Despite a career that ultimately encompassed an estimated 1,600 commissions across the nation, a large corpus of articles on plants, landscape design, and planning, and a leading role in founding the American Society of Landscape Architects, Warren H. Manning (1860–1938) has remained puzzlingly understudied for years. Manning began his career as a nurseryman for his family’s business before entering the design field as a planting assistant in Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.’s office. He worked there from 1888 until 1896 and gained considerable experience through his involvement with many prominent commissions across the United States. Setting out on his own after leaving Olmsted’s firm, Manning established his practice in Boston and quickly built an initial client base designing gardens and landscapes for residences and large estates.

In the decades since his death in 1938, his career has received spotty attention. Norman T. Newton’s 1971 book, Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture, recognized Manning primarily for his engagement as a founding member and later president of ASLA while making a tantalizing brief mention of his “remarkably varied” practice. Detailed investigations of Manning’s career did not emerge until the 1980s when William Grundmann, ASLA, a professor in the department of landscape architecture at Iowa State University, began organizing and writing on the collection of Manning’s papers held at that institution. Since then, a handful of articles and books on individual Manning projects have materialized, but there remained no comprehensive overview of his wide-ranging activities. While the long and wide shadows cast by Olmsted and the breadth of scholarship on his office sometimes obscure the generation of practitioners who directly followed him, the dearth of scholarship on Manning might also be attributed to the disposal of several truckloads of Manning’s documents after his death, when many former clients showed no interest in receiving project records.

This new publication is then a valuable and necessary corrective to these omissions and presents evidence of Manning’s extensive contributions as both a landscape architect and an environmental planner. In many ways, this volume seems long overdue, particularly given the scope of Manning’s undertakings and the various landscape architects who trained in his office before establishing their own careers, including Fletcher Steele and Dan Kiley. The research that underpins the book traces its origins to the Library of American Landscape History’s Warren H. Manning Research Project, initiated in 2004. The goals and intended products included creating a public online database listing clients and projects, along with two planned volumes: the first, this volume, with illustrated, selected entries chosen to show Manning’s contributions, and the second forthcoming, with an overview of Manning’s career along with promised interpretive “essays about aspects of his work.”
Beautifully produced with numerous plans and an abundance of black-and-white period photographs complemented by contemporary color site photographs by Carol Betsch, this book is organized as a compendium rather than a chronology or thematic survey. Selected projects are arranged alphabetically by state, with individual entries written by 25 contributors. This format works well for a general audience unfamiliar with Manning’s work. Many professionals will also find the entries helpful because they frequently name the plants selected for projects. Robin Karson, Honorary ASLA, provides an illustrated introductory essay on Manning’s career, and three appendices offer a list of Manning’s office employees, a map of his projects in the United States, and a list of Manning’s published writings. The map is a powerful visual tool, showing the reach of Manning’s practice, with only 12 states untouched by his work. His projects are heavily concentrated in his home state of Massachusetts, other New England states, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. A large number of projects are located in the Midwest, the Southeast, and the South, with a much smaller number in the West. Manning managed to publish many short articles on horticultural subjects throughout his career as well as longer reports on parks and planned communities. The appendix listing these writings and the footnotes will be useful for scholars wishing to delve deeper into Manning’s writing.

Designed and planned landscapes are dynamic and living environments, of course, subject to changes over time. The authors do a good job of including period photographs and plans to illustrate a project’s original appearance while making judicious use of color photographs to highlight current conditions and alterations. What the book makes readily apparent is the prodigious range Manning demonstrated: Large estates, public parks, park systems, campus plans, company towns, planned residential developments, city plans, and master plans were all part of his practice. The selections presented here are intended to represent some of the preoccupations evident in Manning’s work, including his naturalistic approach heightened by careful framing of views to reveal a landscape’s most interesting elements. These projects also draw attention to Manning’s consideration of transportation networks, circulation patterns, carefully mapped natural resources, and future residential or industrial growth. Karson notes that Manning learned to use overlay maps to record and study site data in Olmsted’s office, a technique that helped him generate site analysis information and ultimately enabled his expansion into environmental planning. It would be interesting to see more detailed study of how this method was presented graphically by Manning in surviving documents. Manning’s concern for environmental planning is a compelling component of his practice, separating his work from his predecessors. Readers interested in understanding the development of sustainability practices in urban and regional planning can find early evidence in Manning’s approach. Karson acknowledges in the afterward that there are many more significant park designs, campus planning projects, and planned suburban developments by Manning worthy of future exploration. It is fascinating to realize that the book may just be scratching the surface of a sizable career.

