

Clifton Park

A Significant History of Landscape Design

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Clifton Park is Baltimore's fourth oldest country landscape park after Druid Hill, Patterson, and Carroll Parks. Recently the Department of Recreation and Parks with the consulting architectural firm Ayres/Saint/Gross engaged the Friends of Clifton Park and community stakeholders in a comprehensive master planning process. Remarkably, this is the first time in Clifton Park's history that planners are taking a comprehensive look at its design and function.

The design team developed guiding principles for the historic resources based on the report for the National Register application prepared by Elizabeth Jo Lampl in 1997. Mary Hughes, FASLA and landscape architect for the University of Virginia, made recommendations for managing historic elements.

With an Italianate mansion overlooking sweeping tree-studded lawns, Clifton's landscape features were influenced by four periods of ownership:

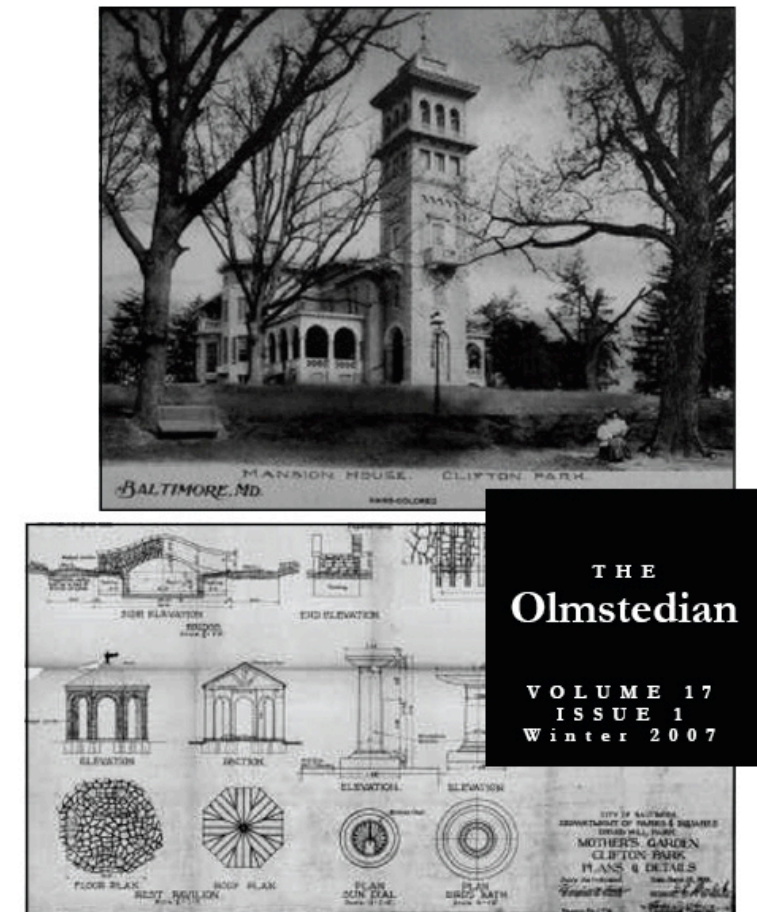
- Thompson farmstead (1799–1841)
- Hopkins estate (1841–1873)
- Johns Hopkins University Trustees (1874–1894)
- Baltimore Park Commission and the Department of Recreation and Parks (1895–present)

Landscape features of Clifton Park date from around 1800 when Baltimore merchant Henry Thompson purchased the rural property improved with a farmhouse, which came to be called Clifton. Over time, Thompson added to the house, creating a federal style mansion.

Johns Hopkins, wealthy business man and benefactor to the nation's first university, pur-

chased the farm in 1841 and developed the landscape as a gentleman's country summer estate—complete with lawns, tree groves, meandering paths, an ornamental lake, parterre gardens, gardener's cottage and conservatory. Lampl conjectured that the style was influenced by the writings of prominent landscape theorist Andrew Jackson Downing, author of *Landscape Gardening and Rural Architecture in America* (1845).

