Mountain View Cemetery Imperiled

The NAOP has added its voice to those protesting the proposed alteration of one of Frederick Law Olmsted’s earliest and most significant works, Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California. The design integrity and historic fabric of the site are threatened by a planned 106-seat chapel and 18,800 square foot mausoleum and columbarium complex on the central entry circle. The plan has been approved by the City of Oakland, after a process riddled with errors by city staff and political pressure. An attorney for a local neighborhood group, the Piedmont Avenue Neighborhood Improvement League (PANIL), is preparing to file a petition for a Writ of Mandamus under the California Environmental Quality Act, asking the court to order an Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The EIR would focus on the potential negative impacts to the site’s historic resources, and, unlike the city’s review process, would require consideration of alternatives such as design revisions or alternate sites for the project and possible mitigations. Also advocating further study of the project’s impacts are the Oakland Heritage Alliance (the local historic preservation group), the California Preservation Foundation, and the NAOP.

Frederick Law Olmsted was managing the Mariposa Mining estates in Bear Valley, California when the trustees of the newly formed Mountain View Cemetery engaged him to lay out the cemetery grounds in 1864. Olmsted was already famous as co-designer of Central Park, but Mountain View Cemetery was his first major commission without a partner. After his death, the cemetery trustees continued to consult with his successor firm, Olmsted Brothers, on improvements, including plans for additional plots and proposed building sites drawn between 1938 and 1947 (Job Number 9685). Adding to the site’s historic value, it is the final resting place for many prominent figures in regional and national history, and spectacular family crypts and monuments trace a history of architectural styles and funerary symbolism.

While the cemetery’s marketing materials tout its unique historic value, the site is not a formal landmark, and thus avoids the more thoughtful review that landmark status would trigger. Preservationists are not only concerned about the current project. The cemetery has announced plans to install landscaping from Olmsted’s original plan which was never planted, an action considered “false historicism” under the Secretary of the Interior’s Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes. Other long-term concerns include crumbling infrastructure (such as early cement walkways and swale-shaped gutters), questionable maintenance of heritage trees, and the cemetery’s recent policy of selling off Olmsted’s grassy walkways as burial sites.

The Olmsted plan is still largely intact, but the proposed new complex, designed by Manhattan architect Alexander Gorlin, continued on page 2

NEWS from Fairsted

100th Anniversary of Frederick Law Olmsted’s death

This past summer, with the 100th anniversary of Frederick Law Olmsted’s death in August 1903, media attention focused on Fairsted and the Olmsted landscape legacy:

- On July 1, National Public Radio’s “The Connection” broadcast a one-hour show on Olmsted’s vision and the urban landscape with panelists Tupper Thomas, administrator of Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York; and Robert Garcia, director of The City Project, Center for Law in the Public Interest in Los Angeles.

- On August 14, Boston’s WGBH Channel 2 show “Great Boston: with Emily Rooney produced a program on Olmsted’s Brooklodge with panelists landscape historian Ayen Levee and Brooklyn Greenspace Alliance President Adam Mattison. The show featured Fairsted in its video introduction.

- On August 28, the anniversary of Frederick Law Olmsted’s death, Boston’s WBUR-FM Morning Edition interviewed National Park Service Ranger Mark Swartz about Fairsted’s landscape, and

- On August 29, Public Radio International’s “Marketplace” broadcast a show on Frederick Law Olmsted’s legacy nationwide. The show emphasized work accomplished in Portland and Seattle, and included interviews with a number of officials and activists.

This August Fairsted also hosted two popular performances of “Frederick Law Olmsted: Passages in the Life of an Unpractical Man” – a one-man play conceived and presented by Boston’s long-time park advocate Gary Wright.

Olmsted Archives

The Olmsted Archives recently completed processing of the NAB/NAC Reference collection that consists of a wide range of materials collected by the Olmsted firm and covering design-related topics in the fields of landscape architecture, architecture and horticulture. The materials come from numerous sources – magazine articles and plates, photographs, published studies, landscape architectural plans, promotional brochures, souvenirs publications, newspaper clippings, and original memos and correspondence. Topics range broadly from housing and cemeteries to public benches and sand dune planting. A finding aid is available for reference use.
Plans for Olmsted Memorial Park in Rhode Island

Laurence S. Cutler writes from Newport that he is involved with a group there undertaking a project to develop an Olmsted memorial park. The group believes it to be the first such undertaking where a park was designed by Olmsted and will be a memorial dedicated to him.

