

EXPERIENCE OLMSTED'S History in Passaic County



Portrait of a young Frederick Law Olmsted., circa 1860.
Courtesy of Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park

Frederick Law Olmsted

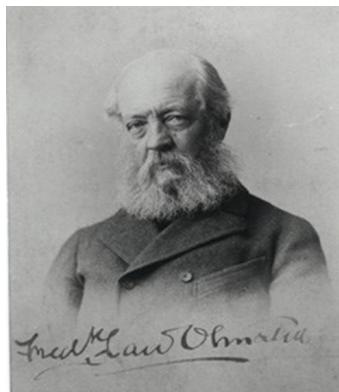
Frederick Law Olmsted, known as a co-designer of Central Park, was born on April 26, 1822 in Hartford, Connecticut. He was one of the first American landscape architects whose vision, sustained by his sons, inspired the Passaic County Parks System.

In his youth, Olmsted studied the works of famous European and American theorists who focused on using the features of landscapes to help the public engage with nature in a way that would benefit their physical and mental health. Influenced by John Ruskin and Andrew Jackson Downing, Olmsted created his own point of view in landscape design by making the democratic values of the United States accessible through the use of public parks. The lectures he attended in science, agriculture, and engineering at Yale University between 1842 and 1847, encouraged him to seek out more fulfilling work. As a result, he lived in England for two years to study pastoral farmlands and ended up finding inspiration at Merseyside's Birkenhead Park, the first public funded civil park in the world. Designed by Joseph Paxton, Frederick Law Olmsted observed how landscape design intended for public use was used by politicians to restrict social movement and playful collaboration between all residents.

In England Olmsted found himself in the company of Henry Raymond, co-founder of the New York Times. He used the opportunity to request to become a foreign correspondent covering the American South. From 1852 to 1855 he reported on the economic impact of slavery on the region. Later published as a book titled, *The Cotton Kingdom* (1861), the coverage is identified as an accurate portrayal of slavery and life in the South prior to the Civil War. Dr. Austin Allen, associate professor of landscape architecture emeritus at the Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture at Louisiana State University summarizes:

"Olmsted became more aware of the way African and African American slaves were shaping the American landscape. Slaves had an 'untold and impactful influence' on Olmsted's early conception of American landscape architecture."¹

Olmsted's experience in England and the American South merged with his newfound support of the abolition movement and gave meaning to his dream to "democratize parks." He envisioned Americans in segregated and industrialized cities using a public park as a way to interact outside of the expectations of government and society. He wanted everyone to use the space as they saw fit.



Carte-de-visite of Olmsted, 1893.
Courtesy of Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park

¹Roxanne Blackwell, Jared Green, and Lisa Jennings, "A Vision for Truly Inclusive Public Spaces Rooted in Olmsted's Core Values," Olmsted 200 (National Olmsted Parks Association , April 26, 2021), <https://olmsted200.org/a-vision-for-truly-inclusive-public-spaces-rooted-in-olmsteds-core-values/>.

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In 1857 Olmsted transitioned from the field of journalism and was named superintendent of New York City's planned Central Park. The Board of Commissioners were not satisfied with the original park plan and set up a contest to invite fresh perspectives of the designated space. Olmsted was approached by Andrew Jackson Downing's protégé, Calvert Vaux, to create "Greensward." Their design that had water features, meandering greenways, vast fields and hid the cross-town traffic from visitors, was selected.

It would take Vaux until 1865 to convince Olmsted to return to the field of landscape architecture. Together under the firm of Olmsted, Vaux & Co, they went to design Prospect Park in 1866; the parks and parkway in Buffalo, the grand necklace of parks in Milwaukee, and the Niagara Reservation at Niagara Falls. In 1872 the pair dissolved their partnership. While Olmsted went on to become the leading landscape architect in the United States, his collaboration with Vaux had a lasting impact on the way all residential areas were developed.



Frederick Law Olmsted (at left) and Calvert Vaux (second from right) with others responsible for building Central Park, 1862.
Courtesy of The New York Public Library.



FL Olmsted, Sr. writing in the Hollow, Fairsted.
Courtesy of Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park

After 1886, Olmsted primarily focused on designing a vast system of parks and parkways for the cities of Boston and Brookline, Massachusetts, as well as working on a landscape rehabilitation project for Boston Harbor. In 1888, he was hired to design the grounds at Biltmore, the Asheville, North Carolina estate of George W. Vanderbilt, the grandson of railroad mogul Cornelius Vanderbilt. It was one of the final major works in the picturesque style by Olmsted. Olmsted was appointed to lead the landscape project for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair in the late 1880s. Olmsted retired in 1895 after recognizing signs of senility as he worked with clients. His firm was to his sons, John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. who renamed it the Olmsted Brothers.

Frederick Law Olmsted died under the care of the McLean Hospital on August 28, 1903 in Brookline, Massachusetts.