher William McLean, who had been active in Pennsylvania journalism for more than 50 years, was among the most respected men in the state because of his reputation for sober, socially responsible journalism. The Bulletin considered a seven day sesquicentennial "an offense to the people of Philadelphia" that "degraded the city's celebration of the birth of American independence." The paper editorialized that "the law and tradition of Pennsylvania" required event organizers "keep faith" with Philadelphia history, "honor" the sabbath and avoid the spectacle of "a Sunday show."

The debate was joined by the Philadelphia Daily News, the city's pioneering tabloid paper and self-styled defender of "worker's rights." It embraced the arguments of Episcopal, Lutheran and Unitarian modernists who deplored the effort of "rich Pharisees" to legislate morality against "poor publicans." The Daily News editorially excoriated sabbatarians as "narrow-minded fanatics," a "lunatic fringe" who practiced "class warfare" by denying workers access to the sesquicentennial on "the only day they can make it." The paper saw sabbatarianism and Prohibition as "twin evils" perpetrated by "the rich and idle" against the American working
man. The same mentality "that prevents the working man from having a glass of beer" denies his family "the educational experience" of attending a publicly-funded fair. The paper's front page people's poll endorsed a seven day sesquicentennial and repudiated "those unhappy creatures who take a perverted pleasure in inflicting injury upon others" while "violating individual liberty."  

After sesquicentennial authorities voted to open the fair on Sundays beginning July 4, Mayor Kendrick attempted to placate sabbatarians and avoid a threatened court suit by embracing the compromise plan of city Quakers. It called for the fair to be open and free on Sundays. But Austin successfully argued against the plan. Sesqui losses would not be recovered by "temporizing" sabbatarians. President Calvin Coolidge's refusal to move his visit up to July 4 irritated Austin and heartened the coalition opposing a seven day event as did the president's July 5 warning, delivered at Sesquicentennial Stadium, that America "must not sink into pagan materialism" but "must cultivate respect for the spiritual and moral leadership that made the country great." 33

The Philadelphia Record, the city's principal Democratic paper, emphasized Coolidge's claim that any celebration worthy of the Declaration of Independence must show "the reverence our forefathers showed for the things that are holy." The paper, once owned by Thomas Wanamaker, also gave front page attention to a protest rally held at Bethany Presbyterian Church at Second Street and Bainbridge. This was the church founded by John Wanamaker, Thomas's father, who was an active sabbatarian and early promoter of the sesquicentennial. The paper joined protesters in opposing "commercialization" of the sabbath, while backing the effort of forty local organizations and 100 area churches to petition Governor Pinchot urging state action "to save the city's reputation." 34

Pinchot, who aggressively courted the evangelical voter and was considering an independent run against Vare, responded with a court suit, which was filed against the sesquicentennial board in Harrisburg. That meant exposition authorities faced a two front fight. Austin had already been arrested and convicted of violating the city's Blue Law in a case brought in Philadelphia by the Methodist Men's Committee of One Hundred. City solicitor Joseph P. Gaffney argued a $100 million investment would be lost, the city "humiliated" and the nation "embarrassed" if the sesquicentennial was not opened Sundays. That was the way the Inquirer and the Public Ledger, with strong ties to Philadelphia's business community, saw the argument. They charged it was everyone's "patriotic duty" to "set aside differences and support the sesqui." They argued it would be "a burning
PHILADELPHIA INVITES
THE NATION AND
THE WORLD

THE MAYOR OF PHILADELPHIA ASKS HIS
FELLOW CITIZENS TO JOIN TOGETHER WITH A
DETERMINATION TO SHOW THE CITY’S GUESTS
THE TRUE AMERICAN HOSPITALITY FOR WHICH
THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA IS UNIVERSALLY
KNOWN.

PRESIDENT COOLIDGE HAS ISSUED A PROCLAMA-
TION INVITING THE STATES, AMERICAN
DEPENDENCIES, AND FOREIGN NATIONS TO
PARTICIPATE IN THE SESQUI-CENTENNIAL
EXPOSITION, AND APPOINTED A NATIONAL COM-
MITTEE TO CO-OPERATE.
shame and disgrace” if an evangelical boycott of the sesquicentennial “defeated
the exposition and tarnished Philadelphia’s reputation as the trustee of the
nation.”

