A glittering dream: celebration, spectacle, power, and identity in American cities, 1886-1924

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A GLITTERING DREAM:
CELEBRATION, SPECTACLE, POWER, AND IDENTITY IN AMERICAN CITIES,
1886-1924

by

Wyatt Erchak

A Thesis
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

College of Arts & Sciences
Department of History
2019
Abstract

In July 1886, the city of Albany, New York celebrated the Bicentennial of the granting of its city charter, an event that synthesized and innovated existing forms of spectacle and celebration. Parades of municipal, fraternal, commercial, and military organizations joined orations and elaborate pyrotechnics to mark the occasion. Its central feature—a grand “historical pageant”—was one of the first times a city told the sequential story of its creation using dramatic and mechanical techniques, with expert assistance from Mardi Gras and Carnival float designers.

The Bicentennial and subsequent celebrations were arenas for expressions of power and identity. Elites sought to project their vision of civic unity, while others simply saw economic opportunity or occasions for leisure. Some groups, such as Native Americans, were caricatured to fit into stereotypes serving as foils for ideals of progress. This thesis explores the many meanings of celebration by examining these expressions in the Bicentennial and charting the history of celebration and spectacle in American cities using Albany as its case study.

Albany’s history also suggests a different perspective on historical pageantry, an artistic movement often considered to have emerged from influences outside the United States. This study argues for reconsidering historical pageantry’s indigenous heritage as a case of cultural transmission from South to North and offers a fuller accounting of the movement’s chronology.
A Glittering Dream:
Celebration, Spectacle, Power, and Identity in American Cities, 1886-1924

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Introduction

Americans had never seen anything quite like what the political and business elite of Albany, New York planned for the two hundredth birthday of their city in July 1886. Certain citizens of the Southern states around the Gulf of Mexico had their Mardi Gras and Carnival. Ethnic and immigrant communities enjoyed folk traditions and masquerades. People everywhere loved to cheer the boom of cannon fire, the swirling color of fireworks and elaborate staged scenes, and the pleading, hoarse voice of the politician at mass rallies and campaign stops. They loved, too, to put on a spectacular show of exaltation not only when beloved figures passed through, but of grief when they passed away. By 1886, Americans were beginning to become familiar with the combination of history, technology, capitalism, and optimistic spirit that typified the organized spectacle of celebration in the later years of the nineteenth century. But it was in Albany that summer, that these four strands of celebration wove together to mark the city’s two-hundredth year.

When the topic of spectacle is raised in the context of that era, most think of the World’s Fairs. Indeed, all of the elements noted above were present at the first World’s Fair held in the United States only ten years before Albany’s Bicentennial, at Philadelphia’s 1876 Centennial Exhibition. Visitors to that Fair’s display halls, the “White City” at Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition (1893), and the “Rainbow City” at Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition (1901) all witnessed the greatest spectacles ever seen in the United States up to their times; smaller World’s Fairs held in other cities in between these bonanzas attempted to replicate what Philadelphia had started. With each World’s Fair, the displays grew ever more elaborate and technically sophisticated, eventually becoming something closer to fantasy than most Americans’ realities, as the “White” and “Rainbow” monikers imply. Scholars have
consequently often used the lens of World’s Fairs to characterize how influential leading Americans—the most prominent figures from across the United States’ social world—saw, envisioned, and ultimately shaped their modernizing nation from the 1870s through the 1930s. During those years the World’s Fairs, as historians Robert Rydell and John Findling wrote, gave “form and substance to the modern world.”¹ The sheer volume of ink spilled by scholars like Rydell et alia writing about the Fairs is enormous; the Smithsonian Institution’s exhaustive collection of written material alone is overwhelming.²

Cultural historian Neil Harris has written that “fair-going was a typical experience for the American at the turn of the century.”³ It is true that the World’s Fairs that Harris referred to were visited by millions of people from across the country. Perhaps, though, this common assertion is not entirely accurate nor inclusive of the average person’s experience. Most Americans, in fact, did not directly experience the World’s Fairs, despite their impressive and unprecedented visitation. Still, most had begun to witness something like them. During the years between 1876’s Centennial Exhibition and 1893’s Columbian Exposition, the disparate elements of spectacle people regularly witnessed came into form at the local level where most Americans lived. In an era before most people could readily travel long distances, local events, like the one Albany’s governing class promised to create in 1886, put more people in touch with the smaller but still spectacular “kaleidoscope of wonders” than witnessed a World’s Fair firsthand. What manifested on the national and international stages of the World’s Fairs took shape on local, smaller stages.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth were an age of American exhibitionism at all levels. As Harris has also noted, those years also saw the parallel growth of cultural institutions—the orchestras, libraries, and museums—that joined with department stores and an emerging culture of consumerism to attempt to orient urban Americans towards “educational pleasure grounds, designed or at least intended to have a pervasive if vaguely defined improving effect” upon the populace. This study responds to Harris and other scholars’ focus on World’s Fairs by not focusing on them, instead concerning itself with those lower, more typical levels of American experience also pointed to by Harris. If the World’s Fairs were “a powerful and inspirational vision of city life,” he wrote, suggesting “attachment to city living as an emblem of human progress and national greatness,” then what motivations and experiences may be found in the smaller but more common events of an average American city?

Exploring celebrations and spectacle in the representative city of Albany, New York from 1886 and before through 1924 and beyond, this thesis uses the “improving effect” of the 1886 Bicentennial intended by Albany’s elites as its central case study.

Albany originated with the Dutch and Henry Hudson’s explorations on their behalf in the early seventeenth century and is one of the oldest cities in the United States. Its political prominence has a similarly long history; by the nineteenth century, Albany was central to American political life. Grover Cleveland moved from Albany to the White House in 1884 (he was elected to a second non-consecutive term in 1892). Two years later, the city received President Chester A. Arthur for his final resting place in its rural cemetery. This central status in the nation’s political life had been maintained throughout the nineteenth century, with the city

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5 Harris, Cultural Excursions, 112.
serving as home base for such cunning political operators as Senator Roscoe Conkling, President Martin Van Buren establishing his “Albany Regency” there, and William Seward—later Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of State—residing in Albany as New York’s Governor. From the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries, the Roosevelt family descended upon Washington, D.C. by way of Albany.6

Albany was also a growing city in 1886. When John Boyd Thacher succeeded Anthony Bleecker Banks as Mayor in May of that year, he came in with concern over “the problem of municipal government” in an era when “the ratio of the urban to the total population is steadily increasing,” noting the city’s population of 90,903 (fourth largest in New York after Buffalo, Brooklyn, and New York City) just a few years prior in his inaugural message to the Common Council. “The indifferent good citizen is not much better for his city than the bad citizen,” Thacher told the Aldermen. One way to “arouse” citizens was with “pomp and ceremony,” and “our most prominent and representative people,” as the Mayor called Albany’s political and social elite, had the perfect occasion to go all-out in the two-hundredth anniversary of the city. Impressing upon the Council with an almost martial sense the critical importance of using the event to their utmost advantage, Thacher concluded his address with a proclamation: “Our Bi-centenary must and shall be a success.”7

The first chapter of this study examines the precedents for Albany’s 1886 Bicentennial present in American cities in the years leading up to it. Four key forms preceded and contributed to Albany’s celebration: the majesty of the World’s Fairs; the dramatic theatricality of street carnivals and Southern pageantry; new technology and public demonstrations of sport and

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pyrotechnics; and the ornate displays and symbolism created for political events, funerals, and military parades. By considering these disparate elements together, chapter one seeks to establish the widespread culture of exhibitionism through celebration and spectacle in late nineteenth century American cities.

Local celebrations like the Bicentennial illustrated the formation of identities. Celebrations consisted of active and passive organizers (the elite) and participants (the commons); even the most passive participant plays an active role in shaping how events take place, for events are defined as “non” if nobody attends them. What did the celebration mean to those who did the shaping and those who did the spectating? What forces compelled civic elites to put such a massive effort into celebrating an ephemeral event? How was the story of the city told in the pageantry of celebration? Chapter two addresses these questions by narrating the history of Albany’s Bicentennial through a close analysis of newspaper and first-hand accounts. The “four days of glorious festivities” and “the most magnificent spectacular display ever witnessed in the state” advertised by The Albany Argus, the Bicentennial’s “official” local paper closely tied to the Democratic elite of the city, contained identity and power dynamics that typified late nineteenth century urban celebrations.8

A central aspect of constructing identities through pageantry and celebration was the instillation of values, from consumerism to civic pride, cultural and racial superiority to the wonders of the new technologies driving economic growth. Celebratory events often were deliberately designed to impart lessons to accomplish this. At the World’s Fairs, Rydell and other scholars have observed an effort to define and illustrate progress and “persuade Americans that they had to set aside older values such as thrift and restraint and become consumers of America’s

8 “Bi-Centennial Anniversary,” The Albany Argus (July 11, 1886), 2.
factory and farm products,” while propagating a particular worldview “that insisted on the presumed fact of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority.”

One of the Bicentennial’s most important legacies was the introduction of the “historical pageant,” a meticulously designed drama on floats illustrating the history of a city to construct its identity and demonstrate its identity, much like what was done at World’s Fairs. The historical pageant was created by combining the “historical procession” consisting of general historical scenes representing abstract virtues, a form practiced in Albany and widely in American cities of the nineteenth century, with the mystic pageant tradition of the Deep South. Thomas Cooper De Leon, writer, journalist, and the manager of Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama, joined Albany’s elite in the spring of 1886 to lend his “wild, sensuous, Mardi Gras spirit” to creating that summer’s “glittering dream,” as The New York Times described it.

Chapter three moves past 1886 to focus on a representative selection of celebrations in Albany after the Bicentennial had made its mark. Particularly close attention is paid to the city’s 1924 Tercentenary and historical pageant, directed by dancer and American Pageant Association vice-presidential Virginia Tanner; this production, which marshalled the citizens of Albany into a theatrical performance based on “the charm of ancient yesterday” as John Boyd Thacher II (who served as Mayor of Albany from 1926 to 1941) called it in the souvenir program, illustrated the sort of historical pageantry that scholars have seized on as representing the widespread popularity of pageantry for civic celebrations in the early twentieth century.

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By the 1924 Tercentenary, Albany’s historical pageantry had developed into the theatrical productions that historian David Glassberg examined in his seminal 1990 work *American Historical Pageantry*. As Glassberg noted, historical pageants of the early twentieth century were the products of collaboration between “the same self-appointed guardians of tradition who usually orchestrated public ceremonies in the late nineteenth century”—the elite upper classes, some of whom found in the pageant form a comforting, medieval antidote to their nervous uncertainty about American modernity—and the spirit for social and political reform that began to sweep across the country into the twentieth century, seeking to improve the “moral, aesthetic, and patriotic qualities” of civic celebration. In their idealized visions of the past, present, and future, pageant creators sought to “combine the customary patriotic and religious themes of the historical oration, revised for an age of mass spectacle, with a growing interest in the past as a source of communal traditions that could offer emotional respite from the consequences of modern progress.” By striving for a collective history and culture, Glassberg pointed out how historical pageants constructed identity and power in similar ways to the World’s Fairs, creating idealized portraits of communities without external conflict or strife between ethnicities or labor groups, and using racial groups as comparative foils for progress, for example in their frequent use of Native Americans, a pattern repeatedly reflected in Albany’s history. “Chronological time in pageants,” Glassberg observed, “began with the arrival of the first white settlers and the ‘inevitable’ decline of the Indians.”

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Glassberg’s study described the historical pageantry movement in the early twentieth century. The third chapter of this study responds by extending that history further back in time, pointing to Albany’s experience as illustrative of American historical pageantry’s evolution from its earliest forms in the Deep South to the staged dramas analyzed by Glassberg and other scholars. The contributions of Southern cities towards new and popular forms of mass celebration like historical pageants in the North after the Civil War have not been properly considered. As this study will show, historical pageantry in the United States originated not only in the medieval revivalism of early twentieth century English pageantry but grew directly from the celebrations of cities like New Orleans and Mobile in three phases. First, the mystical pageants of Southern Mardi Gras and Carnival introduced historical themes throughout the nineteenth century. After the Civil War, mystic pageantry came North, fusing with civic celebrations in the second phase to create historical pageants in cities like Albany. Finally, the historical pageantry movement developed into a form of theater, spreading widely to cities and towns throughout the United States that sought to tell their stories through visual spectacle.

This thesis suggests a new chronological framework for the historical pageant movement, by highlighting and documenting its indigenous American heritage using Albany as a case study. By doing so, it offers a new perspective on the interconnections and influences that drove changes in how American cities and Americans celebrated, and illustrates the complex intentions and meanings when they did so.
Chapter One – The Greatest Demonstration Ever Seen

The floats of Albany’s Bicentennial “appeared like visions from fairyland,” according to Mayor Anthony Bleecker Banks’s compendium of the event.13 From start to finish, the Bicentennial week was a break from the norm, a massive celebration put together in a relatively short period of time that for most people not privy to the planning process—the majority of the city’s inhabitants—must have seemed to come out of nowhere when decorations began to go up in July 1886. But if the historical pageant’s floats and all the rest seemed somewhat fantastical, they did not simply appear out of thin air. In many cities large and small across the United States in the nineteenth century, extraordinary spectacles took place with regularity after the first American World’s Fair in 1876. This chapter examines four key elements, or cultural forms, that advanced and shaped civic celebration and spectacle in the years immediately preceding Albany’s Bicentennial and contributed to the form of “visions” for that event.

The most visible of these were also the most enormous, setting the tone for all celebrations into the following century: World’s Fairs, which drew crowds by the millions to their host cities, starting with Philadelphia in 1876 and including Milwaukee and Atlanta (1881), Louisville (1883), Boston (1883-1884), and New Orleans (1884). New technology and economic productivity, in addition to a general theme of unified nationalism after the Civil War, characterized the Fairs and their visions of progress. The Fairs themselves, in fact, sat atop a hierarchy of local celebrations and spectacles: nineteenth century American cities harbored long traditions of street carnivals like St. Patrick’s Day and Mardi Gras, political pageantry (parades and state funerals, for example), and other forms of technological display, ranging from expansive exhibitions to public demonstrations and popular entertainments. An accounting of

spectacular precedents for Albany’s celebration, however, must begin with Philadelphia’s Centennial International Exhibition.

**World’s Fairs and Civic Celebrations**

Tens of millions of visitors were treated in Philadelphia to a “dynamic vision of past, present, and future,” as historian Robert Rydell described the Fair’s organization. Wondrous technology was displayed, with the great Corliss steam engine as the centerpiece, alongside examples of a racialized past through exhibitions of Native American cultures presented as an antithesis to progress. Its halls and areas taught Americans to see the amazing growth of their civilization through spectacular displays and juxtapositions as envisioned by the Anglo-Saxon business and political elite. The Centennial launched a World’s Fair movement in the United States to advance the notion that elites’ direction of the growing American industrial economy would bring prosperity and progress. As Rydell and others have noted, between 1876 and the turn of the century, elites organized these greatest of spectacles in American cities to show off the latest technological innovations and emphasize the superiority of white American civilization.\(^\text{14}\) The World’s Fair movement set the tone nationally in this period—capped by the World’s Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893, the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo in 1901, and continuing through the Century of Progress Expositions of the 1930s, in addition to other smaller Fairs held throughout the country—inspiring elite-led celebrations of all kinds in American cities. At the local level spectacles and celebrations had a long history; some of these

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contained similar power dynamics to the Centennial, and the pattern would be reflected in Albany’s Bicentennial.

Philadelphia’s Centennial, then, began a period of mass celebration in American cities and instituted a pattern of spectacular commemoration led by local elites. Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair was itself held in honor of Christopher Columbus’s 1492 landing in the Americas. “Such commemorative rituals—often celebrating the origins of a community—have always been part of the American scene,” historian David Glassberg observed. The nature of civic celebrations, however, was not static; neither was their very existence, as Clifton Hood has shown in examining New York City’s Evacuation Day. Every November 25, New York honored the end of British military occupation, and the 1883 celebration was considered “one of the great civic events of the nineteenth century in New York City,” Hood argued. President Chester A. Arthur was in attendance at an enormous parade of thousands, while the elite sponsoring organization, the Society of ’83 (later called the Sons of Revolution) envisioned an idealization of colonial New York by organizing lectures and dedicating historic sites and statues. In the context of the dramatic influx of immigrants into New York during this period, Evacuation Day took on an intensely nationalistic aura of cultural education. After 1883, though, the event slowly died off as the elite’s didactic nativism turned people away, and gradually organizations moved their events to Thanksgiving. Other scholars have similarly described the nationalism and triumphalism inherent in many civic celebrations and the sort of “Columbianism” on display at World’s Fairs and in New York City’s 1892 Columbian celebration.

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As the example of New York’s Evacuation Day demonstrates, civic celebrations grew from relatively small affairs to large city-wide events over the course of the nineteenth century; Albany’s own history illustrates this well. The Bicentennial citizens’ committee in Albany looked to its past for precedent, and several events offered models for what they could do in 1886. On July 22, 1776, the city marked the “jubilee” centennial of its charter with a public feast at City Hall, followed by a procession of the Common Council westward to what would become Capitol Hill, joined by any citizens that wished. At the top of the hill, thirteen toasts and one for the charter were given with drink drawn from a “barrel of good spirits,” as fourteen cannons were fired.\textsuperscript{18} New York’s ratification of the United States Constitution in 1788 provided an occasion for celebration, too. Organized by a citizens’ committee in similar fashion to 1886, the celebration took place on August 8, 1788. Military regiments and tradesmen paraded, creating portable shops on wheels arranged by industry, with the Constitution on parchment suspended on a staff and carried about while “eleven ancient citizens,” descendants of old Albany stock, marched nearby. A bower fifteen by forty-four feet was erected to feed parade participants. After the feast a decorated and painted bateau, horse-drawn and loaded with goods, moved through the streets with “Mr. Gerardous Lansing, the character of a trader and an Indian properly dressed and ornamented, sitting in the stern.” Essentially, the city in 1788 put on a smaller, more primitive version of what elites envisioned for 1886. The passage of the first boat through the Erie Canal in 1823, and the opening of that feat of engineering in November 1825, which both saw oration, parades, and cannon fire to mark the occasions, were also considered by the committee.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} Banks, \textit{Albany Bi-Centennial}, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 14-16.

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Mystic Pageantry and Street Carnivals

As Albany planned its Bicentennial, the citizens’ committee ultimately decided to work from the 1788 ratification celebration’s model, which included a municipal feast and displays of local pride accompanied the parading of the Constitution through the city streets. They settled, in part, on the street carnival tradition as inspiration; Albany itself, as noted, held its own traditions in its past celebrations as did cities throughout the nation. But when Thomas Cooper De Leon arrived in Albany from Mobile, Alabama in April 1886, he had a mission for the old Dutch capital of New York. Motivated by a long career managing Mobile’s Mardi Gras, De Leon believed that the mystic pageantry and street theater traditions of Mobile, New Orleans, and other parts of the American South might convince the committee that something much more interesting than merely parades and workshops on wheels could be done for the Bicentennial. Albany’s “grand historical pageant” emerged directly from the precedent of Southern pageant traditions that De Leon sought to bring North.

Before traveling to Albany to organize and design its historical pageant, De Leon had a long career (in addition to being an ex-Confederate soldier, journalist, playwright, and novelist) as the pageant master for a variety of Mardi Gras, Carnival, and other celebrations in the South, a career he chronicled in his 1898 book *Creole Carnivals*. Due to his central role in Albany, his own history serves as a window into the transmission of this Southern tradition into the cities of the North, and is vital to properly understand later manifestations of historical pageantry.

De Leon traced the history of Mardi Gras to the French, the Saturnalia of the Old World, and “that perennial, if varying, love of glitter, pomp and pleasure, inborn in man.” Mardi Gras and Carnival satisfied an urge for merry-making, and the American descendants of the French

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brought this tradition to the New World. The Creole Carnival pageant creators proper, De Leon insisted with more than a tinge of racism, were the white French aristocracy of Louisiana, not mixed with the “taint of negro blood.”

Mobile, De Leon’s hometown, held its first Mardi Gras in 1830. He told its colorful origin story by describing the formation of Mobile’s first “Mystic Order,” the Cowbellian de Rakian: “On New Year’s Eve, sixty-eight years ago, Michael Kraft and a few jolly citizens of Mobile supped at a then famous Creole restaurant. Wine perhaps flowed freely, before the midnight revelers, homeward bound, passed a hardware store belonging to one of their number. Rakes, scythes, gongs and cow-bells, as was the time’s custom, hung without as signs. A raid was made; those strange instruments making music for serenade to several citizens. As each of these appeared to quell the clamor, he was impressed into the ranks of the revelers; and the last visit was to the Mayor, who invited the party in—to breakfast! Next year this augmented party supped, paraded and serenaded; the strange emblems, now so well-known, again having use; the third year was marched by more formulated fun, under mask, for the first time.”

From this origin, mystic pageantry developed into a diverse spectacle every Mardi Gras and on several other occasions throughout the year. More and more Orders formed for the purpose of putting on mystic pageants, whose purposes eventually became instilling civic pride, educating, and bringing economic stimulation to their host cities. “The vast crowds, pouring in to witness the Carnival…spend money liberally, to the advantage of caterers, retailers and the petty trades,” De Leon wrote. “Thus all interests benefit mutually; railroads and river lines profiting by increased carriage of travel and merchandise; every city business, great and small, reaping that

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21 Ibid., 12-14.
22 Ibid., 21.
advantage ever sure to result from great temporary addition to population,” despite the considerable production costs.\textsuperscript{23}

Other Southern cities saw the success of New Orleans’s and Mobile’s mystic Carnival pageants as tourist draws and began to create their own. Pensacola, Florida, Memphis, Tennessee, and Vicksburg, Mississippi all did so, with the last of these seeing De Leon himself design a pageant in 1867 themed around “Arthurian legend.” The mystic pageants slowly spread, eventually reaching St. Louis where starting in 1878 local elites organized the Veiled Prophet Celebration, heavily drawing on Gulf State traditions.\textsuperscript{24} In 1881, De Leon was invited to Baltimore, where he designed that city’s short-lived, three-day long “Oriole” celebration, which featured a parade of military and civic organizations, trades, and industries, music from Gilmore’s Band, fireworks and colored fountains. De Leon chose “Time’s Enigmas” as the theme for the Oriole pageant. Twenty-four floats, from “Building the Pyramids” to the famous engine “No. 600” (which was exhibited at the 1876 World’s Fair), moved through the streets. Cincinatti, Louisville, Nashville, Atlanta, and other cities all made attempts at establishing mystic pageants in their celebrations.\textsuperscript{25}

In addition to pageantry’s contribution to the form of celebration in other American cities, De Leon also saw his native art form as a possible bridge to the North after the destruction of the Civil War. This theme is reflected in his novel \textit{Creole and Puritan}, which appeared in \textit{Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine} in 1889.\textsuperscript{26} The novel demonstrated how Southern celebration was discovered by Northern soldiers, or “Federals,” and suggests that their fascination could be

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 38-44.