Further research reveals special significance in the relation of the Hopkins estate to the history of landscape design and horticulture. Around 1850, Hopkins hired William Saunders, a Scottish immigrant and professional horticulturist, who was trained at the College of Edinburgh and later at Kew Gardens in England. Saunders' work in laying out the Clifton grounds launched his impressive career



Clifton, the country estate of Johns Hopkins, and a drawing for the 1928 Mothers' Garden. Courtesy of the Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks.

as a horticulturist and landscape gardener. Saunders also planned the grounds of the Crimea, the estate of Thomas Winans in Leakin Park in west Baltimore.

Although Saunders is relatively unknown today, his work earned him a national reputation. According to the *Cyclopedia of American Horticulture*, 1917: “[Saunders] was a landscape gar-

dener of note... planned many parks in the eastern portion of the United States, among the most noted of which were Clifton, the country home of the late Johns Hopkins.”

In 1854, William Saunders and a partner began an illustrious career in designing parks, estates and cemeteries, including laying out a park and garden

system in Washington, DC, and the campus of the state University of Illinois in Normal. In 1862, he was appointed to the office of the horticulturist in the Department of Agriculture. Saunders designed the Gettysburg cemetery and sat with President Lincoln as he delivered the *Gettysburg Address*. He also completed many of the plantings in the nation's capital park system that were started by Andrew Jackson Downing, and introduced plants such as the navel orange from Brazil.

Building upon the original federal style mansion, Clifton's grand Italianate villa was completed by 1852 in the architectural style espoused by Downing for the ideal country villa. Establishing the appropriate style of landscape garden for American country estates was of interest to wealthy rural landholders during Hopkins' time.

1858 was a seminal year for the development of our nation's urban landscape parks when Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux won the design competition for New York's Central Park. The project launched Olmsted's long and brilliant career in cities across the nation. As a result, Olmsted's name is commonly associated with the practice of 19th century rural

park design in urban areas, and many of these landscapes are assumed to be "Olmsted designs." Yet Olmsted as well as other designers, including William Saunders, were affected by the same stylistic influences of their times.

Whether the style is called "English Country Landscape," or the "Landscape Gardening and Rural Architecture of North America," amateurs and professionals practiced in similar styles. Local examples include not only Clifton Park, strongly influenced by the development of the Hopkins estate by William Saunders, but also Druid Hill Park, designed first as a country estate by owner Lloyd Nicholas Rogers and later as a country landscape park by Howard Daniels.