That reputation was at risk as the dimensions of the sesquicentennial’s failure
became apparent. Paid admissions did not reach one million until August 7, one
twentieth of projected estimates. The sesquicentennial was $8 million in the red
and losing nearly a million dollars a month. The city extended its line of credit and
heavily borrowed to keep the event open as creditors appeared to be planning a
suit of their own. Reduced Sunday fees failed to generate hoped for crowds. The
mass resignation of the sesquicentennial’s committee on religion and their nation-
wide crusade to boycott the event enraged the exposition’s boosters. The Inquirer
and Public Ledger editorially castigated “the malicious and ignorant organized
opposition” who “knocked the exposition.” The Daily News charged “the people
who seek to damage the sesquicentennial” were “worse than anarchists.” Sabba-
tarians shot back that Kendrick had “dug his political grave.” In the meantime, the
Record noted, “ushers outnumbered paying customers” at many events. The only
thing everyone agreed on was that fair attendance was “a scandalous disgrace.”

The fight over a seven day sesquicentennial, initially a battle between
modernists and evangelicals within Protestantism, quickly became a struggle
between competing communities in Philadelphia and a proxy war within the
state’s political establishment. The press served as a forum for this civic quarreling
which by mid-July had taken on statewide and national overtones. Three thousand
Pennsylvania businessmen joined the protest, charging that the “the desecration of
the sabbath” symbolized “the breakdown and passing of American civilization”
and reflected America’s flirtation with “European forces” that were pushing that
continent into anarchy. KKK members preyed upon this fear by leafletting protest
rallies with the demand “America for Americans.” Nativists exploited Kendrick’s
decision to prevent Klansmen from marching to the fairgrounds while encourag-
ing the Knights of Columbus to do so. One Presbyterian pastor received a two
minute ovation when he charged “there is not a single outstanding Protestant” in
Kendrick’s administration and that the mayor was under the control of Solicitor
General Joseph Gaffney, a Catholic.

Many of Philadelphia’s 750,000 Catholics and 200,000 blacks, joined by mem-
bers of its Jewish community and elements within organized labor, were alienated
by the sabbatarians’ tone as well as the company they kept. They city’s archdiocese
ridiculed those who claimed America was “a Protestant nation.” The Catholic
OFFICIAL
SESQUICENTENNIAL DAILY PROGRAM and GUIDE

TEN CENTS

Tuesday, October 5, 1926
Standard and Times noted that half of all American churchgoers were Catholics. Dennis Cardinal Dougherty, who initially resisted any sectarian tone to the sesquicentennial, celebrated mass before an overflow crowd at Sesquicentennial Stadium as "striking proof of Catholic loyalty to America" and to serve notice on "evil men undermining many dead minds" that Catholics were "determined to safeguard our religious freedom." While praising Kendrick's decision to bar "500,000 hooded haters" from marching to the sesquicentennial, Philadelphia's blacks seemed little interested in supporting the fair's "Jim Crow sideshow" that included a negro hut and piackaninnies in a watermelon patch. Chris J. Perry, a leading member of the city's black community who had launched Philadelphia's Tribune 42 years before, charged the banning of blacks from sesquicentennial festivities, including their exclusion from parades and the sesquicentennial chorus, showed "all too clearly" the event was another "Nordic showcase." Perry wrote that the sesquicentennial was a painful reminder "that America has reached a point where it is impossible to think clearly on the issue of race."

By summer's end only two million persons had paid to see Philadelphia's sesquicentennial tribute to the nation. The city found itself enmeshed in lengthy litigation and an appeals process that would last for years. A civic celebration intended to outdo the triumph of Philadelphia's centennial had only exposed the distance that now separated the city's warring constituencies. At the height of this struggle fair organizers delivered a final blow to their opponents by a surprise announcement that became the final round in Philadelphia's struggle over self-identity during America's sesquicentennial year.

"The Greatest Boxing Event Ever"

On August 5, 1926 Mayor Kendrick's office told Public Ledger sports writer Frank McCracken that it "knew nothing" about rumors the city was negotiating to stage the Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney heavyweight championship fight at Sesquicentennial Stadium during the third week of September. But in fact the Kendrick administration had seized on the well-publicized trouble Tex Rickard was having with New York's Boxing Commission to assure the fight promoter the contest would have "clear sailing" in Pennsylvania. The announcement on August 18 that the title fight had been set for September 23 reopened city hall's rhetorical warfare with Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and Lutheran clergymen who decried Kendrick's "sophistry" in sanctioning "a bloody contest" in which fighters were paid to "disfigure" one another. They passed a resolution "regretting
beyond words” further injury to the city’s “fair name” and urged Kendrick to reverse his action.41

