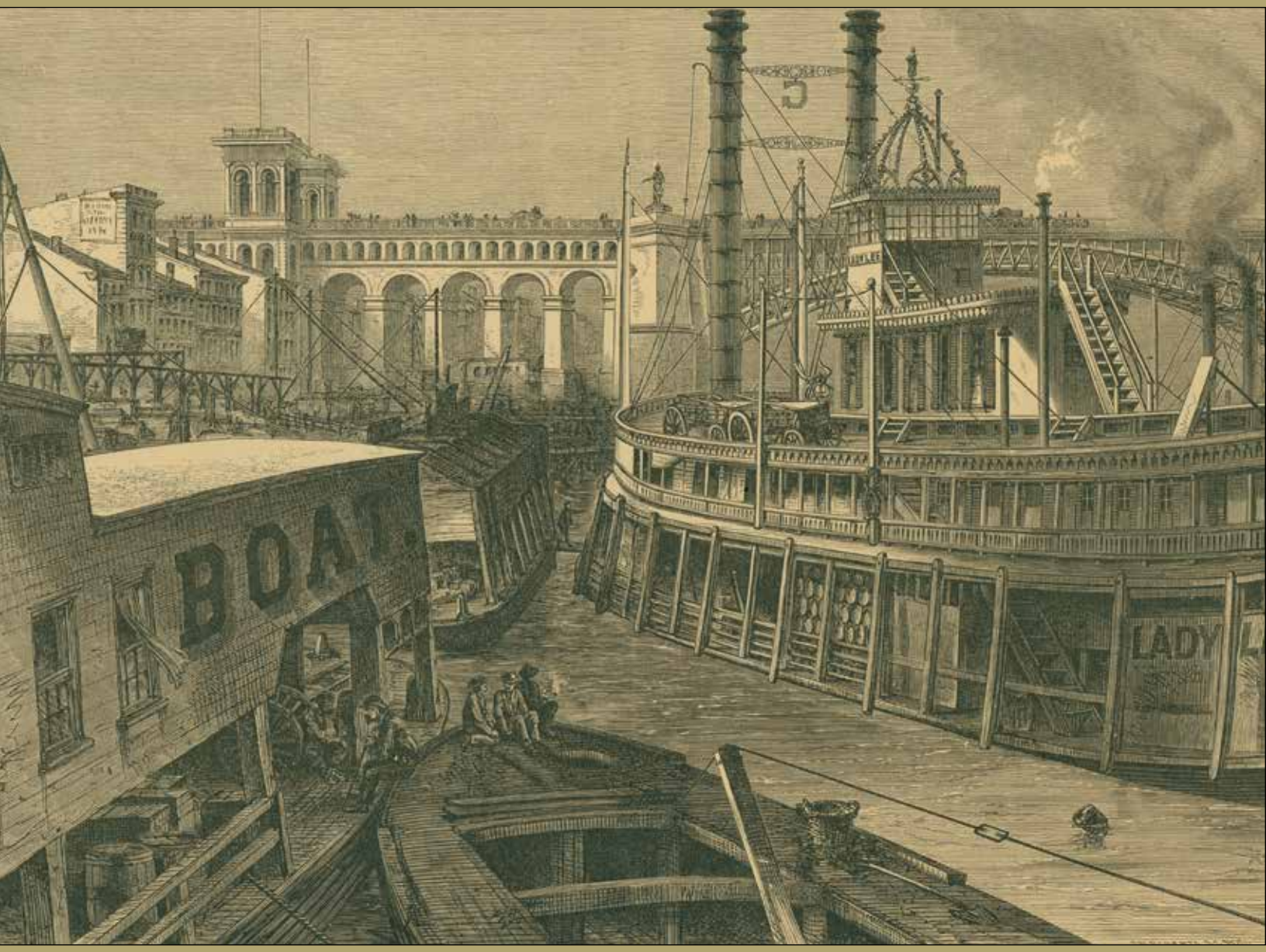
A Frontier City Through a Planner's Eyes:

