Figure 1-1. The young James Duane Doty, from a miniature in the possession of the Neville Public Museum of Brown County, Wisconsin.
CHAPTER I:  
AN APPRENTICE IN DETROIT

In the year 1818, a young man by the name of James Duane Doty left his family home in upstate New York, and headed west to pursue his fortune. Boarding a sailing vessel somewhat at random, the eighteen year old Doty found himself bound towards the frontier settlement of Detroit. Although the streets and squares of the city in which Doty landed had only been laid out eleven years previous, a bustling boom town greeted his eyes. The broad avenues near the wharf were already lined with homes and places of business, and several public buildings had been erected on the squares. The city was thronging with activity upon his arrival, as many settlers and land speculators had traveled to the city in anticipation of the first public sale of government lands in the Michigan Territory. The excitement of the sale opening was heightened by yet another momentous event, as the first steam driven vessel ever to cross Lake Erie docked on the Detroit waterfront. As Doty watched, the S.S. Walk-in-the-Water arrived to the sound of a full canon salute. During his first weeks in the new city, Doty had witnessed the arrival of a new era for the frontier. The opening of public lands combined with the development of great lakes steam travel brought a flood of travelers from the east.
Figure 1-2. The S.S. Walk-in-the-Water arrives in Detroit on her maiden voyage.  
From a print in the Detroit Public Library.
The charming and well educated James Duane Doty did well in his new town. The Attorney General of Detroit, whom Doty had met by chance, had offered the young man a law apprenticeship which served to immediately introduce him to some of Detroit's most powerful and influential citizens. Doty used these connections to maximum advantage, and soon he had found additional work copying legal documents for a prominent local lawyer in return for room and board. Accommodations in the rapidly growing frontier city were often curious, and Doty's lodgings were no exception. His living quarters were located in a small dormitory partitioned off at the end of the Council House, the same structure in which Doty worked. The Council House was then Detroit's most important public building, and all court sessions, elections, auctions and public meetings took place there. It was probably in the courtroom of the Council House that Doty met Judge Augustus Woodward, a gentleman who would help him launch a lifelong career in law and become something of a role model for the young apprentice. Woodward was the presiding judge of the Michigan Supreme Court, and besides the Governor, was the most important man in the territory. The judge must have seen much promise in Doty, for in a short while he had suggested that the nineteen year old be presented before the bar and admitted to the practice of law. The influence of Doty's benefactor was substantial, for the young man was licensed to practice law before he could vote. Woodward's guidance and assistance was to continue, and soon Doty was witness to all of the important business of the town as the secretary and official scribe of both the Supreme Court and the City of Detroit.
Figure 1-3. Plan of Detroit: ca. 1797. The central figure of the fort with its radiating palisades, suggests the plan that Woodward was to build atop the ruins of the earlier city.
Augustus Woodward had been appointed to the leadership of the Territorial Court by his close friend, Thomas Jefferson. The new Supreme Court appointee had arrived in Detroit to take office on June 30, 1805, only to find the city a smouldering ruin. Only days before a disastrous fire had swept the city leveling the fort and the church, as well as every single store and residence within the limits of the old city. Founded by Cadillac in 1701, Detroit had existed as a small and extremely compact settlement compressed within a three acre rectangle. A grid of narrow streets, none wider than twenty feet, had allowed the fire to leap unhindered from building to building. To the north of the city stood the fortress, enclosed by a wooden palisade which extended to completely "protect" the old city. Located in between the fortress and the city was an open space, which was enclosed on its east and west sides by the wooden walls of the palisade. This open space, called the Esplanade, was composed of a parade ground with a series of gardens arranged about its perimeter. It was into the open space of the esplanade that the citizens of Detroit had fled on the night of the great conflagration, watching their city burn from the gardens. For weeks the citizens of the town took stock of their losses and hotly debated how the town should be rebuilt. Some wished to rebuild the town as it was, others thought this a fruitless endeavor. Into this situation arrived Judge Woodward, who was greeted with an open air reception worthy of a man who was on first person terms with the great Jefferson. Woodward’s arrival was timely and fortuitous, for it was obvious that a plan for the reconstruction of Detroit was badly needed such that the construction of winter shelter could commence. Woodward was probably the best educated man on the frontier, and he expressed himself familiar with "the street arrangements and the parks and public buildings of European cities where scientific planning had been successfully attempted." Woodward had even, it seems, discussed the matter of city planning with Jefferson. He was summarily appointed to a committee of one to lay out the new Detroit.
Figure 1-4. Woodward's Plan for Detroit, Michigan: 1807.
Woodward set himself to the planning of the new city, the design of which was only a small part of the problem. The greatest obstacle to be overcome was that neither Judge Woodward nor the Territorial Governor had the authority to guarantee title to the lands on which the new city was to be laid out. As only an act of Congress, approved by the President could guarantee such titles, Woodward departed in the early fall of 1805 for Washington. Taking with him a plan of his proposed city, Woodward's goal was to lobby congress for such an act and to lay the plan before his friend Jefferson for his comments and approval. While lobbying Congress took much longer (and much more wine) than he had hoped, in April of 1806 President Jefferson approved "An Act to Provide for the Adjustment of Title of Land in the Town of Detroit and Territory of Michigan and for Other Purposes." After his return to Detroit, Woodward evidently revised his plan somewhat, perhaps to take into account comments he may have received from Jefferson. Eventually a plan was approved, a novel design for the city consisting of:

"...an equilateral triangle having sides of four thousand feet each, and divided into six sections by a perpendicular line from every angle bisecting the opposite side, with squares, circuses and other open spaces of ground where six avenues and where twelve avenues intersect, with lots of 5,000 square feet, with an alley or lane coming to the rear of every lot, with subordinate streets of sixty feet feet width, with a fine internal space of ground for education and other purposes, with grand avenues to the four cardinal points of two hundred feet width, and with other avenues of one hundred twenty feet width..."
Figure 1-5. Thomas Jefferson's State Capitol in Richmond, Virginia: ca. 1785 (above); and the Michigan Territorial Capitol as it was built in Woodward's Capitol Park: ca. 1823 (below).
Certainly Woodward's plan of Detroit owes a debt to Pierre L'Enfant. Woodward had in fact known L'Enfant in Washington, and was quite familiar with his plan for the federal capital having kept a small print of the city on which he recorded his land holdings. Woodward probably also knew intimate details concerning Jefferson's and L'Enfant's communications during the development of the Washington plan, as Woodward was a frequent visitor at Monticello during the period 1795-1801. During these visits Woodward and Jefferson held discourse on a variety of subjects, especially Federalist politics, education and the structure of scientific knowledge. One subject of long standing interest to Jefferson, which Woodward obviously shared, was city planning. Jefferson had a good collection of city plans, which he probably shared with Woodward. Jefferson had also sketched several designs for ideal cities by the time he knew Woodward. Jefferson made no secret of his opinions with regard to cities and architecture, and his opinions can be seen to have had an influence on Woodward who has been called, "Jefferson's disciple." Even after spending considerable time in Paris, Jefferson viewed "great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man." Jefferson had disdained the narrow streets and dense blocks of Paris while holding the French neoclassical ideal of the villa set in a garden in the highest regard. He felt that the classical object building set in a romantic park or garden setting would be the ideal architectural planning principal for American agrarian "cities." Jefferson explored this theme in several built projects, notably the State Capitol in Richmond, Virginia. This idea directly influenced Woodward's design of the Detroit plan, as a principal aspect of the plan was to situate all public buildings as objects set in generous parklike settings. A comparison of Jefferson's Richmond Capitol and Woodward's Capitol Park in Detroit demonstrates the similarity of the way in which these public buildings were situated.
Figure 1-6. The gardens of the Palais Royale, Paris, France: ca. 1735. Jefferson admired the Palais Royale roughly fifty years after this view was drawn.
As the previous illustrations imply, the intention of situating a public building in an open, romantic park setting was not an "urban" one. Both of these structures belie their locations in major cities, masquerading as if they were located in the countryside. This idea of an "agrarian" city is close to the heart of many of Jefferson's thoughts on what American settlements should be. Besides the neoclassical villa in the park, Jefferson had greatly admired a vast rectangular square he had seen in Paris; the Palais Royale. The idea which attracted Jefferson to the Palais was the notion of a country garden brought into the city, displacing the tight streets and dense blocks of central Paris. For Jefferson, this model was much more than a mere aesthetic preference, as he felt that the dense "solid block" city was a principal source of disease and pestilence in American cities:

"...Ventilation is indispensably necessary. Experience has taught us that in the open air of the country the yellow fever is not only not generated, but ceases to be infectious."

One answer to the "problem" of the city would be therefore to bring aspects of the country into the city; a kind of "agrarian city." Generous parks and greens would allow American cities to be "ventilated." Jefferson went so far as to suggest a city based on a checkerboard, the black squares being built-up blocks, the white being open greens or squares. Woodward was evidently much influenced by the notions of his avowed mentor, as he built Detroit around a variety of parklike circuses, squares, neighborhood greens and tree lined avenues. Woodward even passed laws requiring almost excessive tree plantings on the streets, squares and avenues of Detroit; mandating that the beauty and health giving effects of the countryside be present in the city.
Figure 1-7. Plan of Detroit, Michigan: twentieth century. The drawing reveals the last surviving vestiges of Woodward's radial planning.
Jefferson's vision of the "agrarian city," and Woodward's Detroit were not to be. As early as 1808 attempts were made to abandon Woodward's plan and supplant it with a rectangular gridiron of city blocks devoid of the public greens and open spaces that made up the design. Throughout the first quarter of the century the design was slowly eroded, with Woodward making valiant attempts to salvage his visionary plan and make clear his opinion that the planning of cities was an essential art in the development of the nation:

"...the art of man should aid the benevolence of the Creator, and no restricted attachment to the present day or to present interests should induce a permanent sacrifice of ulterior and brilliant prospects." 

These words were written during the summer of James Duane Doty's arrival, shortly before he came to know Woodward. As the secretary of the court and of the city, the fierce debates surrounding Woodward and the plan of Detroit would have been known to Doty to the finest detail. Living in Detroit from 1818-1823, Doty had the opportunity to watch firsthand the politics and ideologies that shaped the design of the city. He could step outside to walk the streets, avenues and squares of Woodward's plan taking shape before his very eyes in the boom town economy. Doty had the opportunity to know the designer of Detroit, a man conversant in the design ideals of Jefferson and L'Enfant. Perhaps just as relevant to Doty's development, he watched Woodward's failure as his visionary and radical plan was abandoned and replaced.
Figure 1-8. The Detroit waterfront near the time of Doty’s departure.
Doty must have watched Woodward's career with a careful eye, using it as a model for his own. Within three years of first meeting Woodward, Doty began a lobbying effort to create a new superior judgeship and to have himself appointed to the position. Doty even traveled to Washington to meet the president and secure his nomination, just as Woodward had once done. Doty followed Woodward's career in other ways as well. In addition to the plan of Detroit, Woodward had designed the plans of two other cities: Woodwardville and Ypsilanti. As the name Woodwardville would imply, Woodward was the owner as well as the designer of the city where he attempted sell lots at a profit. In the case of Ypsilanti, named after Greek heroes popular at the time, Woodward operated as the developer in conjunction with two partners. In order to encourage investors the partners built a mill and a tavern in the town, and Ypsilanti was eventually something of a success. The young Doty evidently took careful note of Woodward's development attempts, as shortly thereafter he began a lifelong career as designer and promoter of townsites. When Doty left Detroit and again headed west, he also took something of Woodward's design ideology with him. For as can be seen in the following chapters, Doty had absorbed Woodward's passion for town planning and his attitude that such efforts were an art form essential to the urban development of the nation.