Frederick Law Olmsted’s
PASSION for PARKS

Sunbathers catch the last rays of the day in New York’s Central Park, a vale of tranquility amid the metropolis. Here and in hundreds of public spaces across the country, Olmsted helped bring the soothing beauty of nature to rich and poor alike.
Olmsted integrated natural terrain with landscaping to create moods of mystery and surprise. His serpentine drive to the Biltmore house gives visitors “the sensation of passing through the remote depths of a natural forest” before encountering the grand château.
YEARS EARLIER he had chosen the site for its natural features, for its lofty oaks and shagbark hickories, for the dappled green and gentle slope of Wellington Hill. These were his signature touches: a palette of light and shadow, the subtle layering of textures, a pastoral centerpiece edged with the leafy mysteries of the picturesque. He believed his plan might offer a measure of tranquillity to the McLean Hospital's mental patients. But now he was one of them, and the effect on him was anything but tranquil.

Near the end of a long life otherwise steeped in serendipitous good luck and brilliant achievement, Frederick Law Olmsted—maker of our nation's first great urban parks and founding father of landscape architecture in America—succumbed to a senile dementia so severe it demanded his confinement in this institution he had intended for others a generation before. The year was 1899; the place, Belmont, Massachusetts, not far from Boston. There, asylum staff watched over Olmsted among a cluster of cottages, one called Hope. The name had no relevance to his prognosis. Accompanied by a nurse or a family member, he strolled the grounds, his gift for observation not yet so dulled that he failed to note certain deviations from his original concept. "They didn't carry out my plans," he complained to his family. "Confound them!"

How bitterly in his bouts of paranoia Olmsted must have scorned the memory of a handful of other clients who failed to carry out his plans, confound them! Or were there moments at Belmont when a fading mind might have recalled the prouder legacies of a gifted career? Surely he could not forget the parks that had brought light and air and community soul to the crowded poor of Boston and Buffalo and Louisville and New York, among a score of cities. No forgetting some of the other designs his genius had wrought: of campuses and great estates, cemeteries and arboreta, the serene grounds of the United States Capitol, the grand esplanades of the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893, the nation's first parkway (in New York), one of the first planned suburbs with curvilinear streets (Riverside,

A PROLIFIC DESIGNER

Fairstede Farmhouse • Brookline, Massachusetts

Protective wrappers that once held drawings for America's grandest landscapes remain in the vault at Fairstede, Olmsted's home and studio in Brookline, Massachusetts. More than 140,000 plans are carefully preserved at this national historic site. A compulsive workaholic, Olmsted (right) pondered the big picture, then designed down to the finest detail.
Illinois), the reports demanding that Yosemite Valley and Niagara Falls be saved from the spoilers at a period in our history when commercial vandalism was even more in vogue than it is today. Among the many tributes to this body of work, Olmsted might have remembered snatches of an editorial in Garden and Forest magazine hailing him, in the year of the Chicago exposition, as “the foremost artist which the New World has yet produced.” Still, though “millions of people now unborn will find rest and refreshment in the contemplation of smiling landscapes which he has made,” the memory of his name and personality may be dimmed in the passage of years, for it is the fate of architects to be lost in their work.

Within a half century of his death in 1903, the name of Frederick Law Olmsted was indeed largely forgotten, lost in works that had already lapsed “toward ruin” (in the words of one biographer) or yielded to the “vicissitudes of neglect” and the “mischief and care of citizens and politicians” (in the words of another). Then, in the early 1970s, around the sesquicentennial of his birth, the name of Olmsted enjoyed a revival of sorts—a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, an increased interest in his long-restricted papers at the Library of Congress, the first of several contemporary biographies, the convening of conservancies to restore his neglected parks. But the revival failed to arouse much public interest beyond the ranks of a relatively small circle of historians and park preservationists. Olmsted? Oh, yes, some folks would say, wasn’t he that fellow who did New York City’s Central Park?—as if that were enough to define a man who had left his prodigious mark on at least one other calling before turning, without either schooling or credentials, to his premier profession: landscape architecture.

In my own time as a newspaper reporter in New York City, in those mid-century years preceding the revival, Olmsted’s was a name not often invoked by the Press. Matter of fact, I’d never heard of him. Tabloid editors and gumshoe newshounds such as I were conditioned to see that great rectangular green in mid-Manhattan not as a public pleasing ground but as a killing field, where teenage gangs clashed by night, and daybreak brought detectives from the Central Park Precinct to ponder yet another taped-off, blood-soaked crime scene. I lived on Staten Island then, across the bay. A local friend, a landscape architect named Bradford Greene, first introduced me to the Olmsted story; told me how Olmsted had farmed on the island in his early years, later returned to prepare a report on the island’s improvement (which predictably recommended no improvement at all to the natural scenery), and left behind a legacy that had hugely influenced Greene’s own career in the shaping of landscapes.

