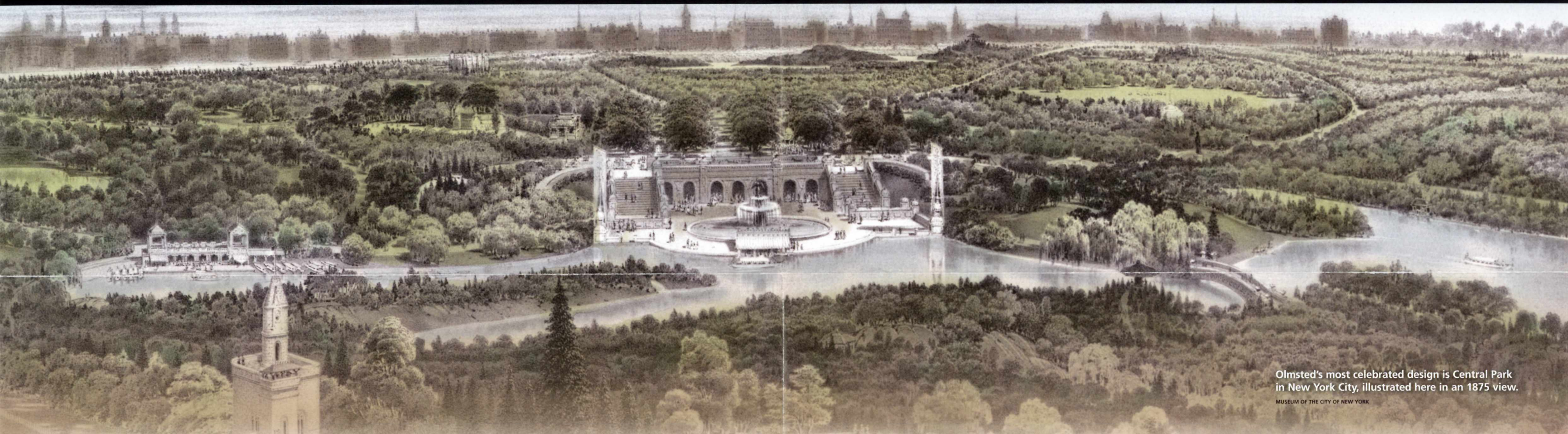




Olmsted's most celebrated design is Central Park in New York City, illustrated here in an 1875 view.
MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Can you think of a community green space that holds importance to you? Chances are, Frederick Law Olmsted had a hand in it.

Best known for creating major urban parks, Olmsted (1822–1903) affected the United States landscape perhaps more than anyone else. He combined his love of nature and strong belief in democratic ideals, including equality and community, and applied these values to his grand vision of parks as peaceful gathering places all can enjoy.

CHANGING CITIES The mid-1800s saw many areas of the United States become more industrialized, changing from rural to urban societies. Fast-paced city life proved stressful as populations and urban centers grew. Olmsted believed people needed places to escape city pressures and nourish both body and spirit. This understanding, plus his idealism, artistry, and practical knowledge, equipped Olmsted to soften some of the shocks of industrialization. He set out to preserve and create green and open spaces, eventually creating dozens of city and state parks—oases amid materials and machines.

RESHAPING AMERICA Olmsted's interests and ideas led him to farming, writing, public health (he was US Sanitary Commission secretary), and urban and regional planning. All influenced his work as a landscape architect. His landmark 1865 report on the management of California's Yosemite Valley emphasized a democratic society's duty to ensure everyone has access to natural beauty. His designs set standards for campuses, hospitals, parkways, estates, railway stations, and suburbs. By establishing the United States' landscape architecture profession, he ensured his principles would continue to guide and inspire planners.

LANDSCAPE LEGACY Olmsted's career let him act on his love for the land and commitment for improving US society. His popular, informal natural settings characterize the national landscape. Whether broad concepts or small details, his influence is everywhere. From restful green spaces to campuses encouraging learning or wilderness preservation and protection, Olmsted's legacy exhibits his philosophy and passion for improving quality of life for everyone in the United States. Embodying nature, restraint, and simplicity, his spaces still meet the people's needs and are enjoyed by millions.

Envisioning the Olmsted Park



Before Olmsted began his work, no large public space in any US city had been designed solely for recreation. He and Calvert Vaux (*far right*) practically invented the American park through their work at New York City's Central Park. A visionary at ease combatting hard urban realities, Olmsted was suited for the task. His mastery of social, economic, esthetic, political, and technological factors gave each of his parks an enduring place in their cities.