Albeit a small park (3 acres), it is truly a significant one since it is located in the middle of "the most elegant street in America"—Bellevue Avenue in Newport, RI.

The park is the last open space on Bellevue Ave, home to many of the most notable Gilded Age mansions. As we know, Olmsted did many projects in Newport as well as the City Master Plan.

Olmsted designed the grounds of the park in 1884 for a stately style mansion called Stoneacre (the mansion was torn down in the 1960's to save taxes), shortly after he moved his office to Fairrested in Brookline, Mass. Thus, it has been said that this was his first commission after naming the profession "Landscape Architecture." Recently the group behind the memorial park discovered that several of the trees are designated as Champion Trees of Rhode Island as they are the oldest and largest of their species, perhaps in the entire USA.

The group has been grooming the park land for the past 5 years, have planted some trees in anticipation of their neighbors reaching the end of their lifespan soon, are installing nameplates for the trees, have removed a 90 car parking lot on the property, and the small undertaking is beginning to be revived. Soon they will be erecting a four face Seth Thomas-style Street Clock within the park.

Notes from Ann Morris' visit to site Memorial Day weekend 2003

I tried to reciprocate by taking some photos of the Frederick Law Olmsted Memorial Park next to the Museum of American Illustration in Newport. Frederick would be embarrassed of his little memorial park. It is the size of my yard in Webster Groves, maybe a quarter of an acre. It is all overgrown — tall grass and weeds. There is a huge, magnificent copper beech tree on one side and some other trees. There is a two-foot high rock wall across the front, along the sidewalk. And some one has put a new privacy fence across the back and down part of one side. The other side has a circular drive or a parking lot since it faces an alley running between it and the Museum of American Illustration. A wall wall surrounds the museum. There is much work to be done to make the property worthy of anyone's memorial, but a memorial would be better than a new house.

Mountain View Cemetery Imperiled

continued from front cover

would remove the outer ring road of Olmsted's double roundabout at the cemetery entrance and alter side roads. Demolition of the ring road is already underway, as a city permit or approval is not required. The cemetery proposed removal of the ring road to answer criticism that the complex crowded the road like an urban development; the large, inward-looking courtyard of the highly modern design is also in conflict with Olmsted's intent.

The small village of Oakland that Olmsted knew has grown to surround the cemetery. Reportedly a favorite rural picnic spot in Victorian times, the cemetery's 220 acres are now a much-loved walking, jogging and birding site. "...The new buildings can and should be made compatible with the aesthetic intentions of Frederick Law Olmsted, who planned the landscape with such foresight that it pleases the spirit in every season, from every angle, at every hour — [nearly] a century and a half after it was completed," neighbor Jane Margold wrote to the Oakland City Planning Commission.

Photographs of the cemetery and photomontages of the proposed project can be viewed on PANIL's web site, www.panil.org; click on "Zoning." For further information, contact Valerie Winemiller at 510/653-4562, or at vwinemiller@hotmail.com.
Centennial of Olmsted’s Death

This issue of NAOP Reprints commemorates the centennial of Frederick Law Olmsted’s death, on August 28th, 1903. The excerpts from obituaries presented here are from the many death notices that appeared in the United States and abroad, and provide some insight into how Olmsted’s legacy was already being characterized at the time of his death. A family scrapbook conserved at the Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline contains dozens of such clippings.

Olmsted retired from professional life in 1895 and spent the last eight years of his life in an intermittent state of dementia. For five years until his death he was a patient at the McClean Hospital in Waverley, Massachusetts, an institution for which he had provided the landscape design many years earlier. He died there in a cottage on the grounds, at the age of eighty-one, survived by his wife Mary, his stepson John Charles, and his two children, Frederick, Jr., and Marion.

