



Frederick Law Olmsted

DESIGNING AMERICA

A companion resource for the PBS documentary



Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America

A companion resource for the WNED-TV PBS documentary

“Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America” is a co-production of WNED-TV Buffalo-Toronto and Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc. The television documentary will air nationally on PBS in June 2014. **“Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America”** presents a biography – with gorgeous cinematography, creative animation, and compelling commentary from noted scholars – of a man whose parks and preservation are an essential part of American life.

Among the cities that have Olmsted parks in them and are featured in the production are Atlanta, Georgia; Buffalo, New York; New York City, New York; Brooklyn, New York; Niagara Falls, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Boston, Massachusetts; Louisville, Kentucky; and Washington, DC.

WNED-TV is working with the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP) on various screening events across the country, more specifically where Olmsted had a significant impact.

An extensive PBS website accompanies the production. The website features scholar-written essays about Olmsted and landscape architecture, as well as special bonus video segments, classroom resources and activities and NAOP contacts. The “Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America” program website can be found at: pbs.org/wned/frederick-law-olmsted.

Frederick Law Olmsted is probably best known for his design and work on New York City’s Central Park. This 840-acre park was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1962 and is the most visited urban park in the United States. But over the course of his lifetime, Olmsted and his family firm have left a landscape-designed imprint on much of our country. Besides being the founder of landscape architecture, Olmsted was also an advocate for green space (ahead of his time), a journalist, a committed anti-slavery reformer and a believer in urban health.

Olmsted translates into “Place of the Elms.” Some say his planting of these trees could be considered similar to the signature of an artist.

Olmsted’s biggest passion seemed to be “solving the problem of building a dream in the middle of a city.” We have Frederick Law Olmsted to thank for campaigns of preserving natural scenery and creating portraits with our landscape. Olmsted’s mother died when he was three years old and one of his few memories of her was that of her sitting under a tree sewing while he played nearby. He strived to recreate settings for other mothers and children to spend quality time in natural surroundings.

In this booklet, you will find an excerpt from an article written for *Engineering Magazine* in 1895, by Olmsted himself. One can experience the thought process of a man who was part of constructing New York City’s Central Park, which has been deemed a “triumph of 19th century engineering.” Central Park Conservancy historian and photographer, Sara Cedar Miller, provides an overview of Central Park and its developmental 150 year history from her publication *Seeing Central Park, The Official Guide to the World’s Greatest Urban Park*. Author and noted art historian Frank Kowsky also provided a section of his work from *Best Planned City in the World*, which details Olmsted’s work in the city of Buffalo. An overview of NAOP is included in this publication. And finally, there is a reference section highlighting web links to a selection of Olmsted-based organizations and content for the community.

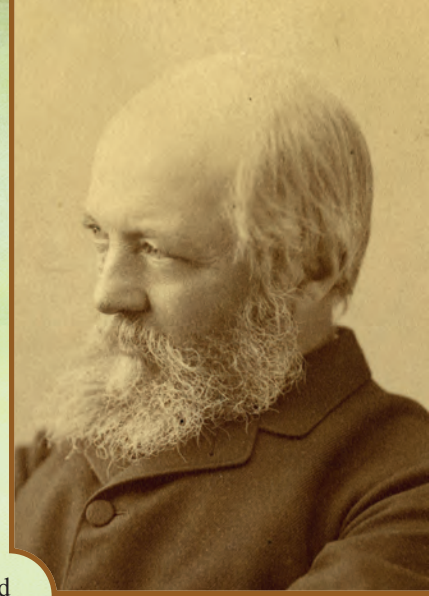
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An excerpt from **Parks, Parkways, and Pleasure-Grounds**

by Frederick Law Olmsted,

originally published in *Engineering Magazine* January 1, 1895



The aggregation of men in great cities practically necessitates the common or public ownership, or control, of streets, sewers, water pipes, and pleasure-grounds. Municipal pleasure-grounds comprise all such public open spaces as are acquired and arranged for the purpose of providing favorable opportunities for healthful recreation in the open air. As there are many modes and means to open-air recreation, so there are many kinds of public pleasure-grounds. The formal promenade or plaza is perhaps the simplest type. Broad gravel-ways well shaded by trees afford pleasant out-of-door

Frederick Law Olmsted was nominated as a Republican Vice-Presidential candidate in the 1872 presidential election.

halls where crowds may mingle in an easy social life, the value of which is better understood in Southern Europe and in Spanish America than in the United States. Agreeable and numerous open-air nurseries

and playgrounds for small children present a more complex, but perhaps more necessary, type of public ground. Very few public open spaces suitably arranged for this special purpose are to be found in American cities, and yet it goes without saying that every crowded neighborhood ought to be provided with a place removed from the paved streets, in which mothers, babies, and small children may find opportunity to rest and sleep and play in the open air.

