

**Lesson Title:** 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and Women in the Public Space

**Lesson Class Name and Grade Level:** This lesson is intended for a US History class in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Lesson Type:** Lecture, Questioning, Group work, Discussion.

**NCSS Themes:** II Time, Change, & Continuity

III People, Places, & Environment

V Individuals, Groups, & Institutions

**Illinois Learning Standards:**

**16.A.4a** Analyze and report historical events to determine cause-and-effect relationships.

**16.A.5a** Analyze historical and contemporary developments using methods of historical inquiry (pose questions, collect and analyze data, make and support inferences with evidence, report findings).

**16.A.5b** Explain the tentative nature of historical interpretations.

**Introduction:** As a cultural event of great importance, the spectacle that was the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition essentially told Americans about themselves. Thus, the events of the Fair can now tell historians how Chicagoans perceived themselves in the world during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the first time ever, women were given the opportunity to be in complete control of an aspect of the fair, in effect controlling the way that women were presented to fair-goers. A board of 117 "Lady Managers" was appointed to manage the Woman's Building, with a female architect designed the structure, and the displays within were devoted to exhibitions detailing the accomplishments of women around the world. Displays of female achievement ranging from industry to art to science to literature filled the space, and so did special topic exhibits created by more than 60 organizations. President of the Board of Lady Managers and Chicago socialite Bertha Honore Palmer claimed that the Woman's Building demonstrated that "ability was not a matter of sex," a feeling that most of her fellow members agreed with. Most importantly, women were given creative control of their own work, and the Woman's Building changed perceptions about women for fellow women and men.

In this lesson, students will analyze an 1893 description of the Woman's Exhibit at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois to analyze how these women were presenting themselves for a public audience. Students will discover what affected the goals the women set and explore the choices that affected their choices.

**Goals:** When students complete this lesson, they should be able to:

1. Identify and analyze reliable primary sources.
2. Deduce information about historical events based on factual evidence.

3. Consider how women around the turn of the twentieth century presented themselves to the public

#### Materials/Equipment:

1. Primary Source Reading
2. Primary Source Analysis Document
3. Computer Access (optional)

#### Procedures:

##### Pre-class Preparation:

- Make photocopies of Primary Source Analysis Sheet and the primary document on the Woman's Exhibit in the World's Columbian Exposition
- Prepare background knowledge on the the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and women in the public sphere (see bibliography)

##### Anticipatory Set

The instructor will begin a brief discussion about public presentation in the lives of the students.

- a. **Ask:** If you were given the opportunity to create an exhibit about this class to the rest of the school, what kinds of things would you choose to present?

##### Statement of Objectives

1. Be able to identify reliable primary sources.
2. Identify the relationship between the World's Columbian Exposition and public perception of women.

##### Outline of Lesson Contents

1. Lecture on the World's Columbian Exposition and the exhibits there. The internet has a wide variety of photographs and websites dedicated to this event. Try the World's Columbian Exposition website developed by the Paul V. Galvin Library at <http://columbus.galvin.library.edu> and see Appendix A for more information.
  - a. **Ask:** Why was this an important event?
  - b. **Ask:** What did it mean to have the authority to create an exhibit here? That is, who should be able to present their ideas at such a wide forum?
2. Tell the class that they will be looking at a primary source from the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.
  - a. **Ask:** What are primary sources?
  - b. **Ask:** How might primary sources help historians figure out the past?

- c. **Ask:** How might historians use the information in primary sources as evidence for their ideas?
3. Lecture very briefly on the women's movement into the public sphere. At this time, new perceptions of women as part of the public sphere (or the "New Woman") were entering popular culture. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women were seen as part of the domestic sphere, but many women leaders (including female suffragists) were agitating for change and recognition. They wanted to create more space for women to pursue careers that were previously taboo and obtain acceptance for women to enter all parts of the public sphere as equals. Introduce the Woman's Building and lecture briefly. Photographs are available online. Try <http://members.cox.net/academia/cassatt5.html>. Then write the quotation by Berta Palmer on the board—that the Woman's Building sought to demonstrate that "ability was not a matter of sex."
- a. **Ask:** How could a forum such as the Woman's Building. Give women authority to talk about their abilities?
5. Explain that today the students will have the opportunity to analyze a primary source—a description and photo of the Women's Exhibit at the World's Columbian Exposition, written by the Board of Lady Managers themselves in 1893. They will be using a primary source analysis sheet in order to analyze the document.
6. Break the students into small groups and give them time to read the document. Hand out the Primary Document Analysis Worksheet and allow time for questions regarding the worksheet. Then tell the students to fill out the worksheet as a group, keeping in mind both the woman's suffrage movement and the woman's exhibit.
7. After 20 minutes or so, bring the class back together as a whole and lead a discussion on the results.
- a. **Ask:** How did this primary source add to your understanding of the World's Columbian Exposition? The entrance of women into the public sphere?
- b. **Ask:** Do you think that this was a successful way to gain recognition for women?

#### Evaluation:

Students will be expected to know this information for the next unit test. An essay question on analyzing primary sources would be one way to evaluate this knowledge.

#### MIVCA:

The lesson is meaningful because it conveys to students how primary sources are a necessary tool for historians to better understand historical developments and how new primary sources can fit into our perceptions of history. The lesson is integrative because it utilizes a primary

source and quotations to enhance the presentation. The lesson will be challenging because students are asked to synthesize information from a lecture and a primary source and create an entirely original interpretation of history with the evidence at hand. The lesson also promotes active learning through use of group work and discussion.

**The Women's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition**  
**Primary Document Analysis Sheet**

Adapted from the National Archives "Written Document Analysis Sheet"

DOCUMENT INFORMATION

DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT: 1893

AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:

FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THIS DOCUMENT WRITTEN?

ANALYSIS

- A. Why do you think this document was written?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- B. What evidence in this document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- C. Name at least three types displays in the woman's building. Describe the contents of one display.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- D. Why do you think women chose to display these talents? Quote from the document.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- E. Write a question to the author(s) that is left unanswered by the document.

#### Appendix A:

This fair was part of an international trend at the time. Since 1851, when the Great Exhibition was held in London, World's Fairs were an opportunity for countries in Western Europe and the United States to demonstrate achievement and progress. Usually, the Fairs were very nationalistic endeavors, and the Chicago Fair of 1893 was no exception—its official purpose was to celebrate the anniversary of Columbus' arrival in North America. Designers created an ideal city—the White City—within the confines of Chicago, a beautiful example of classical architecture and industrial progress, and exhibitors such as the Illinois Central Railroad and General Electric demonstrated their achievements. As a cultural event of great importance, the spectacle that was the Fair essentially told Americans about themselves. For the first time, the trustees appointed a "Board of Lady Managers" to oversee a woman's exhibit. The President was Chicago socialite Berta Honore Palmer. In a speech, she claimed that women's participation in the fair demonstrated progress itself, and that "even more than Columbus, which we are gathered together to celebrate, is the fact that the General Government [of the Fair] has just discovered woman."

For more information, see:

Bolotin, Norman and Christine Laing. *The World's Columbian Exposition*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Burg, David F. *Chicago's White City of 1893*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976.

Gourley, Catherine. *Gibson girls and suffragists perceptions of women from the turn of the century through 1918*. Minneapolis, MN: Twenty-First Century Books, 2008.

<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/newwoman.html>

World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. <http://columbus.gl.iit.edu/> (accessed January 13, 2010).