



Fergus Bordewich on the Centennial and the Great Fair of 1876

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[0:00:00.4] Thomas Donnelly: From the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, this is *We The People*.

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[0:00:07.8] Thomas Donnelly: I'm Tom Donnelly. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. In 1876, millions of Americans celebrated the nation's first century since declaring independence. The Civil War had ended, and plans were made to hold a great fair in Philadelphia. In a wonderful new book, our guest, Fergus Bordewich, explores the history, invention, and celebration of America's 100th birthday. Fergus M. Bordewich is a prize-winning author and historian. He's the author of numerous books, including *Klan War: Ulysses S. Grant and the Battle to Save Reconstruction*; *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*; *The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, and a Group of Extraordinary Men Invented the Government*; *America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and the Compromise That Preserved the Union*; and of course, the book that we're discussing here today, *Centennial: The Great Fair of 1876 and the Invention of America's Future*. Fergus, I'm delighted to welcome you to *We The People*.

[0:01:20.6] Fergus Bordewich: Well, Tom, it's very nice to be with you. I'm looking forward to this.

[0:01:24.9] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. I mean, maybe let's just start at maybe the most natural spot here, Fergus. Why did you choose to write this book?

[0:01:32.2] Fergus Bordewich: Well, I had been working for several years on my last book about Ulysses Grant's war against the Ku Klux Klan. And frankly, that was a very draining book because it deals with dreadful violence, years of conflict, and racism and so on. And as I was writing that, I was thinking, I need a break for the next one. And I kind of stumbled on the subject of the Great Centennial Exhibition while writing the Klan War book because somebody I was writing about, Major Lewis Merrill, a hero of that last book, when he finally, finally was able to get a furlough from South Carolina, came back to Philadelphia. He was a Pennsylvanian, and he apparently was a chief assistant, an advisor to the president of the Great Centennial Exhibition. And I thought to myself, what was that? And I realized I didn't really know anything much about it except that it had existed. So I was really pursuing Major Lewis Merrill, who it turns out really didn't do anything very interesting having to do with the Centennial Exhibition. But it got me deeper and deeper and deeper into the exhibition, which

was meant to celebrate the first Centennial of the United States, 1776 to 1876. It was the first World's Fair in the Western Hemisphere, of course, in the United States as well. It was a gigantic extravaganza, really amazingly complex and ambitious, looking both back toward the founding and then forward towards the 20th century. So the deeper I became engrossed in just figuring out what the Centennial was and how Americans were taking stock of that first 100 years. Who are we as Americans? What have we become? Would the founders like us? Would they think we've honored their legacy? And what do we wanna become? Of course, this became much more complicated than just a big fair, which is fun to write about, but it became much more complicated because America in 1876 was a country fraught with dire issues. But I began working outward from simply the Centennial festivities to looking at what America really was and how much of that did the great exhibition reflect and how much not.

[0:04:24.4] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And 1876 is such a fascinating year for the reasons you're suggesting. Everything from the future of Reconstruction at stake, capital, labor, the West, the growth of the push for women's rights and women's suffrage. So many things we could talk about here. But maybe let's set the scene just at the beginning of the exhibition itself. So it's May 10th, 1876, you have President Grant there about to start the Corliss engine at the Philadelphia Centennial. It's 100,000 visitors there from all across the country in Fairmount Park, which I, as a Philadelphian, know well. Maybe talk a little bit just on the ground, what would it have felt like to be one of those visitors as this exhibition is getting ready to begin?

[0:05:14.4] Fergus Bordewich: Well, this was the biggest public event that had ever occurred in the United States and people knew it. People were gaga over it. And as you already said, there were untold numbers of people who showed up packing Fairmount Park, which is a huge park. For those people who don't know it, it's gigantic, comparable more or less to New York's Central Park. And the multitudes... Most people can't hear what's being said on the platform. There's no amplification in those days. But as you said, the President Ulysses Grant gives a Grant loathed big public events of this sort, but he did his job. He gave a speech, rather nice speech actually. There were many, many, many, many speeches, patriotic in nature. The promoters of the Centennial had commissioned a Centennial March from Richard Wagner, the great German operatic composer, which was played. Apparently the reviews weren't great, but it was a big deal. There was a 1,000 voice chorus singing patriotic songs and so on. And poetry was recited, it was an era of poetry. People found poetry at that time entertaining in the way people certainly find theater or music entertaining today.

[0:06:54.2] Fergus Bordewich: It sounds kind of marginal today. It's not a popular form especially, but it was then. So poetry was recited. And the person who really disliked the poetry that was recited was Walt Whitman, because it wasn't his. He was... He had submitted a poem, not great Whitman, I have to say, but pretty good poem anyway, extolling the Centennial, but they didn't pick it. So he was sitting at home in Camden, New Jersey, across the river. He could hear all or a lot of this anyway, certainly the music and so on, from his home in Camden. And I have to picture him sitting there kind of growling to himself, pulling his beard and so on. But at any rate, it was a spectacular event. And then you mentioned something called the Corliss engine. I don't imagine that most people who are listening to this have a clue what the Corliss engine was, so I'll tell you. It was a humongous engine built by Mr. Corliss up in Providence, Rhode Island. He was a great engineer of the era. It took 60 freight cars to get all the pieces of it down to Philadelphia.

[0:08:13.6] Fergus Bordewich: It was assembled there. And it was an enormous engine that ran all the other machinery in a hall dedicated to machines. Hundreds, ran hundreds of them. And the moment at which Ulysses Grant, the president, and his most honored guest, Emperor, Emperor Pedro of Brazil, yes, Brazil had emperors then, they had two only, then no more after that, but Emperor Pedro was... People loved the guy. He was a kind of democratic emperor, contradiction in terms. And the two of them pulled levers and the enormous Corliss engine, as high as a couple of buildings, by the way, it's really big, you can find pictures of it online, and people look like ants beneath the Corliss engine, and then all these machines, hundreds of them, began cranking into action. And people, this is the Gilded Age, it's America's, I don't want to say it's the birth of American industrialism, but a kind of, a high point in the great surge of American 19th-century industrialism. People loved engines, they loved noise, they loved smokestacks, smog, who cares? It was industry, it was jobs, it was power. So much there, there were aspects of the Centennial, including the opening, that gave the people there a tremendous charge, a sense of America just roaring into action when those machines began.

