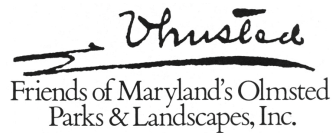


The Olmsteds on Two Coasts

Baltimore and Seattle in 1903

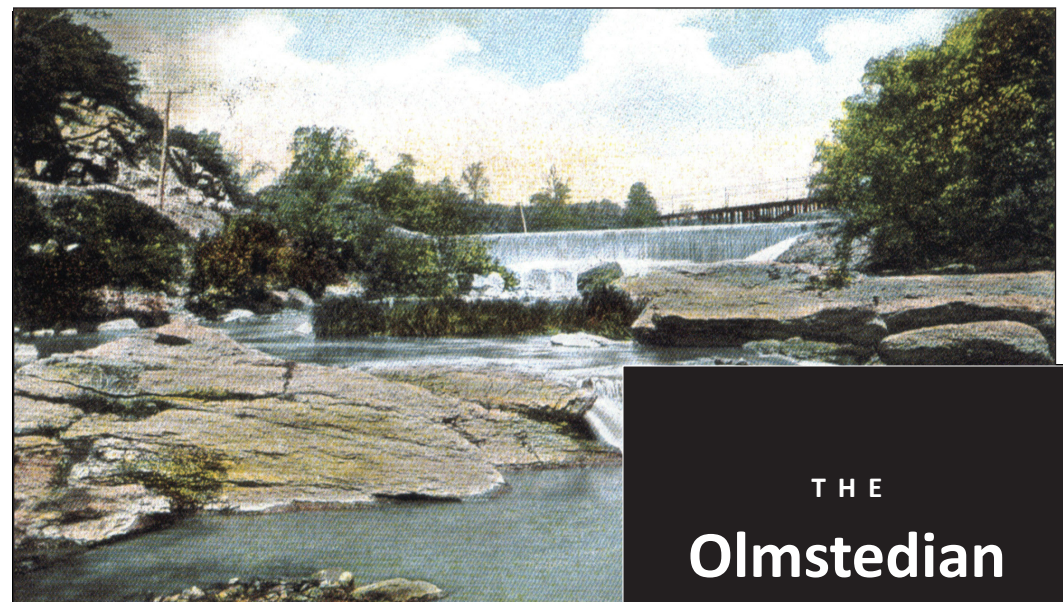


FMOPL Digest
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One hundred years ago the Olmsted Brothers undertook major park plans on two coasts for very different cities: Baltimore and Seattle. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (Rick), the younger senior partner and heir to his father's mantle, served as principal for the Baltimore plan, working for intervals over a year to submit the report in November, 1903. Locally, we refer to this as the 1904 plan—*Report Upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore, 1904*, because it was published early the next year. John C. Olmsted, veteran senior partner in the firm founded by his famous stepfather, spent the period from the end of April until the first of June on site in Seattle (as well as consulting for a plan in nearby Portland, Oregon), presenting an oral report in June and a typescript copy in July, 1903. On August 28, that same year their illustrious father, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.—ailing since the late 1890s—died.

The plans, developed simultaneously for cities dramatically dissimilar—in age, size, topography, and rate of growth—and implemented to a remarkable degree in succeeding years, with the continuing consultation of the firm, marked the first decade of the twentieth century as the most significant era of park planning and park development in both Baltimore and Seattle.

Contacts with Olmsted, Jr. for the Baltimore parks plan came through the Municipal Art Society, a City Beautiful-inspired organization of civic leaders, which negotiated a fee of \$3,000 for a report to be submitted to the city's Board of Park Commissioners. The study was to be comprehensive for the city as a whole, but it should place special emphasis upon the "suburban zone" in terms of park needs and main lines of communication. At the time Baltimore ranked sixth nationally with a population of approximately half a million and boasted an established economic and commercial base. The time for such a report was auspicious: Baltimore's 1888 annexation had tripled the city's size,