Frederick Law Olmsted's Visit to St. Louis

BY JEFFREY SMITH

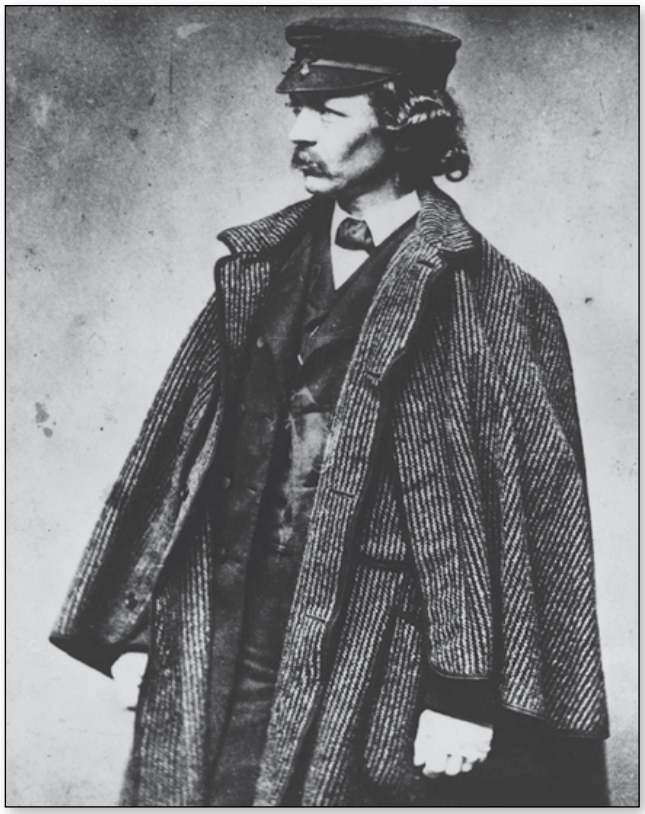


When Olmsted stepped off the ferry, he saw one of the bustling riverfronts in the United States. Even when Olmsted was in St. Louis, the Mississippi waterfront was busy supplying vast areas on steamboats. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

Perhaps the most striking part of Frederick Law Olmsted's *Journey in the West* is his proclamation in the first sentence that in St. Louis, the westernmost city he visited, "there is nothing peculiarly western." One can't help but wonder what a New Yorker like Olmsted expected: Indian wars in the city limits? Buffalo wandering the streets? A city of log cabins?

One thing is certain, though. Much of the St. Louis that Olmsted saw in April 1863 was fairly new. A devastating fire in May 1849 destroyed more than 900 buildings near the riverfront after the steamer *White Cloud* caught fire and ignited other steamboats and part of the city, much of which was replaced during the 1850s. Besides that, St. Louis was a burgeoning city. With some 160,000 souls on the eve of the Civil War in 1860, its population was more than double that of 1850, making it the eighth-largest city in the United States. To us, it seems like quite a sight to behold.

So, what brought him to St. Louis in 1863? By the start of the Civil War, Frederick Law Olmsted was already well known in the field of landscape design. Today, we think of him (along with Andrew Jackson Downing) as the father of landscape architecture. By the war's start, he and his partner, Calvert Vaux, had already started designing Central Park in New York. When the war started, Olmsted took a leave of absence as director of Central Park to join the war effort as Executive Secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission—so named for its role in promoting health and sanitation in military encampments. A forerunner of the American Red Cross, the Sanitary Commission had many functions—caring for the wounded, delivering humanitarian aid to the front, overseeing some procurement of supplies. In this capacity, it was the general umbrella organization for Soldiers' Aid Societies—local organizations of women taking on tasks as varied as caring for wounded soldiers, producing foodstuffs and bandages, and sponsoring fetes to raise money for the war effort. In St. Louis, local leaders organized a similar organization, the Western Sanitary Commission, led by local businessman James Yeatman and Unitarian minister and Washington University founder William Greenleaf Eliot.[1] Initially, the Western Sanitary Commission was to support efforts in the western theater, but Olmsted crossed swords with Yeatman in 1862 when the St. Louisans started raising money among wealthy abolitionists in New England, which Olmsted considered poaching.[2] The relationship was already less than ideal; Olmsted wanted the westerners under the national commission rather than, as he saw it, a rival. But he finally resigned himself to it in February 1862, remarking that as long as the group in St. Louis agreed to help all Union men rather than Missourians only, there was little Olmsted could do.[3] But the fundraising back east renewed tensions; in



Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) ranks among the first landscape architects in the United States. Although an administrator with the U.S. Sanitary Commission, Olmsted is best known for his landscape work on public parks with his partner, Calvert Vaux. By the end of his life, Olmsted ranked among the nation's most revered landscape architects. *(Image: National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)*

Wagons of goods and supplies from the Sanitary Commission were orchestrated through Olmsted's offices, connecting production in the states with battlefield needs. James Gardner, one of the most famous photographers of the Civil War, took this photo in 1865. *(Image: Library of Congress)*

What follows, then, is an excerpt from Olmsted's *Journey in the West* describing his visit to St. Louis in the spring of 1863, in the midst of the Civil War. It is reprinted with permission from the Johns Hopkins University Press.

April Olmsted admonished Yeatman, and asked what would happen if other places raised money in the east as well. "Others less fortunate than St. Louis has been in possessing men of earnestness, energy and eloquence," Olmsted noted, "might, although their needs were greater, obtain little or nothing."[4]

So, Olmsted may have arrived in St. Louis with something less than an open mind in his assessment of it. He starts his narrative with a brief account of dining at "a small villa," almost certainly Yeatman's home.[5] Given their relationship and Yeatman's southern roots, it is no wonder that Olmsted wanted to look down on Yeatman and his ilk.

Yeatman was one of a larger group of St. Louis leaders who arrived between the late 1830s and early 1850s to become among its civic elite into the late nineteenth century. Most were self-made men, benefiting from the economic expansion in St. Louis. They were the founders or leaders of organizations as diverse as Washington University, the St. Louis Mercantile Library, Bellefontaine Cemetery, and the Western Sanitary Commission. In many ways, their vision of making St. Louis into a modern American city was theirs. As civic boosters, Olmsted was probably not far from the truth when he noted that, "No subject was talked of that did not give occasion for some new method, (always used confidently and with certainty that it was kindness to do so) for trumpeting St. Louis. It was the same with every man & woman we met in St. Louis."

But Olmsted cannot seem to help but compare St. Louis to eastern cities. The wines are on par with Charleston, but the buildings are "respectable" but undistinguished. Shaw's Garden is nice but soon to be outgrown. It is overly focused on business rather than culture. "Even the Mercantile Library, however" sniffed Olmsted, "is mercantile."

Spring 1863 • St. Louis, Chicago

In the general street aspect of St. Louis there is nothing peculiarly Western. It is substantially built—more so than most Eastern towns—more so than New York on an average. There are few buildings of notable character, many which are respectable. The same is true of the town socially, I judge. We dined one day at a small villa. The people—well-bred and neither genteel nor stylish—were chiefly of Southern birth and of modified Southern manners. I should probably have said Western, if I had not become familiar with those which are Southern. The wines were nearly the same as at a Charleston dinner of similar scale, the talk about them was a playfully held but natural remnant of the serious Charleston habit of wine-talk. There were some good paintings and an exquisite small statue by an Italian sculptor; the grounds had a plantation rudeness, inequality of keeping and untidiness. The family, hot and strong Unionists, hating the rebels and zealous with newly emancipated repugnance to Slavery, had nevertheless an obvious, though unconfessed and probably unconscious pride in being Southern. But this they would, if it had