[0:10:03.1] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. Yeah. I mean, the triumph of industry certainly seems to be one of the big themes of the Centennial as you tell it here. At the same time, we're just a few years into what, the greatest depression in American history to that point, following the Panic of 1873. How did the average visitor sort of think about that tension or even outright contradiction?

[0:10:28.1] Fergus Bordewich: Yeah, that is a really good question. And that, I wrestled with that actually, because the framework here is that people loved this fair. 10 million people came. It was 20% of the American population. They loved it. They loved this great celebration. They'd never seen anything like this before. But unemployment had run as high as 30% in the United States in some industries, and 15% baseline, often as high as 30% since 1873. The country was lurching towards recovery, but it certainly wasn't there. I mean, imagine, it's easy because we have some of the same things today, there were homeless people all over the streets, very, very often written about, say, in New York in particular. Homeless people, people crouching in doorways, people crowding into police stations just to be out of the inclement weather. In those days, there was no social safety net. Zero. None. None. Hadn't been invented. And indeed, many leading Americans, including churchmen, opposed anything like a safety net because the ethics of the time, the common morality of the time, considered that people were all responsible for themselves, and if they were out of work and poor, it was their own bad luck or they weren't working hard enough. And I do talk about this in my book, actually. It's shocking, it's quite shocking how callous many Americans of the time were.

[0:12:14.1] Fergus Bordewich: I quote a factory manager for Andrew Carnegie out in Pennsylvania who's describing, in just an ordinary message, a telegram to Carnegie, an accident that's taken place out near Pittsburgh. And an enormous piece of metal, basically, has fallen and crushed and crushed, I think flattened, a boy, because children worked in these factories in those days. And he says, "Well, it was kind of his own fault. He was in the wrong place." That's that. So outside the gates of Fairmount Park and so on, there's a lot of grief and poverty in the United States. Labor has been... There are no labor unions. There have been efforts to form labor unions, they have all failed so far. And just 90 miles north of Philadelphia, there has been a tremendous, violent strike that has recently been crushed up in the coal mining country of Schuylkill County. I think just you can drive up and back in an hour and a half today, it's that close to Philadelphia. And you could come into Philadelphia by train and go home the same day then. Okay. And workers have been savagely impoverished.

And there is underway, as the Centennial's taking place, Philadelphia newspapers are also carrying stories about the severe repression of labor leaders up there in Schuylkill County who are being hanged.

[0:14:03.9] Fergus Bordewich: These are judicial lynchings. Judicial lynchings. I'm not being metaphorical here. The authorities up there set out to execute the labor leaders and packed the courts. I could go deeper into that, but we have a lot to talk about. So Americans are aware of that. By the way, I should say that it cost, I think it was 50 cents to go to the fair. A lot of people couldn't afford it. There were not that many working people there unless their companies bring them in on excursion trains, which some did. Classic industrial paternalism. They'd be brought down for the day, including from Schuylkill County, given ice cream and a box lunch and then taken home again. And they loved it. The letters by workers, although these were kind of pro-management workers, great time. They loved the Corliss engine. Not a big surprise, they're workers and so on. So don't imagine there were a lot of really poor people at the Centennial. 10 million people, but most of them are middle class.

[0:15:21.7] Thomas Donnelly: In your story, in a lot of ways, sort of the height of big business during the era is represented by the figure of Tom Scott, who was such an important figure of the period economically, politically. Maybe talk a bit about him, his background, and also more broadly what he represented as part of this story?

[0:15:43.1] Fergus Bordewich: Yeah, Tom Scott is one of four people I write about as kind of central figures in the narrative of this book. Tom Scott was the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which was universally acknowledged as the most successful corporation in America and probably in the world at that time. You know, it's called Pennsylvania Railroad, you figure, well, has trains in Pennsylvania. Tom Scott was working to carry the Pennsylvania Railroad to California, to San Diego. He's buying or co-opting railroad lines all over the country. He, through the South, through the Midwest, as far as the Mississippi, Texas, and so on. And he himself travels out to San Diego to try to organize this. It doesn't quite come to pass because he is a mogul of the first rank and other moguls wanna thwart him. Ultimately they succeed, but it's a close-run thing. Tom Scott was a fascinating individual. He's not remembered anymore because there are no Tom Scott papers to speak of. You find him, you have to... I had to winkle out Scott material from the records of the Pennsylvania Railroad. But there is no great personal collection anywhere. Very interesting guy.

[0:17:09.3] Fergus Bordewich: Came from nothing to speak of. His father was an innkeeper in Pennsylvania and he had very little, very little formal schooling, but he was quite brilliant. And he especially had a brilliance for mathematics, which carried him higher and higher in the Pennsylvania Railroad Corporation until finally he became its president. He was very courageous during the Civil War. He was an ardent unionist and an abolitionist as well. And he... There's a famous incident of him personally riding in the cab of a train to race ammunition to federal troops at Antietam. Great story. True. It's a true story. And he did much else to help build the rail system for the Union war effort. So he had an heroic dimension. On the other hand, he was a ruthless businessman. Absolutely ruthless. And despite his own humble origins, he shared some of those values, "I made it. Why can't they? I'm a success. Why aren't you?" He figures very significantly at the end of my book, because in history he did, because in 1877, just after the fair closed, was the... Took place the first national railroad strike in American history. It started, well, in Maryland, but was centered in Pennsylvania.

And much of it was targeted at the Pennsylvania Railroad, which had cut workers' wages radically in the previous couple of years, as we were talking about. Particularly in Pittsburgh, militia were sent to many cities, Reading as well in Pennsylvania, but in Pittsburgh about 100 people were killed in the streets.