Olmsted and most of his immediate family are buried in the Old North Cemetery in Hartford, Connecticut. The cemetery was founded in 1807, and other leading cultural figures of nineteenth-century Hartford are buried there as well, including Horace Bushnell and Daniel Wadsworth. Old North Cemetery was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. The condition of the Olmsted family grave sits—and of the cemetery as a whole—has fluctuated over the years. According to Norma Williams of Friends of Old North, much has been done to improve the maintenance of the cemetery, but the landscape continues to need more public support. The Olmsted grave site was last fully rehabilitated after the death of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (also buried there) in 1957. The job was done by the Olmsted Brothers firm, and files and photographs are available at the Olmsted National Historical Site.

There are few monuments to Olmsted; most eulogizers agreed that his parks served that purpose best. Rarely has Christopher Wren’s epitaph, “Si monumentum requiris, circumspice” (If you would see his monument, look around) more aptly or consistently been evoked. Boston did rename a (small) portion of the Emerald Necklace system Olmsted Park while he was still living, and there are a few other places named for him. But Olmsted himself would have been horrified if one of his masterpieces (particularly those in which Calvert Vaux shared design credit) were redesignated as a memorial. His entire philosophy of public parks (and his Yankee distaste for ostentation, so evident in his family’s simple burial vault) would have rejected such pretension. Perhaps it was best that New York did not follow the advice of The Times, and erect a statue somewhere—certainly not in one of his parks.

The only monument to Olmsted in Central Park is, of all things, a flower bed planted in the south end of the Mall in the 1970s.

The most significant commemoration of Olmsted’s life took place in 1979, when Congress designated his home and office, Fairbank, in Brookline, Massachusetts, as the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. The site is not like other “house museums.” In addition to preserving and presenting the historic house to the public, an active Olmsted Archive continues to research and catalog the firm’s projects, and provide an essential resource for scores of groups and individuals engaged in restoring Olmsted parks and landscapes across the country. The Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, a National Park Service initiative, is also housed at Fairbank, and continues a tradition of working landscape architects on the premises, who in this case provide design and management plans for a variety of cultural landscapes.

Perhaps the continuing work of the many park volunteers, advocates, and organizations (including the National Association for Olmsted Parks) are the commemoration Olmsted would have appreciated most. His is a legacy of communities as much as landscapes, and he recognized the two as inextricable parts of what he hoped could be more healthful and beautiful American cities. So in that spirit, let us indeed look around, and continue to care for the monuments all around us.

Ethan Carr
N.Y. Tribune, September 6, 1903
Parks His Monument
City Abounds in Works of Frederick Law Olmsted

The monuments to the great in many walks of life are merely ornaments for public places. However enduring the materials and however artistic and attractive the forms, such memorials are but abstractly associated with the achievements which called them into being. Frederick Law Olmsted's most enduring monuments are the works which he performed. The fact that Boston, in his ripe old age and while yet he lived, honored him by bestowing upon one of its largest recreation grounds his name is pleasing, but it cannot possibly impress future generations as they must be impressed by the park itself, everything of beauty in which bears the impress of Mr. Olmsted's genius. Whatever is admired in the many parks which he created, at least if it be more than a detail of gardening or architecture, is his monument.

The Boston Globe – Saturday, August 29, 1903
Park System His Monument
Frederick Law Olmsted, America's Greatest Landscape Architect, Dies at Waverley

Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect, died early yesterday morning at Waverley [sic], aged 82 years. Mr. Olmsted retired from the practice of his profession in the summer of 1895, owing to ill-health. His home was at 93 Warren St., Brookline, and his wife, who was Mary C. B. Perkins, two sons, John L. [sic] and Frederick Law, Jr., both prominent landscape architects, and one daughter, Miss Marion Olmsted, survive him.

