

**Thompson Elk Fountain, Portland Oregon:**

**The patron, the makers, historical context, and early reception**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Thompson Elk Fountain, opened to the public late in 1900, was a work of functional public art given to the City of Portland by its former mayor, David P. Thompson (Fig. 1). Until its removal by RACC (Regional Arts & Culture Council) in July 2020, the fountain and its surmounting elk sculpture stood downtown, in the center of Main Street between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenues, with Lownsdale Square immediately to the north and Chapman Square to the south. Made of Vermont Barre granite, the fountain was topped by a near-

life-size bronze sculpture of a standing male elk, with large multi-point antlers, rising from a granite pedestal at the center of the granite water basin. Thompson offered the fountain as a public monument providing drinking water to people and passing draft animals. As founding director of the Oregon Humane Society, he also intended it as a monument to that organization. The fountain featured four rectangular horse troughs at street level, each facing a cardinal direction and fed by two small granite beaver head spouts; separated by granite steps, these rose to an octagonal basin fed by two larger granite cougar head spouts projecting from the rectangular pedestal's short sides. The elk sculpture was designed by New York-based sculptor Roland Hinton Perry and cast by that city's Henry-Bonnard Bronze Co.; the fountain and pedestal were designed by Portland-based architect H. G. Wright. The sculpture and pedestal stood approximately 11 feet high (measured from street to tip of antlers), the fountain basin measured about 3 feet and 3 inches high and 8 feet square. On either of the pedestal's long sides, an inscription read "PRESENTED TO THE CITY OF PORTLAND BY DAVID P. THOMPSON A.D. 1900," and below that, "H.G. WRIGHT ARCHITECT" (Fig. 2).

A beloved local landmark for generations, the fountain has also served as a rallying point for public gatherings and protests, particularly during the 1930s and since the Occupy Portland protests of 2011. In 1974, the Thompson Elk Fountain and Chapman and Lowndale Squares were designated historic landmarks under an "emergency" ordinance recommended by the city's Historic Landmarks Commission and approved by the Portland City Council. Following damage incurred during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the fountain and sculpture were removed that July. On 11 May 2022, Portland's Mayor and City Council unanimously approved a resolution directing "the Office of Management and Finance to take all steps necessary... to fully restore and return the Thompson Elk Fountain to its original condition and location to the extent feasible." The "return of The Elk will send a clear message that the City is committed to revitalizing the downtown core," the resolution stated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Portland City Council Resolution #37576, "Direct Bureaus to take necessary steps to restore and return the Thompson Elk Fountain to its original condition and location," adopted 11 May 2022, <https://www.portland.gov/council/documents/resolution/adopted/37576>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

## THE PATRON: DAVID P. THOMPSON

### *Birth and Early Years in Ohio and Oregon*

David Preston Thompson was born in Cadiz, Harrison County, Ohio, on 8 November 1834.<sup>2</sup> His Pennsylvania-born father, Joseph Thompson, was a farmer and mill owner whose own father had emigrated to the U.S. from Ireland in 1792. Having attended public schools in Harrison County, David Thompson apprenticed as a blacksmith and assisted with local railroad surveys. In 1853, at age 19, he was hired by Robert R. Thompson (no relation) to walk a herd of sheep across the country to Oregon City. Young Thompson arrived in the Oregon Territory 1853, just ten years after Asa Lovejoy and William Overton's original founding land claim on Portland's future site (1843), and two years after the city was incorporated on 5 February 1851.

Portland in the year of Thompson's arrival saw its first fire-fighting companies, its first ferry across the Willamette River (at Stark St.), and its first brick building (put up by William S. Ladd). By 1853, the town featured a steam-powered sawmill, a log-built hotel, a newspaper (The Weekly Oregonian), and around 1000 inhabitants. In a letter published the following year in Cadiz's Democratic Sentinel newspaper, Thompson wrote awkwardly of his journey westward, providing notes about Oregon's upcoming bid for statehood, its timber and mining resources, and its agricultural riches. "I have saw potatoes here that weighed 7 pounds," he wrote, "and parsnips that measured 5 feet in length, there is turnips raised here that measure 18 inches in diameter." He offered

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<sup>2</sup> Basic biographical data for David Thompson can be found in several books and online sources, including Wikipedia and Prabook. While this report draws on many of these and will note them as due, it leans most heavily on the various Thompson family and business records housed at the Oregon Historical Society in Portland (OHS hereafter). Found here are: D.P. Thompson Co. Records, 1859-1869 (DPTCR hereafter, mss. 1681, 6 boxes); David P. Thompson Family Photograph Album (album 455), ca. 1880-1901; In Memoriam: David P. Thompson, 1901-1918; Thompson and Teal Family Papers, 1808-1993 (T+TFP hereafter, collection 168, 7 boxes); assorted vertical files on Thompson, the Thompson family, the Thompson Elk Fountain, etc.; and other resources. A typed and annotated family tree indicates David P. Thompson's birth year as 1831, but this is apparently an error as it is repeated nowhere else; OHS, T+TFP, box 1.

descriptions of Portland, which he found small and rather primitive, and of Oregon City, the hub of the territory where he soon settled.<sup>3</sup> There he lived until 1876, marrying Mary R. Meldrum in 1861 and raising three children (Bessie, Genevieve, and Ralph, the last of whom was left an invalid following a bout with spinal meningitis at age 14). Thompson prospered and the family eventually moved to Portland, to an elegant, three-story, Second Empire-style house on a large, well-landscaped lot at 12<sup>th</sup> and Yamhill.

### *Work*

Upon arrival in Oregon in 1853, Thompson began his working life chopping wood in Oregon City for John McCracken. Under McCracken he became involved in local Democratic party politics. By the late 1850s, the connections he had made helped him secure a federal appointment as Deputy Surveyor for Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Thompson served in that capacity until 1863, running “the base line of Oregon across the Cascades to the Blue Mountains, and the Columbia Guide Meridian north to the Big Bend of that river. In 1869 he surveyed the Dalles-California military wagon road and in 1872 surveyed and allotted lands to the Indians of the Grande Ronde Reservation.”<sup>4</sup> According to an obituary published in The Oregonian, Thompson “may be properly called the father of United States surveys in the Northwest.”<sup>5</sup> A tribute published in The Oregon State Journal a week after his death in 1901 declared that he had “surveyed more of the public lands of Oregon than any other man. Thousands of corner stones and trees in the in the mountains bear evidence of his tireless industry.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Portland City Directory for 1878, Thompson aptly listed his profession as “speculator.”<sup>7</sup> Having previously described the falls at Oregon City for his Democratic Sentinel readers, Thompson would in 1866 help build a railroad around them to Canemah—one of the earliest railroads in Oregon. That same year, he became

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<sup>3</sup> David Thompson, Jr., “Letter to the Democratic Sentinel” (Cadiz OH), 19 April 1854, OHS.

