



Spring 3-20-2009

Constructions of Femininity: Women and the World's Columbian Exposition

Lauren Alexander Maxwell
Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses>

 Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maxwell, Lauren Alexander, "Constructions of Femininity: Women and the World's Columbian Exposition" (2009). *Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection*. 40.
<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses/40>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

BUTLER UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

Honors Thesis Certification

Applicant Lauren Alexander Maxwell

Thesis title Constructions of Femininity:

Women and the World's Columbian Exposition

Intended date of commencement May 9, 2009

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Vivian DeB 3/20/09
Date

Reader(s) B Bigelow 3/29/09
Date

Certified by [Signature] 6/2/09
Date
Director, Honors Program

For Honors Program use:

Level of Honors conferred: University Magna Cum Laude
Departmental Highest Honors in History

**Constructions of Femininity:
Women and the World's Columbian Exposition**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Lauren Alexander Maxwell

March 20, 2009

Contents

Introduction	1
The Queen Isabella Association	6
The Chicago Women's Auxiliary	8
The Board of Lady Managers	9
First Meeting of the Board	16
The Phoebe Couzins Affair	20
Palmer Consolidates Her Powers	22
The Queen Isabella Pavilion	29
Second Meeting of the Board	32
The Congress of Women	34
Conclusion	37
Bibliography	40

Introduction

As early as 1885, prominent Americans were suggesting a World's Fair commemorating the Quadro-Centennial of Columbus' discovery of the New World. Each of the major American cities clamored for the honor of hosting this exposition. Chicago was only one of the competitors and was not sure it would succeed in winning the coveted prize.¹ When prominent Chicago men founded the World's Fair Corporation to secure the Exposition for themselves, the city's professional women were equally determined to contribute. Consequently, on August 17, 1889, civic-minded women incorporated the Queen Isabella Association in the city of Chicago. Their goals were to erect a statue in honor of Queen Isabella of Castile, acknowledging her as the 'codiscoverer of the New World,' and to build a pavilion for large-scale meetings of women.² Several months later, in October 1889, another organization, the Chicago Women's Auxiliary, was established. This group of women had three goals: the erection of a Woman's Building, a discussion of charity and philanthropic work, and finally, to help Chicago's businessmen sell shares in the Chicago Fair corporation.³ From the outset, these two groups disagreed on the purpose and scope of women's involvement in the Exposition. The Isabellas hoped to advance the cause of women's suffrage and equal rights while the Auxiliary

¹ For ease of understanding, the 'World's Columbian Exposition of 1893' will be referred to throughout as simply 'the Exposition.' The event was also commonly referred to as the 'Chicago World's Fair,' which is demonstrated in many of the names of involved organizations. The Board of Lady Managers references the body of women appointed to oversee women's work at the Exposition. The other, all male, organizations involved with the planning of the Exposition were similarly structured, and were also called 'boards.' However, for the purposes of this paper, the 'Board of Lady Managers' will be referred to throughout as simply 'the Board.'

² Untitled, [ca. 1890-1891], Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society

³ Jeanne Weimann, *The Fair Women* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 27.

women were focused on philanthropy.⁴ When Congress finally awarded the Exposition to Chicago in April of 1890, the foundation was laid for conflict among the women of Chicago.

The women of the Queen Isabella Association were the embodiment of what has been termed the 'New Woman.' While the New Woman was an amalgamation of many different trends, historians agree that she "represents one of the most significant cultural shifts of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries."⁵ These women chose to "move beyond domesticity" and fought to become equal members of American sociopolitical life.⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz argues that their greater significance was the tendency of the New Woman to "challenge the dominant Victorian sexual ethos."⁷ She inserted herself into the public sphere on her own terms, without the protection of the patriarchal family structure. The New Woman was educated and sophisticated; she also frequently held a professional job, a practice that was still rather revolutionary at the opening of the Exposition in 1893.

The professional women of Chicago also provide a window for unraveling the complex role of women in the industrial city at the turn of the century. This is especially true in the city of Chicago, where women took an active role in municipal affairs beginning in the years following 1871, the year of the Great Chicago Fire.⁸ Upper and middle-class women used their reform organizations and social clout to

⁴ Weimann, 27-28.

⁵ Martha H. Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1.

⁶ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), xvii.

⁷ Meyerowitz, xix.

⁸ Maureen A. Flanagan, *Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City 1871-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 58.

construct the city as a place that allowed for women's autonomy. In Chicago, women became an important part of the city's social fabric, casting themselves as municipal housekeepers and working to ensure the city maintained a welcoming urban culture.⁹

While historians have paid ample attention to the development of the New Woman and women in the development of urban Chicago, they have been less concerned with the participation of women in the Columbian Exposition.¹⁰ Despite this landmark event in American history, historians have largely ignored gender in the Exposition.¹¹ While women's and gender histories are on their way to becoming a significant part of the master narrative of the Exposition, most of these works have treated women as a unified group. None of them have examined in detail the conflicts between the women themselves, and how an analysis of this conflict contributes the larger discussion of the definition of proper womanhood in the period.

⁹ Flanagan, 57.

¹⁰ For further discussion on women's urban culture, see Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift*; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Sharon Wood, *Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹¹ Numerous sources have examined the Exposition itself; its architecture, exhibits, and congresses captured the public's imagination and provided vast resources for historical study. See Robert Knutson, "The White City: the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1956); Titus Karlowicz, "The Architecture of the World's Columbian Exposition" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1965); Donald L. Miller, *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996); Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003). Of these historians, only Larson includes any discussion of the women involved in the planning of the Exposition. Even then, all of the credit for the women's efforts goes to Daniel Burnham, the Chief Architect of the Exposition, despite the fact that women produced the most successful exhibit, the Woman's Building.

Jeanne Weimann's *The Fair Women*, the first major work that focused on the contributions of women in the planning of the Exposition, did not appear until 1981.¹² Weimann offers a detailed account of the work of women before, during, and after the Exposition and illuminates many of the conflicts that ensued in the planning and execution of their responsibilities. Her narrative provides a detailed account of the factions that existed within the Board of Lady Managers and the sources of their competing ideologies. While this work chronicles the events leading up to the Exposition, it fails to make a coherent historical argument concerning the activities of the Board.

Jane Homsher uses the Board of Lady Managers at the Columbian Exposition to discuss female identity in the period and the ways in which it influenced cultural values.¹³ By exploiting societal beliefs about women's innate morality, Chicago's women inserted themselves into the public sphere through social reform work.¹⁴ She discusses how femininity was understood in the period, and at the Columbian Exposition more specifically, and how women capitalized on their feminine roles as a justification for their expanded involvement in municipal life.

Charlene Garfinkle examines the embodiment of women's participation at the Exposition through an analysis of the cultural significance of the Woman's Building, stating that "never had woman's participation been so conspicuous,

¹² The interest in exploring the role of women in the Exposition emerged from the field of women's history, due to the second wave of the feminist movement in the preceding two decades.

¹³ Jane Elizabeth Romano Homsher, "The Genius of Liberty, Cultural Motherhood at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893" (PhD diss., San Francisco State University, 1994), 7.

