

Biographical Portrait

FREDERICK LAW
OLMSTED SR. (1822–1903)

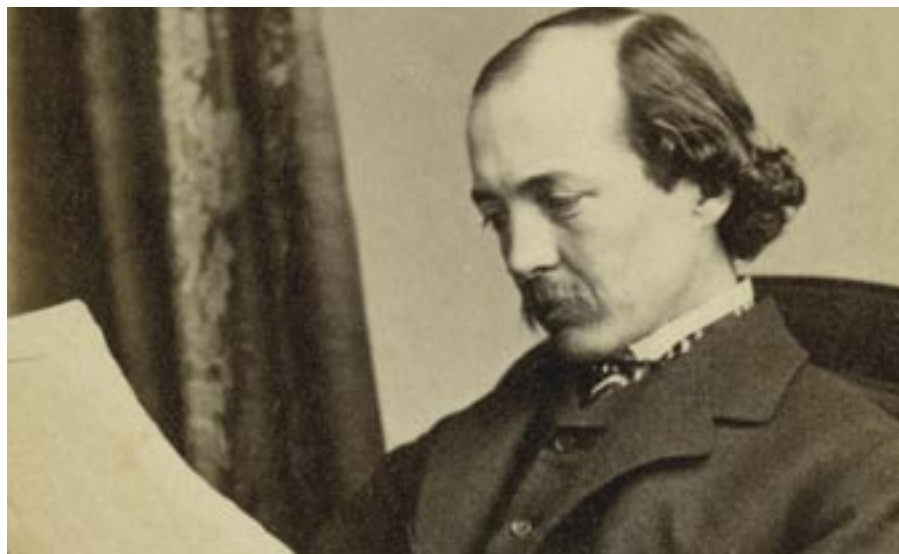
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FREDERICK LAW
OLMSTED JR. (1870–1957)

By Alfred Runte

Frederick Law Olmsted and his son, Frederick Jr., dominated the field of landscape architecture from the mid-nineteenth until well into the twentieth centuries. Born into a prosperous Connecticut family at Hartford, on April 26, 1822, Frederick Sr. was to begin study at Yale University in 1837, but a bout with poison sumac affected his eyes and cost him a sustained formal education. This deficiency did nothing to inhibit his growth and maturity as a writer, however; following a tour of Europe and Britain in 1850, he composed the first of several books, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* (1852). By 1861, he was also renowned for his lengthy series of articles about the antebellum South and slavery, which he had prepared as a traveling correspondent for *The New York Times*. These works, collected and condensed as *The Cotton Kingdom* (2 vols., 1861), revealed Olmsted's keen sense of observation and political astuteness.

Olmsted's greatest reputation, of course, was still to be linked with the rising field of landscape architecture. As early as 1850, he had praised the city parks of London and Liverpool in England as a noble experiment in democracy. Regarding Birkenhead Park in Liverpool, for example, he exclaimed: "The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British queen.... Is it not a grand, good thing?" That England had beaten its young rival, the United States, to the invention of parklands for the common man did not escape the attention of American nationalists, who themselves had long argued for city parks as a means of protecting the quality of urban surroundings for both the



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.

working and the leisure classes. Thus, Olmsted was philosophically prepared when an opportunity presented itself for him to become superintendent of Central Park in New York City in 1857. Shortly afterward, he and his partner, Calvert Vaux, entered the competition to draw up a new design for the preserve, which the two men won under the title of "Greensward." Accordingly, on May 17, 1858, Olmsted was appointed architect-in-chief of Central Park in addition to superintendent.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Olmsted resigned as head of Central Park to become general secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission. Then, in 1863, he moved to California to become superintendent of the Mariposa Mining Estate in the Sierra Nevada foothills at Bear Valley. To the east lay Yosemite Valley, which Olmsted and his family first visited

in August of 1864. Two months earlier, on June 30, 1864, Congress had set aside the valley and the nearby Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias and had presented both areas to California to be managed as a state park "for public use, resort, and recreation." The state was further required to protect the park "inalienable for all time."

Some accounts link Olmsted's name with the park campaign itself, although there is no direct evidence of his participation in the initial movement to preserve the valley. Rather, Olmsted's major contribution came as head of the Yosemite Park Commission, for which he prepared a detailed assessment of the valley. This report, presented to the commissioners in 1865, outlined steps to mitigate the inevitable conflicts that would arise between the desire to protect the park and that to open it to visitors. Unfortunately,

after Olmsted left California his fellow commissioners failed to present the report to the legislature, and the text of the document was lost until 1952. By that time, the worst of Olmsted's fears about Yosemite Valley being overrun with tourists and resort facilities had come true.

