CIVIC ART
A Centennial History of the
U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

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An Enduring Design Legacy: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. in the Nation’s Capital

ARLEYN A. LEVEE

Among the remarkable assemblage of experts who have guided the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, landscape architect and planner Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. holds a unique position by virtue of the length and character of his service and the extent of his productive involvement in molding Washington, leaving an indelible artistic imprint upon the federal city. A youthful appointee in 1901 to the Senate Park Commission, the so-called McMillan Commission, he was a major contributor to this body’s creative process to interpret, recast, and supplement Peter Charles L’Enfant’s remarkable eighteenth-century conception for America’s capital into a visionary plan for the city’s renewal and future. To ensure vibrancy of the vision and artistic coherence in the city’s architectural reconfiguration, the long-discussed Commission of Fine Arts became a reality in 1910 with Olmsted as one of its first members. During his eight-year tenure, with his firsthand knowledge of the McMillan Plan’s design intent, he guided the implementation of its components while steadfastly guarding its aesthetic principles.

But the Commission of Fine Arts lacked authority to supplement the vision, to extend L’Enfant’s ideas into the active policies required to shape and service the growing metropolitan city of a twentieth-century world power. To accomplish this expanded role of comprehensive urban planning and parkland acquisition—without compromising the balanced grandeur and artistry of the McMillan vision—required the creation in 1926 of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCPPC). Again, Olmsted was instrumental in this process and among the first appointees, serving until 1932.

Beyond his duties for these three commissions, Olmsted sat on numerous Washington advisory councils with significant responsibility to study and develop features of the McMillan Plan. Together with his partners and associates in Olmsted Brothers, he was engaged in professional design projects throughout the metropolitan area, many of these relating back to the McMillan Commission or Commission of Fine Arts tasks; others stemmed from other associations; and still others independently commissioned but always considered according to the consummate aesthetic principles established by the McMillan Plan. For much of this work, Olmsted drew little salary, barely covering the firm’s overhead and contributing his services for the greater cause to ensure that Washington’s landscapes of monuments and parks were unified expressions of L’Enfant’s grand concept as envisioned by the McMillan Commission. America’s national capital was to be an exemplary model of a comprehensively planned city, balancing architectural grandeur and landscape artistry while serving the resident and visiting public alike.

When he began his appointment on the McMillan Commission, Olmsted, at age thirty, was more than twenty years younger than his colleagues. While maintaining an extensive, multifaceted design and consulting practice across the country over his wide-ranging career, Olmsted continued to remain deeply involved in Washington design for more than fifty years. His longevity, his abiding interest, and his generous commitment to public service ensured a continuity of thoughtful oversight either by him personally or by Olmsted Brothers’ partners to maintain, nurture, and adapt the aesthetic vision.

Background

At the turn of the twentieth century, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., known as “Rick” to his family and friends, was a relatively untested practitioner of the still-developing discipline of landscape architecture and of the even newer field of...
city planning. He brought to his challenging tasks multifaceted talents, an incisive intellect, and a well-studied comprehension of the landscape art, honed under the intense tutelage of his father, Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.; his older half-brother, John Charles Olmsted; and their partner, Charles Eliot. Each of these men had expanded the parameters of the emerging profession by their advocacy of skilled land-use planning, design aesthetics, and principles of scenic conservation and their commitment to public service.

Born on July 24, 1870, in New York, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., originally christened Henry Perkins Olmsted, was renamed by his father sometime around 1874 to ensure that this Olmsted name would continue to be "identified with the firm and the profession." As the fifth and youngest Olmsted child, he was raised in a household that was also the firm’s working office. He grew up surrounded by the product and passions of his father’s myriad intellectual endeavors and design commissions, which ranged across the country. By the time the family moved to Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1882, the home office had expanded beyond the kitchen table to include an atelier of hard-working associates implementing the senior Olmsted’s aesthetic perspective in shaping land and city form and learning from his sense of social mission. As his biographer, Laura Wood Roper, noted, “In Olmsted, the artistic and the social impulse are equally strong and indissolubly joined.” For the senior Olmsted, landscape design was not mere decoration on the land. Rather, he conceived it as a comprehensive and integral art form, in harmony with nature, with parts subordinate to the whole, fulfilling a distinct educative,civilizing purpose often directed toward fundamental psychological needs of city dwellers. This was the credo that Olmsted’s sons, protégés, and associates inherited, expanded, revised, and passed on.

Educated at both private and public schools and at Harvard College, class of 1894, the junior Olmsted spent the summers of his college years either working on the grounds of the emerging Chicago World’s Fair—for which his father was one of the chief planners—or in European travel with his father, exploring the design ideas expressed in major public and private landscapes. The World’s Fair collaborations, learning firsthand from the artists who would later become his Washington colleagues, Daniel H. Burnham, Charles F. McKim, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, were a highlight of his professional life. As he observed in notes for his twenty-fifth Harvard reunion report, this was a ‘rush job’ full of enthusiasm and intense sustained effort, in which I first encountered the stimulus and satisfaction of working, even though as an unimportant youngster, with some of the ablest architects and other artists. The most exhilarating and notable thing about that experience was the prevailing spirit, among these men of great individual creative ability and diverse points of view, of self-subordinating cooperation in joint pursuit of a common aim inspired by enthusiasm for an artistic ideal.

During the summer following his Harvard graduation, Olmsted worked as a recorder for the thirty-ninth parallel survey, learning to read the land as his older brother John had done earlier in 1869 and 1871. He then learned the hands-on process of construction and planting as an apprentice at Baltimore, the extensive George Vanderbilt estate in Asheville, North Carolina, with increasing responsibilities as his father’s health failed. He was officially added to the Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot payroll in December 1895. With the sudden death of Charles Eliot in 1897, the firm was reorganized as Olmsted Brothers in 1898 with John Charles and Rick as partners. Olmsted Jr. took over the planning role for the Metropolitan Park Commission, Eliot’s innovative regional system of parks, reservations, and parkways, which conserved for public use a network of unique landscape types linked by parkways and managed centrally without regard to municipal jurisdictions. During this early period, he also began designing the Baltimore subdivision of Roland Park, an enterprise that led to numerous related long-term commissions, including the Baltimore park system of stream-valley reservations and neighborhood playgrounds, which he worked on simultaneously with the early Washington projects.

Nineteenth-century Washington and the Transition to the New Century

Public design and planning projects in the nation’s capital have a significance of their own. From the outset, L’Enfant’s planning shaped a city intended for ceremonial as well as practical uses, clearly cognizant of its necessary symbolic character to represent the nation. By the late nineteenth century, particularly in Europe, urban progress was measured by planning efforts designed to beautify, to improve services for citizens, and to protect municipal resources. But in America’s capital, which was self-conscious about its role as exemplar for the country and the world, such efforts were invested with didactic implications. Beyond mere physical alterations, plans were considered in terms of appropriate values of a democratic society, standards of art and taste, political process, and economic justice, as well as social and racial equality.

Many of these ideas were of concern to Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. when in 1874 he began the most notable commission of his career, the design of a setting of suitable dignity and grandeur for the United States Capitol. In addition to considerable site challenges, it was the symbolic importance of this commission, this pinnacle opportunity to educate the
Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.’s plan for the grounds of the United States Capitol, 1874. Olmsted sought to balance formal elements appropriate for such a national monument with curvilinear paths and drives and artfully placed plant groupings to enhance its surroundings. His ingenious addition of a terrace for the western facade was intended to settle this very large edifice into its sloping terrain, providing a platform from which to view the dramatic sweep of L’Enfant’s intended Mall and the western vistas.

taste of the nation that intrigued Olmsted. He recognized that this would be a work of generations and would be among his most important contributions to American landscape architecture.

Presaging concerns that would be articulated two decades later, the senior Olmsted expressed his dismay about the condition of the national capital in a letter of January 22, 1874, to his sponsor, Senator Justin Morrill of Vermont. Although the building of Washington represented a considerable federal investment, it was, in his eyes, “a standing reproach against the system of government.” The L’Enfant Plan had envisioned the Mall as a harmoniously ordered composition, a grand axial sweep of space lined by significant institutions with a defining cross-axis at the president’s house. Instead, a “broken, confused and unsatisfactory” effect had been allowed to develop, with a bewildering array of buildings intruding upon one another. In short, he continued,

The capital of the Union manifests nothing so much as disunity. ... What is wanting is a federal bond. Had the buildings been ranged about a single field of landscape ... consistent and harmonious one with another, a much more sustained and consequently more impressive effect would have been produced. Great breadth in this field of landscape and largeness of scale in all its features ... would not be felt in the least as a disadvantage. 3

Rather, with no controlling motive, Olmsted thought each building in the disorderly assemblage seemed to have “its own little domain.” 3 Olmsted’s advice was to put the control of all federal grounds and buildings under one body, which would pursue a sustained plan to elevate the capital city to “the scale of art.” He further suggested at this early date that a committee of landscape architects, to include William Hammond Hall and H. W. S. Cleveland, should provide oversight over this planning. 3

Although such ideas about governance went unheeded in their day, Olmsted Sr.’s endeavors over two decades succeeded in surrounding the Capitol with a gracious landscape significant for its artistic merit.

