

The Environment:

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## OLMSTED'S ODYSSEY

Frederick Law Olmsted began work on Manhattan's Central Park—the first of his creations—exactly 125 years ago. The anniversary finds a small group of Olmsted scholars still laboring on a project begun in 1972: editing the letters of a man who changed the way Americans perceived their cities, their suburbs, their wilderness. Two volumes have already appeared; a third is forthcoming; there are nine more volumes to go. Part aesthete, part engineer, part late-blooming reformer, Olmsted (1822–1903) designed a large share of urban America. His firm laid out some 1,000 parks in 200 cities. Here, Charles McLaughlin, editor of the Olmsted Papers, traces the man's life, his ideas, and his enduring achievement.

*by Charles Capen McLaughlin*

One of the curious things about creativity is how accidentally it can unfold and how its appearance can catch even the creator by surprise. In retrospect, it seems easy to match a person's talents to his accomplishments, but that is not always the way people living out their lives perceive it. Hence, the importance of a collection of letters. To read 60 years of a person's correspondence is to experience the twists and turns of his fate. Where Frederick Law Olmsted is concerned, we see how long he took to grow up, we see his impetuous risk-taking, his charm and irascibility, and ultimately his emergence as both a talented administrator and a far-seeing artist.

Olmsted sprouted early but blossomed late. After many false starts, and inspired by an earlier generation of garden and park designers (mostly in England, their work confined mostly to private estates), he established landscape architecture as a profession in America and gave it a public face. Visitors to Yosemite National Park, Boston's Franklin Park, Chicago's Jackson Park, the U.S. Capitol grounds, Niagara Falls, Stanford University, and scores of other places, big and small, all owe a debt to FLO (as Olmsted signed himself). They usually do not

*Frederick Law  
Olmsted at the age  
of 28: ardent but  
awkward ladies'  
man; gentleman  
farmer; peppery  
correspondent; not  
yet a park-maker.*



know it. For there is an “always been there” quality about much of Olmsted’s work; now, in their maturity, his landscapes often appear so “natural” that one thinks of them as something not *put there* by artifice but merely *preserved* by happenstance.

In a practical, old-fashioned sort of way, Olmsted became as much a social scientist as an artist. He had tried to gauge, as best he could, “the drift of human nature in America these last fifty years,” and he had rather clear ideas about what the next fifty years might bring and what he, as an individual, could do about it.

At a time when New York City stopped well below what is now “midtown Manhattan,” he foresaw the vast megalopolis that today includes portions of Connecticut and New Jersey. For cities generally, he realized that something had to be done not only to relieve the density at the center but to plan for orderly development of the surrounding suburbs. Though hardly a “man of the people,” Olmsted was a fervent democrat who believed that a park should be enjoyed equally by citizens of every class. He considered healthful the sheer aesthetic relief a park afforded from the city’s “constantly repeated right angles, straight lines, and flat surfaces.”

Olmsted never wrote a Great Book about his parks or his landscape practice. His principles are nowhere codified. Those who would follow his footsteps must read his reports and acquaint themselves with his landscapes. But Olmsted did leave

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behind tens of thousands of letters. Here, we can see him exercising his eye for detail and his talent for friendship. Here, we can watch Olmsted casually, even thoughtlessly, stumbling toward a destiny known only to us. As Olmsted conceded toward the end of his life, "I had no more idea of being a park-maker than of taking command of the Channel Fleet."

### **The Miseducation of Mr. Clodpole**

Frederick Law Olmsted was born on April 26, 1822, to a prosperous Hartford merchant who, fortunately for him, would always remain prosperous. The entire Olmsted family enjoyed the outdoors, scenery, nature, but Fred especially so, and his letters betray the predilection. As a boy, he once wrote to his father about finding "a brook which winds about in gorges till it finds the most effective spot for display—when it jumps off and comes tumbling and smashing through the rocks, over the side of the mountain in the most astonishing manner."

