Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect:
An Introduction to His Life and Work

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Just five days after Charles Eliot died in 1897 at the age of 37, Charles Sprague Sargent published his obituary in Garden and Forest, his weekly journal. As an apprentice to Frederick Law Olmsted, Eliot had prepared planting plans for the Arnold Arboretum, and thereafter Sargent followed his career, first in solo practice and later as partner to Olmsted. Sargent wrote, “in a great variety of work he has proved himself one of the most accomplished of designers. He had an intense appreciation of nature, but he always kept up his student habits, examining the outdoor world critically, and reasoning upon what he saw to establish principles which could be applied in practice.”

Sargent also knew Eliot as a frequent contributor to Garden and Forest; he would be missed for his “gift of expression in a singularly effective style ... his writings embody such an amount of sound doctrine, effectively stated, that one regrets that he has not left more of this kind of work behind him.... it is no exaggeration to say that his untimely death is an almost irreparable loss to rural art in America....”

In 1902 Eliot’s father, President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard University, compiled and annotated the son’s writings, which he published as Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect. Nearly a century later, it remains one of our most valuable collections of landscape writing and a necessary resource for those interested in the history of landscape architecture or city and regional planning. The following essay is excerpted from the introduction to a new edition.

Recently returned to Boston from a year-long study tour of Europe, the young Charles Eliot set up a landscape architecture practice on Park Street in December 1886. Over the next decade he would make an indelible mark on the physical form of the metropolitan region and beyond. In Eliot’s solo practice, and later as a partner in Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot, he developed many fine public parks and private estates. He became one of the country’s most prolific and influential landscape critics and historians, and provided the creative and political impetus for the Trustees of Public Reservations, the first statewide preservation and conservation organization in the country and the precursor to Britain’s National Trust. Finally, and most importantly, Eliot directed the early development of the Boston Metropolitan

Five images of Charles Eliot (1859–1897), clockwise from top left, c. 1863; c. 1869; Harvard College graduation photograph, 1882; at age 35; at center, age 37. Courtesy of Alexander Y. Goriansky.
Park System, one of the first and most successful American experiments in regional landscape planning. It is astounding that all this was accomplished in less than eleven years. Eliot's death from spinal meningitis in 1897, at the age of thirty-seven, robbed the country of one of its most talented landscape architects ever.

Early Years

When Charles Eliot was born in 1859, his father was a professor of mathematics and chemistry at Harvard College. His mother, Ellen Peabody Eliot, was an amateur artist and lover of nature. She died when he was ten years old. Charles had one younger brother, Samuel Atkins Eliot, who became an important Unitarian minister, presiding over the Arlington Street Church, Boston, and president of the Unitarian Association. The Eliots' home life was characterized by cultural and social prestige and by intellectual stimulation.

In 1863, after losing a promotion battle at Harvard, Eliot senior took his family abroad so that he could study in French and German laboratories. From August of that year, when young Charles was three, through the summer of 1865, the family traveled between Paris, London, Heidelberg, Marburg, Vienna, Berlin, Switzerland, and Italy. Late in 1864 Ellen Eliot wrote to her mother of the family's life abroad:

I keep regular school for Charly every morning & it is a pleasure & an interest to him & to me. He learns readily & enjoys it highly—I really sometimes fear the chicks may be spoiled by the entire devotion of their parents to them. They are necessarily with me all day & Charly sews with me & studies with me & paints with me and they generally walk with me, and it is rarely that I can catch Charles—Every day C[harles] gives Charly a regular gymnastic exercise—the child has improved much in the use of his arms & legs.2

The exercises were intended to counteract the lingering effects of a bout of typhoid fever that little Charles had suffered during the winter of 1863–1864. He was ill for more than a year but eventually recovered fully.3

An invitation to teach chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology brought the senior Eliot and his family back to Cambridge in the fall of 1865, but his wife's lung and throat congestion prompted them to return to Europe in June 1867 through the following June. Mrs. Eliot died a year later.

Young Charles had loved learning at his mother's knee, but he found formal education onerous. In 1876 he wrote of the school he attended between ages twelve and sixteen: "To my dismay was sent to Kendall's School, Appian Way! . . . Disliked most of the boys but liked Kendall. Often dissolved in tears even in schoolroom; much to my despair."4 Fortunately, his education was supplemented by drawing lessons from Charles H. Moore, which he liked. He made lifelong friends at Kendall's, however, especially Roland Thaxter and John H. Storer, and his preparation there helped him pass the entrance examination for Harvard College in June 1877.

Charles was a fragile boy, diffident and often given to melancholic moods, while Sam
This extraordinary volume, 770 pages in length, is the record of a developing landscape philosophy, the story of a remarkable career, and a landmark in American writing on landscape architecture. Originally published in 1902 and reprinted in 1999, it is a rare example of filial biography, the story of a son’s life by his father. Charles’s father, President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard University, did not sign the title page because he considered his role to be that of editor and organizer of his son’s writings and record.

Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect is really three books intertwined. The first is an intimate life story, told as a loving tribute by a devoted father. The second is a species of superb travel literature, written by young Charles from the perspective of a landscape analyst. The third is an annotated, chronological anthology of professional correspondence and public reports. President Eliot’s format places these elements in the context of his understanding of his son’s life and career.

While his name does not appear on the title page, there is no question of President Eliot’s role as helmsman on this journey of reconstruction. He not only wrote but financed the publication of this book. For the publisher’s spring catalogue of 1902, the senior Eliot provided Houghton Mifflin with a statement of the contents and purposes of the volume:

correspondence, and diaries from which he drew this manuscript. The speed at which the book was written and published reflects its author's determination, especially given his other responsibilities as president of Harvard.

The father presented a very different biography from the one his son would have written about himself. By today's standards, the book is hagiographic; Eliot emerges as the perfect model for the young profession, receiving credit for ideas and projects that were actually the work of many minds and hands. The overstatement of Eliot's achievements is particularly evident in the description of his role at the Metropolitan Park Commission. President Eliot presents his son as the sole creator, but it is clear that the journalist Sylvester Baxter played a seminal role in conceiving of the metropolitan Boston ideal.³

Also, President Eliot's narrative emphasizes the importance of heredity and the influential background from which his son had emerged. The Eliots belonged to what Oliver Wendell Holmes had dubbed "the Brahmin caste of Boston." "In their eyes," observed Charles senior's biographer, "their wealth obliged them to strive for personal achievement and social usefulness."⁴ So we are treated to glimpses of many family members including President Eliot's first wife and young Charles's mother, Ellen Peabody Eliot. Thus the book is an intimate family portrait. Not all of the nearly 750 pages of text will prove interesting to a modern reader. For example, the chapter on the Metropolitan Park Commission projects of 1894 is excessively detailed, of concern only to those thoroughly familiar with the topography of the Boston area parks. But certain sections of the text are true gems of landscape literature. Anyone interested in the history of landscape architecture, regional planning, or city planning will want to read them.

Despite the book's being privately produced and only moderately distributed, it has become a classic in the literature of American landscape architecture and city planning, just as President Eliot had hoped that the example of his son's brief career would be a standard and a model for the profession.

Notes


³ Baxter certainly wrote about the idea of a metropolitan park system before Eliot, but the landscape architect had been thinking about issues of regional planning for many years and would prove to have the staying power and political acumen necessary to make it possible to realize Baxter's dream. Sylvester Baxter, Greater Boston: A Study for a Federated Metropolis (Boston, 1891), and "Greater Boston's Metropolitan Park System," Boston Evening Transcript, Part 5, 29 September 1923, p. 8.

resembled his father. As President Eliot wrote: "His father and brother had very different temperaments from his. They were sanguine, confident, content with present action, and little given to contemplation of either the past or the future; Charles was reticent, self-distrustful, speculative, and dissatisfied with his actual work, though faithful and patient in studies which did not interest him or open to him intellectual pleasures." Charles Eliot seems to have inherited his mother's talents and interests in art and nature. Unfortunately, her death in 1869 coincided with his father's appointment to the presidency of Harvard College: the emotional gulf widened between the busy father and his awkward, shy elder son.

When his father remarried in 1877, the young man resented the intrusion of a stepmother. He recorded his reactions to a new union in his diary: "Heard rumors of father's wooing a Miss Hopkinson and one day after Sam had gone East was told by father of his engagement." After President Eliot married Grace Mellen Hopkinson in October, Charles reported that he "tried hard to be pleasant, but felt awkward and 'queer'." The distance between father and son continued to grow. Charles secretly complained that he was "distressed by father never telling Sam & me of his plans & doings as he once did. Also much annoyed by many things at 'home'." Nonetheless, within a few years it was his stepmother who became an anchor in his emotional life.

President Eliot hoped to improve his firstborn's sense of self and increase his physical strength by involving him in the "strenuous life," camping and sailing along the coast of New England. Young Charles enjoyed these rigorous forays into nature. During the summers of his second and third years at Harvard, he organized and led a small band of classmates known as the Champlain Society in scientific exploration of Mount Desert Island in Maine. Like Theodore Roosevelt, his near-contemporary at Harvard, young Charles Eliot embraced life in the out-of-doors, but he was inspired primarily by a delight in viewing nature. President Eliot had consistently reinforced the benefits of physical activity and knowledge of the wilderness, emphasizing this experience as a way of counteracting his elder son's melancholic withdrawals.
The Education of a Landscape Architect

Charles Eliot's preparation for a career in landscape architecture began long before his Harvard years. During the family's travels in Europe, his parents showed him the beauties of many natural and manmade landscapes. After the death of his mother, his father and other family members continued this tradition. In the summer of 1871 the Eliots spent their first summer on Mount Desert, and the following year they acquired a forty-three-and-a-half-foot sloop, The Sunshine. Maine would remain a central and important part of Charles Eliot's life thereafter.

