

Choosing a Site for the Eastern Illinois State Normal School:

A Study of Nineteenth-Century Community Planning and Public Health

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Why was Charleston, a small county seat fighting even to keep its courthouse from moving to another town, chosen as the site for a new State Normal School in 1895? Why was the school located south of the town, when the most convenient means of transport, the railroad, was located to the north? The answers, surprisingly, lie in health scares in Chicago as well as the Columbian World Exposition of 1893.

By the mid-nineteenth century, there was an "instinct for improvement" among community leaders and citizens. People were tired of the ugly, chaotic conditions that existed in cities. It was a commonly held belief that the urban environment was an unnatural and unhealthy place for humans. These ideas transformed into a movement to elevate the urban population by creating more beautiful and natural surroundings. Nature had the power to instill the ideals of America's democratic rural past in the common man. The rural cemetery movement of the 1830s had been translated into a movement for public parks. Public parks were considered necessary to protect public health, provide for recreation, and foster moral improvement and republican virtue, which was disappearing as people lost their connection to the land. City leaders were quick to adopt the vocabulary of sanitary reform in promoting the creation of public parks and squares within the cities.⁽¹⁾

By the end of the Civil War, the public generally understood that disease was preventable. However, it was hard to motivate the public except when epidemics created crises. Then people were willing to implement measures aimed at controlling diseases. Medical theory at this time blamed filth in the form of noxious odors or miasmas caused by decomposing garbage and waste for epidemics. Therefore, reformers believed that cleanliness could solve many of the nation's

health problems. Epidemics usually initiated massive cleanup campaigns. The New York Metropolitan Board of Health's success in combating the 1866 cholera epidemic prompted other cities to establish municipal boards of health. It also prompted a realization by people that their own health and comfort depended in part on their neighbor's and illustrated the need for more water to secure cleanliness. But, the increased usage of water created drainage and disposal problems since most cities did not have a network of drains and sewers. [\(2\)](#)

Chicago in the 1850s had a reputation for being unhealthy. It was no wonder because the city had no sewer system. Garbage and refuse was thrown into the Chicago River or alleys. Drinking water came from shallow wells or the lakeshore. Since the city had been built on the lake plain, it always had a drainage problem. Chicago's problems and the attempts to fix them mirrored what was occurring nationally.

The 1854 cholera epidemic was especially deadly. As a result, in 1855, the city council established a Sewerage Commission, which brought in Ellis Sylvester Chesbrough, the designer of Boston's water system, to design the first comprehensive sewage system in the country. The system had to be built in the middle of the street because the water table was so close to the surface. The sewers were allowed to drain by gravity into the river. The new system created a drier and somewhat healthier Chicago, but the river and the city's drinking water became more polluted. So in 1864, Chesbrough headed the construction of an intake tunnel in the lake out of the way of mounting river pollution. However, the tunnel never worked right. Freshets and spring floods periodically drove sewage into the water system. [\(3\)](#)

Dr. John H. Rauch and other city health officials proposed the creation of anti-dumping laws with strict enforcement. However, city leaders were afraid that this would drive business out of the city. Instead, they chose to adopt Chesbrough's plan to reverse the river and send the sewage through a canal to the Illinois and Mississippi rivers where the water would dilute and deodorize it. The project was completed in July of 1871 and Chicago's waste became the problem of the smaller communities surrounding her. But, shortly after the project was completed, John Wentworth and William Ogden dug a ditch from the Des Plaines River to the Chicago River to drain some land that they owned. This caused sediment to wash into the canal. A year later, the current slowed and stopped. [\(4\)](#)

Then in the summer of 1879, the Des Plaines River flooded and forced the Chicago River back into the lake beyond the intake pipes. Chicago's citizens were forced to boil their drinking water. The problem occurred again in 1885 and set off outbreaks of typhoid, cholera and dysentery. Out of necessity, the state legislature created the Sanitary District of Chicago and gave it the power to tax and issue bonds to

construct a new canal that ran parallel to the old one. The Chicago River was also deepened and widened. The new Ship and Sanitary Canal again reversed the river. However, this time it drew more water from the lake and had a stronger current. The water purified itself through oxidation and dilution by the time it reached Joliet. [\(5\)](#)