For half a century, American landscape architects followed...naturalistic ideals, but with this important point: instead of reproducing the features of the natural American landscape, they attempted to imitate the English landscape on American soil. Frederick Law Olmsted was the leader in the revolt against this treatment of the landscape. He came as the apostle of a new dispensation. He was no slavish follower of English naturalistic ideas to the extent of trying to reproduce something which was foreign. He insisted that the treatment which should be given to
American landscapes should be American, although he was
catholic enough to see that formal architecture might have a place
in landscape gardening, and that in a naturalistic treatment of a
landscape there should be originality and not imitation of nature.
He was a master in the art of preserving natural beauty, by giving
to each tree and plant and area of grass its opportunity to do the
best and to fill its proper proportion in the landscape. Formal
elements were allowed in a landscape when they were required for
use, because Mr. Olmsted recognized that simple, impressive
natural beauty was not incompatible with the idea of use.

It was in the planning of Central Park that Mr. Olmsted made
such a success that he at once impressed lovers of outdoor art with
the fact that there was a treatment of landscape which was purely
American and yet represented the highest development of art in
landscape. Other landscape gardeners were not slow to profit by
the example. The rare combination of utility and beauty could not
fail to make its impress on American landscape gardening.

### Saturday, September 5, 1903

**The American Architect and Building News**

In the death of Mr. Frederick Law Olmsted this country has lost
not only a great artist, but also the pioneer, we might almost say,
in the great American art of landscape gardening. We are so
accustomed to the magnificent parks which now adorn every
American city of importance that it is hard to realize that when
the quiet and stately Connecticut farmer, known to the public
only as a writer of books on agricultural matters and methods,
was invited to take charge of the laying-out of the proposed
Central Park, in New York, Boston Common was the largest
public park in America. Even in Europe, although parks existed,
they were mostly palace gardens, opened by courtesy to the
public, like the Luxembourg and Tuileries Gardens, in Paris, or
vast, uncared-for spaces, available for fresh air, but with little
pretension to artistic effect. In the Central Park Mr. Olmsted
found a tract two miles long, and half a mile wide, diversified with
hills and valleys, meadows and pastures, rocks and streams,
uninviting enough in its actual condition, but presenting to the
artist an opportunity which he seized with enthusiasm. Everyone
knows what use he made of it. We have been at various times
familiar with many parks, but none that we have seen compares
in poetical sentiment with the New York Central Park. The
nearest approach to it is, perhaps, to be found in the Boston
Fens, also, in its conception, Mr. Olmsted's work; but the Fens
landscape is not yet matured by the growth of the trees, and it
still lacks the contrast of architectural formality which is made,
with such exquisite skill, to enhance the natural beauties of the
Central Park.
New York Times, August 29, 1903

F. L. Olmsted is Dead

End comes to Great Landscape Architect at Waverly, Mass.
Designer of Central and Prospect Parks and
Other Famous Garden Spots of American Cities

BOSTON, Aug. 28 — Frederick Law Olmsted, the famous landscape architect, died to-day at Waverly [sic], Mass., aged eighty-one years. Death was due to weakness resulting from ill-health and advanced age. His wife, two sons and a daughter, survive him.

It was owing to the art shown in [Central Park] that Olmsted was overwhelmed with commissions. Prospect and Washington Parks in Brooklyn, the parks of Montreal, Buffalo, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Trenton, Detroit, and Bridgeport bear the stamp of his genius. The grand girdle of parks about Boston, the Capitol Park at Washington with the terraces, stairways and approaches to the Capitol, are due to his initial effort.

From his office came Codman, who laid out the World’s Fair at Chicago. In this city Riverside and Mounting Park and the arrangement of the city above the Hudson River belong to him.

In 1872 he was the President of the New York Department of Public Parks [sic], and in 1875 the salaried landscape architect of the city.

It was he, indeed, who may be said to have created the title of landscape architect, now so worthily borne by many younger men, as opposed to the old title of landscape gardener or landscape engineer.

Personally Mr. Olmsted was a man who had great charm of manner, won perhaps in his long career as traveler and student of nature, into the great polemic between the believers in formal gardening and those who think Nature should be left as much as possible to herself. He entered with no great zest. So far as Central Park is concerned, he introduced very little of the formal element, believing that the transition from our very dry and ugly architecture and the terrible cut-and-dried layout of Manhattan streets would be grateful, as indeed it still is, although the situation at present is not so bad in such respects as it was forty years ago. In his later years he had been unable to work, but the pleasing characteristics of the man remained long after he had given up the practice of his profession.

