

*“More Almost Than the Men”:  
Mira Lloyd Dock and the  
Beautification of Harrisburg*

MIRA LLOYD DOCK epitomized the New Woman in turn-of-the-century America. Born in 1853 into an old, financially comfortable Pennsylvania family, she devoted her adult life to a remarkable variety of activities from feminism to photography. She related almost all of them to her chief concern, botany. Hers was no armchair interest. A bluestocking, she studied at the University of Michigan, wrote, and lectured, developing a large acquaintance among landscape architects, foresters, and conservationists.<sup>1</sup>

Although she was a heavy-featured, stocky spinster, she compensated for her lack of physical beauty by an abundance of wit and charm. She could captivate a lecture audience in a large hall or a shrewd councilman at a tête-à-tête. Both men and women adored her, but men were charmed to the point of bewitchment. Even in middle age she enthralled men with her concern for them as individuals, her sparkling candor, and her utter devotion to conservation and beautification.<sup>2</sup>

Nor did her concern stop outside the city limits. In common with several other forest conservationists, Mira Dock believed both in saving rural environments and in introducing them, properly tended and idealized, into the urban milieu. In concert with others,

<sup>1</sup> Biographical information on Miss Dock is in the Mira Lloyd Dock Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereinafter cited as MLDP), and the Dock Family Papers, Manuscript Group 43, Pennsylvania State Archives (hereinafter cited as DFP).

<sup>2</sup> Clipping photographs, DFP; L. C. Clemson to Dock, June 1, 1899; F. R. Wilkinson to Dock, July 18, 1901; George P. Ahern to Dock, Aug. 24, 1901, MLDP; *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Dec. 17, 1900.

she led the fight to improve Harrisburg, her birthplace and sometime residence.<sup>3</sup>

When the improvement campaign began in 1900 Harrisburg's population was 50,167, and the city had been the state capital for eighty-eight years. Unfortunately, much of Harrisburg wore the look of a railroad town or an industrial village. The older section of the city stretched in an elongated oval, some five miles north to south, between the Susquehanna River on the west and the flood-prone Paxton Creek on the east. Steep banks along the Susquehanna's edge forced the Pennsylvania Canal and the tracks of the Pennsylvania and Reading railroads into the flood plain of Paxton Creek. East Harrisburg, a newer residential section often called "the hill," rose beyond the 2,000 foot swath of canal, tracks, and creek.<sup>4</sup>

The river front, saved by its abrupt banks from railroad tracks, was defiled instead by sewers at its base and piles of trash and garbage at its summit. Many streets were poorly paved or unpaved even at intersections. Sewage from the east slope of the oval and from the western section of "the hill" poured into the Pennsylvania Canal and Paxton Creek. The city drew its unfiltered and untreated water from a Susquehanna laden with sewage from upstream cities and towns, and with culm washed down from anthracite mines. During periods of low water on the Susquehanna, Harrisburg's drinking water ran murky and foul-smelling from taps in homes, and its sewers spewed their contents over the rocky shore beneath the river bluffs.

Harrisburgers seeking an escape to natural beauty spots and recreation areas found few offerings within the city limits. The only park of any size, underdeveloped, twenty-six-acre Reservoir Park, spread over the summit of "the hill," a mile and more from other residential areas. Capitol Park, the four-acre site of the old capitol building destroyed by fire three years before, was crowded with picnickers and strollers on warm weekend afternoons. People with the time and means to escape chose picturesque "Wetzel's Swamp"

<sup>3</sup> On the relationship between conservation and civic beautification, see Henry Hope Reed, Jr., *The Golden City* (Garden City, N. Y., 1959), 100, and Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Berkeley, 1957), 183-185.

<sup>4</sup> General information on Harrisburg is in George P. Donehoo, *Harrisburg and Dauphin County: A Sketch of the History for the Past Twenty-Five Years, 1900-1925* (Dayton, Ohio, 1925), and *Harrisburg: The City Beautiful, Romantic and Historic* (Harrisburg, 1927).

just north of the built-up section, the hamlet of Rockville and its environs farther north, or some other place outside the city.<sup>5</sup>

Mira Dock believed that Harrisburg should enjoy the rural delights of parks, landscaped views, and pure water. Her concern for urban esthetics and recreation, and for the functional improvement of the city was more typical of the City Beautiful Movement than the monumental plazas and civic centers usually associated with it.<sup>6</sup> With verve and skill she exploited the two means of gaining a beautiful city that were available to the leisured, middle-class women of her day, organization and publicity.