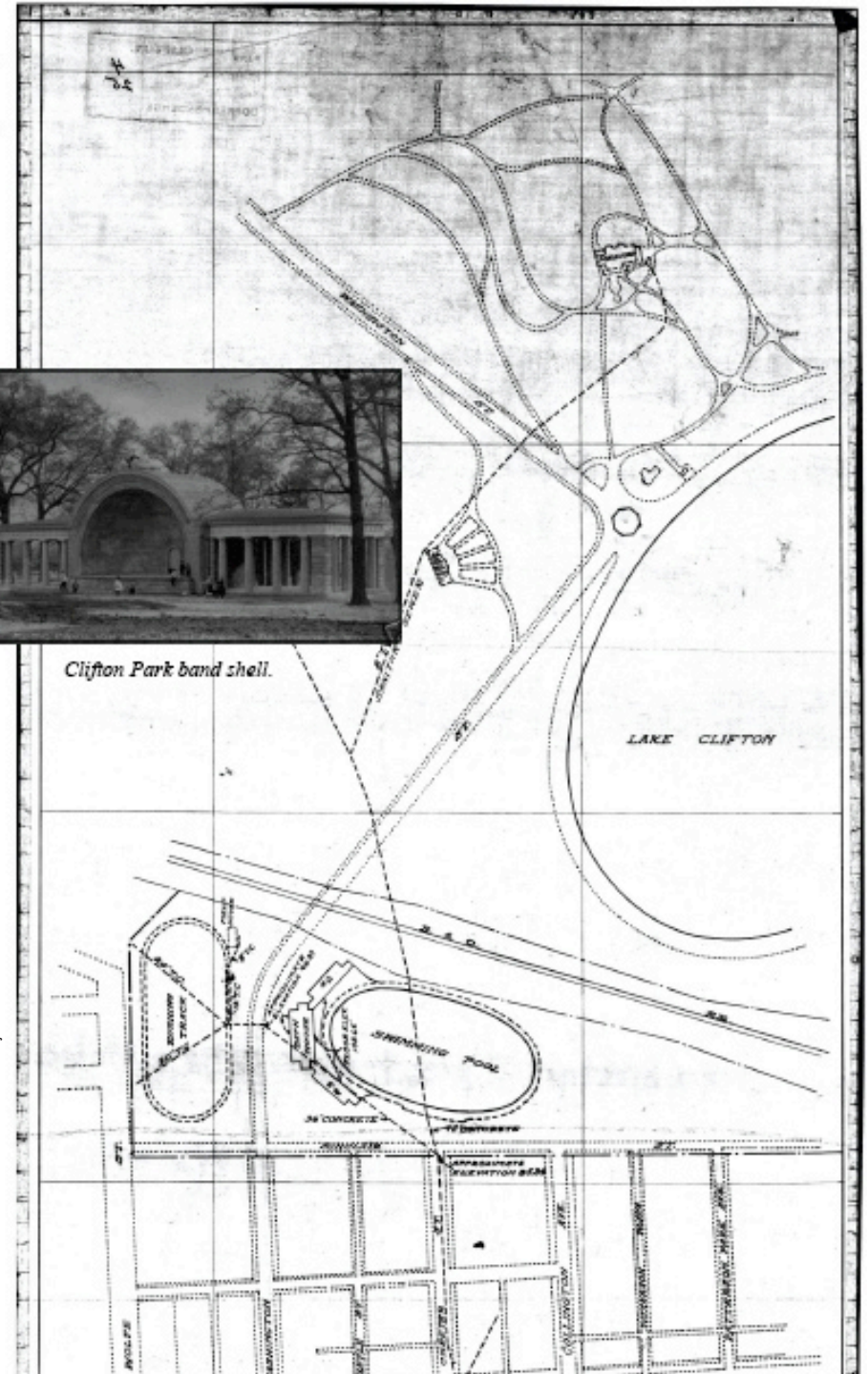
Johns Hopkins maintained Clifton as a summer estate until his death in 1873, and bequeathed the property to the trustees of the Johns Hopkins University. Established in 1876, the University was first housed on North Howard Street and remained a downtown campus for about fifteen years. Hopkins hoped that the University would relocate to Clifton.

During the university trustees' tenure at Clifton, the landscape gardens were not well-main-

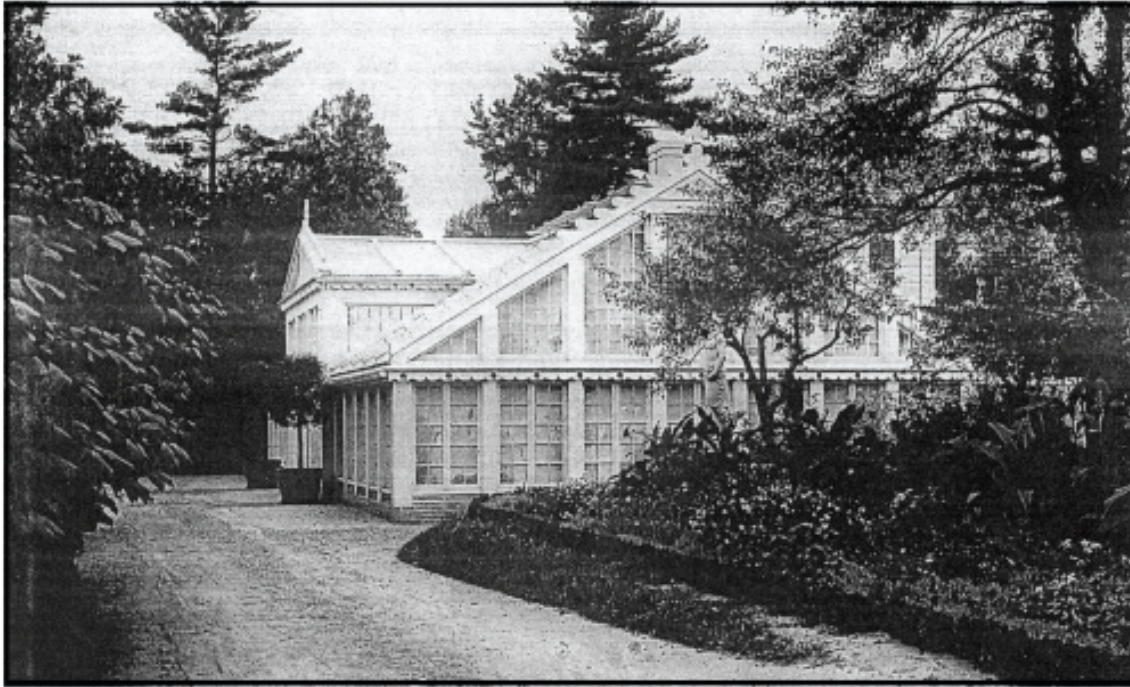
Publication Design
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Sparks



