

THE U.S. CAPITOL GROUNDS:

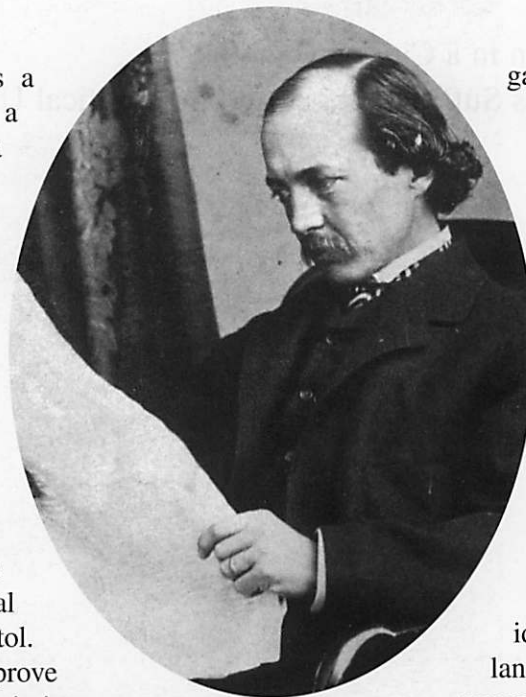
Frederick Law Olmsted's Legacy in the Nation's Capital

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Frederick Law Olmsted was a nineteenth-century visionary, a pragmatic optimist but not a utopian. Like Thoreau, he dreaded the devastating impact of industrialization, but unlike the Walden recluse who sought escape from it, Olmsted used his skills to devise ways to counteract what he saw as the negative aspects of change. We know him today as the founder of the profession of landscape architecture in this country, but it was not primarily an interest in landscape gardening or architecture that led him to design splendid public spaces such as Central Park or the grounds of the U.S. Capitol. What motivated him was a desire to improve the world around him, to transform it into a better place. It just so happened that landscape offered him the chance to do that.

OLMSTED WAS BORN IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT IN 1822, and to a large extent the New England landscape became his benchmark for beauty. He admired its intimate scale and its subtle variety of vegetation and visual effect. Often traveling with his father, he came to know and appreciate harmonious scenes like those captured on canvas by painters associated with the Hudson River School. His formal education ended early, but farming, extensive travel, reading, writing, publishing experience, and a close association with leading reformers set him on course for his later career.

Travel to England in 1850 convinced him of the value of what he called "commonplace scenery"—not grand or prominent features, but ordinary materials combined to create pleasing effects. He visited private English parks and



*Figure 1. Frederick Law
Olmsted (1860-65)*

gardens, but he was most impressed with the public parks such as Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park in Liverpool. The young Olmsted admired the idea that all classes of citizens could share in the enjoyment of a single picturesque landscape. It interested him that the park had been professionally designed. He also admired the fact that the newly completed park had already improved the value of real estate in the surrounding area. By 1851, he was calling for the improvement of American cities with "free public parks and gardens." By 1858, he was hard at work putting his ideas into practice by creating a pastoral landscape out of some 700 acres of rocky, swampy, and otherwise unremarkable terrain in the middle of Manhattan.

Central Park, a visionary project by any definition, launched Olmsted's landscape career. It also launched his fourteen-year partnership with English architect and landscape gardener Calvert Vaux. At Central Park, Olmsted contrasted scenic passages to create illusions of depth, distance, openness, and intimacy. He drew on the artistry of the English landscape gardening tradition, but his interests diverged from those of others who designed gardens for private pleasure. Well before germ theory was understood, at a time when waste was ubiquitous and land use zoning nonexistent, Olmsted suggested that cities might be significantly bettered if marshes were drained and other nuisances removed and if gentle curves replaced the tyranny of the grid to offer relaxation and relief. He selected plants and engineered his projects with such precision that many came to take his work for granted, hardly aware that

most projects were built from scratch. Elaborate drainage systems, for example, lay beneath the man-made lakes and reservoirs of Central Park. (Figure 2)

Olmsted recognized, too, that “healthy places of exercise and amusement” could appreciably improve life for the “poor, ignorant, homeless, abandoned” who could not escape to country houses. As Laura Wood Roper noted in her landmark Olmsted biography, he “not only cared for parks as scenery but saw them in the context of a social plan.”¹ Without a doubt the social dimension was as crucial to Olmsted’s vision as the artistic, and it explains much of what motivated him to translate talents honed in scientific farming and investigative journalism to park construction, urban design, and city planning. It is no surprise that he linked park building to the evolution of what he called “civilized communities” and saw landscape as a tool capable of furthering democracy. It was fitting that such a man designed the grounds of the U.S. Capitol, symbol of American democracy.