The shift from the filth theory of disease to germ theory began in the 1880s as French and German scientists began to demonstrate that germs were the real cause of disease. However, it was the turn-of-the-century before germ theory really began to take hold and campaign for personal hygiene began to appear. Charles V. Chapin, the health commissioner of Providence, Rhode Island, was one of the first people to acknowledge that contagious disease,

[s]pread more among filthy people just because such persons use very little soap and water and allow their faces, hands, belongings and dwellings to become and remain smeared with mucus, saliva, pus and other infectious material. [\(6\)](#)

A pure and ample water supply and personal hygiene were essential to preventing the spread of germs.

While the metropolises worked to clean themselves up, small towns and cities tried to grow. During the nineteenth century, it was a widely held belief that with enough capital, political manipulation, and human spirit any town could become a great metropolis. Towns promoted themselves relentlessly in the hopes that they would turn into a bustling center of commerce. If a town was lucky, its promoters might acquire the county seat, a hospital, college or some other public institution, or the railroad might come through. Any of these could ensure the survival of the town and increase its growth. As a result, fierce battles raged between towns for these institutions. Lobbying, pork-barreling, and local donations of land all helped to encourage the government or organizations to bestow these prizes on a town. [\(7\)](#)

The booster ethos that prevailed during the nineteenth century equated social unity with progress. The collective will or public spirit of the community as much as its geographic location and natural resources decided its fate. Factionalism or jealousy led to failure and ruined a town's chances for success. No one worked harder at town promotion than the editors of local papers. Newspapers were constantly expounding on the virtues of their town and praising the efforts of its citizens. They also pointed out the town's failure to promote itself. More importantly, the local papers worked to discredit their rivals and never failed to comment on their failures and misfortunes.

In 1894, Charleston experienced a surge of this booster ethos. *The Charleston Plaindealer* published a twenty-four-page souvenir edition on December 21, 1894, which detailed the advantages of the town and highlighted some of its more

prominent businesses and citizens. Among the advantages listed were: location, climate, schools, churches, businesses, transportation facilities, modern houses, electric lights, water-works, and a fire department. The editors then went on to describe the accomplishments of the past year and concluded,

[s]ocially, religiously, municipally and commercially considered, the advancement has been steady and universal. Each of these branches of the municipal system are pushing vigorously and energetically forward.⁽⁸⁾

Charleston was a city on the move.

At the 1893-94 annual meeting of the State Teachers' Association in Springfield the need for more normal institutes in the state was discussed and a committee was appointed to see that the issue was brought before the state legislature. During the winter of 1894, bills for that purpose were introduced in the General Assembly. Coles County Superintendent of Schools, John L. Whisnand, actively worked to secure a school for eastern Illinois. In February 1895, Senator Isaac Craig of Mattoon and Representative W.H. Wallace of Humboldt introduced bills for the establishment of an Eastern Illinois State Normal School.⁽⁹⁾

At the time, Mattoon was generally considered the favorite. She was at the crossroads of the Illinois Central and Big Four railroads, which connected her to most of Illinois. As a result, the town's population had increased more rapidly than Charleston's. By 1890, it had a population of 7,000 compared to Charleston's 4,135.⁽¹⁰⁾ Plus a politician from Mattoon had introduced the bill for the normal school. The increasing size of Mattoon and the chance at the normal school may have spurred some members of the town into action. As the county seat, Charleston wanted to appear progressive. Especially since plans for a new courthouse were being discussed and Mattoon hoped to have the county seat moved. Charleston did not want to lose the county seat.