When Kendrick pressed ahead with plans to increase stadium seating to 130,000 for the big fight, statewide Presbyterians and Methodists sent a letter to Pinchot demanding he prohibit the bout in the interest of “public order” and “civil decency.” But this time Pinchot was in a precarious position. He had helped to legalize boxing in Pennsylvania three years before and was in no position now to reverse himself. Instead, he fired one of the three members of the state boxing commission who opposed the contest and told reporters the time was right for a title fight that would “be a test of courage and endurance which are so necessary in the battle of life.”42

Evangelical charges that the Demsey-Tunney fight would “debase” the city and further transform the sesquicentennial from “the celebration of America’s cultural and moral vision” to “a commercialized game of graft, fakery and greed” received little attention in the press. The Democratic Record and McLean’s Evening Bulletin, which had opposed the commercialization of Sunday, joined the Inquirer and the Public Ledger in backing the bout. The likely reason was self-interest. Circulation managers knew a Jack Dempsey fight was the jazz generation’s greatest readership booster, producing fifty percent circulation surges. The Inquirer set the pre-fight standard in hyperbole, exulting that “the greatest crowd ever” would attend “the greatest boxing event ever” in “the greatest Stadium ever” on the grounds of “the greatest international exhibition” ever conceived. The Daily News noted the sabbatarian “knocking of the sesquicentennial had kept thousands away” but the Dempsey fight would make Philadelphia the “focus of the nation.”43

When Dempsey arrived to tour the stadium 50,000 persons greeted him. The Public Ledger reported that “business men, newsboys, trolley men, police and women of all ages” were counting down the days to the big bout. Young women wanted to know “if the good-looking Tunney is married.” Posed pictures were daily printed of the fighters at work and play—Dempsey and Mayor Kendrick in a harmonica duet; the champ arm and arm with boys club members at his training site in Atlantic City; and Dempsey kissing his wife goodbye at a train station “and promising to beat Tunney.” A closeup of the challenger is captioned “Tunney’s smile,” while a closeup of his fist is slugged “Waiting for Jack’s Jaw.”44

Politicians who feared alienating constituencies in the Sunday closing fight now hoped to win votes by associating themselves with the values projected onto
The Sesquicentennial International Exposition
Philadelphia
June First to December First
1926
the fighters. Pinchot, a Teddy Roosevelt Republican, forester and advocate of the "vigorous life," visited Tunney's training site in Stroudsburg, where he told reporters "the battling marine" was "a clean cut chap" young people would do well to emulate. Pinchot promised to be ringside along with seven other governors the night of the fight "pulling for my man Tunney." Kendrick also got in on the act, posing for a picture with Tunney atop the shoulders of U.S. marines. Taking its cue from Tex Rickard and sesquicentennial publicity director Odell Hauser, the press portrayed the relatively unknown Tunney as the fitting hero of America's sesquicentennial year, "a figure sharpened by a life so remarkably clean and wholly American to be beyond belief."45

Dempsey needed no build up. During his seven year reign as "Fistiania's Tiger Man" the public had gotten to know Dempsey "better than a member of their own family." The Colorado hobo turned millionaire was the quintessential American success story, ballyhooed by reporters and poets alike as "a killer with that God in heaven smile." Each of his infrequent title defenses was transformed into a morality tale in which the generation's "perfect fighting man" affirmed the potential of a fast fading rugged individualism with the power of a single punch. "Impassable crowds" gathered for Dempsey's and Tunney's carefully staged tours of Sesquicentennial Stadium. Sixty-five thousand persons gathered at the stadium on the Sunday before the Thursday fight. The press reported most were looking for their seats in what was now being billed as "the greatest battle since the Silurian Age."46

Just as a seven day sesquicentennial became a touchstone for conflicting social values, the images cultivated by Philadelphia's press for the coming "battle of the century" reflect the Jazz Age's fetish for self-promotion. Readers were told the "historic clash" was "a fitting tribute" to the city and nation, because each fighter was a "type." Dempsey was portrayed as a Neanderthal and Tunney a character out of Frank Merriwell. Dempsey had "the backward sloping brow of the man born to be a fighter." Tunney had a "full and well-developed forehead—the head of a student." Dempsey fought with "killer spirit." Tunney was a defensive boxer of "careful habits." Readers concerned with America's "moral direction" were told "the cause of culture might be materially advanced" if "mind were to triumph over matter."47

