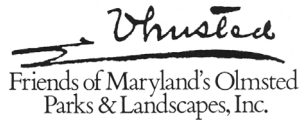


# Leakin Park

## Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.'s Critical Advice



FMOPL Digest

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In 1897 an editorial in the *Baltimore News* stated that Baltimore had “but one great park.” Rather than sing the praises of Druid Hill Park, the editorial lamented the “undeveloped condition” of the city’s other parks. After scolding city officials for their “neglect and bad management,” it concluded that the city’s parks “should be for the people— all the people— not for a particular class, or for those living in a particular district. Park pleasures and benefits should be available to all, and when a city grows as large as Baltimore now is, it is self-evident that one park will not do for all. We should have a series of parks adequate to the wants of the people.”

In 1904 and again in 1926, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. issued reports on the city’s park resources, in each case recommending expansion of existing parks and the creation of new ones. In preparing these reports, one of Olmsted Jr.’s goals was to achieve a “roughly equitable distribution” of park

amenities for “all the people,” but this was not his only objective. Perhaps more than any other park, the story of Leakin Park is emblematic of the competing priorities— and the difficulties— city officials and park enthusiasts encountered as they set out to create a world-class park system for Baltimore.

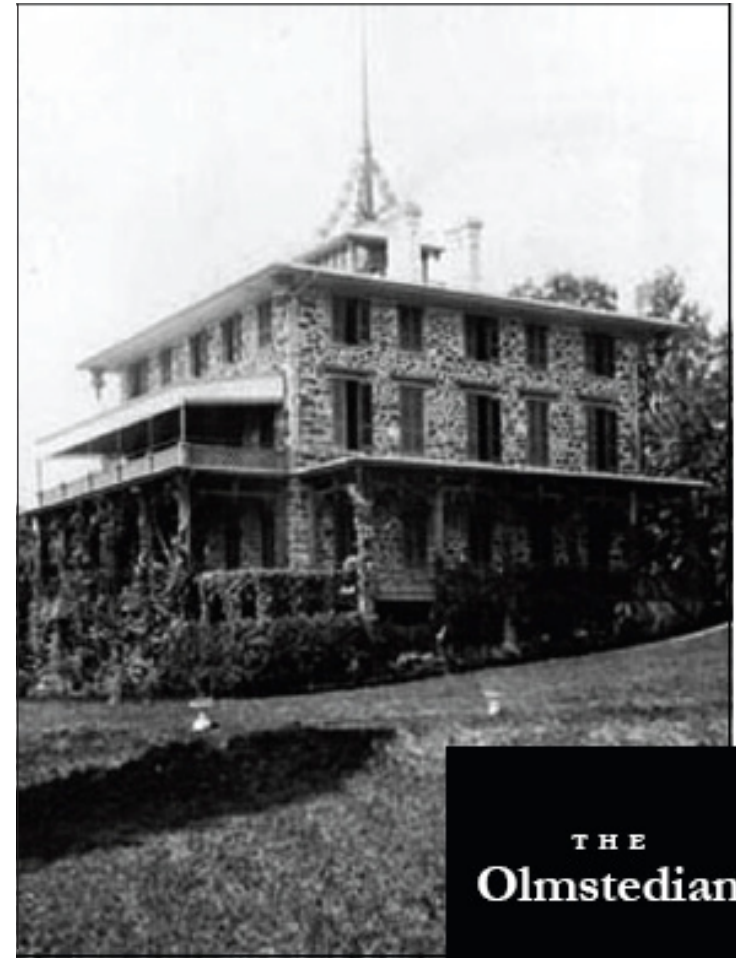
One of the hallmarks of Olmsted’s 1904 *Report upon the Development of Public Grounds for Baltimore*, was the concept of the stream valley park. According to Olmsted, protecting the city’s stream valleys offered several advantages:

- The scenery found along the streams was one of the city’s greatest assets.
- Such lowlands could usually be purchased for a modest price.
- Preserving natural drainage systems obviated the need to construct an elaborate and expensive piping infrastructure to handle storm waters.
- Olmsted Jr. observed, a stream valley “...cannot be built

on, it cannot be left in irresponsible private hands, but it can be used to great advantage for park purposes.” The key was to acquire enough land.

Enter J. Wilson Leakin, a successful Baltimore lawyer and philanthropist. In 1922, Leakin died, bequeathing his downtown estate to the city of Baltimore. His intention was to leave the city with a parcel of land to sell in order that a park could be purchased and bearing the Leakin name, to honor his grandfather, Shepard A. Leakin, a former mayor of Baltimore. The city was instructed to wait five years before selling Leakin’s property due to existing contracts with tenants. By the late 1920s, however, the real estate market had collapsed, forcing the city to maintain the property as a rental unit until the market recovered.