In spring 1874 Charles, then fourteen, accompanied his aunt Anna Peabody on a trip through South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. A notebook in which he recorded his impressions of the landscape, people, and local customs provides us early evidence of his response to landscapes. At this time he was sketching frequently, exhibiting the natural talent that would later encourage him to consider a career in landscape architecture.

In shaping his education, Charles had the advantage (or disadvantage) of being the son of one of the era's major educational reformers. Parent and child frequently discussed Charles Eliot's future vocation, although it was Charles's own decision to pursue a career in landscape architecture. Since no professional programs existed at the time, the two men together devised a postgraduate course of study at Harvard's Bussey Institute, a professional apprenticeship with Frederick Law Olmsted, and a period of professional travel in the United States and abroad.

"You See I Am a Wanderer"

Charles Eliot was a landscape wanderer, constant but attentive, and a connoisseur of landscape forms. While still a young teenager, he began in 1875 to take a series of walking tours, often tied to public transportation routes, which allowed him to visit natural areas throughout the greater Boston basin in a methodical manner. In his diary for 1878, he provides a "Partial List of Saturday Walks before 1878." Eliot would later recommend many of the sites as additions to the metropolitan park system. He also meticulously recorded a short trip that he took with his father in 1875, to a "small manufacturing village" (of which he drew a plan), where there was "a very large woolen mill" and also "a tannery and a stream below the mill."10 Charles's penchant for landscape description and analysis was further nurtured by keeping the log for The Sunshine.

During his thirteen-month tour of England and the Continent in 1885-1886, Eliot continued to record scenery through detailed narratives and sketches. In a richly annotated collection of excerpts from his diaries and journals, Eliot assesses the design, horticulture, and topography of the sites on his self-generated itinerary and offers sharp opinions about the defining characteristics of cultural landscapes—admiring the Scandinavian countryside, expressing contempt for French landscape fashion and suspicion toward the "nabobry" of the aristocratic English landscape.11 Eliot often used his extensive knowledge of the New England landscape as a touchstone, describing an island near Stockholm, for example, as "roughly, wildly beautiful in a wholly New Englandish manner."12
Of all the private estates, public parks, and natural sites that Eliot methodically visited in Europe, he was most affected by the former estate of Prince Hermann Pückler at Muskau in Silesia. In one of his last letters to Olmsted before returning in October 1887, Eliot effused about the lessons that Muskau could teach:

His park is probably the finest work of real landscape gardening on a large scale that this century has seen carried out in Europe. It is a work that has made one very proud of the profession—for here was a river valley in great part very barren, fringed by monstrous woods of p. sylvestris and in no way remarkable for beauty or interest—but now one of the loveliest vales on earth—and full to the brim, so to speak, of variety or pleasant change, of quieting and often touching beauty.

In many ways, Muskau served as a prototype for all that Charles Eliot would do in America. Every element of the landscape—the pleasure grounds near the Schloss, the village and the alum factory, the river valley and the surrounding woodlands—was carefully “improved” with native plants. Pückler presented Eliot with a lasting lesson on how to capitalize on the inherent qualities of site and celebrate the ability of man to enhance nature.

No landscape architect before Eliot had combined so thorough a grounding in the literature of the profession with such close observation of the practice of landscape architecture. Eliot’s call slips from the British Library are evidence of his voracious literary appetite and the methodical manner in which he read everything on the topic in English, French, and German from the seventeenth century on. Thus Eliot returned to the United States with a uniquely profound knowledge of the history of his profession. In the December 1887 issue of Garden and Forest, he included a recommended list of books on landscape architecture, based on his readings in Europe.

Eliot also actively pursued the individuals who could help him grow professionally. His journals recount his critical reaction to many of the leading landscape gardeners and nurserymen of Europe. One of the most hospitable of his English contacts was James Bryce, with whom Eliot stayed in both London and Oxford. Bryce was an avid mountaineer, secretary of the Commons Preservation Society, and the author of the Scottish Mountains bill and other open space legislation in Parliament. Thus, he could share with young Charles Eliot his direct
knowledge of efforts to legislate landscape preservation in Britain. Eliot also visited the secretary of the Lake District Defense Society, Canon Hardwicke D. Rawnsley, an activist who advocated protection of the Lake District, especially from the potential intrusion of railroad lines and urban reservoirs. Later, he was one of the founders of the National Trust for Places of Scenic and Natural Beauty in Great Britain. From their meeting, Eliot learned about landscape preservation strategies in England and was able to share his knowledge of parallel American efforts. It could not have been a better preparation for the work that lay ahead.