\textsuperscript{25} De Leon, \textit{Creole Carnivals}, 52-56.

\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Cooper De Leon, \textit{Creole and Puritan, Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine} 44 (July – December 1889), 439-563.
harnessed if Southern traditions were brought to the soldiers’ homes in the North; coming after
Albany’s Bicentennial, De Leon wrote *Creole and Puritan* knowing how much cities in the
North took to his native region’s celebratory forms. One scene in particular set during
Reconstruction in New Orleans illustrates this sense. The city in De Leon’s telling is full of
tension due to the presence of Federal soldiers, but more than this it is full of anticipation for
Mardi Gras. Rumor on the streets had it that the Mystic Krewe of Comus would be reemerging
after the “blank” war years: “Once again the great Krewe was to crown the Carnival with one of
its glittering pageants; and round that event centred the keenest and most curious anticipation of
all the holiday.” The Federal garrison, more so than anyone else assembled to catch a glimpse of
the Krewe’s rumored appearance, were “wide-eyed” with wonder and curiosity, and its men and
officers mingled in the crowds, “giving and taking chaff with high good humor and equal regret
that their general’s order forbade participation.” Amidst all of this good cheer, something in the
distance turned everyone towards the approaching Krewe: “Ushered in by the rosy glow of
distant, pulsing light and softened blare of brazen march…gradually through the rosy cloud were
seen the rich and stately forms, in antique guise, marshalling the mystic host…Nearer, slow-
moving, came the brilliant and unique pageant, incarnating thought through deft design of form
and color, lit by a thousand bright reflectors, toned to softer glow by colored fires.”

Each float in the Mardi Gras was preceded by a “transparency,” fabric banners
illuminated from within by an oil lamp used widely in celebrations and demonstrations of all
sorts during the nineteenth century, including political campaign parades. The transparency for
the Krewe’s float announced its title: “Past, Present, and Future.” “The Past” was typified by
imposing figures posed like Greco-Roman statues clearly invoking the Civil War years, with
names like War, Destruction, Conflagration, Want, Grief, and Terror, while the cast of “The
Present” included the qualities emphasized by boosters of the New South: Industry, Commerce, Agriculture, Science, Art, and History. Finally, “The Future” was represented by a beautiful figure “radiant and fair of promise,” surrounded by Peace, Hope, and Love, “as emblematic of the new life to follow that active Present born from the hot and evil Past!”27 To the “Federals” and Southern spectators, the message of reconciliation would have been clear: let us move on and enjoy progress and prosperity together. In this spirit, De Leon sought to use his expertise in mystic pageantry to build bridges to the North, as many in the New South sought to rebuild and find a new direction for their depressed region.28 Eventually it was possible that a “National Carnival” may take place “under the eagle eye of Speaker Reed himself,” referring to Republican Speaker of the House Thomas Brackett Reed, “for the carnival spirit is spreading beyond its pristine limits,” De Leon wrote.29

The influence of the mystic pageants from cities such as New Orleans and Mobile was clear and direct through De Leon’s direct involvement, as will be elaborated upon in later chapters. But as it crept northward from the Deep South and began to reach cities like Baltimore, it was Philadelphia that first began to incorporate mystic pageantry into its own bicentennial celebration in 1882, forming the direct precedent for Albany’s innovation a few years later. The event began with a reenactment of William Penn’s landing, and included parades of the military and the city’s industrial and fraternal organizations. Grand displays of fireworks included a massive recreation of Niagara Falls. A “historical carnival parade” focusing on Pennsylvania history included two floats borrowed from New Orleans’s Mardi Gras via Baltimore’s “Oriole”

27 Ibid., 501-506.
29 De Leon, Creole Carnivals, 50.
designed by De Leon, depicting “Illustrious Women Rulers of World History” and “The Ramayana—Ancient Hindu Epic of the East.”

In Philadelphia, like Albany, civic celebrations like the 1882 bicentennial built on a much longer history of street celebrations stretching back to the Colonial period, as did De Leon’s crowds spectating at the Mardi Gras in Mobile and New Orleans, and the rowdy participation in impromptu processions that characterized the pageantry tradition. However, it is important to note that these events were frequently contested and exhibited considerable tension between classes. Historian Susan Davis, examining Philadelphia, found a long tradition of both “respectable and rowdy” street theater. Temperance processions, workers’ strike and fire company parades, tradesmen gatherings, funerals, political receptions, Christmas costuming, mock-militia marches and other “stylized, ritualized actions of crowds and mobs” all existed alongside each other. David Glassberg has similarly found in Philadelphia and elsewhere marauding revelers in fantastic costumes on Christmas and at New Year’s time, and boisterous Fourth of July celebrations. By the mid-nineteenth century ethnic communities had firmly established their own public traditions, such as St. Patrick’s Day parades for the Irish and pre-Lenten Carnivals for Germans. Glassberg, Davis, and other scholars note that these celebrations were not always enjoyed by elites and the working class alike, and often were occasions of tension. The contested nature of American celebrations and commemoration have been present throughout the nation’s history.

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31 Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); for a history of urban celebrations, see Glassberg, *Sense of History*, 61-67; on German-American Carnival, see Heike Bungert, “‘Feast of Fools:’ German-American Carnival as a Medium of Identity Formation, 1854-1914,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 48, No. 3 (2003), 325-344; Michael Kammen,
A contested Carnival-esque tradition—one that De Leon may well have recognized in some of its forms—had a unique presence in Albany itself in the form of Pinkster, a holiday festival marked by the city’s free and enslaved African-American population (alongside lower-class whites) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Initially, the holiday was based on the Dutch Pfingsten, or Pentecost, akin to Boxing Day when servants were given a day off after Christmas. In Albany, Pinkster Hill, later to become the site of the State Capitol, was arranged around Pentecost time to form an amphitheater, filled with stands offering fruit, cakes, beer, and liquor. On the Monday after Pentecost, while the Dutch attended church, a biracial group formed on the hill awaiting a figure known as “King Charles,” who had absolute authority during the week. The “King” paraded through the city and back to the hill to formally open the festivities. For three or four days and nights, sports and dance took place, including what one early source called “lewd and indecent” gesticulation between black and white males and females. Shane White concluded that Pinkster existed as “a complex syncretization of African and Dutch cultures created within the context of American slavery as it existed along the Hudson River Valley, on Long Island, and in New Jersey.” Jeroen Dewulf, however, found that rather than stemming from Dutch traditions, Pinkster should be understood as an Atlantic Creole celebration in a Dutch-American context, rather than Dutch-African; he finds that the festival was African, influenced by European (specifically Portuguese) missionaries, and had its roots among black lay brotherhoods. The slaves brought to New Netherland, Dewulf argues, originated from Portuguese zones and transmitted cultural traditions from those zones.32

This festival was still recalled in Bicentennial-era Albany among the African American community and written about by others. A history published in 1886 contained an interview with John J. Williams, born in 1809 and formerly enslaved to Colonel Philip Staats. “‘Pinkster Day’ was in Africa a religious day, partly pagan and partly Christian, like our Christmas day,” Williams is recorded as saying. He described a festival usually taking place in May, led by “Charley of the Pinkster Hill,” who was brought from Angola and purchased by a rich merchant. Drum music inspired dancing and revelry, with the drummer crying “Hi-a-bomba, bomba, bomba” as he beat the sheep-skin. Historian Alice Morse Earle recorded an account of Pinkster in an 1899 work on colonial New York, writing that “nowhere was it a more glorious festival than at Albany, among the sheltered, the cherished slave population in that town and its vicinity. The celebration was held on Capitol Hill, then universally known as Pinkster Hill,” and quoting other accounts of the festival. She also noted that executions and other public punishments took place on Pinkster Hill in addition to festivities before going on to describe Pinkster celebrations in other regions of New York.33

**Technological Displays and Public Demonstrations**

Cities abounded in festivals and celebrations in the 1880s that sprung from long traditions of street theater like Pinkster. Philadelphia’s 1876 Centennial, however, established a different precedent for spectacle in American cities: the large-scale display of technology. The Centennial’s famous centerpiece was the gigantic Corliss steam engine, theatrically put into

operation by President Ulysses S. Grant at the Fair’s opening ceremonies. But while the Centennial and subsequent World’s Fairs may have been the largest and most spectacular acts of showing the wonders of technology, cities frequently did the same on a smaller scale in various ways, some more unexpected than others.

Philadelphia’s own history provides a good example of the typical style of technological display in the Franklin Institute’s hosting of the fourth International Electrical Exhibition in 1884. Across 200,000 square feet illuminated by 5,600 incandescent and 350 arc lights, visitors could behold the latest and greatest in electricity. The largest dynamo in the world at the time, fire and burglar alarms of many kinds, telephones, and electric clocks could all be viewed. “There is a great case of eggs,” Harper’s Weekly observed, “from which chickens are to be hatched by electricity.” A joint exhibit of the Army’s Ordnance Corps and Signal Service displayed an “electric self-recording rain gauge.” Not to be outdone, the Navy showed off electrically-launched torpedoes, guns, and search lights: “In one of the towers is a great electric naval search light, perhaps the most powerful in the country, throwing its ray, by means of lenses and reflectors, over the city for a distance of more than two miles.” Adding to the “dazzling noonday splendor” of the thousands of electric lights was the Exhibition’s central fountain and its colored water: “The spray, illuminated by the surrounding lights, transmitted through glasses of different colors, reflects prismatic hues at every point, and falls in a perpetual shower of jewels.”

Technological display did not always occur, however, through a formal exhibition enclosed in enormous halls and illuminated by electric light in the style of the World’s Fairs; sometimes they were held outside in active demonstrations, and the form of technology on offer

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34 Rydell, All the World’s a Fair, 15-16.
35 “The Electrical Exhibition,” Harper’s Weekly 28, no. 1447 (September 13, 1884), 597.
fell into many different categories. In the winter of 1886, Albany’s snow-covered streets were the site of an extraordinary form of this when the city’s bobbing clubs held a spectacular “Coasting Carnival” on January 20, which “presented features that never before have been seen in New York State,” according to Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper. A half-mile long procession of over 150 bob-sleds presented by eighty bob-sled clubs were either horse-drawn or hauled in “old volunteer fireman style.” These sleds, though, were not simply planks; a typical bob-sled exhibited that day was “an elaborate machine,” up to nearly forty feet long, “equipped with complicated steering apparatus, head lights, steel brakes, and trip gongs.” As such, the bobbing clubs were displaying the latest forms of sledding technology. The largest of these sleds could carry twenty-five people and achieved high speeds, allegedly up to a “mile a minute.”

Many were painted and decorated with Chinese lanterns, flags, and “red fire,” while the men of the bobbing clubs paraded in costume. The “Mikados,” for example, wore “Japanese suits, and had Japanese decorations” for their bob-sled.

After their parade, the clubs demonstrated their sleds’ abilities by racing down Madison Avenue’s hills and slides, where women joined in for rides dressed in thick, padded wool suits.

“Half a dozen of these bobs tearing down-hill faster than the wind, loaded down with jocund passengers, the jangling of the gong and the warning voice of the police, make things lively along the descents,” the paper reported. Until nearly midnight, the streets were “alive with flying bobs, carrying hilarious loads, and watched by crowds that packed the sidewalks.”

These same clubs would re-assemble in July to march in the Bicentennial’s Civic Day parade.

Grand displays of fireworks, or pyrotechnics as they were commonly referred to during this era, were common, and not only for political events or commemorations like the Fourth of

36 “A Coasting Carnival in Albany,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper 61, No. 1584 (January 30, 1886), 395.
July. Urban Americans enjoyed spectacular pyrotechnic entertainments that blurred the line between technological display, drama, and history. Albany’s elite—who traveled frequently to and from New York City—would likely have been familiar with one such popular offering, enjoyed by summertime vacationers at Coney Island’s Manhattan Beach. By day, crowds bathed and strolled along the shore listening to Gilmore’s Band, admiring the view and how the “white sails of passing yachts and coasters stand out between the blue of the sky and the green of the sea.” The enjoyment continued into the nighttime, “when the dull, darkened sky, in the absence of its summer stars, is made brilliant with hundreds of artificial ones,” described by Harper’s Weekly on one summer night in 1885.

That July, Manhattan Beach’s crowds were treated to a spectacle, “The Last Days of Pompeii,” an enormous set piece designed by Henry J. Pain, whose father and grandfather preceded him staging spectacular shows in England in London’s Crystal Palace and elsewhere. Using actors and built sets, music, burning powders, colored fire, electric lights and, of course, fireworks, Pain recreated the eruption of Mount Vesuvius based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1834 novel of the same name: “In looking on the gigantic panorama before him the spectator, from his comfortable reserved seat, can easily imagine that he is an ancient Pompeiian invited to witness the annual festival of the goddess Isis. The streets, of strict architectural correctness, are filled with people; flower girls, refreshment vendors, priests, and pretty children crowned with garlands bearing flowers…”

The lake in front of the audience contained moving barges, while soldiers marched under triumphal arches. Sports, dance, and games took place as music played; on a trumpet’s blast, the assembly began the adoration of Isis. Suddenly “the earth quakes, and Vesuvius vomits forth

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flames and clouds of smoke, the temple columns totter, the people fly, and Pompeii becomes a ruin.” As the “ancient city” crumbled, a huge display of fireworks was sent up into the sky. Pain would go on to stage numerous such spectacles at Manhattan Beach, and notably at the Pan-American Exposition World’s Fair held at Buffalo in 1901.39

**Political Pageants and Military Parades**

Fireworks were common at celebrations of all kinds, in addition to being used for entertainment, and political events were no exception. Municipal receptions for political figures often took the form of enormous spectacles. During the presidential election campaign of 1884, Grover Cleveland—then the Governor of New York—visited Buffalo, taking a special train from Albany on October 2, where he arrived to what *The New York Times* called “the greatest demonstration ever seen in that city.” “No demonstration of equal magnitude and enthusiasm was ever before witnessed in Buffalo,” *Harper’s Weekly* claimed. “The city blazed with illuminations and fire-works, and the crowded streets presented an aspect of general festivity and rejoicing.” 40

Despite torrential rain, a procession of “magnificent proportions” made up of thousands of representatives from political organizations across New York State, joined by the Buffalo Legion, immediately formed to escort Cleveland’s carriage drawn by eight white horses. The parade made its way through city streets decorated with Chinese lanterns and colored fire towards the hotel where Cleveland was staying. Once there, he addressed the crowd, promising

“safer and better administration of the general government,” and leaving the assembly with a message stressing the need to impress “upon the endeavor of those intrusted (sic) with the guardianship of your rights and interests a pure, patriotic, and exacting popular sentiment.” Following the Governor’s remarks, the parade then went into reverse, forming a counter-procession at midnight; Cleveland watched the marching for fully two more hours, demonstrating again another common feature of celebration during this period: they were lengthy, late-night affairs.\(^{41}\) Cleveland would perform this same role and witness a similar though even greater spectacle when he returned to Albany as President for its Bicentennial.

When Governors and Presidents visited cities, huge crowds turned out to see them and local elites often put on a show to greet them. The symbology of such popular political figures’ presence stimulated an outpouring of local pride. This phenomenon, however, did not require such figures to be alive and breathing, for their funeral processions were just as spectacular as the “monster reception” Cleveland received in Buffalo. In the year before the Bicentennial, both Albany and New York City were witness to the “pageantry of woe” that was the funeral procession for President Ulysses S. Grant. The unique power of symbol at Grant’s funeral even brought the North and South together, if temporarily, forming the basis for renewed nationalism, testifying to the potential power of spectacle that Albany’s elite hoped to tap into.\(^{42}\)

On July 23, 1885, Grant died at his cottage on Mount McGregor, north of Saratoga Springs—not significantly north of Albany—where he had been working to complete his memoirs during protracted illness, “looking out upon the winding Hudson,” *Harper’s Weekly* wrote. After a private family service at the cottage on Tuesday, August 4, his body was received

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
by General Winfield Scott Hancock and his staff to be taken on special train to New York City, leaving promptly at 2:10 P.M.

Its first stop, however, was Albany, which it reached at 3:40. There, his casket was “escorted through the streets by a procession of over 4,000 men, including 1,000 Grand Army Veterans, under the command of General Hancock,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* reported. Governor David Hill—who oversaw the Bicentennial a year later—received the remains at the State Capitol, where the coffin was “placed upon the magnificent catafalque which had been prepared for its reception. The great chamber was illuminated by electric lights.” There the remains were on view until late the next morning, during which between 65,000 and 80,000 men, women and children filed past to pay their respects all night long. At noon Wednesday, the funeral train departed for New York City, greeted along the way by “mourning emblems, flags at half-mast, and silent crowds of people. At West Point there was a salute of guns.” When the train finally reached New York, an enormous crowd had gathered at Grand Central Depot, drenched from a rainstorm that had rolled through late in the afternoon. An “imposing military pageant” drew the “vast crowd which such a spectacle always gathers” for the final procession to Grant’s tomb.43

Military parades, related but distinct from political celebrations and memorials, formed the final element in the mix of precedents for Albany’s Bicentennial. Since the earliest days of the Republic, towns and cities regularly saw processions of troops and militia, both volunteer and regular. After the Civil War, which had seen an unprecedented mobilization of men serving in Union blue (and Confederate gray), this tradition exploded along with the new celebration of Memorial Day and the formation of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR).

On June 17, 1879, for example, the GAR’s annual encampment was opened at Albany “with a parade of military organizations divided into six divisions,” each color-coded. Nearly all of the Northern states sent delegations to the city to take part, and “a vast gathering of spectators rewarded with profuse cheers the visiting veterans” as they marched through the “gayly decorated” city. The Governor, Lucius Robinson, reviewed the procession with his staff, and receptions and addresses were held in the evening. A second parade was held the following day, in addition to a commemorative dinner for the Army of the Potomac, in “all respects a most picturesque and memorable reunion of the veterans.”

When Albany’s Bicentennial citizens’ committee was formed to create a civic celebration intended to impress the masses and demonstrate “their pride in the honorable history” of the city, Mayor Banks also charged them with finding “suitable forms of public rejoicing.” In their search for “suitable forms,” Albany elites in 1886 could draw on four key elements present in the cultural forms of celebration and spectacle in American cities: the massive scale and messaging of the World’s Fairs; the theatricality of street carnivals and the mystic pageants of the South; the wonders of technology and public demonstrations of sport and spectacular effects; and the elaborate displays and symbolism for political events and military parades. The next chapter illustrates the presence of each of those features in Albany during one week in July 1886 by describing the extensive planning process behind creating the celebratory week, the experience of the celebration itself, and the Bicentennial’s multiple meanings for its participants.

44 “Annual Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper 48, No. 1240 (July 5, 1879), 299.
Chapter Two: The Pledge of a Still More Glorious Future

On December 18, 1885, Albany’s Mayor Anthony Bleecker Banks issued a proclamation on the forthcoming two hundredth anniversary of the city’s charter the following July, noting a growing “public interest” in marking the occasion, reading in part: “It will be perceived that the observance of that day, by suitable forms of public rejoicing is justified, not only in consideration of the past, but also as tending to arouse a general determination to achieve that enlarged prosperity due to the great natural advantages of our city…We shall, likewise, demonstrate our natural and artificial resources as the pledge of a still more glorious future. The Bi-centennial occasion will foster those higher sentiments which are founded upon love of home and country. This will constitute its real and highest value.”

This chapter examines the “suitable” forms of celebration planned by Albany’s elites, and the “higher sentiments” they sought to instill in citizens. The Bicentennial brought together all of the distinct elements discussed in the previous chapter and added its own innovations to produce a spectacle distinct from others that had come before, notably the production of the first self-consciously designed historical pageant. Albany’s fantastic pageant gave birth to a movement that scholars have heretofore marked as coalescing in the first decade of the twentieth century, addressed in-depth in chapter three. At the same time that the city’s elites were innovating in how spectacles were presented to the public, the Bicentennial contained tensions over power and identity. Utilizing a close and careful reading of newspaper and first-hand accounts, this chapter explores, narrates, and interprets the Bicentennial as an exemplary representative of 1880s American urban celebration and seeks to uncover and note hidden tensions as they presented themselves in that summer of 1886.

45 Banks, Albany Bi-Centennial, 2-3.
Plans and Realities

Banks’s proclamation was made in response to a letter sent to him on November 10, 1885 from Captain O. Smith of the Albany Burgesses Corps, a uniformed marching brigade that often took part in civic events, such as escorting Presidential visits. Captain Smith told the Mayor how the Corps had met the prior evening and discussed the subject of “properly celebrating the bi-centennial of this city…The opinion prevailing that prompt action should and would be taken by the proper city officials to perfect arrangements for celebrating, in a fitting manner, this important event.” Although Smith did not elaborate on what a “fitting manner” would look like, he offered the Burgesses Corps’ services for escort and other duties that might be needed. This letter was conveyed to the Common Council at a meeting on November 16, and Alderman James Lyons of the Fourth Ward offered a resolution, swiftly adopted, stating that July 22, 1886 would be “an occasion of great historical importance in American municipal history and of pride to Albany, the oldest city in the Union,” and therefore the day should be celebrated. The Council’s resolution charged the Committee on Public Celebrations and Entertainments to report back their views and recommendations “with all due speed.”

