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# The American Path: From the Pleasure Garden to the Amusement Park

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*Pleasure gardens were ubiquitous in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America with most cities hosting multiple venues. Beyond amusing the masses, American pleasure gardens served several important roles in defining national identities, including navigating the transition from agrarian to industrial nation. Yet despite their importance and popularity, they all but vanished from the American landscape by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This article examines what happened to the gardens in both physical terms, and, more importantly, in terms of what happened to the social space they created. It demonstrates that the amusement park is the chief successor to pleasure gardens, and that (unlike their British counterparts), this transition took place via public parks and world's fairs. The legacy of pleasure gardens it is argued continue through many forms, including the theme parks, shopping centres, and museums of today. Naomi J. Stubbs is Assistant Professor of English. Her areas of research include 19<sup>th</sup>-century American theatre and popular entertainments and critical editing. Her first book, *Cultivating National Identity through Performance: American Pleasure Gardens and Entertainment*, was published in September 2013 with Palgrave Macmillan. She is currently working with Amy E. Hughes on an annotated critical edition of a 19<sup>th</sup> century actor/manager/playwright's diary, tentatively titled *A Player and a Gentleman: The Diary of Harry Watkins, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Actor*. Stubbs is the co-editor of the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*.<sup>1</sup>*

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In presenting “groves, arbours . . . shrubs, trees and flowers,” and “summer houses, alcoves and seats,” the proprietors of Gray’s Ferry in the 1780s were providing patrons with a picture-perfect rural idyll.<sup>2</sup> In a single evening at this popular Philadelphian pleasure garden, patrons might witness “thirteen young

Ladies and the same number of gentlemen dressed as Shepherds and Shepherdesses” alongside transparency paintings of presidents, without leaving behind the comforts and conveniences of the city.<sup>3</sup> All the while, they might parade in their finest dress and sup upon turtle soup and other light refreshments. Such refined rural scenes were common within the vastly popular pleasure gardens of America and they betray a number of contradictory aspects of national identity that Americans grappled with in the 19th century, principally, the role of agrarianism in the increasingly industrial nation, and the function of class in a “democratic” nation.

Popular in England, America, and across the globe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, pleasure gardens were privately-owned outdoor entertainment venues where one went to see and be seen. Concerts, fireworks, dances, and light refreshments were typically provided, but one might also find exhibits of waxworks, demonstrations of scientific inventions (such as the velocipede or parachute), full-length theatrical productions, or volcanic eruptions. In their heyday, pleasure gardens could be found in most North American settlements, with many cities boasting multiple gardens operating concurrently; New York, for example, had almost 60 such venues between the Revolution and Civil War.<sup>4</sup> However, these valuable spaces were disappearing from the American cultural and literal landscape by the late 19th century at an alarming rate. Various scholars have argued this was due to the gardens not being “economically viable” as the “value of land climbed,” suffering from “the public’s preference chang[ing] gradually from active to passive entertainments,” or conversely, that there was a “desire for more participatory and fast-paced forms of recreation.”<sup>5</sup> I argue here that it was the changing society and identity concerns that led to the changing use of outdoor spaces for entertainment.

Many became theatres,<sup>6</sup> some succumbed to pressures for land development, and still others continued through their influence on other forms.<sup>7</sup> Roof top gardens, for example, offered summer concerts and variety acts from the late 19th century and allowed entertainments to take place in quasi-garden settings in an increasingly-developed city. Concert saloons were populated by performers who “also performed from time to time at pleasure gardens,” and the gardens it is argued “played a pivotal role in the evolution of variety theatre in America and of the term ‘concert saloon.’”<sup>8</sup> The legacy of pleasure gardens can also be seen in vaudeville—both as an early venue for vaudeville entertainments and as one of the first venues to use the term.<sup>9</sup>

While there is some merit to many of these assertions surrounding amusement parks, rooftop gardens, saloons, and vaudeville, the tendency of scholarship has been to focus on the physical space of the gardens, and sometimes on a single, specific garden. Such arguments miss the more interesting nuances of this puzzle, in particular what replaced the gardens in terms of the social space that they had created and filled. In this article I ask what happened to pleasure gardens, not in the literal sense of what happened to the geographical space they occupied, but rather what happened to the cultural and social space they had nurtured.

Most scholarship surrounding pleasure gardens has focused on the British exemplars, and certainly many of the features and roles of these venues were shared; issues of national identity and the role the gardens played in exploring and fleshing out national constructions of identity have been examined by, among others, Gregory Nosan and John Brewer.<sup>10</sup> The US sites, however, have been largely unexamined in terms of their role in national identity formation, despite the fact that the sites were popular at a time of anxiety and opportunity surrounding national identity, operating as they were between the Revolution and Civil War.

In this article, I target self-performance and spectatorship and how these relate to the performance of class, and the concerns surrounding the rural ideal in the increasingly industrial society. Pleasure gardens were spaces that allowed for the navigation of complex facets of national identity through their very nature as gardens. I would like to suggest that the amusement park was a chief successor to pleasure gardens in terms of addressing certain social issues, and that the “siblings” of public parks and world’s fairs were important transitional stages.<sup>11</sup>

### ***The social space of pleasure gardens***

The pleasure gardens of America created a space in which patrons could explore through performance (consciously or unconsciously) a variety of issues concerning American identities in a manner unlike other contemporaneous forms. Pleasure gardens were simultaneously gardens, entertainment venues, nostalgic retreats, venues for displays of technological advancement, sites of commemoration and celebration, and spaces of inclusion and exclusion along lines of race, class, and gender. They served an important role through the social space they created that allowed patrons to address questions regarding what it meant to be American—crucially though the display of the self, the performance of class, explorations of the rural/urban tension, and the uniting of technology and patriotism.

