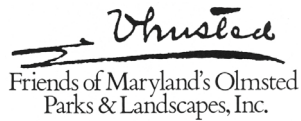


# 1904 Olmsted Bros. Report

## The Advancement of City Planning in Baltimore



FMOPL Digest

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Easily overlooked a century later, the 1904 Report, the convenient name for the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects (OBLA) *Report upon the Development of Public Grounds for Baltimore*, helped lay the groundwork for the growth of comprehensive planning in Baltimore, because it described the essential role to be played by a park system, one that included a network of boulevards and natural reservations. The 1904 Report was a key guide to managing growth. It

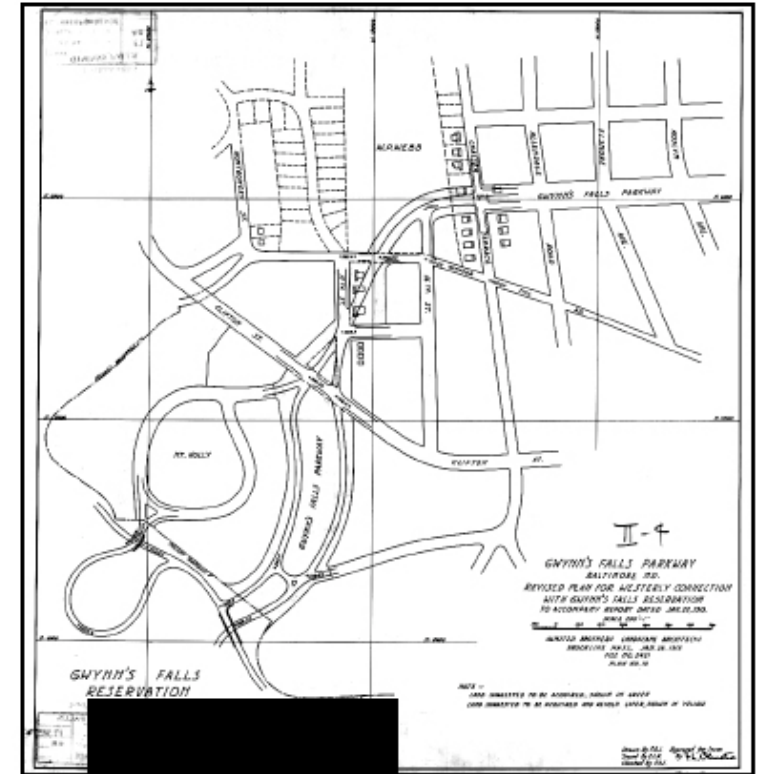
was one of many contributions the Olmsted firm, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. in particular, made to the establishment of city planning in early 20th century America.

The sixth largest US city in 1900, Baltimore had a population of nearly 509,000. What stands out today is how concentrated an urban environment it was. The “Existing and Proposed Park Lands” map of the 1904 Report<sup>1</sup> shows that many areas (still within its small 1888 borders) remained undeveloped, especially the northwest section.

Like other cities of this era, Baltimore expected to grow rapidly and extensively, and further annexation was anticipated. A prime concern of the early city planning movement was how to extend street connections efficiently into annexed areas. Controlling such extensions was one of the few powers cities had at that time to structure their future growth.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the 1904 Report devoted much attention to using boulevards and park-ways as key connections to the growing suburbs like Roland Park and other areas likely to be annexed.

The 1904 Report also stressed the need to plan a street system for the new areas with a hierarchy of functions. One report section, Principles of City Subdivision, criticized strongly the practice of planning all future streets without any thought about their eventual function. This approach gave secondary roadways a disproportionate amount of space. Delineating too rigid a system of streets was another serious flaw, for it impaired future developers from discovering the “most economical and most appropriate” ways to lay out their projects. Indeed, if a logical and efficient street system were planned, the 1904 Report asserts, the individual mistakes of specific subdivisions would have less an impact on the overall growth of the city. The report also cautioned that locating parks should not interfere with extending the street system in the most logical ways.

