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Consulting LALH Designers

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Jonathan D. Lippincott, NYC

VIEW design: Florio Design, NYC

P.O. Box 1323
Amherst, Massachusetts
01004-1323

(413) 549-4860
(413) 549-3961 fax

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Creating a Preserve on the Niagara River


The thirty-six-mile-long strait known as the Niagara River flows northward from Lake Erie through Buffalo and then cascades over magnificent Niagara Falls. Before settling into a broad riverbed at the village of Lewiston, New York, it rushes into the Niagara Gorge, bordered by white dolomite cliffs two hundred feet high. It then flows on to Lake Ontario. Over the course of its journey, the river drops a total of 325 feet, half of that at Niagara Falls.

At the north edge of Lewiston, the Niagara passes a twenty-nine-acre parcel on its eastern bank that was recently designated the Stella Niagara Preserve by the Western New York Land Conservancy. The property was purchased by the Land Conservancy from the Sisters of Saint Francis, who had owned it for more than a century.

By dedicating the land as a preserve, the organization has ensured preservation of a site rich in natural and cultural significance as well as the provision of public access, in perpetuity. Although the Sisters no longer hold title to it, they will have ongoing access to the land they have nurtured and loved since 1907. I was commissioned to design a plan to protect and enhance the unique natural and cultural heritage of Stella Niagara while making it accessible to the public.

Vegetation history here goes back many centuries, when the most recent glacier scraped over the landscape. In the millennia that followed, the land was subject to the effects of floods and ice floes, lightning-ignited fires,

BY DARREL MORRISON



The waves of human impact continued with the work of the Sisters during the last hundred years, in their production of fruits, vegetables, and garden flowers, as well as the periodic mowing that kept the historic river view open.

Niagara River from the Stella Niagara Preserve. Photograph by Jay Burney. Courtesy Western New York Land Conservancy.

wind and ice storms, and burrowing, browsing, and grazing by native wildlife. With the arrival of a human population, these natural phenomena were accompanied by the activities of cutting, clearing, burning, and planting of crops. The waves of human impact continued with the work of the Sisters during the last hundred years, in their production of fruits, vegetables, and garden flowers, as well as the periodic mowing that kept the historic river view open.

I first saw the site with my design associate Nancy Aten, ASLA, on a hot, humid day in August 2015, accompanied by the Land Conservancy executive director, Nancy Smith, and development director, Jajeon Rose. That view of the Niagara River, an azure band with a mixed forest rising up on the Canadian side, remains

with me still. Scrambling down a steep slope at the northern edge of the property, we looked over a gently undulating plain with a scattering of trees in a field of pasture grasses and other oldfield species. A walking tour revealed the diversity of the vegetation on the land as well as many cultural artifacts dating to the Sisters' tenure there and before.

A rustic stone grotto dedicated to Bernadette of Lourdes was built by the Sisters soon after they acquired the land. A historic landing known by the native Tuscaroras as "Yeh-heh-weh-kwah-taw," or "where they take the boats out," survives as well. Throughout history, this landing provided one of the last opportunities for people in canoes and boats traveling southward to come ashore before reaching the cliffs of the Niagara Gorge and the



Left: Morrison, Aten, and members of the Land Conservancy exploring Stella Niagara.

Bottom, left: View to the Niagara River in the distance.

Bottom, right: Existing meadow conditions at Stella Niagara.

Photographs by Nancy Aten.



falls. British troops landed here on December 19, 1813, during the war of 1812, and proceeded to destroy the village of Lewiston and then march northward to capture Fort Niagara.

To the south is the Little Chapel by the River, reputedly the smallest religious structure in western New York. According to local folklore, the building was constructed as a supply shed during the War of 1812. Ninety-five years later, when the Sisters acquired the property, they engaged a local Jesuit building contractor to convert it, and, a half century later, commissioned the Polish artist Joseph Slawinski to create unique “sgraffito” murals on the interior walls. In 1964, the Sisters commissioned the Peace Memorial in memory of President John F. Kennedy. Here, too, Swalinski’s distinctive sgraffito art in rich, deep colors enlivens both the interior and exterior.

Land Conservancy staff provided us with a comprehensive inventory of the natural and cultural features of the Preserve site, including maps showing topography, geology and soils, hydrology, and existing plant communities and lists of invasive plant species on the site. Working with a facilitation consultant, Make Communities, the Land Conservancy also conducted a series of stake-

holders meetings in late summer of 2015 to gain local opinion and expertise. A plan established five goals:

- Protect and enhance wildlife habitat
- Provide access to the Preserve for people to walk, hike, kayak, canoe, learn, and be inspired
- Protect and celebrate the Preserve’s diverse attractions
- Explore and promote the Preserve’s history
- Learn—and adapt—together over time

Three elements are central to the design Aten and I created to respond to these goals: the pathway system, the treatment of historic/cultural features, and the proposed vegetation complex.

