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# Perceptions of Paradise

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Intro to Landscape Studies

Prof. Steven Moga

### Perceptions of Paradise

I can remember clearly the day when I first set eyes on Paradise Pond. It was a snowy day in April, yet the slush did not deter me from plunging into the path from the quad that led into the wooded area adjacent to the river. After a series of overwhelming college visits, its peacefulness and removal from human affairs felt like a paradise, just as its name implied. Since matriculating at Smith, I have still treated that path along the pond as a sanctuary of sorts, a serene way to immerse myself in nature, away from the bustle of college life. Although I shared the opinion of those who call it a paradise, I always wondered who had first given it that name. It was not until I discovered the garden book, a gem of writing and illustrations from more than one hundred years ago, that I decided to delve into the implications of the name. Through my research, I realized that in this specific site as well as the broader campus, people have continuously shaped the landscape to meet their expectations of “paradise,” consciously or unconsciously.

My view of the garden book as part of a larger theme of shaping paradise might not have immediately emerged had it not been for my current mindset on the day I discovered it. That day in my Environmental Science course, I was learning about the Edenic root of environmentalism, and the tendency to idealize “nature” in a certain form. In my English class, I was reading *Paradise Lost*, and the fall of humanity from the Garden of Eden. The story implies that humanity is constantly striving to return to that unfallen state, and therefore has the tendency to call earthly places “paradise.” These were the thoughts in my head when I went to the college

archives after class to study about the landscape site I chose, the path in the woods along the pond. I was dubious as to what information I would discover, expecting a few photographs at the most, or maybe some documents regarding the ecology of the place. Instead, an archivist directed me to a box containing a “garden book”. I carefully opened the worn, barely-bound book, unsure of what a “garden book” entailed. The first sentence I read was completely unexpected: “The Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day”. Immediately, I continued reading, immersed in the 1880s world of a woman whom I later discovered was named Harriet Kneeland.

Harriet Kneeland titled each section of writing with the year, or occasionally the month and the year. The first year chronicled was 1881, when Harriet’s family bought a lot in Paradise woods, where the President’s house is in the present day. In 1882, they moved into the house that they had constructed, and the first of many logs of trees and other plants appears under that year’s heading. The variety of plants accumulated over the years is astonishing. They cultivated fruits such as strawberries, pears, and cherries, and they grew vegetables: radishes, beets, sweet peas, spinach, and onions. The family also planted trees: willow, sassafras, white ash, white dogwood, pink dogwood, magnolia, black cherry, white pine, yellow pine, hemlock, red cedar, beech, birch, sugar maple, and elm. Several types of flowers, as well as shrubs and vines, were present on the Kneeland property. Continued perusal of the book revealed that it was not quite a diary, but by no means merely a planting log. Rather, it featured a diverse array of quotes, lists, descriptions of events, and notes of monetary exchanges. Some of the more personal entries vividly described social events that took place in the garden. In 1901, a lawn party was held for the children’s class. Each child participated in a game of finding their fortune pinned to a tree. Picking fruits and vegetables also seems to have been a social event that involved many different

neighbors and family members. The most significant event to happen in the garden, however, occurred in 1909. The entry is longer than most, beginning with lines that cement the importance of that day: “July 14<sup>th</sup>, the great day of the garden, the day for which it was made from the beginning, the day of the wedding.” The wedding in question is the wedding of Mary Frances Kneeland, the daughter of Harriet’s brother Frederick. The occasion was obviously very important to Harriet, and the way she described the day is in keeping with the same paradisiacal rhetoric she uses elsewhere in the garden book. According to her, the day featured “the bluest of skies and the softest of fleecy clouds”, and the “music of many children’s voices.”<sup>1</sup>

While reading through the first garden book, I already felt connected to the writer’s perspective of the wooded garden, but I still did not know who she could be in the context of the history of the college. She did not reference herself or give any clues as to what her place was in her family structure. A 1997 article by Larry Parnass in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* gave me her name: Harriet Josephine Kneeland. She was an unmarried woman living in her brother’s house with his wife and children. They sold their property to Smith College, which demolished the house and rebuilt a larger one which President Neilson moved into in 1920.<sup>2</sup> After reading this article, I realized that it referenced two garden books, and set about finding the second one.