Such passages demonstrate a belief (typical of the early city planning movement) that good planning can achieve both “efficiency” and “beauty” as well as produce “economical” solutions for city growth. Not until 1902 did Baltimore be-



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*This 1915 Olmsted Brothers Revised Plan for the Westerly Connection with Gwynn's Falls Reservation shows recommendations for land acquisition to achieve a comprehensive park system envisioned in the 1904 Report. Subsequently, this recommended approach to the park was not fully realized.*

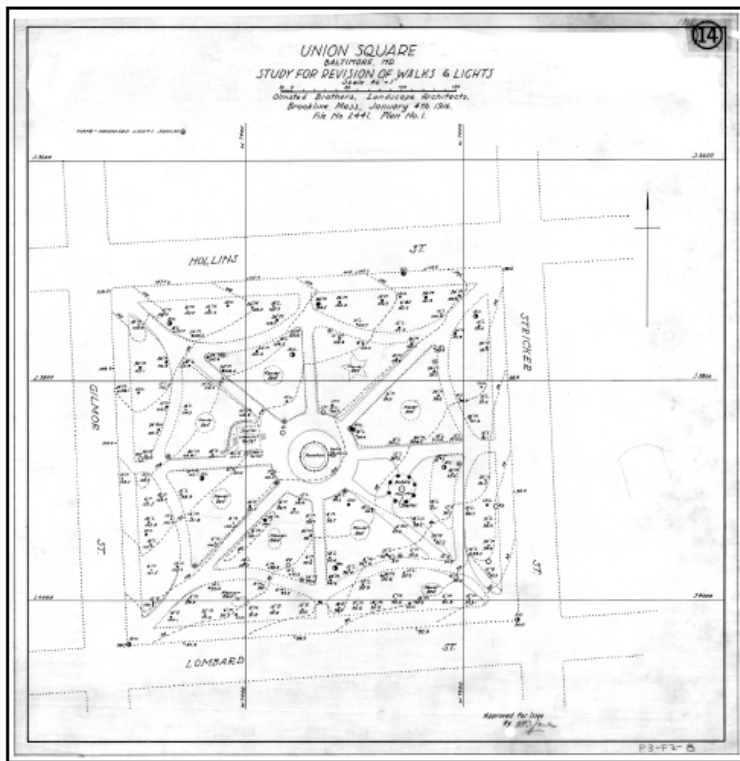


Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., circa 1910. Photo by Alice Austin courtesy of Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

gin to require subdivision plan review to ensure that new streets could properly connect to existing streets. Consequently, the advice of the 1904 Report should not be taken by readers today as merely stating the obvious.

The stream valley recommendations of the 1904 Report were also a guiding strategy for growth. Setting aside major stream val-

leys as natural reserves offered not merely aesthetic and environmental enhancement, but also helped Baltimore avoid perpetuating the overcrowding and the attendant problems that typified much of the existing urban fabric. These stream valley reserves would also provide for more efficient urban storm water management and avoid placing growth in areas subject to flood hazards.



*Olmsted contended, “it is the one big job of Comprehensive City Planning to take all such specialists with all their plans, and put them together to evolve a general city plan which will have the maximum of advantages and the minimum of disadvantages for the People of Baltimore as a whole.”*

Olmsted, Jr. expressed his concern about the failure to follow the parkway recommendations in his 1923 response to a *Baltimore Sun* inquiry regarding park proposals promoted by a City Planning Committee chaired by Mayor Joseph Shirley. He acknowledged that many deviations from the 1904 Report recommendations were justified because they were responding to changes in the built environment that had occurred since publication. However, he also blamed a lack of prompt action after 1904 for leading to a “shrinking and shaving down” process regarding many of the proposed radial parkways.

A good example of this complaint was the swift demise of the original concept for a parkway to connect Druid Hill Park and Clifton Park. The 1904 Report conceived of a meandering parkway, a section of which would run along Sumwalt Run, a stream located near the present 32nd Street. In 1906, an insensitive extension of St. Paul Street had destroyed key naturalistic qualities that underpinned this recommendation. This situation was compounded by sale and loss of important wooded areas further east along the recommended route. Consequently, Olmsted did not

object to the later transformation of the original 1904 concept into the more formal and narrower boulevard that became 33rd Street.

