

**A City of Homes and Homeless: Portland's Early-Twentieth
Century Development and Its Consequences for the County
Poor Farm**

Kira Lesley

Portland State University

Society of Architectural Historians—Marion Dean Ross Chapter

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From 1906 to 1913, Portland experienced a boom that reshaped the city in such a dramatic way that the Poor Farm, situated as it was off Tanner Creek in the Tualatin Hills, was now close to the center of town. Psychically, the poor farm was too ramshackle and dilapidated to be brought into the fold of the City Beautiful. Physically, as land values skyrocketed in Portland, would-be developers and their supporters chafed at prime real estate being squandered on social welfare.

Like other western cities, such as Denver, San Francisco and Seattle, Portland came into its own as a modern city from the closing years of the nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth. Portland's tremendous growth, in population, finance, and building in the early twentieth century, created anxiety for the city's residents—as it did in other West Coast cities. The surge in population, industry, and the built environment coincided with increased attempts to impose order on growth—both financial and physical.

West Coast cities, such as Oakland, Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles, all brought in professional planners in the opening decades of the twentieth century to draft comprehensive plans for city development. Proponents of city planning, primarily businessmen and their political allies, described the predicted benefits of planning in speeches and editorials. A well-ordered city, they argued, would bring beauty, improved morality, civic virtue and financial gain.¹

¹ For a discussion of city planning in Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle and Portland, see Mansel Blackford, *The Lost Dream*. Blackford assesses the planning movement in these cities through the framework of organizational synthesis. He finds that such a framework is useful, which views city planning in the early twentieth century as the product of late nineteenth century business organizations and associations, as useful but incomplete. The concept overreaches, according to Blackford, because it assumes that business interests all acted in unison; in reality, Blackford argued, business interests covered a

Competition with regional rivals drove much of the push for growth and development—and planning—in Western cities of the Progressive Era. As New York and Boston, or Philadelphia and Baltimore, had done a century earlier, West Coast cities fought for financial, commercial, and cultural supremacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the Panama Canal under construction beginning in 1903, businessmen along the Pacific Coast jockeyed for lead position to capitalize on the increased trade the canal's opening would bring.²

In Portland, this coming of age involved a flurry of identity building. Some of the resulting developments, such as the planting of two landscaped rose gardens and the creation of the citywide Rose Festival, were the direct result of deliberate planning by professional and businessmen. Others, such as Pittock Mansion, were private enterprises, made possible by the economic boom, that have become associated with the city's identity over time. Portlanders attempted to redefine their city in both absolute and relative ways: planners and civic leader sought to create a city of world class beauty and design, and business and professional men pushed to establish Portland as the regional hub over Denver, San Francisco, and especially Seattle. In the new Portland, there would be no room for last century's poor farm.

Keeping up with the Competition

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Portland boosters wanted to attract more people. Portland was a regional powerhouse, but its population was too small to

broad range of people and opinions.

² Mansel Blackford, *The Lost Dream: Businessmen and City Planning on the Pacific Coast, 1890-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993),15-20.

support aspirations of being a national player. In 1890, Portland's population was less than half that of Denver, and less than a sixth that of San Francisco. Even worse in the eyes of merchants and bankers, the city seemed to be losing ground to Seattle. Although Portland doubled its population in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and then again in the opening decade of the twentieth, Seattle grew even more rapidly. Seattle did not edge out Portland as the largest city in the Northwest until 1910, but Portland businessmen felt increasing pressure from the northern neighbors beginning in the 1890s.

While Portland struggled to regain financial stability after the panic of 1893 (which hit Denver especially hard), Seattle successfully promoted itself as the jumping off point for the Yukon Gold Rush of 1892, and was on its way to becoming the international hub of the Northwest, the gateway to Alaska and to the East. Fearing they would soon lose their primacy as the region's commercial and shipping center, Portland businessmen began to organize.

Portland boosters emphasized the city's perfect placement to serve as the regional shipping point for the Northwest's natural bounty. The first Portland Chamber of Commerce bulletin described the city's geographic advantage: "The geographic position of Portland and the immense territory of rich country tributary to it has made the city a strong commercial center and gained for it the title of 'Prosperous Portland.'" ³ Further, as a 1907 souvenir book sought to demonstrate, Portland's "beautiful and commodious" harbor was "the envy of the Puget Sound cities." ⁴ The same book claimed that Portland

³ *Chamber of Commerce Bulletin* July 1904, Published Monthly Under the Auspices of the Portland Chamber of Commerce, 4.

⁴ Introduction to *Portland, Oregon: The City of Roses*, (The Portland Post Card Company, Portland, 1907). Introduction.

shipped more wheat than the Puget Sound cities combined.