“Mr. Olmsted’s Profession”

Charles Eliot inherited the mantle of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., who defined the post-Civil War profession of landscape architecture in the United States. After pursuing careers as a farmer, journalist, publisher, and traveler, Olmsted had established himself as the country’s leading landscape architect with his 1858 design for Central Park in New York City. He moved his highly successful practice to Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1883. One of Olmsted’s neighbors in that suburb was Charles Eliot’s uncle, the architect Robert Swain Peabody. It was he who suggested Olmsted as a potential role model to the young man in search of a vocation. After a period of self-designed study at Harvard’s Bussey Institute, in 1883 Eliot gladly accepted the invitation to become the first official unpaid apprentice in the Olmsted office.

Olmsted soon recognized Charles Eliot’s multiple talents and encouraged their development. While Eliot was in Europe in 1885–1886, he wrote frequently to Olmsted about the sites he visited and people he met, many of them through his mentor. Olmsted responded, “I have seen no such justly critical notes as yours on landscape architecture matters from any traveler for a generation past. You ought to make it a part of your scheme to write for the public, a little at a time if you please, but methodically, systematically. It is part of your professional duty to do so.” Eliot heeded
In 1885, as apprentice to Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles Eliot worked on planting plans for the Arnold Arboretum. He also worked at the Arboretum, staking out shrub beds from plans he had helped to prepare. This photograph of the collection was taken in May 1931.

Olmsted's advice and became one of the most productive and effective landscape critics of his generation.

Gradually, the professional relationship achieved more equal footing. While Eliot was in Europe, Olmsted asked him to return home and join the firm. Olmsted was currently developing plans for the Stanford University campus in California and was eager to capitalize on Eliot’s fresh knowledge of Mediterranean plant material and design. President Eliot’s opinion of the offer was characteristically firm: “You can make an excursion to California whenever it is your interest to do so for $300 & I shall be happy to pay for it. I see no inducement whatever in Mr. O’s offer of $50 a month. You had better start for yourself in my opinion. . . . My impression is in favor of refusal by cable—’Decline’ & by effusive letter.”19 In the end, Eliot took his father’s advice, finishing his trip as planned and setting up his own office on his return. Instead of working for Olmsted, Eliot asked his former mentor to provide a reference for an advertisement announcing his new business.20

Three years later, Eliot asked Henry Codman, who had followed him as an apprentice in the Olmsted office, to join his firm as a partner, but Codman declined. Then, in July 1889, in a letter to Olmsted, Eliot proposed yet another plan:

My talk with Codman has led me to imagine a possible general union of forces in which all three of us young men [Eliot, Codman, and John Charles Olmsted] might serve as more or less independent captains under you as general. We could perhaps have offices in N.Y. and Phila. as well as in Boston and Brookline . . . and while we should manage all small jobs ourselves we should refer all weighty matters and all persons who distinctly desired your opinion to you.21

But his idea never materialized. Codman accepted a position with Olmsted, and Eliot continued to pursue his independent practice.
One of Hamburg’s Alster Basins, which served as Charles Eliot’s inspiration for his 1894 proposal for the improvement of the Charles River in Boston

until January 1893, when Codman suddenly died from appendicitis while supervising the landscape development of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Once again, Olmsted, especially eager for help with the Chicago Fair, begged Eliot to become a partner, not just a junior employee; this time the younger man saw a more dynamic role for himself and agreed. In March 1893, the office of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot was officially announced.

By the time Eliot had joined the firm in 1893, Olmsted’s health had begun to fail, and one of the burdens Eliot could take on for his elder partner was the writing of reports and articles. Much of the younger man’s writings was cast in his mold, including one article that defended his former mentor. Realizing that Olmsted’s work for the Boston Municipal Park Commission was frequently attacked for its “unnaturalness,” Eliot responded with an article titled “The Gentle Art of Defeating Nature,” in which he stated his (and Olmsted’s) belief that landscape architects must alter natural conditions to meet the needs of the public.

On one occasion, Eliot actually wrote an article that was published under Olmsted’s name. The senior Eliot states that “Parks, Parkways, and Pleasure Grounds” in Engineering Magazine was “a concise statement—with some new illustrations—of doctrines which Mr. Olmsted had been teaching all his life. It was prepared however by Charles . . . Mr. Olmsted being unable at the time to write it himself.”

Eliot had thoroughly absorbed every lesson on landscape aesthetics and professional practice that Olmsted taught. In addition to the standard Olmsted agenda, the article includes new ideas that Eliot was then pursuing and for which he uses new language—for instance, “reservations of scenery,” “Board of Trustees.”

As an ultimate indication of mentor-student closeness, Eliot was invited to draft an obituary
for Olmsted in 1896 (several years before Olmsted's death). He submitted the draft "with great diffidence," he wrote in the accompanying letter, having "been too near him to write it rightly." Eliot began the piece: "It is seldom that the death of one man removes a whole profession, but, excepting for a few associates personally inspired by him, this is really what has happened in the case of the death of Frederick Law Olmsted." Eliot was certainly one of those "associates personally inspired by him" and provided a rich and elegant account of his mentor's life and work.