The Capitol did not always look as it does today. Because of the significant grade drop between its east side and west, the sub-basement on the west stood above ground. Early engravings depict a spacious tree-lined Pennsylvania Avenue leading directly to nothing so auspicious as a mound of earth piled against the building as if to hold it in place.

Olmsted first visited Washington with his father in 1839. When he returned in 1861, the Capitol was undergoing a major expansion. The squat wooden dome that Charles Bulfinch had completed in 1824 did not sit comfortably atop the much-expanded building. Thomas U. Walter, designed a new dome, and it was being erected at that time. Olmsted would have seen the construction when he arrived for a stay at the Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue. He had

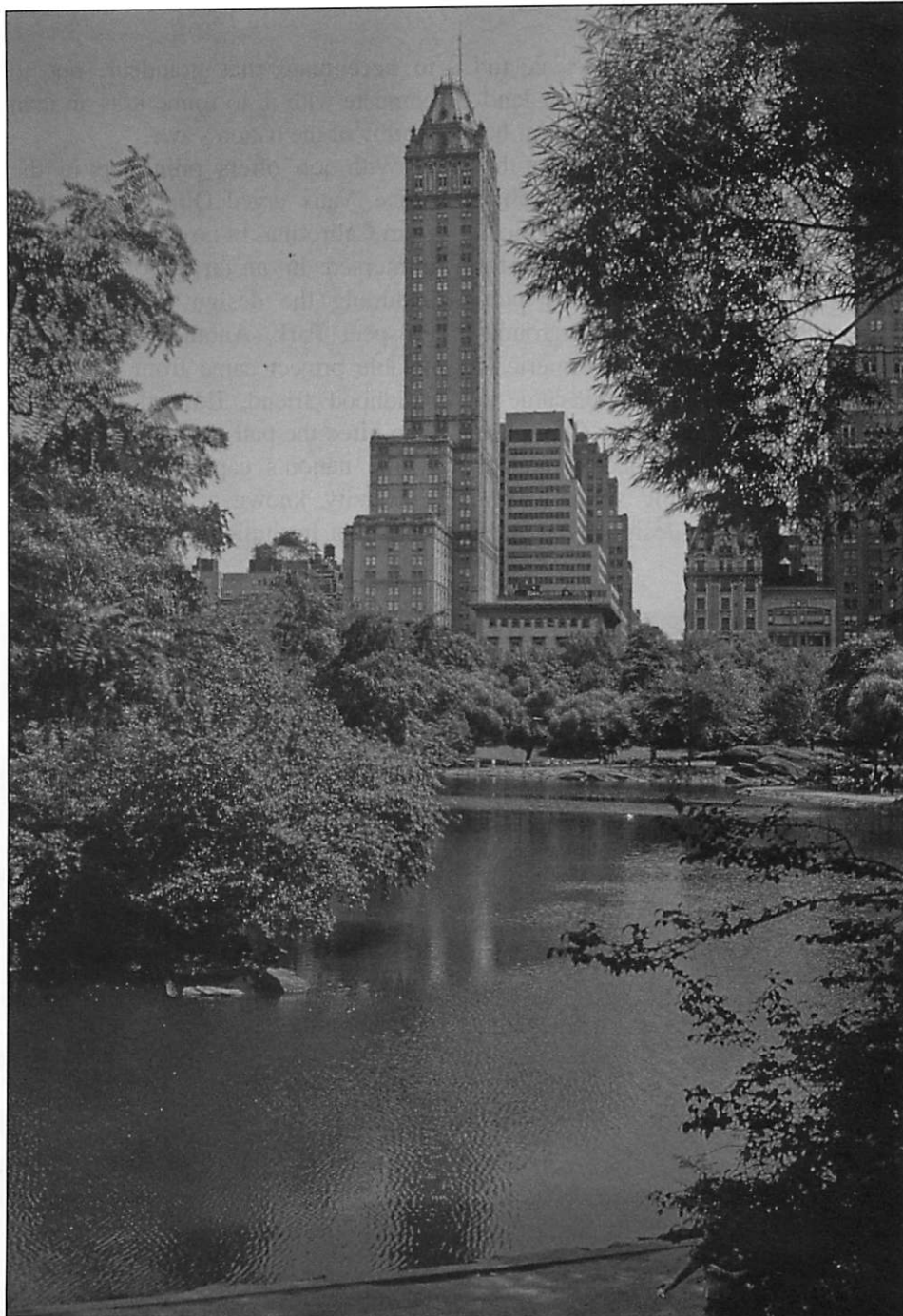


Figure 2. New York City, Central Park

come to town to assist in the Union war effort, however, not to ponder the Capitol or its grounds.