[0:18:59.1] Fergus Bordewich: Workers, workers, by militiamen. Philadelphia militiamen, as it happened, because Pittsburgh militiamen wouldn't shoot their own families who were striking or supporting strikers. Men, women, and children were killed because women and children were massed along with the strikers. And Tom Scott presided over the crackdown. Basically, he took over the government. The governor just said to Tom Scott essentially, "Please take care of it." And Scott himself called out the militia. So there's Tom Scott. I mean, I think he's a guy who epitomizes what's happening with Gilded Age industrialism in the United States. He was like John D. Rockefeller. He's like Carnegie. He was the man who actually created Andrew Carnegie by hiring him as a telegraph operator. And they were very close. Carnegie bailed him out at least once, high roller, I mean, the railroads in those days were the great tech industry of the time, by the way, quite analogous to the way high tech is today, Silicon Valley tech, is thought of. Both envied and admired and feared. All true of the railroads at the time.

[0:20:22.8] Fergus Bordewich: And Tom Scott therefore embodied that. He also made the Pennsylvania Railroad the chief backer of the Great Centennial Exhibition. It wouldn't have happened without Tom Scott. He twisted arms and, frankly, passed quite a bit of money under the table to the Pennsylvania State Legislature to approve this and appropriate money for the Centennial Exhibition. He also stands at the intersection of big money and politics. He is an ardent Republican. Bear in mind that the Republican Party, since its founding in the 1850s, had been the progressive party of its day. Okay? Through the 1870s, Black Americans who can vote are all Republicans because the Republican Party, of course, led the Union to victory during the war. And where there are radicals in government, they're all Republicans. Tom Scott was, like many of his peers, a radical on slavery. At any rate, by the 1870s, he is what in our present-day terms you might call a reactionary on the subject of labor. Sounds like a contradiction. It wasn't in the 19th century. And by writing about Tom Scott enables me also to talk about how the Republican Party by the 1870s has become the party of big money and is rapidly shedding its reformism. Hasn't totally gone. Hasn't totally gone, but you see it kind of hanging in shreds by 1876.

[0:22:03.1] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And we'll return to the Republican Party and the Democrats too a bit later when we get to the election of 1876. Staying here for a moment longer on industry, if Tom Scott is sort of the embodiment of the successful business person of the era, sort of the technological genius of your story is Alexander Graham Bell. So maybe talk a bit about him and where he stands in this story?

[0:22:29.2] Fergus Bordewich: Sure. That's a very nice way of putting it, by the way. They're two poles on the same spectrum. Alexander Graham Bell is the only figure in this book who is really quite well known. Everybody knows he invented the telephone. Thank you very much. And I wondered whether I should write about him, but I needed to write about invention because this is a great era, mid-late 19th century, of American innovativeness. Still is. We're still in that. We just innovate, invent different things. Okay. So I started looking at his papers in the Library of Congress and I basically fell in love with the guy. Wonderful man. He was a

wonderful fellow. When we think of him, if you have a mental picture, it's a kind of somewhat portly guy with a big white beard looking... Looks like Walt Whitman, actually, a little bit. Well, that's much later in life. He lived well into the 20th century, into the 1920s. He was a young, killingly handsome man with great mutton chop whiskers. He was a romantic. That is to say, the world of invention that he lived in had a romantic dimension. It was a world of the imagination and in many ways akin to art. Okay? He was a speech therapist professionally, as was his father.

[0:23:57.6] Fergus Bordewich: That's what he trained in. And that's an important part of why he understood speech and sound so well and hearing. His mother was deaf, as was his wife. Now, anyway, a lot of the letters in the Library of Congress are to his then fiancée, a little bit later, his wife. They're wonderful letters. They're very romantic and sweet and intelligent. He was a very serious guy, and you could tell she was the one who had her feet on the ground. She's always talking him down from a cliff. And very unusual for the time, mid-late 19th century, he writes a lot about his feelings. That's very unusual, very unusual for the time. And he was filled with anxiety. He was, frankly, a bit neurotic. He dreadfully lacked confidence in his, especially his telephone. He wasn't a professional inventor. He'd invented one or two things, but not much. And he's worrying about getting back to his class to deal with his deaf students. Part of why he also worked as a figure in this book is that her father in Massachusetts was on that state's board of directors for the Massachusetts building at the Centennial. So he was plugged into it, and he got space for Alexander Graham Bell at the Centennial.

[0:25:25.1] Fergus Bordewich: Bell, Bell had... Somewhat had his head in the air at that time, somewhat, and he wouldn't have worked it out by himself. And then he was kind of shanghaied by his then fiancée, lovely young woman, shanghaied onto a train for Philadelphia. She didn't tell him that's where he was going. And her brother, she'd had her brother get his apparatus onto the train beforehand. And he's writing these telegrams from stops along the way saying, "I want to go back to Boston. I want to go back to Boston. I'm not ready." Anyway, he winds up in Philadelphia, and it's by a stroke of extraordinary good fortune that the telephone became the sudden sensation that it was. Now, it wasn't on view for the entire six months of the Centennial. He got to demonstrate it one day. He had a slot, a time slot. And it was, I guess you know Philadelphia in midsummer, it was hot. It was witheringly hot. And the judges, the scientists who were judging various inventions, were wilting. They were everything but falling over from the heat. And remember, people in those days wear these heavy broadcloth suits and so on, and they were withering. And they were about to quit and just leave before seeing Bell's, when amongst the judges is Dom Pedro, the Emperor of Brazil. There he is. He can go anywhere he wants because he's the most famous guest.

[0:27:05.6] Fergus Bordewich: And Dom Pedro sees Alexander Graham Bell a little bit ahead, "Mr. Bell, Mr. Bell, do you have something here?" And Bell says, "Well, as a matter of fact..." At any rate, Dom Pedro insists on hearing Mr. Bell's. He had met Bell in Boston briefly in a class, nothing to do with the telephone. He was interested in Bell's speech therapy program. Anyway, so thanks to Dom Pedro, Bell got to demonstrate his phone. It was instantly recognized as far beyond that of any other submission in that category. And very interesting to me, not only is that a good story, but it was in production within a year, which is astonishing. And that tells you a lot about America at that time, that something could be put into production that fast. And within, in less than two years, it's being demonstrated in Europe. And in Boston, I think a year or so after that, you could buy a telephone. Mark Twain bought one of the first. And Bell goes on to invent all kinds of things, by the way, up into the 20th century, including

an airplane, a viable airplane, the first microphone, and he never stops. But he's such a warm, sympathetic individual. I think he's possibly a bit rare among great celebrities in deserving the kind of admiration that he's received all this time.