The second garden book is, if possible, even more enticing than the first, with a hand-drawn title page of beautifully illustrated letters: “The Story of a Garden Paradise.” Harriet’s continued references to “paradise” show her deep and fond attachment to her home, and the garden that she spent so much energy maintaining. Her garden was truly her realm, a realm of nearly 4 acres stretching from Elm Street to the Mill River. More quotes and poems abound in

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<sup>1</sup> “Garden Book” manuscript, Harriet Kneeland, 1881-1912, Smith College Archives

<sup>2</sup> Parnass, Larry. “Wrinkles in Land, and in a Time.” *Daily Hampshire Gazette* [Northampton, MA] 13 Mar. 1997. Excerpt from the Smith College Archives

the second volume, most notably several quotes from scripture, showing the inevitable connection of her nature paradise and her Christian religion.<sup>3</sup>

Harriet wrote, “Paradise it was to the eye of most beholders”, and she was not the only one to share that view. Her brother, Frederick Kneeland, in his book *Northampton: The Meadow City*, writes with similar utopian diction in describing “Paradise Woods,” the wooded area near the pond. He describes it as a perfect, pristine location, a “beautiful wilderness,” met with “universal approval.” Kneeland touches the concept of refuge adding to the location’s paradisiacal qualities, mentioning how its seclusion gave “pleasant wonder to all.”<sup>4</sup> I learned that the story surrounding the name of Paradise Pond stems from, of all people, Jenny Lind, the famous “Swedish Nightingale”. Apparently on her honeymoon, she declared that the pond and surrounding grounds “must be the paradise of America”. This event occurred in the 1850s, and the name has certainly stuck.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Harriet Kneeland never alludes to the fact that there is a bustling women’s college right next door to her paradise. Her other neighbors are referred to, with the mentions of all the flowers, seeds, visits, and favors they exchange. Curious as to how Harriet’s world related to the world of Smith College, I located a few maps that would show the location of the Kneeland property, and realized how much activity was happening with shaping the landscape of Smith College around the same time that she was shaping the landscape of her garden and woods.<sup>6 7</sup> Horowitz’s *Alma Mater*, a book detailing the motivations behind the landscapes of women’s colleges, makes clear that Harriet was not the only person concerned with forming the

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<sup>3</sup> Second “Garden Book” manuscript, Harriet Kneeland, 1900-1915, Smith College Archives

<sup>4</sup> Kneeland, Frederick. *Northampton: The Meadow City*. 1894. Excerpt from the Smith College Archives

<sup>5</sup> W., E. "Smith College: News." *Smith College: News*. Smith College, 22 June 2006. Web.

<sup>6</sup> Plan of the Kneeland Lot, August 1881, Smith College Archives.

<sup>7</sup> Map of Northampton, 1884, Historic Northampton Archives.

land into an ideal paradise<sup>8</sup>. The men who shaped Smith College after Sophia Smith's bequest wanted the college situated in a pastoral landscape to preserve the students' femininity. These men all shared a Christian religious connection, placing them even closer to the Eden phenomenon; Julius and Clark Seelye were staunch Puritans who studied theology, John Greene was a pastor, and Edwards Park was a professor of theology. Even Sophia Smith had some idea of Smith being a sacred haven of learning, saying she desired the college to be "pervaded by the spirit of evangelical Christian religion." The decision for Smith to be a women's college gave rise to discussion of seclusion away from the influences of young men, not in the austere fashion of seminaries, but in a protective way more evocative of a paradisiacal refuge.

The emphasis placed on Smith's landscape as a utopia is apparent in the high priority placed on the quality of Smith's gardens. According to Chase's "Imagining Utopia", an article that explores the landscape decisions made on Smith's campus, highly trained specialists have been hired for the much-valued task of planning the gardens. William Ganong, one of the most influential figures in imagining Smith's garden paradise, was hired as botanic garden director by Seelye in 1894, and those hired after him were trained at the world-renowned Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, an institution which favored serene naturalistic styles.<sup>9</sup> This dedication and zeal for gardens in Smith's history shows a striving toward building another Eden. The early advisors of Sophia Smith shaped the landscape to be perfect in the way which they thought would most advance the education of the ideal women, full of femininity and domesticity. In the Garden of Eden, the first female living in paradise was also characterized by these same

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<sup>8</sup> Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. "Foundings." *Alma mater: design and experience in the women's colleges from their nineteenth-century beginnings to the 1930s*. New York: Knopf, 1984. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Chase, Lisa. "Imagining Utopia: Landscape Design at Smith College, 1871-1910." *The New England Quarterly* 65.4 (1992): 560. Web.

idealized feminine principles, and the fall only occurred when she dared to break that pattern of obedience and docility.