Shortly after the bill was introduced in the legislature, the *Charleston Scimitar* in proper booster form suggested that Charleston would be missing an excellent opportunity if she did not enter the contest for the normal school. (It is likely that the other city papers were also promoting this course of action during the winter of 1894-95.) It wasn't, however, until April 19, 1895, that the citizens of Charleston made any move on the issue. At that time, a public meeting was held and a committee was appointed to go to Springfield and investigate the town's chances.

On May 22, 1895, Governor Altgeld signed Senate Bill No. 148, which allowed for the appointment of a board of trustees and the creation of an Eastern Illinois State Normal School. Under the provisions of the law, the donation of a site and "other valuable considerations" was required. The bill stipulated that the site should be "not less than forty acres of ground ...with a view of obtaining a good water supply

and other conveniences for the use of the institution." It also stated that the building be "made fire-resisting, and so constructed as to be warmed in the most healthful and economical manner, with ample ventilation in all its parts."⁽¹¹⁾ Both of these statements reflect concerns that had developed in the nineteenth century in regards to public health and sanitation.

Obviously, the state legislature had learned from Chicago's problems with the public water supply. Otherwise, water would not have been a primary concern in the selection of a site for the normal school. The citizens of Charleston were well aware of the importance of an ample and pure water supply to the board of trustees. Several Charleston papers from the period make reference to Sec. 10 of the law, which required good, pure water. In fact, they emphasized the water supply when promoting Charleston. The board was given a demonstration of the power and effectiveness of the city's waterworks when it came to inspect potential sites for the school. Four streams of water were thrown from the corners of the square over the courthouse dome.⁽¹²⁾

The trustees came back for a second visit in July 1895. At that time, the normal school committee presented Charleston's offer. The offer stated that as long as the school was located within two miles of the courthouse, the citizens promised to donate forty acres of land to be selected from any of the sites shown to the board; donate from \$35,000 to \$45,000 depending on the value of the site selected; extend water mains to the site and supply the school with water for fifty years at five dollars a year; build a paved or gravel street from the courthouse to the school and provide sidewalks; provide free freight for construction materials; furnish incandescent electric lights to the school for twenty five years at the rate of ten cents per thousand watts and at half the regular rate for arch lights; and provide the school with various grades of coal for heating at fixed rates until July 1, 1901.⁽¹³⁾ The selection of the location for the normal school seemed to hinge on the water question. The trustees took water samples from the different towns in the running for the normal school. Charleston had the best and the purest water according to the chemist that conducted the test.⁽¹⁴⁾ The water supply probably helped put Charleston over the top because she offered \$70,000 less than Danville and \$40,000 less than Mattoon.⁽¹⁵⁾

Testimonials that appeared in the local papers after Charleston's victory support the importance of the water supply and a healthful site. As the *Urbana Courier* stated, [a]n analysis of the water from the competing towns showed Charleston's to be the purest, and this, coupled with her unexcelled natural drainage, was undoubtedly the goose that laid the golden egg.⁽¹⁶⁾

The *Announcement of the Eastern Illinois State Normal School (1899-1900)* also supports this analysis. It reiterates the importance that the board of trustees placed

on considerations of water and drainage in choosing a location for the school. It also states that impure water and imperfect drainage are prime factors of diseases, so provisions must be made to meet these needs especially when large numbers of people will be present.⁽¹⁷⁾ The lessons of nineteenth-century Chicago were not lost on the legislature and the board of trustees.