The fact that Manning and his office accomplished so much in a pre-airline travel and pre-computer age is also remarkable.
Surprisingly, during his peak period of activity before World War I, Manning did not have a partner in his Boston office. As Karson explains, his office was not carefully segmented into specific roles as Olmsted’s firm had been. Instead, Manning’s approach was less formal, and he hired young practitioners who worked in any number of assigned roles for projects. Although Manning had hoped that his son would become his partner and successor, his son’s activity was limited to looking after the firm’s business needs. In 1915, Manning added an office near his family’s ancestral home in North Billerica, Massachusetts, housing it in a specially designed octagonal building. He hired new employees, including Violet Harrison, who worked there for five years, and Marjorie Sewell Cautley, who remained for a year. As Karson points out, Manning’s hiring of women designers was unusual for his time. Commissions slowed during World War I and its conclusion, forcing Manning to close his Boston office and trim his staff to a small group that included his brother. By 1923, Manning left his North Billerica office, rented space in Harvard Square, and acquired a few large projects. Once the stock market crashed, Manning’s practice suffered again, prompting him to close his firm in 1935. He started writing his autobiography in 1937 and died in 1938.

Manning was active during the fertile period of expansion within landscape architecture and planning that coincided with the dramatic growth and modernization of American cities and suburbs, industries, and higher education institutions. New approaches to designs for city planning and residential development, public park systems, company towns with their accompanying worker housing and facilities, and campus planning were in demand. Within this context, the book presents ample proof of Manning’s active engagement with a variety of design challenges. His horticultural knowledge, gained in his early years in his family’s nursery business, guided him in the use of native plants, although he was not opposed to introducing new plants when he thought they were warranted. His attention to specific local conditions through careful study of topography, soils, climate, and existing natural landscape elements and the role they played in his design process point to his deep engagement with the environmental systems.

This holistic strategy influenced Manning’s broader thinking about what we would call his projects’ sustainability, an approach driven by his application of environmental planning ideas. Evidence of this expansive thinking can be seen in Manning’s work in Ithaca, New York, at the Enfield Glen State Park (now Robert H. Treman State Park), which Manning visited in the summer of 1914 at the request of the local businessman Robert H. Treman. Treman purchased the land surrounding a popular waterfall and later helped turn it into a state park. Noticing that the natural gorge and Lucifer Falls site were overrun by tourists, Manning worked on plans in 1916 to repair trails and bridges to the waterfall, establishing paths that would allow appropriate future access. This led to a far-reaching vision for the area, with Manning working as the landscape consultant for a larger Finger Lakes regional parks system, identifying special flora and gorge views that were worthy of protection.
It is perhaps the nature of a planned two-volume survey that divides the interpretive from the descriptive to leave some questions hanging. The book is successful in sparking multiple questions about many aspects of Manning’s practice and career. What attracted clients to his practice, and how were those relationships cultivated? Some connections, for example, are evident in the work Manning did for members of the aforementioned Treman family. In 1901, he devised a landscape plan for the Robert H. and Charles E. Treman Estates in Ithaca, creating an open pasture linking the rear of the properties and terminating in a stone wall. The relationship continued when Treman contacted Manning in 1906 to help with the city’s street and landscape planning for the Cascadilla Park Road residential development and gorge park area. Eventually, this work evolved to larger road network studies emanating from the city to scenic attractions around Cayuga Lake and led to the Finger Lakes State Parks work. How many other projects did Manning undertake for clients that demonstrated a similar skill in expanding scale and complexity, moving from landscape designs for a private estate to neighborhood and then regional planning? Manning’s work included parks, planned communities, and campuses, all of which are environments enjoyed and used by people. More analysis of Manning’s work as it related to then prevailing theories about human relationships with nature could add to the reader’s understanding of the projects.

The individual entries work best as entry points to selected examples of Manning’s talents, offering a rich introduction to his work. The book’s state-by-state arrangement provides a clear geographical organization that can be easily consulted, particularly if planning a site visit. Because the individual entries were written by 25 different contributors, they do not readily connect to each other to present a more comprehensive analysis of Manning’s career. Organizing them by project type and comparing them could potentially offer the reader a worthwhile path to understanding more about Manning’s approach to, for example, park design or his theories about planned company towns or residential communities. Perhaps these larger links within various project types will be more widely investigated for the planned second volume.

Taken as a whole, this book serves as a sound overview to Warren H. Manning’s work and provides a useful springboard for future studies. Gathering the multiple selected examples of Manning’s various projects into one volume is an admirable project requiring sustained effort, and the editors and contributors should be applauded for their product. In the afterword, Karson writes that the contributors “hope that the portion we cover in this volume will inspire others to create an increasingly comprehensive view of Manning’s life’s work.” Manning’s importance comes across in his dedication to understanding the environment of particular areas and regions and thinking about broader environmental planning objectives in his projects. With absorbing source material such as the projects found in this publication, future scholars and historians can immerse themselves in Manning’s built work and continue to elucidate various aspects of his career, expanding our understanding of this significant figure for American landscape and planning history.

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