Later developments in the very site where Harriet Kneeland once had her garden also embrace a feeling of spirituality and connection with nature. The Japanese teahouse and garden were constructed in that stretch of woods, intended to be a location for meditation and contemplation. Around the garden, stones depicting the life of Buddha and his spiritual journey were strategically placed.<sup>10</sup> In the archives, I discovered original plans and drawings for the teahouse done by David Slawson, the main designer. One drawing, completed in color, especially spoke to the same theme of using refuge and seclusion to create an ideal location in the midst of a natural setting.<sup>11</sup> I also encountered a few old grayscale photographs with no date, of the pond and the path where the Kneeland property once was located, labeled simply “Paradise.”<sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> The shared feeling of connection to this area of land and the pond is common still today to those who use it every day. My own observation showed me that the location is still as ideal for use as in Harriet Kneeland’s time, although the methods of use may have changed. Dog walkers diligently make their rounds daily, and runners complete their exercises on the path. Some of the most interesting figures are those who are not in motion, who are simply sitting by the water’s edge, contemplating, or observing the wildlife around them. These people remind me the most of the experience Harriet Kneeland shared, in the same place, one hundred years ago.

Yet in the constant striving for the ideal, utopian landscape, environmental concerns are often overlooked. The appearance of nature seems to be sufficient for human aesthetic

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<sup>10</sup> Japanese Garden Rock Formations Guide, Smith College Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Japanese tea house design drawing, n.d., Smith College Archives.

<sup>12</sup> “Paradise” view of the pond, n.d., Smith College Archives, Photograph.

<sup>13</sup> View of Paradise woods path, n.d., Smith College Archives, Photograph.

sensibilities, however contrived the actual landscape may be. Paradise Pond itself only exists because of a human-made dam, yet it is extolled as a “natural environment”. Harriet Kneeland, in her raptures about her personal paradise, does not mention the existence of the Maynard Hoe Factory down the river, an institution that surely had an effect on the natural ecological surroundings. The oldest definitions of the word “paradise” make the tendency of people to dub any favored landscape as such even more ironic. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of its definitions is “a beautiful, unspoilt place”.<sup>14</sup> Beautiful though it may be, the pond is not strictly speaking “unspoilt”. Yet the perception of passersby is enough to affix the moniker to the spot.

In sum, throughout the history of Smith College’s gardens, and that particular site between the pond and woods, people have attempted to shape and elevate the grounds into an imitation of a utopian, Edenic, or pastoral ideal. Others who did not have a say in the landscaping decisions added to the culture of this ideal by calling the area “paradise”, or being drawn to its natural, secluded aura. From Jenny Lind to the Kneelands, and William Ganong to David Slawson, primary actors have bolstered this paradisiacal ideal. Perhaps the most fitting conclusion to the enigma of people constantly striving for a landscape paradise, changing nature to better fit a perceived ideal, is in the words of Harriet Kneeland’s December entry, the last entry in the garden book: “Nature never stands still, nor souls either, they ever go up or go down.”

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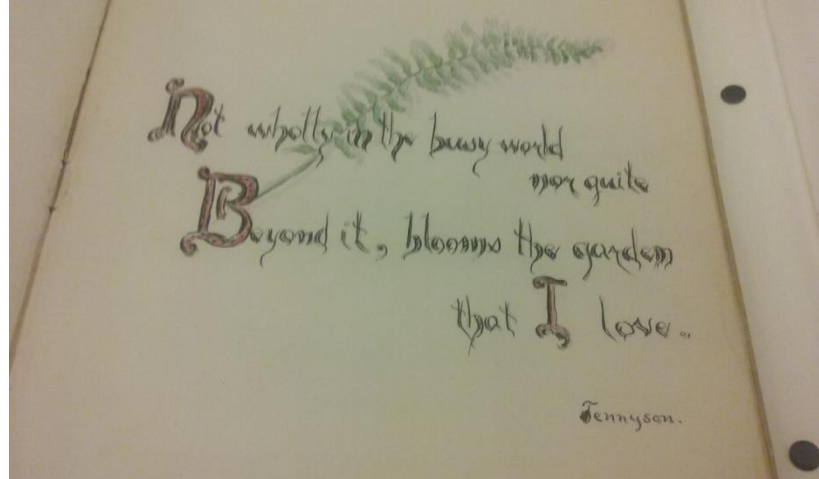
<sup>14</sup> "Paradise, n." Def. 3. *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. N.p.: Oxford University Press, 2005. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web.



