
Henry Shaw

Missouri Botanical Garden

By M. Karen Hubbard

Henry Shaw was born on June 13, 1800, and was the oldest of four children. His family lived in Sheffield, England. When he became of age, he was sent away to boarding school. His father's business was not doing too well financially, so the family had to bring Henry home from boarding school. He started to help his father, Joseph Shaw, with the business. They went to Quebec, Canada, where the father had done well selling metal grates which were made in Sheffield, England. Shaw's father had borrowed money to finance selling Sheffield knives in New Orleans. The knives were lost or misplaced so Henry's father sent Henry, a teenager, to New Orleans to obtain and sell the knives. People there were not buying many things at the time so Henry took the knives to an area he heard was growing rapidly – St. Louis. He arrived in St. Louis on May 3, 1819, when he was eighteen. The city was about fifty years old and stretched for about one mile along the river and three blocks deep.

Starting out in the city, he was able to establish a successful hardware store selling high quality cutlery and other metal products to people who were living in St. Louis: farmers, soldiers, and pioneers going west. He never married and did not spend much money so he invested much of his money in real estate, and made a fortune as St. Louis was expanding at the time. In 1839, when he reached the age of forty, he was so wealthy that he was able to retire, but that would not stop his pursuits. His retirement just allowed him to shift his attention to his great interest in botany (study of plants).

Before he started on developing his land, he traveled to visit family as well as for pleasure. When Henry Shaw came back to St. Louis, he had a new home built for him. He called it Tower Grove House. Then, working with leading botanists (people who study plants), Shaw planned and built a garden around his home. As the garden became bigger and more elaborate, he decided to open it to the public and even extended the hospitality of his home. Missouri Botanical Garden was officially founded in 1859 and continues to this day to be a center for botanical research and education.

In 1870, Henry Shaw donated, to the City of St. Louis, 190 acres of land next to the garden for Tower Grove Park. He also helped with its construction. He gave the city a school as well as land for a hospital. In 1885, he gave an endowment of improved real estate to Washington University that yields \$5,000 yearly income to organize and maintain the School of Botany which enabled it to have a Ph.D. program. His efforts also helped to found the Missouri Historical Society.

Shaw personally oversaw the development of the garden for the next thirty years until his death in 1889 at the age of 90. He is buried near his Tower Grove House in the Garden. He gave most of his property to the City of St. Louis and his works are still appreciated to this day.

Today, the Garden is a not-for-profit charitable trust with a mission to discover and share knowledge about plants and their environment in order to preserve and enrich life. Its three functions are research, education, and horticultural display. Not-for-profit organization is an incorporated association, club, or society which operates exclusively for educational, charitable, social welfare, civic improvement, pleasure, recreational, or any other purpose except profit. The shareholders or trustees do not benefit financially. Almost all not-for-profit do not pay federal income taxes.