

by John E. Findling

It is a well known fact of Olympic history that the Games of the IIIrd Olympiad were originally awarded to Chicago but actually took place in St. Louis, as an event associated with the great Louisiana Purchase International Exposition, a large world's fair held (one year late) to celebrate the centennial of Thomas JEFFERSON'S purchase of the Louisiana Territory from NAPOLEON in 1803. Conventional wisdom tells us that St. Louis somehow "stole" the Olympic Games from Chicago, perhaps with the connivance of President Theodore ROOSEVELT.

The standard Olympic history, *The Olympic Games* (1976), by Lord KILLANIN and John RODDA, relates that the Games were moved from Chicago to St. Louis after the exposition was delayed for a year due to financial reason. The fair management requested that the Games be transferred to St. Louis and let it be known that it would sponsor major athletic events if it was unable to host the Olympic Games. Chicago's Olympic Committee responded by asking Pierre de COUBERTIN and the IOC for a postponement of the Games to 1905, but the IOC refused to allow this. The rival cities then asked President Theodore ROOSEVELT to arbitrate the conflict. He opted for St. Louis, the IOC reluctantly agreed, and the Games went to the Missouri city. It is a nice story, but there is no documentary evidence to support the president's involvement.¹

Another version of the story appears in Robert BARNETT'S essay, "St. Louis 1904," in John FINDLING and Kimberly PELLE'S *Encyclopedia of the Modern Olympic Movement* (2004). BARNETT concludes that the postponement of the exposition from 1903 to 1904 put the fair and the Games on a collision course, and implies that the Chicago Olympic Committee simply did not work very hard to prepare for the Games and thus welcomed the transfer as a way out of a difficult situation. Meetings were held in October 1902 between representatives of Chicago and St. Louis, and following these meetings, the chairman of the Chicago committee, Henry J. FURBER, wrote COUBERTIN that the Olympic movement might suffer if the Games were held in competition with the fair. Chicago, he said, would not object if the International Olympic Committee

(IOC) wanted to transfer the Games to St. Louis. While COUBERTIN and the IOC hated the idea of associating the Games with yet another international exposition after the Paris 1900 disaster, they ultimately chose what they felt was the lesser of two evils and authorized the transfer to St. Louis in December 1902.² Wolf LYBERG, the prolific historian and fact-finder for the IOC, notes that some scholars assert that COUBERTIN cabled ROOSEVELT asking what his preference was (it was supposedly for St. Louis), but he can find no documentation to confirm this.³

These accounts leave many questions unanswered. First (and perhaps foremost), why did the Chicago planners appear to acquiesce in the transfer so easily? Chicago had been awarded the Games in the summer of 1901, and FURBER and his committee had worked for well over a year to bring about a successful event in Chicago. Why then, after two meetings with St. Louis leaders in October 1902, should FURBER rather meekly tell COUBERTIN that Chicago would not stand in the way of a transfer? Second, what was the role of President ROOSEVELT? Did he really make the choice for COUBERTIN and the IOC? Third, what were the roles of sporting goods manufacturer Albert G. SPALDING, and James E. SULLIVAN, the head of the *Amateur Athletic Union* (AAU)? We know that SULLIVAN was angry at his failure to obtain a seat on the IOC in 1900, and we know that he was responsible for planning athletic events at the *Pan American Exposition* in Buffalo in 1901 and was later appointed to serve as secretary-treasurer of the athletic committee for the Louisiana Purchase International Exposition. KILLANIN and RODDA allege that SULLIVAN was responsible for the Games going to St. Louis but offer no information as to how he might have accomplished this. Fourth, what had the Chicago committee been doing prior to the time of the transfer of the Games? Unspoken in the traditional accounts is the suggestion that the Chicago Olympic Committee had not really done very much to prepare for the Games by late 1902 and were thus pleased to be shorn of the responsibility.⁴

¹ KILLANIN, Lord Michael / RODDA, John, *The Olympic Games*, New York 1976, p. 32.

² BARNETT, Robert, "St. Louis 1904", in: FINDLING, John / PELLE, Kimberly (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Modern Olympic Movement*, Westport, CT 2004, pp. 33-35.

³ LABERG, Wolf, *Fabulous 100 Years of the IOC: Facts, Figures, and Much, Much More*, Lausanne 1996, p. 253.

