The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Project

Frederick Law Olmsted was the founder of the profession of landscape architecture in America and the designer and planner of hundreds of landscape commissions across the country. In addition to these historic landscapes, Olmsted left an invaluable resource of personal and professional papers spanning the years of 1838 to 1895, which provide a unique perspective on American society and institutions in the nineteenth century.

From its inception in 1972, The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Project has undertaken to identify the most significant of these writings and to present them in context in a readable, published twelve-volume format.

As of 2009, the Olmsted Papers Project is within sight of achieving this goal. Volumes 1 through 7 and Supplementary Series Volume 1 have been published by Johns Hopkins University Press—presenting the most significant of Olmsted’s writings to 1882 and major reports on public parks drawn from his whole career. Work is now underway on Volume 8 and Supplementary Series Volume 2.

The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers
Published Volumes

Volume 1
The Formative Years, 1822–1852
Published 1977

The volume begins with a short biography of Olmsted and a biographical directory of the friends and relatives who played leading roles in his early life. His letters show the skill in observation that made his later travel books so effective, and provide a vivid picture of coming of age in New England in the 1840s. Included are fascinating letters written during a voyage in the China Trade in 1842–43, and accounts of the trip to the British Isles in 1850 that he later described in his first book, Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England.

Volume 2
Slavery and the South, 1852–1857
Published 1981

During these years Olmsted traveled in the South and wrote his classic descriptions of southern society. The volume contains the personal letters and newspaper accounts that he did not include in his four books on the South. It also contains letters concerning his work in the “literary republic” of New York as a publisher and the managing editor of Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, which published the work of promising American writers—including Melville and Thoreau. During this period Olmsted was also active in promoting free labor colonization in Kansas and Texas, in an effort to halt the spread of slavery.

Volume 3
Creating Central Park, 1857–1861
Published 1983

This volume contains the most significant documents in Olmsted’s papers concerning the design and construction of Central Park and his other city-planning activities in New York before the Civil War. It publishes for the first time the complete original “Greensward” report and plan submitted by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in the design competition of 1858, accompanied by the “before and after” views they provided the park commissioners. Other documents tell how the design for the park changed during the early stages of construction, and how Olmsted supervised that massive operation. A concluding Pictorial Essay
includes a “tour” of Central Park in the early 1860s by means of sixty-five photographs and stereographs taken in 1863 or earlier.

Volume 4
Defending the Union: The Civil War and the U.S. Sanitary Commission, 1861–1863
Published 1986
For the first two years of the Civil War, Olmsted served as general secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a civilian organization that had responsibility for the health of the volunteer soldiers in the Union Army—the sanitary condition of camps, care of wounded, and the distribution of food, clothing and bandages that flowed in from the Commission’s branches all over the North. Olmsted’s letters tell of political intrigue in Washington and give a vivid description of events in the field—including the rout of volunteer soldiers at the battle of First Bull Run, the suffering of the wounded during the Peninsula campaign, and the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg. Other documents portray his role in helping to define the purposes of Reconstruction—including his efforts in early 1862 to expedite the “Port Royal Experiment” in dealing with freed slaves on the South Carolina Sea Islands. Olmsted’s journal of a trip through the Mississippi River valley in early 1863 displays the skills of travel-writing that marked his earlier volumes on the South.

Volume 5
The California Frontier, 1863–1865
Published 1990
As general manager of the Mariposa Estate, Olmsted undertook to run the largest gold-mining operation in the country at the time. While there, he carefully observed frontier society and the stages of its development. His letters contain many vignettes of frontier life, as do two previously unpublished works—a series of chapters, some incomplete, dealing with the influence of emigration and the frontier on American society, and a study of the Mariposa Estate as “a frontier community of the present day” (published in Volume 5 as “The Pioneer Condition and the Drift of Civilization in America”). Olmsted’s letters and journals describe summer camping trips to Yosemite Valley and his work as head of the first commission for managing the public reservation there. The volume also contains the four reports that Olmsted wrote for major design projects in California: the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Big Tree Grove reservation, a park system for San Francisco, Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, and the campus of the College of California in Berkeley.