From his apprenticeship days on, when Eliot wrote to his family and friends about Olmsted, he expressed a mixture of both respect and criticism in his letters. He happily told his close friend Roland Thaxter in October 1883 that he had "become apprentice to the leading man in my proposed profession—namely Mr. Fred. Law Olmsted... the man who has had a hand in almost every great Park work that has been attempted in this country." But in six years of private practice, Eliot had formed his own distinct opinions and was highly critical of many things that Olmsted did. Eliot also maintained many of his earlier, independent jobs—such as positions on the Metropolitan Park and the Cambridge Park commissions—after he joined the firm. Eliot was neither an extension nor pale reflection of Olmsted; he was his own man, facing important new issues in the profession of landscape architecture.

Olmsted was delighted to have his former apprentice in the firm and the added income from major projects on which Charles was working. In an 1893 letter to his partners, Olmsted effused about the importance of the work currently in the office:

Nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work, meaning the Metropolitan quite equally with the city work. The two together will be the most important work in our profession now in hand anywhere in the world. . . . In your probable life-time, Muddy River, Blue Hills, the Fells, Waverley Oaks, Charles River, the Beaches will be points to date from in the history of American Land-

All but the first of these landmark projects were commissions that Eliot brought to the firm. Within the Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot office, Charles exerted a major influence, especially among the younger members of the firm. Warren Manning worked closely with Eliot on the analysis of the metropolitan reservations, learning a process of natural-condition data collection and systematic analysis that he would use frequently later in his practice. Arthur Shurtleff, who with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. established the first academic program in landscape architecture at Harvard, wrote extensively about the lessons he had learned from Eliot. The poignant vacuum that Charles Eliot's early death left in the firm is hauntingly symbolized by the photograph that Shurtleff took of Eliot's desk on the day he died.

Eliot's Landscape Philosophy and Language

Eliot envisioned a new type of public landscape and used a distinctive vocabulary to articulate a new set of objectives. Whereas Olmsted wrote about green country parks, parkways, and pasto-
Charles Eliot's "scientific 'park system'" for metropolitan Boston included reclaiming the riverbanks and beaches, which were occupied by tenements and industry. In 1896, word spread that the Metropolitan Parks Commission had "reserved" three miles of Revere Beach for the use of the public. With warm weather, multitudes began to visit, as seen in the photograph at the top. On one Sunday in July the number mounted to 45,000, convincing the Commissioners that large-scale constructions were needed to accommodate visitors. Charles Eliot spent the rest of that year preparing plans.

By 1900, streets and railroads had been relocated, shanties and saloons razed, and sidewalk, driveway, and promenade built. Those constructions can scarcely be seen in the photograph at bottom, taken during "the carnival", for one week in August, local business people were permitted to use part of the beach for sports and amusements, including balloon ascensions and diving horses.
ral retreats as places in which modern city dwellers could find spiritual replenishment through passive contemplation of nature, Eliot discussed reservations, trusteeships, and rural landscape preservation that would provide settings for active enjoyment of nature. In contrast to Olmsted's retreat into a private contemplation of nature, Eliot compared scenery or landscape to other advantages of urban culture, especially books and art. While Olmsted's parks were created through design, Eliot's reservations were products of choice, preservation, and improvement.

Eliot used the word "reservation" often in his articles and lectures. Indeed, he even thought that the Boston Metropolitan Park Commission should really be called the Metropolitan Reservations Commission. He realized that the term "park" had a specific and limited meaning for his contemporaries, so Eliot took a different word—"scenery"—to distinguish his ideas from common assumptions. He had three basic goals: to preserve scenery, make it accessible, and improve it. By Eliot's definition, scenery was land that had been "resumed" or reclaimed for the public benefit. Reservations, Eliot believed, should be "held in trust," and those who preserved and improved scenery were therefore "trustees" of that heritage. Eliot's use of the term "trustee" invoked a legal process by which individuals were designated as the guardians of landscape, as in the Trustees of Public Reservations. It is interesting that he also referred to park users as "trustees." He was convinced that "ordinary people," as trustees, had the potential to appreciate and the right to expect the merits of public reservations.

Eliot's highly effective and original landscape ideas were especially apparent in his work for the Metropolitan Park Commission, where he envisioned a new regional approach to planning. In his first letter to Charles Francis Adams, chairman of the temporary commission, Eliot outlined the landscape types he wished to incorporate into the system:

As I conceive it the scientific "park system" for a district such as ours would include

1st Space upon the Ocean front.

2nd As much as possible of the shores and islands of the Bay.

3rd The courses of the larger Tidal estuaries (above their commercial usefulness) because of the value of these courses as pleasant routes to the heart of the City and to the Sea.

4th Two or three large areas of wild forest on the outer rim of the inhabited area.

5th Numerous small squares in the midst of dense populations.

