The Court Archive:
Ferris Wheel

John A. Lupton
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One of the most iconic attractions of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago was the Ferris Wheel—the 250-foot ride that carried 1.4 million passengers during its two years in operation at Jackson Park. Originally called the Chicago Wheel, it was later named after its designer, Pittsburgh engineer George Ferris.

When the Exposition ended, the wheel was dismantled and stored in pieces at Jackson Park. Ferris, through his company the Ferris Wheel Company, tried to sell the wheel to developers in New York and London, but both deals fell through. In 1895, Ferris partnered with Chicago streetcar mogul Charles Yerkes to build an entertainment park on North Clark St. near Lincoln Park, featuring a beer garden and the rebuilt Ferris Wheel.

Lincoln Park residents opposed Ferris's park because they feared alcohol sales would disturb the peace in their neighborhood. Despite their concerns and several lawsuits to prevent it, the Ferris Wheel was rebuilt and began operating again. However, city officials passed a new ordinance requiring a dram shop license to be supported by a majority of the registered voters in a neighborhood.

The Ferris Wheel Company challenged the new ordinance, claiming it was improperly enacted. They sued Chicago Mayor George Swift in an action of mandamus to compel him to issue the dram shop license under the previous law. The circuit court dismissed the Ferris Wheel Company's petition, but the Illinois appellate court reversed the decision. The mayor then appealed the decision to the Illinois Supreme Court in *Swift v. People ex rel. Ferris Wheel Company*, 162 Ill. 524 (1896).

Justice Jacob Wilkin wrote the opinion for the unanimous court and reversed the appellate court's decision and agreed with the circuit court's decision, which denied the Ferris Wheel Company its dram shop license. The Supreme Court believed the ordinance was properly enacted and that the city council trusted the people of the neighborhood to make decisions that affected their well-being.

George Ferris died in 1896. The Ferris Wheel operated until 1903 at the Clark Street location but failed to make a profit due to an economic depression and the company defaulted on its bills. A scrap dealer eventually purchased the Ferris Wheel, and it was rebuilt for the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, where it made a profit of $200,000. After the fair, the scrap company could find no buyers or a new location for the wheel. In 1906, the Ferris Wheel was destroyed by controlled explosions.

Today, as an homage to the original Ferris Wheel, a similarly designed wheel now operates at Navy Pier in Chicago. And yes, you can purchase and consume alcohol at Navy Pier, just as George Ferris envisioned for his Clark Street entertainment park.