PARK SITES AND BOUNDARIES

A visit and report from a professional park-designer will prove valuable, even at this earliest stage of operations. Grounds of the local playground class may safely be selected in accordance with considerations of cheapness and a reasonably equitable distribution, but the wise selection of even small landscape parks requires much careful study. It is desirable that a city's parks of this class should present scenery of differing types. It is desirable that the boundaries of each should be so placed as to include all essential elements of the local scenery and to produce the utmost possible seclusion and sense of indefinite extent, as well as to make it possible to build boundary roads or streets upon good lines and fair grades. Public grounds of every class are best bounded by streets; otherwise, there is no means of insuring the desirable fronting of buildings towards the public domain. If the courses of brooks, streams, or rivers can be included in parks, or in strips of public land connecting park with park or park with town, several advantages will be secured at one stroke.

PARK PLANS OR DESIGNS

To "plan" something means to devise ways of effecting some particular purpose. It has not always been thought necessary to "plan" the various kinds of pleasure-grounds. In order to be able to devise a consistent plan, such as may be followed during a long period of years with surety that the result will be both useful and beautiful, it is necessary, in the first place, to define as accurately as possible the ends or purposes to be achieved.

Plans for those larger public domains in which scenery is the main object of pursuit need to be devised with similarly strict attention to the loftier purpose in view. The type of scenery to be preserved or created ought to be that which is developed naturally from the local circumstances of each case. Rocky or steep slopes suggest tangled thickets or forests. Smooth hollows of good soil hint at open or "park like" scenery. Swamps and an abundant water-supply suggest ponds, pools, or lagoons. If distant views of regions outside the park are likely to be permanently attractive, the beauty thereof may be enhanced by supplying stronger foregrounds; and, conversely, all ugly or town-like surroundings ought, if possible, to be "planted out." The paths and roads of landscape parks are to be regarded simply as instruments by which the scenery is made accessible and enjoyable. They may not be needed at first, but, when the people visiting a park become so numerous that the trampling of their feet destroys the beauty of the ground cover, it becomes necessary to confine them to the use of chosen lines and spots. These lines ought obviously to be determined with careful reference to the most advantageous exhibition of the available scenery. The scenery also should be developed with reference to the views thereof to be obtained from these lines.

Frederick Law Olmsted's landscape design for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 was a model for Disney's Experimental Prototype of the Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT).

Within large rural parks economy sometimes demands that provision should be made for some of those modes of recreation which small spaces are capable of supplying. Special playgrounds for children, ball or tennis-grounds, even formal

arrangements such as are most suitable for concert-grounds and decorative gardens, may each and all find place within the rural park, provided they are so devised as not to conflict with or detract from the breadth and quietness of the general landscape. If boating can be provided, a suitable boating-

The Olmsteds worked with some of the country's most famous families including the Edisons, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Kennedys and Heinzes.

house will be desirable; the same house will serve for the use of skaters in winter. In small parks economy of administration demands that one building should

serve all purposes and supply accommodations for boating parties, skaters, tennis-players, ball players, and all other visitors, as well as administrative offices. In large parks separate buildings serving as restaurants, boat-houses, bathing-houses, and the like may be allowable.

PARK CONSTRUCTION

That the man who thinks out the general plan of a park ought to have daily supervision of the working-out of that plan is undoubtedly theoretically true. It is impossible to represent in drawings all the nice details of good work in grading and

planting, and yet no work is more dependent for its effect upon finishing touches. On the other hand, however desirable the constant oversight of the landscape architect may be, it is impracticable under modern conditions. The education of a designer of parks consumes so much time, strength, and money that no existing American park commission, unless it be that of New York, can as yet afford to engage the whole time of a competent man.

Most men of specialized training, such as architects, engineers, and all grades of horticulturists, stand in need of an awakening before they are really competent to have to do with park work. Each has to learn that his building, his bridge or road, his tree or flower, which he has been accustomed to think of as an end in itself, is, in the park, only a means auxiliary and contributive to a larger end, — namely, the general landscape.

If men can be found who will thus cooperate with park commissioners to the end that the lands and landscapes which the latter hold in trust shall be cared for and made available in strict accordance with that trust, excellent results can be hoped for in American parks. As before remarked, men who are capable of such work may certainly be trusted to construct and manage town spaces — squares, playgrounds, and the like — with due regard to their special purposes and to the satisfaction of all concerned.

