

PERFECTING SPACE: J. HORACE MCFARLAND AND THE AMERICAN CIVIC ASSOCIATION

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In 1900 Charles Mumford Robinson's publication of *The Improvement of Cities and Town* provided a blueprint to how U.S. cities could correct urban congestion.¹ By 1910, more than two thousand groups for civic improvement existed in the United States.² In each city, "a gradual crystallization of the civic improvement efforts" led to a "comprehensive grasp of the whole problem" facing that city and pushed residents toward "the concrete realization of the dream of the city beautiful."³ The widespread popularity of the City Beautiful Movement combined aesthetic concerns, a new approach to municipal control, and social uplift ideology in an effort to improve society on both physical and social grounds. The emphasis on expanding the public sphere challenged the traditional political, social, and economic order. This new public space was built on ordinary citizens contributing to civic discourse, reformers demanding accountability, minorities seeking inclusion, ending gender inequality, and protecting exploited workers. Looking at urban beautification within this framework, the push for greater planning represented a means to bolster middle-class power through a new regulatory routine.⁴

According to historian William H. Wilson, civic beautification rested on a holistic belief in beauty, an inclusive "improvement" framework, and links between functionality and aesthetics.⁵ McFarland's work and life highlight these points. For McFarland the first step in city planning was not design, it was political activism. As he explained in a 1906 *Outlook Magazine* column, the "good citizen" was not one that hoped for municipal improvement; instead he explained intelligent citizens ". . . are informed at least upon the fundamental facts of the finance of their immediate municipalities."⁶ As a taxpayer, the active citizen was a stockholder in a municipal corporation required to use their knowledge to promote civic betterment. In an attempt to address both physical congestion and societal upheaval associated with city life, middle-class Americans turned to city planning. This shift was neither accidental nor uniform; instead civic groups and concerned individuals educated themselves and struggled to define the aims associated with planning.

For concerned citizens motivated to act, but unsure how to achieve results, national civic organizations provided crucial guidance and support.

My participation in the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Scholar-in-Residence Program was dedicated to understanding the impact of the American Civic Association (ACA) and its president, J. Horace McFarland, on the development of city-planning activism in the United States. The examination of the J. Horace McFarland Collection at the Pennsylvania State Archives allowed me to highlight McFarland as an under-appreciated figure in the Progressive Era. The archive's vast holdings represent a unique opportunity for scholars interested in reform. The collection, which includes personal correspondence, organization papers, photographs, pamphlets, and other materials allows us to situate McFarland's legacy within a broader context and place new emphasis on the practice and ideology associated with comprehensive planning as expressed through the ACA.

In many ways, McFarland was the ACA, acting as president for twenty years, from the organization's inception he guided its agenda. McFarland and the organization he led became crucial agents for spreading planning and conservation ideas in the United States. A conservationist as well as a planning advocate, he helped to defend Niagara Falls from power company interests, worked with John Muir to preserve Yosemite Park, and pushed for a National Park Service. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William H. Taft recognized McFarland's expertise as advocate for conservation and beautification. In addition, he became a recurring adviser to interior secretaries throughout his long career. A lifetime resident of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, McFarland's reputation began with activism to develop a comprehensive city plan that transformed the city into a nationally known urban planning success story. From there, McFarland pursued political reform, planning development, and efficiency in other American cities.⁷

While other leading lights of the City Beautiful Movement were self-styled planning professionals, McFarland stands apart as a lay advocate for planning and conservation. Respected in many circles and emulated by concerned citizens, McFarland and the ACA provided important inspiration and practical information to grassroots campaigns in countless cities across the United States. The ACA clarified ideas, suggested action and endorsed solutions used to achieve civic reform. In doing so, McFarland's interpretation of planning and conservation was instrumental in shaping popular perception and action across the country.

