

ALL'S FAIR

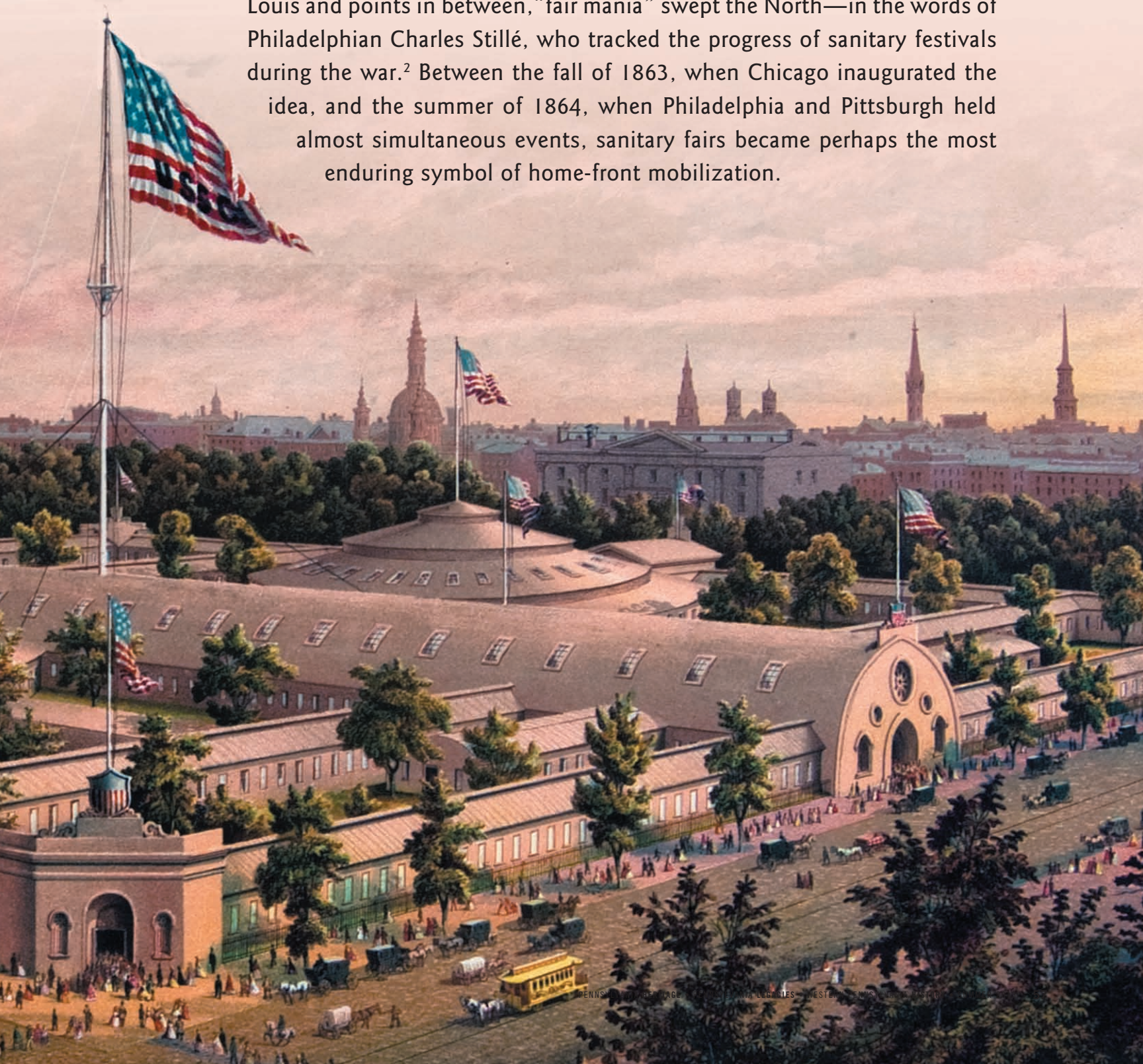
PHILADELPHIA AND THE SANITARY FAIR MOVEMENT DURING THE CIVIL WAR


By Richard S. Newman

Buildings of the Great Central Fair. Lithograph by
James Queen, printed by P.S. Duval & Son, 1864.
Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



For three weeks in June 1864, Philadelphia hosted the “Great Central Fair,” one of the largest fundraising bazaars of the Civil War. Hundreds of thousands of people—roughly 29,000 per day—attended the event, which raised over a million dollars for the United States Sanitary Commission.¹ Much more than a massive fundraiser, the fair was part and parcel of a reform surge all along the Union home front. From Boston to St. Louis and points in between, “fair mania” swept the North—in the words of Philadelphian Charles Stillé, who tracked the progress of sanitary festivals during the war.² Between the fall of 1863, when Chicago inaugurated the idea, and the summer of 1864, when Philadelphia and Pittsburgh held almost simultaneous events, sanitary fairs became perhaps the most enduring symbol of home-front mobilization.