Mulberry Street, New York, mid-1800s

replace "debasement pursuits and brutalizing pleasure" with "rational enjoyment." For him, beautiful scenery had more than restorative powers; it had a moral influence on human behavior, promoting "communitiveness" and healthy participation in civic life.

INNOVATIVE ARTIST Olmsted's parks were massive public works: swamps drained, rock blasted, earth excavated, valleys and hills created, water systems installed, road networks with bridges and overpasses built, and shrubs and trees planted.



Prospect Park, Brooklyn, 1870

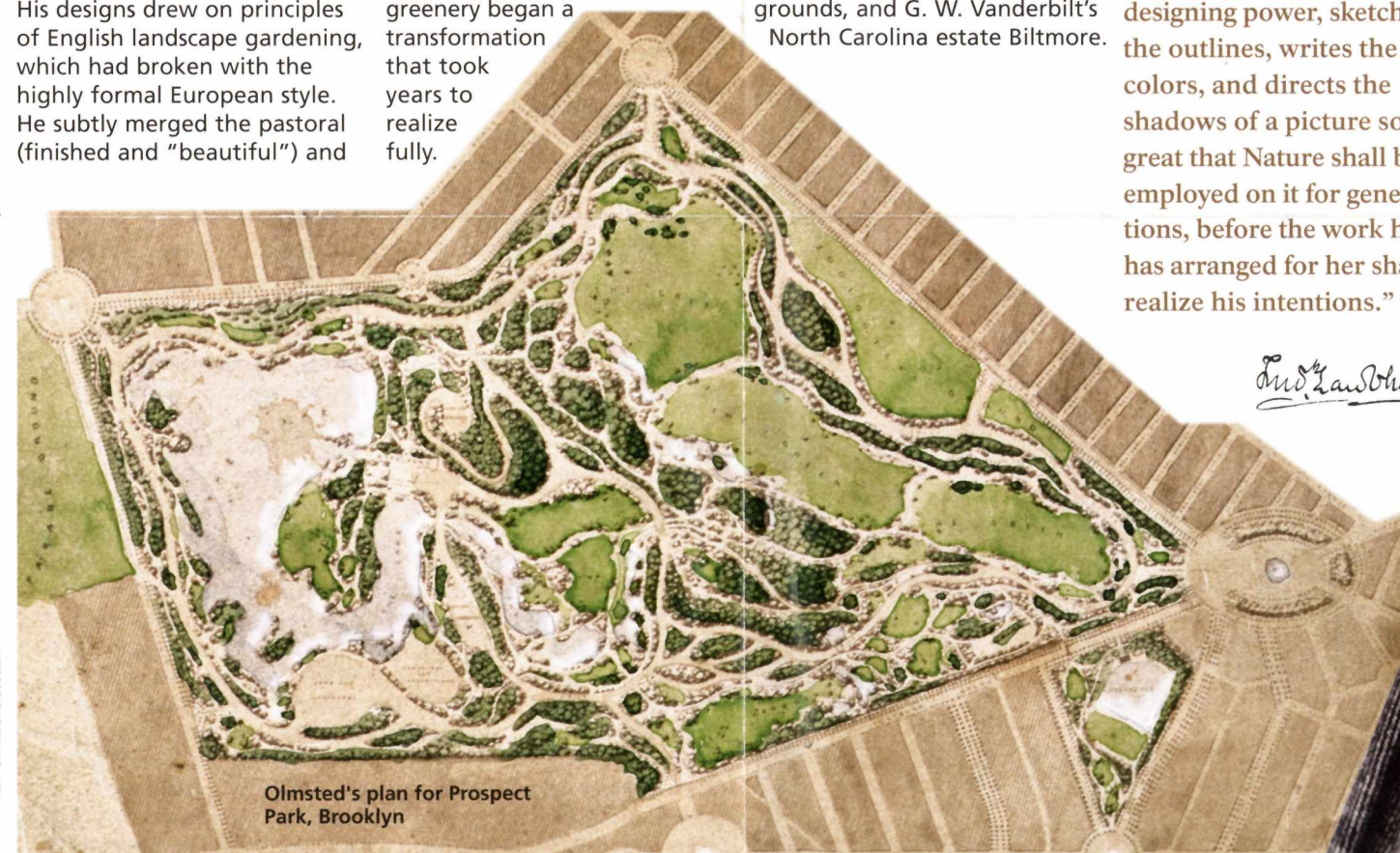
As a respected administrator, Olmsted had a remarkable ability to combine the practical and the beautiful. He considered a well-made park a "work of art...framed upon a single, noble motive." He sensed the "genius of the place," rooted in the immense time taken to create its forms, and strove for compositions as spontaneous and inevitable as the natural landscape.

