

CELEBRATING *Our 10th Anniversary and 20th Issue*

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Letter from the Editor

Dear *Site/Lines* Reader,
The hundredth meridian separates the American West from the rest of the country. West of this line of longitude, annual rainfall is less than twenty inches a year and here a gradual transition begins from a landscape of cultivated fields into an arid terrain of mountains, deserts, and savanna. Those who have not attuned their eyes to buff-colored sand, ridges cleaved by arroyos, tabletop mesas, and sparse vegetation – a blond and rose rather than a green landscape – do not necessarily consider the West attractive or interesting in terms of place. The editors of, and contributors to, this issue of *Site/Lines* disagree.

As the American frontier pushed westward in the nineteenth century, parts of the landscape considered unfit for settlement and cultivation acquired the pejorative name of “badlands.” Dan Flores brings these “useless” areas into focus in his article “Mother Earth Laid Bare: Learning to Love the Badlands of the American West.” Several American artists, most

On the Cover:

L. Prang and Co., *After Thomas Moran, Shoshone Falls on the Snake River*, chromolithograph, 1876.

notably Georgia O’Keeffe, elevated America’s badlands in the eyes of the general public. But even elements of the Western landscape that have not benefited from a signature artist have their charms. As described in Asher Price’s “Lonesome Drive: The Wide Open Spaces of West Texas,” the flat, big-sky vacancy of endless rangeland fascinates – even before the hip art colony of Marfa comes into sight.

Succulent plants hold a particular attraction for many people, and displays of cacti are often found in greenhouses. However, in horticultural conditions that more closely approximate their native Southwestern habitats, they can be planted out-of-doors. In “California Treasure: Henry Huntington’s Jewel-Box Desert,” author Paula Panich describes how an industrialist, with the assistance of a talented and passionate horticulturist, created “one of the greatest botanical gardens on any continent.”

The West is famously the place where schemes for getting rich from newly discovered ore were rife. When things went awry in the boom-and-bust economy, many mining towns were abandoned and fell into ruin. In “Pilgrimage to Rhyolite: In Search of

the American Ghost Town,” Elihu Rubin explores one of these lost settlements.

In addition to valuable natural resources, the West was replete with another kind of wealth, that of sublime scenery. Artists such as Thomas Moran accompanied government-sponsored surveyors on extended field expeditions, portraying a part of their country as yet unseen by many Easterners. In “Shoshone Falls: The Niagara of the West,” Joni Kinsey tells the story of how the display of a magnificent Moran canvas failed to garner sufficient Congressional support for a bill to create Shoshone Falls National Park. Instead the Congress passed the 1902 National Reclamation Act, after which a massive hydroelectric dam impounded the flow of the Snake River just upstream from the falls, thereby diminishing their crashing cascade of water and foreclosing the opportunity to preserve one of the sublime wonders of the American West.

The so-called winning of the West involved transcontinental railroads built by Gilded-Age Eastern financiers. In “Eastern Design in a Western Landscape: Olmsted, Richardson, and the Ames Monument,”

Ethan Carr describes how the achievement of Oakes and Oliver Ames in building the Union Pacific portion of the first transcontinental railroad is memorialized by Henry Hobson Richardson’s sixty-foot-high pyramidal monument constructed of rusticated granite blocks quarried from a nearby outcrop. Those who opt to take the short unpaved road off Interstate 80 twenty miles east of Laramie, Wyoming, will see how this magnificent structure of architectural genius sits in stark grandeur on a knoll above the treeless high plains.

In closing, I am proud to say that 2015 marks the tenth anniversary of the Foundation for Landscape Studies and that this issue is the twentieth publication of our biannual journal *Site/Lines*. Today the largest question we face, if we are to move forward into the next decade, is one of funding. *Site/Lines* is a donor-supported publication, and its continuance depends on votes of approval from readers in the form of regular donations. Because of the high cost of printing and mailing, we have discussed the option of publishing the journal solely in an electronic format. This idea has met with near-unanimous rejection by readers and

2015 Book and Grant Awards

2015 John Brinckerhoff Jackson Book Prize Winners

Patricia Bouchenot-Déchin and Georges Farhat
André Le Notre in Perspective
Yale University Press, 2014

Vittoria Di Palma
Wasteland: A History
Yale University Press, 2014

Sonja Dümpelmann
Flights of Imagination: Aviation, Landscape, Design
University of Virginia Press, 2014

Marion Harney
Place-Making for the Imagination: Horace Walpole and Strawberry Hill
Ashgate, 2013

Susan Herrington
Cornelia Hahn Oberlander: Making the Modern Landscape
University of Virginia Press, 2014

2015 David R. Coffin Publication Grant Winner

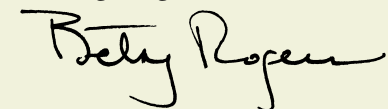
Elizabeth Milroy
A Greene Country Town: William Penn’s Legacy and the Birth of Philadelphia’s Public Parks
Penn State Press

friends with whom we have spoken.

We agree that the design and format of *Site/Lines*, which make it satisfying to the eye and hand as well as practical to carry in a pocketbook or briefcase, should not be sacrificed. Heretofore we have sent copies of each issue to approximately two thousand persons presumed to have an interest in our principal subject, place, regardless of whether they have ever returned our solicitation envelope with a check or made an online donation. Now it is essential to make the necessary economy of cutting back

our mailing list, and in the future only readers who contribute on an annual basis, in whatever amount they deem desirable, will receive *Site/Lines*. Please, therefore, if you have not already made a gift to the Foundation for Landscape Studies within the last three years and wish to receive our next issue, send us your contribution now to help underwrite its future publication.

With gratitude
and good green wishes,



Elizabeth Barlow Rogers
President

Strange Beauty: Landscapes of the American West

Time and Place: Deep Thoughts on a Journey Down the Colorado River

You can't consider the formation of the Grand Canyon and the Colorado, the river that flows through it, without considering the subject of time. In doing so, you are confronted with relative time scales: the brevity of our human lives – *mortal* time; the centuries and millennia memorialized in written records and archaeological finds – *historical* time; and the hundreds of millions of years in which the processes responsible for Earth's formation and its physiognomy occur – *geological* time.

Then there is another kind of time – *suspended* time – a period in which normal life simply stops and another reality – one with an almost dreamlike quality – takes its place. Suspended time implies life according to the diurnal rhythm of light and darkness rather than the calendar and the clock. It is willing acceptance of separation from the outside world, a period when a state of being in a certain place is the temporary totality of life.

Time cannot be separated from place, for a measurable sequence of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years occurs – takes *place* – physically as well as temporally. The calendar is thus inevitably linked to wherever you are at any given moment. Time accumulated prior to our own brief span of life on earth becomes human history: a record of past peoples, civilizations, and geographies. Then there is earth history, a science that tells another place-based story in the language of rocks and fossils. Dwarfing the millennia of recorded history, it is calculated in tens of thousands and hundreds of millions of years, stretching into the realm of an unfathomable past and incomprehensible future.

What makes sustained contact with the Colorado River and the stupendous canyon through which it flows such an awesome – in the true sense of this overworked word – experience is the insistent fusion of time and place. First, there is the humbling realization of our own size (a mere micromilimeter when gauged against the height of the canyon's walls) and temporality (the tiniest fraction of a nanosecond when measured on the stratigraphic clock of a mile-high series of rock formations). Then there is the consciousness of being in physical contact with an important chapter of American history: the surveying of the continent when maps of the West

still designated its desert areas as “unknown territory.” Awe becomes amazement as your gaze drops from the canyon's rims to the base of the cliffs, and you realize that you are riffling the pages of a book of earth's history that spans 1.2 billion years.

When I first knew my grandmother as a child, I was fascinated by her facial topography. Her wrinkles were not the crow's-feet or frown lines that show up in midlife but instead the soft folds and runnels that mark people as genuinely elderly. When she died in her mid-nineties, I was on the brink of adulthood, the callow period of life when one assumes that vigor, health, and good looks are permanent entitlements. Now I am surprised to see that my daughter is no longer the little girl to whom I read bedtime stories, but a mother with children in the full bloom of young adulthood. It never occurred to me when I was their age that I would one day wear my grandmother's face, nor that I would immerse myself in a macroversion of it: a strange and remarkable landscape of rivulet-tasseled plateaus and canyon creeks.

But here is time's truth. For aging human bodies, strength diminishes, reflexes slow, bones become fragile, and skin bruises easily when it is no longer taut and smooth. Which is why, two years ago, my husband Ted and I began to talk with some friends about organizing a sixteen-day rafting trip down the Colorado, while we were still fit enough to make the journey. This turned out to be a thrilling adventure, during which we had the chance to take the measure of our powers as we each confronted what John Wesley Powell, the first intrepid American citizen to have made an expedition down the river, called the “great unknown.”¹

During the weeks before our late September put in – the beginning and end of a river-boat trip are referred to as the “put in” and “take out” – both excitement and apprehension mounted. I knew that there would be side canyons to explore, so I took weekly hikes in the mountains outside of Santa Fe, where we were spending the summer. I also worried a lot about gear and made several trips to REI for essentials: head lamp for getting around camp at night, quick-dry shirt and pants, sun screen, sun glasses, sun hat, and – the number-one

priority – waterproof splash gear to keep me dry when the boat ran the rapids.

Did I say “rapids”? In several places along our route, the water roils over invisible rocky debris that the eroding canyon walls have spilled into the river. Particularly treacherous in fact as well as reputation is the rapid known as Lava Falls. Here is what I read (and maybe shouldn't have) about Lava Falls in Tom Martin and Duwain Whitis's *Guide to the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon* before we departed:

Lava Falls Rapid is formed by tons of rocky debris washed into the river from Prospect Canyon. The large Prospect Canyon drainage is susceptible to flash flooding like other side canyons, but it drops 1,500 feet in a little over a mile, eroding out the gravels and volcanic debris that have filled the once-deep side canyon. The 200-foot-high bluffs on river left that make up the Prospect Canyon debris fan are remains of a long-ago flood that deposited massive amounts of gravel and boulders. The Lava Falls of today pales in comparison to the Lava Falls created by that flood. This rapid, like all rapids in Grand Canyon, gets sharper with in-washing of side canyon materials and gets less turbulent as the Colorado River washes the side canyon debris downriver. You can scout this rapid on either the right or the left. Both sides of the rapid offer passage, but the left side gets rocky at lower water levels. The center of the rapid at the top has a wide, sharp drop called the Ledge Hole that easily flips boats. If in doubt, scout the rapid from both sides.

Perhaps if I had not already turned the corner at life's halfway mark, the prospect of running scores of rapids, including Lava, would have added to my excitement. Instead, as I tramped around on my fitness hikes, the name “Lava Falls” kept gnawing at the edges of happy anticipation. At one point I even found myself rhythmically chanting “La . . . va . . . Falls, La . . . va . . . Falls,” as one foot and then the other hit the ground. I suspect that for the others in our group who were

¹ A word to the wary: For those who like vacations with a high component of creature comforts and the security of a predictable itinerary, a rafting trip down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon for sixteen days, with fifteen nights spent in a tent on a riverine sandbar, is not a good idea. But for people who want to penetrate a place of extraordinary grandeur (hence its name) and challenge both their physical and metaphysical limits, it deserves a place near the top of their travel wish list.

doing this trip for the first time, Lava Falls was an unspoken mantra as well.

Then came the day of departure. As we flew west across the United States, I noticed the continental landscape scrolling by below. The well-treed, domesticated landscape of the Northeast gave way first to the agrarian geometry of Midwestern fields and then to the sparsely vegetated desert. Because geological perspective is more transparent in desert landscape than elsewhere, as our descending plane crossed over the Colorado Plateau in Arizona, I began noticing some of the things I had read about in preparation for the trip.

The Colorado Plateau has what is known as a dendritic pattern of water drainage, a topographic configuration that on a map or from the air resembles the twigs, branches, and limbs of a tree. The Colorado River receives all the rain and snowmelt from the surrounding upland plateaus as it courses through this chain of waters. Its velocity is the knifelike force that cut, over unfathomable eons of time, the mile-deep gash in the earth known as the Grand Canyon. Wind, rain, ice, and the river itself continue to erode the gorge's layered rock formations and carve deep side canyons. Where the rocks are more friable, the canyon walls recede and the river widens; where their mineral structures are more resistant to erosion, the river is compressed into narrow gorges. Eroding boulders plucked from the walls form fans of scree or tumble into the river to create rapids. This was the chasm into which we were heading.

In Flagstaff we rented a car and entered the landscape I had likened to my grandmother's wrinkles while I was looking at it from the window of the airplane. At the end of our ride, we were greeted by Christa Sadler, the trained geologist who was our trip organizer and leader. "You might want to take off your watches and not wear them for the rest of the trip," Christa advised, as our six rafts slid off the Lees Ferry boat ramp into the water and she and the five other boatmen took up their oars. "Just let the river take over."

Sixteen days of un-clocked time! Most of us were still thinking of computer screens chock-full of email messages and piles of regular mail we would have to deal with on our return to "real life," not to mention a calendar of deferred appointments. But the river and the rhythmical sound of the oars had a soothing effect. I settled into a peaceful and awe-struck mood as we became isolated from the outside world by the high rock walls encasing the river.

In the beginning, the practicalities of a new way of life occupied most of our attention. Before long, however, we had become proficient in the mechanics of setting up camp. First we formed a baggage line, the boatmen handing off waterproof bags of personal gear and sleeping bags, along with the ammo cans in which we stored items that we might need during the day. Next came the bags of equipment: folding chairs that would be placed in a circle around our campfire ring; folding tables, cooking stove, and other equipment for making and serving dinner and washing up; several five-gallon containers to hold filtered river water for drinking; a bucket that would store filtered water for hand washing; and finally, the groover – a metal box for human excrement – since by National Park Service regulation, waste must be carried out of the canyon. Once everything was ashore, we went about selecting our individual tent sites. After unpacking whatever clothes and toiletries we might need, we helped ourselves to the fine meal that Christa and the boatmen had cooked, with a little help at the chopping board or dish pan from our group. As we ate and talked, we would gaze at the glowing embers and the bright constellations moving across the sky between the canyon's walls. Then we would make our way by the light of our headlamps to our respective tents, where we

had spread out sleeping bags for the night.