¹⁴ Homsher, 26.

important, or complete as at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893."¹⁵ Through an examination of the building décor, Garfinkle maintains "the women of 1893 were not interested in replacing their roles of wife and mother with that of career woman."¹⁶ In this, she fails to recognize that her discussion applies only to the small group of women that directed the construction and decoration of the Woman's Building. Her discussion is only a glimpse into the ideology of the women charged with exhibiting women's work.

More recently, Mary Cordato discussed the different representations of women's work at the major American Expositions in 1876, 1893, and 1904.¹⁷ Cordato traces a tendency in the three Expositions to move closer to a view of equality of men and women. Cordato's analysis parallels the development of the New Woman, as she moves from a rarity to a fixture in American life.

These gender historians have begun the exploration of how women's identity is defined in Chicago at the turn of the century. They were active participants in Chicago municipal life and their actions were determined by the way in which they thought about their identities as women. However, there is a tendency to treat the women of Chicago as a unified entity; there are no distinctions drawn between different visions of how the New Woman should be defined. In reality, there were competing visions of the New Woman and how she interacted with the city around her. An examination of the Columbian Exposition offers an

¹⁵ Charlene G. Garfinkle, "Women at Work: The Design and Decoration of the Woman's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition – Architecture, Exterior Sculpture, Stained Glass, and Interior Murals" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1996), 20.

¹⁶ Garfinkle, "Women at Work," 292.

¹⁷ Mary F. Cordato, "Representing the Expansion of Woman's Sphere: Women's Work and Culture at the World's Fairs of 1876, 1893, and 1904" (PhD diss., New York University, 1981), 15-16.

opportunity to examine the source of different visions of womanhood and how one vision is marginalized in favor of another. The Exposition also allows an examination of women's culture in the city of Chicago; in this city, women's involvement in municipal affairs is not sporadic. The Columbian Exposition is a unique setting to examine the different visions of womanhood in urban spaces.

The Queen Isabella Association

The Queen Isabella Association was aggressive in their campaign to represent women's interests in the Exposition; they decided not to confine their efforts to Chicago and chose to establish branches of their Association in other cities. By allowing participation in the Association to women in other cities, the Isabellas established a wider circle of influence and increased the chances of achieving their goals. They opened chapters in New York, Washington D.C., and St. Louis, creating an organized national Association.¹⁸ Not only did this action guarantee a broader base of support for their goals, but also undermined the attempts of rival cities to win the Exposition. Chicago was in heated competition with New York, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. to serve as the Exposition's host, and if women in those cities argued for a Chicago location, it greatly increased the chances of Chicago's success while diminishing the chances of rival cities. Immediately, they commenced accumulating financial support for their proposed

¹⁸ "Honor Due To Isabella," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 3, 1890.

statue. After commissioning the sculptor Harriet Hosmer to create the statue, they started selling shares for the statue immediately after their incorporation.¹⁹

The Isabellas' efforts represented a less traditional view of women's role in society, and specifically the meaning of women's work. Rather than assuming that women were only in the workforce temporarily, the Isabellas believed that women's work could be a significant and lifelong endeavor. The Association tended to attract primarily middle-class, educated women that were qualified to work in a professional field.²⁰ These women were more apt to choose a career that required an education over wage work, a trend that was in its beginning stages in 1890. Frequently, they were advocates for women's suffrage and political rights equal to those of their male peers. The Isabellas were therefore unique; they often made choices that were considered abnormal by society at large. Their organization served not just as an impermanent organizational body for the one-time event of the Exposition, but as a support network for those women who were similarly pursuing a professional career.²¹

The newly formed Queen Isabella Association was a readily recognizable organization among citizens of Chicago by March of 1890. Their long-term goal was to establish the Association permanently; they anticipated that their meetings during the Exposition would turn into an international "union of workers in

¹⁹ Untitled, May 11, 1891, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

²⁰ Untitled, ca. 1890, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society. The Association also attracted small numbers of working-class women that had a measure of financial independence. Because the price of membership was set at one dollar and a share in the statue at five dollars, most working-class women were unable to afford the necessary fees.

²¹ Proposed Plan for the International Congress of the Medical Department of the Queen Isabella Association, to be held in Chicago, U. S. A., in 1893, ca. 1892, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

professions, trades and occupations of life, who extend a helping hand to those in search of advice or information.”²² In offering these support networks to professional and workingwomen, the Isabellas tended to be much more radical than was readily acceptable in American society at the time. They did not believe that their roles in society were limited to being daughters, wives, and mothers, but instead they were some of the first women to pursue professional careers.

Chicago Women’s Auxiliary

While the Isabellas increased their national membership, the Auxiliary had no pressing need to establish a network of support. The Auxiliary had the advantage of ties to prominent Chicago establishments, through women’s clubs, philanthropy work or the wealth and political connections of their husbands. The Auxiliary offices were located in the same building as the offices of the World’s Fair Corporation.²³ This close proximity facilitated a strong connection between the Auxiliary women and the prominent men involved in bringing the Exposition to Chicago, which did not bode well for the Isabellas.

In general, the Auxiliary women held socially conservative views, especially in regard to women as workers. These women believed that any woman’s excursion into the public realm of society should be an extension of their

²² Art Department of the Queen Isabella Association, Untitled, [ca. 1891], Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

²³ Weimann, 30.

traditional, nurturing roles. The Auxiliary women were wealthy, and therefore spent their time engaging in philanthropic activities instead of working to support themselves. Most of these women had received some degree of education, but they employed their knowledge very differently from the Isabellas. Overwhelmingly, the Auxiliary women believed that they were to play a supporting role to their husbands and their contributions demonstrated a conservative view of appropriate activities for women. For years, these women had been involved in prominent women's clubs in Chicago, participating in efforts to remedy the immorality and inherent filth of the city. Their involvement with the Auxiliary extended their work as moral reformers and philanthropists into the political realm.

The Board of Lady Managers

On April 25, 1890 President Benjamin Harrison signed into law a bill establishing Chicago as the site for the Exposition. The bill provided for two all-male governing bodies called the National Commission and the Chicago Directory to preside over the development and execution of the Exposition.²⁴ A number of wealthy and influential Chicago businessmen were appointed to these boards. Also included in the bill was an amendment that established the Board of Lady

²⁴ These organizations, the National Commission and the Directory, had major conflicts in the early months of planning because of a lack of communication. Eventually, the Board of Control was created to mediate the disputes.

Managers, to be appointed by the National Commission.²⁵ Its purpose was to oversee all matters pertaining to women's work at the Exposition. This recognition of women's ability to contribute to the planning of the Exposition was largely due to the lobbying efforts of several prominent women such as Susan B. Anthony and Myra Bradwell, though they had hoped to secure appointments of women to the National Commission and the Directory, not the establishment of a separate and sex-segregated board.²⁶

Women's participation in the administration of the Exposition was an indicator of their increasing influence in the public sphere; however, individual women had very different views on just which roles women should pursue in that public sphere. These different views stemmed largely from different ideologies that developed out of different social backgrounds. While the Auxiliary came from wealthy upper class families, the Isabellas consisted of middle class professional women.²⁷ The debates between these two groups of women threatened the stability of Board, but eventually the views of the Auxiliary won the debate through their greater economic, social, and political influence.