British pleasure gardens have been identified as being sites in which people went to see and be seen, and this holds true in the American sites, as they were a forum for parade and self-display.<sup>12</sup> In attending a pleasure garden, patrons were presented with the opportunity to parade in an open space for all to see. Wearing one’s finest, one could be observed by others while observing fellow patrons, as Fig. 1 illustrates. In this image, we see people in the garden watching one another and being watched by those on the balconies. As they engage in games, promenades, and conversations, they are watching, being watched, and thus in turn being cast as performers themselves. While patrons could be perceived as being performers when attending theatres, circuses, and museums, patrons at pleasure gardens were more conscious of being observed by others and would while away their time within such a space by walking around as though on parade.

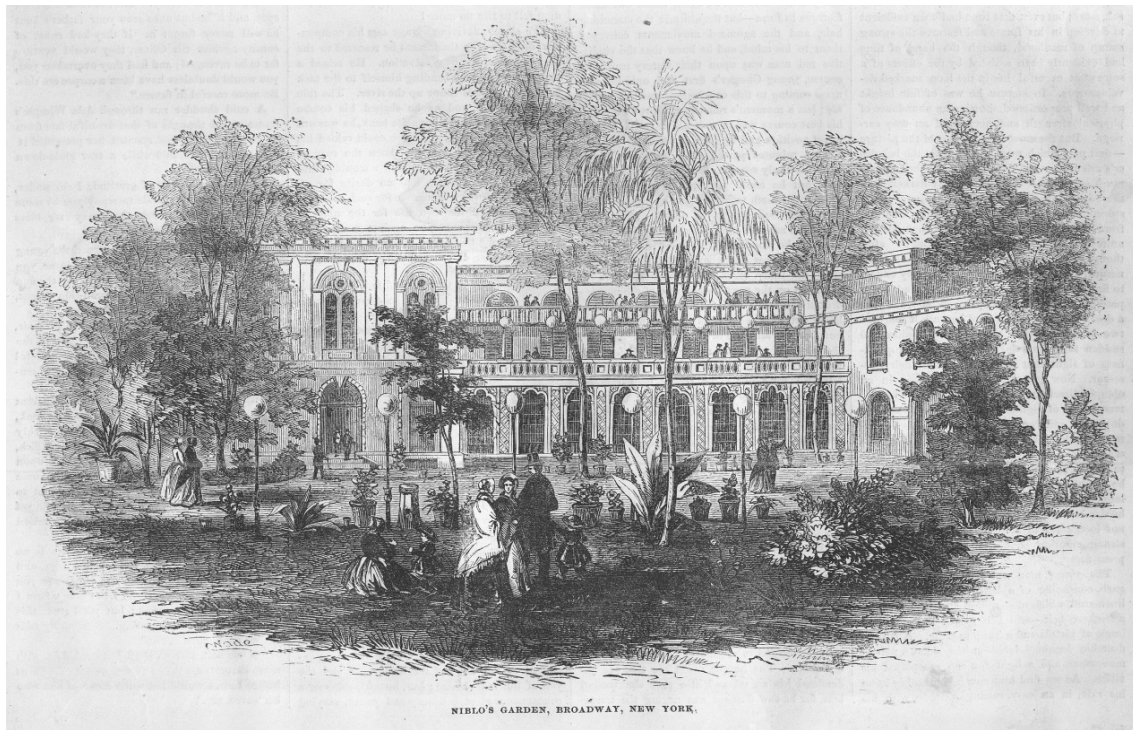


Figure 1. Niblo's Garden. *Gleason's Pictorial* (Boston), March 6, 1852. Author's collection.

Tied to this idea of self-display was the display of class: what one wore, where one was, and who saw one there, were indicative of class status as performed. While America cannot be seen to have been a “classless” society, the ideal that all were equal was a popular one. The fact that people of all classes attended pleasure gardens in England is commonly cited in order to prove the fact that pleasure gardens (notably Vauxhall and Ranelagh) were spaces in which “mixing” and “mingling” of people of all ranks of society occurred.<sup>13</sup> In America, the idea of a space in which class divisions were lacking would seem perfectly in line with the new nation’s mission of equality, and so we would expect the gardens in the US to be seen as such. However, the pleasure gardens of America (and arguably in the UK as well) were places in which people could “perform” class, wearing appropriate clothes and behaving as though of a higher class, thus conceding that class divisions existed. Such behaviour allowed individuals to perform as persons of a higher social class through self-conscious display while also reinforcing the idea that there was something inherently “better” in being of a different (higher) class.

This is seen most clearly in the operations of the Vauxhall under Joseph Delacroix in New York in 1803, when he allowed free admission, so long as people dressed in a genteel manner.<sup>14</sup> Initially, this was to encourage people of lower classes to have the opportunity to attend free of charge and behave as though members of a higher class. Delacroix quickly modified this, however, when he observed that many who were “genteely dressed ... were not genteel in character, [and] therefore not suited to the chief part of the company who frequented his gardens.”<sup>15</sup> Delacroix makes it clear through this announcement that an outward

show of gentility through dress was not sufficient to allow a person to pass as being genteel. In order to assert a degree of exclusivity, Delacroix introduced the dividing line of price, enforcing a “refreshment ticket.” While people were still able to observe others and to be aware of others observing them, class was exposed as more than mere performance—it was not open to all.

