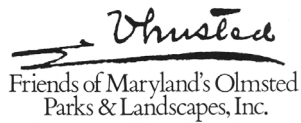


Latrobe Park



FMOPL Digest

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A small park in South Baltimore is still graced with the fine touches of an Olmsted design. Often overlooked on the way to Fort McHenry, Latrobe Park is a neighborhood treasure. Originally only six acres in size, this park was created to serve the working class neighborhoods on the Locust Point peninsula, as well as those on the trolley line that ran along Fort Avenue, a major street at the park's northern edge. Unlike plans for much larger parks like Patterson and Clifton,

what distinguishes Latrobe Park was the amount of active recreation that had to be accommodated in a tight space.

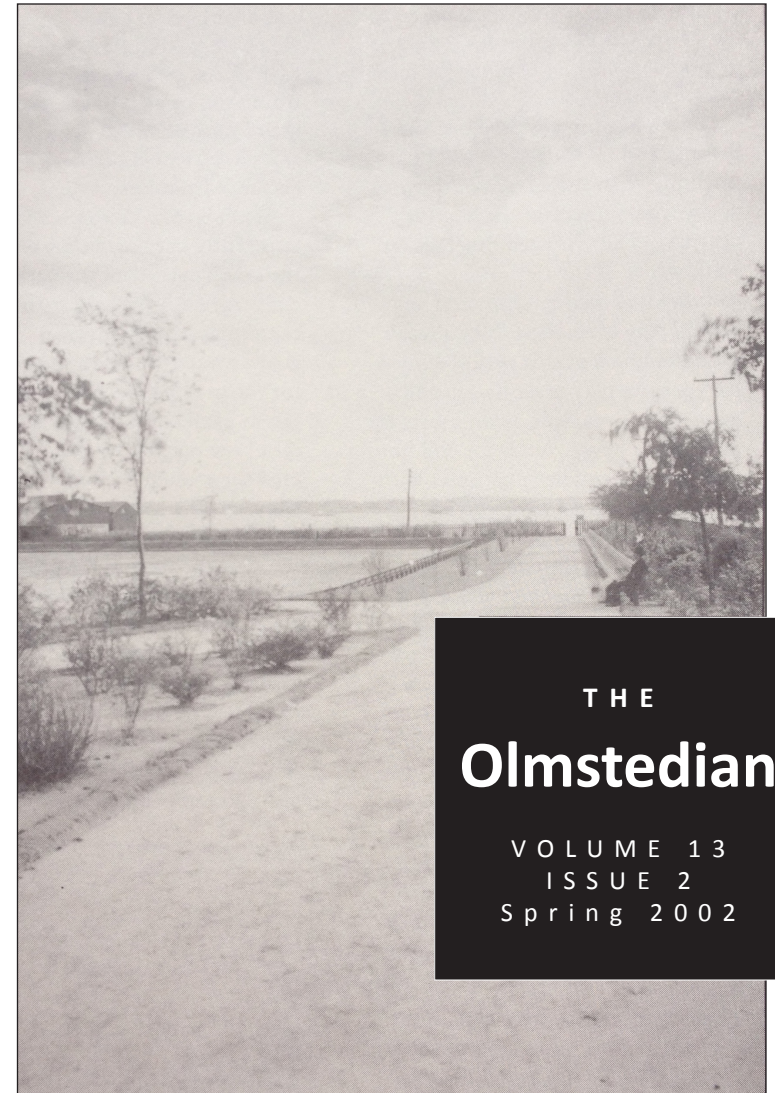
In 1904 the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects produced the *Report Upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore*, which had been commissioned by the Municipal Art Society and was enthusiastically received by the public. During the previous decade OBLA, based in

Brookline, Massachusetts, had designed the residential sub-division of Roland Park and developed plans for Riverside Park in south Baltimore.

The park is most likely named for Mayor Ferdinand I. Latrobe of Baltimore's distinguished Latrobe family. The City acquired the Locust Point site in 1902 during the Thomas G. Hayes Administration, 1899 to 1903. Mayor Latrobe had appointed Hayes to serve as City Counsel (now City Solicitor) during his administration (seven terms between 1875 and 1895). The City accepted both the Children's Playground Association's offer to operate programs at that location and the Public Park Athletic Association's proposed donation of a gym apparatus. In 1904, the Board of Park Commissioners retained the Olmsted Brothers firm to provide a plan that would accommodate these activities, as well as fulfill the public's request for a playing field.