When sunrise is your alarm clock, everyone is an early riser. After scrambling into a quick-dry top, river pants, and sandals, and stuffing our gear back into waterproof bags, we would eat a hearty breakfast. Then we would set about breaking camp and loading the boats. Before our departure Christa would speak to us about the geological history of the formations we would observe as our rafts passed alongside them or pulled to shore for a closer look; modestly she called these ten-minute briefings "morning blathers." Thus began each new day. All were interesting, some were thrilling, and each was different from the one before.

Nor was there any uniformity in the scenery. Although the Grand Canyon has its own microclimate, three different deserts – the Great Basin (Colorado Plateau), Sonoran, and Mojave – intersect with its river corridor. Therefore the canyon provides a home for several species of cacti – the prickly pear, ocotillo, and cholla among them. There are mesquite trees, acacia, coyote willow, agave, yucca, arrowweed, Mormon tea (*Ephedra*), and the prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia*). Shrubby stands of tamarisk, a plant native to Eurasia and Africa, which was introduced to the United States in the 1930s, have prolifically self-propagated and now occupy great

stretches of beach all along the river. Perhaps the most beautiful plant of this desert landscape is the datura (*Datura innoxia*). Strictly a night-blooming species – it is sometimes called moonflower – it is known as witches' weed also, because of its poisonous nature and hallucinogenic effect. Another name, Angel's trumpet, better describes the creamy white throat and outward-curving petals I saw one night by flashlight.

Once we admired a California condor soaring against the blue sky, an offspring of a captive breeding



Lunchtime on the Colorado River.
Photographs by Elizabeth Barlow
Rogers.

program that has reintroduced this endangered bird, which has a wingspan of up to nine and a half feet, into its native habitat. Twice we saw bighorn sheep running on the rock ledges on the opposite side of the river.

And always there was the river itself and the cliffs that confined it. Whether rowing through glassy stretches, navigating choppy riffles, or running serious rapids, we were always aware of the towering walls in which distinctly defined layers of sediment and narrow gorges created by igneous granite

and ancient lava flows revealed as nowhere else on earth the forces that mold and remold the physiognomy of the planet. Geologists have named and dated each formation to within some ten to a hundred million years, give or take. In terms of rock science – or in this case rock mystery – the most memorable point of the trip occurred on the morning of the tenth day, when we spent a couple of hours at Blacktail Canyon. Here Christa explained a phenomenon that earth scientists call the Great Unconformity. This geological anomaly consists of the fact that there is a gap between the 1.7 billion-year-old Vishnu Schist and Zoroaster Granite and the 500-million-year-old Tapeats Sandstone above them (which looks a lot like stacked pancakes). People are always speaking of the Grand Canyon in terms of “deep time.” Well, this is it.

When I had seen that the hikes I had envisioned before the trip were intended to take place in such terrain as this, I realized that my summer training on the trails outside of Santa Fe hadn't given me sufficient agility and stamina to follow my younger companions, who could jump from rock to rock up the sides of a steep canyon wall. Therefore I opted most times to sit on a rocky ledge and gaze at the river below or, looking up, observe how the beautiful rose-and-buff-colored walls around me had weathered into forms that appeared against the blue sky as actual castles in air. I kept admiring what seemed to be an entire dictionary of architectural elements. Architraves, belfries, blind arches, columns, cornices, cupolas, domes, entablatures, lintels, pediments, pilasters, pyramids, spires, stringcourses – indeed, everywhere I looked



Christa Sadler explaining the Great Unconformity, the puzzling gap of about 1.2 billion years separating the 550-million-year-old sedimentary strata of Tapeats Sandstone and the 1.7 billion-year-old Vishnu Schist, the metamorphic granite formation that constitutes the Grand Canyon's “basement.”

I could find nature speaking the language of human building forms.

And there were other pleasures of the imagination. Often, after I had tucked myself into my sleeping bag at night, I would read by the light of my

headlamp about others' encounters with the same river whose soft thrumming was lulling me to sleep. In this way, I slipped into another of time's dimensions. I particularly liked the fact that I was accompanied throughout the trip by the man who in 1869, three years after my grandmother was born in St. Joseph, Missouri, had embarked on his historic expedition.

Scientist, surveyor, explorer, and Civil War veteran, John Wesley Powell was a man of steely courage and insatiable curiosity. Despite having lost an arm in the battle of Shiloh, he thought nothing of climbing the canyon's near-vertical cliffs to collect geological samples. His well-documented journey down the Green and Colorado Rivers is an important landmark in American history, and his published journal reads like adventure fiction, which sometimes made it hard to turn off my headlamp and go to sleep.

Powell and his men were not on the river for the thrill of running white-water rapids, as are some dory boaters, kayakers, and rafters today. Instead they rowed the expedition's heavy, wooden boats through navigable stretches, and where the rapids appeared too treacherous to run, they portaged their crafts or walked along the river's edge pulling them forward with ropes. In spite of accidents in which food and gear were lost, and a nagging uncertainty as to what lay ahead – the next rapid might be a precipitous fall or impossible-to-navigate rock-strewn current – they were determined

to map the river's course and make a scientific reconnaissance of the Grand Canyon's geology and ethnology.

Powell was a man of his time in his appreciation of the Sublime, that apotheosis of Romanticism that marks the style of Thomas Moran and other nineteenth-century painters of the American West. None of the calamities or adversities he and his men endured diminished his awe of his surroundings. Here is how he put it:

All the scenic features of this canyon are on a giant scale, strange and weird. The streams run at depths almost inaccessible, lashing the rocks which beset their channels, rolling in rapids and plunging into falls, and making a wild music which but adds to the gloom of the solitude. The little valleys nestling along the streams are diversified by bordering willows, clumps of box elder, and small groves of cottonwood.

Low mesas, dry, treeless, stretch back from the brink of the canyon, often showing smooth surfaces of naked, solid rock. In some places the country rock is composed of marls, and here the surface is a bed of loose, disintegrated material through which one walks as in a bed of ashes. Often these marls are richly colored and variegated. In other places the country rock is a loose sandstone, the disintegration of which has left broad stretches of drifting sand, white, golden, and vermilion. Where this sandstone is a conglomerate, a paving of pebbles has been left, a mosaic of many colors, polished by the drifting sands and glistening in the sunlight.

While thrilling to the Grand Canyon's sublimity, Powell understood that its existence implied that there was no point in talking anymore about the planet's geophysical origin as something that had occurred in seven days a few thousand years ago. Now the evidence pointed to a different history – a chronology that is still disturbing to some religious believers and mind-boggling to anyone who isn't a geologist – time measured on a scale of hundreds of millions of years.

To realize how the dynamics of geology apply to the Grand Canyon is to grasp why Lava Falls is particularly scary to all but the most experienced Colorado River rafters. This is so because of a fundamental principle. Karl Marx said famously, “All that is solid melts into air.” Geologists might put it another way: “All that is solid melts into earth.” Everywhere along the river we had seen how rain and wind had abraded, polished, and configured towering canyon walls formed hun-

dreds of millions of years ago in ancient seabeds. The marine environment that had created the sedimentary strata was now evidenced in brachiopod remains, such as the fossil imprints we examined in a section of Redwall Limestone. After these strata were uplifted as part of the creation of the Colorado Plateau, gravity once more asserted its force and their slow dissolution and carving began. A few millions of years of erosion obliterated several limestone strata, and then the advance of another ancient sea deposited more sedimentary layers. These were now crumbling into the skirts of scree that we observed lying below the layered walls. We also saw big fans of rock from debris flows, which are great spills of boulders that roaring floodwaters shove to the base of side canyons or dump directly into the river in a single, cataclysmic event.

Now, on our thirteenth day on the river, we were to about to test our mettle as our rafts began their slow glide toward Lava Falls. Soon we were poised to literally take the plunge into churning waves being thrown high in the air as water rushed over big boulders and rocky scree. Were we ready? Certainly we were in a different state of mind than we had been at the beginning of the trip. Such creature comforts as clean sheets instead of sandy sleeping bags were of little importance. We had hiked up the rocky slopes of side canyons and showered beneath waterfalls in tributary streams. In this fashion we had become one with the river and entered the realm of suspended time, in which mortality, history, and geology were compressed into a unified consciousness, much grander than the quotidian perspective of ordinary life.

Nevertheless, the nagging specter of Lava Falls that had been in the back of everyone's consciousness ever since the boats had left the dock at Lees Ferry was still there. As silent tension grew that day, we were distracted by a pleasant hike in a side canyon – a rocky creek bed sandwiched between towering limestone walls with a trickle running through it, and little pools of water here and there. Afterwards we ate lunch, climbed into the boats, and headed downstream toward the fearful rapid.

As our boatmen duly scouted the current and decided to run it on the right side, I assessed my own mood. After rafting through more than twenty other rapids, both large and small, with no serious mishaps during the previous twelve days, I had lost much of the apprehension I had had at the beginning of the trip. Moreover, the idle moments I had spent thinking about the meaning of time – in both its finitude and immensity – had made me at peace with the concept of fate as life's incontrovertible reality. By the time we

rowed through the glassy smoothness of the water toward the lip that would drop us over a rocky ledge into the churning maelstrom, my original fear had morphed into something approaching equanimity, and I was no longer nervous about my imminent encounter with Lava Falls.

I grabbed a baggage strap as the boat dropped steeply sideways from the unruffled river surface into the turbulence of breaking waves and watched our boatman, Greg Woodall, defly ply the oars, pivoting the raft between them. Strangely, even though we were rocketing up and down and getting drenched, I felt only exhilaration. Then it was over – and all in less than thirty seconds. The other boats had equally successful runs, and I marveled how weeks of dread could dissolve so quickly into inconsequence. For me, the lesson here was the impotence of fear as a way of facing the future.

As we went ashore at Tequila Beach a short distance downriver, there was a shared sense of jubilation. Three days later our boats pulled into the Diamond Creek, our take-out point on the Navajo Reservation. After a very bumpy ride a mile up the boulder-strewn road that provides an exit through a gap in the canyon walls, our van pulled over in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven, where a bus was waiting to take us back to Flagstaff. The high walls of the Grand Canyon, our home for sixteen days, had melted into the flat plateau surrounding us.

Back in my permanent home, an apartment in New York City, I could not stop thinking about the trip. At night I would dream of being on a river flowing through mile-high sedimentary strata and granite gorges. Nowadays it doesn't seem to matter so much that my life, like the river, is flowing in one inevitable direction toward the Great Unknown. Don't all of us, in the end, have to come to terms with our own mortality?

Another word for suspended time is "idyll" – a Golden Age in which mankind and nature exist in total harmony. That is what these happy days had been for me and my companions. We had been carefree children of nature. Most important, the river and our days and nights spent in its embrace had left us with a precious residue of memory that should sustain us through the rest of our years. The past of this place is now a chapter in our own life stories.

This then is *remembered* time – a sweet recollection of one of the most beautiful places on earth, and of the group of friends who briefly but deeply experienced its wonders.
– Elizabeth Barlow Rogers

Mother Earth Laid Bare: Learning to Love the Badlands of the American West

On the plains of West Texas, in the walls of the great canyon that gives rise to the Red River of the South, one encounters a series of formations that national park investigators almost a century ago named the Spanish Skirts. Standing roughly twenty-four feet high, these horizontally banded mounds are composed of 240-million-year-old Permian Age clays and mudstones that have been eroded by wind and water. For lovers of landscape, as Georgia O'Keeffe certainly was when she first saw this country during World War I, the vernacular name for these formations – badlands – was a misnomer of high order.

If your aesthetic sense thrills to color and form, as O'Keeffe's obviously did, in the right light these undulating mounds can take your breath away. I have walked among the Spanish Skirts in the slanting, reddish light of morning and the high yellow of sunset, and I can tell you that the experience is to be fairly dazzled by earth art. Eroded into overlapping, earthen hemispheres, the Spanish Skirts in full expression reveal at least seven different hues. The bottommost tint is the pale tangerine of Palo Duro Canyon's floor. Atop it rests a layer of dark burnt orange, often separated from the crenulated, tangerine base by thin, horizontal stripes of white gypsum. More of these slender bands, finely drawn as if with white ink, surmount the burnt orange belt. Then come fireworks: a broad swipe of deep lavender and another of rich saffron, finished off by an unexpected, quite wonderful stripe of coffee-bean chocolate. Where the Spanish Skirts exist as free-standing mounds, the final flourish is often a cap of creamy white atop the chocolate, like frothed milk floating on the surface of a latte.

A traveler moving across North America from east to west first encounters badlands in West Texas; then discovers them scattered from New Mexico to California. They drape much of southern Utah and appear as far north as the plains of Montana and Alberta. For centuries, though, these regions suffered from an image problem. For a primate species requiring water, wood, and shade, the badlands are something of an acquired taste.

Northern European settlers reacted to them instinctively as the antithesis of the green landscapes with which they were familiar. The name for these stark, multihued mounds came from eighteenth-century French explorers on the Northern Plains, who called them *mauvaises terres*, because they presented so few possibilities for settlement. But the post-Civil

War American explorer John Wesley Powell, who saw and wrote more about the West than anyone else of his time, said prophetically of the badlands that they were “a desert to the agriculturalist, a mine to the paleontologist, and a paradise to the artist.”

Classic western badlands are undulating landscapes of colorfully striped clay or shale. These erodible mounds and hoodoos, smooth for lack of a regolith (a scatter of surface rocks), are sculpted by wind and water into sensuous hemispheric curves and swirls resembling Neapolitan ice cream on a giant scale. They are made up of shoreline sediments that precipitated to the bottoms of rivers, lakes, and oceans 10,000 to 240 million years ago, forming today’s shales, clays, and mudstones. The thirty-five-foot mound in front of you may preserve deposits that took 45 million years and several geologic periods to amass. So don’t underestimate the provenance of a badlands landscape with only fifty feet of vertical relief. Very likely, it is ancient. Badlands are geological gifts, exposing Cretaceous, Jurassic, Triassic, and Permian soils and rocks.