With Central Park under construction, Olmsted took a leave and moved to Washington as secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission, a Civil War humanitarian organization and precursor to the Red Cross. Between 1861 and 1863 he worked out of Washington inspecting army camps

and hospitals, securing medical supplies, food and clothes, and finding ways to improve public hygiene and boost the morale of the Union soldiers by creating better drained, cleaner, and more hospitable surroundings.

The work took its toll. Worn out and depressed, Olmsted headed west in 1863 to recuperate. He took over as superintendent of a mining camp not far from the Yosemite Valley in north-

ern California. The awesome scale and natural grandeur of the western landscape did not at first appeal to him but he came to appreciate the power of that landscape and the extent to which it played a key role in defining American identity. He authored a report calling for the preservation of Yosemite as a "public pleasure ground," laying the groundwork for the creation of America's national parks. When he later came to work on the grounds of the Capitol in Washington, the man-made grandeur of the Capitol building similarly impressed him. His design goal was

to accentuate that grandeur, not to compete with it, to frame it as an icon worthy of the nation's awe.

With job offers piling up in the office, Vaux urged Olmsted to return from California. In no time, both were immersed in an array of projects, including the design of Brooklyn's Prospect Park. Another smaller but notable project came from Olmsted's childhood friend, Edward Gallaudet, who hired the pair to design a campus in the nation's capital for Gallaudet University, known at the time as the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and

Dumb. The site consisted of 100 acres of farmland bordering Florida Avenue northeast of the Capitol. The 1866 plan is significant for its curvilinear roads and pathways and its wide, open green surrounded by academic and residential buildings—much like the common in a New England village. (Figure 3)

In 1868 Olmsted took the same idea and laid out a plan for an entire suburb, Riverside, Illinois, intentionally using gently curved roadways as an antidote to the oppression of the urban grid and hectic city life in general. By 1869 he was working on numerous other proj-

