

OLMSTED IN MASSACHUSETTS

The landscape architecture firm founded by Frederick Law Olmsted and later directed by his stepson, John C. Olmsted, and son, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., has had a profound influence on the designed open space of America. Scores of communities in 45 United States and the District of Columbia, as well as in Canada, Cuba, Bermuda, Puerto Rico and the Phillipines, contain Olmsted landscapes. The sheer number of projects is impressive: 5,500, of which some 3,500 reached the stage of plan preparation.

The legacy of design created by the Olmsted firm for Massachusetts far exceeds that of any other state. Olmsted moved his home and office from New York to Massachusetts in 1883. The chosen site, "Fairsted" at 99 Warren Street in Brookline, remained the principle office of the firm until its purchase by the National Park Service in 1980. Beginning in 1866 with a plan for the campus of the Massachusetts Agricultural College in Amherst, followed by the planning of public walks and open space in Cambridge in 1868 and the design of South Park in Fall River in 1870, the Olmsted firm was involved in some 1,200 projects in more than 150 communities in Massachusetts, of which 800 progressed as far as the drawing up of plans. (The state with the next largest number of Olmsted designs is New York, with c.700 projects, 400 of which led to preparation of plans.) Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., was probably involved in a significant way in 150-200 designs in the state.

PARKS, PARKWAYS & OPEN SPACES

It was Olmsted's mission to utilize the skills of the landscape architect in providing a healthful, efficient and aesthetically pleasing setting for the whole range of human activities. For this, he planned parks and recreation grounds in cities, molding them into systems by means of connecting parkways and boulevards. In Boston, these public open spaces ranged from the wild marshlands of the Back Bay Fens to the rolling pastoral scenery of Franklin Park, and from the scientifically-arranged plantings of the Arnold Arboretum to the gymnastic grounds of Charlesbank. Working with his pupil and partner, Charles Eliot, Olmsted also encouraged the creation of scenic reservations in metropolitan Boston, beginning with Lynn Woods in 1889. Eliot founded the Trustees of Reservations and campaigned for a Metropolitan Park System in the early 1890's. After Olmsted retired in 1895, his successor firm expanded its park-making in the Boston area and extended its work around the state to include 200 public recreation grounds in 50 communities.

SUBURBAN COMMUNITIES

Olmsted recognized that the suburban movement of post-Civil War America would transform daily residential life. He hoped to create in the Boston region an influential example of the amenities that a well-designed suburban community could provide. Several subdivisions were laid out by the firm in the Brookline-Chestnut Hill-Newton area. Olmsted looked forward to expanding that foothold of residential planning and the designing of public open space that accompanied it. As he neared retirement, he observed: "*... the comprehensive improvement of Boston suburbs {was} by far our most important work.*" The later expansion of the firm's park designs in the state was accompanied by concurrent planning of subdivisions and residential communities, eventually reaching 60 or more.

PRIVATE HOME GROUNDS

Part of the firm's contribution to the improvement of suburbs and demonstration of what suburban life could be was the design of individual home grounds. These varied greatly in size, but Olmsted's concern was always to provide the means for carrying on daily domestic life in the outdoors. In particular, he supplied "out-of-door apartments" - e.g., terraces, lawns, thickly-planted enclosures, and walled garden areas - for the extension of indoor occupations into the fresh air and sunshine. In all, the Olmsted firm created designs for nearly 500 private Massachusetts estates.

SCHOOL CAMPUSES

Planning for academic campuses, both as the setting for studies and as communities for shared living experiences, was an important task for Olmsted and his successors. The first opportunity came in 1866 with the Massachusetts Agricultural College in Amherst and continued with designs for 35 other schools and colleges.

INSTITUTIONS

Closely related to designs for academic campuses was planning for residential medical institutions, usually involving the siting of several buildings and the creation of therapeutic landscapes to help speed cure and convalescence. Olmsted began such work in Massachusetts with a comprehensive plan for Massachusetts General Hospital's McLean Asylum in 1877. Thereafter, the firm planned the grounds for more than a dozen such institutions. Careful siting of public buildings and communal institutions was also needed. Olmsted created plans for the Thomas Crane Library in Quincy and the Town Hall in North Easton - two of 20 such projects. Even buildings for commerce and industry were included.