

**HANNIBAL'S RIVERVIEW PARK:  
A PUBLIC LANDSCAPE  
BY O. C. SIMONDS**

*By Karen Bode Baxter and Matthew Cerny  
with help from Mandy Ford and Sara Bularzik*

Riverview Park covers 465 acres of high bluffs and deep draws overlooking the Mississippi River at the northern edge of Hannibal in Marion County, Missouri. The park owes its existence to the generosity of Wilson B. Pettibone, who created and opened the park in 1909. Pettibone sought strictly to respect the natural appearance of the land and to avoid all traces of artificiality. To do this, he turned to one of the leading proponents of the prairie style of landscape design, Ossian Cole Simonds. With his advanced understanding of native Midwestern plants, Simonds was able to take bare land that had been abused by farming and turn it into an enhanced representation of what most people now assume to be a native forest. The mature park remains today a rare unaltered example of this style as envisioned by its designer.

**OSSIAN SIMONDS**

When Hannibal newspapers looked back on the creation of Riverview Park, they often stated that Ossian Cole Simonds was an Englishman. In fact, he was born on his father's farm near Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1855. Julia Sniderman Bachrach, Simonds' biographer in *Midwestern Landscape Architecture*, laments that

Simonds is often overlooked by historians, in contrast to contemporaries such as Jens Jensen.<sup>1</sup> While Jensen was an able promoter who wrote manifestos for prairie-inspired designs, Simonds was self-effacing and wrote books, such as *Landscape-Gardening*, which were practical and instructive but not philosophical.<sup>2</sup>

Simonds' professional training began as a student of civil engineering at the University of Michigan in 1874. He studied architecture under William LeBaron Jenney for two years until the architecture program closed, then went to work for Jenney's firm in Chicago after completing his engineering degree in 1878. Jenney assigned Simonds the responsibility for draining the low-lying marsh at Graceland Cemetery on the north side of Chicago.

Bryan Lathrop, a prominent Chicago speculator and philanthropist (whose 1892 house by McKim, Mead & White still stands at 120 East Bellevue Place), represented the cemetery, and Simonds credited him with providing his real education in landscape gardening.<sup>3</sup> Lathrop inspired Simonds to approach his career with humility, convincing him that landscape gardening was the "rarest and greatest" although the "least understood and appreciated" of the fine arts.<sup>4</sup> At his mentor's suggestion, Simonds read Andrew Jackson Downing's magazine, *The Horticulturist*, works by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., and writings from the English landscape school. This early friendship foreshadowed Simonds' relationship with the benefactor of Riverview Park,

since Wilson B. Pettibone was also a philanthropist and visionary, yet very humble.



Frederick Hibberd's statue of Mark Twain was erected in Riverview Park in Hannibal in 1913, four years after the park's opening. Ossian Cole Simonds designed the park and added this more formal setting for the statue. Photo courtesy Steve Chou.

In 1880, Simonds began transplanting indigenous plants to Graceland, including oak, maple, and ash hornbeam. Bachrach notes that popular enthusiasms at that time involved exotic foreign flora and most people considered native plants invasive weeds. Simonds worked full-time as superintendent of the grounds from 1883 to 1888, crafting a cemetery that closely resembled nature. He incorporated elements of the native prairie, such as clustering the trees and allowing the grasses to grow untrimmed. During the 1890s and 1900s, Simonds published many articles in journals such as *Park and Cemetery* and *Modern Cemetery* and gained a reputation as the “dean of cemetery design.”<sup>5</sup>

Following Graceland, Simonds worked as an independent consultant to design Fort Sheridan, north of Chicago (now a National Historic Landmark). Simonds’ plan included a parade ground for military drills, but he also created a “meadow that extended back from the wooded bluff with a natural ravine as its border.”

By the 1890s, Simonds was in demand and was able to form O. C. Simonds and Company, later O. C. Simonds and West, with offices on Buena Avenue in the Lakeview area of Chicago. Most of the office documents were destroyed in a fire, and few of Simonds’ plans have survived to the present. During the 1900s, Simonds worked on Lincoln Park, constructing the famous lagoons. With his old friend Lathrop, he worked to extend the park north to Devon Avenue. His policy was to keep park buildings low and dark in color, so as not to encroach on the natural setting. He encouraged the large park restaurant, the South Pond Refectory (now the Café Brauer) to be built by Prairie School architect Dwight H. Perkins, and included a naturalistic lagoon as well as low-lying loggias. A reporter re-

marked that he was evidently inspired by creating views and vistas of Lake Michigan.<sup>6</sup> This characteristic is evident in Riverview as well, where he was working at the same time, and where he created even more dramatic views of the Mississippi River from the bluffs in the park.