As a result of such decisions by proprietors, pleasure gardens in the cities of north east USA became associated with genteel behaviour and refined leisure from the 1790s to the 1820s, and were able to be perceived as being exclusive locales fit for the most refined and genteel citizens. By parading within the space of a pleasure garden, patrons were performing gentility through association and took pains to ensure their dress matched their desired class performance. However, by the 1840s, the New York gardens were increasingly becoming associated with lower classes and unruly behaviour. Observers note the gardens sinking into “a state of rowdyism,” becoming victims “of a decline in the quality of patronage” with “the most sensational entertainments ... attracting the lowest riffraff or clientele.”<sup>16</sup> Although the gardens had a history of being elegant and elite venues, suitable for the conspicuous display of social class elevation, by the mid-19th century their nature had changed.

The stages upon which these performances were occurring were also deliberate constructions, due to their very nature as gardens within cities. Pleasure gardens presented patrons with a highly-constructed version of the Edenic landscape in the heart of early American cities. The phrase “rural retreat” was a common name for pleasure gardens, yet many of the post-1800 sites were found in the heart of the city—a retreat without departing from the city itself. Pleasure gardens provided the semblance of escape and catered to a nostalgia that was hard to find at other venues within rapidly-expanding cities; they allowed city-dwellers to indulge in aspects of and associations with the country without abandoning their city lives. The place of the rural (an aspect crucial to American identities) was thus supported within cities through the gardens.

The rural ideal has been a central element in American identities from the very founding of the country. Thomas Bender describes agrarianism as “a political philosophy and a definition of a social ideal” that figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton saw as central to an American way of life; “simplicity, farming, virtue, and Republicanism” he goes on to argue, “were fused into a national ideology.”<sup>17</sup> Leo Marx similarly observes that “the pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery.”<sup>18</sup> As cities expanded, the vices associated with urbanisation and the threat they posed to this rural sensibility were persistent topics of discussion. While some forms of entertainment emerged intended to educate and warn against such ills, others appeared to counteract their effects and/or to provide an alternative, such as pleasure gardens.

In Gray's Ferry (the garden cited at the start of this article), for example, the proprietors sought to capitalise on the appeal of the rural through careful selection of entertainments and the language used to describe it. Garden proprietors in Baltimore and New York used such names as "Rural Retreat" and "Rural Felicity" and promoted them as allowing patrons to escape "the heat and fatigues of the day" and to "enjoy rural life."<sup>19</sup> In these ways, proprietors assured patrons that despite the increase in urbanisation (and the urban location of the pleasure gardens themselves), the rural ideal was unharmed and could still be part of modern life.

Coupled with this concern about urbanisation was a need and desire to embrace or at least slow down the inevitable march of progress.<sup>20</sup> Harmless novelties and recent innovations such as gas lighting, the velocipede (an early bicycle), and waxworks were exhibited within pleasure gardens, and many of them were framed within a patriotic context. Some of the earliest fireworks exhibitions took place within such sites, and displays of pyrotechnics, mechanical devices, and displays of light and colour were very common.<sup>21</sup> In positioning such items within a garden, fears of rapid industrialisation were allayed within a patriotic context; fireworks were often in celebration of the Fourth of July, and illuminations and transparencies often depicted presidents or patriotic images. It was in the fairs and exhibits specifically dedicated to manufacturing, however, that this can be seen most clearly.

Founded in 1828, the American Institute held yearly exhibits that showcased "the finest products of agriculture and manufacturing, the newest types of machinery, [and] the most recent contributions of inventive genius" with the goal of "encouraging and promoting domestic industry in this State and the United States."<sup>22</sup> These fairs were held at a number of pleasure gardens, including Niblo's Garden (1834 and 1845), Castle Garden (1846 to 1853) and Palace Garden (1859).<sup>23</sup> Using the gardens for the display of new technologies was more than a matter of mere convenience (i.e., pleasure gardens were not the only suitably-sized spaces). By using the space of the pleasure gardens, organisers of the fair were part of an ongoing coupling of education with entertainment that was later employed at museums (such as Peale's and Barnum's in Philadelphia and New York respectively) and in the theatres (such as the temperance reform melodramas, *The Drunkard* and *Ten Nights in a Barroom*). In the American Institute's annual fairs, the displays of products were a means of celebrating the nation's achievements.

Yet as effective as the pleasure gardens were in bridging the country and the city, the rural and the urban, and as unique as they seemed in terms of venues for performance of self and class, other forms took on some of these roles concurrently, including public parks and world's fairs. These venues formed transitional stages leading to the modern day amusement park.

### ***Public Parks***

The green space open to all within a city that was the public park shared many attributes with the pleasure garden—both drew on the idea of escaping from the chaos of the city without actually leaving the city, both contained elements of self-conscious display (seeing and being seen), and both provided spaces in which those of lower classes could (and were actively encouraged to) perform as though of a higher class, with a view to being considered more “respectable.” Although Thomas Garrett argues the public park system served the same functions as pleasure gardens (thus leading to the latter’s decline), a more complex relationship can in fact be seen, with aspects of public parks rejecting the form of and associations with pleasure gardens, while also retaining similarities as the social and cultural context evolved.<sup>24</sup>

Some public parks sought to distance themselves from the idea of pleasure gardens. When designing Central Park, for example, the Central Park Commission considered pleasure gardens as a model for park development.<sup>25</sup> However, it was determined that the park should not reflect pleasure garden sensibilities, but rather have a “unified artistic and social purpose” and be “insulated from both the novelties of pleasure gardens and the social unpredictability of the streets,” and they selected Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s design as best suited to their purposes.<sup>26</sup> Heath Schenker argues that the rejection of the pleasure garden as a model for Central Park was also driven by issues of social class—while pleasure gardens were “associated with working-class leisure” by the mid-century, Central Park was to create “an escape from urban crowds and boisterous revelry.”<sup>27</sup> While this may appear to suggest that Central Park (and public parks generally) sought to distance themselves from pleasure gardens,<sup>28</sup> it could also be argued that they were trying to recapture the ideals pleasure gardens once represented.