McFarland's life as a reformer began with an interest in nature photography that intersected with his formal training as a printer. Educated in his father's print shop from a young age, McFarland combined an interest in photography with a practical need to provide good illustrations for the seed books he was printing. His skills as a photographer are noteworthy in themselves. An early adopter of the Lumiere Brothers' color photo process, McFarland created numerous slides for his seed catalogs. Perhaps more importantly, he used photography to promote civic improvement and conservation. The Pennsylvania State Archive contains numerous examples of his work. Like contemporary figures such as Jacob Riis and later Lewis Hines, McFarland should be rightly classified as a documentary photographer. Documentary photography emphasized rational, factual, and objective depictions of the environment as a means to give Americans a glimpse of the conditions affecting society.⁸

For Progressives, the key to reform lay in public awareness. Believing the system to be fundamentally sound, reformers sought ways to highlight the dark reality of everyday problems and shock people into action.⁹ This process placed great emphasis on figures that could articulate ideas and engaged with the new media environment created by rising newspapers and magazine publications. McFarland was such a figure. He followed this philosophy of public engagement by focusing on plants and flowers and their relation to humanity. McFarland's pictures appeared in *Outlook Magazine* and he was chosen to accompany Liberty Hyde Bailey, noted botanist from Cornell University, on a tour of New England in 1898.¹⁰ McFarland's photographs appeared in conjunction with Bailey's descriptions of plants, flowers, and natural formations. While McFarland successfully published pictures of events and important people in *Outlook*, he gravitated toward nature photography; this desire combined with his work with Bailey sparked a new career as a commentator about gardening and landscape. His completion of an article entitled "An American Garden" in 1899 gave him broad renown in landscaping circles and solidified his reputation as an advocate for natural spaces and by extension, civic beautification.

McFarland's beliefs typified upper and middle-class assumptions about the effects of environment on health and safety at the turn of the century. They believed access to natural surroundings nurtured good personal character and fostered community stability. As American cities became populated industrial centers, a variety of organizations and individuals attempted to take direct action to curtail the pollution and congestion associated with urban life. These activists pursued better housing, better landscapes and better

architecture while raising questions about what actions municipalities should take to address problems created by rapid urbanization. McFarland was an important voice contributing to this debate in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.¹¹

Harrisburg, like many small communities, was faced with the problems associated with industrial and population growth. By 1900, the city's concerned citizens gathered at a meeting of the local Board of Trade to hear a speech by Mira Dock on "The City Beautiful." Mira Lloyd Dock came from a middle-class family in Harrisburg, but her career was far from the typical woman. Dock studied with private tutors, then went on to a local private school and later to, study at University of Michigan and further work in Germany with famed botanist Dietrich Brambis. Dock's speech on urban beautification emphasized the civic improvement actions being taken around the country and how far Harrisburg had fallen behind, especially along the shores of a polluted Susquehanna River.¹²

Dock's speech was the first time local business leaders' minds were challenged on the need for beautification in Harrisburg. Nonetheless, it was McFarland who took these concerns and designed a campaign that brought City Beautiful initiatives to life in the city. McFarland began by preaching the value of beautification in a speech to the Harrisburg Women's Civic Club. Like Dock, he stressed the need for civic involvement and urged middle-class women to work with local businessmen to improve the community. The dual message created by McFarland and Dock would become the model that planning activists would employ in other cities. McFarland was an advocate for women's participation in the public sphere. His cooperation with Dock was not an isolated experience. Indeed, he expressed his personal belief that women deserved the right to vote observing, "I do not know of a live and successful movement of civic betterment anywhere in the United States which has either not originated in the brain of some God-inspired woman or been forwarded to active value by a body of such women."¹³ Nonetheless, throughout his career McFarland emphasized inherent abilities that incorporated traditional middle-class belief in gendered social spaces, acknowledging exclusive ability and societal duties for men and women.¹⁴

McFarland joined a select group to create the Harrisburg League for Municipal Improvement (HLMI) in 1901. He emerged as leading figure in the HLMI's effort to build public support for the city plan. McFarland identified the obstacles, organized resources, and formulated the message that sold the city plan to local voters. He recognized that Harrisburg's political landscape represented the first major obstacle to improving the environment. Throughout the

election season in November 1901, McFarland, Dock, and others went to community gatherings preaching the value of the “Harrisburg Plan,” as the improvements agenda came to be known. The progressive ticket’s victory in Harrisburg sparked nationwide attention as control of the city government, coupled with the public’s support for a municipal bond issuance, placed Harrisburg at the forefront of civic beautification trends in the United States.¹⁵



FIGURE 1: Portrait of J. Horace McFarland, ca 1930 by Kazanjian Studios, Washington, DC, courtesy of the Pennsylvania State Archives, MG-85, Horace McFarland Papers.