An excerpt from

Seeing Central Park – The Official Guide to World's Greatest Urban Park

by Sara Cedar Miller. Published by Abrams Publishing (2009)

For more than 150 years, Central Park has been the centerpiece of New York City, drawing more than 25 million visitors each year. Almost entirely man-made and built between the years 1858 and 1873, its visionary designers, Fredrick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, referred to their creation as “a single work of art.”

Composed of natural elements – turf, wood, water and rock – and balanced with exceptional examples from the decorative and fine arts, the Park could also be perceived as an outdoor museum that brilliantly combines the kinds of attractions in its neighborhood cultural institutions, the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

From Sheep Meadow, Harlem Meer and the Strawberry Fields to The Ravine and Great Hill and Children's Glade, the Park is both a paragon of Victorian landscape design and a beautiful escape where visitors can find respite and relaxation in a city constantly on the move.

Central Park is America's first theme park, and its “theme”

is Nature. Many people assume that the 843-acre Park is a slice of the last remaining virgin territory on Manhattan Island, but nothing could be further from the truth. When the site was set aside in 1853 for a future park in New York – two and a half miles north of the city's center – 1,600 people lived in the scruffy and “broken” landscape. As with contemporary theme parks, the natural and manufactured elements that make up Central Park were planned, planted and placed according to the practical and aesthetic decisions of its designers, Olmsted and Vaux.

THE MODERN PARK: A PARK ON THE GO

Over the course of its 150-year history, Central Park has always been a reflection of the most important values held by the society of the day. The 19th century Park was created as an individual's oasis in the chaos and commotion of the city – a place for quiet contemplation and an appreciation for nature. In the 20th century those important needs for escape continued for many; however, for the most part, the next generation of New Yorkers preferred outdoor communal



Central Park, New York City
Photo credit: Thorstein Thielow

for neither responsible management nor necessary maintenance. The Park in the 1920s experienced its first serious decline.

ENDING THE CYCLES OF DECLINE AND RESTORE

Influenced by the global environmental movement that emerged in the 1970s, many activists and concerned New Yorkers banded together to save the 843 precious acres of the planet. In 1979, Mayor Edward I. Koch and Parks Commissioner Gordon J. Davis appointed urban planner Elizabeth Barlow (now Rogers) to the newly established position of Central Park Administrator – to oversee the daily operations of the Park, a position that had not been filled for more than 70 years.

gatherings that echoed the hustle and bustle of the new, electrified landscape. At this time, New Yorkers created the nation's most famous amusement parks at Coney Island and the new sports stadiums of the Polo Grounds Dodger and Yankee Stadiums, as well as small local parks, playgrounds and recreational facilities.

After the death of Vaux (1895) and Olmsted (1903), Central Park began a slow and steady decline. Samuel Parsons, the Parks Department landscape architect and Vaux's able successor, was constantly challenged in his fight to save the Park from politicians and opportunists, who threatened to encroach on precious parkland and who cared little

Frank Lloyd Wright Jr.,
who followed his father into the
field of architecture, apprenticed
at the Olmsted firm and specialized
in horticulture and botany.

A year later, in 1980, Koch, Davis and Barlow established a public-private partnership between the City of New York and the newly formed Central Park Conservancy. Today, through the generosity of thousands of New Yorkers, Central Park is once again the greatest urban park in the world, bringing joy to those who visit either once a day or once in a lifetime.

An excerpt from **Best Planned City in the World** by Francis R. Kowsky

Published by University of Massachusetts Press (2013)

In the mid 1860s, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, planners of New York's Central Park, stood in the forefront of the rising profession of landscape architecture. In August 1868, Olmsted came to Buffalo to survey the city for parkland. To everyone's surprise, he proposed not one park but three separate "pleasure grounds," as he called them. Soon after, he and Vaux forwarded a detailed proposal for this novel scheme that would become the Buffalo park and parkway system. They called for a 350-acre park they called The Park (the present Delaware Park); a 50-acre site on the waterfront identified as The Front (today's Front Park); and a 35-acre space on East Side known as The Parade (the present Martin Luther King Jr. Park). Each of these spaces would offer a different type of recreation. Moreover, all three parks were to be linked by tree-lined boulevards that Olmsted and Vaux called "parkways."