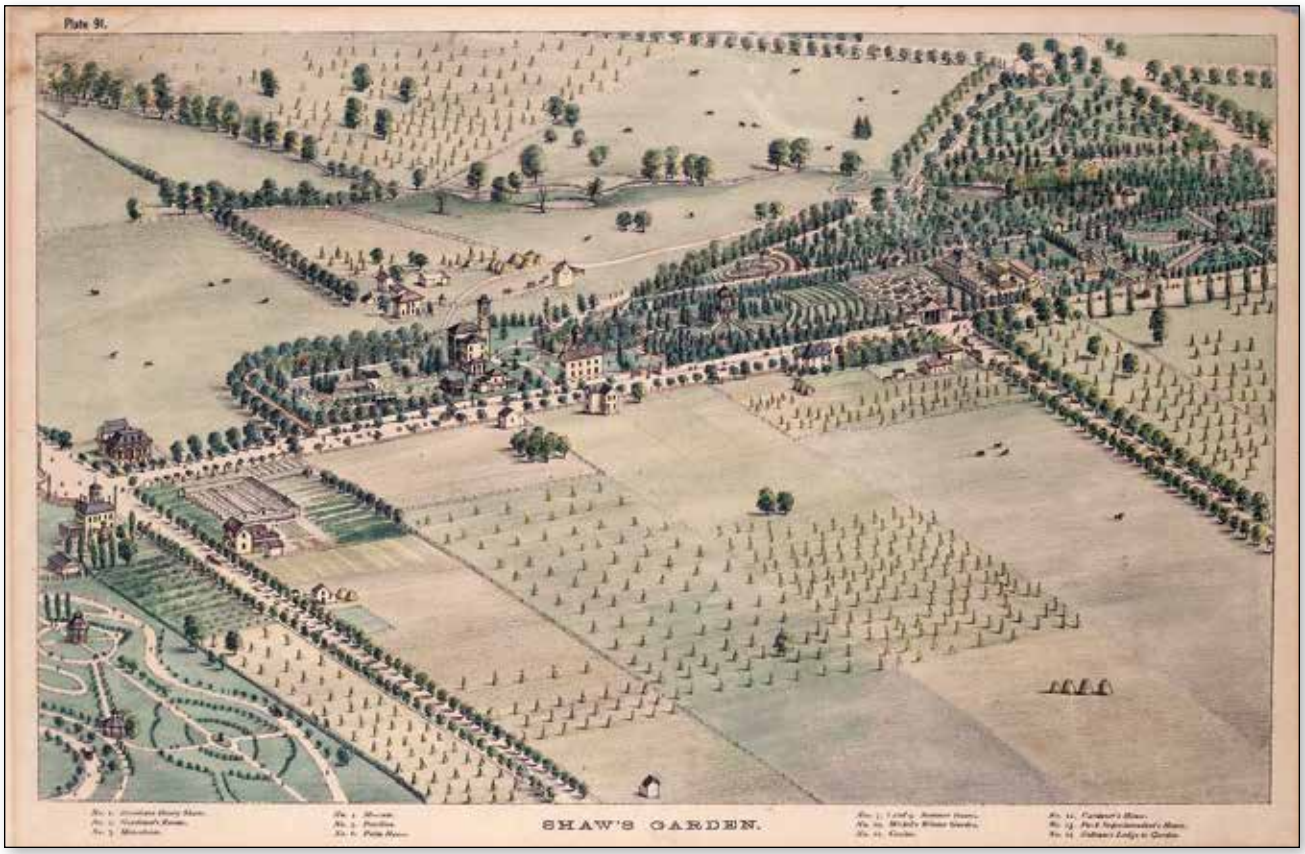
James Yeatman (1818-1901) was part of a generation of young entrepreneurs who migrated to St. Louis in the 1840s. Despite his youth, he was one of the founders of several cultural institutions in St. Louis including the St. Louis Mercantile Library and Bellefontaine Cemetery. He was head of the Western Sanitary Commission. This is a rare painted daguerreotype, blending the artistry of both photographer and portrait painter. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

been demonstrated to them, have themselves regarded as a weakness, possibly; what they never thought of concealing or suppressing or restraining from its utmost outpouring was their satisfaction in being St. Louisans. No subject was talked of that did not give occasion for some new method, (always used confidently and with certainty that it was kindness to do so) for trumpeting St. Louis. It was the same with every man & woman we met in St. Louis. The devout dwellers in Mecca do not worship the holy city more than every child of St. Louis, his city. It happened that I was enough interested to enjoy this. It was what I wanted. And the most notable thing I Learned of St. Louis was the pleasure of the people to talk about it—what it had been, what it would be.

The two things which interested me most, after the poorly contrived barracks of immense extent, and the military hospitals, were the Mercantile Library and the Botanic gardens of Mr. ___ [Shaw] promised by him to be given at his death to the city. The Botanic Garden greatly disappointed me—simply because I had sometime before read an account of it in the Western advertising style in which it was magnified by adjective force, many hundredfold. It's a very noble affair for Mr. ___ a man who came here from England, poor & who has been working very hard for the best part of a long life to be able to be munificent, but it's a dwarfish & paltry affair for a town like St. Louis and with its prospects. The next generation will be by no means satisfied, I hope, with such a baby-house sort of public garden. I doubt not the plan will have been simplified a great deal before you see it. Mr. ___, it is said, has lately proposed to enlarge his gift by presenting the city with ground for a park. There are several hundred acres of land in his possession about the Botanic garden, having at present a majestic simplicity of surface. A park of noble breadth and delicious repose of character could be made here. Such a gift would be of ten thousand times the value of the garden, even for educational purposes.