McFarland's efforts in Harrisburg made him a national figure. Here again, the Pennsylvania State Archive holding are enlightening in important ways. Correspondence between McFarland and Dock shows he travelled to Chicago to discuss the Harrisburg experience in 1902. In a letter to Dock, he explained that, "Together with Doctor Leipziger, of New York, I was guest of honor at a dinner, after which the Harrisburg story was told to some exceedingly interested people."¹⁶ McFarland's trip to Chicago came at a crucial moment in broader history of the planning movement in the United States. Both the Merchant and Commercial Clubs of Chicago were beginning inquiries into the feasibility of comprehensive planning. These business organizations recognized civic reform could have benefits, but as historian William H. Wilson explained, the "solid middle- and upper-middle-class citizens like themselves, were content with a smoky, noisy, unkempt city so long as it got the job done: distributed goods, provided housing, and brought together employer and employee."¹⁷ By 1902 concerns about growth were becoming real. Franklin MacVeagh, president of the Chicago Art League (and future member of the ACA), advocated for the establishment of a special committee to study the civic improvement arguing that Chicago transportation and park system was outdated and future development required action. The Chicago Plan created by Daniel H. Burnham that emerged from this activism is hailed as highest example of comprehensive planning in the City Beautiful Era. The plan is a singular accomplishment, but close examination of the process surrounding the comprehensive planning movement that emerged in years after 1902 shows links to the Harrisburg experience. McFarland's presence in Chicago is one vital clue, but the form and function of the comprehensive planning movement owes much to the Harrisburg experience.

The improvements done under the Harrisburg Plan between 1905 and 1908 increased the land value in formerly marginalized areas. In doing so, Harrisburg's experiences were added to the growing number of civic improvement success stories that provided a vital cornerstone for the City Beautiful Movement. Civic betterment groups across the United States argued that municipal expenditures for civic beauty were justified because the economic gain came along with environmental betterment. McFarland agreed, yet he also stressed that the exact nature of the Harrisburg's improvements was unimportant; instead he argued that the methods employed to create the improvement plan represented the first steps in a process of "municipal advancement" in the United States.¹⁸ There can be no doubt that McFarland's

success in Harrisburg gave him important experience that he used as the head of the American Civic Association.

By 1904 civic improvement efforts had reached a point that duplicated efforts threaten to splinter consensus and stifle action. Fearing the failure to achieve reform goals, two major civic organizations gathered at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, MO to create a new association to coordinate efforts. The American Park and Outdoor Art Association (APOA) and the American League of Civic Improvement (ALCI) met with the intention of creating a new body that could address urban and rural development problems. The McFarland Papers offer important insight into this kind of inter-group dialogue during the Progressive Era. McFarland's centrality allows us to understand how the nature of issue-oriented activism mobilized diverse groups around the United States. In 1912 for example, John Franklin Crowell, president of American Civic Alliance offered to merge his group with the American Civic Association to avoid confusion arising from the similarity in name.¹⁹ Such requests were not unusual and they underscore the reasoning that led to the creation of the ACA. The drive to act was not enough to insure success. National, regional, and local groups struggled to achieve their goals in this period. Successful groups merged grassroots activism, understanding of policy process, and expertise to provide a coherent message for action.

The Pennsylvania State Archive holds a variety of sources that demonstrate that the ACA and McFarland achieved the synthesis of thought and action that inspired the organization's creation. The McFarland papers contains both McFarland's personal letters and correspondence conducted as president of the ACA. Recognized as a spokesman for the City Beautiful Movement, McFarland linked beautification to a civilizing impulse affecting the urban environment.²⁰ As a result, the ACA honed a message advocating planning and conservation, arguing that it was that generation's responsibility to "make the best use of their heritage of land and water resources for their own and coming generations."²¹ In 1905 delegates from across the United States gathered in Cleveland for the American Civic Association's (ACA) first national convention. Pennsylvania State Archive holding demonstrate the organization's engagement on a national level. McFarland received letters from across the country asking for advice, support, and guidance.²² The organization developed a tiered agenda with national, state, and local goals for urban planning and conservation. The ACA served as an information hub for individuals and groups, creating a news archive that tracked successful

efforts, forwarding information to members with the intention that winning techniques would be replicated. The ACA, like other progressive groups, educated members, but McFarland brought the message of reform to countless communities through personal appearance, written appeals, and ACA publications.²³

