

## BELLEVUE PARK

### THE SUBURB BEAUTIFUL AND ENDURING

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**ABSTRACT:** City Beautiful leader J. Horace McFarland and Herman Miller, working with landscape designer and urban planner Warren Manning, conceived and developed Bellevue Park in the 1910s and 1920s as Pennsylvania's first fully planned suburban community at the eastern edge of Harrisburg's city limits. They committed to creating a stylistically consistent and rationally designed environment, focus on preserving and enhancing the natural landscape, belief in the power of natural and human-made beauty to uplift, and preference for neoclassical Colonial Revival forms. McFarland, Miller, and Manning—joined by the new neighborhood's first residents—applied City Beautiful approaches and values previously applied to civic and other public spaces to a new sphere: the private and domestic.

**KEYWORDS:** Bellevue Park, Harrisburg, Warren Manning, J. Horace McFarland, suburb, Herman Miller

Sitting adjacent to the green and sloping expanses of Reservoir Park, Bellevue Park contains the loftiest residential real estate within the city of Harrisburg (fig. 1). Beyond its literally elevated position—some 200 feet above Harrisburg's riverfront—Bellevue is a livable reminder of what was, perhaps, Harrisburg's most high-minded and ambitious period. Viewed today, Bellevue Park's solid, traditional homes, elegant landscaping, and curving streets remain breathtaking. In historical perspective, Bellevue Park impresses as a *domestically* focused capstone to Harrisburg's influential engagement with the national City Beautiful movement, which—in Bellevue—also broke new ground in the history of planned suburban developments.

Bellevue Park originated out of the vision of J. Horace McFarland and his business partner, Herman Miller, to develop a 132-acre tract of agricultural land at the eastern edge of Harrisburg's city limits.<sup>1</sup> Establishing the Union Real

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FIGURE 1. Bellevue Park as seen from Reservoir Park, ca. 1920. Photograph from Evan Miller's scrapbook, *Bellevue Park 1910–1925*, 9. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

Estate Investment Company in 1907 to this end, the company hired Warren Manning to design a landscaped suburb from the property “Belle Vue,” known for its impressive vistas (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Manning, who had studied with the era’s preeminent landscape designer and urban planner, Frederick Law Olmsted, and later his son Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., completed a plan distinct for its human-made interventions, such as roads that honored the tract’s natural topography. Manning’s plan included 280 large lots for freestanding, single-family dwellings along winding roads “in a tree-shaded, park-like setting, free of fences, telephone poles, overhead utility lines and black smoke.”<sup>3</sup> The plan represented a departure from Harrisburg’s existing residential neighborhoods and those of other northeastern American cities where rowhomes lined streets laid out in a grid (fig. 3). It was bucolic but within an easy commute: a half-hour on foot and ten minutes by streetcar to Market Square in downtown Harrisburg, a regional center for business, industry, and state government.<sup>4</sup>

In its planning and development in the 1910s to 1920s, Bellevue Park stood as the culmination of an effort to translate City Beautiful, most closely associated with public, civic spaces, to the private, residential sphere.<sup>5</sup> As a fully



FIGURE 2. Warren Manning and Herman Miller, ca. 1910. Photograph from Evan Miller's scrapbook, *Bellevue Park 1910–1925*, 5. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

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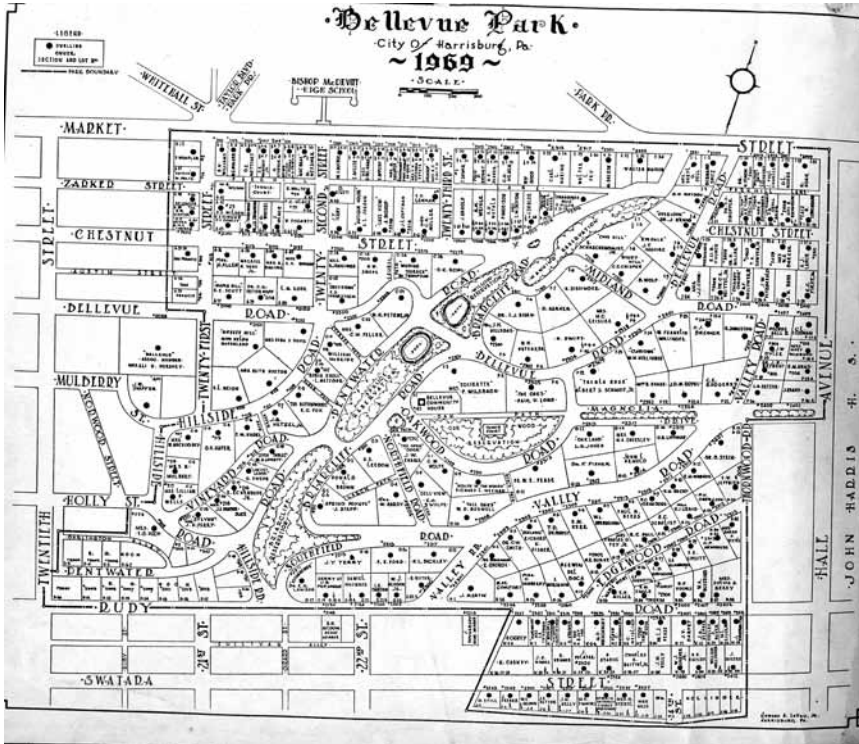


