

Roland Park Company

The Critical Planning Role
of the Olmsted Brothers

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The Olmsted Brothers left their mark on Baltimore's suburbs through decades of collaboration with the Roland Park Company. Together with the company's first president, Edward H. Bouton, they shaped a large swath of north Baltimore into a unified district. Bouton hired the Olmsted Brothers landscape architecture firm in 1897 after previously working with George Kessler. The firm had a prominent reputation by the time Bouton contacted them.

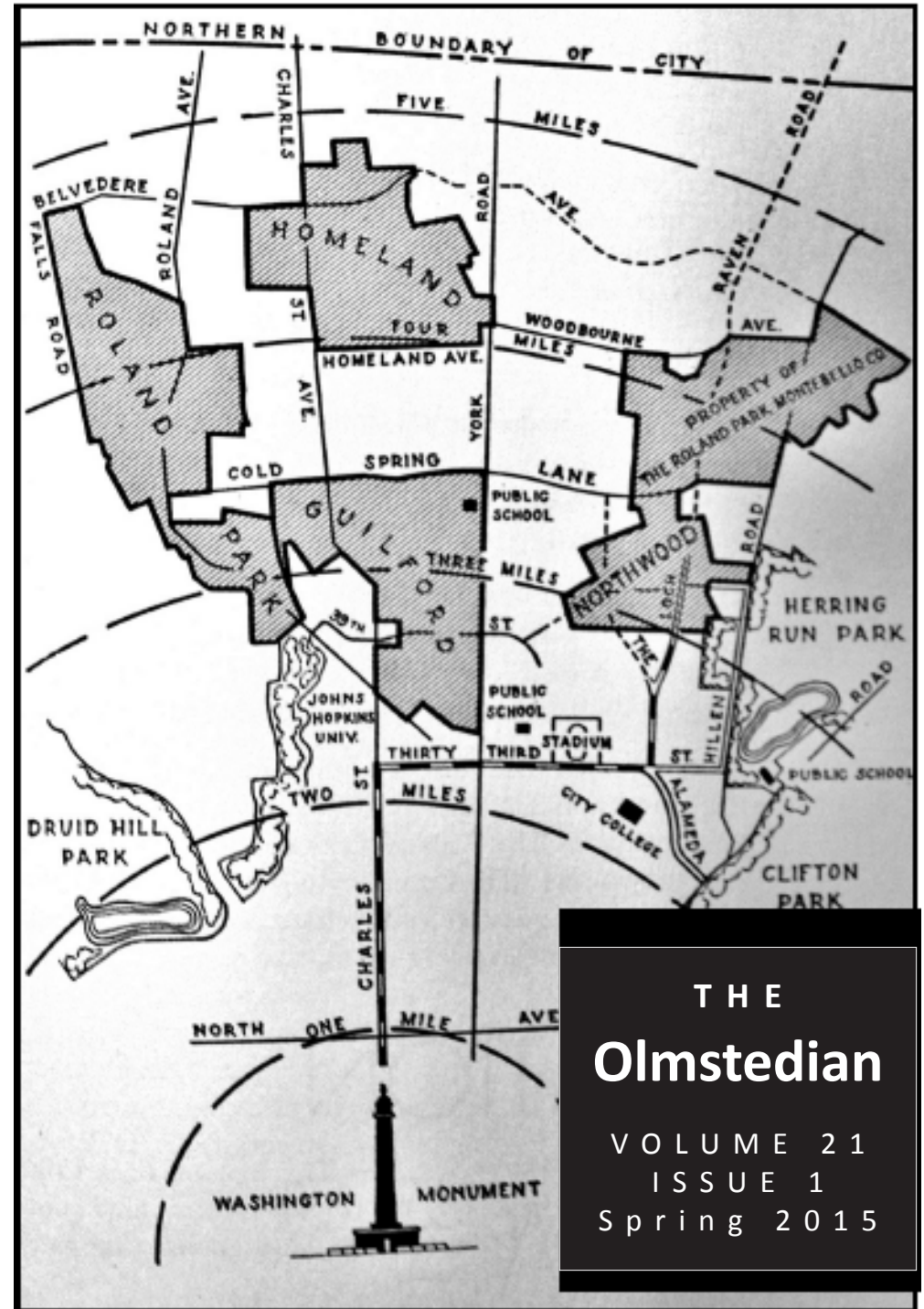
Before setting foot in Roland Park, the Olmsted Brothers sent Bouton the firm's *Circular as to Professional Methods and Charges* in which they outlined a comprehensive process for how they worked with clients. They described their business as "the supplying of professional advice with respect to the arrangement of land for use, and the accompanying landscape for enjoyment." To this end, they "consulted