The Mayor’s proclamation followed this resolution, inviting “the citizens of Albany, and especially the various civic and military organizations, by authorized representatives and otherwise” to attend a public meeting on the evening of January 6, 1886 to begin planning the Bicentennial. A “large and representative gathering” met that included city officials, old Dutch elite families, Senators and ex-Senators, plus various battalions, the Young Men’s Christian

Association (YMCA), Catholic societies, Freemasons, Dutch and Scottish groups, and representatives from the school system. When the “Citizens’ Bicentennial Committee” was formed, however, it was drawn primarily from Albany’s political, business, and social elite. Anthony N. Brady, Robert C. Pruyn, James H. Manning, and Mayor Banks himself (who had already served as Mayor from 1876 to 1878\(^47\)) were a few of the names on the new committee. A brief examination of each is useful for understanding the sort of people who brought the Bicentennial to life with their time and money.

Brady was considered to be one of the richest men—if not the richest man—in Albany and had a stake in almost every business venture. He owned extensive holdings in New York City corporations, including its rapid transit system, the Metropolitan Traction Company, along with investments in the transit systems of several other metropolitan regions. When he died in 1913, he left an enormous estate of nearly $80,000,000, the modern equivalent of about $2 billion, to his children.\(^48\)

Descended from old Dutch stock, Pruyn was also exceedingly wealthy. His father, Robert Hewson Pruyn served from 1875 until his death in 1882 as the fifth president of the National Commercial Bank and Trust Company of Albany. The younger Robert was the Bank’s seventh president from 1885 to 1912 and enjoyed a hyper-active civic life. In the banking field, “he was noted for the number of his protégés who attained success,” according to a publication honoring the Bank’s one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary.\(^49\)

James H. Manning served as the State Civil Service Commissioner from 1887 to 1889, and Mayor of Albany from 1890 to 1894. In addition to his political offices, Manning served as president of several companies: Weed-Parsons Printing Company, Hudson River Telephone Company, and the National Savings Bank. His father, Daniel, preceded Robert C. Pruyn as president of the National Commercial Bank and Trust Company from 1882 to 1885, when he resigned to serve as President Grover Cleveland’s Secretary of the Treasury; he played a vital role in Cleveland’s election in 1884 in his position as chairman of New York State’s Democratic Committee. In 1886, the elder Manning accompanied the President as a member of his Cabinet to take part in the Bicentennial, when James served as grand marshal of the historical pageant and played a very active role on several subcommittees organizing the entire affair. In addition to the interest in history exhibited by his involvement in the pageant (as well as the Bicentennial Loan Exhibition, examined later in this chapter), Manning had a side career as something of a historian. In 1917, he wrote a two-volume history of Albany, though he never published the manuscript. “Albany has set its face to the east and adjusted its stride to the march of Progress…In this movement every good, progressive, loyal citizen should be heartily and enthusiastically enlisted,” he wrote. Organizing the Bicentennial would help the city adjust its “stride.”

Brady, Pruyn, Manning, and Banks were connected in ways typical of the upper class in American cities, as partially outlined above. In Albany, this interweaving can be observed in all four serving as directors of the Albany Railway, the city’s rapid transit system, powered by horses at the time of the Bicentennial. These men’s financial interests placed a premium on

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50 Ibid., 17; Reynolds, *Albany Chronicles*, 719-720.
51 James Hilton Manning, *Historic Albany, From Its Founding as a Trading-Post in 1614 by the Hollanders Under the Auspices of the Dutch West India Company of Amsterdam to the Year 1915, Volume One*, (Albany: Unpublished manuscript, 1917), 5; see also, Manning, *Historic Albany, Volume Two*. 

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stability and order, a city where the trains ran on time and everybody paid their due. Hence, the Bicentennial served this group in personally beneficial ways beyond notions of civic duty.

Lower down on the chain of late nineteenth century American social hierarchy than these men but still occupying a position of considerable social prominence were a group of people exemplified by William Olin Stillman. Stillman, also of old Dutch origin, was one of Albany’s leading physicians and served as president of the New York State Historical Association. In 1892, he was elected president of the Mohawk and Hudson River Humane Society, and in 1905 as president of the American Humane Association. His farm outside of the city on the west bank of the Hudson sprawled over many cultivated acres, where Stillman found “solace and enjoyment away from the cares and anxieties of his busy life” among books and nature, for he was “not a lover of city ways,” according to a profile in the Historical Association’s Proceedings. Stillman represented the genteel reformist segment of the upper class, present on the committee but not in its driving seat. He and his wife helped to organize the Bicentennial Loan Exhibition and the city’s decorations and general arrangements.

The citizens’ committee formed the overall authority on the celebration’s shape and met weekly under the Mayor’s direction, but its many details were delegated to sub-committees. On January 30, a communication was received from Thomas Cooper De Leon, “a gentleman of large experience in the preparation of pageants in southern cities…offering his services.” De Leon himself would later imply that the city had sought him out, not the other way around: “Mayor Bleecker Banks and the citizen committee called the writer, as the guest of the city, to explain what ‘a real Creole Carnival’ was,” he wrote in 1898. By February the committee had

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53 Banks, Albany Bi-Centennial, 8.
54 De Leon, Creole Carnivals, 58.
created the week’s program, which would include a “grand historical pageant, under calcium and electric light and colored fires, showing the contrasts of the past with the present.” But they still had not decided if it would take the form of “living tableaux” on floats or a “grand torchlight procession with historical features.” To help make this decision, De Leon was invited to visit the city, which he did on April 8 when he “explained at length the matter of the historical pageant.” After meeting with him, a sub-committee reported positively on De Leon’s ideas, and that Albany’s history could and should be presented on floats “in the manner customary in Mobile, New Orleans, Baltimore and other cities in their well-known mystic pageants.” A foot parade, by contrast, would be “entirely unsatisfactory.”

The sub-committee was self-conscious that they would be undertaking “a pioneer effort” by innovating in this type of presentation, “and that it will become an exemplar in similar undertakings elsewhere in the future.” Philadelphia’s 1882 Penn bicentennial had done something similar, but with its borrowed Mardi Gras floats and focus on history in general—and Pennsylvania state, not the city of Philadelphia—it was quite different from a city designing and telling its own story from the earliest point in time to the present day. Albany’s was to be a true historical pageant. “Our undertaking, if adopted, will be essentially different in spirit from anything previously undertaken in the same general line,” the sub-committee reported. “It will be incumbent upon us to show that a strictly historical theme offers equal, and it is to be hoped, even more satisfactory facilities for illustration than have been afforded by mystic performances elsewhere.”

Albany’s spectacle had to be presented “in first-class style or not at all,” the report continued. “Those who have seen similar exhibitions in Baltimore, New Orleans and other cities

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55 Banks, Albany Bi-Centennial, 17-33.
should find in Albany no warrant for unfavorable comparisons.” To that end, the sub-committee suggested that not much less than $10,000 would be needed to make the historical pageant a reality. De Leon, willing to contract for $9,000, estimated he would need seventy-five volunteers for the tableaux scenes; he would furnish his own experts, and handle the hiring of the considerable number of people needed to bear the lamps, torches, and title transparencies for the floats, as well as the estimated forty horses and corresponding handlers.56

The creation of the historical pageant officially began with De Leon’s contract. Its nature as the first of its kind was pushed heavily in promoting the Bicentennial before and after it took place, and the entire celebration lent itself to grandiose claims, a kind of boosterism. The Argus, calling it the “culminating feature of the bi-centenary,” loudly proclaimed on the day of the historical pageant that it was “considered on a grander and broader scale than even the world renowned Mardi Gras processions of New Orleans and other southern cities…Nothing like this pageant has ever been exhibited on this side of the Atlantic. The Mardi Gras procession alone attracts thousands to New Orleans. Our pageant, on a larger scale, is but one feature of our bi-centennial week.”57 The official program published in all of the local papers made sure to note how “it will be the first display of the kind ever witnessed in the North,” embracing “features similar to the Mobile and New Orleans Mardi Gras,” and boisterously proclaimed that “this pageant will undoubtedly be the most magnificent spectacular display ever witnessed in the state.” The Daily Graphic, meanwhile, said that “the programme which has been arranged exceeds in variety and wealth of display anything of the kind heretofore seen in America.”58

56 Ibid., 36-38.
57 “The Zenith of the Festival,” The Albany Argus (July 21, 1886), 4.
58 “Bi-Centennial Anniversary,” The Albany Argus (July 11, 1886), 2.
In May, John Boyd Thacher was elected Mayor, taking over the reins of the celebration from Banks.\(^5^9\) Thacher entered office with an energetic impulse for reform. In his inaugural message to the Common Council, he cited the increasing population of cities and the need to solve “the problem of municipal government.” He also showed concern with the level of civic pride and participation in cities: “The indifferent good citizen is not much better for his city than the bad citizen,” Thacher said. “Municipal evils are tolerated and grow and wax great, because of the indifference of the so-called good citizens.” After advocating for “home rule” and a tax cut as a “birth-day gift” to the city, Thacher ended his address by noting the occasion of the Bicentennial: “It is your official duty and mine, impressed as we are with its significance, to arouse our citizens to a realization of all it means in historic interest and commercial advantage…Our Bi-centenary must and shall be a success.”\(^6^0\)

Aside from arousing civic pride, or what Banks had called a “love of home,” another motivation present in newspapers from the Bicentennial month is the sense that Albany needed to keep pace with the competition. Cleveland, Ohio, for instance, taunted Albany in an article reprinted by the Argus from the Cleveland Leader, saying that its Bicentennial celebration might give Albany some satisfaction, “but unless that old city bestirs itself another hundred years will find it much smaller and less important, by comparison with other American cities,” and went on to note that between 1870 and 1880 Cleveland’s growth was three times greater, and that Albany had dropped in its national ranking, noting that “since the last census it has been passed by three surely, and probably five more cities, and the capital of New York is in danger of becoming, before long, very small for its age.”\(^6^1\) Sentiments focusing on this aspect of the Bicentennial

\(^{5^9}\) Ibid., 41.  
\(^{6^0}\) Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of Albany 1886, 256-270.  
\(^{6^1}\) “Albany Is Dead, Is It?,” The Albany Argus (July 26, 1886), 4.
were common, summed up by another article from the same issue: “It is time that Albany began to take on the vigor of some of the younger municipalities, and to show a business enterprise and progressive activity commensurate with the dignity which should become the capital of the State.”

At the Bicentennial week’s opening, the *Argus* set the tone by arguing that the celebration should “teach the active, energetic, wealthy business men of the age—from whatever land they come—that the same and greater advantages and opportunities for success” could be found in Albany. At the week’s closing it echoed much the same, hoping that certain lessons were learned: “Encouragement to our merchants…Remove from Albany the stigma of lagging behind other cities in the race of industrial and commercial progress…Rival the go-head spirit of the great trade centres…Increase the pride of Albanians in their beautiful city and make them still more willing to co-operate with our efficient municipal government in extending its flame and influence.”

The same article quoted above from the week’s opening, however, also went on to note that “it is equally interesting to recall the fact that anarchist and socialist war-makers against society have also failed to capture Albany,” and “no great mobs or riots have ever achieved success.” Despite the paper’s confidence that the city was “almost free from dangerous classes,” the determination to keep it that way was telling and suggested an additional concern on the part of the Bicentennial’s organizers behind the celebration. Albany’s citizens read back-to-back coverage in their local newspapers of the celebration as it took shape and took place, but before, during, and after the Bicentennial, those papers were also full of stories detailing labor unrest.

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63 “Albany’s Opportunities,” *The Albany Argus* (July 18, 1886), 3.
locally and nationally, reporting from Chicago where the anarchists’ trial for the Haymarket Massacre was unfolding and frequently appearing side-by-side with stories on Albany’s celebration. These stories were often shocking, sometimes terrifying, describing secret plots, underground lairs, bomb threats, and dormant cells of devious radicals scheming to destroy the established order. Just before the Bicentennial opened, a story entitled “The Great Conspiracy” appeared in the *Albany Evening Union* updating the citizenry on “sensational developments in the anarchist trial.” The article related the Chicago police chief’s “touching” account of the “massacre” at the Haymarket, conspirators meeting in dark, noisome, underground holes, making “dynamite and bombs” for “revolution.”65 Investing city residency with a singular, inspiring purpose through celebration and commemoration provided an avenue for maintaining social order in an increasingly unruly society, as Alan Trachtenberg observed: “the popular mode of celebration covered over all signs of trauma with expression of confidence and fulsome praise.”66 Celebrations and patriotism—both a love of home and of country—were statements against disunity, implicitly critiquing unapproved forms of agitation.

Readers of the *Albany Sunday Press* learned that the Knights of Labor were planning to make the first Monday in September a labor holiday, and planned a parade in New York City expected to include 75,000 men and women, amid news of idle mills, petitions for ten-hour days, and “a good many strikes occurring.”67 In the same issue, the *Press* informed readers that “trouble on a large scale is brewing among the miners and a general strike is possible” in Pittsburgh.68 Closer to home, the *Argus* announced just before the Bicentennial was to begin that

65 “The Great Conspiracy,” *Albany Evening Union* (July 17, 1886), 5.
steel workers in Troy, just across the Hudson River, were on strike, shutting down the mills of the Troy Steel and Iron Company; the dispute became one of the first cases heard under a new state arbitration law. Key members of the citizens’ committee had diverse business interests and were invested in maintaining order. “Trouble” was precisely what they sought to avoid.

Immediately after the celebration, a fiery editorial against the “murderous brood of Anarchists” appeared in the Argus. “The revelations that are being made of the designs and plots of the Anarchists in this country should arouse the authorities everywhere to the necessity of adopting stringent measures to crush out an element that is antagonistic to the well-being of society and menacing to law and order,” the anonymous author wrote. “The welfare of society imperatively demands the stamping out of Socialists, Progressives, Anarchists or whatever those cowardly cutthroats call themselves.” That these sorts of views would have been seen, if not shared, by many of the Bicentennial’s organizers is suggested by the fact of the paper’s Democratic political affiliation, shared by many citizens’ committee members. As noted, for example, two of its central members were or would serve as Democratic Mayors of Albany, and virtually all of them were Democrats themselves identified with Grover Cleveland’s pro-business “Bourbon” faction.

The President, who was to visit the city to take part on Bicentennial Day itself, held similar views to Albany’s elites that developed over his time in office on the need to use holidays and other celebrations to teach the citizenry. In an address given at the Union League Club on George Washington’s birthday, February 22, 1907—after serving two non-consecutive terms as President—Cleveland worried over Americans’ lack of interest in proper observance of public

69 “Another Troy Strike,” The Albany Argus (July 15, 1886), 6; “Their First Case.” The Albany Argus (July 17, 1886), 4.
70 “An Element That Must Be Suppressed,” The Albany Argus (July 28, 1886), 4.
holidays and proper reverence for the past; they were driven “constantly to thoughts of the future.” Such occasions as Washington’s birthday needed “deliverance” in order “to teach children the inestimable value” of American institutions, “to inspire them to emulation of the virtues of which our nation had its birth, and to lead them to know the nobility of patriotic citizenship.” Complimenting the Union League for commemorating the day for the past twenty years since 1887—when commemoration was the order of the day among elites—Cleveland noted how “it commemorates the incarnation of all the virtues and all the ideals that made our nationality possible, and gave it promise of growth and strength.”

In his speech, Cleveland condemned “destructive agitators,” “demagogues,” and “irresponsible and worthless ease” as opposed to “harmony, industry, and frugality.” America’s “limitless resources, its astonishing growth, its unapproachable industrial development and its irrepressible inventive genius have made it the wonder of centuries,” he said. “Nevertheless, these things do not complete the story of a people truly great.” The nation lives within the heart, mind, and conscious. “Are we keeping its roots well surrounded by the fertile soil of loving allegiance, and are we furnishing them the invigorating moisture of unselfish fidelity?” Cleveland asked. What was needed in celebrations, holidays, and commemorations was a “revival of pure patriotic affection for our country for its own sake.” Though he was speaking for himself many years later, Cleveland’s opinion on celebrations accorded closely with elite goals for Albany’s Bicentennial and his presence there in 1886 was perfectly in line with these stated views.

The concern with patriotism was reflected even in the citizens’ committee’s intentions for erecting historical markers around the city. On May 13, the sub-committee on monuments

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reported their plans. Four evergreen and wood arches were to be erected at the sites of the city’s historic gates, while nineteen granite slabs with bronze tablets would highlight local historic sites, joined by five tablets inside buildings and five noting old street names. These landmarks, the sub-committee reported, would “arouse in the hearts of unborn generations a stronger love of birthplace and home, and a more deeply impressed familiarity with its early history and its prominence in securing the liberties he, as a native, now enjoys.”

Harper’s Weekly praised the markers, writing that memorialization was “a practice which has been too long neglected in this country,” adding that “local pride in its large and generous relations is patriotism or love of country, the spring of the noblest heroism and the most beneficent achievement.” It was the “excellence of the local celebrations which frequently recur that they develop and strengthen this lofty conservative sentiment,” the paper wrote.

When the Bicentennial flag design was presented on June 24, the citizens’ committee decided that they would be sold for $2 each, “so that no person could consider himself too poor to add his mite to the funds now being raised.” The committee hoped that “the citizen that floats on his outer walls the banner of the Bi-centennial will bear witness to the world that he is public spirited, liberal, full of love for his native town, and a contributor in money to the success of the celebration.” In other words, citizens could advertise the depth of their patriotism by purchasing and displaying the flag.

The Bicentennial was financed by a mix of public and private money appropriated by the Common Council and raised through subscription for the celebration fund. The largest single donors were the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company and New York Central Railroad, who each

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72 Banks, Albany Bi-Centennial, 43-44.
73 “Albany,” Harper’s Weekly 30, No. 1545 (July 31, 1886), 482.
74 Ibid., 60-61.
gave $1,000 in anticipation that the celebration would bring enormous business to their trains. While the wealthiest Albanians like Brady and Pruyn donated, businesses, organizations, and many individuals made gifts of all sizes.\textsuperscript{75} As Bicentennial week grew closer, appeals were made for singular purposes, such as one for $2,500 made in the \textit{Argus} to entertain visiting firemen, civic bodies, military organizations and representatives from other States and communities.\textsuperscript{76}

There were disagreements over apportioning money, however. Representative of such disputes was the debate by the Common Council over whether or not to fund the placement of drinking water around the city “to quench the thirst of the multitude.”\textsuperscript{77} On July 6, Alderman Howard N. Fuller from the Eleventh Ward introduced a resolution providing for twelve hogsheads or barrels filled with ice water, each with a faucet and drinking cups, maintained by four men for $2 a day.\textsuperscript{78} At a July 12 Council meeting, the committee on public celebrations and entertainments, which had been appointed to look into the possibility, reported adversely without comment or explanation on Fuller’s resolution, putting an end to the city’s funding of drinking water for the celebration.\textsuperscript{79} With the city unwilling to act, charities stepped in early on during Bicentennial week. Under the direction of the City Mission and the YMCA, four barrels containing free ice water were placed around the city, where “they are proving quite popular with the immense crowds thronging the streets,” according to the \textit{Argus}, while also appealing to the public: “Twenty-five dollars are still needed to cover the cost of running them.\textsuperscript{80} Like the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union which set up a booth in Capitol Park distributing milk,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 395-400.
\item \textsuperscript{76} “The Bi-Centennial Fund,” \textit{The Albany Argus} (July 10, 1886), 4.
\item \textsuperscript{77} “Apportioning the Money,” \textit{The Albany Argus} (July 10, 1886), 8.
\item \textsuperscript{78} \textit{Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of Albany 1886}, (Albany: The Argus Company, 1887), 449.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 463.
\item \textsuperscript{80} “Notes,” \textit{The Albany Argus} (July 20, 1886), 5.
\end{itemize}
the YMCA saw the Bicentennial as an opportunity to advocate for temperance and the consumption of water rather than alcohol.

On July 5, the Bicentennial Loan Exhibition opened at the Albany Academy, split up into designed rooms and displays, from where Mayor Thacher officially opened its doors by noting the “historic ground” of the site where the scientist Joseph Henry announced “to commerce and to the world that the lightnings were harnessed and were ready for their use” by his electro-magnetic experimentation in 1831 to ring a bell via a wire, so for the spot of the exhibition “it is our duty to recall its glories.” Leonard Kip, a lawyer and writer of old Albany stock, then gave an oration in which he noted that this year, unlike so many Independence Days, Albany was preparing to “change our method, letting the great interests of the nation at large go on without our patronage, and bringing our observation down to the more limited area of our city.” About the exhibition, Kip boasted that “as flowers to a feast, we have here collected into one pleasing museum the treasures of our homes, to exemplify our perception of taste, our artistic culture and our veneration for the past.” His oration also called for greater historic preservation and beautification in cities, “tasteful and harmonious architecture” and “bright and open spaces.” The “treasures” in the exhibition just opened, Kip said, “have already taught a lesson, in adding inspiration toward an ever-brightening future of art and culture.”