Badge worn at the Retail
Grocery Department,
Great Central Sanitary Fair,
June 1864.

United States Sanitary Commission
Philadelphia Branch Collection.
Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

No city held a more impressive fair than Philadelphia. Looking back after the war, Jane Hoge, a Chicagoan partly responsible for the first sanitary fair, noted that Philadelphia deserved to sponsor the longest, most elaborate, and in many ways most important fair. After all, the City of Brotherly Love was the republic's founding city, and it had long remained a vital center of art, benevolence, commerce, and medicine. With its Great Central Fair, Philadelphia staged an exhibition whose aesthetic qualities matched its grand history.³

At the same time, the fair also became a living embodiment of Civil War tensions. While the fair's very success depended on women, some men worried that women had overstepped their bounds. More ominously, the Great Central Fair marginalized abolitionists, extending nary an invitation to racial reformers who might have spoken about the great emancipation war—certainly a strange thing in the birthplace of the American anti-slavery movement. Like the war itself, the fair was grand but not always consistent.

Philadelphia's sanitary fair took shape against a backdrop of Union-wide civic mobilization. As battle loomed in June 1861, benevolent men and women met with army officials and politicians about creating a civilian commission that would tend to sanitary matters in both soldiers' camps and hospitals. Noting that the British experience in the Crimean War had illustrated the perils of infection, disease, and soldiers' ill-health, sanitary reformers pledged to monitor warriors' well-being and recovery. The U.S. Sanitary Commission was born.

With local and state auxiliaries spreading throughout the Union over the next two years, the Sanitary Commission became perhaps the largest single benevolent organization the United States had ever seen. The Philadelphia branch was a vital link in the chain, raising money and spreading the word about wounded soldiers' needs. In a February 1863 visit to

the city, Henry Bellows, head of the Sanitary Commission, touted Philadelphia's key role in the battle for soldiers' health.⁴ The exigencies of war pressed hard on Union soldiers and their families, he maintained, who required ever more support beyond the battlefield. Bellows asked Philadelphia, like other Union strongholds, to give more. The following year, when Union armies bogged down outside of the Confederate capital of Richmond, sanitary officers echoed Bellows's call for more goods, money, and aid from the home front.

Beyond normal fundraising efforts, what could citizens do? One answer had already come from Chicago, where a group of women organized a sanitary fair in the fall of 1863. Drawing on women's long tradition of holding anti-slavery and sewing fairs, female Chicagoans raised thousands of dollars for the Sanitary Commission, proving in the process that fairs were more than leisure diversions: they could be potent vehicles of voluntary benevolence during wartime. Others cities soon followed suit.⁵

Indeed, bolstered by a friendly spirit of boosterism, Union cities began competing with one another to raise the most money and supplies. Boston, Cincinnati, and New York all bragged that they had outdone other cities. New York's success galvanized Philadelphians. With New Yorkers "running almost wild" about their "Metropolitan Fair" (which raised more money than any exhibition), a Philadelphia paper challenged locals to rise above Gotham as a sanitary capital.⁶ Even when the Great Central Fair began taking shape in the winter of 1864, civic leaders goaded Philadelphians to action by referring to other successful bazaars. Calling out to every Philadelphian from the press to the pulpit and the farm to the factory, fair organizers asked local citizens to do something heroic for the Union soldier.⁷

Once planning for the event began, Philadelphians responded with a sense of vigor and purpose. But launching the Philadelphia fair was no simple matter. In January 1864,

Great Central Sanitary Fair volunteer wearing ribbons from the Floral Committee, Historical Autographs display, and *Our Daily Fare* refreshment area.