In the spring of 1870, hundreds of workers, many of them Union veterans, began to construct the partners' audacious plans. Under the able guidance of William McMillan, the

long-serving parks superintendent, Buffalo became the first American city to create a comprehensive park and parkway system. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places, this national treasure is watched over today by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy.

DELAWARE PARK: A "COUNTRY PARK"

Delaware Park would be a classic "country" park, a place in which to relax amid surroundings evocative of a rural landscape. To Olmsted and Vaux's way of thinking, large parks laid out in imitation of rural scenery provided city dwellers with "the feeling of relief . . . on escaping from the cramped, confined, and controlling circumstances of the streets of the town." Consisting of "combinations of trees, standing singly or in groups, and casting their shadows over broad stretches of turf, or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools," such tranquil landscapes enjoyed at leisure, they realized, brought joy to the heart. With its picture-perfect lake (manmade and first called Gala Water, now

Hoyt Lake), its broad meadow, and its shady drives and paths, Delaware Park was created with this end in view.

FRONT PARK: BUFFALO'S UNIQUE SCENERY

The chief feature of the Front Park was a terrace focusing the view of Lake Erie at the opening of the Niagara River. Here, Olmsted remarked, one could observe “a river effect such as can be seen, I believe, nowhere else – a certain quivering of the surface and a rare tone of color, the result of the crowding upward of the lake waters as they enter the deep portal of the Niagara.” Moreover, facing this scenic backdrop, the terrace would be a striking venue for public events.

THE PARADE: ATHLETICS AND ENTERTAINMENT

The Parade welcomed activities that Olmsted and Vaux feared would disturb the quiet atmosphere of Delaware Park. The Parade invited citizens seeking active recreation and lively entertainment. Most of The Parade consisted of a field for parades and sports and a grove with children's playthings. The Parade also drew people seeking a good time in the company of others. The spectacular Parade House, a restaurant, bar, and dance hall designed by Vaux, opened here in 1876 and immediately became a magnet for Buffalo's diverse population.

THE PARKWAY SYSTEM

The parkways that joined the parks together into a system represented a new category of street. These 200-foot-wide boulevards allowed vehicles, horseback riders, and pedestrians to proceed along discrete pathways that were separated from one another by strips of lawn. Multiple rows of trees, mostly the American elm, shaded all of these, and spacious circles coordinated junctures. These strictly residential

streets would likewise serve as small parks in the neighborhoods through which they passed. “Thus, at no great distance from any point of the town,” Olmsted explained, “a pleasure ground will have been provided for, suitable for a short stroll, for a playground for children, and an airing ground for invalids.” Bidwell, Chapin and Lincoln Parkways constitute a grand entry to Delaware Park. The longest parkway was Humboldt Parkway, which linked Delaware Park to The Parade on the East Side. Formerly regarded as one of the most beautiful streets in America, since the mid-1960s it has formed part of the Scajaquada and Kensington Expressways.



Lincoln Parkway, c. 1890, Buffalo, NY Postcard

Photo credit: The Mendola Collection

To link the new parks and parkways to the older city, Olmsted and Vaux annexed several streets in Joseph Ellicott's 1804 plan for Buffalo to their system. Chief among these was Delaware Avenue, destined to become one of America's grandest addresses. It formed the principal route to Delaware Park from the center of town, Niagara Square. Access to the main park from the West Side was to be via Porter and Richmond Avenues, which added preexisting Prospect Park to the system.



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION for
OLMSTED
PARKS

National Association for Olmsted Parks

The Olmsted firm designed the U.S. Capitol Grounds. The firm also worked on the Jefferson Memorial, White House and the Mall.

citizen activists, and representatives of numerous Olmsted organizations around the United States. Its concern is the legacy of landscape work left by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.

The National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP), established in 1980, is a coalition of design and preservation professionals, historic property and park managers, scholars, municipal officials,

and the firm continued by his sons, the Olmsted Brothers. NAOP's work reflects those objectives with projects that are both research and education-oriented, as well as with its advocacy and support roles in maintaining irreplaceable parks and landscapes designed by the Olmsted firm. NAOP has served as sponsor of The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Project since 2007, providing it with administrative and financial assistance. The Project, which began in 1972, is a series of nine chronological volumes and three supplemental volumes of Olmsted Sr.'s most significant writings, presented in context in a readable format. These personal and professional papers were combined into thematic collections, such as his discussion of his travels through the American

South in *Slavery and the South, 1852-1857*, while another volume cites his most well-known project, *Creating Central Park, 1857-1861*. Three more volumes will complete this set of the most important letters over the course of his career. The collection, to be completed in 2015, provides invaluable primary sources for park advocates across the United States and Canada, and is found in most research libraries.