It would take twenty-five years before distress at the architectural disunity of Washington’s public spaces ignited a productive response to reconsider L’Enfant’s design and plan for improvements with the appointment of the Senate Park Commission. It would take another nine years for the suggested advisory body of “seven well-qualified judges of the fine arts” to become a reality in 1910 with the creation by Congress of the Commission of Fine Arts and the presidential appointment of the first commissioners. 16 Yet another sixteen years would pass before the idea of a comprehensive planning authority with a metropolitan purview was validated with the creation by Congress of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission in 1926. 17 When these three events occurred, Olmsted’s son and namesake, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., was in the vanguard of leadership.

The McMillan Commission

Rick Olmsted entered the fray over the capital’s dignity with provocative observations that expanded upon his father’s earlier commentary. By 1900, the Mall’s clutter had worsened, leaving L’Enfant’s intended grand spatial and symbolic conception unrecognizable. In his seminal
speech to the American Institute of Architects in 1900, Olmsted stated with in-cise eloquence, “that the purpose of the Mall was, and ought to be, to em- phasize, support and extend the effect of the Capitol as the dominant feature of the city and the most important building in the whole United States.” As such, he con-tended, the Mall should contribute to “the effect of grandeur, power and dignified magnificence which should mark the seat of government of a great and intensely active people.” To recap-ture the greatness and unity of L’Enfant’s plan, to provide suitable settings for future federal buildings, and to avoid “caprice and confusion” would require lengthy and careful study. He con-cluded:

Here is a plan not hastily sketched, nor by a man of narrow views and little foresight. It is a plan with the authority of a century be-hind it, to which we can all demand undevi-ating adherence in the future.

He thus introduced the three tenets that would govern his aesthetic deci-sions during the following decades of his Washington work: First, thoroughly an-a lyze the site, its history, its features, and its intended uses; second, develop and adhere to a controlling artistic and hier-archical plan appropriate to locale and need; and third, strive for stylistic con-sistency. Olmsted’s tasks would vary greatly, from grand monument to urban square, from expansive greensward to wooded dell, from small park to local playground, and from parkway to neigh-borhood street, but each component would contribute to the overall effect of an American capital worthy of its her-itage and its international stature.

Although a plaster world of monu-mental facades, the classical artistry of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago—better known as the Chicago World’s Fair—nonetheless had set transformative standards for the na-tion. A cosmopolitan and harmonious city seemed to offer the promise of or-derly reform and moral uplift, a new “aesthetic language” for the nation. With the mounting dissatisfaction over the capital’s appearance and the im-pending centennial celebrations, Senator James McMillan, chair of the Com-mittee for the District of Columbia, tapped into the planning enthusiasm that had continued after the exposition. Through astute political maneuvering abetted by powerful professional groups such as the American Institute of Archi-tects, McMillan engineered a resolution to appoint “experts” ostensibly engaged to consult on improvement of Washing-ton’s park system. In fact, these experts had a larger objective—to develop a master plan to rehabilitate and adapt L’Enfant’s design. For these tasks, McMillan reassembled the original Chicago colleagues, Daniel H. Burnham, Charles McKim, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, with Rick Olmsted serving as the stand-in for his incapacitated father. Thus, McMillan and his able secretary, Charles Moore, set in motion that care-ful study Olmsted Jr. had referred to in his AIA speech, on a scale worthy of the powerful edict long-associated with Burnham, “to stir men’s blood.”

As in the planning process for the 1893 events, Burnham set the pace with what Olmsted called his “contagious enthusiasm” to subordinate all to an artis-tic ideal. The collaborations of this leg-endary 1901 commission reflected that spirit as it set forth its ambitious agenda for Washington’s future, proposing im-provements that would have consequent national implications. Although many pens were doubtless at work on the Sen-ate Park Commission Report, better known as the McMillan Report, its em-phasis on developing Washington’s landscape opportunities to recapture the intent of the monumental core and de-velop the scenic promise of the city’s outlying areas was typical of the plan-ning ideals that characterized Olmsted firm work. Likewise, the admonition to acquire land before ill-considered devel-opment destroyed its advantages was a recurring Olmsted mantra.

Evident in the greater part of the McMillan Commission Report are the substantial rec-ommendations to craft the parks, park-ways, and reservations throughout the growing city. Charles Moore observed that young Olmsted’s “shoe-prints marked every hill and valley” of the nearly three thousand acres already in federal control. Olmsted also explored and recommended the acquisition of the ninety acres of Analostan Island, the ex-ten sive malodorous marshes of the Ana-costia River, Mount Hamilton, and land for parkways and small neighborhood reservations. This ambitious list would give Washington an enviable system of varied open spaces for differing recre-ational uses designed to accommodate a growing population. It would take decades, however, to acquire park space in Washington approximating the McMillan intentions.

Achieving parkway linkages would prove most challenging, as buildings crowded into the intended areas, elevat-ing the cost of land takings and dimin-ishing the political will necessary to ac-quire land. The park-side drives along the Mall’s greensward (now known as Madison Drive, NW, and Jefferson Drive, SW); the Rock Creek and Po-tomac Parkway with its smaller spurs; the river-edge pleasure drive encircling Aerial view of the Mall, c. 1900, looking east from the Washington Monument toward the Capitol. In the right foreground are the formal gardens and greenhouses of the Department of Agriculture, a building razed in 1930; beyond that, in front of the Smithsonian Castle, are the tree plantations as sug-gested by Andrew Jackson Downing in 1850. In the left middle ground is the roof of the station for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad; roofs of the various U.S. Botanic Garden structures can be seen among the trees at the foot of Capitol Hill.

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Preliminary Plan for Public Recreation Grounds, East Potomac Park, prepared for the Division of Public Buildings and Grounds of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, by James G. Langdon, consulting landscape architect, March 1916. The plan transformed this wedge-shaped area of land, created from dredged material from the river, into a park with various recreational facilities, surrounded by a circuit drive.

East Potomac Park; and other broad and verdant routes were achieved, many with the Olmsted firm’s advice. Unfortunately, the innovative Fort Drive, a scenic circuit roadway that Olmsted proposed to link the then outlying Civil War forts and thus make their breezy hilltops publicly accessible and connected to established parks, was never completed, despite several valiant attempts to do so during the 1920s and 1930s. While the Capper-Cramton Act of 1930 gave a boost to major parkway development by providing land acquisition funding for the George Washington Memorial Parkway as well as for extensions for Rock Creek and Anacostia Parks, the Fort Drive proposal “never captured the imagination of Congress.”

The complexity of land acquisition in inner-city neighborhoods could not compete with the appeal of “grand approaches.” In the post–World War II era, a new generation of planners transferred acquisition efforts and funding to the creation of high-speed beltway loops at the suburban edge of the city.24

**The Washington Consultative Board**

In the transitional years between the submission of the *Senate Park Commission Report* and the establishment of the Commission of Fine Arts, the former commissioners and their proponents campaigned vigorously to protect the design ideals and generate support for execution of the plan. The so-called Washington Consultative Board—Burnham, Olmsted, McKim (until his 1909 death), and Bernard Green, the congressional librarian—served as unofficial guardians of the McMillan vision. Working without pay, they monitored ongoing projects around the monumental core, negotiating with the various agencies involved, such as the Army Corps of Engineers, to refine plans to ensure that structures and landscapes of appropriate character were located according to the plan’s intentions.25

One such example involved placement of the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial at the eastern end of the U.S. Botanic Garden, in the area intended by the McMillan Plan to become Union Square. The monument was originally designed by architect Edward Casey and sculptor Henry Shrady for a location on the Ellipse, where its orientation was to be one-sided. It took considerable courtly diplomacy in 1907 by McKim and Olmsted to convince Casey to redesign the base for four-sided access. Additionally, careful negotiations and Olmsted’s horticultural skill were required to quiet the ensuing hubbub over the necessary removal or relocation of existing Botanic Garden commemorative trees in order to accommodate the monument.26 The future of the Botanic...
facilities, such as parks with various recreational amenities from the river, into this wedge-shaped area of landscape. With his characteristic pragmatism, Olmsted reassured Burnham, reminding him that, 

Officially and legally, our position as an Advisory Board is helpless and that of the president in having appointed us borders upon the ridiculous, but if practically we can bring about the results we want, as we are now in a good way to do, I, for one, am willing to be laughed at all day long.15

