

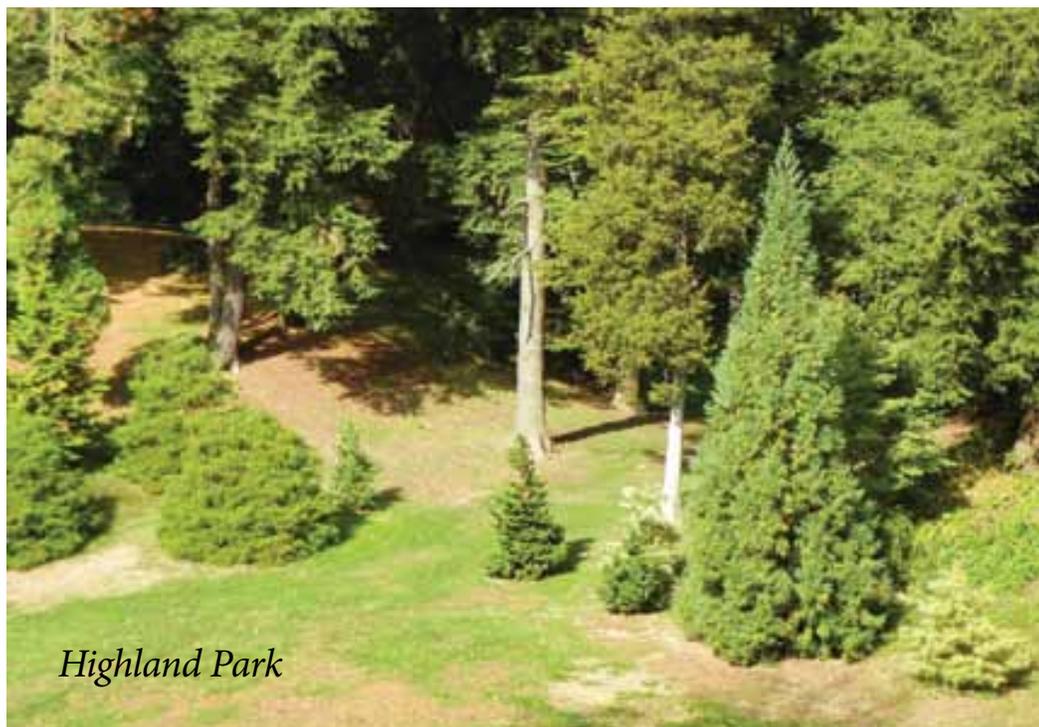
A Return to Rochester

“Legacy”

Elmer Dustman

Rochester, New York received the nickname “Flower City” in 1860, at which time over 2,000 acres were devoted to the production of nursery stock and seed production. Hundreds of growers produced fruit, ornamental and evergreen trees plus perennials and annuals. The Ellwanger & Barry Nursery, established in 1840, became the largest in the nation, gaining national recognition for developing the trade. Wholesale distributors were established and stock was shipped by Erie Canal, rail and mail order throughout the country.

