The First Design for Fairmount Park

Fairmount Park in Philadelphia is one of the great urban parks of America, its importance in landscape history exceeded only by New York’s Central Park. Its name derives from the “Faire Mount” shown on William Penn’s plan of 1682, where the Philadelphia Museum of Art now perches, and where the gridded Quaker city suddenly gives way to an undulating scenery of river and park. Measuring over 3,900 acres, it is one of the world’s largest municipal parks. Nonetheless, for all its national importance, the origin of the park, its philosophical foundations, and its authorship have been misunderstood in the literature. ¹

About the principal dates there is no dispute: in 1812–15 a municipal waterworks was built on the banks of the Schuylkill, the site of which soon became a popular resort location and a subject of picturesque paintings; in 1843 the city began to acquire tracts of land along the river to safeguard the water supply; in 1859 the city held a competition for the design of a picturesque park; finally, in 1867, the Fairmount Park Commission was established to oversee a much larger park, whose layout was eventually entrusted to the German landscape architect Hermann J. Schwarzmann. This is the version rehearsed in all modern accounts of the park.

All texts agree that 1867 marks the origin of the park, in conception and execution. They depict the pre–Civil War events as abortive and inconclusive; in particular, they dismiss the 1859 competition. According to George B. Tatum, writing in 1961, a series of “plans were prepared,”

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¹ The first account of the park is Charles S. Keyser, Fairmount Park: Sketches of Its Scenery, Waters, and History (Philadelphia, 1871), and the principal modern history is Theo B. White, Fairmount, Philadelphia’s Park: A History (Philadelphia, [1975]); Elizabeth Milroy’s cultural and historical study of the park is forthcoming.
although many of the specific proposals “were never carried out.” For Richard Webster, writing in 1976, the competition resulted in the victory of Andrew Palles, whose design was “not executed, presumably because of the Civil War.” Theo B. White’s monograph, *Fairmount: Philadelphia’s Park*, does not even mention the competition, taking for granted that the history of the park only began with the act of the state legislature in 1867. Of recent scholars, David Schuyler was the first to call attention to the 1859 plan although he too pointed out that “few of the improvements . . . were implemented.”

Here historical judgment has been colored by negative evidence. Writers from Tatum to White have concentrated their research on the ample files of the Fairmount Park Commission and, finding nothing there about the pre–Civil War history of the park, have assumed there was none. This article proposes that the pre-1867 history of the park was crucial to its form, and that the designer of the park was an architect of sophistication and historical importance; in so doing, it corrects the chronology that has persisted in all modern histories of the park.

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In some sense Philadelphia in the early nineteenth century already had a ready-made park landscape, for along the banks of the Schuylkill were situated some of the city’s most stately aristocratic country seats. Just as English aristocrats commuted to their seats upriver along the Thames, so did Philadelphia’s colonial elite take to their riverside estates each summer (and probably a little more hastily, since they were also fleeing outbreaks of yellow fever). Much of the story of Fairmount Park is the tale of the democratization of these picturesque aristocratic seats—unlike the story of Central Park, which is that of a great civic building enterprise.

By the 1840s Philadelphia’s Schuylkill River estates were no longer fashionable: industry upriver in the mill town of Manayunk had made

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4 White, *Fairmount*, 16–19.

them somewhat less salubrious, and meanwhile both railroad and steamboat were extending the reach of the convenient commute, chiefly to Germantown and later to Riverton, New Jersey. The two estates immediately to the north of the waterworks, Sedgeley and Lemon Hill, were given over to commercial development. Sedgeley, which had been owned by William Crammond, was purchased in 1836 by Isaac S. Lloyd, who gave the splendid trees on the site a brutal scalping. Its Gothic villa, built by Benjamin Latrobe, moldered until it was demolished in 1857. Meanwhile Lemon Hill, that authoritative Federal villa built by Philadelphia merchant Henry Pratt, was reduced to peddling ice cream and was sold to the city in 1843. In 1851 Frederick Graff Jr. made a design for landscaping Lemon Hill and integrating it into the grounds of the waterworks where he served as chief engineer. This was a kind of proto-Fairmount. Nothing systematic was done however until 1855 when city council passed a resolution to open the land formally to the public as Fairmount Park. The formation of New York’s Central Park in 1857 and the adoption of the plans of Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted spurred the city. In that same year the city acquired Sedgeley, the adjoining estate, by public subscription for an urban park.