with owners, architects, engineers, and gardeners." While the Olmsteds established that they were the experts in any project, they also stressed the importance of collaboration.

The Olmsteds laid out a six-step procedure in the *Circular*. First, they would make a "preliminary visit" in which they toured the site and spoke with the client. The client then sent any materials requested to the firm's office in Brookline, Massachusetts. These might include maps and building plans. The Olmsteds then designed preliminary plans meant to be "examined, criticized, and discussed." Based on any feedback the client provided, the Olmsteds made a General Plan accompanied by an Explanatory Report. At that point clients could choose to implement the plan with their own staff. Or, as a final step, the Olmsteds could offer a variety of options for

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The 1911 Olmsted Brothers Plan for Guilford's lost park, Residence Park. From the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, MA.



supervising different aspects of the work including guiding grading, road building and planting.

Once Bouton agreed to the employment terms of the *Circular*, he also agreed to the Olmsted's prices. A preliminary visit typically cost one hundred dollars in 1898. The Roland Park Company also paid for all travel and expenses for the Olmsted's and their assistants. Producing a preliminary plan ranged from fifty to several thousands dollars. Any supervisory work could be negotiated later but included a fee for the work and all expenses paid. At the very minimum the Roland Park Company paid \$150 to hire the Olmsted Brothers or \$4,170 in 2015 dollars. The cost of a planned subdivision was actually much higher.

These methods and costs formed part of the Olmsted Brothers' larger role in professionalizing landscape architecture, borrowing from the professionalization of related disciplines. In 1899, the Olmsted's helped found the American Society of Landscape Architects, while they worked on Roland Park. John Charles Olmsted served as the society's first president. ASLA later released its own *Methods of Charges and Recommended Minimum Charges*. In the circular the Olmsted Brothers sent Bouton, they stated that they based supervisory work procedures on American Institute of Architects' *Schedule of Minimum Charges*.

Their relationship was characterized by friendly give-and-take in the spirit of consultation and exchange as the Olmsted's outlined in their employment terms. Bouton and the Olmsted's collaborated closely because they shared an ideal for well-planned suburbs. They envisioned curvilinear streets where every inch would be meticulously controlled and landscaped to offer a seemingly natural pastoral scene. Street names also carried an ideology. According to Olmstedian principles, names should reflect the physical conditions of the site. Bouton and the Olmsted's exchanged lists of names. If Bouton had simply taken all the Olmsted's suggestions, Roland Park would have streets called *ackfrid*, *ackhurst* and *ackenshaw*—all derivations meaning oak wood or *ackbroyl*. Plat Two of Roland Park might have been called *Many Mansions Hill* or *What Cheer*.

Another hallmark of their collaboration was remaining flexible. Over the three decades of working together, Bouton and the Olmsted firm adapted their planning principles to the particular demands of each Roland Park Company development. In Homeland, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. worked with Bouton on longer blocks suited for cars. Farther east in Original Northwood, the Olmsted firm adeptly scaled designs to suit the smaller site plan and more modest lot sizes. In Guilford and Homeland, they took pre-existing man-made features like the ice ponds of these former estates, turning them



Lucille Bouton (1859-1951) in her garden at Rusty Rocks. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Garden Club of America Collection.

into what became Sherwood Gardens and the Homeland lakes.

