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REPORT

TO

PARK BOARD

NEW YORK CITY

OF

SAMUEL PARSONS, Landscape Architect,

ON

VISIT TO EUROPEAN PARKS

1906

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF PARKS

THE ARSENAL, CENTRAL PARK

SAMUEL PARSONS,
Landscape Architect.

JANUARY 15, 1907.

To the Honorable Park Board of New York City.

GENTLEMEN—Feeling the importance of securing from time to time the fullest and latest information concerning parks and their development in foreign countries, and having been authorized by your Board to make investigations in Europe during the past summer, I sailed for Antwerp on July 7, 1906, for an absence of seven weeks.

During this tour, through the courtesy of various Park Directors, such as the Herren Fintelman and Eitner of Potsdam, Herren Bouche and Lediem of Dresden, Herr Lauche of Muskau, and many other managers of different parks and estates, I was able to make a specially satisfactory examination of parks in Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Italy, France and England.

Without undertaking to compare individual parks, which might seem invidious and quite possibly unjust, on account of peculiar conditions and limitations which could not be properly appreciated because of lack of time, I will present a few observations and reflections that presented themselves during the course of the journey.

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One of the things that impresses one throughout the Continent and Great Britain is the large size of the trees compared to those we are accustomed to see in the parks and estates of this country. On investigating the causes that contribute to this superiority it becomes evident that we are ever apt in America to give too much credit to the equable and favorable climate of Europe, although this does, without question, make greatly for health and vigor; but the more one examines the question the more one comes to feel that in Europe people really care more for trees than they do here, and that consequently they display a more intelligent and persistent skill in their management from their first planting to their death. This is true of all classes of society, from the humblest cottage dweller to the richest nobleman.

We think we love trees and flowers in America, and we do increasingly love and cultivate them, but we can hardly realize the extent of the regard in which trees and flowers are held throughout Europe, and the great effect it has on their superior development. For one thing, trees in Europe, judging from visits made to different nurseries, both on the Continent and in Great Britain, are more carefully selected. Crooked and weakly plants are thrown away; the remaining ones are carefully trained to stakes, frequently transplanted, and above all, the soil is cultivated and kept free from weeds to a degree seldom found in America. There is an incessant, one would almost say an unconscious effort in watering, pruning, fertilizing, manurings and employing other horticultural devices. No person competent to judge can deny that we have fine shade and ornamental trees in this country; but all the same, after a careful consideration of the question I am satisfied that the credit for superiority will have to be awarded to Europe. Nor is it only that the quality and size of cultivated trees are better in Europe; the roads, too,

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are better constructed and maintained, the turf is richer and less disfigured with weeds, and the foliage generally is healthier and more vigorous. All this is largely because the work is done regularly and skilfully, and is followed up with a better system of management. Everywhere, in every spot, better order prevails. The grass is watered, the fences are in order, the trees are pruned, sometimes, indeed, too much for beauty; piles of rubbish are banished, and weeds become conspicuous by their absence. One feels as he looks on it all an instinctive shame that the maintenance of our American parks, and especially some of those in New York, is not better.

Yet when we have acknowledged the great superiority of foreign park maintenance, we may turn with reviving self-respect and pride to consider ideas and designs which characterize the most important American parks. Modern park designs in Europe are apt to present, with a few exceptions, a curious mixture of the formal or artificial with the natural style of treatment. A hundred years ago the natural style, which yields the various sensations caused by the wind-swept hill, the high open meadow, the peaceful glade and the sunny lawn enclosed in wooded groves, obtained general recognition and sway in Europe. Attaining popularity in a marked degree with the appearance of the work of Repton at the beginning of the last century, and shortly afterwards in Germany with that of Prince Puckler and Messrs. Lenne and Meyer, and members of their school, it rapidly extended all over Europe and America, even including finally the shores of the Mediterranean, the home of the formal and artificial Italian villa and Spanish or Moorish terrace.