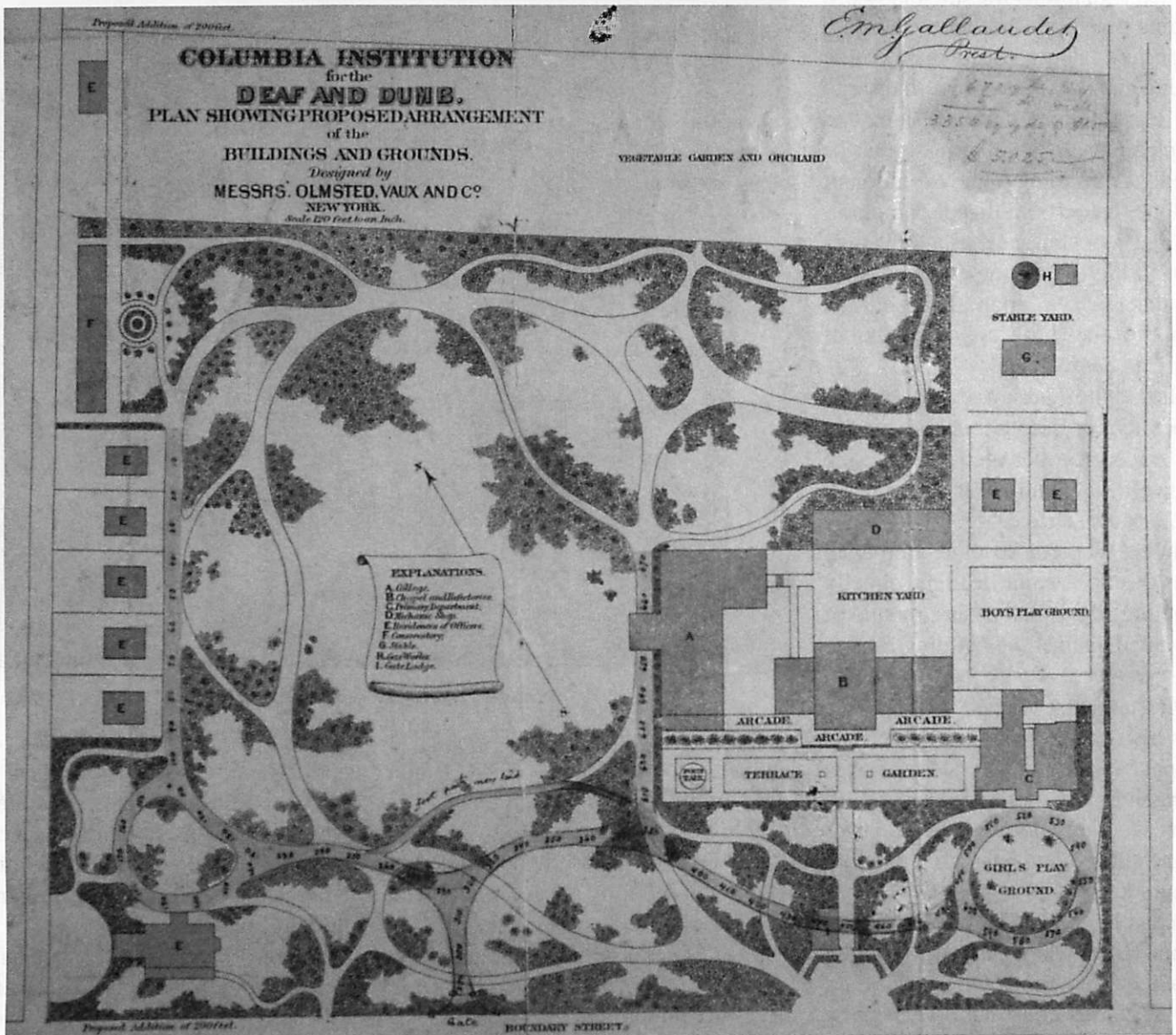


Figure 3. Gallaudet University plan, 1866

ects, including the string of parks, parkways, and landscaped waterways now prized as Boston's "Emerald Necklace."

All that Olmsted had done before informed his work at the U.S. Capitol. Congress appointed him landscape architect of the Capitol grounds in 1874 after Sen. Justin Morrill (R-VT), chair of the Senate Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, invited him to Washington to consider improvements to the grounds around the Capitol. Although L'Enfant had indicated a mall in his 1791 plan, that space had not yet acquired its formality, nor was it considered "sacred space" at that time. Renwick's Smithsonian castle stood nearly in the middle with Andrew Jackson Downing's gardenesque plantings around it, and there was no logical connection between the Capitol and the Mall, nor between the Capitol and the wide roads that radiated from its perimeter.

Olmsted visited Washington twice in March 1874 and strongly recommended that the Capitol grounds be planned not as a building yard or garden but as part of a larger effort to link the Capitol to the White House and the Potomac River beyond.² Congress did not share that vision. He was advised to limit his purview to the acreage surrounding the Capitol and he did.

Walter's new dome was higher and weightier than its predecessor, and thought to be fireproof because it was made entirely of cast iron. The building expansion that altered the relationship between the building and its dome also altered the relationship between the much-enlarged building and its site. The space surrounding the Capitol building was not yet recognized as a necessary component of the whole scheme—and could have been used to accommodate further Capitol expansion or for other purposes. It was Olmsted who saw the whole picture and urged Congress to create a finite enclave free of structures, displays, or other intrusions. The design challenge he faced was how to create a plan that

recognized the Capitol as a workplace but also provided a dignified setting that amplified the power of the architecture—as an icon, our leading symbol of democratic identity.