Teas, polite conversation and literary exegesis were not, for her, the proper ends of a woman's club. By 1896 she was seeking advice on how to found a civic organization that could do something about cleaning up Harrisburg's dirty streets. Two years later she became one of the founders of the Civic Club of Harrisburg, serving as chairman of its Department of Forestry and Town Improvement. Soon she was importuning councilmen and other public-spirited males to rid Pennsylvania's capital city of its village atmosphere.<sup>7</sup>

The opportunity for publicity came when a correspondent, Miss F. R. Wilkinson, the landscape gardener of the London Public Gardens Association, invited her to attend the horticultural section of the International Congress of Women at London in June, 1899. Next the Federation of Pennsylvania Women and the Parks Association of Philadelphia named her to be their representative to the congress. Still later the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture agreed to expand her visit into a study of forestry and urban arbori-

<sup>5</sup> Photographs and lantern slides, DFP; *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Nov. 5, 1900; Apr. 27, May 4, July 27, July 29, 1901; Jan. 8, Jan. 9, Jan. 15, Feb. 8, 1902.

<sup>6</sup> For a brief discussion of some interpretations of the City Beautiful Movement, see William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City* (Columbia, Mo., 1964), xiii-xvi. A carefully reasoned study, which places Daniel H. Burnham's City Beautiful plans in a broad perspective, is Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago: Architect and Planner* (New York, 1974), 139-216, 312-345. Hines' discussion focuses on the inception, creation, and presentation of Burnham's plans, in most cases, and is limited to the cities in which Burnham worked.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Channing Wister to Dock, Oct. 29, 1896, MLDP; Donehoo, *Harrisburg and Dauphin County*, I, 138; John Hoffer to Dock, Apr. 12, 1898, MLDP; manuscript "Report of the Department of Forestry and Town Improvement, year ending July, 1899," MLDP. Good, brief reviews of the women's club movement are in Edith Hoshino Altbach, *Women in America* (Lexington, Mass., 1974), 114-121; and William L. O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: the Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago, 1969), 84-90.

culture in England and the continent. The results of her travel and investigation appeared in 1900 in her *A Summer's Work Abroad*, Bulletin No. 62 of the state department of agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

European travel broadened Miss Dock's knowledge of forestry and heightened her concern for civic beautification. A first-rate amateur photographer, she returned with dozens of negative plates of urban parks, squares, and riverine improvements. Even before completing her booklet she had been discussing the possibility of major improvements in Harrisburg with two friends, J. Horace McFarland, an aggressive businessman, preservationist, and fellow Harrisburger, and Warren H. Manning, a Boston landscape architect trained by the great Frederick Law Olmsted. After writing *A Summer's Work Abroad* she prepared a lantern-slide talk, comparing the manicured parks and river banks of European cities and the natural beauties of the Harrisburg area with Harrisburg's trash-strewn bluffs, foul sewers, and generally unkempt appearance. Slides of improvements in other American cities heaped still more humiliation on the smug little city alongside the Susquehanna.<sup>9</sup>

By December, 1900, Miss Dock was ready for a major appearance. On the twentieth of that month she spoke on "The City Beautiful" to a "large audience" composed of members of the city's elite Board of Trade and their guests. Her graphic descriptions, her more than one hundred striking slides, and her "graces that give so much charm to the successful public speaker" compelled her audience's attention. The talk, stripped of her vibrant animation, consisted of well-worn, if well-presented arguments for the City Beautiful. Harrisburg, Miss Dock averred, was blessed with a beautiful setting but it had abused some of its natural beauty spots and failed to preserve others. Some cities with fewer natural advantages had achieved more beauty. Her "vivid description of the roughness,

<sup>8</sup> *A Summer's Work Abroad, in School Grounds, Home Grounds, Play Grounds, Parks and Forests*, Bulletin 62, Department of Agriculture, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1900).

