

ARNOLD ARBORETUM
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



BULLETIN
OF POPULAR INFORMATION

SERIES 4. VOL. VIII

APRIL 26, 1940

NUMBER 1

THE GENESIS OF THE ARNOLD ARBORETUM

THE development of the Arnold Arboretum from the time of its establishment in Jamaica Plain has been described with thoroughness and understanding, especially by the late Charles Sprague Sargent, and more recently by Mrs. Susan D. McKelvey. From shortly after the date of its founding in 1872 until his death in 1927 it was continuously in the capable and creative hands of Professor Sargent, under whom it grew from scarcely more than an idea to an artistic, horticultural, and educational institution of first rank in the world.

The history of the institution is usually considered to have begun with the execution of an indenture between the President and Fellows of Harvard College and three trustees under the will of James Arnold of New Bedford. These three men were George B. Emerson, John J. Dixwell, and Francis E. Parker, all of Boston. To them, as trustees, had been bequeathed one and a quarter twenty-fourth parts of the residue of Mr. Arnold's estate, "to be by them applied for the promotion of Agricultural or Horticultural improvements, or other Philosophical, or Philanthropic purposes at their discretion . . .". The indenture contained agreements between the contracting parties: *first*, that the trustees would transfer the fund at their disposal to Harvard College, with the understanding that it be kept as a separate unit and allowed to accumulate until the principal had reached \$150,000 and until the Bussey land in West Roxbury had finally become available to the College; *second*, that 5 percent of the net income each year should be added to the principal¹; *third*, that the income should be used for the establishment of an arboretum to be known as the *Arnold Arboretum*,

¹The James Arnold Fund now contains \$174,793.17.

and to support the "Arnold Professorship" in the College; *fourth*, until the happening of the events named in the first clause, the college should be allowed to spend a third of the income in each year for preparations toward future development of the Arboretum; *fifth*, that the fund should be subject to the same minimal expense of administration as other College funds; and *sixth*, that the arboretum should be established upon a part of the Bussey estate in West Roxbury.

Mr. Arnold's will was drawn in January, 1867; and he died in December, 1868. The above indenture was signed on March 29th, 1872. Within this short space of time, therefore, the idea of starting an arboretum in the vicinity of Boston had crystallized; further, it was to be established as a part of the botanical organization of Harvard College, and was to be located at the newly-organized Bussey Institution in West Roxbury. The consequences of these arrangements have acquired such broad significance that it becomes of great interest to trace the stages by which they came about, to visualize the motives that determined them. The Arnold Arboretum was the first of its kind to be established in America, and has been the principal inspiration and source of ideas for the many institutions of similar aims now in existence. With whom did the idea of starting an arboretum originate, and how was it brought to the attention of the College? What were the causes for its establishment in West Roxbury rather than in Cambridge? There is nothing in the terse wording of the clause in Mr. Arnold's will to indicate that he had such a specific purpose in mind; in fact the latitude given the trustees was so great that they could have used the fund for a purpose entirely outside the field of botany. Professor Sargent states (10) that Mr. Emerson proposed that the Arnold bequest should be used for an Arboretum; and in two of the published accounts of Emerson's life (1, 13) there are brief notes to the effect that he was instrumental in securing the bequest.

A number of letters between the principal actors in the drama have recently been examined, and these throw new light on the questions just noted. The remainder of this sketch will be devoted to a brief account of their contents, together with such biographical items as seem pertinent.

James Arnold was born in 1781, at Providence, R.I., of Quaker parentage. Very little is known of his early life or education, but he came as a young man to New Bedford where he entered the business office of Mr. William Rotch, Jr. In 1807 he married Sarah Rotch, a daughter of William Rotch, and eventually became a partner in the Rotch mercantile concern. With increasing wealth he acquired an

estate of about eleven acres in New Bedford and built, in 1821, a mansion house of his own, surrounded by large lawns and gardens. This establishment was a mecca for visitors through many years. The Arnolds both took a keen interest in the garden, building it in the varied but orderly manner of the English type. They carried on the unusual practice of opening it to the public on Sundays. Other than this natural interest in gardening, equaled if not superceded by that of his wife, we have no indication that James Arnold had any particular interest in natural history or horticulture. In fact, if he had any consuming interest outside his business, it appears to have been his study of classical literature. For this he was well-known among his neighbors, and was a prominent member of a local literary society of the day.