At the state level, the ACA supported regional planning that balanced natural space and development. McFarland was a public voice against countryside uglification, supporting rural planning to provide highway access, adequate utilities, and better homes for the rural population. The ACA tracked billboards and other visual pollution and shared this information with members to bolster local crusades.²⁴ While education was crucial to this process, McFarland joined popular Progressive Era reformers such as Jacob Riis and Chicago's Jane Addams to demand that urban residents have access to natural spaces to promote personal and community health. The ACA partnered with groups like the Playground Association of America (PAA) to urge members to lobby municipal authorities to create park systems with facilities that included playgrounds, workshops, gymnasiums, art and science rooms, museums, and libraries that would help children develop good physical and mental characteristics.²⁵

McFarland's fame led him to become a columnist with *Ladies Home Journal*, a position that allowed him to promote a broad beautification agenda that began with neighborhood improvement campaigns and expanded to general programs of municipal betterment.²⁶ Cast as innovators, the ACA support for city planning emphasized beautification first, but coupled that with efficient engineering that challenged contemporary development patterns. They campaigned against signs on commercial structures, the abolition of billboards from residential neighborhoods, and the restriction of outdoor advertising in any place where it would detract from the natural beauty. Ultimately, the ACA promoted the belief that every city should have a municipal art commission that would establish a plan that merged public structures, public building, and municipal grounds.

Despite the ACA's support for comprehensive planning as a progressive reform, its actions as a clearinghouse for information bolstered the business-friendly approach to city planning that ultimately ran counter to the progressive ideas that gave birth to the city planning movement. The organization's reliance on consensus building led its members to support a pattern of planning that stressed economic profitability as a justification for civic beautification. Like the work of many civic betterment advocates,

McFarland's leadership of ACA translated into planning policies that supported civic center building, street plans, and zoning while ignoring calls for housing reform and social service accessibility that came to define a more "radical" planning vision after 1910. This decision was not entirely surprising; it reflected a schism in the planning movement. As professional city planners attempted to leave the idealism associated with the City Beautiful Movement, they deemphasized beautification. Despite the advantages that came from beautified streets, buildings, and homes, increasingly city planners sought to distance themselves from fiscal cost critics associated with beautification. A new breed of professional planners, influenced by corporatism in the United States, believed scientific principles applied to land use problems provided greater benefit for urban development issues.²⁷ A new "City Scientific" planning perspective identified transportation, sanitation, markets, law, and financing as interconnected issues central to the planning enterprise in U.S. cities.²⁸

Despite this schism, the ACA continued to link beautification to the city planning process even as conflict over the future of city planning divided professionals and activists.²⁹ Indeed, the ACA stance fuelled a public rhetoric about city planning progressive benefits, even as it became difficult to maintain a cohesive city planning vision. The broad elite support for urban planning disappeared as businessmen declined to pay for needed infrastructure changes and politicians feared the voter reaction to tax burdens associated with City Beautiful plans.

While McFarland and the ACA intended to clarify this conflict of ideology, their efforts provided mixed results. The ACA emphasized success stories that often centered on city plans and the plan commission model. Their publications offered progressive interpretation of planning and sidestepped the increasingly difficult question of creating affordable housing and the politics zoning. The ACA remained effective, however, because its agenda was flexible enough to include elements professional planners demanded, such as comprehensive zoning, while retaining the neighborhood friendly focus that middle-class activists believed beautification represented. The long-term effect of such activism created awareness about planning, even as the civic engineers, professional planners, and politicians came to see goals associated with planning practice very differently from progressive civic reformers.