During this period, Olmsted was also engaged in design and initial construction for other Washington projects.16 He consulted with the Army Office of Buildings and Grounds on improvements for East Potomac Park, a large area of reclaimed land without “striking natural features.” Olmsted worked with his associate James Langdon to shape this space into a central meadow interspersed with recreational facilities and bounded by a tree-lined circuit drive along the water to serve as a “place of contrast to city conditions.”17 In 1906, work commenced to commemorate Senator McMillan by creating a “beautiful, dignified and enjoyable” neighborhood park located around a sand filtration reservoir at North Capitol Street in Northwest Washington that he had sponsored.18

The Establishment of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Park and Planning Commission

Various attempts to intrude upon the Mall made it clear that an established commission with artistic oversight would be critical to maintain and implement the McMillan vision for Washington. By 1910, this goal was achieved with the creation of a permanent Commission of Fine Arts composed of “seven well-qualified judges of the fine arts” to advise upon the location and character of monuments, fountains, and buildings and their settings. For this new commission, the surviving members of the Senate Park Commission—Burnham, Olmsted, and Moore—were reassembled with five new appointees to fulfill its mandate of oversight.19 These pioneering members were tasked with both the evaluation of suitability and merit of various projects and the more complicated problem of developing standards and setting parameters for the Commission of Fine Art’s purview. During his eight-year tenure from 1910 to 1918 on the commission, Olmsted was its hardworking landscape expert; he also served for six of those years as vice chairman. He diligently reviewed sites throughout the District and beyond, conferred on street plantings, sketched alternative layouts for monuments, and wrote definitive reports on varied projects, always maintaining his comprehensive perspective as to the appropriateness of style, scale, and the setting of the project to its intended use—all considered within the overarching design scheme.20

Many of the important projects before the commission in this early decade concerned the development of the monumental core and its periphery. Of particular importance were the decisions made to complete the plans for the structure and setting of the Lincoln Memorial, which finalized commitment to the Mall’s westward extent. To relate the memorial’s landscape to its eastern neighbor, the Washington Monument, Olmsted worked with James Langdon and Clarence Howard, a young architect who would assist Olmsted on several other Washington projects, to shape a linear reflecting pool intended to be lined by allees of English elms.21 Unfortunately, as the United States was drawn into World War I, much of this area became the location for “tempo,” block-like and hastily constructed federal office buildings that would serve a multitude of supposedly temporary purposes, some of which persisted into the 1970s.

By 1920, little had been accomplished to retrieve this seminal space from its disunity. Still populated by tempos and various athletic facilities, the central panel continued to be an irregularly graded, weedy expanse filled with remnants of bygone designs. Parsimonious appropriations and haphazard federal-local direction hindered effective planning, let alone any implementation, eroding the McMillan-L’Enfant vision before its City Beautiful goals had been achieved. However, Olmsted’s “landscape emphasis” for the McMillan Plan, the “basic cloth into which the public buildings [of the monumental core] were woven,” continued to generate support. Olmsted, as a member of the Committee of 100, an arm of the American Planning and Civic Association, worked with other nationwide proponents to legitimize the planning process for Washington to keep alive the verdant and comprehensive vision. By 1926, these efforts coalesced into the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCPPC) with vested powers to prepare, develop, and maintain “a comprehensive, consistent and coordinated plan for the National Capital and its environs,” involving both federal and District agencies. As an original appointee to the NCPPC and a member until 1932, Rick Olmsted was able to continue the judicious oversight and fostering of McMillan Plan implementation that he had begun under the Commission of Fine Arts.22

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Rock Creek Park and the National Arboretum Debate

Beginning in 1912, the problem of the Anacostia mudflats came before the Commission of Fine Arts. Olmsted, appointed as a committee of one with power to resolve design issues, reviewed the reclamation proposals from the army engineers. His plan to shape a large lake for recreation involved treating the verges of filled land as naturally as possible, reflective of healthy tidal marshes rather than the straight stiff sea walls preferred by the army engineers. This issue of artistry, of appearing natural while hiding the necessary engineered constructions, would be a continual debate along most of Washington’s central public waterfront, one in which the Army Corps usually triumphed. Like other projects reviewed by Olmsted during his tenure on the Commission of Fine Arts, the Anacostia issue would resurface under many guises for Olmsted’s consideration over the following decades. The aspirations suggested by him in appendix E of the McMillan Report for “a national botanical collection,” possibly even an arboretum, combined with the unresolved status of the existing Botanic Garden located in what was to become Union Square, provided continuing challenges for the Olmsted firm well into the 1950s.

The arboretum idea spawned park planning controversies well beyond Anacostia, involving both East Potomac and Rock Creek Parks. The Olmsted firm’s involvement in Rock Creek Park began in 1890 when the senior Olmsted and John Charles began planning for a National Zoological Park to occupy a section of the valley; however, their work left unresolved whether the zoo was to be a place for scientific investigation or public recreation. In the 1901 report, the junior Olmsted had recognized that this picturesque valley, a linchpin in the park system planning, was in need of careful study to protect its intrinsic landscape values while permitting public use. At this time, the lower valley from the mouth of Rock Creek at the Potomac, almost as far as the zoo, was environmentally degraded, surrounded by industry and tenements. The Georgetown Citizens Association sought a “closed valley” solution, putting the creek in a culvert and filling the valley to create more surface land for a parkway to link the monumental core to areas to the north. Alternatively, the Washington Board of Trade proposed an “open valley” solution whereby the valley would be rehabilitated to enable construction of a scenic parkway along the creek amid seemingly natural conditions. Basings their decision on “economy, convenience and beauty,” the McMillan Commission put its support behind the open valley treatment rather than the dubious alternative of filling the valley. But Olmsted remained concerned over the challenges of accommodating a parkway, park use, and cross-valley access without harming the landscape’s unique character.

As a member of the newly created Commission of Fine Arts, Olmsted was asked to consider several legislative attempts to relocate the Botanic Garden into Rock Creek Park, responding first in 1911 to Senator Wetmore that it was "bad principle to acquire land nominally as part of a park project and subsequently divert it to other uses." However, the valley slopes were not favorable for greenhouses and other appurtenances required by a botanic garden. He maintained that a study was needed to consider a scientifically planned, well-managed national arboretum and

LEFT: Rock Creek Park, Diagrammatic Plan for Landscape Units, showing proposed traffic thoroughfares across the park and a system of park drives, December 1918.
Olmsted and Edward Clark Whiting (who was soon to become a firm partner) explored the park landscape in detail in 1917, mapping topographic, vegetative, historic, and other features. They assessed the impact of varying uses, evaluated needs for present and future accessibility, recommended land acquisitions, and considered methods to maintain the park. The vast acreage was divided into four major units, some with subtypes, scattered throughout the park. These were based upon the existing growth patterns: natural forest, open woodlands, wooded slopes, and open grassland, with management recommendations established for each. They looked at the differing locations of these units and their potential uses from the perspective of the park as a whole and against the city context, considering thoroughfare crossings and park roads. Their comprehensive report, a collaborative effort actually written by Whiting, recorded their recommendations, enhanced by plans, sketches, and photographs.

The Olmsted tenet was that the justification for any large park was the preservation of its unique qualities, in this case the “very, very precious” character and restfulness of the Rock Creek valley with its tributaries, its forested slopes and ravines, its rolling hills, and its occasional meadows. But these ideas were also pragmatic, that no matter how valuable this scenery might be, its true value remained in its enjoyment by large numbers of people, “poor and rich alike,” who were, after all, the park’s owners. What the Olmsted assessment provided was an analysis of various landscape types that could be made accessible, by what means, and for what type of use. It also identified areas of wilderness to be protected at all costs by limiting user amenities. Enabling public enjoyment of those characteristic picturesque passages of scenery, representative of the genius loci of an individual landscape unit, was an intended goal. But preservation of the overall unity and harmony that nature had provided in the valley was foremost. Regulation and policing procedures were critical to maintain the balance of landscape protection and appropriate access, in addition to park staff knowledgeable about the essential qualities desired. Whiting concluded his report with a plea for appropriations to meet the increasing needs of the patrons while insuring protection of park values, but he counseled “the guiding policy should be distinctly one of restraint.”

While this report offered some protection for Rock Creek Park against future inappropriate incursions, the fate of a national arboretum was still unresolved. In 1901, Olmsted had considered East Potomac Park as a possible arboretum location, but he later decided this was too small and poorly adapted for either arboreal or botanical collections. From 1918 forward, the Commission of Fine Arts championed the Mount Hamilton site, located northeast of Union Station, for an arboretum that would fulfill a component of the McMillan Plan’s park mission. But Congress had to be motivated to purchase the necessary lands and provide for “the proper administrative organization of the national botanic garden.”

