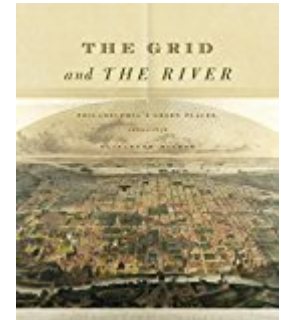


**Elizabeth Milroy.** *The Grid and the River: Philadelphia's Green Places, 1682–1876.* University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016. 464 pp. \$64.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-06676-9.



**Reviewed by** Roger D. Simon

**Published on** H-Pennsylvania (February, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Allen J. Dieterich-Ward (Shippensburg University)

Elizabeth Milroy has written a big (4 pounds), lavishly illustrated (187 figures), and impressive book that changes the way we understand an important aspect of Philadelphia's development and its park system. Milroy is an art historian at Drexel University and her sophisticated close reading of the imagery is a great strength of the book. She demonstrates the powerful connection between literary and artistic representations of green places, how they acquired their meaning, and how that meaning and symbolism in turn shaped Philadelphia's growth. This is the history of an idea and an ideal as much as of place that also puts the story in the broadest historical, political, economic, and social contexts.

In the book's first section, "City," Milroy addresses Penn's original plan and makes the obvious, but often overlooked point that Philadelphia was "a picture before it was a city" (p. 3). Penn's remarkable plan was not just a grid of streets. In laying out Philadelphia, he set aside five large squares for public use, one in each quadrant (today Franklin, Washington, Rittenhouse, and Lo-

gan) and a center square where the two main streets converged (today Penn Square, site of City Hall). Milroy explores in depth the origin of the plan and its symbolic meaning. Penn wanted his green spaces to be public gardens that would anchor neighborhoods, and he hoped that, along with his carefully drawn laws, an orderly street grid and orderly open spaces would encourage orderly behavior.

But the town did not grow in the way Penn expected. Because the port was the center of economic life, the population hugged the Delaware River. Even by the 1770s the settled area barely extended westward as far as Seventh Street. Thus, the squares remained remote from the center of population and failed to serve as the focus of neighborhoods. The eastern squares were used for potter's fields and cattle grazing. The only public communal space in the colonial town was the State House yard (now Independence Park), site of major rallies in the Revolutionary era.

In the 1790s Philadelphia was struck by virulent yellow fever epidemics, and the city responded by building the nation's first public water works. The water works played a determinative role in shaping Philadelphia's green spaces. Steam-powered pumps at Penn Square lifted water from the Schuylkill River. In celebration of the civic achievement, the engines were housed in an elaborate classical structure and the surrounding grounds landscaped. While still west of the built-up area, the square became a popular recreational and communal venue in the century's first two decades. The grounds became a model for improving Washington and Franklin Squares in the 1810s and 1820s. At the same time the city took over Independence Hall and restored the yard. With those improvements the city "assumed a pioneering role" in the country's park development (p. 178). These four green spaces constituted the nation's first city-owned landscaped public parks, at a time when cows still grazed on Boston Commons and New York neglected Battery Park and a jail stood in City Hall Park. But Penn's admirable squares had their limitations, especially as greater Philadelphia's population soared over 100,000. There was no systematic plan to set aside additional neighborhood parks as the city expanded.

In the 1820s water-powered pumps along the Schuylkill River replaced the inefficient steam engines. The new works were an engineering marvel, but the particularly telling element was the elaborate classical structure that housed them (still standing), making the works "a powerful emblem of civic health and progress" (p. 187). The engineering achievement was celebrated in a romantic setting with landscaped grounds that became a refuge from the congested city and a sight-seeing attraction for visitors. For those who could afford it, coaches ran several times a day to the site.

The middle section, "Suburb," shifts attention to the Schuylkill River waterfront and brings us to

the heart of the book. In eighteenth-century England wealthy families built country houses and villas, often along the Thames, with carefully landscaped grounds, gardens, and greenhouses that were powerful symbols of refined taste, good order, and social standing. Milroy called those estates an "exercise in philosophical and aesthetic as well as political self-definition" (p. 61). Along both banks of the Schuylkill River Philadelphia's wealthy elites expended considerable resources to emulate those British estates. Milroy describes those green places in considerable detail. Leading the trend locally was the Penn family itself. William Penn himself began an estate along the Schuylkill just north of the city limits known as Springettsbury which was finished by his descendant Thomas who, with help from the famous nurseryman John Bartram, laid out extensive ornamental gardens, the largest in North America at the time. The estates of the elite featured the carefully designed vistas and focal points characteristic of the age. Some of those villas are still standing within Fairmount Park (including Laurel Hill, Lemon Hill, Strawberry Mansion, and Mt. Pleasant) while others survive in the names they gave to Philadelphia neighborhoods: Belmont, Powelton, Francisville, Woodford, Lansdowne, and Bush Hill. Together, the estates created—and, importantly, preserved—a green landscape along the Schuylkill waterfront. Milroy counts at least major fifty estates by the early nineteenth century. The owners dominated business, politics, and social life and cemented their power with marriage alliances.

Paintings, sketches, prints, verbal descriptions, and even chinaware patterns celebrated the landscapes using a visual and verbal vocabulary borrowed heavily from English depictions. The views do not simply show the houses, which in some cases are barely visible, but emphasize the grounds and the vistas to and from the estates. People felt the panorama itself "possessed therapeutic qualities" (p. 193). Estates were opened to the public so the aspiring respectable classes

could appreciate and imbibe the owners' good taste and refinement. Milroy argues that the estates and the powerful symbolism and iconography that surrounded them were intended as "evidence that their owners were best qualified to lead the nation because they were the stewards of these picturesque landscapes" (p. 4).

