

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

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At the age of eighteen, Henry Shaw (1800-1889) left his home, the industrial town of Sheffield, England, to import manufactured goods from St. Louis via the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Two decades of financial success in St. Louis allowed him to relinquish his business operations and take up more genteel pursuits. In 1840 he began nearly ten years of travel, which exposed him to museums and botanical gardens in Europe, Asia Minor, and Russia. He also visited Chatsworth, in Derbyshire, England, where he saw Joseph Paxton's arboretum and the duke of Devonshire's world-class botanical collection. He vowed to create a similar cultural enterprise in St. Louis, his adopted home. Over the next three decades, Shaw fulfilled his ambition, transforming his estate, Tower Grove, into one of the nation's leading botanical gardens. Carol Grove chronicles Shaw's remarkable story, from his early love of plants to his rising social conscience and his determined and successful quest to create a place of unsurpassed beauty and distinction that would educate and thereby improve American citizens. At the outset, Shaw ordered thousands of plants, arranging the grounds with a gardenesque approach, using J. C. Loudon's "three grand divisions" of garden, arboretum, and fruticetum. He ornamented his garden with observatories, a sunken parterre, and a "herbaceous ground" of plants scientifically arranged. He consulted with William Jackson Hooker, the director of the Royal Botanical Garden at Kew, and enlisted the Harvard botanist Asa Gray to guide him in establishing a research facility for scientists. St. Louis physician and botanist George Engelmann, the nation's foremost authority on American cacti, was Shaw's primary adviser. Shaw's Garden (now the Missouri Botanical Garden) opened in 1859 to legions of wildly enthusiastic visitors eager to see one of the first botanical institutions in the country. Over the next thirty years, Shaw expanded the plantings, drawing on the newly discovered species made available to him by the era's great plant hunters. In 1867 he began intense work on Tower Grove Park, a stretch of 276 acres adjacent to the garden's southern end. Despite the rising popularity of Frederick Law Olmsted's pastoral style, Shaw again chose to design with a gardenesque method that emphasized plants as specimens, in keeping with his educational mission. He carefully labeled all trees and ornamented the landscape with exotic, Oriental-inspired pavilions and summerhouses. Beautifully illustrated with contemporary and historical photographs, this volume offers an insightful cultural history of Shaw's landscapes, among the most important examples of the gardenesque in America.