⁴ SPALDING, Albert G. to FURBER, Henry J., 3 June 1902, *Henry J. Furber Papers* (hereafter referred to as Furber Papers), *Nevill Green Museum*, Green Bay WI, USA

Early this year, Allison HELLER, the curator of the *Hellenic Museum and Cultural Center* in Chicago decided that it would be appropriate to mount and exhibit on the Olympics since this year's Games are in Athens. Working with Olympic scholar John MACALOON of the *University of Chicago* and communications professor Rose ECONOMOU of *Columbia College* in Chicago, HELLER sought to highlight Chicago's closest connection with an Olympics Games, the "loss" of the Games of 1904. In the



Henry J. Furber, Chicago lawyer.

process of assembling materials for the exhibit, she learned that the papers of Henry J. FULLER were held at the *Nevill Green Museum* in Green Bay, Wisconsin, where they had lain untouched for many years. HELLER and ECONOMOU went to Green Bay, where they were able to undertake only a brief examination of the papers, but what they found adds much to what we know about the story of Chicago losing the Olympic Games of 1904. And more thorough research in these papers may give us definitive answers to the questions posed above. What follows now is a recounting of the events in Chicago and St. Louis between mid-1901 and early 1903, based on letters and other documents found in the *Furber papers*, supplemented by newspaper sources.

Work on a possible bid for the 1904 Olympic Games had been underway in Chicago since the late summer of 1900. In August 1900, a Professor INGRES of the University of Chicago had brought up the idea, and university president William Rainey HARPER and FURBER decided to move ahead with it later that month. Henri MEROU, the French consul in Chicago, advanced the idea to COUBERTIN, and Henri BREAL, a Paris lawyer, was hired to push the Chicago effort in France, along with Chicago industrialist Charles R. CRANE, then in Paris. At this time, Chicago's strongest rivals for the 1904 Games were Berlin, Copenhagen, and Stockholm. FURBER estimated that the Games would cost nearly \$200,000 to put on but bring in \$375,000, and that the financial side of the Games could be handled through a corporation that would sell 2000 shares of stock at \$100 per share. The first public announcement of the proposed bid was made at a dinner at the Chicago club on February 13,

1901. At this dinner, attended by prominent businessmen and University of Chicago faculty, a committee, to be known as the International Olympian Games association, was appointed to draw up a prospectus for an Olympic Games that could cost as much as \$250,000. CRANE presided over the meeting, and FURBER presented a study he had made that pointed out the very good chance Chicago had of getting the Games. The city's reputation as a world's fair site and its central location

in the United States were seen as important factors. "*Chicago has the best chance of securing the games that could be desired. The question is whether they could be given a proper financial support,*" FURBER said. The committee chosen included FURBER as chairman, V. W. FOSTER, Professor G. E. VINCENT, Amos Alonzo STAGG, and John Barton PAYNE. Among the guests at the dinner was Henri MEROU.⁵

The IOC was scheduled to evaluate the proposals in May 1901. While Philadelphia and New York had entertained thoughts of bidding for the Games, neither city presented a proposal. St. Louis put in a very late bid. Chicago's proposal was well put together, and supported by key people in the United States. On April 30, prominent sport leaders Caspar Whitney, William M. SLOANE, and James E. SULLIVAN wrote COUBERTIN that they agreed that Chicago was the best site for the Games. French Ambassador to the United States Jules CAMBON announced on May 20 that "*you may rest assured that Chicago will get the Olympian games [...] All France is rejoicing with you, and I think even Scandinavia, Chicago's greatest rival, will say it is pleased.*"⁶

On May 22, Chicagoans learned that four days earlier, the IOC had chosen their city unanimously over St. Louis. COUBERTIN had sent Furber a telegram that read simply, "*Chicago wins.*" The *Tribune* noted proudly that "*Chicago well deserved to be the scene of the next Olympic games in view of the enterprise shown by her citizens and the efforts put forth by the university [...] St. Louis had excellent claims, especially in view of the exposition but they were overshadowed by the advantage offered by Chicago.*" The newspaper also reported that

⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, 14 February 1901 and 12 January 1902.

⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1901.



William
Rainey
Harper,
University
of Chicago
President.