[0:28:48.3] Thomas Donnelly: That's great. If certainly industry and technology, one key topic here, another recurrent one is the issue of race. And maybe talk a little bit about 1876. Where does the debate over race stand in America at the time? Where does the African American community stand at that point in Reconstruction? Maybe provide some context for us before we dig into your other two key figures, Edmonia Lewis and Rutherford B. Hayes?

[0:29:22.9] Fergus Bordewich: Well, it's a pivotal moment in the United States, 1876. The Civil War is barely 10 years past, 11 years past. The fruits of the resounding Union victory in the war are in danger of being lost. Certainly, they're already eroding. Think of the three great post-Civil War amendments, 13th, 14th, and 15th, ending slavery, guaranteeing civil rights to formerly enslaved people, and then finally the vote, all of which are in the process of becoming dead letters as early as 1876. Slavery will not be restored, of course, but African Americans, as we all know, will be, for the most part, reduced to a kind of quasi-peonage of Jim Crow, the Jim Crow era and so forth. That hasn't quite happened yet in '76. Large numbers of African Americans are voting in the United States, including in the South. There are three states in the South that still have racially mixed legislatures. The Republican Party in the South is a biracial party, significantly so. There are white Republicans and there are black Republicans, and black Republicans are, in a couple of states, South Carolina and Mississippi, up to a point, really the heart of the party anyway. But this is being undermined partly as a result of the activities, the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan in previous years.

[0:31:00.1] Fergus Bordewich: Grant, President Grant, has overcome the Klan, but nonetheless, innumerable numbers of black voters have been terrorized away from the polls and are not voting even by 1876. And there are resurgent white supremacist organizations that are not the Ku Klux Klan, that are legal and are competing for office in Southern states and by and large winning because of the terrorism that has scared away black and white Republican voters in the South. So this is happening. There are stories bearing on this that are in the newspapers. When I read about the news from Philadelphia, I'm also reading about news from South Carolina and so on. It was a great decade, the previous decade, for black Americans. The hopes were immense that the United States had really turned the corner on institutionalized racism. I mean, we can forget this, that Reconstruction was actually, for black Americans, it was an immensely positive time, and indeed for all Americans who really cared about fairness and equality and rights for everybody, it was a positive time. It... Reconstruction was rolled back. We don't need to get into the... Too deep in the weeds on this, but it was rolled back because significantly, Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives in 1874. And Democrats in control of the House would not appropriate any money whatsoever to maintain federal troops in the South, small in number as they were, or to provide, to pay federal judges to try Klansmen and so on.

[0:32:55.3] Fergus Bordewich: So it gets down to politics, which significantly played a role in the 1876 presidential election. At the same time, African Americans are more involved in public life than ever because slavery is over. And however, in spite of the fact that some of the figures that were managing, running, and organizing the great Centennial Exhibition came out of the abolitionist movement, they were former federal high-ranking officers and so on and supported civil rights and the radical wing of the Republican Party, the Centennial itself

actually was built on a racist foundation. Because one, African Americans were not permitted to have a pavilion of their own. They wanted one, they were not permitted. There were very, vanishingly few black Americans who had exhibits, including a very important Philadelphian, by the way, William Still. William Still, famous within to historians anyway, as the head of the Underground Railroad pre-war, pre-Civil War in Philadelphia, and whose record of the Underground Railroad is the best that survived, 700 pages of detail about people who passed through his office. He wrote that to be... Partly to sell it at the great Centennial Exhibition. And he had a stand there in which he was... Where he was selling the books. There is no information about his experience there. Very frustrating. I would like to have written more, but there's just nothing survives that I found. Anyway, so African Americans were pretty much excluded as exhibitors. Were they welcome as visitors, tourists?

[0:35:01.1] Fergus Bordewich: It seems clear that at least at the beginning, there were segregated days of visitation. I think that ceased. It's not clear, frustratingly. I mean, there are definitely visual records, etchings, drawings in *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, *Harper's Weekly*, that show African Americans there. So clearly they attended. Were facilities segregated? They had to have been. Nobody really was paying much attention to the black experience at the Centennial, which tells you a lot. And something else that speaks volumes is that the most popular eatery... There were many, many, many, and they were, some of them were exotic and some of them were good, some not so good, but the most popular one by far was called the Old South Restaurant, or the Southern Restaurant sometimes. And part of what appealed to people was that the servers were all blacks who were dressed as and cast as slaves. And a band performed, performed plantation music. People loved it. Tells you a lot. Tells you a lot about what was fine, what was okay. But anyway, that's the climate around race in the period. Bear in mind, it's a factor in the election that's taking place. That's to say the campaigns are taking place all that summer while the exhibition is on. And I don't know, maybe we should talk a little bit about Edmonia Lewis here since.

[0:36:47.0] Thomas Donnelly: Yeah, why don't you talk about her and where she fits into the story? She's a fascinating figure altogether.

[0:36:54.4] Fergus Bordewich: Yeah, Edmonia Lewis is another wonderful figure. Virtually forgotten for more than 100 years. She's been kind of rediscovered. And indeed, you can see some of her work. The piece I'm gonna be talking about is called *The Death of Cleopatra*. Doesn't sound exciting, but it's a wonderful sculpture at the Smithsonian in Washington. Anyway, Edmonia Lewis was a very, very unusual woman. She was the first African American artist to be successful in America. She was a sculptor. So she was half Black American and half Native American. No connection with slavery in her life directly. She grew up in upstate New York, around not far from Albany. Spent part of her early life living with her mother's native family, very... Not clear how long. She made much of it. She had a great instinct for marketing. And where it suited her to be a successful Black American, she was Black. Where it suited her for other reasons to emphasize her Native American part, she did. She looked Black rather than native, but be that as it may, she embraced both sides of herself. She went to Oberlin College. She was well educated, although she claimed for publicity purposes to have been raised in a teepee. Well, maybe not. She went to Oberlin. She studied French, probably had a little Latin as well, found her calling as an artist.