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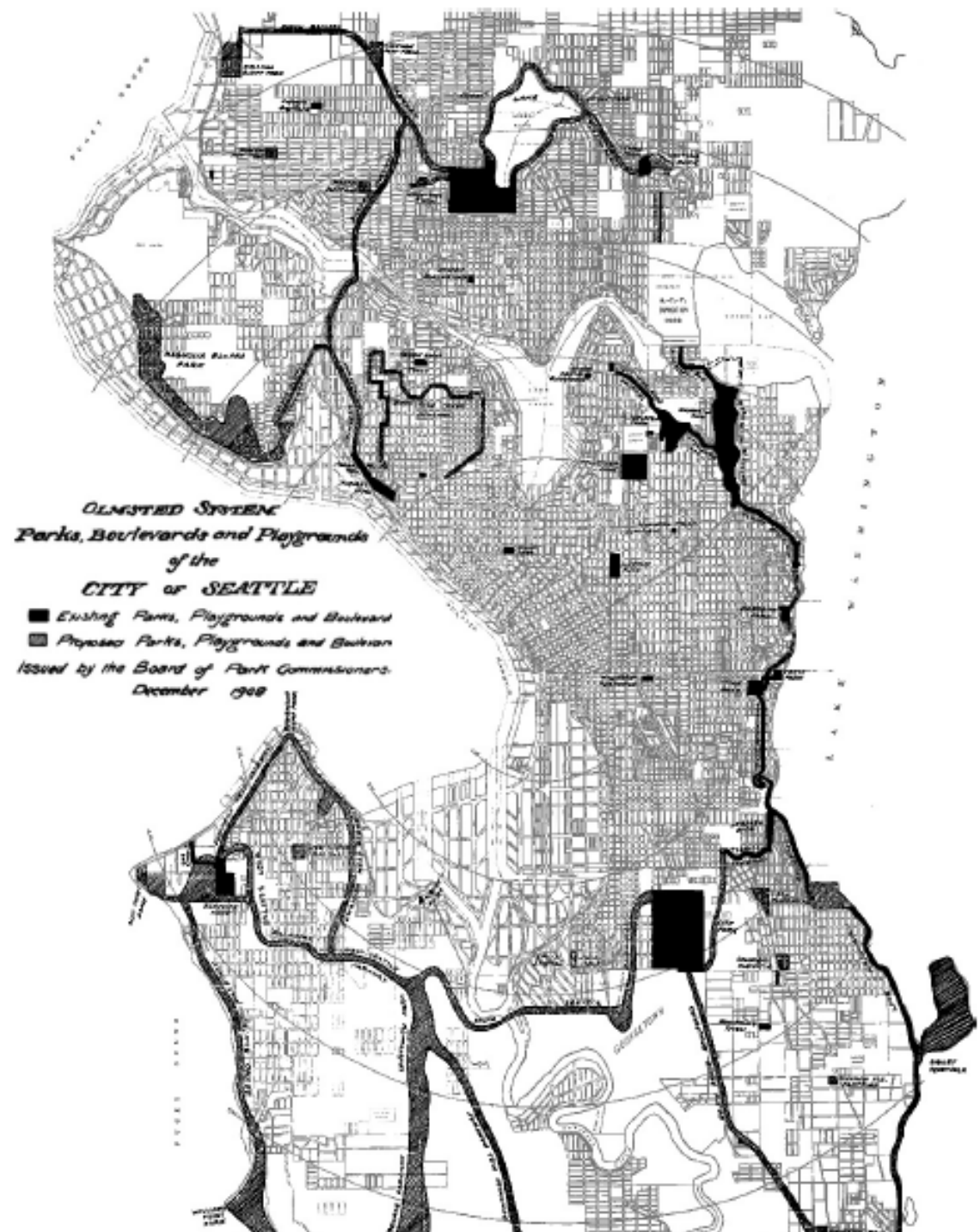
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(Above) A Seattle postcard view of the curving lakeside roadway of Lake Washington Boulevard, with Mt. Rainier in the background. (Below) The Olmsted report for Baltimore identified the stream valleys as prominent topographical features to be secured as parkland; postcard view along the Gwynns Falls (Enoch Pratt Free Library).

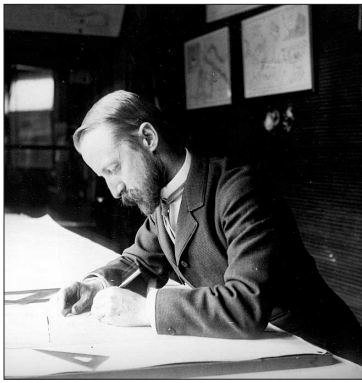
and another annexation was anticipated (the last, it turned out, accomplished in 1918, tripling the size once more). Though only in his early 30s, Rick had been groomed as his father's successor and already had participated in a number of major projects, including membership on the McMillan Commission which was developing a comprehensive plan for nearby Washington, D.C.