In late 1858 the Committee on Public Property (later, City Property) of Philadelphia’s city councils (select and common councils) invited “Plans for the Improvement of Fair Mount Park.” The goal was to weld the newly acquired upriver estates, along with a few other slivers of land, comprising about 130 acres all together, into a unified park on the New York model. The committee announced a deadline of February 15, 1859, and promised substantial premiums to the competition winners.

Landscape architecture was still in its infancy—the term itself not yet coined by Olmsted—and the competitors embraced a range of professions. Eight firms competed, of which only four names have been preserved: William Saunders, Andrew Palles, Edwin F. Durang, and Sidney & Adams. Saunders was a landscape gardener, Palles a civil engineer, and Durang a prominent architect of Catholic churches. The firm of Sidney

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6 See Frederick Graff Jr., Plan of Lemon Hill and Sedgeley Park, Fairmount and Adjoining Property, lithograph by L. N. Rosenthal ([Philadelphia, 1851]).
7 The purchase of Sedgeley was secured partly by private funds, in which James H. Castle played a crucial organizing role. See James H. Castle Correspondence, 1854–58, Society Small Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
8 The competition for “Plans for the Improvement of Fair Mount Park” was organized by the Committee on Public Property. Announcements were published in late 1858 in the major Philadelphia papers. See, e.g., Philadelphia Press, Nov. 27, 1858.
& Adams, a newly formed partnership, specialized in landscape and villa architecture. Of these men, Saunders was likely the favorite, having designed Philadelphia’s Hunting Park a few years earlier and enjoying close personal connections to the proponents of the Fairmount scheme. ⁹ Officially the winners were not to be chosen until March, but even in those days there were genteel leaks. Within a week the newspapers were abuzz with descriptions of “the design thought most likely to win.” ¹⁰ On March 3, just over two weeks after the drawings had been submitted, the committee announced the winners. Palles received the second prize of $250 while the $500 first prize—and with it the commission for executing the design—went to Sidney. Saunders did not place, but his friends on the committee voted him and Durang a bonus of $100 each. ¹¹

The firm of James Clark Sidney (ca. 1819–81) and Andrew Adams (ca. 1800–60) was easily the best qualified of the local competitors. Sidney, an English-born cartographer, had considerable experience in shaping large romantic landscapes. ¹² He had come to architecture obliquely; as a protégé of John J. Smith, the Philadelphia cartographer and director of the Library Company of Philadelphia, he first worked as a surveyor. Together with Smith’s son, the prominent map publisher Robert Pearsall Smith, Sidney made a series of maps in the late 1840s and early 1850s, first of Philadelphia, then of New York, and then up the Hudson River to Albany. ¹³ These maps, based on Sidney’s own measurements, were highly successful, helping to establish Philadelphia’s

⁹ “I visited Lemon Hill with Messrs. Keyser and Castle last t[e]sday . . . I never saw any ground with half the advantages for a park— None of the London Parks can compare with it. . . . Hunting Park is tame—tame— No expense can ever make it like Lemon Hill as it is now—” William Saunders to J. J. Smith, n.d, James H. Castle Correspondence, 1854–58. For Saunders, see the biographical entry in Charles A. Birnbaum and Robin S. Karson, eds., Pioneers of American Landscape Design (New York, 2000).

¹⁰ Philadelphia Public Ledger and Daily Transcript, Feb. 22, 1859. This description clearly referred to the Sidney & Adams scheme.

¹¹ Although the terms of the competition made no provision for third- or fourth-place winners, Durang and Saunders received the premium “as an expression of approval of the labor, skill and taste which they display in a very high degree.” “The New Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, and Its History,” Gardener’s Monthly 1 (1859): 57–58.


