FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED: LANDSCAPES FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD
The year 2022 marks the bicentennial of the birth of Frederick Law Olmsted—landscape architect, journalist, social reformer, and creative genius who transformed the American landscape. During his life, Olmsted completed hundreds of landscape projects ranging from parks, parkways, and institutional campuses to urban and suburban areas and planned communities. While his physical landscapes are remarkable, the values behind them are equally important. Olmsted believed that parks and landscapes are essential public spaces, belonging to all Americans. His democratic vision of public parks, and his insistence that human health and civic engagement depend on them, resonate more than ever today.

The Oak Spring Garden Foundation, in partnership with the National Association for Olmsted Parks and Olmsted 200, is proud to celebrate Olmsted’s birth with this exhibition, which focuses on Olmsted’s life story, his major landscape commissions, and their relevance for contemporary society. Also highlighted is Olmsted’s trailblazing philosophy about the natural world and how to shape it for public benefit.
Witness to a rapidly growing and urbanizing America, Olmsted understood that the future of the natural world would be threatened without more public-spirited intervention. Foretelling current environmental concerns, he predicted “woods which will soon be felled, streams which will be turned into sewers, meadows that will be built on, landscapes that may be shut off…” When Olmsted considered a landscape, he asked instead: “What improvements have you here that tend to insure permanent healthfulness and permanent rural beauty?”

Olmsted’s foresight is best illustrated by the landscapes he designed, which would not grow to maturity until decades later. Yet he anticipated and believed in the role they would play in the future. Today, Americans in cities throughout the country continue to enjoy and advocate for his legacy.
Olmsted’s deep appreciation of rural scenery formed early in childhood, shaped by his father’s extensive collection of British and European landscape prints. The family also enjoyed frequent countryside jaunts in search of picturesque views near their home in Hartford, Connecticut. At a young age, Olmsted discovered the works of the leading English landscape theorists William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Humphry Repton. While Gilpin, Price, and Repton sought to improve views on private estates, Olmsted adopted and applied their naturalistic landscape principles to public parks.

Olmsted’s thinking was especially influenced by Humphry Repton’s picturesque compositions. Respecting and enhancing a site’s natural features became fundamental to Olmsted’s landscape designs. For Olmsted, enhancing “the genius of the place” could bring about a powerful effect on the viewer, whether through “dark, picturesque, rugged ravines” or pastoral meadows.
SEEDS OF A LIFE’S WORK

As a young man, Olmsted showed few signs that he would come to define and dominate the nascent field of landscape architecture during the second half of the nineteenth century. He worked as a dry goods clerk, seaman, scientific farmer, writer, and managing editor of an influential literary and political magazine. He also traveled extensively, publishing insightful accounts of his journeys through England and continental Europe. Four books, based on articles published for the New York Times chronicling his travels through the pre–Civil War South, were influential in opposing slavery.

Living on a Staten Island farm purchased by his father, Olmsted explored agriculture—growing fruits, vegetables, and trees. He named the farm Tosomock and hosted lively gatherings there with his beloved brother John and their friends. Concern for the future of Staten Island prompted him to help found an agricultural improvement society. Taken together, Olmsted’s disparate experiences prepared him for his life’s work and strengthened his sense of duty to the public good.
For Olmsted, the natural world was essential to maintaining well-being and renewing health, a discovery he made through personal experience. Exhausted and undernourished after a yearlong stint on a merchant ship to China, Olmsted recuperated with long walks in the woods. He found further validation of nature’s healing power in the work of Swiss physician and philosopher Johann Georg Zimmermann. Zimmermann’s *Solitude Considered* promoted rural pursuits and scenery to heal malaise and melancholy, as an antidote to the ills of urban living.

Olmsted drew on the healing power of nature in designing parks as well as hospital grounds for mentally ill patients. He believed that tranquil landscapes and pathways in nature had an unconscious calming influence on patients’ mental health and relieved the anxiety of urban life.
During his 1850 walking tour of the British Isles, Olmsted visited the newly opened Birkenhead Park outside Liverpool. Familiar with privately owned parks on family estates, he was struck by this oasis created for public enjoyment. The park’s artistic design and social value prompted Olmsted to “admit that in democratic America, there was nothing to be thought of as comparable to this People’s Garden.” Olmsted employed these forward-looking principles in the planning and design of Central Park, his first professional landscape project.