This was the first moment in American history that women had a formal, institutionalized role in the planning and execution of government tasks; to serve as a member of the Board of Lady Managers was to participate in a singular moment in American women's history. When the Chicago Fair Corporation chose

²⁵ Weimann, 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁷ The 'Chicago Women's Auxiliary' will be referred to throughout as simply 'the Auxiliary.' The 'women of the Queen Isabella Association' will be referred to as 'Isabellas' and the 'Queen Isabella Association' as simply 'the Association.'

their representatives to serve on the Chicago Directory at the end of April, both the Isabellas and the Auxiliary attempted to win their favor, as well as the favor of the National Commission. Each organization had very different visions of the way in which the Board would function, which contributed to the intensity of the competition between the two groups. For several months, women from both organizations sought recognition from the men serving on the National Commission and petitioned for policies that would serve their own interests. While the Auxiliary women lobbied for a Board comprised of active Chicago women, the Isabellas argued for national representation.²⁸

These differing perspectives were due to the structure of the organizations. While the Auxiliary women were located only in the city of Chicago, the Isabellas had a widespread network of women all across the United States. If the Board of Lady Managers were to be assembled from the nation as a whole, then it was much more likely that the Isabellas would receive greater numbers on the Board. However, if the Board were made up of women from Chicago, it was almost a surety that the Auxiliary women would dominate these leadership roles. The group that won the greater number of seats on the Board would be able to influence the ideological framework and control the way that women were represented at the Exposition. The women of the Auxiliary had been active in Chicago's civic life for many years, and their husbands were among the most prominent men in the city. The Exposition offered them a very public arena in which to showcase their talents

²⁸ "The 'Board of Lady Managers,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 20, 1890.

in municipal decision-making by serving on a governmental administrative board.²⁹ In addition, the Auxiliary women were able to exploit their close relationships with the men of the World's Fair Corporation, assuring their prominence in the selection of Lady Managers. The Isabellas, who did not hold such high positions in the Chicago community, were unlikely to have the same social recognition, and therefore were less likely to have significant representation on the Board.

Though neither organization received an official response, the *Chicago Tribune* reported in late May, 1890 that the Auxiliary women had been promised leadership of the Board of Lady Managers as well as a large sum of money to erect their building on the Exposition grounds.³⁰ Refusing to be discouraged, the Isabellas proposed a method for an equitable selection of the members of the Board, proposing that women from each state vote for several representatives from which the appointments would be made.³¹ This would make the Board "national in character" and involve women from the entire nation in the planning of the Exposition.³² Eventually, their lobbying had some effect; just before the appointments were announced, Thomas Palmer, the President of the National Commission, stated that he planned to treat both organizations equally. Though he had no familial ties to the powerful Potter and Bertha Palmer, the city of Chicago's premier family, his appointment as the President of the National Commission afforded him a position of influence in the Chicago community for the duration of

²⁹ Flanagan, 57.

³⁰ Fixing Their Powers, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 29, 1890.

³¹ Queen Isabella Association, "Board of Lady Managers Should Be National," June 26, 1890, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

³² "The 'Board of Lady Managers,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 20, 1890.

the planning of the Exposition. Upon speaking to Palmer in mid-September, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that it was “probable that the Queen Isabella Association will get its three [appointments], and that the Women’s Auxiliary will likely get precisely the same number, the other three being appointed outside of either organization.”³³

Several weeks later, Thomas Palmer announced the appointment of the Lady Managers. Knowing that these appointments were likely to incite anger in Chicago’s women from both organizations, he made himself scarce for three weeks, hoping that in that time, the furor would die down.³⁴ Though the Commission had promised to treat the two organizations fairly and equally, the final appointments overwhelmingly favored the Auxiliary women. There were two Lady Managers from each state and territory, which appeared to satisfy the request of the Isabellas. However, the women named to these positions were rarely sympathetic to the Isabellas’ agenda; more often they were analogous to the Auxiliary women. They were the most prominent women from their state or territory, which often meant that they were at the very top of the upper class and were unlikely to advocate for the formal equality of women that the Isabellas sought. For example, Mary Trautman, a Lady Manager from the influential state of New York, was sincere in her belief that women were to maintain traditional standards of appropriate behavior even in their duties in civic government. She wrote letters to any Lady Managers that she believed to be too outspoken in their objections and advocated

³³ “To Be Equally Divided,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 14, 1890.

³⁴ Palmer’s Coup D’Etat, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 28, 1890.

harmonious action at all times, no matter how divisive an issue may be.³⁵ Many other Lady Managers shared this sentiment; Trautman's views by no means represented the minority of opinion among the Board members.

The appointments that were most disappointing to the Isabellas were the nine additional Lady Managers from Chicago. Of these nine, four were directly affiliated with the Auxiliary and only one with the Isabellas; this state of affairs was quite a departure from the promised three appointments for each organization that had been made only two weeks earlier.³⁶ These seats were significant because the Chicago Lady Managers had more clout than the others by mere virtue of proximity; it was impossible for over one hundred Lady Managers to reside in Chicago for two years. As a result, the Managers in the city were the voices heard most frequently.

Both organizations were bitterly disappointed at what they perceived to be low representation of their respective organizations.³⁷ While this sentiment was more accurate in the case of the Isabellas, the Auxiliary women had expected their social connections to guarantee them a majority on the Chicago Board. This had failed to materialize as they held only four out of the nine seats; they were unable to use the power of majority to assure their views would always prevail. However, the Auxiliary was in a much more powerful position than the Isabellas because they only needed one extra vote for a majority win, as opposed to the Isabellas' need for

³⁵ Weinmann, 97.

³⁶ Those affiliated with the Auxiliary included Jennie Sanford Lewis, Marion Mulligan, Myra Bradwell, and Emma Wallace. These women represented some of the most active clubwomen in Chicago and were generally satisfied to play a subordinate and sex-segregated role in the city's public spaces. In fact, some of these women were the first to suggest the formation of a women's auxiliary branch to Chicago's World's Fair Corporation. "Women and the Fair," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 19, 1890.

³⁷ Palmer's Coup D'Etat, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 28, 1890.

four additional votes. Moreover, their political connections made it much more likely that they would be able to sway other members of the Board to vote in favor of measures supported by the Auxiliary. The Auxiliary had essentially become synonymous with the Board of Lady Managers. Only a small minority of women serving on the overall Board identified themselves as Isabellas.³⁸

Rather than conceding defeat in the wake of this political upset, the Isabellas chose to continue actively campaigning for their cause. They hosted social events in the city to increase awareness for their proposed statue of Queen Isabella.³⁹ They also continued to send out pamphlets encouraging membership in the Association and highlighting the benefits of membership.⁴⁰ Departments were formed not only to provide professional women a forum to discuss issues of significance in the workforce and their greater communities, but also to give these women an opportunity to support one another in their endeavors.⁴¹ Divided into “art, science, literature, trade or occupation,” these departments were designed to “promote the interests of all members” and establish an organization that was “connected with the Columbian Exposition only because an opportunity [was] afforded of holding a conference.”⁴² It was always intended that the meetings at the Exposition would be the first of many in the years to come. This was believed to be

³⁸ Though there were some women that identified themselves as Isabellas serving on the Board of Lady Managers, this paper will refer to them throughout as a separate entity. This is due to the very different ideologies that these women held, which often created conflicts with the large proportion of women serving on the Board.