¹³ These include Map of the Circuit of Ten Miles around the City of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1847); Map of the City of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1849); Sidney’s Map of Twelve Miles around New-York (Philadelphia, 1849); Map of Dutcheess County, New-York, from Original Surveys (Philadelphia, 1850); Map of Westchester County, New York (White Plains, NY, and Philadelphia, 1851); and Map of the Vicinity of Albany and Troy ([S.I.], 1851).
Sidney established himself as an architect in 1850, generally working with a partner. Like his professional model, Andrew Jackson Downing, he published a volume of villa designs. And like Downing, he served a suburban clientele, working on the rural outskirts of Philadelphia, where he practiced in a picturesque Gothic mode. In the downtown he built little of note. In this way he differed from his better-known local contemporaries, such as Samuel Sloan, John McArthur Jr., and John Notman, who made Philadelphia a national center for architecture. Between 1856 and 1858 Sidney lived in New York, where he designed cemeteries (although his most famous cemetery there, Woodlawn, in the Bronx, was not built until 1863). He was professionally well regarded and was an early member of the Philadelphia chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Sidney is also noteworthy as the first architect in the city—perhaps in America—to employ women in his office “as designers.” His work at Fairmount Park is the central achievement of his career.

Sidney’s original winning scheme, as endorsed by Philadelphia’s city councils, has apparently been lost. Neither Philadelphia City Archives nor the Fairmount Park Commission appears to have a copy. It is known only from Sidney & Adams’s submission, published as a pamphlet, and from

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15 Sidney’s documented works include the Episcopal Church of the Covenant, Philadelphia (1861, demolished), Wyoming Valley House in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania (1863, demolished), the Germantown Savings Bank (1868), and others. Sidney invariably practiced with partners, who included James P. Neff (ca. 1850–55), Andrew Adams (1858–60), Frederick C. Merry (1860–65), and a certain Mr. Kirby (1875), which at least raises the possibility that he required an architectural specialist while he concentrated on the landscape work. He was admitted to the Philadelphia chapter of the American Institute of Architects on May 9, 1870.


17 In 1875 the firm of Sidney & Kirby hired women from the School of Industrial Design for Women to act “as designers.” Philadelphia Times, Mar. 15, 1875.
the woodcut reproduced in the rare *Gardener’s Monthly* (cover) and in the *Evening Bulletin* in April 1859. In fact, however, Sidney’s scheme has long been under the eyes of researchers and published repeatedly. This is the version entitled *Plan of Fairmount Park . . . with the Proposed Addition of the West Bank of the River Schuylkill*, printed in 1859 and credited to his erstwhile competitor Andrew Palles (fig. 1). With cheeky sleight of hand, Palles placed his name under the full title, implying that he designed the entire park shown in the plan. In fact, Palles contributed only the rather simple landscaping of the west bank, although historians like Tatum assumed his authorship of the entire scheme. Sidney’s failure—or the city’s failure—to commission a popular lithograph of his plan has allowed scholars to give Palles undue credit for the work.

Sidney’s plan proposed a few eye-catching elements, a Grand Avenue and carriage drive, an open parade ground, and a terraced garden, which were to be interlaced by a network of serpentine paths. Much of this was inspired by the philosophy of Olmsted’s work in New York. Like Central Park, it too was to “present the greatest possible contrast to the artificiality of the city.” Toward this end, Sidney proposed to plant

a thick screen of deciduous trees on the outside boundaries of the Park.

. . . to shut out as much as possible the view from within the Park, of buildings now existing or likely to be put up around its borders.

Sidney believed, as did Olmsted, that “once in the Park one should not be reminded of the city.” And like Olmsted, he laid out underpasses and bridges to screen the major road that bisected his park, Girard Avenue.

Also from Central Park came the idea of a prominent carriage drive, which Sidney made the great entry of the park, and which formed the transition from the geometric regularity of the city to the irregular landscape beyond. It commenced at the southern entrance to the park in a graceful sweeping curve, and then straightened into a grand avenue ninety-six feet in width lined with American lindens; strips of grass separated the

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carriage drive, sixty feet in width, from the pedestrian paths on either side. This promenade led toward the river, where it terminated in a roundel, beyond which it turned into a meandering romantic drive along the river. In length the Grand Avenue extended half a mile. Other carriage drives measured thirty to forty feet in width and meandered more picturesquely through the wilder sections of the park. Together the whole park encompassed over three miles of carriage drives and three miles of walks.21

Sidney also proposed various park pavilions as well as a series of riverfront boathouses to serve the sport of sculling, which was then undergoing its first flush of popularity. Rather than simply inserting useful buildings into his schemes, he insisted that the architecture served to “aid materially in giving effect to picturesque scenery, thus showing the strong relationship which always exists between landscape gardening and architecture.”