His designs drew on principles of English landscape gardening, which had broken with the highly formal European style. He subtly merged the pastoral (finished and "beautiful") and



Workers install the Central Park water system.

the picturesque (irregular and "wild"). His work with earth, water, light, stone, and greenery began a transformation that took years to realize fully.



Olmsted's plan for Prospect Park, Brooklyn

Olmsted insisted his parks were not self-expressive but designed to elicit a specific response in others. The "kinetic" (moving) nature of his designs—his most original concept—provided a cumulative experience as visitors explored "passages of scenery" enhanced by memory and anticipation.

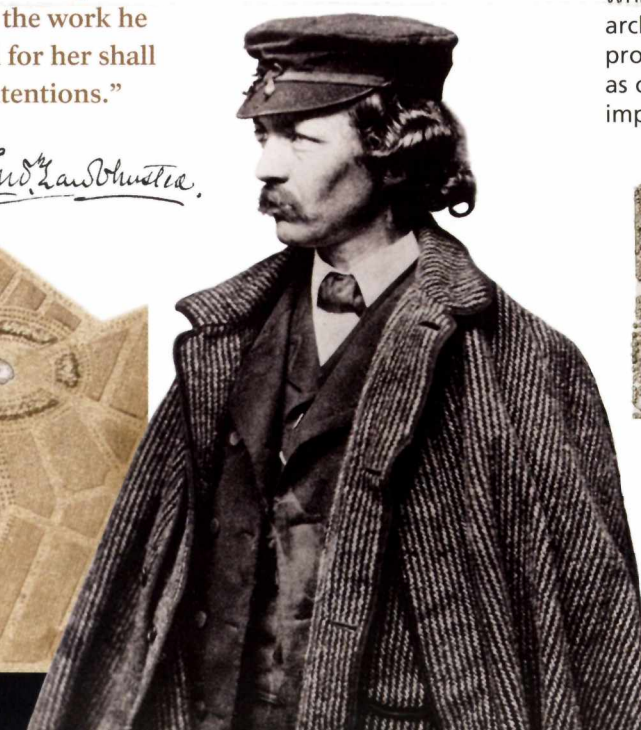
His influential designs spanned projects including the Chicago World's Fair, the US Capitol grounds, and G. W. Vanderbilt's North Carolina estate Biltmore.



The Meadowport Arch, Prospect Park

"What artist so noble... as he who, with far-reaching conception of beauty and designing power, sketches the outlines, writes the colors, and directs the shadows of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed on it for generations, before the work he has arranged for her shall realize his intentions."

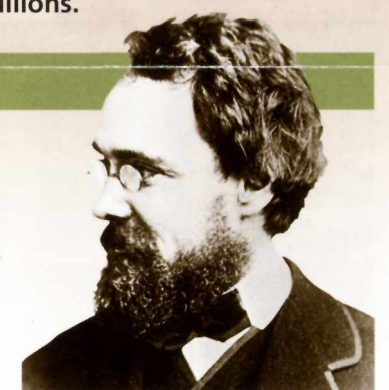
Frederick Law Olmsted



Building a Profession

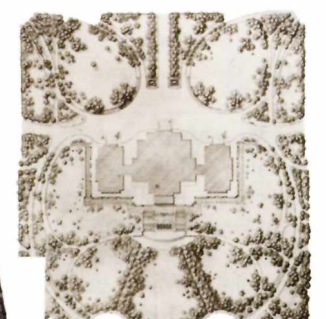
Olmsted's "vagabondish and somewhat poetical" early years prepared him for his life's work. On trips through the New England countryside, he absorbed his father's reverence for "great simple country."