Despite the optimism at the turn of the century, by 1950 Lewis Mumford would declare that, "Practically all the impressive architecture and good planning in this country today are in low-density areas outside the big cities."³⁰ The study of J. Horace McFarland and ACA complements and

expands on city planning history by highlighting how planning evolved to embrace this low-density model. McFarland's leadership and the ACA's support for grassroots action spread a regulatory doctrine throughout the United States. This doctrine, like the organization that supported it, afforded a flexible framework that emphasized community betterment. This doctrine provided a vital context for civic improvement by raising awareness about the nature of urban problems and encouraging concerned citizens to support changes in municipal policy. By studying city-planning activism we can explore the already established link between middle-class societal views and public policy formation. The link however, will be greatly clarified by additional information on the type of logistical and intellectual support provided by groups such as ACA. This information will allow me to create a clearer picture of the expectations and actions associated with comprehensive planning and demonstrate how those expectations shaped urban and rural development. Ultimately, understanding the ideological evolution in this era will open the door to expanding our understanding of progressive activism throughout the twentieth century.³¹

NOTES

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3. Charles Mulford Robinson, "The City of the Future," *Charities and the Commons* 17 (November 3, 1906): 190.
4. For consideration of City Beautiful Movement see William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989) and Stanley K. Schultz, *Constructing Urban Culture: American Cities and City Planning, 1800–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). For a consideration of cultural influence on city planning and civic policy see Peter C. Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street: The Reform of Public Space in Hartford, 1850–1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).
5. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 50.

6. J. Horace McFarland, "The Ignorance of "Good" Citizens," *Outlook* (1893–1924): Feb 3, 1906; 82, 5; APS Online pg. 271.
7. J. Horace McFarland, "The Great Civic Awakening," *Outlook*, Apr. 18, 1902: 73, 16" APS Online pg. 917.
8. Edward R. O'Donnell, "Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis," *The Public Historian*, (Summer 2004), 13–14.
9. Peter Seixas, "Lewis Hine: From "Social" to "Interpretive" Photographer," *American Quarterly* 39 (Autumn 1987): 382–83.
10. Ernest Morrison, *J. Horace McFarland: A Thorn for Beauty* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1995), 49.
11. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 132.
12. Morrison, *J. Horace McFarland*, 69.
13. J. Horace McFarland, "Woman's Power in Politics," *New York Times*, January 9, 1910.
14. Louise M. Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7–9.
15. Charles Mulford Robinson, "Planning for City Beauty," *Municipal Journal and Engineer* 21 (September 5, 1906): 230.
16. J. Horace McFarland to Mira Lloyd Dock, November 28, 1902, MG 43: Dock Family Papers, Mira Dock Paper Box 6: Folder 61. Pennsylvania State Archive.
17. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 83.
18. Morrison, *J. Horace McFarland*, 85.
19. John Franklin Crowell, president of the American Civic Alliance to J.H. McFarland, November 12, 1912. J. Horace McFarland Papers, American Civic Association, General Correspondence MG 85, Box 3. Pennsylvania State Archive.
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21. American Civic Association Pamphlet. John Nolan Collection, Box 3. American Society of Planning Officials Records, 1925–1978. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.
22. American Civic Association, General Correspondence, Folder Address and Article, Ln-M, MG 85: J. Horace McFarland Collection. Pennsylvania State Archive.
23. "American Civic Association 1910 Convention News." American Civic And Planning Association Records, Box 3. American Society of Planning Officials Records, 1925–1978. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.
24. American Civic Association. American Civic Association Clipping Sheet, "Fighting the Obnoxious Billboard," American Civic and Planning Association Records, Box 3. American Society of Planning Officials Records, 1925–1978. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Cornell University Library.
25. Luther H. Gulick, "The Playground," *Playground* 1 (April 1907): 8.
26. Edward Bok, *The Americanization of Edward Bok: The Autobiography of a Dutch Boy Fifty Years After* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1922), 255–56.
27. These views drew on the scientific management principles advocated by Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*, planners appealed to business by promising greater returns on

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- municipal investment. Planners reiterated Taylor's view that systematic management, "rested upon clearly defined laws, rules, and principles" that were "applicable to all kinds of human activities." See Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1911), 7. See also Fredrick L. Ford, "The Scope of City Planning in the United States," *City Planning*. Hearing Before the Committee on the District of Columbia United States Senate on the Subject of City Planning. 61st Congress, 2nd Session, Senate document No. 422. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910): 70–73.
28. Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 146–47.
 29. Susan Marie Wirka, "The City Social Movement: Progressive Women Reformers and Early Social Planning," in *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City*, ed., Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 59.
 30. Lewis Mumford, *From the Ground Up* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955), 230.
 31. Recent scholarship has put emphasis on the existence of a broad progressive ideology that shape American reform. See Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).