[0:38:39.3] Fergus Bordewich: She studied art in Boston and then pretty early in the 1860s,

she was in her 20s at the time, she moved to Rome, where any aspiring American artist would wanna live, at least for a time, because it gave... It was like going to Harvard or Yale, it gave cachet having studied in the world of the ancient classics. And she found a home in Rome and she lived most of her life there, although she would come back to the US to sell her work. Her main audience or clientele was American. She was the first artist of any kind to travel to California to sell her work. And she set up a... She set up, I kid you not, she set up a teepee as her kind of her gallery. But she was a, I mean, a wonderful, she was kind of flamboyant. There's a picture of her in my book. She's quite wonderful looking, quite charming by all accounts, tough as nails, although it didn't show on the surface. Anyway, she set out to create a masterwork to be exhibited at the Centennial. She did. It was called *The Death of Cleopatra*, a very popular theme in that era of neoclassicism. Also a theme that had a certain kind of African resonance, so abolitionists tended to like it because Cleopatra was sometimes popularly then said to have been an African. I mean, the Egyptians were not Africans. Cleopatra was of Greek lineage, as it happens. But nonetheless, it had a resonance for Northern liberals, dare I say.

[0:40:30.9] Fergus Bordewich: And it's a very, very beautiful... Very beautiful and very accomplished sculpture. And she priced it at \$30,000, which is an astronomical sum at the time. I should say, by the way, she may have been the wealthiest Black American woman of her day. Her sculptures sold. People came to her studio in Rome and bought her pieces or commissioned them. Very successful. She had Italian stonemasons working for her. Anyway, she came to Philadelphia and remarkably, she... There was a huge arts building. Huge, thousands of pieces. But anyway, she had a sense of style and she brought kind of an Egyptian canopy to put over this that was pretty exotic. So you could see the sculpture and it was under a canopy. And she was standing there, quite ready to talk to people. She was very short. She's about five feet tall by all accounts. And people were by turns shocked or astonished or thrilled to find her there and discover that she was the artist herself. And there's one newspaper report that I quote in my book by a reporter who just loved her. He said it was... I think he was himself Black. I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure. And he just thought, he was so proud of her being there. And she elsewhere described having... Well, no, he, in that same story, he described her having been manhandled a bit, spat at by others. Okay. All right, I should tie off something I said a bit earlier about racism at the Centennial.

[0:42:21.3] Fergus Bordewich: Why was there a racist overtone to the Centennial? Well, because one of the goals of the entire exhibition was to promote a sectional reconciliation with the South. They wanted Southerners to come. And there was an ideology of reconciliation. It's understandable, of course, but it was at the cost of the rights of Black Americans. But she had no trouble there as an exhibitor whatsoever. She was famous and she won a prize, as did one other Black exhibitor who almost had his withdrawn because they didn't realize the painter was actually Black. And Edmonia Lewis and some others, other painters, stood up for him and he got the prize. But again, it gives you a sense of the climate. And she never did sell it. And that sculpture, Cleopatra, was lost for almost 100 years. Well, more than 100 years, actually. And it wound up basically in a junkyard in Chicago and was rediscovered in the 1990s by a very enterprising art historian and has since been restored to its glory and it's in the Smithsonian along with other sculptures. And various other museums have one or two of hers. She often, her themes sometimes had to do with abolitionism.

[0:44:01.9] Fergus Bordewich: She sculpted busts of John Brown and other famous anti slavery people. Others were native characters thematically, usually from the story, the great

poem of *Hiawatha*, which nobody reads anymore, but even into my early lifetime, it was still pretty much known by everybody, at least a few stanzas of it. Not a bad poem, but not of our time. And she did portraits and otherwise. She won awards in Europe. Royalty sometimes came to her studio and bought her pieces. So she's a wonderful, wonderful story. A little enigmatic. She didn't leave papers, but she did give interviews. She lived in a community primarily of female avant-garde, not primarily, female artists in Rome. Never married, never had children. She may have been gay, she may not. But it was Rome. She was asked by a *New York Times* reporter why she was living in Italy. She said, "People don't treat me badly there." She said a little more than that, but that's what she said. And she was just in Italy, be just a person, be an artist, do her thing. And she did. She lived into the 20th century, although she returned to her Catholic roots and mostly sculpted for churches in later years.

[0:45:31.0] Thomas Donnelly: Can't wait to take... Next time I'm in DC, can't wait to take my kids to see some of her works in the Smithsonian. Another key female figure in your book is Susan B. Anthony. And you talk about her and her allies on the one hand and the push for women's rights, and then talk about the Women's Pavilion also erected at the Centennial. Could you talk about sort of those two strains of what we see when it comes to women in America in 1876?

[0:45:59.3] Fergus Bordewich: We're already almost 30 years after the great Seneca Falls Conference, 1848, in upstate New York, which ignited the women's rights movement in the United States. And it became... It gathered speed, it gathered attention, it gathered force in

these years. Okay? And already by this time, women were lobbying for the vote, radical women. There are... It's... I think it's fair to say there were two kind of parallel aspects to the women's movement at the time. The radical one, which we're now familiar with and we regard as kind of the true triumphant, as it was, triumphant current of the women's movement, is led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, both from upstate New York, both from abolitionist backgrounds. Susan B. Anthony from a Quaker background as well. Anthony was pretty confrontational. Stanton not much less so. Very different personalities, though. Anthony never married, never had any space for men in her life. Stanton did marry and have children and so on. But at any rate, parallel to this, there is a more conservative side to the women's movement that is not supportive, especially at this early date, of full women's rights. Certainly not the vote. They were very careful not to be.

[0:47:39.9] Fergus Bordewich: And this wing of the women's movement has a pavilion at the Great Centennial. It was organized primarily by Philadelphia, wealthy Philadelphia clubwomen. Their aim was to show all that women could do. Everything in the pavilion was designed or operated by women. Initially, women raised money for a pavilion, and then the organizers actually took the money away and gave it to something else and said, "Well, no, you're not really gonna get a pavilion." They were so... The women, were so incensed that they raised another ton of money and built a pavilion. And as I said, completely run by women, including machinery. It emphasized women, opportunity for women, both but also side by side with home life. And for every machine, there was a homemade sampler, a knit sampler or something like that. And it included also a model kindergarten, the first one open to the public in American history. There were little kids there that the women had recruited from an orphanage, along with teachers and so on, and they did their lessons. People would sit in a gallery and watch the little kids do their lessons. A little bit exploitative, I grant you, but it actually helped spur the movement for kindergartens in America. So it served a valuable

purpose as well as a somewhat embarrassing one.

