

THE ARCHITECTS
FREDERICK
LAW
OLMSTED

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AMERICAN HERITAGE • NEW WORD CITY



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On the face of it, there seemed to be no reason why anyone should offer Frederick Law Olmsted the job of constructing a park in what would become the middle of New York - the first such park in the city or, for that matter, in the country. Or why Olmsted should design a park that perfectly suited New York in his time and has defined the city in ours. Or why he should go on from there, while inventing the profession of landscape architecture in the United States, to leave his inerascable mark on the cities, towns, and even the wildernesses of America.

When that New York job was casually proposed to him in the summer of 1857, Olmsted was thirty-five and had worked as a surveyor, bookkeeper, seaman, farmer, publisher, author of travel books, and social commentator. He was, in fact, finishing his latest book at a Connecticut seaside resort when he met a friend who was serving on the New York park commission. Over tea, the commissioner described the project to Olmsted and worried that they had not been able to find a satisfactory superintendent. Listening to Olmsted's questions and suggestions, he remarked: "I wish we had you on the commission, but, as we do not, why not take the superintendency yourself?"

"Till he asked the question," Olmsted later recalled, "the possibility of my doing so had never occurred to me. I at once answered, however, smiling: 'I take it? I'm not sure that I wouldn't if it were offered me.'"

"Well, it will not be offered you," the friend replied. "That's not the way we do business; but if you'll go to work, I believe you may get it."

The salary was \$1,500 a year, and Olmsted, needing a job and money, went to work, which meant getting the support of important friends. He wound up with the endorsements of Washington Irving, Peter Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Whitelaw Reid, Horace Greeley, August Belmont, and a few dozen others. They knew him largely as a literary man - which some members of the commission held against him. They finally voted him in the position, but they must have left the meeting wondering just what it was that Olmsted had done to warrant this huge job of urban landscaping.

Olmsted himself wondered over the matter, and many years

later - when his contemporaries were acknowledging that "no American had been more useful in his time than Frederick Olmsted or has made a more valuable and lasting contribution to civilization in his country" - he suggested an answer. "My pleasure in landscape," he declared, "began to be affected by conditions at an early age, even before I began to connect the cause and effect of enjoyment in it."

It started with his father, a well-to-do merchant in Hartford, Connecticut, who shared his fondness for nature with his son - "a bothering little chap," Olmsted remembered himself. He took Fred along on long excursions through the countryside, by carriage, horse, and canal boat. It was from these trips and from visits to his uncle in Geneseo, New York, that Frederick's mind was filled with images of "being sometimes driven rapidly and silently over the turf of the bottom lands among great trees," and of stopping at "a house in the dooryard of which there was a fawn and at which a beautiful woman gave me sweetmeats."

Though he loved his son dearly, Mr. Olmsted was an emotionally distant man who sent Fred away for schooling to half a dozen clergymen whose rote learning and pious discipline did little to advance Fred's formal education. The boy was a wanderer, rambling through the countryside, getting to know, as he put it, "interesting rivers, brooks, meadows, rocks, woods, mountains . . . pleasant old gardens" and making friends with a rural scholar "of musing, contemplative habits," who loved "Virgil and took pleasure in reading and translating him to me."

A self-taught reader, he was enthralled with two books he came upon in a library - by Uvedale Price and by William Gilpin - on the subject of picturesque landscapes. Another, *Solitude* - "one of the best books ever written," he said enthusiastically - was penned by a crotchety Swiss named Johann Georg von Zimmermann, who, though longing for the seclusion of country life, admitted that "the world is the only theater upon which great and noble actions can be performed."

A bad case of sumac poisoning blinded Fred for a while and kept him from entering Yale. Apprenticed at fifteen (in 1837) to an engineer, he learned surveying and dealing with land. Sent to a New York silk merchant, he worked diligently as a book-keeper for a year and a half. Then, signing on as a seaman, he

sailed to China, enduring seasickness, scurvy, typhoid, and brutal shipboard discipline.

Back from the sea, lagging behind his friends in schooling, and dependent on his father for upkeep, Fred studied at Yale in a haphazard fashion learning a bit of chemistry, geology, and botany, but then decided to be a farmer. He took over a farm in Guilford, Connecticut, whose house, as Olmsted described it, was "nasty" and whose land was "juicy." Setting out to improve the property, Fred brought a drawing of a proposed house to Alexander Jackson Davis, who thought the design lacked character and sketched him a Gothic Revival farmhouse. But before he could get much done, Fred bought (with his father's money) a larger farm on Staten Island, across the harbor from New York.

"The whole place was as dirty and disorderly as the most bucolic person could desire," a friend wrote. "Fred moved the barns behind a knoll. He brought the road in so that it approached the house by a gentle curve. He turfed the borders of the pond and planted water plants on its edge and shielded it from contamination. Thus, with a few strokes and at small expense he transformed the place from a very dirty, disagreeable farmyard to a gentleman's house."

He also showed ability as a manager. "He introduced system and order to his men," wrote the young lady who would marry Fred's brother and, when widowed, would marry Fred. His men were taught that "at knocking-off time every tool used should be returned to its appointed place and that every chore should be done at the hour fixed."

He was a good farmer and a helpful neighbor. His wheat and turnips won prizes, but his land benefited more than his pocket-book. Even a fine crop did not justify the \$34 an acre he spent to improve his wheat fields. Still, his neighbors, impressed by his landscaping, asked him how to improve the looks and convenience of their farms. He spent half of his time on the farm, half in the nearby city, where his college friends drew him into their cultivated circles. One of them, Charles Loring Brace, who founded the Children's Aid Society, showed him the darker side - the hopeless poor, the homeless children. The city was, to Olmsted, "an immense vat of misery."