FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED
(1822 – 1903)

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"Not the Smith's"

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Born in Hartford, Conn., on April 26, 1822 to a prosperous dry-goods merchant and the daughter of a farmer, Fredrick Law Olmsted was fascinated with nature from his youth and is widely recognized as the father of landscape architecture, the nations foremost parkmaker and the founder of modern city planning after the Civil War (Internet Site 3). His accomplishments in park design, conservation, landscape architecture and urban municipal planning, have had a significant impact on American and international city planners. Olmsted is best known for his landmark works such as Central Park and Prospect Park in New York and Riverside in Illinois. However, his search of knowledge, his work in soil and land conservation, involvement in the anti-slave movement and as a civilian administrator during the Civil War illustrates him more than just a landscape designer, it defines him as a man for the ages.

As a youth, Olmsted received an erratic, nontraditional education. His formative years were spent studying agricultural science and engineering at Yale University, traveling, writing on social issues of the day and farming (Internet Site 2). Although an eye ailment kept Olmsted from graduating from Yale, he was made an honorary member of the class of 1847 and received an honorary degree from Yale in 1867.

His personality was one of restlessness. Sometimes referred to as a 19th century renaissance man, at the age of 21, Olmsted took on the grueling charge as a merchant marine to travel to China. Returning to the United States he changed careers and went into farming. His farming career, along with a six-month walking trip of England in 1850, ultimately shaped his future (Rybczynski 84). His *scientific* farms being anomalies for the era.

His first farm located in southern Connecticut was cultivated not to produce crops, but for its physical beauty (Internet Site 6). This is where Olmsted first began importing trees and bushes and arranging them for the greatest visual effect against the background of Long Island Sound (Rybczynski 81). At his second 130-acre experimental scientific farm — called Tosomock Farm — on Staten Island, rather than planting crops that could be sold for profit, Olmsted investigated tree species, drainage systems and land conservation (Internet Site 2). Financed by his father, the two farms never made any money. After Tosomock Farm failed, and his proposal for a park in the Bronx was rejected, Olmsted believed that Americans were not willing to make long-term public investments required by city planning.

While working at Tosomock, Olmsted was introduced to New York's literary community. Although he began his writing career working for small magazines, over the course of five years starting in 1852, Olmsted made several sobering, yet enlightening journeys through the Deep South as a writer for *The New York Daily Times* (now the *New York Times*). During this period he used his literary activities to oppose the westward expansion of slavery and to argue for the abolition of slavery by the southern states (Internet Site 6).

As an expert farmer, Olmsted studied the plantation system (Internet Site 2). His sojourn through the South, along with his already liberal political views against slavery, further reinforced his belief in the evils of slavery (Internet Site 2). Before the Civil War, he wrote a trilogy of books[1] condemning slavery, trying to convince plantation owners slavery was not only morally wrong, but it was not as economically

[1] A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on Their Economy (Our Slave States I); A Journey Through Texas; or, a saddle-Trip on the South-western Frontier: with a Statistical Appendix (Our Slave States II); A Journey in the Back Country (our Slave States, III) 1860

advantageous as they believed (Olmsted, Ed. xl). These books were condensed and considerably revised as *The Cotton Kingdom* in1861 (Internet Site 2).

In the books, Olmsted described the Poor-Law System — how the annual costs to a plantation owner to feed, house, and provide medical attention to their slaves was more than the wages he would pay a free laborer (Olmsted 480-491). Olmsted's own solution to the slave problem was "gradual manumission[2] by action of the slaveholders themselves" (Olmsted, Ed. xliii). Returning to New York after 14-months traveling in the South and Southwest, Olmsted took the position of superintendent of what was to become Central Park in 1857 to support his wife (he had married his brother's widow) and family. Although Olmsted pictured himself an intellectual, he was a realist and took high paying administrative positions to secure a comfortable living. In fact, he once told an associate, "A poor man is considered a failure" (Rybczynski 225).

Olmsted is best remembered for designing New York's Central Park. At the age of 36, after one of the original designers of the park, Andrew Jackson Downing died, was Olmsted invited to join the huge landscape project. His eventual partner, and Downing's cohort Calvert Vaux, appointed Olmsted chief architect of the Central Park project. As chief architect, Olmsted was at liberty to make whatever changes to the park he believed would enhance its value for everyone, not just a place for the well to do to visit (Internet Site 3).