[0:49:31.6] Fergus Bordewich: So the more... The Women's Pavilion did not welcome the radicals. They were distressed by them. There was one little corner of the Women's Pavilion which had a little display hidden in the shadows of paper material from Stanton's and Anthony's group. But at any rate, Susan B. Anthony basically stole the show on July 4, 1876. July 4th was the pivotal day of the entire Centennial, because the whole Centennial was meant to memorialize and celebrate the Declaration of Independence. So at any rate, there was another huge program on a huge platform with hundreds of people seated and so on, and various dignitaries led by the Vice President of the United States. He's actually a US Senator. Because the VP had died, the Senator has stepped in to fill that place. He was a pro-women's rights man, a senator from Connecticut. So politically, he was kind of aligned with the Anthony group. But he would not risk, nor would almost anybody in Congress risk, going out on a political limb to really advocate for legislation on behalf of women. Okay, at any rate, Anthony and a small group of her colleagues were on this huge platform, and when there was a lull, they rushed up to the... There's no microphone because there's no amplification, but at any rate, up to the podium where Vice President Ferry is standing and hand him a huge scroll. And what is it? It's the Women's Declaration of Rights.

[0:51:30.9] Fergus Bordewich: They officially hand it to him. And of course, this is a huge embarrassment for the male dignitaries up there. And Ferry, who's not unsympathetic, but he doesn't actually read it. They didn't expect him to, but they got the publicity they wanted. Then they left the stage, went across the square to another stage which had already been reserved by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. And there Susan B. Anthony read the Declaration. It's this wonderful document. Everybody should know it. It's very well written because Stanton and Anthony could write. It's very long and it denounces the subjection of women in terms that were still radical in the 1960s and '70s and have become one of the great benchmark documents of the women's movement. Unfortunately, it may have inspired people on the spot, including male supporters, and they existed, but it didn't lead to the kind of transformative legislation that they wanted and hoped for at the time. And that would take another nearly 50 years and so on. But it was one of the great moments, one of the most dramatic moments in the evolution of the women's movement. And I don't think it probably gets the degree of attention it has. I'm not sure why. Possibly because the Centennial as a whole isn't remembered as well as it should be, nor, I should say, was it really reported in any detail in the newspapers at the time. A lot was going on. It was July 4th, and it was acknowledged here and there, but it didn't get serious attention, and it was mocked by some. No surprise there. That was fairly standard.

[0:53:23.8] Thomas Donnelly: As we get towards the end of our conversation here, Fergus, I definitely wanna end on the election of 1876, but before getting there, I'd love for you to take a beat on one of the more dramatic moments in your narrative, which was the Centennial's happening and visitors get news of the Battle of Little Bighorn and the death of George Armstrong Custer. I'd love to just hear more about sort of what Custer represented to the visitors at the Centennial and more broadly, where the Native American story stood in 1876 at this important moment.

[0:54:00.5] Fergus Bordewich: There had been a plan originally organized by the Smithsonian Institution to bring a couple of hundred Native Americans from different tribes to the Centennial and set up a living village where people would live in their traditional dwellings and do traditional activities and so forth. That didn't come to pass. Fortunately, it would have been a, I hate to say it, a zoo, because that was the concept behind it. And that was done at a

later World's Fair about 30 years later, and it's embarrassing to read about today. But at any rate, Native peoples, other than those who may have, did visit as visitors, and they did, some, not many, were not present as any kind of an exhibit. What there was was a Smithsonian exhibit of Native artifacts, and I think today you would say some of them were artworks, totem poles and all kind of a big jumble of artifacts from all over the place, from Mesoamerica to Alaska. And the net effect was one, it was just a confusing assortment of things from communities, tribes that didn't really connect with each other, but it's the Indians. But as a people who are already fading into oblivion, it was a display of artifacts, as if Native Americans were themselves artifacts by that time.

[0:55:39.0] Fergus Bordewich: And that was reflective of the popular view of Indians held by most Americans. The term vanishing American, everybody's heard this term without perhaps really being able to define it, but it was believed by most Americans that Indians were vanishing. And it's true enough that demographically the numbers had radically declined, radically, primarily from disease over generations. Anyway, so that's what there is to see related to Native Americans at the Centennial. One of the visitors is George Armstrong Custer. He's east on leave, and he goes and sees the Centennial. And I sort of... You have to picture him looking at these Indian artifacts and sort of maybe stroking his long blond hair and thinking, I know about that. Custer in his day, in his lifetime, was a... And to us, I think, was a living embodiment of Manifest Destiny, the idea that Euro Americans were destined by providence to populate the entire continent, and anybody there beforehand, Native Americans, would just fade away. Custer himself had somewhat ambiguous attitudes about Native Americans. In his important memoir, *Life on the Plains*, he actually empathizes with and identifies with Native Americans and said, "If I were an Indian, I would fight too." That's not particularly common among expansionist white Americans at the time.

[0:57:25.0] Fergus Bordewich: But at any rate, he also was guilty of what today you'd call war crimes against Native villages and so forth. He'd been on campaign in the West for several years. I should say, parenthetically, to those who may not know, he was one of the great military heroes of the Civil War. He fought very bravely, very significantly in the Civil War. So he had a national celebrity reputation even after the war, one that he really hoped to enhance. 1876 was the year of the last coordinated major campaign, major Indian war, let's say. There are other fights with Native communities afterward, but in 1876 saw ultimately the defeat and demolition of the last really significant Native alliance. Okay, war has broken out in the Dakotas and the Montana Territory, primarily with the Sioux, the Lakota and other Sioux groups, and their allies, Cheyenne and others. Custer has been dispatched as one of three columns of troops to fight and to presumably bring that Native, they called it a rebellion, but in any way it was war, to an end. On July 5th, 1876, William Tecumseh Sherman is sitting at... He's at the Centennial. He came for July 4th, all the festivities. He would have been sitting there when Susan B. Anthony delivered the women's Declaration of Independence. He was there, probably in the front row. He probably... She may probably have brushed by him. Okay, anyway, so July 5th, he's sitting there. The heat is withering, as you already know, and he's got his boots off and his feet up. He's in his hotel and his jacket open, and a messenger comes rushing in and says, "General, Custer's been killed." And news breaks right then, the day after July 4th, that Custer's command, the bulk of it, has been wiped out to the last man.

