



Muddy River Restoration Project

The Maintenance and Management Oversight Committee (MMOC) is the independent citizen-led oversight body of the Muddy River Restoration Project.

Setting the (Landscape) Stage: Olmsted, the Emerald Necklace, and the Muddy River Park

"Let it not be for present delight, nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think...that a time is to come when men will say, 'See, this our fathers did for us.'"

Frederick Law Olmsted

A Brief Introduction to Olmsted's Beginnings and the Creation of Landscape Architecture

Beginning in 1857 with the design for Central Park in New York City, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), his sons and successor firm created designs for more than 6,000 landscapes across North America, including many of the world's most important parks. Olmsted's remarkable design legacy includes Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Boston's Emerald Necklace, Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina, Mount Royal in Montreal, the grounds of the United States Capitol and the White House, and Washington Park, Jackson Park and the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. Olmsted's sons were founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) and played an influential role in the creation of the National Park Service.

Frederick Law Olmsted was born in Harford, Connecticut in 1822. What we now call "landscape architecture" did not exist until he created it in the middle of a disjointed but ultimately masterful career. Olmsted's education and experience though seemingly disconnected included stints as a civil engineer, gentleman farmer, writer, and, for 30 years, the first administrator of New York's Central Park. His design for Central Park allowed him to synthesize the many skill and talents of the profession we call landscape architecture.

As a young man, all parts of the natural world delighted him. Olmsted was particularly drawn to the pastoral Connecticut and later English countryside, which reminded him of his childhood rambles:

"Such a scene I had never looked upon before, and yet it was in all its parts as familiar to me as my native valley."

[Sources are listed at the end.]

Indeed, throughout his career, his time spent in rural England's of broad pastures, ponds, and gentle mists remained his aesthetic ideal and appeared again and again in his designs.

Olmsted's Design of the Boston Emerald Necklace Park System

"Nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work...I would have you decline any business that would stand in the way of doing the best for Boston all the time."

Frederick Law Olmsted's design of the Emerald Necklace Park System (constructed between 1878 and 1895) was one of the largest public projects undertaken by the City of Boston. The system contained over 2,000 acres of open land stretching from the Boston Common to the outer limit of South Boston and well into the Town of Brookline, Massachusetts. The system is comprised of 6 major parks: Back Bay Fens, The Riverway, Olmsted Park, Jamaica Pond Park, Arnold Arboretum, and Franklin Park, as well as their connecting Parkways.

Perhaps Olmsted's most realized achievement in this plan, beside the utterly significant sanitary public health achievement of the Emerald Necklace, was Franklin Park where we can experience Olmsted's aesthetic, social philosophy, and ideals at their best. Though the Park is not nearly as utilized as it ought to be and has been transformed in various ways that detract from its original intent, for many landscape scholars, Franklin Park stands with Prospect Park in Brooklyn as Olmsted's finest achievements.

The entire Muddy River Park certainly adheres to these same ideals. Even more important than the size of the park systems was its role as a prototype for open space projects of even more ambitious scale. Olmsted's planned intent of a comprehensive, regional planning of open space has become an established precept of landscape architecture and city planning. His underlying philosophy on the value of natural scenery near densely settled urban centers is increasingly embraced and valued not only because it provides respite for urban dwellers but also as a climate mitigation strategy.

By the time Olmsted retired in 1895, the Emerald Necklace was completed. By the early 1970s, the Emerald Necklace Park System was designated a Boston Landmark and placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Muddy River and Back Bay Fens

Olmsted was a veteran—and sometimes victim—of burdensome municipal bureaucracy and politics. He had learned how to “offer suggestions” and propose widely ambitious plans gently and even somewhat offhandedly to those in charge. He wisely referred to his huge Muddy River engineering sanitation and landscape park plans for the Muddy River Park particularly modestly as “Proposed Improvement of the Back Bay.”

He also persuaded the Park Commissioners to change the name from Back Bay to Back Fens, referencing the character of his plan and scenery.

Sanitation Aspect of the Project

The Olmsted's plan for the Back Bay was hardly a park design as we commonly understand it. Instead, it was a strategy for sanitation improvement.

Olmsted immediately grasped that the primary challenges were the difficult topographical, engineering, and especially waste disposal problems the site posed. In colonial times the site consisted almost wholly as a salt marsh. By the turn of the prior century, the Back Bay was entirely created out of landfill and became a dumping ground for raw sewage. As the populations of Boston and Brookline grew after the 1820s, the area became increasingly foul. Flooding of the stagnant, still water was also a problem, as it would be again in the 1990s.