Trends in the American Parks Movement

Latrobe Park's design is as much as reflection of Olmsted aesthetics as it is a commentary on the social



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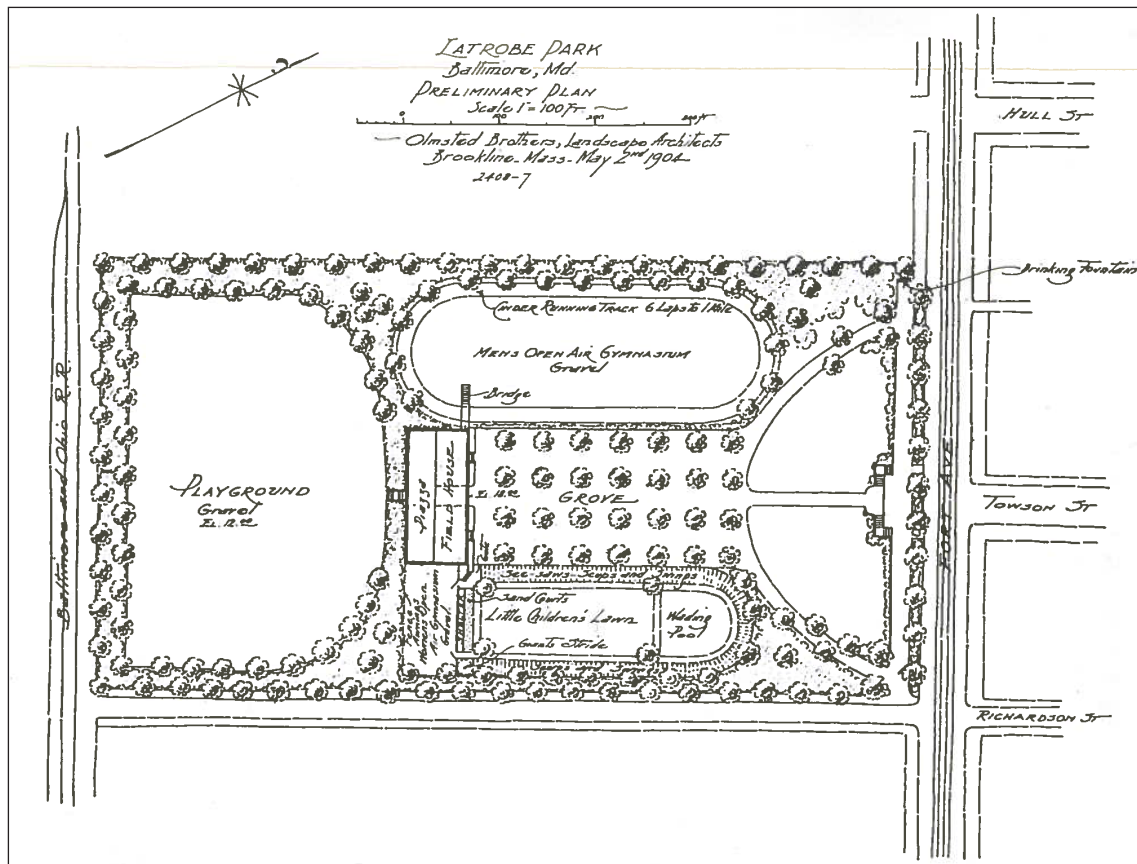
*An original park vista of the Patapsco River Middle Branch, now obscured.
Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Thomas W. Sears Collection.*

concerns of the period. In 1900, there was a fundamental shift in the concept of the appropriate use of city parks. The sensibility that guided earlier park development was that parks inspired and educated through the beauties of nature.

A new philosophy took hold at the turn of the century that promoted active recreation as a means to physical, mental, moral and social health. "Provision for exercise in the open air...is a matter of vital importance...as cities increased in



The Olmsted Brothers firm designed these sand courts with their distinctive massive two-foot columns supporting a gable wood trellis and the adjoining sitting shelter to provide shade for mothers watching their toddlers. The shelter and sand courts remain much the same today, but are now covered with blue metal roofs. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens.



Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

density, as more people come to be engaged in confining occupations, and...cheap transportation... reduces the amount of exercise people are compelled to take..." the Olmsted Brothers also wrote in their 1904 Report.