Again Sidney was following the lead of Vaux, who was responsible for the rustic architecture of Central Park, with its bark-covered logs and self-consciously primitive carpentry.

In some respects, however, Sidney’s plan differed from that of Vaux and Olmsted. At Central Park a massive and artful reconfiguration of the landscape took place, while Sidney worked to augment the existing features of the landscape. As much as possible he treated the terrain as it was, or—in the case of the clear-cut fields at Sedgeley—as it had once been. He delighted in the rugged rock outcroppings along the banks of the Schuylkill, which were dramatically excavated for the winding course of the riverside drive.

But above all, Sidney avoided the moralistic tone of Olmsted’s program. Fairmount Park was to be a democratic institution, but its central feature, the carriage drive, was emphatically an aristocratic one. Even the sport of sculling, with its boathouses, was a rather restricted pursuit. And although there was the open field of the Parade Ground, this was not exactly a sweeping expanse of turf, the great hallmark of Olmstedian planning. Rather, Sidney concerned himself with the tactile and the useful rather than the moral. While he carefully arranged for a screen of evergreen trees alongside the river to shield the glare from the water, he had little to say about the mixing of different social classes on the neutral fields of the park.

22 Sidney & Adams, Description of Plan for the Improvement of Fairmount Park, 4.
23 Sidney published at the same time an article in favor of thatch construction, calling for buildings that “have as little of the saw and plane about them as possible.” J. C. Sidney, “Thatch,” Gardener’s Monthly 1 (1859): 35–36.
24 “The road along the river’s edge will be a beautiful feature, and will be tunnelled through two large rocks and pass under the Girard Avenue Bridge. A piece of ground is set apart for the Zoological Society, which has just been formed.” Ibid. It seems as if the excavation through the rocks was not undertaken until about 1870, although most of the other work was completed several years earlier. Perhaps it was difficult to procure the necessary explosives during the Civil War.
25 Of course rhetoric and reality often diverge, and it has been suggested that Central Park was far more exclusive than Olmsted’s democratic language implied. For a revisionist interpretation of Central Park, see Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, The Park and the People: A History of Central Park (Ithaca, NY, 1992). A social history of Fairmount Park has yet to be written.
With the acceptance of Sidney’s plan (for Adams seems to have played little part in it), he was appointed architect to the park. His tenure was remarkably carefree, and he seems to have been left alone. There was as yet no Park Commission with strongly held and contending views; instead Sidney worked directly under the commissioner of city property, where he had a lucrative contract. The landscaping and road-building work at the park was estimated to cost fifty-eight thousand dollars, of which Sidney was to receive 5 percent, amounting to a fee of about three thousand dollars.26

The city moved decisively. Construction began in the summer of 1859, and by the end of 1860 major results were already visible. The grand avenue of American linden trees, the great axis arriving from Fairmount Avenue, was planted and the road graded. The deciduous and evergreen trees at the perimeter were also planted and the principal walks laid out. Already by the end of the second year of construction, the carriage drive was largely completed “in the most durable manner, gravel on a stone bedding with chains at the sides.” Gardener’s Monthly praised it as “beautifully undulating with easy grades, now skirting along the margin of the beautiful Schuylkill and then winding up on the high ground, affording most exquisite views up and down the river.”27

Sidney’s work at the park is an extraordinary example of what might now be called public-private partnerships. While private building might still occur in the city’s park, Sidney acted as a one-man architectural review committee.28 When the Skaters’ Club sought to build a new boathouse in January 1860, the Committee on Public Property selected the site (Sidney & Adams had designated an area for boathouses, indicating three sites in a symmetrical arrangement, with room to insert other boathouses subsequently). Sidney & Adams then in March made the preliminary plan, which was turned over to the architect William S. Andrews for development. Finally, before the contract could be let, Andrews had to present the drawings to Sidney for approval.29 Thus architecture in the