Olmsted himself had trouble finding the most effective spot for display. He was to follow his brother John to Yale, but a severe case of sumac poisoning waylaid him at age 15, putting his education permanently off course. Eventually, Fred went off for an enjoyable three years to study civil engineering with Frederick Augustus Barton in Andover, Massachusetts, where he learned the rudiments of surveying and amused himself by drawing up plans for hypothetical towns and cities. The next stop, at his father's behest, was New York City, where Fred worked as a clerk in a dry goods-importing house. "Oh, how I long to be where I was a year ago," he wrote to his stepmother.

Olmsted returned to Hartford, slipped briefly into local "society," and made frequent jaunts to see his brother in New Haven. In 1843, he did what many lads did long before "finding oneself" became a cliché: He went to sea. Circumnavigating the globe, Olmsted was ill most of the time (acute seasickness, then typhus) and saw almost nothing of the Far East as a result. "My opportunities of observation and investigation," he wrote to his family, "are very similar to those enjoyed by Mr. Pickwick while a resident in his Majesty's Fleet Prison."

Fred returned home, at age 22, more partial to land than sea. He would, he now decided, become a "scientific farmer,"

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one of the new breed. "I should think by the use of proper tools and machinery," he wrote to his brother, "at least half of the most disagreeable and hard labor of our old-fashioned farmers might be dispensed with to advantage." He audited some pertinent courses at Yale, then served a kind of apprenticeship at model farms in Connecticut and New York. It was during this period that he met Andrew Jackson Downing, whose *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America* (1841) had established him as the leading American authority in that small field.

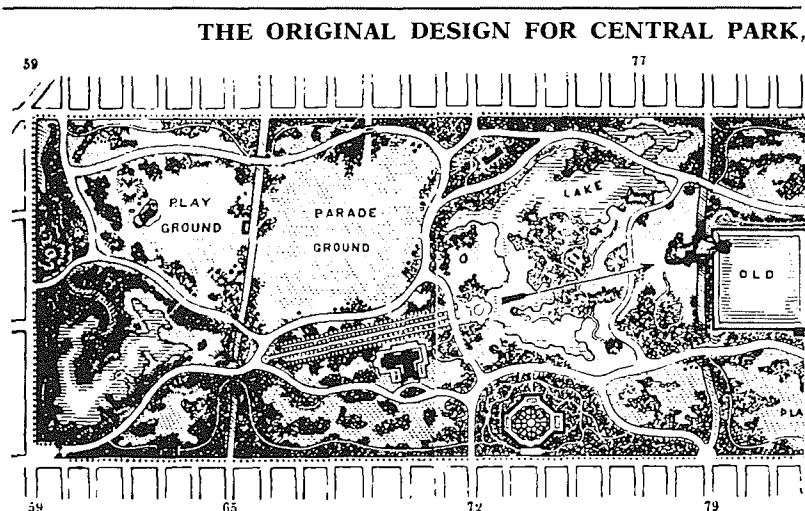
Possibly none of this seemed as important to Olmsted at the time as a woman named Elizabeth Baldwin ("Excellent princess. She's a dove. Whew!"), the attractive daughter of a former Governor of Connecticut. Fred could be insecure. He was aware of his lack of formal schooling—his "miseducation," he called it. He once referred to himself as "Mr. Clodpole." But Lizzy Baldwin seemed to accept Fred for what he was, sometimes preferring his company to that of the Hartford toffs—"all white-kid-dom creaking in their new boots," as Olmsted pictured them. Miss Baldwin introduced Fred to the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, and John Ruskin, teaching him respect for his "constitutional tastes," he later wrote, and giving him "a kind of scatter-brained pride." Lizzy, unfortunately, broke off the relationship, such as it was.

### A "Vagabondish" Life

To his brother, Olmsted poured out his feelings. He had just finished Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Fred wrote, and sympathized greatly with the hero of the book, Teufelsdröckh. Like Olmsted, Teufelsdröckh had suffered great uncertainty about his role in life, had loved and lost a lady of high station, and had felt himself to be a talented but poorly educated lover of nature. Dutifully, Olmsted took Carlyle's injunction to heart: "Up! Up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might."