While working in Chicago, Simonds also worked from 1895 to 1912 for the Boulevard and Park Association of Quincy, Illinois, less than fifteen miles upriver from Hannibal. There he designed and managed eight parks. Bachrach notes that Simonds preferred the design opportunities of this area to Chicago because of “the expansive landscapes where natural attributes could be preserved and existing vegetation could be retained and enhanced with masses of indigenous plants.”<sup>7</sup> Simonds became expert in the terrain of Quincy, appreciating the way its meadows and ravines could provide vistas.

By 1915, when Wilhelm Miller wrote *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening*, he recognized Simonds along with Jens Jensen as an initiator of the style “that drew inspiration from the native landscape of the Midwest, its landforms, waterways, and vegetation.”<sup>8</sup> Simonds himself said that he was only attempting to create the most beautiful and natural effect.

#### WILSON PETTIBONE

Wilson B. Pettibone came to Hannibal in 1876 at the age of 26 to direct his father’s lumber operations. The Pettibone lumber interests were the most prominent in the Mississippi River Valley at the very time that the entire mid-section of the nation was being developed. Pettibone quickly organized several local lumber companies, including the Hannibal Saw Mill and the Hannibal Door & Sash Company, two of the community’s largest industries. His business endeavors followed the evolution of the lumber industry to the northwest, and he acquired interests in several associations and companies, such as Missouri Lumber, the Louisiana Long Leaf Company, the Lambert Lumber Company of Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, and Pettibone Timber of Washington. The Pettibone lumber operations became the linchpin of Hannibal’s economy, making it a major lumbering center in the Mississippi River valley.<sup>9</sup> Pettibone was also a banking leader and was active in the Hannibal Chamber of Commerce.



A postcard reproduced in the Hannibal Courier-Post shows how Riverview Park descends to the Wabash Bridge and the edge of the river.

His success was reflected in three progressively larger and newer houses, culminating in the 1913 Georgian Revival mansion, Cliffside, at 8 Stillwell Place. But he is best remembered as Hannibal’s greatest philanthro-

pist. In addition to Riverview Park, he gave land and money to Levering Hospital; furnishings for the orphans home; the entire cost, over \$200,000, to rebuild the North School after it burned (it is now called the Pettibone School); 80 acres for a community youth camp on the Mississippi River; playgrounds for several other public schools; and funds to pave several streets.

Pettibone guaranteed the Christmas savings accounts of three thousand Hannibal school children after their savings bank failed at the beginning of the Great Depression. Landscape projects were especially important. Pettibone paid \$15,000 for land to create a park in front of the Eugene Field School. He purchased property surrounding the Levering Hospital and transformed it into another park. He built the sunporch at St. Elizabeth's Hospital and the playground at the Mark Twain School. These efforts to provide naturalistic settings for schools and hospitals culminated in the creation of Riverview Park. Throughout the park's design and development process, Pettibone maintained an active role, even to the selection of trees.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF RIVERVIEW PARK

Wilson B. Pettibone was perhaps the first Missouri philanthropist to create a park with a naturalistic environment, in contrast to other benefactors who provided parks with urban amenities such as picnic grounds, shelters, playgrounds and zoos.

In a 1908 letter to Captain C. J. Lewis and banker George D. Clayton, two of the leading men of Hanni-

bal, Wilson B. Pettibone outlined his plans to secure a location for a public park for Hannibal's people. He intended to have it "converted into a public park with the usual boulevards, drives, walks and places of resort, recreation and rest, and with the expectation that the title to it without valuable consideration will ultimately pass to the City of Hannibal . . . for the perpetual use by the people for that purpose."<sup>10</sup> He already had selected the name Riverview Park and was urging the creation of a park association to which he could deed the grounds, with the expectation that work would begin on park improvements early the following spring.

Pettibone began to acquire property on the northern end of Hannibal in 1908, parcels that had been farms and an apple orchard.<sup>11</sup> He focused his purchases on the high bluffs that afforded scenic views of the Mississippi River. He presented an initial donation of about 240 acres to the city in 1909, but he continued to add acreage to the park, with at least four separate purchases noted by the newspaper in 1917, 1924, and 1928. These extensions were intended to insulate the park from surrounding developments. While this concern may have seemed excessive at the time, Hannibal was already developing in that direction, and in recent years the park has been surrounded by residential development, with a new federal highway interchange encroaching through eminent domain on the southern edge of the park.