Because they were created from the shorelines of bodies of water that existed millions of years ago, badlands in the American West (and around the world) are treasure chests of ancient life-forms. The work that made American badlands a prime destination for nineteenth-century paleontologists began in 1849, when Dr. John Evans explored the Dakota badlands and published a scientific article on their possibilities. From then on, scientific luminaries like Yellowstone Park advocate Ferdinand V. Hayden sought out Western badlands to dig fossils. The Yale paleontologist Othniel Marsh, stimulated by a stirring lecture Thomas Huxley gave in New York in 1876, assembled a chronology of horse evolution from fossilized badlands remains. His series became the principal evidence to support Darwin’s controversial theory of evolution by natural selection. Groundbreaking badlands science continues today, as Jack Horner and others scour ancient formations for dinosaur fossils. Still, as Powell predicted, artists and lovers of landscape have also come to appreciate the sensuous and aesthetic possibilities of these regions.

In the early twentieth century, with the homesteading of the West well advanced and the automobile making dreaded and even dangerous places less formidable, the badlands began to shed their reputation as wastelands. In 1899 the explorer Robert Hill descended the Rio Grande River in West

Texas through the future Big Bend National Park; *Century Magazine* published the story of his journey two years later. It took Hill nearly a month of exposure to sights like the “vermillion foothills of red clay” (as he called the formations he saw along the river) before the adjectives “weird,” “repulsive,” “spiteful,” “bizarre,” and “sterile” dropped from his verbal palette, replaced by grudging admiration for form and color. His journey was a watershed in the understanding of the badlands, an early recognition that they were worthy of more than the dismissive place they had occupied in landscape aesthetics. Hill was followed by the art historian John C. Van Dyke, who wrote marvelous descriptions of the badlands of Death Valley in his early 20th-century volume, *The Desert*.

A disproportionately high number of women emerged as advocates of these maligned landscapes. Beginning in 1894, British expatriate photographer Evelyn Cameron delighted in capturing the Northern Plains badlands near her Terry, Montana, ranch through her viewfinder. Californian Mary Austin, Cameron’s contemporary, earned herself a place as an early fashioner of a badlands aesthetic with her 1903 book, *The Land of Little Rain*. These two women were followed by the artist Zoe Beiler of North Dakota, whose paintings of the almost science-fictionlike landscapes along her state’s Little Missouri River attracted attention to both place and artist by the 1920s. But it was Georgia O’Keeffe who did more

to bring the badlands into the American consciousness than anyone else.

Sometime in 1915 or 1916, while the rest of the world was distracted by the war in Europe, young O’Keeffe found herself seriously dazzled by Palo Duro Canyon. Everyone else hated West Texas, she said. But, as she told her friend Anita Politzer, “It’s absurd the way I love this country.” It was the colors and shapes of the earth that most moved her. Luckily for aficionados of landscape and American art, O’Keeffe never got over being dazzled by the badlands. After years of living as Alfred Stieglitz’s model and artist-wife in New York, she bought a seven-acre ranchette at the foot of the Ghost Ranch cliffs, near Abiquiu, New Mexico, in 1935 and turned her attention from flowers to the sunlit and hot-colored landforms around her home. For the next half century, she continued to paint the views outside her back door and went in search of others across the Southwest, as well.

Ignoring the penchant in Christian America for conferring names evoking Hades and Satan on these seemingly sterile, vegetation-free formations, O’Keeffe called her favorite badlands the Red Hills, the White Place, and the Black Place. Year after year, in New York show after New York show, she presented to the world her visions of an organic and sensual Western landscape – a landscape she charged with all the suppleness and grace of the human form.

Why do you love these barren badlands of your Black Place so? an interviewer from Boston asked her, puzzled at her passion for places lacking conventional marks of beauty. “Oh,” she said, “it’s an especially fine place to climb around in.” For her, badlands were places that offered up the earth as ready-made, curvilinear, abstract modern art. All she had to do was paint it. The results were classics: *Pedernal and Red Hills* (1936), *Red Hills and Bones* (1941), *The Grey Hills* (1942), and *Black Place III* (1944).



The badlands of Death Valley National Park in California. Photograph by Dan Flores.

Georgia O'Keeffe, *The Grey Hills*, 1942. Indianapolis Museum of Art.

After moving to New Mexico, O'Keeffe wrote to her friend Arthur Dove:

I wish you could see what I see out the window – the earth pink and yellow cliffs to the north – the full pale moon about to go down in an early morning lavender sky behind a very long beautiful tree covered mesa to the west – pink and purple hills in front and the scrubby fine dull green cedars – and a feeling of much space – It is a very beautiful world – I wish you could see it.

Today, in part thanks to O'Keeffe herself, people do see it. No longer overlooked or denigrated, badlands (sometimes in conjunction with other landforms) have become the sites of national parks: Badlands National Park in South Dakota, Theodore Roosevelt Historical Park in North Dakota, Death Valley National Park in California, Big Bend National Park in Texas, Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona, and Dinosaur Provincial Park in Alberta, Canada. Numerous state parks, including Makoshika in eastern Montana and Toadstool Geologic Park in Nebraska, as well as a sizeable number of federal wildernesses, such as the Ojito Badlands and Bisti Badlands of New Mexico, were created around badlands. After being passed over by homesteaders, ignored by landscape aficionados in favor of mountains or canyons, and eventually treasured by scientists and artists, the badlands have at long last acquired an audience of admirers. Far from forgotten or ignored, these sculpted, striped mounds have become a visual byte that symbolizes the Western landscape.

I will admit to a strange passion for badlands country. I've journeyed to South Dakota for no other purpose than to wake up amidst the pastel yellow, humps-to-the-horizon landscape



of Badlands National Park. I've driven far out of my way to go for solitary hikes in the Bisti Badlands of northwestern New Mexico. I've had the pleasure of riding horseback with Anthony Bourdain through O'Keeffe's Red Hills, less than one hundred yards from the back door of her house at Ghost Ranch, and recognizing the very mounds in her paintings. I've had badlands adventures in Teddy Roosevelt National Historic Park in North Dakota and in Montana's Terry Badlands, which Evelyn Cameron photographed a century ago. I've hiked the badlands of Death Valley in winter and summer. On the island of Kauai in the Hawaiian chain, I've blissed out more than once to the burbles of a miniature river, complete with waterfalls, bouncing musically along through terra-cotta badlands in Waimea Canyon: a wild slice of the Southwest in the middle of the blue Pacific.

I find wandering around a place like the Painted Desert in Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park more thrilling than exploring any glacial cirque or canyon stream. The feeling of walking alone or with a friend under a flawless, cobalt, autumn sky; the crunch of granulated, dry clay underfoot; the movement of the body through curvilinear forms entirely barren of vegetation and water, their bands of sediment offering a wild riot of color at every hand, can be a form of profound sensuous arousal. New York expatriate writer Mabel Dodge Luhan, in her book *Edge of Taos Desert*, called such country "a pink and yellow dream." Dreamscapes, I think, may be the right way to picture badlands.

Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Hills and Bones*, 1941. The Joseph Stieglitz Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Just to experience the whole of the place with my senses, I once walked through another badlands locally referred to as the Painted Desert – this one at the northwestern edge of Big Bend National Park – on a cloudless morning in June. Big Bend is as far south in North America as you can get and still be in the U.S. At that latitude June means searing heat that is felt in the nostrils with every inhalation. It is heat that is also a smell: it can leave a coppery taste in the mouth. The morning dawned at 78 degrees, but my thermometer read 92 by nine o'clock, 98 at eleven, and 108 shortly after noon. By then my body felt like a bag of water that the blast furnace of the Painted Desert wanted to reduce to raisin form.

Wandering half-lost in that astonishing landscape – it was like being on a planet populated with recumbent herds of gray, buff, and lavender elephants, whose bodies had partly melted into the ground – I had to remind myself at 1:30 p.m. that five hours in a sauna is more than enough. The screeching of cicadas in the tamarisk thicket, where I'd parked my Jeep, guided me back to shade and safety. But even on a 112-degree day, I lingered long in that world of elephantine forms, reluctant to leave.

A final expression of my hopeless badlands obsession: I even dream of Mars, our solar system's ultimate desert, with its red canyons, 25,000 feet deep, and its badlands – such badlands! – on a scale beyond anything that our earthbound imagination could conjure. And what would an O'Keeffe make of badlands like those? – Dan Flores



Pilgrimage to Rhyolite: In Search of the American Ghost Town

A light rain was falling in the Amargosa Desert of Southwestern Nevada when I pulled my rented Hyundai onto the paved road leading to the former town of Rhyolite. I had driven from Los Angeles through Death Valley to see the city in ruins. At its peak in 1907, it was the leading metropolis of the Bullfrog Mining District, with modern infrastructure and an impressive business district. The town had a Nob Hill as well as a red-light district, and its population at its peak probably exceeded ten thousand. Named for the rose-colored volcanic rock found in the surrounding hills, Rhyolite was already in decline in 1909 and mostly abandoned by 1911. Hangers-on and caretakers remained off and on for years, but it had become known as a “famous ghost city” as early as the mid-1920s.

I was only the most recent to make pilgrimage to Rhyolite, to view the remains and consider their meanings. The area is now governed by the Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which has taken strident measures to conserve what little is left at the site. The Bottle House, built in 1906 of, yes, empty bottles collected from the town’s many saloons, had been cordoned off with metal posts and a barbed-wire fence. The gate was open, thankfully, and I could rub my fingers across the multicolored glass walls, but it was hard to shake the impression of a detention center. In 2008 a ramp for wheelchairs had been constructed, which ran from a small, dirt parking lot to the house’s front door. It was a gesture of accessibility, paired uncomfortably with the defensive enclosure. The BLM had struck an awkward balance between access and upkeep, it seemed.

One goal of “ghost townering” – hunting for abandoned settlements and industrial relics, often associated with the boom-and-bust cycles of mining districts – is to access these remote or difficult settings. Half the fun is getting there and basking in the obscurity. In the American West this means traversing the region’s vast, desolate, and beautiful landscapes to find the humble remains of ill-fated ventures. It is an activity that has captivated many thousands of us. The multitude of ghost-town guides attest to this fact.

As a literary subject, the ghost town came to the fore with 1920s travel promotion. Guide-book writing in this domain accelerated in the 1950s and 60s, in step with the rise, for some Americans, of affluence and mobility; new books are released every year. The guides provide capsule histories of each town, sometimes with glossy photographs of the time-worn ruins. Readers may live vicariously through the adventures of the author, if they decide to stay at home.

As an encounter with western history, the ghost town is specific and generic at the same time. The characters and anecdotes change, but the story remains the same. The outlines of Rhyolite’s story line could apply to hundreds of other places: A roguish, peripatetic prospector makes a strike. He promptly sells for a fraction of its future value and adjourns to the nearest saloon. Boomers rush to the site and file mining claims. Stock companies form to finance mining operations. A town-site company lays out a grid, divides the land, offers it for sale, and promotes the prospects of the emerging metropolis. Rival tent camps and settlements fade away. A successful mining company – the Montgomery Shoshone was the largest and most profitable in Rhyolite – establishes large-scale diggings and builds mills to process the ore. Railroad connections – Rhyolite had three – make or break the town. Those venues that are successful become small industrial cities, with unionized work forces and segmented social classes. The reality of mineral wealth never matches expectations, however. The remote town is connected to a broad financial network, and when stocks collapse, a panic ensues. Capital is withheld or flees. Soon the little city is bankrupt and mostly empty. It begins a new phase in its life cycle as an intermittently stewarded ghost town.

I doubt that residents of mining towns like Rhyolite held many sentimental feelings about the landscape itself. The business of the town was to claw and ravage the Earth. The hills were viewed as precious vaults to be unlocked – a twist on the concept of a Sacred Mountain, one based on mastery and not reverence. Ghost-town hunters, however, do not view deteriorating and abandoned towns in opposition to their natural settings. On the contrary, the agency of time and exposure has brought the architectural remnants into a new harmony with their surroundings. As buildings recede into the landscape, they take on new beauty and resonance. But they must not recede entirely – that’s the difference between a ghost town and an archaeological site. Foundations alone are often not enough: we must still perceive a discrete town, however fragmented; a sense of the street; a place substantial enough to

offer our imaginations vivid scenes of the past. Rhyolite was among the first to be promoted as such a destination – a place to bask in what once was. It has been a pilgrimage site for at least ninety years. What have we been looking for?

In January 1926 four men and two women left Los Angeles for Death Valley, then in its early days as a tourist destination. The group drove two apiece in three different cars: a Ford Touring, a Ford Roadster, and a Durant Motors Star Car. After they passed Atolia, a small mining town on the edge of the desert, there would be few paved roads to Death Valley. The group packed tents

The John S. Cook & Co. Bank Building, also known as the First National Bank, was built in 1906 and is one of the most vivid ruins in Rhyolite. Photograph courtesy of Christina Storozkova, 2015.



and cooking stoves, anticipating a rugged, nine-day camping excursion. One participant brought a camera – probably a Kodak Series III folding model – and the resulting album of photographs with handwritten captions has made its way to the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Los Angeles in 1926, in the midst of rapid urban development, was one of the most modern cities in the world. The trip to Death Valley was an escape from the pace and polish of the fast-changing metropolis. The trekkers may have seen the 1924 film *Wanderer of the Wasteland*, based on Zane Grey

novels, which offered a Technicolor glimpse of Death Valley; or the 1925 film *The Air Mail*, in which a pilot makes a forced landing at a “Ghost City” in the desert, played by Rhyolite. In any case, the group was out for adventure and they viewed Death Valley and its relics – including their destination city, Rhyolite – as a playground of follies that brought the vast desert into human scale.

The photographs bring out this spirit of play. We watch them pitch tents and prepare breakfast on camp stoves. They push their stuck cars out of the desert sand and rumble over primitive roads that might have been cut through the desert by the twenty-mule teams of the Pacific Borax Company in the 1880s. The automobiles that appear in so many of the pictures serve as counterpoints to the landscape, emphasizing the modesty of the endeavor while celebrating its achievements.