Volume 6
The Years of Olmsted, Vaux & Company, 1865–1874
Published 1992
The volume contains letters and a dozen reports on parks, park systems, and city planning written during the partnership of Olmsted and Vaux (from 1865 through September 1872)—including reports for Newark, New Britain, Hartford, Albany, Fairmount Park in Philadelphia, Fort Greene and Tompkins parks in Brooklyn, and Union Square in Manhattan, and correspondence relating to such other projects of the Olmsted-Vaux partnership as Prospect Park and adjoining parkways in Brooklyn, the
Buffalo park system, the Chicago South Park, and work on Central, Riverside and Morningside parks in the period 1865–74. Also, reports for the suburban communities at Riverside, Illinois, and Irvington and Tarrytown on the Hudson above New York City, for the campus of Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., and the report concerning the planning of national agricultural colleges that Olmsted & Vaux presented with their plans for the campus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the University of Maine. The volume also contains letters concerning Reconstruction policies and politics that Olmsted wrote to Charles Eliot Norton and Samuel Bowles.

Volume 7
Parks, Politics and Patronage, 1874–1882
Published 2007
The volume presents documents relating to Olmsted’s work while he was living in New York following his partnership with Vaux, his dismissal from the New York City parks department in 1878, and his gradual move to Boston during the early 1880s. There are reports for the design of Riverside Park and Tompkins Square in Manhattan, and the street and rapid transit systems for Riverdale and other sections of the 23rd and 24th wards (the Bronx), correspondence relating to Olmsted’s designing of the U.S. Capitol grounds and Mount Royal in Montreal, and his collaboration with the architects Leopold Eidlitz and Henry Hobson Richardson in the redesign of the New York State capitol. Several documents describe Olmsted’s leading role in the early campaign to create a scenic reservation at Niagara Falls. Other letters and reports document his early role in creation of the Boston park system, and his planning of the Back Bay Fens, Arnold Arboretum, and Muddy River sections of the “Emerald Necklace.” Also included is the first publication of an annotated version of his pamphlet “The Spoils of the Park with a Few Leaves from the Deep-Laden Note-Books of ‘A Wholly Unpractical Man’,” which marked the end of his career with the New York City department of parks. Concerning events of the time, the volume provides examples of his intense reaction to questions of Reconstruction policy and the election of 1876.
**Supplementary Series Volume 1**

*Writings on Public Parks, Parkways, and Park Systems*

Published 1997

The volume contains Olmsted’s most significant articles, lectures and reports concerning public parks and recreation grounds. It contains several general discussions of the subject, including *Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns* (1870) and *A Consideration of the Justifying Value of a Public Park* (1881). Also included are his remarkable reports on individual parks and park systems that combine general observations with specific proposals, including reports on New York’s Central Park, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Mount Royal in Montreal, Belle Isle in Detroit, Franklin Park in Boston, the Niagara Reservation, and a park system for Buffalo.

**Timetable for Completion of the Entire Series**

An ambitious schedule for the completion of the last four volumes in the Series by 2013 has been set. In addition to the editorial work required to keep to this schedule, the need to secure the necessary funding to proceed remains paramount.

**Supplementary Series Volume 2**

*Plans and Photographs of Public Parks, Recreation Grounds, Parkways, Park Systems and Scenic Reservations.*

Scheduled for Publication in 2011

The coffee-table-size format has been selected so that the details of the plans will be clear and adequate for reference purposes. The volume will contain sketches, preliminary and final plans, and historic photographs of the seventy most significant of Olmsted’s public park projects. They will show the original site, construction, and appearance of the projects at various stages of development.

Projects will be presented chronologically by earliest date of work in a particular city. Each project will have a separate presentation, consisting of multi-image layouts accompanied by explanatory text and captions for individual images. At present, 700 images have been selected for possible inclusion in the volume. The volume will contain a full listing of the projects of this kind with which Olmsted was involved. In addition, a CD ROM will present large and detailed plans, including final plans (which sometimes measure more than six feet in length), topographic plans, and planting plans, all of which contain a level of detail that cannot be reproduced in the format of the printed volume. This volume will provide for the first time a comprehensive view of the variety of Olmsted’s public park planning. It will also be the first publication to present visually the distinctive aspects of the Olmsted design idiom.