Pettibone presented his plan for Riverview Park to the City of Hannibal on January 12, 1909. A governing board of nine citizens would control and supervise the park, but the option would remain for the transfer of the park to the City, if the City created a park board of its own, and if the city would provide sufficient funds for proper management. The park was to be kept free of man-made construction and maintained as a naturalistic setting. The management of the park should "forever be free from all political, religious, social or other bias, without prejudice, preference, or discrimination." These provisions were spelled out in Pettibone's deed of gift.<sup>12</sup>



An early photo of Riverview Park, showing its unforested original condition. Courtesy Steve Chou.

Pettibone provided a cash gift of \$5,000 for use by the governing board in constructing driveways, footways, and other improvements. As a member of the governing board himself, Pettibone hired Simonds, who came to Hannibal on May 13, 1909 to take "further measurements

and notes of the grounds under improvement.”<sup>13</sup> Work started immediately, and on June 17, Simonds returned to view “the improvements there and inspect the construction of new roads being built.” Two associates, W. T. League, a native of Hannibal, and a Mr. Cohan from Chicago, represented the firm of Simonds and West in Hannibal throughout 1909 to oversee development. Already in July, the *Hannibal Courier Post* printed a long story praising the emerging beauty of the park, with old fences removed, the orchard relandscaped, and roads complete. A large work force planted trees and shrubs, and eighteen men reportedly worked into mid-November to finish before the ground froze. The roadway through the park was laid out according to Simonds’ drawings and graded with a combination of oil and red sand. Another group constructed concrete steps and walks leading from River Road just above the water up the side of the bluff to the top of Tunnel Hill, so named for the railroad tunnel beneath it. A series of switchbacks equipped with benches on resting platforms brought the park “within easy walking distance of the business center.”

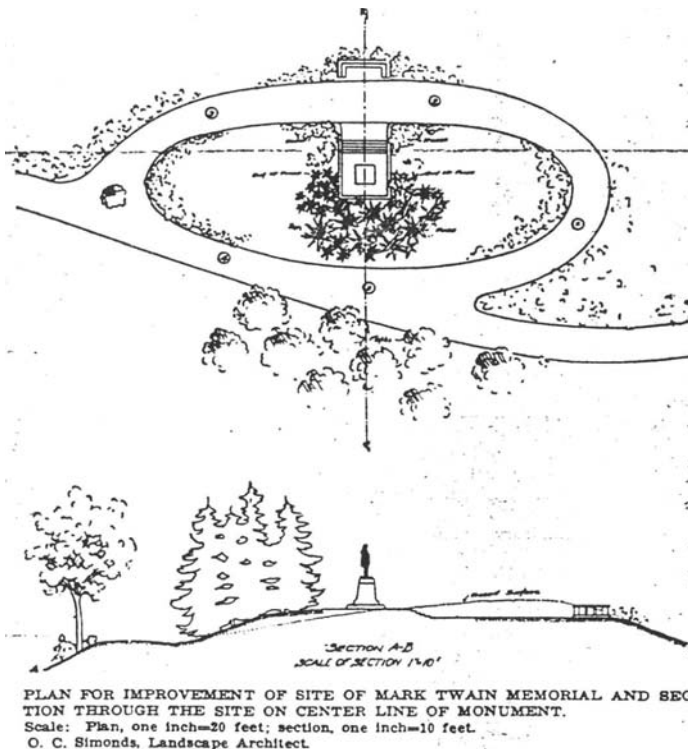
The firm of Simonds and West continued to work in Riverview Park as it expanded. Simonds drew up plans in 1912 for the scenic overlook and layout for the Mark Twain statue competition.<sup>14</sup> In 1929, he prepared grading and planting plans for the new entrance drive, still the only vehicular entrance into the park. In one of the rare extant documents between the two visionaries, Simonds sent Pettibone a sketch for the wooded border along the

entrance drive in October of 1929, writing that he “wished to secure an attractive wooded border that will be specially attractive in autumn from the rich coloring of its foliage.” Simonds enclosed a list of 1,500 seedlings that he had ordered from Naperville Nurseries, including such species as Sumac, Red Oak, Pin Oak, and White Oak, Tulip Poplar, and Sweet Gum.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the land for Riverview Park was acquired from farmers who had previously cultivated the land, so when first developed, the park’s trees and shrubs were quite small. They have matured well, and the winding drive and footpaths allow the visitor to experience what is now a mature arboretum. In a tree survey compiled five years ago, the current park supervisor and forester, Doug S. Reinert, noted many of the same tree species found in Simonds’ original order. Given the age of the trees, Reinert also listed a number of others clearly planted at that time or transplanted as larger specimens of native tree species.<sup>16</sup> Others may be younger trees, seeded by the original plantings or spread naturally into the maturing arboretum. Although Reinert admitted that his list was probably not a complete inventory, he had found black cherry, American elm, white ash, black walnut, at least two varieties of hackberry, black oak, sugar maple, snag, den tree, black maple, white oak, chinquapin oak, shag bark hickory, basswood, northern red oak, Kentucky coffee tree, paw paw, and sassafras.