But old habits and customs adhere and cling in the minds of men long after later ideas have generally prevailed, and though now it is the general rule in Europe to use the natural style

in designing parks, yet often we find the old ideas persisting. Spots of formal plan, that have no proper relation whatever to beautiful open meadows and wooded glades, thrust their fantastic and geometric curves and straight lines over fair stretches of turf like discords in the harmonies of a pastoral symphony. Italian villas one respects for the fine dignity of their architectural lines, and the homely spirit with which they animate the slopes of the Apennine Hills. They are fitted to the conditions of the region and people in which they have slowly grown into being. Much the same criticism may be applied with equal truth to the older types of the landscape gardening of the cities and countries of France. They have perhaps less inherent charm than the Italian villas, and are less fitted to the spots where they exist, but they are, nevertheless, great works of art that no devotee of landscape gardening can afford to spare.

But what shall we say of these well-designed excellent parks to be seen in various parts of Europe where the clear beautiful note, creating sensations of nature, peace, vigor, restfulness or quiet charm, is obscured or obliterated by beds of red and yellow tropical plants and variegated freaks and sports of native trees? If it is desired to have splendid exhibitions of these tropical or brilliant color effects, and they are entirely proper demonstrations when well placed, as they are in the Plaza in front of the Emperor's Palace at Potsdam, why not limit them to similar spots and prevent them from defacing the fair surface of some of the finest parks in the world?

In this country we sin frequently in the same way, but, be it said to the honor of the New York parks that this false art appears little within their boundaries. Doubtless the fact that we had attempted little or nothing of park design before those great landscape architects, Olmstead and Vaux, came to practice

their art in Central and Prospect Parks, made it possible for us to begin on the right path. Indeed, it is hard to find anywhere in Europe a purer example of the natural style than in the parks of New York. In order to realize more fully how good is their constructive art, it may not be uninteresting to consider in connection with them the character of one of the great parks of Europe and one that has remained for generations an unsullied and purely natural park.

This treasure may be found in Silesia, Germany, at a place called Muskau, where nearly one hundred years ago a great designer of parks, Prince Puckler, transformed an estate of several thousand acres, inherited from a long line of ancestors, into a great creation of landscape art.

Prince Puckler worked on the improvement of this estate for half a lifetime with the greatest sympathy, and broad, as well as intelligent comprehension of its special landscape character and the results which should be attained by its development in the right way.

The greater extent and larger features of river, lake and hill-top of Muskau gave it originally an incontestable advantage over the smaller areas of the New York parks, although we may except perhaps the noble natural beauties and distant views of Van Cortlandt and Pelham Parks in the Bronx Borough, and of Prospect Park, Brooklyn. But when we come to consider the details of Muskau and stand in the presence of magnificent trees, worthy to be painted by Constable, of fine grasses that clothe the ground with green sward, of roads well constructed, and therefore easily kept in order, of waters with shores clean and clothed with shrubs and grass, that the superiority of Muskau at once impresses the American visitor.

Muskau, while it is not maintained in as great perfection as some Berlin and Paris parks, is still kept in good order, and is so intelligently reconstructed or renovated from year to year, that its condition always remains satisfactory; all the more so, perhaps, because its good order is not obtrusive. Any one visiting the large nursery of Muskau Park, established in chief part for the purpose of refilling the ranks of park plantation, members of which have been blown down or have died, or have been cut down to relieve the pressure of crowded conditions, will realize the amount of scientific forethought which is expended on this beautiful place.

