

## Introduction

**H**enry Shaw's friend and botanical adviser George Engelmann once excitedly called St. Louis the "center of North America, if not the world and civilization." Shaw shared his enthusiasm; practically from his arrival in the spring of 1819, he envisioned the city's potential, and he would contribute to its progress—in education, science, politics, social service, and aesthetics—until his death in 1889. During his lifetime he gave to St. Luke's Hospital, Christ Church Cathedral, and the Missouri School for the Blind; in his will he named as beneficiaries institutions including the Home of the Friendless and the Little Sisters of the Poor. He helped to found the Missouri Historical Society and the Mercantile Library, was founder of the School of Botany at Washington University, and endowed scholarships for practical gardeners. His contributions to the city were more than monetary: he adorned the walls of a local hospital with artwork purchased abroad; he donated land for an orphanage but also made Christmas visits to the children there. Shaw believed in education and opportunity, better services for the disadvantaged, and the importance of cultural institutions as a means of improving the city.



*Henry Shaw,*  
1800–1889.

This concern for civic improvement is evident in Shaw's most important personal projects, the Missouri Botanical Garden and Tower Grove Park. His decision to create a public garden and park went far beyond an interest in providing St. Louis with pleasant surroundings. More important, both institutions were vehicles for elevating its citizens. Foremost in his mind was the belief that the cultivation of taste—the appreciation of nature, art, and beauty—could act as a powerful instrument of reform.<sup>1</sup> Not only could it educate and refine, it could shape a person's judgment, and the development of critical perception could ultimately raise the level of society as a whole. Shaw understood that addressing taste was as important as considering economics, practicality, and the needs of the city's future in a given project. He

viewed the botanical garden and “park keeping” as key instruments in making the citizens of St. Louis more discriminating and civilized, and the city a better place in which to live.

Shaw’s interest in this particular kind of improvement may date to his earliest days in St. Louis, when the city was an outpost and busy shipping port and there was a clear divide between the rough and the refined. It may also date to his childhood and adolescence in Sheffield, England, where he saw a similar contrast between factory workers and the landed gentry and aristocracy who lived in the countryside. Certainly his interest manifested the collective concern with social and intellectual improvement that shaped the middle classes of both his country of birth and his country of choice. And it was no doubt the natural outgrowth of his own education in taste, by way of extensive European travel and reading, which came after several decades of concentrating—to the exclusion of virtually everything else—on business.

Shaw’s belief that the discernment acquired through an appreciation for aesthetics could teach and shape individuals coalesced most powerfully in his interest in “garden botany”—the science of plants—and the art of design. He enjoyed personally arranging gardens and grounds, collecting exotic plants, and drawing plans. With age and insight he understood that he could make a unique and vital contribution to society by labeling trees and shrubs and promoting an interest in flowers and vines organized in botanical sequence. This combination of art and science at the garden was intended to aid in the development of “higher tastes and manners,” and to benefit “all classes of society.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Tower Grove Park would not only ornament the city, it would be conducive to health and happiness, and promote “the advancement of refinement and culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Henry Shaw’s life spanned the nineteenth century, from 1800 to 1889, yet figuratively he stood with one foot planted in the eigh-

teenth century, the other firmly in the nineteenth. He was representative of two periods of history both in his personal interests and in relation to the characteristics that define each age. Shaw inherited many of the sensibilities and traditions prevalent in the eighteenth century: he was a gentleman in demeanor and way of life, educated and well read, and as he traveled he acquired art, furnishings, clothing, and wine, developed an interest in architecture, and became a deeply engaged advocate of landscape. When having his likeness painted, he chose the tradition of eighteenth-century portraiture—incorporating objects that reveal the sitter's interests within the composition—to express himself. In the management of his estate he adopted an aristocratic sense of duty and a commitment to accountability and productivity.

Shaw was well suited to the image of the gentleman gardener, a station associated with an earlier age that combined privilege with specialized knowledge. In the nineteenth century, however, the role of the gentleman gardener diminished, and responsibility was increasingly transferred to hands-on gardeners trained in what was becoming an increasingly popular profession. A gentleman gardener who involved himself in every aspect of planting, nurturing, and design, Shaw gracefully represents the moment in history when privilege made way for middle-class interests, and in this way he personifies the Victorian age. An interest in innovation, education, and improvement of the landscape and society as a whole mark him as representative of the nineteenth century. Attuned to the concerns of the working middle class, and to democratic aspiration, he believed the enjoyment of nature to be a path to societal reform. He embraced technological progress and improved methods in gardening, choosing to be guided by contemporary models and writings rather than historical ones.

