

Interview with Matthew Evans
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Interviewer, Ron Sarasin
President, USCHS

Ron Sarasin: Welcome to the latest interview in the United States Capitol Historical Society's series of Oral History Interviews. My name is Ron Sarasin. I am a former congressman from Connecticut and President of the United States Capitol Historical Society. Matthew Evans is Senior Landscape Architect and Horticulturist at the United States Capitol. He is now in his 17th-year of public service with the Office of the Architect of the Capitol. His 37-year career as a landscape architect includes 20 years in private practice, in which he designed more than 2,000 built projects. His public service at the United States Capitol has won national recognition for excellence in design. His many projects include Bartholdi Park, the Senate Rain Garden, and a four acre park between the Rayburn House Office Building and Federal Center South West Metro Station. Prior to becoming a landscape architect he was an English professor at the University of Puerto Rico. A man of many talents he's fluent in Spanish, a painter, a calligrapher, a chess player, and a jazz singer. He is the author of one book on the landscape architecture of Washington DC and is currently at work on a second book entitled, "Our Capitol Grounds, a Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow Story." Matthew it is a pleasure to be with you today and to talk about your work at the Capitol.

Matthew Evans: It is great to be with you.

Ron Sarasin : Matthew, let's begin by talking about your job, in the position of senior landscape architect and horticulturist. What does that mean? What do you do? What are you responsible for?

Matthew Evans: When I came to work here in 1991, I was the assistant landscape architect and I was involved in the day to day operations and services provided by the grounds. That included a number of activities, from day to day maintenance, custodial work, gardening tasks, doing seasonal plantings throughout the year, repairing roads, removing snow, quotidian kinds of things. In more

recent years, I've been doing research, writing and serving as a special assistant to the Architect of the Capitol.

Ron Sarasin : Are you responsible for the events that take place at the Capitol—like the programs done on the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and the Inaugurations, and so forth?

Matthew Evans: For many years I was a team member, and today, there is a new position, a Capitol grounds superintendent, who takes care of those kinds of things.

Ron Sarasin : When we talk about the Capitol grounds, what area are we talking about? What does that encompass?

Matthew Evans: The grounds have grown in acreage throughout the years. Originally, the square of land surrounding the building was about 29 acres. Then it grew to about 59 acres, roughly twice that. That was in the eighteen--mid -nineteenth century, 1850s, and 1860s. Then Mr. Olmsted came and worked his magic to make the grounds what we still greatly appreciate and use very efficiently today. So, but we are up to over 450 acres. Now, not of that is contiguous land and some of it is used for storage facilities, and equipment, and so on.

Ron Sarasin : So that is land that is away from the Capitol itself?

Matthew Evans: Some-some is yes. Some of it is in Maryland; some of it is in Virginia. So it is--

Ron Sarasin : And the Landscape Architect is responsible for all that?

Matthew Evans: Indeed. Some of that is maintained by contract because it wouldn't be practical to travel back and forth routinely.

Ron Sarasin : Before you became a landscape architect you were an English professor. Now, how did you get from one to another?

Matthew Evans: Well, I was at a moment in my life, perhaps we've all been in, when you hear a small voice and you know that you need to make a decision even if it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense at

the time. You either grit your teeth and take the plunge, or you know you'll never do it. I had taught for five years at a university. I had become chairman of the program. I became involved in administrative work and I knew that I was going to have to go back to school to get a Ph.D. if I were to continue to be an academician; and I had been going to school since I was five years old and I thought, I can't do it. So, I thought of what I might do otherwise and here's a photograph of my grandfather, who was superintendent of grounds and buildings at the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical School of which at that time was in Miami, Florida. The date of this newsletter is April 16, 1943, the year I was born in. So this little copy of this newsletter for the airline school was called 'Fly Paper' and then there's a little quote after it 'Stick to it!' So, here he is with his victory garden that he established behind one of the hangars and he's holding up a bunch of carrots in one hand and roses in the other. And I adored this man and I wanted--I thought it would be great--to do what he did. He was father of seven children, my mother being midway in that group. He had the two qualities I admire most in people; number one, he was gentle and number two, he was resourceful with what he had.

Ron Sarasin : Before you came to Washington, you were in private practice?

Matthew Evans: Correct.

Ron Sarasin : In Florida?

Matthew Evans: Correct.