In the meantime, officials began the process of identifying a suitable location for Leakin Park. One



*Built around 1856, Orianda House at the Crimea Estate was the country villa of the Thomas Winans family. Photo courtesy of the Friends of Orianda House.*

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option mentioned as early as 1925 in the meeting minutes of the Park Board was the Winans Estate on Windsor Mill Road, also known as The Crimea, and later, the Hutton Estate. Initially rejected out of hand, this property, situated in the

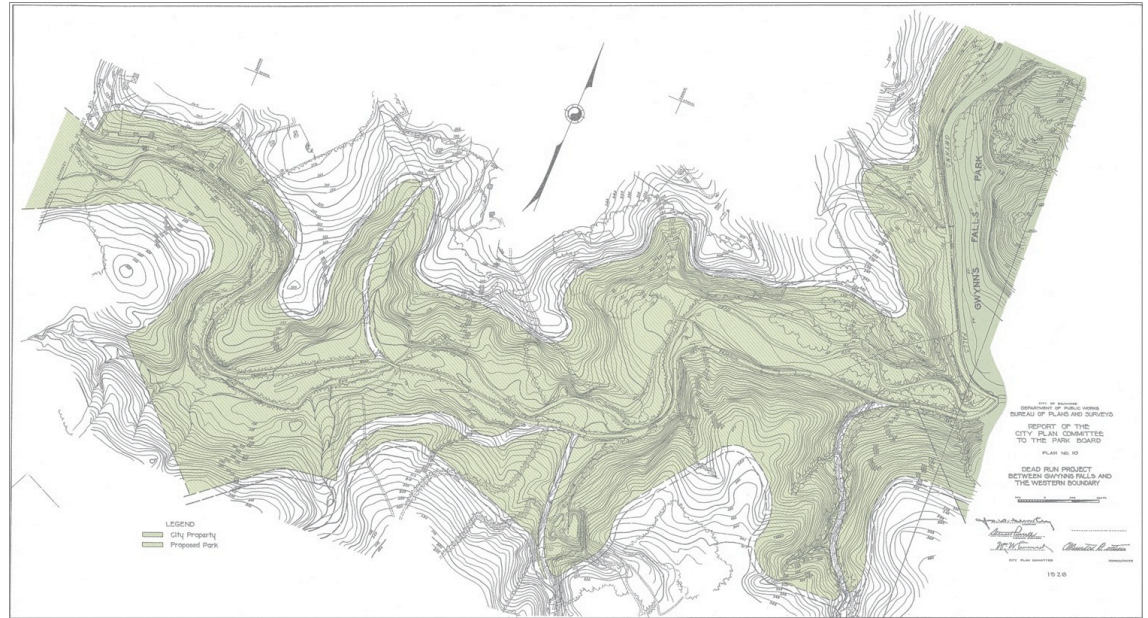
Dead Run Valley in the northwest corner of Baltimore, would re-emerge as a potential site several times over the next 14 years.

Meanwhile, a variety of other sites were brought to the attention of

***This valley [Dead Run], of all those discussed, has been freer from defacement by man's activities. It is considered by all who view it as one of the very best bits of scenery near Baltimore.***

***--Olmsted Brothers, Report and Recommendations on Park Extension for Baltimore, 1926***

*This 1926 Olmsted Brothers map of the Dead Run stream valley identified parkland adjacent to Gwynns Falls Park, which became Leakin Park with Baltimore City's purchase of the land in the 1940s. Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park encompass 1,200 acres – Baltimore's largest park and one of the largest wilderness woodland parks on the East Coast. Today the Gwynns Falls Trail offers access to this historic greenway for hiking and biking, beginning in Leakin Park and following the Gwynns Falls stream valley to the Middle Branch of the Patapsco River and the Inner Harbor. Ten miles of additional paths allow hiking to scenic wooded slopes within Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park. Map from Olmsted Bros. Report, 1926.*



the Board—private estates, industrial properties, Patapsco River frontage, swimming pool facilities, even a “Coney Island.”

However, members of the City Council were unable to agree on one large property for Leakin Park. As a compromise they decided to divide the bequest and establish numerous playground parks. This pleased some members of the council because a larger portion of the city's population would stand to gain if smaller parks were dispersed throughout the neighborhoods. There was just one problem. John Wilson Leakin's

sister was adamantly opposed to the playgrounds plan. She took the city to court arguing that her brother wanted only one park established in his name. Both the Circuit Court and State Supreme Court agreed with her. The city was therefore forced to abandon the proposal for playgrounds.