His plan, preserved by the Office of the Architect of the Capitol, accomplished those goals. (Figure 4) It linked the Capitol to the dozens of streets and walkways that converged on its boundaries and it provided easy access to carriages and pedestrians (and later to automobiles). The curvilinear pattern, seen earlier at Central Park and on a smaller scale at Gallaudet, would not

have worked here by itself because of the formal mass of the building at its center. Here Olmsted deftly superimposed relaxed curves over the straight diagonals that anchor the plan and connect it to L'Enfant's plan for the city. The idea was to create a landscape that featured comfort and control, one that complemented the architecture but provided respite from its colossal scale and powerful impact, a strong statement, but one that did not call too much attention to itself. It had to work well with the existing street plan. Olmsted wanted to provide a visual

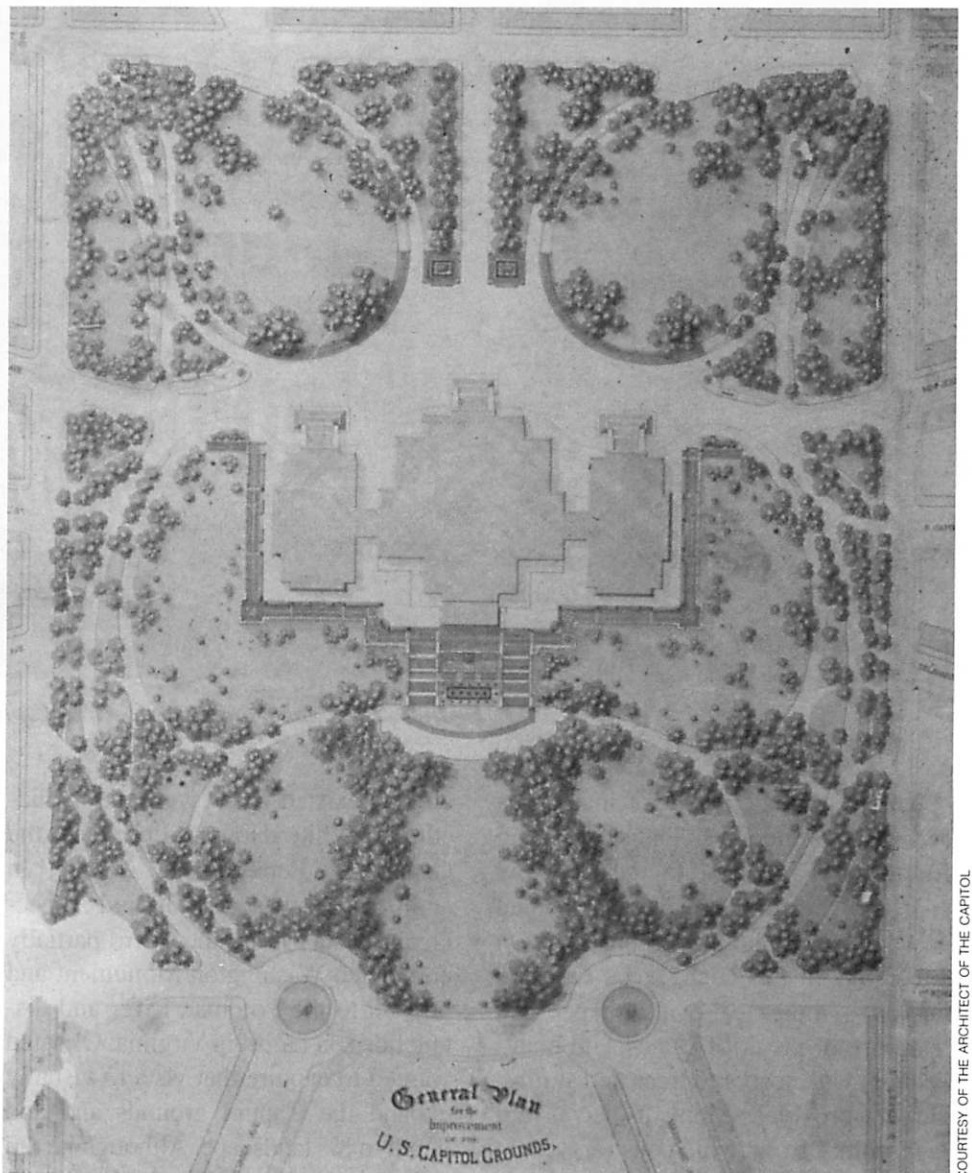


Figure 4. Olmsted's 1874 plan for the Capitol grounds

and psychological oasis in the midst of a growing city that by his own description was congested, noisy, crowded, hot and more often than not seething with political intrigue. Views of the Capitol are carefully framed for maximum impact. Olmsted intended for people not just to glimpse the building but to encounter it.

East Capitol Street opens a vista to the stately east front and leads to the

covered by vines and provided shade in summer. He relied on the simple massing of greenery and lawns punctuated by specimen trees to give his design interest and visual unity. He did not favor brightly colored flowers that in his opinion detracted from the whole and cheapened the effect.