Another good friend, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, was about to become a force in the Central Park revival and would later serve as Central Park administrator and first president of that park’s conservancy. So it wasn’t long before I felt obliged, out of self-defense, to get busy filling the gaps in my knowledge of this extraordinary man and his body of work. I’m still at it. “Following Olmsted’s life,” wrote his most recent biographer, Witol Rybczynski, is like “putting together a picture puzzle. All sorts of odd-shaped pieces are lying on the table.”

**A PLANNED COMMUNITY**

Red lights warn of a train’s approach near the restored water tower in Riverside. Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s pioneering Chicago suburb offered country living with city conveniences.

**The Vagabond**

Frederick Law Olmsted was born April 26, 1822, in Hartford, Connecticut, first son of John Olmsted, a well-to-do dry goods merchant, and Charlotte Law Hull, who died when Frederick was almost four. The motherless boy was remanded into the custody of a succession of rural clergyman who instructed the child in reading, writing, and arithmetic. On holidays and summertimes, Frederick joined his father and new stepmother on carriage rides through the Connecticut backcountry. Both adults were much enthralled by Nature. So was the child.

He was hoping to attend Yale College, but a bad case of sumac poisoning had weakened his eyesight, and the doctors advised him to rest his eyes. Left to “run wild,” as he later recalled it, he surrendered himself to a “vagabond life” and in his 21st year shipped out for China, a deckhand on the good bark Ronaldson. He returned a year later, sick with the scurvy. Now the vagabond thought he might try his hand at farming. Perhaps the sandy soils of Staten Island might turn him a profit under cabbages and turnips. They didn’t. He converted his fields into orchards and amused himself planting exotic trees.

In 1850 Olmsted sailed for England with his brother John. In their first month ashore they hiked some 300 miles through Wales and the Midlands, soaking up the rural scenery. “The country—and such a country!” Olmsted would write, “green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous!” But there were urban sights as well.
At Birkenhead, across the River Mersey from Liverpool, they inspected the grounds of a new park designed by the innovative gardener Joseph Paxton. Olmsted was much impressed with the meandering footpaths and open meadows spanned with rocks and scattered trees. He wondered how cleverly "art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty," and wonder of wonders, this was not just a sanctum for some noble lord but a park open to the public, a park for people of all stations in life. In all the cities of democratic America, he had to admit, there was nothing quite like it. Not yet, anyway.

The Scrivener

"I if he had done nothing of note after the 1850s," biographer Elizabeth Stevenson wrote in Park Maker, "if there had been no parks, if he had declined into worthy obscurity, Olmsted would still have a secure place in American memory." History and literature, she declared, would remember him as a man of words. Though he would write millions of them during his later careers as an administrator and landscape architect—his collected papers are said to number 60,000 separate items—Olmsted scored his highest literary marks in the mid-19th century, a literary journalist at play in the fields of the antebellum South.

He had just published an account of his British travels, Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England. The book was well received, especially by Henry Raymond, the editor of the New-York Daily Times, who was looking for a correspondent to tour the southern states and file a series of unvarnished reports on how slavery was affecting the region’s culture and economy. Now he had one.

In his earliest dispatches to the Times, Olmsted had tried to remain impartial on the slavery question. But his travels increasingly exposed him to the cruel side of the cotton culture, with all of its moral implications, and he began to realize that servile labor had manifestly depleted the South’s soil as surely as it sapped the region’s economic vitality. In 1861, shortly after the first shots were fired in the war that would bring an end to slavery, his southern writings were collected in two volumes as The Cotton Kingdom, a classic still in print.

Olmsted’s literary achievements also included a hitch at Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, where he published Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno and Henry David Thoreau’s Cape Cod. Later he and a friend founded The Nation, still extant and the country’s longest running weekly magazine. It was between these two experiences that Olmsted managed to land his biggest job—as superintendent of New York City’s yet-to-be-constructed Central Park.

The Administrator

The park that Olmsted built in mid-Manhattan is possibly the world’s most widely admired municipal open space. Through its many elegant arches and down its winding paths each year stroll millions of appreciative visitors from near and far, few even remotely aware of the park’s shabby origin or of its evolution out of chaos into a place of uncommon beauty.

Hired as superintendent in 1857, thanks largely to recommendations from such literary friends as Washington Irving and William Cullen Bryant, Olmsted found the 770-acre site “a very nasty place” speckled with squatters’ huts and swamps “steeped in the overflow and musk of pigsties, slaughter houses and bone-boiling works.” He attacked this squalor with an army of immigrant laborers that would soon number more than 3,000. Over the years, Olmsted’s...
During a stint managing California gold mines, Olmsted became enthralled with Yosemite Valley and its “placid pools which reflect the wondrous heights.” Advocating for its protection, he planted the seeds for the National Park System.
brigade would shuffle ten million cartloads of rock and dirt in or out of the park and plant an estimated four million to five million trees and shrubs, all in fulfillment of an elaborate design known as Greensward.