<sup>9</sup> Evidently many lantern slides of Miss Dock's, used to illustrate Harrisburg conditions, are not among the slides in DFP. However, photographic negatives and prints in DFP do depict such conditions, and, together with newspaper reports, indicate that Miss Dock used slides of the same or similar scenes as shown in the negatives and prints. McFarland to Dock, June 26, 1899; Manning to Dock, Nov. 20, 1899, MLDP. For Manning, see the booklet *Jacob Warren Manning* (n.p., n.d.), 10-11, copy J. Horace McFarland Papers, Manuscript Group 85, Pennsylvania State Archives (hereinafter cited as JHMP).

slime and filth we create for ourselves, caused applause and then the hush of full comprehension."<sup>10</sup>

After appealing to civic pride and to her auditors' competitive spirit, she played on the theme of organic unity, a favorite of turn-of-the-century urban planners. She reminded her audience that classes were interdependent, and that working-class people and their children needed beauty spots and recreation areas as much as or more than anyone else. The city should build playgrounds, parks, and public baths (swimming pools with tubs, showers, soap and towels available in the dressing rooms) for those citizens who lacked the means to provide for themselves. Parks, recreation, clean streets and clean inhabitants were compatible with a city's business success. Milwaukee, Dayton, Ohio, Boston, and Hartford, Connecticut, demonstrated that commerce and industry thrive in attractive, inviting, urban settings. Through Miss Dock's slides of progressive American cities "the cash value of cleanliness and beauty in busy places was strongly shown."<sup>11</sup>

Miss Dock's lecture inspired some members of Harrisburg's commercial, industrial, and financial elite to begin a widely ranging City Beautiful planning program that continued for almost forty years. It awakened the businessmen of Harrisburg to the Civic Club's agitation for clean streets and beautification, and to its day nursery and summer kindergarten programs. Businessmen dominated the Harrisburg League for Municipal Improvement, the major propaganda and publicity organization, but they opened membership to women and actively sought their cooperation. McFarland always credited Miss Dock with beginning the City Beautiful Movement in Harrisburg. In articles in *World's Work* and *The Chautauquan*, and in speeches the hyperactive McFarland praised her inspiring leadership.<sup>12</sup>

The campaign itself evolved through several phases. A preliminary

<sup>10</sup> The quotation "graces . . ." is from the *Wilkes-Barre Record*, Apr. 18, 1901. The description of the Harrisburg speech is from *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Dec. 21, 1900.

<sup>11</sup> *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Dec. 21, 1900.

<sup>12</sup> The beautification campaign and its organizational effort may be reconstructed from the *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Dec. 21, 1900—Feb. 21, 1902, and is briefly summarized in Donehoo, *Harrisburg and Dauphin County*, I, 179–182; J. Horace McFarland, "The Awakening of a City," *The World's Work*, III (April, 1902), 1930; "The Harrisburg Achievement," *The Chautauquan*, XXXVI (January, 1903), 402.

plan for a bond issue to finance sewers, parks, water filtration, and other improvements climaxed a period of general discussion. During 1901 Vance C. McCormick, a young industrialist and politician, retained an engineer and consulted with a landscape architect to develop the plans further. When a leading businessman suggested a public subscription be raised to support elaborate expert studies, McFarland and others enthusiastically seconded the idea. After the fund reached its \$5,000 goal in May, 1901, the contributors formed the League for Municipal Improvement and selected a committee of eleven to retain the experts. The committee accepted the experts' reports in November. Then it launched a vigorous campaign replete with a downtown headquarters for the League, carefully-staged neighborhood meetings designed to publicize the bond issue and to answer its detractors, pamphlet distributions, and reams of favorable newspaper publicity. A mass meeting and rally featuring an address by Governor William A. Stone capped the campaign. Two days later, on February 18, 1902, the bond issue carried every ward but one, where the measure lost by only four votes.<sup>13</sup>

To the standard organizational furniture of the usual City Beautiful bond election campaign its male proponents added typical justifications. Taxes, they said, would rise about two dollars per \$1,000 valuation, an unimportant increase, given Harrisburg's low existing tax rate. The collector sewer along the river and the interceptor sewer in the Paxton Creek bed would raise the city's sanitation level, while filtered water reduced its death rate. The arguments were not entirely utilitarian, for there were appeals to urban chauvinism, but on the whole they emphasized the practical advantages of the improvements.<sup>14</sup>

Mira Dock was as active in the improvements fight as she had been in starting it, but she worked other veins. Her role, and the role of the Civic Club, were different from that of the men's organization. The distinction could be laid in part to late Victorian ideas about the separate spheres of women and men. Participation in formal decision making and in major public meetings was closed to women. Though she contributed to the expert's fund neither Miss

<sup>13</sup> For the campaign see citations in footnotes 11 and 12. The bond vote official returns are in the *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Feb. 21, 1902.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 2, 3, 6, 1902.