Planners had expected the city to grow to the east, but the city core

by artists who juxtaposed shadow and light to draw the eye deep into pictorial compositions. But to incorporate distant views of landmarks, water, and sunsets, Olmsted had to provide a suitably grand vantage point, a viewing platform that allowed the building to take advantage of its hilltop site.

He also needed to address the massive weight of the new dome. There was



Figure 5. East Capitol Street approach to Capitol

open paved area created for inaugurations and other ceremonies. The steps rising from the open plaza to the doorway added to the drama of a processional arrival. Trees lined the formal axis. On either side of this central axis Olmsted laid out symmetrical ovals, shaped like teardrops or precious stones, and planted them with scattered trees and shrubs. He even provided seating at special vantage points from which visitors could best take in the building and its majestic dome—ironwork shelters that were

already existed to the west and included the White House—linked to the Capitol by Pennsylvania Avenue. In addition, the west side offered a spectacular vista toward the (then) partially completed Washington Monument and beyond to the Potomac River and distant horizon far off in Virginia. Olmsted wanted to capture that vista to visually expand the Capitol grounds and add depth to his landscape. Although he did not consider himself an artist, he utilized the same painterly methods used

nothing subtle about the dome. It was a powerful symbol—but powerful only to the extent that it did not appear to crush the building beneath it or cause it to slip down the slope that bordered it on its west. Olmsted's solution was to design multi-tiered marble terraces along the west front of the Capitol, transforming what had been a grassy mound into a solid structural foundation for the massive building. Unlike the far more informal turf-covered terraces that he used to frame the

Gallaudet Chapel, these featured white marble, accented only by wrought iron lamp posts, railings, and great bronze urns filled with greenery. Two grand staircases provided transition between the building and the park-like grounds below and flanked blind arcades that hid the sub-basement. (Figure 7) It was an elegant solution that also provided much needed stability and effectively turned the Capitol toward the city below.

By aligning the staircases with radiating walkways Olmsted also linked the Capitol to the city to the east. To give members of Congress an idea of the view from the terrace and how the terraces would look, Olmsted constructed scaffolding and invited members of the oversight committee to inspect it. They authorized funds for the project in 1876 but appropriations requests failed that year and again in 1877 and 1878. Olmsted, convinced that reason would ultimately prevail, left town to pursue other projects. He returned to supervise the completion of the project in 1884 when Congress finally appropriated the funds for the terraces and monumental staircases.

As with all his projects, there were political skirmishes along the way. Olmsted knew when to stand his ground and when to compromise to see his visions realized. In 1885, for example, Sen. Henry Dawes (R-MA) suggested that he open the arcades to allow light into the rooms beneath the Capitol; Olmsted refused and threatened to quit, arguing that the Capitol needed a solid base. In the end, however, he agreed to insert windows—only in the middle section between the stairs, though, and not beyond. In overall effect, the new terrace reinforced the impression that the massive building was solidly supported. In giving that impression, Olmsted knew that the corners were most important. He could compromise on the center, but not on the edges.

The formality of the terraces and stairs contrasted the informality of the



Figure 6. Architect Thomas Wisedell, an Englishman who had worked under Vaux at Prospect Park, was responsible for the fine brickwork in the grotto, the summerhouse that Olmsted tucked onto the grounds near the northwest corner of the grounds at a spot where a spring emerges to provide fresh, cool water to parched summer visitors. The red sandstone grotto, shaded by shrubs, trees, and hanging plants and almost invisible from afar, also includes a water carillon that added a soft music to the cool oasis.



Figure 7. Terrace and urns on the west façade of Capitol



Figure 5. East Capitol Street approach to Capitol

landscape on the gently sloping grounds below, where Olmsted employed the same design principles as he had used on a grander scale at Central Park to create a sense of openness and breadth. By massing planting around the base of the terraces, he added to the visual solidity of the foundation. By alternating dark and light and accenting open lawn with solitary trees, he created a landscape that was at once expansive and intimate.

Although paths linked the park to the city beyond, the city seemed far away at times—and that was intentional, too. The grounds that look so naturalistic and picturesque were neither when Olmsted started work. Like Central Park, the grounds are a man-made landscape, not natural scenery fortuitously preserved in the middle of the city. Olmsted reconstituted the existing landscape with the help of engineers who re-laid sewer, gas, and water lines beneath the surface just as he did in parks he designed in

Boston, Buffalo, and Brooklyn. From past experience, he knew how to prepare the soil and how to select proper plants.