Olmsted threw himself into managing the two farms his father purchased for him at Sachem's Head, Connecticut, and Staten Island, New York. He shaped the grounds to please his eye, planted groves and hedges, cabbages, and pears, learned how to supervise hired labor and run a business. Everything grew except Olmsted's income. His enthusiasm waning, Fred abruptly sailed to Great Britain with his brother. As he wrote his father in 1850: "The idea of settling down for life without having seen England seemed to me cowardly and unreasonable."

He was captivated at once, not only by the "green, dripping,

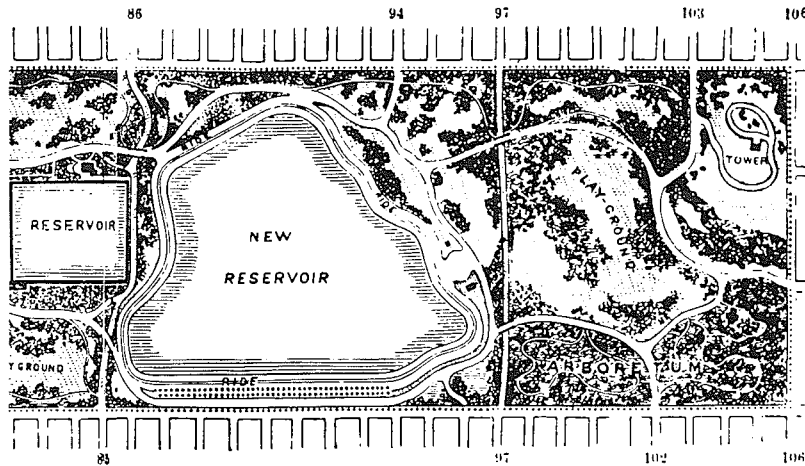


glistening” countryside but by the formal parks at each country seat of the titled elite. The men (such as “Capability” Brown and Humphrey Repton) who imposed their vision on Nature were “artists” at work on “a picture so great that Nature will be employed upon it for generations.” This God-like role appealed to Olmsted.

England of 1850, though, was also Charles Dickens’s England. Olmsted was shocked by the “dead mass of pure poverty” in city and countryside, and by the fact that few Englishmen “seemed to feel that anyone but God, with his laws of population and trade, was responsible for it.” But a “public parks” movement was underway; urban space was being reclaimed by landscape. Fred was especially taken with the new town of Birkenhead, a suburb of Liverpool, in the midst of which Joseph Paxton had carved out a 120-acre park with groves, greensward, and lake. In democratic America, he wrote, “there was nothing to be thought as comparable to this People’s Garden.”

Olmsted gathered his notes and letters from the trip into a book, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, published in 1851. It caught the eye of Henry Raymond, editor of the *New York Times*, who hired Olmsted as the paper’s roving correspondent in the American South. Most of his dispatches were biting portrayals of a society based upon an institution—slavery—that Olmsted believed to be both economically ruinous and morally indefensible. But the Southern experience also led Olmsted to ponder anew the very different ills threatening

## OLMSTED AND VAUX ARCHITECTS, 1857



Courtesy of The National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

America's Northern cities: uncontrolled urban sprawl; a continuing influx of immigrants; over-crowding. Above all, perhaps, cities were losing their *civility*, which Olmsted thought of as "an all-embracing relationship based on the confidence, respect, and interest of each citizen in all and all in each."

Olmsted spent six years as a respected if not affluent writer and journalist. Finally, with \$5,000 (from his father), he bought a partnership in the firm of Dix and Edwards, publisher of *Putnam's Monthly*, whose contributors included Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Olmsted felt that "this great country and cursedly little people" needed the uplift of a magazine like *Putnam's*. But Dix and Edwards and *Putnam's* failed ignominiously in 1857, leaving Olmsted unemployed, in debt, and deeply humiliated.

He was now 35 years old, and the parts of his life seemed to add up merely to the sum of those parts and nothing more. Yet Olmsted had acquired over the years—"without my knowledge, through living a somewhat vagabondish, somewhat poetical life"—a rather unique set of skills and interests. He was an engineer, a surveyor, a horticulturalist, a farmer. He enjoyed an instinctive rapport with "scenery" and had thought deeply about urban life. He was also a writer. This, oddly, proved decisive. As Olmsted later wrote, "If I had not been a 'literary man' . . . I certainly should not have stood a chance."