Local and private action can do as much under the 5th head but the four others call loudly for action by the whole metropolitan community. With your approval I shall make my study for the Commission on these lines.

This broad scheme represented a larger landscape analysis than had ever been attempted in America.

To explain these concepts and others, Eliot invoked a landscape language that had not previously been employed. His arena was the physical world at large. In a lecture to a farmer's association in New York State, he explained that he meant "by the term 'landscape' the visible surroundings of men's lives on the surface of the earth." Eliot considered himself an architect and repeatedly referred to a definition of architecture borrowed from the English socialist and art critic William Morris: "Architecture, a great subject truly, for it embraces the consideration of the whole of the external world, for it means the moulding and the altering to human needs the very face of the earth." This broad environmental consciousness is rooted in the lessons he drew from Prince Pückler, a topic about which Eliot frequently both spoke and wrote.

Eliot's proto-environmentalist viewpoint grew naturally out of his contact with the Transcendentalist writers of New England. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, is frequently quoted in both Eliot's commonplace book and in the selections his father incorporated in the biography. An uneasy product of Unitarianism, Eliot had been attracted early to the Transcendentalist belief in nature as an allegory for the divinity. In essence, however, Eliot practiced an applied Transcendentalism, actively securing
for the general public the advantages of active engagement with nature, not just urging its passive contemplation.

Onto this literary-philosophical base, Eliot grafted other ideals. He was a democrat and an environmentalist, long before the term had been coined. He wrote that reservations, parks, and parkways must “be placed, without regard to local pressure, solely with a view to securing the greatest good of the greatest number,” following the principles of English political philosopher John Stuart Mill. And he opposed commercial intrusion into this scenery of beauty; he argued against the exploitation of the landscape with giant advertising signs and proposed that telegraph lines be sunk below ground to remove another modern irritant from the reservations. His concern transcended the needs of his contemporary generation. He wrote about hopes for improved water quality in the Charles River and celebrated the increase of “wild birds and animals” that had resulted from improvement in the Stony Brook Reservation. Recently, Ian McHarg, a leader in landscape architecture education, commented in his autobiography: “I have been described as the inventor of ecological planning, the incorporation of natural science within the planning process. Yet Charles Eliot, son of Harvard’s president, a landscape architect at Harvard, preceded me by half a century. . . . He invented a new and vastly more comprehensive planning method than any pre-existing, but it was not emulated.”

McHarg believed that his own education as a landscape architect at Harvard had been deficient because the school had forgotten the planning vision of Charles Eliot in the 1890s.

A persistent theme in Eliot’s public writings and professional reports is the principle “what would be fair must be fit.” In an article for Garden and Forest by that title, Eliot first warned his readers about the three types of landscape designers to avoid: commercial nurserymen who would think only in terms of the plants they could sell, landscape gardeners who laid out everything in curving lines, and former students of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, who saw garden design in lockstep geometry. Eliot’s distance from these dominant trends reflected his sense that function, or “fitness,” should be the guiding principle of design. He was not a proponent of either side of the great debate between the natural and the formal style of landscape design. In his review of Italian Gardens by Charles A. Platt, a leader of the formal garden revival, Eliot was enthusiastic about the lessons that the Renaissance garden could teach but warned that the conditions of climate, topography, and needs of the client must all justify this choice of landscape mode. In his essay “Anglomania in Park Making,” he similarly cautioned against the mindless popularity of the English or natural landscape style as the only correct manner for public park design. Eliot’s philosophy resembles a landscape theory variation on the theme of “form follows function”—the battle cry of the Chicago architect Louis Sullivan at that time.

To achieve his broad aims for landscape design preservation, Eliot lobbied ceaselessly through prolific letter writing, frequent public speaking, appearances before legislative committees, and regular contributions to popular magazines and professional journals. His major written contribution to a philosophy of scenery preservation and enhancement was his report, posthumously published in 1898, Vegetation and Scenery in the Metropolitan Reservations of Boston. Although specific in its definition of the basic types of landscapes found in the Boston metropolitan reservations and the appropriate methods for their management and development, Eliot’s report has generic implications as well.

One important message conveyed in the report is that all of the landscapes of the metropolitan reservations are “artificial” in that they have been changed through human interaction with them. Eliot wanted to counter the popular assumption that the reservations were “wild” and therefore should not be altered in any way. “Before and after” drawings of specific sites emphasized the importance of improving the scenery through careful analysis of natural systems and well-conceived plans of action. Much of this analysis had already been begun with the surveys of geology, topography, and history of use in the reservations. The next step would have been the development of general plans for each of the reservations, blueprints for improv-
From Charles Eliot’s Vegetation and Scenery in the Metropolitan Reservations of Boston, one of the sets of before-and-after drawings in the manner of English landscape gardener Humphry Repton made by Arthur A. Shurcliff. The first—with overleaf—was captioned “Tree-clogged notch, near the southeastern escarpment of the Middlesex Fells, which might command the Malden-Melrose valley and the Saugus hills.” The second—with overleaf removed—illustrates the sweeping view of valley and hills that will appear when the notch is unclogged.
The "Civic Pride Monument" erected in memory of Charles Eliot at the St Louis Exposition, 1902.

ing the scenery and providing access to these sites. Sadly, however, Eliot died before he could convince the Metropolitan Park Commission to move on to this next stage.