FIGURE 3. Bellevue Park plan and development as of 1969. From Evan Miller's scrapbook, *Bellevue Park 1910–1925*, 8. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

planned community, the first of its kind in Pennsylvania, the new neighborhood followed ideals more prominent in the public sphere. A focus on preserving and enhancing the natural landscape and the belief in the power of natural and human-made beauty to uplift the spirit and instruct the mind are obvious in, for example, one of Bellevue's most distinctive and defining innovations: an "emerald ribbon" of five "reservations" complete with ponds created through the damming of streams. The neighborhood also reflects City Beautiful in its neoclassical forms, stylistically consistent environments, and emphasis on rational design.<sup>6</sup>

While Bellevue reflected McFarland's commitment to reimagining and rebuilding American industrial cities, the neighborhood also marked an important place in the nascent trend toward suburbanization. Llewellyn Park was America's first proper suburb, founded in Orange, New Jersey, in 1853. By the turn of the century, Olmsted completed work on Chicago's Riverside

(started in 1869) and Baltimore's Roland Park (started in 1891) neighborhoods. McFarland and Miller envisioned and described their project as a "restricted residential Park which would be comparable to Roland Park in Baltimore."<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, McFarland noted that "In laying out Bellevue Park all the best features of the most up-to-date suburban developments of Boston, New York and Philadelphia were taken into account." What distinguished Bellevue from the suburbs of the major cities mentioned—beyond being a single neighborhood developed according to a comprehensive plan, unified by a single company—was that it "was planned on more generous lines . . . than have been practicable in the vicinity of the larger cities named."<sup>8</sup>

As a planned suburban community, Bellevue expressed American social inequities that existed alongside the aspirations of City Beautiful reformers to improve the well-being and quality of life of all classes. McFarland, who both developed the Park and lived in it (at "Breeze Hill," 21st and Bellevue Road), envisioned an extended enclave of single-family homes on large lots. The attractions this held in terms of aesthetics and quality of life are clear, as is their outcome: a new community that was homogenous in economic status (wealthy), race (white), ethnicity and national origin (western and northern European), and religion (predominantly Protestant Christian). Like American suburbs generally, Bellevue represented a separation of the elite from the broader population.<sup>9</sup>

In Bellevue, as in modern suburbs, various restrictions, explicit and implicit, worked to establish boundaries around aesthetics and people.<sup>10</sup> Written restrictions at Bellevue imposed limits on the development of lots and bans on private offices, stores, apartment houses, and rowhomes. As Evan Miller, the son of Herman Miller, noted, "Restrictions which at first seemed severe to the citizens of Harrisburg" were eventually "recognized as necessary for the protection of home values."<sup>11</sup>

It remains an open question whether those who established Bellevue Park placed written restrictions on who could live there. While some Harrisburgers with long memories recall that Bellevue Park did not, in its early decades, welcome African Americans or Jews, deeds from this period do not clearly include restrictive covenants based on race, religion, or ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, unwritten but closely held "gentleman's agreements" enforcing such restrictions were common throughout the United States long into the twentieth century. The surnames of the neighborhood's residents in the 1920 census, in any case, show that Bellevue Park was home to families of Scots Irish, Pennsylvania German, and otherwise Anglo Germanic descent: the



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Harrisburg area's particular blend of "old-stock" Americans.<sup>13</sup> A redlining map of the city dating to the late 1930s and produced by the Home Owners Loan Corporation shows Bellevue Park, uptown Harrisburg, and Camp Hill as the "best" sections in Harrisburg and its existing West Shore suburbs; accompanying descriptions characterize these areas as neighborhoods of white professional classes.<sup>14</sup> On a practical level, the financial prerequisites for living in Bellevue excluded most of the population: ownership rates were exceptionally high (80% of properties owned) compared to the rest of the city (47%) in 1930, and the median property value—\$20,000—was four times that of the city as a whole (\$5,500).<sup>15</sup>