These souvenir books, some of which were published by the Portland Chamber of Commerce, cited Portland as the major shipping port for cattle from Eastern Oregon and fruit and wheat from the central Inland Empire. The Willamette, for its part, brought natural produce from the fabled fertile valley for distribution through Portland to the region and beyond, to the Pacific Rim. Seattle and Tacoma had no such rivers to supply their ports, boosters wrote.⁵

In addition to be occupying the best geographic position among Western Cities, Portland was also the most respectable, the most civilized, and the most “eastern,” according to boosters. Compared to the raucous and rowdy San Francisco and upstart, precocious Seattle, middle middle-class Portland seemed to residents a community of intellect and refinement—a city of “245,000 happy, contented, and prosperous souls.”⁶ The solid, sober image that boosters projected was that of “a city of homes” and “a city of roses.”⁷ In promoting middle-class respectability, Portland business leaders were following the likes of Denver and Oakland, whose own promoters were trying to distance their cities from the boom-and-bust, bachelor society image that would-be investors might still have associated with Western cities.⁸ In addition, all Portland businessmen at the dawn of the twentieth century were concerned with creating new opportunities for

⁵ Carl Abott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-century City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983): 35.

⁶ *Portland, Oregon: The City of Roses*, 1907. Introduction. The population cited here is higher than the U.S. Census statistics for 1910, three years after this souvenir book was published.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Blackford, *The Lost Dream*, 1993.

profit while protecting existing investments.⁹ Portlanders were determined to grow their city.

Despite the region's undeniable bounty, however, the number of indigent men and women continued to grow. Ledgers of admission to the County Hospital and Poor Farm show an increasing number of admissions every year. Further, the farm was far from self-supporting, even in the fertile Western Oregon climate. Food, especially meat, was purchased from suppliers, attempts at growing hay and other grains failed, and the fuel needs depleted the farm's supply of firewood. Reports of the farm published in *The Oregonian* from the late 1890s described the quality of the soil as not very productive. In addition, even at times when vegetables were abundant, the county had to pay outside workers to harvest them.¹⁰ The reality of life for the county's poorest residents, however, did nothing to dull the enthusiasm of the city's promoters.

The Great Extravaganza

Early twentieth-century Portland boosterism reached its zenith in the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition.¹¹ The "Great Extravaganza" transformed the city more greatly

⁹ Ibid 46.

¹⁰ "Defends Mr. Courtney," *The Oregonian*, April 3, 1904. Accessed through Multnomah County Library. Admissions information comes from analysis of the County Hospital and Poor Farm admissions ledger, located at the Multnomah County archives in Portland, Oregon. "Will Raise Vegetables: The Poor Farm Land is Not Suitable for Grain," *The Oregonian*, September 4, 1896. Accessed through the Multnomah County Library. "Crops on County Poor Farm: Plenty of Food for the Inmates but Labor is 'Scarce,'" *The Oregonian*, August 3, 1901

¹¹ Much scholarship, from both amateur researchers and distinguished historians, has been devoted to the Lewis and Clark Exposition. Academics and the local public are still fascinated by the fair. See Carl Abbott, *The Great Extravaganza: Portland and the Lewis and Clark Exposition* (2004); Robert Rydell, "Visions of Empire: International Expositions in Portland and Seattle, 1905-1909" *Pacific Historical Review* 52 (1):37-65; Olsen, Deborah M. "Fair Connections: Women's Separatism and the Lewis and Clark Exposition of 1905." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 109 (2), 2008: 174-203; Blee, Lisa. "Completing Lewis and Clark's westward march: Exhibiting a history of empire at the 1905 Portland World's Fair," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 106 (2), 2005: 232-253.

than any other event would until at least the first World War. Business and civic leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries knew that World's Fairs represented progress. In addition, such an event would bring an immediate influx of cash to the city and would spur development, leading to more profit down the road. Fearful of the growing cities to the North and wishing to capitalize on new markets in Asia and Latin America, leaders such as *Oregonian* publisher Harvey Scott pushed to make Portland the seat of the West Coast's first world's fair, thereby solidifying Portland's regional pre-eminence.

Starting in 1899, wealthy Portlanders lobbied hard to stage the exhibition as soon as possible. Scholars of the World's Fair phenomenon, which reached its zenith from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, have frequently discussed how elite groups who funded such exhibitions used them to promote their technological advancement and civilization, especially in comparison to the colonies and protectorates that formed their empires. Scholars have argued that funders used world's fairs to promote national identity.¹² The same argument could be made for the use of fairs to promote local and regional identity.

Portland business leaders, who were all white, were concerned with the depiction of the relationship between the white man and the Asian man; in 1905 Portland, Asian markets were the future, and developers strove to emphasize Portland as the gateway to the Oriental consumer. The event's laborious title--"The Lewis and Clark Centennial and

¹² Katherine Smits and Alix Jansen, "Staging the Nation and Expos and World's Fairs," *National Identities* 14 (2), 2012: 173-188. Ebsco Host.

