



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDEN

One day in the spring of 1819, 18-year-old Henry Shaw, an Englishman recently landed in the river town of St. Louis on the edge of the American wilderness, took a half-day journey on horseback out of town. Riding westward through marshy ground, past sinkholes and Indian burial mounds, he came at last to a narrow path cutting through brush, and found himself on elevated ground overlooking a prairie. "Uncultivated," he recorded, "without trees or fences, but covered with tall luxuriant grass, undulated by the gentle breeze of spring."

If ever a man loved a piece of ground, it was Shaw. Shaw's fortunes grew, he resolved to return something to his adopted city, and 40 years after his arrival in St. Louis, he opened on the land he so loved a botanical garden for the city's residents. This garden is today the Missouri Botanical Garden. One of the oldest botanical gardens in the U.S., Missouri Botanical Garden is outstanding not only in the excellence of its displays, but also in the richness of its architectural heritage and the importance of its botanical research.

Garden founder Henry Shaw came to St. Louis in 1819 to open a business selling hardware and cutlery. As St. Louis flourished in the second quarter of the 19th century, and the city's population grew, Shaw's business expanded to include investments in agricultural commodities, mining, real estate, and furs.

Shaw's business success provided him with a substantial fortune and allowed him to retire by 1839. He was not yet 40. During the next decade he continued buying property. His eventual holdings of about 1,000 acres included the land he had seen his first year in St. Louis. On this land he had a country home built. From 1849 to 1851 he also traveled extensively in the United States and Europe.

By the 1850s Shaw had resolved to spend the remainder of his life in acts of philanthropy and began to provide a great deal of support to develop many St. Louis cultural and social institutions.

Shaw also had a strong interest in botany and gardening, fostered by early years at Mill Hill School, located on the former estate of English botanist Peter Collinson. It was not surprising, therefore, that one of his trips to England inspired him to give the people of St. Louis a garden like the great gardens and estates of Europe. Shortly after 1851 Shaw began development of a ten-acre site near his country home. His unusual gesture presaged the age of American philanthropy and the creation of the great U.S. public parks by several decades.

The news that Henry Shaw was building a botanical garden reached Dr. George Engelmann, a German physician-botanist who had come to the U.S. several decades earlier. Engelmann, one of the great early American botanists, suggested that the garden be more than a public park, that it become involved with scientific work like the great botanical institutions of Europe. With the assistance of Harvard botanist Asa Gray and Sir William Hooker, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, near London, Engelmann persuaded Shaw to include a herbarium (collection of botanical specimens) and a library in his garden. Shaw in turn encouraged Engelmann to buy specimens and books in Europe.

The Missouri Botanical Garden opened to the public in 1859 and began to grow in the European tradition of horticultural display combined with education and the search for new knowledge.

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Today, 148 years after opening, the Missouri Botanical Garden covers 79 acres, operates the world's most active tropical botany research program, has over 41,000 members, and an annual attendance of 1.2 million.

Text by Joseph M. Schuster (except last two paragraphs). Reprinted by permission from Garden, January-February 1983, the publication of The Garden Society, a Division of The New York Botanical Garden.

For more information, contact the Public Relations Department at (314) 577-0254 or (314) 577-5141 or check the Garden's Web site at www.mobot.org. For 24-hour recorded visitor information, call (314) 577-9400 or (800) 642-8842 toll free.

The Missouri Botanical Garden's mission is "to discover and share knowledge about plants and their environment, in order to preserve and enrich life." Today, 148 years after opening, the Missouri Botanical Garden is a National Historic Landmark; a center for research, education and horticultural display; and the 2004 winner of the *Horticulture* Magazine and the American Public Gardens Association's (formerly the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta) "Garden of Excellence" Award.