The Olmsted's developed a personal as well as professional relationship with Bouton to the point where they also landscaped his Roland Park home, Rusty Rocks. Bouton's wife, Luella, turned the gardens of Rusty Rocks into a focal point for community gatherings as well as aesthetic beauty. The *Baltimore Sun* called Rusty Rocks "one of the most artistic in this part of the

country." Luella Bouton organized garden parties and hosted productions of Shakespearian plays. She also kept straw mats for whenever she invited school children into the garden to learn about local plants and animals.

Luella Bouton also helped establish the social life in Roland Park, when residents—especially women—did not have many local options. One of her achievements still exists today, The Woman's Club of Roland Park. Beginning in 1896, a group

of residents began meeting in each other's homes. They decided to formalize their meetings into a club. She helped secure a prime lot from the Roland Park Company on Roland Avenue by Ridgewood Road, where the club continues to operate in the original building. That same year the founding members drew up a constitution and by-laws. Luella Bouton served as Second Vice President. The original charges to join consisted of \$2 for annual dues, a 25 cent initiation fee, a 10-cent fine for absences, and 5

cents for lateness. The club joined city-wide and national networks of women's organizations across the country.

Although the Olmsteds and Edward Bouton received much of the credit for making the Roland Park Company's suburbs successful, Luella Bouton was a guiding force behind the scenes. One story that was often reprinted in newspaper articles about Roland Park names her as inspiring Edward Bouton to create a planned suburb. "Beauty," she supposedly told him, "draws more than oxen." Whether apocryphal or not, it points to her reputation, which she cemented during Roland Park's early days. Those close to the company attested to her importance; Edward Bouton's successor, John Mowbray, said "Mrs. Bouton's knowledge, wit, and courage did more to bring about the things that Mr. Bouton dreamed about than all of his employees."

