

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

January 2022

Birmingham's Olmsted Legacy

The year 2022 marks the 200th birthday of Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903). The anniversary will be marked with talks and programs exploring the Olmsted legacy in Birmingham and nationwide. This newsletter summarizes the extant work of Olmsted Brothers in our region.



Upcoming Films and Talks

Birmingham-Southern College hosts a showing of the nationally broadcast PBS film "Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing America" on Tuesday, January 11 at 7 p.m. in the college Geodome. Following the film, Marjorie White will discuss Birmingham's Olmsted legacy.

The Birmingham Botanical Gardens hosts "An Evening with Historian Laurence Cotton" on Wednesday, February 16, at 6 p.m. Olmsted scholar Laurence Cotton served as principal researcher and consulting producer for the PBS film (*cited above*). Cotton, who grew up with the Olmsted-designed Emerald Necklace park system in Boston, lives in Portland, Oregon, another city with a park system inspired by Olmsted design. He has immersed himself in Olmsted scholarship and visited Olmsted landscapes across the United States. Preregister at bbgardens.org/Olmsted starting January 6.

About Frederick Law Olmsted and Olmsted Brothers

Frederick Law Olmsted's best known accomplishments as a landscape architect are the codesign of Central Park, the first great American city park (1858); designs for the Great White City of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the U. S. Capitol grounds, and the Biltmore estate in North Carolina; plans for the park systems in Buffalo, Boston, and many other cities; and leadership to safeguard Yosemite and Niagara Falls. Considered by many as the most successful American landscape architect, Olmsted made parks a central feature of American life. After Olmsted, every city had to have parks, preferably linked by park-ways into a park system.

The Olmsted firms include those of Frederick Law Olmsted and of his successor Olmsted Brothers formed by his stepson John Charles (1852-1920) and son Frederick Jr. (1870-1957) and their associates. Together these firms continued from 1857 to 1950 and created an enormous imprint on the American landscape by designing more than 4,000 city, state, and national parks; private estates and gardens; residential neighborhoods; and college and university campuses.

In the 1970s publication of the twelve-volume edition of Frederick Law Olmsted's writings began with Charles Beveridge as series editor. In 1980 Fairstead, the home office of the Olmsted firms, was acquired by the National Park Service, along with an archive of plans, photographs, and correspondence. A year later, the National Association of Olmsted Parks was formed to increase public awareness of the firms' legacy and support the restoration of Olmsted-designed public parks and landscapes.

The Birmingham Legacy

In Birmingham, Birmingham Historical Society has explored the treasure trove of correspondence, plans, and photographs now housed at Fairstead and at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. The Society published not only the 1925 park system report, but also the correspondence between Olmsted Associates and local advocates. Under the direction of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., this firm oversaw work here during 1924 and 1925 and again from 1947 to 1950. The 32-year-old Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. came to the Birmingham area as an observer during the 1850s.

Birmingham's extant legacy includes an impressive plan for a comprehensive park system, the plan for Birmingham's civic center with its governmental buildings surrounding today's Linn Park, the site selection for today's Samford University, and the site selection and general plan for the Vestavia Country Club.

Frederick Law Olmsted Observes the Future Site of Birmingham, 1853

Frederick Law Olmsted came to the future Birmingham region in 1853, but not as a practicing landscape designer. Working as a correspondent for a New York newspaper that became the *New York Times*, Olmsted traveled across the South for several years, recording his observations on the daily lives of Southerners and

the practice and negative effects of slavery. On one trip, Olmsted passed through Jefferson County when traveling north from Tuscaloosa headed to Tennessee. Here he encountered open pit, brown ore mining near the Tannehill forge then operating south of today's Birmingham and Bessemer.

Northern Alabama, June 15th. – I have to-day reached a more distinctly hilly country – somewhat rocky and rugged, but inviting dells. The soil is sandy and less frequently fertile: cotton-fields are seen only at long intervals, the crops on the small proportion of cultivated land being chiefly corn and oats. I notice also that white men are more commonly at work in the fields than negroes and this as well in the cultivation of cotton as of corn.

The large number of the dwellings are rude log huts, of only one room and that unwholesomely crowded. I saw in and about one of them, not more than five grown persons, and as many children. Occasionally, the monotony of these huts is agreeably varied by neat, white, frame houses. At one such, I dined to-day, and was comfortably entertained. The owner held a number of slaves, but made no cotton. He owned a saw mill, was the postmaster of the neighborhood, and had been in the Legislature.

