

Frederick law olmsted
american landscape
architect history
essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

He is considered the father of American Landscape Architecture. He is to this day the most prolific park designer in history, his parks having a certain gravity about them that still draw thousands of people to them. He is the creator of historically significant landscapes that have changed the American landscape forever, such as Central Park in New York City, the country's oldest system of public parks and the oldest state park. His name is Frederick Law Olmsted. Frederick Law Olmsted set out on a steadfast journey early with one mission in mind. He aimed to change the face of the country and become a man of influence within society and American culture. Olmsted's career as America's first landscape architect did not start as you may think however. He dabbled as a farmer, his first hobby, followed by a career in publishing and journalism which eventually allowed him to gain insight into the mainstream of contemporary American life. His many misfires in his erratic beginnings and classic American background prepared him well to achieve his lofty goals and go on to become the most influential landscape architect of his time.

Frederick Law Olmsted was born on April 26th 1822 in the city of Hartford, a city in which his family had resided for over seven generations. His recollections of his childhood schooling were not ones he was particularly fond of. Instead, Olmsted chose to remember best what he did during school not what he had studied. Even as a child Olmsted had shown a propensity to being outdoors, keeping himself busy by exploring and learning about nature. He did however have plans to study at Yale, but these plans were derailed by deteriorated eyesight. Instead, Olmsted decided to study engineering and farming. (Congress) He stayed at home choosing to read

books that kept him up to date with the outside world. These books included Webster's first Dictionary and the thirteenth-volume of Encyclopedia Americana. (Roper) Olmstead eventually put his studies and practices to work on a small farm that he owned in Staten Island, New York. These experiences served as a great jumping off points for Olmstead's careers in both journalism and landscape architecture.

Olmsted's farm gave him time to cultivate his skills as a farmer in turn lead him to gain invaluable information about agriculture and horticulture, both necessary sciences for a successful career in landscape architecture. The New York Tribune described Olmsted's farm in an advertisement: " contains 125 acres, about 100 of which are high in state of cultivation, and the rest woodland ... the farm is well fenced, there are a large number of fruit trees on the premises, and two excellent gardens, with profusely bearing grape vines." (Roper) Olmsted named the farm, which he had acquired with the help and guidance of his father, Tosomock Farm. At Tosomock, Frederick Law Olmsted famously added a one and half story addition to the Dutch farmhouse which had been rumored to be over a century old and many other minor improvements to the corresponding barns. Olmsted commented that the landscape surrounding the house was very unsightly and bald and one of his first projects for the site was to upgrade the landscaping. The farm as a whole was used by Olmsted for many purposes including a tree nursery and pasture for livestock. Olmsted planted a diverse amount of plants and trees including large Cedar of Lebanon conifers and Osage Orange trees that were rare at the time. His experiments here on the farm led to a thirst for more

horticultural knowledge, one that would help his career as a landscape architect boom.

Soon into Frederick Law Olmsted's venture of Tosomock Farm, Olmsted's brother John and family friend Charley Brace asked Olmsted to join them on a walking tour of England. At first Olmsted was reluctant but eventually obliged to go in April of 1950 after realizing the trip would be one he could relish forever. In England he visited many parks and furthered his familiarity with the park advocacy of Andrew Jackson Downing. He remarked that he was very impressed by his visit to Birkenhead Park, designed just a few years earlier by Joseph Paxton near Liverpool. Birkenhead Park was designed and billed as the first park of its kind to be built for the enjoyment of the average citizen. Olmsted remarked in a book written later: "...art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty...large valleys were made verdant, extensive drives arranged-plantations, clumps, and avenues of trees formed, a large park laid out. And all magnificent pleasure ground is entirely, unreservedly, and forever, the people's own. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it ...as the British Queen." (Alexopoulos) The elements that appealed to Olmsted most in the English parks and gardens he visited were the use of bodies of water for aesthetic interest and beauty. He also enjoyed the extensive, sweeping lawns that were defined by groves of trees. Here in these groves, Olmsted picked up one of his signature features in his parks, the use of a specimen tree. A specimen tree is a tree that is singled out for its nobler qualities that the designer specifically wants to be noticed. Olmsted also noticed the "illusions of great distances created through the use of long vistas, middle-distance plantings." (Alexopoulos)

Another practice that Olmsted took notice to were the undulations in ground plane helping to form aesthetic interest as well as winding, bordering paths and drives, which gave the impression of great range. Olmsted went on to use all of these practices in his designs which are still widely used today, however he adapted the English versions to fit into the American landscape. After returning from England Olmsted published *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* in 1852, catching the eye of the founding editor of the *New York Times*, Henry J. Raymond who offered Olmsted the opportunity to write a report sparking a new career in journalism for Olmsted.

Raymond had commissioned Olmsted to travel to the deep south of the United States in search of stories to write for the *New York Times*. On December 11th 1852, Olmsted set forth “ on his classic tour of observation” as Olmsted called it. He started in Washington D. C. traveling to Richmond and Petersburg Virginia before turning east for the coast towards Norfolk and then south to Raleigh. He then took a detour to Charleston and from there went south to Savannah Georgia and eventually travelled west into Montgomery, Alabama and New Orleans, Louisiana. The first leg of this initial trip would become the basis for Olmsted’s first piece, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*. (White and Kramer) Olmsted has been credited with making it fascinating with witty descriptions of his conversations and experiences in a society which was on the verge of overwhelming change. Olmsted’s experiences served as a valuable asset in his quest to change the face of the country, except as Olmsted remarked “ the face of the country was about to change forever.” (Roper) His travels through many different

terrains and landscapes enabled him to gain a wide scope of the landscape outside the world he had known in the northeast. He learned about the different types of people that were residing in the mountains of Alabama, Tennessee and North Carolina and that the life style of the societies was different for each area of the United States. Olmsted used this knowledge not only to write as a journalist but he also used it later in his designs. He understood early as a designer that designing the landscape to cater to the society and people that inhabited it was very important to the success and popularity of the site. Olmsted had always said that he had used his career as a journalist to gain insight into people all over the country. But that was not the only reason he did so. He also claimed that his career in journalism introduced him to people that had a tremendous amount of power. In the arguably the greatest city in the world, New York, Olmsted had made connections with some of the most influential people in the country. Olmsted was making the correct decisions with impeccable timing eventually helping to springboard him into his remarkable career as a landscape architect.