After less than a year of college, Olmsted embarked on "voyages of discovery" as an engineer's apprentice, clerk, merchant sailor, and scientific farmer. A published account of his 1850 walking tour of Europe, where he studied parks and estate grounds, led him to a *New York Times* assignment on slavery's effects on the South's economy. In 1857, when a superintendent was needed to oversee the



Calvert Vaux, Olmsted's partner and principal architect for Central and Prospect parks

construction of Central Park, his literary contacts and farm experience won him the job. Olmsted partnered with Vaux to design a public pleasure ground on 840 acres, formerly an African American freedperson's village with rock outcroppings, hog farms, and swamp. For 40 years, Olmsted was a leader in what Vaux called "landscape architecture," furthering the profession by claiming the title as one who "makes more important the idea of design."



Above: 1874 plan for the US Capitol grounds
Left: Frederick Law Olmsted, about 1857

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The Brookline Years

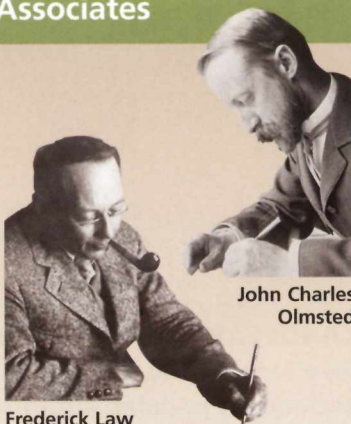


Fairsted, Olmsted's home and office, about 1904

Olmsted, Brothers, and Associates

In 1883, Olmsted moved his home and office from New York to a farmhouse in Brookline, establishing the world's first full-scale practice for professional landscape architecture. His office was the center of a complex built 1889 to 1925. The firm prepared designs for projects in 47 states; Washington, DC; and other nations.

Following collaborator and friend H. H. Richardson, Olmsted set up an apprentice system of instruction, reading, and practical experience. His sons John Charles (1852–1920) and Frederick Jr. (1870–1957) were trained from an early age to be landscape architects, with