³⁹ A Reception to Mrs. Hooker, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 28, 1890.

⁴⁰ “Application for Membership,” ca. 1890-1891, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

⁴¹ They Have But \$300,000, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 4, 1890.

⁴² “Art Department of the Queen Isabella Association,” May 11, 1891, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

important in encouraging women to continue on in their careers, despite resistance that they may meet. This campaigning continued throughout the months leading up to the Exposition.⁴³

First Meeting of the Board

The first meeting of the Board of Lady Managers convened on November 18, 1890.⁴⁴ On November 20, Bertha Palmer won the nomination for President by a unanimous vote. Palmer held considerable influence in the city of Chicago well before becoming the President of the Board of Lady Managers. She was a prominent member of the two most influential women's clubs in Chicago: the Fortnightly Club and the Chicago branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.⁴⁵ While she was not a registered member of the Auxiliary, she did share their ideology and beliefs about women's role in society. She was able to use her appointment to the Chicago Board to turn many decisions in favor of the Auxiliary women's objectives, as her vote usually tipped the decision in favor of the Auxiliary women. Her influence was intensified by the fact that her husband, Potter Palmer, was one of the wealthiest and most successful businessmen in the three decades

⁴³ Virginia Populists Name a Ticket, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 4, 1893.

⁴⁴ *The Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers of the World's Columbian Commission: The Minutes of the Board from the Date of its Organization, November 19, 1890, to the Close of its Second Session, September 9, 1891, Including the Act of Congress, and Information in Regard to the Action of the World's Columbian Commission and of the Chicago Directory of the Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1891), 43.

⁴⁵ Sally Webster, *Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural By Mary Cassatt* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 50.

leading up to the Exposition. He owned significant amounts of valuable real estate and was the proprietor of the famous Palmer House, a lavish hotel that catered to the most influential figures of the day, including several United States Presidents.⁴⁶ Potter Palmer had also been named the second vice-president of the Directory, and served as a member of the Committee on Grounds and Buildings and the Committee on Fine Arts.⁴⁷ Upon her election, Palmer spouted lofty ideals about unity in all the Board's actions, saying,

We must, however, seriously realize the greatness of the opportunity which has been given us...Above all things else, harmonious action is necessary. That is the foundation which we must have for the superstructure that is to be gradually erected, and which we trust will be the successful result of our work together.⁴⁸

This kind of unity was not demonstrated, however, in the next order of business, as the nomination for the Board's Secretary was much more discordant. There were a total of six nominees for the position, but after four ballots, the Isabella's candidate, Phoebe Couzins, won the necessary votes by a very slim margin.⁴⁹ These elections set the stage for the conflict between the Isabellas and the majority of the Board. While Couzins was a dedicated suffragist, Palmer was much more concerned with the expansion of women's roles as mothers and wives into the public realm than with fighting for both political and social equality with men.⁵⁰ The two women represented the distinction between the traditional clubwoman and the New Woman; while both actively participated in the public

⁴⁶ "Women and the Fair," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 19, 1890.

⁴⁷ Weimann, 42.

⁴⁸ Minutes of the First Session of the Board of Lady Managers, 1890 Nov. 19-1890 Nov. 26, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁴⁹ *The Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers*, 59.

⁵⁰ Cordato, 221.

sphere, they had very different beliefs regarding the proper manner of doing so. The ongoing debate between these two women eventually resulted Couzins' forcible removal from her position. In retaliation, Couzins filed a lawsuit against the Board of Lady Managers, and the legal battle that ensued was the most public display of the clash between the Isabellas and the Board, greatly undermining the Board's authority in the public eye.⁵¹

One of the first debates that emerged in the first Board meeting concerned the representation of women's work. The Isabellas believed that women's work should be exhibited alongside that of men, and also insisted that all work that was presented at the Exposition should be "accompanied by an affidavit of the number of women employed in its production" so that the contributions of women in all professional fields would be recognized.⁵² This opinion was in no way unanimous among the women of the Board, as most Board women were not yet reconciled to the idea that women could have fulfilling professional careers. This reflected their trenchantly held belief that despite their participation in municipal government, this was to be an expansion of their traditionally feminine roles.⁵³ A professional career violated Victorian sexual mores and was therefore less respectable than participating in social reform activities.

The majority of the Board women wanted to create a display of women's work in their own, gender segregated building to demonstrate the progress women

⁵¹ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Felton, August 25, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁵² Untitled, October 18, 1890, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

⁵³ Flanagan, 10.

had made in the centuries since Columbus' discovery of the Americas.⁵⁴ This building was also designed to serve as the administrative center for the Board during the Exposition.⁵⁵ At the end of the first session of the Board, the women submitted an application for a Woman's Building to the Exposition's Directors, and were eventually approved. The Directors did not specifically dictate the purpose of this building, which left the decision to the discretion of the Lady Managers.⁵⁶ As Palmer started to consolidate her power on the Board, it was increasingly likely that the Building would be used for separate exhibitions of women's work.⁵⁷

To satisfy any detractors, Palmer asked that each exhibit in the main buildings be labeled with a placard stating the percentage of the exhibit that was produced by women's labor. By doing so, she appeared to satisfy the Isabella's demand that women's work be given equal consideration as men's, but Palmer was still able to place all the exhibits of women's work in the building constructed by the Board. Ultimately, however, her suggestion was futile; the requested statistics were rarely acquired due to poor survey response.⁵⁸ This created an illusory impression that women were not involved to a significant degree in the production of many industrial and craft goods. Palmer's suggestion perpetuated the perception that women were not an important part of the American economy, but rather were only involved in women's club movements across the country. Even in this smallest

⁵⁴ "Great Progress Made This Week," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 29, 1890.

⁵⁵ Weimann, 51.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁷ *Chicago Herald*, December 27, 1890; as quoted in Weimann, 55.

⁵⁸ Webster, 52.

of compromises, the Isabellas saw the representation of women as independent wage earners in the Exposition's exhibits disappear.