Their occupants clamber atop the abandoned monuments whenever they have a chance, to wryly signal another conquest and indicate its size in the landscape.

They pass the Ashford Mill in Death Valley, abandoned just ten years prior, and perceive a monument to failed dreams, “a deserted hope, thousands of dollars of equipment left here.” Two small figures dangle their legs off the steeply sloped roof – an impressive climb! The remains of the Eagle Borax Works look like little more than a graffitied bunker, half-buried in the sand. The four men in the group lean on the structure and look toward a mountain range, their backs to the camera.

In Rhyolite many of the wooden structures had been removed to more promising sites: the town had been cannibalized. The buildings that were left were falling apart. “The Ravages of ‘Time,’” explains one caption. A few of the structures had been made of more durable materials. The group scampers over the Spanish Mission-style parapets of the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad Depot and perches on its roof and chimney. The vivid structure is intact and habitable, but the fading “RHYOLITE” sign signals deterioration and neglect.

A handful of buildings on Golden Street, the commercial spine of the city, still stand in these photographs. The street is littered with debris. Large clumps of brush, piles



of wood, and a fallen telegraph post clutter the foreground. The John S. Cook & Co. Bank Building – the company folded and became the First National Bank of Rhyolite within a year – still exists, but its mahogany-trimmed interiors are stripped and its imported stained glass windows removed or destroyed: “The insides of these buildings were littered with glass, evidently there were lots of brick throwers came thru [sic] Rhyolite after it was deserted.” Vandalism accelerated decay and disturbed the work of time.

At the back porch of the Bottle House, three men pose in mock sobriety, with bottles in hand. Built in 1906, the quirky building was raffled off to a young family that lived there until 1914. The walls were made of multicolored glass bottles, stacked lengthwise and set in mortar. A porch with carved, wooden, gingerbread-style details was added in 1907. The Players-Lasky Corporation that produced *The Air Mail* had restored the Bottle House in 1925. (Supposedly they took a chunk out of the wall to make room for a camera.) A second bottle house had toppled over; another house was made out of flattened tin cans.

Other groups who made pilgrimage to Rhyolite focused their representations more on text than image. A pair of middle-aged men, Charles Holland and Paul Adyman, set out from Los Angeles in the same year as the party of travelers with the Kodak. Their literary field notes, interspersed with small snapshots, also found their way to the Bancroft. At Rhyolite, Holland and Adyman asked their readers to “Imagine, if you can, a city that once boasted of a population of ten thousand people, now reduced to a solitary inhabitant.

The school at Rhyolite was completed in 1909, just in time for the town’s decline. Many of the windows and doors were transplanted to the school at Beatty. In this picture, the view is west toward the Grapevine Mountains of Death Valley. Photograph courtesy of Christina Storozkova, 2015.

Picture in your mind’s eye, a little city that once teemed with life; whose streets and stores were crowded; whose Sabbath bells summoned the Godly to their devotions.” All of that was gone; but the men could tap into the city’s faded glory, marking an experiential trope of the Ghost Town: “The

desert sage brush again grows in the deserted streets, which echo only to the tread of an occasional tourist, and jack rabbits and rattle snakes keep the lone watcher company.”

Promoters hoped for greater numbers of human visitors. Former Death Valley miner Robert Eichbaum built a toll road through Death Valley in 1926, vastly enhancing its accessibility to motorists and conveniently leading them to Bungalow City, a resort he built in Stove Pipe Wells. Eichbaum hired a publicist, Alma Overholt, to write a series of pieces about the region, including a report of her own trip that was published in *Travel* magazine. Her assessment amounted to a rebranding of the place: “The Death Valley of yesterday, grim, tragic as Dante’s inferno, today is California’s most unique playground.”

In Darwin, a mining town west of the Panamint Mountains and just outside Death Valley, Overholt and her traveling companion stopped for gas and inquired about the state of the roads. “They are all good now,” the proprietor admitted wistfully. “Can’t put a car through its paces any more by coming to Death Valley.” A professional road crew maintained Eichbaum’s toll road in tip-top condition. “We rolled along as if we were on a city boulevard,” Overholt wrote, “rather a far cry from the torturous trails that led in Death Valley but a few years ago.” The 1926ers would have smiled ruefully. At the top of the article, Overholt placed a postcard image of Rhyolite to illustrate one of the region’s top attractions. Her principal intention, however, was not to promote specific sites, but to establish the overall ease of navigating Death Valley by car and to soften its inhospitable image.

Overholt left it to others to explore the metaphorical resonance of the abandoned city. Photographer Edward Weston and his companion Charis Wilson visited Rhyolite in 1938, during a road trip partially funded by a Guggenheim grant. The pair departed from Los Angeles after consulting with Phil Hanna, the editor of *Westways*, the magazine of the Automobile Club of Southern California. He helped them

map out routes and assisted them to finance the journey by commissioning photographs for the magazine. They used the extra money to buy a new Ford V-8 sedan. Wilson's written reflections and Weston's images of the expedition would appear in the publication *California and the West*.

Charis Wilson looked askance at tourists and saw them as superficial consumers of views. "Zabriskie Point is a great favorite with snapshooters who dash up, snap, and dash away, faster than you can keep count," she wrote. Weston carried a large-format camera, eight by ten inches, which required more time and care to operate than consumer-grade Kodaks. When conditions were poor for photography, the two of them would return to Zabriskie Point to people-watch: "There was a fat man in a dark blue business suit, champing a black cigar, who remarked to his wife after surveying the multicolored badlands, 'well, it's certainly booful; very booful.'" They make fun of tourists, even the tourists who had come to Death Valley because of its beauty. Ironically their work was par-

tially subsidized by propagating just the sort of tourism they disdained.

Weston and Wilson made the pilgrimage to Rhyolite; by then it was part of a well-known trope. "Here is the western ghost town at its nakedest," Wilson wrote. The town had deteriorated since the visits of the 1920s. "Parts of the walls of a three-story hotel, a two-story bank, and a grocery face each other across a weed-bordered, desert road. Sections of worn adobe wall rise here and there from the trash heaps of broken bottles, old shoes, rusty metal, and tin cans." They encountered rough conditions, an experience that bolstered their sense of artistic professionalism. "A cold wind beat on us savagely from the moment of our arrival," Wilson wrote. "I held the heavy tripod anchored while Edward worked to get the ruins against the pale storm clouds that were drifting up the sky." She reported that "Edward was fascinated with the town – Nevada's Athens, he called it – and would doubtless have found more to do in better weather." More than just

a formal exercise, the photographer saw the ghost town in grand historical terms, playing its part in an epic of Western civilization – once powerful, now come to ruin.

A few of Weston's photographs were used to illustrate the 1939 guide to Death Valley produced by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. In it Rhyolite was said to have been "the prize ghost town of the Southwest for many years." The authors of the guide reported a population of three people, including the owner of the Bottle House, who operated a museum – "no charge, hours irregular" – and sold bottles, colored glass, arrowheads, bits of ore, and small relics. The town's most architecturally significant building was the depot: "Past grandeur has its sole representative in the *Railroad Station* at the upper end of the main street. There is no longer any railroad, but this gabled structure was so solidly built that it looks much like it did in 1907." With nothing to arrest their decay, many of the other structures were threatened. "Today even ghost Rhyolite is rapidly vanishing," warned the authors, suggesting that the town had touristic value that could be squandered.

Two years after Weston and Wilson's visit, the Federal government sent its own representative to Rhyolite. Arthur Rothstein took pictures for the Farm Security Administration between 1936 and 1940. Rothstein's colleagues included Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Russell Lee, and many others who traveled the country to document the poverty of 1930s America. For these photographers, images of disregarded and decaying Main Streets spoke to the human fallout of disinvestment and the unevenness of economic recovery. But in Rhyolite Rothstein found not the saddened or hardened characters of a half-deserted dustbowl town, but well-heeled tourists with tripods and cameras. His images represented the ghost town as a destination for middle-class travelers.

Rothstein's images of Rhyolite anticipated postwar interest in ghost towns as popular attractions. Muriel Sibell Wolle, a professor of fine arts at the University of Colorado, stoked this interest with the publication of several guides, including an ambitious survey of ghost towns in the West. She travelled by car with a companion and made charcoal sketches of ghost-town streetscapes. When she visited Rhyolite, the railroad depot was operated as a Ghost Casino for tourists and a couple who lived in the Bottle House ran a small museum. Wolle was a great ghost-town enthusiast, but she did not find



A view of Rhyolite from the hills to the south of the townsite. At the right is the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad Depot. Photograph courtesy of Christina Storzokova, 2015.

Rhyolite picturesque or charming. To her it was an “eerie ghost whose sand-filled skeleton buildings seem shockingly urban and out of place on the lonely, sun-bleached desert.” The chalky and crumbling concrete buildings were not aging gracefully. Rhyolite could not disguise that it had been an industrial city rather than the home of a picaresque, mythical West.

More than fifty years after Wolle’s visit, I also found something sad in the ruins of Rhyolite. There were fewer buildings remaining than I expected, and they were stark, as if they had been attacked by violent human forces and not merely the ravages of time. The paved road may have been the most disturbing part of it for me. It destroyed the ghost-town context and replaced it with antiseptic display. Too utilitarian, it may have been built by the BLM or by a company that came to Rhyolite in the 1990s to rework dormant mines. Wire fences around the remaining buildings on Golden Street, designed to discourage vandalism or any other form of physical interaction, also diminished the ghost-town atmosphere. The BLM’s heavy-handed approach to conservation raises important questions about how old and abandoned structures should be cared for.

Nevertheless, Rhyolite continues to evolve. There were just a handful of visitors at my second visit, the day after my first. The rain had passed and skies were clear. Tourists stopped at the Goldwell Open Air Museum, which has installed sculptures at the outskirts of the ghost town. In 1984 Belgian artist Albert Szukalsi created the first of these, a *Last Supper* mimicking Leonardo da Vinci’s fifteenth-century mural, with white plaster shrouds suggesting human figures. A few of the museum’s sculptures have acquired iconic stature, including *Lady Desert: Venus of Nevada* (Dr. Hugo Heyrman, 1992), a blonde goddess with a Lego-like body, and the *Tribute to Shorty Harris* (Fred Bervoets, 1994), a silhouette of the legendary prospector with a penguin for a companion. They are both playful follies that mediate the scale of the desert landscape.

The paved road to Rhyolite ended at the railroad station, which was fenced off. A narrow dirt road continued forward; a shortcut to Beatty, Nevada, I assumed, and possibly the way of the 1926 Los Angeles Trekkers, who did not retrace their steps. I tried to drive the little Hyundai down that bumpy path. I advanced about a quarter mile or so before the car began to sink into massive ruts. I decided to turn around and slowly returned to Rhyolite, to make my way out the same way I had come in. – Elihu Rubin

California Treasure: Henry Huntington’s Jewel-box Desert

On a recent winter morning, the darkish sky bruised with gray, pink, and heliotrope, Gary Lyons, wearing a grass-green jacket against the chill, stands near a garden bed edged by a clutch of wonderfully weird boojum trees. We are in the Baja section of the lower Desert Garden in San Marino, California, part of the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

It has rained overnight, and the perfect winter light of Southern California brings forth the subtle colors of arid-land plants: the shy pink leaf margins on cacti, the creamy, pearly stripes of giant variegated agaves. Coral and orange blooms flame up from the garden’s world-famous aloe collection.

On a day like this, the Desert Garden can look like Oz.

Lyons, who is the garden’s conservation curator, is holding a long handle – the business end of which is a curved, wide-gapped saw – that he’s using as a pointer. Two young gardeners stand close by; Lyons has their undivided attention.

He is indicating a bed of the ferocious, worming plant called, with good reason, creeping devil cactus.

“This one is dead,” he says, forking up a dark piece. “You can take it out.” The gardeners nod almost imperceptibly.

“This one may root,” Lyons says, pointing again. They know to leave it alone.

After a few more minutes, he acknowledges my presence by looking up.

“There’s no history of this naturalizing outside of Baja,” he says of the cactus under present consideration. “This is it.”

This is it is a phrase not uncommonly heard in the Huntington’s Desert Garden, which the celebrated Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx once called “the most extraordinary garden in the world.” This pork-chop-shaped, twelve-acre piece of land is a gathering of the diaspora of succulents and other dry-land plants from

around the globe. They have taken root in the last one hundred and eight years from a multiplicity of sources and methods; tens of thousands of plants represent at least twenty-one hundred species. *Cereus xanthocarpus* is the oldest cactus in the garden. A pup in the 1880s but planted on the property in 1912, it may be the only known example of its species in cultivation; likewise, “the old and solitary” (as Lyons describes it) *Neobuxbaumia scoparia*, which flowers annually but does not set seed, may be the last of its kind found garden-bound anywhere.

There are stories upon stories in this layered, intense, concentrated, and deliberately constructed landscape. Lyons set these boojum trees in this spot himself, in the late 1970s, when the Baja section was planned and planted. (As he explains in *Desert Plants: A Curator’s Introduction to the Huntington Desert Garden*, published in 2007 to commemorate the garden’s centennial, Baja California is the eight-hundred-mile projection of California into Mexico.) The ancient boojums are of the genus *Fouquieria*; three were brought to the property in the 1930s, part of the bounty from one of the fabled

A curving pathway in the Desert Garden on a wet winter’s morning is enlivened by golden barrel cactus, *Echinocactus grusonii*, at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California. Photographs copyright Ilana Panich-Linsman, 2015.



collecting expeditions by the nurseryman Howard Gates into Baja.

It's almost impossible to describe the Desert Garden's beauty, but its purpose is also scientific. "This is not Disneyland," Lyons remarks. "This is a fantasy, yes, but one based on reality." He and his staff try to replicate the plants' natural habitats. "We provide the tools – rocks, contours, exposure – in order for the plants to adapt." He gestures to the area around us. "Much of the rockwork here in the Baja bed was done by how I understood the rocks and plant placement in the wild," he continues. "We're responsible for the garden's topography and microclimates."