**Volume 8**

*The Early Boston Years, 1882–1890*

Scheduled for Publication in 2012

This volume follows Olmsted’s career as he establishes his home and office in Brookline, MA, and his formation of a partnership with his stepson and protégé John C. Olmsted in 1884. The principal focus will be the major public design work that Olmsted initiated in Boston’s Back Bay Fens, Riverway, Arnold Arboretum, Franklin Park, Charlesbank, Marine Park, and throughout the “Emerald Necklace,” as well as his proposals for treatment of the islands in Boston Harbor.

This volume presents documents relating to Olmsted’s collaboration with Henry Hobson Richardson in the Boston area, particularly for the Boston Park Commission and for the Ames family at North Easton, which ended prematurely with the architect’s death in 1886. Documents on the design of Belle Isle in Detroit, the U.S. Capitol grounds, the Rochester, New York, park system, and collaborations with Calvert Vaux on the design of Morningside Park in Manhattan and the Niagara Reservation are also included, as well as material on planning the campuses of Lawrenceville School and Stanford University.

Professor Ethan Carr, University of Virginia at Charlottesville, is the principal editor of this volume, and Amanda Gagel is assistant editor. Selection, transcription,
and proofing of most of the 150 documents to be included has been completed and writing of annotation has begun.

Volume 9
The Last Great Projects, 1890–1895
Editorial work to commence early in 2010

The final chronologically arranged volume in the series, it will present the last stage of Olmsted’s career, with a firm that included his former students Henry Sargent Codman and Charles Eliot as new partners. During this time Olmsted concentrated his energies on his two last great commissions: one was the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 on the site of the Chicago South Park that he and Vaux had designed in 1871, with the subsequent redesigning of Jackson Park and the Midway; the other was the extensive Biltmore Estate in North Carolina. There will also be correspondence concerning the development of the park systems of Louisville, Kentucky, and proposals for park systems in Milwaukee and Kansas City. The volume will present some of the remarkable retrospective letters he wrote to Mariana Grisword Van Rensselaer and his son, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. It will conclude with several undated and unfinished writings on the history and principles of landscape design. Some 150 documents have already been selected and transcribed for inclusion in this volume.

Supplementary Series Volume 3
Plans and Photographs of Commissions for Residential Communities and Neighborhoods, Educational and Residential Institutions, Government Buildings, Expositions, and Private Estates
Editorial work to resume 2010

This last volume in the series will contain visual material relating to one hundred of Olmsted’s most significant projects in other categories than that of public parks and recreation grounds. Special emphasis will be given to the U.S. Capitol grounds and terraces, the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, and the Biltmore Estate, due to their significance and the richness of their pictorial documentation. Other projects to be included that are especially well documented are the Arnold Arboretum in Boston; the street system of the Borough of the Bronx in New York City; the campuses of Lawrenceville School and Stanford University; Parkside subdivision in Buffalo; The National Zoo in Washington, D.C.; the estate “Moraine Farm” in Beverly, Massachusetts; Olmsted’s home and office, “Fairstaid,” in Brookline, Massachusetts; and several estates in Newport, Rhode Island. A considerable number of illustrations for this volume have already been identified and collected by the Olmsted Papers editors.

The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Project has brought many individuals and organizations together. These volumes have been an invaluable primary source for park advocates across the United States and Canada struggling to save and restore their Olmsted parks. The Papers have also provided the intellectual capital for many of the advocacy and restoration efforts of the National Association for Olmsted Parks, the sponsoring organization of the Project. Completion of these volumes is an essential ingredient for all of our efforts to preserve historic Olmsted landscapes.
The groundbreaking work on the Project by its first Editor in Chief, Charles Capen McLaughlin, the scholarly research and public outreach of the present Series Editor, Charles E. Beveridge, and the impetus provided in 1972 by the Olmsted Sesquicentennial celebration assured a solid foundation for the Project. Editorial work has continued with contributions from David Schuyler, Jane Turner Censer, Victoria Post Ramney, Carolyn F. Hoffman, Tina Hummel, Gerard J. Raulak, Kenneth Hawkins, and the present editors of Volume 8, Ethan Carr and Amanda Gagel.

The work has been aided by the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, and the National Park Service staff at the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts.

In addition to the sponsorship and financial assistance of the National Association for Olmsted Parks, the Olmsted Papers Project has received substantial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and the National Endowment for the Arts, all Federal agencies, as well as from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Trust for the Humanities, and other private foundations and individuals.