

# ORIGINS

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Historical Perspective

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# It's a Disney World, After All

by Steven Conn

The Walt Disney Company has announced its ambitious new plans for an American history theme park where learning will be fun. Yet, Disney CEO Michael Eisner insists that this will be no sugar-coated version of American history. Park General Manager Mark Pacala probably had it closer to the truth when he described the concept: "The idea is to walk out of Disney's America with a smile on your face. We don't want people to come out with a dour face. It is going to be fun with a capital 'F'." It's an amusement park, after all—save those dour faces for history class.

Years away from opening, the park is already rich with irony. After all, what could be a better act of historic respect than to bury the more or less undeveloped tract of land surrounding the site of a real Civil War battle in a concrete and asphalt historical fantasy? And in planning the "Family Farm" site someone in the corporate offices forgot to notice that the period being sentimentalized—1930 to 1945—saw a record number of foreclosures on small family farms due to the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Yet these are but niggling details, which undoubtedly won't interfere with history as Disney wishes to portray it.

The proposed project startled some observers, who pointed out that Disney might want to first stop the breathtaking financial hemorrhaging at its Euro Disney disaster before embarking on any new theme park adventures.

Other pundits though, pointed to the wisdom of the plan: 3,000 acres of choice, undeveloped real estate outside Washington D.C., with the Northeast's millions of potential visitors nearby. Rather than make all those complicated arrangements to fly to Florida, Disney-

*Steven Conn is a graduate student in History at the University of Pennsylvania, and will never take his kids to a theme park.*

*In November 1993, the Walt Disney Company announced plans to build an American history theme park in Prince William County, Virginia, just thirty miles from Washington D.C. "Disney's America" will combine amusement park attractions with vignettes of American life and history.*

*Disney's proposal divides the park into different thematic areas where visitors can interact with the past. Sections include "Civil War Fort", where battles will be re-enacted and the daily experiences of a soldier portrayed; "Family Farm", a tribute to the nation's farms; "We the People", an area filled with ethnic food, music and other exhibits to celebrate the diverse immigrant population in America; and "Enterprise", a model factory town outlining important inventions and the development of industry. Keen visitors will also learn about Presidents, the formation of the United States, the culture of Native Americans, and American military history.*

*Disney's goal is to "create a unique and historically detailed environment...which celebrates the nation's richness of diversity." Though still very much on the drawing board, the announcement of this latest mega-plan has already sparked heated debate. Just how will Disney incorporate history into yet another fun-filled, money-making venture?*

*In the two related articles which follow, the authors outline their reactions to "Disney's America." Disney skeptic Steven Conn begins by discussing the United States' long-standing theme park mentality and traditional manipulation of reality. In contrast, J. Quaid Loebbecke lauds the educational and recreational opportunities provided by the Disney Company's new venture.*

crazed families from New York or Baltimore will soon be able to simply jump in the car.

On another level, however, Disney's America is as logical as whistling while you work: having already appropriated the present and the future in its existing parks, all that remains for the purveyors of Disney-think is to put mouse ears on the past. An American history theme park helps Disney complete its take-over of the human imagination.

The impulse behind the Disney fantasy, as manifested in Disneyland, Disneyworld, Epcot etc., is at once utopian and insidious. Disney parks are perfect places, separate from the rest of the world—which is, after all, decidedly messy. The Disney impulse carries on a long tradition in America, which stretches back at least to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The designers of that fair, which was known as "The White City", presented a dazzling, utopian vision of what a city could be which stood in stark contrast to the real Chicago just outside the fair gates.

But utopia comes at a price. In Chicago, the World's Fair was rooted in racist ideas about Anglo-Saxon supremacy—it was a White City through and through. At Disney, the price is more subtle, but still significant. To enjoy their day at Snow White's castle or at Space Mountain, visitors to Disney submit to a startling amount of social control. Disney tells people where to walk, where to snap pictures, how to behave; those who transgress are thrown into "Disney Jail".

