

Henry Shaw's Victorian Landscapes: The Missouri Botanical Garden and Tower Grove Park
Carol Grove

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The Missouri Botanic Garden opened to the public in 1859 and is the oldest continuously operating botanic garden in the USA, now ranking with Kew as a world-renowned scientific and educational institution. Tower Grove Park is the finest Victorian urban park in America. Carol Grove, who teaches landscape studies at the University of Missouri, has written the story of their founding by Henry Shaw, born in England in 1800. Shaw grew up near Chatsworth, Derbyshire, and was educated at Mill Hill, Middlesex, on the site of eighteenth-century plant collector Peter Collinson's botanic garden. Grove traces Shaw's love of plants, landscape design, and architecture to these childhood associations. In 1819

Shaw crossed the Atlantic and made his way to the pioneer town of St Louis on the Mississippi. He was a talented entrepreneur who took pleasure riding the prairie, and eventually bought land which became the site of his country home, later evolving into the Botanic Garden, and Tower Grove Park. Both were intended for the enjoyment and education of the public. At age forty, by then a rich man, Shaw returned to Britain in the first of three extended tours, which included much of Europe and Egypt, visiting gardens, parks, institutions, and Crystal Palace at The Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park, London. During this travelling decade Shaw collected art, artefacts and books – his library in St Louis included works by authors such as Humphry Repton, Joseph Paxton, Andrew Jackson Downing, John Lindley, and John Claudius Loudon. Planning his botanic garden in the 1850s Shaw consulted with William J. Hooker at Kew, and Asa Gray at Harvard, Massachusetts, who introduced him to plant collector George Engelmann. Their focus was scientific study – museum and library – but Shaw, while following Loudon's tripartite garden/fruticetum/arboretum organization, believed the arts of gardening and architecture beneficial to society and planned, for public pleasure, a grand entrance gate, fanciful structures, and elegant planting design motifs. Shaw's Garden opened to the public in 1859 and flourished under gardener James Gurney, who had worked with Robert Marnock at Regents

Park, London, and became renowned for the cultivation and breeding of Victoria water lilies.

Shaw's focus then turned to 289 acres of adjoining land that he donated to the city of St Louis for a public park, opened in 1872. Grove draws parallels between Birkenhead, the Derby Arboretum and Loudon's writings on public parks to Shaw's gardenesque concept, which contrasted with contemporary picturesque Central Park. Tower Grove Park incorporated 7 miles of paths for horse, vehicle and pedestrian; a sailboat pond with mock ruins; four entrance gates with lodges; two palm houses; a music stand encircled by busts of Shaw's favourite composers; eleven ornamental pavilions; and seventeen thousand trees, shrubs and vines. Perimeter houses were planned, but only the model villa was built; it now serves as the Park Director's residence.

Since his death in 1880 the Botanic Garden has changed in style, focus, and size and would be unrecognizable to Shaw today, yet it still serves his intention as a pleasurable and educational public attraction. At Tower Grove Park amenities have been added while retaining the original character and buildings. After many years of decline Tower Grove Park was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989; and it has been much restored since. It is a rare and fine example of a nineteenth-century public park.

Grove used Shaw's journals, receipts, sketches, and meticulous account books recording plant habits, locations, and sources to find the character of Shaw, landscape gardener. The result is an enjoyable book about a most interesting pioneer and his contributions to public open space. Grove sets the story in the context of nineteenth-century mid-west America, with background commentary on social, scientific and aesthetic forces on both sides of the Atlantic. For the lay reader Grove provides a primer in eighteenth- to nineteenth-century landscape history with, for example, pages devoted to plant exploration, and a lengthy discussion of picturesque and gardenesque philosophy. Landscape historians will appreciate the valuable accounts of one of the world's most important botanic gardens, and a charming nineteenth-century public park of significance to all who are interested in landscape architecture.

The text is well supplemented by photographs and plans (unfortunately not listed) from the archives of Missouri Botanical Garden and Tower Grove Park, and recent photographs by Carol Betsch.

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