In designing the parks, a similar concern with creating the unnatural as natural can be seen; pleasure gardens were often overt manifestations of rural ideals (complete with lakes and shepherds) and were constructed to reflect that ideal. Similarly, the design of public parks was not simply marking off existing green space, but rather the overt construction of *apparently* “natural” spaces. In large part drawing from the British landscape school of design, Central Park required great feats of engineering to be able to come into being.

What pleasure gardens and public parks shared more directly was that they were both responding to the changes that were being seen in the urban landscape. Cities were growing rapidly throughout the 19th century, and they were often portrayed as dens of vice, while the country was associated with innocence, honesty, and patriotism—the latter being threatened by the former. Raymond Weinstein suggests that both public parks and pleasure gardens responded to “the burst in urban populations and the desire of reformers to counteract the negative effects of overcrowding,”<sup>29</sup> and Neil Harris labels them both as “wholesome antidotes to urban congestion,” operating as “safety valves” and “public health measures” which

allowed for the elevation of society from the squalor and poverty that plagued cities.<sup>30</sup>

Thus public parks shared their origins with pleasure gardens in that both forms were created to counteract the ills of rapid urbanisation, and both presented a highly-constructed version of a country landscape in the heart of the city. Although there is no direct link to suggest that public parks led to the demise of pleasure gardens, or that public parks filled a void created by the closure of pleasure gardens, it is clear that despite efforts to differentiate their designs from those of pleasure gardens, they actually shared much in common in terms of the social functions they attempted to fulfill. At the same time as the public park system was emerging, another form was developing that shared links with pleasure gardens—World's Fairs.

### *World's Fairs*

As described above, pleasure gardens played host to many of the American Institute's fairs which can be seen as predecessors to world's fairs. While these fairs were popular for many years, the World's Fairs quickly filled this function as the goal switched from a state-level representation to national and international stages. America's first world's fair came in 1853 with the "Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations" in New York. Inspired by London's Crystal Palace, a large building on the site of what is now Bryant Park, designed by Charles Gildemeister and Georg J. B. Carsten (designer of Copenhagen's Tivoli Park), housed the various exhibits.<sup>31</sup> When the main building burned down in 1858, it was hosting the annual fair of the American Institute, again highlighting the links between the two.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most significant World's Fair in terms of the development of the form came in 1893 with The Columbian Exposition (or the White City, as the 1893 fair was popularly known). This was projected as a unified vision of "harmony, unity, and beauty" and was compared to an "ideal city."<sup>33</sup>

For this fair (as well as public parks), the idea of retreat from the ills of urbanisation could be seen. As John Kasson identifies, there were close ties between the goals of the planners of early public parks and those of the White City, as both "provided an alternative environment that expressed a strong critique of urban conditions and culture," with Central Park providing a "picturesque rural retreat" and the 1893 Exposition, a "heighten[ed] ... sense of possibility of what a city might be."<sup>34</sup> Further, direct links between public parks and World's Fairs and pleasure gardens can be seen in the design component, as Olmstead was involved with the planning of both Central Park and the Columbian Exposition.<sup>35</sup>

Another area in which links can be seen between pleasure gardens and World's Fairs is in the use of technology and the display of mechanical innovations. As we've seen, such displays played an important role in many of the pleasure gardens from their very inception, with fireworks being among the many "velocipede," displays of new artistic mediums (such as transparencies and



panoramas), and, most significantly, the exhibits held in New York by the American Institute were among such displays.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, pre-1893 World's Fairs included such entertainments as "machines-in-motion, tethered balloon ascensions, frequent fireworks displays, drills by the U.S. Life Saving Service in Exposition Lake, and torpedo explosions."<sup>37</sup>

From 1893, world's fairs included the now-infamous "Midway."<sup>38</sup> The Columbian Exposition in Chicago was the first American World's Fair to include the popular entertainments within the grounds of the fair itself; these usually took place on the outskirts of fairs. This area included anthropological exhibits, mechanical rides, various restaurants, and a number of structural marvels. The contents of this portion of the fair provide further direct links between pleasure gardens and amusement parks: the "captive balloon," various panoramas, and theatres coupled with the exotic villages nod towards the activities at pleasure gardens, while the Ferris wheel, "Snow and Ice Railway" (a version of the rollercoaster), and "Street in Cairo" hint at the direct contributions this (and other) World's Fairs were to give to the amusement park. The amusement park presents the next (and final) step in the trajectory under discussion here.