In Evan Miller's memento volumes dedicated to the Bellevue neighborhood, residents state a simple desire to experience the convenience of urban life (fig. 4), but in a more "wholesome," rural setting; perhaps one removed from the residents of Harrisburg's then-teeming immigrant wards, "The unfortunates who live along the river level."<sup>16</sup> McFarland invoked personal attire to debunk the notion of Bellevue Park as "elitist" in an urban manner while simultaneously summoning visions of the landed country gentry's way of life:

Nothing could be more of an error than to believe that Bellevue is a sort of "dress circle" affair. Some of the men who live in Bellevue have dress suits, probably most of them, but the lure of the outdoors is so strong that corduroys are more often seen.<sup>17</sup>

Bellevue belonged to Harrisburg's business and professional classes, and living there set its inhabitants apart from everyone else. In a testimonial featured in an advertising circular dating to ca. 1915, McFarland enthuses about the ability to garden in Bellevue's spacious lots and enjoyment of the "health, recreation and relaxation from the strain of business life."<sup>18</sup> These are benefits that, by implication, were not available to those living closer to the city's center. Speaking to the Progressive Era's concerns with industrial pollution and its firm embrace of rational, scientific methods for maintaining individual and public health, McFarland wrote of Bellevue Park and the benefits of its elevated setting:

Often down-town Harrisburg will be entirely enveloped in a pall of smoke while the air at Bellevue will be perfectly clear. . . . The people who live in Bellevue have found their doctors' bills very much less than when they lived in the city of Harrisburg.<sup>19</sup>

## Why do I like Bellevue Park?



FOR many reasons, one of which is that it gives me not only high, pure air to breathe, but a prospect of distant hill and river so lovely as to have led the cultured German who named it Bellevue in 1819 to say that “even on the Rhine I know of no region equal in dimension with the vicinity of Harrisburg which surpassed the picture displayed here by nature in its variety of scenic effects and its pleasant charms.”

Bellevue Park gives opportunity to have a garden, also; and in the garden I find it possible to obtain not only flowers and fruits and vegetables better than can be bought, but health, recreation and relaxation from the strain of business life.

J. HORACE McFARLAND.

FIGURE 4. A testimonial from J. Horace McFarland included in a ca. 1915 advertising circular. From Evan Miller’s published book, *Bellevue Park 1910–1985*, 11. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

A similar sentiment of separation can be found in another advertising circular of salesman William McCord from the same time:

We like Bellevue to live in because it is a retired spot away from the bustle and turmoil, smoke, dust and congestion of the city, yet within twenty minutes of the business center. Built on good-sized plots, our houses are flooded with sunshine and air and surrounded by spacious

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lawns and gardens. . . . We like Bellevue because of the wonderful health-giving advantage it affords our children, with its breezy hills for kite flying, broad grassy fields, and sunny slopes for other sports so dear to “Young America.”<sup>20</sup>

McCord spoke not as an aesthete but a concerned family man. By the end of the nineteenth century, the “country life” and “back-to-nature” movements fit securely in the Progressives’ big tent. Put into practice, these beliefs resulted in the winding streets, picturesque vistas, and dramatic landscaping—and, again perhaps, in the demographic homogeneity—of neighborhoods such as Bellevue Park. “The solidity of the enterprise is one of its best features,” McFarland wrote.<sup>21</sup>

The heart of Bellevue was its homes, which its developers carefully monitored but designed in diverse, individualized, and even innovative ways. An unnamed chronicler and promoter of Bellevue Park—presumably McFarland—noted that, while house plans had to be approved, initially, by the developers and later by the Bellevue Park Association, “the management of the Park has been exceedingly liberal . . . many types of houses are already represented, each in a sense reflecting the personality of the family building it.” Elsewhere McFarland contrasted the “personal liberty” possible at Bellevue due to detached and distant lots, without the constraints of “more crowded conditions.”<sup>22</sup>

The sturdy, stately homes of Bellevue Park are the image of an old-stock American sense of prosperity and respectability. Evan Miller’s book depicts a few houses with the vestigial remains of the Victorian-era Queen Anne style, but more common are bungalow and foursquare styles (associated with the turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts movement), and especially classically inspired Georgian and Dutch “colonials” (figs. 5 and 6). The early residents of Bellevue Park, whether in reality or aspiration, represented Harrisburg’s Anglo-German iteration of America’s old-stock. For such a cohort, the choice of Colonial Revival could represent an attempt to identify with the Anglo and German colonial settlers who preceded the mass migration of southern and eastern Europeans between 1880 and 1924.