Olmsted and Vaux only worked part-time on the park from 1858 until 1877, when their services were terminated due to ongoing political squabbling (Internet Site 3). The design of the park included many of the distinctive characteristics that

[2] A formal written act to free slaves

eventually would become Olmsted's pattern trademark (Internet Site 3). Most examples of his work incorporate winding paths, scenic vistas and large open common areas for people to relax in (Internet Site 3). The design and planning of Central Park, which began as a simple idea to create a respite for the common workingman inside a bustling cityscape, quickly turned into the urban park movement.

According to professor of landscape architecture Anne Whiston Spirn, "during the late 19th century, Olmsted's contemporaries recognized Central Park (and Boston's Fens) as being designed and built" (Cronon 91). However, today, because Olmsted was so skillful at concealing the artifice of both the lengthy and ambitious projects he had so brilliantly constructed, they are largely invisible and are perceived as nature (Cronon 110-111).

Olmsted took a leave of absence from the Central Park project to become the general secretary of the Sanitary Commission. Founded in New York in 1861 as the Women's Central Association of Relief for the Sick and Wounded in the Army, this private organization's mission was to provide aid and reassurance to Northern soldiers during the Civil War. With the authorization of President Abraham Lincoln, it grew into the "Commission of Inquiry and Advice in respect of the Sanitary Interests of the United States Forces." Known as the Sanitary Commission, it had to overcome resistance from the Army Medical Bureau — chiefly because of its civilian leadership and the use of women as nurses. Under Olmsted's leadership — his years as administrator for the Central Park commission had served him well — (Beveridge 6). The works of the commission quickly became celebrated for its efforts on and off the battlefield, especially in the field hospitals (Defending the Union 1).

Olmsted understood from the start that it was the responsibility of the Army Medical Bureau to care for the wounded soldiers. He constantly fought for, and eventually reorganized and expanded the Medical Bureau (Defending the Union 6). Although Olmsted resigned his commission in 1863, the Sanitary Commission procured almost $5,000,000 in cash and supplies valued at $15,000,000 during the war. In contrast, the South had small groups that offered some comfort to its sick and wounded troops, but nothing equal to the services provided by the Sanitary Commission. Note: The Sanitary Commission influenced one of its nurses, Clara Barton, to start the American Red Cross after the war (Beveridge 7).

The city planning school-of-thought before Olmsted's urban park movement was based largely on the culture and tradition of 18th century settlers from England. Their designs were mostly built on the principle of intersecting streets that included town (municipal) squares and gardens that indulged the rich and prosperous of society and paying little attention to the poor. For example, New England towns had wide avenues creating grand views of its buildings. Philadelphia, PA., and Annapolis, MD., are two cities that follow this classic design. However, the best and most famous example of this design is Washington D.C. Under the supervision of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson (both were slave and plantation owners), Charles L'Enfant designed a rectangular plan with diagonal roads with the Capitol as the city's central feature.

Our third president, Thomas Jefferson was one of Americas leading horticulturists during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Jefferson called his home, Monticello, an "essay in architecture" and is a testament to his meticulous interest in architecture, landscaping and agriculture (Internet Site 5). He planted its walks with

trees and strewed its gardens with flowers (Internet Site 1). Unlike Olmsted who grew trees to study their growth, the gardens of Monticello were a botanic laboratory of visually pleasing ornamental plants from around the world. In Monticello's two orchards, Jefferson grew over 170 different fruit varieties. Plus he cultivated over 330 vegetable varieties along the 1000-foot-long garden terrace (Internet Site 4).

Another marked difference between Olmsted and Jefferson was access to their farms and the vistas they created. Jefferson surrounded his gardens with wooden fences (some with spikes on top) that were locked or thickets of shrubs to keep foragers out (Internet Site 4). Moreover, he planted hardy perennial flowers, and ground covers to enhance and refine the existing landscape (Internet Site 6). In contrast, Olmsted applied the philosophy of separation and subordination more consistently than any other landscape architect of his era (Internet Site 7).

Subordination was achieved in his parks by carefully constructing walks and paths that would flow through landscape with gentle slopes and uncomplicated curves. By design, separation within an Olmsted park system is intended for the enjoyment of the scenery — in other words, architectural details were deliberately planned to enhance the landscaping, not the historical other way around (Internet Site 3). Olmsted integrated structures into his parks (retaining walls, bridges, fountains) to fuse with their surroundings. Moreover, in his larger parks, Olmsted created smaller recreational areas for other activities. Parkways were built to connect the smaller areas and to handle both pedestrian and commercial traffic inside the park, thus bringing balance to the huge expanses of land.

One other glaring difference between Jefferson and Olmsted were their viewpoints of slavery. Although Jefferson was a staunch supporter of freedom and a powerful advocate of liberty, slaves cared for his beloved Monticello (Internet Site 3).