Kip—who had married a Van Rensselaer—expressed the upper class tastes and concerns of the Bicentennial’s managers, several of whom donated their own collections to fill the exhibition’s displays. Mrs. W. O. Stillman, for example, donated sixteenth century carved wooden Italian chairs. James H. Manning donated Zuni and Moki pottery from Arizona and New Mexico. “Their pursuits are pastoral and agricultural, and notwithstanding the fact that they live

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81 Banks, *Albany Bi-Centennial*, 78-86.
in this apparent civilized manner they are still the most ardent idol and sun-worshippers of this
continent,” read the exhibition catalog’s description of Manning’s pottery.82

In fact, the Loan Exhibition would turn out to be a huge success—at its closing, it had
made a surplus profit and received tens of thousands of visitors and “not a cup thus far has been
broken.” There were other, less culturally refined reasons for visiting aside from coming to see
the 14,000 different articles in the various rooms, providing some insight into the elitism of the
exhibition’s planners. The *Albany Evening Union* reported that “ice cream and lemonade shows a
handsome profit, despite some diffidence about starting that: ‘What! Sell lemonade at a high art
exhibition! Shades of our ancestry look down upon us!’” the article mockingly quoted the
exhibition planners. “But it was done,” the paper commented, “and in the words of the worldling
it ‘caught on.’ Somehow, circus methods are growing into aesthetic life.”83

The Loan Exhibition also offered women one of the few entrees into any sort of influence
on the celebration’s shape. One half of the population of Albany were relegated almost
exclusively to passive spectators or silent actors. Women were not permitted to march in any of
the parades and did not take part in the majority of the celebration’s planning. There were two
major exceptions to this: riding on floats as part of the entertainment of the week and designing
the Loan Exhibition. Playing roles in floats and tableaux meant being the center of attention, and
as such women assumed important symbolic roles, albeit one that was reduced to acting as an
attractive prop in some cases. The Loan Exhibition, in contrast, was partially designed by
women. Its various sub-committees included a “Ladies’ Auxiliary Committee,” and Mrs.
Stillman and Mrs. Thacher served on the exhibition’s executive committee; each of the women

82 “Catalogue of Albany’s Bicentennial Loan Exhibition, at the Albany Academy, July 5 to July 24, 1886,” (Albany:
Weed, Parsons & Co., 1886).
83 “The Loan Exhibition,” *Albany Evening Union* (July 17, 1886), 5.
who did manage to get involved in positions of authority were all the wives of men on the citizens’ committee, raising questions about how much real influence they wielded. Nonetheless, some of the exhibition’s sections were designed by groups that were almost entirely female, and women in general made up a large proportion of each body responsible for sourcing items and designing the exhibition’s spaces.\textsuperscript{84}

On Saturday, July 17, a different group of partially excluded people, thirty-three Caughnawaga Indians, arrived from Canada for the celebration, met at the train station by the Jackson Corps and a delegation of Aldermen. A crowd had gathered to get a look at the “unique spectacle” of the visitors. “Although the natives were in the ordinary garb, their race mark was sufficiently prominent to give the scene a strong interest,” according to Banks’s narration of the Bicentennial. The welcoming delegation and the fourteen men and sixteen “squaws,” with younger women “decked out in all the height of civilized fashion,” made their way to a packed City Hall. Mayor Thacher welcomed them with an address directed at the two Chiefs who led the delegation, Joseph Skye and Angus George. “Chiefs, many moons ago, almost more than you can count with the beads upon your wampum belt,” Thacher began, “your fathers gave a hospitable welcome and hand of friendship to our fathers…It is now our turn to greet you and give you our welcome.” He continued by giving credit to the Iroquois Confederacy for inspiring America’s founding on the principle of union and praising their tradition of storytelling. Thacher also laid out a story of his own that would be repeated and reinforced over and over during and beyond the Bicentennial: that “in all our dealings with you, in all our acquisitions of land, we robbed you of nothing, but paid for what we got,” and with this purchase also received the “confidence and friendship of the Indian.” While Thacher seemed sincere in his praise and warm

\textsuperscript{84} Banks, \textit{Albany Bi-Centennial}, 86-88.
welcoming, the idea depicted the displacement of the Native Americans from the region as an almost natural process, so that having to “welcome” them to their ancestral home did not seem strange at all.  

Chief Joseph Skye’s reply was made in an Iroquois language, and a young man of the tribe helped to translate it. The Chief expressed appreciation for the invitation, saying that “when we arrived in the city and saw the people gather around to see us and as we witnessed the decorations we supposed that Indians and white people are to meet as friends,” in addition to apologizing for not being able to make a full reply due to the language gap. “As we know the State of New York has been bought by your ancestors and the money has been received by the Indians of St. Regis and other tribes, so I must not refer to this any further, your honor.” This cryptic statement, regardless of what exactly the Chief was attempting to convey, was greeted with loud applause, followed by a performance by the city band and corresponding song sung by the visitors in “the Indian language.”

The Caughnawaga Indians had arrived into a city transformed for the festivities. “Everybody seems as if trying to vie with each other in their display of patriotism and the effect is seen in extremely handsome decoration,” the Albany Evening Union remarked on July 17, adding that the streets “are kaleidoscopes of various hues, and the strangers who will gather next week, cannot fail to go in ecstasies over the artistic work of the decorators.” While the citizens’ committee worked to instill civic pride through the Bicentennial, the streets of Albany assumed a “brilliant appearance” with omnipresent red, white, and blue, as well as the flags of all the nations that would be represented in the celebration’s proceedings, especially the Netherlands.

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85 Banks, Albany Bi-Centennial, 89-91.
87 “The City in Gay Attire,” Albany Evening Union (July 17, 1886), 1.
Businesses erected their own displays often encompassing a mixture of local and national pride. The Marx Bros. building was “decked with streamers and bunting,” while large signs on its side proclaimed such mottoes as “God bless our ancient city. Empire State and Glorious Nation, the President, the Governor, the Mayor, and their administrations.” Billeman’s store featured a festive arch with a “grand bi-centennial centre piece supported on the right and left by two Roman Knights in armor.” The Union Clothing Company exhibited bunting and a “waxen Goddess of Liberty,” while a “floral eagle” attracted much attention at Beth Emeth synagogue. Some stores utilized technology to wow the crowds. Writing on Tuesday, July 20, the Argus described one such display at a clothing and textile shop specializing in silk and black mourning goods: “John G. Myers’ show windows last night attracted the attention of immense crowds of promenaders. The wonderful display of the Edison system of electric lighting was the cause. Over 100 little colored lamps gave light intermittently by an automatic arrangement and the effect was magnificent.”

Unfortunately, a “terrible storm of wind and rain” that opened Bicentennial week on an inauspicious note “played havoc” with many of the city’s decorations. Colors washed out from paper muslin decorations and ran into the gutters, leading the Argus to offer a colorful description, which also set the tone for the celebration’s complicated depiction of Native Americans during the historical pageant: “A few of the streets looked as if our impregnable capital had suffered an invasion of the red men, or as if our Mohawk guests from Caughnawaga had drawn the terrible tomahawks from under their nineteenth century coats and used them upon the heads of their hosts.”

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89 “Notes,” *The Albany Argus* (July 20, 1886), 5.
Despite the storm, at ten in the morning on Monday, July 19, the city marshal, wearing a broad cardinal sash and carrying a white baton, was joined by Mayor Thacher carrying a sword to lead a procession including the citizens’ committee and the Caughnawaga Indians to the southern city gate. There, Thacher theatrically opened the gate and addressed the assembly: “To all ye of good fame and honest name…peace, welcome, cheer and greeting…Enter then beneath this triumphal arch and with us unite in parade and oration. Freedom, liberty and immunity we give thee for this time.” The marshal then tacked the Mayor’s proclamation—reproduced on sheepskin—onto the gate, and the Indians rendered an “Iroquois hymn,” before the entire group repeated the ceremony at the northern gate. The Bicentennial had officially begun.

Following Thacher’s welcoming ceremony, thousands of visitors streamed into the city for the week’s first events on Trades’ Day (Monday), turning Capitol Park into a “miniature Coney Island.” Vendors set up shop hawking popcorn, balloons, and candy, while the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union ran a booth dispensing milk day and night in an lively effort to reduce alcohol consumption during the celebration. “Rural lovers” congregated for transgressive picnics: “The several grim policemen in the park turned their backs when they instinctively realized a stolen kiss was in the air,” the Argus wrote. “Many were stolen, and as nobody objected the fun was uninterrupted.” Meanwhile, ensconced far above in the executive chamber, Governor David B. Hill put the finishing touches on his Bicentennial oration.

Not every visitor’s experience was alike. Hundreds came in from the Albany’s rural hinterlands along with visitors from all over the United States. “The prevalence of our country cousins was noticeable. The crowd of them in the city is attracting much attention owing to the fact that there are more of them than other city people,” the Argus observed. “Of course every

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91 “Opening the City Gates,” The Albany Argus (July 20, 1886), 9.
92 “From the Capitol,” The Albany Argus (July 20, 1886), 11-12.
one from neighboring towns is here, but there is an equal number of citizens from other cities here.”\textsuperscript{93} Some of these “country cousins”—as the papers frequently caricatured rural folk—were overwhelmed over the course of the week by the sights and sounds of the city’s unfamiliar technology. The \textit{Albany Morning Express}, while ridiculing such people, provided a fascinating comment after the celebration’s conclusion: “Gentlemen fresh from pasture, you know, are easily overcome by the electric light. Paralysis of the legs and incoherence of speech were common symptoms among country cousins at midnight. Impromptu choral medleys lacerated the sensitive ear, and suggested a call for an ambulance. These and other premonitory symptoms of stomach disarrangement and temporary aberration of the mind faded away with the coming of the morning’s sun.”\textsuperscript{94} Whether or not this account is accurate, rural people were portrayed as being so used to the natural light of the sun that the artificial electric lights caused physical illness.

These “country cousins” in Albany were spiritual forerunners of Uncle Jeremiah and his family, the central characters of C. M. Stevens’s satirical account of rural folks visiting the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Encountering an electric light show at nighttime, Aunt Sarah for example is astonished and overwhelmed: “She sank upon a chair and gazed stupefied for some minutes at the awful scene,” Stevens wrote. Another instance from this same episode is Stevens’s description of a “farmer” who is similarly overcome by the lights on an incandescent, globe-studded column: “A bystander whose attention happened to be directed toward him says that he stood gazing at the column for fully three minutes after the light had been turned off and that his countenance betrayed overwhelming bewilderment. Once or twice he raised a hand and drew it across his forehead. Then he was seen to press his temples with both palms, all the while gazing in an awestricken way at the great pillar. The attention of several visitors was attracted to the

\textsuperscript{93}“The Grand Night Parade,” \textit{The Albany Argus} (July 22, 1886), 10.
\textsuperscript{94}“Post Bi-Centennial!,” \textit{Albany Morning Express} (July 23, 1886).
farmer, and one of them stepped to his side to inquire of anything was wrong with him.” The farmer shouts and goes prostrate, before setting off sprinting around General Electric’s exhibit pursued by guards. When he is finally captured, the “madman” is sedated with a “quieting potion,” while excitedly talking about “bottles” on the column turning to “fire” after a “white cloth” was taken off them. While Stevens refers to him as both farmer and madman, this character, Aunt Sarah, and the rest of the family are reminiscent of Albany’s “country cousins,” suggesting that such encounters with technology were common.

It is worth noting that Albany only began to light its streets with electricity in early 1881. With the intensification brought to the city’s lighting by the Bicentennial, it is not particularly surprising that those unused to the new power may have found it awesome. Historian of technology David Nye has observed how electric light was rare in the 1880s. Rather, electricity retained much of a sense of magic or otherworldly power. “It bordered on the supernatural…any form of artificial light, astounded people because it violated the natural order,” Nye wrote. In Wabash, Indiana, he notes, four three-thousand-candle arc lights were set up on the town’s courthouse. When the lights switched on, the thousands assembled to see the exhibition “stood overwhelmed with awe, as if in the presence of the supernatural. The strange weird light exceeded in power only by the sun, rendered the square as light as midday…Men fell on their knees, groans were uttered at the sight, and many were dumb with amazement,” Nye quotes the Wabash Plain Dealer reporting this scene in 1880.

People traveled in from the countryside and neighboring regions of New York, but visitors also came to the city for the week from all corners of the United States. The editor of the *Nashville Chronicle* came “to see how far we could succeed with our mardi-gras festivities.”

“Stand on any street corner and accost the first man you meet,” the *Argus* commented, “and he is as likely to tell you that he lives in Baltimore, another at San Jose, and the third Memphis. This simply establishes the fact that the patriotism of Albany has aroused the fervor of the American heart, and our history is not local, but national. The people are here.”

Railroad men told an *Argus* reporter that trains and boats had brought over 150,000 into Albany over the course of the week. Standing at the main rail station late at night, the reporter was hailed by “a man well charged with bi-centennial beer” with an interesting anecdote: “Say, boss, excuse (hic) me for speak(hic)ing to you, but (hic) I saw the World’s Fair at (hic) Paris and there wasn’t any such crowd (hic) there as here.”

Even if this was pure boosterism and an entirely fictional interaction, it demonstrated that some people were either actively comparing or sought to compare Albany’s Bicentennial with larger affairs.

The celebration’s crowds also afforded cover for criminals, an underclass who operated outside the lines of society. For these people, the Bicentennial’s meaning was money, a potential economic opportunity unwittingly given by the city’s elites who nevertheless were on high alert for security problems of all kinds. From the very start of the week’s proceedings crime was potentially a problem: Mayor Thacher’s proclamations at the city gates welcoming all with freedom, liberty, and immunity “were removed immediately after the ceremony to prevent their being stolen by the welcomed guests.”

The local detective force was increased, augmented by

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101 “At the City Hall,” *The Albany Argus* (July 20, 1886), 12.
police from New York City. “The officers are watching all the trains, steamboats and other conveyances running into the city, for suspicious persons,” the Argus reported, before detailing the arrests of two men, Charles Larrabee of Rome and John Giegle of Utica, before the celebration week began. Several loaded dice were found on them, and while Giegle denied knowing Larrabee, Larrabee said they came together, and both admitted they had come “to make money during bi-centennial week.” It was quite possible, the Argus huffed, they would have “worked crooked games on unsuspecting persons.”

Assaults, vagrancy, and theft were all recurring problems. A thief escaped with thirteen dollars picked from a woman’s pocket while she was watching a parade, while a man was robbed of his silver watch and chain. George Dell, “a well known thief,” was arrested after a man complained that Dell stole his coat and vest. When confronted, Dell claimed that “he took the clothes by mistake after removing the uniform with which he appeared on one of the German floats” for All Nations Day. Detectives “spotted three well known thieves who were working the crowd,” gave chase, but lost two; the third, Michael Ryan alias Burns, was arrested and sent to jail. A gold watch and jewelry were stolen from a house at 265 Madison Avenue, and the house of the Vanderpoel family, absent for the entertainments on Wednesday, was entered and a suit of clothes, gold chain, charm, and other articles were stolen. Charles Allen alias James Harris, a “professional pickpocket from New York,” was apprehended “mingling with the crowd” and added his face to the police headquarters’ “rogue’s gallery.”

102 “Nipped in the Bud.” The Albany Argus (July 17, 1886), 4.
Crime prospered, but so did Albany’s many businesses. Legal economic opportunities abounded in the crowds of the Bicentennial, all potential customers. Local papers were filled with advertisements by stores and companies offering special deals and vying with each other to best use the celebration to their advantage, of which the Union Clothing Company’s ad placed in the *Albany Evening Union* was typical: “Farmers! Mechanics! Strangers! And all Visitors to Albany’s Bi-Centennial!” its banner read. Union invited revelers to their downtown establishment on State Street “where we have placed on sale the finest line of clothing to be found between New York and Chicago,” and offered ten to twenty-five percent under manufacturer’s costs during the celebration week. It would be a week to remember, the ad proclaimed with a nod towards the Bicentennial’s emphasis on history, a “week in which the Greatest Slaughter Sale of Men’s Suits that had ever been known took place.” “We will make,” Union promised, “every customer a walking, talking advertiser.”

Others simply saw the Bicentennial as an escape from daily life or, in one case, from parental rules. Frank Riley, Fred Le Fare, and John Kelly, a group of boys from Syracuse, for example, had come to see the parades that week after running away from their homes. Their adventure came to an end early when they were picked up by the police on Tuesday, who then sent word to their parents that their boys had been found some 150 miles to the east.

**Visions from Fairyland**

Despite mixed motivations for visitors’ presence—an opportunity for activism for temperance workers, for example, or financial gain for criminals—the citizens’ committee’s

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104 Union Clothing Company advertisement, *Albany Evening Union* (July 17, 1886), 2.
extensive planning paid off in their eyes. The main activities of the week—the parades, orations, exercises, regatta, and the Bicentennial’s main event, the grand historical pageant—appeared successful on the surface; mass spectacles drew crowds into Albany by the thousands and the assembled masses were exposed to the messages of civic pride and unity intended by elite organizers. What problems that did arise were mostly of a technical nature, as this section will describe. Of particular interest for this study is how these spectacles told the story of the city’s identity.

The first day was both Trades and Manufacturers and Children’s Day, beginning with a chorus of five hundred children singing “America” in a tent set up in Capitol Park, followed by a series of historical tableaux vivants played by Albany High School students. The curtain rose on the first scene showing Henry Hudson at the site of what would become Albany: “The Indians looked very fierce in their feather and war paint, and quite threw into the shade the peaceful and civilized Mohawks who sold beadwork and baskets in the park without, or struggled with their white brethren for a sight of the exercises within,” the Argus described. This scene—in which white locals dressed up to play Indian, a phenomenon discussed in more detail in the next chapter—was followed by scenes of the presentation of the city charter and a reception of General Burgoyne at Schuyler Mansion. 106

After the children’s chorus and set pieces, the city’s businesses and trades as well as labor organizations paraded in a “monster procession” that “no one was at all prepared for,” officially launching the more spectacular aspects of the Bicentennial; the Chief of Police thought the crowds exceeded that for Grant’s funeral the prior year. The atmosphere was that of a raucous carnival-meets-commercial: “Cakes of soap were thrown directly into the crowds, regardless of

whether they landed on a twenty dollar bonnet or in the outstretched hand of a dirty ragamuffin,” the *Argus* observed. “A baker tossed from his oven bread and cakes; confectioners and popcorn makers bombarded the crowds with their sweetmeats; a clothier threw balls for those who could catch them, and a music publisher dropped from his wagon dainty rolls of music. And then what a scramble there was.”

Organized labor led the first marching division on foot, with the Knights of Labor turning out large numbers, before a series of creative and elaborate floats made by businesses began to pass through the streets. Joseph Fearey & Sons, “well-known shoe manufacturers,” presented an enormous shoe, in which sat the proverbial old lady surrounded by children. When David S. Brown & Co. of New York began throwing soap samples out, a citizens’ committee member suggested that the “hoodlums” that scrambled to collect them “certainly needed a little soaping.” A blind man named Sol Pohly, a graduate of the New York State Institute for the Blind in Batavia, manufactured brooms with a special machine. Uncle Sam drove the Union Clothing Company’s float trimmed in red, white, and blue. Julius Fish & Brother operated a complete cigar factory on their float. Raw tobacco leaves were stripped, rolled, and packed before being tossed out to the spectators. As some happy smokers lit up their unexpected gifts, Hammond & Co. appeared displaying a huge beef weighing 1,017 pounds; the meat also symbolized a technological marvel still new in 1886, as it had been dressed in Hammond, Indiana and shipped to Albany in a refrigerated train car. Taking up the rear was a wagon holding a “man stuffed with pillows to an enormous size, who was pictured as one who ‘eats Hammond’s beef.’” Live pigs, piles of pork, and sugar-caned hams also made an appearance in this cornucopia of consumption.

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108 Ibid.
Many spectators agreed that the “most magnificent spectacle” were the Beverwyck Brewing company’s series of floats. In the first, set in 1614, a “red chieftain” with “three braves and one squaw” sat around a tent in a wooded area, while four Dutchmen stood nearby ready to trade. The next was a little working brewery of 1685, complete with a kettle and active fire beneath it, while Dutchmen sat at a table drinking. The company’s third float featured Gambrinus—the legendary European figure of *joie de vivre*—on his throne merrily serving beer under a canopy of hop vines surrounding by armored knights, cavaliers, and pages; company officials stood nearby indulging in their product.\(^{109}\) When the brewer’s float arrived at City Hall, it stopped and sent several large tankards of lager inside. One made its way up to Mayor Thacher’s office and came down empty. Seeing this, ex-Mayor Banks, expressing doubt that Thacher drank it all, commented that he “didn’t get a chance” to do so when he was Mayor.\(^ {110}\)

The next day, Tuesday, was All Nations Day, conceived as “a representative gathering of the nations associated with our country’s history,” explained the *Argus*. “Though it is a boast that we weld into one the citizens of all countries,” having expressions of national pride in a large parade would be a “satisfactory display, pleasing to all true Americans.”\(^ {111}\) This statement requires some unpacking, for on its face it is a refreshing does of liberalism contrasting with the nativism that often accompanied celebrations and much else during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While All Nations Day sought to and did allow expressions of ethnic identity, it did so for established immigrant groups and only under strictly proscribed conditions; all floats or plans for marching had to be checked and authorized by the citizens’ committee and the grand marshal in charge. In this way it expressed the power of establishment; power of

\(^{109}\) Ibid.
\(^{110}\) “At the City Hall,” *The Albany Argus* (July 20, 1886), 12.
establishing American identity, and the power of the establishment that controlled and
determined what sorts of representation were considered appropriate. Taken this way, for all of
the power dynamics involved, All Nations Day was a sort of forerunner to the Immigrant or
Cultural Gifts movement in the first half of the twentieth century which sought to take
representative aspects of foreign, immigrant cultures and use them to enrich American culture,
promoting a more tolerant vision of differences. Albany’s elite did make sure that the city’s
various ethnicities, for the most part, were included in the count of “all” nations. For two of
the more peculiar nations in American history—African Americans and Native Americans—the
questions of representation in the Bicentennial were more complicated, as will be discussed.

The parade itself did not go off without a hitch. The Dutch, who had created a float
featuring a traditional working windmill, ran into trouble quickly. As the float rolled along, an
electric or telegraph wire—the newspapers do not specify—caught one of the windmill’s arms
“and left it a cripple.” The Italians, who were marching in the same division as the Dutch, had
created an enormous replica of Columbus’s Santa Maria. It, too, was “wrecked on the shore of a
wire” while sailing on the sea of streets.

A group of thirteen of the visiting Caughnawaga Indians—specifically the men, led by
Chief Angus George—carried lacrosse rackets and were dressed in “full war costumes”
marching immediately ahead of the Scots in kilts and tartans. When they marched, they were
simply there, bearing their “race mark.” It is worth asking what they symbolized, considering
that there were virtually no Native Americans left in Albany in 1886, and that white people were
dressing up as them symbolically and playing Indian. There was no special expression of their

113 For an overview of ethnic relations in late nineteenth century Albany, see Thomas Reimer, “Ethnicity in Albany,
identity aside from the lacrosse sticks and their “war costumes.” As the historical pageant’s imagery would suggest, the Caughnawagas represented a foil for Albany’s modernity; the “whence we came” of the progressive story, a living link to the era of the 1686 city charter and supposed friendship between whites and Natives.