State Street merchants, transportation companies, and hotels had already pledged nearly \$85,000. The editorial staff could not resist a little jab at rival St. Louis: "*St. Louis tried to get the Olympian games but the International committee seems to have decided that St. Louis wouldn't know what to do with them.*" The newspaper was more smug the next day, when an editorial pointed out that the people of Chicago would not get "much worked up" over the Games until 1904 and that a victory over a "*small city like St. Louis is nothing to be specially proud of.*" The following Saturday, however, some 2,000 university students celebrated on Marshall Field at the *University of Chicago* by burning a huge bonfire. The total of 6,000 spectators exceeded by far the expectations of the organizers.⁷

Once the initial euphoria wore off, the committee had to begin planning for the Games. On September 11, the first meeting of the International Games Association was held, and Furber announced that four individuals, J.R. ANTHONY, Arthur A. BURNHAM, F.E. WEAVER, and P.A. KIRBY had each pledged \$50,000. Interestingly, as far as can be determined, none of these investors had direct connections with Chicago. They were easterners, businessmen with close ties to Charles R. CRANE. On September 24, the association was formally incorporated, and in October, it elected officers and an executive board and adopted a set of by-laws. In November came the announcement that the Louisiana Purchase exposition would include a program of athletic events, but since the exposition was scheduled for the summer of

1903, no one expressed concern about the exposition's games.⁸

On January 12, 1902, Chicago newspapers published plans and drawings of a huge lakefront stadium that would seat 75,000 spectators. Furber said it would be the most "pretentious" structure ever for such a purpose. The stadium, which sporting goods magnate Albert G. SPALDING claimed to have designed (the drawings were not signed), was to cover 11 acres and measure 800 feet by 130 feet, significantly larger than the Athens stadium, which held fewer than 50,000. Plans called for a permanent roof over the seats and a system of waterproof curtains controlled by electrically-operated rollers that could bring cover to the playing field in inclement weather. During the Games, the arena would be open, but it would be able to be closed "*with the push of a button.*" The stadium could also be divided into two or three smaller venues when events dictated such an arrangement. There were to be no obstructed views from columns, and the seats would range from 5 feet to 60 feet above the field. In the tradition of exposition buildings, the stadium was to be a temporary structure that would be torn down once the Olympic Games were over.⁹

Within a month, however, opposition to the lakefront stadium developed. A group of downtown merchants, led by retailer Montgomery WARD, argued that the construction of such a stadium would violate city ordinances that prohibited any building in the park area between Chicago's "Loop," (the central business district) and Lake Michigan. At the same time, the Olympic committee announced that a decision on the stadium site would be postponed until after the state legislative session that year, with the hope that the legislature would grant the committee the authority to buy a plot of land in the park area east of the Art Institute, in the so-called prohibited area, on which to build the stadium.¹⁰

While the stadium plans festered, the Chicago committee continued to work on the preparations for the 1904 Olympic Games. In January, the committee appointed SPALDING, who had headed the U.S. delegation to the 1900 Paris Olympic Games, and William Hale THOMPSON, a former athlete and current city politician, as directors of the athletic competition and told them to "line up every sport on the globe" for the Games.

⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, 22, 23, and 26 May 1901.

⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, 12 September 1901.

⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, 12 January 1902.

¹⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, 8 February 1902.

Meanwhile, the Chicago Turners announced that they would try to have their 1904 national championships held in Chicago in conjunction with the Games.¹¹

On April 18, 1902, FURBER discussed the ambitious plans for the Olympic Games in a speech to the *Press Club*. He identified six sections of Games planning:

- 1) world's championships in all international sports;
- 2) competition in games "peculiar" to certain nations;
- 3) demonstrations of other athletic events, including a revival of the ancient games;
- 4) a military display, perhaps held in conjunction with the formation of the newly authorized National Guard;
- 5) an exposition of sporting goods; and
- 6) an Olympic congress after the Games to analyze the "lessons" of the event.

FURBER also mentioned that a "midway" feature was under consideration.¹²

At the same gathering, Durand CHURCHILL, chair of the Committee on Final Athletics, announced the tentative schedule of athletic events, divided into "*Outdoor Track Events*" "*Boys' Athletic Events*," and "*General Athletics*" The ambitious outdoor track program included more than forty separate competitions, including the potato race and the pole vault for distance, and the boys' schedule included some sixteen of the more standard races and field events.¹³

This was probably the high point of the Chicago Olympic committee's progress toward the 1904 Games. On May 1, 1902, the announcement came that the Louisiana Purchase Exposition was to be postponed from 1903 to 1904, and three weeks later, a worried FURBER wrote SPALDING about the possibility of St. Louis hosting competing athletic events at its exposition. He noted that the Chicago committee was working on a plan that would include an endorsement of the Chicago Games by President ROOSEVELT, an effort to persuade St. Louis not to schedule competing events, and attempts to involve both the press and prominent athletes in Chicago's cause. The next day, FURBER wrote ROOSEVELT, who replied promptly and kindly, but

stopped short of committing his administration to Chicago's cause, claiming that it was not the role of the federal government to involve itself in such a matter.¹⁵

The stadium idea was still alive in June, when FURBER wrote a friend that the Games committee was planning to build a stadium, some training and storage facilities, and other collateral structures in the lakefront park area. These would be temporary structures, he emphasized, and the site would be vacated by November 1904 and the buildings removed by February 1905. He also pointed out that ROOSEVELT was especially interested in planning a spectacular naval display on Lake Michigan in conjunction with the Games.