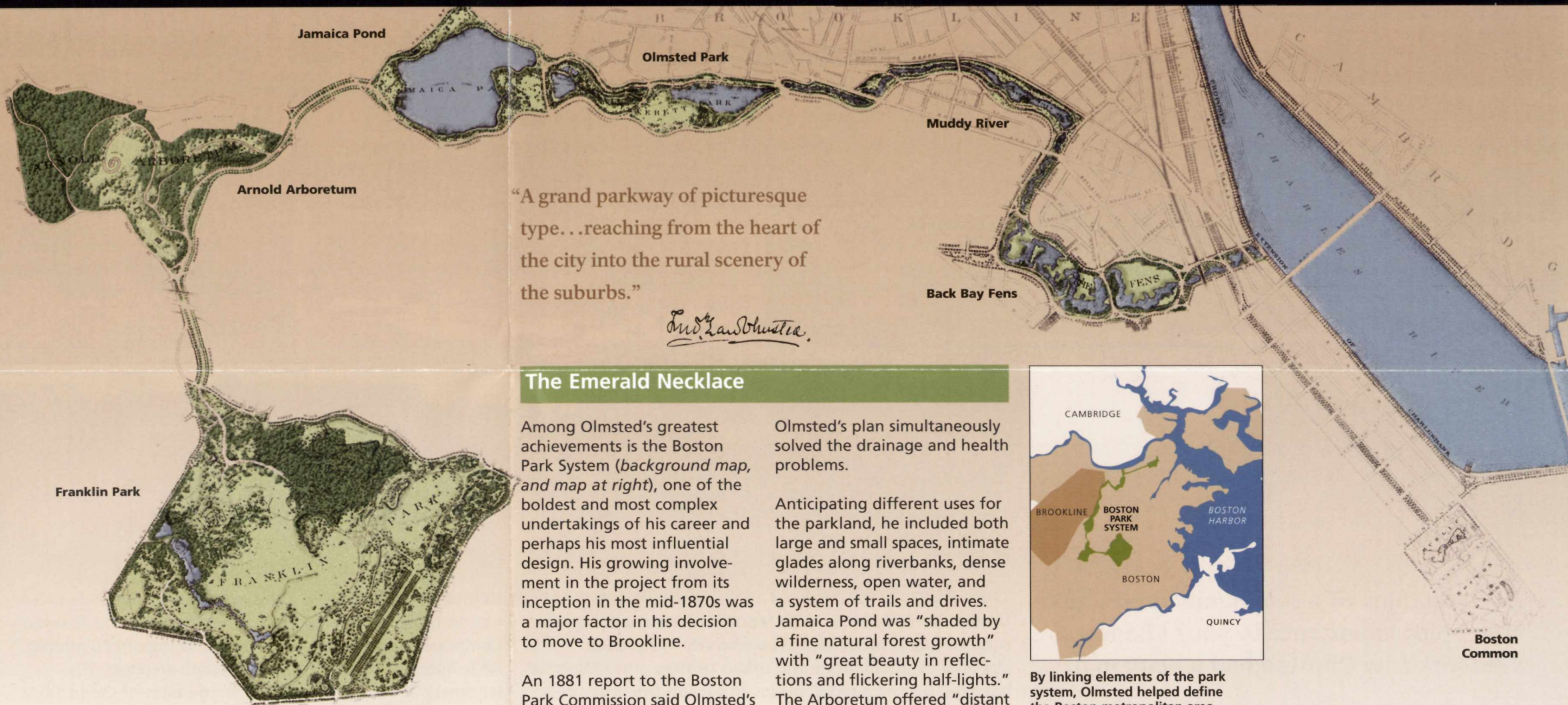
John Charles Olmsted

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.

a grounding more thorough and orderly than their father's. John Charles' management skills gave the firm continuity after his father retired in 1895. In 1897, Frederick Jr. became a partner. Five years prior to their father's 1903 death, the firm became Olmsted Brothers, led by John Charles and Frederick Jr.

The brothers taught their father's design principles to staff and partners, expanded the firm's number of employees and commissions, and grew their father's legacy.

After Frederick Jr.'s death, Olmsted Associates, Inc., emerged and remained here until 1980—amassing a catalog of about 6,000 design projects.



The Emerald Necklace

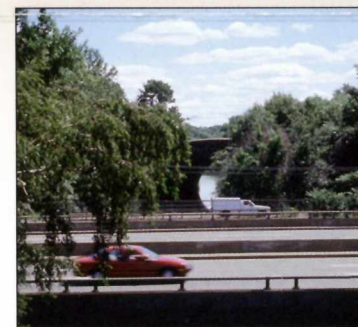
Among Olmsted's greatest achievements is the Boston Park System (background map, and map at right), one of the boldest and most complex undertakings of his career and perhaps his most influential design. His growing involvement in the project from its inception in the mid-1870s was a major factor in his decision to move to Brookline.

An 1881 report to the Boston Park Commission said Olmsted's vision was of a "lovely dale gently winding between low wooded slopes, giving a broad expanse of unbroken turf, lost in the distance." Together, these would form "a grand parkway of picturesque type...reaching from the heart of the city into the rural scenery of the suburbs."

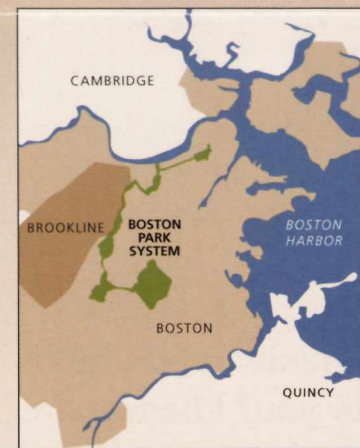
He wove varied landscapes into the city's fabric—from the salt-water marshes of the Back Bay Fens to the sheep meadows of Franklin Park, where he envisioned visitors could seek a "complete escape from town." The Back Bay Fens had been a sewage-fouled tidal creek and swamp that flooded constantly.

Olmsted's plan simultaneously solved the drainage and health problems.

Anticipating different uses for the parkland, he included both large and small spaces, intimate glades along riverbanks, dense wilderness, open water, and a system of trails and drives. Jamaica Pond was "shaded by a fine natural forest growth" with "great beauty in reflections and flickering half-lights." The Arboretum offered "distant prospects, in one direction seaward over the city, in the other across...to blue distant hills." Muddy River was "bordered by passages of rushy meadow...trees in groups, diversified by thickets and open glades."



Boston roads have encroached on Olmsted's compositions, as shown at the entrance to Back Bay Fens.



By linking elements of the park system, Olmsted helped define the Boston metropolitan area.

Olmsted had spent his career working out the interdependent relationship of city and country. This project fulfilled many of his urban-planning principles. Completed near the end of the 1800s, this five-mile "emerald necklace" of linked parks, ponds, and parkways brilliantly combined planning, engineering, and design.