The Phoebe Couzins Affair

At the first Board meeting, the Isabellas had won the small victory of electing one of their most prominent members, Phoebe Couzins, as Board Secretary. As such, it was Couzins' primary responsibility to record and publish the official minutes of the Board. After the first session, the notes were in disarray; it took Couzins several weeks to put them in order. In the weeks that followed, Couzins was obligated to travel during the holidays and was unable to come into the office to finish editing the minutes; however, she was assured that the minutes could not be published without her written consent. When she returned several weeks later, she discovered that some of the reports of the by-laws had been altered. In each instance, the alterations served to allow the President greater discretion and influence over the Board's activities while simultaneously curbing the powers of the Secretary. When other Lady Managers were consulted about the discrepancies, a majority agreed with Couzins' interpretation.⁵⁹

When Couzins finished editing the minutes with the original by-laws, which maintained a more equitable distribution of power between the President and the Secretary. However, before the minutes could be approved by the designated

⁵⁹ Weimann, 75.

committees, Couzins fell ill and was bedridden for several weeks. During her absence, Palmer worked feverishly to ensure that Couzins would have very little practical power on the Board upon her return. Working closely with the Commission, Palmer won special dispensations that enabled her to make authoritative decisions in Couzins' stead.⁶⁰

When Couzins was removed from her position because of her insistence that Palmer's activities were illegal, she sought legal action. Couzins strongly believed that she was entitled to justice, and no amount of pleading could entice her to drop her suit. This turned into a rather embarrassing affair for the Board, and for Palmer personally. For a woman that valued "harmonious action" above all else, a very public lawsuit was her worst nightmare.⁶¹ Eventually, Palmer was vindicated when the judge threw out Couzins' suit due to insufficient evidence, but she would always remember the incident with bitterness.

Palmer was especially hurt by the Couzins affair because it violated her beliefs about how proper women should comport themselves. Toward the end of the conflict, she expressed her disappointment in other women's behavior, writing,

My great desire was to prevent any more quarrels or evidence of bad feeling coming before the public. I suppose the truth is, that as women come forward into public life, they will be actuated by just the same motives as men, and show the same personal ambitions and divide into as many factions; but at present, while we are on trial and all working apparently for the same good cause, it seems very unwomanly to have so many hard feelings arise among us, and so many contentions to settle.⁶²

⁶⁰ Weimann, 83-85.

⁶¹ Minutes of the First Session of the Board of Lady Managers, 1890 Nov. 19-1890 Nov. 26, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁶² Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Logan, November 3, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

The vicious fight that broke out between the two groups of women had demonstrated not only their respective beliefs about proper behavior for women, but also the incredible strength of those beliefs. Both Palmer and Couzins displayed great depth of feeling throughout the conflict, indicating the great significance that this debate had for the way women interpreted and understood their own lives.

Palmer Consolidates Her Powers

In the following months, Palmer launched an effort to secure her position as not only the figurehead of the Board, but also as its voice. This was fairly easy for her to accomplish. As most of the Lady Managers were from distant states and territories, there were very few Board members in the city of Chicago at any given time. Many of the Lady Managers were heavily reliant on the communications from Palmer's office to stay informed about the decisions and issues facing the Board.

The only other source of information the Lady Managers had was newspaper coverage, but the news coverage of the Board's activities was obtained almost exclusively from Palmer herself. The local and national press sourced Palmer almost exclusively as a result of her status as President and the Board's de facto leader. In the event that the newspaper coverage was not to her liking, Palmer took further steps to ensure that the Board was painted in a flattering light. She appears to have used her social clout in the city of Chicago to influence the tone of the editorial content in several major Chicago newspapers. In a letter to Mrs.

Shakespeare, Palmer clearly refers to her disapproval regarding the *Chicago Herald's* news coverage that spoke in favor of the Isabellas, saying, "we have talked with the editor and have shown them how wrong their impressions were, and how absurd the pretensions of any other body of women to occupy this field."⁶³ It appears that this conversation was effective, as she later writes to Jasper Scott, the editor of the *Herald*, stating, "I am very much gratified at the friendly position now taken by the Herald and I thank you for your assurance that it will continue."⁶⁴ Even when Palmer was out of the country on her European tour, Scott continued to speak of the Board favorably.⁶⁵ Her influence over his editorial content was so great that he was easily swayed to change his interpretation of women's participation in the Exposition. He was afraid to publish anything that might be interpreted as negative, or even ambivalent, even while Palmer was more than an ocean away.

There was little opportunity for others, including the Isabellas, to report the activities of the Board or the President in a manner that was unfavorable to Palmer. This hegemony of communication effectively established Palmer as the only available source of information, which made the non-local members of the Board of Lady Managers wholly dependent on her to understand the important issues that came before them. This put the Isabellas at a distinct disadvantage when the two factions came into conflict, as they had very limited communication with the Lady

⁶³ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Shakespeare, January 24, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁶⁴ Bertha Palmer to Mr. Scott, February 7, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁶⁵ Bertha Palmer to Mr. Scott, August 3, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

Managers. The Isabellas had few resources to inform Board members of their own views that were contrary to Palmer's. They found it difficult to increase their base of support when the Board was not in session.

Palmer also used her influence to undermine anyone, not just journalists, that might put forth a different interpretation of events. Suspicious of the Isabellas, she remained cautious in her dealings with the Lady Managers that she did not know well, never giving out sensitive information until she was absolutely sure of their loyalties. All of this intrigue served to further cement Palmer's position as the Board's figurehead, which ensured greater control over the Board's reputation. Knowing that she was a part of a singular moment for women, Palmer jealously guarded the legacy that would be recorded in historical accounts of the Exposition. She encouraged the Lady Managers that shared her ideological beliefs to ferret out which members of the Board had been won over by the Isabellas. To one of her closest allies, Palmer wrote,

In your correspondence with any of the ladies of our board can you find out whether or not they are members of the Queen Isabella Society without telling them that I wish to know? If you should mention it in a friendly letter to any with whom you are sufficiently acquainted, and send me the resulting information, I shall be greatly obliged.⁶⁶

This was accomplished through subterfuge; Palmer marked all of this correspondence confidential, rather than revealing her intent to discover which Board members were affiliated with the Isabellas.⁶⁷ She often accused the Association of "antagonizing the Board of Lady Managers" and even in her official

⁶⁶ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Shakespeare, February 6, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁶⁷ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Cotton, August 5, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

correspondence, held all of its members in contempt.⁶⁸ In Palmer's view, the Isabellas did not fulfill the expectations for proper female behavior, and as a result, they needed to be put in their place.

Once Palmer had established complete power over the activities of the Board, she used her influence to undermine the achievement of the Isabellas' goals. Each time she mentioned the Queen Isabella Association in her correspondence, her disdain and contempt for their ideology and methods of raising support are unmistakable. She held them to be more than a simple nuisance; she believed that their activities would eventually lead to a reversal of the gains that the Board had been able to achieve. In one letter, Palmer goes so far as to say, "I don't know that I would quite feel that we could trust anyone that is or has been a member of the Isabella Association."⁶⁹ The American government's acknowledgement of the abilities of women in the public sphere was significant; Bertha Palmer sought to protect the reputation of the ladies of the Board at whatever cost necessary. If this meant the exclusion of the Queen Isabella Association in all Board activities, she was more than willing to use her influence to undermine their every move.