[0:59:51.0] Fergus Bordewich: And here he was the spearpoint, the... Custer, that is. The spearpoint, the sharp fighting edge of Manifest Destiny, of the Anglo-American drive across

the continent, and he's been wiped out. And Americans go into shock. Sherman goes into shock. He said, "No, no, no, it's impossible. It must be fake news." He basically says that. But no, it's true. It's true. It shook Americans, ordinary Americans, white Americans' sense of who they were and what America was. At any rate, the outcome was kind of foreordained militarily. The army regrouped, sent more troops, chased the Lakota under Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, the two most famous Native leaders, chased them all over the prairie for months through the winter. They starved, most surrendered. Sitting Bull and others ultimately marched to Canada. And remained there for some length of time. But it was the de facto end of the, let's say the important, the really competitive Indian wars. And here it is in the Centennial year. It didn't change Americans' attitudes about anything except maybe to confirm those who were promoting a harsh policy towards Native Americans. Grant, who was leaving office in 1877, had actually pursued what was called a peace policy. Grant wanted to genuinely, he was that kind of a man, wanted to find an accommodation with the native tribes. Of course, they'd be subject to the United States, they'd be on reservations with all we know that entails. But nonetheless, he was not a man who wanted to fight wars of extermination against Native Americans at all, at all. But after the Custer massacre, war to the end was the only thing there could be because that's what the public wanted.

[1:02:08.3] Thomas Donnelly: And maybe as we get to the end of the conversation here, Fergus, we'll turn finally to the last major figure that you talk about in the book, Rutherford B. Hayes, and sort of the extraordinary thing that in addition to everything that we've talked about, in addition to this giant fair, we also have a consequential presidential election campaign happening between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden. So maybe end for us here on sort of the importance of this moment for American politics and sort of where Rutherford B. Hayes in particular fits in?

[1:02:43.1] Fergus Bordewich: Hayes may not register with a very high profile in the minds of most Americans. Those who can place him at all tend to think of him perhaps as, oh, one of those guys with a big beard after the Civil War. The election, nonetheless, was one of the most pivotal in American history. And that's a word that's overused, pivotal, but this genuinely was because the future, the fate of Reconstruction, hung in the balance. More things as well, but the Republican Party, even with all the caveats, the hesitation that we talked about earlier in this conversation, nonetheless supported Reconstruction. Hayes, if he'd been politically able to do it, would have continued to support the prosecution of Ku Klux Klansmen and particularly the protection of black voters in the South because those black voters were Republicans, and the Republican Party depended on those votes. Regardless of racial attitudes, the racial alliance between black and white Republicans in the South was extremely important to the party. So Hayes was an abolitionist. He was a very brave officer, general, during the Civil War.

[1:04:06.3] Fergus Bordewich: He was wounded seven times. Seven times, and a couple of twice really severely at the front of his men and so on. He was no shrinking violet. He was very well educated, very thoughtful, serious guy, a genuine political reformer. He was not a creature of corrupt politicians or industry, although his relationship to big money becomes somewhat equivocal as the campaign goes on. He was a very good candidate, actually, and admired at the time. He was the governor of Ohio. He was very much a known quantity. He's running against Samuel Tilden, the governor of New York, who is certainly one of the dullest individuals ever to run for the presidency. He has competitors, but he was a significant

politician, but he was a kind of classic backroom politician. Very effective as a backroom politician in New York. He counted as a reformer because, well, it suited him to be. He was known as the giant killer for, at the time, crippling Tammany Hall, the crooked political machine known as Tammany Hall. A little more complicated than that, but at any rate, he was a bachelor. He was very, very introverted.

[1:05:34.0] Fergus Bordewich: In those days, nobody campaigned on the stump. Presidential candidates, none of them did. People did for other offices, but not the presidency. It was considered unseemly, undignified, and so on. Both of them came to the Centennial and gave speeches. Hayes gave an okay speech, not so great. Tilden gave one of the shortest speeches anybody ever gave at the Centennial and then essentially ran away back to New York. He was so uncomfortable being in a crowd and averse to too much contact with the public that he basically ran back to New York. Now, the Democratic Party, I should say, because it seems like a contradiction, was the, one, the party that tended to represent more working people, heavily, heavily so, as well as important ethnic minorities, the Irish and the Germans in particular. And it was also the reactionary party of the time. It was wedded, it was politically wedded, had been before the Civil War to the defenders of slavery and then after the Civil War towards ex-Confederates who wielded more and more power within the Democratic Party. There were Ku Klux Klansmen who attended the Democratic nominating conventions in those days. And the white supremacist organizations that were intimidating black voters in the South were all Democrats.

[1:07:08.8] Fergus Bordewich: They were wings of the Democratic Party. So that's how the two parties are shaping up in 1876. Hayes expects to lose. The Republicans have been in power since Lincoln's election in the fall of 1860. 16 years. People are tired of them. The public, often for the wrong reasons, gets tired of people who are in office too long. And to compound that, the Grant administration suffered greatly from accusations of unparalleled corruption. Much exaggerated, it existed, where it was called out and prosecuted, it was correct, but much exaggerated. And the Republican Party was suffering defections of certain... A whole faction of kind of high-minded, mostly New England reformers who were repelled by the corruption. Frankly, they were repelled by Grant because he wasn't polished enough and some of his associates weren't high-toned enough and so on. So Hayes, the Republican, expected to lose. The Democrats were sure they were gonna win. It was a sure thing. Anyway, to bring this to an end, it was a very, very tricky election to the extent that, as I said, the outcome was not finally known until two days before Inauguration Day. It devolved into a question of illegal voting, illegal voting or fraudulent voting in several states, some of them Southern states, the crucial ones Southern states, where huge numbers of black voters were essentially disenfranchised because of intimidation.