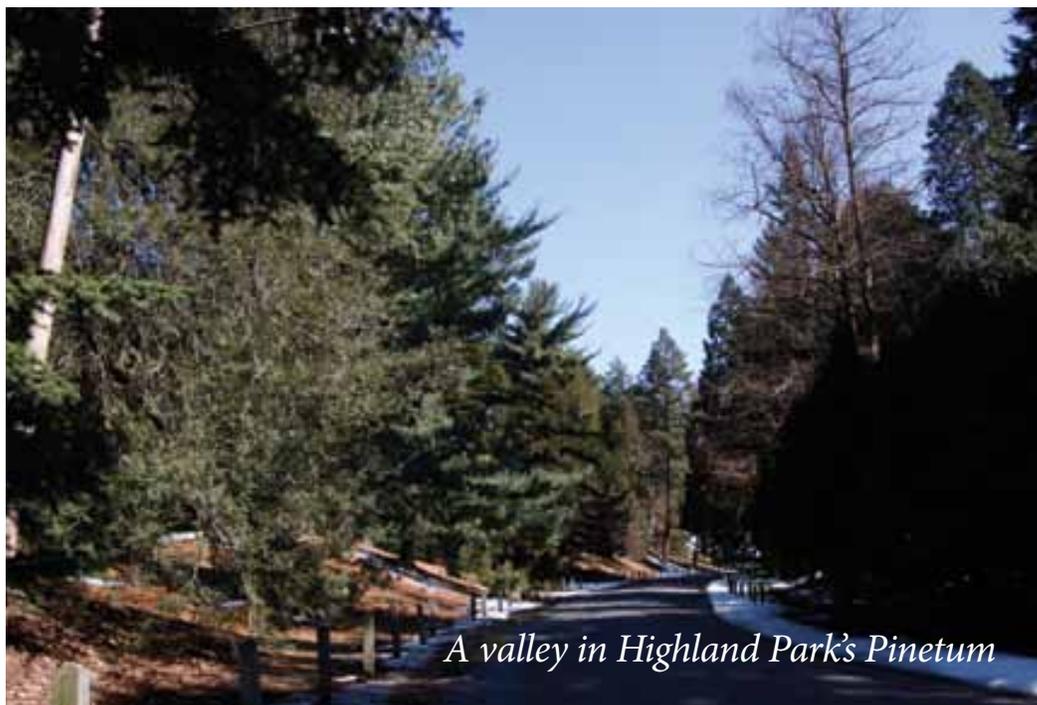
Frederick Law Olmsted designed the jewel of the Arboreta Park System, Highland Park, using donated nursery land. Highland Park was just the beginning for Olmsted’s vision of a park system for Rochester, which he called an “emerald necklace” of parks and gardens along the Genesee River, the Erie Canal and Lake Ontario. He went on to design Genesee Valley Park, Seneca Park and Maplewood Park, along with several small city parks sprinkled throughout Rochester.



Highland Park

The Arboreta Park System became a testing ground for woody plants from China via the Harvard Arnold Arboretum. Mature and rare specimens of many of these plants can be seen in these parks. The Rochester Park System also distributed thousands of seeds, trees, shrubs, scions, and cuttings to botanical and horticultural institutions throughout the USA and many other nations. The largest institutional distribution was a 10,000-pound shipment of seeds and small plants to the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, New London, England in 1931.

Highland Park, besides boasting the Olmstead design, is also a National Historical Landmark. Let me take you on a virtual tour, which begins on Pinetum Drive. This curving hill road creates a feeling that one is traveling through a wooded canyon in mountain country. Only trees are visible and this creates both mystery and suspense.



Huge conifer specimens, firmly anchored in the hillsides, loom over the road. You mentally ID them as having a special “look”. Is this due to age, rarity or an unusual cultivar not to be found today? Some have provenance through annual consignments from Arnold Arboretum, starting in 1902. Highland Park was the place of choice to try collected botanicals from Western China by plant explorer and collector Ernest H. Wilson. The collection has some of the oldest dawn redwoods,

Metasequoia glyptostroboides, to be found in the states raised from the six seeds, received from the Arnold in 1946.

According to Kent Milham, probably the best resource person in the Park's department; "Looking at the card catalog and in the BG-BASE, the dawn redwood at the corner of Highland and Goodman was received in 1948 from the Arnold Arboretum as a plant. The seed was germinated on 2/22/1948, and seed was originally sent to the US by the University of Nanking (China)."



One of the original dawn redwoods from Arnold Arboretum by Elmer Dustman



Zinc label by Elmer Dustman

I enjoy reading the old zinc tree tags, which show more provenance information than the currently used aluminum tags. It is also surprising that these tags have labeled these trees for over a hundred years.

Some examples of this information on my favorite trees;

- Chinese white pine *Pinus armandi* 352 Arnold Arboretum 1905-1911
- Black pine *Pinus nigra* 'Hornibrookiana' Highland Park propagated WB
- Glehn's spruce *Picea glehnii* 449 Arnold Arboretum 1900-02

A few years ago Jerry Kral and I gave a tour of the Highland Pinetum for the local Master Gardeners. We discovered almost a hundred trees

over a hundred years old! This horticultural tradition is now partly carried on in the landscape by American Conifer Society members. You will have a unique opportunity to enjoy their gardens and enjoy a personal tour of Highland Park's unique Pinetum.