Horace Howard Furness Collection of the Great Central Fair, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

By 1864, women's home-front heroism was heralded from New York to St. Louis. In Philadelphia, women ran refreshment saloons, worked at hospitals, raised funds, and helped outfit sanitary trains, wagons, and ships destined for the battlefield.

there was still no broad agreement on staging such an exhibition. A key push came from a delegation of Chicago women, who worked with local women to bring Philadelphia around. Soon after, an executive committee of worthies took shape, headed by banker John Welch. By March, planning was well under way, with a flurry of handbills, newspaper articles, speeches, and circular letters touting the fair as the most important nonmilitary event of the summer. Exploiting Philadelphians' longstanding commitment to charity, fair organizers asked citizens to do more than merely remember the men on the battlefield. As a handbill aimed at "Florists, Horticulturalists and Seedmen" put it, all citizens should donate funds to aid "our brave soldiers" who sacrificed their lives to "protect our home."⁸ A circular from the Agriculture Committee observed that "agriculturalists" and farmers—who sent a high proportion of men to the army—had a special "duty" to support "the gallant soldiers" fighting for the Union. Patriotic farmers could contribute not only by donating cash but by giving "products of the field, stockyards, the garden, the dairy and the household." Whether "grains," "eggs," or "oxen," rural dwellers had key resources for the Union cause.⁹

With similar missives aimed at workers, financiers, bakers, and others, the planning committee of the Great Central Fair built momentum right through the summer.

Over 100 committees oversaw details large and small. In his history of the fair, Charles Stillé, a member of the Executive Committee charged with recording the city's good deeds, compiled a catalogue of committee members that ran over 50 pages long!¹⁰ There was a "tide of benevolence" washing over the Union, *Our Daily Fare*, the cleverly named periodical covering the bazaar, proclaimed after opening ceremonies on June 7.¹¹

Despite such broad support, women remained perhaps the fair's most committed organizers, planners, and logisticians. Nevertheless, the idea that women would rise to the level of co-organizers of the Great Central Fair was a sticky issue. Stillé observed that the mere concept of establishing "the ladies committee" proved to be a "delicate" matter. Some men worried that women would transcend their normal (read domestic) sphere. This dispute harkened back to the very origins of the Sanitary Commission. When women approached Northern leaders in 1861 about spearheading sanitary reform, doctors in the Army Medical Bureau thought women might meddle in the serious business of medicine and war.¹²

Without women, however, sanitary reform would have fallen flat. By 1864, women's home-front heroism was heralded from New York to St. Louis. In Philadelphia, women ran refreshment saloons, worked



at hospitals, raised funds, and helped outfit sanitary trains, wagons, and ships destined for the battlefield. Validation of their essential role came from no less a figure than Henry Bellows, who hailed women as indispensable sanitary reformers.

With that thought in mind, Stillé applauded a decision by fair organizers to let women serve as co-chairs of many committees. The official term was "cooperation," meaning that men supervised men, and women supervised women. Thus, Mrs. John Cresson provided "energetic management" to the Children's Clothing Department, while Mrs. Coleman Jacobs offered "indefatigable zeal" to the "Sewing Women." While these roles epitomized domestic spaces as women's true home, others went a bit further. The "Department of Labor, Income and Revenue," headed by a man and a woman, raised roughly a quarter million dollars during the fair—one of the event's largest single revenue sources. Two of nine members of the "Committee of Organization"—a subcommittee whose goal was to induce everyone in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware to donate one day's wages to the fair—were women. The "Editorial

View of the main corridor of the Great Central
Sanitary Fair, 1864.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania Photograph Collection.



Committee,” which helped produce *Our Daily Fare*, comprised 20 people, divided evenly between men and women. “They performed their duty, if we are to judge by the results, with great discrimination and judgment,” Stillé wrote in a nod both to women’s contributions and their savvy way of handling controversies over wartime work.¹³

Cooperative leadership signified more than a compromise over gender relations. It also highlighted the concept of national unity. Hovering over the various planning meetings, circular letters, proclamations, and reports leading up to the fair was the ghost of disunion and discord. Though recognizing that political disagreements were endemic to democracy, fair planners sought to distinguish politics from patriotism. Thus, the fair took shape “in the interest of *no* party, radical or conservative, Republican or Democratic, administration or anti-administration.” Of much greater importance was the cause of the “national soldier,” who needed nourishment,