Although a major east-west parkway developed in a much-attenuated form in a design later emulated by the Gwynns Falls Parkway, other 1904 Report concepts fared much worse. Often, city expansion outpaced the decisions necessary to implement these concepts. As quickly as 1906, for example, Olmsted concluded that the proposed parkway from Clifton Park to Patterson Park was “now blocked so as to be impractical.” The proposed parkway from Druid Hill Park to Robert E. Lee Park met a similar fate.

Comments about Broening Park show clearly Olmsted’s frustration at the absence of more effective city planning. Sacrificed to expanding the industrial and commercial uses of the waterfront, Broening Park by the early 1920s was only a shadow of the public space the 1904 Report envisioned. “Common sense,” Olmsted, Jr. declared, “should have prevailed in finding other locations for such industrial uses and permitting the thousands of new residents in areas to the south to have easy

access to enjoyment of the waterfront.” But common sense had not prevailed.<sup>4</sup>

In his mind the chief culprit was a lack of “any coordinating agency with the power and the will to bring conflicting specialists into line for the general welfare.” It was understandable that any city agency (the Harbor Board, in this case) would promote its own priorities. But a broker was needed. In a quite graphic way Olmsted contended “it is the one big job of Comprehensive City Planning to take all such specialists with all their plans, and put them together— knock their heads together if necessary— to evolve a *general* city plan which will have the maximum of advantages and the minimum of disadvantages for the *People of Baltimore* as a whole.”

Although Olmsted, Jr. never wrote a full scale description of his philosophy of city planning, this passage certainly makes clear his view that coordination was absolutely essential for effective city planning.

—David Holden, *Urban Planner, Charter FMOPL Board Member and author of Charles Street: A Boulevard Revisited*

*Olmsted Bros. Franklin Square Study for Revision of Walks and Lights, 1916. Digital image from the Olmsted Project, © Maryland State Archives, 2002.*

By the 1910s OBLA had assisted in the acquisition of 1,050 acres of new parkland. It also laid out Wyman, Swann, and Latrobe Parks and planned the boundaries of Gwynns Falls Park.<sup>3</sup>

In designs for the extension of Roland Park and the Homeland, Guilford and Original Northwood residential developments, the Olmsted firm did much to help fill in the growth framework its 1904 Report had helped establish. Builders like James Keelty and Edward Gallagher built thousands of daylight townhouses in other annexed areas between the turn of the