A cooperative effort by the superintendent and his new partner, the English-born architect Calvert Vaux, the Greensward plan had one great purpose, and that, as Olmsted saw it, was "to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God's handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month or two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances."

The Civil War interrupted Olmsted's work at Central Park. In lieu of military service, he accepted a post as general secretary of a volunteer relief force, the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which would care for the sick and wounded of the Union Army and otherwise function as a kind of precursor to the American Red Cross.

During the Army's peninsular campaign in Tide-water Virginia, Olmsted commanded a fleet of raftsag steamboats that served as floating hospitals, picking up wounded soldiers and freighting them out of harm's way.

But it was a constant bloodless conflict with the Sanitary Commission's board that wore him out. He resigned as another administrative challenge lured him to California. (Olmsted later resumed his involvement with the Manhattan park. It would run in an on-again, off-again fashion for more than a decade. Predatory politicians meddled with his work, but in the long run, the Olmsted-Vaux design prevailed. Despite a number of intrusions, the park today still reflects their vision.)

The Planner

Late in 1863 Olmsted accepted an offer to become manager of a congeries of gold mines in California. Spread across 70 square miles in the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada, the enterprise went through some hard times, and its new owners hoped this seasoned administrator—however inexperienced in mining matters—might stanch their losses.

This was a prickly venue for an Easterner who liked his landscapes green and glistening. A long drought had savaged the California countryside. The scrub-covered hills sat powdered with brown dust. From his headquarters at Bear Valley, Olmsted could look northeast toward more verdant elevations. And soon he'd be riding that way himself, first to a grove of giant sequoias—"the grandest tall trees you ever saw"—and finally into a lush valley bracketed by towering cliffs. Curiosity had introduced Olmsted to Yosemite.

He was not the first landscape aesthete to discover the glories of that magical place. Carleton Watkins, the stereoscopic photographer, had already set up his tripod in Yosemite Valley, and Albert Bierstadt, with palette, was not far behind. Unbeknownst to Olmsted at the time of his own first visit, the works of Bierstadt and Watkins had recently inspired Congress to enact a measure transferring the valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove to the state of California, to hold in trust for the entire nation as a place "for public use, resort and recreation." President Abraham Lincoln signed the act in June 1864. Three months later the governor of California appointed Olmsted chairman of the Yosemite Commission, impaneled to draft a management plan for the country's first de facto national park.

(In 1872 Yellowstone became the first official national park; Yosemite was not designated a full-fledged national park until 1890.)

In his report, drafted for the California legislature, Olmsted praised Yosemite not so much for the sharp relief of its cliffs and waterfalls as for the way the "wondrous heights" were "banked and fringed and draped and shadowed by the tender foliage of noble trees." He admired the Merced River "rippling over a pebbly bottom" and much preferred the meadows where wreathed in a "light, transparent haze."

"The first point to be kept in mind then," Olmsted insisted, "is the preservation and
AN URBAN ISLAND
Jackson Park • Chicago, Illinois

maintenance... of the natural scenery.” Yet for all its graceful logic, the document never reached the legislature. Calvert Vaux had persuaded Olmsted to return to New York to help design a new park in Brooklyn, and, in his absence, three of the Yosemite commissioners scuttled his plan.

The Artist
In later years, even after his talented hand had touched the landscapes of a score of major projects, Frederick Law Olmsted confessed that he was prouder of Brooklyn’s Prospect Park “than of anything.” He had good reason to be, for most assessors of his and Vaux’s collaborative designs tend to rank this place as the partners’ most beguiling work. Moreover, the park’s very name had the ring of promise and hope about it. Here, after so many distractions, was the “hinge,” one biographer called it—on which Olmsted could swing back to the career that would challenge him for the rest of his life.

In designing Prospect Park, the organizing principle was simple enough: Provide the visitor with “a sense of enlarged freedom” by restricting the intrusion of architectural distractions. Parkways would radiate into other parts of Brooklyn, inviting access, but once inside the park, the visitor would find its borders moundied up and densely planted to shut out the city beyond. Grass, woods, and water were to define the park’s interior, one element leading onto the next: First, the Long Meadow, an undulant pasture (and long by a mile), “its turf lost in a maze of the shadows of scattered trees”; then a forest skirted by a brook cascading through a leafy ravine; and finally a 60-acre lake built on the outwash plain of an ancient glacier.

Olmsted was ambivalent about embracing the presumptive role of artist. “I don’t feel strong on the art side,” he informed Vaux before tackling the Brooklyn collaboration. But Olmsted was only kidding himself, for he had already described Central Park as his canvas. “My picture is all alive,” he boasted. “Its very essence is life, human & vegetable.”