Indeed, by the 1870s, the Muddy River was receiving much raw sewage. As the tide fell, some of this was carried off to the ocean, but residue lay on the mud flats baking in the sun. Needless to say, the smell was disgusting, and the entire area posed serious potentials for disease of the population. No animal life was living in those waters.

The park site was 100 acres adjacent to Back Bay, already a fashionable residential neighborhood built on the land reclaimed from the Charles River Basin. This low-lying area received sewage outflow of the Muddy River and Stony Brook and flooded at high tide. Olmsted devised a plan that diverted the sewage into underground conduits and solved the tidal problem by creating an artificial salt-grass marsh, traversed by a winding stream. The crookedness of the stream was designed intentionally to prevent the surface of the water from forming a swell in wind that could lead to subsequent flooding. In addition, the stream banks were gently sloped, and three water gates controlled the tidal flow from the Charles River and the outflow of the two creeks. Park drives were laid out at the edges.

The aim was to restore the original salt marsh to its original condition with the addition of constructed sewers. Olmsted therefore had to plan for grasses and shrubs that could tolerate salt spray and sea immersion. He designed the area so that it appeared to be a salt marsh around which the City happened to grow, fully in keeping with Olmsted's emphasis on landscape that seemed designed by nature versus the more typical of the time heavily designed garden landscapes. He believed that less artificially designed, gentler landscape created a much better sense of rest for weary urban dwellers.

The Fens was completed in Olmsted's lifetime, though the salt marsh survived only another 15 years. When the Charles Dam was completed in 1910, the water flowing into the Fens was fresh instead of salt.

Olmsted's Philosophy, Social Ideals, and Purpose

Central to Olmsted's philosophy is a conviction that those living in fast-paced dense urban environments need to have access to the natural world for both their physical and mental health. Such spaces should not have highly manicured gardens and elaborate architecture but should be simple and pastoral, using predominantly native materials. He expressed these ideals time and again, most eloquently in the report that accompanied the Park plan, *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters*. He viewed pastoral landscapes and country parks as places where people of all classes could come together in a word he coined "communicatively" without the wariness that mark nearly all other societal encounters. His conviction was that parks were places where "you may thus often see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old...each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each other."

The roots of his philosophy and convictions go back to his childhood in Connecticut, his early adulthood time spent in England, and his time in New York. They can perhaps be attributed in part to his own far from ideal experiences with municipal politics in New York City. Olmsted wrote:

"Openness is the one thing you cannot get in buildings. Picturesqueness you can get. Let your buildings be as picturesque as your artists can make them. This is the beauty of a town. Consequently, the beauty of the park should be the other. It should be the beauty of the fields, the meadow, the prairie, of the green pastures, and the still waters. What we want to gain is tranquility and rest to the mind."

Olmsted's philosophy steeped in his childhood and early adult experiences also stemmed from his reading and literary sources, not the least of which were the writings of major literary figures of his time, notably William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson—the great romantic English poet and the noted American Transcendentalist.

Need for Continued Stewardship of Today's Restoration

Since World War II, maintenance of the park system has been sorely neglected. It has taken decades but now the vexing problems are being mitigated through the Muddy River Restoration Project. Many areas of the Fens have been taken over by *Phragmites*, an invasive reed that chokes the River and sets up conditions for flooding and fires. The Project includes removal of large tracts of these tenacious reeds. The City of Boston and Town of Brookline are utilizing strategies for clearing more of them.

The Muddy River Park, along with entire Emerald Necklace Park System, is now in its second century, recognized from the time of its completion to be one of Olmsted's cultural achievements, comparable to the masterpieces in the Museum of Fine Arts.

It behooves the municipalities of the City of Boston and Town of Brookline, along their citizens, to continue the maintenance and stewardship of this long-deferred

restoration, which was achieved by dedicated citizens. It is the MMOC's intention that generations of urban dwellers now and to come may enjoy the sense of community, peacefulness and democratic respite Olmsted intended, and which is still too rare in the world today.

For Further Exploration

BOOKS

The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, (Project completed in 1972-2020)
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-law-olmsted-papers/about-this-collection/>

Charles E. Beveridge, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape* (Rizzoli, New York, NY, 1995)

Cynthia Zaitzevsky, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Boston Park System*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982)

WEBSITE

National Association of Olmsted Parks website: www.olmsted.org

MEDIA

PBS: "Olmsted's Parks for the People," September 24, 2015
<https://www.pbs.org/video/ket-documentaries-olmsteads-parks-people/>

PBS: "Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America," April 17, 2012
<https://www.pbs.org/video/wned-tv-history-frederick-law-olmsted-designing-america/>