Others had tried to plant around the Capitol before, but none had succeeded because the soil conditions were so poor. Olmsted found the ground eroded and unsuitable for planting. He attempted to save a number of existing trees but found them too weak because of shallow roots that had been unable to penetrate the clay subsoil. Writing to his sanitary engineer, George Waring, he described why it was necessary to plough and till the existing soil before adding manure and at least fifty cubic feet of fuel peat to each acre of subsoil and another fifty to the surface soil. The cost was high, he said, but it was absolutely necessary if plants were to survive.³

Olmsted's plant list left nothing to the imagination. He knew what he wanted and where he wanted it placed. Many specimen trees were labeled.

Unlike buildings, which are complete when done, landscapes are not “done” when planting is complete. Landscapes have the added dimension of time. Even when large plants are planted, it takes time for landscapes to mature...and they need constant care, as well. Subsequent “improvements” or changes can threaten landscape quality. Olmsted successfully arranged plants to obscure views of carriage roads, but the later use of the east plaza as a parking lot was nothing he could have screened out.

Having worked in Washington for years, Olmsted knew the climate well, and he saw trees not only as a means of providing shade but as a means of helping to rid the city of noise and pollution. His interest in trees reached beyond the Capitol grounds. He served as chairman of the street trees committee of the city's Board of Public Works while he worked on the Capitol. According to Frederick Gutheim, the planner and urban historian who mas-

ter-minded the national Olmsted sesquicentennial in 1972, Olmsted's recommendations led to the eventual planting of some 60,000 D.C. street trees.⁴ In a paper prepared for the Landscape Foundation in 1985, Gutheim also described how Olmsted urged the city to plant a belt of trees between the Capitol and the marshes to the southwest to keep what was then called "malarial 'miasma'" away from Capitol Hill.⁵ That was radical thinking at a time before the mosquito was recognized as a disease carrier and before water was recognized as its breeding ground. According to Gutheim, too, Olmsted's suggestions to Montgomery Meigs about a great urban park for Washington helped give

impetus to the creation of Rock Creek Park, a long-term project developed by the Army Corps of Engineers and later the National Park Service under the continued supervision of the Olmsted firm.⁶

Much has happened since Olmsted designed the grounds of the Capitol but the purpose of this paper was to explore what he wanted to do and what he did, not what others have made of it or what others have done to it. Thankfully, the Architect of the Capitol intends to rebuild the historic Olmsted landscape on the Capitol's east front once the new U.S. Capitol Visitors Center is complete. The landscape will be altered because of the sloping entrance to the underground