The threat from St. Louis continued to grow during the summer of 1902. On August 1, Arthur A. BURNHAM, one of the principal investors in the games, wrote to CRANE that the AAU was soon to meet in order to plan its national championships in conjunction with the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, whose organizers, he said, want "*world championships*" BURNHAM urged the Chicago committee to consult SPALDING and James E. SULLIVAN, the powerful secretary of the AAU, and convince them not to make the Chicago Olympics a "sideshow" to the exposition's athletic events. Three days later, BURNHAM wrote FURBER that "*the St. Louis people are 'making love'*" to the AAU, and that some AAU officials have already joined the committee to plan athletic events for the exposition. FURBER, who was on an extended trip to Europe with John Barton PAYNE and LaVerne NOYES trying to line up competitors for the Games, could not have been pleased when Burnham wrote again, in early September, that the exposition managers were "*pulling every string*" to land major athletic events.¹⁶

If April had marked the high point of the Chicago effort, then October and November marked the low point. Early in October, SPALDING had pressed the Chicago committee for more details about its plans for the Games and then urged the Chicago and St. Louis partisans to meet and work out the conflict, while avoiding "*athletic politics*." On October 18, BURNHAM wrote FURBER that the *Illinois Supreme Court* had ruled against any construction east of the Illinois

¹¹ *Chicago Tribune*, 26 May 1901 and 12 January 1902.

¹² *Chicago Tribune*, 19 April 1902.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 2 May 1902.

¹⁵ FURBER to SPALDING, 23 May 1902, *Furber Papers*; FURBER to Theodore ROOSEVELT, 24 May 1902, *Furber Papers*; ROOSEVELT to FURBER, 28 May 1902, *Furber Papers*.

¹⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, 15 September 1902; Arthur A. BURNHAM to Charles R. CRANE, 1 August 1902, *Furber Papers*; BURNHAM to FURBER, 4 August 1902, *Furber Papers*; BURNHAM to FURBER, 8 September 1902, *Furber Papers*.

Central railroad tracks that skirted the east side of the Loop. This meant that the dream of a lakefront stadium was dead, and BURNHAM said that a location on the north side of the city would have to be favored. Ten days later, SPALDING and David R. FRANCIS, the president of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, met in New York to discuss plans for athletic events at the fair.¹⁷

Although Theodore STANTON, one of the American representatives on the IOC told the *Chicago Daily News* on November 7 that the IOC favored Chicago because the organization would not want to repeat the fiasco of the 1900 Games in Paris, that Chicago had been selected because "it was Chicago" and that some French athletes were saying that they would not come to the Games if they were moved, the situation was looking bleak for the Illinois city. On November 10, FRANCIS and members of the St. Louis group came to Chicago to meet with FURBER and his committee and the following day, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Chicago might lose the Games. There were reports that the exposition company had already spent a great deal of money on track facilities, training quarters and other preparations for athletic events and would not be willing to give up this part of the exposition to Chicago. On November 13, the Chicago committee approved the notion of discussing the transfer of the Games to St. Louis, and the next day, FURBER wrote to SPALDING that after talks with Francis, plans were still up in the air. He asked that the AAU defer any decisions on its championships or decide to hold them in conjunction with the Olympics, wherever those might be.¹⁸

On November 18, FURBER went to St. Louis to discuss the matter further with FRANCIS and the other St. Louis leaders, and while no decision was apparently made at that time, FURBER wrote to COUBERTIN two days later that St. Louis had a great deal of money and much interest in the Games. A few days later, in another letter to COUBERTIN, FURBER suggested postponing the Chicago games until 1905, asserting that St. Louis was "trying to seize upon our games,"¹⁹

For the next few weeks, rumors about the Games abounded. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger*

reported that Chicago was a more desirable site that St. Louis, since the latter site was too hot and humid in the summer and could not host the ambitious naval display the president wanted. The *Chicago Record-Herald* said that the Games might be switched to Berlin. Yet another rumor floated around to the effect that the IOC would never allow the Games to go to St. Louis but might consider a postponement. On December 10, however, the *Chicago Daily News* correctly reported that COUBERTIN might allow a transfer but would not countenance a postponement, and five days later, the Chicago committee voted to suspend work on the games until a final decision was reached on the site.²⁰