26 Sidney & Adams, Description of Plan for the Improvement of Fairmount Park, 22; Fourth Annual Message of Alexander Henry, Mayor of the City of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1862), 84.
28 I am indebted to Thomas Beischer for his paper on Philadelphia’s Boathouse Row, presented at a symposium at the Clark Institute of Art, May 1996, and now published in this issue.
29 The Skaters’ Club boathouse is the oldest surviving boathouse on Boathouse Row. With its
The Civil War broke out in April 1861, the third year of construction, but enough of the park had been laid out to accommodate visitors in their carriages. Already $22,500 had been disbursed, and about a third of the work envisioned by Sidney had been completed. The curmudgeonly Philadelphia diarist Sidney George Fisher paid a visit on November 21 and found it disappointing. “Not much work appears to have been done at the park,” he complained, “except to make some winding drives. A few clumps of trees, most of them evergreens, have been planted, but seem neglected.” Of course, the war had paralyzed work on the park, and only a token $500 was spent during the year, as an anxious city huddled for invasion.

Meanwhile, Sidney’s firm underwent change. Adams died and was replaced by Frederick Merry, although responsibility for the park seems to have remained with Sidney. By the start of 1862 the city had rebounded, and it allocated $10,000 for the park. Now Sidney hit his stride: he supervised the addition of many new roads, including a “beautiful drive” along the east or urban side of the park, a new approach to Girard Avenue, and a series of serpentine walks along the river shore of the park. Sidney even remodeled Frederick Graff’s old engine house at the waterworks to serve as the park’s chief restaurant.

Allocations for the park fluctuated in response to the war. In 1863 the Committee on City Property requested only $8,000, noting that “under other than the present circumstances of the city, the committee would ask a larger appropriation.” The request, although it came in the same month

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30 “galvanic battery for restoring animation,” it was the park’s rescue site for drowning victims. Susan Anderson, “No. 14 Boathouse Row” (unpublished typescript, May 1, 1980), Athenaeum of Philadelphia. See page 308 of this issue for a photograph.


32 Sidney & Merry received a fee of twenty-five dollars for their work in 1861, that is, 5 percent of five hundred dollars. Ordnances and Joint Resolutions of the Select and Common Councils, of the Consolidated City of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1854–75), 1862, no. 51, items 8, 38 (Mar. 17, 1862), 73, 76.

33 Ordnances and Joint Resolutions, 1862, no. 51, item 8 (Mar. 17, 1862), 73.


as the Battle of Gettysburg, was granted.\textsuperscript{36} A year later, with the end of the war already in sight, the city granted $20,000 for the park.\textsuperscript{37} By 1866 work was largely complete, and Sidney turned to the task of building a river wall to form an embankment along the Schuylkill.\textsuperscript{38} This marked the end of his official connection with the enterprise. What had been built was a 130-acre park, complete with its apparatus of drives and paths, its planting scheme, and landscaping. Contrary to the conventional account that the designs “were never carried out,” Sidney’s plan was in large measure realized.

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Even as the park was being completed Philadelphia citizens took steps to expand it dramatically. The city acquired new parcels to the north and also to the west, across the Schuylkill. With this much larger municipal park came a more formal arrangement for its control. During the course of the war the city experienced a great wave of municipal activism, culminating in the Sanitary Fair of 1864, a vast exhibition that was held on Logan Square. The success of the fair suggested that future municipal undertakings might be coordinated with the actions of spirited public groups. And no longer would the park be under the charge of the Committee on City Property, which also handled the city’s market halls and wharves. Instead it would be governed by its own municipal commission. Accordingly the city formed the Fairmount Park Commission in 1867.\textsuperscript{39}

The newly established commission evidently had no interest in Sidney. At any rate, the man who was Philadelphia’s preeminent landscape architect was not invited to work again at the park. And the Committee on City Property seems to have had enough of him; when it requested four

\textsuperscript{36} Journal of the Select Council, 1863, 2:35; Ordinances and Joint Resolutions, 1863, no. 261 (Sept. 18, 1863), 269. This and the subsequent expenditures are quite low compared with the cost per acre of landscaping Central Park. But the grounds of Lemon Hill and Sedgeley were already to some extent landscaped, while Central Park presented a much rawer landscape. Sidney & Adams noted that the “natural features of the ground are, happily, so park-like already, that little more art is necessary than to complete what is already so perfect in outline.” Sidney & Adams, Description of Plan for the Improvement of Fairmount Park, 3; quoted in Schuyler, New Urban Landscape, 103.