One example of this willingness to take drastic measures to undermine the Isabellas' influence was her successful attempt to remove any mention of the Isabellas from the official history of the Board. Mary Newbury Adams was commissioned to write the official history of the Board for a book to be sold during the Exposition; she gave the publisher permission to change anything that Palmer

⁶⁸ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Chetlain, February 18, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁶⁹ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Henrotin, ca. February 18, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

did not like.⁷⁰ When it was ready for printing, Adams was able to view the manuscript in its final format. She was shocked by the changes that had been made. The Isabellas and their efforts were completely absent from the text. She immediately wrote to Bertha Palmer, indicating that she believed this to be an injustice, no matter how bothersome the Association had been. Palmer argued that the Auxiliary women were “a much finer body of women” than the Isabellas and that “they make many absurd claims which would mislead any one not acquainted with the facts.”⁷¹ She indicated that there was no need for the Isabellas to be mentioned in the text; they had contributed nothing to the successes of the Board, and had, in fact, impeded its success at every turn.⁷² Eventually, Adams requested that her name be removed from the text because she felt the work had lost its historical integrity.⁷³

This is only one example of the ways in which Palmer sought to control the flow of information to the public by abusing her position of power as President of the Board; the official minutes were also edited in a similar fashion.⁷⁴ There are only a handful of mentions of the Queen Isabella Association in the Official Minutes, despite the fact that Phoebe Couzins was the original author of about one third of the document.⁷⁵ The mentions that are present are merely invitations to social events; these selective inclusions make the Isabellas appear to be little more than a

⁷⁰ Weimann, 70.

⁷¹ Bertha Palmer to Mary Adams, March 27, 1892, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁷² Bertha Palmer to Mary Adams, March 27, 1892.

⁷³ Bertha Palmer to Mary Adams, April 4, 1892, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁷⁴ Official Minutes of the Board of Lady Managers, [ca. 1891-1893], Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁷⁵ *Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers*.

social club, similar to the clubs that the Auxiliary women created for themselves. It is no wonder that their organization has disappeared almost entirely from the historical discourse on the Exposition and the Board of Lady Managers. The records that are commonly consulted to determine the historical context and to better understand the events and ideologies of the Exposition have no reference to the forgotten Association. All of this was completed in the name of saving the Board's reputation.

In an attempt to further cement her power over the Board, Palmer took it upon herself to influence the decisions of the Commission despite her subordinate status to that organization.⁷⁶ Ironically, throughout her dealings with her male superiors, Palmer uses rather aggressive language. While spending her time criticizing and undermining the Isabellas for adopting a more aggressive approach to their activism, Palmer violates her own conservative vision of proper womanhood by speaking to her male superiors in an insubordinate manner. She adopts a more masculine management style while advocating all the while that women's proper role in society is to fulfill their roles as nurturers and supporters of their stronger male counterparts. Her tactics are justified, however, because she believes her work is furthering the status of women in American society.

Most of the men that had been named to the Directory and the Commission were acquainted with the Palmers, or at the very least were well aware of their social prominence. Bertha Palmer frequently exploited these connections to win the support of the men directing the administration of the Exposition. With the

⁷⁶ Bertha Palmer to Mr. Butler, February 2, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

support of these men, she was able to exert great authority in carrying out her plans for the Exposition. In one letter, Palmer acknowledges a commissioner's authority to appoint another Lady Manager in lieu of one who has passed away. However, she specifically writes the letter to pressure him into appointing "a worthy successor" and to urge him to conclude the matter as soon as possible. Her tone is certainly not one of a subordinate requesting a favor of her superior; on the contrary, she gives the impression of having the upper hand.⁷⁷

Palmer even went so far as to dictate procedure to Daniel Burnham, the Chief Architect of the Exposition. Upon hearing that Burnham had selected an architect for the Woman's Building that Palmer believed to be unsuitable, she immediately conveyed her displeasure and notified him of an alternate plan. Knowing that she had significant relationships with men in high places, she casually mentioned that "as the Directors, Commissioners and every one else favors our plan and are willing to show us this courtesy...I think there should be no question as to the result."⁷⁸ Her proposal was almost immediately adopted. After a series of similar power plays, the *Chicago News* reported that the Commission had entrusted Palmer "with almost autocratic power" when the Board was not in session, authorizing her to make important decisions on behalf of over 100 Lady Managers and their alternates.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Bertha Palmer to Mr. Butler, February 2, 1891.

⁷⁸ Bertha Palmer to John Root, January 13, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁷⁹ *Chicago News*, April 4, 1891, as quoted in Weimann, 86.

The Queen Isabella Pavilion

At the beginning of February 1891, the Isabellas' plans for their own pavilion on the Exposition grounds appeared to be well on their way to becoming realized. Included in their architectural plans were a hospital and a kindergarten so that all Exposition visitors had the opportunity to observe two of the most popular professions for women. There were also to be numerous office and committee rooms to serve as a temporary headquarters for "any department of art, science, literature, trade, or occupation."⁸⁰ They were ready to move forward with the construction of the building.

The officers and other significant members of the Queen Isabella Association were invited to Daniel Burnham's office to select a location for their pavilion. However, once they had selected a site, their request was shuffled from one committee of men to another. Each committee claimed that they lacked the proper authority to grant the request.⁸¹ Ultimately, each of the committees declared that all proposals concerning women and women's work were to be passed through the Board; upon hearing this, the Isabellas withdrew their request.⁸² Because the Board was not in session, the decision would be placed in the hands of Bertha Palmer, who controlled the day-to-day affairs in the stead of the full Board, or even the Board's Executive Committee. The Isabellas hoped to present their request to

⁸⁰ Queen Isabella Pavilion, ca. 1890-1891, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

⁸¹ Review of World's Fair Work, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 7, 1891.

⁸² Power for Lady Managers, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 5, 1891.

the entire Board at the next full session.⁸³ They refused to allow Palmer the satisfaction of denying their application for the Isabella pavilion and hoped to find a more favorable reception of their proposal among the members of the full Board.

In early March 1891, rumors started to circulate that the Queen Isabella Association was bankrupt and could not afford to build the promised pavilion. The *Chicago Tribune* reported, "while the zeal and enthusiasm of the projectors are great, the available building fund is a mere bagatelle and the thousands of dollars necessary to construct the pavilion are not forthcoming."⁸⁴ Reports abounded that the Association had barely enough money to continue day-to-day affairs and that the organization was insolvent.⁸⁵ The public faith in the Association was shaken despite the Isabellas' vehement denials of this dire financial outlook and a reassertion that the Isabella Pavilion would be constructed.⁸⁶

Interestingly, Bertha Palmer appears to have been the source of these assertions; weeks before the rumors appeared in the public, Palmer's correspondence reflected awareness of the Isabellas' supposed financial troubles.⁸⁷ Due to the discrepancy between the date that Palmer indicated her knowledge of the scandal and the date when the news was revealed through the media, it is likely that Palmer herself was the source of the rumors.⁸⁸ This scandal marked the beginning of the Association's decline. With their reputation tarnished, they had

⁸³ Withdraws the Application, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 13, 1891.

⁸⁴ It Has Only the Plans, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 6, 1891.

⁸⁵ Accomplished During the Week, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 7, 1891.

⁸⁶ The Queen Isabella Association, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 20, 1891.