June 11th. – The country continues hilly, and is well populated by farmers, living in log huts, while every mile or two on the more level and fertile land, there is a larger farm, with ten or twenty negroes at work. A few whites are usually working near them, in the same field, generally ploughing while the negroes hoe. About noon, my attention was attracted towards a person upon a ledge, a little above the road, who was throwing up earth and stone with a shovel. I stopped to see what the purpose of this work might be, and perceived that the shoveler was a woman, who, presently discovering me, stopped, and called to others behind her, and immediately a stout girl and two younger children, with a man, came to the edge and looked at me. The woman was bareheaded, and otherwise half-naked, as perhaps needed to be, for her work would have been thought hard by our stoutest labourers, and it was the hottest weather of the summer, in the latitude of Charleston and on a hill-side in the full face of the noon sun. I pushed my horse up the hill until I reached them, when another man appeared, and in answer to my inquiries told me that they were getting out iron ore. One was picking in a vein, having extracted a short adit; the other man picked looser ore exterior to the vein. The women and children shoveled out the ore and piled it on kilns of timber, where they roasted it to make it crumble. It was then carted to a forge, and they were paid for it by the load. They were all clothed very meanly and scantily. The women worked, as far as I could see, as hard as the men. The children, too, even the youngest – a boy of eight or ten – were carrying large lumps of ore, and heaving them into the kiln, and shoveling the finer into a screen to separate the earth from it.

— Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations On Cotton And Slavery in the American Slave States, 1853-1861*.

Portland Parks Inspire a Parkway and Greenways along Red Mountain, 1905-

Inspiration for a mountain top parkway running along the northern face of Red Mountain came from Jemison & Co. developer Hill Ferguson's c.1905 visit to Portland, Oregon. Here John Charles Olmsted had completed a plan for citywide parks and parkways in 1903 that underpinned acquisition and development of Portland parks in subsequent years.

Back in 1905, Jemison & Co. proceeded to acquire the land for the mountainside subdivision called Mountain Terrace, the initial piece of today's Forest Park and Redmont neighborhoods. By 1908, the Altamont Parkway, today's Altamont Road, was under construction. Altamont Park was designed and completed by 1911 under the supervision of George Miller, a former associate of Warren Manning, the former assistant to Frederick Law Olmsted.

Many were the attempts to extend this parkway along the mountain as a scenic road and to incorporate it within the right-of-way of the mineral railroad that ran along the mountainside. The City acquired the mined over site of today's Vulcan Park in 1935 and with the assistance of the Works Progress Administration positioned the iron statue of Vulcan atop an ore vein and a monument in the mountaintop park setting. In 2018, the Vulcan-Kiwanis Trail project successfully accomplished converting the

railroad bed into a pedestrian greenway extending from Vulcan Park to Greensprings Highway.

Mayor George Ward Seeks Olmsted Brothers' Park Planning Advice, 1908

Eager to plan, acquire, and develop parks as the centerpiece of his City Beautiful campaign—and despite meager City revenues available to accomplish this—Mayor George Ward sought to get Olmsted Brothers to stop by Birmingham en route to their work in Montgomery and assess the City's park situation—without charging travel expenses. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. responded with the following statement that aptly describes what a city might expect from the firm's park planning process:

It is our understanding that you wish us to examine the existing parks of the city and make recommendations for their general improvements, to study the question of the need and possibility of additional parks, of recreational grounds, of parkways and boulevards and in general to offer such suggestions as would make the city better organized for its business and pleasanter for its inhabitants.

— Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to Mayor George Ward, November 30, 1908. Olmsted Associates Records, Series B, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

Olmsted Brothers Plans a Park System for Birmingham, 1924-1925

In 1923 new state legislation provided for the creation of Park Boards in Alabama cities of more than 100,000 residents. Lumber magnate M. P. Phillips had corresponded with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and followed his guidance in establishing both the state legislation and the Birmingham Park Board. On April 7, 1924, the Birmingham Park Board selected Olmsted Brothers to address needs and opportunities of Birmingham parks. Phillips spearheaded the initiative and corresponded extensively with the Olmsted Brothers principals throughout the process.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., working from Olmsted Brothers' west coast office at Redondo Beach, California, supervised the work of his firm's principal Southern representative Edward Clarke Whiting and his associate William Marquis. Olmsted Brothers prepared *A System of Parks and Playgrounds for Birmingham: Preliminary Report upon the Parks Problems, Needs, and Opportunities of the City and Its Immediate Surroundings* (Job Number 3540) completed in 1924 and published and released in 1925.