In the 1830s and 1840s, locally and nationally, elites promoted green spaces as an antidote to growing urban disorder—as morally uplifting places for quiet contemplation of nature. The movement promoted both parks and cemeteries. The metaphor of parks as the lungs of the city was reiterated, as was the idea that they promoted civic virtue and harmony: spaces where classes could interact in ways that would uplift the multitude. Laurel Hill, sited on a Schuylkill waterfront estate, was among the first of the nation's landscaped rural cemeteries, designed as a place of repose, not only for the deceased, but also for the families who came to visit. Although the rural cemetery was for the wealthy to enjoy, it also furthered the idea that green spaces were beneficial for the masses.

By the 1840s commerce and industry encroached along the banks of Schuylkill River. Coal barges floated down stream, while textile mills, ice houses, iron forges, and chemical works dumped pollutants into the river, degrading the quality of the city's drinking water and threatening the bucolic vistas. As several of the large estates were sold off for development the distinct possibility arose that the romanticized panorama would disappear forever. It was in those circumstances that the basis was laid for an urban park, something much larger than Penn's squares. A coalition of several overlapping groups emerged to protect both the water quality and the remaining estates and villas. The coalition included descendants of the elite families, some of whom still owned country estates, industrialists concerned with the city's reputation, and allied prominent professionals. Those men, over the subsequent

three decades, actively promoted and brought into being Philadelphia's Fairmount Park.

In the early 1840s when it appeared that two estates close to the water works, Lemon Hill and Sedgley, would be developed for commerce and housing, the threat to both the bucolic panoramas and the purity of the water was apparent. The Water Committee, dominated by social elites, called upon the city to buy the estates and turn the grounds into a public park, ostensibly to protect the water quality. In 1843 the city acquired Lemon Hill and in 1855 dedicated it as a public grounds; this was the nucleus of Fairmount Park. A private subscription raised half the money needed to buy the adjacent Sedgley property, and the city borrowed the balance. Preventing development of those properties did protect that water quality, but Milroy argues, these advocates "could visualize how buying Lemon Hill would preserve the Fairmount panorama" (p. 213).

The third section, "Consolidation," refers to the 1854 merger of the city and the county. After several major riots in the 1840s, calls came forth for consolidation to preserve order since the political fragmentation of the area into thirty separate entities made effective policing difficult. Furthermore, several municipalities had built their own water works, but the systems lacked coordination and taxpayers suffered from heavy burdens. The 1854 Act of Consolidation merged the city with the entire county and was justified primarily in terms of order and efficiency, but included a mandate that the city acquire park spaces. Milroy argues that preserving the endangered bucolic atmosphere and garden villas was as much an impetus to consolidation as issues of public safety and efficient governance. The argument constitutes an important new insight into how we understand the park and the city.

After the Civil War the state established the Fairmount Park Commission with power to make further acquisitions, use eminent domain to remove adverse uses, and maintain the park. The

same people who drafted the Act of Consolidation wrote and pushed through the new legislation and dominated the commission in its early decades. The commission never adopted a comprehensive master plan for the park, so expansion of Fairmount Park was piecemeal and opportunistic as remaining estates became available. Their “unwillingness to redesign the landscape weakened the integration of the park system with the historic green spaces at Penn’s squares in the center city.” Perhaps it was enough that the estates had been preserved, and maybe the commissioners wanted to keep the park isolated from the growing city. As the park expanded, it grew away from the city center “conceptually as well as physically” (p. 332).

In 1876 Philadelphia hosted a world’s fair marking the nation’s centennial, which was sited in west Fairmount Park. Considerable sums were spent for water lines, sewers, roads, and trolleys and ten million visitors attended. Milroy argues that the fair reinforced the “sense of separation” of the park from the city (p. 306). After the fair there was little money available for improvements. The two permanent structures, Memorial and Horticultural Halls, were stranded in the middle of the park. Much more popular was the zoo, which opened in the mid-1870s.

Although the subtitle suggests the book ends in 1876 with the fair, a final chapter carries the story into the early twentieth century. In the 1880s elite Philadelphians attempted to regain the initiative in protecting the city’s green spaces. They established the City Parks Association that revived the tradition of private subscriptions buying up green spaces and donating them to the city or reselling at cost. By 1900 the city had obtained twenty-nine properties, including Bartram Gardens and Liberty Island. Later, it added the valleys of Cobbs, Tacony, and Pennypacker Creeks. The association used the same arguments of promoting health and public morals and protecting the water supply used a half century earlier.

Social class is a theme that runs through the entire volume. The economic elites built the country estates to confirm their status; their descendants worked to preserve that legacy and, in the process, reaffirmed that they were proper stewards of the environment and public morality. The notion that green public spaces promoted good order, fostered decorum, and elevated morals links William Penn’s neighborhood squares, the Schuylkill River estates, and Fairmount Park. This vision is found in Penn’s plan and his instructions, in the artistic representations of the villas and estates, and the arguments in favor of Fairmount Park.

Milroy’s contribution to our understanding of Philadelphia’s development lies in linking the country estates, as green places and as powerful symbols, to the consolidation of the city and county and the Fairmount Park Commission. She provides a much more complete understanding of how Fairmount Park came to be, why it looks at is does, and the unfulfilled promise that better planning and integration of the city’s green spaces might have brought.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pennsylvania>

**Citation:** Roger D. Simon. Review of Milroy, Elizabeth. *The Grid and the River: Philadelphia's Green Places, 1682–1876*. H-Pennsylvania, H-Net Reviews. February, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47215>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.