Bellevue Park’s more than one-hundred-year history has corroborated its developers’ claim that “every lot would be so restricted that the values would be permanently maintained or increased.”<sup>23</sup> Today Bellevue Park has its own website, and the history it shares draws toward its close with the celebration of good planning and careful maintenance: “A jewel of early suburban design, Bellevue Park has only improved during the almost 90 years its landscaping has matured.”<sup>24</sup>





FIGURE 5. An Art-and-Crafts/“Craftsman”-style bungalow, ca. 1920. Photograph from Evan Miller’s scrapbook, *Bellevue Park 1910–1925*, 93. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

Bellevue Park is more than property values: it is a material manifestation of the ideals of the City Beautiful movement as applied to residential architecture as set in a carefully chosen, preserved, and enhanced landscape in a newly minted setting—the suburb, a world both part of and distinct from the established spheres of “city” and “country.” The rigorous planning that guided the building of Bellevue Park and the carefully considered restrictions put in place to maintain it reflected City Beautiful aesthetics and its concerns with preserving and restoring nature for the sake of beauty, health, and socioeconomic concerns. Stable and growing property values typically reflect stable community demographics. Considering Bellevue Park on its own terms—as it was discussed by its developers, first residents, and contemporary observers and through the historical lens of the City Beautiful movement—suggests that its synthesis of artistic, natural, and financial goals ensured that it remained a model suburb over the past century and, likely, into the future.

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FIGURE 6. Georgian/neoclassical-inspired “Dutch” Colonial Revival home, ca. 1920. Photograph from Evan Miller’s scrapbook, *Bellevue Park 1910–1925*, 88. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

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NOTES

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1. “Bellevue Park: A History,” <https://www.bellevuepark.org/history>.
2. Evan Miller, *Bellevue Park, 1910–1985* (Harrisburg, PA: self-published book, 1985, 2, courtesy Evan Miller Collection, the Historical Society of Dauphin County. The property’s original owners from 1856 were Christian Haehnlen,

a prominent German immigrant, and his family. Christian's son Jacob built a summer residence atop Belle Vue's highest peak, an Italianate mansion that would eventually become the famous Breeze Hill property purchased by McFarland.

3. "Bellevue Park: A History."
4. "Bellevue Park: An Ideal Place to Live," *Facts and Figures* 7, no. 1 (April 1913). No author given; it is likely by McFarland. Available at the Historical Society of Dauphin County.
5. George Donehoo, *Harrisburg: The City Beautiful, Romantic, and Historic* (Harrisburg, PA: Telegraph Press, 1927), 179: "With this era of civic improvement . . . there also commenced an era of improvement in the homes of the people."
6. William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 78–80.
7. Miller, *Bellevue Park, 1910–1985*, 18.
8. "Bellevue Park: An Ideal Place to Live," 3.
9. As Robert Fishman has argued, American suburbanization reflected both the desire of capitalists and upper-middle-class and upper-class elites to separate from the world of their employees, and native-born Americans' interest in fleeing the tide of (largely) eastern and southern European immigrants who arrived in America between, roughly, 1880 and 1924. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
10. *Ibid.*, 141–42. Fishman emphasizes the "restricted" nature of modern suburbs, characterizing these new communities as excluding those outside the middle and upper classes, eliminating nonresidential functions, and differing visually from other parts of a city by virtue of an open plan.
11. Evan Miller, "Bellevue Park, 1910–1925," hand-assembled scrapbook, p. 2, Evan Miller Collection, Historical Society of Dauphin County.
12. The collection of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, includes deeds from Bellevue Park dating from 1920 to 1940. An examination of these deeds, and three others from the Dauphin County Recorder of Deeds database (<https://deeds.dauphinc.org/OnCoreweb/Search.aspx>), revealed no such restrictions.
13. Representative examples: Dietrich, Fahnestock, Hause, Heathcote, Hess, Hockenbury, Taft, Voorhees, Wilson, and Wright. Data courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.
14. The map was digitized by Digital Harrisburg and is now available through the "Mapping Inequality" website of the University of Richmond: <http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>.
15. Data courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.
16. J. Horace McFarland, "Bellevue Park and the High Cost of Living," *Facts and Figures* 11, no. 1 (April 1917): 6.

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17. “Bellevue Park: An Ideal Place to Live,” 4.
18. Miller, *Bellevue Park, 1910–1985*, 9.
19. “Bellevue Park: An Ideal Place to Live,” 5.
20. Reproduced in Miller, *Bellevue Park, 1910–1985*, 25.
21. “Bellevue Park: An Ideal Place to Live,” 4.
22. Ibid.
23. Miller, “Bellevue Park, 1910–1925,” 2.
24. “Bellevue Park: A History.”