In support of this quest, Olmsted and colleagues from the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) actively campaigned throughout the 1920s to acquire this wooded and hilly site with its...
The process began with an engineering study for the Washington Monument’s base. To implement McKim’s elaborate garden scheme would require extensive regrading, which the engineers concluded would be most precarious since the monument did not rest on bedrock. Olmsted and architect William A. Delano were commissioned to develop contrasting schemes, informal and formal respectively, for the monument’s surroundings, both of which were to involve only minimal surface remodeling. Included in this challenge was the establishment of Mall traffic routes, the handling of the crossing streets, and the provision of parking areas. In the view of the Commission of Fine Arts and others, automobile traffic was usurping the streets and despoiling the dignity, grandeur, and beauty of Washington’s intended artistry.

In conjunction with his partner, Henry Hubbard, Olmsted developed a simple design based on several aesthetic principles. Instead of its existing insignificant “fringe” of trees, the monument should be flanked by masses of foliage out of which it should rise as the dominant feature at the end of the formal allée looking west and at the end of the reflecting pools looking east. Cars should be kept distant from the monument, with circuit roads and paths designed and planted to enframe various vistas. Reluctant to choose such a radical revision of the original Monument Garden plan, the commission tabled this decision, ostensibly until the Mall roads were completed and the matter could be restudied.

Model and plan of suggested treatment for the grounds of the Washington Monument designed by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and his business partner Henry V. Hubbard, c. 1932. The proposal used tree groupings to enhance vistas of the monument while keeping traffic at a distance from the monument base. Parking areas were proposed to the north and south, keeping the main east-west axis clear.

potential connection to the Anacostia shore for aquatic collections. They finally achieved success by 1930 when funds were appropriated for the land acquisition under the Department of Agriculture. More than purely a place to maintain a great collection of living plants, Olmsted stressed that the arboretum should afford recreation and the enjoyment of landscape beauty. Not to compete with the scientific objective, such beauty was as a constant guide … the peculiar beauty of certain ecological groupings of plants arising, in the absence of human interference, from the orderly operation of biological forces interacting with conditions of the environment.

As in the Rock Creek Park study, the arboretum should be planned in advance as landscape units, each distinctive for its artistic character as much as for its horticultural interest. Echoing his father’s words of a half-century earlier on the need for a controlling motive in the capital’s landscape, the junior Olmsted noted, “The only safety lies in a most painstaking adherence to the principle of a definite and enduring dominance of a single purpose … all other purposes being there subordinated.”

The Washington Monument Grounds

Lobbying efforts for the George Washington bicentennial celebration to be held in 1932 succeeded in obtaining legislative authorization to realize some of the Mall plans. But without substantial funding, this again would be a piecemeal operation. Anticipating an influx of visitors, members of the Commission of Fine Arts petitioned the congressional Bicentennial Committee for consideration of several items to ensure that the artistic intent of the founders was achieved.
The process began with an engineering study for the Washington Monument’s base. To implement McKim’s elaborate garden scheme would require extensive regrading, which the engineers concluded would be most precarious since the monument did not rest on bedrock. Olmsted and architect William A. Delano were commissioned to develop contrasting schemes, informal and formal respectively, for the monument’s surroundings, both of which were to involve only minimal surface remodeling. Included in this challenge was the establishment of Mall traffic routes, the handling of the crossing streets, and the provision of parking areas. In the view of the Commission of Fine Arts and others, automobile traffic was usurping the streets and despoiling the dignity, grandeur, and beauty of Washington’s intended artistry.

In conjunction with his partner, Henry Hubbard, Olmsted developed a simple design based on several aesthetic principles. Instead of its existing insignificant “fringe” of trees, the monument should be flanked by masses of foliage out of which it should rise as the dominant feature at the end of the formal allée looking west and at the end of the reflecting pools looking east. Cars should be kept distant from the monument, with circuit roads and paths designed and planted to enframe various vistas. Reluctant to choose such a radical revision of the original Monument Garden plan, the commission tabled this decision, ostensibly until the Mall roads were completed and the matter could be restudied.

Aerial view of the monumental core looking west, showing the cluttered conditions prior to 1932. In the foreground are the various structures and irregular paths of the Botanic Garden, with the Grant Memorial statue at its eastern edge. In the middle ground are “tempo” still in evidence in this view and on the north side of the Reflecting Pool by the Lincoln Memorial. Some of the earlier tree plantings are visible in front of the Smithsonian Castle. The new Department of Agriculture building is set further back, respecting the lines of the Mall, but elements of the former gardens remain in front.
There was still debate in late 1932 as to the number of roads that should line the Mall and how to plant them so as to frame the central greensward. Some voices from various Washington planning agencies continued to call for a mixed planting to include tulip trees and red oaks. Olmsted labeled this idea of a varied tree palette “unfortunate” and emphasized that the distinctive essence of the 1901 scheme was the formality of its elm colonnade, with its high canopy and Gothic arch effect providing diagonal and transverse glimpses within and along the Mall.⁴⁶

**Union Square**

In 1933, an infusion of money from the Public Works Administration to continue Mall construction involved Olmsted in the design for Union Square, beneath the Capitol’s walls at the eastern terminus of the Mall. As in the Monument Grounds project, he tangled with some Commission of Fine Arts members committed to strict adherence to the McMillan Plan images rather than to its intent. As conceived by the McMillan Commission’s watercolor illustration, this area was to consist of an open rectangular plaza spatially articulated by formal beds of lawn punctuated by fountains, pools, or statuary, which axially terminated the panels of the Mall. To create this space, the curving west wall of the Capitol Grounds would have to be straightened. The decreased area of the Capitol’s western lawn was to be decorated with a central cascading water feature that terminated in a grand oval pool, with all of this supported by a series of retaining walls. All that remained of the senior Olmsted’s plan were tree-lined diagonal paths that he intended to lead to the diagonals of Maryland and Pennsylvania Avenues. In the McMillan scheme, these strong diagonal lines would be interrupted by the plaza.⁴⁷

By 1933, instead of this formal plan, Union Square existed as a rather dysfunctional trapezoidal space. The Grant Memorial, which had been located along the eastern end by McKim and Olmsted in 1907, reigned over a space now containing the Meade Memorial and an eclectic collection of noble trees and fountains along meandering paths.⁴⁸ Along the southern edge, greenhouses—remnants of the Botanic Garden—still dominated. The Garfield and Peace Monuments terminated the Maryland and Pennsylvania Avenue diagonals respectively.

Working with his associate Clarence Howard, Olmsted saw his prime task as bringing this space into proper relationship with the Capitol’s west terrace and the broad reach of the Mall while reconciling serious design inconsistencies. In his April 1934 report to the commission, he noted Union Square’s importance was as one unit “of a much larger whole, extending from the Capitol to the Washington Monument and on to the Lincoln Memorial.” The northern and southern boundaries of the square, as defined by L’Enfant’s strong diagonal avenues, had been extended into the Capitol landscape by the senior Olmsted’s tree-embowered diagonal paths terminating at the western terrace.⁴⁹

Olmsted’s first step was to convince the Commission of Fine Arts that the 1901 plan, which radically shortened the Capitol’s western lawn by one hundred feet in order to insert the cascade and pool, was a profound mistake. Earlier, his father had rejected Senator Morrill’s desire for such a cascade, noting the importance of the simple turf panel as foreground to the Capitol’s grand architecture. Observing that this area of the 1901 plan had been less studied by the commission “and was embodied in the report under pressure of time as a tentative solution in spite of expressed doubts… as to some of its features,” Olmsted reminded the Commission of Fine Arts that the plan’s illustrations were never intended to be definitive in terms of their details. Reinforcing his argument that precedent did not support truncating the Capitol Grounds by a straight line, he provided seven historical plans, beginning with that of L’Enfant, illustrating that throughout all the architectural renovations of the Capitol, the western boundary had continuously been retained as a curved line.⁵⁰

In Olmsted’s view, recognizing the integrity of Union Square as a whole space, defined by strong diagonal avenues and related to the vista beyond, was critical. The square’s function, he said, should be to “prepare the eye for the transition from the uniform width of the vista on the Mall to the treatment on the Capitol Grounds,” where the converging lines continued as spatial definers. Alignments were complicated due to deviations from true axial projections. In 1901 adjustments had been made to align the Mall’s axis from the Capitol to the off-center Washington Monument. The Olmsted team noted that the Grant Monument had been placed on a line drawn from the center of the Capitol’s west facade rather than from the dome, an off-center divergence of an additional four feet. These discrepancies had to be subtly adjusted within the Union Square design, using many of the relocated mature Botanic Garden trees as screening.⁵¹

Again, Olmsted’s tampering with the sacred lines of the 1901 plan unleashed a flurry of indignation from commission members, particularly from architect Egerton Swartwout. He insisted on the original McMillan Plan treatment of the Capitol Grounds and the intended plaza, vociferously objecting to Olmsted’s informal planting scheme and to the general lack of monumentality and architectural perspective. Olmsted, in turn, reiterated that the 1901 plan never contended with the continuity of the Mall, nor with the successful termination of...
axial plaza. By fountains, pools, or statuary, which remained of the senior Olmsted's plan series of retaining walls. All that related by formal beds of lawn punctuated oval pool, with all of this supported by a water feature that terminated in a grand terminus of the McMillan scheme, these strong diagonal avenues, had the McMillan Plan images rather than been extended into the Capitol land.