### ***Amusement Parks***

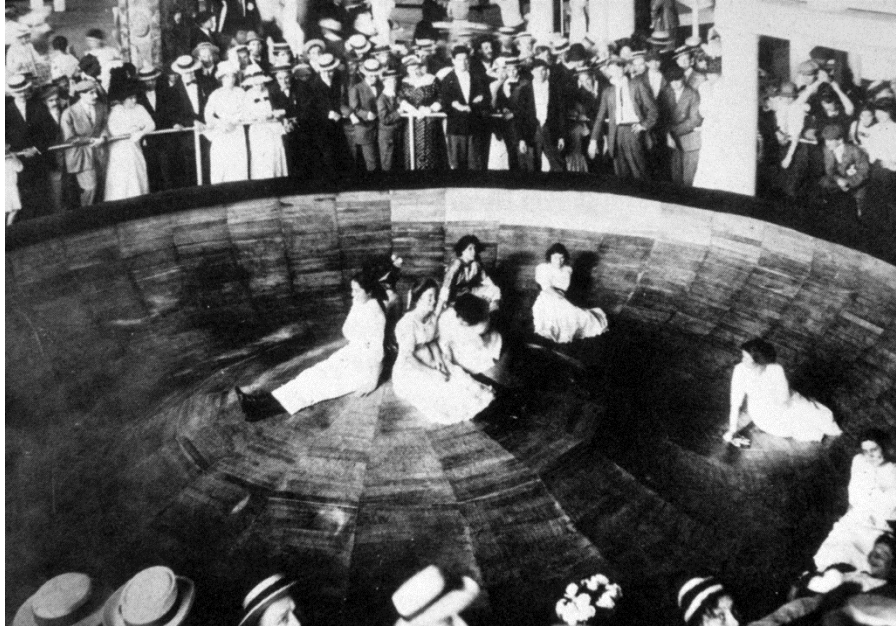
For British gardens, the most commonly-cited answer to the question of what happened to pleasure gardens is that they became amusement parks.<sup>39</sup> The common argument regarding the relationship between the two forms often rests on the British exemplars where the physical space of pleasure gardens became the geographic location of many amusement parks. Josephine Kane's *Edwardian Amusement Parks: The Pleasure Garden Reborn?* for example, suggests that many amusement parks "were in or near an outdoor space that often had a history as a pleasure garden or commercial park of some sort."<sup>40</sup> This does not hold true in the United States, where the land the gardens once occupied was deemed too valuable for large scale recreational facilities like amusement parks. And while there is a case to be made that both pleasure gardens and amusement parks were privately-owned, outdoor entertainment venues catering to the paying public, the relationship between the two is more interesting and nuanced than that.<sup>41</sup>

As John Kasson argues, "America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was at a critical juncture where essential values were in conflict," including "the agrarian ideal" and "the concept of a nation" which were being challenged by "industrial capitalism," and "the [continuing] rise of cities."<sup>42</sup> These questions and conflicts were not new to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but rather had been present in America through the early part of the century, and the amusement park was a significant entertainment venue of the 1880s onwards that took up the baton of addressing these concerns. Much like pleasure gardens and public parks, amusement parks were enclosed areas "segregated from urban environments," which Kasson identifies as being an attempt to "eliminate the unsavory elements of city life."<sup>43</sup> Requiring transportation to visit, early amusement parks were located outside of the city, inviting patrons to escape

the evils of city day-to-day life and to take an excursion to a place designed for escape and release.

The first American amusement park is generally agreed to have been Coney Island, Brooklyn.<sup>44</sup> Initially a seaside resort in 1824, Coney Island offered visitors “seclusion and surf” in an area that was not significantly developed.<sup>45</sup> However, as Coney Island’s fame grew, and, more importantly, transportation became more efficient, a series of establishments emerged that were run by a number of individual entrepreneurs.<sup>46</sup> Operating over the summer months (from May to early September), Coney Island’s various parks were marked by several features that were shared by pleasure gardens: the provision of a form of escape from city life, a concern with improving the moral quality of the entertainments and patrons, the enclosure of outdoor areas into defined spaces requiring admission, and the introduction of mechanical inventions.<sup>47</sup> The improvements in transportation and the business model established by the proprietors of the parks brought the ability to “escape” the city for a day within reach of a wider section of the population. In doing this, amusement parks became a means of escaping the drudgery of daily life in the city, much as the gardens had once done.

Another aspect of amusement parks that is shared with pleasure gardens are the acts of seeing and being seen. The performativity inherent in attending pleasure gardens in both England and America was an important aspect of their allure. In amusement parks, pleasure was to be found in the mechanical rides, making spectatorship which often saw patrons become the object of spectacle. Figs. 2 and 3 reveal the degree to which patrons of the amusement parks were also part of the spectacle, and that the fact that seeing and being seen was part of the appeal. In Fig. 2, a large number of spectators can be seen to closely watch the participants—our attention is drawn to the act of watching. A similar example of the visitor becoming the object of observation can be seen in the Blowhole Theatre at Steeplechase Park, which saw small groups (often couples) being taken by surprise by jets of air which blew garments and accessories (Fig. 3). After making their way through the various elements of this attraction, participants would end up in an auditorium where they were able to view the people behind them going through the same experience—the visitor to this attraction would literally be the spectator and spectacle.<sup>48</sup> While the degree of participation and transparency of the acts of observing and being observed were more pronounced in this setting, pleasure gardens, early public parks, and amusement parks all shared “seeing and being seen” as an essential component.<sup>49</sup>



*Figure 2. Photograph of the "Human Whirlpool" at Steeplechase Park, c.1910.  
Department of Art History, University of Minnesota.*



*Figure 3. The Blowhole Theater at Steeplechase Park, Coney Island, 1943.  
Coney Island History Project.*

A further similarity between pleasure gardens and amusement parks can be observed in the introduction of technological innovations. The importance of rides employing new technologies within the amusement parks is well known—what would an amusement park be if we were to ignore such rides as the rollercoaster, carousel, and Ferris wheel? Although it is tempting to cite the introduction of early rollercoasters in French pleasure gardens as the origin of rollercoasters in American gardens, the trajectory of the introduction of such mechanical rides in America did not simply reflect the French developments. The transition from pleasure garden to amusement park took a slightly different route in the US.<sup>50</sup>