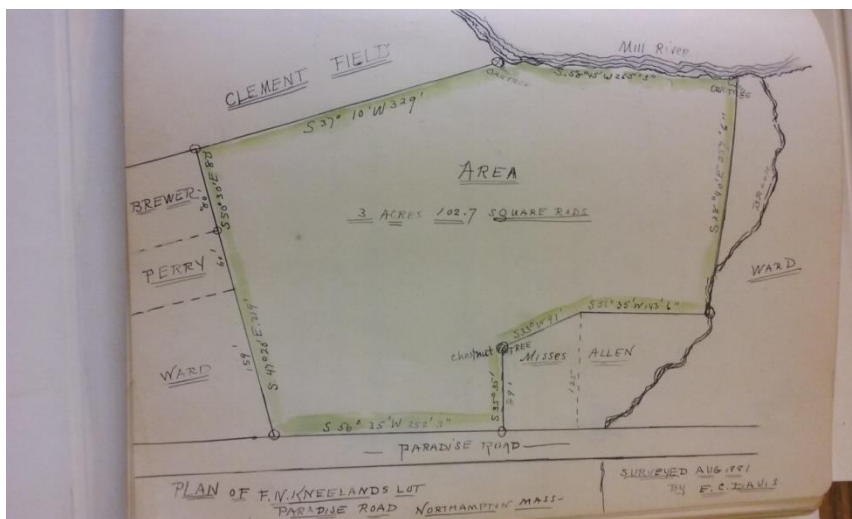
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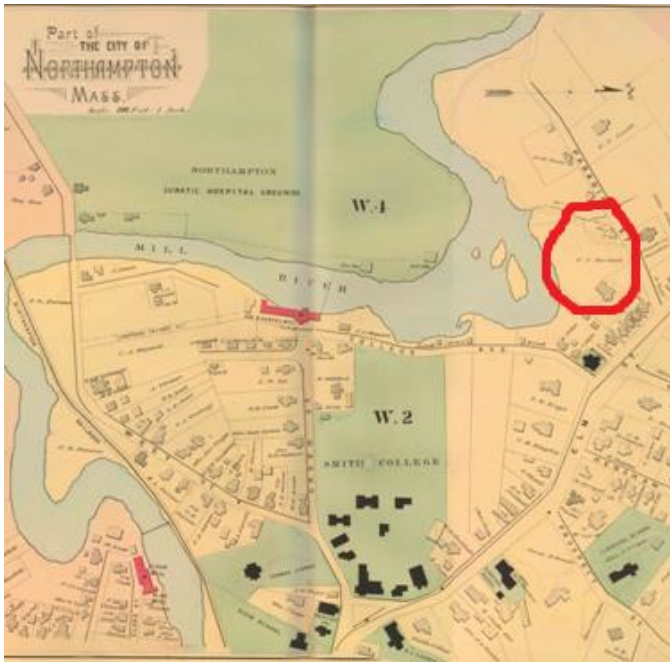
Cover Page of the second garden book written by Harriet Kneeland



A Tennyson quote in the second garden book by Harriet Kneeland



Plan of the Kneeland Lot, August 1881, Smith College Archives.



2016 Map of Smith College with Kneeland Lot circled

Map of Northampton, 1884, Historic Northampton Archives.



Japanese tea house design drawing, Smith College Archives.



View of Paradise woods path, n.d., Smith College Archives, Photograph.



Garcia-Israel, Katya, *View of Paradise woods path*, 2016. JPEG



"Paradise" view of the pond, n.d., Smith College Archives, Photograph.

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