The report emphasized the important functions that parks fulfilled in the life of a city:

- Enjoyment of outdoor beauty
- Informal neighborhood recreation
- Organized outdoor exercise
- Improved health of mind and body

In 1925, the Olmsted Brothers firm gave the Birmingham region a road map for park development. The plan provided a long-term vision for the acquisition of the regions' most scenic lands and for the development of large parks in the floodplains of area creeks and on mountain tops. The plan recommends the acquisition of specific lands on what were then undeveloped floodplains of area creeks, along ridge tops, and in the outskirts of the city proper. These lands were relatively cheap in the 1920s, and they were not under the jurisdiction of the City of Birmingham. Once acquired these lands were to be considered a cultural trust, assets to be protected, maintained, and made accessible for future generations.

The Olmsted planners and M. P. Phillips could see the vision for the major parks that might be built, over many decades, in the scenic lands surrounding the city, the acquisition of which Phillips was pushing to put in motion before his untimely death in 1925. Phillips' familiarity with the Boston and Baltimore park systems as well as his tutelage by the members of the Olmsted Brothers firm helped him understand the grand vision that other Park Board members did not have and did not embrace following his death, choosing instead to allocate funding to acquire small parcels and build golf courses and a football stadium. Meanwhile the floodplains of area creeks filled with houses.

Sometime in the 1980s, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials concluded that they could not channelize or stop the water in Village Creek from flooding and must remove the people. That's when cultivated citizens and public officials in Birmingham began revisiting the Olmsted Park Report.

Following the removal of houses, persons, and neighborhoods, several parks and greenways have been introduced in the floodplains of Village Creek, including Patton Park and Ensley's Village



Outline Plan of Proposed Park System for Birmingham, File No. 3540, Plan No. 7. Olmsted Brothers, Brookline, MA for the Park and Recreation Board, Birmingham, AL. September 1924.

Creek Greenway, which when complete will extend from Ensley to East Lake.

And since the 1980s, along Red Mountain, mined-over mineral lands have been released for sale. Today, thousands of acres now serve as the core of the Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve and the Red Mountain Park, providing forested slopes and meadows for hiking and recreation within minutes of the city center.

The Freshwater Land Trust's Red Rocks Trail system, a network of parks, trails, and bike routes begun in 2010, projects 750 miles of greenways and corridors connecting Jefferson County communities and providing recreation for walkers, hikers, and bikers. With 125 miles complete, the trails follow the Village, Five Mile, Shades and Turkey creek corridors as well as former railroad beds and city streets.

The Olmsted Park plan remains relevant and inspires current park stewards and advocates for open space and trail developments to consult its recommendations and to find inspiration as well as persuasive language and authority to help safeguard scenic resources of our region.

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The primary agent for the fulfillment of Olmsted planning principles is Warren Manning (1860-1938) of Cambridge, Massachusetts. From 1888 to 1896 Manning worked as a horticulturalist and project director in the office of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. on 100 projects, including the World's Fair in Chicago, the Emerald Necklace of streamside parks in Boston, and the Biltmore estate and forest in North Carolina—projects that provided models for park and suburban designs across the nation and in Birmingham.

Manning provided Birmingham with a City Plan of 1916 that outlined considerations for a Great City of the Future, designed in harmony with its natural resources. Manning extolled the value of "ribbon-strip parks" along railroad rights-of-way and the banks of creeks. These creekside parks provided through routes for traffic and room for the creeks to flood as well as parks for residents. The plan and research files were provided to Olmsted Brothers for their work on Birmingham's park plan designed a decade later.

Individual Park Planning, 1924-1925

Olmsted Brothers continues to work in Birmingham and across the state for other clients. During the late 1920s and 1930s, the firm develops campus plans for state colleges and universities and for the capitol building in Montgomery.

While working on the general plan for Birmingham parks, the firm also provided detailed plans for Rushton Park, Underwood Park, and today's Linn Park.

Rushton Memorial Park (Job No. 3089), 1906-1924

The firm found the park well-suited topographically to the informal, secluded beauty of an ornamental park and not suited to the encroachment of playground apparatus. The final study recommended plantings, paths, and well-defined lawns. The neighborhood committee underwriting the park's development rejected this assessment, favoring active recreation that the firm found inappropriate. Nothing was done.