The exact origin of the rollercoaster has been explored fairly comprehensively in Robert Cartmell's *The Incredible Scream Machine*, in which he identifies "Russian mountains" as being the first examples of rollercoasters.<sup>51</sup> Dating to the fifteenth century, these early prototypes were initially made of ice, and wheels were added to the cars in 1784. When introduced in Paris from 1804, these rides gained much popularity and appeared in many Parisian pleasure gardens. In America, the first rollercoaster appears to have been devised independent of the French craze. In 1827, Josiah White developed the switchback railway at Maunch Chuck, Pennsylvania, that employed gravity to transport coal and workers from the top to the bottom of the mountain. To return the carts to the top again, mules, then later, steam engines were employed. In 1872, the use of this railway switched to tourism exclusively, and the ride became a popular attraction. It was this basic idea that Richard Knudsen drew upon when he submitted his 1878 patent for his "Inclined-Plane Railway," which first saw fruition in "Thompson's Switchback Railway" built by Fred Thompson in 1884 in Luna Park, Coney Island.<sup>52</sup> In this and subsequent years, numerous variations and developments of this basic model could be found in Coney Island, including the iconic Steeplechase created by George Tilyou. The connection between coal mining and the rollercoaster can also be seen in Butte, Montana, where one of the latest pleasure gardens I have identified in the US employed a similar device drawing on the mechanics required by the town's mining industry.<sup>53</sup>

These links between amusement parks and mining notwithstanding, the role of World's Fairs in stimulating the development of the amusement park through technological innovations used for pleasure deserves attention. George Tilyou provides a direct link between World's Fairs and the rides at amusement parks: after having seen George Washington Gale Ferris's wheel at the Columbian Exposition of 1897, Tilyou attempted to buy the machine once the exhibition closed in order to bring this technology designed for recreation to the masses in Coney Island. After Ferris refused to sell his creation, Tilyou created his own version for Steeplechase Park.<sup>54</sup> In this manner, direct links can be seen between World's Fairs and the attractions of amusement parks. Similarly, Tilyou's dramatic cyclorama "A Trip to the Moon" opened after he saw a similar display at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo.<sup>55</sup> Earlier links can be seen in 1877, when, as Harris observes, one of "Coney Island's first major novelties was directly imported, in 1877, from the Philadelphia Centennial"—the Sawyer Observatory.<sup>56</sup> Frederick Thomson (co-

founder of Luna Park) further cements these ties to World's Fairs, as he was involved with the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, where he encouraged a focus on the entertainments of the fair, culminating in "Midway Day."<sup>57</sup>

The links between the pleasure gardens, public parks, world's fairs, and amusement parks are numerous. Yet these various forms create a complex trajectory that does not present a simple "A became B" pattern, but rather a variety of forms responding to similar concerns and drives in different ways. Although they possessed a number of common features, they were, in fact, very different venues responding to changing social concerns. Along with increasing pressure for land development and other such external factors, two crucial shifts can be seen between the age of the pleasure garden and the rise of the amusement park that ultimately fuelled this shift from one form of entertainment to the other: the attachment to the rural idyll and the concern with class.

As outlined above, the image of Americans living off the land in an untamed wilderness was an important one, and increasing urbanisation and industrialisation seemed to threaten that. The gardens provided a space that allowed the semblance of preserving and experiencing the country within reach of the conveniences of the city. However the year 1920 marks the first time that more Americans lived in urban areas than rural, meaning a fundamental shift had occurred with regards to the relationship between the rural/urban tension and American identities.<sup>58</sup> While non-urban American identities continue today, the place of the city in American national identities took on new-found and wide-spread acceptance. Although the idea of escape and excursion remained present in the social space of amusement parks, it was merely escape from the city and not necessarily to the country that the amusement parks offered.

Similarly, changing attitudes towards class identities were themselves changing by the early twentieth century. Class was an important element in the success of the gardens: it was instrumental in their success because it allowed people to elevate their class status through performance. Although not always successful, this aspect of the gardens combined nostalgia, the rural idyll, and performative aspects of the form to create a space in which class could be performed. However, as Neil Harris observes, world's fairs and similar forms after the 1930s "no longer had to serve as bridges between high and low; they could, instead, acknowledge the broad middle without apology."<sup>59</sup> Restrained, sedate, and nostalgic forms of entertainment ceased to be as important as they once were, and entertainment without restraint or extensive concern for decorum was no longer in demand.

### ***Conclusion***

Several outdoor entertainment forms can be seen to have direct ties to pleasure gardens; concert saloons, roof garden theatres, vaudeville, World's Fairs,

public parks, and amusement parks can all be traced back to pleasure gardens. Although pleasure gardens were not the only form of popular entertainment to influence these later venues and forms, the pleasure garden was a significant element. From presenting variety entertainments, to celebrating technological advances in the context of national achievement and entertainment, pleasure gardens can be seen to have had a significant impact on these later alternative urban environments, without it being the simple trajectory argued for in relation to the European venues due to variations in geography (and city spaces) and concerns of American national identity.

