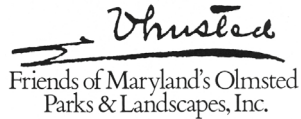


The Great 1904 Fire

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.'s Role in Rebuilding the Burnt District



FMOPL Digest

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One hundred years ago, the Great Baltimore Fire destroyed over 1,500 buildings and left 140 acres of downtown Baltimore in ruins roughly from Liberty Street to the Jones Falls and Fayette Street to the Harbor.

While the 1904 Fire devastated many businesses and financial interests, the catastrophe created a great opportunity to improve the heart of Baltimore by widening streets, developing a new public market and improving wharfs at the Inner Harbor. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. played a major role in the rebuilding of Baltimore. The Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects (OBLA) had just completed *A Report upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore* for the Municipal Art Society and the City Park Commission. This plan for stream valley parks along the Jones Falls, Gwynns Falls and Herring Run shaped park development in Baltimore for the next hundred years. In February 1904, city leaders sought Olmsted's help in

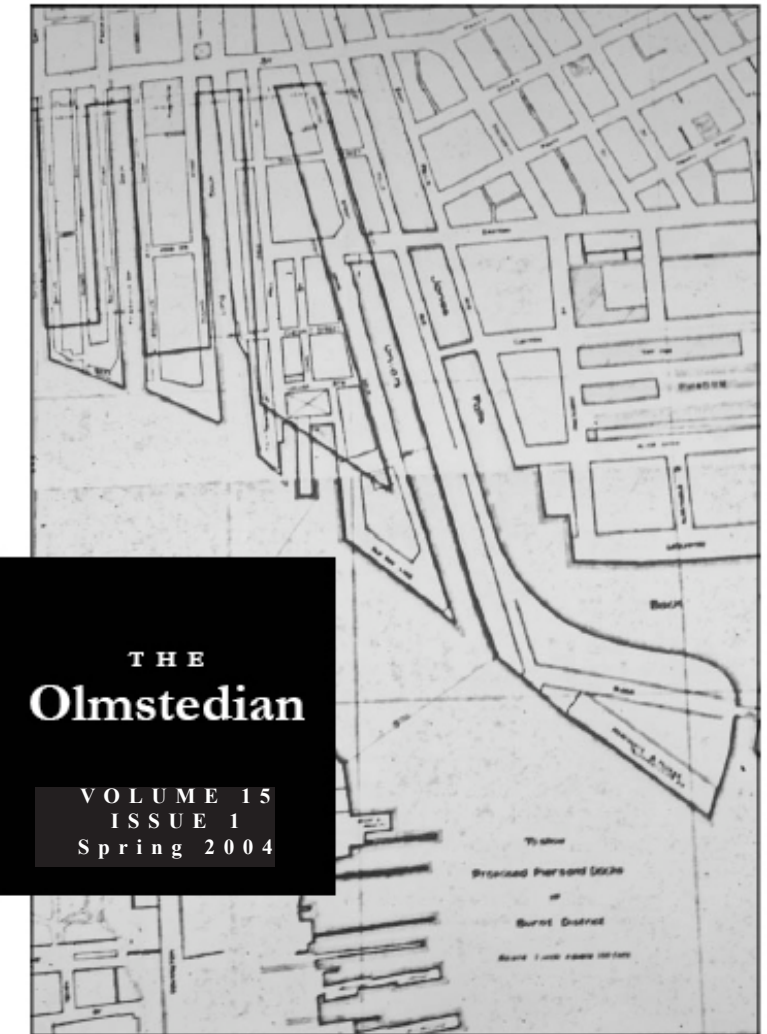
planning for improvements in the downtown area destroyed by the fire.

Time was of the essence. Businesses in the downtown area were in a hurry to rebuild. Olmsted conducted a study in five days. On February 18, 1904, only ten days after the fire ended, he outlined his recommendations in a 19-page letter to the 63 member Citizen's Emergency Committee created to handle post-fire rebuilding.