The urban park movement was more than designing parks and leisure areas. Olmsted sought to create a new kind of community. This new community was one that had been carefully planned for the single purpose of domestic life (Internet Site 7). This sweeping movement was one of the principal objectives of reformers who, like Olmsted, struggled to repair the problems (over crowding, poor sanitation, lawlessness and political and monetary gain at the expense of the common man) inflicted on America's cities after the Civil War (Internet Site 7). Their vision was recreation accessible to all and separating residential life from business by simply improving the design of the streets and creating pleasant views to relax in. Olmsted believed infusing these elements in a scheme would bring the healing power of nature into the city and were the remedy to of congestion and chaos of the city.

His first attempt at this new organizational arrangement was the Buffalo Park System. Began in 1868, rather than design one large centrally located park, he and Vaux dispersed several smaller recreational areas throughout the city and connected them via a parkway system that excluded commercial traffic. This new model was such a triumph that it attracted national and international attention.

Because of the success in Buffalo, in 1887, Boston city planners commissioned Olmsted to connect a string of nine parks he had designed for them. Olmsted connected the chain of parks via a parkway system called the Emerald Necklace (Rybczynski 361).

The best example of an Olmsted/Vaux planned community is Riverside, Illinois (Internet Site 9). Sixteen hundred acres were set aside for the planned neighborhood along the Des Plaines River. It took Olmsted and Vaux two years to plan. They created a spectacular handsome community completed with parks, gaslights, grand vistas and rich greenery (Beveridge 6). The parkway[3] they had built between Chicago and Riverside was one of the first commuter parkways in the nation. His distinctive plan preserved the banks and flood plain to ensure all residents had plenty of recreation space while leaving the scenic views of the river unobstructed (Internet Site 7).

More importantly, Olmsted paid considerable attention to the inner roads of the community. He made them as scenic as possible by eliminating all right angle intersections while following the natural curvature of the land. By avoiding right angles he created more public spaces. It was decided that although the land between the public streets and houses was private, it had a public function (Internet Site 7). The idea behind this new concept was to use the land as a transitional area to benefit both the public and private sectors of the community — a compromise between the city and the country (Internet Site 9). Unfortunately, only 1000 of the 1600 acres were developed (Internet Site 7). Another vision of Olmsted's to go unrealized in Illinois was a walkway on the lakefront from Jackson Park to Washington Park that would have created one large, magnificent South Park.

In addition, the layout of Riverside, with its curving streets that fit into the landscape, plus the landscape itself as an integral element of village, were a new concept — and the exact opposite of conventional city planning at the time. Most thought Olmsted's designs impractical and idealistic. He was described as "ruthlessly

[3] The parkways Olmsted designed were a totally new concept; all commercial traffic was excluded.

pragmatic and visionary" at the same time (Internet Site 8). In fact, although he was described as, having "almost single-handed laid the foundations for a better order in city building" Olmsted's visions were not shared by many prominent designers of the late 19th century (Rybczynski 418). Moreover, his mentor at the sanitary Commission, the Rev. Henry W. Bellows stated:

> Olmsted was one of the first people to recognize the necessity for planning in a large, industrial country, whether in peace or war. This recognition was not widely shared, which is why he was often misunderstood. He looks far ahead, and his methods are sometimes mysterious. His critics think him impracticable, expensive, slow — when he is long-headed[4], with broader, deeper notions of economy than themselves, and with no disposition to hurry what, if done satisfactory, must carefully be completed. It is a field where a long time — sometimes generations — is required for the full realization of the designer's goal (Rybczynski 21).

Olmsted had the gifts of patience, intuition and foresight; this allowed him to picture what the small trees he planted would look like fully-grown 30 years later.

The Olmsted firm became the foremost landscape architects in America. In 1883 he moved his professional firm to the living room of his home in Brookline, Massachusetts. There he trained young apprentices, including his sons, in the art of landscape architecture. Olmsted and his successors designed thousands of public and private landscapes over the next century — including World's Fairs, college campuses, urban parks, private estates and residential suburbs across the entire United States — forever changing the face of our nation. Some of Olmsted's later and most enduring works include:

- Chicago's South Park and Jackson Park
- The grounds of the Capitol, Washington, D.C.