Along the southern edge, greenhouses—along the Mall. By 1933, instead of this formal plan, there was still debate in late 1932 as to some of its features, Olmsted reiterated that the 1901 plan never constituted with the continuity of the Mall, extending from the Capitol to the Washington Monument and on to the Lincoln Memorial, which had been located along the Mall. October 1935.

Working with his associate Clarence L'Enfant, Olmsted had been less studied by the compostion Grounds project, he tangled with the McMillan Commission’s watercolor illustration, this area was to consist of an open rectangular plaza spatially articulated by the senior Olmsted’s tree-emphasis that the distin.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. in the Nation’s Capital.

ABOVE: Handwritten notations on a photograph of the Senate Park Commission rendering for Union Square indicate the strong diagonal lines to be retained and the various sculptural elements to be integrated.

LEFT: General Plan for Union Square, October 1935.
the diagonal avenues that ended in the plaza. Moreover, he maintained, in Washington’s climate such an open plaza would be “objectionable.”

Months spent negotiating redesigns finally resulted in agreement in March 1935 among all the commissions involved. At this time, however, Rick Olmsted was recuperating from a near-fatal burst appendix, and other partners of Olmsted Brothers supervised the work. Construction, completed by 1937, involved a massive tree-moving operation in which forty-one mature specimens were transplanted and 250 removed. The Olmsted design remained relatively intact until the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill redesign and installation of the reflecting pool about 1973, with its unequal sides to compensate for the geometric inconsistencies.

The White House Grounds

Olmsted had reviewed the White House grounds in 1918, finding them “distinctly disappointing,” not up to the standards of tasteful surrounds for great mansions, public and private. Concerned that this was a dwelling for a succession of families, he thought that the grounds nonetheless ought to be “in the front rank, both as expressing the honor due to the President of the United States, and as an educative example to less distinguished citizens.” Specifically, the grounds lacked “the intimate and essentially domestic kinds of beauty and usefulness that are as much to be desired for a President’s family as for any other.”

Bringing this issue before the commission in 1934, Charles Moore noted that both Mrs. Coolidge and Mrs. Hoover had shown little interest in Olmsted’s 1928 report. Since architectural renovations were planned for the building, President and Mrs. Roosevelt had consulted with Olmsted and Charles Moore, then the chair of the Commission of Fine Arts, to assess the landscape problems. Knowing that President Roosevelt had prior experience directing work on the grounds of his family estate at Hyde Park, New York, they believed...
he would be a knowledgeable client with a strong interest in history.\footnote{56} Because of this, Olmsted hired Morley Williams, a professor of landscape architecture at Harvard University who was working at this time on the Mount Vernon grounds, to collaborate with him. Williams was to study “the long and somewhat obscure history of developments and changes in the White House Grounds—a thing much needed as a sound basis for guiding any changes and improvements to be made in the future.”\footnote{57}

The final report, including Williams’s richly illustrated historical study of the White House grounds, was presented to the commission in October 1935. Olmsted and Williams had recommended returning an appropriate historic character to the landscape in their preliminary White House report. They sought to increase the sense of privacy, to ameliorate traffic conflicts along the roads and paths, and to correct accessibility issues at the entrances. Within the grounds, Olmsted made several suggestions to improve tree and shrub compositions and to rehabilitate the formal gardens with dignified simplicity.\footnote{58}

Implementation followed a difficult course, due to cost, economic conditions resulting from the Great Depression, and jurisdictional and professional conflicts with the National Park Service. Olmsted, still recuperating from his illness, was aided on this project by Henry Hubbard, his Olmsted Brothers partner and a member of the NCPPC, which had advisory jurisdiction over the White House grounds. Hubbard noted that the firm had spent “a great deal of loving care in the investigation of this particular problem, and it certainly would be a pity and a waste if the carefully matured conception which has crystallized in Mr. Olmsted’s mind were not given a fair chance of realization.”\footnote{59}

Some recommendations were implemented between 1935 and 1937. These involved renovation of the east and west gardens, providing some seclusion for the residents without altering the broader visual compositions, strengthening the southern axial views, and replacing an existing pool with a simple fountain moved further south to better relate to the open areas.\footnote{60}

**The Thomas Jefferson Memorial**

Returning to Washington work in July 1935, Olmsted was drawn into a controversy concerning the Thomas Jefferson Memorial when he agreed to voluntarily review preliminary studies for National Park Service Director Arno Cammerer. Charles Moore had set lofty goals for this monument to be “one of the most distinguished structures in the National Capitol … to contribute to the perfection of the Washington plan.”\footnote{61} Olmsted, however, had already raised concerns about the appropriateness of a grandly scaled monument in this location during his work on the Theodore Roosevelt memorial in 1922. At the time, his evaluation of the proposal led him to state that the McMillan Commission had not adequately studied the intent of the original L’Enfant Plan for this area. In looking at the view from the Tidal Basin north, Olmsted had been struck by the domestic scale of the White House as a terminus in comparison to the grandeur of the other focal points. Olmsted concluded that this southern focus should be treated less grandly than originally conceived.\footnote{62} Ultimately, the Roosevelt memorial was not built at this location, but Olmsted’s concern regarding appropriate scale for treatment along the White House axis remained (see essays by Pamela Scott and Carroll William Westfall). Echoing these earlier concerns, Olmsted cautioned Cammerer that any monument placed on this axis had to visually relate to the already developed compositions along the east-west axis from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol and the north–south axis from the White House to the Washington Monument.\footnote{63}

John Russell Pope’s plans for a grandiose monument to Thomas Jefferson on an artificial island to be constructed in the Tidal Basin Jefferson aroused Olmsted’s particular consternation. “From a professional standpoint and as the surviving member of the Commission of 1901, I am worried most directly about the probable esthetic outcome,” he stated, adding that he did not want to see the government committed to site construction operations costing millions of dollars.\footnote{64} After Pope’s death in August 1937 and the relocation of the memorial site to a peninsula on the shore of the Basin, Henry Hubbard represented the Olmsted position in ensuing discussions with the successor architects, Eggers & Higgins.\footnote{65} In the controversy surrounding the aesthetic relevance of the Pantheon form and its shoreline setting, Hubbard often found himself in debate with the architects’ historical advisor, his brother-in-law Fiske Kimball.\footnote{66} From the fall of 1938, Olmsted Brothers was employed by the architects, and later by the Park Service, to provide landscape planning and implementation oversight to make the memorial’s setting an effective contribution to the general plan of Washington. Complicated site conditions, conflicting transportation routes, overlapping controlling agencies, and public outrages concerning the loss of revered cherry trees frustrated attempts to produce an artistic effect. Devising an aesthetic and economical landscape scheme for such a controversial building required reconciling the opposing positions of the NCPC, the Commission of Fine Arts, and the highway engineers from the National Capital Parks. Hubbard later commented that his role had been that of diplomat more than designer.\footnote{67}

Rick Olmsted returned to active participation in the memorial planning controversy in the spring of 1941. Because
Olmsted Brothers’ plan, in collaboration with architects Eggers & Higgins, showing the “location and approximate dominant elevations of the structure together with the suggested relocation of roads” for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, October 1938. Additional notes on this plan indicate it is intended to show “tree masses and relations of important open spaces and views to and from the memorial.”

Gilmore Clarke, chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts, had rejected the planting plan as “out of scale with the Memorial, and in detail, much too fussy,” Olmsted agreed to reconsider the planting palette. However, agreeing with Hubbard, he still questioned the wisdom of erecting any great memorial in this location before the traffic issues were resolved and the relationship to the monumental core axes was determined. Although planting supervision was under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, implementation of the design was plagued by problems of substandard material and workmanship. While wartime exigencies and a limited budget for such a significant structure exacerbated the problems, Hubbard expressed his own dismay at the difficulties in achieving an artistic effect. The temper of the times, the change in values, the increasing complexity of diverse pressures—particularly that of traffic congestion and altered artistic priorities—significantly thwarted the grand vision.