African Americans, rather than a foil, were an Other. Their voices are hard to locate in the reports from the Bicentennial, for their presence was noted scantily in the record; the few examples of which are noted here. “The grand concert by the colored citizens last night was very good,” the Argus said blandly, along with a brief description of the program from the Tuesday evening show. Dwarfting this little blurb, however, was a lengthy and glowing description of a large concert given by the Albany City and Tenth Regiment Bands the same night.115 During the All Nations parade, the African American delegation from the “Burdette-Coutts society” (a reference to the English philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts) rode in carriages with the French and Italians after the Dutch, and “an elegant banner, presented by the ladies, was displayed,” and the Argus included the “colored people” in its list of nations associated with national history.116

Following the All Nations parade, the Germans and the Irish decamped to Washington Park to plant memorial trees, as did the city’s “colored citizens.” In the park, a reverend thanked God that, “as representatives of a once down-trodden and despised race, which had been lifted up, they had the privilege enjoyed on that occasion.” T. H. S. Pennington, a local African American leader residing in Saratoga Springs delivered a fiery speech directed at the city’s elites: “To the mayor, common council and others of the bi-centennial committee: What a wonder! What a crime! What a shame!” Pennington used his talk to remind the group of a history that was

being erased by its invisibility: the history of Dutch slave-owning and the enslavement of Africans in their homes and estates. “This method of involuntary servitude was carried on in this State until about sixty-eight or sixty-nine years ago,” when the legislature abolished it. “Taking into consideration the many disadvantages that the descendants of Ham labor under, on account of color, and their former condition, we might almost as well have remained as we were.”

After his strong condemnation of the racism African Americans were living with, Pennington concluded by holding up the Bicentennial as offering possible hope. “But the bi-centennial has brought about a great change. To-day, that once persecuted race, meets here on one broad platform, and independent with all nations, we have met for the purpose of commemorating the settling of Albany and to perpetuate the celebration of the bi-centennial. And we, as a part and parcel of this great republic, in common with other, purpose to plant an elm…to show our affiliation with and approval of this movement.”

If the Bicentennial’s embrace of the pride of ethnic groups could be cultivated, then perhaps there was a chance for improvement of the position of the condition of African Americans.

The Argus described the final speaker of the tree planting ceremony, chairman of the Colored Citizens Association of Albany P. J. McIntyre, as delivering a “stirring speech.” After pointing out that the farmers who they toiled for at one time had taken their land from their original owners, the Mohawks, McIntyre focused on the position of African Americans and the question of patriotism. “I desire to say that in answer to those ignorant negroes who were anxious to know of me the color and style of our flag, I point them with pride to the starry flag, whose bright stars and broad stripes float a warning to all those who train under or claim any other.” Despite their history, African Americans were American, McIntyre argued, and needed

no other flag. He dismissed Africa as having “no civilization, no education, no houses and no flag,” and having fought, bled, and died in America—presumably a reference to the Civil War—“we, too, have a right to feel at home under its flag, which is our flag, and though we appear today in line as colored people, we are the second best Americans and, I am proud to say, Albanians.”

The emphasis on African American perseverance and hope was echoed earlier in the week on Sunday, where a very large group of attendees heard Reverend Israel Derrick preach at the Israel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Hamilton Street. “No victory can be achieved without a well planned and a hard fought battle,” the Reverend said. “Endurance and perseverance, even against opposition, will eventually be rewarded.” African Americans, like other groups, interpreted and engaged with the Bicentennial in their own way. For black leaders, the celebration offered a chance and a hope for improving their status in the community.

For established ethnic groups and social organizations the Bicentennial offered opportunities to showcase pride and theatrics. The Irish, for example, arranged thirty-two young ladies to represent the counties of Ireland on a float that “was a magnificent affair and the admiration of every Irish person.” The Earl of Leicester, Prince of Orange, Emperor William and King Leopold all rode together in a carriage, emphasizing the Bicentennial’s official theme of national unity. The Apollo Singing Glee Club created a float with a recreated “primeval wood” in the rear of which was a throne where the god Apollo, “surrounded by garlands, leaves and other natural properties” (never mind, the Argus sniffed, that his pink tights did not fit “with that quickness and grace usually seen.”). Patriotic floats representing the Goddess of Liberty and All Nations rounded out the kaleidoscopic procession, reviewed by Governor Hill and state officers.

118 Ibid.
from the veranda of the secretary of state’s office; Jack, a dog once belonging to President Cleveland while he was governor, watched from a dangerous ledge that he “crawled through the apertures of a balcony rail” to get to.¹²⁰

As the sun started to go down, the city’s secret societies emerged to parade through the streets in a ritualistic display of elite values. “Antique buildings vied with modern in their illumination, and Greek fire shed a halo over landmarks 219 years old, untouched and standing intact with the primitive finish of age that we revert to as sacred,” wrote the Argus. The societies, which including groups like the Odd Fellows and the Knights of Pythias, created four allegorical floats, three from the Fellows and one from the Knights: “Friendship,” telling the Biblical story of David and Jonathan; “Brotherly Love,” which depicted the parable of the Good Samaritan; “Truth,” an elaborate display of the interior of a temple with a high priest surrounded by attendants; and the Knights’ float, showing the execution legend of Damon and Pythias.¹²¹ The evening procession of the secret societies, that day’s All Nations parade, the previous day’s Trades and Manufacturers parade, and the following day’s civic procession all reflected the enormous growth in voluntary associations in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹²²

On Wednesday—Civic Day—the city’s municipal apparatus transformed wholesale into a parade, joined by political clubs and the secret societies from the previous night, with other fraternal organizations.¹²³ For the firemen, their parade held special meaning. Their longtime Fire Chief, James McQuade, was sick and ailing when Civic Day came. Against the orders of his physician, he insisted on being there. “The presence of their gallant old chief who had almost

¹²¹ “Fraternal Emblems,” The Albany Argus (July 21, 1886), 11.
¹²³ “Bi-Centennial Anniversary,” The Albany Argus (July 11, 1886), 2.
filled the span of life, three score and ten, allotted by the prophet, was a source of inspiration” to the firemen, the *Argus* reported. McQuade could not bear the idea of the “boys” being out there without him there at the head of the line, and there he marched for the entirety of the several hours it took to move through the city. When pressed to take a seat, the “sturdy veteran would not hear of it.” The march, though, took its toll. Spectators saw the old Chief’s ghostly paleness, the twitches of pain and convulsions with each movement. Still, McQuade “never flinched for a moment,” summoning a “superhuman resolution” even while this final act of devotion ultimately cost him his life. On the Sunday following the Bicentennial, while church bells called worshippers to services, the Chief, whom the *Argus* called “the bravest, coolest and sturdiest of modern paladins,” “quietly breathed his last.”

124 This anecdote demonstrates how the Bicentennial meant different things to different people. For Chief McQuade, it gave one final chance to lead the firemen, to express pride in his civic identity; for his men, it allowed them an opportunity to give him their respect and devotion. For the city’s fire companies, the Bicentennial had transcendent and personal meaning.

In the evening came the main event of the entire week, the top-secret and much-anticipated historical pageant. “In the gathering twilight the army of sightseers began to mass its squadrons in front of the high stockade enclosing Col. De Leon’s factory,” all “darkness and silence, while the garrison of workmen made final preparations for moving,” Banks’s narrative described.

125 What lay behind the high wall guarding the pageant master’s mysterious workshop? The pageant floats were created in secret under De Leon’s strict supervision, but in 1898 he described what one may have seen if they were to wander in:

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125 Banks, *Albany Bi-Centennial*, 316.
“Hammer and saw, the ring of anvils, the hum of lathes and the hiss of steam mingle in confused sound. In the open space, huge cauldrons, like the witch-pots of Macbeth, boil and bubble with the papier-mache ‘mash’ for the ‘brew’ of tiger, horse, or elephant, as needed…Scattered about the yard may be seen great platforms of bolted timbers, resting on massive, broad-tired wheels. These are of varied size and shape; and over them swarm builders, busy and various as those of the elder Babel. Into some machinists are fitting levers, cogs and springs; all preparing for the lighter superstructure, representative of Art or Nature’s work. For mechanical devices that mimic all movements of life are now the prideful triumphs of every great pageant…And quietly among them, may stroll a silent gentleman, with hands in his pockets and a glass in his eye, through which he notes each point of progress and weighs each effect. He may represent the brains that conceived and detailed the long and intricate pageant. As he sees it in his mind’s eye, so must it be seen upon the crowded streets, on that night months hence, when the glare of a thousand varying lights and the tongues of as many citizens will test its finished whole. Experienced care and practiced eye are needed so to see it, by day and in the dingy warehouse at close quarters; and to calculate justly changed effect of distance and artificial light.”

The night was cloudy; all of the electrical lights of the city were shut off “by the consent of all,” Harper’s Weekly reported. The Argus, a local source, described exactly the opposite: from Governor Hill’s executive chamber could be seen “a vast eddying wave of humanity…The electric light danced over this human sea and threw into strong relief the white dresses and parti-colored ribbons that marked where the thousands of fair lookers on were among the

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126 De Leon, Creole Carnivals, 46-47.
multitude.”128 In any event, De Leon the “silent gentleman” from Mobile was ready, and Manning, grand marshal of the historical pageant wearing a “helmet with a flowing plume,” readied his aides and soon a “singularly beautiful” spectacle was on the move: “To the spectators standing in the middle of the street directly in the line of march the approaching column appeared shrouded in a crimson halo…The handsomely-uniformed staff upon their high-stepping horses appeared in strong relief upon a blood-red background, while looming up amid the volumes of radiant smoke the floats appeared like visions from fairyland. The smoke from the red fire, fading to a faint pink as it rose, capped the most splendid spectacle ever seen in the Northern States.”129

A series of magnificent floats bobbed through downtown. The first introduced the show with the emblem of the city, while the second, the “Spirit of Discovery,” showed Discovery holding an astrolabe joined with her companions seeking new lands, personified by three beautiful women in a shell being pulled across the sea by dolphins. The “Spirit,” in turn, motivated the next two subjects: “The Northmen” depicting Lief Erikson and his crew of “heavy, sinewy men” rowing toward the New World in a large Viking ship, and “The Landing of Columbus,” showing the titular figure emerging triumphantly onto a tropical beach accompanied by soldiers and a priest with crucifix. Columbus and his party were regarded with curiosity by “stealthy, inquisitive, half-fearful Indians” hiding behind trees.

Several more floats focused on local history from that point: the building of “Fort Orange,” the “First Land Purchases” (“The idea intended to be brought out by this float is that the land of the aborigines, when occupied by the Hollanders, were not violently seized, but

129 Banks, Albany Bi-Centennial, 317-318.
honestly purchased,” *The New York Times* explained, alluding to Thacher’s story.\(^{130}\), “Dutch Legends,” “The King’s Charter,” “The Dongan Charter,” “The Schenectady Massacre” (*The New York Times*: “The roof of the burning building was lined with asbestos (sic), and inside a whole chemical laboratory was contained, from which the lurid effects of the conflagration were produced.”\(^{131}\), “The Surrender of Burgoyne,” “The Heroine of Revolutionary Days,” and “The Last of the Patroons.”

The final two floats, “The Erie Canal” and “Prosperity and Progress” (sometimes called “Past, Present, and Future”) shifted the focus to technology and the promise of the future. In the first of these, the *Seneca-Chief* emerged from a lock as the first boat to move through the canal from Buffalo to Albany. Standing in the boat were three figures instrumental to the canal’s construction: De Witt Clinton, Joseph C. Yates, and Philip Schuyler. In the final float, “a dazzling sun revolves with glittering rays and flashing speed, and the sea beneath catches the reflection…The river banks at sunset are seen, upon the river the steamboat palace of to-day rides in resplendent beauty, and upon shore an engine and train of cars arrive. The *Clermont* paddles in the dim distance. In the cloudy dimness rests the graybeard Time and his scythe. And high above is youthful Albany symbolized in youth, strength and vigor.”\(^{132}\) *Harper’s Weekly* described the last float as showing “the prosperity and progress of the country at large” typified by “a mechanical contrivance” representing the “glistening rays of the sun” over the sea “while Father Time gives way before the powers of steam and electricity that change his hours of the


\(^{131}\) Ibid.

\(^{132}\) Banks, *Albany Bi-Centennial*, 318-324.
past to the minutes of to-day.” The New York Times called the float a “marvel of artistic and mechanical dexterity.”  

A “dream landscape” had appeared, although it was a landscape tinged with stereotypical views of Native Americans, more explicit than was expressed at any point in the celebration before the pageant. Because the pageant was described and advertised as the epic story of the city as told by the city, its portrayal of Native Americans—their characters and roles in Albany’s history—was explicitly official. When Thacher welcomed the Caughnawaga Indians to the city, they were cast in supporting roles to lend authentic color to the Mayor’s opening ceremonies and to All Nations Day’s claims to include all nations. Nonetheless, at no point were they included in the Bicentennial; the stories of Natives—both living and fictional—were prescribed and told through celebration. The story told in the historical pageant as the celebration’s centerpiece established a lasting image of Native Americans that remained in modified but constant forms for the next fifty years.

The first floats in which “they” appeared (all were played by white locals) established Natives as primitive and meek, bewildered by the appearance of white men in “The Landing of Columbus.” Harper’s Weekly described the Columbus float as “a most striking scene, as he takes possession of a continent, while the savages dodge behind trees in their amazement.”  

“There were the savages of the primeval wilderness around Albany, as tigerish in their instincts and brutal in their passions as the red men of the present day, whom the United States army is chasing over the mountain fastnesses of the southwestern frontier,” the Argus observed of some of the characters in the pageant, making reference to the ongoing Indian Wars in the West.  

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almost every float where they featured, Indians were portrayed as violent and savage, no longer noble or friendly, moving from primitive to threatening. In the eleventh float, portraying the Schenectady Massacre in 1690, featured “a cabin on fire, and before it is stretched the body of a white man. The red savages are shown dancing about in their fiendish glee and slaughtering the little children and the helpless women.” Unfortunately, it can only be speculated what the Native Americans in the city must have thought, and whether they would have considered the pageant’s potent scenes as out of a “dream”—or a nightmare in the “blood-red” light.

The official narrative presented in the passing floats’ imagery mixed with complimentary messaging in local papers, exemplified by historical sketches claiming to depict Albany in the time of Henry Hudson, as the Argus published on July 18: “There were also to be seen Indians scattered through the deep and dark forests, in ambushed passes, along these hills and valleys, holding in their strong hands the bow and arrow, the tomahawk and scalping knife—their hunting shout borne upon the breeze, their terrific yells now and then echoing among the wood bound hills, the smoke curling up from their rude wigwams, and their frail canoes spinning over the waters of the noble Hudson where now, under the march of civilization and the triumphant genius of the white man, sail the splendid steamboats and along whose shores move with wonderful rapidity the numerous and elegant railways cars of to-day.”

The Argus captured the essence of the pageant’s narrative: “Terrific” yells, “rude” wigwams, “frail” canoes, living in the “deep and dark forests” of prehistory before the “triumphant genius of the white man” creates civilization with its unstoppable march, bringing today’s “splendid” and “wonderful” technology. The message of the pageant was one of progress from the “prehistory” of the Native Americans. Transformed from a primordial people to a

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136 “The Pageant,” Albany Evening Union (July 17, 1886), 1.
137 “Pen Pictures of Albany,” The Albany Argus (July 18, 1886), 3.
contemporary threat, Natives were shown as violent “savages.” Once their land was taken and they were removed from the narrative, Albany’s progress and civilization then had space to proceed, eventually leading to a past, present, and future defined by optimism and technology in the concluding float.

This essential narrative—that the Indians were a relic, that history did not begin until white people decided it would, that their extinction was inevitable—was reinforced over and over, and as shall be shown in chapter three remained in the city’s celebrations well into the twentieth century, as would the hobby of “playing Indian.” In Albany’s historical pageant all of the “savages” were played by whites, either Albany High School students or members of various military organizations. When the Argus described the dye from the celebration’s storm-damaged decorations running like blood into the gutters, as if their supposed Caughnawaga friends “had drawn the terrible tomahawks from under their nineteenth century coats,” the paper was tapping into this potent image. Native Americans would always be at least a little suspicious and potentially dangerous, and despite the other narrative pushed for the celebration—that whites and Native Americans had always been on uniquely friendly terms in Albany, which got its own float depicting a supposedly fair purchase of land between them—it was this specter of the “savage” Indian that haunted much of the city’s spectacle and continued to do so for years after.

When the historical pageant concluded, a new spectacle began. Near midnight, a “ghostly procession emerged from beneath the Columbia street bridge, bearing a somber coffin in their midst, and a banner with the inscription ‘Mystic Order of Momus’ surmounted by a skull and cross-bones.” This “Mystic Order,” as was described in chapter one, was undoubtedly suggested by or designed in close collaboration with the mystic pageant master De Leon. The procession’s leader wore white robes with a black mask and spoke in a “deep sepulchral voice,” while the
others inverted his colors. The “weird column” moved through the streets until it reached a roped area, where, “in the glare of the electric lights and in full view of the assembled thousands,” they performed their “mystic services,” beginning with an invocation of the elements. The black-masked “high priest” then stepped forward and delivered an address: “We are now assembled about the inanimate form of the departed. Before us lies the record of the past two hundred years of our native city,” he intoned. “Dear Old Fogies! Old Antideluvians, whose lumbering, tortoise-like pace has held us back in the race of progress for so many years! Is it, indeed, true that we are to part from you forever? That you are about to vanish from our gaze in a cloud of flames and smoke, even like the obstacles which you were so wont to strew in our pathway. And, as the flames ascend skyward, and the glowing sparks are all borne upward on the bosom of the billowy vapors, will we perchance view your disembodied spirits? Perhaps, my brethren, we will even be able to recognize some of them.”

“I offer you, in your great grief, words of comfort and joy,” the high priest continued. “There is yet a future ahead—a future before which the history of the past will sink into oblivion—a future in which the years to come shall retrieve the errors of those that are gone. Let us, then, exchange tears for the dead and smiles for the living, while we congratulate ourselves that there is among us an element battling nobly for prosperity.” After a few more words, a torch was applied to the coffin’s tarred lid, sending flames leaping into the air and the “mystic brethren, burning blue lights, joined in a ghostly dance about the burning pyre.” As the fire grew, the high priest tossed in the Order’s banner and kicked over the pyre, “and amid an uproar that was deafening the mystic crew re-formed” and marched down the street, removing their masks and robes and revealing their identities; the “mystic brethren” were, in fact, members of the elite
and old families of the city—including one “J. D. Rockefeller.” The bonfire, along with the fire of two hundred cannons the next morning, ushered in Bicentennial Day.\footnote{Banks, \textit{Albany Bi-Centennial}, 324-327.}

The Bicentennial Day began with a military procession of local and visiting military organizations and Grand Army of the Republic posts escorting President Cleveland in the procession. “President Cleveland kept his head uncovered throughout the line of march and acknowledged the cheers and other demonstrations with which he was greeted almost continuously.” “Hail to the Chief” was played, and “the populace stood with uncovered heads.” Following the military parade were the deliveries of a poem by William H. McElroy and an oration on the history of Albany by the Governor (who repeated again the story of “fair negotiation and liberal treatment” of Indians). “What shall be said of the future of Albany? That it will largely share in the prosperity, growth, honor and renown that surely awaits this progressive country of ours in the years which are to follow, may be safely predicted,” Hill told his audience. During the literary exercises, the assembly sang “America” and the “national hymn.” In the evening, a reception in the Senate chamber was held for the President and his Cabinet, federal and state officials, and other guests.\footnote{“Post Bi-Centennial!,” \textit{Albany Morning Express} (July 23, 1886); Banks, \textit{Albany Bi-Centennial}, 350-382.}

The military procession, like the firemen’s parading earlier, held an extra layer of meaning as a reunion of sorts for veterans of the Civil War. The Seventh Regiment veterans were delighted with the opportunity to take part, and on their way home to New York City, several stayed up late talking “over the war times and their love for the Seventh.” Quartermaster Holly was thinking as much about the future. “I have my uniform done up in camphor,” he said, “waiting for the time when my son can put it on and enlist in the regiment. He is just my size and build and I want him to wear it.” Several men echoed Holly’s sentiment. Colonel Locke W.
Winchester beamed, happy that the Seventh had “left Albany in a blaze of fireworks and
glory…Nothing could be more gratifying also than the way the veterans came in from their
country homes to swell our ranks and do credit to the organization.”

Bicentennial Day was closed with a pyrotechnic display in Washington Park, where at
least 50,000 people congregated in anticipation following the day’s exercises, overflowing into
the danger zone around the Unexcelled Fireworks Company’s staging area. Four great set-pieces
lit up the dark amidst a program of spiraling rockets, twisting dragons, and bombs; the
presentation of the city charter to Pieter Schuyler in 1686, Hudson’s landing, Albany’s coat-of-
arms, and an enormous, shimmering simulation of Niagara Falls that stretched one hundred
seventy feet across and forty feet above onlookers. Their complicated construction involved an
artist making a scale design, which was set on racks five by ten feet to make square foot sections,
then intricately laying out fuses and materials to cause near-instantaneous ignition, putting the
scene together piece by piece. “Their grandeur cannot be described,” the Argus gaped, “one must
see them to know.” Despite some injuries from the explosives, everything seemed to indicate
success to the organizers and a fitting climax to a splendid week.