\textsuperscript{39} For the membership of the original commission, see the appendix in White, Fairmount, 123.
rustic pavilions in 1866, it pointedly ignored him, turning instead to young architect Frank Furness, just back from the Civil War by way of New York.  

If the city had imitated Olmsted in the first campaign at Fairmount Park, now it summoned the real thing. One of the first acts of the new commission was to invite Olmsted to make a study. He was to review the existing work in the park and make proposals for its expansion, and perhaps even to superintend it himself. 

Olmsted glided in, sniffing over Sidney’s work, not mentioning him by name in his report, perhaps not wanting to give undue credit to his colleague. Likely he smelled a commission. But at the same time Olmsted was not about to criticize either; Sidney’s work was too close in spirit to his own, and too sensitive to the spirit of the landscape. Instead he laid out his own philosophical program and proposed, in effect, that the new precincts of the park be treated like the old. 

What Olmsted did contribute, and what Sidney could not, was a theoretical statement of the purpose of the park. Olmsted drew on a different intellectual tradition than Sidney, who was decidedly a product of the rather empirical culture of Philadelphia. For Olmsted the park had a higher moral dimension: it was a place where class stratification was overcome.

It may be considered one of the great advantages of a public domain of this kind that it gives occasion for the coming together of the poor and the rich on the ground which is common possession and that it produces a feeling which to the poor is a relief from the sense of the restriction, which they generally experience elsewhere in comparing their limits of activity with the apparent freedom of those whose cares and duties have a wider scope.

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42 Philadelphia’s Quaker founders, not requiring university-educated clergymen, were late in founding institutions of higher learning and concentrated instead on the practical and useful arts; this is the insight of David Hackett Fischer, Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America (New York, 1989).

43 Olmsted letter, Dec. 4, 1867, quoted in White, Fairmount, 40.
In other words, a sense of mental freedom was to be conveyed by suggesting the possibility of physical freedom in space. This was an imaginative stroke, quite unlike Philadelphia’s more utilitarian recreational space, which still spoke the early nineteenth-century vocabulary of pleasant vistas and charming views. Here was high moral seriousness, and here also was a direct translation of Olmsted’s particular conception of mental freedom into a specific program for the landscape, and one in which the meadow loomed large:

As art deals with the manners and morals of men through the imagination; this is one of the many reasons why the expression of amplitude and free sweep in the scenery of a park which can only be produced by broad meadow-like surfaces with shadowy and certain limits, is an artistic requirement of the first importance.  

The whole mental furniture of this debate—the appeal to social mixing, the use of a moral as opposed to utilitarian vocabulary, and above all the transcendentalism—was all foreign to Philadelphia tradition. While some of the park commissioners might have appreciated Olmsted’s ideals, they were also practical industrialists and engineers who shared the Quaker habit of viewing the world in prosy terms.

In January 1871, the commission asked Olmsted and Vaux to submit a formal proposal for the completion of the park. As payment they were to receive a maximum of fifteen dollars per acre, as opposed to the 5 percent architectural fee that Sidney had claimed. In August of that year Olmsted submitted his plans, fully expecting to be named park architect.

Philadelphia may have been envious of Central Park, but this envy did not go so far as to hire its designer. At the last minute the Park Commission turned instead to an ambition-streaked young German architect, Hermann J. Schwarzmann, who had made his own plan.