Clifton Park band shell.



This 1915 drawing, made by the City Department of Parks with guidance by the Olmsted Brothers, shows the transformation of the Clifton estate and reservoir (Lake Clifton) to park land with recreational facilities. Layers from each ownership era are evident. The City later removed the reservoir, which became the site for the Clifton Park Senior High School (1971).



Johns Hopkins maintained this large conservatory at Clifton for the extensive plantings throughout the grounds.

tained, and the estate was used for student athletic facilities that could not be accommodated downtown. Baltimore City condemned part of the estate to build a drinking water reservoir (at the current location of Lake Clifton High School) and the impressive American gothic style valve house nearby. In 1894, when the value of stock in the B&O Railroad plummeted, the trustees sold Clifton to Baltimore City for \$1 million to raise operating expenses for the university. In 1895, the Baltimore Park Commission began making improvements for a public park on the site

and invested in rehabilitating various gardens as well as some roadways.

In 1903, the Municipal Art Society retained the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects (OBLA) to design a municipal park system for Baltimore. Their 1904 *Report Upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore* recognized Clifton as one of the city's major parks that would anchor the system. The Park Commission hired the Olmsted Brothers for various projects throughout Baltimore's park system, including Clifton Park.

OBLA recommended that a comprehensive plan be prepared for Clifton, but instead, the Park Commission only retained them to design a series of specific projects over the course of nine years. The Commission's penchant for hiring the firm for projects instead of comprehensive plans was a source of tension with OBLA.

The first Clifton Park project in 1904 included an athletic ground on the southern park south of the railroad, where an Olmsted-era stone wall still stands. When constructed, the Olmsted-designed swimming

pool was the largest concrete pool in the country. Significantly remodeled, the original bath house pavilion remains. Under OBLA's direction, a music shell was located where the current band shell stands. The original structure, which burned in 1947, was an elegant building in a classical style. According to Lampl, "What stands today was built following the fire and is a renovated and stripped version of the original shell." Lampl states, "The firm's work is embodied in the landscape, building orientation, design solutions for athletic grounds, swimming pool, band shell, baseball fields, children's playground and Washington Street."

Later additions to the park include Baltimore's first public golf course (1916) and Mothers' Garden (1928), originally dedicated to "The Mothers of Baltimore."

One of the greatest challenges facing historic parks continues to be finding the funds to restore original features, often badly deteriorated due to an extended period of deferred maintenance. However, following decades of abuse, Clifton's Italianate villa is stabilized, and the current tenant, Civic Works, is restoring the interior. The Gardener's Cottage has not

been as fortunate. In her summary report, Mary Hughes, FASLA, calls attention to the picturesque, though tarnished, structure: "the cottage is incredibly important to the 'story' of Clifton Park. In the Hopkins era, the cottage was the picturesque counterpoint to the Italianate mansion. In Andrew Jackson Downing's aesthetic theory, he contrasted the 'Beautiful' in architecture and landscape with the 'Picturesque'... In the development of Clifton, Hopkins put this aesthetic theory into practice by developing both 'beautiful' and 'picturesque' areas on his estate, demonstrating the integration of buildings and landscapes in each style."

The 2007 Clifton Master Plan recommends stabilization of the Gardener's Cottage and restoration of the gothic Valve House. The Mansion will likely be a higher priority. The Master Plan is a welcome opportunity to engage the public to look comprehensively at the historic landscape and develop a rational plan for rehabilitating the park for current users.

--Myra Brosius, Parks Planner and FMOPL Board Member, with assistance from Jea Chapman and Eric Holcomb, also FMOPL Board Members.