The Albany Morning Express, however, provided a different account of what transpired
in the park that suggested it was more than fireworks that were ready to explode that night. In its
telling, nearly 100,000 people formed a “mass of humanity” in Washington Park and the streets
and avenues leading to it. The show was late to start; as the night wore on the crowd grew
restless with “tin horns” and “cat calls” growing numerous. An impromptu group struck up
“America,” and thousands joined in the rising chorus, the effect of which combined with “the

starlit sky and the ardant [sic] beauty of the place” impressed “something sublime” on the listening *Express* reporter. Just next to the sea of people inside the Unexcelled Fireworks Company’s roped-off staging area were the Bicentennial committee members, city aldermen, and their friends, who had received complimentary tickets to the best seats in the park. Seeing this elite cohort, someone in the crowd began to complain, telling the assembled masses that “no committee had any right to appropriate whole acres of the public park for their immediate friends.” The singing was over; revolution was in the air. “The people own the park!” the crowd began to cry, and a few jumped the ropes. In an instant 10,000 people rushed over the barriers and “the aldermanic favorites thus found themselves engulfed in the ‘rabble’ and ceased to have exclusive possession of that portion.” Almost as if on cue, the pyrotechnic display began a few minutes later.\(^\text{143}\)

Adding to the tension described in the *Express* story may have been Washington Park itself. As a public space, the park was charged with meaning; it was known as the playground of the rich, a genteel center of high society, and the surrounding streets “black with humanity” that night were where the very wealthiest had their homes, including Anthony Brady, Robert Pruyn, and the Van Rensselaers. The writer William Kennedy, an Albany native, recalled that proximity to the park was “aesthetically important,” offering “promenades among the flowers, band concerts, contemplative musings beside the Moses Fountain or the Robert Burns statue, boating in the summer, skating in the winter, and Arcadia in all seasons.” But some entertainments were not the exclusive domain of the genteel. In the 1880s, winter carnivals were in fashion, and all of the public turned out to see fireworks and the enormous ice palace constructed in the park’s

\(^{143}\) “Post Bi-Centennial!,” *Albany Morning Express* (July 23, 1886).
corner at Madison and Lake Avenues. The contested meanings of Washington Park for both the upper and lower classes of Albany were intensified in the charged atmosphere of the Bicentennial.

When the mayhem of the pyrotechnics display was over, the city awoke on Friday to survey the damage. The Argus reported that “people living in the vicinity of the park do not desire any more fireworks there. A considerable amount of damage was done to private property.” This was not the only instance of festival-goers asserting their ownership over spaces. “At Washington park, for instance,” reported the Albany Evening Union, “on Wednesday night, under every tree and bush could be found a sleeper, with the stars for a canopy and the sod for a bed. The park, in front of the city hall, was the same and the steps of the state house were used. The greatest sight, however, was in the tent in the capitol park, and slumbering upon the benches could be seen the forms of fully two or three hundred men and boys.” The crowds left garbage “strewn all over every grass plot” and made an “improvised restaurant” of St. Peter’s church.

The Glittering Dream Faded Away

On Friday, the historical pageant sub-committee met and adopted a resolution conveying “heartfelt thanks to the young ladies and gentlemen who, with such commendable patriotism and with such admirable taste, performed the parts allotted to them upon the tableaux exhibited in the pageant parade in honor of the city’s bi-centenary.”

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146 “Where the Crowd Lived,” Albany Evening Union (July 24, 1886), 8.
147 “After the Celebration,” The Albany Argus (July 24, 1886), 8.
Not every organization had such a wonderful experience. For the Albany Railway, the Bicentennial had been a disaster. The crowds that poured into the city stretched the company’s lines to their limits, and severely tested the capacity of its horses to handle the dramatically increased loads. “The horse cars were densely crowded,” the Albany Morning Express wrote of the chaos of people trying to get to Washington Park for the pyrotechnic display on Thursday. The Railway’s superintendent, John W. McNamara, “rode over the lines all the evening with a horse and buggy, in order to see that the travel was unimpeded. The State street line cars, however, were so heavily overcrowded that they could scarcely be moved even with six horses before each car.” Crowds stormed the cars, and the police had to aggressively keep people off as the horses strained to budge; some cars ran off the rails, and a brisk business was done by impromptu teamsters who took advantage of the mess.148

This same episode sparked accusations of cruelty in the papers, alleging that McNamara had brutally beaten and abused the horses that night with his buggy whip. The Argus interviewed McNamara, who claimed that “every charge of cruel and inhuman treatment of horses” was news to him, while admitting that “several times during Wednesday and Thursday it was necessary for me to urge horses to do their share of the work, especially when six horses were used, but the urging was done without inflicting any blows.” He also offered a reward of twenty-five dollars for the arrest and conviction of anyone guilty of cruelty. “Not one” horse was injured, McNamara said, “all are on duty and doing well.”149

It is possible that the scale of the celebration and corresponding magnitude of the chaos in attempting to handle the crowds (and the bad press from alleged cruelty in trying to get horses, having natural limits in energy, to pull the heavy loads, especially up the city’s several hills)

148 “Post Bi-Centennial!,” Albany Morning Express (July 23, 1886).
finally convinced the company’s board of directors that they needed to come up with a different system of rapid transit. In the same interview, McNamara called some comments in the press that discussed operating some lines by cable “sound and timely,” wishing that rather than attacking him and the company such comments had been “preceded by a more temperate statement of the difficulties of operating hill lines by means of horses.”

Fortunately for McNamara and the Albany Railway, a new energy—electricity—was beginning to come into use in motors at exactly the same time. By 1889, the company was testing electric streetcars. On April 28, 1890, the first electric car rolled out of its stable on Quail Street and traveled to Broadway and back; a new era had begun, and on May 15 the company put two hundred horses for sale at a mass auction.150 “The time came much sooner than the most sanguine of us dreamed of,” McNamara reflected at the eighth annual meeting of the Street Railway Association of the State of New York that September.151 At the turn of the century, the electric system of the Albany Railway (known by then as the United Traction Company, a consolidated corporation of several area street railways) had grown to create a metropolitan region stretching across the Hudson River and carried 27,732,556 passengers a year.152 From a certain point of view, Manning’s retrospective judgment in 1917 that Albany had “adjusted its stride to the march of Progress” was achieved—at least technologically—by the company directed by himself and so many of the Bicentennial’s managers. The Bicentennial had magnified the issues with a horse-based streetcar system, concentrating its elites on the

151 John W. McNamara, “An Electric Street Railway Motor,” *The Electrical World* 16, No. 13 (September 27, 1890), 228.
difficulties associated with large amounts of people; a growing population, growth implicitly being a goal of the Bicentennial, would require new infrastructure.

Technological upgrades like electrification of the old Dutch city’s rapid transit was only one of the benefits brought by the Bicentennial, both immediate in the short term and longer lasting alike. As De Leon hoped, it proved to be a massive economic stimulus, filling hotels, restaurants, and trains. The *Argus* interviewed John Keeler in the aftermath of what proved to be “the biggest week’s business I ever saw in Albany,” the State Street restaurateur told the paper. His establishment fed 3,000 people on Wednesday alone, utilizing every chair available. Asked whether it was true, as rumor had it, that he had ordered twenty tons of oysters from New York City, Keeler smiled and confirmed an order of 20,000 shellfish during the week and hazarding a guess at 10,000 people fed in total.153

Beyond the particular immediate benefits, the Bicentennial established a new model for the city in how it presented itself to its citizens that would last for the next fifty years and beyond. American cities in the years following 1886 embraced Albany’s model of spectacular celebration and historical pageantry. In 1896 Cleveland, Ohio, for example, whose Cleveland Leader had sniffed at New York’s capital as “smaller and less important” despite its satisfying celebration, celebrated its own centennial in the same manner starting on July 19—almost ten years to the day from Albany’s Bicentennial—and lasting through September 10, complete with an assortment of orations (including by soon-to-be-successful presidential candidate William McKinley), concerts, exhibitions, and parades (as well as “mass calisthenics” among other activities). President Grover Cleveland, then in his second term, also participated in the celebration from his home in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts by pressing a button to electrically

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illuminate the Centennial Arch erected for the occasion of Founder’s Day on July 22. Following the electric light show was the Cleveland centennial’s main event, an extravagantly spectacular historical pageant entitled “The Passing of the Century” consisting of twenty-four floats led by “Progress.”\textsuperscript{154} The \textit{Albany Argus}, its own city having pioneered this sort of spectacle and receiving back-handed compliments from the \textit{Cleveland Leader}, commented on Cleveland’s celebration, honoring the city’s achievements and character, saying, “It is happy in its present conditions; it is hopeful in its prophetic outlook.”\textsuperscript{155}

Albany’s model even spread up to the level of the World’s Fairs. In the 1890s, America witnessed its most magnificent spectacle yet: the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The state of New York, after losing out to the Windy City in the bid to host the World’s Fair, began planning for its own exhibition. On the nomination of Governor Hill, a firsthand witness Albany’s 1886 celebration, President Harrison appointed John Boyd Thacher the “Bicentennial Mayor” to serve as one of the state exhibition’s general managers in the small group of national commissioners. Thacher went on to help fundraise for New York’s effort and plan its exhibition, helping to secure items for display; he even donated his own items, including “the wampum belt commemorative of the first treaty and alliance of the Six Nations of New York, and now in the possession of Hon. John Boyd Thacher, of Albany.” The belt would be exhibited at the Fair in the “Government Building.”\textsuperscript{156}

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\textsuperscript{154} Cleveland Centennial Commission, \textit{Official Programme of the Centennial Celebration of the Founding of the City of Cleveland and the Settlement of the Western Reserve}, (Cleveland: Cleveland Centennial Commission, 1896).
\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Report of the Board of the General Managers of the Exhibit of the State of New York at the World’s Columbian Exposition}, (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1894), 83-84.
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At Chicago, Robert Rydell noted how the Fair featured a large-scale replica of Niagara Falls in fireworks, much like what was exhibited at Albany and Philadelphia in the 1880s, and parades from the Midway through the White City sometimes took on Carnival-esque qualities featuring characters from the “Wild East.”\footnote{Rydell, \textit{All the World's a Fair}, 28.} But it was for Chicago Day—celebrated on October 9, 1893, and marking the twenty-second anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871—that Albany’s celebratory form explicitly appeared at the largest scale imaginable, with over 700,000 people visiting the Fair that day to witness the decorations, cannon salutes, concerts, exhibitions, and exercises. In the evening, a large procession of illuminated floats entitled “Chicago in her Growth welcoming the World” moved through the White City, led by “I Will,” surrounded by the States of the Union and guided by Love and Liberty. Early episodes of Indian massacre were highlighted in the city’s representations of its history, followed by visions of Chicago’s industry, experiences in war, and that of the Great Fire itself: a colossal “Fire Fiend,” holding a torch, lit up a ruined mass of columns, arches, and fragments. National groups—reminiscent of Albany’s All Nations Day—joined the historical pageant in costume, led by prominent figures from national pasts (Lief Erikson headed the Norwegian contingent). The pageant’s final float, the “Genius of Electricity,” featured a gigantic red-green dragon illuminated by 2,000 incandescent lamps, followed by a massive pyrotechnic set piece display, the largest of which covered some 14,000 square feet in four scenes to depict “The Burning of Chicago.” Balloons, bombs, rockets, and brilliant lighting entertained the applauding thousands until late at night.\footnote{Rossiter Johnson, Editor, \textit{A History of the World's Columbian Exposition, Volume One}, (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1897), 453-456.} Although massively amplified in scale, Chicago Day’s spectacular forms adhered closely to the essence of celebratory form used in smaller cities like Albany.
Other World’s Fairs drew on that model, too. In 1897, in the run up to the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska, several groups considered how best to create excitement and support for putting on the spectacle. One of these groups, the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben (an adjunct of the Omaha Commercial Club, whose name is the reverse of Nebraska), put on a pageant procession inspired by the Mardi Gras of New Orleans as a “soothing tonic to entertain and cheer a depressed people.” Twenty floats were drawn through the city streets, including “Welcome Prosperity” and others themed on Nebraska’s natural resources. While not strictly historical and adhering more to Philadelphia’s earlier model, this episode and the floats of Chicago Day showed how widely the use of spectacular pageantry had spread. The Omaha Exposition would go on to be visited by over 2.5 million people in 1898.\textsuperscript{159} The forms of Albany’s Bicentennial, though appearing physically for only one week in July 1886, reappeared year after year throughout American cities in celebrations large and small.

The various components of Albany’s Bicentennial itself dissipated quickly after the week’s end. The loan exhibition was “brought to a very successful termination” that Saturday night having earned a surplus of $3,000. The citizens’ committee was so happy with the results that they recommended the exhibition should be made permanent, and a special committee was created to confer with the Mayor to decide on the best use for the money earned. An “excellent orchestra” performed for the “many hundreds” who took the last chance to visit the “rare art treasures.” “Catalogues have been sold with a rush, and the refreshment counters did a large business,” the Argus reported, adding that the “ladies and gentlemen” who worked so hard deserved praise, as did “the police arrangements under charge of Mr. James H. Kelly.” Despite immense crowds, the paper said, there were “no pickpockets at work, and no disturbance of any

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 109-111.
kind.” Total receipts from the exhibition were $7,607.63, and on the final day of Saturday alone $450 was brought in, a significant sum. The exhibition’s managers estimated between 22,000 and 23,000 visitors came through the Albany Academy’s doors, and Wednesday was the biggest day with 3,500 paying the admission fee.\textsuperscript{160} By contrast, the \textit{Albany Evening Union} praised Kelly but noted that “the thieves visited the place but they were quietly ousted and the result was most admirable.”\textsuperscript{161} As this thesis has found, criminals were in the city for plum opportunities just like this. Given the concentration of treasures owned by Albany’s elite inside the Academy it is not surprising that there were incidents like the \textit{Union} noted.

Grand Marshal James Manning was “justly proud of the success of the historical pageant parade,” reported the \textit{Albany Sunday Press}. “Not a single unpleasant incident nor accident marked this leading feature of the Bi-centennial celebration.” The Mystic Order of Momus, pleased with their bonfire-turned-funeral pyre in the city square, sent a thank-you card to the Mayor and Chief of Police “for the many acts of kindness shown us, on the night of our parade and exercises.” The Mayor also received a visit from the Caughnawaga Indians before they departed for Canada; a musical fete was given for them and in turn the visitors “rendered a number of songs in their own language.”\textsuperscript{162} The \textit{Argus}, for its part, proclaimed that “there was sufficient glory in the bi-centenary to stimulate the ambition of any city.”\textsuperscript{163} On Thursday, the historical pageant sub-committee sent for “the Mobile experts” brought by De Leon and “lunched and wined them” before presenting each with a bronze medal expressing their deep satisfaction.\textsuperscript{164}

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\textsuperscript{160} “Closing the Exhibition,” \textit{The Albany Argus} (July 25, 1886), 8.
\textsuperscript{161} “The Loan Exhibition,” \textit{Albany Evening Union} (July 24, 1886), 8.
\textsuperscript{162} “Echoes of the Celebration,” \textit{Albany Sunday Press} (July 25, 1886), 8.
\textsuperscript{163} “Lessons of the Bi-Centenary,” \textit{The Albany Argus} (July 25, 1886), 4.
\textsuperscript{164} “After the Pageant,” \textit{The Albany Argus} (July 23, 1886), 4.
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What did the pageant master from Mobile himself think about the spectacle? In the immediate aftermath, he was extremely critical of his hired workers. The small boys detailed as firemen were “wholly incompetent” and “threw their fire away along the route.” He had much the same to say about the light bearers, many of whom were “to his surprise, monopolized by the bands, and some of whom abandoned their lamps in the street.” Apparently, De Leon’s local helpers were more interested in joining the fun of spectating or shining their lights on the musical entertainment. The *Albany Morning Express* seconded his comments, saying that the pageant could have done without “‘kids’ who turned the torch light on the spectators instead of the floats and without others who wasted red light by the barrel.”

Despite the personnel mishaps, De Leon told the *Argus* that he believed it “equal to any seen in the south,” and he and his crew (some of whom had made twenty-seven pageants in total in Mobile and other cities) thought it “the best parade we have ever put on wheels.” Comparing it to his most recent work, he concluded, “I think it is far superior to the Oriole which I made for Baltimore. Then I had twenty-four floats, made principally by the same men. Here I have sixteen and, I think, this pageant is fifty per cent better.”

Reports after the pageant took place noted how nothing like it had quite been seen before. A glowing report in *The New York Times* gushed about the “wild, sensuous, Mardi Gras spirit of creole New Orleans” that had animated “old Dutch Albany.” “The whole festivities were of a character entirely novel and foreign to the North. Next to the visit of the President and his Secretaries the pageant has been the big card of the Bicentennial Committee…Nothing like it has ever been presented north of the cities in the far South, except the Oriole parades in Baltimore

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165 Ibid.
166 “Post Bi-Centennial!,” *Albany Morning Express* (July 23, 1886).
and the festival of the Veiled Prophetess (sic) in St. Louis,” happily observing that “the introduction of this Southern spectacular show as the piece de resistance of the jubilee of a conservative Northern city wedded to Dutch tradition was a daring experiment.” When the pageant terminated, the Times reporter reflected, “the glittering dream faded away.”168 But as noted with the example of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, and Cleveland’s 1896 centennial, Albany’s historical pageant set a trend in motion for celebration in Northern cities.

Harper’s Weekly found it hard to describe, saying that “a description that would convey the scene to the mind of the reader is wellnigh impossible.” Grafting a Mardi Gras festivity onto a historic celebration was “considered a crazy scheme by some, while others shook their heads, and all awaited the result of the experiment with interest.” Harper’s theorized that the unlikeliness came from the fact that “our Northern blood runs very slowly, the Dutch blood is said to run slower, and the Albany Dutch blood the slowest of all.” The doubters were surprised on Wednesday night, which “proved that a custom used on frivolous occasions for the most part can be trained so as to give the most pleasing and lasting impressions of even so grave a subject as history.” Applauding the pageant master, the magazine concluded that “the Northern people should thank the energetic Alabamian who came to Albany and taught this lesson, for in no other city of the north has it yet been shown.”169

De Leon retrospectively wrote that “to New York State must be credited” with success at having perfected the importation of Southern mystic traditions and making them their own. “It really came nearer to a genuine Mardi Gras festival—both in its spirit of production and its

reception by the packed thousands, who came days’ journeys to witness it—than any ever seen beyond the range of the Gulf breezes.”

Judging by this reaction, the historical pageant’s description from its official program was an accurate picture. “From time immemorial it has been the custom to celebrate the recurrence of important anniversaries by means of spectacular shows carried along in procession upon the streets,” it began, citing Southern Europe’s Ash Wednesday traditions and Albany’s “modest way” of doing this for the Constitution’s ratification. The Creole cities of the South practiced a similar custom, with representations often based in poetry or history. The “historical pageant” at Baltimore five years prior based on “ancient and medieval history” was an influence, as were those pageants in St. Louis, Vicksburg, and other Southern cities. For its own occasion, Albany’s “loyal sons” were “adopting some form of celebration which should be practically unique and worthy of the occasion” by recalling an historic sequence of events important to the state and the entire country. “Our historical pageant,” the program read, “is unique, in so far that nothing in precisely this spirit has ever before been exhibited, so far as we know, and especially in that no similar spectacle has hitherto been witnessed in the United States as far north as Albany.”

As the Bicentennial’s decorations came down at week’s end, its revelers filtered out of Albany and its citizens resumed their workaday lives. But one final set of occurrences, both involving the dispensing of the pageant, suggested a divergence in attitudes towards the whole week gone by from what its directors envisioned. All but ten of the pageant’s costumes were advertised for sale to the highest bidder the following week. De Leon, expecting to start back for

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the South on Monday, notified costume-makers in New York City and Brooklyn, Boston, and Philadelphia of the sale. While he hoped that they could be offloaded before his departure, it appears that nobody was interested; all of the costumes were purchased by De Leon himself for $250, perhaps to be recycled back into use in the South’s mystic pageants.

Since Wednesday evening’s spectacular historical pageant, its floats had sat in the “pageant building” on Washington Avenue where, despite their loss of sheen and De Leon’s elaborate stage lighting, hundreds continued to come and view them, especially those who had been unable to make it into town for the live show. Once the last visitors had taken their looks, the historical pageant committee’s members quickly moved to dispense with the floats, hoping that a public auction would bring excited bids and extra revenue for the celebration’s accounting. Like so much else the Bicentennial’s directors envisioned, this final event did not go according to plan.

At three o’clock on Monday, July 26, a small group of people—about fifty passers-by and curious gentlemen with a few ladies and “hoodlums of all complexions and sizes,” according to an Argus reporter on the scene—assembled in the muddy lot where auctioneer William D. Dickerman and the historical pageant committee were waiting among the floats. “Gentleman,” Dickerman announced as he mounted one of the floats, “we are about to dispose of, for cash, the remains of the first historical pageant that was ever shown in a city north of Baltimore.” The sale must happen right then and there, no matter the prices offered, he told the group as he awaited the opening bid. Nothing happened. “A terrible silence followed,” the reporter noted. The committee members “gazed at each other in amazement,” wondering about the crowd’s level of

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interest—or lack of it. Dickerman battled the oppressive summer heat by fanning himself with a straw hat and tried a new tactic, alluding to the floats’ quality and decorative features. The assembly remained silent, politely smiling as Dickerman wiped his brow with a Bicentennial flag-turned-kerchief.

After attempting to spark an interest in several floats to no avail, the “Emblem” float showing Albany’s coat-of-arms and other patriotic heraldry finally received an opening bid of one dollar. “Dollar, dollar, dollar, dollar,” Dickerman replied, and after a little back and forth the float—which had cost several hundred dollars to create—was sold for five dollars, and “silver dollars at that,” the reporter sarcastically commented. An hour of strenuous effort followed, and by four o’clock the auction was over. The exhausted auctioneer put his straw hat back on, took off his handkerchief, and revealed a wilted collar. The auction had brought in a total of sixty-five dollars for floats that totaled thousands in value. “I never worked harder to get a few dollars,” Dickerman told the reporter, “and while I had not the honor of taking part in the construction of the floats, I have the pleasure of having disposed of them.”175

This result surely left the committee exasperated, but it was never clear that the physical remains of the historical pageant were ever destined to become anything more than white elephants. What was more important was the message, and for the leaders of American cities Albany’s Bicentennial suggested a new way to deliver theirs. By the end of July, the carnival was over; it brought economic stimulus, motivated Albany’s electrification and growth in the following decades, and for the citizens’ committee, provided an optimistic injection of civic pride. Furthermore, Albany had established that summer a new model for spectacular celebration.

in Northern cities, and a lasting style of celebration—including historical pageantry—for its own citizenry, as the next chapter will explore.
Chapter Three: The Charm of Ancient Yesterdays

Albany’s carnival was over by late July, but its sights and sounds continued to echo in the city and beyond in the decades that followed. This chapter discusses the echoes of the Bicentennial by looking at subsequent celebrations in the city and how they expressed similar themes and forms. Elite-led celebrations used history as the anchor for their spectacles: anniversaries, for example, offered a convenient moment to convey idealized civic identity.