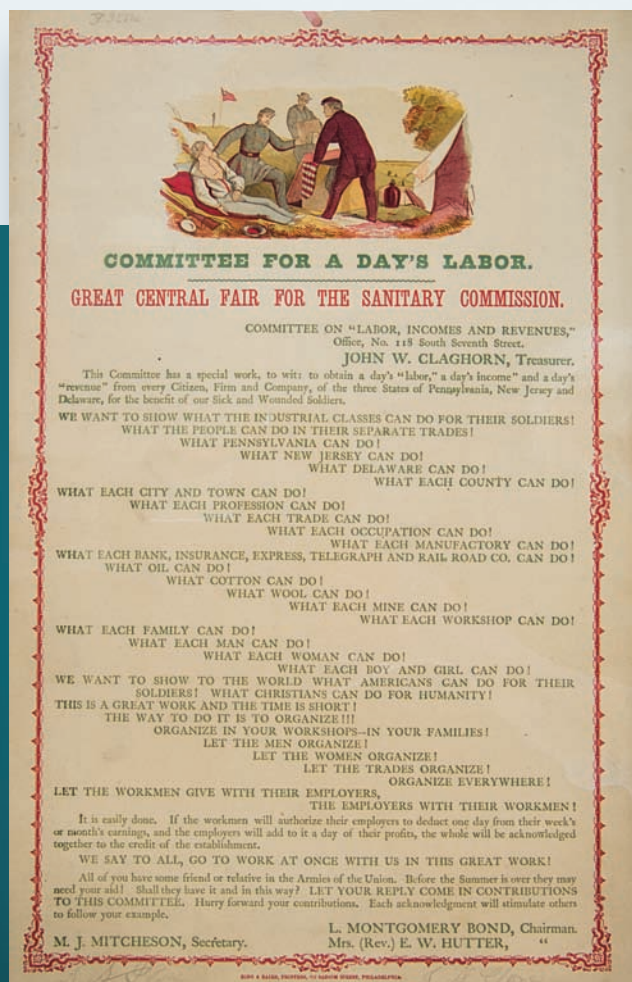
medical supplies, and copious amounts of love, aid, and comfort. Fair organizers asked all those dedicated to Union soldiers to put aside political differences and join the cause.¹⁴

When the exhibition opened, the fairgrounds themselves became a monument to national unity. Laid out in Logan Square, the grounds offered a commodious home to the weeks-long sanitary bazaar. As Jane Hoge observed, Logan Square provided “a spacious public park, whose broad walks seem to have been created for the buildings of the fair, and whose lofty forest trees lent their leafy branches for ornament and shade to the waiting and departing multitudes.”¹⁵ Hoge delighted in the pleasing “aesthetic” environment of the Philadelphia fair. The layout underscored the importance of cleanliness, beauty, and both bodily and civic health. Indeed, where other fairs had utilized churches, lecture halls, and various makeshift buildings, the Great Central Fair arose as a gleaming new city. Local architects and builders had hastily created dozens of new structures, walkways, and thoroughfares. An impressed Hoge stayed 10 days and walked away

dazzled. In its voluntary “vastness, its completeness, and its unity,” the Philadelphia fair was a “living embodiment of the zeal of a patriotic people for its ideal—a government of universal freedom, of civil and religious liberty.”¹⁶

Art, agriculture, commerce, education—these building blocks of American liberty found representation in the very layout of the fair. Arranged as a square grid, bounded by Race and Vine at the southern and northern ends and by 18th and 19th Streets on the east and west, the fairgrounds contained roughly 200,000 million square feet of exhibit space and promenades. In the middle, the Horticultural and Restaurant Departments provided pleasing diversions, while the edges of the square contained an art gallery, Children’s Department, Machinery Department, cabinetry and furniture displays, and a bevy of other sections testifying to the Union’s productive might. The avenues bisecting the fairgrounds featured a seemingly endless array of tables with donated goods, curiosities, trophies and vases, historic relics, and other material designed to raise funds.

Union Avenue, the central artery, was a marvel in and of itself. Nearly three football



Cooperative leadership signified more than a compromise over gender relations. It also highlighted the concept of national unity. Hovering over the various planning meetings, circular letters, proclamations, and reports leading up to the fair was the ghost of disunion and discord.

Broadside for the Committee for a Day's Labor, 1864.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania Poster and Broadside Collection.

fields long and over 60 feet wide, it featured a series of Gothic arches that soared above the landscape below. The result was a cathedral-like effect that Stillé compared to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Instead of frescoes depicting God and nature, Philadelphians marching along Union Avenue enjoyed real trees that prospered beneath the graceful arches. For fairgoers, here

Emancipation Proclamation took effect and stranger still in the onetime home of legendary abolitionists Anthony Benezet and Richard Allen. But abolitionists were not invited to speak about slavery's demise, nor did they appear in order to espouse equality. With a network of black abolitionists—including William Still, Robert Purvis, and Octavius

City draft riots worried Philadelphians. Trying to stay true to the ideal of unity, organizers shied away from an issue—abolitionism—sure to stir up ill-will among some white Philadelphians. Indeed, when not buried, race and abolitionism manifested themselves in worrisome ways. Hospitals for wounded black soldiers were segregated from white ones, and



By March, planning was well under way, with a flurry of handbills, newspaper articles, speeches, and circular letters touting the fair as the most important nonmilitary event of the summer.