The Huntington Desert Garden is one of the greatest botanical gardens on any continent. Divided into sixty beds, only five are planted by (mostly) geographical origins: the Sonoran Desert, the State of California, Argentina, Madagascar, and the Baja California sections. The rest are horticultural assemblages, though plants from what is still known at the Huntington as the Old World are weighted in the upper garden and those of the New in the lower. But this ground is not a desert at all. Nothing about the place is quite what it seems: the lower garden, where the Baja bed is planted, for example, was once a pond.

The landscape is framed by the blue-gray San Gabriel Mountains, rocky puzzle pieces snapped into the east-west Transverse Ranges of coastal California. In the early twentieth century, this land, already well settled by Anglos, was a luxuriant paradise planted in citrus and roses and gracious with California live oaks and mighty riparian sycamores.

The San Andreas Fault snakes along the mountains. A tributary fault line, the Raymond Hill, heads straight down into the San Gabriel Valley and through the property of the Huntington. Escarpments, fault lines, and a river in the San Gabriel Mountains mean water, which made possible Henry E. Huntington's dream for a great estate to benefit the public. The miraculous presence of water in the San Gabriel Valley enables cultivation of all the gardens on the property; it makes this jewel-box desert possible.

To travel to the actual desert, by the way – to Palm Springs, for instance – requires a couple of hours' drive on two free-ways. And to get to the northernmost tip of Baja California, count on eighteen long hours wedged in a bus seat.

The Desert Garden, and most of the other gardens that make up this tourist-beckoning estate, owes its existence to men of prodigious energy and ambition. Henry E. Huntington had



great wealth and vision; William Hertrich was a talented and passionate horticulturist.

Henry Huntington first saw the rich San Gabriel Valley in April 1893, en route to San Francisco while accompanying his uncle Collis P. Huntington, businessman, philanthropist, and president of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Henry was, like his uncle, a practical man. He was "first assistant" to the railroad president and, also like him, understood what he wanted and how to go about getting it. They stayed overnight at San Marino Ranch; in 1903, Henry would buy it.

Collis Huntington, in 1895, married his longtime, much younger mistress, Arabella Yarrington, mother of a boy who was most likely his biological son. After Collis died, five years later, Henry set about wooing Arabella. In her book *The Art of Wealth: The Huntingtons in the Gilded Age*, Shelley Bennett suggests that the way to win Arabella's heart was with property. If that's true, Henry cannily engaged the help of his uncle's widow in the planning of his transformation of San Marino Ranch. Both were avid collectors of European art. The residence, designed by the architects Myron Hunt and Elmer Grey, still displays the result of their efforts. The grounds, however, were developed by William Hertrich.

In 1903 – the same year Henry Huntington bought the San Marino Ranch – Hertrich arrived in Southern California with a solid reputation and an eagerness to make his mark. By the end of 1904, Hertrich had become the ranch's landscape gardener. Garden-building at the San Marino Ranch began when Hertrich noticed that his Mr. Huntington liked

Beaucarnea recurvata, sometimes called elephant's foot or ponytail palm (though the tree is not a palm at all) in the Desert Garden.

palms. In 1905, four acres were prepared for the Palm Garden. He first collected specimens from California, then from other U.S. nurseries, and even-

tually from Europe and Asia.

At the same time, Hertrich approached his employer with the idea of a cactus garden. In his charming memoir, *The Huntington Botanical Gardens, 1905 . . . 1949: Personal Recollections of William Hertrich*, he writes: "Mr. Huntington evidenced complete surprise and questioned why I thought anyone could possibly be interested in such a garden, admitting that he himself thoroughly disliked all types of cacti." (While supervising Southern Pacific Railroad construction in the Mojave Desert, Huntington had endured a painful run-in with a cactus.)

The horticulturalist was savvy enough to appeal to Huntington's beliefs in education and the public good: Hertrich argued that a major collection of desert plants from the American continent would be of educational and scientific interest. Perhaps they might consider South African plants too, he suggested slyly.

Hertrich not only bought specimens but became a plant explorer as well, collecting first in Arizona before statehood and then in Mexico. This was at the end of the golden age of cactus-collecting directly from natural habitats. Since the early nineteenth century, Europeans, among them many of Hertrich's countrymen, had been hauling these horticultural wonders out of the deserts of the Americas.

Hertrich is essentially the creator of the Palm, Desert, Rose, and Japanese Gardens, along with other plant collections. He supervised citrus and avocado production; he started the site's first plant nursery; he was responsible for the water system; he oversaw a number of difficult jobs in the construction of the Huntington residence, library, mausoleum, and other buildings. He was also instrumental in the management of the Huntington's real-estate interests, and in the founding of the town of San Marino. For Arabella Huntington, he built and maintained an aviary for her enjoyment during her stays at the ranch.

Unfortunately for her husband, Arabella spent little time at San Marino Ranch; she preferred her grand houses in France and on Fifth Avenue, where she died in 1924. (A grieving Henry followed three years later. The two are buried on the property in the architect John Russell Pope's round, white, classical-style mausoleum.) However, the close Hertrich-Huntington partnership and joint stewardship of the property lasted until the death of its founder, in 1927. And

in 1928, the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery opened to the public.

The Desert Garden has bred fierce loyalty in its custodians. Gary Lyons has spent most of his career in this garden. His first post there, as head gardener, began in 1965, when he was hired by Myron Kimnach, who was only the third superintendent of buildings and grounds since the garden's beginnings. William Hertrich, then age eighty-seven and long retired, still came almost daily to walk its paths, as always sharply dressed in a suit and tie. His eyesight was failing, but the Huntington, and especially the Desert Garden, was his life. An internationally celebrated horticulturalist, his influence continues to this day. In 2007, at the conclusion of *Desert Plants*, Lyons writes, "I must acknowledge an enormous debt of gratitude to William Hertrich: his inspiration and guiding spirit taught me to plant my prayers rather than say them."

On a crisp and sunny January day, I sit on a bench in the lower garden, tucked away along the back edge of the two-acre Heritage Walk. This area, which opened in 2002, was renovated and landscaped with significant historical specimens along its curving walkways.

Lyons has pointed out that this section of the garden echoes the "desertscape" of Henry Huntington's time, with pathways and beds lined with native granite river rock. According to Hertrich, Huntington came to appreciate the uniqueness of the Desert Garden, and enjoyed showing it off to amazed friends and colleagues. On the Heritage Walk, special attention was made to incorporate plants that were among the fifteen hundred listed in the plant accession catalog, initiated in 1932.

January in the garden is the moment of aloes, and a number of *Aloe arborescens* – one of the first aloe species to be cultivated by Southern California home gardeners – are rocketing orange-red around the people strolling through.

A fence of vertical, pleated young organ pipe cacti (*Pachycereus marginatus*) runs partially along the northern edge of this garden. I love the plant's pinstriped margins and elegant, minimalist shape. The fence suggests a modernist composition.

The trees I can see from my bench include mesquite, acacia, a dormant desert willow, and some towering *Yucca filifera* from Mexico – perhaps thirty feet tall – collected by Hertrich in 1912. Often the garden's specimen plants, some of which measure a few feet across, are so visually compelling that visi-

tors forget to notice what is overhead.

In the recent past, the Huntington's public spaces have been designed to accommodate federal and state safety mandates. Yet one can still glimpse lovely views of the closed areas, beyond their slender metal gates. Behind me on this bench is a remnant of stone stairs, part of the hidden Huntington Desert Garden, which is honeycombed with dirt paths, steps, and old rare plants and trees. Hertrich's 1907 design sensibilities are on offer here, and it is not difficult to imagine the Huntington family and their friends enjoying the quiet pleasures of this garden more than a century ago.

Today, the property – with its hundred and twenty acres of gardens and buildings (although there is still undeveloped acreage) – continues to fulfill Henry Huntington's intentions to educate the public. His library is one of the great scholarly research centers; his art collections are iconic; his botanical and other public gardens have taken their place among the most famous. Each year six hundred thousand people visit.

Still, the Huntington continues to march forward. Gardens are often rethought, restored, and reconfigured, and new ones are built and planted as well. The complex and startling Garden of Flowing Fragrance, the first public Chinese garden in California and only the fourth in the United States, opened in 2008; the refurbished Japanese Garden reopened in 2013 with a new teahouse. The year 2015 marks a milestone: a two-year construction project, which added a 52,000-square-foot education and visitor complex, opens this spring with a native-plant landscape.

Change will undoubtedly come to the Desert Garden as well. Some of the garden's admirers worry about the new botanical center expected to replace the decades-old Desert Conservatory, which will certainly alter the appearance of the upper garden; additional paths are also allegedly planned for easier access to the new education complex.

At the same time, the past is respected. The visitor to the Desert Garden may encounter plants from habitats that no longer exist – making this truly a living museum – and the Huntington continues its serious mission of propagating and distributing documented genetic material that might otherwise be lost.

For me, the Desert Garden is imbued with a strong sense of *gravitas* – a sense of the past in the present, and of the arid landscapes of the world distilled into twelve acres. But this sense also springs from the concentration of vision and effort that created and sustained this unique garden – the partnerships over the course of a century among those who made this their life's work. – Paula Panich

Lonesome Drive: The Wide Open Spaces of West Texas

The landscape of the American West begins – has its eastern shore, you might say – in West Texas, an area comprising as many as seventy counties. These are wide spaces and weathered plateaus. The late journalist A.C. Greene described the territory as a "billowing ocean," and indeed it was submerged once beneath a prehistoric sea. Driving through West Texas, you have the sense of being aboard a fast-moving ship; of the vastness of your surroundings and the solitariness of your situation. Here is the brutality of Cormac McCarthy country, where humans are small and close to the earth, dwarfed by the wide skies and occasional craggy mesas, heavily outnumbered by the ocotillo and prickly pear. In his novel *All the Pretty Horses*, the weather goes "all sideways" during a funeral in San Angelo, muffling the preacher's sermon: "When it was over and the mourners rose to go the canvas chairs they'd been sitting on raced away tumbling among the tombstones."

The drama of the landscape lies in the way it chases people away and beckons them back again. Resourceful ones, determined to carve out some territory, push back against a slow-moving takeover by desert, lizards, and cacti. The literature exploring this tension is long. One can see it play out in the correspondence of Robert E. Lee, stationed as a high-ranking U.S. Cavalry officer in West Texas in the 1850s. In a letter to his wife, at home in Virginia, he described himself as adrift in a "desert of dullness," calling the land "the most barren and least inviting country." And when it didn't numb the brain, it bruised the body. After injuring himself on a plant known as the Spanish bayonet, Lee wrote, "Every branch and leaf in this country nearly are armed with a point, and some to poison the flesh. What a blessing the children are not here!" Gusts grew so tiresomely strong, he told his daughter Mary, that "the violence of the wind requires all my hands to hold the paper." Yet for Lee, as for so many who have visited these parts, the land, for all its harshness and hostility, beguiled and even inspired. "The sun was fiery hot, the atmosphere like a blast from a hot air furnace, the water salt," he wrote one Fourth of July. "Still my feelings for my country were as ardent, my faith in her future as true, and my hopes for her advancement as unabated as they would have been under better circumstances."

A century and a half later, West Texas still abounds in challenges. Yet humans, just as persistent in overcoming them, have added their imprint to the scene. Its landscape of



On the road in West Texas.

far-flung cities, connected by long, slender ribbons of asphalt – tightropes across the desert – nudges people who don't care to make a two-hundred-mile round-trip to the grocery store toward self-sufficiency. Back-to-the-landers and survivalists thrive here, composting their own manure or solarizing their homes.

Bereft of the snowpacks found in other parts in the West, the land is ungenerous with its water. In this corner of America notable for bony aridity, windmills were introduced in the nineteenth century to pull up underground reserves for the steam trains puffing westwards. Many of the old whirligigs, often rusted and crowded with weeds about their bases, still pump water to replenish livestock ponds. If the terrain of West Texas is lunar in its topography, these scattered and diminutive windmills are like flags: announcements of human presence and rallying points of resilience.

More recently, West Texans have learned to exploit the cruel wind that sweeps through the region for a new purpose: the generation of electricity. The impulse began with hippie visionaries determined to disconnect from the grid. Then, with a push from the Capitol in Austin, wind power became big business. With a new breed of windmills – ones with names like the GE 2.5, which came into fashion in the late 1990s – Texas, on some gusty winter nights, gets as much as 25 percent of its electricity from wind power. By 2012 the state had more wind turbines than all but five countries in the world. They are as tall as the Statue of Liberty and resemble children's pinwheels, their blades playfully, lazily, mesmerizingly spinning through the sky.

The old windmills were low on the horizon and often came singly. Today's windmills form orchards – wind farms – clustered atop mesas, with red lights flashing in the night to ward off aircraft. Some people say they are a blight. I think of them as wonderfully architectural: vertical ingenuity in an unrelentingly horizontal landscape. If A. C. Greene thought of the land as an ocean, then these are the buoys, bobbing up to reassure us of human hardiness.

To get from my home in Austin to my favorite parts of this harsh, alluring landscape, you must drive nine hours: first across the rolling Hill Country – the pretty, once-poor, thin-soiled land where LBJ had his roots – and then on west as the land flattens out at the town of Junction, so named because of the two rivers that come together there. Continuing across the wide-open Chihuahuan Desert on I-10, which resembles an airplane runway flanked by scattered mesas, you arrive in the town of Fort Stockton, a far-flung Confederate outpost during the Civil War.

You are on the West Texas frontier now – but your journey continues. You still have to drive through the biblical-sounding burg of Balmorhea, a cold-spring oasis. Not long after, you hook a left and find yourself in the quaint town of Fort Davis, with an inn offering fresh biscuits and a trailer dishing up some of the best tortas north of the Rio Grande. The monotony of the wide-open spaces traversed on the 450-mile journey is broken by the Davis Mountains, home of the McDonald Observatory. Here you can attend astronomer-hosted “star parties,” where docents shine laser pointers at faraway galaxies as if they were as close as an auditorium blackboard. The blackness of the night in Fort Davis was why the University of Texas chose this location for its observatory; at night this is the darkest spot in North America. Even in this remote place, though, the human presence can be detected on the skyscape. On a moonless night – one that leaves you feeling adrift in outer space – the brightest spot in the inky sky is the bulging glow of El Paso, low on the horizon, about 200 miles away.

