

Books:

Edited by Laura Jones

Reviewed:

by Jane Canter Loeffler

The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted.
Vol. I: The Formative Years: 1822-1852.
Charles Capen McLaughlin, Editor;
Charles E. Beveridge, Associate Editor.
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University
Press, 1977. 423 pp., \$20.

To an architect, the most striking aspect of Frederick Law Olmsted's early years could well be how little training or experience he had in anything related to design. Moreover, he showed little indication of pursuing such an interest or career. Olmsted, who later designed more than 17 urban parks, pioneered in campus and suburban planning and did so much to shape the growth of American cities, spent his first 30 years traveling, writing, thinking about religion, experimenting with farming and simply observing and enjoying nature.

This is the first volume of Olmsted's papers, carefully edited and amply annotated by Charles Capen McLaughlin from among the many thousands of items collected at the Library of Congress. In taking on this work, projected to yield seven volumes, McLaughlin faced no easy task. Historians have long recognized Olmsted's importance as a social critic of the antebellum South; landscape architects look to him as the founder of their profession. Not only has McLaughlin had to depict a man of several identities, but also he has had to make editorial selections from the papers of a man who wrote absolutely everything down and kept it.

In his letters, Olmsted rambles on about the beauty of the New England landscape and the "unconscious influence" of rural scenes; he argues with himself over moral issues and struggles with religious doubts; he talks about clothes and haircuts and travel arrangements, and analyzes the values of scientific farming.

The most dramatic letters describe the ordeal of his passage around the Cape of Good Hope to China under sail in 1843.

It seems that the variety of work and travel led him to a cultural medium well suited to the growth of imagination and new ideas. No ordinary civil engineer or landscape gardener would have seen the importance of draining malarial marshes while creating an entire system of parks and parkways for Boston unlike anything before.

Today, the luxury of leisurely correspondence is rare, but Olmsted was a faithful correspondent. He used his

writing time to explore ideas as well as to record events in an unself-conscious way. His papers, assembled by his son Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., with whom he is often confused, form a voluminous collection. McLaughlin has succeeded in creating a well-organized framework for the project. In addition to the letters themselves, the book contains a concise Olmsted biography and introductions to key relatives and associates. The exhaustive research has yielded an invaluable reference work.

Olmsted was more than a 19th century problem-solver; he was the person who figured out what the problems were. At last, he is accessible, and there are six volumes to come.

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Jane Canter Loeffler, a planner, was the Executive Secretary of the Olmsted Sesquicentennial Committee and is now a curator with the National Building Museum.

Briefly Noted:

FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted, by Laura Wood Roper, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1973, 555 pp., \$15.

With this book, Olmsted emerges a multi-faceted and key figure in 19th century America. His experiences and accomplishments as writer, farmer, administrator, conservationist, social critic, planner, and landscape architect are presented and discussed, with documentation from Olmsted's notebooks, journals and letters.

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.: Founder of Landscape Architecture in America, by Julius Fabos, Gordon Milde and Michael Weinmayr, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1968, revised 1970.

105 pp., b & w illus. including gatefolds. \$6.00 pb, \$12.00 cloth.

Survey of Olmsted's career using drawings & photos of his work in urban, state, & national parks, community and regional plans, campus and estate design.

Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition, by Albert Fein, George Braziller, New York, 1972.

180 pp., bibliog, index, illus. \$7.95 paper.

Introduction to FLO's pioneer work in environmental design.

Civilizing American Cities, by Frederick Law Olmsted, S. B. Sutton, Editor, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1971, 310 pp., index, illus. \$7.95 pb.

Writings of FLO including descriptions of parks in New York, San Francisco,

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The Alliance Letter

Monthly Newsletter of the
Boston Preservation Alliance

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Conservation:
Keeping America's

NEIGHBORHOODS
Together



National Historic
Preservation Week
May 10-16, 1981

Plans continue to unfold for the City's celebration of Preservation Week. The Alliance, the Trust and many neighborhood organizations are coordinating an extended week (May 7-17) of events and activities. You are advised to keep that period of time open, as the opportunity for house and neighborhood tours will be unequalled. Many private homes, normally inaccessible to the public, will be on display throughout the City. Neighborhoods full of pride in their accomplishments will provide walking tours for a unique first-hand learning experience.

In conjunction with the National Olmsted Conference Frederick Law Olmsted's home and office "Fairsted" (a national historic site) will be open to the public for the first time this year. Fort Independence at Castle Island will also be open to the public for the first time this year.

The Ashmont Hill Association is this year's recipient of the Boston Society of Architect's-Historic Resources Committee Preservation Award. The public is invited to the Award Ceremony, reception, and a tour of the neighborhood.

Next month's AllianceLetter will feature a complete calendar of events

Massachusetts Coalition Formed to Counter Reagan Budget Cuts

by Angus W. Crowe

Responding to the devastating budget cuts in preservation programs proposed by the Reagan administration (see Network Alert insert), the Massachusetts Coalition to Preserve America's Heritage has been formed to both educate the administration's advisors, and convince the Congress that there is substantial bi-partisan constituent support for the Historic Preservation Program.

Initially formed from Alliance member organizations, the Massachusetts Coalition is growing daily as sponsoring organizations statewide are joining this effort. The Coalition has identified the immediate obstacles to effecting a large statewide response to Congress, outlined a strategy, and implementation is underway.

Ironically Massachusetts was one of three states in the Union without a Preservation Action Statewide Preservation Coordinator. Nancy Coolidge of SPNEA has been selected for that role, and Harron Ellenson has been retained as staff coordinator for the Coalition. Stan Smith of Historic Boston Inc. has the formidable task of organizing the fundraising effort.

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National Olmsted Conference

by Carla Wyman Benka

The Olmsted Conference will bring together landscape architects, park administrators, preservationists, park advocates, historians, and civic leaders.

Park preservation and the importance of open space are critical issues today. The conference goals include the identification and assessment of current problems in park preservation and the development of strategies for future improvements.

Conference features include:

The Olmsted lecture Thursday afternoon at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, offered this year by Lawrence Halprin,

The exhibit at Gund Hall "Olmsted in America" by William Alex of the Frederick Law Olmsted Association, New York,

Welcoming ceremonies at Boston City Hall, Friday morning,

On site tours of the Olmsted Park System (in Boston and Brookline),

Presentation of the Master Plans for the Back Bay Fens and Franklin Park,

Reception at the Old State House for Olmsted authors, Friday evening, sponsored by The Bostonian Society,

Issue-oriented workshops at Boston

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