The staging of the Dempsey-Tunney fight was portrayed in Philadelphia's press as a great triumph for the city. More people paid more money to see the fight than any sporting event in American history to that time. Through a radio hookup
the bout was listened to by more than 30 million people across the United States and was heard via shortwave along five continents. Two thousand millionaires, including representatives of most of the nation's major banks and brokerage houses, were among the 125,565 people who paid nearly $2 million to be at the event. One veteran journalist called Tunney's easy ten round decision over Dempsey in a driving rain "the worst heavyweight bout in the history of the heavyweight division." But that observation failed to appear in any of the more than 200 stories the Inquirer, Public Ledger, Evening Bulletin, Daily News and Record filed on the fight that day.48

The day after the fight Philadelphia cleaners did record business pressing the three piece suits soaked at the deluge. One fight critic called the storm "God's justice on a sordid affair." But city fathers and the press saw only sunshine. The Evening Bulletin, which had first warned its readers to "beware of the ballyhoo blitz" surrounding the fight, carried a full page ad after it was over celebrating the fact that fight coverage had now made it the third widest selling paper in the country. Mayor Kendrick praised the press for helping to make the fight a success, noting Philadelphia would net $5 million for staging it. The contest had done much to resuscitate a citywide celebration, he observed, allowing the sesquicentennial to succeed in its mission of "communicating the spiritual values that lie at the foundation of American development and prosperity."49

CONCLUSION

When it came time for the official history of Philadelphia's 1926 sesquicentennial celebration to be written three years after the event, the rancor aroused by the exhibition was still palpable. Writing for "a reader of a generation now unborn," fair organizers decried "that portion of the local population addicted to the habit of destructive criticism." The refusal of sabbatarians "to subordinate their personal preferences to the good of the city as a whole" succeeded in destroying "the largest undertaking of the city in years" and robbed Philadelphians of the "glory" that should have marked a celebration "unparalleled" in the history of any city. What particularly rankled exposition officials in the sabbatarian controversy was the implied criticism of their traditional authority to decide what was best for the city. "Once the city had committed to the sesquicentennial," they argued, years after the event, "it was the duty of all good citizens to drop their personal inclinations and pull together" in the interest of civic unity.50

Moderating voices within the city urged "reasonable men" on both sides of
the issue to negotiate their differences and make sure the sesquicentennial "went down in history as worthy of the City of the Declaration." But this formula did not fit the reasonable men on both sides of the issue who thought they were fighting for principle, nor was it aided by nativists on the one side and a corrupt political administration on the other determined to win at all costs. The resulting clash between communities and within constituencies of Jazz Age Philadelphia was not unique to the city during the decade of the Twenties, but was perhaps most painful there, because the celebration of the meaning of the Declaration of Independence forced upon the city the necessity of defining itself as a means of informing its future. That is why so many people in the city and across the state felt personally and collectively betrayed by an event that affronted their notion of history while fueling their fears for the future.

Philadelphia's press, which served as a forum and catalyst for civic debate over the sesquicentennial, tells the story of how the city struggled over self-identity in an era buffeted by the lapsing of a unifying communal vision that may have formerly bound member to member. This is why Philadelphia's decision to define itself in such a moment made the city's struggle a metaphor in the often painful and uncertain experience of urban living during the decade of the twenties. If world's fairs are the timekeepers of history than what Philadelphia's failed celebration shows is the conflict between tradition and modernity and the struggle over urban identity that has come to dominate much of American life since the nation's sesquicentennial year.
Notes


6. The tension between America’s idealization of its past and its struggle with urbanization and industrialization is described by Paul Bellamy, a senior editor with the Cleveland Plain Dealer, in an address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors. See Problems of Journalism, volume 2 (Washington: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1927), pp. 152-156.


8. Henry Adams raised fair spectatorship to civil religion in late Victorian America. See Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), pp. 363-398. For Leuchtenburg’s discussion of historical pageantry as a means of creating a community’s understanding of its past, see pp. 231-238 and Glassberg’s discussion of historical pageantry as a means of creating a community’s understanding of its past.