We do not know all the facts leading up to his bequest to the three trustees in Boston. It is clear, however, that he was influenced toward it by one of them, Mr. George B. Emerson, who was a relative by marriage, and apparently a rather close friend. Since Mr. Emerson played an important part in the succeeding events, some account of his life will no doubt prove significant.

George Barrell Emerson was born in 1797, at Wells, Maine, and died in Brookline in 1881. His father was a prominent physician in Wells, a graduate of Harvard in 1784. Young Emerson took his degree at Harvard in 1817, but suffered a severe illness during the latter part of his work there which considerably impeded his further studies. For two years after leaving Harvard he was master of a private school at Lancaster, Mass., and in 1819 was called to Harvard as a tutor in mathematics. In 1820 the English Classical School was founded in Boston, with Mr. Emerson as its first principal. He remained in this capacity until 1823, when he established a girls' school of his own in Boston. This proved to be a highly successful undertaking, and absorbed Mr. Emerson's active teaching energies for thirty years. In 1823 he married Olivia Buckminster, who died in 1832, leaving two sons and a daughter. A second marriage occurred in 1834, to Mrs. Mary (Rotch) Fleming.

He was prominent in the organization, in 1830, of the American Institute of Instruction; and a report on the school situation in Massachusetts, prepared by him and presented to the Governor of the Commonwealth, led to the organization of a State Board of Education with Horace Mann as its secretary. This step proved to be an important milestone in the development of public education, not only in Massachusetts but in the whole nation.

Although widely recognized in the field of education, he is also well known in the world of natural science for his classic work on the "Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts." This book was prepared as a result of his appointment as chairman of a commission to make a zoological and botanical survey of the state. It went through five editions, the first of which was published in 1846. For six years, between 1837 and 1843, he was president of the then recently formed Boston Society of Natural History. In subsequent years Mr. Emerson travelled extensively in England, France, Italy and Germany, making observations of plant life and studies of educational methods. In 1870 he made a journey to the Pacific coast.

Here, then, was a man who by training, inclination and experience might have been a prime mover in the development of the arboretum idea. That he was is clear from the following letters. We have but little information concerning Mr. Dixwell or Mr. Parker. Professor Sargent says that the former was "a successful Boston business man, . . . also a lover and student of trees, and had assembled on his place in Jamaica Plain one of the largest and best collections of native and foreign trees which was growing at this time in New England"(12). A passage in one of Mr. Emerson's letters, quoted below, gives further indication of Dixwell's interest in matters botanical and horticultural. Mr. Parker was an attorney in Boston, and there is some evidence that he handled the financial transfers connected with the bequest.

In the Harvard College Archives is a letter from Professor Asa Gray to Dr. Andrew Preston Peabody who was Acting President of the College during a short period of months between the administrations of Thomas Hill and Charles W. Eliot. The letter is dated February 20, 1869 and was written from Egypt where Dr. and Mrs. Gray were travelling at the time. Dr. Gray says, "I am apprised in a letter from Mr. John Lee that Mr. Arnold of New Bedford, just deceased, has left a legacy of \$100,000 to trustees for horticultural, agricultural, scientific or other like purposes, and that Messers Geo. B. Emerson, J.J. Dixwell, and F.B. Parker are the trustees. Whether any, or if any what sum is applied or applicable to horticulture and the like, I have not the means of knowing, nor whether the disposition is at the discretion of the trustees under the will. But I have reason to think that some provision may be made for arboriculture and an arboretum, and it is known to the Corporation of the University that I have, from time to time pressed the recommendation that the grounds around the Observatory, having the advantage of being contiguous to the Botanic



