Excerpt from Charles E. Beveridge, "The Design Concept of Louisville’s Olmsted Parks: A Report," Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, 1992

The Louisville park system was the last system Frederick Law Olmsted undertook to design. He began the work in 1891; thirty-four years and nearly a full career after he and Calvert Vaux began their successful competition design for Central Park in New York City. During those years, first with Vaux and then with a succession of assistants and partners (most important of whom was John C. Olmsted, who also played a leading role in the firm’s Louisville work) Olmsted had evolved a number of concepts and had designed and constructed numerous examples of each. Every commission was for him an opportunity to create an influential example of landscape design. It was through the constructed landscape that Olmsted’s design concepts were to be best experienced, appreciated, and understood.

The first and most important of Olmsted’s concepts was that of the park itself. As he wrote to the architect Henry Van Brunt a few months before he began his work in Louisville:

“My notion is that wherever grounds a great city may need for other public purposes, for parades, for athletic sports, for fireworks, for museums of art [and] science, such as botanic gardens, it also needs a large ground scientifically and artistically prepared to provide such a poetic and tranquillizing influence on its people as comes through a pleased contemplation of natural scenery, especially sequestered and limitless natural scenery.”

(Frederick Law Olmsted to Henry Van Brunt, January 22, 1891, volume A12, p. 579, Olmsted Associates Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.)

In Olmsted’s projected park system for Louisville, Cherokee Park was to be the place of “sequestered” and apparently “limitless” scenery, consisting of “superb umbrageous trees, standing singly and in open groups distributed naturally upon a gracefully undulating greensward...such scenery in higher perfection than, with large outbays to obtain it, is yet to be found in any public park in America.” (see Annual Report that follows)

In fact, the design for Cherokee Park concentrated more exclusively on experience of scenery than did any of Olmsted’s other park designs. Even Genesee Valley Park in Rochester, designed at approximately the same time, had an area for children’s games, and Delaware Park in Buffalo had a “Gala Water” for boating on which there was a large boathouse and refectory. Some parks contained formal promenade or concert areas, as in Central Park, Prospect Park and Franklin Park, while others had extensive areas for sports, as in Central Park, South (now Washington) Park in Chicago, and Franklin Park. But the terrain of Cherokee Park did not lend itself to boating, ball fields, or formal promenades. Olmsted did expect to transform the Alexander house on Alexander Hill into a refectory, but abandoned the idea in time, feeling that it was not in the right part of the park to serve that function well. He wished to utilize the top of Bonnycastle Hill for ball playing, but the terrain was only marginally suitable. He also objected to creating a lake by flooding Beargrass Creek, approving only of a pond, too small for much boating activity, on the site of the present Willow Pond. The flat areas along the course of the creek, like the creek and its banks, were to be retained and improved for their scenic effect, and not for active or festive uses. To a remarkable extent, therefore, Cherokee Park was to be devoted to landscape.

Two other sites were part of the earlier park-system proposal, and Olmsted was asked to include them in the system he was hired to plan. These were Burnt Knob south of the city and an area on the Ohio River on the west side in the general location of present day Shawnee Park and Shawnee Golf Course. These became Iroquois and Shawnee parks. They lent themselves well to the park-system concept that Olmsted had carried out in several cities. He believed that while every city should have a park dedicated to pastoral scenery, that park should be supplemented by other sorts of natural scenery and important vista points. There should also be areas for playing field games, particularly for children, and places for formal promenades, or for large gatherings of citizens for civic gatherings. And, as in the case of Iroquois and Shawnee parks, the larger elements in the park system were intended by Olmsted and his partners to serve all-city purposes, and to be used by persons from throughout the city.
Within this concept, Shawnee Park ably supplemented Cherokee Park. It was of good size, some two hundred acres, so that it was possible to have enjoyment of scenery as one of its features. The park had views of river scenery from atop the banks, and Olmsted planned the bluff as a formally arranged promenade and viewing area. There was provision for concerts, and for floral displays. At the same time, Shawnee was to be the one park that provided access to the river for bathing and boating. Moreover, the size of the park made possible an extensive lawn area of twenty acres with gently modulated surface and scattered shade trees, a greater single expanse of greensward than was feasible in Cherokee Park. This open green space also was to be a place for playing field sports. In this way Olmsted transferred to Shawnee Park a number of activities that he often had felt constrained to include, somehow, within the principal landscape park of a city.

The Louisville park system closely resembles the first park system, in Buffalo, that Olmsted and Vaux created beginning in 1868. In that city the two smaller grounds, the 56-acre Parade and the 32-acre Front, were planned for concerts and large public gatherings, and the Parade was supposed to have both a large refectory/dance-hall and a variety of play facilities for children. And so Delaware Park, like Cherokee, could be planned with provision for such activities. The size of the Louisville sites meant that the city had three areas large enough to fit Olmsted's concept of a park, while Buffalo had only one.

The third principal component of the Louisville park system was Jacob Hill, or Burnt Knob (now Iroquois). Olmsted proposed to treat this site as a scenic reservation, protecting forest scenery such as he had first encountered with much pleasure during his journey on horseback through the upland South from Mississippi to Virginia in the summer of 1854. Iroquois, then, would provide "a treasure of sylvan scenery, alternative and supplementary to the treasures which you would have on your other properties, the grandeur of the forest depths in the dim seclusion of which you may wander musingly for hours."

Excerpts from First Annual Report, Louisville Board of Park Commissioners, July 1891, prepared by F. L. Olmsted & Co., Landscape Architects

"We deem it an important point that the principal parks of a city should be distinguished one from another somewhat markedly in the way in which they are used and in their landscape treatment. Having this general principle in mind, we have aimed to so design the three principal parks of Louisville that they would serve somewhat different purposes, each being as complete as possible in itself, and the purpose to which each park is designed being in harmony with the existing topography and natural growths."

"If you wish the city to possess broad and tranquil meadowy spaces, with, by and by, the shadows of great spreading trees slanting across them, and offering at once areas of turf to be inexpensively kept in a suitable condition for lawn games, more can be done to meet this want for a thousand dollars on this site you have named Shawnee Park than on this of Iroquois Hill for a million."

"If you want the refreshment that is to be had in the contemplation of superb umbrageous trees, standing singly and in open groups distributed naturally upon a gracefully undulating green sward, to procure such scenery in higher perfection than with large outlays to obtain it, is yet to be found in any public park in America, all that is needed is the removal of fences and a little judicious use of the ax on your Cherokee Park site."

"On the other hand, if you want as a treasure of sylvan scenery, alternative and supplementary to the treasures which you would have on your other properties, the grandeur of the forest depths in the dim seclusion of which you may wander musingly for hours, this you may find ready to your hand on the Iroquois Hill, and the beauty of the present forest there may be extended and increased and given diversity and made more interesting by processes which, judiciously organized and patiently pursued, will not be difficult or unreasonably costly."

John B. Castleman to C.C. Laney (Superintendent, Rochester Parks), May 16, 1910

"The Olmsteds have built our parks and are responsible for all of their marvelous beauty; we neither plan, construct nor destroy without the advice of the Olmsteds. In other words, they are architects building and we lay no stone without the architects' advice. They have the most marvelous ability and wonderful foresight as to future results of constructive work."