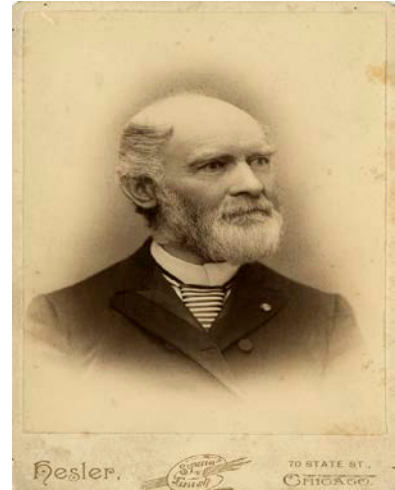


ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: THOMAS BARBOUR BRYAN (1828-1906)

“Thomas B. Bryan in his visit to Europe has promoted the interests of the World’s Columbian Exposition as no other man possible could have done, and in his private capacity as a citizen and as a man he has everywhere reflected the highest credit on Chicago – which is exactly what Chicago expected him to do.” -Chicago Tribune, 1900

Thomas Barbour Bryan was a prominent Elmhurst resident and business leader who helped to change Chicago’s rough-and-tumble image, and put the city on the international stage with his efforts to bring a World’s Fair here in the late 1800s.

Bryan was born in Virginia on December 22, 1828. He earned his law degree at Harvard University, and married Jennie B. Page in 1850. The young lawyer and his wife moved to Chicago in 1852 where he acquired extensive real estate interests. Bryan took up residence with his family on an estate in Cottage Hill, Illinois circa 1859, and he is credited with changing the town’s name to Elmhurst. Despite devastating commercial losses following the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, Bryan was instrumental in helping to rebuild the city. He was the founder of Graceland Cemetery and earned a reputation as a gifted orator and civic leader.



Thomas B. Bryan. M2012.1.7



The Bryan Estate, circa 1900. The property was on the south side of St. Charles Road between York Street and Cottage Hill Avenue. P73.1.7

In July of 1886, a resolution was introduced in Congress to consider holding a World’s Fair in North America. Washington, D.C. was proposed as the prime location – but Chicagoans had other ideas. Newspaper publisher J. W. Scott originated the idea of Chicago hosting the World’s Fair and proposed it to Mayor Cregier. A committee of the city’s business and political elite was formed, and Thomas Barbour Bryan’s persuasive oratorical skills were tapped to lead the charge. At a City Council meeting on August 1, 1889, Bryan introduced a series of resolutions, the last of which stated: *“The men who have helped build Chicago want the Fair, and, having a just and well-sustained claim, they intend to have it.”* The resolutions were unanimously adopted.

A committee of fifteen U.S. senators convened in January of 1890, and cities competing for the fair were invited to present their cases. Chicago was represented by Bryan, Mayor Cregier, and Edward Jeffery, former general manager of the Illinois Central Railroad. Bryan stated that Chicago was both willing and able to provide the “ample space, accommodations and transportation for all exhibits and visitors, together with convenient access to the greatest number.” He stressed that the fair was of “vital interest” to the West—and that the West wanted it held in Chicago. Congress agreed, and Chicago was selected as the World’s Fair site.

On April 25, 1890, President Benjamin Harrison signed the World’s Fair bill and created the national World’s Columbian Exposition Board, with Thomas Bryan appointed as a commissioner-at-large. In this role, Bryan traveled throughout Europe to gain audiences with crowned heads to win support for the World’s Fair, and he entertained many distinguished international guests who visited the fair. Bryan was also elected to the World’s Fair Board of Directors as a co-Vice President with Potter Palmer and President Lyman Gage. Thomas Barbour Bryan lived the final years of his life in Washington, where he served as Commissioner of the District of Columbia. He will long be remembered for his leadership and benevolence—and for bringing a World’s Fair to a city that desperately needed to stake a claim on the international landscape.

*By Nancy Wilson, Elmhurst History Museum Staff
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