44 Ibid.  
45 White, *Fairmount*, 43.  
46 Schwarzmann (1846–91) was a Bavarian architect, son of the decorative painter Joseph Anton Schwarzmann. He attended military school, then studied architecture, perhaps at the royal academy in Munich (although this remains unclear). He emigrated to Philadelphia at the age of twenty-two, and spent most the next decade connected with Fairmount Park. His principal work was the design of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition grounds and many of the important pavilions. In 1878 he left Philadelphia for New York where he retired in 1886, already unable to work from the syphilis that killed him in 1891. It was an ignominious end after such a promising start. See John Maass, *The Glorious Enterprise: The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 and H. J. Schwarzmann, Architect-in-Chief* (Watkins Glen, NY, 1973).
Schwarzmann had been appointed park engineer in 1869, charged with the ongoing work of park maintenance. In this capacity he had ample leisure to study the Olmsted reports and to devise his critique of them. Apparently he had been waiting at the periphery of negotiations, planning his move from the curtains. (This was an old technique of his, and he used it like a dagger: he would do the same thing in 1874 when he stole the commission for the Centennial buildings from Collins & Autenrieth.) On January 25, 1872, the Olmsted plan and the Schwarzmann plan were considered by the Park Commission. The local man was hired; evidently Olmsted’s lofty theorizing about the social role of the park was too abstract for its pragmatic commissioners, who after all had begun their undertaking with the pragmatic goal of safeguarding the city’s drinking water.47 Or perhaps they simply felt that Olmsted was too uppity, a constant, nagging reminder of that park in Manhattan that they would prefer not to recall.

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Fairmount Park is the culmination of a particular Philadelphia tradition of public gardens and parks that extends back to the city’s founding in the seventeenth century. William Penn himself was a botanist of note, who from the beginning placed public squares in his “greene countrie towne.” For the sober Quaker temperament, which avoided the sensual arts, horticulture offered an acceptable outlet in which the aesthetic impulse and the utilitarian might meet without contradiction. Philadelphia, by the eighteenth century, boasted John Bartram’s internationally known gardens and was the center of American botany.

Bartram’s gardens, accessible to the public, had created a tradition of public gardens in the city. Among others, Philadelphians soon enjoyed the stately formal garden behind Independence Hall and the festive fountain and garden adjoining Benjamin Latrobe’s waterworks in Penn Square. The success of Philadelphia’s romantic landscapes (Laurel Hill Cemetery, Fairmount Park, and Hunting Park) was prepared by the public gardens of the eighteenth century. Another hallmark that was passed on from the scientific gardens of Bartram’s day was a high degree of sophistication in the selection of individual species for particular settings.48

47 White, Fairmount, 43.
48 Sidney reflected this tradition. An especially adept horticulturalist, he was selected by the City of Philadelphia in 1860 to chose those species of trees to be planted. Assessing such variables as durability, susceptibility to pests, and amount of foliage, he recommended different types of trees for
Any effort to praise Philadelphia must turn in the end to a comparison with New York City, and so the effort must always fail. The comparison itself is an admission of defeat. Since the 1840s, when New York emerged as the nation's financial leader, Philadelphians have reflexively looked upon it as the arbiter of all that is stylish and fashionable. On the other hand, such a comparison is not wrong. In their way, each park is the faithful mirror of its city. Central Park is the product of a single heroic act of civic energy; Fairmount Park is the cumulative product of decades of compromise and incremental growth. Central Park is the abrupt and satisfying departure from New York's grimly utilitarian real estate grid; Fairmount Park is the culmination of Penn's "greene countrie towne," which had open squares from the beginning. And, finally, Central Park is an international treasure today, its designer the subject of biographies and television documentaries; Fairmount Park has become dowdy, neglected, and bisected cruelly by an expressway permitted by the park's own stewards, even as the name of its original designer was allowed to drop into oblivion.

J. C. Sidney's achievement was to translate the ideas of New York's new Central Park into the conventions of scale and character familiar to Philadelphia, which had its own vigorous and longstanding tradition of landscape architecture. The park that he helped shape is perhaps Philadelphia's finest man-made object. That his name is unknown does not reflect his achievement so much as it expresses Philadelphia's characteristic reticence.

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49 A contemporary Philadelphia civic project that was likewise carefully modeled on New York was the Academy of Music. The critical figure in that competition was Frederick Graff Jr., the engineer of the waterworks who made the first design for landscaping Lemon Hill. In both these instances, the academy and the park, events took the same course: fashionable currents coming from New York were changed as they encountered a culture of pragmatic Philadelphia engineering. See Michael J. Lewis, "The Architectural Competition for the Philadelphia Academy of Music," Nineteenth Century 17 (spring 1997): 3–10.