In conveying their visions, elites constructed identities for their cities that used racial groups as foils for visions of progress, both civic and general. In Albany’s celebrations from 1886 through 1924 and beyond the foils for progress were consistently Native Americans, whose presence in the pageantry of celebration was constrained within the views of contemporary white audiences. In this way, from the Bicentennial in 1886 to the Tercentenary in 1924, Albany’s celebrations—typical of the American city—reflected the use of race in the World’s Fairs to describe the progress of civilization from a primitive state to an impressive present and a more glorious future. As Robert Rydell has noted, at the 1876 Centennial Exposition, exhibits on Native Americans showing their “past and present condition” relegated them to the “wasteland of humanity’s dark and stormy beginnings,” not the future. Race was used in similar fashion at World’s Fairs in Chicago in 1893, Buffalo in 1901, where “a carefully crafted allegory of America’s rise to the apex of civilization” was constructed in contrast with its Indian Congress exhibiting “long haired painted savages in all their barbaric splendor,” and Fairs through the first decades of the twentieth century in cities large and small, according to Rydell.176

One of the main ways the Bicentennial conveyed identities and lessons of progress along the lines Rydell observed at the World’s Fairs was through pageantry, and in pageantry were its

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176 Rydell, All the World’s a Fair.
biggest innovations and contributions to American celebrations. For the first time, a city told its story in dramatic, sequential form: the historical pageant. Prior to this, cities had only just begun to include historical subjects in their pageants in general forms, and *tableaux vivants*, though wildly popular during this period, did not tend to depict local histories. In 1886, Albany staged a fully-designed display of its own story, creating historical pageantry as it came to be known in the decades following. Far from being a revival as scholars have typically considered it, in the early twentieth century American pageant directors copied and built upon this indigenous tradition of the American city.

In its earliest form, historical pageantry took shape in the Gulf States of the Deep South, where mystic orders created dramatic presentations on floats in the Mardi Gras of New Orleans and Mobile. After the Civil War this mystic pageantry was brought North, leading to the synthesis of Northern and Southern celebratory traditions, with Albany’s Bicentennial among the first results. New influences from England and a turn to an idealized past of medieval play drove historical pageantry’s development in American cities, becoming a popular movement. Using Albany as a case study from 1886 through 1924, this chapter offers a reconsideration of the chronology and history of American historical pageantry as exists in current scholarship.

**Echoes of 1886**

Albany resumed its normal pace of life after the Bicentennial. However, the components assembled for that celebration by the city’s elites were utilized in many events in the decades following, as did the leading classes of American cities across the country for their own spectacular affairs, discussed in the previous chapter. In Albany, the Bicentennial model continued to influence subsequent celebrations, and shaped how the identity of the city was
constructed through elite-led spectacle, such as the use of Native Americans as foils for progress and expressions of political ideas.

In 1894, a group of upper class city residents decided to put on a historical pageant at Harmanus Bleecker Hall for one week in December: “The History of Albany In Ten Acts.” This performance was intended as a charitable effort for the Albany Historical and Art Society to raise funds to support the rebuilding of the last remaining Dutch gable house in the city, which had been removed the prior year.

Those ten acts ranged from “Hiawatha, the Indian Lawgiver,” to the Civil War, reflecting a trend that later pageantry in Albany and other communities would solidify. Rather than portraying the entire history of a city from its beginnings to the present and projecting into the future, historical pageants in the 1890s and beyond often only depicted an idealized portrait of the community from its mythic origins and terminating at some point in the past, in this case Albany’s contribution to the Civil War.

The pageant’s creators and sponsors were drawn from the most elite and established section of Albany society, with names familiar in organizing city events: Lansing, Pruyn, Stillman, Thacher, Van Antwerp, Van Rensselaer, Manning, and so on. Members of these families were cast in the production itself; the pageant’s program, for instance, specified that in the fourth scene, the “First Dutch Wedding,” “no one appears in this scene who had not an ancestor in Albany over two hundred years ago. The bride and groom are lineal descendants of the bride and groom of 1650.” The desire for a direct, blood connection to the past was intended to enhance the educational quality and historical authenticity of the pageant, and this desire was present throughout the production. “The Colonial Congress” scene featured James Fenimore Cooper, a descendant of New York’s Lieutenant Governor James De Lancey, and his namesake
grandfather the author of *Last of the Mohicans*, alongside former Bicentennial historical pageant grand marshal James H. Manning, who played one of the delegates. In “General Washington’s Visit,” the President was played by a William D. H. Washington of Virginia, supposedly related on his father’s (twice) and mother’s (once) sides to the first President. Finally, the Civil War scenes featured veterans from Grand Army of the Republic posts. The desire for roles to be played by actual descendants of historical figures or active participants in historical events meant that participation was strictly limited to those who met the genteel elite’s standards. The exclusivity of patriotic and hereditary societies left “most citizens spectators, not participants” in similar pageants during the 1890s through the first decades of the twentieth century, according to historian David Glassberg’s study of American historical pageantry.  

The sole exception to the strenuous effort for authentic casting were the first scenes featuring Native Americans, who were played by white students from the Albany Business College. In addition to being played by whites, Native Americans in this pageant were presented in both highly idealized and stereotypical forms, possessing political ideas strikingly familiar to the genteel audiences who came to the show. Hiawatha, for example, was described as a “Christ of Indian theology” who “advocated the elevation of women” and “taught his people that in unity there is strength.” Like the “savage” Indians of 1886, these Native characters were “noble,” a different orientation for the same fictionalized expressions reflecting white viewpoints. This style of depiction would dominate also in 1924’s historic pageant, though that production somewhat complicated the one-dimensional image of the Native American as either “savage” or “noble.”

That Hiawatha supposedly advocated the “elevation of women” may have reflected one of the pageant’s most significant differences from 1886: the increased participation of women on

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stage and behind the scenes. The sub-committees responsible for the design of the majority of scenes were entirely composed of women with a handful of minor exceptions and in the cases of the “Installation of the First Mayor,” “The Colonial Congress,” and all three of the Civil War scenes, war being considered a topic suitable only for design by men. The executive committee holding final authority was split between men and women. While the finance committee held a five-to-three ratio in favor of men, representation for women at all was a step forward from 1886; Mrs. W. O. Stillman, for example, served on both. The sub-committee which determined the pageant’s historical accuracy, however, was all-male, demonstrating that the advance of women went only so far. In addition, the kinds of women participating were limited to the wives of the upper class. Still, though they ultimately derived their authority from the simultaneous presence of their husbands, this pageant saw Mrs. Charles E. Fitch serve as “manager,” while Mr. L. W. Seavey was “stage manager,” and it was the men who sold tickets.178

The changing role of women in historical pageantry continued into the twentieth century. In this case, the production was put on for charity to support the rebuilding of a historic structure. Kristin Hoganson has observed that these kinds of fund-raising pageants were just one among the many new ways that women in the period after the Civil War through World War I attempted to appear cosmopolitan. The newly-prosperous middle class of this period saw their daughters create amateur arts organizations and women’s clubs that flourished throughout the United States. Pageantry was one of the areas that women were able to carve out spheres of influence within American culture. Virginia Tanner—who created the historical pageant for Albany’s 1924 Tercentenary celebration—became a vice-president of the American Pageantry Association (APA) in 1921, and the APA’s annual meeting that year saw women emerge for nomination as

directors. Women in pageantry and the expanding ranks of arts organizations and women’s clubs were described by Karen Blair as “torchbearers,” “leading others to the highest ideals” through cultural instruction.179

Beyond pageantry, Albany continued the Bicentennial’s tradition of civic celebration, marking the 1897 centennial of the city’s designation as New York’s capital in 1797. For this event, literary exercises, orations, poems, and addresses were joined by the familiar grand fireworks display, parade, and an elaborate ball given at the Albany Armory (as well as an ice carnival). The same social elites again made up the citizens’ committee for the 1897 celebration, demonstrating how whether it be a historical pageant, or a civic affair, the upper classes drove the concern with and production of celebrations in cities like Albany. Mayor Thacher, serving a second term in office that once again coincided with an anniversary, prompted the 1897 celebration by writing a letter to the Governor that some sort of observance was in order.180

The morning of January 6 was saluted with cannons and chimes, and “thousands of strangers were present in the city. The show of bunting and patriotic colors was brilliant and general,” with municipal buildings leading the way.181 For this event, Bleecker Hall—scene of 1894’s historical pageant—saw a series of concerts and speakers highlighting a continuation of themes from 1886. While a President did not make a physical appearance this time, Governor Frank S. Black dramatically read a letter from President-elect William McKinley: “I, with the people of the entire nation, look with peculiar pride upon New York as the great ‘Empire State’ of the Union…Fortunate it is that the stranger from across the seas, entering the great republic as

181 Ibid., 54.
its eastern gate, should be confronted by such evidences of new world civilization.” McKinley saluted Albany for “pride” in the past, “exultation” for the present, and “hopes” for the future.182

The central oration was given by the president of the New York Central Railroad, Chauncey Depew, who picked up on McKinley’s imperial theme and the usage of Native Americans as foils for progress. Speaking of New York, “Nature has made her the seat of empire,” he began, before describing its previous inhabitants, the Iroquois, as “rude and savage,” “rude soldiers of the forest,” and “sagacious savages” who nonetheless paved the way for the American model by their own confederacy of tributaries. “The true American is cosmopolitan,” Depew said. “He is in touch with the most marvelous material development of any age or any country, and is carried upon the car of progress at a speed which fires the brain.” While it was fine to lament the “good old times,” the “best day is to-day, and to-morrow will be better,” he observed. The past should properly be used for “courage, hope and inspiration;” New York’s prosperity and progress would continue indefinitely if its citizens kept the faith.183

In his historical oration, Depew sounded themes of speed and optimism—common in the Progressive Era, defined as much by rapid technological change and economic growth as by social and political movements for reform—that he echoed at other ceremonies. Later that same year, at the testing of New York City’s state-of-the-art pneumatic tube mail system on October 7, 1897 (at which he sent a container of letters through the tube and, a few minutes later, received a bag in return, out of which jumped a little cat!) Depew proclaimed, “This is an age of speed. Everything that makes for speed contributes to happiness and is a distinct gain to civilization.”184

182 Ibid., 61-63.
183 Ibid., 70-104.
184 “Mail Tube is a Success,” The New York Times (October 8, 1897), 16.
Prosperity, the race of industry and progress, civilization; themes from 1886 in the next decade now saw speed added to their number. Local papers trumpeted these themes and ideas.\textsuperscript{185}

Celebrations in Albany after the turn of the century continued the attempts at national relevance, exemplified by the statewide Hudson-Fulton celebration in October 1909. For this occasion, the Bicentennial’s model was recreated, and a United States military encampment and tournament harkened back to the GAR’s 1879 encampment discussed in chapter one (with the addition of the Signal Corps’ exhibiting a “Wireless Signal Apparatus.”). The first day’s main events included exercises by school children and an illuminated parade of fraternal societies. On Friday, October 8 a naval parade escorted a replica of Hudson’s \textit{Half Moon} and of Fulton’s \textit{Clermont} for their arrival at Albany, the last leg of their journey from New York City. The Hudson-Fulton parade took place that afternoon, with “handsome floats” from companies of “All Nations,” and “23 magnificent historical floats” representing periods and events connected to the history of the state. Fireworks that evening joined a chain of bonfires the next evening from Cohoes, just north of Albany, all the way down to New York City. For the duration of the celebration, elaborate decorations adorned Riverside Park and State Street was electrically transformed into the “Hudson-Fulton Court of Honor.”\textsuperscript{186}

For the Tercentenary of the city, celebrated in the early summer of 1924, Albany looked to 1886 for inspiration. For a month’s time from May through June 1924, Albany opened a loan exhibition, put historical documents on display, and unveiled a portrait of Peter Schuyler in the Mayor’s office. Other popular events included Boy and Girl Scout field days, orations, concerts, and a “parade of decorated boats.” A pair of historical pageants were held on the evenings of

\textsuperscript{185} Capital Centenary Commission, “The Capital Centenary,” 116-120.
\textsuperscript{186} “Old Albany: Published in connection with the Hudson-Fulton Celebration at Albany, October 4 to 10, 1909,” (Albany: National Commercial Bank, 1909).
Monday, June 2 and Tuesday, June 3, followed by a “dark historical moving picture” about Dutch leader Pieter Stuyvesant. The Tercentenary parade occurred on Tuesday afternoon, with a dance and costume ball held that night.¹⁸⁷

The Tercentenary focused on “the charm of ancient yesterdays,” according to John Boyd Thacher II, nephew of his namesake “Bicentennial Mayor.” In the foreword to the souvenir program printed for the occasion, Thacher evoked similar themes that at that point had been sounded for nearly forty years: beauty, progress, pride, and prosperity. The “journey” of attaining those things was made by “hardy pioneers, the trail-makers, the road-builders, the track-layers, the builders of the homes, the farms, the factories,—Empire builders, the makers of these great United States of America.” This “story” told at the celebration was told “in such a way to take you back” into the past and be “caught by the march of progress, go with it down the years, a part of it,” at least. Underlining those themes, Thacher concluded by inviting all Americans to join Albany in celebrating the city’s history because “who built our City builded Yours, and helped to build America. The Building Made Them One!”¹⁸⁸

Thacher’s foreword set the tone for the parade, arranged into historical periods, from the “Indian” of pre-1624 (featuring, according to the program, however unlikely, “Indians, or of Indian Descent”) to “Statehood” from 1789 to 1924, followed by the various ethnic divisions and fraternal, military, and commercial divisions. For this parade, the city created “episodes” within each historical period that focused on development, aligning with Thacher’s praise of “Empire builders.” Episodes included “First Railroad, 1826,” “The Beginnings of Electricity, 1831,” and

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 13-14.
“Deeper Hudson and Albany of the Future” which focused on the plan for deepening the Port of Albany to establish the city as a major trading center on the Hudson River.\(^{189}\)

Two historical pageants were created for the Tercentenary; an introductory scene, “The Landing of the Dutch at Albany in 1624,” written by James Sullivan, Assistant Commissioner for Secondary Education at the State Department of Education, and the main production which charted a select period of Albany’s history from “The Era of the Red Man” to the granting of the city charter in 1686. Members of old Albany stock—the local elite, with names like Pruyn, Van Antwerp, Van Rensselaer, Ten Eyck, Lansing, and Vrooman—made up a significant portion of the cast, as can be seen in a photo of the cast for the “Dutch Settlers” scene; they also played the role of celebration sponsors, joined by other elites like the erstwhile James H. Manning, who served on committees organizing the Tercentenary’s opening exercises and loan exhibition. Unlike prior historical pageants—with the exception of 1894’s charity performance—1924’s productions were taken off of floats and performed in a series of scenes set in open air, with the addition of spoken dialogue.

“The Landing of the Dutch at Albany in 1624” opened with a woodland scene on the banks of the Hudson River. The pageant established the Native Americans gathered to receive the arriving Dutch as poor and unable to support themselves, but for the first time also depicted dissension and a degree of agency to their actions. Discussing amongst themselves what to do about the “pale people” just arrived, Alnoba, one of the Indians, speaks as the lone voice against allowing the Dutch to stay: “When the first pale people came over the great sunrise water to this land of Mahikanaki it was their custom to trade their goods for ours…Now they come for a far different purpose…to stay on our land forever, and in the end to take it all away from us. Thus

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 9-10.
they have done on the lands of the Massachusetts and on the lands of the Powhatanaki, far to the south, so our messengers say.” After several exchanges—some of the gathered Indians remark that these “pale people” are different—a vote is taken, and Alnoba is voted down. The chief, Teison-ko-mo, addresses the Dutch, telling them that the “Great Spirit” created all things, including the newcomers and their homeland, who their ancestors had no knowledge of. The Dutch, represented by a Captain May, reply that they “see the difficulty you have in getting sufficient food” and were there to help although they did not expect to be allowed to settle for nothing. The chief grants their settlement and asks for “an assurance that you do not take our land away from us or drive us hence,” before closing by confirming the Dutchmen’s concern—and that of the contemporary audience—by wishing that they “do all of us Indians justice” as “we are a poor people and we wish you to be kind to those who are not able to support themselves.”

This introductory pageant established that these productions would work essentially in the same vein as those that came before by creating Native American characters that spoke more to contemporary white conceptions of Indians as poor, primitive, and dependent than to realism about Native culture. At the same time, the 1924 historical pageants contained the most nuanced portrayal of Native Americans that pageantry in Albany would ever produce; in the introductory scene, the dialogue acknowledged mistreatment and illegal land seizure while simultaneously painting both the victims and the perpetrators as blameless by the characterization of the Indians as “poor” and the Dutch as different and just. Despite the nuance and slight allowance to Native Americans as victims of European (and therefore white American) aggression, the Tercentenary’s historical pageantry remained in most cases a more developed and complicated version of the images produced in 1886.

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190 Ibid., 143-146.
The nuance detectable in the Tercentenary’s two pageants may have originated with Arthur C. Parker, who wrote the first scene of the main production, “The Era of the Red Man,” and also contributed an essay to its souvenir program entitled “The Capital District of Indian Days.” Parker, who at the time of the Tercentenary was serving as state archaeologist at the New York State Museum, was born on the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation, half-Seneca on his father’s side. He married twice, first in 1904 to Beulah Tahamont, an Abenaki model and actress, and then in 1914 to Anna Cooke, a young white woman adopted through her marriage into his Seneca Bear clan who featured in Parker’s Tercentenary pageant scene as the “Daughter of the Earth.” Parker later became director of the Rochester Museum and developed a career as a museologist, marrying his interests in his Native roots with his conception of America as “a great melting pot of nations” where ethnic groups would evolve towards assimilation. Parker tried thus to reconcile how Indians and other groups could reach “American” identity while retaining their own culture.  

Hence, his contributions to Tanner’s historical pageant and the Tercentenary reflect a conflicted attempt at conveying a Native viewpoint. Parker’s involvement represented the first true instance of Native American participation in the narrative being presented. When the Caughnawaga Indians arrived for the Bicentennial in 1886 and marched in that celebration’s All Nations parade, their roles were prescribed, constrained, and starkly contrasted with the historical pageant’s “savage” imagery that dominated the event. In 1924, though still largely contained within the parameters of white perceptions, Parker was able to introduce through his writing a more human conception of Native Americans as something more than caricature.

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Parker’s essay followed Thacher’s foreword in the Tercentenary’s program, and told the history of the Mahikan people of the Algonquin tribes. Parker portrayed the Capital District as a “wonderland known as Mahikan-aki” prior to the coming first of the Mohawks and then white Europeans. He directly contradicted the elder Thacher’s 1886 narrative—repeated for nearly forty years since—that Native Americans were fairly and justly treated by whites, with full and knowing friendship existing between them. “The loyal Indians of the Capital District lost their lands, their just rights were trampled upon,” Parker wrote. Noting that the Mahikans served in the patriot cause during the Revolution, he continued, “today in all this region there is not a monument, a marker, or scarcely even a lingering memory expressing one iota of gratitude to the patriot Mahikan people who in their devotion lost their lives and their lands that a new nation might be born.” “Thus have the first Albanians passed away,” Parker concluded, “and in a far distant state their descendants still remember with a heart hunger the homeland that their fathers loved.”192

The main pageant, written and directed by Virginia Tanner, was held in the dueling contexts of the introductory pageant performed prior to it—that excused displacement and stereotyped Native Americans as poor and dependent—and that of Parker’s essay, which implicated white audiences by reminding them of the pain of losing home. In addition, the narratives of peaceful coexistence, Indian decline and their dual savage/noble nature resided in Albany’s celebrations since at least 1886. When pageants attempted to tell these stories, the portrayal of Native Americans inevitably reflected the mixed messaging. Tanner, a dancer with a master’s degree and several years’ experience creating and contributing to historical pageants as a vice-president of the American Pageant Association, was keenly aware of the contradictory

tension at the heart of these portrayals, and pageantry’s potential to contribute. “America has never done the Red Man justice,” Tanner wrote in 1919. “It remains for her in Pageantry to finish him off completely.” The Association’s guidelines recommended the casting of actual Native Americans if possible, but if not, then it was acceptable to cast roles from organizations with an interest in Indian lore, such as the Boy Scouts or the Improved Order of Red Men. David Glassberg has observed that the 1914 Pageant and Masque of Saint Louis, for example, made use of sixteen gallons of copper-colored makeup and gunnysacks to transform local whites into “Indians.” Albany’s pageant featured painted local whites playing Indians, too, and the production’s chronology reflected an additional quality typical to historical pageantry, as Glassberg described: “Chronological time in pageants began with the arrival of the first white settlers and the ‘inevitable’ decline of the Indians.”

“I have chosen only the events leading up to the founding of the city,” Tanner wrote in the foreword to the pageant program. “No history of Albany as a whole has been attempted.” Instead, Tanner created an idealized portrait of the city showcasing what Thacher called “the charm of ancient yesterdays.” Albany’s past was “distinctly different” in this telling from other American settlements. “Nowhere else have the Indian and the white man lived in such unbroken peace and harmony,” she wrote, and “nowhere else in this country, did a colony thrive under a purely feudal system,” referring to the Dutch patroon system of land ownership. Tanner’s “series of little genre pictures” would try to portray this past world with “fidelity.”