The Park Maker
It was surely fortuitous that the man who introduced the practice of landscape architecture to America should come along at a time when its aging cities discovered they needed parks to let in some fresh air. Olmsted helped frame that discovery against the postwar emergence of a frontier more perilous and barbaric than that of the Wild West. The new frontier was eastern and defined by the crowding, the stagnation, the industrial morbidity of urban America in the latter half of the 19th century. In tandem with Vaux, or without him after dissolving the partnership in 1872, Olmsted increasingly found his talent for designing parks much in demand. Buffalo was one of the first cities to seek his advice. Before long he was busy launching three of his most notable projects, each one eventually completed basically as he designed it—a park system for Boston, a mountain park for Montreal, and a parklike design for the grounds of the U.S. Capitol in Washington. For the Capitol he prescribed curvilinear walks among specimen trees and a new marble terrace flanked by matching grand staircases. In Montreal he left Mount Royal’s features pretty much as the glaciers had fixed them. “It would be wasteful,” he declared, “to try to make anything else than a mountain of it.” And for Boston he created an Emerald Necklace that would reach, via connecting parkways, from the Common and Public Garden at the foot of the State House all the way to Franklin Park.

In subsequent years Olmsted parks or park systems would be in the works in Bridgeport, Connecticut; Rochester, New York; Wilmington, Delaware; Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee. Three of his most charming parks would be opening in Louisville, each named to honor a tribe—Cherokee, Shawnee, and Iroquois—that once had shared the dark and bloody hunting grounds of Old Kentucky.

The Architect in Chief
The Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site is located at 99 Warren Street, Brookline, Massachusetts, in an 1810 wood-frame farmhouse handsomely perched on a two-acre lot. The house and an office wing contain the Olmsted Archives, a collection of hundreds of thousands of plans, drawings, planting lists, lithographs, and photographic prints that document the creative energy of this self-taught man and his professional heirs over the
Olmsted wanted his parks to change with the seasons while still drawing the eye to visual delights: a curving lake in Montreal, a rustic gazebo in Brooklyn, a mighty oak or broad parkway in Buffalo. He was convinced that natural beauty could improve human nature.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS
Land, water, trees became “successive incidents of a sustained landscape poem.”
The archival abundance here can overwhelm you, unless you have already dropped by the Library of Congress, where the architect's paper legacy occupies shelf space the linear equivalent of a football field.

Olmsted had moved from New York to Boston's most distinguished suburb in 1881 and later purchased the farmhouse he called Fairview. It served as both office for his busy firm and home base for his extended family—wife Mary, their two children, and her own three from a previous marriage to John Hull Olmsted, Frederick's brother and closest friend who had died, age 32, while Frederick was starting to tackle the challenge of Central Park. Two of the children—John Charles and Frederick Law Jr.—would come of age as full partners in the firm and carry its work well into the 20th century.

By the 1880s Olmsted's accumulating ailments were beginning to take their toll. He suffered from chronic insomnia. A twice-injured leg had forced him to take up a cane. Periodic bouts of depression plagued him. At the same time, according to his most definitive biographer, Laura Wood Roper, he was carrying "a heavy burden of professional works, some of staggering complexity... There was a curious disparity between his passion for the contemplative enjoyment of scenery and his compulsion to work to his utmost limit."

Two works in particular challenged Olmsted in the final decade of his life—George Washington Vanderbilt's great estate, Biltmore, near Asheville, North Carolina, and a design for the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893.

For Olmsted, the grounds of the Columbian Exposition were familiar territory. With Vaux, some 20 years earlier, he had drafted a plan for a thousand-acre pleasing ground in Chicago—Jackson Park on the lakeshore, Washington Park on prairie land to the west, and, connecting them, a broad greenway called the Midway Plaisance. The Chicago fire of 1871 had delayed that scheme, but now Jackson Park, with its inner lagoon and lake views, and part of the Midway were up and running as the site of the fair.

Olmsted's vision for the fair was by far his most daring and exotic. To offset the overpowering, almost blinding, effect of the exposition's massive white buildings (newspapers referred to the fairgrounds as the "White City"), he insisted on dense displays of luxuriant foliage; 75 railroad flatcars were needed just to deliver his order for aquatic plants. And to give the lagoon eye-catching cachet, he called for a fleet of birchbark canoes with Native American paddlers, in deed-skins, darting among flotillas of Chinese sampans and "Esquimaux kajaks."

But his time was winding down. He was getting forgetful. He was obliged to leave the important work to others. He wrote to a friend that he feared he might be institutionalized in an asylum, and it wasn't long before he was.

Frederick Law Olmsted died at the McLean Hospital at two o'clock in the morning of August 28, 1903. He was 81.