With all deference to the art of American parks it is evident, therefore, that in the presence of one of the most economically kept and yet most beautiful parks in Europe, the poor maintenance of the New York parks becomes all the more inexcusable. The spirit of American progress is so impatient, so determined to achieve rapid and astonishing results, that it undervalues in its quest of new worlds to conquer the paramount need of adequate maintenance. Consequently, while it is not difficult to secure millions to build new parks in New York, it is well nigh impossible to persuade the authorities to appropriate the few thousands extra to properly maintain these parks when finished. Many reasons may doubtless be given why this state of things is allowed to exist; the fact remains that we build many parks and do not take care of them. But while the German and the Frenchman and the Englishman are now building fewer parks, they carefully and intelligently maintain those they have, nor is this all. Neglect begets neglect, and decay seizes hold of the park neglected, year by year, with incalculable and fast multiplying vigor. Hundreds and thousands of trees die; and this is not the end of it, for frequently the loss injures or destroys

the picture planned at that particular point by the landscape architect. It becomes a little startling when we look at the question in this way, and realize that even after we have seriously undertaken to re-establish original conditions we shall probably have to wait twenty years to see the complete restoration of the normal effect, and the worst of it all is that this decadence has been going on for at least twenty years with very little attempt to check it. Probably in another twenty years, unless comparatively large sums of money and great intelligence are used by those dealing with the restoration of the New York parks, they will become disgraceful wastes, that no New Yorker will want to show to visitors from abroad. He can only say, we once had beautiful parks, but through the neglect of many successive governments, they have come to be such places as you see. It is only fair to say, however, that a good beginning, particularly in Brooklyn, has been made in the New York parks in the work of restoring the quality of the soil and plantations.

There can be no question that the citizens of New York are proud of their parks, but it is to be feared that few of them realize how precious they are. The beautiful Babelsburg Park in Potsdam I found in a condition not unlike that of the New York parks. Many years ago it was greatly improved, and in fact laid out anew under the fostering influence of Prince Puckler Von Muskau, and now it presents the most charming effects of the natural landscape type—distant views, wooded hillsides and glades, and open lawns which recall our parks in the Bronx Borough of New York. But like the New York parks, for some inexplicable reason, Babelsburg has been allowed to lapse into considerable decay. The walks and roads are grass-grown and the water is run out of the lake. Some day, however, when this neglect becomes evident in the proper quarter, we shall find that,

in no long time all this will be restored to its original beauty ; for Berlin is not in this respect like New York. The habit of the authorities is to maintain everything well, and the parks are, in most cases, kept beautifully. This will make its restoration easy, when it is once determined to undertake the work. It is otherwise in New York. We shall have more to do to restore our parks to their original beauty, and if it is to be done successfully, it will be a long and serious undertaking.

This will require no spasmodic action, but an intelligent, systematic and prolonged expenditure of money. The neglect of a score of years cannot be redeemed in a season, although much may be done by skill and activity. Rich soil or mold, manure, sod, trees, shrubs, vines, better fences, cleaner water-ways will have to be secured and developed to their fullest extent, or New York parks will become a byword for bad conditions. At the present time, to the unobserving visitor, there is perhaps not a great deal at first sight to call attention to these really serious defects in our parks. The steps of decay are insidious, and rapidly advance until the dilapidated conditions are clearly evident to all. Even to-day one may readily see by the briefest examination, that the dead and dying trees are numerous, that soil has been unduly washed away from around their roots, that in some places they are crowded and need thinning out, while in others new trees should be planted to restore the effect of those that are gone. In a word, fresh, rich soil, manure, sods, trees, shrubs and vines are needed everywhere if this too evident decay is to be arrested.

In recalling the various reflections that result from a tour of a number of the European parks, one is impressed with the fact that for purity of design and natural beauty unmarred by artificial flower beds set in places improperly adjusted to the gen-

eral landscape scheme, New York parks are the superiors of those of Europe; but in the work of the skilled horticulturist, both in construction and maintenance, we have a great deal to learn from the study of foreign models.

Thanking your Honorable Board for affording me the opportunity of giving so much time to the study of these foreign park models, and hoping that the few brief notes and comparisons that I have presented will not be devoid of interest and food for thought, I beg to subscribe myself,

Respectfully,

SAMUEL PARSONS,
Landscape Architect.

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