[1:09:00.2] Fergus Bordewich: And there were accusations of fraud in other states as well. But the outcome of the election finally came down to three Southern states, South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana, where in all of those states, both parties claimed victory. This may sound like elections closer to our own time, and it's not surprising. There's no question Hayes would have won easily had all African Americans in the South been able to vote. It would have been a walkover. In the end, the votes, the electoral votes of those several states were at issue. There was no constitutional mechanism to resolve this. The Democrats, some Democratic leaders threatened to storm the US Capitol to stop the counting of votes. Sound familiar? That didn't happen, but a very prominent Democratic newspaper editor in Louisville urged Democrats to arm themselves and go to Washington to stop the count. In the end, a

special commission was organized. That commission met in secret, which has given rise to all kinds of dark rumors ever since. But the solution that was finally worked out, there are people who consider it a corrupt bargain, I do not, because the worst corruption took place when black voters were denied the vote in the South. Okay. But at any rate, the tacit agreement that was worked out, it was not a quid pro quo, it was not a clear this for that, was that Hayes would take office. He finally was granted the electoral votes of all three states in dispute and won the election, therefore, by a single electoral vote. Just one. He took office. Tacitly, Republicans agreed not to send any more federal troops in the South to protect elections. It's often said he withdrew the federal troops from the South.

[1:11:32.5] Fergus Bordewich: There were very few there to withdraw, contrary to popular belief. There were very... A couple of 1000, and they were mostly guarding polls, which is what they should have been doing. They shouldn't have been withdrawn, there should have been many more sent if we were sincere about protecting the vote and protecting the polls. But at any rate, the result, the net result was, in the course of the next months and elections, every one of those Republican governments, state governments in the South, lost office and was replaced with resurgent white supremacist Democrats. So the net result was a Republican president, but the sacrifice of black voters in the South. Hayes did not like it. He did not want that outcome, but he was a political realist after all, and he saw that there was no other way in which the election could be resolved without bloodshed. And we may not like that outcome. I don't like it. But it's what happened and was what the realities of politics in 1876 compelled to happen. And Hayes himself in later years regretted it. That didn't do black voters much good, but he knew what had happened and he blamed himself. He had talked himself, and this is important to understand about Hayes, who is a very positive-minded man, very decent man. And he persuaded himself that by compromising, in effect, with Southern Democrats, the racial warfare in the South would end, politics in the South would be normalized, a normal two party system as in the North would develop. Did he really believe that? I think he convinced himself, except he was disabused of his mistake in later years and he wrote about that. As I say, it didn't do black voters much good.

[1:13:39.3] Thomas Donnelly: Now, over the last, during this year, we've been celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. You've now spent quite a bit of time thinking about the Centennial. How does that inform how you think about America 250?

[1:13:56.7] Fergus Bordewich: Well, look, I think America 250 is a bust. Okay? I mean, I'll be direct. I think it was a bust. I live partly in Washington, DC. I walked over to the Mall to see the so-called Great Fair. It was embarrassing, frankly. Okay. So I feel it was a great opportunity for that, at least at that level, that was lost. Okay? Countless Americans in other parts of the country, in different states, have used the 250th as a way of kind of thinking about the founding and celebrating or acknowledging it in more modest ways, more modest but honest ways, I think. So that's fine. But as a national opportunity, I think it was a loss. It was a big loss. And look, in my book, as I said right at the beginning of our conversation, at the center of the book is the Great Centennial Exhibition, and I follow it through its six-month lifespan. However, I take the story outward from that to look at what's happening in America in that year. And I do talk, as we have in this conversation, about race, Reconstruction, labor and management, the repression of labor primarily, Indian wars in the West, and other topics that Americans, to a degree, in 1876 didn't wanna look at either. The Great Centennial Exhibition wasn't actually the soul-searching that I had hoped it would have been. Americans wanted to have a big fair, and they had a big fair. And I think what we can draw from the present is, in a way, the same message. Let's look at our history honestly. I don't think we

should be scrubbing anything out of our past and out of our history. The good, the bad, and the ugly, let's look at it all.

[1:16:11.7] Fergus Bordewich: Guilt mongering about what our founders and their descendants might not have been is worthless. It's not history. It doesn't lead anywhere good. Okay? I mean, to deny the extraordinary, extraordinary political creativity and political courage of people like Madison and Jefferson, Washington, and many others, I mean, these men really deserve to be understood and honored for this extraordinary machine that they've built that's still here 250 years later. But let's be honest also about what happens to be true in the United States in the present day as in the 19th century. Yes, yes, labor was being squashed and brutalized in 1876. African Americans were being betrayed in 1876. Native Americans were losing their last chance at some kind of autonomy, organized autonomy in 1876, and so on. And racism, it has to be said, was as indelible a part of American history in 1876 as later, as the great struggle for expanding rights and constitutionalism and so on. We, I don't think we as a people, we're a mature people by now. We don't need to hide our history from ourselves. I think it's foolishness. And frankly, a lot of the darker side of American history is pretty interesting. Doesn't make us lesser people. Doesn't make it a lesser nation at all. We don't need comic book history anymore. We don't need it. Get rid of it. Get rid of it. It's boring. It's boring. It's shallow. And my point being that all Americans, everybody deserves to hear the truth. And we shouldn't be censoring each other from any end of the political spectrum.

[music]

[1:18:22.3] Thomas Donnelly: Fergus Bordewich, for teaching us all so much about the importance of the Centennial and the year 1876, thank you so much.

[1:18:30.1] Fergus Bordewich: Well, thank you, Tom. It's been a great conversation. I look forward sometime in the future to having another one.

[1:18:38.1] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. Same here. Thank you so much.

[music]

[1:18:43.9] Thomas Donnelly: This episode was produced and mixed by Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Anna Salvatore and Tristan Worsham. Please recommend *We The People* to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional education and debate. In celebration of America's 250th anniversary, we published *The Promise of America: Reflections on Our Enduring Ideals*. The book is an inspirational collection of essays exploring the founding principles that continue to shape American democracy from the nation's leading constitutional scholars. To purchase a copy of *The Promise of America*, visit constitutioncenter.org/promiseofamerica. And as always, remember that the National Constitution Center is a private, nonpartisan nonprofit, and we rely on your generosity, passion, and engagement for all of our programming, including this podcast. Please consider donating today at constitutioncenter.org/donate. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Tom Donnelly.