The Theodore Roosevelt Memorial
The course of development for the Theodore Roosevelt Island National Memorial on Analostan Island is a case in point. Like the Jefferson Memorial, this is one of the last major projects involving Olmsted and his firm that emerged from the 1901 plan. From the outset, the report of the Senate Park Commission had recommended that Analostan Island’s acreage be acquired and suitably treated so that it would not come into “disagreeable occupancy.”

Within sight of the west end of the Mall, this isle of wilderness so close by offered the promise of unique recreational opportunities in contrast to the grandeur of structures and vast sweep of formal greensward across the river. This juxtaposition was an echo of the Chicago World’s Fair, where the senior Olmsted had developed the Wooded Isle as a place of verdant respite in contrast to the structured formality of the great White City.

Located at the fall line of the Potomac River, the ecologically diverse island had an interesting social history. Once owned by the family of George Mason of Virginia, by 1913 it had been
purchased by the Washington Gas Light Co. and was intended for industrial uses. The Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Association rescued this prime site by purchasing it in 1931 and deeding it to the federal government for use as Roosevelt’s memorial, while retaining planning rights. In accepting the deed in 1932, President Hoover commented on “the especial appropriateness” of this wooded island as this memorial, being “forever within the view of the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Capitol and the White House . . . a bit of nature within the boundaries of this city which he loved, and where he rendered such noble service.”71

The association contracted with Olmsted Brothers in May 1932 to prepare a general plan and report, turning to Olmsted and Hubbard to advise them on whether the army engineers should be allowed to fill the island’s tidal flats with dredging from the Potomac channel. Olmsted rejected the idea as too early in the planning process to be made, wisely observing that “it is a bad beginning when parts of a block of marble are carved before a clear and self-consistent artistic conception had been formed of the entirety and the spirit of the sculpture-to-be.”72

Although Olmsted was inspired by the idea of developing the island as a “thoroughly worthy, dignified and self-sufficient” memorial park, his health delayed his early involvement, and so once again Henry Hubbard handled preliminary planning matters in consultation with Olmsted. Hubbard’s list of “Considerations Affecting the Design” set forth some determining features. The island was to be “a sanctuary—a sacred grove,” primarily for pedestrian use with minimal automobile access. Much of the shore would be preserved in its natural condition, subject to approval by the engineers. The architectural element, a memorial fitted to the natural conditions of the site, was to be designed by John Russel Pope. This was to be the unifying feature of the island, “expressive of the personality and work of Theodore Roosevelt,” and was to be visible from various points on the mainland as a component of the central monumental composition. Thus Roosevelt would be represented among the panorama of celebrated presidential monuments with a uniquely appropriate statement.73

The overgrown condition of the island prevented any real examination of its topography and significant vegetative features. Therefore, in early 1934, in order to begin comprehensive planning, Olmsted requested that the Civilian Conservation Corps be brought in to clear the flammable debris, dead trees, and weedy growth. From late 1934 through 1935, crews were at work clearing stumps and brush. They also developed foot trails and bridle paths and eventually replanted thousands of trees, shrubs, and ground cover for forest improvement, while Olmsted and his firm’s plantsman, Hans Koehler, marked off areas of special native vegetation to be preserved.74

By December 1932, Olmsted began to conceptualize the principal elements of design and preservation for the island, refining his ideas over the next three years.75 The dominant natural feature was the woodland, which Olmsted hoped could be returned to the original of rich variety that had once covered the Potomac islands. “With skillful, yet self-subordinating and humble-minded aid from man,” he said, “nature can be induced to recreate here . . . the very sort of climax forest, full of enduring and noble dignity and unity of character” that once had existed in this area. At the southern end of the island, the high ridge with good views to the mainland was an ideal location to have a commemorative inscription or the eventual monumental structure. While convenient access was essential, it should not interfere with the sense of seclusion proper to such a forest memorial. Therefore, no automobiles should be allowed; instead there should be opportunities for moving through at leisure on foot or on horseback, with access to the island by “a simple unassertive modest” footbridge and perhaps by boat. Few changes should be made to the natural ground surface, except in the flood-prone marshy areas where Olmsted recommended placing large irregular boulders to simulate a rocky shoreline.76

Unfortunately, throughout the late 1930s Olmsted’s plan went largely unrealized except for the trail work, due to a chronic lack of funds from both the Park Service and the Roosevelt Association. The Olmsted firm, having committed itself to this task, was essentially working gratis. Nonetheless, the firm proceeded with a design for an overlook plaza at the island’s southern end where a memorial could be constructed with reciprocal views toward the Mall and along the river. Olmsted’s hope was for a simple unpretentious monument to emphasize to the public that the “entire beautiful island” was the primary physical memorial to Theodore Roosevelt, “embodifying so many qualities which he keenly appreciated . . . and which he led so many others to appreciate and make a part of their enjoyment of a full, well-rounded life.” But, he cautioned, until there was a permanent means of pedestrian access and a minimal amount of maintenance to stabilize the balance of nature, there was little point in building a monument. Eventually, between 1945 and 1947, the Olmsted firm finalized most of the plans, bringing the job to a point where it would be ready for construction as soon as money became available. The association had a goal of completing the work before Roosevelt’s centenary in October 1958.77

None of this was to be. The autocracy of the automobile thwarted the careful planning for such a unique memorial. Between the early 1950s and
The suggested area for a commemorative element. Aerial rendering of the southern end of the island.

Provision is made for a comfort station and two boat landings on the north and south points.

East and south; a network of trails curve with the contours through woods and skirt the large marsh on the island’s eastern edge.

TOP: General Plan for Development, Theodore Roosevelt Island, May 1945. Critical attention is paid to the design of the vistas east and south; a network of trails curve with the contours through woods and skirt the large marsh on the island’s eastern edge. Provision is made for a comfort station and two boat landings on the north and south points.

ABOVE: Aerial rendering of the southern end of the island, showing the proposed primary boat landing and the curving wall below the suggested area for a commemorative element.
1964, heated negotiations to preserve Olmsted’s pioneering model of a wilderness sanctuary in the central city came to naught. The association was caught in a devil’s dilemma between preserving "the integrity and sanctity of... an area of wild solitude in the very heart of the Nation" or allowing traffic congestion to disrupt the aesthetic harmony of the national capital that Theodore Roosevelt had cherished. They allowed a bridge to pass over the southern end of the island, destroying all possibility of the intended visual connections. Also destroyed was the innovative concept to complement the classic architectural memorializations in the Mall with a living wilderness set aside as a monument to a president so closely associated with American conservation. In 1967 a plaza memorial to Roosevelt was inserted into the woods on the island’s north side and, in 1976, a footbridge was added to provide pedestrian access to the island.

The Enduring Legacy

Olmsted did not live to see the destructive intrusion into his innovative concept for the Roosevelt memorial. In the fifty-year span from the high ideals of the Senate Park Commission planning to post-World War II conditions, preservation of architectural treasures and landscape legacies was in ebb. Cities were depleted by flight to the suburbs, and the means of flight—the automobile—ruled decision making. The complexity of urban planning had moved beyond the manageable collaborative approaches that Olmsted and his colleagues had devised to new utilitarian priorities that no longer valued artistic considerations, let alone spacious greenswards and verdant passages of scenery. Well before his death in 1957, Olmsted had begun to direct his major professional efforts to planning for the acquisition, management, and preservation of scenic and natural resources as public parks. The unique memorial idea of a public landscape consisting of a healthy, evolving climax forest abutting an intensely urban area seems to have stemmed from this thinking. From his work to establish the National Park Service in 1916 to his planning for the Florida Everglades, the California state parks, Yosemite, or the Colorado River Basin, Olmsted’s endeavors ensured that America’s extraordinary scenery would continue to provide opportunities for that sense of “enlarged freedom” that he treasured.

Looking back over his long career from the vantage point of his fiftieth Harvard reunion, Olmsted emphasized the satisfaction he had gained from his profession, from solving problems that "would result in appropriately beautiful landscapes, whatever kind of use the land might serve." He enthused over the enjoyment of the collaborative process, the interchange of ideas, the continual learning from the reactions of people interacting with their environment. But he was equally clear that the designer’s role was to steward and enhance the beauty inherent in the land, not to overwhelm it.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. left an indelible legacy on the American landscape over his long and multifaceted career. Fortunately for the stewards of this landscape patrimony, he left a treasure trove of material, an extensive record of prescient reports, insightful correspondence, and imagery to guide the thoughtful evolution of his landscape creations. Nowhere are the productive results of his professional and collaborative endeavors more evident than in the diverse landscape environments of the nation’s capital. Over his half century of public service to the city, he molded Washington’s terrain by policy, by plan, and by shovel to ensure that the landscapes of monument and park were unified expressions of a controlling aesthetic motive, a continuing and evolving stewardship of the L’Enfant concept and the McMillan Plan. Understanding the comprehensive nature of Olmsted’s thinking and his ability to integrate the grand concept with the smallest detail and to balance nature with artifice in his creations will ensure a future for his legacy of artistry for the nation’s capital.