As medical science demonstrated, disease was spread through germs and plenty of water for washing was needed to combat them. As a result, the board wanted not only a pure supply, but also an ample one. Charleston had both. The report went on to extol the city's water works and the fact that it had always provided a sufficient water supply even during dry seasons. Mattoon could not make the same claim. During 1895, the city's reservoir failed to maintain a sufficient supply of water. In fact, at the time of the trustees' visit to collect water samples, there was a drought and Charleston was furnishing part of Mattoon's water. The citizens of Charleston also helped their case by using water liberally to demonstrate the abundance of their water supply.⁽¹⁸⁾

The city of Charleston gave the board of trustees ten sites to choose from for the location of the school. The trustees examined the different sites when they visited Charleston in June of 1895. The sites were not equal in the eyes of the citizens of Charleston. If two of the sites were selected, the donation from the community would be \$37,000 rather than \$40,000. If two other sites were selected, the payment would only be \$35,000.⁽¹⁹⁾ Unfortunately, Coleman's book does not contain the map of the sites that went with the city's proposal and the original document has not been found, so it was impossible to determine exactly which sites these were. It is possible however, to reconstruct the ten sites and make some deductions as to why the present site was chosen.

Three of the sites were north of town. J.K. Decker owned two of these sites. One of them had a spring on it. A stream ran through the area and it was wooded. The third site was the Craig forty, which was a mile north of town. These three pieces of property were north and west of the Big Four and Clover Leaf Railroad tracks. According to the 1894 *Charleston Plaindealer*, this was the industrial section of Charleston. While the three sites may have been picturesque, they would have been subject to the noise, soot, and grime from the railroad and other industry. More importantly, placing the normal school north of town would not necessarily have brought the students into Charleston. The school was expected to bring several hundred students and visitors to Charleston. The businessmen of Charleston wanted these people to go through the business district and spend money. This was more likely to happen if the school was located south of the railroad.

The county fairground offered a nice setting with many large trees. It is unlikely, however, that the citizens of Charleston wanted to give up the fairground unless it

was absolutely necessary. From the 1893 plat map, it also appears that the fairground was not 40 acres, which was one of the stipulations from the legislature.

Three more of the sites were on the eastern edge of Charleston. One of these was Trower Park at the end of Jackson Street. However, in examining the 1893 plat map, it also does not appear to be forty acres. The other two sites were the Dunbar forty and the Reat place across the road. These sites met the requirements stipulated in the enabling legislation. They would bring students and visitors through the business district of Charleston. However, there is nothing extraordinary about them.

The three remaining sites were all on the southern edge of town. They were the Wiley tract, the C.E. Bishop site and a piece of land belonging to Mr. Bishop and Monroe White at the foot of Tenth Street. A location at the southern edge of town removed the school from the dirt, grime, and heavy industry of Charleston, especially because the prevailing winds tend to come from the south and east. It also brought students and visitors through the business district and past the homes of the leading citizens of Charleston. This was important to the business and community leaders of Charleston as they wanted to be seen as a progressive and growing town. *The Plaindealer* made a point of describing Charleston as "[a] city of modern houses, exerting the best social and religious influences." It also mentioned the remodeling that had taken place in the business blocks of the city. The new buildings conformed to the styles of the day with plate glass front windows and a substantial appearance. [\(20\)](#) The business leaders also hoped to attract the business of the students and visitors passing through Charleston.

The C.E. Bishop site was the one eventually chosen by the Board of Trustees. It sat at the base of Sixth Street. It was a wooded area with a pond and was used by the town for picnicking. Interestingly enough, the *Charleston Scimitar* had suggested that this hill south of town would be an excellent site for the normal school in May of 1894. [\(21\)](#) Governor Altgeld described the virtues of the site in his speech at the laying of the cornerstone.

Neither geographical location nor other accidental circumstances has caused the concentration of great corporate wealth in our midst or promoted the building of mighty cities. On the other hand you have escaped the intensified form of vice, misery and disintegration of society that are peculiar to centers of population. Dollars may grow in cities but men grow nearer to nature.... The nearer we get to nature the higher we rise in the conception of the world. Here is the place to found schools and academies. [\(22\)](#)

The picturesque surroundings fit in well with the idea that nature was a place for contemplation and thought. Nature also uplifted the spirit and improved the moral character of the individual. It stood in direct opposition to the inherent vice of cities.

All of these characteristics were necessities for an institution of learning.