Olmsted’s insights into English landscapes and his ideas about social reform were published in his first book, Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England (1852). He dedicated it to New York State farmer George Geddes, from whom Olmsted had learned scientific farming methods. The book reflected Geddes’s egalitarian sensibilities, which honed Olmsted’s vision and its practical application.
Olmsted’s commitment to the public good is evident in Central Park, an 843-acre oasis in the heart of Manhattan. He and Calvert Vaux, a British-educated architect and landscape designer, envisioned a people’s park, for the pleasure of “the poor and the rich, the young and the old.” Olmsted understood the ability of nature and scenic views to counteract urban ills and promote recreation. His persistence overcame city leaders’ continuing schemes to fill the park with buildings and commercial activities. Central Park was to be Manhattan’s lungs, providing fresh air and green space for all.

In 1858 Olmsted and Vaux won the design competition for Central Park, which became the first landscaped public park in the United States. Their plan, called Greensward, integrated naturalistic and formal settings with architectural and recreational features, such as a pedestrian mall, water terrace, and lake for boating and ice-skating.
In the 1850s, Olmsted traveled through the American South as a correspondent for the New York Times. Galvanized by what he saw, he published a book, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States (1856), to expose the injustice and economic bankruptcy of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe called it “the most thorough exposé of the economical view of this subject which ever appeared.” British novelist Charles Dickens lauded Olmsted’s accounts for their accuracy and careful reflection. Just before the American Civil War broke out, Olmsted published The Cotton Kingdom (1861), which he hoped would influence British public opinion along pro-Northern lines.

Olmsted left his post as superintendent of Central Park to aid the war effort. From 1861 to 1863, he served as general secretary of the US Sanitary Commission, a forerunner of the Red Cross that supported Union troops. He considered it his patriotic duty to improve soldiers’ welfare. Olmsted lobbied Congress for funds to build modern hospitals, organized an efficient system for distributing supplies, outfitted ships as floating hospitals, and promoted fresh vegetables for soldiers’ rations. Operating tirelessly near the front lines of the Peninsula Campaign outside Richmond, Virginia, Olmsted improved supplies and sanitation to benefit the health of soldiers.
In 1865 Vaux convinced Olmsted to return to New York to codesign a park for Brooklyn, then the country’s third-largest city. The result was Prospect Park, which Olmsted thought an even more successful design than Central Park. It seamlessly blends pastoral vistas in its Long Meadow with a lake, drives and walkways, and wilder features—such as the Ravine, a steep, forested gully carved from rock, with pump-powered flowing water. Visitors coming from “the confinement and bustle of crowded streets” could find “the suggestion of freedom and repose,” either through communal recreation or solitary contemplation of nature.

As vice president of the New York Charities Aid Society during the 1870s, Olmsted promoted his view that parks were meant to nurture the spirit of all people. He wrote to physicians and ministers describing the healthful benefits of both Central Park and Prospect Park, and posted notices about these benefits in tenement houses.
Olmsted believed that carefully planned, suburban communities would provide the most beneficial environment for American domestic life and contribute to a stable democracy. Suburban villages could avoid the crowded squalor of the city and overcome the isolation and lack of services of rural areas. They would bring about “the ruralizing of all our urban population and the urbanizing of our rustic population.” Olmsted’s designs for residential communities demonstrate his desire to safeguard the land’s natural scenic resources, while providing recreational areas for the enjoyment of the whole community.

Olmsted and Vaux’s 1868 plan for Riverside, Illinois, represented their first fully developed residential community. Situated along the Des Plaines River west of Chicago, nearly one-third of the 1,600-acre tract preserved streamways, scenic views, and wooded areas for public use. Olmsted’s holistic design approach is evident in the carefully graded, curving roadways, which provide ease of movement for physical and psychological benefit.
In 1878 Olmsted began planning an ingeniously varied park system for Boston. Stretching nearly seven miles, it encompassed the colonial-era Common and the 1837 Public Garden, as well as Back Bay Fens and Muddy River, Jamaica Pond, Arnold Arboretum, and Franklin Park. With parkways and green spaces knitting together these landscapes and waterscapes, the system became known as the Emerald Necklace. Olmsted preserved the natural beauty of a large, glacial kettle hole, Jamaica Pond, enhancing it with new trees, shrubs, and walkways. Negotiating a joint enterprise between Harvard University and the city, he integrated the fledgling Arnold Arboretum into his design.