The design process that gave form to the pathway system and the proposed plant communities involved elements of both art and science. We began by playing with form, using chalk pastels on overlays of the base map. We were inspired by music (Bedřich Smetana’s flowing composition *The Moldau*, in particular) as we created a series of quick color sketches. These sketches were in turn refined to reflect the patterns of soil types and topographic forms on the site. I have long felt that topographic maps with their fluid contour lines are

We were inspired by music (Bedřich Smetana's flowing composition The Moldau, in particular) as we created a series of quick color sketches.

THE CENTERPIECE of the planting is the series of native grassland communities designed to restore biodiversity and ecological function while maintaining the view of the Niagara River. The plant communities are matched with the topography, soils, and moisture. Starting from the sandy plateau at the eastern edge of the site, they are: (1) an Eastern sandplain grassland; (2) a xeric grassland community in the upper section of the steep west-facing slope next to it; (3) a dry-mesic grassland composition on the lower portion of that slope; (4) a mesic grassland community throughout much of the undulating plain that dominates the central part of the site; (5) an oak savanna, where bur and white oaks will be planted in an "island" within the mesic grassland; (6) a wet-mesic grassland in a low part of the undulating plain which is subject to periodic flooding; and (7) a sedge meadow in a gentle depression near the pathway to the landing. There are typically twenty to thirty species of native grasses, forbs (wildflowers), and ferns in each of the community groupings. Typically, some species carry over from one zone into the adjacent one. As a result, there will be subtle gradations of colors and textures from one zone to the next.



Concept plan detail of new plantings, January 31, 2016. Drawing by Darrel Morrison. Courtesy WNYCL.

elegant compositions themselves and provide a great beginning point for defining vegetation zones.

The selection of eastern grassland communities for the extensive center portion of the Stella Niagara site was also based on a blend of science and art. The botanic richness of the Niagara region was explored by a host of prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century botanists—Pehr Kalm, André Michaux, Alexander Agassiz, and Asa Gray among others—who found an abundance of native grassland species there. The site provides an opportunity to restore some of this natural heritage and interpret it to the public.

Aesthetically, the grassland model maintains the long view out over the river, and also provides richly varied experiences for people walking through the different zones on the broad pathways. As an example, the xeric grassland vegetation growing on the hot, dry upper slope near the east edge of the Preserve will have a prevalence of short grasses and forbs, only one to two feet tall, and

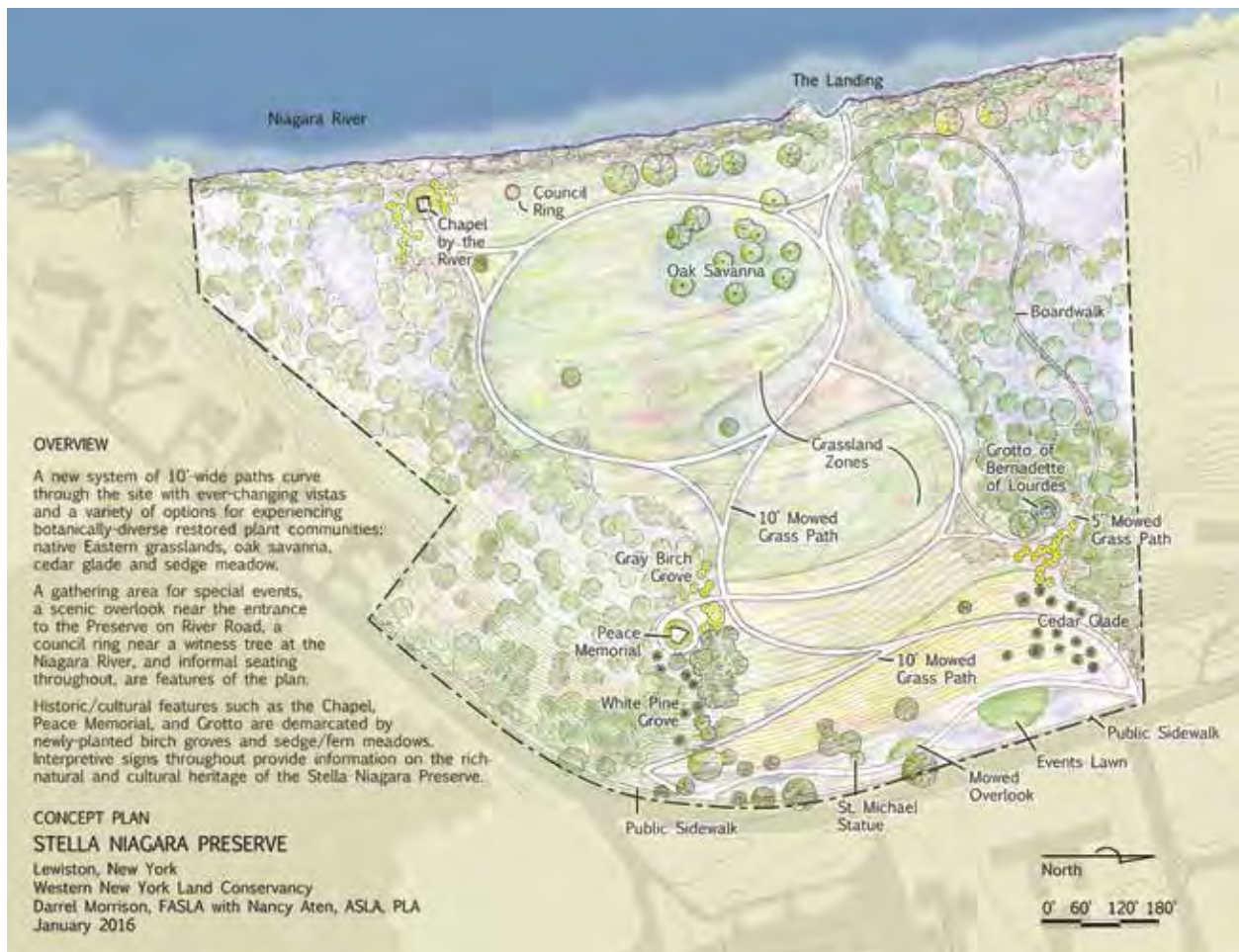
people will be able to look out over it throughout the year. The plant species in the mesic and wet-mesic zones will, on the other hand, reach heights of four, five, or six feet by the end of summer, engulfing visitors in a billowing sea of vegetation.