Aerial view over Theodore Roosevelt Island with Rosslyn in the foreground and the Kennedy Center in the background, 1970s. The bridge severed all intended views toward the monumental core. A circular memorial space in the woods at the northern end of the island was designed by Eric Gugler and contains a monumental statue of President Roosevelt designed by Paul Manship.
26 Charles F. McKim to Newlands, March 31, 1904, Box 6, Folder 64, Newlands MSS. Emphasis McKim.
27 Newlands to McKim, December 19, 1904, Box 7, Folder 72, Newlands MSS.
28 McKim to Newlands, March 3, 1905, Box 8, Folder 77, Newlands MSS.
29 Newlands to Burnham, October 7, 1906, Box 10, Folder 95, Newlands MSS.
30 Burnham to Newlands, October 13, 1906, Box 10, Folder 95, Newlands MSS.
31 Executive Order No. 306, March 14, 1905.
32 Daniel H. Burnham to Charles F. McKim, February 5, 1907, Box 2, Folder 10, Daniel H. Burnham Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, the Art Institute of Chicago (hereafter cited as Burnham MSS).
33 McKim to Burnham, February 13, 1907, Box 2, Folder 50, Burnham MSS.
34 Burnham to McKim, February 13, 1907, Box 2, Folder 50, Burnham MSS.
35 William H. Taft to Burnham, February 14, 1907, Box 3, Folder 66, Burnham MSS.
37 In addition to Trowbridge and Brown, the committee included George B. Post, William A. Boring, Robert S. Peabody, and C. Grant La Farge. See Brown to Newlands, January 9, 1908, Box 12, Folder 118, Newlands MSS.
38 60th Cong. 2nd Sess. S. Doc. 685 at 7-10.
39 60th Cong. 2nd Sess. S. Doc. 685 at 21.
40 S. B. P. Trowbridge to Newlands, January 11, 1909, Box 16, Folder 155, Newlands MSS.
41 Trowbridge to Newlands, January 21, 1909, Box 16, Folder 156, Newlands MSS.
42 Military aide Archibald Butt wrote about many Washington personalities to his sister-in-law, Clara Butt, beginning in 1909 until he died in 1912 in the sinking of the Titanic. Archibald Willingham Butt was born in Augusta, Georgia, on September 9, 1865. He attended the Summerville Academy near Augusta and then the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, majoring in journalism. He worked for two southern newspapers before becoming the Washington correspondent for the Augusta Chronicle. During this time, he met General Matt W. Ransom, a former Confederate officer and U.S. Senator from North Carolina. In 1895, Ransom became the U.S. Minister to Mexico, and Butt entered the diplomatic world as his private secretary. With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Butt returned to the States and first entered the U.S. Army as a first lieutenant. After the war, he remained in the army and ultimately gained the rank of major, serving for six years in the Philippines, where he met Taft, and then in Cuba, before President Theodore Roosevelt selected him to be one of his military aides. President Taft was less interested in employing military aides; however, he asked Butt to continue to serve in this capacity. Butt wrote to his sister-in-law, in part, it seems, for future generations. See Archibald Butt, Taft and Roosevelt: The Intimate Letters of Archie Butt (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1930), 21:420.
43 Butt, Taft and Roosevelt, 2:746–47.
46 Reiner, Roosevelt's Religion, 209.
50 The Committee on the Library had oversight of the congressional library, congressional art collection, and U.S. Botanic Garden.
51 Gilbert, Cook, Trowbridge, Burnham, Millet, Blashfield, French, and Olmsted had also been named to Roosevelt’s Council of Fine Arts.
53 Daniel H. Burnham to George P. Wetmore, May 19, 1910, Series 5, Reel 333, Case file 801, Taft MSS.
54 Burnham to Wetmore, May 19, 1910, Taft MSS. Anderson and Bennett had worked for Burnham and Bennett was his co-author for the Chicago Plan of 1909.
55 Burnham to Wetmore, May 19, 1910, Taft MSS.
56 Burnham to Francis D. Millet, May 19, 1910, Series 5, Reel 333, Case file 801, Taft MSS.
57 Newlands to William H. Taft, May 25, 1910, Box 21, Folder 208, Newlands MSS. Taft to Newlands, May 26, 1910, Series 8, Reel 202, Taft MSS.
58 See May 1910, Series 5, Reel 333, Case file 801, Taft MSS and certificate, June 13, 1910, OP 11, Burnham MSS.
60 Burnham to Charles Norton, July 20, 1910, Series 6, Reel 372, Case file 187, Taft MSS.
61 Burnham to Norton, August 8, 1910, Series 6, Reel 372, Case file 187, Taft MSS.

E S S A Y B Y A R L E Y A. L E V E E

Most projects in the Olmsted firm files were assigned an individual job number. However, for the numerous Washington, D.C., projects, particularly for the public work, the numbering reflects a complex system that indicates the point of origin or organizational sponsorship of the work. Thus, subsumed under the File #2843 assigned to the Commission of Fine Arts projects is a complicated list of major projects and consultations covering decades of work. Moreover, some projects became independent work and are given separate job numbers; so, for example, Rock Creek Park is assigned File #2837; Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway is assigned File #2843; and yet another Rock Creek folder is numbered File #2843-File C-4. As a result there exists today in the Olmsted records a byzantine series of overlapping administrative records concerning Washington.

In 1901, architect and planner Daniel H. Burnham (1846–1912) was nearly fifty-four; architect Charles Follen McKim (1847–1909) was the youngest son's name. Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., writing to John Charles (1852–1920) and Owen Fredrick (1857–81). His half siblings were the children of his mother, Dr. John Hull Olmsted (1825–57), Frederick Law's younger brother Rick there (Henry, Frederick, ‘Erick’, Rick)” See Charles E. Beveridge and Antoinette J. Lee, Mon Sense Kind: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the Emergence of Comprehensive Planning in America, 1900–1920” (master’s thesis, George Washington University, 1988), 32.

Laura Wood Roper, F. J. O.: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 338. Mrs. Roper cites a conversation with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. as a source, but correspondence as late as 1877 continues to indicate confusion over the McCmillan Commission and who would go on to chair the Commission of Fine Arts, was closest in age to Olmsted at forty-five.

In 1895, Ransom became the U.S. Minister to Mexico, and Butt entered the diplomatic world as his private secretary. With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Butt returned to the States and first entered the U.S. Army as a first lieutenant. After the war, he remained in the army and ultimately gained the rank of major, serving for six years in the Philippines, where he met Taft, and then in Cuba, before President Theodore Roosevelt selected him to be one of his military aides. President Taft was less interested in employing military aides; however, he asked Butt to continue to serve in this capacity. Butt wrote to his sister-in-law, in part, it seems, for future generations. See Archibald Butt, Taft and Roosevelt: The Intimate Letters of Archie Butt (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1930), 21:420.

Butt, Taft and Roosevelt, 2:746–47.


Reiner, Roosevelt’s Religion, 209.


The Olmsted family at the time of Rick’s birth consisted of his full sister Marion (1861–1948); his half sister Charlotte (1855–1908); and two half brothers, John Charles (1852–1920) and Owen Frederick (1857–81). His half siblings were the children of his mother, Mary Cleveland Perkins Olmsted (1830–1921), and her first husband, Dr. John Hull Olmsted (1825–57). Frederick Law’s younger brother who had died of tuberculosis, Frederick Law Olmsted married his brother’s widow in 1859 and adopted her children. John Charles Olmsted would become Rick’s partner in the firm of Olmsted Brothers.

In addition to the New York parks, Olmsted Sr. and his partner, Calvert Vaux, had advised on park work in Newark, New Jersey, Buffalo, New York, New Britain, Connecticut, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Fall River, Massachusetts, etc.; had planned several subdivisions including Riverside, Illinois, and Tarrytown, New York; and had worked on various academic and residential institutions. After the dissolution of their partnership in 1872, Olmsted’s work expanded to include the U.S. Capitol Gardens and the capitol grounds for Hartford, Connecticut, and Albany, New York; park work in Boston, Massachusetts, Detroit, Michigan, and at Niagara Falls, New York; numerous institutional projects; residential subdivisions; and estate work and railroad station grounds for the Boston and Albany Railroad.


Payroll Ledger 21, pp. 1–81, Administrative Records, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.


Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. (hereafter “Olmsted Sr.”) to J. R. Morrill, chairman of the Committee for Public Grounds, U.S. Senate, January 22, 1874, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Olmsted MSS).