This particular location also allowed the community leaders to apply the tenets of the "White City," whether it was done consciously or unconsciously on a much smaller scale. The location of the normal school and the courthouse created the perfect vistas, especially since a new courthouse was going to be constructed. Each was to be constructed on a small hill. Running between the square and the normal school site are Sixth and Seventh Street, which at this time were lined with the homes of many of the leading citizens of Charleston. The lots were large and the homes were a mix of late nineteenth century styles. All of the homes had barns and other outbuildings behind them. Large trees graced the area. While not lining the edge of the street as Olmsted and others proposed, they did shade the area and give it the aura of a parkway.

This central axis through Charleston resembles the central axis that Burnham and Root created at the World's Fair. The courthouse and the normal school replace the Administration building and the Peristyles. Sixth and Seventh Streets with their grand homes take the place of the buildings along the Court of Honor. The picturesque surroundings of the normal school and the homes also hint at the landscaping of the fairgrounds. The link between the civic and the cultural exemplified the order and harmony that the "White City" strove to create in an industrialized society. It was repeated in many city plans during this time, including Burnham's Plan for Chicago.

City plans that came out of the World's Fair also placed monumental structures at the entrances to the city. The location of the courthouse and the normal school serve that function in Charleston. The normal school building would have been an imposing sight for anyone entering Charleston on the road from Mattoon. The courthouse would create an equally imposing site to visitors that arrived by train and were brought by cab into town. While not Neoclassical, the Gothic style with Romanesque elements of the normal school building and the Romanesque style of the courthouse gave the vistas an overall sense of order and harmony.

The normal school arrived in Charleston as the result of the boosterism of its community leaders and of the public health concerns of the state legislature and the board of trustees. The site chosen by the board of trustees exemplified the picturesque qualities of nature that provide for contemplation and virtuous edification of the spirit. It also provided Charleston with a central axis that linked the school to the business center of town. Like many other projects throughout the nation, the changes in Charleston espoused the ideals set forth at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and demonstrated the progressive nature of the community.

1. M. Christin Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 3, 34.

2. Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York, 1995), 60, 64.
3. Donald L. Miller, *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America* (New York, 1996), 124-9.
4. *Ibid.*, 130-1.
5. *Ibid.*, 424.
6. Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt*, 107.
7. Don Harrison Doyle, *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825-70* (Urbana, 1978), 18.
8. *Charleston (IL) Plaindealer*, souvenir ed., Dec. 21, 1894, 6.
9. *Charleston (IL) Courier*, May 28, 1896.
10. These figures are from the 1890 Federal Census.
11. "An Act to establish and maintain the Eastern Illinois State Normal School," May 22, 1895, Illinois General Assembly, Section 10 and 11, University Archives, Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University.
12. "The Story of a Great Success," *Charleston (IL) Scimitar*, May 29, 1896.
13. R.S. Hodgen, Geo. R. Chambers, Isaiah H. Johnson, "To the Board of Trustees of the Eastern Illinois State Normal School," University Archives, Booth Library, Eastern Illinois University.
14. *Charleston (IL) Plaindealer*, Aug. 29, 1899, 1.
15. "Charleston Gets It. The New Reform School Located at Catfishville," *Mattoon (IL) Weekly Gazette*, Sept. 13, 1895.
16. "Unsolicited Testimonials," *Charleston (IL) Scimitar*, Sept. 20, 1895.
17. *Announcement of the Eastern Illinois State Normal School at Charleston [1899-1900]*, n.p.
18. *Charleston (IL) Plaindealer*, Aug. 29, 1899, 1.
19. Charles Coleman, *Eastern Illinois State College: Fifty years of Public Service*, Charleston, Eastern Illinois State College Bulletin, 189 (Jan. 1, 1950), 19.
20. *Charleston (IL) Plaindealer*, Dec. 21, 1894, 4.
21. *Charleston (IL) Scimitar*, May 29, 1896, 1.
22. *Charleston (IL) Courier*, May, 28, 1896.