Ron Sarasin : And in Washington DC, or just in Florida?

Matthew Evans: Yes later in Washington DC. I had an office at the Watergate for several years.

Ron Sarasin : And then you transitioned to the Architect of the Capitol's office. What prompted that move?

Matthew Evans: Well, that was just fortuitous. I had met the landscape architect of the Capitol at a professional meeting and he mentioned to me that his assistant would probably be retiring in the

near future. He said, "Would you be interested in applying for the position?" So he and George White, who was Architect of the Capitol at that time, called me in and before long I had an offer from them.

Ron Sarasin : And the rest is history?

Matthew Evans: I thought long and hard for about 3 seconds. [I] thought it would be a great career opportunity and I've loved every moment of it for seventeen years now.

Ron Sarasin : Let's talk about some of the major projects of the Capitol, Bartholdi Park. Where is it, and what is the significance of it?

Matthew Evans: Bartholdi Park is one of the main components of the US Botanic Garden which comes under the Joint Committee of the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress has books and what have you, the Botanic Garden has plants. It's own kind of collections. Bartholdi Park is very significant. It's not only a beautiful place to visit, great place to have a brown bag lunch, but also a great place to learn about plants. Many of them are labeled and people come with their little notepads and make note of things they might want to try out in their home garden. I was very honored years ago to design the entire layout, the western half of it. As time has gone on, the very fine gardener there, Robert Pritchard has filled in those spaces and it's a real destination point.

Ron Sarasin : Let's talk about the Senate Rain Garden.

Matthew Evans: The Senate Rain Garden is actually some distance away from the Botanic Garden. It's on the Senate side of the Capitol, roughly between the Senate office buildings and Union Station. That's one of our environmental projects, where we capture storm water that drains off a large parking lot. And before the water can get into the storm drain system, we took out a lot of heavy-type clay soil and replaced it with sandy, gravelly soil and chose plants that will filter the rain water. The plants stand in water up to their knees sometimes and they will also withstand droughts. So it's a good way of managing storm water without adding any further burden to the city storm drain system.

Ron Sarasin : There's an area between the Rayburn Building and the Federal Center, SW Metro area. Does that have a name and what is there?

Matthew Evans: I'm laughing because I have a name for it. I call it the Dorothy Hamill park, but that's not an official name. The area down there, I used to get phone calls. People would complain; "Why don't you ever cut the grass, why don't you move the old tires that had been thrown off trucks, why don't you clean up the liquor bottles and make that presentable?" Well, it was not our land. It belonged to another agency. Finally, I was able to get an improvement easement for it. I didn't have a lot of money and the excavation for the Capitol Visitors Center was to start in the near future. I was able to recycle a lot of beautiful plants and very mature crape myrtles and a few other things. I think it's a truism that good design is simple, the simpler the better. I started at one end of a four-acre stretch of land that was just a series of snippets of land that was left over from the construction of the interstate highway there. I started at one end with the line, that if you imagined Dorothy Hamill leaning her shoulder to the right going this way and then leaning to the left going all around through that park with a very restrained palate of plant material and with just that line to tie it all together. It's gotten a lot of nice response from people who tell me they enjoy walking through there everyday now. So it is very gratifying.

Ron Sarasin : Tell us about any special moments that you have had in your career at the Capitol. I am sure there must have been many, but give us a few of them.

Matthew Evans: Sure. I would divide them roughly between plants and people. How fortunate we are to work with both the animal and plant kingdom. Among my great memories is interaction with people. The old expression "you only get one chance to make a good first impression" I think really holds true for the Capitol grounds because I always hope and pray that if someone's grandmother arrives at the Capitol for the very first time, that it's in pristine condition. There's no trash on the sidewalk, there's no weeds in the beds, and that's a favorable first impression. Likewise, a bus full of high school students who come for their junior level trip to Washington. So those experiences I've had. I was lucky when I was younger, and I still am,