The following morning, you arrive in Marfa, a handsome-enough town, whose claim to fame was that the James Dean-Elizabeth Taylor film *Giant* was shot there.

The lobby of the Paisano, the grand old hotel that sits on Marfa's too-wide boulevard, proudly displays mementoes of the film on its walls. Nowadays, though, Marfa is known as the sort of place where a person, especially an artist, can test him- or herself against the elements. The cheapness of the land doesn't hurt, either. In 1977 the sculptor Donald Judd decided to remove himself from New York's gallery- and dealer-dominated art scene, purchasing buildings and a decommissioned army base in Marfa. These became his gallery and studio spaces, where, with Dan Flavin and John Chamberlain (and eventually others), he could work and exhibit in the grandeur of this flat, sun-drenched landscape.

Judd's arrival in Marfa began an unlikely, ongoing evolution. Today, in addition to the usual offerings of a dusty Texas frontier town, you can buy cappuccinos and thin-crust pizzas and browse about at a hipster bookstore. Some visitors find the Marfa experience a little surreal – especially when tumbleweeds roll through town on windy days, which are not infrequent. Phil Davison, a correspondent for the British newspaper *The Independent*, recounted his passage through the Texas borderlands during a 1996 windstorm. “By the time we stopped for coffee and petrol, a mean wind had whipped up and tumbleweed had piled up against the car,” he wrote. “There were hundreds of giant balls of twigs crossing the highway every hundred yards and traveling at about fifty miles an hour. They got bigger

Pine Canyon in Northern Kinney County. Photograph by M. L. Radio.



and bigger until some were ten feet high, and not ‘weed’ but bunches of hard scrub rocking the car with each hit.”

Nature pushing back, you might say, if you thought nature had an agenda. I think of Judd and the artists who came at his invitation to occupy studios and display their works in Marfa in the 1970s, grappling with this question amid not particularly hospitable surroundings. To my eyes Judd’s rows of industrially milled aluminum boxes, displayed in two buildings of the former Army airfield on the outskirts of town, are sleekly minimalist statements of human presence within this vast landscape, whereas Chamberlain’s sculptures, composed of crushed, scrap-metal auto parts, seem like tumbleweeds – man-made forms crumpled into giant balls, blowing across the range.

Although many art-scene pilgrims leave Marfa as soon as they have visited its several museum-like buildings, no trip to this part of the world is worthwhile without a visit to nearby Big Bend, which is not only the country’s largest national park but also one of its most remote. Nowadays you can bed down at a lodge in the park’s center or in Terlingua, the ramshackle town on its fringe, home of an annual international championship chili cook-off. Situated as it is in a crook of Texas that borders Mexico, Big Bend has the allure of true frontier. The names of the trails – Lost Mine, Sam Nail Ranch, Tuff Canyon – capture the romance and harshness this land has long held for people willing to brave the elements. Before choosing a hike, visitors need to make sure they have plenty of water strapped to their hips. My favorite is a modest trek to the hot springs that border the river. Here you can settle into the century-old ruins of the J. O. Langford bathhouse – travelers once paid a dime a day to bathe in the 105-degree water – and simultaneously dangle an arm over the edge of the building’s foundation, into the cool Rio Grande.

Langford first learned of the springs from an old man in the lobby of a hotel in the West Texas town of Alpine. “Nothing down there but rattlesnakes and bandit Mexicans,” the man warned him. “And it’s too far away – that damned country promises more and gives less than any place I ever saw.” But lounging there, you can see why Langford persisted in building his bathhouse, and why so many others have found wonder in this largely unforgiving environment. The stars swim above and, in the dying light, you might catch sight of a petroglyph or two on the rock wall above you: the last, faint marks of ancient peoples who also made a place for themselves in this brutal landscape. – Asher Price

Shoshone Falls: The Niagara of the West

With a vertical drop of 212 feet and a flow that at its height rivals those of the most impressive waterfalls in the world, Shoshone Falls – also known as the Great Falls of the Snake River – is even higher than Niagara Falls.

Traditionally called the Niagara of the West, it is located in south-central Idaho, southeast of Boise and just east of Twin Falls. Although less renowned outside its region than Yosemite and Yellowstone, Shoshone Falls became so well known in the nineteenth century through scientific and popular texts and artistic portrayals that by 1900 it seemed poised to become as famous as its Eastern counterpart. But Shoshone Falls never attained such recognition. Even though it is a state park and was considered for national-park status, its ultimate fate was to become an engine of progress rather than a “sacred site” of national eminence. Its history is a poignant case of what-might-have-been, offering insights into the uneasy relationship between landscape appreciation, environmental conservation, and industrial development in America.

The precipitous gorge of the Snake River at Shoshone Falls was formed when Lake Bonneville flooded some 14,500 years ago. The giant, prehistoric lake (whose remnants today include the Great Salt Lake in Utah) broke its natural boundaries and scoured a vast area, carving the Snake River’s route through a series of precipitous chasms marked by a chain of waterfalls in what would become southern Idaho. Many early nineteenth-century explorers and immigrants passed through the area, as they sought new routes to the Pacific or followed the Oregon Trail. The falls could be heard some ten miles away from the main route, but few travelers noted them until 1847, when the Catholic bishop Augustine Blanchet described the cataract in his journal, calling it the Canadian Waterfall. The formation was renamed Shoshone Falls in 1849 by members of the Mounted Riflemen, the first military expedition to traverse the entire Oregon Trail from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Vancouver. Two men from the party descended to the foot of the falls and one of them, an artist named George Gibbs, made what was probably the first sketch of it. Although the sketch has been lost, the expedition’s report asserted that the place was “one of nature’s great wonders” declaring, “There seems to be but one opinion, that it equaled in grandeur [and] in proportion to the column of water, the Niagara Falls.”

To be likened to Niagara in 1849 was the highest possible praise. Often called the “grandest subject in nature,” the falls had long been the most celebrated American landscape, even though they straddled an international boundary, liter-

ally split between Canada and the United States. In overtly patriotic imagery, Niagara was often coupled with allegorical figures of Liberty, bald eagles, and Indians to reinforce its distinction as a national symbol. But less blatantly symbolic portrayals of the cataract in landscape paintings, essays, poems, and prints could be equally nationalistic. The presence of the spectacular falls was the visible proof of the equivalence – or even superiority – of the United States to the Old World, with its castles, Alps, and storied history. By the 1850s, as other unique American landscapes were discovered and celebrated, the highest accolade they could receive was to be pronounced as grand or distinctive as Niagara.

The sublimity of Niagara and the Shoshone Falls was central to their significance and appeal. Although today anything particularly wonderful may be characterized as “sublime,” the term’s historic application was more profound. In Edmund Burke’s seminal *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), the source of the sublime was described as “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger . . . or operates in a manner analogous to terror”; something “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” Distinguished from the truly violent or dangerous by the viewer’s distance from the scene, which rendered the sublime a “delightful” aesthetic phenomenon, sublimity was inherent in vastness, enormity, power, infinity – anything that humbled the viewer into a state of genuine awe. Only the most extraordinary and extreme landscapes qualified as sublime – enormous canyons, erupting volcanoes, precipitous valleys, and, of course, massive waterfalls such as Niagara and Shoshone Falls – and these sites were sought after ardently for their power to affect viewers’ sensations and emotions.

Niagara’s sublimity and its status as a national icon did not protect the site, however, and it became one of the first battlegrounds between industry and environmental conservation. By the middle of the nineteenth century, as the falls were increasingly being celebrated in poetry and art, commercial development was significantly compromising them. As early as 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville wrote to a friend that if he hoped to “see this place in its grandeur,” he should hurry or else “Niagara will have been spoiled for you. Already the forest round about is being cleared.” The following year a British journalist wrote that speculators were planning “grist-mills,

store houses, saw mills, and all other kinds of unornamental buildings . . . The beautiful scenery about the Falls is doomed to be destroyed." In an early preservationist message, two English ministers asserted in 1834 that "The universal voice ought to interfere . . . Niagara does not belong to Canada or America. Such spots should be deemed the property of civilized mankind."

With no mechanism for protectionist action, however, encroachment escalated in subsequent decades, and a host of hotels and tourist amusements joined the industrial sites around the falls. The area was described as "solid ugliness," the shores swarming with "sharper, hucksters and peddlers." In the late 1860s an array of notable individuals, including the famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the writer William Cullen Bryant, and the painter Frederic Edwin Church, whose spectacular 1857 painting *Niagara* had been a national phenomenon, called for action, but the internationalism of the site and the lack of precedence for governmental intervention presented significant complications. It would not be until the mid-1880s that New York and Canada responded with legislation that established the New York State Reservation and an Ontario provincial park, and the governments began buying and restoring the terrain immediately flanking the falls. Even with this retroactive preservation, however, the lure of hydroelectric power was such that dams were installed above the falls in the early twentieth century. The flow to the cataract remains essentially shut off between midnight and dawn. Tall buildings now loom around Niagara, and, the green belt notwithstanding, the entire area is more urban than natural. Niagara Falls is very much an engineered landscape, despite the fact that it was, to some degree, an early success story in environmental conservation.

As Niagara was becoming a cause for concern, Shoshone Falls was just emerging as a tourist attraction. Frederick Lander briefly noted it in his 1855 Pacific Railroad Survey report; after the local Shoshone and Bannock peoples, who

Thomas Moran, *Shoshone Falls*, 1900, oil, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

had fiercely defended the area, were essentially subdued by the mid-1860s, Shoshone Falls began to be more frequently visited and celebrated. *The Christian Reporter* published two articles about the area in 1864 and 1866, with the first noting that the waterfall had been "always enveloped in mystery," but that it was "entitled to the distinction of being called the greatest in the world" since it was "thirty-eight feet higher than Niagara . . . and the cascade is one solid sheet or body." The second article, entitled "The Niagara of the West: A World's Wonder – the Great Shoshone Falls" (reprinted with slight revisions in the *American Art Journal* the same year) was much longer and filled with purple prose: "Surely there must be a God above . . . who made these Western falls, which soon shall mock the magic art of Eastern ones and sink them into insignificance." The writer also underscored the commercial prospects of the site:

As tourists tell, the cataracts of Southern Asia and the falls of the fair Rhine; the Victoria Falls of Zambezi, Africa, explored by Livingstone, and the Fall of Straubach, Switzerland, as immortalized in Byron's *Manfred* may each have special charms which won celebrity for special point; but as a whole, for wildness and for witchery, for width and volume, this "Niagara of the West" will stand second to none of all. These falls of the Snake or Lewis Fork of the Columbia have been but a couple of years discovered and have been seen as yet by scarce as many scores of white men; but before a few more years, with steam communication stretching from Salt Lake to the Columbia, their shrine is destined to have its thousands of worshippers.

Among the earliest of these "worshippers" was a group that visited the site in 1868 with Idaho territorial governor David W. Ballard. Anticipating the arrival of the railroad to the area, one of the party wrote in the *Idaho Statesman*, "Much can and will be done to make the Shoshone attractive to tourists as a place of summer resort. The day is not far distant when the shrill whistle of the iron horse will be heard to mingle with the thunder of our falls. Sweet will such music be to the ears of Idahoans." In fact, Shoshone Falls would never be served directly by a railroad line, but as early as 1875 a farmer from Iowa named Charles Wolgamothe bought squatters rights to the land flanking the river and began to prepare the area for tourism. He built an inn by 1879 and established a stage line from the main road to the falls.

Shoshone Falls was also the object of scientific inquiry during the period, and this had an important impact on pictorial representations of the cataract. Members of two of the federal so-called Great Surveys that traversed enormous portions of the west for over a decade visited the cataract, making observations, artistic portrayals, and photographs. The first of these visitors were the participants in the Geological Survey of the Fortieth Parallel, led by Clarence King in 1868, with artists John Henry Hill and photographer Timothy O'Sullivan. The second group of surveyors belonged to George Wheeler's 1874 Geographical Survey West of the Hundredth Meridian, which also had O'Sullivan as a member, along with the artist Gilbert Munger. While Hill and Munger's images remain relatively little known, O'Sullivan's photographs became some of the most important Western views of the era, and his views of Shoshone Falls are among his most distinctive.

Charged with representing the geological interests of the survey leaders as well as portraying the river from the most compelling perspectives, O'Sullivan created some twenty full-plate and more than thirty stereoscopic views of Shoshone Falls: more pictures than he took of any other Western site. These images were reproduced as wood engravings in popular magazines such as *Harper's Monthly* (September 1869) and in the official survey reports. In addition, Wheeler published several deluxe, annotated albums of photographs from his expedition, with the one from 1876 prominently featuring Shoshone Falls. Several large images accompanied a text offering directions to the site, favorable comparisons with Niagara Falls,



and predictions about the area's appeal to tourists and artists.

As a "catastrophist" geologist investigating sudden and dramatic events in the Earth's physical history, King had a different perspective on Shoshone Falls than Wheeler. Fascinated with the visible evidence of cataclysmic change from the Lake Bonneville flood, he wrote extensively about the falls and their surroundings in government reports (*Systematic Geology*, 1878), scientific books (*Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, 1872), and popular articles (*Harper's Monthly*, 1869 and *Overland Monthly*, 1870), all of which helped raise awareness of the falls' importance and appeal as a major American landmark. The following description, which appeared in *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* was typical of King's evocative style:

It is a strange savage scene: a monotony of pale blue sky, olive and grey stretches of desert, frowning walls of jetty lava, deep beryl-green of river-stretches, reflecting here and there the intense solemnity of the cliffs, and in the centre a dazzling sheet of foam . . . Upon the foam of the cataract one point of the rock cast a cobalt-blue shadow. Where the river flowed around the western promontory, it was wholly in shadow, and of a deep sea-green . . . Dead barrenness is the whole sentiment of the scene. The mere suggestion of trees clinging here and there along the walls serves rather to heighten than relieve the forbidding gloom of the place. Nor does the flashing whiteness, where the river tears itself among the rocky islands, or rolls in spray down the cliff, brighten the aspect. In contrast with its brilliancy, the rocks seem darker and more wild.