<sup>4</sup> “David Preston Thompson,” Prabook, <https://prabook.com/web/david.thompson/3771173>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>5</sup> “D.P. Thompson Dies,” The Morning Oregonian, 14 Dec. 1901, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> “D.P. Thompson,” The Oregon State Journal (Eugene), 21 Dec. 1901, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> E. Kimbark MacColl with Harry H. Stein, Merchants, Money, and Power: The Portland Establishment, 1843-1913 (The Georgian Press, 1988), p. 216.

manager of the Oregon City Woolen Manufacturing Co., then the largest corporation of its kind in the northwest. About this same time, he began investing in real estate and working with multiple railroad and navigational construction companies, including eventually the Oregon Construction Co., the Oregon Railway and Navigation Co., the O, R & N Railroad, and others. With J.W. Brazee, Thompson founded Portland's first savings bank in 1880, the Portland Savings Bank; he would subsequently be President or Director of 17 northwest-based national banks before retiring in 1891. An obituary published in The Cadiz Sentinel called him "a leading man on the coast, engaged in enterprises in many localities. His main business was in Oregon, but he was the largest tax-payer on city property at Seattle, Washington."<sup>8</sup>

### *Politics and Public Service*

Thompson built his fortune through real estate, banking, shipping, mining, and manufacturing, but politics and public service were where he made his greatest mark. In 1861, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, beginning as a lieutenant and rising to the rank of captain. He served 18 months with the First Oregon Cavalry and stayed in the northwest, volunteering for Union Army duty during the Civil War, yet seeing no action due to Oregon's remoteness from the conflict. Instead, his term was spent mostly on the Oregon Trail, preventing conflicts between natives and settlers.<sup>9</sup>

A letter sent on Thompson's behalf in 1859, recommending that he be appointed as notary public, called him "a good democrat, a good man."<sup>10</sup> Democratic party politics helped give him his start in Oregon, yet by 1868 the pro-abolitionist Thompson was elected to the Oregon State Senate as a Republican representing Clackamas County. In 1870 he was elected again, this time serving Multnomah County as a Democrat. In

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<sup>8</sup> "David P. Thompson," Cadiz Sentinel (Cadiz OH), 19 Dec. 1901, n.p. See also: "D.P. Thompson," The Oregon State Journal (Eugene), 21 Dec. 1901, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Or, as The Morning Oregonian put it, "holding in subjection the hostile tribes." 14 Dec. 1901, p. 1. See also: "Ex-Governor Thompson Died in Portland," The East Oregonian (Pendleton), 14 Dec. 1901, n.p. Between 1840 and 1860, about 400 settlers were killed on the Oregon Trail, and violent encounters increased in the years following the outbreak of the Civil War. <https://www.history.com/news/9-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-oregon-trail>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>10</sup> "Letter from L.F. Cartee to George L. Curry," 19 Feb. 1859, OHS, DPTCR, box 8.

April 1876 he was appointed Territorial Governor of Idaho by President Ulysses S. Grant, but he served less than four months due to conflicts of interest around federal mail contracts he held inside the territory.<sup>11</sup> In 1878 and again in 1889 he was elected to the Oregon State House as a Republican.<sup>12</sup>

Thompson was elected Mayor of Portland in 1879 and again in 1881.<sup>13</sup> Though he lost a third election in 1882 to former Mayor James A. Chapman, The Oregonian called his administrations “efficient and vigorous.”<sup>14</sup> Others, however, found him cautious at best, to the point even of lacking “enterprise” and “public spirit.” Judge Matthew P. Deady questioned his “trait of mingling business with politics.”<sup>15</sup> Properties Thompson owned were identified as the sites of prostitution and gambling.<sup>16</sup> Accusations were also raised of his having falsified his county assessor’s return in 1879 and of his engagement in banking improprieties during the 1890s. Thompson was never prosecuted on any of these charges and area newspapers later attributed them to “envy and malice,” so his guilt or innocence remains uncertain.<sup>17</sup> In 1890 he became the Republican nominee for Governor of Oregon, but lost to Sylvester Pennoyer, a Democrat and later Populist party member noted for his strident opposition to Chinese immigration and labor in Oregon—a then-popular position.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the local and regional level, Thompson was named Presidential Elector for the Republican national conventions of 1876 and 1884, each time nominating James

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<sup>11</sup> Robert C. Sims and Hope A. Benedict, Idaho’s Governors (Boise ID: Boise State University, 1992), p. 216.

<sup>12</sup> “David P. Thompson,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_P.\\_Thompson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_P._Thompson), accessed 1 Oct. 2022. See especially the links to “Oregon Legislative Assembly Sessions” under “References.”

<sup>13</sup> On the contested election of 1881, see: MacColl, Merchants, Money, and Power, pp. 218-19; and Jewel Lansing, Portland: People, Politics, and Power, 1851-2001 (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2002), pp. 166-69.

<sup>14</sup> “D.P. Thompson Dies,” The Morning Oregonian, 14 Dec. 1901, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> MacColl, Merchants, Money, and Power, pp. 216-17.

<sup>16</sup> MacColl, Merchants, Money, and Power, p. 291; and Lansing, Portland: People, Politics, and Power, p. 210.

<sup>17</sup> MacColl, Merchants, Money, and Power, pp. 216-17, 311; “D.P. Thompson Dies,” Morning Oregonian, 14 Dec. 1901, p. 10; “D.P. Thompson,” The Oregon State Journal, 21 Dec. 1901, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> MacColl, Merchants, Money, and Power, p. 238.

G. Blaine, a Republican supporter of black suffrage. In 1892 Thompson was appointed by President Benjamin Harrison as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Ottoman Empire. He took up this post on 7 January 1893, but resigned just two and a half months later, on March 21. While communications with the State Department are vague about his reasons, a handwritten note on the back of one of his ambassadorial calling cards claims he quit “because he was ill and worried over his business interests” at home.<sup>19</sup> Thompson had sold all his Portland banking assets before taking up his ambassadorial position, but in 1893 he returned, working unpaid for nine months as a receiver for the Portland Savings Bank, which he had founded and presided over between 1880 and 1886. The bank had failed during the nationwide economic depression of 1893, and it was Thompson’s activity as receiver that led to the charges of impropriety noted above.<sup>20</sup>

While the account just given provide a sense, however incomplete, of the wide range of Thompson’s activities, it only hints at his political positions and outlook on life. Of these, one finds ample evidence in the documents he left behind, most of these now archived at the Oregon Historical Society (OHS). Of particular interest in this regard are the texts of some of the many speeches he delivered during his years in Oregon. Thompson’s 1854 description Oregon’s oversized vegetables, quoted above, reveals a young man of limited formal education and a loose grasp on English grammar and syntax. His later writing is quite different, however. Political consulting and the employment of professional speechwriters was far less common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than it is today, but even if Thompson received help with his public talks, his private correspondence shows the same evolution toward more fluid and refined prose. The man had evidently educated himself. One thing that had not changed since 1854 were his gifts of careful observation and rich description. Thompson enjoyed travel in his later life, and speeches detailing his voyages to Turkey, Palestine, Egypt, and Japan survive at OHS among others. In these he offers extensive and well-observed accounts of geographical and architectural settings, climate, customs, local institutions, food, clothing, religion, government, agriculture, and more. Thompson was no more immune

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<sup>19</sup> OHS, T+TFP, box 4.

<sup>20</sup> MacColl, Merchants, Money, and Power, p. 311.

to the biases and blind spots of his era than are any of us, but he was genuinely curious and thoughtful, writing with sensitivity, vigor, and vividness. His perspective is often sociological or anthropological in character, though never dull and only rarely approaching the sort of cultural insensitivity that modern audiences find vexing.

During the 1890s, Thompson gave several speeches around Portland touching on issues of particular interest to 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences. In a talk dating from 4 July 1895, he knowledgeably discusses the Declaration of Independence and Thomas Jefferson's contributions to political thinking in the U.S. He cites at length a passage Jefferson wrote, later removed from the Declaration "out of deference to the slave power of the southern colonies," disavowing "any connection or approval of the slave trade." He expresses his vigorous support for Lincoln and the abolition of slavery, and his high regard for those Union soldiers who fought "for the preservation of the nation.... It now remains in the hands of the rising generation to maintain the freedom and independence of our great Republic." Thompson praises the Monroe Doctrine, states his support for building "the Nicaragua canal" [the route generally preferred over Panama before 1900], his opposition to foreign interference, and his support for strengthening immigration laws against "the criminal and pauper classes of Europe, who have in the past and still continue to swarm our great seaport cities." Proficiency in English, he says, should be required of all voters, native and foreign-born alike. "No foreign influence should have a foothold on American soil."<sup>21</sup> Another speech of 1895 presents these themes in even stronger terms, though Thompson also recognizes the contributions of foreign-born citizens: "Some of our best citizens are of foreign birth." Still, he says, "it is the duty of our government to protect our labor.... No man should be allowed to become a citizen until able to read the Constitution of the United States in the English language."<sup>22</sup> Many of these ideas are still debated by citizens and leaders of the United States.

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<sup>21</sup> Independence Day speech, 4 July 1895, OHS, DPTCR, box 8.

<sup>22</sup> Speech on immigration, 1895, OHS, DPTCR, box 8.



It is inevitable that some of Thompson's rhetoric in in these speeches will offend contemporary progressive sensibilities.<sup>23</sup> Thompson, after all, was a man of his era and his views were quite common, mainstream even. For instance, beginning in 1882, police in Portland were required to be U.S. citizens "able to read and write English. That same year the U.S. Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act, which was repeatedly renewed (first in 1892) and not repealed until 1943. In 1883, an attempt to overturn Oregon's constitutional ban on black suffrage failed to pass. Oregon elected an anti-Chinese governor (Sylvester Pennoyer) over Thompson in 1890. In 1892, Ellis Island opened as the nation's first federal immigration station. Nativism, racism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-immigrant sentiment were rife across the country, widely visible in political and cultural forums and in all variety of popular media. A two-page cartoon published in 1893 in the popular humor and commentary magazine Life, for example, shows Uncle Sam asleep in a garden chair while rats--with caricatured human faces and hats identifying them as Italians, Slavs, Jews, and Gypsies—pour in and surround him. The caption reads: "An Interesting Question: How long will it be before the rats own the garden and the man gets out?" (Fig. 3).<sup>24</sup> None of this is meant apologize for or excuse Thompson. Rather, it reminds us that beliefs and actions once deemed acceptable and held in common have often become unpalatable to later generations; the same will undoubtedly be true for our own beliefs and actions, some of which, no matter how well-intentioned or forward-thinking today, will inevitably become unfavorable or outdated at some future point. Again, Thompson was a man of his era, operating well within the prevailing norms and accepted boundaries of that era.

If anything, Thompson's charitable works show him to have been a highly active citizen and a social progressive even, in relative terms at least. He was the founding President and a lifetime member of the Oregon Humane Society. He held active

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<sup>23</sup> In the only slur I have found from him regarding specific ethnic groups, Thompson makes a derisive remark about poor, uneducated Italian and Chinese immigrants to the U.S. Speech on immigration, 1895, OHS, DPTCR, box 8. In a personal note, my maternal grandmother's family arrived in Portland from southern Italy in 1905, and my great-grandfather worked as a landscape gardener at the city's Union Station. Considering Thompson's remarks came more than 120 years ago, I am not bothered by them, nor is my sense of well-being threatened by the prospect of the Elk's return.

<sup>24</sup> Life, XXI:547 (1893): 398-99.

memberships in the Waverly Baby Home Association (providing assistance to orphans and indigent mothers), the Unitarian Church (as trustee) and its Channing Club (a spiritual discussion group of which he was first President), the Masons, the Ohio Society of Oregon (also as first President), and the Library Association of Portland--helping found the Portland Public Library, and again serving as first President; he also paid for the installation and maintenance of electric lights at the library's new building.<sup>25</sup> Thompson was a Regent of the University of Oregon and made substantial donations to further construction of its Woman's Memorial Hall (now Gerlinger Hall) at the university's Eugene campus.<sup>26</sup> A firm believer in the hygienic benefits of cremation over burial, he was one of the founders of the Portland Crematorium, which opened in Sellwood in April, 1901--the first crematorium west of the Mississippi River.<sup>27</sup> Thompson was a stockholder in and President of the Portland Business College, a three-term member of the Portland School Board, and Director of military instruction for Portland's public schools.<sup>28</sup> With the elk fountain, Thompson also gave Portland its second work of public art, following the Skidmore Fountain of 1888.

### *Death*

In May of 1901, Thompson began a trip around the world. Along the way he expected to stop in Cadiz to visit Ohio friends and relatives, but he took sick in Iowa and had to return to Portland. Four weeks later, at his home there, he died of "pernicious anaemia" related to stomach problems.<sup>29</sup> Following his cremation in Sellwood (at a time when cremation was still quite rare among Americans), Thompson's ashes were deposited at Riverview Cemetery, and his funeral held at the Unitarian Church at 7<sup>th</sup> and Yamhill.

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<sup>25</sup> OHS, DPTCR, box 8; Wallace Yates, "Monument to Mr. Thompson," Oregonian, 21 Dec. 1901, p. 3; Cheryl Gunselman, "Pioneering Free Library Service for the City, 1864-1902: The Library Association of Portland and the Portland Public Library," Oregon Historical Quarterly, 103:3 (Fall 2002): 320-37.

<sup>26</sup> OHS, DPTCR, box 8.

<sup>27</sup> "Funeral of D.P. Thompson," Oregonian, 14 Dec. 1901, n.p.; Albert L. Grutze, compiler, A Selection of Wills (Portland: Title and Trust Co., 1925), p. 30; will originally filed for probate on 17 Dec. 1901, Record of Wills of Multnomah County, State of Oregon, vol. 8, estate no. 4456.

<sup>28</sup> OHS, DPTCR, box 8; OHS, T+TFP, box 4.

<sup>29</sup> "D.P. Thompson Dies," The Morning Oregonian, 14 Dec. 1901, p. 1.

Portland's public schools were closed in his honor on the day of his funeral, allowing hundreds of area teachers to attend along with numerous friends, family members, and business associates. Over the next week or two, obituaries and tributes were published in newspapers across Oregon, the United States, and England.

### THE ELK FOUNTAIN, ITS ORIGINS AND ITS MAKERS: R.H. PERRY, HENRY-BONNARD, H.G. WRIGHT

#### *Thompson's Idea*

According to a story published in The Oregonian on 7 June 1899, Thompson had for the past several weeks been developing a plan for a monument to the Oregon Humane Society, "calling to his assistance architects and engineers."<sup>30</sup> He submitted his plans to the city via a letter and drawing on 6 June 1899. These were published in The Oregonian on the following day. The letter is worth quoting in full here.

"To the Mayor and Common Council, the Board of Public Works and Water Committee of the City of Portland—Gentlemen: From my office window [in the New Market Theater building, which Thompson purchased in 1880<sup>31</sup>] I have an opportunity to see the great benefit the Skidmore Fountain [completed in 1888] is to Portland by furnishing water to the dumb [i.e., speechless] animals and birds to quench their thirst, as well as to the great number of human beings who also drink of the pure water which flows from this fountain.

"Nothing has been done by any of our citizens which has been of so much benefit to the dumb animals, and consequently to humanity, as

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<sup>30</sup> "Gives a Fountain," Oregonian, 7 June 1899, p. 8; "David P. Thompson Elk Fountain," archival documents, recorded 31 Dec. 1973, record no. A/D 2579, Auditor's Office, City of Portland, <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/7884150/>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>31</sup> The theater was built in 1872-75 by Capt. A.P. Ankeny and Andrew J. Watson, at a cost of about \$100,000. It contained a market below and a 1200-seat theater above, offering the Portland Symphony its first home. The building was owned by the Thompson family from 1880 until at least 1976.

the construction of this fountain from funds provided by our late fellow-citizen, Stephen G. Skidmore.

“For many years past I have been an official of the Oregon Humane Society, and was for a time its President. At the last annual election of officers of the society (and on the retirement of Dr. T. L. Eliot,<sup>32</sup> who, for 17 years has so ably filled the office, but who asked to be relieved from further duties as president), I was again elected president.

“I now make this proposition to your honorable bodies: I will construct a fountain in the street between the two Plaza blocks [Portland’s first public park, established in 1869, today called Chapman and Lownsdale Squares, believed by many to have once been a feeding ground for local elk] in front of the county courthouse. I will construct it of granite and bronze, to be ornamental in design and on a concrete foundation, the basin and steps, as well as the drinking troughs, to be of granite, the center and ornamental parts to be constructed of granite and bronze. The plans of the same to be agreed upon by us jointly. I will put in all pipes through the granite and bronze work and the concrete foundation; the street around the fountain to be maintained in good condition by the proper committee of the city government; the water committee to make all necessary connections with the city water mains, and to furnish free of charge water for the fountain and to keep the fountain clean after it is completed and accepted by the proper committees.

“(This has not been done as it should be in the case of the Skidmore fountain, for I have seen Mr. H.D. Skidmore, a friend of Mr. Skidmore, directing the cleaning of it when the city was neglecting it, and when it needed cleaning badly.)

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<sup>32</sup> Eliot was the Unitarian minister, noted in Thompson’s will, who presided at his funeral. He later became an active member of the Portland Park Board, contributing to many of their projects. Grutze, A Selection of Wills, p. 30; William F. Willingham et al., Open Space and Park Development, 1851-1965 (Portland Parks and Recreation, 2010), pp. 4, 7, 9-10.

“It is my purpose to make this fountain useful as well as ornamental—a monument to the Oregon Humane Society.

“I have little care for a costly monument in Riverview cemetery, where I expect my ashes to be deposited when my body has been cremated [as per his will, dated 9 November 1901], and I want this work constructed where it will be of benefit to humanity and the dumb animals, instead of it.

“This work to be completed on or before July 4, A.D., 1900.

“The inscription on it to be: “Presented to the City of Portland by David P. Thompson, A.D. 1900.

“Respectfully submitted, David P. Thompson, June 6, 1899.”

The Oregonian article including Thompson’s letter goes on to discuss his meetings with the City Engineer regarding possible locations, and his consideration of various alternative fountain types, including one “throwing a stream up in the air.” The monument would be “12 or 15 feet in height. The elk would be emblematical of this western country, and the fountain would be supplied water through four panther [i.e., cougar] heads... the panthers also being emblematical of this western country.” The monument “will probably have to be made in Rome, as [Thompson] is informed that such work is not done in this country... They who have seen the plan think the fountain will not cost less than \$20,000 [i.e., @ \$705,000 in 2022], and perhaps much more.”<sup>33</sup> Like other famous and lesser-known Americans of this era who built substantial fortunes, Thompson with this gift sought to return something to the city that helped him build his (Figs. 4 and 5).

Though he asked that his name, as donor, be put on the fountain, Thompson in his letter clearly indicates that it be built in lieu of a personal funerary monument to himself. The work was explicitly intended as a gift to the city, a benefit to its people and animals, and a monument to the Oregon Humane Society (Fig. 6).

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<sup>33</sup> “Gives a Fountain,” Oregonian, 7 June 1899, p. 8.

Thompson's plans were presented by City Engineer W.B. Chase to the Common Council, the Committee on Streets, the Board of Public Works, and the Water Committee on June 7. The initial proposal (as published in The Oregonian) and the specifics of the design were approved on June 8. On 7 March 1900, Ordinance #11518 was passed, specifying the precise location for the fountain and vacating a portion of the Plaza Blocks (i.e., Chapman and Lownsdales Squares). City Engineer Chase certified completion of the fountain on 5 September 1900, and Thompson formally presented his gift to the city in a letter dated November 29. The city's thanks for and acceptance of the gift "in behalf of the citizens of the City of Portland," were passed by resolution, adopted by the Common Council on 5 December 1900, and published in The Oregonian on the following day.<sup>34</sup>

*Sculptor Roland H. Perry and the Henry-Bonnard Bronze Co.*

Thompson had been advised, said The Oregonian in June of 1899, that the sort of bronze work he wanted was "not done in this country." The following July 31<sup>st</sup>, however, the paper reported that "the bronze elk for the D.P. Thompson fountain arrived yesterday and will be transported to the fountain site today."<sup>35</sup> In the end, it came not from Rome but New York City. Sometime during those not-quite 13 months a U.S.-based bronze sculptor was found, contracts were signed, the sculpture designed and cast, and the finished work sent from New York to Portland via San Francisco. Thus far, no further information about the circumstances of the commission have been found.

Thompson may have seen work by sculptor Roland Hinton Perry while traveling in Washington, D.C. during the late 1890s. In 1898, Perry completed his most famous project, which art historian James M. Goode, in his monumental history of statuary in the nation's capital, described as "certainly one of the more exuberant works of

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<sup>34</sup> "David P. Thompson Elk Fountain," archival documents, record no. A/D 2579, <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/7884150/>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022; "D.P. Thompson Fountain Accepted," Oregonian, 6 Dec. 1900, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> "Gives a Fountain," Oregonian, 7 June 1899, p. 8; "Elk for the Fountain," Oregonian, 31 July 1900, p. 7.

sculpture in the city.”<sup>36</sup> Inspired by Rome’s Trevi Fountain (1732-62), Perry’s sprawling Court of the Neptune Fountain, is located on the west side of the Library of Congress’s Thomas Jefferson Building. The sculpture features dramatic, neoclassical bronze renderings—cast to Perry’s designs by the Henry-Bonnard Bronze Co. of New York<sup>37</sup>--of Neptune, sea nymphs, turtles, frogs, tritons, dolphins, and hippocampi, or “sea horses,” their muscles bulging as they appear to gallop through the spray. The work was immediately and widely published in newspapers and magazines across the country, including The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Minneapolis Times, and The Architectural Record. Thus, even if Thompson did not see Perry’s work in person, he might easily have seen it illustrated somewhere or been recommended to the young artist by one of his associates.

Born in New York City in 1870, Perry went on to study sculpture and painting at the New York Art Students League, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and the Académies Julian and Delécluse in that same city. In 1894, following his return to the U.S., he secured a commission for four bas-relief bronze panels for the entrance pavilion at the new Library of Congress building. The Neptune Fountain commission was originally given to sculptor George Gray Barnard, but when he resigned in 1896, Perry was awarded that job. He went on to complete important sculptural projects in Portland, Harrisburg and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Buffalo, New York City, Washington D.C., Chattanooga, San Francisco, Louisville, and other places across the U.S. After 1920, he devoted most of his artistic effort to painting, and his canvases can today be seen at the Detroit Institute of Arts and other major museums. He died in 1941.<sup>38</sup>

Whatever the exact circumstances of his hire, Perry took up the task in his New York studio, presumably working from photos or drawings, making a plaster model of an

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<sup>36</sup> James M. Goode, Washington Sculpture: A Cultural History of Outdoor Sculpture in the Nation’s Capital (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp., 38-9, 791.

<sup>37</sup> This according to Fred F. Poyner IV, Portland Public Sculptors: Monuments, Memorials, and Statuary, 1900-2003 (America Through Time, 2021), p. 17. Poyner’s citations are sporadic and casually, often carelessly, applied, leaving many of his assertions essentially unsupported. This one, however, has been verified.

<sup>38</sup> In Oct 1909, several Oregon newspapers picked up a minor national story about Perry’s being jailed for refusing to pay alimony. See for example: The Eugene Weekly Guard, 14 Oct. 1909, p. 4.

adult bull elk of uncertain species.<sup>39</sup> Goode writes that Perry in his sculptures “was most interested in spirited movement and heroic figures in action.”<sup>40</sup> Portland’s elk conveys no movement, and its heroism is questionable. It stands with its head turned to the left, surmounted by a huge rack of antlers, its hind legs slightly apart, the musculature in its neck, chest, and haunches clearly defined. Compared to any known species of elk, its legs, body, and neck are notably thin, particularly when seen beneath the impressive rack (Fig. 7). The hipbones protruding from its hindquarters give it a slightly emaciated look. Said one early observer in The Oregonian, “Looks as if he hadn’t had a blade of grass... for 50 years... he does look gaunt, as if his home were in snowy woods, instead of this green plain.”<sup>41</sup> Still, according to another in 1900, it was “a very fine piece or work, representing an elk standing ‘at gaze’ or in a position as if he had just heard the hounds baying on his track. His mane is as natural as life, and even the veins in his legs showing.”<sup>42</sup>

Perry’s work was cast by Henry-Bonnard Bronze Co., founded in New York in 1872 by Eduoard Henri (Edward Henry) and Pierre A. Bonnard and operated between 1884 and 1909 by Eugene F. Aucaigne. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, bronze casting was still relatively new to the U.S., only having been introduced to this country at mid-century. Staffed by French emigrés, Henry-Bonnard used the sand-casting method, as opposed the lost-wax process more commonly associated with Italian foundries. In brief, sand-casting typically involved mixing sand with clay or plaster; the wet mixture was placed within a wood frame, or flask, and the sculptor’s plaster model was impressed upon the wet sand. Once the sand mixture dried, the molten bronze (an alloy of copper mixed with tin, zinc, and lead) was poured. Each major section of the final sculpture was cast in a separate pour. Finally, the sections were cleaned, colored, and polished, and assembled, and the finished work was ready. In late 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, sand casting

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<sup>39</sup> Various elk species live in Oregon, none of them looking quite like the Thompson elk. John Terry, “Statue features a strain of elk peculiar to Portland’s history,” Oregonian, 1 Nov. 1998, n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Goode, Washington Sculpture, p. 791.

<sup>41</sup> “Juanita Visits the City,” Oregonian, 18 Nov. 1900, p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> “Approaching Completion,” Oregonian, 8 Aug. 1900, p. 7. A note on weight: most recent sources put the bronze elk’s weight at 3000 pounds, while earlier ones generally claim it weighed 6800 pounds. It is not clear which figure, if either, is correct.



was hailed as a new, modern industrial process, while the more costly and complicated lost-wax method seemed old-fashioned (though the latter did give more control to the artist, as opposed to the foundry, and gained renewed popularity after 1900). Henry-Bonnard dominated bronze casting in turn-of-the-century America, serving as the favored foundry for such nationally renowned artists as Frederic Remington, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and Daniel Chester French.<sup>43</sup>

### *Architect H. G. Wright*

During July and August of 1900, stories appeared frequently in The Oregonian telling of the fountain's progress. Street widening required that trees be cut, the wood to be sold as cord wood. The granite pieces arrived by mid-July, ready for assembly. Perry's completed sculpture arrived in Portland, in two parts—body and antlers—on 30 July 1900—just short of Thompson's July 4 deadline. Several measures still needed to be taken, however, before the fountain could be completed, and these caused months of delay. Caulking and cementing were needed around the fountain's joints. The pedestal's capstone, on which the elk would stand, had not yet arrived. Finally, the elk was elevated into position on its pedestal on August 27, but water connections still needed to be finalized. A request from the Fire Department for a dedicated connection to aid in fighting nearby fires caused further delay.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, on September 5, City Engineer W.B. Chase finally certified completion, although Thompson did not formally present the fountain to the city until November 29. In his letter that day he wrote, "it is believed by those competent to judge such work to be as strong and durable as it can

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Edward Shapiro, Bronze Casting and American Sculpture, 1850-1900 (Newark: University of Delaware Press), 1985, pp. 16-24, 72, 171-72; Thayer Tolles, "American Bronze Casting," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Oct. 2004, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abrc/hd\\_abrc.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abrc/hd_abrc.htm), accessed 1 Oct. 2022; Ann Boulton, "A Tale of Two Foundries: Art Bronze Casting Comes of Age in America," in Sharon Hecker, ed., Finding Lost Wax: the Disappearance and Recovery of an Ancient Casting Technique and the Experiments of Medardo Rosso (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 66-92.

<sup>44</sup> From Oregonian stories on the Thompson Elk Fountain published on 7 July 1900 ("Foundation for Fountain," p. 7), 13 July 1900 ("Granite for the Fountain," p. 7), 8 Aug. 1900 ("Approaching Completion," p. 7), and 28 Aug. 1900 ("Fountain Elk in Position," p. 7).

be made, and should be as lasting (with little care) as the city of Portland—which credit is also due [to] H G Wright Architect and Builder of it—”.<sup>45</sup>

As with Perry, the specific circumstances of H.G. Wright’s employment here remain still unclear. In fact, little at all is known about Wright. He arrived Portland late in 1897, having left Moline, Illinois, that October, where he had recently dissolved his monument design and manufacturing partnership with C.K. Devote and E.O. Fisher.<sup>46</sup> He had been in practice at least since 1890, when he designed and built a monument for the Soaper family at Fernwood Cemetery in Henderson, Kentucky.<sup>47</sup> That monument reportedly cost \$10,000, and according to an Oregonian story of 1901, Wright later sold the design—an Egyptian obelisk rising from a four-sided classical tabernacle set on a three-stage base--so that it could be reproduced elsewhere. Wright was said to obtain all stone used in his work from Coskie and Son’s granite quarry in Barre, Vermont. He specialized in “designing monuments, public fountains and mausoleums,” and claimed that “his designs today not only grace the different cities of his home state, but... they are found in many of the most prominent centers of the Eastern states.”<sup>48</sup> Almost immediately upon arrival in Portland, Wright found high-profile work. In 1898 he secured the contract for a \$5000 memorial to Portland lawyer and former U.S. Senator Joseph Norton Dolph (a Republican, most famous today for having been caricatured by Thomas Nast), who, like Thompson, was interred at Portland’s Riverview Cemetery. As Wright told a reporter, this was “pretty good work for a new man in a new territory.”<sup>49</sup> In 1903 he was awarded a contract to build a monument to the Second Oregon Volunteers, to be set in front of the county courthouse in Portland.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “David P. Thompson Elk Fountain,” archival documents, record no. A/D 2579, <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/7884150/>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>46</sup> The Monumental News, vol. 10 (1898): 78; Stone, vol. 13 (1896): 296. He would continue to hold property and conduct business there until 1917, at least. Granite, Marble & Bronze, 1917, p. 36. It is not known when or where he died.

<sup>47</sup> William Soaper was a successful tobacco farmer. “William Soaper,” Find A Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/83676663/william-soaper>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>48</sup> “D.P. Thompson Fountain,” The Morning Oregonian, 1 Jan. 1901, p. 24

<sup>49</sup> The Monumental News, vol. 10 (1898): 188.

<sup>50</sup> Stone: an Illustrated Magazine, vol. 26 (1903): 574. See also: “Favor Tilden Design, Oregonian, 17 June 1903, p. 12.

Whatever his other accomplishments, Wright remains best known for having designed, carved, and assembled the granite basin and pedestal of the Thompson Elk Fountain. Clearly, he was proud of this work for he featured it prominently in an illustrated advertisement for his business, published in the Portland City Directory in 1900. Beneath a drawing of the still-uncompleted fountain, with Mt. Hood rising in the distance, Wright claims “The best MONUMENTAL WORK in the different cemeteries of Portland has been erected by me for its leading citizens. All the stone work is completed in our quarry by the most skilled workmen with the latest improved machinery. Have erected some of the best Monuments in nearly every State in the Union” (Fig. 8). Wright lists his address as 614 East 12<sup>th</sup> St., between Hoyt and Irving in northwest Portland.<sup>51</sup>

## RECEPTION

The Oregonian for 6 December 1900, included stories of ongoing debates in Congress about U.S. involvement in the Philippines, the execution of Boxer Rebellion leaders in China, a yellow fever scare in Chicago, a deadly street duel in West Virginia, the deaths of two prominent Oregon pioneers of the 1850s, a payroll robbery at Portland’s Western Lumber Co., and the Portland Common Council’s formal resolution to accept and thank David P. Thompson for his “Costly and Beautiful Gift... known and designated as the ‘David P. Thompson Fountain.’”<sup>52</sup>

Understanding any community’s response to the public art in its midst is a difficult task, especially when looking back across 120 years. Many, perhaps most, people give little thought to their built environments, and even those that do rarely record their impressions. Portland’s population in 1900 stood at just over 90,000, leaving us the potential for at least 90,000 responses of varied character and intensity. Of those few that were recorded, some have likely been long-since lost or discarded, a few might still reside in attics, fewer still survive in archives or local newspapers. How thoroughly,

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<sup>51</sup> Advertisement for H.G. Wright showing Thompson Elk Fountain, Portland City Directory (R.L. Polk & Co., 1900), p. 759.

<sup>52</sup> The Morning Oregonian, 6 Dec. 1900, pp. 1, 7.

clearly, consistently, or honestly people express themselves lends further complication to interpreting those responses available to us.

That city leaders would express lavish appreciation is unsurprising: Thompson was one of their own; his “costly and beautiful gift” was a then-rare and artful public adornment filling a much-needed function at minimal cost to the city. That The Oregonian would describe the fountain in favorable terms is also to be expected, given that Thompson and Editor Harvey W. Scott had been friends since 1857, when they chopped wood together in Oregon City.<sup>53</sup> Headlines in 1899 describe Thompson’s proposal as generous and the fountain as “AN ORNAMENT TO PORTLAND... [and] A Handsome Structure on Main Street.”<sup>54</sup> The paper’s obituary for Thompson illustrates “the beautiful drinking fountain [he] presented to the city.”<sup>55</sup> Beyond this, however, the paper offered few qualitative remarks, publishing illustrations in 1899 and 1900, but limiting captions to pure description.<sup>56</sup>

A short piece published in August 1900 reported that the sculpture had arrived in Portland and that the elk’s “magnificent antlers” still needed to be attached to its body. Titled “This is not a Carnival Elk,” the story refers to the upcoming the Portland Carnival and Street Fair, which opened on September 5, with “Elks’ Day” on September 6—a day dedicated to the 7000 visiting members of the B.P.O.E., or Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks. The story goes to say that the Thompson elk would soon “be ready to be admired by all the thousands of Elks who will gather here during the Carnival.” The day before, people had reportedly gathered at the fountain site, many of them “discussing the question of why the elk... was furnished with such large antlers.”<sup>57</sup> The Elks’ Club may also have produced their own elk sculpture for the carnival. A souvenir

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<sup>53</sup> Alfred Holman, “Harvey W. Scott, Editor—Review of His Half-Century Career and Estimate of His Work,” The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society, 14:2 (June 1913): 90.

<sup>54</sup> “Gives a Fountain,” Oregonian, 7 June 1899, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> “D.P. Thompson Dies,” The Morning Oregonian, 14 Dec. 1901, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> “Thompson Fountain,” Oregonian, 25 June 1899, p 16; “D.P. Thompson’s Gift to Portland,” Oregonian, 1 Jan. 1900, p 23.

<sup>57</sup> “This is not a Carnival Elk,” Oregonian, 20 Aug. 1900, p 5. The Oregonian that Sept. was full of stories on the Carnival. See especially: “This is Elks’ Day,” The Morning Oregonian, 6 Sept. 1900, pp. 8, 10.

brochure shows an illustration of a temporary triumphal arch topped by an elk rearing on its hind legs (but otherwise looking much like the Thompson elk), with “Portland Lodge No. 142 B.P.O.E.” indicated beside it (Fig. 9).<sup>58</sup>

The story has often been repeated in recent decades that the Elks’ Club did not, in fact, admire the Thompson elk. Rather, they were said to have found it an abomination, and reportedly refused a request to dedicate the fountain. One of their number, employing a term used earlier by 18<sup>th</sup> century art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, purportedly called the elk a “monstrosity of art,” its legs too thin, its neck too long.<sup>59</sup> It is not clear where this story originates. An extensive online search using a wide variety of search terms and databases--including Historic Oregon Newspapers, Newsbank, and The Oregonian Archives--turned up no evidence of the Elks’ rejection. Nor did inquiries to local historians and Milwaukie-Portland Elks Lodge No. 142, which maintains records going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>60</sup> The first use of the term “monstrosity of art” to describe the fountain appears to come from a story published in The Oregonian’s Northwest Magazine in 1983; one year later, the paper used the term “monstrosity of nature” as a supposedly historical description of the fountain.<sup>61</sup> These

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<sup>58</sup> Page from a souvenir brochure, Portland Carnival and Street Fair, Sept. 1900, “Associations and Institutions Collection, ms. 1511, box 9 (Elks Club), OHS.

<sup>59</sup> This story has been repeated in numerous texts, none of which provide an original source. See for example: Poyner, Portland Public Sculptors, p, 20; and “Chapman Square,” <https://www.portland.gov/parks/chapman-square>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>60</sup> In Sept. 2022 I contacted local historians William J. Hawkins III and Chet Orloff, along with Milwaukie-Portland Elks Lodge no. 142 (specifically, Carly Moser, Lodge Secretary). None were able to provide an historic source for this story. This leads me to conclude that the story resulted from one of three circumstances: 1) events may have occurred at the time (1900) as later reported and been published in a source I have not yet located; 2) events and comments, or something like them, may have occurred and been passed down orally, subject to embellishment or misquotation over the years; or 3) the story was invented at some later date, turned into “oral history,” passed along to journalists, and made “fact” by frequent repetition among authors who did not verify sources.

<sup>61</sup> Norma Catherine Gleason, “The Portland Public Art Tradition,” Northwest Magazine (Oregonian), 23 Jan. 1983, pp. NW 9, 12; Bob Olmos, “Beaverton Commission Head Wants 1% for Arts,” Oregonian, 14 June 1984, p. E11. See also: Norma Catherine Gleason and Chet Orloff, Portland’s Public Art, (Portland Western Imprints, 1983). None of these titles provide notes or sources.

are the earliest instances of these terms that I have found and the first to cite the Elks' Club "rejection" story.

One thing the Elks' Club did do—according to an Oregonian account of 1900—was conclude their Elks' Day march through the city at the Thompson Fountain.<sup>62</sup> Their having done so would seem undermine the virulence and even the veracity of their purported rejection. In a related note, a campaign to have Theodore Roosevelt attend the fair and the Thompson Fountain's dedication was also reported by The Oregonian. Roosevelt was then Governor of New York, soon-to-be-Vice-President of the U.S, under William McKinley, and President following McKinley's assassination in Buffalo in September 1901. The paper also deemed him a "high authority upon the Elk and his habits." The invitation came to naught, although Roosevelt did visit Oregon in 1903. It is not known if he then saw the Thompson elk.<sup>63</sup>

In later years, the elk fountain would be officially named a historical landmark (1974), appear in modified form in a popular film (Gus Van Sant's My Own Private Idaho, 1991), and be repeatedly damaged by protestors with no apparent grudge against the fountain itself (2011, 2016, 2020).<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the fountain's most strident critic was one Cornelius O'Donovan, a Portland-based real estate agent and noted crank according to The Oregonian, which once devoted a editorial to his frequent letters to the paper.<sup>65</sup> On at least three occasions in 1936, O'Donovan wrote to the Portland City Council and Commissioner of Parks, J.E. Bennett, demanding that the fountain be removed. He called it "a hazard to traffic and time," a "fossilized stag" that had "outlived its usefulness," a "frightful, dangerous... gargoyle quadruped... a hideous eye-sore... howl[ing] for elimination." In 1937, Bennett, by then Commissioner of Public Affairs, declined O'Donovan's demands, saying simply that there was "no emergency which would warrant the appropriation of funds" for the fountain's removal.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "This is Elks' Day," The Morning Oregonian, 6 Sept. 1900, pp. 8.

<sup>63</sup> "Trying to Get Roosevelt," Oregonian 24 July 1900, p 12.

<sup>64</sup> "Thompson Elk Fountain," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thompson\\_Elk\\_Fountain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thompson_Elk_Fountain), accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

<sup>65</sup> "Back on the Auld Sod," Oregonian, 17 March 1950, p. 14.

<sup>66</sup> See his letters of 11 Jan. and 18 Jan. 1936, 25 Aug. 1936, and 11 Aug. 1937. "David P. Thompson Elk Fountain," archival documents, record no. A/D 2579, <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/7884150/>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

Two final items bear noting in this context. First, in 1919, the journal Architect and Engineer of California published a special issue on Portland, including a jury's findings on the city's "notable examples of architecture, landscape architecture, and sculpture." Only two sculptural works were mentioned: Olin Warner's Skidmore Fountain of 1888, and Herman A. McNeil's Coming of the White Man of 1904, the latter given by Thompson's family and possibly initiated by him.<sup>67</sup> The elk fountain, alas, did not make the cut in this case. The journal offers no information on the jury's deliberations or criteria, although it does say that it consisted of "three outside architects [i.e., living and/or working outside of Portland], the Professor of Art at the University of Oregon, and the Curator of the Portland Art Museum."<sup>68</sup>

More affirming, perhaps, is the fountain's appearance in a seemingly unlikely place. The library of University of California, Santa Barbara contains a photo album from the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, showing pictures of a California-based Japanese-American family during a trip to Oregon and Washington (Fig. 10). All but two of the photos included there show people. The other two represent an unidentified water tank and reservoir, and a full view of the Thompson Elk Fountain as seen from Lownsdale Square.<sup>69</sup> Monumental public statues of animals were relatively rare before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even now they are far less common than statues of people or abstract imagery. And unlike more familiar heraldic or allegorical images of, say, lions or eagles, Portland's elk carries no obvious symbolism, no evident political messaging. Perhaps this absence of message was what appealed to the photographer, the elk appearing to him or her as simply interesting, amusing, or beautiful.

Or maybe it was something else. In a recent post on his Portland Architecture blog, local writer Brian Libby suggests that the elk's main message might be about

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<sup>67</sup> "The Most Notable Examples of Sculpture," The Architect and Engineer of California, LVI:3 (March 1919): 70-1.

<sup>68</sup> Frederick Jennings, "The Most Notable Buildings of a City—What Are They?," The Architect and Engineer of California, LVI:3 (March 1919): 39.

<sup>69</sup> Japanese family photo album, ca. 1900-1939, California State University, Japanese-American Digitization Project, jia\_07\_01\_054, <http://digitalcollections.archives.csudh.edu/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/8957/rec/1>, accessed 1 Oct. 2022.

humility, “our humility, before the natural world. The bronze elk statue in the middle of Oregon's biggest city is a kind of reminder, just like seeing Mt. Hood, that living here we are closer to the forests and beaches than most urban denizens. For a lot of us, it's a big part of why we live here.”<sup>70</sup> For a stranger, far from home and visiting a large, unfamiliar city, such a public display of humility before nature might well have been a comfort.

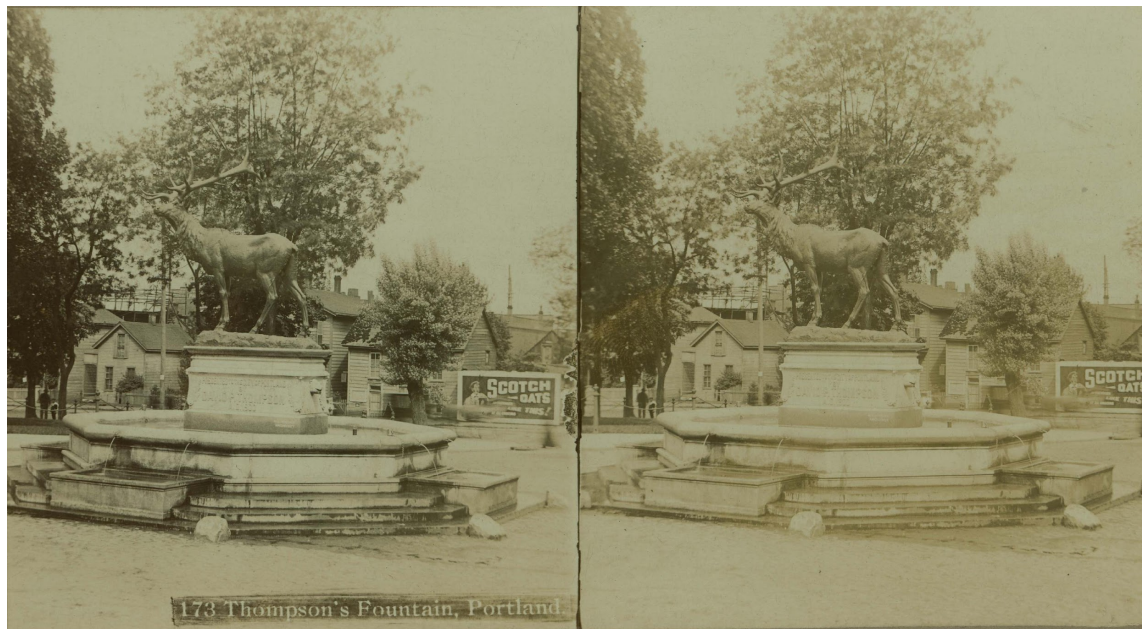


Fig. 1--Thompson Elk Fountain, ca. 1901,  
<https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/3587530/>

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<sup>70</sup>Brian Libby, “The Elk Statue is Just Fine, Portland Architecture,  
<https://chatterbox.typepad.com/portlandarchitecture/2020/08/the-elk-statue-is-just-fine.html>, accessed 25 Aug. 2022.





Fig. 2--Thompson Elk Fountain, 1967,

<https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/3577257/>

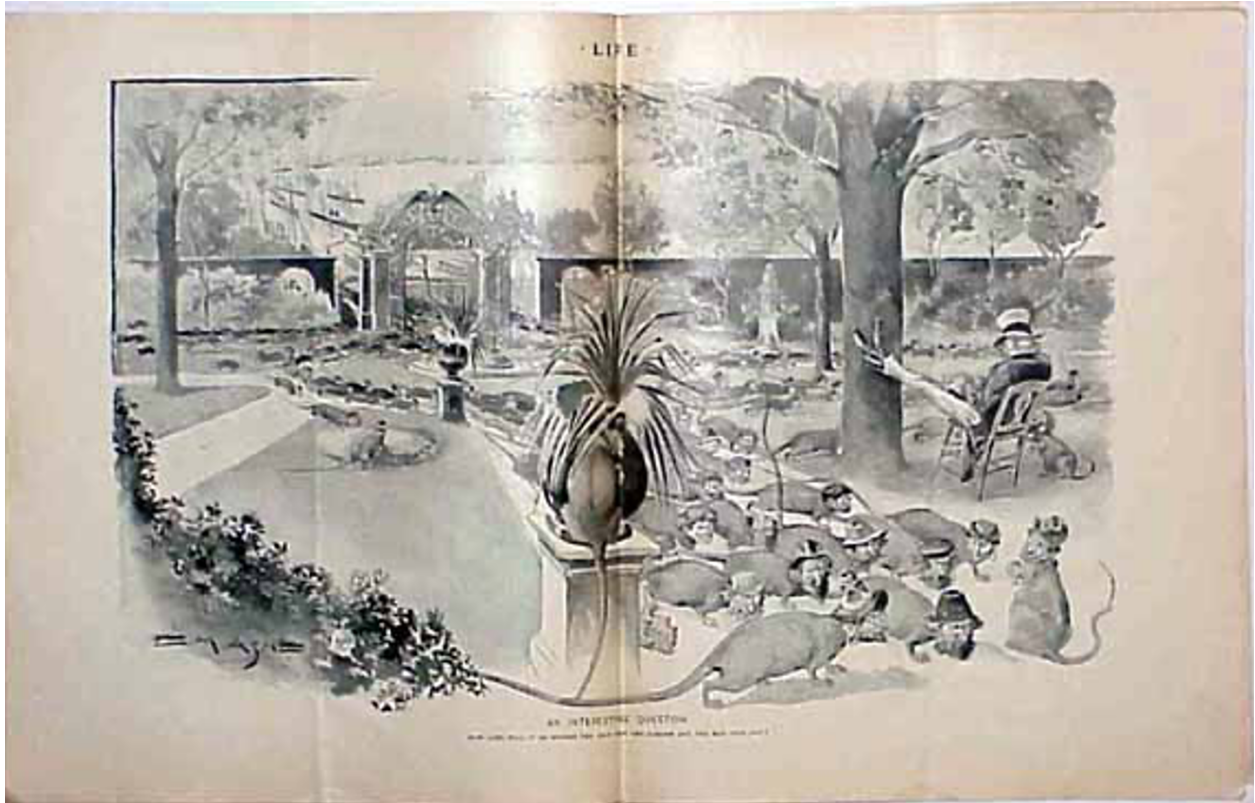
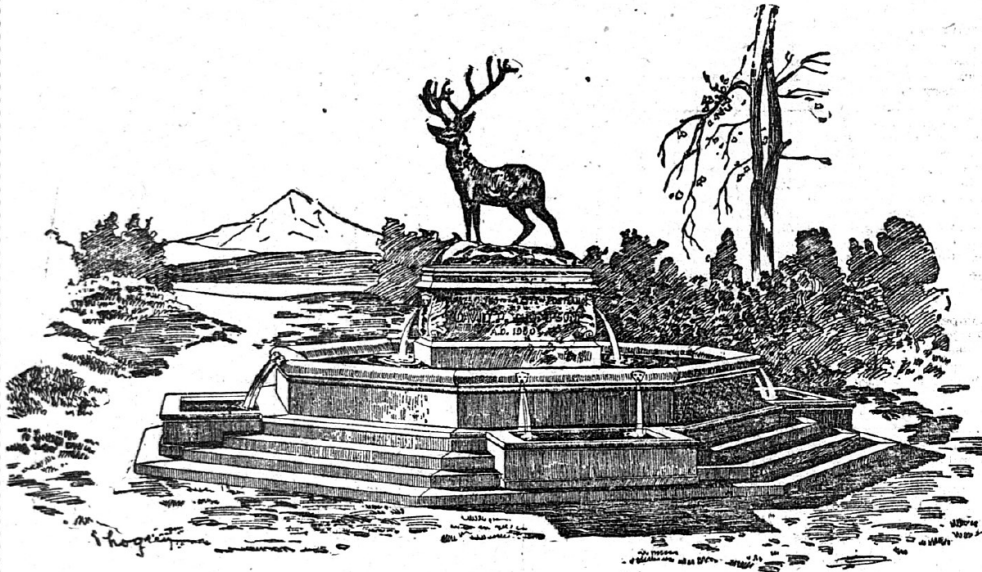


Fig. 3--"An Interesting Question: How long will it be before the rats own the garden and the man gets out?" Life, XXI:547 (1893): 398-99.

D. P. THOMPSON'S GIFT TO PORTLAND



The Thompson Fountain, which is a gift to the city of Portland from Hon. D. P. Thompson, will be completed in time to be dedicated on July 4, 1900. The contract price of the fountain is \$20,000, the contract being held by H. G. Wright, of this city. It is being built in the East, of granite, and the work is well under way, the granite being all quarried. The elk surmounting the fountain is to be of the finest bronze. The diameter of the fountain at its base is 25 feet. The height from the base to the feet of the elk, is 8 feet, and to the top of the elk's antlers, 11 feet. Mr. Wright, who holds the contract, designed the fountain.

Fig. 4--The Oregonian, 1 Jan. 1900, p. 23.



Fig. 5--Thompson Elk Fountain, 2018, Carol M. Highsmith, photographer,  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2018699254/>



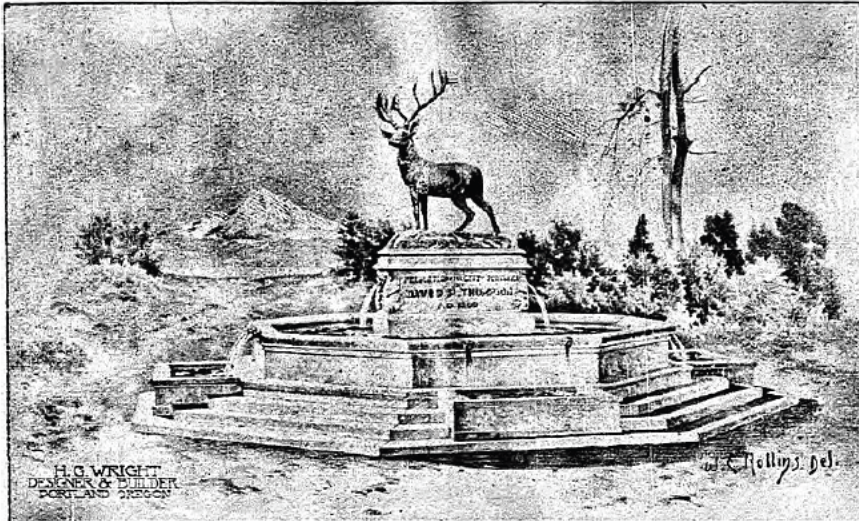
Fig. 6--Thompson Elk fountain, ca. 1905, OHS negative no. 74547,  
<https://www.portland.gov/omf/news/2022/2/15/iconic-elk-statue-will-return-downtown-portland>



Fig. 7--American Elk (native to Oregon), <https://www.britannica.com/animal/elk-mammal>

# THE THOMPSON FOUNTAIN

Donated to the CITY OF PORTLAND  
by Hon. David P. Thompson



**BASIN AND PEDESTAL ARE OF THE FAMOUS BARRE GRANITE**

...DESIGNED AND CONSTRUCTED BY...

## H. G. WRIGHT

**Manager Barre (Vt.) Granite Quarry and  
Works for the Pacific Coast**

The best MONUMENTAL WORK in the different cemeteries of Portland has been erected by me for its leading citizens. All the stone work is completed in our quarry by the most skilled workmen with the latest improved machinery. Have erected some of the best Monuments in nearly every State in the Union.

**ALL WORK GUARANTEED BY BOND.**

**614 E. TWELFTH ST., PORTLAND, OR.**

**Tel. White 331.**

See Back Cover of this Book.

Fig. 8--Portland City Directory (R.L. Polk & Co., 1900), 759.



Fig. 9—Page from a souvenir brochure, Portland Carnival and Street Fair, Sept. 1900, “Associations and Institutions Collection, ms. 1511, box 9 (Elks Club), OHS.”





Fig. 10--Page from Japanese-American family photo album, ca. 1900-1939, California State University, Japanese-American Digitization Project, jia\_07\_01\_054, <http://digitalcollections.archives.csudh.edu/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/8957/rec/1>

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