PIONEERING WITH PLANS AND PLANTS: H.W.S. CLEVELAND BRINGS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE TO WISCONSIN

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Horace William Shaler Cleveland was the first professional landscape architect to practice in Wisconsin. His work in this state preceded that of such better-known colleagues as Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed important parks in Milwaukee; Jens Jensen, who shaped landscapes throughout the Midwest and founded "The Clearing" in Door County; and John Nolan, who developed the proposal for Wisconsin's state park system and planned important public open space projects in Madison, Milwaukee, Janesville, Green Bay and LaCrosse. Yet, relatively little is known of this visionary environmentalist, and he has not received the scholarly attention his accomplishments justify.

During his professional career spanning more than fifty years, Cleveland pioneered significant contributions to the planning, design and management of the land. Not only did he provide an important link between the American West and the fledgling field of landscape architecture beginning in the East; he also was perhaps the most persistent and articulate nineteenth century spokesman regarding the comprehensive scope of his new profession. This activity, as he perceived it, extended far beyond the "... adornment of professedly ornamental grounds ... and the private estates of men of wealth," to encompass, as he so eloquently wrote, "... the art of arranging land so as to adapt it most conveniently, economically and gracefully, to any of the varied wants of civilization."

The descendent of an early New England seafaring family, Horace William Shaler Cleveland was born in Lancaster, Massachusetts in 1814. His grandfather and father had prospered from an active maritime business and, as a young man, Cleveland received not only a formal education, but benefited from his father's broad literary interests and sailing experiences.

At the age of fourteen, Cleveland's family moved to Cuba, where his father became Vice-Counsel. Here, young Horace worked on a coffee plantation, where he learned native mulching techniques that he would later utilize on his own farm and in many aspects of his landscape architectural practice, particularly those concerned with forest management.

Two years later, Cleveland returned to Massachusetts where he took up the study of civil engineering. This training led to employment as a land surveyor in central Illinois and Maine. The Illinois work, starting in 1833, provided his first opportunity to visit the Midwest—at that time a wild, virtually undeveloped frontier. This adventure undoubtedly left a lasting impression upon the twenty-one year old and the area's potential influenced his later decision to move west. After returning to New York on horseback, Cleveland turned to a career in agriculture and horticulture, buying a farm near Burlington, New Jersey, in 1841. During this period he also founded the New Jersey Horticultural Society and served as the organization's Corresponding Secretary.

The combination of experience in civil engineering, agriculture and horticulture served as a springboard for Cleveland's long and productive career in landscape architecture, or landscape gardening as it was known in the 1840's. Returning to New England in 1854, he established an active landscape architectural practice with Robert Morris
Copeland. The two men set up an office in Boston and engaged in work to “. . . furnish plans for the laying out and improvement of Cemeteries, Public Squares, Pleasure Grounds, Farms and Gardens.”

Seeking the prestigious commission to plan Central Park in New York, they submitted a design for the 1857 competition, but it was not chosen as the winning entry.

Little is known of Cleveland’s work during the ensuing decade. However, in 1868, he went to work with Frederick Law Olmsted, the founder of landscape architecture in America, where he worked on plans for Prospect Park in Brooklyn. During this time, the Olmsted office was actively engaged in preparing a new, innovative subdivision layout for Riverside, Illinois, only nine miles from Chicago. This project may have revived Cleveland’s interest in the West, developed more than thirty years earlier. In 1869 he established his landscape architectural practice in Chicago. He could now become more intimately involved with new and exciting professional opportunities in this young and dynamic city and also with the rapid development occurring throughout the Midwest.

It was from Chicago that Cleveland, with missionary zeal, worked to extend the frontier of landscape architectural practice into America’s heartland. A prolific writer and engaging speaker, he appealed for orderly development of the land and set forth his philosophies of land planning and design in a variety of pamphlets, articles, letters, and his remarkably perceptive book Landscape Architecture As Applied to the Wants of the West.

In this publication, he eloquently stressed the landscape architect’s social role and responsibility in the newly-developing region, where a surge in homesteading activity and the efforts of railroad companies and land speculators stamped, with mechanical regularity, the gridiron plan upon the land.

By 1871, he had formed a loose partnership with William M. R. French, a creative civil engineer who later became Director of the Chicago Art Institute. Cleveland’s work now began to assume important new dimensions and encompassed the design of cemeteries, suburban residential developments, vacation resorts, parks, university grounds and other institutional projects, and the sites for several new state capitol buildings. Their active practice eventually extended throughout the region to include projects in Illinois and Wisconsin, as well as work in Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota and Nebraska.