FURBER held out hope to the end that the downtown stadium site would materialize. On December 15, he wrote to H.H. HONORE, a downtown business leader, stating that the question of a lakefront site was vitally important and that if the Games could be held on such a site, it would be a "definitive" argument against the transfer of the Games. But it was not to be. On December 23, the IOC met and approved the transfer of the 1904 Games to St. Louis, contingent on the favorable postal vote of absent members. At the same time, a rumor flew around Paris that the decision had been left to President ROOSEVELT. COUBERTIN denied this rumor, but also said he had letters from Chicago threatening to fight the transfer of the Games, although by this time, the Chicago committee seemed very accepting of the decision.²¹

The deal was done. On February 1, 1903, FURBER announced that there was a "strong likelihood" that the Games would take place in St. Louis and that Chicagoans should not let "pride or ambition" stand in the way of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, now a national enterprise with \$6 million in government funding. The official notification of the transfer came in a telegram from COUBERTIN to FURBER on February 10: "Transfer accepted" and two days later, FURBER told the *Chicago Tribune*, "We're giving up."²²

Later that month, FURBER traveled to St. Louis, talked about good will and Midwestern solidarity, and proposed that St. Louis reimburse the members of the Chicago committee the money

¹⁷ SPALDING to F. J. V. SKIFF, Director of Exhibits, Louisiana Purchase International Exposition, 9 October 1902, *Furber Papers*; BURNHAM to FURBER, 18 October 1902, *Furber Papers*.

¹⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, 11 November 1902; FURBER to SPALDING, 14 November 1902, *Furber Papers*.

¹⁹ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 19 November 1902.

²⁰ *Philadelphia Public Ledger-Record*, 3 December 1902; *Chicago Record-Herald*, 12 November 1902; *Chicago Daily News*, 10 December 1902.

²¹ FURBER to H. H. HONORE, 15 December 1902, *Furber Papers*; *Chicago Record-Herald*, 28 December 1902.

²² *Chicago Tribune*, 2 February 1903; Pierre de COUBERTIN to FURBER (telegram), 10 February 1903, *Furber Papers*; *Chicago Tribune*, 12 February 1903; BURNHAM to ROSENTHAL, 12 February 1903, *Furber Papers*.



obtained. But the Games could still have gone on without a lakefront stadium. One could have been built at a north side site, and there were other venues in the city for various events. Was it because of the chicanery of Spalding and, perhaps, James E. Sullivan? We don't know for sure. Clearly, Spalding was deeply involved in the Chicago effort but was also talking with the St. Louis people and wanted to be in the center of action. Sullivan, as the driving force behind the AAU, was in a position to create problems for the Olympics by virtue of his influence over the site of the annual AAU championships. Moreover, he likely had a grudge against the IOC, which had

Clipping from
the New York
Times
February 12,
1903.

they'd spent promoting the Games in their city. On March 7, St. Louis paid the Chicago committee just over \$6,950 in reimbursement, although an accounting statement dated March 9 details expenses of just under \$7,600. Two months later, on May 25, the *International Olympian Games Association* formally dissolved their corporation.²³

Why, then, did Chicago lose the 1904 Olympic Games? Was it because the Chicago committee had not done its work in adequately preparing for the Games? We don't think so, because by all accounts, the committee had done a great deal of work, creating sub-committees, planning for events and venues, and traveling abroad to stir up interest in and competitors for the Games. Was it because of the failure to acquire lakefront property for the main stadium? Perhaps. The stadium appeared to be an important factor to FURBER, since as late as December, he was still holding out hope that a lakefront site could be

refused to select him to membership in 1900. But without more information, we cannot know for certain. Finally, was it simply a gesture of good will on the part of Furber and the Chicago committee? Again, perhaps. But St. Louis and Chicago were rivals in many ways, and as recently as 1901 and early 1902, the two cities had been involved in a bitter dispute over a drainage canal through Illinois that emptied into the Mississippi River near St. Louis. The courts had decided in favor of Chicago and Illinois, and St. Louis could not have been pleased. On the other hand, athletes representing the Chicago Athletic Clubs were prominent performers at the St. Louis Games. We hope that the recent discovery of the Furber Papers, and other sources that they might lead us to will enable scholars to answer these questions more conclusively and understand better the attitudes of those civic leaders involved in a losing effort to host an Olympic Games.



Application
for the "Inter-
national
Olympian
Games of
1904" by
Chicago.

²³ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 15 February 1903; Accounting statements, 7 March 1903 and 9 March 1903, *Furber Papers*; document of dissolution, 25 May 1903, *Furber Papers*.