His fine presence and handsome head will be sure to attract sculptors a grateful subject when Manhattan shall remember to erect his monument in or near Central Park. Boston has already recognized his extraordinary services by naming the 200 acres formerly known as Leverett and Jamaica Parks after him. Manhattan should choose some more striking and personal way of recalling to posterity the master of a very grand art.

The commemorative Olmsted flower bed (created in the 1970s), in spring tulips. Central Park, New York.
NAOP Assembles a task force to preserve and protect the Capitol Grounds.

The NAOP advocacy committee, led by board member Susan West Montgomery with other board members Charles Binbaum, Faye Harwell, Susan Casolin, and co-chairs Lucy Lawless and Jerry Baum, formed a task force this summer to promote long-range planning for the Capitol Grounds that recognizes and protects this Olmsted, Sr., masterwork. At its second meeting on August 19th, the task force adopted a mission to secure "a master plan for the U.S. Capitol Grounds and its setting that will guide future development of the site and preserve and protect, to the greatest extent possible, the integrity of the Olmsted-designed landscape." Efforts to convene an august body of Washington, D.C. and national notables are underway while NAOP continues to encourage the Architect of the Capitol to complete and publish the already commissioned landscape history and adopt historically appropriate landscape details in association with the rebuilding of the East Lawn for the Capitol Visitor Center. Stay tuned!

Preservation Action Offers Benefits To NAOP Members

NAOP members may receive a landscape preservation legislation update from Preservation Action as a 6-month trial member benefit. To sign up, contact NAOP’s new coordinator in Buffalo, Michele Holbrook at mholbrook@buffalo.mastersparks.org. Preservation Action is the national advocacy coordinator for our architectural heritage, launched in 1974. Taking its lead from local preservationists, Preservation Action monitors Congress and federal agencies and keeps members informed of their activities related to historic preservation. NAOP board member Susan West Montgomery has been president since 1998. Read more about Preservation Action at www.preservationaction.org.

Publications

The Complete Illustrated Guide to Boston’s Public Parks and Gardens (Silver Lining Books, a division of Barnes & Noble) focuses on the Emerald Necklace. $15. Note: copies ordered from the Emerald Necklace Conservancy yield a portion of the price to the CNC. $15 (plus $4.95 shipping per copy) to BNC: Two Brookline Plaza, Brookline, MA 02445. Autographed copies $20 each, same shipping.


"The fineness of detail in this exhaustive study will delight scholars...Students of the architectural history of New York will welcome the thorough discussion of individual commissions as well as the richness of Kowsky’s insight into the personalities of professionals and patrons alike...Kowsky does real service in demonstrating Calvert Vaux’s central place beside Olmsted and other better remembered designers as a major player in the shaping of New York...This will remain the definitive study of Vaux’s life and work."—The New York Times Book Review

"Scrupulously detailed...An important contribution to the history of the art and profession of landscape design, and to the context in which Vaux’s more famous partner prevailed."—ARTnews

After beginning his architectural career in England, Calvert Vaux came to America in 1850 at the invitation of architect Andrew Jackson Downing. In 1852, he moved to New York City and castle greenhouse for Olmsted, the landscape architect, to join him in preparing a design for Central Park. During the next thirty-eight years in New York, Vaux defended and refined his vision of Central Park and pursued a distinguished architectural practice. After the Civil War, he and Olmsted led the resurgent American park movement with their designs for parks in many American cities. And as a pioneering advocate for apartment houses in American cities, Vaux designed buildings that mirrored the advance of urbanization in America, including early model housing for the poor. His works also include many Gothic and Palladian style dwellings, the original portions of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, and a stunning proposal for a vast iron and glass building to house the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Most notable, perhaps, are the arched bridges and other structures that he designed for Central Park. This book is the first in-depth study of Vaux’s life and work.

The author, Frank R. Kowsky, is SUNY Distinguished Professor of Art History at Buffalo State College.

Publication Deadline for the Spring Issue is March 1, 2004

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Letters Welcome! Send to info@naop.org.

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