According to meeting records for May 1939, the Park Board again dismissed the Hutton Estate as a potential site, favoring instead a playground in East Baltimore. When support for this option disintegrated, however, the Park Board was forced to resume its

search.

With no resolution to the impasse in sight, Theodore Marburg, Chairman of the Municipal Art Society, sought Olmsted Jr.'s advice. In an 8-page letter to Marburg, dated July 12, 1939, Olmsted Jr. reported that he had examined the hundred or so specific sites that had been nominated before beginning the process of elimination. He reminded Marburg that Leakin Park should be located in a neighborhood where recreational space was lacking and also that the new park should provide diverse activities for people of different

age groups and social classes.

Olmsted Jr. proceeded to explain why certain parts of the city should not be considered for a new park. First, the price of acquiring land in the inner city would be too costly for a park of an effective size. Second, while the eastern portion of the city was in need of a park, the declining population there was reason enough to discount this location. He also noted that while a park in a depressed neighborhood might stimulate activity and attract people back to the area, it was too big a risk to take at this point in time, especially when

safer options were available.

In the end, Olmsted insisted, the choice was clear: “The Crimea site offers, in my opinion, the best opportunity now to be found anywhere in the city. Its acquirement was one of the major recommendations of the *City Plan Report of 1926 on Extensions of the Baltimore Park System*; and it seems even clearer today, in the light of recent trends, that it certainly ought to be acquired. It is a type of park which is notable for its exceptional natural landscape beauty, of a sort very keenly enjoyable, in a quiet, leisurely way, by many kinds of



*This relic waterwheel is easily accessible the Gwynns Falls Trail. Near the trail is the remnant of a carriage path which provided access to the Orianda Mansion, the ruins of a mock fort (apparently inspired by Winans' years in Russia), and the foundations of old farm structures which were part of the nineteenth-century Crimea estate.*

people, who will come to it even from considerable distances if conditions are as favorable to that particular kind of enjoyment that can be kept at the Crimea site....” Olmsted also made it clear that a park on the Crimea site would not be utilized as a traditional park because it should remain a wooded parcel of land. “It will be apparent that what I am here considering

is something much more than a mere ordinary utilitarian playground or playfield on the one hand, or a little ornamental square of park with a few benches on the other hand. It is a newly-developing specialized type of social institution, notable alike for its beauty and its utility in meeting the needs of large and important parts of the population of a modern industrial

and commercial metropolis.” Olmsted Jr. also stressed the economic logic of the Crimea acquisition, declaring that, “...it would be a valuable and much needed addition to the Parks of the City *as it now exists* [italics added].” Emphasizing the financial prudence of the recommendation, he went on to argue that the site provided a substantial amount of land for

the available Leakin funds; moreover, “annual costs for credible and satisfactory maintenance” for this type of park could be “relatively low.”

This time the city followed Olmsted Jr.’s advice. On January 15, 1941, 243 acres of the Dead Run Valley were purchased for \$109,486, from a descendant of Thomas Winans.

The Crimea had been the country estate of railroad magnate Thomas Winans. Winans made a fortune building railroads and designing locomotives during the 19th century. Upon completion of the St. Petersburg-Moscow Railroad, Winans purchased his 1,000-acre country estate in 1856–1857, giving it a Russian moniker in recognition of his most recent achievements.

In 1948, the city acquired another portion of today’s Leakin Park for \$154,000— paid for by the investment returns on the bequest. The additional 69 acres, situated on top of a plateau overlooking the Dead Run Valley, included the mansion house. According to property records, seven more parcels were eventually acquired by the city. Five of these came from Hutton, along with one each from Walter C. Mylander and Thomas G. Young.

Leakin Park adjoins Gwynns Falls Park to the East. The adjacent parks have morphed into a 1,200-acre recreation area of which Leakin Park accounts for approximately 325 acres.

So while J. Wilson Leakin should be credited with providing the means by which the city obtained this attractive piece of property, it was Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. who carried the day for the Dead Run stream valley site. Although Olmsted and members of the Park Board could easily have recommended a park site in East Baltimore— a section of town, arguably in greater need of recreational space, they opted instead for a site that abutted the large and established Gwynns Falls Park.

Clearly, Olmsted’s appreciation for natural beauty, his concern for the city’s stream valleys, and his eye for the bottom dollar— not to mention the limitations of the Leakin bequest— figured prominently in the final decision. By 1939, city officials, no doubt weary after more than 17 years of delay, were finally ready to follow Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.’s advice.

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