Dock nor any other woman served on the selection committee. Nor did women address the capstone rally at the Court House.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Miss Dock's activity affirms that the male civic leaders of Harrisburg welcomed women in the struggle, depended upon their experience and expertise, and expected them to carry a significant part of the propaganda fight. From the fall of 1899, if not earlier, both Miss Dock and McFarland were working with their friend, landscape architect Warren H. Manning, on a tentative park and landscaping scheme for Harrisburg. Manning wanted the job of landscape consultant to Harrisburg and acknowledged their efforts to get it for him. The expert selection committee, of which McFarland was a member, chose Manning to prepare the park study. In October, 1901, Manning gave a stereoptican lecture on urban beautification at the Board of Trade hall by invitation of the Civic Club.<sup>16</sup>

During the final, intensive propaganda phase of the campaign the Civic Club pressed city councils to inaugurate a municipal garbage collection service, and passed a resolution calling "the attention of Councils to the unsightly and unsanitary condition of the river bank, caused by the violation of the ordinance against dumping refuse, garbage, ashes and brush over the embankment." Meanwhile its members were collecting a \$175 donation to a second fund drive held to finance the publicity campaign. Miss Dock lectured on the improvements at the club's annual meeting.<sup>17</sup>

Later, on the twentieth, Mira Dock spoke at a neighborhood meeting in the Bethany Presbyterian Church. On the last night in January she braved bitter cold to deliver a "rather sparsely attended" stereoptican lecture at the high school. Early in February, when overnight temperatures were falling below ten degrees, she spoke again at the All Saints' Mission. Her message emphasized both the potential beauty of Harrisburg and the functional relationship of beauty to cleanliness, health, and civic prosperity. Although in content her speeches were similar to those of the male orators, she emphasized beauty and the interdependence of beauty and

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, May 4, June 8, 1901; Feb. 17, 1902.

<sup>16</sup> Manning to Dock, Feb. 25, 1901; May 27, 1901, MLDP; *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Oct. 22, Nov. 22, 1901.

<sup>17</sup> *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Nov. 26, 1901; Jan. 16, 25, 1902.

utility more than most of them did. Convinced that people opposed urban beauty only through ignorance, she urged her audiences to join the propaganda crusade. "Those who oppose municipal improvement," she insisted, "do not know what it is, and need to be instructed."<sup>18</sup>

Both before and after the bond issue vote, men praised the work of the women campaigners. "The Civic Club of this city has demonstrated the power of organization among the good women of any community," the *Telegraph* editorialized in January, 1902. "I don't know whether any of us could have accomplished anything had not the Civic Club paved the way," McFarland wrote to Mira Dock in late February. "Back of the Civic Club is your own effort and enthusiasm, and I think, when this thing is hunted down to sources, you and [a male organizer] will have to stand as the sponsors of the whole movement." Although his remarks were tinged with an unconscious condescension, another of Miss Dock's admirers introduced one of her talks by saying that the Civic Club had done "more almost than the men" to launch the movement for a beautiful Harrisburg.<sup>19</sup>

The Civic Club and the men's organization led the bond issue fight, but they were not entirely responsible for its passage. Events helped to illustrate the inadequacies of the status quo. In 1901 the Pennsylvania Canal company closed the last section of the once proud "main line," leaving the sewage-clogged segment through Harrisburg to stagnate. A springtime typhoid fever outbreak and a wintertime flood gave still more point to the public improvement message. So did a determined if unsuccessful effort to move the capital to Philadelphia rather than rebuild a new capitol building to replace the structure destroyed by fire in 1897. Moreover, opponents of the bond issue were decidedly inept. Harping on the costs and inutility of the proposed improvements, they lacked verve and organizational skills. At any event, it remained for the Civic Club and the male leadership to rouse Harrisburg's voting public and sustain the drive for sewer and water improvements, parks, and street paving.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 21, Feb. 1, 4, 1902.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 22, Feb. 1, 1902; McFarland to Dock, Feb. 21, 1902, MLDP.