9. The sesqui-Centennial board’s claim the international exposition reflected the city’s “idealism” and not its mendacity is made in Austin and Hauser, p. 19. Its hopes of projecting the city as the nation’s “business and commercial capital” is described in the “New Modified Plan for the Celebration of the Sesqui-Centennial Anniversary of American Independence.” Collection No. 587. Sesqui-Centennial Exhibition. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Mayor W. Freeland Kendrick assures the sesqui board that the exposition will be on a “paying basis by Labor Day” in the minutes of the August 16, 1926 meeting of the Board of Directors. Sesqui-Centennial Exhibition Association. Series 231.1. Box A-1467. City Archives of Philadelphia.

and Scope" describe "the worldwide prestige" and "invaluable publicity" that will come to Philadelphia through the fair. See Sesquicentennial Exhibition Papers. Programs, clippings, advertisements. Collection No. 587. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The attack on festival opponents who refused "to subordinate their personal preferences to the good of the city as a whole" is found in Austin and Hauser, pp. 24-26.


Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania is cited in Rydell, p. 19.


Part of the reason for Kendrick's haste in having the sesquicentennial ready for the Shriners was his position as Imperial Potente of the Order of the Mystic Shrine. Kendrick's long association with civic organizations, particularly the Lu Lu Temple of the Shrine, helped make him Vare's leading vote-getter. For Kendrick's long association with the Shrine, see his obituary in New York Times, March 21, 1953, p. 17.


26. The city's optimistic plans to turn a profit in the sesquicentennial celebration are reflected in the April 2, 1926 entry in the Whitcomb Sesquicentennial Papers, despite official claims three years later that "idealism" alone guided the undertaking. See Austin and Hauser, p. 19.

As late as mid-August, 1926, Mayor Kendrick was certain the sesquicentennial could be put on a paying basis. See his remarks on August 16, 1926 at the Board of Directors meeting for the Sesquicentennial Exhibition Association. Series 232.3. Box A-1467. City Archives of Philadelphia.


28. The sesquicentennial's mounting debt in the first days of the event is described in Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Sesquicentennial Exhibition Association for meetings on June 7, 1926, June 14, 1926 and June 21, 1926. Series 232.1. Box A-1467. City Archives of Philadelphia.

Austin's "General Order" to all department heads advising them on the likelihood of Sunday openings, effective July 4, 1926, is described in Whitcomb Sesquicentennial Papers. Collection No. 1936. See entry for June 24, 1926. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

29. The unsuccessful effort of manufacturers to keep the centennial exhibition open Sundays is chronicled by the Philadelphia Inquirer, July 18, 1876, p. 2. July 21, 1876, p. 2 and September 8, 1876, p. 4.

30. The sabbatarian argument is laid out in

The struggle over a seven day sesquicentennial becomes a rallying cry for evangelical Protestants across the country. See the summary in *The Lutheran*, July 8, 1926, "The Sesqui-Centennial Revives the Sunday Question," p. 14. Concordia Theological Seminary. Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Evangelicals see sabbath observance as a moral compass in the country's uncertain course. "When an automobile runs down a hill at a much too rapid rate," the editorial urges, "wisdom would indicate that the brake be used instead of the accelerator."


McLean began his career in the circulation department of the *Pittsburgh Leader* before becoming business manager of the *Philadelphia Press* when he was only 26. Seven years later McLean purchased the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, the oldest afternoon newspaper in the state and in less than a year managed to increase its circulation five fold. The half million circulation he achieved in 1926 when 100 times what it had been when he bought the paper.


The *Philadelphia Daily News* was launched on March 31, 1925 by Bernarr Macfadden, a New York based health enthusiast, whose *New York Daily Graphic* attempted to outdual the *New York Daily News* for the city's working class readership by "attacking the puritanical complex" that ruled America.

Macfadden's determination "to carry a liberal view of life to the masses" meant giving them "news in a language they can understand." In Philadelphia, that meant aligning himself with Boss Vare and Vare's southside political organization and against "the steel and financial trusts that run Pennsylvania." Mayor Kendrick felt the paper's popularity came "from fighting for the best interests of the people of our city."

For Macfadden's view of his working class read-
ership and the paper's relationship with the Vare machine, see *Philadelphia Daily News*, March 25, 1926, p. 15; March 31, 1926, pp. 2, 27; April 6, 1926, p. 15; April 9, 1926, p. 15 and April 13, 1926, pp. 3, 8.

33. For the determination of Austin and exposition board members to handle the problem of a seven day sesquicentennial in a “bold way” by rejecting Kendrick’s compromise, see Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of the Sesquicentennial Exhibition, June 28, 1926 meeting. Record Group 232.4 Box A-1467. City Archives of Philadelphia.


34. *Philadelphia Record*, July 3, 1926, pp. 6, 12; July 5, 1926, p. 1; July 6, 1926, pp. 1 and 2; July 7, 1926, p. 2; and July 8, 1926, p. 3.