American Pacific Exhibition and Oriental Fair"-- was chosen to underscore the city's role in the new empire.¹³ As local businessman Irwin Mahon cautioned, "Oregon has the army of material with which to achieve glory by capturing the preponderance assured to it in the general affairs of the world, but Oregon can not gain the victory unless it utilizes--and this means work--the opportunity now at its disposal." Men who envisioned a grand metropolis for Portland believed the fair was the vehicle to achieve their vision.

In many ways, the Lewis and Clark Exposition was a great success. It was praised in editorials of the day and it precipitated a seven-year boom for the city. Bankers, brokers and the Board of trade had pushed for the Exposition, and the planning process brought together the cadre of businessmen who would guide Portland's land use for the next two decades.¹⁴

But if Portlanders wanted to demonstrate their superiority to other cities and live up to the Chamber of Commerce's "Prosperous Portland" image,¹⁵ they could not have the county hospital and poor farm on display. Portland businessmen and developers struggled with how to promote their city as a leader of commerce, industry and civilization, with a relic of centuries past, and highly visible symbol of poverty, in their midst. As housing developments crept up over the West Hills in the years following the fair, businessmen and politicians increasingly could not keep the poor farm out of sight, or mind.

¹³ Carl Abbott, *The Great Extravaganza*, xii.

¹⁴ Carl Abbott. *Portland: Planning, Politics and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1983): 33.

¹⁵ Though the July 1904 Chamber of Commerce bulletin claimed Portland had the nickname "Prosperous Portland," it does not appear in literature from that time period nearly as frequently as "city of roses." It seems likely that the Chamber was hoping to make the nickname catch on.

A “City of Homes”

Much of the Fair’s exhibits and programming reflected hopes for the future as much as reality of the present. For the Multnomah County Poor Farm, the particular aspirations that proved most relevant were those of real estate developers. In the years following the fair, the city experienced an unprecedented building frenzy. As high-end residential neighborhoods closed in on the Poor Farm from all directions, the farm and its impoverished, tubercular residents seemed increasingly out of place.

The subdivisions that stood to gain the most from The Lewis and Clark Exposition were Willamette Heights and Westover Terrace, located on the hillside overlooking the fairgrounds. The fairgrounds sat below, on the former site of Guild’s Lake, currently the Northwest Industrial District. In 1905, these hillside neighborhoods had been platted, but were largely undeveloped and had very few houses. Nevertheless, savvy businessmen promoted Willamette Heights as a point of interest in the “Portland For the Newcomer Section” of the Chamber of Commerce Bulletin.¹⁶ The blurb described the neighborhood’s “fine point of view,” and “handsome residences.”¹⁷ Despite the presence of a few expensive homes, many lots of land remained unsold at the beginning of the exposition.

Further south along the ridge of the West Hills, Portland Heights had been a summer home destination for Portland’s elite for at least two decades before the streetcar line or the fair. But the Portland Heights loop and Willamette Heights route opened up

¹⁶ Willamette Heights appeared in the “Points of Interest” section of the Portland Chamber of Commerce Bulletin from 1904 to 1910 and possibly later.

¹⁷ Chamber of Commerce Bulletin, August 1904, Portland.

those areas for development on a large scale. Like Willamette Heights, Portland Heights also featured prominently in Chamber of Commerce Bulletins. From Portland Heights, the bulletin glowed, “a magnificent view of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers is afforded” and “within a fifteen minute walk is the far-famed Council Crest.”¹⁸ Real estate developers hoped that the increased traffic on the streetcar would result in more land sold and developed.

Conveniently, the streetcar line made a direct loop into these new hillside neighborhoods, and fairgoers could see for themselves the fine views these plots of land would command. Daily programs printed the day’s events and reminded the reader: “don’t miss the famous Portland Heights loop ride.”¹⁹ The fame of the loop ride was probably overstated, but the views were breathtaking. When the Portland Heights streetcar loop opened in 1904, it offered “the finest view of Portland and the surrounding country [which is] obtained from our heights to the southwest of the city.”²⁰ The line began at Union Station, ran into the heart of downtown and then climbed a hill to City Park. From there, the Portland Heights Loop headed north, over the Jefferson Street viaduct,²¹ to Council Crest, the highest elevation in the city. From the Crest, a visitor could take in “the beauty for which [Portland] is justly noted” and gain “a knowledge of the sublimity of the panorama which Joaquin Miller, Thomas Nast, Charles Warren Stoddard, Joseph Cooke and other famous personages have eulogized.”²² The new infrastructure brought passengers, who were part of the city’s burgeoning tourist

¹⁸ Chamber of Commerce Bulletin, August 1904, Portland.