King's vivid and colorful characterizations were especially important in helping readers imagine such a remote site in an era in which most images were reproduced in black and white.

O'Sullivan's photographs from both surveys were important in many ways, but not the least in providing inspiration for one of the leading painters of the American West. Thomas Moran (1837–1926) had traveled with the Great Surveys, becoming the first artist to visit the Yellowstone region in 1871 with the Ferdinand Hayden expedition and the first to paint the Grand Canyon when accompanying John Wesley Powell in 1873. These and other trips inspired him to produce an array of images of the West, from intricate and evocative watercolors and illustrations to larger-scale paintings in oil. Most noteworthy of the latter are his mammoth canvases *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872, and *The Chasm of the Colorado*, 1874, which sold for \$10,000 apiece to the U.S. Congress in the early 1870s and launched his fame as the

preeminent painter of the American West. The first of the two seven-by-twelve-foot paintings was developed from Moran's field sketches, which were instrumental in helping convince congressmen to enact landmark legislation that preserved these landscapes.

Although Moran did not actually visit Shoshone Falls until 1900, he created several views of the cascade in the mid-1870s, using O'Sullivan's images, King's colorful descriptions, and possibly an 1880 panoramic photograph made by his friend William Henry Jackson. An exquisite watercolor, today in the Chrysler Museum, was commissioned by Louis Prang, a prominent Boston chromolithographer, who published it in an extraordinary series of color prints of the West in 1876. Another of Moran's images of the falls accompanied an 1876 article in the *Aldine*, an important art publication of the period. It was not uncommon for Moran to portray sites he had never seen, and his faithfulness to O'Sullivan's depictions made his early views of Shoshone Falls the best artistic representations of the place to that point.

Finally in 1900, at age sixty-three, Moran traveled to southern Idaho to see the falls for himself. The previous summer his beloved wife of thirty-six years, an artist in her own right, Mary Nimmo Moran, had died of typhoid fever, and the grief-stricken artist sought solace in travel, taking an extended tour of the West with his daughter Ruth. But his trip seems to have had an additional motivation: Shoshone Falls was being considered for national-park status. Responding to requests from the Governor of Idaho and the U.S. Senators from that state, *The Annual Report of the Commissioner of the General Land Office* to the Secretary of the Interior recommended the national designation in 1900, saying of the falls, "there is nothing else like it elsewhere. Nothing half so weird, so beautiful, so clothed in majesty, so draped with terror." Moran may have heard of the proposal from friends in Washington and hastened to the scene to paint the formation firsthand, hoping to unveil a new national-park picture, just as he had done thirty years before, with his first great Yellowstone painting.

Shoshone Falls had become much more accessible and well-known by the time of Moran's voyage. In 1884 the Oregon Short Line had established a railroad line across southern Idaho, and Senator William A. Clark of Butte, Montana, and three Omaha businessmen had bought Wolgamoth's property along the banks of the falls, building roads, a ferry, and a tourist hotel. Even so, the area remained

relatively pristine, as Ruth Moran later wrote, describing her father's reaction to the site, "Not since his first sight of the Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon had he been so stirred and thrilled. . . . There were no houses or people to spoil the grandeur of the mighty torrent . . . and it was beyond words magnificent."

At the falls Moran followed his usual process of sketching. He then spent much of the summer in his East Hampton, New York, studio completing what would be his last monumental canvas. *Shoshone Falls* (1900, Gilcrease Museum) measures six by twelve feet, a dramatic horizontal composition that presents the falls cascading from the right and dropping from a semicircular brink. In one sense the work is an homage to Frederic Church's famed *Niagara* of 1857, but it is filled with even more energy and movement. The enormity and wildness of the Niagara of the West has a foreboding quality. The emphasis is on the forces of rock, weather, and water that animate the scene.

Moran had high ambitions for *Shoshone Falls*. He exhibited it at the National Academy of Design and the Century Club in New York and then at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901, where it received high praise and won a silver medal. But, as with Niagara, celebrated portrayals and fame could not protect the landscape itself. Congress did not act on the Shoshone Falls National Park proposal, and following the 1902 National Reclamation Act, a massive program for water usage in the West, plans were formulated for a hydroelectric dam just upstream from the falls. As the *Pacific Northwesterner* noted, "On March 1, 1905, Frank Buhl gave a ceremonial pull on the wheel on a winch . . . the Snake River was diverted, and that night Shoshone Falls went dry."

Shoshone Falls today shows something of its original glory during the spring rains, but because it is a shadow of its former self most of the time, it remains relatively little known, compared to other major Western landscapes. Moran's painting, too, had a less than glorious fate. Initially it languished unsold for many years. Unlike his earlier great canvases purchased for the U.S. Capitol, *Shoshone Falls* remained in his collection. In 1948, almost half a century later, Thomas Gilcrease bought the artist's studio remnants after Ruth Moran's death; *Shoshone Falls* is now regarded as one of the gems of the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Both Shoshone Falls and Moran's great painting of it were casualties of changing times. Many other national parks would be designated in the twentieth century, but in 1905 Shoshone Falls was more valued as a power source than as a sublime landscape, and enormous scenic paintings were on the verge of being supplanted by newly fashionable modernist canvases. – Joni L. Kinsey

Eastern Design in a Western Landscape: Olmsted, Richardson, and the Ames Monument

Few people come upon the Ames Monument by chance. Isolated on the high plains, between Laramie and Cheyenne in southeastern Wyoming, the sixty-foot-high pyramid sits on a windswept knoll, eight thousand feet above sea level. Although not far from Interstate 80 (the pyramid is just visible, when driving westward), it defines its own precinct, seemingly remote in time as well as distance. Its enormity is in keeping with the vast, treeless landscape of short grass, fantastic granite outcrops, and expansive horizon. The monument's perfect geometry is in complete harmony with its setting, extending upward in a primordial communion of earth and sky. The combined effect of structure and landscape lends a sense of purpose and pilgrimage to even a casual visit.

Starkly simple, almost atavistic, the monument emanates that rarest quality of built works: a timeless presence. But the structure belongs to a very specific and dramatic moment in both the history of American design and the American West. Built between 1881 and 82, it commemorates the achievements of the brothers Oakes Ames (1804–73) and Oliver Ames (1807–77) – in particular, their role in financing and building the Union Pacific portion of the first transcontinental railroad. The site for the memorial – where the tracks crossed the Laramie Mountains near Evans Pass on their way to meet the Central Pacific Railroad in northern Utah – was chosen by the Union Pacific directors because it was then the highest point of their line. In 1879 they commissioned the forty-one-year-old architect Henry Hobson Richardson to design a monument memorializing the Ames brothers, who had been principal investors and directors of the corporation.

Richardson responded with an idea for a memorial unlike any that had been produced in the United States: a massive, slightly stepped pyramid, sixty-foot square at its base, rising to a sixty-foot height, constructed of rusticated granite blocks quarried from a nearby outcrop. The architect had never visited the remote location (although he saw his work before he died). Yet site and monument were perfectly matched, enhancing one another. Richardson's close friend and collaborator, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, observed in 1887 that he “never saw a monument so well

befitting its situation, or, a situation so well befitting the special character of a particular monument.”

Olmsted had reason to be particularly interested in the Ames Monument. In the early 1880s he and Richardson were working together on a number of projects in Massachusetts, notably for the extended Ames family in North Easton. The Ames Shovel Works, established before the American Revolution, had grown into a major manufacturing center there, and Oakes and Oliver Ames oversaw an empire of manufacturing and finance. In 1863 Oakes helped organize the Republican Party in Massachusetts and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. There he became a member of the select committee responsible for the Pacific Railway Act of 1864. Oakes and Oliver Ames, among others, were recruited to buy stock in the new Union Pacific corporation – a scheme that was probably framed as both a sound investment and a patriotic duty. As a result of their investments – and the complicated and sometimes nefarious deals made in Congress around the fluctuating prices of railroad corporation stock – Oakes became a central figure in one of the most notorious political scandals of the day, the Credit Mobilier affair, named for a Union Pacific subsidiary construction company. He was censured in Congress in 1872 and died the next year.

The family, intent on clearing the Ames name, sponsored a series of public works in North Easton. Olmsted and Richardson collaborated on a public library, dedicated to Oliver, and a “memorial town hall,” dedicated to Oakes, as well as other Ames family commissions in the area. For their part, the directors of the Union Pacific committed to the creation of a monument dedicated to the two brothers, sited at what was then the station stop of Sherman, Wyoming.

Although Olmsted was probably not directly involved in the design of the monument, we know that he discussed Richardson's conceptual sketch with the architect and saw the finished result. Shortly after Richardson's premature death, in 1886, Olmsted referred to it in a letter as “our monument.” The prior decade had been a period of maximum mutual influence between the two designers, who at the time were the country's leading figures in their respective fields. In an article published several years later, their mutual friend, the art critic and Richardson biographer Mariana Griswold van



Rensselaer, provided insight into the extent of the collaboration between the two men, who were also friends and

neighbors in Brookline, Massachusetts. Richardson “was constantly turning to Mr. Olmsted for advice, even in those cases where it seemed as though it could have little practical bearing upon his design. And where it could have more conspicuous bearing he worked with him as a brother-artist of equal rank and of equal rights with himself. The Town Hall at North Easton may be cited as one example of the extraordinary success which can spring from such co-operation, and Mr. Richardson was never tired of explaining how invaluable in this case had been Mr. Olmsted's assistance.”

The commissions in North Easton give the best indication of how Olmsted's ideas of site-based design effected a transformation in Richardson's architecture. The memorial town hall was sited just west of the memorial library, creating a new and better-defined town center. Together the two men created a work of civic art responsive to the site and especially to local geology, advancing our understanding of how landscape and architectural design can be melded. In her critical assessment of the town hall, Van Rensselaer focused on how

The Ames Monument,
Henry Hobson Richardson, 1882,
Sherman, Wyoming.

Richardson used the rocky location to advantage and how Olmsted extended and enhanced this method. She described the approach to the building as “a series of successive platforms and short flights of steps, kept duly inconspicuous and artistically adapted to the inequalities of the rocky surface.” She was particularly enamored of the use of the depressions in the land and the site’s granite formations as design elements and “the manner in which the tower of the hall rises out of the rock, almost like a natural development.” It appears as if the rock is part of the building and the building part of the rock.

As he did elsewhere, Olmsted designed the landscape setting for Richardson’s buildings in part by exposing and emphasizing the rocky surface of the site. Directly opposite the town hall, he created a massive boulder terrace, on which a stone cairn commemorated the town’s Civil War dead. The joints of the boulder masonry of the terrace were filled with soil to support vines and other plants. An arched opening allowed passage through it, and steps were incorporated into its stones. At the F. L. Ames estate nearby, Richardson created a memorable gatehouse that also employed boulder masonry, and the building itself served as an arched entryway into estate grounds designed by Olmsted. Like the design of the Ames Monument, the North Easton collaborations during this period demonstrate the continuity between Olmsted’s structured landscapes and Richardson’s landscape-inspired structures, each rooted in an enhanced sense of the site’s geology.

While he was working in North Easton, Olmsted was simultaneously designing the Back Bay Fens in Boston, a public park evoking the estuarine wetland that formerly existed there. In 1880 he asked Richardson to collaborate by designing the Boylston Street Bridge. Built in irregular granite ashlar (although Olmsted originally wanted more rugged boulder masonry), the undulating, unornamented mass of the bridge suggested an organic form consistent with Olmsted’s landscape. Both designs eschewed historical references, and were inspired instead by the formal character and geology of the site. The architectural historian James F. O’Gorman has described the bridge as a “complete collaboration between architect and landscape architect, between man and nature, between architecture and geology.” The same is true, O’Gorman observed, “of the man-made mountain Richardson designed at this time in memory of Oakes and Oliver

Ames out in Sherman, Wyoming, a monument conceived as a conventionalized outcropping and quarried from a real one.” The development of this design aesthetic, employing highly engineered and articulated structures that were nevertheless evocative of natural features, would mark a turning point in Richardson’s career – and, considering his influence on Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, in the course of American design history.

For the Wyoming commission Richardson, who had never traveled to the West, could draw on the wealth of photographs, engravings, and paintings of western landscapes that had recently become widely available to the public – in part thanks to the transcontinental railroad. More important to his conception and approach was input from Olmsted, who, unlike Richardson’s other colleagues in Brookline, had lived in the West. In the 1860s, while managing the Mariposa Mine in California, Olmsted had given considerable time and thought to landscape design in semiarid regions. In 1865 he wrote an influential report recommending management policies for the preservation of Yosemite Valley, where he met and employed the geologist Clarence King. During the 1880s, he crisscrossed the country to work on a number of commissions – most notably a project for Stanford University – in which he developed a distinctive approach to landscape design appropriate to the formal character and climate of the region.

In 1881 the Norcross Brothers, a construction firm that realized many of Richardson’s designs in the East, traveled west to work on the Ames Monument. The company oversaw a labor camp on the site for two years, until the commission was completed. Men, tools, and supplies were brought in, of course, by the Union Pacific. There is no evidence that Richardson visited the site of the monument either before conceiving its design or during its construction. However, Frederick Lothrop Ames, who acted as the family representative for the North Easton commissions, suggests in a letter that the architect traveled with him to Sherman in the family’s private car in September 1883, after the project was complete. Unfortunately, Ames makes no mention of the monument itself.

Four years later, however, Frederick Law Olmsted was passing through and requested a five-minute stop at Sherman to

assess its condition. On January 29, 1887, Olmsted wrote to F. L. Ames, speaking of the monument in proprietary terms:

I had several times heard that our monument had been much injured by the dinting of pebbles thrown against it in heavy gusts of wind and having been told by one of the officials of the U. P. that he believed the reports were true with his assistance I obtained an order to have the train detained five minutes this morning so that I could have a look at it. The surface of the ground in the neighborhood, as you will remember, is largely composed of flakes of granite from half an inch to an inch in diameter; there was a high wind blowing and I could believe that if a little intensified, a man might get a very unpleasant pelting, but the granite fragments are thin, scaly and brittle and it seemed to me that it would take countless blows of them to make any notable impression on a firm granite wall. I could take but a moment’s passing glance at the monument and in this could not see that the slightest impression had been made upon it. And what is likely to be made in the next thousand years will, I should think, no more than improve it.