As a way of bringing modern technology to historical documents and sites, a more recent research project is Olmsted Online. This web portal offers interactive maps, original plans and drawings, historic photographs, and correspondence and descriptions of the landscape design, as well as urban and regional planning work of the Olmsted firm. Olmsted Online can be used to plan an outing, explore history, research designs, analyze changes in land use, and support the preservation, restoration, and maintenance of the historic Olmsted-designed landscapes. Developed for the general public, this website offers the ability to search for nearby Olmsted parks and see overlays of plan drawings onto aerials of the developed site, in addition to finding historic and current images and letters written by the firm regarding a project. Environmental resource and transportation planners, landscape architects, historians, educators, preservation and park advocates, visitors bureaus, gardeners, local residents, and tourists can all benefit from Olmsted Online.

While research is a major focus of NAOP, advocacy and support of Olmsted sites are equally important, as these landscapes revitalize communities and enrich people's lives. NAOP's goal is to build the capacity of its national network to raise awareness, mobilize resources, and facilitate collaboration on relevant issues. The organization supports local advocacy by providing information and tools to effectively respond to advocacy concerns.

The Olmsteds believed in the restorative value of landscape and that parks can bring social improvement by promoting a greater sense of community and providing recreational opportunities, especially in urban environments.



Franklin Park, Boston MA
Photo credit: Stephen McCarthy

Additional Resources

Fredrick Law Olmsted: Designing America

The PBS Project website that includes bonus videos, essays and educator and community resources about Frederick Law Olmsted.
pbs.org/wned/frederick-law-olmsted

National Association for Olmsted Parks

A coalition of design and preservation professionals that support Olmsted family works.
olmsted.org

Olmsted Online

Supports the preservation of restoration and maintenance of Olmsted Parks across America.
olmstedonline.org
Supported by the National Association for Olmsted Parks

Fredrick Law Olmsted – National Historic Site

For Teachers: Offerings include curriculum-based programs at Fairsted, experiences at local Olmsted-designed parks, and professional development workshops.
nps.gov/frla/forteachers/index.htm

American Society of Landscape Architects

Founded in 1899, the American Society of Landscape Architects is the national professional association representing landscape architects.
www.asla.org

Educator Resources

Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy

Learn about Buffalo's parks and integrated parkway system.
www.bfloparks.org

Central Park Conservancy

Discover tours, recreation and programs for the whole family.
www.centralparknyc.org/about/programs
Find things to see and do at Central Park.
www.centralparknyc.org/things-to-see-and-do

The Emerald Necklace: Boston's Green Connection

Lesson plans provided by the National Park Service, Teaching with Historic Places.
cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/86bostonparks/86bostonparks.htm

Thanks to the National Parks Service: Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site for the Olmsted fun facts

Cover images: center - Central Park, New York City

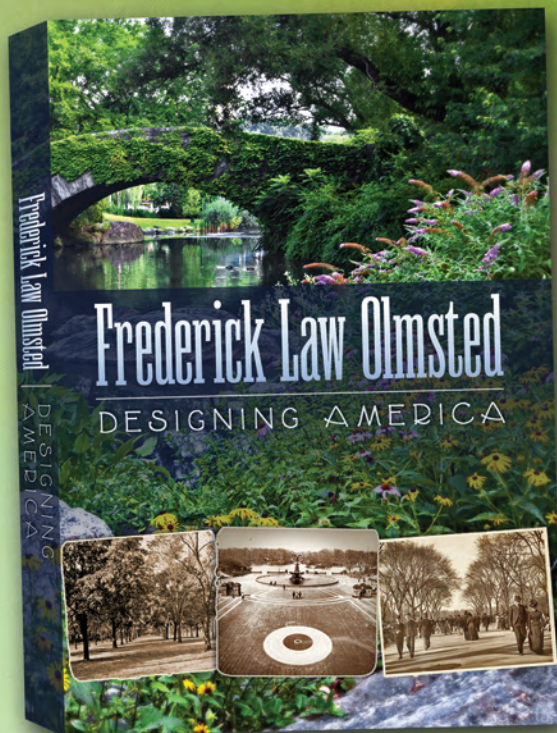
Small photos, from l. to r.

- Humboldt Parkway, Buffalo, NY

credit: Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy

- Bethesda Fountain, Central Park credit: Library of Congress

- The Mall, Central Park credit: Library of Congress



For information about “Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America” and to obtain the DVD:
pbs.org/wned/frederick-law-olmsted



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