[4] *Long-headed* is good

- The Boston park system
- The grounds of the Stanford University, Palo Alto, Calif.
- The Biltmore Estate, Asheville, North Carolina
- Olmsted's most important late work was the design for the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago

One of the unforeseen consequences of planned communities resulted in the suburban sprawl that began after World War II (Saffron). Thousands of Planned Urban Developments (PUD's) with their cookie-cutter homes, strip malls and "big-box" stores now cover the suburban landscape. Rural roads are clogged with ten times the vehicle traffic they were planned for. Land development has reduced permeable land, which has lead to increased flooding, plus the additional costs of municipal services have brought the congestion of the city to the suburbs. Today, zoning regulations first utilized by Olmsted are the backbone of suburban planning commissions. These ordinances slow or halt land development in smaller communities outside of big cities. According to Schiavo, if developers meet certain conditions to build on land they purchase (usually land that was once a farm), they must maintain the agricultural "integrity" of the area. In addition, local planning commissions are purchasing family farms and other open spaces to reduce any further housing or real estate development (B1).

Planned communities on the outskirts of large cities also had an impact on our society. As families began leaving the ethnic enclaves of their city neighborhoods to the suburbs, they accelerated the inevitable process of being assimilated into the American culture — fueling the great American "melting-pot."

Olmsted and his works, and more importantly his model of city planning, are still relevant today. He believed that "it was the purpose of his art to affect the emotions…by creating passages of scenery in which the visitor would become immersed, experiencing the restorative action of the landscape by an 'unconscious' process" (Internet Site 6). Unlike a painter or composer — whose works are not finished when the last brush stoke is applied, or the final note is written down — a landscape architect's creation will continually change for years to come. In their living canvas, trees will have grown taller providing shade, food and shelter for numerous species of wildlife. Shrubs grow bushier and in addition to food and shelter, they provide magnificent colors to the spring and summer landscape that are very pleasing to the eye. The ponds, streams and brooks spawn new aquatic life each year. As the seasons change, so does the land: green grass for picnics and other outdoor recreation, the multicolored leaves of fall bring a world where nature has one last fling before settling down into winter's sleep, and the cold of winter to skate on frozen ponds.

George Perkins Marsh, U.S. diplomat, scholar, conservationist and one of the foremost

ecology, and land resource management forces of the 19th century wrote:

> "in claiming and reoccupying lands laid waste by human improvidence or malice…[Olmsted] become a co-worker with nature in the reconstruction of the damaged fabric." His projects were an embodiment of this principle. Without any modern equipment, his laborers literally moved miles of earth and shoreline by hand and mule. All to fulfill his vision of how the plants, shrubs and trees he planted would grow and nurture other plants. Even though Olmsted's designs were shaped by the culture of his time, in later years it was discovered that "he successfully matched the form of the landscapes he designed and the spatial structures they created to span and account for future social and political change and processes"(Cronon 110).

Olmsted's designs were mostly very large in scale, but were designed to make visitors feel intimate with the surroundings. Some, like New York City's Central Park, encompass several hundred acres and employed thousands of laborers to shape. Olmsted's landscapes have been enjoyed by thousands of people daily — from the day they were created, while still being treasured today. He believed people need a place to relax and commune with nature, especially in urban areas. Throughout his life, Olmsted displayed a deep appreciation for nurturing community and using the healing effects of nature's scenery to battle the debilitating forces within the modern city. Spirn wrote, "Olmsted sought to design with nature, the paradox of his success is that many of his most important creations are no longer recognized as such: People look at them now and see nature, not Olmsted's works" (Cronon 91).

Frederick Law Olmsted died on August 28, 1903. His sons and their successors continued the landscape architecture firm he founded until 1980. His home and office were purchased by the National Park Service and were opened to the public as a museum.

In conclusion, Olmsted never expected towns full of chain stores, malls, fast food restaurants, and traffic lights…however, as cities sprawled into the suburbs, the trend is for developers to come in and clear the land, and put as many of the same style houses as they can on to a plot of land — inevitably leaving a community void of character (This Old House). No matter what he was doing, Olmsted's most important objective was to attempt to make American society better (Parker). It is Olmsted's legacy that his creations will continue to be greatly treasured for many more generations to come. Olmsted said, "I have all my life been considering distant

effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future"(Rybczynski 15).

Olmsted had the inexplicable ability to see in his mind's eye the unique texture of the land and how to wrap it in the fabric of noble greenery. In fact, it is ironic that he is best remembered for his work as a landscape architect — a field that did not exist before the mid-19th century. His lasting contributions of parks, however, are just a small measure of the man. As an adventurer in search of knowledge; a farmer; a surveyor; a vocal member of the abolitionist movement; a social reformer; a writer in the New York publishing world; a pioneering city planner; an advocate of the emerging ecology movement; a teacher and friend of the common man, all helped fashion this individual who was so instrumental in shaping our cities of today.

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