There is a danger that the bad qualities of the New York Central Park, growing out of natural limitations of the site not to be overcome, will lead to a fashion of cheap park-planning, in which a sentiment will reign the reverse of that which is characteristic of nature on the continent and of that which, except for fashion, would be most agreeable to the people. The craving, and incoherent cry of the people of St. Louis even now for a pleasure-ground and for rural-recreations is to be detected in various ways, most demonstratedly to the capitalist by the experience of a company who lately established in the suburbs an Agricultural Fair-Ground. On the occasions when it has been open to the public, on payment of admission fees,

Small wonder that a landscape designer visited Henry Shaw's famous gardens on the outskirts of the city. This drawing gives some sense of the Shaw's Garden that Olmsted marveled at in 1863. *(Image: Missouri Botanical Garden Archives, St. Louis)*



more than forty thousand persons a day have visited it; on one day, when the Prince of Wales took part in the performances, above eighty thousand. This number was pretty well established, I was told, though in part only by the admission-fees, the gates and fences having been carried away in the press. One of the treasured utterances of the Prince on the occasion, after having been cheered by several acres of close packed men, was: "I suppose there are more than a thousand people here." At least thirty thousand must have been looking him in the face at that moment, it is said. The investment of the company in the grounds, buildings and otherwise is supposed to be about one hundred thousand dollars; its receipts during a cattle-show acquisition of valuable information or other hope of pecuniary return. And this in a town west of the Mississippi, nearly one third of the population of which have been brought across the Atlantic from Germany, as steerage-passengers, and every man in which, of the rich as well as the poor, seems enslaved to a habit of incessant activity and labor to enlarge the supply, at St. Louis, of the material wants of men. The tide of commerce incessantly flows through every man's brain. You perceive it as strongly in those of the quieter callings—the teachers, preachers, physicians, as in others. All are busy with the foundation-laying of civilization. Some stones for the superstructure are being set but they are so let in to the foundations that the sense of commercial speculation is never wholly lost.

Out of domestic life, the Mercantile Library was the most respectable matter that I came in contact with in St. Louis. A very large hall with a goodly number of men and women, boys and girls, reading books, and looking at statues and paintings. These were not all very good, but enough to feed that part of a man's nature through which works of art do him good, better than one man in a million is fed by unassociated reaching out for such aliment. Even the Mercantile Library, however, is mercantile and, as I inferred from some account of its rent transactions, would hardly exist—certainly would not be what it is—had not the plan for it possessed a certain element of good trading. I think it was, in some way or other, apropos of the Mercantile Library that a gentleman said to me: "People here like very much to associate all their benevolence with business. Almost any benevolent enterprise will be taken

Created in 1853, Central Park in New York was America's first landscaped public park. Local elites thought such a park would help New York City compare favorably with cities like Paris and London. Its governance was politicized early, though, and Olmsted was part of it. The first Central Park Commission, created in 1857, was dominated by the Republican Party to keep it out of the hands of the emerging Democratic political machine in the city. By the start of the Civil War, Olmsted was well known in Republican circles. Currier & Ives printed this image of the park for popular consumption in 1869. *(Image: Library of Congress)*

hold of liberally here, if you can show that it carries a business advantage to our city with it. We are all very fond of feeling that we are driving business and philanthropy harnessed together in the same team." An enormous building designed for a hotel but not occupied, was pointed out to us.

"Why is it not occupied?"

"It really is not needed as a hotel. It would not pay expenses, I suppose, if it were opened, now."

"Why was it built then?"

"The capital was supplied for it by the property owners in this part of the city because they thought it would have a favorable influence upon the value of property. They have in effect, for this reason, given a bonus of several hundred thousand dollars in order to get the finest hotel in the city established where it will help to bring their lots and buildings more into public view. That is a kind of advertising which is very much resorted to here. Our churches are built, in that way, a great deal."