In addition to new plantings, our plan mandates the removal of invasive exotic species, such as Norway maples, and unhealthy trees, like ashes that have been afflicted with emerald ash borers. The ecological landscape restoration and management firm Applied Ecological Services is doing the selective removals, as well as creating the path system and seeding the open center of the site with a diversity of native plant species, all documented to have been growing locally, although not necessarily on the Preserve site.

As we learned on our initial visit on that hot August day, existing pathways at Stella Niagara can be challenging, traversing as they do 15 to 18 percent slopes in several cases. One goal in the pathway design is to make

Late summer meadow, showing mix of native and invasive species. Photograph by Nancy Aten.





Concept plan overview, February 4, 2016. Drawing by Darrel Morrison.

them more accessible, which led us to propose a system with a maximum gradient of 8.3 percent and an average gradient of 4.9 percent. We wanted to heighten and vary the experience for people visiting the Preserve, replacing long, straight stretches of the pathway with broad, sweeping curves that afford ever-changing views and an element of mystery. Further, we wanted to provide several options from which people could choose the length and character of the loop they might walk.

We designed the approaches to each of the three structures (the Grotto, the Chapel, and the Peace Memorial) through groves of gray birches, early successional trees that often grow at the forest edge. A three-foot wrought-iron fence encircles each of the three structures. Within these enclosures, a mix of Pennsylvania sedge and hay-scented fern contrasts with the surrounding vegetation, setting them apart as sacred places. Our design plan also incorporates a stone council ring as a gathering place on the western edge of the Preserve, overlooking the Niagara. While it is not a replica or restoration of an earlier council ring on the site, it is a symbolic reminder of the people of the Haudenosaunee, who almost certainly gathered here in an earlier era.

As we worked, Aten and I were also aware of the example of Frederick Law Olmsted, who advocated strenuously for the protection of Niagara Falls in the 1870s and 1880s, and who, with his partner Calvert Vaux, designed the nation's first integrated park system in nearby Buffalo. Olmsted and Vaux considered the Niagara Reservation a vital part of this system, and they planned improvements that were designed to protect it and make it accessible to the public.

The goals of the Western New York Land Conservancy closely align with those of these early preservationists. The new design for Stella Niagara will continue to protect the cultural history of the site as it provides access for visitors who want to explore the landscape on its own terms. The enhanced diversity of plants will attract a greater variety of birds, butterflies, bees, and other pollinators in a complex web of life. The very presence of those species will enrich the human experience of the Preserve. In perpetuity. And, in the words of director Nancy Smith, "that's a long time."

DARREL MORRISON is professor and dean emeritus at the University of Georgia and practices ecology-based landscape design. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.