Most of Olmsted's recommendations involved widening streets. He called for Pratt Street to become a 120-foot to 150-foot wide major thoroughfare to accommodate waterfront traffic. Baltimore Street, a major commercial street,

could only be widened on the north side since several surviving buildings stood on the south side: Alex Brown and Sons, the Continental Trust Company and the International Trust Company. Since Baltimore Street carried a great deal of streetcar traffic, Olmsted suggested that it be widened to 52 feet with 14-foot wide sidewalks – a total of 80 feet. The prospect of widening Baltimore Street caused so much turmoil, however, that the recommendation was dropped from the plan.

Olmsted also predicted that within 25 years transit would be moved into underground tunnels (He was off by 54 years, since the Baltimore Metro did not open for service until November 1983). The prospect of widening



Olmsted, Jr. proposed major changes for rebuilding the Inner Harbor piers destroyed by the 1904 Fire. Olmsted Associates, Project No. 2410 Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

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Olmsted also proposed the widening of Light Street, German (now Redwood) Street, Lombard Street, Hopkins Place, Commerce

Street and Charles Street. Most of these recommendations were approved and accomplished, but only within areas destroyed by the fire. Charles Street narrows north of Fayette Street where O'Neill & Co. department store and the Old Central Saving Bank

Building survived the fire. Calvert Street was not widened south of Baltimore Street to accommodate surviving buildings.

The Olmsted plan proposed a new street to run from the Harbor at Pratt and Light streets northwest to Baltimore and Liberty streets. This street would provide a shortcut to the waterfront and reduce traffic on Baltimore Street. City leaders rejected this idea since it would disrupt too many existing building lots. Years later, planners and citizens would lament that Charles Street does not connect directly to the Inner Harbor.

Olmsted also recommended a public plaza directly across from the St. Paul Street side of the Baltimore Courthouse to provide a dignified setting for the building and for fire protection. This plaza was built but reduced in size from 160 feet to 120 feet. He also suggested creating a civic plaza south of the Post Office and City Hall—an idea that was rejected at the time, but resurfaced 15 years later in a different form with the creation of War Memorial Plaza in front of City Hall. He also recommended the creation of a new municipal market space from Baltimore Street to Lombard Street and Market Place to the Jones Falls. The Fish Market (now Port Discovery) is the only surviving market building, though additional wholesale and

retail market buildings were built at the site he suggested.

In addition to the physical improvements the City accomplished, Olmsted wanted architects to cooperate on projects in order to create harmonious streetscapes. He felt that architects could adopt the same type of brick or stone trim on adjacent buildings. For the most part this suggestion was ignored except in one case. The architects of buildings next to the old Alex Brown Building at Baltimore and Calvert streets cooperated in the manner proposed by Olmsted. All buildings adjacent to the surviving bank feature a similar brick color, stone trim, and height.

While Olmsted was in the vanguard in his proposals to rebuild downtown Baltimore after the fire, he did not envision the Inner Harbor as a public promenade. City leaders also followed Olmsted's advice to acquire the entire waterfront destroyed by the fire and build new piers that could be leased to waterfront uses. Three days after the fire, Edward H. Bouton, the President of The Roland Park Company wrote to the Olmsted Brothers, stating, "It seems to me that there is an opportunity here now to make some provision for the improvement of this water front, so that, while meeting commercial needs, it can be made an attractive place

also ... after providing for stone wharves and a reasonable driveway back of them, a parked or open space might then be left. This would be of incalculable advantage in the future ..."

Olmsted replied two days later, "I fear that the treatment you mention would not be practicable, or if practicable, would not be worth its cost. The average length of piers is such that a continuous promenade at the shoreward end of them must be somewhat remote from the main body of water. Moreover, any park strip in such a position would be crossed at grade by the innumerable streams of traffic connecting with the wharves; and the wharves are almost inevitably to be occupied in a great number of cases by sheds and other structures which would cut off a view of the water."

At the time an unknown architect, Paul Burkhard, developed a schematic plan in keeping with Bouton's suggestion, which was published in a local architectural journal in May 1904, but Burkhard's plan was ignored. Today, planners are turning Bouton and Burkhard's idea into a reality.

