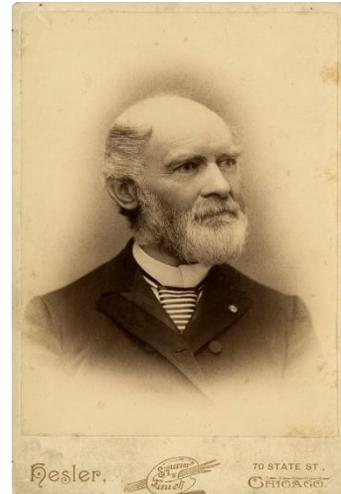


ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Thomas Barbour Bryan (1828-1906)

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

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

Bryan was born in Virginia on December 22, 1828. He earned his law degree at Harvard University, and married Jennie B. Page in 1850. The young lawyer and his wife moved to Chicago in 1852 where he acquired extensive real estate interests. Bryan took up residence with his family in [Hill Cottage Tavern](#) in 1856 while waiting for the construction of his estate in Cottage Hill, called Bird’s Nest. It was at this time that he struck up a lasting friendship with the artist [G.P.A. Healy](#), who resided in Cottage Hill during the Civil War Years. Despite devastating commercial losses following the [Great Chicago Fire](#) in 1871, Bryan was instrumental in helping to rebuild the city. He was the founder of Graceland Cemetery and earned a reputation as a gifted orator and civic leader.



Thomas B. Bryan, M2012.1.7



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

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

who have helped build Chicago want the Fair, and, having a just and well-sustained claim, they intend to have it.” The resolutions were unanimously adopted.

A committee of fifteen U.S. senators convened in January of 1890, and cities competing for the fair were invited to present their cases. Chicago was represented by Bryan, Mayor Cregier, and Edward Jeffery,

former general manager of the Illinois Central Railroad. Bryan stated that Chicago was both willing and able to provide the “ample space, accommodations and transportation for all exhibits and visitors, together with convenient access to the greatest number.” He stressed that the fair was of “vital interest” to the West —and that the West wanted it held in Chicago. Congress agreed, and Chicago was selected as the World’s Fair site.

On April 25, 1890, President Benjamin Harrison signed the World’s Fair bill and created the national World’s Columbian Exposition Board, with Thomas Bryan appointed as a commissioner-at-large. In this role, Bryan traveled throughout Europe to gain audiences with crowned heads to win support for the World’s Fair, and he entertained many distinguished international guests who visited the fair. Bryan was also elected to the World’s Fair Board of Directors.

Apart from his involvement with Chicago and the Fair, Thomas Bryan’s impact on Elmhurst was profound. In 1869, Bryan gathered a group of townspeople to propose that the nascent community of Cottage Hill change its name to Elmhurst. This was to better reflect the German heritage of many of the town’s settlers as well as the numerous elm trees that Bryan had planted throughout the area a decade earlier. The gathered townspeople readily agreed with Bryan’s suggested name, and the change was put into place. The Bryan family was also responsible for the seeds of Elmhurst University. In 1869, they sold 30 acres of their property to the German Evangelical Synod of the Northwest for a sum of \$10,000. The Elmhurst Pro-seminary was founded on that same property in 1871.

One of the first churches in Elmhurst, Bird’s Nest Chapel, was located on the Bryan Estate. In 1860, Bryan discovered that an old church building in Chicago was being converted to a bowling alley. Having a bowling alley in the basement of his new estate home, he decided to convert it to a chapel and provide church services to his neighbors. The response was so positive that in 1865 he constructed a small chapel next to the entrance of his estate, where Cottage Hill Avenue bisects St. Charles Road today. The chapel, which was taken down in 1914, was the precursor to the modern Church of Our Saviour at 116 E. Church Street.

Thomas and Jennie Bryan spent their waning years travelling east to Washington, D.C., and Virginia. He lived the final years of his life in Washington where he served as Commissioner of the District of Columbia before passing away in 1906. The estate in Elmhurst passed to his son, Charles Page Bryan, who served abroad in the diplomatic corps and was rarely in the area. In 1920, the estate was given to a charitable organization to become an orphanage, though that venture failed and it was sold to a developer in 1924--the land was subdivided the following year to accommodate Elmhurst’s booming population.

Though nothing remains of Bryan’s once-vast estate, which included a 21-room manor house, garden house, and artificial lake, his legacy lives on through his various contributions to Elmhurst. Bryan was once more recognized for these works when Bryan Middle School opened on Butterfield Road in 1960.

By Nancy Wilson and Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, Updated October 2021