The abundance of hawthorn trees that can be seen blooming early each spring throughout River Park has a special significance both as Missouri’s state flower and as the transplanted location of the original hawthorn tree developed by the local botanist, Rev. John Davis, the rector of the local Trinity Episcopal Church. Davis developed a variety of the hawthorn, garnering recognition by the Smithsonian Institution, the Missouri Botanical Garden, and the Arnold Arboretum in Boston.<sup>17</sup>

The State of Missouri erected a statue of Mark Twain in 1913, paying \$10,000 for the statue and the surrounding viewing platform. The state commission charged with erecting the monument engaged Simonds to select the location for the memorial with the guidance of the sculptors who competed for the commission. They wanted “to have the memorial in harmony with its immediate environment” and “an integral part of its surroundings.” The competition led to the selection of Frederick C. Hibbard of Chicago, who had designed his figure to fit its exact location after visiting the site and making sketches on the ground. Hibbard had already created the William Henry Hatch statue in Hannibal’s Central Park, and he later sculpted the Tom and Huck statue that stands at the north end of Main Street.



This is one of very few surviving Simonds design drawings.

The figure stands on a pyramidal pedestal, set in a wide platform at the highest point in the park, terraced up from a winding road that encircles the statue and its knoll. The view from the statue is one of the most majestic on the edge of the bluff, looking both up and down the river. As reported in *Park and Cemetery* in December 1912, this site with its view was especially appropriate as the Mississippi River was the focal point of many of Twain's most famous works. The author himself is said to have commented that this was the best view of the river, looking both up and down the stream and over into Illinois for many miles. The landscaping details, including the loop in the road, the terraced knoll, the plantings, and the overlook, were finished according to Simonds' design.

Grateful citizens of Hannibal tried to convince W. B. Pettibone to let them erect a memorial to him in Riverview Park, but he wished to avoid publicity. Eventually, however, they succeeded by suggesting a creative

Pettibone's wishes, recorded in deeds and newspaper articles, reflected his appreciation for the natural environment. If the council failed to adhere to Pettibone's intent, the property would revert to him or his heirs. When he died in 1946, he left a trust fund of \$100,000 for the park, prohibiting "anything that would encroach upon its natural beauty," including construction, "whether for utilitarian purposes or for purposes of amusement." In his will, Pettibone explained that his intent was "to protect and preserve its most striking and distinctive feature, that is, the wild and unsubdued beauty with which nature has so bounteously endowed it."<sup>19</sup>

By the time the Riverview Park Board turned the trust fund over to the City in 1980, it had doubled to \$200,000. At that time the Board relinquished control to the Parks and Recreation Department. Riverview Park has maintained the original vision of its benefactor for nearly one hundred years as a natural environment unencumbered by manmade objects, not even picnic tables.

Current controversy revolves around the need to update the city's water storage facility located on an inholding in the midst of the park. The original 1909 park tract bordered 17 acres of land already owned by the Hannibal Water Company. The city's water reservoir was located on this site, which had quickly become known as Reservoir Park, since citizens used the ground around the reservoir for picnics. Pettibone's subsequent purchases left the water company's land encircled. By 1924, the Water Company had built a large concrete storage tank, a brick filtration building, and a water tower on about four acres of their property, while the remaining acreage had been developed with a picnic shelter, restrooms, and playgrounds. These facilities were convenient for local citizens, since Pettibone did not want such amenities in Riverview Park itself. Because of lack of accurate surveys at the time, it now appears that part of the filtration building and the water tank may actually be on park property. Although the boundary dispute is not likely to be resolved in the near future, an additional water storage tank was completed in 2004 behind the filter plant building on Water Department land, replacing the picnic shelter. The new tank will permit repairs to the old one. The discussion generated about the historic significance of the park resulted in a structure that was less intrusive in height and location than the tall tank originally proposed, limiting its visual impact on the natural landscape of the park.