After 100 years, approximately 20 per cent of the buildings constructed after the fire within The Burnt District survive. The

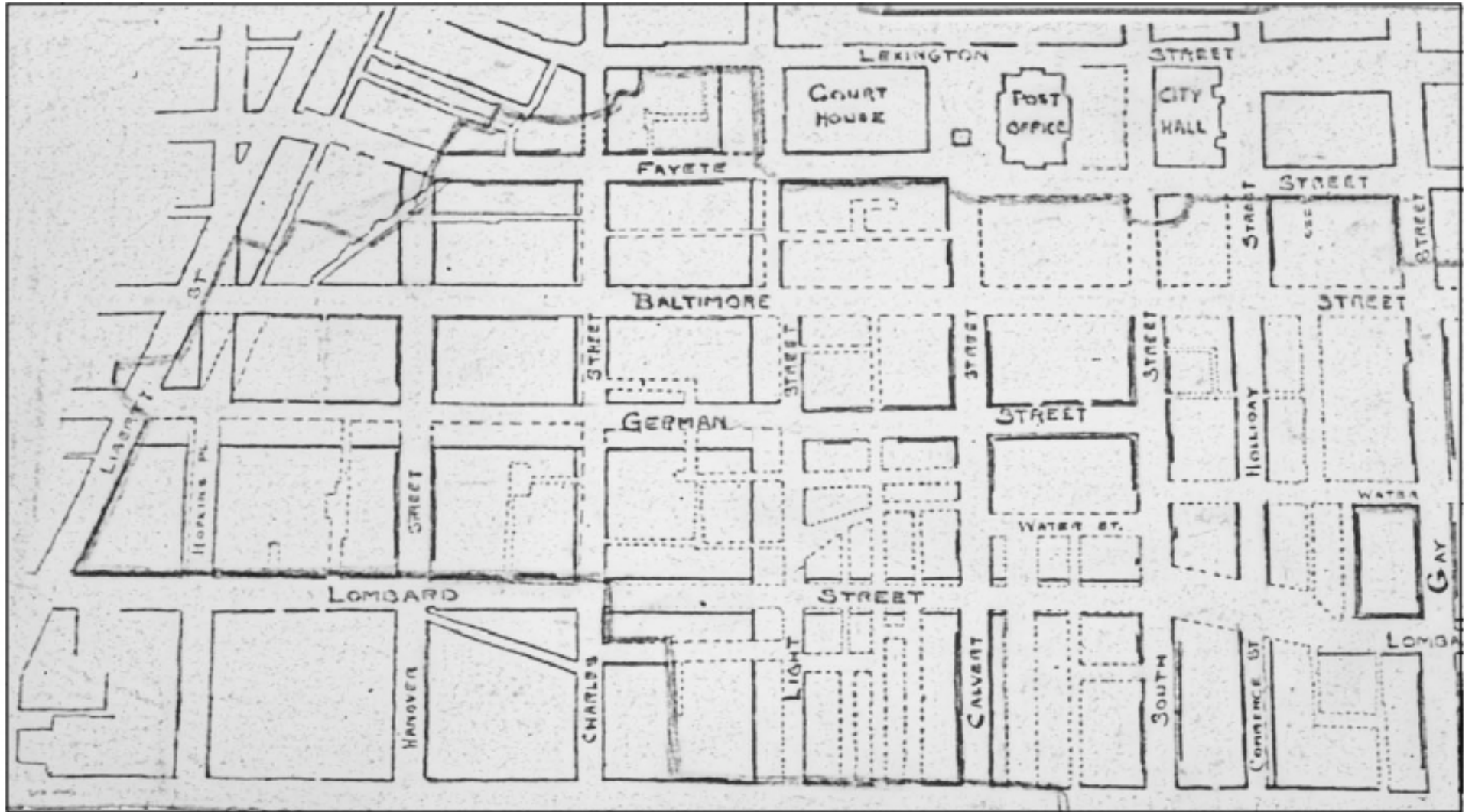


Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., circa 1910. Photo by Alice Austin courtesy of Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

Charles Center and Inner Harbor redevelopment projects have rebuilt entire blocks. Office towers built after 1970 replaced smaller commercial buildings on Baltimore Street. Little of the built environment is recognizable from Olmsted's time, yet the street widenings, municipally controlled harbor, piers and the open space west of the Courthouse on St. Paul Street endure as a tribute to Olmsted's significant city planning efforts a century ago.

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This 1904 map shows the plan proposed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. to improve traffic circulation by removing and widening streets for a growing downtown business district a century ago. Olmsted Associates, Project No. 2410 Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.