to have had and still have mentors. I think one of my greatest experiences was having a young woman, who was a high school student, come to work for me one summer. I normally only hire a student for one summer and then try to offer the opportunity to a wider audience of teenagers. She was so helpful that I asked if she'd like to come back a second year. At the end of the second year she said, 'Guess what?' and I said, 'What?' She said, 'I want to do what you do.' She asked me what to do, and I said, 'You march right up to Cornell and get your master's degree in landscape architecture.' She did and now she's working on her Ph.D. in Geography at the University of Minnesota. So those are great experiences, but dealing with many people who come to the Capitol; everyone, from presidents of other countries, kings, queens, people from rural parts of the country who have not been here before. It's really been a rich experience. I go home and tell my wife stories practically every night about someone I have met, celebrities and, of course, I've come to know a lot of Members of Congress. Many of whom are great champions of the Capitol grounds. And to see plants grow. If you look at the back of a fifty-dollar bill, are trees that I hand picked from a nursery in New Jersey, and I put a little red plastic tag on the north side of each of those trees. When they arrived here, we planted them at the very same orientation to be sure that the side that had been on the north side, the shady side of the tree wasn't suddenly exposed to southern hot exposure all day long with the bark likely to crack and insect infestations getting in and causing problems. We had a great success rate with that and I am always proud to see a fifty-dollar bill with those trees I planted there and within the Olmsted terraces when I came to work here in the early nineties.

Ron Sarasin: Now there are a lot of trees on the Capitol grounds and many of them have special significance not only in the kind of tree it is but they're named after people or planted in honor of people. Tell us about the trees.

Matthew Evans: Sure. We have a remarkable green oasis here. We have over four thousand trees. Many of those have survived from the early 20th century. And some are commemorative, commemorating a state, often a state tree. Some are in honor of a person. Not necessarily a Member of Congress but someone who

has contributed to American life at a national scale. And then others are memorials which honor people who have died. I have come to know the families of those people and the trees have been a rich source of my making many dear friends here.

Ron Sarasin: Matthew, you are working on a book about the Capitol grounds. One of the people that has had a great deal of influence on the design of the Capitol grounds is Frederick Law Olmsted. His work has been preserved through the years, I think probably more so in the recent years than in the interim period, but what can you tell us about Olmsted's work and what you have done to maintain it?

Matthew Evans: I'm always elated to talk about Frederick Law Olmsted. He was a tremendous 19th century American figure. Certainly he is way at the top of my list of people to admire and emulate. He was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1822. And for that period, he lived a long life. He lived until 1903. The project for which he is most famous is Central Park in New York City. There was a design competition in the 1850s and he and a partner entered into that and won. He became widely known and before you know it he was doing projects all over the country. And then in the mid-nineteenth century, actually beyond that in the 1870s, there was a gentleman you know of by the name of Justin Morrill who was both a Representative and Senator here in Washington. He knew that the Capitol needed to be expanded and after the expansion was completed, the addition of the two wings the House and the Senate Chambers we know today and the new dome, we knew that the grounds really needed some thoughtful design. Olmsted did an absolutely magical job. The grounds still are extremely functional today. He was truly a visionary and prescient in that at that time when he was designing the mall it only extended down to the Washington Monument. Of course now it goes on to the Lincoln Memorial and includes other sites. But Olmsted had a very, I don't have the words to describe. It's just amazing how he came up with this design that is park like. Its green, it's soft, yet there is a structure to it. There is a formality about it but that formality is offset by the casual groupings of trees interrupted by swaths of lawn where one can have a view of the Capitol from interesting perspectives. What artists would call a two-point perspective, where you see one side of the building and at the same time another. As those roof lines and

ground lines go away from you they diminish down so that the part closest to you looks this big, the part out further away looks this tall, and it heightens the monumentality of the views.

Ron Sarasin: An artist who worked in the Capitol for many years, Costantino Brumidi, who decorated much of the interior, once wrote how fortunate he was to “make beautiful,” as he described it, the Capitol of this nation. As a landscape architect you try to show the setting of the Capitol. Let’s talk about your philosophy, what is it that you are trying to accomplish in the landscape around the building itself?

Matthew Evans: I certainly adhere to remarks that Mr. Olmsted made. For the Capitol, the landscape architecture was intended by him to be secondary to the architecture. Now other projects he did, and other projects I’ve done, certainly in some cases you might want to hide the building. But here we certainly continue to, and as you mentioned a few moments ago, the grounds today look more like the Olmsted plan than they did earlier in the twentieth century. And there were periods of neglect. There were many years when there was no landscape architect. Someone mowed the grass and did rudimentary things but the plan was really sort of lost. I have seen photographs where things just became so overgrown that you wouldn’t have recognized it. And in our country the words “historic preservation” mean more to us today than they would have a few decades ago. So both the inside and outside of the buildings, Mr. Brumidi and Mr. Olmsted, took great pride. Of course Mr. Brumidi became an American citizen in the process. I know they both considered it a great privilege to design for the United States Capitol.