Shaw returned to England both before and after he became a naturalized U.S. citizen on July 3, 1843, and he retained an affinity for his native country. Throughout his life, his preference for English objects, conventions, and ideas persisted. When choosing garden seats and urns, for example, he ordered from the foundry

at Coalbrookdale, considered the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. The tiles he chose to ornament the front hall of his town house were from Stoke-on-Trent. At midcentury he still signed his name with the title of “Esquire,” evoking the English landed gentry. His friend Thomas Dimmock’s biographical sketch emphasized Shaw’s ideological relationship to England, evident in his interest in retaining the English “hereditary traits” and the habits he was born with.<sup>4</sup> He preferred to be surrounded by the things that reminded him of England: his town house and country villa at Tower Grove were filled with older English furniture, the pictures and prints on the walls were of English subjects, and he “preferred to read his favorite authors in the English editions, through which he first knew them.” Although Shaw chose to live in America, and absorbed an American point of view that balanced his Englishness, his attachment for the land of his birth remained deep and ardent.

Shaw’s memory of and respect for England also shaped his work at his garden and park. Visually and ideologically English references abound: his early plant houses resemble those at the Sheffield Botanic Garden, and his park maze was modeled on that at Hampton Court. He used English practitioners and authors as the basis for his work, in particular Joseph Paxton and John Claudius Loudon,<sup>5</sup> whom Shaw placed on a par with the eighteenth-century botanist Linnaeus and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. To Shaw, who could read French and Italian, choosing English references was a deliberate act rather than done for ease and convenience. Shaw’s ultimate inspiration was Chatsworth, in Derbyshire, which had long been recognized as one of the most distinguished estates in England. Maintaining an efficient and profitable estate was considered the moral responsibility of the English landed gentry, and Shaw’s decision to shape his own property was a reference to this tradition. Yet when he visited Chatsworth in 1851, the estate was becoming known for more contemporary projects—an arboretum and a world-class collection of orchids and water lilies—joint efforts

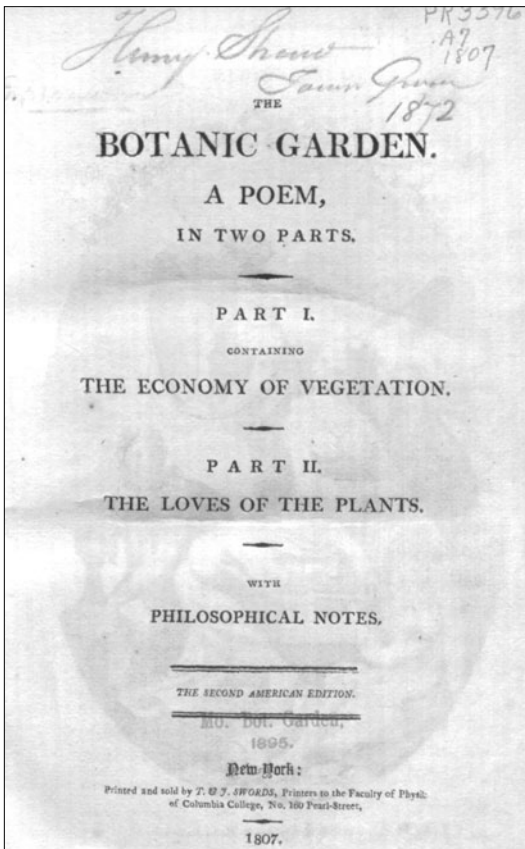
of Paxton and the duke of Devonshire. These were the projects that galvanized him.

Never marrying and without children, Shaw viewed his villa, and ultimately his park and garden, as a legacy in lieu of the family he did not have and as the hallmark of dignity in place of the ancestry he lacked. Shaw's choice of Chatsworth as a model for his own "ancestral" home and grounds may reflect an affinity he perceived between himself and the sixth duke of Devonshire (1790–1858). Growing up not far from Chatsworth, Shaw knew of William Spencer Cavendish and likely viewed him, and his circumstances, with admiration. Of the same generation (Cavendish was ten years older than Shaw), both had reserved personalities yet were eager to share their ideas and enthusiasm with people of all positions and rank. Cavendish would inherit both title and property at the age of twenty-one on the death of his father; Henry Shaw, "Esquire," would work to acquire the American equivalent. Both men were "bit by gardening" and aware of its contribution to society, and that neither married allowed each to devote his time to projects too demanding for one with family responsibilities. The home and landscape of the "Bachelor Duke" were the abiding loves of Cavendish's life,<sup>6</sup> and the same can be said of Shaw, who in old age would refer to his plants as his family, in need of nurturing.

