

The History of the Ferris Wheel

(and it's connection to Richard Somers)



Few attractions hold a place in the American imagination like the Ferris Wheel. It's impossible to conjure up an image of a state fair midway or even an ambitious [carnival](#) without a Ferris Wheel looming over all, lazily spinning. But, few may know how it all began or anything about the history of the Ferris Wheel.

Interestingly, the answer is this: a competitive group of engineers and architects from the United States wanted to outdo the French and their masterpiece, the Eiffel Tower.

But before that, a version of the [Ferris Wheel](#) had already appeared as far back as the 17th Century, and more modern versions were in use in places such as Asbury Park, Atlantic City and [Coney Island](#).

History of the Ferris Wheel: Humble Beginnings

There are writings dating as far back as the 17th century that describe various machines that were essentially early prototypes of Ferris Wheels.

For example, Peter Mundy, who traveled across Europe and Asia from 1608-1667, included descriptions of “pleasure wheels” in which chairs hung by rope from a large wheel which were turned by a team of men.

Roman Pietro Della Valle also wrote about a Great Wheel at the Ramadan festival in Constantinople in 1615. Various incarnations of the Great Wheel continued to crop up across Europe over the next few centuries, as well as India, according to the BBC.

William Somers Roundabout

In 1893, William Somers received a U.S. Patent for his “Roundabout,” basically an early version of the Ferris Wheel. Somers had placed three of the wheels – each 50-feet tall – at Asbury Park and Atlantic City in New Jersey, as well as at Coney Island in New York.

Supposedly, one of the riders of his wooden wheels was a man named George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. The ride would play a major role in the rest of his life.

The United States Moves the Idea Forward

The big leap forward for Ferris Wheels came in Chicago. Daniel Burnham, an architect who was overseeing the upcoming World's Columbian Exposition, wanted to create something that was as memorable as the Eiffel Tower, recently unveiled in Paris.

Unfortunately, no one among his team of engineers and architects could come up with anything.

However, the owner of the Pittsburgh-based company charged with inspecting the steel used at the exposition – Ferris Jr. – had an inspiration, according to Smithsonian magazine. He wanted to create a huge, revolving steel wheel.

Once constructed, the wheel was the largest ever built, standing 264 feet tall. The wheel rotated on a 45-foot axis – forged by the Bethlehem Iron Company – and had 36 cars that held as many as 60 people. The wheel moved slowly – it took 20 minutes to complete two revolutions.

While he invented something that would become a staple of American life, Ferris Jr. himself did not live to see it. He became bankrupt after the end of the fair and was involved in a web of lawsuits with Somers, suppliers he owed and money he claimed the exposition owed him. In 1896, Ferris Jr. died of typhoid fever.

However, his invention lived on. Others followed in his footsteps and created new wheels. The Ferris Wheel – while perhaps never rivaling the iconic status of the Eiffel Tower – is something still enjoyed by millions at summer fairs and on boardwalks around the world.

It's also gone worldwide. London unveiled the London Eye in 2000, and some of the biggest wheels are now outside the United States, including the Singapore Flyer and the Star of Nanchung in Jiangxi Province, China.

Wherever they are, riders still experience the joy felt by Ferris Jr. – and even those riders back in the 17th Century – as they lazily turn up to a great height, looking below at a world lit in neon.

This information above was written as part of a Somers family history research project and distributed by George M. Somers III, a relative of Richard Somers, the famous Master Commandant in the U. S. Navy.

Somers' service as commanding officer of Nautilus during operations against Tripoli won him promotion to Master Commandant on May 18, 1804. In the summer, he commanded a division of gunboats amidst five attacks on Tripoli, during the First Barbary War.

On September 4, 1804, Somers assumed command of fire ship Intrepid, which had been fitted out as a "floating volcano", alongside 12 members of a volunteer crew. The Intrepid was to be sailed into Tripoli harbor and blown up in the midst of the corsair fleet close under the walls of the city. That night, she got underway into the harbor, but she exploded prematurely, killing Somers and his entire crew.