In addition, children became a distinct and important focus of park planning with the advent of the playground movement in the late 19th century. The Olmsted Brothers, as well, wrote of the importance of "the quantity and quality of physical and mental play of chil-

dren." As a result, park designers of this period tended to segregate play areas by age and gender—for example, team sports for older kids, playgrounds for children, and separate toddler play areas with women associated as caregivers.

Elements of Design

The plans for Latrobe Park and the correspondence between the Olmsted firm and the Baltimore City Department of Parks reveal a design approach to the creation of a compact recreational park within a natural setting. An 1898

topographical survey shows several blocks of rowhouses to the north of Fort Avenue, but little development existed to the south except scattered manufacturing plants. The open site sloped down 17 feet from Fort Avenue to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad tracks on the south. The Olmsted firm prevailed upon the City to acquire more land to the west as far as Hull Street (now Latrobe Park Terrace) to prevent housing with backyards abutting the park.

A 1904 Olmsted letter to the

Chairman of the Board of Park Commissioners outlines the basic design concept for the Latrobe site. A broad promenade along Fort Avenue would overlook the park with trees and plantings on either side to provide shelter from the bustling street. In response to a five-foot grade drop from the sidewalk to the park, a grand stair, complete with a fountain at its base, would become the central entrance from Fort Avenue opposite Towson Street. Across a wide lawn, two gently curving walkways from the north corners of the park would converge with the axial path in the center into a grove of trees. This grove would provide a shaded haven for the public to sit and relax or listen to band concerts—the social center of the neighborhood.

Gravel covered the ground beneath the trees to allow for the wear and tear of such activities as dancing.

To the west of the grove would be the men's running track and open air gymnasium, and to the east, the children's play area complete with a wading pool and sand courts. Adjoining the children's playground would be a small area dedicated to women's recreational fitness. Two field houses containing men's and women's dressing rooms would flank the grove of trees. Between the field houses, "a grand arch way would lead...to a piazza...overlooking the lower third of the park...devote(d) to field sports."

From the park's high point would be a view of the Patapsco River



View of Latrobe Park from the running track toward the Romanesque stone facade of the Church of Our Lady of Good Council on Fort Avenue in Locust Point. School youths play in the center gymnastics area. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens.



The original marble fountain at Latrobe Park. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens.

beyond the railroad tracks at the south end of the park. The Olmsted firm hoped that a future bridge over the tracks would reclaim the water's edge for boating and public bathing.

The simple, orderly design for Latrobe Park represented the ideals detailed in their 1904 Report. They wrote of "...the enjoyment of the formal decorative design...Compact trees in orderly rows...beds of flowers, hedges...all forming, with turf and paths...well-organized and obvious designs; these are particularly appropriate to the smaller and narrower park areas...because such areas are so intimately a part of city life that it seems only reasonable that they should be highly civilized themselves and give evidence throughout of a very perfect

human control."

What was built

By the following year in 1905, Latrobe Park was under construction and much of what the Olmsteds described was built. Photographs of the park, shown here, are from the Thomas W. Sears Collection of the Archives of American Gardens at the Smithsonian Institution.

Today, a berm constructed for the I-95 Fort McHenry Tunnel obscures the view of the water in the middle branch of the Patapsco River, but one can see the tall shipping cranes of the marine terminal. Over the years, the park has seen additional change. Adjacent land was added on the western edge along the railroad tracks for ten-

nis courts and a baseball field. The original running track and wading pool were grassed over, and many of the early trees were replaced.

There are still majestic shade trees along the west promenade marking the grove at the park's center, though it may be difficult to perceive the central grove as a united space since paths were installed instead of a "gravel carpet." It is also harder to discern the strong

symmetry of the original plan since Richardson Street was never extended and the women's field house, which complemented the men's field house, was never built.

There is a resurgence of interest in Latrobe Park. Recently, trees were planted, and through great community effort, the children's playground was upgraded. Although parts of the original plan are missing, a tour of Latrobe Park will

reveal elements of the distinctive Olmsted vision.

-Jillian Storms, AIA with special thanks to Eric Holcomb and Sandy Sparks



Thomas Sears' photograph for OBLA of the completed playfield and field house, with Fort Avenue in the distance. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens.