

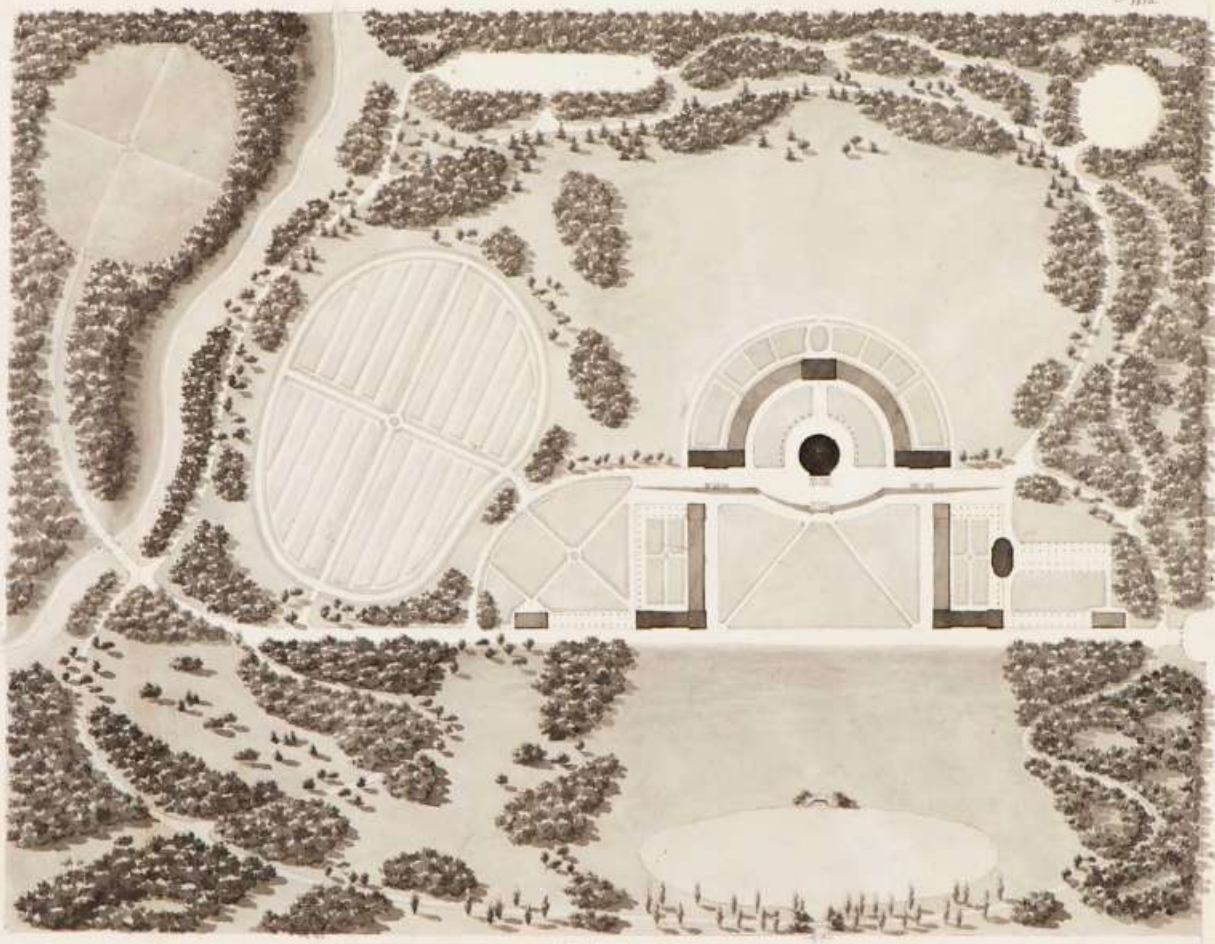


# Union College offers a tantalizing exhibit of early 19th-century plans for the campus

Exhibit shows elaborate, unrealized plan for Union campus

**Tim Kane**

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"Plan of Union College" Inscribed in handwriting (at top and bottom of sheet) *College de l'Union a Schenectady, Etat de New Yorck, 1813*. Ink and wash on cream wove paper 9" x 11 1/2" Special Collections, Schaffer Library, Union College

## *Schenectady*

Sometimes history is about what didn't happen.