The Back Bay Fens, likely the nation’s first wetlands restoration, was an aesthetic and sanitary challenge. The boggy land, then a fetid basin for Boston’s refuse, had originally been a salt marsh. Olmsted reconfigured the marsh in a sinuous line, installed basins and tidal gates, and reintroduced salt-tolerant plants along the banks, thus restoring ecological vitality and creating a habitat for waterbirds.
Beginning in 1888, Olmsted realized his vision of a private landscape as a sustainable and environmentally sound enterprise. He viewed Biltmore—George Washington Vanderbilt’s estate near Asheville, North Carolina—as a prime opportunity to plan for the public good: “a private work of very rare public interest in many ways.” Olmsted convinced Vanderbilt to invest in additional tracts of forest in order to establish a national model for scientific forestry, and he tasked Gifford Pinchot—later first head of the US Forest Service—with supervising the undertaking. The project brought about the Biltmore Forest School, founded in 1898, while eighty thousand acres of the estate became the Pisgah National Forest in 1916.

Olmsted poured his expertise into designing Biltmore’s grounds, a monumental setting with an extensive natural reserve and an imposing château designed by architect Richard Morris Hunt. He blended formal gardens with varied, naturalistic vistas and a three-mile-long, sinuous approach to the house. Biltmore was Olmsted’s final great project and remains a testament to his enduring vision.
In 1882 Olmsted relocated his family and business to “Fairsted” in Brookline, Massachusetts. There, he continued to design great works and trained his son Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., stepson John Charles Olmsted, and others, including Henry Sargent Codman and Charles Eliot. When Olmsted was forced to retire due to declining health in 1895, John Charles and Olmsted Jr. established Olmsted Brothers, Landscape Architects. The distinguished Olmsted firm practiced from Fairsted until closing in 1979. The property, buildings, and collections are now the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, part of the National Park Service.

Olmsted’s legacy lives on in vital ways. The National Association for Olmsted Parks helps organizations around the country to protect these historic landscapes. Johns Hopkins University Press has published a twelve-volume set of Olmsted’s significant writings from 1839 to 1895. In 2022 The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted will appear in digital form, providing a valuable resource for the future.
In 1918, the Olmsted firm was hired to complete the Coe family’s Long Island landscape. Covering 409 acres, the design of this once-private estate reveals Olmsted’s principles in practice. Without sacrificing details to the whole, the landscape of Planting Fields creates a distinct sense of place. Here the Olmsted Brothers blended formal gardens with naturalistic vistas and dramatic approaches to the main house, just as their father had done at Biltmore. Pastoral lawns and picturesque gardens combine in a unified composition. The resulting landscape not only suited the estate’s original private function but also its present identity as a public park and historic site meant to nurture the minds and spirit of all people.

English immigrant and businessman W.R. Coe and his wife, Standard Oil heiress Mai Rogers, purchased Planting Fields in 1913 and enjoyed many seasons in Oyster Bay with their family. In 1918 they hired architects Walker & Gillette and the Olmsted Brothers landscape architects to design a fully integrated built and natural environment. The Coes’ love of art, architecture, and horticulture, can be seen across the site to this day.
In 2022, to advance the legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted, Planting Fields embarked on a multi-year project to restore the quintessential sense of place inherent to all Olmsted sites, which had been muted over the years at Planting Fields. With an eye toward sustainability and accessibility, Planting Fields is restoring the site’s original monumentality and distinctive pastoral design, reinvigorating the spirit of the original Olmsted Brothers landscape for future generations to enjoy.

A complete restoration of the Olmsted Brothers design for the Main Entrance Drive, upgraded with ADA-accessible pathways and sustainable oaks, will welcome all visitors to Planting Fields.
Nearly two centuries ago, Frederick Law Olmsted tackled critical social and environmental challenges: disease, pollution, and deep social, racial, and economic divisions. These were profound concerns in the late nineteenth century, just as they are today. Olmsted understood the powerful connection between thoughtful landscape design and solutions to these pressing societal problems. And his prescriptions—democratic spaces, healthful connections to nature, and sustainable landscapes—remain vital in addressing the similar challenges that we face today.

In the face of a pandemic, Olmsted’s parks and places have proved more important than ever and his visionary designs have endured because of generations of dedicated stewardship. We invite you to join Olmsted 200, the bicentennial campaign, to help us sustain and reimagine these essential public spaces. If you live near an Olmsted-designed park, consider how you might help. Check out ideas at Olmsted200.org.