There are few places more meticulously controlled and manipulated than Disney's refuges. This is the world as we only wish it could be: no dirt or trash (it is all dealt with through a network of subterranean passages and the garbage crews are not allowed to come above ground when the park is open);



*Disney's European Adventure: "breathtaking financial hemorrhaging."*

no injustice or poverty (with prices as steep as they are, poor people can't make the trip). Nothing but highly orchestrated fun.

At parks like the Epcot Center, Disney's monument to science and its advances, the future is portrayed as something to look forward to without hesitation. It is a benign future, with beneficent technology making everything better for everyone—antiseptic, non-threatening, anesthetized. The more the real world crumbles and the more the future seems mortgaged to debt and toxins, the more

people run to Disney.

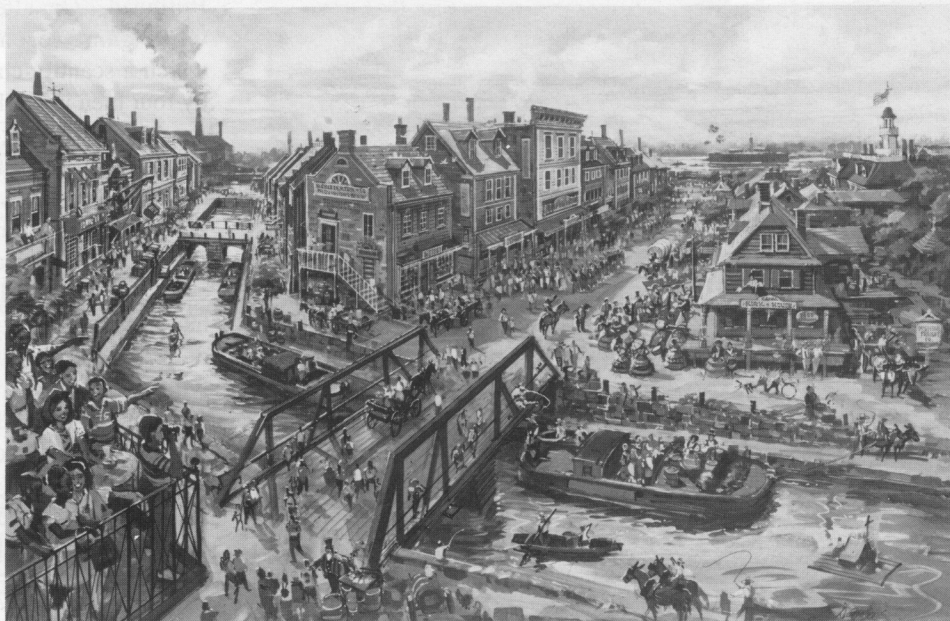
Americans seem to have a particular fondness for theme park escape. Already the 18th century is on display in a theme park at Williamsburg, where they have only recently begun to acknowledge that colonial Virginia was built on the backs of slaves.

Los Angeles, on the cutting edge of so much, has probably taken the theme park idea further than anyplace else. Universal Studios opened "City Walk" earlier this year, where for the price of parking your car, you can have the experience of walking down a *Real City Street*. (There aren't any in LA, apparently, hence the need). Well, it's almost real. It's actually a city street theme park, where Universal controls everything that goes on. To a frightening extent, reality and Disney's America are already one.

As the next logical step, then, why not take on the challenge of controlling history? The real question is whether the past, with all of its contentious characters and controversial events, will prove as easy to control as a set is to build. It is too early yet to tell, but the description of the attraction "Enterprise", a site in Disney's America, provides a clue.

At "Enterprise" visitors will be able to ride the roller coaster "Industrial Revolution". Rather than organize the ride from the perspective of the industrial workers, who struggled bitterly against their exploitation, or from the point of view of, say, Andrew Carnegie, a deeply complex robber baron, the ride is intended to make you experience what it was like to be a piece of steel going through the smelting process.

Herein may lie the secret to Disney's historical strategy: having created a present devoid of any of life's real conflicts, and having projected a future without any ambiguities, Disney now proposes to create a history without any humanity. ➔



*A depiction of the proposed "Crossroads U.S.A." section of Disney's America: will provide a "spirited portrait of mid-19th century commerce." [The Walt Disney Company]*