¹⁹ Carl Abbott lecture at Architectural Heritage Center, Portland, November 12, 2016.

²⁰ “New Portland Heights Loop,” Chamber of Commerce Bulletin, July 1904.

²¹ which was replaced by the Vista Bridge two decades later.

²² “New Portland Heights Loop,” Chamber of Commerce Bulletin, July 1904.

economy, and the poverty and disease of the poor farm into close proximity.

The growth of the streetcar suburb in Portland began before the World's Fair, but after the fair, real estate development and land speculation reached unprecedented heights. Construction soared on both sides of the river. On the West Side, the West Hills neighborhoods of Willamette Heights, Portland Heights, and Westover Terrace saw new development, while on the East Side, Piedmont, Irvington, Alameda and Laurelhurst beckoned with promises of "high class homes" and "beautiful residence park[s]."²³ Between 1905 and 1906, real estate values increased by thirty percent. The growth was especially steep on the open and flat East Side, where the price of building lots tripled or quadrupled between 1900 and 1910.²⁴

East Side property values may have increased more precipitously, but the West Side was also booming. Land prices along the West Hills, in fact, increased so rapidly in a few years that John Charles Olmsted writing to the Park Board in 1908 expressed concern that the city could not longer afford to purchase much of the land outlined for a park system in his 1903 plan.²⁵ The properties along the West Hills were owned by a patchwork of different individuals and companies, who found the post-exposition boom an opportune time for development. Some notable Portlanders expressed their desire to see the West Hills used for housing. Publisher Harvey Scott appears to have favored development of the West Hills—but development of a certain class. His editorial stated: "Many people have expressed themselves in favor of the City Park. The proposal to open

²³ Advertisement for Alameda Park and Laurelhurst, Chamber of Commerce Bulletin, February 1910, 61-63.

²⁴ Abbott, *Portland*, 1984: 54-55.

²⁵ Correspondence between John Charles Olmsted and the Portland Park Board, 1907, Files of the Portland Park Board at the City of Portland Archives.

up a panorama of scenery by a system of boulevards on the heights back of Portland has been received with strong expressions of approval. Everybody admits that the prospect from the park is peerless.”²⁶ Thus for Scott, the West Hills and their magnificent views could be used for private dwellings, but only of the high end variety.

A bit of topographical analysis suggests that the Poor Farm land was at least partially visible from many of the most-coveted, and increasingly developed, sites in the West Hills. According to data compiled by the city and published on Portland Maps, the land forming the original City Park boundaries ranges from approximately 380 feet to 560 feet in elevation. The area where the Oregon Zoo is today, which comprised the southern reach of the Poor Farm land, rests at about 625 feet, while the larger northern section of the parcel, mostly today’s Hoyt Arboretum, is a bit higher at 825 ft.

Although it is impossible to say with certainty exactly which elements of the farm were visible from which vantage points, it seems likely that visitors to City Park and Macleay Park could have seen the farm land with its county hospital, pigs, cows, tuberculosis ward and pest house. Although most of this land today is heavily wooded, in the early twentieth century much of the West Hills’ forest had been logged.²⁷ Pictures from that time period show a much clearer hillside. The Poor Farm very likely was visible from the desirable locations in Portland Heights (elevation 625 ft) and Council Crest (elevation 1070 feet). Even if residents of these older neighborhoods were accustomed to the poor farm vantage, newer developments were going up all around the Farm.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Carl Abbott lecture at AHC.

Unlike other world's fairs, the Lewis and Clark Exposition did not have a lasting physical impact on the immediate surroundings. That is, it left no park or monument. The Forestry building stood as an impressive reminder until it burned down in the 1960s. Many of the fair promoters had hoped the fair location could be transformed to a permanent park, and a park at the Guild's Lake site would have been in harmony with the Olmsted Plan, but this did not happen. As soon as the fair was over, the land went back to the owners, and quickly became filled in because of development of the West Hills, specifically sluicing of the hillside to create Westover Terrace.²⁸

So while the fair did not change the Portland skyline in the way of the St. Louis arch or the Space Needle, it indirectly influenced the flank of the West Hills by contributing to population growth and land speculation. According to Abbott, the biggest influence of the fair was "to bring together both the men and the approach that guided the search for land-use planning over the next quarter century."²⁹ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Portland business was dominated by the second generation of Portland settlers, who made and lost their fortunes with the growth of the city. Although many of the new leaders were funded by the previous generation's wealth, they brought a new sense of professionalism and systematic purpose to their work. Many of the same men who had served on the Fair Commission would go on to serve on the Planning Commission.³⁰ These same names would help steer Portland through its biggest boom years, and simultaneously suffocate the Poor Farm.

²⁸ Abbott, *Portland* (1984): 47.

²⁹ Ibid 47.

³⁰ Ibid 47-48.

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