As this reference to “our monument” suggests, Olmsted saw himself as at least influencing the design. He goes on to relate, “A gentle man tells me that he has often passed it but seeing it only from a distance it had never occurred to him that it was anything other than a natural object. Yet when it can be seen from the train at the Station, as it could not this morning, and I am afraid, seldom can, it has much more fine finished stateliness than was to have been readily imagined from Richardson’s drawing.” Olmsted had conceived of the structure as more rugged and unrefined – perhaps due to the thick lines and bold form of Richardson’s original sketch, which does not survive. In seeing the structure up close, he was struck by its fine craftsmanship and the clean articulation of the rusticated and partially randomized ashlar courses. This craftsmanship was typical of the Norcross Brothers. From afar the masterful finish evoked the surrounding granite outcrops, which were eroded into weird formations. But on close examination, the work was impeccably refined.

In his biography of Richardson, Henry-Russell Hitchcock celebrated the Ames Monument, which exuded the power of “a great glacial moraine roofed and made habitable.” Hitchcock was no geologist, as his allusion makes clear. But writing at the height of the modern movement, the critic claimed the

pyramid as a work looking beyond its own time for something timeless; he saw Richardson “seeking his inspiration back in the time before architecture took form.” The monument was perhaps the purest expression of the new, distinctively American and modern approach to architectural design that Richardson developed toward the end of his life, after working with Olmsted. Hitchcock judged it to be “perhaps the finest memorial in America.”

Historians since have not only agreed, but have analyzed the Ames Monument as a critical moment in architectural history. Mark Wright identifies it as “the fulcrum on which Richardson’s work pivots – before and after” and suggests that the architect’s “imaginative confrontation with the harsh landscapes of the Western United States” resulted in a “new primitivism” reflected in his successive buildings. The formal characteristics that identify Richardson’s later buildings – simplicity, mass, rich surface detail – were expressed in Wyoming more freely and independent of any style, even his own version of the Romanesque. Subsequently Richardson produced some of his greatest works, including the Crane and Billings libraries, the Robert Treat Paine House, and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store. His experience of designing the Ames Monument and his collaboration with Frederick Law Olmsted played a role in their success.

Today, the monument remains in very good condition. As Olmsted predicted, the severe weather conditions of southeastern Wyoming, far from deteriorating its surfaces, “no more than improve it.” The most serious damage has been due not to weather but vandalism. In the 1980s, the two portrait relief panels of Oakes and Oliver Ames, by the greatest American sculptor of the era, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, were damaged by rifle fire. Someone who was apparently an expert shot (it is Wyoming) hit them both squarely in the nose, despite the fact that the reliefs are set into the monument about fifty feet off the ground. Nevertheless, for those who come upon the Ames Monument today, only a short drive on an unpaved road from Interstate 80, its power and its almost sacred precinct endure. Much of that effect is due to its remarkable setting in the treeless high plains, in a regional landscape that has altered little over millennia. More than one hundred years ago, eastern design met western landscape and, in telling part of the story of the transcontinental railroad, created a truly timeless expression of American culture. – Ethan Carr

Place Maker: Stephen F. Byrns

Before his death in 1940, the prominent New York City attorney and humanitarian Samuel J. Untermyer could not give his estate garden away. After years of exuberantly planning, designing, and cultivating his retreat overlooking the Hudson River in Yonkers, and regularly opening his gardens to the public, he was rebuffed by the state, county, and city in his efforts to have it preserved in perpetuity. Now, seven decades later, an enthusiastic architect and former Yonkers resident, Stephen F. Byrns, has taken up the mantle. His passion for the project is a tribute not only to the original creator but also to the present climate, in which gardens are being renewed and celebrated on a massive scale.

Samuel Untermyer, the original place maker, was a lawyer who revolutionized the financial and business world through establishing precedents that led to antitrust laws and fiduciary regulations, even as he himself grew wealthy through astute investments. Originally from Virginia (his father served in the Confederate Army), he went to City College, clerked in a New York law firm, and earned

his professional degree from Columbia Law School. By 1933 he understood the threat of Hitler’s regime and its stance against Jews, and courageously set out to raise public awareness, together with representatives of other nations. He became the head of the World Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League, which called for the boycott of German products.

He lived in Manhattan at 2 East 54th Street, not far from John D. Rockefeller Jr. But the elaborate pile of a granite mansion in Yonkers called Greystone, previously owned by former New York governor Samuel J. Tilden, was where he and his beloved wife Minnie oversaw the creation of a spectacular garden based on classical motifs.

Around 1915 Untermyer hired the Beaux-Arts architect William Welles Bosworth to design it – a natural choice, since Bosworth had already distinguished himself by designing the extensive gardens at Kykuit, the Rockefeller estate in Tarrytown, New York. At Greystone’s peak, Untermyer engaged sixty gardeners, and the garden became a setting for the cultural life he and his wife generously shared with friends and the public. Orchids were delivered from his greenhouses to the city daily to refresh



his ever-present boutonnière.

In 1946, six years after Untermyer’s death, the City of Yonkers finally made the decision to acquire sixteen acres of the original 150-acre garden. These included the walled enclosure called the Greek Garden, the 650-foot-long vista path descending to the river, and two of the original colored gardens – each of which had been devoted to a single hue (pink, blue, yellow, red, and white). Even this partial rescue was a sacrifice for the city, as it meant giving up a sizable portion of taxable real estate. For decades, though, the property languished. While some improvements were made in the seventies, the city lacked the resources to maintain the gardens properly.

In the 1990s, when Byrns himself lived in Yonkers in a house on the river, he and other members of the community attempted to prevent the construction of a nursing home over the original Italian garden. Unfortunately, these efforts failed. St. John’s Riverside Hospital was also built to the north – another lost cause. Byrns then moved to Riverdale, where he served on the board of Wave Hill for ten years. In 2010, however, he resigned, stepping down at the same time from the New York City’s Landmarks Preservation Commission after a six-year term. He was ready for something different.

That August he was inspired to found the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy after his former Yonkers neighbor, the artist Richard Hass, told him that the fountains in the Untermyer Garden had been turned on. “It was an amazing sight,” Byrns recalls, “and it transformed my summer.” As it turns out, it transformed his life.

In September Byrns happened to be in Rome at the same time as Marco Polo Stufano, the consummate plantsman who had overseen the famed restoration of Wave Hill. As they visited the Villas d’Este and

Aldobrandini, among others, Byrns reports, “I made my sales pitch to him, and he replied that he would join us.”

Stephen Byrns now divides his time 60-40 between his Manhattan architecture firm BKSK and his duties as founding chairman of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy. His brand-new office is a simple, one-room affair in the Charles A. Cola Community Center: a single-story building with a hipped roof similar to that of the former carriage house near the garden entrance.

Restoring gardens has been in Byrns’s blood since he worked at age twelve to revive plantings at his great-aunt’s house in St. Joseph, Michigan, after his parents purchased the residence to turn it into their family home. At Princeton University he learned how to view history as an interdisciplinary expression of politics, economics, and culture from the eminent professor and historian Carl E. Schorske. When he received his degree from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, its dean was James Stewart Polshek, a model of social responsibility. Byrns’s prize-winning designs have been characterized by his firm as “weaving together the uniqueness of residents,

local histories, and physical settings in order to celebrate context,” which helps explain his attraction to the Untermyer property.

The Untermyer Gardens have been fortunate in their horticulturists. Marco Polo Stufano felt that he was, in a sense, “coming full circle” when he arrived, because he had learned about the place as a student at the New York Botanical Garden’s School of Horticulture from his great teacher and mentor, the acclaimed horticulturist Thomas H. Everett. In 1927, so the story goes, when the Kew-trained Everett arrived from his native England in steerage, Untermyer’s agent was at the docks looking for gardeners, and Everett was hired. He remained there for a year. To complete the circle, Timothy Tilghman, head gardener since the Untermyer restoration began in 2011, had worked at Wave Hill for four years under Stufano. Although Stufano retired in 2001, he still serves as an informal advisor, and Tilghman considers him his mentor.

The centerpiece of the 16-acre grounds was the walled Greek Garden – despite its name, a hybrid of styles. In the July 1918 issue of *Architectural Record*, Bosworth referred to it as “an Indo-Persian garden,” elaborating, “Many of these so-called Mughal gardens are rectangular in form with a cross of water ways intersecting at the center and

bordered with formal *plate bandes* of flowers.” The plan also called for high, crenellated walls, with octagonal towers topped by summerhouses at the corners. “This form must have come from high antiquity and seems likely to have taken its origin in Greek tradition” – hence his creation’s popular name. The result was a garden of striking grandeur – Bosworth’s finest in America before Rockefeller Jr. sent him to restore Versailles; he remained in France the rest of his life.

The outer wall, with its incised diamond-lattice design, includes carefully spaced pilasters and iron fasteners for vines. It is interrupted on the south side by the main entrance, which was inspired by the massive Lion Gate at Mycenae, built in the thirteenth century BCE. Here, though, the gate is guarded not by lionesses, but by Artemis, goddess of the hunt, depicted in a flowing relief above the lintel. (The free range of her prey is soon to be checked by a deer fence.) When I first entered the garden under two giant weeping beeches and viewed its crossed canals and wide lawns, surrounded by classical follies, I had the delightful impression that the Mughal four-river or *charbagh* landscape around the Tomb of Humayan in Delhi had been set down in



the middle of the Agora in Athens, where philosophers once held forth under their classical stoa, now scattered in ruins around the edges.

As Tilghman explains, although the gardens are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, improvements are monitored by the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation with the goal of evoking its appearance as of 1940, the year of Untermyer’s death. Unable to afford his lavishness, they are treating the gardens as a rehabilitation rather than a restoration. Untermyer planted the gardens with seasonal splash, from spring tulips to fall chrysanthemums, but the look of public gardens has changed in the last

decades – in New York thanks in large part to Marco Polo Stufano. Today many gardens in the city’s parks feature a *mélange* of common hardy perennials or annuals with diverse foliage, textures, and subtle seasonal variety. This approach also makes the garden an educational and public resource for local at-home gardeners.

At the Untermyer Gardens, instead of Bosworth’s English yews, Tilghman has lined the canals with more easily maintained but equally dramatic Japanese hollies. On the opposite side of the parallel path, he has planted fastigate beeches, whose foliage suggests the

Persian Garden, Untermyer Gardens.

golden glow originally achieved with standards of yellow-flowering lantana. While naturalizing bulbs are planted under the beeches, the borders between the hollies are reserved for special summer displays.

As any traveler to India or Pakistan knows, the ubiquitous flower of the subcontinent is the marigold, which flourishes everywhere in gardens and pots. Last summer, in keeping with the Indo-Persian theme – and with a nod to Untermyer’s seasonal extravagance – the garden featured an overflow of marigolds along the waterways, in pleasing contrast to silvery

helichrysum and dichondra. This popular display was complemented by the large numbers of local visitors in colorful, swirling saris.

For the perimeter borders, Tilghman's goal is a romantic mix "to make the plantings softer and more mysterious against the garden walls and balustrades," so that "the rhythmic order plays with the architecture and makes it appear more intimate." This effect has been achieved on the garden's east side (along Broadway) with a mixture of azaleas, rhododendron, and other woody plants and shrubs that form the background to an ever-changing assortment of shade plants. Along the west side, choices made to accommodate full sun include long-blooming red, pink, and yellow "Knock Out" roses. Come March, Tilghman and Stufano review these borders together, catalogues in hand. Then they vary the selections after editing out plants that did not survive. On a lower terrace, Tilghman is planting a solid mass of hydrangea – two dozen or more varieties – near a row of cherry trees that provide airy blossoms in spring, which are visible from the upper garden just above the balustrade.

Mostly intact, the gardens' classical structures, with their mosaic floors, are a powerful presence.

They introduce a veritable dictionary of motifs from antiquity. Where else can one see, locally, examples of all three classical orders: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian? The stoa on the east side, a small porch furnished with pots of tropical plants, feels intimate in contrast to the majestic, open-air, circular Temple of the Sky opposite, which cries out for staged performances. Below it a waterfall once emptied into a swimming pool paved with a mosaic of aquatic creatures; this will require millions to restore. At the far end of the gardens, the amphitheater seats an audience above a reflecting pool and a floor with scrolled mosaic designs based on the famous remains of a fresco from Tiryns (1400–1200 BCE). Bosworth did his homework, but he also knew how to engage contemporary artists; he commissioned the sculptor Paul Manship to create the twin sphinxes on high, paired columns of veined cipolino marble. Placed at the end of the garden vista, they are the perfect eye-catchers.

Like the Conservatory Garden in Central Park (whose cast of Walter Schott's *Three Dancing Maidens* fountain in Berlin comes from the forecourt of Untermyer's Greystone mansion), the garden is surrounded by open woodland with carriage drives, making of the whole a major city

park. At the north end, the long, downhill path (soon to be lined with cryptomeria) leads to a viewing platform from which one can gaze across the river to the Palisades. Returning uphill on a trail winding through woodland, one arrives at the Temple of Love, a charming tempietto under a lacy, wrought-iron dome, perched above another work in progress: a genius of a rockery with a yet-to-be activated cascade of water, and built-in drainage for cascades of flowers.

In a mere five years, Stephen Byrns has reinvigorated one of America's most enchanting gardens, and yet he is more focused on all that remains to be done – notably, replanting the meadow gardens and the floral sundial at the edge of the woodland and reestablishing the carriage drives. He dreams of negotiating a land swap with the hospital to reclaim three more of the original color gardens. But when the fountains bubble over into the four "rivers" in his paradise of a garden, he is no doubt reminded of that first moment he saw them and committed himself to becoming a place maker. He shares this all-consuming passion with Samuel Untermyer, who once said, "I find a strong appeal in the practical, experimental and scientific aspect of gardening." – Paula Deitz

Contributors

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