An entirely unexpected opportunity had arisen. The movement to build a great park for New York City, long championed

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by poet-journalist William Cullen Bryant and landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing, had just succeeded; the New York legislature had appointed 11 commissioners to supervise the vast new project in the middle of Manhattan, with the \$5 million cost to be borne by state and city. Olmsted happened to run into one of the commissioners, Charles Wyllys Elliott, an old friend. A superintendent was wanted, Elliott told him. Fred knew about land, and he knew about labor. Why not apply? Trading on his literary reputation, Olmsted won the support of many of the most admired men in New York and in the country: Bryant, for one, but also Asa Gray, August Belmont, Washington Irving, Albert Bierstadt. He got the job.

### Greensward

With 1,000 workmen, Olmsted began the task of draining swamps, blasting away rock, pulling down the squatters' shacks and slaughterhouses that cluttered the 770-acre plot. There was still no adequate design for the park, but an open competition was soon announced. Calvert Vaux, a charming and enthusiastic British-born architect and former partner of Andrew Jackson Downing, asked Olmsted to collaborate with him on a plan. Their joint proposal was entitled "Greensward" and in the spring of 1858 it was accepted by the commissioners.

The "Greensward" design for Central Park followed many of the English principles of park planning. The most important compositions were pastoral, where massed foliage framed vistas of meadow or mall. The intent was to soothe rather than excite. Footpaths, bridle paths, and carriage roads were separated from one another and never crossed except at over- and under-passes. The man out for a holiday stroll might want to see others in a gregarious mood as well as view the scenery. Accordingly, Olmsted and Vaux planned a mall sheltered by an arch of American elms and a terrace with a fountain overlooking Central Park Lake. The designers hoped that their mall, like public promenades they had seen in England and Europe, would be a "democratic" institution where visitors of all backgrounds and ages could mingle. Located in the middle of Manhattan, Central Park formed a two-and-one-half-mile-long, one-half-mile-wide barrier to east-west traffic, and the state's commissioners had demanded roads to accommodate cross-town horse-drawn traffic. Olmsted and Vaux did not want this traffic streaming across the park in full view. Instead, they designed four transverse roads sunken below the landscape, screened by plantings, and crossed by park roadways and paths on wide bridges.

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Opened section by section, Central Park proved to be an immediate popular success. Because New York, then as now, was a pacesetter, a cultural capital, other cities took note.

In landscape architecture, Olmsted had at last found a vocation and with a single stroke stepped to its forefront. Olmsted also had a family now. His brother had died of tuberculosis in 1857, a last letter imploring Fred: "Don't let Mary suffer while you are alive." In 1859, Fred married John's widow and became a father of three. (He and Mary would produce two children of their own.) John's death took much of the ebullience out of Olmsted and left him prone to overwork as a tonic: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might."

Fred spent the early part of the Civil War as executive secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, set up to help tend the wounded and maintain the health of the Union Army. He mounted a well-run evacuation by sea of Union casualties from General George McClellan's ill-fated Peninsula Campaign in July 1862 and was on hand, a year later, for the grim cleanup at Gettysburg. Local farmers had already scavenged the battlefield, he wrote, but "a great business is being done in disinterring bodies for embalming and shipment north." Soon afterward, Olmsted arrived in California (on behalf of a consortium of New York businessmen) to manage Mariposa, a 45,000-acre estate flecked with gold mines.

### Turning the Tide

In California, Olmsted's landscaping practice began to grow, with little salesmanship on his part. His reputation had preceded him. He was commissioned to design a cemetery in Oakland and the new university campus at Berkeley, and was instrumental in preserving Yosemite as a scenic reservation. (Olmsted spent \$2,000 out of his own pocket to have the valley mapped.) A park system Olmsted designed for San Francisco was rejected as too expensive. Among other things, he had proposed a sunken parkway that would also have served as a fire-break, dividing the city in half along what is now Van Ness Avenue (which is where the great fire of 1906 was checked by dynamiting houses).