The city's map of Riverview Park does not differentiate the land in the middle owned by the Hannibal Water Company, since the property lines have been contested for years. The plant, reservoirs, and picnic shelter are all on Water Company property.

variation. Pettibone's second love, after Missouri, was Vermont, where he had a summer home. He consented after some hesitation to the placement of a large, natural piece of granite brought from Vermont. Today the rock sits along the entrance road about 200 feet beyond the water treatment plant. It reads "Riverview Park, a gift from Wilson B. Pettibone to the City of Hannibal, whose grateful citizens have placed this tablet here. 1926."<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. Julia Sniderman Bachrach, "Ossian Cole Simonds: Conservation Ethic in the Prairie Style," *Midwestern Landscape Architecture*, edited by William H. Tischler (University of Illinois Press, 2000, pp. 80-98), p. 95. For Jens Jensen see Robert E. Grese, *Jens Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
2. *Landscape-Gardening*, originally published in 1920, has been reissued by the University of Massachusetts Press, 2000, with an introduction by Robert E. Grese.
3. Ossian Cole Simonds, "Graceland at Chicago," *American Landscape Architecture*, 6 (January 1932), p. 12, cited by Bachrach, p. 83.
4. *Landscape-Gardening*, dedication, cited by Bachrach, p. 83..
5. Robert E. Grese, "Ossian Cole Simonds," *American Landscape Architecture: Designers and Places*, edited by William H. Tischler (Washington, D.C., Preservation Press, 1989), p. 74.
6. Edward B. Clark, "Formality Ousted in Improvements in Northern Park," *Chicago Evening Post*, April 6, 1907, quoted by Bachrach, p. 87.
7. Bachrach, p. 89.
8. Wilhelm Miller, *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening* (University of Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station, Circular No. 184, 1915).
9. This and other information about Pettibone have been collected by the Hannibal Free Public Library, Missouri Room vertical file, "Pettibone, Wilson B." See also J. Hurley Hagood and Roberta Hagood, *The Story of Hannibal* (Hannibal Free Public Library, 1976), passim.
10. Wilson B. Pettibone to Captain C. J. Lewis and Mr. George D. Clayton, 1908, typescript in collection of J. Hurley Hagood and Roberta Hagood, Hannibal.
11. J. Hurley Hagood & Roberta Hagood, *Hannibal Too* (Marceline, Mo.: Walsworth Publishing Company, 1986), p. 228.
12. Marion County Recorder of Deeds, Book 197, page 402, dated January 16, 1909. Original held by A. Wells Pettibone, Hannibal, Missouri.
13. *Hannibal Courier-Post*, "Park Artist Here," May 13, 1909.
14. *Park and Cemetery Magazine*, "Mark Twain Memorial and Its Setting," Vol. 22 (Dec. 1912), p. 236.
15. O. C. Simonds to W. B. Pettibone, October 31, 1929. A. Wells Pettibone collection, Hannibal.
16. Doug S. Reinert, Survey of Tree Species in Riverview Park, Hannibal, circa 1998 (transmitted by e-mail to Karen Bode Baxter, April 29, 2004).
17. *Hannibal Too*, p. 229.
18. *ibid*, p. 230.
19. "Will of Wilson B. Pettibone," Marion County Recorder of Deeds, Book 13, page 452, dated October 16, 1946, pp. 5 and 6; *Hannibal Courier-Post*, "W. B. Pettibone Dies," October 22, 1946.

---

## CHARLES B. CLARK: KNOWN WORKS by location

---

- CHESTER, IL  
Masonic Hall & Opera House (with 4 stories)  
*Republican*, 5-8-1888, p. 9
- COLLINSVILLE, IL  
public school, Compton & Dry  
*Republican*, 7-19-1871, p. 2
- COULTERVILLE, IL  
school (Compton & Dry)
- EAST ST. LOUIS, IL  
Howe Literary Institute, *Republic* 8-8-73, p. 8
- LEBANON, IL  
School, Compton & Dry
- OTTERVILLE, IL  
School, *Globe*, 7-8-1873, p. 2
- LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS  
First Baptist Church, 6<sup>th</sup> & Seneca, 1871,  
burned 1912, razed 1956, Compton & Dry
- CAPE GIRARDEAU, MO  
State Norman School, 1873-1902, Compton & Dry  
illus. *History of Boone County, Mo*, 1882, p. 67
- CHILLICOTHE, MO  
Central High School, 1875-1923, Compton & Dry  
Marmaduke Cottage, State Industrial School, attr.
- COLUMBIA, MO (Boone County)  
Addition to Stephens College, 1870, Compton & Dry  
illus. John C. Creighton, *A History of Columbia & Boone County*, 1987, p. 129  
John L. Bass Residence  
*Inland Monthly*, Sept. 1872 (Vol. 2), p. 381  
R. T. Prewitt Residence  
illus. *Inland Monthly*, Vol. I, July 1872
- FULTON, MO. (Calloway County)  
State Deaf & Dumb Asylum, 5<sup>th</sup> & Vine,  
dem. 1957-59, Compton & Dry  
*Republican*, 4-21-1873, p. 8
- GRAFTON, MO  
school, *Republican*, 7-27-73, p. 7
- HUNTSVILLE, MO (Randolph County)  
Randolph County Courthouse remodeling, 1877-1882  
Ohman 1981 & 1983 pp. 94 & 95
- NEOSHO, MO (Newton County)  
Newton County Courthouse, 1877-1935  
Ohman, 1981 & 1983, pp. 51, 53
- PIERCE CITY, MO (Lawrence County)  
School, Compton & Dry
- ST. LOUIS, MO  
Cote Brilliance School (District 6), 1871  
*Republican*, 5-25-1871, p. 3;  
Compton & Dry, Plate 105, #16  
illus. *Inland Monthly*, Vol. 1, June 1872, p. 15 :  
"cost \$12,520"