Political and social action were two of the tools Eliot wielded brilliantly to achieve his evolving goals. He worked from the bases of power and influence that were his birthright. As the son of the highly visible president of Harvard University and the descendant of well connected and powerful families, Eliot had learned how to inform and influence his contemporaries, even contributing portions of speeches to powerful friends, such as his Harvard contemporary Governor William Russell, who appointed Eliot to various commissions. Eliot’s network involved a core group of fellow travelers who could understand and appreciate his ideas. For example, Dr. H. P. Walcott, whom Eliot invited to chair the initial meeting in the formation of the Trustees of Public Reservations, was also the chair of the state board of health and would become the chair of the Joint Commission on the Improvement of the Charles River, for which Eliot served as secretary. And Eliot could rely on Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., Charles Sprague Sargent—director of the Arnold Arboretum—and a host of literary and political lions to come forth in support of many of his efforts. But he did not work primarily for the benefit of an economic and political elite; he deeply appreciated the involvement of an informed public. In 1897, when Warren Manning wrote to him about the possible formation of a professional society for landscape architects, Eliot responded that it was more timely and important to establish a broad-based support group for public landscape causes. The American Park and Outdoor Art Association, founded in 1897, was the result.

Eliot’s Legacy

Despite, or perhaps because of, his early death, Eliot inspired others to perpetuate his ideals. He had not only expanded the parameters and concerns of the profession of landscape architecture, he had also laid the foundations for the environmental movement and for the professions of city and regional planning. A model village erected at the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1902 included a “Civic Pride Monument,” one
of many such testimonials to his importance and influence. (Ironically, Eliot would have preferred to be remembered for his belief in metropolitan or regional, rather than civic or municipal, pride.)

Eliot's father became a vocal advocate for the issues his son had embraced. Indeed, President Eliot showed the zeal of a convert. Not only did he write and edit *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect*, he also began to write articles and speak in public about landscape preservation. From 1905 until 1926, he served on the Standing Committee, the central governing board of the Trustees of Public Reservations. President Eliot carried forward his son's vision of a forest reservation on Mount Desert Island, Maine, now Acadia National Park. Perhaps Charles Eliot's finest legacy was his father's commitment to establishing a professional program in landscape architecture at Harvard, which was inaugurated in 1900 under the direction of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Eliot's former colleague, and Arthur Shurtleff, his former protégé. President Eliot's program today maintains his son's name in the Charles Eliot Professorship in Landscape Architecture and the Charles Eliot Traveling Fellowship, which enables promising young landscape architects to benefit from travel study as its namesake had.

After his retirement from Harvard University, Charles W. Eliot moved to a house on Fresh Pond Parkway, a green corridor designed by his son. The Parkway, in turn, connects the Fresh Pond Reservation, his son's design for the Cambridge Park Commission, to the Memorial Drive Reservation on the Cambridge side of the Charles River, another of the younger Eliot's early projects for the Cambridge Park Commission. Today the Eliot Bridge (dedicated in 1955 to both father and son) connects the Fresh Pond Parkway to the Soldiers Field Road Reservation on the Boston side of the Charles River.

Even more directly perpetuating the ideals of Charles Eliot was the work of his nephew, Charles W. Eliot II. Born in 1900, three years after his uncle's death, but named for his grandfather, this Eliot was destined from birth to adopt his uncle's profession. "At the time I was born," he reported late in life, "my grandfather came to the house and asked if it was a boy or a girl. When he was told it was a boy, he said: 'That's good! His name will be Charles like his uncle. He will be a landscape architect like his uncle. He will go on with his uncle's work.'"

Trained in landscape architecture and regional planning at Harvard, this Charles became the first field secretary of the Trustees of Public Reservations in 1925. In May of that year, the Trustees sponsored a conference, "The Needs and Uses of Open Spaces in Massachusetts," in which he took a leading role. One result of the conference was a renewed effort to coordinate the activities of private and public conservation organizations in the state. Equally significant was the proposed "Bay Circuit," a new and larger greenbelt for the Greater Boston Basin. The idea for the Bay Circuit may not have been Eliot's alone, but he became its strongest long-term supporter. Like his uncle, Eliot soon saw an opportunity to advance the cause of landscape architecture and regional planning by moving into the public sector. He became the director of the National Capitol Park and Planning Commission under the Roosevelt administration, a position he maintained until 1955. Eliot then returned to Harvard to become the Charles Eliot Professor of Landscape Architecture. He retired in 1968 but remained an active supporter of land conservation and became the conscience of both The Trustees of Reservations and the Metropolitan District Commission until his death in 1992.