Parker’s narrative emerged in the pageant through the inclusion of Native American beliefs and status’ as victims of a tragedy; Tanner, more interested in promoting the sense of

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193 Tanner is quoted in Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry, 114; on stereotypical pageant depictions of Native Americans, see Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry, 139-179.
194 Tanner, “Albany’s Tercentenary,” 149.
civic unity that Albany elites hoped pageantry could convey, ultimately created a drama that wrote Natives into a narrative of progress along the same lines as prior productions and celebrations. The dueling narratives of Parker and Tanner between the former’s realism and the latter’s symbolism existed in tension with one another but were nonetheless presented to audiences in sweeping fashion intended to idealize history into an allegorical lesson. In this sense it was the narrative of Tanner on behalf of the city elites that dominated the presentation.

The pageant opened with Parker’s scene, the “Spirit of Earth Mother Prepares Earth for the Coming of Man,” a more generic variant of a Native American creation story that exposed the audience to traditional beliefs which may have been foreign to them. Time passes in the idyllic pre-contact America created by the pageant until the arrival of Henry Hudson, who invites the Indians onto his ship and gets them drunk because he “durst not trust the savages.” After the exchange with Hudson, the Indians literally “bury the hatchet” with the Dutch in the fourth scene, reprising Sullivan’s introduction.\(^{195}\)

The brisk sweep of time from pre-arrival to coexistence then turns darkly to a dance interlude, a “danse macabre” wherein “Death in the guise of Civilization comes to Red Men of the Mahicanita River.” The dance, like Parker’s essay and Sullivan’s introductory pageant, characterized the Indians as helpless victims of Death/Civilization. “First he offers them fair friendship, and they respond to his advances: then the first gift of Civilization to the Indian, the wine cup, which they eagerly seize,” the program described. “In his company also, comes the plague, and they are prostrated. With his last gift, the white man’s weapons, he deals them destruction.” This apocalyptic scene concluded with an image of decimated people clinging to

\(^{195}\) Ibid., 151-159
what was left: “When his dance of Death is done, but a weakened few are left among the mighty host upon the banks of the Mahicanita.”

This remarkably explicit and dark concession to the plight of Native Americans at the hands of white settlers, however, was immediately complicated in the next scene by establishing that this fate, however horrific, was inevitable and necessary for Albany (and the rest of the United States) to flourish. The now-helpless Indians sell their land to the Dutch, who then begin to convert them to Christianity; in one scene, a French Jesuit is dramatically saved from the “savages.” The narrative then moves away from any consideration of Native Americans and focuses on the English takeover of what would become Albany with the surrender of Fort Orange.

In the concluding epilogue scene, the 1686 charter is signed and the city is founded. A hymn to Albany is sung and “Albany” herself steps forward with the charter to address the audience: “This the canvas that His’try loves to paint, Shades of sinners, with here and there a saint. Far greater they who clave the wilderness, And carv’d an heritage of happiness!” As she moves to conclude her address, soldiers and sailors join her on stage carrying flags of the United States and of New York, led by “Columbia.” “Pursuing a like progress zealously,” Albany exhorted the audience, “guarding the goodly keepsake jealously, Be it for us to cherish sacredly, Mem’ry of those that left the legacy.” The chorus sang “America the Beautiful” and the “Star Spangled Banner” before all marching triumphantly off the “pageant grounds.” The pageant ended with this hopeful, triumphalist vision of progress, envisioning that the audience left feeling

196 Ibid., 161.
197 Ibid., 162-174.
198 Ibid., 175-176.
pride in their city’s connection with the advance of the nation, an advance that—the pageant expressed but did not linger on—was made at the expense of its original inhabitants.

After 1924, in the final major echo of 1886, Albany marked the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of the city’s charter for “Charter Day,” July 22, 1936. Retreating from 1924’s staged pageantry, the city returned to a celebration closer to the previous century for its “Historical Parade and Pageant,” an enormous affair that combined 1886’s several different parades into one extravaganza. Thacher II—now Mayor—wrote in the foreword to the 1936 celebration’s program that the “colorful parades” would portray Albany’s “splendid romance” in the spirit of looking back “over the amazing rise of America from aboriginal days, but forward as well, to an ever-widening horizon of civic advancement and betterment,” and he invited “all whom American progress delights” to visit the city. The parade depicted a chronological sequence of events in the city’s history from Hudson’s landing in 1609 through 1936, and included the military, municipal organizations, and “fraternal, racial and national groups in costume” with floats (several now ditching horses for the automobile); an “unusual exhibit” of local family heirlooms and objects, orations, choruses, and concerts rounded out Charter Day in by-now familiar fashion, all based on 1886.199

As in 1924 and previous celebrations, “progress” was juxtaposed with Native Americans, who were constructed as characters by whites, as has been noted in this and previous chapters. For Charter Day, the celebration’s program included a lengthy history of Albany written by Francis Kimball that made this definition of “progress” clear. Until Hudson’s landing, “America had been only lightly touched, an immensity of quiet in a virgin continent,” Kimball wrote. When Hudson “found it,” Albany was “a primitive paradise. Its forests ran with game and fruit.

Its streams were thick with fish. A little tillage of maize, hunting and trapping were sufficient to keep the Stone Age natives alive. Life was easy and abundant.” As had been repeated for each celebration for fifty years, Kimball made sure to note that in contrast to how “in many settlements the savages were hated and exterminated at every opportunity,” the “Albany Dutchmen treated the Red Men as human beings, patiently taught them white man’s law, and always took deeds when property was purchased.” The fate of the Indians, in this telling, was their own; Albany’s and America’s “progress” necessitated that “the almost naked Red Man” step aside for the “Empire builders,” one way or another.200

Compounded atop this notion of “progress” was the consistent practice in Albany of what scholars have termed “playing Indian.”201 The celebrations examined in the chapters of this thesis have frequently included examples of local whites dressing up as Native Americans and actively creating Indian characters; photographs from the 1924 Tercentenary parade and pageant as well as 1936’s Charter Day celebration show whites dressed up as Native Americans and others in a variety of different forms.202 Often, depictions aligned with prevailing visual stereotypes, such as Indian women appearing as either idealized princesses or downtrodden “squaws;” the latter of these characterizations frequently acted as a stand-in for the wider status of Native Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century, as “people on the wrong side of history and progress, people from primitive and static cultures with little hope for the future,” as John Coward observed in his study of Native American images in the pictorial press.

Celebrations like Albany’s in this period were part of a larger process of shaping what Native

200 Ibid., 12-13, 30.
Americans meant to American society from multiple cultural viewpoints; their meaning was fluid, and while Albany’s celebrations show consistency in practice, there were differences between depictions, as has been shown. “Indians were represented in fictionalized and divergent ways during the post-Civil War era,” Coward noted, “because white Americans could not settle on a single idea of who Indians were or what they meant to American society.”

This practice of white Indians as “metaphors come to life” has a long history stretching back to the colonial era when “misrule traditions, often performed in Indian dress remained a vital mode of American political protest for more than a century,” as historian Philip Deloria observed in his study of Indian play. By the 1920s, political expressions had been joined by Ernst Thompson Seaton’s Woodcraft Indians for boys, and the Boy Scouts’ honorary society, the Order of the Arrow, included the ritual donning of Indian costume at new member inductions. The Camp Fire girls were founded concurrently, inspired in part by a desire to join the Boy Scouts in playing Indian among various roles in historical pageants like that produced in the summer of 1911 for the one hundred-fiftieth anniversary of Thetford, Vermont. William Chauncy Langdon, that pageant’s director, noted that it would include “every girl in the town and create a strong bond of mutual interest with the city girls” taking part in this “drama of a town” where “the town itself is the hero.” Hobbyists, too, played Indian, such as the Smokis of Prescott, Arizona, a group founded by that town’s chamber of commerce who performed their version of the Hopi Snake Dance annually for decades until pressure from the Hopis forced them to end their ritual. In precisely those moments when Americans sought to illustrate a sense of modernity, “Americans needed to experience that which was not modern.” In Albany, these moments were expressed through the celebrations highlighted by this study: in pageantry,

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picture, and prose, Native Americans were consistently used as a foil for progress and for the character of white Americans themselves.\(^{204}\)

Charter Day brought historical pageantry into contemporary time and out of the world of drama. From 1886 through 1924, the history of Albany was presented dramatically; first on elaborate floats with staged tableaux scenes, created under the initial direction of a Southern pageant master, and later on a stage itself in an open field under the influence of the English pageant tradition. By 1936, the story of Albany had become an entertainment on motorized floats as part of a general bonanza of local pride; the “historical” section of the celebration was not differentiated. In this aspect is the direct descendant of today’s parades. Historical pageantry no longer played any separate role in Albany’s celebrations; it had become historical entertainment.

**American Historical Pageantry, Reconsidered**

“Within the past few months there has been a revival of pageantry. Pageants, in fact, have become almost epidemic, and there are indications that the vogue will continue.”\(^{205}\)

Written in one of the first issues of *Art and Progress* in 1909, these two sentences describe both a historical fact and perspective. The historical fact is that the first two decades of the twentieth century were indeed the flower of American historical pageantry, when performances of history were put on widely in cities and towns large and small across the United States, conveying to spectators “an indescribable magic from its background of greensward, trees, and sky,” as pageant director Constance D’arcy Mackay wrote in 1926.\(^{206}\) The historical

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\(^{204}\) Deloria, *Playing Indian*; on the Thetford pageant, see William Chauncy Langdon, “The Pageant of Thetford,” *The Vermonter* 16, No. 6-7 (June-July 1911), 191-194.

\(^{205}\) “Pageants,” *Art and Progress* 1, No. 2 (December 1909), 41.

\(^{206}\) Constance D’arcy Mackay, “The Rebirth of American Pageantry,” *The American Magazine of Art* 17, No. 6 (June 1926), 303.
perspective is that scholars have extrapolated from this period to describe the 1900s through the 1930s as encompassing a historical pageantry movement, distinct from what had come before in those same cities and towns. In consideration of Albany’s experience of historical pageantry described in this chapter and chapter two, as well as its precedents in chapter one, this predominant scholarly view merits reconsideration.

Existing scholarship on historical pageantry in the United States is typified by the most authoritative and lasting study, David Glassberg’s 1990 American Historical Pageantry. Glassberg holds that “historical pageants” began to be held in the United States once Americans discovered the work of English pageant creator Louis Napoleon Parker in the early 1900s. Prior to this point, cities had continually expanded their celebrations in length and scope, and often included allegorical representations of generalized history in their processions, alongside historical orations, which Glassberg argued formed the centerpiece of celebrations in the late nineteenth century. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, historical pageants were held in cities and towns throughout the country, created by artists, writers, and dramatists. In October 1908, for example, historian Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer created a historical pageant for Philadelphia’s two hundred twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of it’s founding. The pageant featured sixty-eight scenes from Philadelphia’s history mounted on floats and divided into seven periods, with casting and production work drawing on the local community. Oberholtzer was just one of many pageant masters and contributors who came together with reformers interested in educating through exposure to history and art through play to form the American Pageant Association (APA) in 1913. Pageants were held on all sorts of topics, from labor and nature to the African American experience (W.E.B. Du Bois’s The Star of Ethiopia premiered in New York City in 1913, for example), and was even utilized in mobilization efforts for the First
World War; the most frequent pageant productions were the familiar idealized portraits of local history. By the 1930s, other popular entertainments had begun to replace the historical pageant and the movement slowly faded away.\footnote{Glassberg, \textit{American Historical Pageantry}.} Complimentary to Glassberg’s comprehensive work have been studies noting several other themes central to the pageantry movement. Some of these have observed allegorical connections between historical pageantry and mural painting, and the use of symbology in performing community ritual, which some studies have analyzed as a form of liturgy for an American civil religion. Shaping community, or attempts at it, form another central theme to studies on pageantry that have observed the presence of Progressive philosophies of social perfection and a desire for social reform. Other studies have examined the leading roles of women (like Virginia Tanner in Albany) in creating and spreading the “new theatre” and the different political contexts in which pageantry arose around the world.\footnote{Trudy Baltz, “Pageantry and Mural Painting: Community Rituals in Allegorical Form,” \textit{Winterthur Portfolio} 15, No. 3 (Autumn 1980), 211-228; Nancye Knowles van Brunt, “Trusting In Our Own Righteousness: Civic Pageantry’s Role as the Liturgical American Civil Religion,” (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Georgia, 1994); Ann Marie Shea, “Community Pageants in Massachusetts, 1908-1932,” (Ph.D. dissertation: New York University, 1984); Naima Prevots, \textit{American Pageantry: A Movement for Art and Democracy}, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1990); Martin S. Tackel, “Women and American Pageantry: 1908 to 1918,” (Ph.D. dissertation: City University of New York, 1982); Shilarna Stokes, “Playing the Crowd: Mass Pageantry in Europe and the United States, 1905-1935,” (Ph.D. dissertation: Columbia University, 2013).}

This scholarship is all helpful for understanding how pageantry existed within the culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States. Yet the existing body of work is incomplete, not taking into account the earlier history of how American pageantry came to be. Each has treated the pageantry movement typically as an early twentieth century phenomenon indebted to European influence; its American heritage has been interpreted as \textit{historical precedent}, not \textit{history}. Even studies that have noted the existence of an American tradition of pageantry and early twentieth century pageant creators’ knowledge of it do not consider the
contributions made by the Southern mystical tradition. Glassberg pointed to the popularity of *tableaux vivants* in parlor games, urban civic celebration, and Southern Mardi Gras and Carnival as collectively forming a context for pageantry’s emergence (see chapter one) rather than a history with continuity. Albany’s history of celebration from 1886 through 1924, the central concern of this thesis, suggests revisions in the chronology and framework of scholarship on historical pageantry in order for a proper history to be written.

This prevailing view is not incorrect, however, the experience of cities such as Albany make clear that historical pageantry was much more complex and, in fact, drew on a rich indigenous tradition for inspiration; in Albany, this experience was direct through the participation of Southern pageant creators. Additionally, the definition of a “historical pageant” needs to be reconsidered in light of the emphasis Albany placed on its own, and how contemporary sources noted how nothing like it had been seen in the Northern states before. The APA itself noted in its 1914 *Who’s Who in Pageantry* that Oberholzer’s 1908 “historical pageant” in Philadelphia—virtually identical in form to Albany’s over twenty years prior—was a historical pageant in “procession type,” suggesting that prevailing scholarship has dismissed pageantry’s earlier forms and history when pageant creators themselves included it as a part of their tradition.209 This thesis, therefore, offers an alternative model for the history of American historical pageantry by suggesting that it evolved in the United States in three phases.

Originating from mysterious European precedents and lasting through the beginning of the World’s Fair movement with the 1876 Centennial, American pageantry first experienced a “Southern” or “Mystical” phase. This period—explored in chapter one—was characterized by the dramatic and spectacular productions of the mystic orders in Southern states and cities, such

as New Orleans and Mobile. History entered into formal presentations through large and general themes, such as ancient Egypt, rather than a narrow, community-based focus. In this earliest phase, the “artistic forms of almost magical beauty” that defined American pageantry, as Southern pageant master Thomas Cooper De Leon described them, began to take shape. “It is a perfected drama, or a book,” De Leon wrote of mystic pageantry, “and each succeeding picture is a complete scene, or chapter, as perfect in itself as close attention to scenic and architectural detail can make it.”

Moving into the 1880s, cities outside of the South began to incorporate these mystic influences, borrowing from the Southern tradition to present a more coherent story. In this second “Northern” or “Processional” phase, cities like Albany began to merge the two regional traditions of Mardi Gras and Carnival with the “historical procession” to create the first “historical pageants;” it is during this period that the term first appeared. Now, cities communicated their stories from their origins to their presents through staged scenes on floats. Recalling the “perfected drama” of mystic pageantry, it is important to note that the historical pageants of this phase were in fact explicitly seen as dramatic productions, not altogether different from the forms they would later take that moved even closer to theater. De Leon, the hyper-detailed master of Albany’s historical pageant, was concerned with every facet of maintaining its “scenic effects and ensemble,” telling The Albany Argus afterwards that “each float is one scene of a great play.”

In the third and final phase—what can be called the “National” or “Theatrical”—historical pageants began to come down off of floats and into theaters and open fields. Influenced by English pageant creators, American towns and cities told their stories through allegory and

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210 De Leon, Creole Carnivals, 17, 33.
drama in productions beginning to resemble written plays more so than the “processional form” of prior decades. In Albany, the Tercentenary pageant created by Virginia Tanner exemplified this phase, as did the earlier 1894 charity pageant. This closing period of American historical pageantry, examined in-depth by existing scholarship, lasted from its early glimmers in the 1890s through the 1930s, after which the movement gradually lost popularity.

Through all of these phases—Mystical, Processional, and Theatrical—historical pageantry was American, and as much as scholars have correctly located the influence of English pageantry, this thesis offers a starting point for further research fully accounting for its American heritage.
Conclusion

When cities celebrate, they are always asking a set of questions. What is to be celebrated? How? Just as importantly: who will do the celebrating? The answers to those questions say much about identity and the spectacle of celebration itself. Cities *make* history when cities choose to celebrate, especially when history itself is the occasion, and decisions made when doing so hold implications for what is remembered—or forgotten. In their search for and choice of “suitable forms” of celebration, the elites of Albany chose what the city’s story would be.

The power of the celebration is in its ability to highlight what is best about communities and forge a sense of local pride; this was the essential goal of the city of Albany in 1886, even if historical analysis reveals that its seeking occurred in problematic ways. The work of the historian is to analyze the record and tell the full story. No part of a city’s history should be forgotten when they turn to their past to celebrate their present and future. This thesis has attempted to contribute to remembering by uncovering the history of identity and power dynamics—embedded qualities earlier referred to as hidden tensions—in celebrations and spectacle in American cities like Albany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What conclusions can be drawn from the history of celebration and spectacle in American cities examined in this study? First, that spectacular celebrations came in a variety of forms: World’s Fairs-level expositions, technological exhibitions and displays, street theater and Carnival, military parades, political rallies, pyrotechnic shows, and pageantry of all kinds. Albany’s Bicentennial exemplified a civic celebration combining each of these diverse elements. As such, it was an expression of the age and of a movement for exhibition that existed not just at the massively spectacular level of the national World’s Fairs but was widespread also on the
smaller stage of the local celebration from 1876 through the first decades of the twentieth century.

Second, these events often expressed statements of power and identity; what or who was considered important, and the methods used by its organizers lent a celebration meaning. Just as important was how people participated in such cultural events. Being awestruck at technology, for example, can tell the historian several things, such as the newness of the technology, its status in society, the level of technological exposure possessed by the awed person, and so on. This study analyzed the Bicentennial and found a wide variety of uses, meanings, and interpretations. Its organizers hoped to instill patriotic pride and unity, or a “love of home,” as Mayor Banks put it in proclaiming the start of plans for it. Criminals scoffed at any kind of lesson and used the celebration as cover to make money. Businesses enthusiastically participated in the proceedings but were just as if not more interested in promoting their own wares, even handing out free samples. Still others bristled at the elitism on display, and actually broke down barriers in Washington Park to create a more equitable experience while watching fireworks.

Third, these kinds of contested celebrations displayed power dynamics and struggles over identity. What represents the city? Who is included in the story of the city? The changing and constant places of women and Native Americans in Albany’s celebrations from 1886 through 1924 and beyond described changing and constant social values, a reminder that values themselves—if not society itself—are contested.

Finally, this study found that the scholarship of American historical pageantry must be revised to properly account for early influences, an earlier history, and accurately describe its evolution over the course of the nineteenth century (if not earlier) into the twentieth. Far from being a social phenomenon of the early twentieth century, from about 1900 through 1930,
historical pageants in fact emerged much earlier in phases, of which historians have only partially described.

In their earliest form, proto-historical pageants began to take shape as the “Mystical” phase in the South, where Mardi Gras and Carnival pageants experimented with spectacular displays focusing on historical subjects; this phase can be dated to the early nineteenth century, as De Leon traced the tradition of his native city, Mobile, Alabama to about 1830. Historical pageants proper began, however, in the 1880s when the mystic traditions gradually found their way into the civic celebrations of Northern cities, with one of if not the first fully-formed historical tale of a city performed in the historical pageant produced for Albany’s 1886 Bicentennial. This “Processional” phase for historical pageantry was largely performed on floats during large-scale parades and was indigenous to the United States prior to the infusion of influence from England in the early 1900s. In the final phase, the “Theatrical,” historical pageantry evolved from the processional into dramatic forms resembling stage plays, as exemplified by Virginia Tanner’s pageant for Albany’s Tercentenary in 1924. Based on all of the evidence considered by this thesis, then, a proper chronology of the American historical pageantry movement runs from the 1880s at the latest, through the 1930s, when that particular form of spectacle gradually faded away in the face of new forms of entertainment.

Celebrations in American cities like Albany in the closing decades of the nineteenth and the opening decades of the twentieth centuries were pageants of power; spectacles meant to teach, inspire, and instill a sense of identity in people and reverence for the places in which they lived. Often these events were driven by the elite classes and their concerns for society, while those who elites aimed their efforts at—the average American—interpreted celebrations and spectacles in different ways, from joyful enthusiasm to flat disinterest; for many, celebrations
were and are simply entertainment. Modern Americans live with the descendants of these kinds of events—such as the parading of championship sports teams and the dropping of the New Year’s ball in Times Square—and live also with a similarly wide variety of attitudes and levels of engagement.

If these celebrations from another era hold a lesson for contemporary Americans, it is that celebrations are *always* more than entertainment for the masses: there is always a purpose, multiple meanings either boldly stated on surface design, in speeches, or hidden somewhere in the glow of spectacular lights and sounds, and their reflection in the eyes of spectators. Both planners and participants express their identities through the creation and experience of celebrations. Albany’s Bicentennial “kaleidoscope of wonders” in the summer of 1886 was a combination of and innovation on how cities celebrated in the United States in that period, partly through the transmission of cultural tradition from South to North. The pageantry and spectacle of the Bicentennial captured the complexities of pomp and power in urbanizing and modernizing America, a mixture that remains today in urban, modern America.
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