⁸⁷ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Chetlain, February 18, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁸⁸ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Augustus Wilson, April 9, 1892, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

very little influence in determining how woman's work would be represented at the Exposition.

In the following months, the Queen Isabella Association continued their attempts to rebuild their reputation. They persisted in sending out circulars espousing lofty goals of a permanent network of women aiding one another in their struggle for equality.⁸⁹ The Association also passed a resolution denying rumors that the Isabellas' intentions were to antagonize the Board. They argued that they had nothing to do with the "unfortunate dissension between the chief officers" and that they had "only good wishes for the success of all enterprises undertaken by the Board of Lady Managers."⁹⁰ The statement asserted that though they did not seek to irritate the Board, they would continue to pursue their own goals, regardless of the Board's stance. In asserting their right to voice and advance their own opinions, the Isabellas were rejecting Palmer's interpretation of proper womanhood as harmonious and completely without discord. Instead, they politely insisted that it was appropriate and expected that women would not always agree on every matter. The Isabella's assertion that their beliefs were just as valid as those held by Palmer created even greater antagonism among Palmer's allies, and this trading of accusations led to the climax of the conflict between the two groups: the second full meeting of the Board of Lady Managers on September 2, 1891.

⁸⁹ Art Department of the Queen Isabella Association, Untitled, [ca. 1891], Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

⁹⁰ "It Is Disposed to be Peaceful," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 25, 1891.

Second Meeting of the Board

In September 1891, at the second full Board meeting, the first order of business was the election of a new Secretary.⁹¹ To show their support for Phoebe Couzins, sixteen of the prominent Isabellas abstained from voting. Despite this act of protest, Susan G. Cooke, one of Palmer's strongest supporters, was voted in as the new permanent Secretary.⁹² After this victory, Palmer addressed the Board. She denied that the leadership of the Board was unable to adequately deal with the challenges before them and emphasized that the Board was functioning with the full support of the men serving on the governing bodies of the Exposition.⁹³ She also detailed the progress that she and her staff, along with some members of the Board, had been made in the planning of the Exposition. After establishing her competence and asserting her authority to make decisions on the Board's behalf, she argued her case on each of the issues the Isabellas had raised: separate exhibits, awards for women involved in all exhibits, the central authority of the Executive Committee of the Board, and the Phoebe Couzins affair.⁹⁴ Palmer's lofty rhetoric and glorification of the activities of the Board won over nearly all the Lady Managers except the most devoted of Isabellas.

⁹¹ *The Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers*, 153. By this time, the Executive Committee had removed Phoebe Couzins and the National Commission had declared the position vacant.

⁹² *The Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers*, 154.

⁹³ At this time, there were several different governing bodies that worked together in the planning and execution of the Fair: the National Commission, the Board of Control, and the Directory. Each of these bodies were subject to the actions of Congress, and the Board was subordinate to each of these male groups.

⁹⁴ *The Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers*, 156-186

Following this speech, the Isabellas were unable to find more than a handful of women that were willing to listen to their arguments.⁹⁵ Because Palmer's speech was an overwhelmingly effective preemptive strike in the conflict between the two groups, the Isabellas could no longer hope to gain widespread support from the women on the Board. They decided that the meeting was not an opportune time to submit their application for space for their Pavilion on the Exposition grounds, and held on to their application in hopes that a more advantageous moment would present itself.

When it became apparent that public opinion would not swing back in favor of the Isabellas, they were faced with only one option. The Isabellas resubmitted their application on November 30, 1891 to the Committee on Grounds and Buildings, which oversaw architectural and landscaping plans. They asked for a small space for a building as well as space for their statue of Queen Isabella.⁹⁶ The Committee again referred the decision to the Board of Lady Managers, but a full meeting was not in session. This meant that the final decision rested solely in the hands of Bertha Palmer. Given the animosity she felt toward the Isabellas, Palmer was not disposed to grant the request, and by late February 1892 there was no hope remaining for the Isabellas' pavilion. On behalf of the Board, Palmer ruled that the Isabellas could not have their building, but she did accept their statue.⁹⁷

The rejection of the application did not halt the Isabellas' plan to construct their pavilion; they merely relocated it to a building that sat four blocks from one of

⁹⁵ Bertha Palmer to Mrs. Traufmann, September 18, 1891, Board of Lady Managers Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

⁹⁶ "Exhibit of Farm Products," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 1, 1891.

⁹⁷ "It May Reconsider the Action Taken," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 19, 1892.

the Exposition entrances. It provided the promised committee rooms, as well as a hotel for single women of modest means so that they may visit the Exposition without damaging their reputations.⁹⁸ The Queen Isabella Association did deliver on their promises, despite many obstacles and difficulties along the way.

Unfortunately, the Isabellas' defeat meant that the women who preferred exhibiting their work alongside that of men were often denied. Without an advocate to fight for their right to show their work on equal terms with men, most women were forced to exhibit their work in the Woman's Building. Women's contributions were given "separate but equal status," which unfortunately "conveyed the message that women were still second-class citizens in the American republic."⁹⁹ The Isabellas saw this as a major defeat for women, as their achievements were not given the same weight and significance as the works of their male contemporaries. In fact, they were often trivialized; the large majority of visitors to the Woman's Building were female. As a general rule, male visitors did not believe the Woman's Building to be of any value or interest.

The Congress of Women

While unable to claim a space on the Exposition grounds, the Isabellas held several congresses to discuss issues of importance to women within their

⁹⁸ "Meeting of Women Lawyers," August 3, 1893, Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

⁹⁹ Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 65.

organization. There were congresses of the Medical, Art, and Legal Departments.¹⁰⁰ These congresses were the last moment that the Queen Isabella Association was able to capture the public's attention and admiration; after the conclusion of the Exposition, the Isabellas were all but forgotten in public memory. Despite the Isabellas' prolific advertising, it was the Board of Lady Managers' conference, the Congress of Women, which gained the public's interest. Here, there were very few Isabellas represented; the Board had significant influence in the planning of the Congress of Women and therefore it did not emphasize total equality for men and women.

In her opening address at the Congress of Women, Palmer discussed her views, and therefore the Board's views, of women's role in society. Rather than celebrating the administrative accomplishments of women in their participation in planning the Exposition, Palmer chooses to elevate women in their traditional roles as wives and mothers. She concluded by stating,

We advocate, therefore, the thorough education and training of woman to fit her to meet whatever fate life may bring; not only to prepare her for the factory and workshop, for the professions and arts, but, more important than all else, to prepare her for presiding over the home. It is for this, the highest field of woman's effort, that the broadest training and greatest preparation are required. The illogical, extravagant, whimsical, unthrifty mother and housekeeper belongs to the dark ages. She has no place in our present era of enlightenment. No course of study is too elaborate, no amount of knowledge and culture too abundant to meet the actual requirements of the wife and mother in dealing with the interests committed to her hands.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ The Board of Lady Managers, *The Congress of Women Held in the Woman's Building: World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, U.S.A., 1893*, (Chicago: W. B. Conkey Company, 1894), 28.