The function of each venue as a site in which to see and be seen was crucial to their success—whether in the class-defining manner of pleasure gardens and public parks, or the aspect of entertainment this provided at pleasure gardens and amusement parks. The rides and exhibits at Coney Island encouraged such spectacle; the “blowholes” of Steeplechase Park further emphasise this aspect, with the patron becoming very literally the spectator and spectacle.<sup>60</sup> This element is continued with modern-day rollercoasters through the practice of taking photographs of riders at specific points on the ride, then displaying the photos at a booth for immediate observation, as well as for purchase and subsequent display outside the park. Others have pointed to modern-day department stores, shopping malls, and museums, as being other locations in which parade and self-display continue to be demonstrated.<sup>61</sup>

Crucially, hierarchies on the basis of class were witnessed in the gardens and the various related forms discussed here, but this aspect ceased to be as apparent in later forms; the “broad-based, popular culture” of amusement parks and later theme parks were part of a wider shift being seen in the emergence of the middlebrow—the easily accessible, sufficiently respectable, popular forms of entertainment.<sup>62</sup> With regard to performances addressing specific concerns of American identities, the relevance of the rural-urban tension has been shown to have been a particularly important one in the context of the pleasure gardens. Pre-1920, the anxiety over the relationship of American identities to the city and the country was more palpable than in subsequent years. Pleasure gardens (followed by public parks, and, in a slightly different manner, World’s Fairs) responded to this anxiety. Pleasure gardens and public parks both presented patrons with a tamed wilderness—a highly-constructed version of the Edenic landscape at the heart of early American visions of the nation. In providing such spaces, planners and proprietors created reassurance for city-dwellers in their attempt to counteract the vices of the city. Such venues provided the semblance of escape and catered to a nostalgia that was hard to find at other venues within rapidly-expanding cities, allowing city-dwellers to indulge in aspects of and associations with the country, without abandoning their city lives. World’s Fairs such as the Columbian Exposition drew on elements of this idea by providing an alternative—not an escape or haven within a city, but rather, an alternative model—while amusement parks presented the opportunity for escape from the tedium of daily city life, with a brief excursion to, for example, Coney Island.

The period under discussion here witnessed many rapid developments in the fields of science and engineering, and the importance of these developments was seen in the way celebrations and events trumpeted such successes and developments, positioning American industriousness on a national stage. Presenting the best aspects of industrialisation in a space that excluded the detrimental effects of urbanisation was a feature of pleasure gardens (and later, World's Fairs and amusement parks). The display of American industriousness was combined with a vigorous assertion of national worth on an international level with the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations (New York's world fair of 1853) and subsequent American world's fairs. As Neil Harris asserts, the amusement parks that developed out of fairs and gardens continued in this vein, as they were "linked physically and spiritually, to the industrial and technological changes transforming the lives of millions of people," continuing the importance of technological advancement into the twentieth century.<sup>63</sup>

In all these ways, pleasure gardens have spoken to concerns about what it meant to be American at a time when the question was being vigorously debated and continuously renegotiated. Through their form as garden, their focus on visuality, and their various exhibits and entertainments, pleasure gardens served many functions within the construction and performance of American national identities. That they became largely obsolete in the late 19th century should not be taken as evidence of their insignificance—their impact can still be felt in forms of popular entertainment familiar to us all today.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to both Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix and Jonathan Chambers for their edits and helpful suggestions in bringing this article to its present form.

<sup>2</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, May 19, 1789.

<sup>3</sup> *Federal Gazette* (Philadelphia), July 3, 1790.

<sup>4</sup> For a list of American pleasure gardens, see: [www.americanpleasuregardens.com](http://www.americanpleasuregardens.com).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Burge Johnson, *The Roof Gardens of Broadway Theatres, 1883-1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 2; Thomas M. Garrett, "A History of Pleasure Gardens in New York City, 1700-1865" (PhD diss., New York University, 1978), 636; Raymond M. Weinstein, "Disneyland and Coney Island: Reflections of the Evolution of the Modern Amusement Park," *Journal of Popular Culture* 66:1 (1992): 136.

<sup>6</sup> Niblo's and the Palace Garden in New York became theatres, as did the Vauxhall of Charleston and Vauxhall, Washington Gardens of Boston.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Warwick Wroth, *Cremorne and the Later London Gardens* (London: Elliot Stock, 1907); Heath Schenker, "Pleasure Gardens, Theme Parks, and the Picturesque," in *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, ed. Terence Young and Robert Riley (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002); Katy Matheson, "Niblo's Garden and its 'Concert Saloon,' 1828-1846," *Performing Arts Resources* 21 (1998); and Johnson, *The Roof Gardens of Broadway Theatres* (see n. 5).

<sup>8</sup> Brooks McNamara, *The New York Concert Saloon: The Devil's Own Nights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8; Matheson, "Niblo's Garden," 99.

<sup>9</sup> Although an encyclopedia entry on the subject identifies the first use of the term “vaudeville” in America as being in Boston in 1840, Odell’s *Annals of the New York Stage* reveals that Niblo was employing the term to describe “unrelated acts on a single bill” in his gardens from at least 1836. Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, 1 (New York: Routledge, 2007), xv; George C. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, Vol. 4 (1928; New York: AMS Press, 1970), 160, 180. See also Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607-1940* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1940).

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Gerald Nosan, “Pavilions, Power, and Patriotism: Garden Architecture at Vauxhall,” in *Bourgeois and Aristocratic Cultural Encounters in Garden Art, 1550-1850*, ed. Michel Conan, (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002), 101-21; and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Neil Harris describes pleasure gardens, amusement parts, and theme parks as “siblings” in “Expository Expositions: Preparing for the Theme Parks,” in *Designing Disney’s Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, ed. Karal Ann Marling (New York: Flammarion, 1997), 20.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> The most sophisticated discussion of this generally-held truth is to be found in the work of Hannah Grieg, “‘All Together and All Distinct’: Public Sociability and Social Exclusivity in London’s Pleasure Gardens, ca. 1740-1800,” *Journal of British Studies* 51:1 (2012): 50-75.