James Arnold



George B. Emerson

PLATE I

Garden, with some extensions (which could lately have been had without very great cost) should be utilized for the purpose of an arboretum, if ever the means for its support were to be had. Now, if any specific legacy has been made for such purposes, or one which may be so directed by Mr. Arnold's trustees, it would be well that the wants and desires of the University should be represented. And I dare say you may have already been in communication with the Trustees in regard to it. Two of them, Messers Emerson and Dixwell, are very well acquainted with our state and our wants at the Botanic Garden, and would no doubt give attentive consideration to any application of or in behalf of the University. Would you kindly let me know if there is anything to be expected."

This appears to have been the first time the Arnold bequest was brought to the attention of the College. The following note from Mr. Emerson to Dr. Peabody indicates that he had been approached as a result of Dr. Gray's letter. This note from Mr. Emerson is so illuminating that it will be quoted in full.

3 Pemberton Sq. Mar. 31. '69.

Rev. Dr. Peabody,

My dear friend, Dr. Gray is correctly informed in regard to several things about Mr. Arnold's will. He did leave to me, J. J. Dixwell and F. E. Parker, for purposes made known to Dr. Gray—a large bequest, probably two thirds of what it is reported to be. This was originally intended for an arboretum. But Mr. Arnold, to leave us at liberty, extended the limits of the bequest. We have hoped that an arboretum might be formed by it. But, if the greater part of the money would have to be expended for land at house-lot prices, I would be very unwilling to give it that direction. So far as I am concerned, I mean, if possible, to have an arboretum—and for Harvard College: and, if land can be found near the College, already in possession of the college or procurable at reasonable price, the arboretum will be more likely to be in Cambridge as an appendage to the Botanic Garden, than anywhere else. Indeed my original idea, in recommending such a bequest to my dear friend and brother, was the hope that the management of the whole garden by Dr. Gray might be facilitated by this bequest. Have the goodness to give my kindest regards to Dr. and Mrs. Gray, and tell him that now for the first time I feel jealous of you.

Ever sincerely yours,
Geo. B. Emerson

It thus becomes clear that Mr. Emerson, acting independently, and with a definite idea of an arboretum in mind, suggested to Mr. Arnold that he insert a favorable item in his will. The actual wording of the bequest was to give the trustees freedom in case it should not prove feasible to carry out the original idea. It is clear, further, that the original intention was that the arboretum should be a part of Harvard College; if possible, an adjunct to the then existing Botanic Garden under the capable direction of Dr. Asa Gray. In his letter to Dr. Peabody, however, Mr. Emerson was already doubtful as to whether the last would be possible, since he did not approve of diverting any large part of the money to "capital investments" in land. It is of interest to note, in passing, that his reasoning is still good in many aspects of the financing of biological education and research. The fact that such institutions as Harvard University already have large investments in lands, equipment and personnel is of first importance to donors who wish to see their gifts used largely for actual teaching or investigations rather than for expensive material developments.

It is difficult to determine how much influence was exerted by Dr. Gray in formulating the project. He says, in the letter quoted above, that Emerson and Dixwell were both familiar with the problems of the Botanic Garden in Cambridge, and it is not impossible that they had discussed the development of an arboretum. It seems clear, however, both from Gray's and Emerson's letters, that the idea had not taken definite form.

With the purpose established, and the means available, it was finally decided that the arboretum should be at the Bussey Institution, on land already owned by the College. Who made this decision is not definitely known. In the minutes for the meeting of the Harvard Corporation of March 18th, 1872, it is stated that President Eliot "read a memorandum of a proposed contract between George B. Emerson, John J. Dixwell and Francis E. Parker. . . .whereupon it was voted that the President be authorized to sign a contract in conformity with the terms of the memorandum. . . ." A marginal note describes this as the "Memorandum of a proposed contract for an Arboretum at the Bussey Inst'n."