David Swinford

We purchased the property in 2001. The historic mansion was built in 1925 and eventually became known as the Strong Mansion, where Margaret Woodbury Strong lived until her death in 1969. In the early 1940s, Fletcher Stelle designed and built large curving walls and an intimate garden on the north-

east side of the house. Fletcher Steele is best known for designing the Blue Steps at Naumkeag, located in Stockton, Massachusetts. However, as a Rochester resident, he designed many private gardens in the Rochester area, the Strong Mansion being one.

The mansion required almost six years of renovation, and it wasn't until 2007 that we could turn our attention to the largely neglected gardens and landscape. Beginning in 2008, we have done extensive tree work, built new staircases and added an herb garden at the front entrance. Hedges and several hundred shrubs, along with new perennial beds and a terraced conifer garden, restored some of the landscape. At least one new planting bed is being added every year. Much needs to be done, including the rehabilitation of the Fletcher Steele additions.

The property includes a venerable Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum*) planted ca. 1941 and Steele's line of Norway spruce (*Picea abies* sp.) pollarded at four meters for many years. Steele's hedge is currently in two, 150-foot sections and has a 100-foot opening in the center



A small section of the Fletcher Steele wall at the Strong Mansion...the perfect display feature for conifer dwarfs and miniatures.

to allow access and a view of the lower lawns.

A yew hedge (*Taxus baccata*) feeds the deer which roam between two adjacent golf courses. Lots of wildlife, including woodchucks, foxes, coyote, wild turkey, and the world's largest population of hungry chipmunks populate the property.



*Snake branch Norway spruce (*Picea abies* 'Cranstonii').
Photo by Karen Kral*



*A view showing the influence of pollarding on Fletcher Steele's Norway spruce hedge.
Photo Karen Kral*

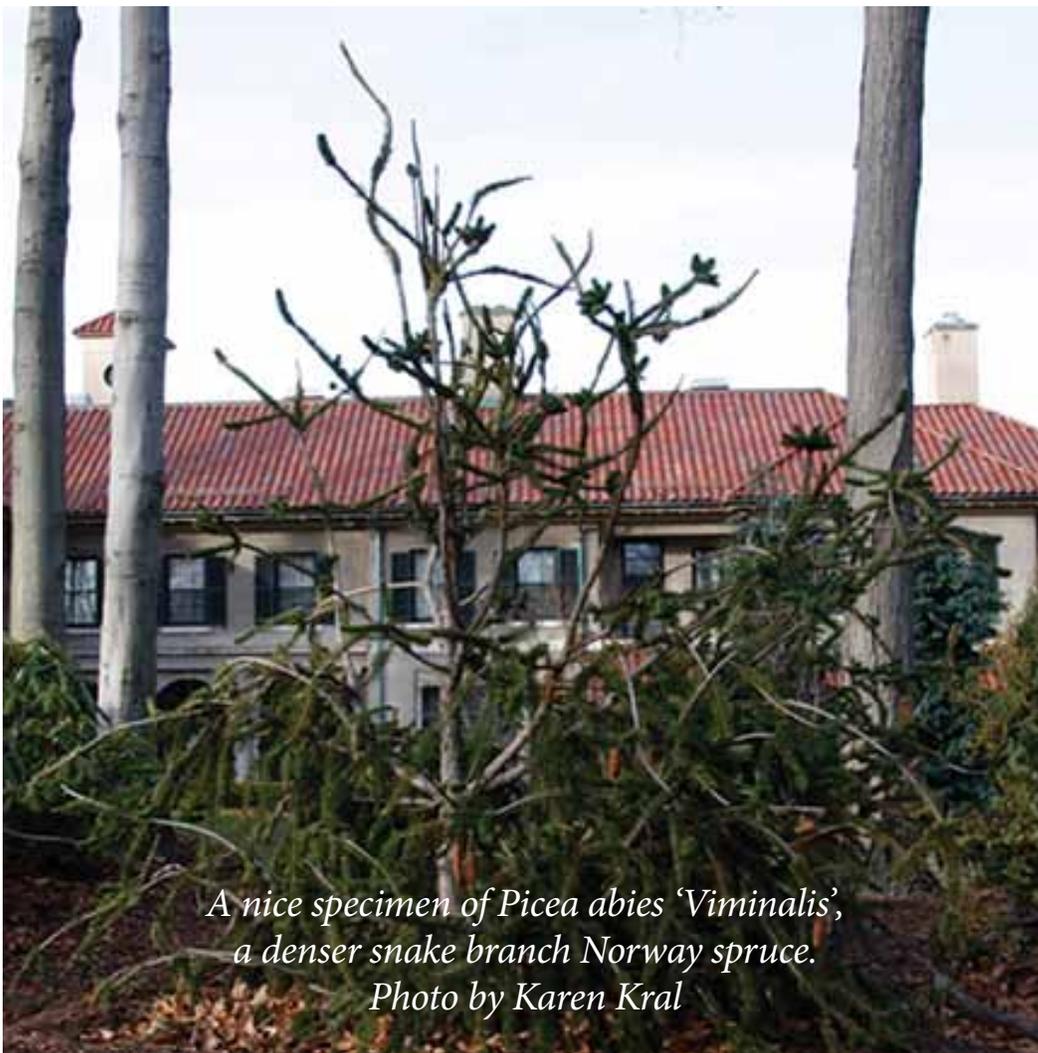
New plantings demonstrate that I am more a conifer collector than gardener. As a result, the emphasis is on foliage color and texture rather than flowers.