---

## GHOSTS OF THE SCREEN: REMEMBERING THE FRENCH VILLAGE DRIVE-IN

by Michael R. Allen

---

Cote Brilliante Church, orig. Union Chapel, 1875-94  
1687 Labadie at Marcus  
Stiritz, *St. Louis: Churches & Synagogues*, 1995,  
p. 63 Compton & Dry, Plate 105, #12  
Dr. E. Chase Residence, 1883  
*American Architect*, Vol. 14, No. 409, p. 204  
(10-29-83)

Crane residence, Compton & Dry  
Fagin Building, Olive between 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup>, 1888  
Toft and Overby, *The Saint Louis Old Post Office*,  
Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc.,  
1979, pp. 21-22, 36

*Inland Architect*, Vol. 11, No. 33.88 p. XIV  
German Baptist Church, Carr & 14<sup>th</sup>, 1863-1889  
congregation became St. Louis Place Baptist  
Church; Compton & Dry, Plate 43, #28

Goldstein residence, Compton & Dry  
Meyer Bros. buildings, Pine bet. 31<sup>st</sup> & 32<sup>nd</sup>  
Compton & Dry

Mount Calvary Episcopal Church, Grand at Lafayette  
*Republic* 2-17-1871, p. 2  
Compton & Dry, Plate 67, #6

C. M. Newcomb, McRee City  
*Inland Monthly*, Sept. 1872, Vol. 2 #1, p. 364

J. O. Pierce Residence (later F. C. Sharp),  
"Cracker Castle" Chouteau at St. Ange, 1868  
Compton & Dry, Plate 40, #24

St. Luke's Hospital, 913 Pine, 1870, moved 1881  
Compton & Dry

F. Tentrapp, 4 adjacent dwellings, 1884  
*American Architect*, Vol. 16, No. 450, p. 72  
(August 9, 1884)

Third Baptist Church, Clark near 14<sup>th</sup>, 1867,  
moved 1884; First Baptist Church until 1918  
Compton & Dry, Plate 41, #20

Warehouse 35, 1885  
*Inland Architect*, Vol. 5, No. 23.85 p. 30

### ST. LOUIS COUNTY, MO

New Mt. Sinai Cemetery, Chapel  
*Republican*, 4-13-1873, p. 11

### WASHINGTON, MO

Public School (later Franklin School), 1871, attr.  
demolished 1950s; Washington Historical  
Society

The decrepit and broken floorboards of the ticket office at the French Village Drive-In near East St. Louis did not look like a place of terror – until its demolition began in August. For anyone who has spent time around broken-down buildings and abandoned places, the ticket office building did not seem very remarkable save its streamlined, late Art Deco design. Yet only a few years ago, in November 2000, police recovered the body of a missing East Saint Louis dentist, Kenneth Long, in this vacant space. His body was stashed in the ticket office – on the floor – where it lay until its odor disturbed residents of nearby homes. The residents called the police, who came to find the gruesome source.

Perhaps it is somehow fitting that the French Village Drive-In has lately been the property of a church congregation, the Church of the Living God of Fairview Heights, and that its own death is happening at the hands of the congregation. The forces of abandonment forge unlikely and unsettling relationships and transform functional spaces into locations of intense historical mutation.