At this time, remnants of earlier design treatments and prior uses decorated the mall. Various buildings intruded into the space at the periphery. The Tiber Creek and the Botanic Garden were immediately west of the Capitol Grounds, followed by an inchoate area of erratic tree groups, crossing paths, and railroad appurtenances. Andrew Jackson Downing’s picturesque park of meandering paths and arboreal esences fronted the Smithsonian Institution, while to its west, gardenesque flower beds and miscellaneous greenhouses covered the grounds of the Department of Agriculture. The still incomplete Washington Monument was surrounded by construction with tidal marshes close by its southern side.

Olmsted Sr. to William Hammond Hall, March 28, 1874, Olmsted MSS.

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From 1903 to 1909, the Consultative Board established by President Roosevelt and later enlarged into a Council of Fine Arts, attempted to protect the artistic effect of new public structures and statuary, but the legal jurisdiction of these bodies was dubious. The board members lobbied to fulfill the heroic agreement for Union Station, removing the trains from the Mall; and they negotiated with an intransigent secretary of agriculture to prevent his new building from infiltrating the Mall’s sacred greenward, enlisting President Roosevelt to enforce the sanctity of its centerline. Finally, after the election of William Howard Taft, legislation was successful to establish a permanent advisory Commission of Fine Arts. See Sue A. Kohler, “The Commission of Fine Arts: Implementing the Senate Park Commission’s Vision,” in Kohler and Scott, Designing the Nation’s Capital, 245–73. Relevant correspondence is found in Files N O T E S 5 6 5
24 See File #2838, OAR, especially Charles Moore, “Some Popular Misconceptions Corrected,” November 1907. In this document, Moore also makes a plea for a municipal art commission like other cities have, noting, “The city of Washington, which should be a model for other cities, seems not able to even profit by their example.” See also Kay Fanning, Cultural Landscape Inventory for National Mall & Memorial Parks: Union Square (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2006).

25 Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (hereafter “Olmsted”) to Daniel H. Burnham, August 1, 1907, File #2839, OAR. This letter was in response to earlier Olmsted correspondence with Burnham. In West Potomac Park, Olmsted had tried to refine the haphazard filling, road building, and tree planting of the army corps, which was in haste to open this section for public use. Considering a compromise over establishing lines and grades, Rick aroused a sharp rebuke from Burnham, who admonished him to “stand for the real thing” for the west end of the Mall, as this would “be a virtual adoption of the whole plan” to settle the Mall against all future attacks. Burnham to Olmsted, July 29, 1907, File #2839, OAR.

26 In addition, during this time Olmsted also maintained a full teaching schedule at Harvard, developing the first courses in landscape architecture; wrote several city planning reports (for Queens and Utica, New York, Holyoke, Massachusetts, and Detroit, Michigan) and periodical articles; and was an active organizer and lecturer for the American Civic Association and later the National Conference on City Planning. A sampling of his design and planning commissions for this period includes park systems in Baltimore and Hartford; a network of playground parks in Chicago’s south side; continued implementation of Boston’s metropolitan parks; plans for numerous educational institutions, among them the Taft School, in Water town, Connecticut (for President Taft’s brother); and residential designs for numerous private clients.

27 Olmsted to Colonel Charles S. Bromwell, January 14, 1907, File #2839, OAR. Frederick Law Olmsted, “City Plan for the City of Washington,” Journal of Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth Annual Convention, American Institute of Architects (1901), 55. A photograph of Langdon’s plan for East Potomac Park can be found in the Commission of Fine Arts collection. Langdon presented his plans for review to the commission in 1915. Commission of Fine Arts minutes, October 2, 1915 (hereafter CFA Minutes). Copies of all minutes are held in the offices of the Commission of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. James G. Langdon began as an employee of the Olmsted firm in 1892, coming to Washington with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to be his draftsman for the McMillan Commission work. Langdon remained in the Washington-Baltimore area, designing a number of public projects, many of which were collaborations with the Olmsted firm.

28 Senator McMillan died unexpectedly on August 10, 1901. Given his involvement in legislation to protect the District’s water system, the area around this reservoir, which he had sponsored, was designated by President Taft as an appropriate location for a neighborhood park, also in recognition of McMillan’s work for the improvement of the park system. Little remains today of the Olmsted design on the ground, and the elegant sculptural fountain designed by Herbert Adams and Charles Platt is reputed to be in storage. See File #2840, OAR and NARA, Record Group 66, Box 101. In 1934, the Commission of Fine Arts forestalled an inappropriately placed playground that impinged on the fountain. CFA minutes, January 23, 1934, letter from Charles Moore to Major Arthur.

29 The new appointees were architects Thomas Hastings and Cass Gilbert, sculptor Daniel Chester French, and artist Francis D. Millet. They were chosen from among a considerable list of suggested candidates. Sue A. Kohler, “The Commission of Fine Arts,” in Kohler and Scott, Designing the Nation’s Capital, 257–59.

30 Olmsted even traveled as far as Panama in 1914 with fellow commission Daniel Chester French to advise Colonel Goethals on beautification possibilities around the canal and its newly constructed communities. CFA minutes, November 15, 1913–May 9, 1913; Sue A. Kohler, “The Commission of Fine Arts,” in Kohler and Scott, Designing the Nation’s Capital, 259–62. Olmsted made several working tours of the small parks and reservations, altering plans from the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. CFA minutes, January 23, 1914–1917. He paid special attention to the transformation of the former Boyce mansion grounds into Montrose Park, trying to blend the character of its plantings and forested slope with the new user amenities. CFA minutes, 1912–1918. Meridian Hill Park received careful scrutiny from Olmsted and fellow commissioners Cass Gilbert and Charles Platt over its spatial arrangements, constructed details, and plantings, as its unique Italianate form emerged. CFA minutes, April 4, 1913–February 24, 1922.

31 CFA minutes, May 20, 1915; July 29, 1915; October 2, 1915; December 3, 1915; September 5, 1916; and October 6, 1916.

32 Gutheim and Lee, Worthy of the Nation, 168–81. Park efforts during this period included encouraging donations of land or funds to fulfill the park system goals. In 1923–24, Charles Glover and Anne Archbold gave considerable acreage of the Foundry Branch valley to become part of the D.C. park system. Together with other members of NCPCC, Olmsted examined this property, preparing a report in April 1930. He praised the “sylvan mystery” and spiritual refreshment of this woodland, analyzed the character of its various component parts, and recommended management procedures to protect beauty while enabling its use as a public park. Gutheim and Lee, Worthy of the Nation, 178, 201–55; File #2844, Folder F-9, OAR.

33 CFA minutes, October 2, 1915; December 4, 1915; September 5, 1916; and October 6, 1916; File #2843, Folder C-5, OAR.

34 Considerations of East Potomac Park, Rock Creek Park, and finally, Mount Hamilton and Anaestia were reviewed by the commission with recommendations for the latter. CFA minutes, January 23, 1914 and CFA minutes, September 18, 1917, letter from Colonel William W. Harts to Representative James L. Slayden, 45–62; and File #2845, OAR.

35 Olmsted Sr., “Part of Draft Report Preliminary to Plan for National Zoological Park,” addressed to Dr. Frank Baker, c. 1890, Olmsted MSS; Moore, The Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia, 87; and File #2821, OAR.


38 Olmsted Brothers (hereafter “OB”) to the Board of Control of Rock Creek Park, December 1917, File #2837, OAR; and Timothy Davis, “Beyond the Mall: The Senate Park Commission’s Plans for Washington’s Park System,” in Kohler and Scott, Designing the Nation’s Capital, 137–81. Following Humphreys Repton’s “Redbook” practice of illustrating before-and-after views for his landscape proposals, many of these Rock Creek Park images showed extant conditions with an overlay of idealized improvements.

39 File #283, OAR. In the Olmsted Brothers collaborative practice, individual work was subsumed under the Olmsted rubric. At the time of this report, 1917–18, as his tenure was ending on the Commission of Fine Arts, Olmsted was heavily engaged in the wartime planning for military and industrial workers’ housing. Characteristic of his energy during
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6 Reper, PEO, 435.


8 Payroll Ledger #1, 1901–1, Administrative Records, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.


10 Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. (hereafter “Olmsted Sr.”) to J. R. Morrill, chairman of the Committee for Public Grounds, U.S. Senate, January 22, 1874, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Olmsted MSS).

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CHAPTER II


2 “Taft for Single Head but Against Suffrage,” Washington Post, May 9, 1909, 1, 3, and 12.


5 Daniel H. Burnham to Charles Norton, June 20, 1910, Series 5, Reel 9, Charles Moore, File #2843-AI, OAR.


8 Hagedorn to the secretary of the Interior, quoted in Ray Fanning, “National Register Registration Form,” Section 8, p. 58.

9 Fanning, “National Register Registration Form,” Section 8, p. 60–61.