35. The fate of Philadelphia’s sesquicentennial celebration, including the evangelical boycott and subsequent court cases, dominated the front pages of much of the city’s press during the summer of 1926. Between June 8, 1926, when the idea of a seven day sesquicentennial is first broached by the *Daily News*, and August 19, 1926, the day the press first began to focus on the prospects of a Dempsey-Tunney heavyweight championship fight in Philadelphia, the *Inquirer*, *Evening Bulletin*, *Public Ledger*, Record and *Daily News* ran 123 separate stories on the controversy with more than two-thirds of those stories appearing on the first page.

36. The sesquicentennial’s deepening financial crisis and growing distress is described in the minutes of the weekly meetings of the Board of Directors of the Sesquicentennial Exhibition Association. See particularly the minutes for meetings held on August 2, 1926, August 9, 1926 and August 16, 1926. Series 232.3. Box A-1467. Volume 6. City Archives of Philadelphia.


The venerable *Inquirer*, with intimate ties to Philadelphia’s business and commercial community, had a reputation as the Republican Bible of Pennsylvania. Its publisher, Col. James Elverson, Jr., cultivated an enthusiasm for yachts, stamps and antique clocks collecting, when not trying to promote Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover, “a man with good business sense,” for president.


Cyrus H. K. Curtis, publisher of the *Public Ledger*, had built a $100 million empire through his *Ladies Home Journal* and *Saturday Evening Post* with a dedication to “romanticizing the accomplishments of American business” and by aggressively soliciting “the most intelligent and progressive readers,” who were the “backbone of the city’s community’s buying power.”


37. Philadelphia Record, June 28, 1926, pp. 1, 3; July 3, 1926, p. 1; and July 8, 1926, p. 3.

38. Dennis Cardinal Dougherty's role in organizing Philadelphia's 150 parishes in "a public act of faith and patriotism" is described in several of his letters to diocesan priests dated August 31, 1926; September 16, 1926; September 20, 1926; September 23, 1926; September 28, 1926; and September 29, 1926. See the Archdiocesan Scrapbook, volume 25. Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Archives and Historical Collections. Overbrook, Pennsylvania.

See also, Catholic Standard and Times (Philadelphia), June 19, 1926, p. 3; June 26, 1926, p. 10; July 3, 1926, p. 4; July 31, 1926, p. 4; August 7, 1926, pp. 1, 2; August 21, 1926, p. 6; September 11, 1926, pp. 1, 3; September 18, 1926, pp. 1, 3, 4; September 25, 1926, pp. 1 and 4; October 2, 1926, pp. 1, 3, 4; and October 9, 1926, pp. 1-4.

The stand of the archdiocese in supporting the sesquicentennial and "staring down religious bigotry" is praised by George N. Shuster, "After Many Years," The Ave Maria 24, October 30, 1926, pp. 562-565.

39. Philadelphia Tribune, May 16, 1925, p. 4; May 23, 1925, p. 4; May 30, 1925, pp. 1, 4; June 13, 1925, p. 1; July 4, 1925, p. 4; July 11, 1925, p. 4; July 11, 1925, p. 4; August 22, 1925, p. 1; August 29, 1925, p. 1; September 5, 1925, p. 4; September 12, 1925, p. 1; June 5, 1926, pp. 1, 5, 6; June 19, 1926, pp. 1, 8; and June 26, 1926, pp. 1, 4.

Perry was born to free parents in Baltimore on September 11, 1854. He went to night school in Philadelphia, worked in private homes and often in libraries before first writing for a newspaper in 1867. He was twenty-seven when he began working on a daily and was later promoted to editor of The Sunday Mercury. As editor of The Philadelphia Tribune, beginning in 1884, Perry was a firm supporter of Republican Party principles and an opponent "of any clique or class that did not serve the interests of the black masses." The newspaper was first published at 717 Samson Street and later at 526 S. 16th Street and had a paid circulation of 700. See "Notes and References Relating to the History of Philadelphia Newspapers," pp. 741-743.


Pinchot went on to tell fight opponents that he had taught his son how to box and that “it was the best thing for him.”


failed to recognize the contradiction of a city purportedly founded on the basis of "brotherly love" making millions off "two men slugging one another."

See also, Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, August 19, 1926, p. 1; September 13, 1926, p. 32; and September 24, 1926, p. 23.


50. The lingering anger of sesquicentennial organizers against sabbatarians and their supporters is found in Austin and Hauser, pp. 24-26.