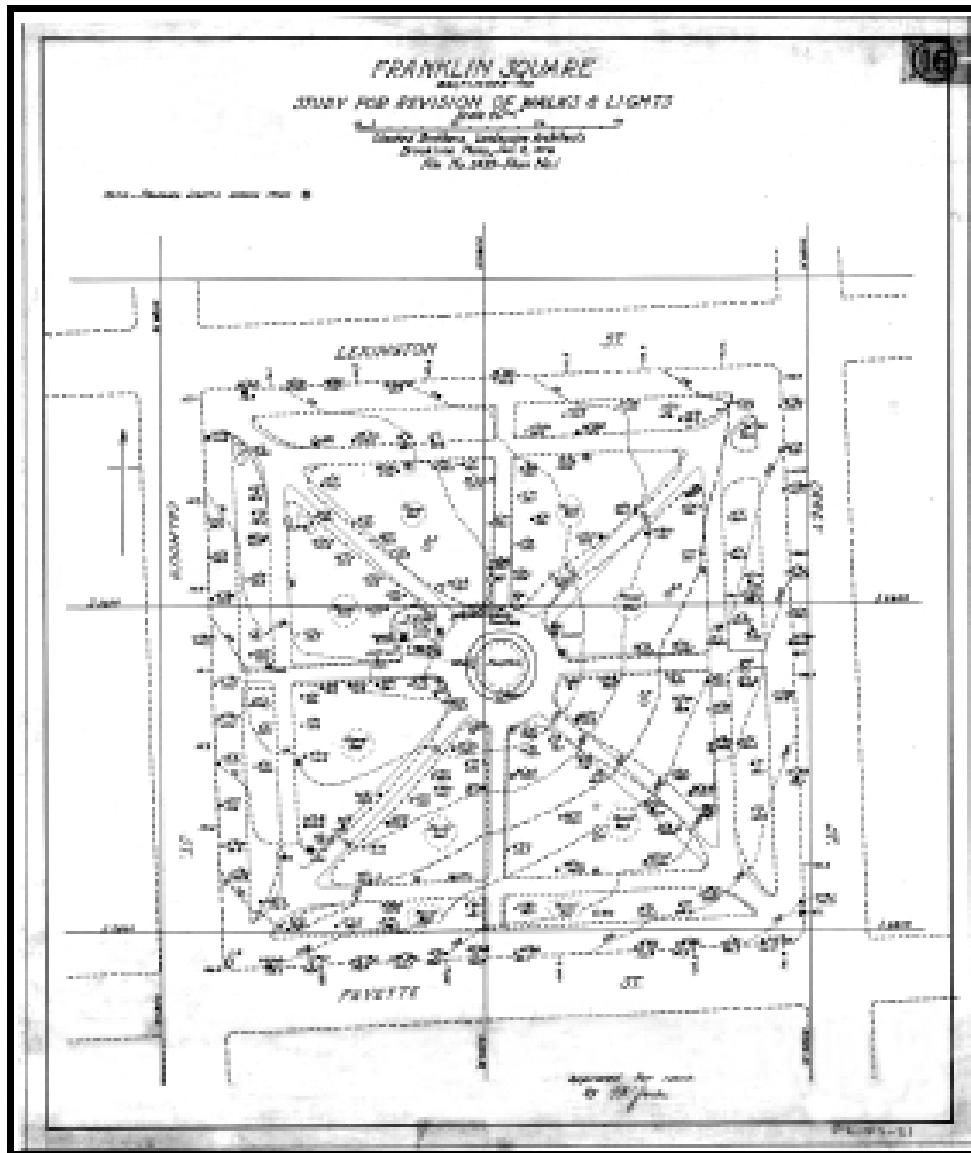
century and World War II. These builders often sought sites along the new boulevards such as 33rd Street and Gwynns Falls Parkway. In addition, new sites near the park edges of Wyman Park and Herring Run enhanced the value and appeal of new residential development. However, the fate of some of the parkway recommendations was mixed, partly because the money to acquire rights-of-way was not set aside and partly because planning mechanisms to coordinate actions by city agencies, landowners, and the Park Board were not established.

<sup>1</sup> A reprint of the 1904 Report is available from the Friends of Maryland's Olmsted Parks & Landscapes.

<sup>2</sup> Before World War I, no American city had a comprehensive plan that covered its entire jurisdiction. Zoning was not a common planning tool until the 1920s. Much planning in this era was sponsored by private groups such as the Municipal Art Society in Baltimore or the Commercial Club in Chicago. Baltimore finally established the City Planning Department in the late 1930s.

<sup>3</sup> A total of about 1400 acres were eventually acquired between 1904 and the second Olmsted park report of 1926. Despite the initial outburst of parkland acquisition after release of the 1904 Report, Olmsted subsequently criticized how many specific park acquisition efforts stopped short of obtaining the minimum acreage needed to make the report's recommendations fully realized.

<sup>4</sup> Another serious omission in Olmsted's mind was the minimal progress the City had made in acquiring and developing neighborhood parks—a deficiency he felt that that the City Planning Committee did not try to address adequately.



*Following the publication of the 1904 Report, the Olmsted Firm worked on numerous plans to integrate Baltimore's isolated 19th Century squares and places into a comprehensive park system for Baltimore. Shown here are plans for revitalizing Union Square and Perkins Square with new walkways, lights and plantings. The Olmsted Brothers were also responsible for developing a site plan for the placement of the grand Francis Scott Key Monument (restored in 2001 by the Baltimore Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation) on Eutaw Place. Digital images from the Olmsted Project, ©Maryland State Archives, 2002.*

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