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Fig. 1. Title from a pamphlet advertising the professional services of Cleveland and his civil engineer partner William M. R. French, after they had established an office in Chicago in 1871. (Photo from the author’s private collection.)

Cleveland’s work in Wisconsin began in 1870—just one year after he opened his Chicago office. At this time, the Board of Public Works of the City of Milwaukee authorized Cleveland, whom the *Milwaukee Sentinel* called “. . . an eminent landscape gardener whose works are all over the country . . .” to prepare plans for a new park in the Seventh Ward, on the city’s east side.

His design for Juneau Park, named after Milwaukee’s founder Solomon Juneau, was submitted on October 15, 1870, along with lengthy and thorough instructions explaining how the park was to be constructed. The entire communication was of such popular interest that several days later, it was printed in full in the *Milwaukee Sentinel.* The article
reflected Cleveland's expertise in implementing all aspects of the project.

The site for this important park consisted of a strip of narrow, steep terrain encompassing the bluff and shoreline along Lake Michigan. Cleveland's plan called for a simple, restrained design that respected the area's indigenous natural features. He noted that

"... the position and character of the tract... confine the whole scope of its possible decoration... and yet its features are so peculiar, and comprise so much that is picturesque... that no artificial ornamentation was required, beyond the simple development of their natural character."11

His design provided for a roadway at the top of the slope flanked with rows of trees and a sidewalk paralleling the upper edge of the bank. At convenient points, informal meandering paths of varying grade and width descended the bluff. Where the slope was favorable, small level landings were to be constructed to accommodate rustic seats. The natural ridges and hollows on the face of the cliff would remain almost undisturbed except for the minor changes necessary in building the paths and planting the beds of shrubbery to be located on the ridges to increase their apparent height.

Along the base of the slope, at a distance of about 20' from the water's edge, a 3' high protective wall was to be constructed adjacent to a proposed meandering pedestrian promenade. At appropriate intervals, steps would lead down to the beach. Toward the south end of the park, two or three pools of water were proposed, fed by springs flowing from the sides of the bluff.

In arriving at this solution, Cleveland sought to avoid using a costly series of artificial terraces which would be expensive to maintain, would interrupt natural drainage patterns and would not fit in with the surrounding natural scenery. As one study of Milwaukee's architectural history put it "... the concern for drainage and shoreline control revealed the advanced ability which Cleveland was able to offer his clients at a time when most landscape gardeners knew little of these issues."12

Two years later, in 1872, land for the park was acquired and construction began. However, early in 1900, the adjacent shoreline was filled extensively and the character of the park was greatly changed. Today the park is extremely popular, though with the passage of years, Cleveland's design for the site has been altered to provide for additional landfill, the introduction of the automobile, the construction of a rail corridor and other changes. Historically, it is significant for two reasons: it was Milwaukee's first real park, and it is the earliest example of the work of a professional landscape architect known to exist in Wisconsin.

So progressive and stimulating were Cleveland's planning ideas, that he was frequently sought out as a lecturer. In February of 1872, he was invited to address the Madison Horticultural Society in the Agriculture Room of the State Capitol.13 The title of his talk "Landscape Gardening As Applied to the Wants of the West," was essentially the same highly-acclaimed address he had given the previous week in both Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota.14 In it, he emphasized that "... Landscape Gardening, or more properly, Landscape Architecture, is the art of arranging land so as to adapt it most conveniently, economically, and gracefully to any of the varied wants of civilization."15 This may be the first time that the title "landscape architect" was used in Wisconsin by a member of this new profession. He went on to give special "... reference to the laying out and beautifying of cities, parks, ... and other outdoor features, and decried the monotonous results of the widespread use of the gridiron street plan in city after city. He further emphasized the urgent need for setting aside more park areas to accommodate the extensive urban growth he predicted would occur in the emerging Midwestern cities. At the end of the lecture, the Secretary of the Society indicated his hope
that Cleveland would come to Madison again "... in a professional capacity, for he knew of no city that nature had done so much for and man so little." 

A short time later, in the spring of 1872, the Governor of Wisconsin, Cadwallader C. Washburn, and members of his Park Board, called upon Cleveland to help design the grounds of the newly-constructed State Capitol. The Senate had passed an Act in March of that year which gave the Governor authority to appoint a three-member Park Board to see that the Capitol Park was "surveyed, aesthetically designed, laid out and platted, and hereafter improved and beautified in accordance with some fixed plan." 

A city-wide controversy on the placement of a fence to surround the capitol grounds had begun before Cleveland was called into service, and he started his work in the midst of the turmoil. The squabble began when Governor Washburn proposed extending the fence surrounding the square out to the edge of the streets. A new sidewalk would then be built outside the fence in the space used for horse and wagon parking. This would narrow the streets, dispel the offensive presence of vehicles and provide a more serene pedestrian environment where citizens could "...
escape from the din and turmoil of the streets.” 18 After examining the area, Cleveland supported Washburn’s proposal noting the “...incongruity of an ornamental park surrounded by a stable yard.” 19 The following is Cleveland’s description of the situation, contained in a letter dated May 1, 1872 to his partner, Wm. French:

“I took the cars for Madison at night and spent yesterday there with the Governor and the committee. The town is or was in a violent state of perturbation in regard to the position of the iron fence and I settled the question in a manner which may subject me to a coat of tar and feathers if I go there again. But I know I am right and they will think so when they see it done and the Governor and committee agreed with me. I have agreed also to furnish a plan of the capitol grounds (12 acres) at $20.00 per acre... My visit was a pleasant and gratifying one.”

True to his inherent egalitarian beliefs, Cleveland suggested that the capitol grounds become an enclosed park area to be enjoyed by all and separated from the hustle of commercial life on the surrounding square by a see-through Victorian iron fence. His plan showed serpentine walks, a music stand, a summer house, numerous fountains, statuary and urns of flowers and plants. Unfortunately, Cleveland’s design was not completely executed. “Only one fountain was built, and the landscaping was confined mostly to trees. Some of the walkways were constructed, but not as many as Cleveland wanted.” 20 The square remained essentially a rigidly geometrical setting for the handsome Capital building rather than a “more personalized public space.” 21 Ironically, the recent redevelopment of the square captures some of the spirit for the place that Cleveland envisioned well over one-hundred years ago.

Four years later, in August of 1876, President John Bascom of the University of Wisconsin wrote to Frederick Law Olmsted asking him to come to Madison to advise on “... the proper position in which we should... place our (new) chapel,” and “... give us suggestions on other points.” 22 Regarding other planning for the campus, he went on to say that “... we are moving rapidly forward to a first class institution and your work will not be lost.” 23 Unable to make the trip to Wisconsin, Olmsted recommended the services of his friend Cleveland “... in whose judgement and taste... (he had) learned by considerable experience to have much confidence.” 24 Fortunately no correspondence of the University of Wisconsin Presidents before 1886 nor records of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents between 1867 and 1887 exists. Therefore, it is difficult to verify what became of the chapel building proposal mentioned by Bascom, or whether Cleveland actually worked on the Wisconsin campus. However, Music Hall, originally the Assembly Hall and Library building, was constructed three years later, in 1879, and the possibility of Cleveland’s involvement with the site development of this building cannot be ruled out.

Nearly five years passed before Cleveland returned to Wisconsin for another professional commission. In a letter dated November 27, 1881, he stated: “I finished my work last week at Geneva Lake...” 25 Another source also briefly notes that he was active in Rice Lake. 26 Both of these commissions were probably for estate grounds.

Although he had as much work as he could handle out of his Chicago office, Cleveland decided to move to Minneapolis. When he left Chicago in the Spring of 1886, this seventy-two year old landscape architect was not moving into retirement, but into his major professional triumph. Here, he helped lay the foundations for the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan park system—perhaps the finest urban open space network in America.

From his new office, Cleveland maintained an involvement with several projects in Wisconsin. In 1887, he was called to Waukesha by Mr. Alfred Miles Jones to lay out the grounds of Bethesda Spring Park—the famous source for medicinal spring water. Jones, a former politician and active
entrepreneur, became manager of the area in 1885 and was eager to make improvements so that the Park might become a paying business venture.\textsuperscript{29} According to an article in the July 25, 1889 issue of the Waukesha Freeman:

"Two years ago... (Bethesda Springs Park) was a shady place with good walks and drives, but utterly without system or real beauty. The first thing... (Jones) undertook was the better and more tasteful arrangement of the park grounds. For this purpose he brought Mr. H. W. S. Cleveland here from Chicago, the gentleman who planned the famous South Park, and this resulted in a complete and systematic survey of the tract... (and) a more artistic plan of the shading, drives, walks, and especially of the miniature lake. Facilities were also provided for handsome croquet and lawn tennis courts etc., and right here we may say that the old-fashioned and healthful game of quoits is specially provided for with an apparatus that will no doubt entice many to take it up anew."\textsuperscript{29}

After Bethesda Spring Park was rebuilt according to Cleveland's plan, Jones developed it into a popular and profitable recreational spa known widely for the healing qualities of its spring water.

Cleveland's last known work in the State of Wisconsin was in Menomonie in 1892. According to the Proceedings of the Dunn County Board of Supervisors for that year, H. W. S. Cleveland and Son were paid $376.50 for laying out the Dunn County Asylum grounds.\textsuperscript{30} The site for this project was entirely barren and Cleveland's plan provided for driveways, footpaths and the planting of some 400 native trees, evergreens and shrubs. An unusual aspect of this project was the appeal he made to farmers in the timbered portion of the county to furnish at least 250 elm, basswood, white ash and box elders from three to five inches in diameter with roots from 15 to 30 inches in length.\textsuperscript{31} Cleveland stated "that if farmers would respond to his appeal... the asylum grounds would have a selection of trees that could not be excelled."\textsuperscript{32}  

The most significant surviving feature of his work there is the sweeping entry turnaround in front of the main building. Many of the original trees donated by the local farmers also remain.

In the early 1890's, perhaps because of his advanced age or the beginning of the 1893 financial recession, Cleveland was experiencing a steady decline in work. Yet, he managed to travel to Chicago to see the fruits of his earlier activity in the South Parks and enjoy his friend Frederick Law Olmsted's work at the Columbian Exposition. He later moved back to Chicago, presumably to live with his son's family for his remaining years.

In 1898, his good friend Charles Loring, the distinguished former President of the Minneapolis Park Board, visited Cleveland in Chicago and "found him, in his eighty-sixth year, the same genial, pleasant, unselfish character that he had known for so many years."\textsuperscript{33} Loring invited him to write a

![Fig. 3. H. W. S. Cleveland during a reflective moment late in his long and productive career. (Photo from the author's private collection.)](image-url)
paper for the Park and Art Association convention to be held in Minneapolis. Although he at first declined, Cleveland quickly reconsidered and wrote his last article, “Influence of Parks on the Character of Children.”

Cleveland died in Hinsdale, Illinois, December 5, 1900, within a fortnight of his 86th birthday. He was buried in Minneapolis, the city he had grown to love.

H. W. S. Cleveland’s long and productive professional life spanned almost the entire last half of the nineteenth century. This period, marked by unprecedented urban and industrial growth, produced great changes in the American environment. Perhaps Cleveland’s greatest achievement was his ability to foresee this physical change and develop concepts and plans to deal with it in ways that would enrich the lives of countless Americans.

NOTES

1 Other pioneering landscape architects whose work can be found in Wisconsin include: Franz A. Aust, Annette Hoyt Flanders, Henry V. Hubbard, G. William Longenecker, Annette E. McCrea, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Elbert Peets and Ossian Cole Simonds.


3 Ibid. 5.


5 Theodora Kimball Hubbard, “H. W. S. Cleveland: An American Pioneer in Landscape Architecture and City Planning,” Landscape Architecture, 20 (January 1930), 94. This was the first comprehensive attempt to examine Cleveland’s career and shed light on his many contributions to landscape architecture and city planning—professions that both were in their infancy at the time.

6 Ibid. 94.


8 Originally published as H. W. S. Cleveland, Landscape Architecture as Applied to the Wants of the West; with an essay on Forest Planting on the Great Plains (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1873).

9 Milwaukee Sentinel, October 19, 1870.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.


13 Madison Daily Democrat, February 23, 1872.

14 Wisconsin State Journal, February 24, 1872.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


21 Holzhueter, p. 248.


24 Ibid.

25 Frederick Law Olmsted, Letter to John Bascom, August 31, 1876, Olmsted Papers, The Library of Congress. On the same day Olmsted also wrote to Cleveland informing him of this correspondence.


28 Waukesha Freeman, October 20, 1898.

29 Waukesha Freeman, July 25, 1889.


31 Dunn County News, April 20, 1893. Original source, Dunn County News, April 29, 1892.

32 Ibid.