Ron Sarasin: Now in your 37-year career a lot of interesting things, I’m sure, have happened, with the Capitol and perhaps in other areas. Tell us about some of the very interesting things you have done as a landscape architect.

Matthew Evans: I think that going back to my earlier years in private practice, in the 1990s I took a trip back to central Florida and I was driving down a busy street. And I was driving past what I thought was really beautiful landscaping. It was just so lush and everything made sense the way the plants were juxtaposed. I slammed on the brakes

and did a U-turn and I went back to look at it up close. I got out of the car and I realized that I had done that project over 30 years ago. That's gratifying and when you design you're really not designing just for the present or even the next very few years, but you're designing for, you hope, a long time if it is a landscape that is worthy of being preserved. And then going from private practice to public practice, I think that seeing the response that people have to the Capitol, and I know that you have taken thousands of people through the inside of the Capitol and we have been on tours of the grounds together, to see how people are just totally struck with the beauty and the majesty and the stature of our architecture and landscape architecture at the Capitol and to hear their comments. As you know I have done many walking tours of the grounds for people who work on the hill and all over Washington DC and the surrounding region. It is just such a wonderful experience to share. I think that the more people know about something, whether we are talking about music or painting or landscape architecture, the more you know about it, the better you can appreciate it; the more deeply you can appreciate it. I would say the interaction between people and our plants are always just getting better and better. We have a great ground crew that does a tremendous job of protecting and preserving and pruning the plants through good horticultural care.

Ron Sarasin: Matthew let's talk about your book. You're writing a book about the Capitol grounds and kind of a yesterday, today, and tomorrow theme. What do you mean by yesterday, today, and tomorrow?

Matthew Evans: A lot of people are not aware of the fact that there were nine different locations for the Capitol in the early days. Cities like Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Annapolis, Trenton, and York Pennsylvania. Philadelphia of course two or three times actually. But it was not until 1800 when the Congress first occupied the Capitol here in Washington and that we had some land, acreage or grounds to be developed. The book is to describe how that took place. There were designs for the grounds before Mr. Olmsted came to Washington in the 1870s, but not as thoroughly thought through. After the Olmsted era, of course, things have happened when my predecessor was here. It was the Vietnam era and there were riots and so forth against the war and the threat of damage to the grounds

by large crowds. And of course we've had 9-11 and we've had a number of life changing events worldwide. I want the book to describe how we've made our very best efforts in our office of the Architect of the Capitol, which by the way is a venerable organization—it was founded in 1793. And then there is a look at today affiliated with things going on now. And then tomorrow, what do we want the grounds to look like in ten years, twenty years, thirty years, and so on. Transportation issues, circulation, growth of the city, changing in public taste, changes in the Congress constantly. Projecting what may occur although we can never be sure, but I think that one thing is certain, we never want to lose the Olmsted legacy affiliated with the Capitol.

Ron Sarasin: So in all of this, what is it that you would like to be remembered for and your contribution to the Capitol?

Matthew Evans: Well some things people would never know about and I think that would be my relationship with some 82 employees that I once had under my supervision. These are hard working, talented people. And I really loved being a manager working closely with them. When the chips were down and we had tight deadlines or we had emergencies these people always, always came through. I want to be remembered somehow as a friend. I went many a wedding, funeral, graduation for family members and people who I saw grow. I had one employee who was illiterate. He had graduated from high school. He was a football player but had never really learned how to read. I got him into a reading class and now he has a very fine job—he is not a laborer anymore. He got hurt doing work outdoors. But it's very gratifying to me to see him typing away at his computer. He still works on the Hill. That's a great memory. So those are sort of the quiet things that no one will ever read about in a book. But I hope that some of the design work that I have done will be remembered and will be kept. My wife asked me the other day if the house caught fire, what things would you grab first? And I said, "That's easy, it would be my art supplies, my drafting tools." Because that's a part of me, to want to create things that are beautiful, whether that's just an oil painting or a design for a garden. My garden at home is one that I'm proud of. I would hope that there would be visual evidence of my having spent a few years here.