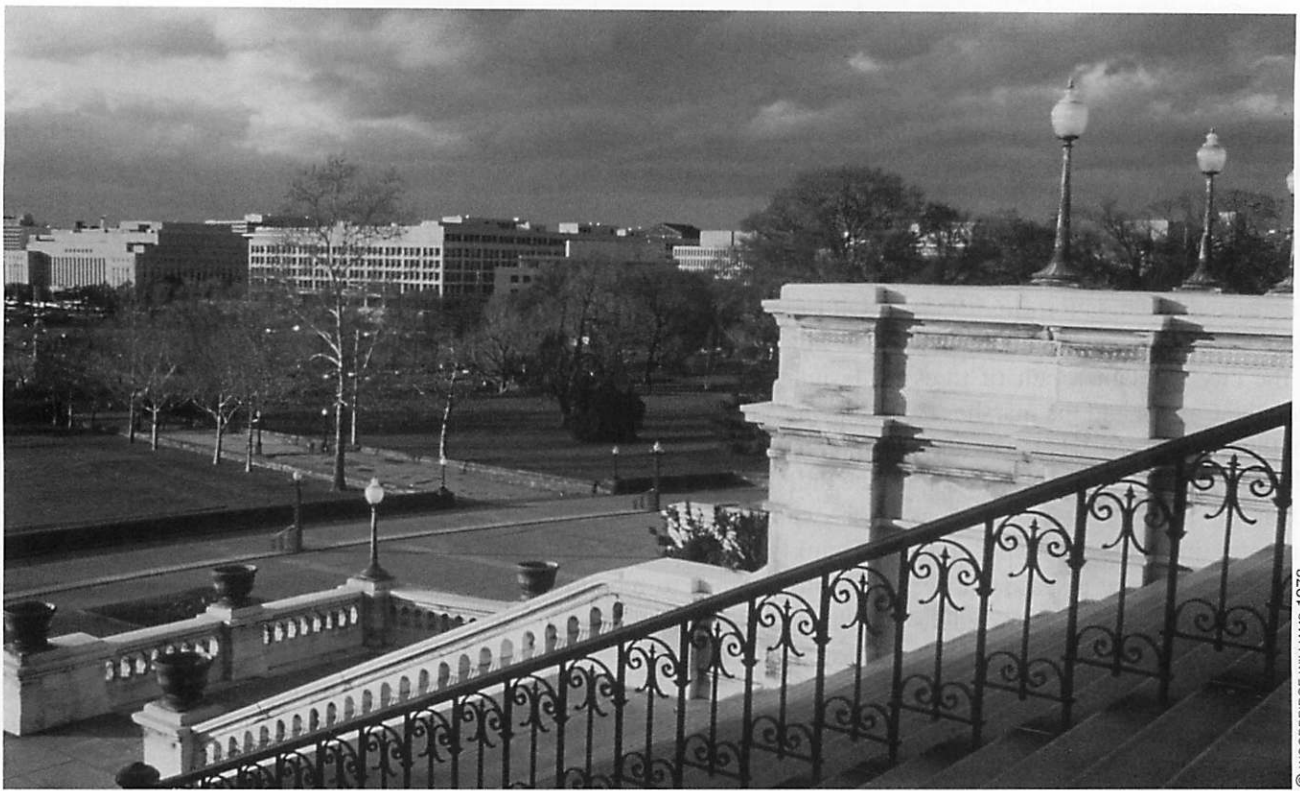
center and because of other factors, but the introduction of brightly colored bedding plants and the presence of cars, not to mention the addition of security barriers, had already compromised the landscape's historic integrity. It can only be hoped that the Architect of the Capitol's new master plan for the Capitol Complex will respect Olmsted's intent. It remains to be seen whether the public will again have access to the terraces and the surrounding landscape or whether visitors will learn about the building (and its grounds) only from films and exhibits.

The security situation at the Capitol is regrettable but serious. Olmsted could not have foreseen the situation that challenges planners today, but his

Figure 9. The curves of the roads and walkways were echoed in the terraces and handsome masonry walls that enclosed the grounds and defined the perimeter. Olmsted took great care to delineate the perimeter because he recognized the importance of the interface between the grounds of the Capitol and the city beyond. The low curved walls set the tone for the enclosed landscapes, suggesting the curves within and drawing people toward the entrances. They also serve as barriers, facilitating access control.



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Figure 10. Details such as ironwork railings further animated what might have otherwise seemed to be ponderous expanses of masonry and added a note of syncopation to steps bordered by more massive parapets and marble balustrades.

plan did give the Capitol building what is today considered to be an acceptable security setback from vehicular traffic. And instead of building his landscape at street level, he elevated its edges and bordered it with walls high enough and strong enough to meet many current vehicle barrier standards. (See Figure 9.) More buildings could have been incorporated into the landscape, or active recreation facilities such as ice rinks, or public roads, but fortunately they were not. Olmsted opposed such

additions because he wanted to maintain the formality of the space around the Capitol. It was a setting for the Capitol, he said, not a city park.

With prescience, Olmsted designed a landscape that continues to serve us well. Amplifying the symbolic potential of the site, he made it at once more powerful and more accessible. Certainly his work has had a “civilizing” influence on the Capitol and it has provided the entire capital with a lasting legacy—more valuable now than ever before. ☆

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Notes

1 Laura Wood Roper, *FLO, A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted*, (Baltimore, 1973), p. 82.

2 Roper, 375.

3 Olmsted to Waring (7/19/1874) cited in Roper, 377.

4 Frederick Gutheim, “The Olmsted Heritage in the Nation’s Capital,” unpublished manuscript produced for the Landscape Architecture Foundation and the National Association for Olmsted Parks, 1985, 16.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 18.

For Further Reading

Beveridge, Charles and Paul Rocheleau, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape*, (New York, 1998).

Gutheim, Frederick. “The Olmsted Heritage in the Nation’s Capital,” unpublished manuscript produced for the Landscape Architecture Foundation and the National Association for Olmsted Parks. Washington: Landscape Architecture Foundation, 1985.

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