Bill of Fare for maizena, or cornstarch products, at the Great Central Sanitary Fair, 1864.

United States Sanitary Commission Philadelphia Branch Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

was yet another reminder of American power and ingenuity.¹⁷

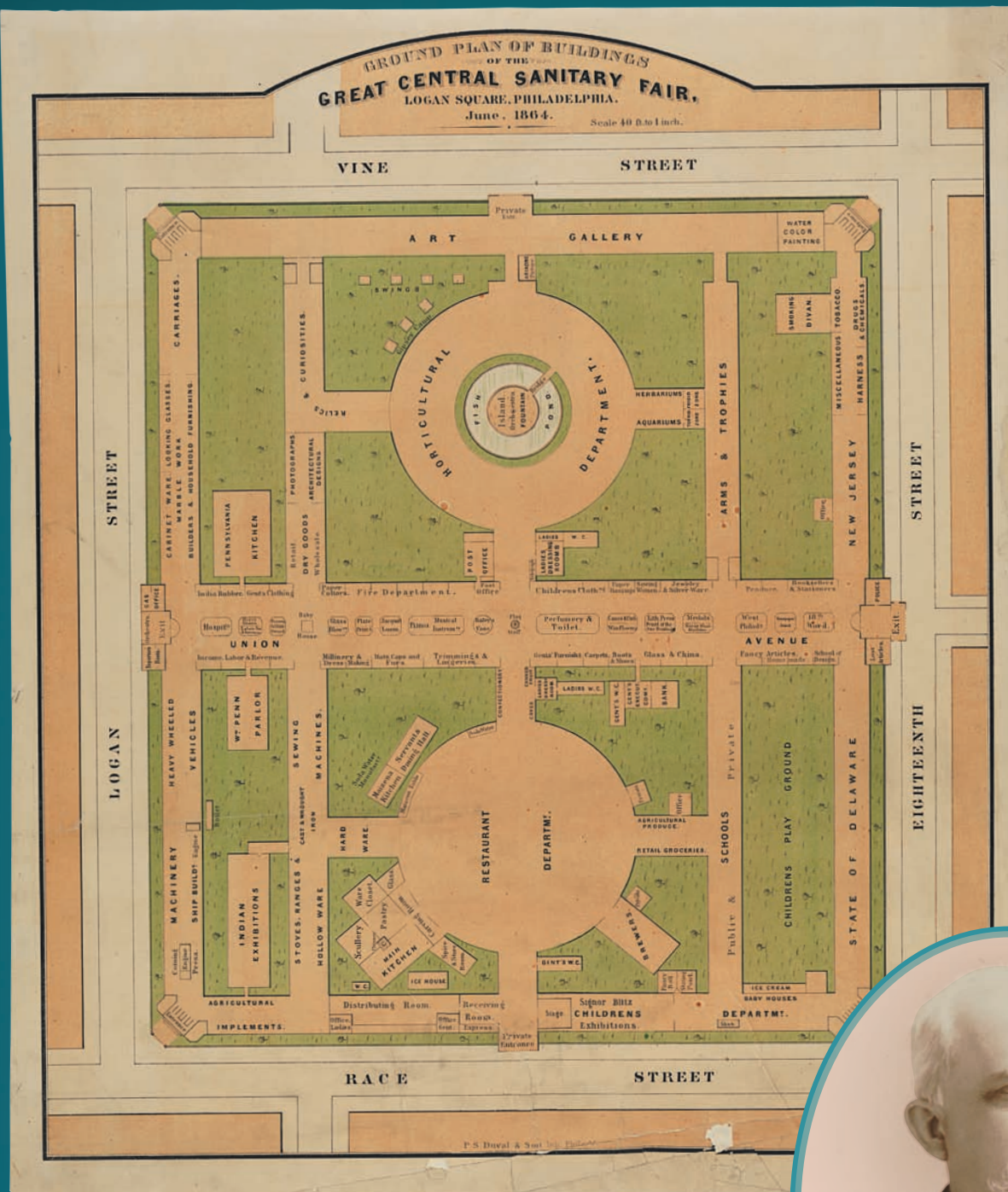
Yet there was one area of concern, at least for reformers: the fair's marginalization of abolitionism. While allusions to the new wartime motto of union and freedom could be found on the fairgrounds—visitors could purchase signed copies of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Children's Department had a note on the wall declaring “all for freedom and freedom for all”—black and white abolitionists were conspicuously absent. This was strange enough in the days after the

Catto—located in Philadelphia, it would not have been hard to find such a speaker. But they were shut out. One distressing sign of the times was the hiring of minstrels as entertainers. In Cincinnati, by contrast, abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison were asked to write on behalf of the sanitary fair.¹⁸ But not in the City of Brotherly Love.

