

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



The story of onetime Carson City resident George Washington Gale Ferris Jr., Ferris Jr. often is confused with Reno architect George A. Ferris. A 1996 article in the *Reno Gazette-Journal* about the former McKinley Park School in Reno credited architect George A. Ferris with inventing the Ferris Wheel. Even Nevada's former First Lady, Sandy Miller, had at one time confused the two men. It happens all the time because of the same first and last names. Yet, by the time George A. Ferris designed the "Spanish Quartet" schools in Reno, and the governor's mansion in Carson City in the early 1900's, George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr., a civil engineer who had spent much of his childhood in Nevada, had long-since died. Nor were the two Nevada families related!

Once again, let's set the record straight. George W. G. Ferris, Jr. was five years old (born February 14, 1859) when his family moved from Galesburg, Illinois to Carson Valley, Nevada Territory in the summer of 1864. One story goes that his inspiration for the Ferris Wheel came from his fascination with the operation of the large undershot water wheel near the Cradlebaugh Bridge on the Carson River -- others say the big water wheel near the Mexican Mill.

Presumably, he imagined what it would be like to be riding around on one of its buckets. George W. G. Ferris, Jr. with his family lived on a ranch about two miles north of present-day Minden, before moving to Carson City in 1868.

George W. G. Ferris, Sr.'s residence was on the southeast corner of Third and Division streets (the restored house is still there at 311 W. Third) and he surrounded his house with trees imported by rail from Illinois. The legacy of this Ferris family included not only the Ferris Wheel, but much of the landscaping of Carson City in the 1870's including the capitol grounds - the spruce that has been the state Christmas tree since 1937 was planted by Ferris, Sr. in 1876. George Sr. and his wife moved to Riverside, California, in 1881.

George Jr. attended the California Military Academy in Oakland from 1873 to 1876. In 1881, he graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, with a degree in civil engineering.

George Jr. began his professional work in New York City and designed bridges, tunnels, and trestles throughout the industrial northeast and midwest. He headed a civil engineering firm in Pittsburgh when he came up with the idea of the Ferris Wheel for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. When the 264-foot-high Ferris Wheel finally opened on June 21, it was an overwhelming success and the fair's primary attraction. During the 19 weeks it operated, the Ferris Wheel carried 1,453,611 paying customers. Its gross take was \$726,805.50. The wheel was duplicated for the 1900 Paris Exposition and, in 1904, the original wheel was moved to St. Louis for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. On May 11, 1906, the wheel was dynamited and scrapped, a Chicago newspaper referring to it as "America's rival to the Eiffel Tower". However, George W. G. Ferris, Jr. did not live to see what happened to his Ferris Wheel, dying on November 22, 1896 in Pittsburgh at the age of 37.

So who was George Ashmead Ferris who sometimes gets credit for the Ferris Wheel? This George was born in Philadelphia on January 31, 1859, two weeks before George W. G. Ferris. He was educated in Quaker schools and Swarthmore College, later coming to Colorado and northern California. In 1906, he opened an office in Reno as an architect. George A. Ferris designed most of the schools in Reno after his arrival as well as high schools in Las Vegas, Eureka, and Austin. His design for the Governor's Mansion was accepted by Acting Governor Denver Dickerson in 1908. In the mid-1920's, Ferris, and prominent architect Frederic J. DeLongchamps, jointly supervised the plans for the State Building in downtown Reno where the Pioneer Auditorium stands today. George A. Ferris died at St. Mary's Hospital in Reno on August 12, 1948, leaving a son, Lehman A. "Monk" Ferris, to carry on the architectural firm. Lehman died in 1997 at the age of 103.

The moral to this story: don't just assume because two names are similar that they are one-in-the-same person. A little homework can go a long way in not inadvertently playing tricks on the living and the dead.

For more information on George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr., and the Ferris Wheel, read Lois Stodieck Jones' *The Ferris Wheel* (1984).

Photo: Nevada Historical Society

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, January 1997. Reprinted January 2005.)