While in California, Olmsted also sketched out some ideas for the campus of the University of California at Berkeley and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Meanwhile, however, he and Calvert Vaux had been reappointed as landscape architects to the commissioners of Central Park, so Olmsted returned east in 1865 to pick up where he had left off in New York City. For the next decade and a half, the firm of Olmsted and Vaux laid out a great variety of projects, including Prospect Park in Brooklyn, the Boston city parks system, and the suburban community of Riverside near Chicago. In 1874, Olmsted was commissioned to design the grounds of the United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. Five years later, he once more turned seriously to scenic preservation by immersing himself in the campaign to restore Niagara Falls to its natural condition and protect the environs of the cataract as a free public park. In 1885, he realized these goals with the dedication of the Niagara Falls State Reservation; in 1888, Ontario followed New York State's example with the opening of its own provincial park on the Canadian side of the falls.

Final highlights of the older Olmsted's career included his design of the grounds for the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893; Stanford University in Palo Alto, California; and George W. Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate near Asheville, North Carolina. He counseled Vanderbilt to undertake the nation's first large-scale forestry experiment, pointing out to his young client that to do so would provide an "inestimable service" to his country. The work there has since been preserved by Vanderbilt's descendants on the estate and the U.S. Forest Service in the Pisgah National Forest. Olmsted spent his declining years in ill health and growing senility and died on August 28, 1903, in Waverly, Massachusetts.

It remained for his son, Frederick Jr., known as Rick, to bring the family tradition full circle. Fortunately, Rick was prepared to follow in his father's footsteps, and in fact was raised to do so. Born July 24, 1870, he was originally christened Henry Perkins and called Boy, according to biographer



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Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.

Laura Wood Roper. "He was so determined that his only son should enter his profession that when the child was four, Olmsted changed his name to Frederick Law so that a Frederick Law Olmsted might be identified with the firm and the profession" long after his death. Rick's work at the Biltmore and the Chicago Columbian Exposition had provided superb opportunities to learn the older man's techniques, and in 1894 Rick obtained his B.A. degree from Harvard University.

With the death of Frederick Sr. in 1903, Rick and his half-brother John found themselves in command of the largest landscape architecture firm in the United States. Great responsibilities and opportunities followed. As early as 1900, Rick began the first curriculum in landscape architecture in the United States at Harvard University and served on its faculty until 1914. In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him to the Senate Park Commission to assist in restoring and developing the L'Enfant plan for Washington, D.C., in light of modern needs. As a result, Olmsted assumed responsibility, in whole or in part, for such projects as the White House grounds, Lafayette Park, the Jefferson Memorial, the National Arboretum, and portions of Rock Creek Park. He was also instrumental in founding the Fine Arts Commission, on which he served from 1910 to 1918. Between 1926 and 1932,

he served as a member of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Thus was his father's work on the Capitol grounds given even wider and more lasting significance.

So, too, in the field of scenic preservation, Rick added to the Olmsted tradition. In one notable instance, preservationists seeking to establish a National Park Service turned to him for suggestions regarding key passages of the proposed enabling act. Time and again, his drafts of the bill passed back and forth between him and its chief proponents, until finally the language was acceptable to everyone. Specifically, the National Park Service Act, approved August 25, 1916, stated that the fundamental purpose of the national parks "is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." For thirty years he advised the National Park Service on issues of management and the conservation of water and scenic resources, leaving his mark on parks from coast to coast.

Similar projects further underscored the concern of the Olmsted family for the physical environment. Proposed diversions of water from the Niagara River between 1906 and 1913 brought Rick back to the



The Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts, served as home and office for the Olmsteds for about 80 years. In 1883, Frederick Sr. moved there and established “Fairsted,” the world’s first full-scale professional office for the practice of landscape design.

scene of his father’s earlier accomplishments, this time to assess whether the falls themselves could survive such dramatic attempts to siphon off their flow. Olmsted, who maintained a part-time residence in California, conducted a survey of potential park sites there in 1928; his report laid the basis for the elaborate state park system developed by California during the following decades; it became a model for other states. Olmsted also devised a master plan for saving the California redwoods. In 1932, Olmsted headed a special investigation to assess the suitability of the Everglades of southern Florida for national park status. Largely on the basis of his report, preservationists opposing the park because it was a swamp came to agree that its uniqueness lay in its sense of wildness and remoteness and that these features, coupled with wildlife, justified creating a park so dramatically different in physical structure from the wonderlands of the West.

Olmsted retired to California in 1950, where he continued his lifelong campaigns



to protect noted features of the Golden State, especially the coast redwoods. He was also active in plans to realize his father’s hopes for better management in Yosemite Valley when death came on Christmas Day of 1957. □

Revised by James G. Lewis from the Encyclopedia of American Forest and Conservation History, which was prepared by the Forest History Society for MacMillan Publishing Company ©1983.

FURTHER READING

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 Susan L. Klaus, “Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.: Landscape Architect, Planner Educator, Conservationist (1870–1957),” <http://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/frederick-law-olmsted-jr>.
The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, 9 vols. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977–2015).