Underwood Park (Job No. 3543), 1924

Then located adjacent the Lakeview School, the firm's preliminary plan recommended development as a playground, open lawn, and wooded hillside. With neighborhood and City financing the plan was fully implemented. In 2004, with the school closed, the City relocated Underwood Park. The new entrance to the St. Vincent's Hospital campus incorporated the concert and picnic groves from the 1924 landscape.

The Civic Center at Today's Linn Park (Job No. 3545), 1924-1925

American cities of the early 20th century sought to emulate the design and planning showcased by the Great White City of Chicago's 1893 World's Fair. The Olmsted firm became the prime designer of these civic centers that grouped similarly designed neo-classical buildings about central parks. Jemison & Co.'s development of Fairfield, designed by George Miller and built as planned between 1909 and 1911, followed Olmstedian design principles with extensive parks, park-ways, and a central park with a civic center. Birmingham citizens campaigned hard and sustained the effort over several decades to build such a civic center here.

During 1924 and 1925, the Olmsted firm sketched several schemes for the park as the central plaza of the future civic center but refused to formalize plans without knowing the exact locations and general design of the surrounding municipal buildings. Improvements to the park, not designed by the firm, were completed in the 1930s when federal funding became available. By this time, the auditorium, library, and courthouse had been built. In the 1950s, construction of City Hall, the art museum, and the school board offices completed the Birmingham civic center.

Warren Manning Plans Mountain Brook

Warren Manning returns in 1925 and 1926 to plan extensive recreational facilities for TCI, the southern subsidiary of U.S. Steel. From 1926 to 1929, Manning also prepares the general plan to develop the 2,500-acre park-like residential subdivision that carefully follows Olmsted principles: winding, narrow roads and

home sites set into the mountain ridges and parks and parkways along the creeks. Robert Jemison Jr. raises the capital to make this extraordinary investment in the finest residential design in the region.

Work in the 1940s

Birmingham Medical Center (Job No. 9755), 1947-1949

Olmsted Brothers provided the general plan and individual site plans for the initial medical facilities of today's Medical Center of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Located at the intersection of 19th Street and 7th Avenue South, these facilities included the Jefferson-Hillman Hospital, The University of Alabama Medical and Dental Basic Science Building and Dental Clinic, the Crippled Children's Clinic and Hospital, and the Birmingham Veterans Affairs Hospital.

Alabama Baptist State Convention and Howard College-Now Samford University (Job No. 9724), 1947-1949

Under the leadership of Carl Rust Parker, this work included the study of possible locations for the new campus of Howard College-now Samford University. Olmsted Brothers' recommended the 400-acre Edgewood Lake campus site on today's Lakeshore Parkway in Homewood. (The lake was extant at this time.)

The firm also provided the preliminary site plan for the ridge-top campus. This plan was approved by the board of trustees and the Alabama Baptist State Convention that solemnly called on "future boards of trustees, however constituted, to abide by the plan." The campus was not developed according to this plan. See Birmingham Historical Society's *Shades Creek: Flowing Through Time* of 2019 for a discussion of Samford's Edgewood Lake campus.

Alabama Education Association-Indian Springs School (9862), 1949-1951

Vestavia Gardens (Job No. 9800), 1947-1949 for Charles Byrd, developer of Vestavia Hills

Olmsted Brothers redesigned the legendary gardens of Vestavia, the estate of George Ward atop Shades Mountain extant from 1924 to 1940. These gardens surrounded Ward's residence, a replica of the Roman Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. Charles Byrd, the developer, expanded the temple residence as a tea house and restaurant. The Vestavia Hills Baptist Church acquired the site in 1958.

Vestavia Hills Golf and Riding Club, today's Vestavia Country Club, (Job No. 9811), 1948-1951

Designed by Carl Rust Parker for Charles Byrd's development of Vestavia Hills, this sweeping entrance drive and siting of recreational grounds and the club house comprise Olmsted Brothers' finest and intact landscape remaining in Birmingham.

Society publications exploring the Olmsted legacy—*Olmsted Brothers' A Park System for Birmingham*, reprint of the 1925 plan; *The Olmsted Vision: Parks for Birmingham*; *Hand Down Unharmd: Olmsted Files on Birmingham Parks: 1910-1925*; *Mountain Brook: A Historic American Landscape*; *Warren Manning's City Plan for Birmingham*, reprint of the 1919 plan; *Shades Creek: Flowing Through Time*; and *Birmingham, The City Beautiful, Compliments of G. Ward*—are available for purchase at BirminghamHistoricalSociety.com.