Correspondence from Seattle with the Olmsted Brothers inquiring about developing a park plan for that city led to the understanding that John C. Olmsted would serve as principal (Rick had other responsibilities, including the Baltimore report), and the cost would be \$1,000 (less if the arrangements with Portland could be coordinated), and the visit would be short (though the anticipated two-week stay turned into two months). The proposed comprehensive park and boulevard system for Seattle was to serve a city of 500,000 people and intended "that all future work would be done in harmony with that scheme, whether done now or a hundred years from now." The plan would be for the improvement of park lands and "a series of roadways and parkways which will tie these isolated tracts together." Seattle was a very new city in the midst of a dramatic boom in population and land development, sparked in the late 1890s by a number of fortuitous economic circumstances, most notably its role as a commercial base for the Yukon gold rush. With a population of only 3,533 in 1880, the city had jumped to 81,000 in 1900, the nation's 48th largest, and in the first decade of the twentieth century Seattle would catapult to 237,000— ranking 21st nationally. John C. Olmsted, Rick's senior by 18 years, had been trained by his stepfather, becoming a full partner in the firm in 1884, and worked on park system plans for numerous cities.

The 1903 reports for the two cities illustrated the way in which the plans developed by the Olmsted Brothers built upon the foundation of existing conditions, while also placing the distinctive Olmsted stamp upon them. In Baltimore, Rick was working with an already developed city park system, the report noting the "beauty and value of many of the parks." As a large park, Druid Hill, created in 1860, should serve as the anchor for the city's park system, supplemented by an expanded Patterson Park on the densely-settled east side. Small parks and playgrounds should be dispersed throughout the city to serve local needs. The more innovative proposals included stream val-



Copy of 1908 Olmsted Seattle Plan, a revision of the original 1903 Olmsted Comprehensive Park and Boulevard System. Courtesy of Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks.



Photograph of John C. Olmsted taken in Portland, Oregon on April 13, 1903, during his west coast planning visit and published in the Seattle Post Intelligencer on May 1, 1903, when he first arrived in Seattle. Courtesy of Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, #2931.

ley parks and parkways. Securing the Jones Falls, Gwynns Falls and Herring Run stream valleys, especially prominent in the landscape of the annexation area, not only would protect their “charming scenery,” but prevent undesirable development and secure natural buffers for the watersheds. Parkways, insufficiently developed in the city in the report’s view, should radiate from Druid Hill to connect the city’s diverse park landscapes.

In Seattle, the parks, like the city itself, were late bloomers, and the lands acquired had been rather small and scattered. Rather than try to create a large park, on the order of those in large Eastern cities like Baltimore, the 1903

Seattle report contended that the park system should take advantage of the “great abundance and variety of water views and views of wooded hills and distant mountains and snow-capped peaks.” Building upon early preliminary sketches of a parkway system and an already-implemented bicycle route, the Seattle plan made a 20-mile “continuous pleasure drive” its centerpiece, extending along the western shore of Lake Washington to park lands on the northern periphery through Queen Anne Hill, above the city’s growing downtown, to the western bluffs along Puget Sound. Concerned that the central and southern districts of the city were already densely settled but under-served by parks, the report recommended that expanded playgrounds be developed in those areas.

In both cities the Olmsted Brothers played a significant role in implementation of the 1903 reports through continuing consultation. Rick returned to Baltimore frequently in the ensuing years, working on plans to balance the athletic and other functions of parks in older sections of the city, addressing the multiple needs of larger parks, and designing new parks, as well as consulting on the plans for east-west parkways. The firm completed an extensive new study—*Report and Recommendations on Park Extension for Baltimore, 1926*, addressing the city’s

park needs to the year 1950. In 1939, Rick weighed in with recommendations on the location of the Leakin bequest for parkland; and in 1941 the firm under his guidance prepared its final comprehensive report for Baltimore. In the late 1930s, Rick noted that he considered the 1903 report “one of the earliest (and I still think one of the best) comprehensive studies of a city park system which I have made.”

In the years immediately following the 1903 Seattle report, John undertook specific design projects

for a number of the city’s parks as Seattle developed major portions of the parkway plan and made unprecedented park acquisitions. While cost constraints had forced him to present a “reduced scheme” in 1903, subsequent bond issues approved by voters greatly enhanced the opportunity for park expansion, leading to follow-up reports in 1906 and 1908. His Seattle affinity was further enhanced by major landscape designs for the University of Washington campus and for the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition.

In the year 2003, we celebrate with appreciation the momentous plans developed by the Olmsted Brothers a century ago. Working in two locales differing in so many ways, they left a distinctive and indelible legacy that profoundly shaped the urban landscapes of Baltimore and Seattle.

—Dr. Ed Orser, Professor,
Department of American Studies,
University of Maryland, Baltimore
County



Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks is celebrating the centennial of its Olmsted plan with events throughout the year. The organization has joined with over 50 partners to highlight different aspects of the Olmsted legacy, including Portland, Oregon, which is celebrating its Olmsted centennial as well. For more detailed information see: seattle.gov/friendsofolmstedparks.

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