<sup>14</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, May 2, 1803.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Cortlandt Van Dyke Hubbard, “The American ‘Vauxhall’ of The Federal Era,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 57 (1944): 166; Garrett, “A History of Pleasure Gardens in New York City,” 611.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in 19th Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Federal Gazette* (Baltimore), January 30, 1800; *Maryland Journal*, July 7, 1789; *North American* (Philadelphia), June 11, 1841; *Daily Advertiser*, June 27, 1793.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the relationship between the rural ideal and increasing industrialisation, see chapter 2 of Naomi J. Stubbs, *Cultivating National Identity through Performance: American Pleasure Gardens and Entertainment* (Palgrave, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, volcanic eruptions at McArran’s Garden, Philadelphia, the velocipede at Vauxhall, Philadelphia, and various transparencies and illuminations.

<sup>22</sup> Edwin Forrest Murdock, “The American Institute,” in *A Century of Industrial Progress*, ed. Frederic William Wile (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1928), v-vi.

<sup>23</sup> Ethan Robey, “The Utility of Art: Mechanics’ Institute Fairs in New York City, 1828-1876” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2000), 628-35.

<sup>24</sup> Garrett, “A History of Pleasure Gardens in New York City,” 616-20.

<sup>25</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Schenker, “Pleasure Gardens, Theme Parks, and the Picturesque,” 69-70, 82, 86.

<sup>28</sup> While Central Park should not be allowed to stand in for all public parks, this example presents an interesting case study in that planners had actively to choose between specific proposals from various parties, rather than contracting a landscape architect (a new job title at that time) to undertake the commission. However, many public parks (designed by Olmsted or not) adhered to the same principles and were responding to similar drives.

<sup>29</sup> Weinstein, “Disneyland and Coney Island,” 133.

<sup>30</sup> Harris, “Expository Expositions,” 20.

<sup>31</sup> John R. Davis, “New York 1853,” in John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle, eds., *Encyclopedia of World’s Fairs and Expositions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 18.



<sup>32</sup> The American Institute's annual fair was held in the (New York) Crystal Palace every year between 1853 and 1858. Robey, "The Utility of Art," 633.

<sup>33</sup> Russell Lewis, preface to *Grand Illusions: Chicago's World's Fair of 1893*, ed. Neil Harris, Wim de Wit, James Gilbert, and Robert W. Rydell (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1993), xi-xii.

<sup>34</sup> John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 18-19. While Kasson uses Central Park as his chief example, he allows his argument to encompass all 19th-century public parks, using Central Park as the specific example only due to its ubiquity. The problem of allowing Central Park to stand in for all public parks is also seen in discussions of world's fairs, where the White City is frequently permitted to stand in for the idea of American world's fairs.

<sup>35</sup> It should also be noted that Walt Disney's father was involved with the construction of the Chicago World's Fair, inspiring him to create his theme parks. R. Reid Badger, "Chicago 1893," in Findling and Pelle, 123.

<sup>36</sup> Other examples of where inventions were displayed in pleasure gardens can be seen with the various balloon ascensions (at Vauxhall [New York], Columbian Gardens [Baltimore], and Washington Gardens [Boston], for example), the demonstration of the velocipede at Vauxhall (Philadelphia), and the various developments in firework technologies.

<sup>37</sup> Miki Pfeffer, "New Orleans 1884-1885," in Findling and Pelle, 83.

<sup>38</sup> The "midway" is an American term for the area at a fair, amusement park, or festival where the amusements and rides are clustered together. A comparable term might be "sideshow alley."

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Schenker, "Pleasure Gardens, Theme Parks, and the Picturesque"; and Josephine Kane, "Edwardian Amusement Parks: The Pleasure Garden Reborn?" in Jonathan Conlin, ed. *The Pleasure Garden, From Vauxhall Gardens to Coney Island* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Kane, "Edwardian Amusement Parks," 227.

<sup>41</sup> Other arguments seeing a link between the two forms have focused on the growing eclecticism: "by the early 19th century the pleasure garden had the look and feel of a fairground." Johnson, *The Roof Gardens of Broadway Theatres*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 23-24.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Weinstein, "Amusement Parks," 23.

<sup>45</sup> Weinstein, "Disneyland and Coney Island," 135.

<sup>46</sup> Regular service to Coney Island was offered by steamship from 1847 (the journey taking about two hours) and via a plank road from 1850. By the end of the 1870s, nine steamboats and five rail lines covered the distance in half an hour. Woody Register, "Coney Island," in *Encyclopedia of Recreation and Leisure in America*, ed. Gary S. Cross, 1 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2004), 239-40.

<sup>47</sup> Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 45.

<sup>49</sup> In present-day theme parks, it is common for riders to have their photograph taken while on a rollercoaster, further continuing this focus on the patron as spectacle.

<sup>50</sup> See Schenker, "Pleasure Gardens, Theme Parks, and the Picturesque"; and Kane, "Edwardian Amusement Parks: The Pleasure Garden Reborn?"

<sup>51</sup> Robert Cartmell, *The Incredible Scream Machine: A History of the Rollercoaster* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 1-47.

<sup>52</sup> Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Harry C. Freeman, *A Brief History of Butte, Montana: The World's Greatest Mining Camp* (Chicago: Henry O'Shepard, 1900), 48-51.

<sup>54</sup> Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 57.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Harris, "Expository Expositions," 21.

<sup>57</sup> Woody Register, *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 80.

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<sup>58</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921), 57.

<sup>59</sup> Harris, "Expository Expositions," 26.

<sup>60</sup> Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry*, 45.

<sup>61</sup> Register, *The Kid of Coney Island*, 17; Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence," in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 140-74.

<sup>62</sup> Schenker, "Pleasure Gardens, Theme Parks, and the Picturesque," 89.

<sup>63</sup> Harris, "Expository Expositions," 21.