The early growth of the Trustees was modest, in part, because Eliot turned his attention so quickly to the Metropolitan Park Commission. By 1897, the year of Charles Eliot's death, only two properties, Rocky Narrows on the Charles River in Canton and Mount Anne Park in Gloucester, had been given to the Trustees. Together they totaled fewer than one hundred acres. Today, the Trustees are stewards of more than twenty thousand acres, "the best of the Massachusetts landscape in all its diversity." The organization has been the inspiration for land trusts both in the United States and abroad, and Eliot's early writings also inspired the formation of other organizations. Most notably, the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty in Great Britain was modeled on the Trustees, as was, ultimately, the
National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States.

Soon after his success in forming the Trustees, Eliot turned his attention to the creation of a public authority, the Metropolitan Park Commission. Celebrating its centennial in 1993, the commission now "embraces almost twenty thousand acres of parklands ranging from dense woodlands and wetlands to intensely developed and managed urban parks." One of the most important potential benefits of the centennial celebration was the appointment of the Green Ribbon Commission to suggest improvements to the organization. At the top of its list of priorities was the issue that Charles Eliot had fought hard but unsuccessfully to impress on the early commissioners—the need for careful and persistent maintenance, or what is today called stewardship. The responsibility now rests with the commission's current administration—and with all of us who are "trustees" of the Eliot legacy—to ensure that these resources receive the care and the use they merit.

Despite the enormous challenges posed by increasing traffic and neglected maintenance, the metropolitan park system that Eliot envisioned remains his greatest achievement. In a chapter titled "Growth Invincible" in his 1906 book, The Future in America, H. G. Wells contrasted his recent visits to New York and to Boston:

If possible it is more impressive, even, than the crowded largeness of New York, to trace the serene preparation Boston has made through this [Metropolitan Park] Commission to be widely and easily vast. New York's humanity has the curious air of being carried along upon a wave of irresistible prosperity, but Boston confesses design. I suppose no city in all the world... has ever produced so complete and ample a forecast of its own future as this commission's plan for Boston.

Today, Charles Eliot's ideas "confess design" as clearly as they did a century ago, just as they attempted to forecast a future not only for Boston but for the whole of American landscape architecture.

Notes


2 Ellen Peabody Eliot to her mother, Marberg, 17 November 1864, Charles W. Eliot Papers, Pusey Library, Harvard University (hereafter cited as CWE Papers).

3 Charles W. Eliot to his mother, Marberg, 5 January 1865, CWE Papers.

4 Commonplace Book, October 1876. Charles Eliot Collection, Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. Hereafter cited as CEC.


6 Commonplace Book, July 1877. CEC

7 Ibid., 30 October 1877 and December 1878.


9 The quotation is from a letter Charles Eliot wrote to his wife, Sunday, 20 July 1895, CELA, 515.

10 Diary of 1875, 14 May 1875, Princeton, Mass. Charles Eliot Papers, Goriainsky Collection, Boston. Hereafter cited as GC.

11 For his comments on "nabobry," see CELA, 176–177; his assessments of landscapes are chiefly found in chapters 9 and 10.

12 Charles Eliot to Frederick Law Olmsted, Sunday, 10 October [1887], GC.

13 Ibid.

14 CEC.

15 He was greatly assisted in this process by the letters of introduction he brought from his father, Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles Sprague Sargent, and Asa Gray, among others.

16 CELA, 32.


18 CELA, 207.

19 Charles W. Eliot to Charles Eliot, 11 June 1886, GC.

20 Charles Eliot to Frederick Law Olmsted, 10 October 1887, GC.

21 Charles Eliot to Frederick Law Olmsted, 20 July 1889, Eliot Correspondence File, 141–142, CEC.

22 CELA, 554–556, 543–545.

23 Ibid., 441.

24 Charles Eliot to Mr. Garrison, 2 November 1896, Manuscript Letters, vol. 2, nos 164 & 165, CEC. Ironically, Eliot died before this obituary could be used for Olmsted.

25 Charles Eliot to Roland Thaxter, 13 May 1883, GC.
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The new edition of Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect is being published by the University of Massachusetts Press in association with the Library of American Landscape History. To purchase copies, phone 413.545.2219, fax 800.488.1144, or e-mail order@umpress.umass.edu.
Approach to an estate of six-and-a-half acres in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, designed by Charles Eliot, 1889–1890. To conceal the boundaries of the estate, plant out undesirable objects, and visually connect the plantings with those of neighboring estates, sixty-two kinds of trees and shrubs were planted in spring 1890. Eliot sent another list of 725 plants (52 kinds) that fall, and yet another list of 520 the following spring. The photograph shows the approach as seen from the highway; the sketch looks down to the highway from the property. From Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect (1902).