<sup>20</sup> *Harrisburg Telegraph*, May 8, 21, June 25, July 10, Dec. 16, 1901; Feb. 17, 1902.



Harrisburg's beautification and improvement efforts did not stop with the 1902 election. Through 1925 Harrisburgers voted ten bond issues for parks and river front beautification as well as for more utilitarian improvements, such as a municipal asphalt plant. Manning's plans for improving "Wetzel's Swamp" were fulfilled in Wildwood Park, as were his suggestions for expanding and developing Reservoir Park. Councilmanic loans provided funds for other improvements. In 1906 the splendidly ornate new capitol building was completed and in 1912 the Commonwealth began acquiring land east of the capitol under its Capitol Park Extension program. In 1939 it completed a grand if imperfectly realized City Beautiful group of office buildings on part of the enlarged park. Harrisburg, then, belied the cliché about City Beautiful plans, that they merely amazed the urban populace with their meritricious designs before being filed away and forgotten.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the fighters in the first City Beautiful contest stayed on to fight again. Vance McCormick, an advocate of the improvements, won the mayoral election in 1902. Although he later became a power in the Democratic Party and developed widely ranging business interests, he continued to be involved in planning for Harrisburg. McFarland was one of the founders of the American League for Civic Improvement in 1901. In 1904 he helped to consolidate it with another organization to form the American Civic Association. He served the new body as president until 1924. A prolific author and a dynamic lecturer who spread the Harrisburg story the length and breadth of the land, McFarland was concerned about urban issues for the rest of his long life.<sup>22</sup>

Not so Mira Lloyd Dock. In 1901 she was appointed a member of Pennsylvania's Forestry Reservation Commission, a position she held until 1913. She served as Vice-Chairman of the Conservation Department of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. An

<sup>21</sup> Donehoo, *Harrisburg and Dauphin County*, I, 182-185; Capitol Grounds Extension Planning Committee, *The Proposed Extension of the State Capitol Grounds at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania* (1941), 7-8, figs. 19, 20.

<sup>22</sup> *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, A (New York, 1930), 196-197, and XXXV (New York, 1949), 242-243; McCormick to Dock, Apr. 25, 1938, MLDP; "Biographical Material," Private Papers, JHMP; John L. Hancock, "John Nolen and the American City Planning Movement: A History of Culture Change and Community Response, 1900-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1964), 139-141.

ardent feminist and suffragist, she fought for women's rights both from within and without organizational frameworks. She maintained a large and active correspondence with a remarkable range of people, including European foresters and botanists, Gifford Pinchot, and her "Dear Cousin," William Dean Howells.

All this left little time for Harrisburg. Indeed, Miss Dock yearned to live in forest country, and began spending more and more time in the South Mountain region a few miles north of the Maryland line. In 1903 she left her family's spacious, late Victorian brick house on North Front Street, with its beautiful view of the Susquehanna and Blue Mountains beyond, and moved to the hamlet of Graeffenburg. Later she lived in Fayetteville. Although she remained interested in Harrisburg, her sustained involvement in its improvement was over.<sup>23</sup>

Miss Dock's return to her first love, forestry, should not diminish her contributions to urban life. She exemplified the clubwoman who refused to exchange a deemphasis of Dante and Shakespeare for mere resolution-framing and dabbling in parliamentary procedure. Her struggle for the beautification of Harrisburg illuminates some neglected aspects of the City Beautiful Movement. Much more than water color renderings of pretty buildings, the City Beautiful Movement in Harrisburg was diverse in its objects. It attempted to answer real human needs, and required the dedication and public spirit of civic-minded men and women for its considerable success.

*North Texas State University*

WILLIAM H. WILSON

<sup>23</sup> In 1902 Miss Dock sponsored a lawn and garden beautification program through the Civic Club's Department of Forestry and Town Improvement, and she took Charles F. Zeublin, a noted academic urbanist on a tour of Harrisburg that year. *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Mar. 15, Apr. 8, 1902. In 1905 she gave 100 pine seedlings to the city for planting in Reservoir Park. McFarland to Dock, Sept. 29, 1905, JHMP. Two years later she resigned from the renamed Harrisburg Municipal League. McFarland to Dock, Dec. 2, 1907, MLDP.