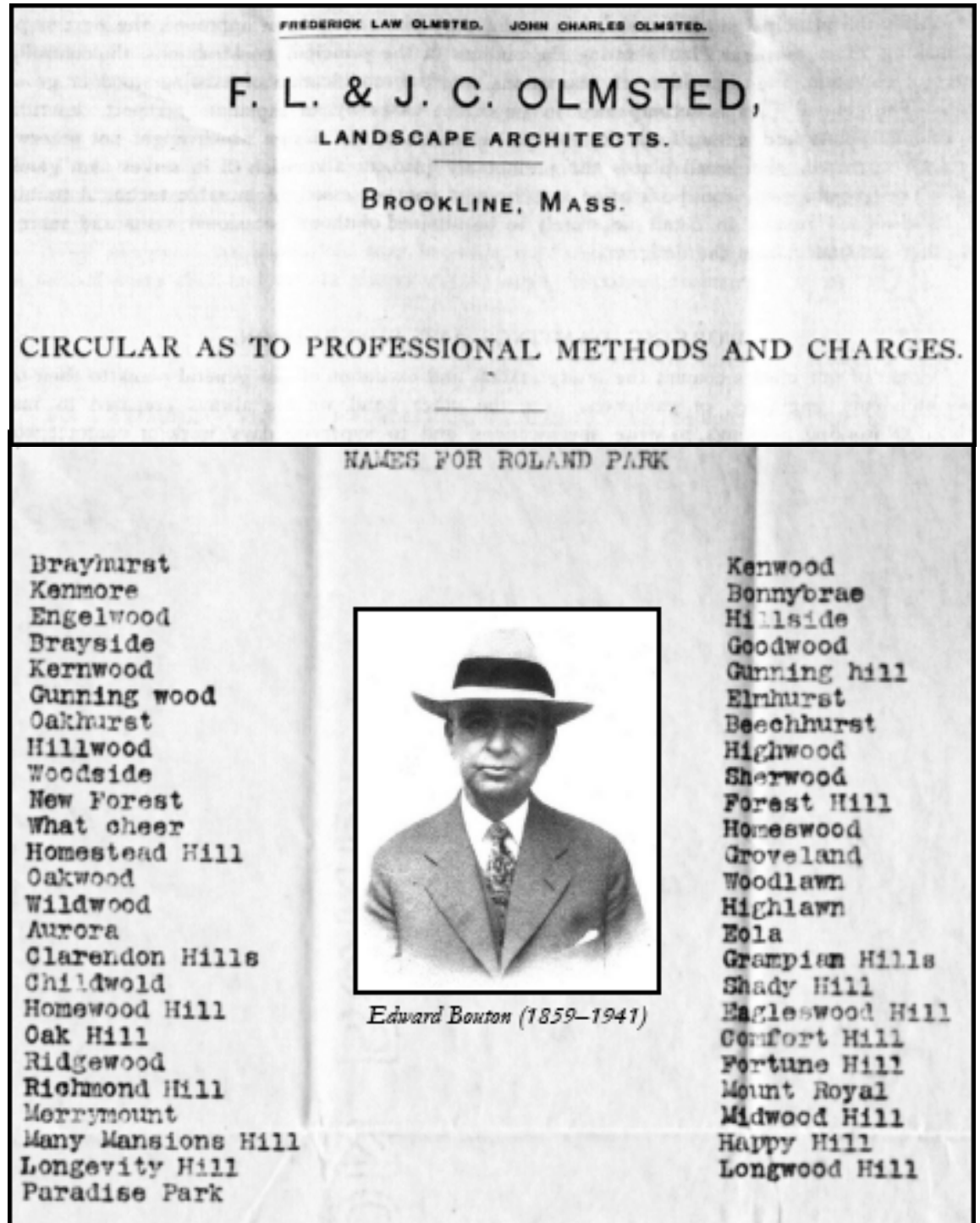
The Olmsted firm's suburban commissions declined after the World War II along with the Roland Park Company's fortunes. The timing seems odd as the years immediately following the war ushered in suburban housing that included the world-famous Levittown. Most post-war developers, however, did not use landscape architects. Rather, they relied on the assembly-line like process of pre-fabrication to quickly produce neighborhoods. Post-war developers aimed to achieve economies of scale rather than meticulous design. However, post-war developers did retain

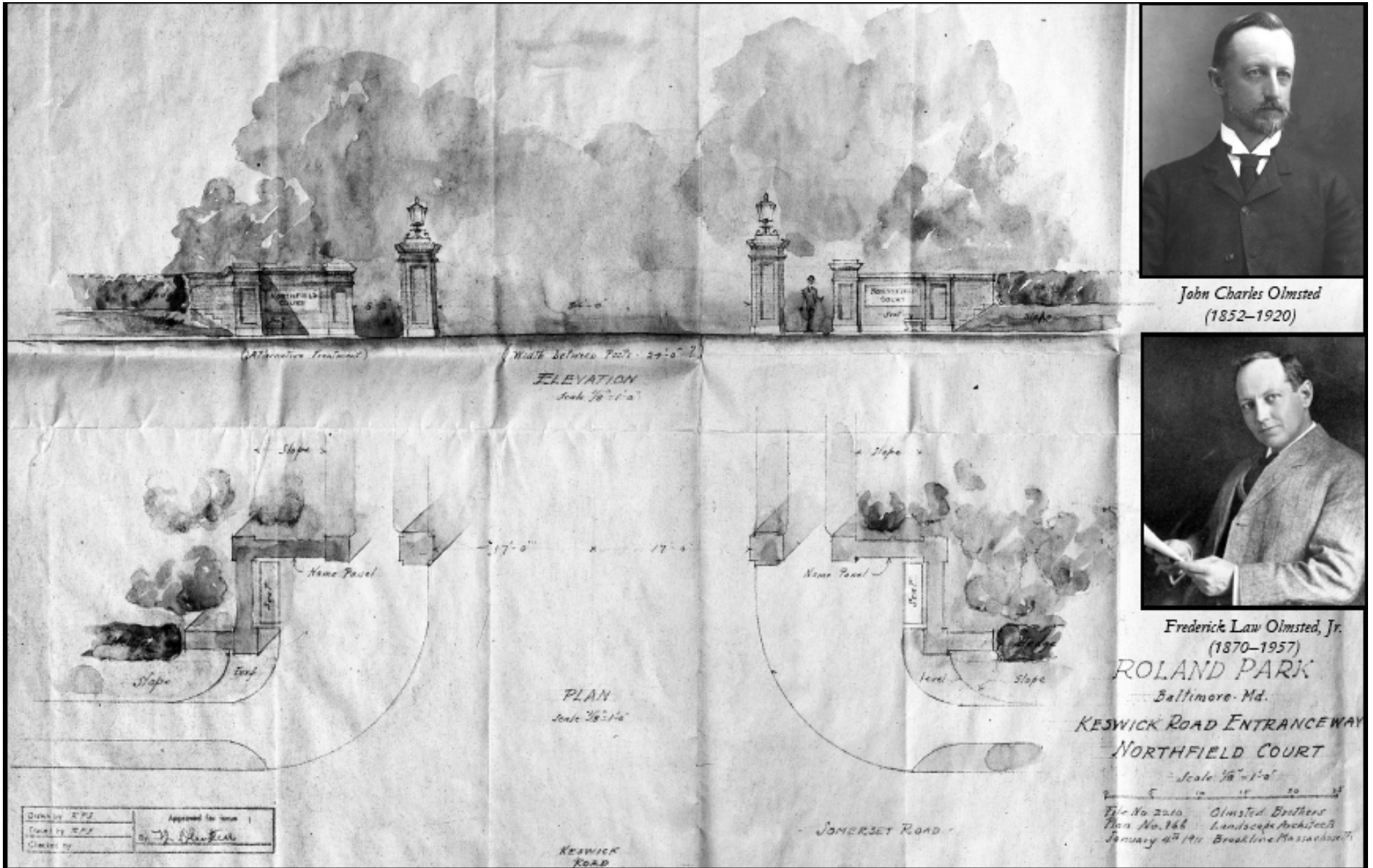
echoes of Olmstedian landscaping principles found in Roland Park Company developments including curvilinear streets with pastoral names.

The Roland Park Company never recovered financially from building Original Northwood during the Great Depression, when Homeland had not been fully sold. In the 1950s, the Roland Park Company was mainly a real estate brokerage before liquidating in 1959. By the time the company went out of business, Bouton had long since retired. Shortly after his death in 1941, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. paid tribute to the developer with whom he had collaborated for over thirty years. Bouton, he said, had done more than any other citizen to make Baltimore a city renowned for its homes.

-Paige Glotzer, Ph.D. Candidate, Johns Hopkins University History Department

Right, top: The title for the Olmsteds' Circular explained the Olmsted Brothers' method and the terms of employment. From Roland Park Company Archive, JHU. Bottom: When The Olmsteds began work on Plat Two of Roland Park, the Roland Park Company planned to give it its unique place names. The Olmsteds sent Roland Park Company President Edward Bouton (inset) a list of potential street and lane names to fit the affluent pastoral landscape they had in mind. Photo courtesy of Doug Munro.





Edward Bouton hired the Olmsted Brothers landscape architecture firm in 1897, after previously working with the landscape architect George Kessler, who designed the first plat for Roland Park on the east side of Roland Avenue. The firm had a prominent reputation by the time Bouton contacted them. Its founder, Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. designed New York's Central Park and the U.S. Capitol Grounds as well as one of the most famous American planned suburbs of the nineteenth century, Riverside, Illinois. His sons, John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., took over the firm by the 1890s as his health declined. The Olmsteds' prominent projects also became a launching pad for other nineteenth-century landscape architects throughout the United States—Kessler began his career by working on Central Park. Above is a January 4, 1911 color elevation drawing shows the Keswick Road Entranceway to Northfield Court. From the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, MA.

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