In Philadelphia, the legacy of antebellum race riots clearly impacted fair organizers' understanding of civic unity. Indeed, the tragic burning of Pennsylvania Hall in 1838 and the more recent example of the New York

African American women found it easier to sponsor their own sanitary fair in December 1864.¹⁹ This would not be the last time that a major Philadelphia exposition whitewashed race reform. At the Centennial Exposition of 1876, African American reformers were again pushed to the side.²⁰

If one set of absences haunted the fair, a significant presence enlivened it: President Lincoln, who visited on June 16. Though planners hoped he would launch the fair, Lincoln demurred, focusing instead on the Richmond campaign and the upcoming



Ground Plan of Buildings of the Great Central Sanitary Fair, June 1864. Lithograph by P.S. Duval & Son. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Nearly three football fields long and over 60 feet wide, Union Avenue featured a series of Gothic arches that soared above the landscape. The result was a cathedral-like effect that Stillé compared to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Charles J. Stillé, corresponding secretary of the executive committee of the Great Central Sanitary Fair. Historical Society of Pennsylvania Portrait Collection.



Republican convention in Baltimore. When he did come, Lincoln found loyal Philadelphians eager to see their commander in chief. Arriving just before noon, the president moved north along Broad Street, where he was cheered by groups of firemen. Turning east on Chestnut, he stopped at a recruiting station for black soldiers, where he was saluted as a hero. After checking in at the Continental Hotel, Lincoln took a carriage out to Logan Square, where John Welsh greeted the president amid burgeoning crowds. Although fair officials doubled the price of tickets that day, throngs of people longed to see Lincoln.²¹

After touring exhibits, Lincoln offered an informal address. Linking home and battlefronts, he acknowledged both the sacrifice of Union soldiers and the spirit of voluntarism evident at the fair. Indeed, for Lincoln, the fair offered convincing proof that democracy would not only survive the war but thrive in it. By supporting the Union cause so “freely,” citizens upheld that pillar of democratic union: voluntary participation. In a heartfelt call and response moment, an emboldened Lincoln asked fairgoers if they would “freely” support a war that might last years longer. If men and supplies were still needed, he asked, “Will you give them to me?” “Yes!” the crowd shouted. As Lincoln learned again in Philadelphia, voluntarism was a powerful force for Union.²²

During his wartime presidency, Lincoln gave roughly 100 speeches, the majority of which were impromptu remarks linking a particular event to the cause of Union. At