When the Mariposa mines failed in 1865, Olmsted's old Central Park collaborator, Calvert Vaux, lured him back east. As partners, they started work immediately on Brooklyn's new Prospect Park, then took on projects in Newark, Philadelphia, and Hartford. At Riverside, near Chicago, they designed a suburban village, arranging houses and foliage, parks and pavilions



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along a riverbank to encourage, they hoped, "harmonious cooperation of men in a community." Olmsted never concealed the civilizing intent of his work.

Both men considered a well-designed suburb to be "the best application of the arts of civilization to which mankind has yet attained." Railway, telegraph, and telephone were rapidly making a new kind of city, where many people with jobs downtown could live on the town's outskirts. Suburbs had to be planned, Olmsted argued, so as to reconcile "a measure of town convenience with a measure of rural village beauty." Because the "outskirts" of 1870 would not be the outskirts of 1970, something also had to be done to keep the suburbs distinctive.

The chief enemy, as Olmsted saw it, was the grid layout. The grid street-plan adopted by New York in 1811, for example, swallowed everything in its path as the city grew: hills, valleys, streams. The uniform 200-foot-wide blocks made narrow tenement houses almost inevitable. Olmsted twice tried, unsuccessfully, to lay out undeveloped parts of upper Manhattan and the Bronx so that streets would follow the terrain and a suburban flavor would stand a chance of surviving. It was an era of corrupt city bosses and greedy developers; few in power would listen. Hence, Olmsted built his spacious suburbs farther out, where they are now—e.g., Tarrytown, New York, and Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

Olmsted and Vaux parted ways in 1872, their reputations established, their relations warm enough, despite some strain and jealousy, to permit occasional collaboration. Olmsted eventually took a son and stepson into the business and pressed on. He designed parks and gardens in Boston, Buffalo, Rochester; suburban subdivisions outside Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago; the grounds of Biltmore (the Vanderbilt estate in North Carolina); the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. He landscaped hospitals, railroad stations, state capitols. He laid out the campus of Stanford University, ignoring the founder's suggestion that it resemble a New England college. "If we are to look for types of buildings and arrangements suitable to the climate of California," he wrote, "it will rather be in those founded by the wiser men of Syria, Greece, Italy, and Spain."

Olmsted worked well into the 1890s, failing slowly, depending on his partner and stepson, John C. Olmsted, to make "any confusion in my mind as little conspicuous as possible." In 1898, aged 77 and senile, FLO was committed to McLean's Hospital outside Boston. He had designed the hospital grounds but didn't appreciate the result. ("They didn't carry out my plan, confound them!") He died in 1903.

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Not many years before entering McLean's, Olmsted had written to Elizabeth Baldwin, by then Mrs. William Dwight Whitney, impulsively resuming their correspondence after half a century. He wrote:

I need not conceal from you that I am sure that the result of what I have done is to be of much more consequence than any one else but myself supposes. As I travel I see traces of influences spreading from it that no one else would detect—which, if given any attention by others should be attributed to "fashion." There are, scattered through the country, 17 large public parks, many more smaller ones, many more public or semi-public works, upon which, with sympathetic partners or pupils, I have been engaged. . . . [T]hey are a hundred years ahead of any spontaneous public demand. . . . And they are having an educative effect perfectly manifest to me—a manifest civilizing effect.

Frederick Law Olmsted's great work was done at a time when the landscape architect and the sanitary engineer combined forces to plan for American cities. He lived into the period when architects such as Daniel Burnham and Stanford White assumed the major role in planning. Moving away from Olmsted, they put greater emphasis on designing an unabashedly formal, monumental downtown, insisting that it was in all cases appropriate. Olmsted found himself swimming against the tide, vowing that "I shall not sink before having seen it turn."

He *did* sink before the tide turned, but he had influenced (and helped to train) a generation of landscape architects. Under John C. Olmsted's and later Frederick, Jr.'s direction, Olmsted's firm continued to thrive until 1954. More important, by deed rather than word, he had educated the public. In the years since Olmsted's death, popular appreciation of the need for sensible urban and suburban planning, for open space, for vast, unmolested wilderness parks, has not diminished. Quite the contrary. Against the chronic pressures of urban economics and short-range schemes, Olmsted's views remain an important corrective influence; his ideas, like his landscapes, are living things and live on.

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