Most visitors, not blessed with Addictive Conifer Syndrome (ACS), accuse us of dragging malformed plants out of dumpsters rather than searching nationwide for unusual specimens. More gratifying are visitor comments that they never realized the variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and textures

conifers provide.

Among my favorite conifers are *Picea abies* 'Cranstonii'. Al Pfeiffer of Oriental Garden Supply had this in his exhibit at Rochester's Gardenscape in 2009. I bought it immediately, having fallen in love with its sparse, snakelike branches. The cultivar was originally grown from seed c. 1840 at Cranston Nursery in Hereford, England.

Another favorite is *Picea abies* 'Viminalis'. This is an uncommon, but very old snake branch spruce. It is much a much fuller plant than 'Cranstonii', and the branches can be very contorted, resulting in an open, but overall graceful appearance. I purchased my specimen from Oriental Garden Supply in 2013; they got it from a farm in Ohio. The cultivar originated as a plant found in the wild in 1741 by Clas Alstromer near Stockholm, Sweden.



*A nice specimen of Picea abies 'Viminalis',
a denser snake branch Norway spruce.
Photo by Karen Kral*



Eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus* 'Pendula') is another favorite. I forget who said that three of these in the same garden are an abomination, but I thought of it as I planted my third this past fall. This specimen forms the entry arch for a pathway between two newly planted conifer beds. It came from a neglected corner of one of Ken Franke's Christmas tree farms and joins the other two planted in 2008. It was first recorded by Nelson in 1866.

The gardens currently display over 350 conifer cultivars in several beds installed since 2008. Many of these plants are specimen grade, giving newly planted beds a more balanced and mature appearance. Although the property has many mature trees, and we moved a number of plants from our previous home in Connecticut, this garden is still very young and very much a work in progress. Thoughtful comments, critiques, suggestions and helpful hints from all visitors are welcome. We are still learning and have killed our share of plants. We try to remove them before people visit, but don't always succeed.



*Photos of the Swinford
garden features by
Elmer Dustman*



EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the last of the *RETURN TO ROCHESTER* series. Rochester is pleased to host the Northeast Region of the American Conifer Society on September 19–21, 2014. Registration is still open and details can be found on the ACS website.