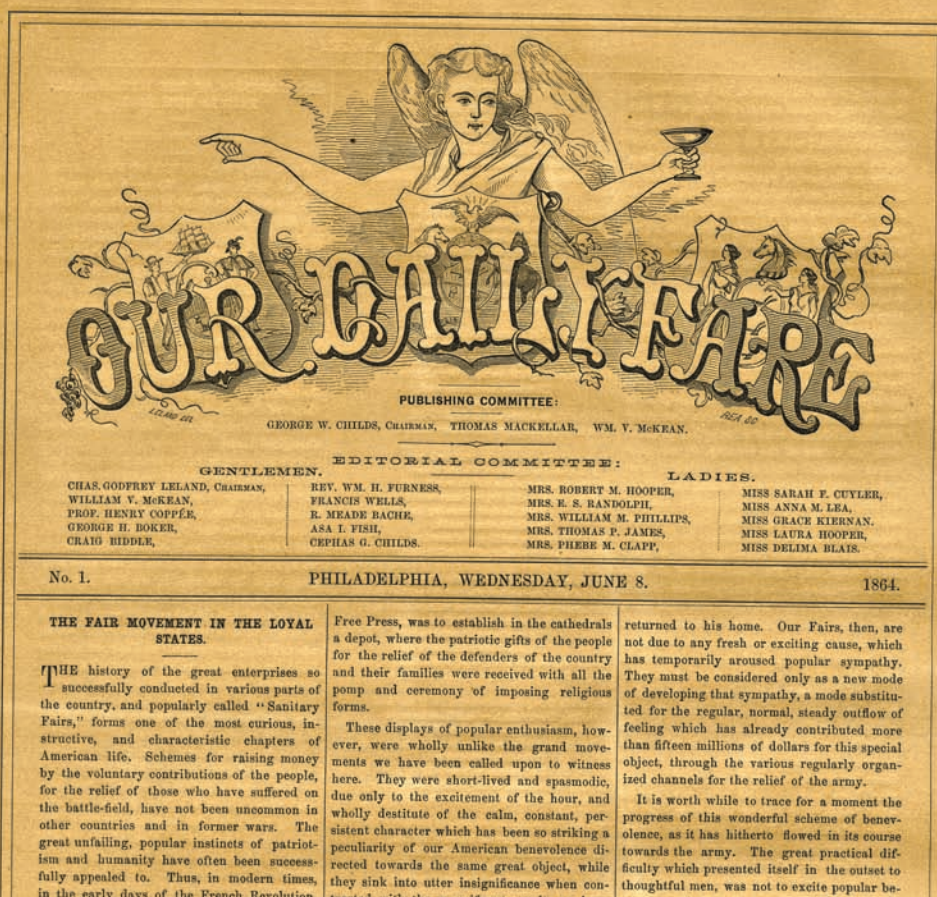
the Baltimore Sanitary Fair in 1864, Lincoln saluted soldiers’ sacrifice on the battlefield while also highlighting black military bravery; at the Washington Fair, he hailed women’s reform efforts.²³ In Philadelphia, Lincoln’s remarks about the power of home-front benevolence followed a brisk tour of the fair’s myriad departments and stalls. After viewing sewing machines, clothing, relics, foodstuffs, and more, he was dazzled by citizens’ contributions to soldiers’ health and recovery. Looking at an army of citizens whose donations were still piling up, he may also have recalled sectional battles of days gone by, when proto-secessionists boldly asserted that Northern mudsills (or average working men) were little better than wage slaves. At the Philadelphia fair, Lincoln found more proof than ever to the contrary. In the troubling early summer of ’64, when stalemate defined the eastern battlefield, Lincoln was cheered again and again by Northern volunteerism

and productivity. When at last he spoke, Lincoln honored a mighty democracy in action. Interestingly, noted orator Edward Everett had the ill-luck to speak alongside Lincoln that day (as he had at Gettysburg the previous fall); few people cared to write down his words. Again, Lincoln had captured the moment almost perfectly.

When the fair closed on June 28, Philadelphians took a collective bow. But they remained attentive to the task of sanitary

**First issue of *Our Daily Fare*,
June 8, 1864.**

Horace Howard Furness Collection of the Great Central Fair,
Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



OUR DAILY FARE

PUBLISHING COMMITTEE:
GEORGE W. CHILDS, CHAIRMAN, THOMAS MACKELLAR, WM. V. MCKEAN.

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

GENTLEMEN.	LADIES.
CHAS. GODFREY LELAND, CHAIRMAN, WILLIAM V. MCKEAN, PROF. HENRY COPPEE, GEORGE H. BOKER, CRAIG HIDDLE,	MRS. ROBERT M. HOOPER, MRS. E. S. RANDOLPH, MRS. WILLIAM M. PHILLIPS, MRS. THOMAS F. JAMES, MRS. PIERRE M. CLAPP,
REV. WM. H. FURNESS, FRANCIS WELLS, E. MEADE RACHE, ASA I. FISH, CEPHAS G. CHILDS.	MISS SARAH F. CUYLER, MISS ANNA M. LEA, MISS GRACE KIERNAN, MISS LAURA HOOPER, MISS DELIMA BLAIS.

No. 1. PHILADELPHIA, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8. 1864.

THE FAIR MOVEMENT IN THE LOYAL STATES.

THE history of the great enterprises so successfully conducted in various parts of the country, and popularly called "Sanitary Fairs," forms one of the most curious, instructive, and characteristic chapters of American life. Schemes for raising money by the voluntary contributions of the people, for the relief of those who have suffered on the battle-field, have not been uncommon in other countries and in former wars. The great unflinching, popular instincts of patriotism and humanity have often been successfully appealed to. Thus, in modern times, in the early days of the French Revolution,

Free Press, was to establish in the cathedrals a depot, where the patriotic gifts of the people for the relief of the defenders of the country and their families were received with all the pomp and ceremony of imposing religious forms.

These displays of popular enthusiasm, however, were wholly unlike the grand movements we have been called upon to witness here. They were short-lived and spasmodic, due only to the excitement of the hour, and wholly destitute of the calm, constant, persistent character which has been so striking a peculiarity of our American benevolence directed towards the same great object, while they sink into utter insignificance when compared to the present movement.