Still, the French Village Drive-In retained a more direct importance. From its opening in 1942 until its closing fifty years later, the French Village Drive-In – originally named for East St. Louis – provided entertainment and escape to thousands of East Siders. People such as my mother fondly remember a night spent gazing at the huge screen in the middle of farm fields, removed enough from the bustle of East St. Louis to provide some sense of get-away to the filmgoers.

J.P. Dromey of Publix Great States Theatres, Inc. opened the East St. Louis Drive-In as perhaps the first drive-in movie theater in the St. Louis area. The original capacity was 500 cars. It attracted local competition by 1949, when the noted Jablonow and Komm chain opened the now-demolished Mounds Drive-In Theatre at 7400 Collinsville Road. By the late 1950's, the ownership fell into local hands, that of the Bloomer Amusement Company (BAC) of Belleville. BAC renamed the drive-in the French Village Drive-In, perhaps in response to the growing out-migration from East St. Louis. The theater was successful until the 1980's, when the multi-theater format and home video technology lured people away from viewing an only-choice film under the sky.

Throughout its life, the theater's stylish design enhanced its presence. Being a relatively early drive-in in the St. Louis area, the theater was constructed when patron and proprietor alike still wanted each movie theater, even a drive-in, to look as lavish as the movies it screened. The French Village Drive-In fulfilled these demands with its stately and colorful Art Deco style. The head-house, site of the ticket office, consisted of a two-story, narrow center portion with projecting canopy wings for cars to pass through. All of the corners were heavily rounded, giving the building a space-age look that must have seemed quite sophisticated in 1942. Directly behind the head-house – symmetrically aligned – was the trapezoidal screen structure, which presented gray corrugated aluminum walls that were punctuated by lively red rectangles on the main facade. The screen structure was unique for a drive-in theater in that it could accommodate stage as well as screen entertainment.

The screen, fronted by a long, somewhat shallow stage, was actually one wall of a building that houses a few dressing rooms, prop storage areas and various lighting controls. During the early days of the drive-in's life, the stage was used often for pre-film and stand-alone live performance.

For years, the screen and stage looked out on a field of small trees that cloak the comparatively banal projection house. This field in winter appeared to be occupied by countless skeletal forms instead of hundreds of east side filmgoers. Of course, the trees were far from deathly as they continued to grow strong in soil that must still be polluted from the exhaust of the thousands of vehicles once parked there. Traces of the past use are embedded in the very earth here. The blank screen still commanded one's gaze from the field; something kinetic seemed imminent there.

In front of the Drive-In was the outstanding although likely not original marquee, a concoction of red and yellow aluminum, neon tubing and the traditional white letterboard space. The marquee framed the words "French Village" in a three-color palate (green, yellow, blue) with accompanying paintbrush. This sign was imaginative – the subtle palate motif rather than an obvious Eiffel Tower image – and shows that the East Side's aspirations have always been as grand and as accomplished as those of St. Louis. This drive-in was finer than any other that has stood in the St. Louis area. Its architecture proclaimed a confident optimism that was betrayed by current events.

Soon, a new Church of the Living God will occupy the site, defeating the desire of many who wished that the

drive-in might rebound to beat the forces of history that led to its unbecoming and horrific demise.



From a nearby hillside, one can catch a view that includes the barren theater grounds as well as the Gateway Arch. The French Village Drive-In came into this view first, before anyone would have predicted that anything much more modern could come along.

---

**Events Calendar**

---

**Exhibit: "Adrian Luchini: Replay"**

Sheldon Art Galleries

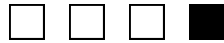
3648 Washington Avenue

September 24 through January 14

Opening reception Friday, September 23, 5 to 7

Sketches, drawings, plans, and photographs document the design process for three projects – two residences and a school. Born in Argentina, where he initially studied, Adrian Luchini also holds degrees from the University of Cincinnati and Harvard. In St. Louis since 1985, he has worked with several firms and is currently Raymond E. Maritz Professor of Architecture at Washington University. He is known for his angular and light-filled designs, expressed in drawings of unusually high artistic quality. The Sheldon is open Tues & Thurs noon to 8, Wed and Fri noon to 5, Sat 10 to 2, and one hour before performances at the Sheldon Concert Hall.





---

**Talk: "Perret and Le Corbusier"**

Schlafly Branch Library, 225 N. Euclid at Lindell  
Thursday, October 13, 7 p.m.

Liane Hancock, lecturer at Washington University School of Architecture, curated the Perret-Corbusier exhibit at the Sheldon last spring. Her talk, using revealing slides from her own visits to major buildings in France by Auguste Perret (1874-1954) and Le Corbusier (1887-1965), provides original insights into the contrasting ways in which these two masters of Modernism used the controversial material concrete.