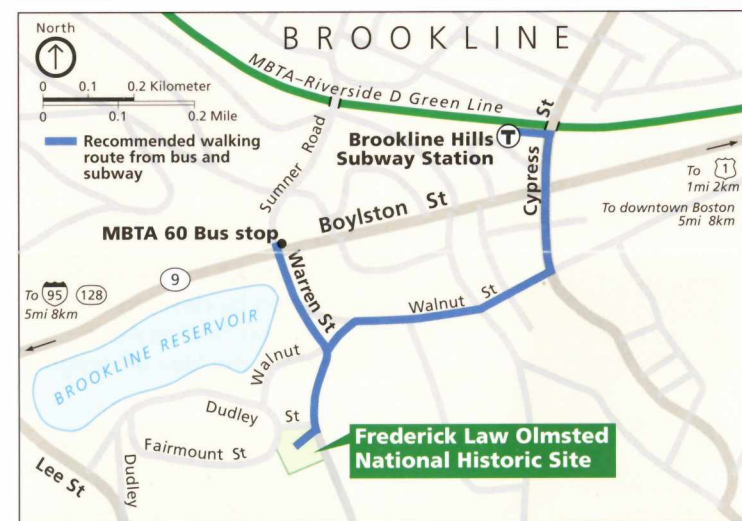
While some of Olmsted's finest parks, both here and elsewhere, have suffered over time, the essence of many of his designs remains intact. Maintenance and restoration costs are high and hard-won,

yet the Olmsted landscape survives—a fundamental component of the city's character and a testament to his vision.



Frederick Law Olmsted, about 1890

Visiting the Park



About Your Visit Hours vary seasonally; call or check the park website. • Call for group reservations. • Parking lot is limited; local on-street parking is available. • Watch your step on uneven ground, on staircases, and in multilevel rooms. • We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. • For firearms regulations, check the park website. **Emergencies call 911**

Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site
99 Warren St.
Brookline, MA 02445
617-566-1689
www.nps.gov/frla
This is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System; learn more at www.nps.gov.

National Park Foundation.
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

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Fairsted and the Olmsted Archives



Fairsted, around 1900. Olmsted proposed every suburban home should have "attractive open-air apartments" like the conservatory he added to the 1810 farmhouse at Fairsted.

This glassed-in space eased access to "nature's best possibilities" by allowing intimate views of the domestic scenery he created with such care.

Olmsted believed "no great town can long exist without great suburbs," so he designed suburban communities, including ones outside Baltimore and Chicago, where people could express individuality or practice gardening—all while retaining convenient access to the city's commerce and amenities. Above all, Olmsted believed the body and spirit could be healed through close association with nature—a benefit he wanted everyone to enjoy.

Olmsted showed his confidence in this city form of the future at his Brookline home Fairsted. Here, he aimed to express the "ideal suburban lifestyle." His vision for the private landscape reflected his ideals of strengthening family ties and feeding "the roots of patriotism." At Fairsted, he applied many of his design principles, including pastoral and picturesque styles. As his parks used plant borders, earthen barriers, and curving paths to put space between

people and the nearby city, Fairsted used dense trees and shrubs to direct views from surrounding streets toward a stately American elm on the south lawn. This let visitors appreciate the whole landscape and fit Olmsted's preference for simple, rather than "strange or striking," landscape elements.

Since 1980, the park has helped preserve and protect Olmsted's home, works, collections, and legacy—including a 15-year conservation and cataloging effort. The Olmsted Archives has most of the firm's surviving records (1839–1980)—financial records, photographs, planting lists, lithographs, plans, reports, correspondence, and models—that represent a rare continuity of work by a single professional office. The Archives also has collections on urban design, landscape architecture, and fine arts. The park is now digitizing materials for public use by Olmsted researchers, historians, and many others worldwide.



Olmsted's most celebrated suburb was Riverside (1869), near Chicago. Linked by rail to the city, these 1,600 acres of rolling hills bordered the Des Plaines River. It was ideal for Olmsted and Vaux's first community-planning experiment.

Rejecting a grid-based design, they instead set sunken roads to natural contours and obstacles. Irregular clusters of trees created spontaneity. Their plan protected the river—the new focus of the community—and

made 700 acres on the banks common parkland. The result harmonized the natural world and human needs. A model suburb, Riverside shows what we can achieve with careful planning and imagination.