Her comments set the tone for the papers and lectures that were presented at the Congress. While some women did express more progressive ideas of women's roles, they were few and far between. As a rule, Palmer's vision of womanhood was the legacy that was left by the Board of Lady Managers.

One decisive factor in the omission of the Queen Isabella Association from the memory of the Exposition and from the histories of women in Chicago at the turn of the nineteenth century is the simple fact that the organization did not persist. While the Association was able to hold meetings and congresses in their building, they were not on the Exposition grounds and were marginalized by the Board of Lady Managers at every turn. The Board managed to construct a marvelous building that captured the imaginations of scores of visitors; the Queen Isabella Club-House was nowhere near so spectacular. Not only did it have a pedestrian architectural design, but because it was not located on the Exposition grounds, it was not a particularly popular tourist location. It also lacked any type of coherent exhibit of women's work, which the Woman's Building offered in abundance.¹⁰² Therefore the only significant attraction that the Isabellas could promote was their selection of congresses. Unfortunately for them, the Board of Lady Managers worked in conjunction with the National Commission to create their Congress of Women so that the Board was provided with much more significant resources to engage with the interesting topics of the day. At every turn, the Board held the advantage over the Isabellas because of Bertha Palmer's previously established connections with the governing organizations of the Exposition. The

¹⁰² "Isabella Club-House and Congress Hall," [ca. 1893], Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

Isabellas had no hope of competing with the resources that Palmer's connections afforded the Board.

Conclusion

While the Isabellas held rather progressive views on the proper role of women during the 1893 Exposition, they still constituted a minority among upper and middle-class society and were unable to find a broad base of support. Despite this lack of success, a short ten years later their methods were adopted for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904, indicating that their hard work was not without effect.¹⁰³ By this time, women's work was integrated with the work of men in the main exhibit space, rather than segregated in a separate building. Despite this legacy, the Isabellas have largely disappeared from memory and their contributions to the planning and execution of the Exposition have been forgotten. Where they do exist in the historiography, they are often nothing more than a token example of class distinctions between women. While there are several reasons that this is so, the first and most important reason is the influence of Bertha Palmer.

While Palmer was to blame for the Isabellas' exclusion from official records such as the published history of the Board or the Official Minutes of their meetings, the Isabellas failed to leave behind records of their own. There are very few

¹⁰³ Cordato, 430. The women planning the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 did not advocate separate exhibits, but encouraged greater involvement of professional and working-class women in the administrative and planning process.

sources in any United States archives that are in any way related to the Association. While there are boxes upon boxes of sources concerning the Board, there are very few mentions of the Isabellas in these documents. There is only one small folder at the Chicago Historical Society containing documents from the Association, despite their established branches in numerous other American cities.¹⁰⁴ The source that contains the most information on the Isabellas is the *Chicago Tribune*, but like most of the surviving historical material, this source is biased in favor of Palmer and those loyal to her. Because there are very few records of the Isabella's activities, there is great difficulty including their contributions in the master narrative; we have already seen the extreme measures that Palmer took to ensure they were eliminated from institutional records. Palmer was most certainly victorious in her efforts to present her interpretation of proper womanhood to the world.

Ultimately, the Isabellas achieved their goals only on a very small scale; their grand dreams of a magnificent pavilion filled with women debating the significant issues that faced women in different professions was never realized. Because they were unable to accomplish that which they had promised to their members, their popularity decreased. Within a very short time after the close of the Exposition, the Isabellas had disappeared from the public discourse. In light of their decreasing popularity and therefore decreasing resources, it is no surprise that they were never able to continue their efforts to maintain an international network of professional and working women in the years after the Exposition.

¹⁰⁴ Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets, Chicago Historical Society.

An examination of the Queen Isabella Association reveals the complexity of the construction of femininity in the years before the turn of the century. There was no unified vision of a 'proper woman.' The quickly evolving nature of Chicago's urban structure created competing visions of femininity during the period, which was exemplified in the conflict between the Isabellas and the Board of Lady Managers. Each of these groups had a different perception of what it meant to be female; these different beliefs led to the ongoing conflict between the two bodies. Not only does the addition of these women into the historical narrative facilitate greater understanding of the construction of gender in the period, but it also points toward the future. The ideology of Bertha Palmer and the Board soon became obsolete; it was the ideology of the Queen Isabella Association that survived. Though they have not been previously recognized for their contributions, the recovery of their voices gives a glimpse of the early stages of the woman's suffrage movement. While the Isabellas suffered a defeat at the moment of the Exposition, it was their vision of womanhood that ultimately triumphed.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Board of Lady Managers. *The Congress of Women Held in the Woman's Building: World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, U.S.A., 1893*. Chicago: W. B. Conkey Company, 1894.

Chicago Daily Tribune, 1890-1893.

The New York Times, 1890-1893.

The Official Manual of the Board of Lady Managers of the World's Columbian Commission: The Minutes of the Board from the Date of its Organization, November 19, 1890, to the Close of its Second Session, September 9, 1891, Including the Act of Congress, and Information in Regard to the Action of the World's Columbian Commission and of the Chicago Directory of the Columbian Exposition. Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1891.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1890 Dec. 3-1891 Feb. 21. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1891 Aug. 2-1891 Nov. 7. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1891 Apr. 8-1892 Jan. 16. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1891 Nov. 7-1892 Apr. 4. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1892 Apr. 4-1892 Jul. 25. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1892 Jul. 26-1893 Jan. 3. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1892 Dec. 31-1893 Apr. 17. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1893 Oct. 6-1894 Mar. 15. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Palmer, Bertha. Letterpress copies of outgoing letters, 1894 Feb. 14-1895 Nov. 8. World's Columbian Exposition, Board of Lady Managers Records. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Queen Isabella Association Pamphlets. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago.

Secondary Sources

Clinton, Catherine. *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.

Cordato, Mary F. "Representing the Expansion of Woman's Sphere: Women's Work and Culture at the World's Fairs of 1876, 1893, and 1904." PhD diss., New York University, 1981.

Keith L. Eggener. *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Flanagan, Maureen A. *Seeing With Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City 1871-1933*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Garfinkle, Charlene G. "Women at Work: The Design and Decoration of the Woman's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition – Architecture, Exterior Sculpture, Stained Glass, and Interior Murals." PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1996.

Homsher, Jane Elizabeth Romano. "The Genius of Liberty, Cultural Motherhood at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893." PhD diss., San Francisco State University, 1994.

Karlowicz, Titus. "The Architecture of the World's Columbian Exposition." PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1965.

Knutson, Robert. "The White City: the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893." PhD diss., Columbia University, 1956.

- Larson, Erik. *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne J. *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Miller, Donald L. *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996.
- Patterson, Martha H. *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008.
- Pohl, Frances K. "Historical Reality or Utopian Ideal? The Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893." *International Journal of Women's Studies* 5 (1982): 289-311.
- Rydell, Robert W. and Kroes, Rob. *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Webster, Sally. *Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural By Mary Cassatt*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Weimann, Jeanne Madeline. *The Fair Women*. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981.