The memorandum itself has not been found, although it may have been only an original draft of the later indenture. Sometime between March, 1869, and March, 1872, the whole matter must have been threshed out. By June, 1872, the indenture had been ratified by both parties and signed. Three letters during this short period are worthy of note. The first is from Dr. Gray to President Eliot, undated

but presumably in the first half of 1870. In it is the following paragraph: "Mr. Longfellow met me yesterday with a plan in his head that you ought to know about. He proposes to be one of 12 or more to buy a large bit of Brighton Meadows for \$12,000 and present it to the College—[I suppose land directly opposite his house!] I told him that if the land he proposed to acquire would serve for an arboretum, I thought the likelihood of his finding partners in the purchase would be largely increased. After inquiring what an *arboretum* might be and why I thought so, he said he would go and see Mr. Emerson." The land along the Charles River, some 70 acres, was purchased and presented. Mr. Longfellow's letter of transmittal was dated July 4, 1870, but it contains no mention of the possible use of the property for an arboretum.

It is probable that the plan for using the Bussey land was already underway at this time. A letter from Mr. Emerson to President Eliot dated December 8, 1869 (Mr. Eliot had been elected President in May of that year) begins with the following sentences: "It would be of little use for us to go to Roxbury while the snow would prevent our walking freely about the Bussey fields and woods. But I would like to talk with you about the intentions of the President and Corporation as to an agricultural school to be established upon that estate." The remainder of the letter contains an outline of what Emerson considered should be the aims and methods in the proposed school of agriculture. We may infer from this letter that Mr. Emerson had been approached by President Eliot as early as 1869 with the proposal that they examine the Bussey land together, presumably with the idea of placing the Arboretum there.

By way of summary, it may be said that a large portion, if not most, of the credit for the starting of an arboretum at Harvard is due to Mr. George B. Emerson. The idea appears to have first taken form in his mind, and he secured an initial endowment fund sufficiently large to make a concrete beginning of the project. Further, together with his fellow trustees of the Arnold bequest, John J. Dixwell and Francis E. Parker, he formulated an unusually far-sighted arrangement with the College for the future handling of the money. Also, we cannot underestimate the significance of Dr. Asa Gray's influence, not only upon Mr. Emerson himself, but in first bringing the whole matter to the attention of the College. That Dr. Gray continued his interest in the Arboretum, and later influenced the actual planning of the grounds, is indicated by an item found in an account of the life of Frederick Law Olmsted, the great landscape architect who had

so prominent a part not only in the development of the Arboretum, but also of the entire Boston park system. This note states that Olmsted spent the summer of 1878 "with E. L. Godkin in Cambridge in order to work out plans for Arboretum with Professor Gray and Sargent." (8) The first topographic map of the grounds, with proposed driveways, was made at about the same time. It is probable that to Dr. Gray must also be given the credit for the extraordinarily wise appointment of Charles Sprague Sargent as the new Arnold Professor of Arboriculture and head of the youthful Arboretum. There are several references to Sargent in Gray's published letters, especially to his friends in Europe, all of them in terms of highest praise. Professor Sargent was for several years in charge of the Botanic Garden in Cambridge, and closely associated with Dr. Gray.

It is difficult to conceive of a finer memorial to an individual than that of the Arnold Arboretum to James Arnold. He did not deliberately plan it so during his own lifetime, but entrusted it to a group of friends whose judgment he respected. The peculiarly fortunate combination of events and ideas described above has probably given perpetuity to his name far more effectively than would have been possible had a specific program been laid down by Mr. Arnold himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer is indebted particularly to the keeper of the Archives of Harvard University for permission to search the files of correspondence and records for notes on the Arboretum's early history. He wishes to express his appreciation also to Mr. Jerome D. Greene, Secretary to the Corporation, for granting permission to publish parts of the correspondence. Miss Lucy Lowell of Boston, a granddaughter of Mr. Emerson, has very graciously placed at the writer's disposal her personal recollections of the man himself and of his connection the beginnings of the Arboretum. The portrait of Mr. Arnold is from Ellis' *History of New Bedford*, while that of Mr. Emerson is taken from Waterston's *Memoir*.

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