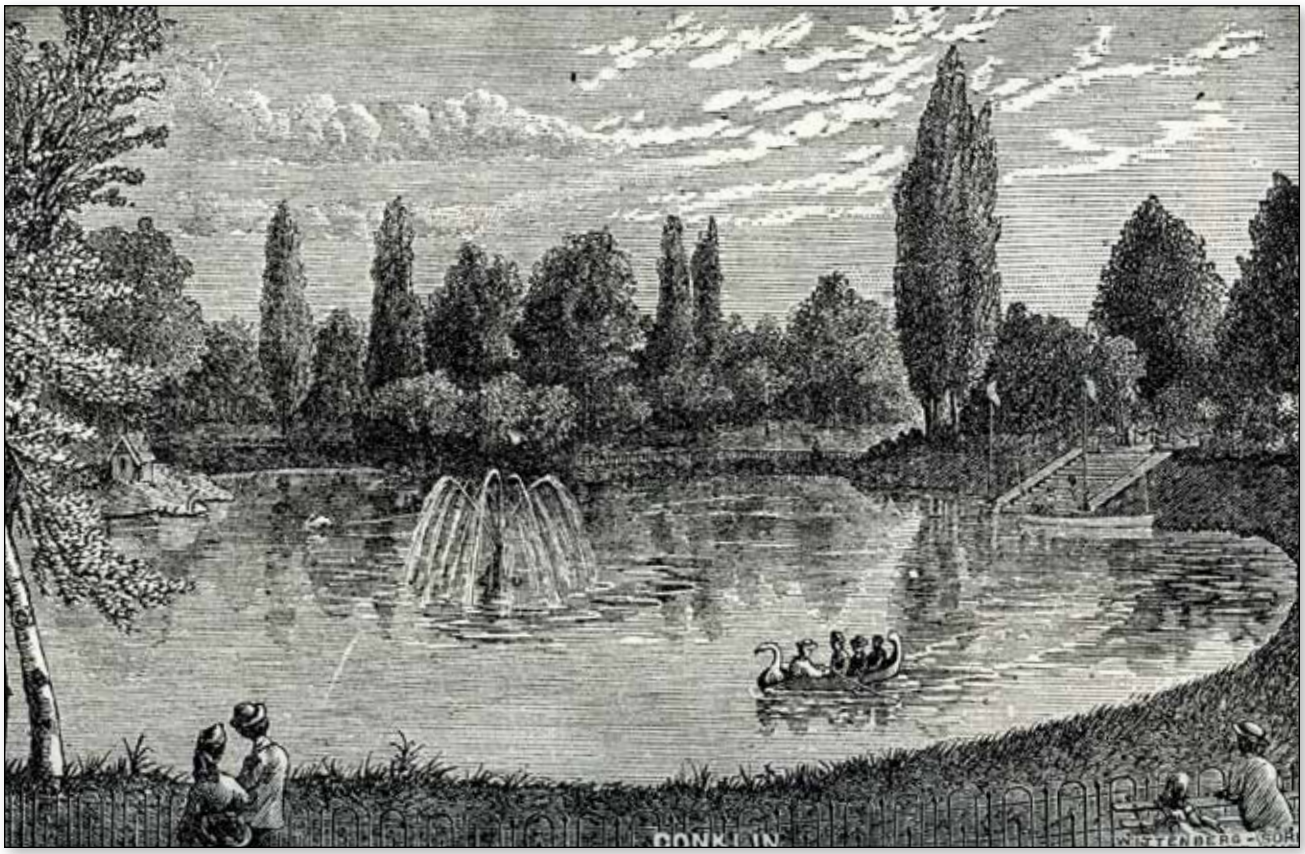
I was glad to notice that the public schools were an object of pride with the citizens. The buildings are large. I did not enter them nor meet any of the teachers.

