

To Beautify the City: the Picturesque tradition, the New York urban grid, and regional landscape culture

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abstract:

Codified by late eighteenth-century British landscape theorists, the Picturesque aesthetic dominated much of American landscape architecture from the early nineteenth century onward. This engagement with nature, which emphasized movement, variety, and changefulness of experience, took root in the Empire City despite, or perhaps because of, the Commissioners Plan of 1811 establishing the ubiquitous orthogonal city grid. Using the examples of designers, engineers, horticulturalists, and other specialists represented in the new volume of *The Pioneers of American Landscape Architecture*, this paper will consider how the often-simplified narrative of the picturesque, natural, or romantic landscape can be reconsidered as a broader, deeper, and longer trajectory.

Erie Canal engineer David Bates Douglass introduced greater New York to the Picturesque in his designs for Green-wood Cemetery in Brooklyn in 1838. Horticulturalist Andrew Jackson Downing praised this early rural cemetery landscape and launched the campaigns that led to the eventual passage of legislation to create a naturalized park in Manhattan. While the seminal position of Central Park in the history of American landscape architecture and the central roles of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and Calvert Vaux in its creation are widely acknowledged, other key participants in the making of the Picturesque park deserve much fuller examination. The park benefited greatly from the sophisticated knowledge of plant material and design acumen of Austrian-born Ignatz Anton Pilat. The civil engineers John Bogart and John Yapp Culyer both contributed to the success of Central Park and launched regional and national careers from their experiences both there and at other New York area parks.

Even after Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. moved his residence and office from Manhattan to suburban Brookline, Massachusetts in 1883, the legacy of Olmsted firm's Picturesque landscapes continued to shape the public and private landscapes of the greater New York City region, either through direct commissions or through projects undertaken by former members of the firm. The work of Olmsted-trained Harold Hill Blossom in New Jersey's Essex County Parks, the Olmsted collaborations with John Rowlett Brinley on New Jersey great estates, or Olmsted's Leon Henry Zach's supervisory roles in New York City's public landscape commissions, financed by the Rockefeller family, exemplify these relationships.

Following in the footsteps of Downing, horticulturalist-designers also added significantly to the character of the regional landscape. From the work of Harold Caparn at the Bronx Zoo and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens to the private arboreta of Julian Francis Detmer in Tarrytown, New York to Lester Collins' magical gardens for Innisfree, one can trace the Picturesque sensibility well into the twentieth century.