If 19th-century architect Joseph Ramee had his way, Union College would have manicured gardens, man-made waterscapes and open promenades spilling onto Union Street. Imagine a utopia in the middle of Schenectady.

It never happened. So why stage an exhibit on something that didn't take place?

"Grand Design: Joseph Ramee's Drawings for the Union College Campus" at the Mandeville Gallery at Union answers with a tantalizing and relevant exploration into what could have been through the hindsight of history.

Hired by Union's president, Eliphalet Nott, in 1813, the Frenchman was commissioned to design a new campus "up the hill" from the Stockade area at the school's current location, as it expanded and gained status as one of the top colleges in early America. The result was far-reaching plans about how to connect humans to nature.

As it stands, only two of Ramee's buildings, North and South Colleges, exist — the only two ever built out of seven proposed. Most of his landscaping ideas were never implemented. With nearly two dozen drawings and sketches, "Grand Design" stirs the imagination and reveals a crucial gap in Union and Schenectady history.

Ramee envisioned the Mohawk River and Union interacting together through a western vista and access points, which, today, is mostly obstructed. The campus was to be ringed by myriad cultivated gardens, shrubs and trees, a network of streams encircling the entire tract and an impressive Pantheon right in the middle of it all. Only the Jackson Gardens provide a sense of his landscape design.

The location for his Pantheon is where the Nott Memorial (named for Eliphalet and finished in 1879) is today. The circular Victorian tower is the college's signature building, but far from Ramee's conception. His design was of its time and lost to time. This is what makes the exhibit compelling.

Of all the visual arts, architectural design is arguably the discipline lost to the past more than the others. Given the scope of projects, financing, damaged plans at construction sites and the sheer community effort to erect institutional buildings, many architecture plans are left unfinished and forgotten.



*Union College, Schenectady, N. York*, William C. Givens Oil on canvas 23" x 72" Signed lower right, "Wm. C. Givens" Union College Permanent Collection

By the late 19th century, Ramee's designs were lost and no records of them existed. They were discovered in the 1930s by a student researching something entirely different. Through Codman Hislop's discovery, an archiving and restoration effort has taken place under the direction of architectural historian Paul V. Turner, a Union graduate and Stanford University professor.

So why didn't the plans come to fruition? "They are a number of reasons why it never happened in its entirety," said Marie Costello, acting interim director of the Mandeville. "Administrations, financial considerations and tastes changed. It was a big project."

Its seven buildings, including a large home for the college president, employed classical forms — squares, spheres rectangles — formed by hard right angles, but there's an understated quality — even for the Federal style.

Being French and trained in Europe, Ramee's work is very much a French interpretation of the neoclassicism popular in the late 18th century. It avoids ornate elements, and he clearly was focused as much on the landscape as the buildings.

Varying uses of trees, streams and walkways, in today's context, stimulates a discussion about what the college's relationship with its surroundings might have been. Over time, parcels of land have been sold off as frontage along Union Street and other roads around campus, creating a more insular feeling when entering.

The idea of devoting so much attention to the landscape was relatively new to the U.S. It gained credence in 18th-century Europe as part of the Enlightenment, a movement that saw humans taming and beatifying nature through rational thought and proportions. Ramee first came to the U.S. to design a vast utopian complex near the St. Lawrence River proposed by another developer. It never happened.

Yet Ramee's influence on Union is unmistakable. Its wide-open central commons is laced with walkways very much in the spirit of his layout. Looking at his renderings, it's hard not to see the campus's careful allotment of green space amid a fairly contained and dense layout is due to his involvement 200 years ago. His vision is very much the blueprint for the college — and other campuses — despite much of it never materializing.

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