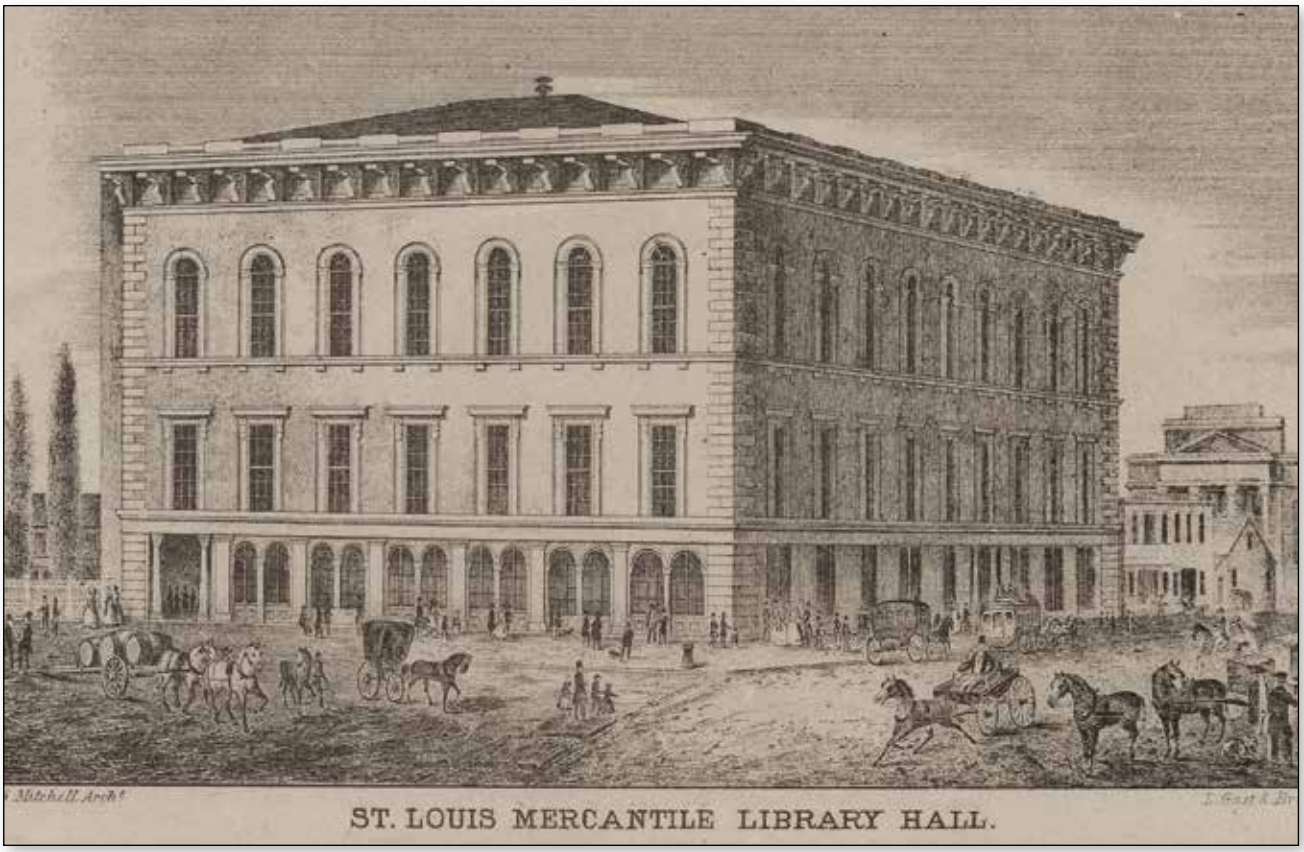
In passing through a part of the town occupied almost exclusively by Germans, on a warm Sunday when the windows were generally open I noticed much new and smart furniture and that the women were nearly all smartly dressed. I saw no squalid poverty except among negroes & fugitives from the seat of war, I did not see a beggar in St. Louis. I do not recollect that I saw a policeman, though I did more than once see and experience the need of one. It is certainly from no action of the law or good regulations or public provision for paupers that no beggar & so little poverty is seen. Yet St. Louis, it is generally supposed, suffers much more than any other considerable town out of the rebel states from the war. Its growth had been recently very rapid until it was arrested by the war. I asked an old resident, distinguished for his interest in the poor & needy, and who had been a mayor of the city, "How generally have poor, laboring men and families been found, in your observation, to improve their condition, after they have moved to St. Louis?"

He answered, "Invariably," meaning, no doubt, that any exceptions were of a plainly accidental character.