**2005 Annual Statewide Preservation Conference**

University Plaza Hotel, Springfield, Missouri  
Friday-Sunday, October 21-23

The Missouri Alliance for Historic Preservation is focusing on transportation related issues this year, "From Wagons to Route 66." Speakers include John Sandor, Skip Curtis, Congressman Roy Blunt, and Michael Bouman. Visit [www.preservemo.org](http://www.preservemo.org) for more info, and phone 417-864-7333 for reservations.

**Exhibit: "The Creative Spirit of Eero Saarinen"**

Museum of Westward Expansion (Gateway Arch)  
October 28, 2005 to July 16, 2006

In honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the construction of the Gateway Arch, the National Park Service is sponsoring an exhibit about its designer, Eero Saarinen. Using pictures, plans, and examples of materials, the exhibit will explore the artistic family in which he grew up and the range of creative designs he produced in his too-short career. A section on the 1947-1948 competition will feature Saarinen's original entry boards and a computer kiosk with pictures of all the other entries that survive.

**Talk: "Rudolf Schindler's Photos of America"**

Schlafly Branch Library, 225 N. Euclid at Lindell  
Thursday, November 10, 7 p.m.

Eric Lutz, newly appointed assistant curator of prints, drawings, and photographs at the St. Louis Art Museum, shares his groundbreaking dissertation from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Rudolf M. Schindler (1887-1953), the Viennese architect who made a major impact on California Modernism, also recorded his adopted home in a series of distinctive photos. Lutz shows how they reveal the interaction of

architecture and photography during the early stages of modernism.

**HIKES INTO HISTORY WITH ESLEY  
Fall 2005**

The St. Louis Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians sponsors Esley Hamilton's series of walks through historic neighborhoods in St. Louis County. All walks are on Saturday mornings from 9 to 11 a.m. \$3 per person. For more information, phone Esley at 314-615-0357.

**Wydown-Forsyth District, Clayton**

Saturday, September 24, 9 a.m.  
Meet at north entrance to St. Michael & St. George,  
Ellenwood near Wydown

Site of the Philippine exhibit at the World's Fair, this neighborhood was designed to provide a worthy setting for Washington University. The architect-designed houses have attracted many outstanding residents over the past century.

**Northwest Webster, Webster Groves**

Saturday, October 8, 9 a.m.  
Meet at old Webster Station, Faith Academy  
Montessori, 44 North Gore at tracks

Some of the oldest houses in Webster Groves are hidden among the hills to the north of the Missouri Pacific tracks, where the town began in the 1850s. This walk is based on the booklet written by Ann Morris and recently published by the Webster Groves Historical Society.

**Hampton Park, Richmond Heights**

Saturday, October 15, 9 a.m.  
Meet inside east gate, Park Drive,  
south side Clayton Road east of Hanley)

Hampton Park was first laid out in the 1910s and it reflects three periods of development: before World War I; the Twenties; and the post-war era. It rivaled Clayton and Ladue in attracting wealthy and influential residents. With its enormous lots and a natural layout, Hampton Park is a great place to enjoy the fall color.



Hannibal photographer Anna Schnitzlein snapped this group of merrymakers early in Riverview Park's history, perhaps on Opening Day in 1909. The park, a gift of lumberman and philanthropist Wilson Pettibone, is the most important work in Missouri by the great landscape architect Ossian Cole Simonds. Photo courtesy Steve Chou.

# News Letter

© 2005 The Society of Architectural  
Historians. St. Louis and Missouri  
Valley Chapters.

**NewsLetter** is published quarterly by the St. Louis and Missouri Chapters  
of Architectural Historians.

Please mail editorial correspondence and submissions for publication to:  
Esley Hamilton, Editor, 7346 Balson Avenue, University City, Missouri  
63130 or contact him by telephone: (314) 615-4696, or by email ehamil-  
ton@stlouisco.com. Deadlines for submission of material for publication in  
**NewsLetter** are as follows:

Spring issue	15 February
Summer issue	15 May
Fall issue	15 August
Winter Issue	15 November

#### St. Louis Chapter, SAH 2004 –2005 Board of Directors

Karen Bode Baxter	President
Kristina Gray Perez	Vice President
Mimi Stiritz	Secretary
Richard Mueller	Treasurer
Esley Hamilton	NewsLetter Editor

#### Memberships:

Individual, \$10	Student, \$5
Supporting, \$25	Joint, \$15

**St. Louis and Missouri Valley Chapters  
Society of Architectural Historians  
Post Office Box 23110  
St. Louis, Missouri 63108**