Review: History of Early American Landscape Design

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**Project**
History of Early American Landscape Design

**Project Team**
*Therese O’Malley*, National Gallery of Art
*Matthew J. Westerby*, National Gallery of Art

A full list of team members is available on the [site](https://heald.nga.gov/mediawiki/index.php/Home).

**Project URL**
[https://heald.nga.gov/mediawiki/index.php/Home](https://heald.nga.gov/mediawiki/index.php/Home)

**Project Reviewer**
*Ann E. Komara*, University of Colorado Denver

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**Project Overview**

*Therese O’Malley, Valeria Federici, and Matthew J. Westerby*

The History of Early American Landscape Design (HEALD) digital resource is an inquiry into the language of early U.S. landscape aesthetics and garden design in the colonial and national periods. Thousands of texts are combined with a corpus of more than 1,700 images to trace the development of landscape and garden terminology from British Colonial America to the mid-19th century. By placing terms in relation to representations in the visual record, the project clarifies their use and meanings, providing for well-informed histories of designed landscapes in the early U.S.

The project is organized by 100 keywords, supported by 100 featured places and historical figures. Without claiming to be comprehensive, this project models an approach to the study of landscapes and gardens that helps scholars consider past cultural conditions, uncover former appearances, and better understand the experiences and meanings of designed environments as they were built and imagined. Relationships between images, keywords, places, and people can be browsed and filtered through the “Image Collection” page, an interactive semantic query.

HEALD was developed from the book *Keywords in American Landscape Design* (Yale University Press, 2010). In its digital extension, the reach, scope, and potential of the project are greatly expanded, providing several advantages. These include the interconnectivity of keywords, images, people, and places that constitute the core of the project; the ability to browse an unprecedented collection of historic images and texts; the development and open access to an extended bibliography, which users can browse and import to personal
digital collections in its entirety from Zotero; and finally, the advantage given by informational modes of collecting, filtering, and parsing data.

The HEALD website is built on MediaWiki, an open access platform. This ready-to-use software integrates a clean interface with the widely used database language SQL. In addition, we chose MediaWiki and the extension Semantic MediaWiki for the ability to archive and migrate the database; the opportunity to work with high resolution image files; the large community of developers who continue to update the software on a regular basis; and the ease of querying and extracting information in a standardized format (RDF) to be used for data analysis and visualization (described on the “Semantic HEALD” page).

The project team and partners periodically review web analytics. Overall, HEALD averages approximately 4,000 users per month, sourced primarily from organic search. The project is made possible with funds from the Paul Mellon Bequest and the Robert H. Smith Research and Outreach Grant to the Center of Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. The design and content, as well as technical and conceptual development, were carried out by National Gallery of Art research associates and staff across many departments, including an external vendor for a recent major upgrade and data migration.

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Project Review

Ann E. Komara

The History of Early American Landscape Design (HEALD) website presents a corpus of archival and research texts paired with visual, material culture to explicate landscape design in America from the early 1700s to 1852, an end date pinpointed as a watershed reflecting broader shifts in culture and society affecting both representational and landscape practices. The site is organized through 100 entries for each category of keywords, places and people.

HEALD surveys landscape design using period-contextualized design vocabulary and topics such as site elements and features; botany, horticulture, and planting; and design process and theory. The content addresses cultural, political, and social structures for landscapes located mostly along the eastern seaboard — estates, farms, gardens, nurseries, urban sites and “landscaped” places showing design intention in conception, layout, implementation, setting, or experience.

The HEALD project’s critical position comes together through its tactical focus on “image and text,” which is solidly situated within landscape history and humanities scholarship. Its methodological position is well explained in articulate essays by leading scholars. Using examples from the website, the authors clarify constructs that inform how one “reads an image” or text as a cultural product, while noting caveats about assumptions in interpretation through questions like: who generated, authored or (re)produced the image or text in question; in what medium and venue; who uses it and for what purpose; and for whom — what audience or
recipient. In HEALD, the agency of production, distribution, and meaning unites images and texts. To extend the recursive potential, each keyword or topical entry on the website is accompanied by a scholarly essay that extends interpretation; and primary source materials — a compendium of journals, letters, archives, and records linked to the various entries — are accompanied by citations and supporting scholarship. All entries and images can be downloaded by site users for reference and use.

The landing page and parallel structure for each entry enables navigation and exploration of the collection, with multiple cross-connections between the various keywords and topics. Omissions are acknowledged in HEALD’s database to address the limitations inherent to colonial and imperial rhetoric. For example, little material acknowledges Indigenous peoples or other oppressed persons whose social position placed limitations on landscape records. HEALD additionally offers unfamiliar names and places and includes women, technicians, and sites and material beyond the canon. This testifies to years of background research and preparation behind this website and reflects the input of many scholars involved in and credited for the work.

Although advantages for pedagogical purposes and for scholars and students include extensive bibliographic content linked to Zotero, users might find that backtracking from the bibliography is difficult. This disadvantage also applies to external archival sites linked via the essays or notes. Users could toggle between multiple open tabs, but this is likely to place undue burden upon users. HEALD’s Mediawiki platform is otherwise fluid; chosen for its “digital sustainability” it easily handles the high quality images and internal and external links. The overall layout is well-structured, clean, and navigable. HEALD is a model for robust, richly illustrated research-driven sites. Its relevance for landscape history and design is certain, but the collection of often inaccessible images and archival materials will appeal to anyone interested in the culture and designed landscapes of this era.