"Can you see that the children of those who came here

Lafayette Park was the first park in St. Louis, located south and west of downtown. Although the St. Louis City Council created it in 1836, Lafayette wasn't dedicated and used as a park until 1851 and named for the Marquis de Lafayette three years later. Its original design had the geometric paths of a European-style "pleasure garden" rather than the more naturalistic lines used by Olmsted. *(Image: A Tour of St. Louis; or, the Inside Life of a Great City, J.A. Dachu, 1878; Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University)*





Olmsted visited the institutions that made St. Louis seem like a "real" city, including the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association, created in 1846. Unlike libraries today, the Mercantile was a subscription library, requiring annual payments to use the books, reading room, and the rest. This building, completed in the early 1850s, included the largest auditorium in St. Louis at the time—large enough for Missouri constitutional conventions in the Civil War era. *(Image: Missouri History Museum)*

longest ago are now generally fit for higher social duties and of a higher rank as men than their fathers?"

"Universally so; with the Germans especially; they become Americans, with all the American characteristics."

There are probably a larger number of men of what would be considered moderate wealth in the middle class of England, in St. Louis, than in any town of its size in Europe. I asked my friend, the ex-mayor, "How many of these came to St. Louis comparatively poor men?"

"There is scarcely one that did not begin here by sweeping out his employer's store or office, and that is true of most of our very wealthiest men also—our bankers and capitalists. We nearly all began here with nothing but our heads and hands."

This being the case it is really more marvelous how well the people live within their own houses than how very poorly they live out of their own houses.

In going from St. Louis to Chicago, we had to cross the Mississippi in a steam ferry-boat, and this was our leave-taking of the Mississippi and its steamboat business. There are two lines of railroad to Chicago. In purchasing tickets for one of them, we were assured that the train upon it would reach Chicago two hours sooner than that leaving at the same hour by the other road, and this statement was confirmed by a gentleman who appeared to be accidentally present, and who said that he had often travelled by both roads. We should have chosen the road we did all the same, if the exact truth had been told us, which was that we should be two hours longer upon it than upon the other. The usual method was practiced of causing a panic among the passengers leaving the hotel in an omnibus, by an appearance of great impatience over the last man to come out and of reckless haste in driving, so that all but the very old travelers were greatly relieved when it was ascertained that the ferry-boat for the train had not left. On that ferry-boat however, we remained at the hither landing three quarters of an hour, being detained twenty minutes past the proper time of starting by the arrival of a large herd of swine. Swine are hard to drive upon a ferry-boat. Sometimes when they were coming nicely, slowly and methodically over the gang-plank, it would seem as if instantaneously the devil entered into all of them, their heads were reversed and they were leaping frantically away from the boat. The dropping of a gate in the boat's

rail prevented those already on board from taking part in this stampede, but nothing could stop those outside till they found themselves on the other side of their drivers, when they would, for the most part, stop and stand quietly till the cordon was again drawn round them. The last of these stampedes occurred at the moment when all but two of the hogs had been got inside of the gate. One stopped as usual and was brought back; the other, finding himself alone, after doubling two or three times, took an upriver course and ran straight out of sight. To my surprise, the captain refused to wait for him and so the Great Eastern Mail and passengers for "Chicago, Cincinnati, and the East," were generously allowed to leave St. Louis, only twenty minutes behind time. I am sorry to say that the trains waited for them. Fare thee well, Father of Waters, who art also Father of Lies to us. May thy tide be clearer and less eddying to my friend, the student of the next century.

Both the United States and Western Sanitary Commissions mobilized women in a variety of roles—making supplies like blankets and bandages, raising money, and caring for wounded soldiers. This image from *Harper's Illustrated Weekly* (the self-proclaimed "Journal of Civilization") called these women "our heroines." *(Image: Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University)*

ENDNOTES

1 For more on Eliot's role in the Civil War and his views on slavery, see Miranda Rectenwald and Sonja Rooney, "'Shall we be one strong and united people . . .," *The Confluence* 2 (Spring 2011).

2 *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted. Vol. 4: The Civil War and The U.S. Sanitary Commission, 1861-1863*, Charles Capen McLaughlin, Editor-in-Chief, Jane Turner, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 34.

3 Frederick Law Olmsted to the Rev. George Magoun (head of the Iowa Sanitary Commission), February 6, 1862, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, 262-68.

4 Frederick Law Olmsted to James Yeatman, April 17, 1862, Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Vol. 4, 306-7.

5 *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, 590.