Andrew Jackson Downing was among the first to realize the need for New York's Central Park. The influential landscape designer had the connections to make it happen. Enter Calvert Vaux, an English born architect who Downing had brought over from England. Downing, who was one of Olmsted's greatest mentors and friends, introduced the dynamic duo. Olmsted was soon named the Superintendent of Central Park and this would prove vital to Olmsted and Vaux successful design. Since Olmsted had not done any previous landscape design work, he was a relative unknown in the design competition. Vaux had specifically asked Olmsted to become his

partner in the design because he felt he could provide “ accurate observation in regard to the actual topography which was not clearly defined on the survey furnished for the competitors by the board.” (Roper) However Vaux would soon learn that he has stumbled upon a goldmine and that Olmsted could do much more than provide information about the grounds.

At first, Olmsted had hesitated to accept Vaux invitation. However he did accept and was at work on the plan by the middle of January 1858. By this time he had also improved his standing with two of the board members for the park and had even gotten a raise. The rules of the competition were simple. Each team was to complete the design fulfilling the requirements that the board had set out for them. The features that the park was to contain included entry locations, three playgrounds of ten acres each, a site for a concert hall, a site for an ornamental fountain, a design for two or three acre flower garden and a place that could be flooded in the winter for ice skating. (Roper) They worked tirelessly every night, because they had professional commitments during the day, until their presentation of the “ Greensward” plan on the final day of submission April 1st 1858. Olmsted and Vaux were announced as the winners on April 28th to the approval of the judges and public. The Times approved of the winning design writing: “ There can be little doubt that in its essential features the plan Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux embraces all the leading requisites of a great park ... adapted not only to the nature of the particular grounds in question, but to the prospective wants of our city also.” (Roper) The descriptive report that was submitted with the plan explained that Olmsted and Vaux had intended to create contrasting and varying passages of scenery, suggesting to the

mind and imagination that there was great range of rural conditions. (Roper) Its "one great purpose," Olmsted wrote, "is to supply to the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, in a specimen of God's handiwork." (Cox)

Olmsted and Vaux were appointed to carry out the plan of May 17th 1858 and Olmsted was entrusted with supervision of everything except for the duties of the designers which he consulted with Vaux. Olmsted was to employ and directing labor crews to build the park. He went on to hire over 2,500 men and by October he had accomplished more work than he had scheduled for. The plan that was to make Olmsted a figure of legend was completed in the summer of 1859. Olmsted had finally done it. He had married his two greatest hobbies and used every skill acquired along his journey to create arguably the world's greatest park. Olmsted used his farming and horticulture background with his experiences as a journalist to create a park that was aesthetically pleasing to the horticultural knowledgeable as well as pleasing to all who visited it for its rural expanses.

As a journalist he explored the agitating questions of the day with the candor and intelligence and in the space of a decade produced a body of work that was a revelation to the pre-civil war generation. Following his prolific career as a journalist was Olmsted's work on Central Park. On the Central Park project Olmsted turned his mind to the problems, already acute, of big-city living. His connections with the United States Sanitary Commission during the war then carried him into the area of the social sciences, the concerns of which dovetailed nicely with those of the work that was his passion for as long as he could remember at last his profession, landscape architecture. <https://assignbuster.com/frederick-law-olmsted-american-landscape-architect-history-essay/>

Furthermore his travels and ventures, any of which could have been a satisfactory life of work for the average citizen, was the preparation that this searching spirit needed. (Roper)

Olmsted enjoyed a prolific 40 year career as a landscape architect. During his time he was regarded as a pioneer, however after his death his name had been forget for almost a half century and many of his designs were left to ruins or turned into botched re-designs. He is credited with being the inventor of the rural park movement in the United States, a successful drive towards setting aside unusual scenic beauty for public enjoyment. With Vaux he designed parks, parkways and developments, the grounds outside public buildings, institutions and private estates all over the country. Under the impact of Olmsted's thought and practice, landscape design shifted its sights from decorative to social aims. Land was beginning to be arranged not only for aesthetic beauty but also for the functionality of it. The landscape began to serve the health, comfort, convenience and good cheer of everyone who used it. In an age where urbanization was taking over America, Olmsted's movement towards humanizing the physical environment of cities and to secure precious regions of landscape for functional use and enjoyment of everyone was somewhat of a heroic undertaking. (Roper) Olmsted's lifelong concern was for the character of his country and his countrymen, he preserved as much of that character as he could by his public parks which preserved the integrity of America's past in both landscape and society. Garden and Forest wrote of Olmsted at the height of his contemporary fame, " millions of people now unborn will find rest and refreshment in the contemplation of smiling landscapes which he has made, and will enjoy the

shade of trees which he has planted. No American has been more useful in his time or has made a more valuable and lasting contribution to civilization in this country." (Roper)