It is worth while to trace for a moment the progress of this wonderful scheme of benevolence, as it has hitherto flowed in its course towards the army. The great practical difficulty which presented itself in the outset to thoughtful men, was not to excite popular be-

Civil War envelope depicting the United States Sanitary Commission aiding a wounded soldier on the battleground.

Civil War Envelope Collection,
Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

H.A. Office 1323 Chestnut Street



reform: aiding more soldiers, outfitting more hospitals, and spreading the gospel of home-front benevolence through the war's end. As for the fair, when the temporary structures came down and Logan Square returned to normal, it moved into the realm of civic memory. Though eclipsed by the subsequent fame of the Centennial Exposition in 1876, the Great Central Fair remained a touchstone of voluntarism and patriotic action for years to come.

Charles Stillé noted that the fair was indeed a most beautiful event, one with “manifold attractions.” But for him, the true measure of the fair’s importance was its ability to display the “animating spirit” of the Union cause. Like Lincoln, he saw “patriotism and holy charity” as the “twin sisters” of the Civil War. On the home front, no less than the battlefield, the Union faithful fought for an ideal: democratic freedom. “Long after everything material connected with the Fair shall have mouldered in the dust,” Stillé concluded, “the influence of the patriotic impulse awakened [in the people] shall remain.”²⁴ But so too did questions linger about the wartime reality of egalitarianism—of just who belonged to that democratic union home-front citizens mobilized so mightily to save.

Rich Newman teaches at the Rochester Institute of Technology. He is the author of *The Transformation of American Abolitionism* (2002) and *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (2008).

¹ See The Library Company of Philadelphia's online exhibition, “John A. McAllister's Civil War: The Philadelphia Home Front,” at <http://www.librarycompany.org/mcallisterexhibition/section6.htm>.

² Charles Stillé quoted in *Our Daily Fare*, June 9, 1864.

³ Jane Currie Hoge, *The Boys in Blue; or, Heroes of the “Rank and File”* (New York and Chicago, 1867), 386–87.

⁴ *Speech of the Rev. Dr. Bellows, President of the United States Sanitary Commission: Made at the Academy of Music, Philadelphia, Tuesday Evening, Feb. 24, 1863* (Philadelphia, 1863), 1–9.

⁵ See Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* (Boston, 2000), esp. chap. 2.

⁶ Undated newspaper collage, box 1, John A. McAllister's Sanitary Fairs Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia.

⁷ John Welsh and Executive Committee, circular letter, March 15, 1864, box 1, McAllister's Sanitary Fairs Collection.

⁸ 1864 circular from the “Committee on Florists, Horticulturalists and Seedmen,” box 1, McAllister's Sanitary Fairs Collection.

⁹ “Appeal of the Committee on Agriculture,” ca. spring 1864, box 1, McAllister's Sanitary Fairs Collection.

¹⁰ See the “Appendix” of committees and volunteers at the end of Charles J. Stillé, *Memorial of the Great Central Fair for the U.S. Sanitary Commission, Held at Philadelphia, June 1864* (Philadelphia, 1864).

¹¹ *Our Daily Fare*, June 8, 1864.

¹² Stillé, *Memorial of the Great Central Fair*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36–37, 40.

¹⁴ John Welch et al., circular on the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair under heading “United States Sanitary Commission,” March 1, 1864, box 1, McAllister's Sanitary Fairs Collection.

¹⁵ Hoge, *Boys in Blue*, 338.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 388–389.

¹⁷ Stillé, *Memorial of the Great Central Fair*, 33.

¹⁸ Charles Brandon Boynton, *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair* (Cincinnati, 1864), 421, 430.

¹⁹ See the circular by the women of St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church, “Fair, for the Sick & Wounded Soldiers!” Dec. 1864, Library Company of Philadelphia. See also “Confronting Race,” in the Library Company's John A. McAllister's Civil War exhibit: <http://www.librarycompany.org/mcallisterexhibition/section7.htm>.

²⁰ Gary Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of American Memory* (Philadelphia, 2002), 266–272.

²¹ Stillé, *Memorial of the Great Central Fair*, 135–137.

²² Lincoln's speech is available on the Dickinson College House Divided website at <http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/25129>.

²³ See Lincoln's speech at the Baltimore Sanitary Fair, April 18, 1864, online at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1067>.

²⁴ Stillé, *Memorial of the Great Central Fair*, 9–10.