Henry Shaw's garden and park were a manifestation of a growing public interest in botany, which had begun in the eighteenth century. Discoveries that resulted from voyages of exploration prompted curiosity about plants and encouraged the collection of exotic specimens from the far corners of the world. Gentlemen connoisseurs and amateur scientists were the first to be drawn to this field of inquiry, but as the eighteenth century progressed the subject was no longer reserved for specialists, becoming more accessible, in part, because of the system of plant classification de-

vised by Linnaeus. The well-read and well-to-do indulged their new interest in plants by reading descriptive books on the subject; it became a major topic of conversation in cultivated drawing rooms. Poetry such as Erasmus Darwin's 1789 *Loves of the Plants* (which Henry Shaw owned), which combined the scientific language of botany with references to human sexuality, made for popular, and controversial, reading. Botany also became fashionable in the decorative arts: prints and paintings of exotic specimens, similar to those in Robert Thornton's *Temple of Flora* (1799), hung on walls papered with botanical motifs. Gardens and conservatories included a steadily widening range of plants, their hot colors and unusual shapes contrasting with plants native to the site. Entire collections of a given type were prized; for ex-

*Title page and frontispiece from Henry Shaw's copy of Erasmus Darwin's Loves of the Plants (1789).*



*“Botanizing” at the  
Missouri Botanical  
Garden, 1890.*



ample, collections of ericaceous plants called “American gardens” could be found across England.

In the nineteenth century the capacity of botany to teach and reform made it a proper hobby for an increasingly broad audience including women and young children. What had been a scholarly, then a genteel, interest became a widespread phenomenon among the working class. The study of plants and their collection, called “botanizing,” prompted the formation of botanical clubs that organized excursions and fieldwork. Interest was no longer limited to exotic specimens brought from afar; amateur collectors were drawn to the native plants that could be gathered nearby. Scrutinizing mosses, dissecting flowers, and organizing flowering plants by petal color became popular activities (Shaw himself made scrapbooks of pressed flowers for two young ladies



who lived near him in the city). Magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* published articles entitled “Botany as a Study for Young Ladies” and “The Collection and Preservation of Plants,” and children learned the subject in textbooks such as Asa Gray's *Botany for Young People and Common Schools* (1858). Soon amateur botany would evolve into a broader field of interest, referred to as “Nature-Study” by the horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey and his contemporaries, which taught youngsters to appreciate the whole of the environment.

The popularity of botany was fueled in part by the nineteenth-century spirit of reform. Botanizing combined physical exercise with the gathering of practical knowledge, promoted intellectual development by improving one's ability to observe and classify information, and enhanced mental discipline by improving memory and reasoning.<sup>7</sup> It added not only to personal knowledge but to the country's knowledge of its own natural history. Contemporary sources praised the characteristic that Henry Shaw appreciated most: botany's ability to promote gentility—refinement, respectability, and politeness—characteristics necessary for a cultivated life. The study of botany was seen as a means of improving the young and the poor, of making wiser people and better citizens, of elevating society. It was in this nineteenth-century context of reform and education that botany, the science that combined “pleasure with improvement,”<sup>8</sup> had its greatest impact.

Henry Shaw remained intimately engaged at his garden and park until his death at eighty-nine years of age, even handling the payroll personally until one month before he died. Seeing the public enjoy and learn at the garden and park was his “bright and unailing pleasure.”<sup>9</sup> For forty years, he could, from the tower of his villa, take in the garden's parterres and observation tower to the north or work being done in the kitchen gardens to the south; in the distance he could distinguish the trees and drives of Tower Grove Park. His appreciation for parks as vehi-

*View north from  
Tower Grove House  
through the grove  
toward the  
conservatory, 1900.*



cles of social reform, his understanding of the needs and workings of St. Louis, his concern for “economy,” and his deep interest in botany, aesthetics, and the gardenesque method shaped the sweep of prairie he had purchased nearly fifty years earlier. After he was gone many would remember the enthusiasm and style with which Henry Shaw had lived, including the celebration on his eighty-first birthday, when he illuminated the garden with Japanese hanging lanterns and ornamented Tower Grove House by spelling out in vivid red flowers the word *Salve*—Latin for “welcome.”