



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Frederick Law Olmsted
National Historic Site
Brookline, Massachusetts

Fairsted

The grounds of Fairsted are a rare resource in the history of American landscape architecture. For almost a century, they formed the working environment of our nation's preeminent firm of landscape architects. Fairsted was also the home of Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., the founder of the firm, from 1883 until his retirement in 1895. Following Olmsted Sr's retirement, his sons John Charles and Frederick Jr. guided the firm into the twentieth century – perpetuating their father's legacy and leaving their own mark on the profession. The grounds of Fairsted continued to serve the dual function of residential and office landscape until the National Park Service acquired the property in 1980. Today, Fairsted is Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. We invite you to explore and enjoy this classic Olmsted landscape.

Olmsted's Genius

Today, the name Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) is synonymous with many of America's most beautiful landscapes. His designs include such esteemed sites as Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, the United States Capitol Grounds, and Stanford University in California. Olmsted's urban parks, however — works like New York's Central Park and Boston's Emerald Necklace — earned him international acclaim as the founder of landscape architecture in America and the nation's premier parkmaker.

Despite a lack of formal design training, Olmsted had a genius for creating practical and beautiful landscapes. Under his skilled hand, the ordinary became extraordinary. He transformed dull or desolate places into lush wilder-

nesses and meadows replete with lakes, rustic furnishings, and intricate systems of paths and drives. Olmsted respected and emulated nature as he gracefully molded the landscape. As a result, one can mistake his deliberate designs for natural surroundings — and fail to take stock of the ideas and experiences that inspired his work.

As a young boy growing up in rural New England, Olmsted first experienced the power of scenery on horseback rides with his father. His awareness was expanded during later visits to England, where he was charmed by the "green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous" vistas. Throughout his life, he recalled these tours of beauty as he engaged in his own work — seeking through design to cultivate "susceptibility to the power of scenery."



Why Brookline

When he moved his family from New York City to Brookline, Massachusetts in 1882, Frederick Law Olmsted was sixty years old and at the height of his career.

By 1880, Olmsted's work in New York was winding down, and his involvement with the development of Boston's "emerald necklace" of parks was well underway. His old friend and collaborator, architect Henry Hobson Richardson — whose works include Boston's famed Trinity Church — had been actively encouraging Olmsted to move to his neighborhood in south Brookline. Of this picturesque neighborhood with its hilly terrain and curving lanes, horticulturalist Andrew Jackson Downing wrote in 1840, "[it] is a kind of landscape garden." One can imagine the allure for Olmsted.

In 1883, Olmsted purchased an 1810 farmhouse owned by Sarah and Susanna Clark, sisters who had spent their entire lives on the two-acre estate in the Green Hill section of

Olmsted frequently combined pastoral and picturesque elements in his designs — mixing peaceful, rolling pasturelands with rugged wildness. He had a distinct social agenda as well, hoping his parks would be restorative to the human spirit and democratic in access. Instead of promoting the exclusive private, pleasure parks of Europe, Olmsted advocated the creation of public parks for individuals from all classes and backgrounds. In addition to designing hundreds of public parks, the firm worked on private estates, subdivisions, suburban communities, academic campuses, and the grounds of libraries, residential institutions, and churches. A taste of the design elements and principles that define an Olmsted landscape are revealed here at Fairsted.



Brookline. Olmsted was eager to settle here with his family — wife Mary Perkins, son Frederick Jr., daughter Marion, and stepson John Charles — and to model their lifestyle and landscape on his interpretation of the suburban "ideal." Olmsted objected to the "fragmentary half-made towns" he saw springing up across America. He wanted his home to be nested in a well-designed community where people could express individuality while feeling connected to landscape, family, neighbors, and the city nearby.

Green Hill & the Suburban Ideal

Fairsted offered the Olmsteds an ideal setting in which to experience nature, foster family ties, commune, and connect.

Here the Olmsted family lived outdoor life to the fullest — whether gardening, sledding on the hillside, gathering with friends on the lawn, or sharing quiet conversation in the "open-air apartment" of the Plant Room. The setting was ideal. In the many suburban communities Olmsted designed, people were encouraged to move off the "island" of their home landscapes into the greater neighborhood. Houses were never far apart — knit together by shadowing trees, curving streets, and an occasional neighborhood park. Olmsted also envisioned neighbors traveling as a community,

"taking air and exercise in driving, riding and talking," and communing along the way.

Olmsted's proximity to friends and collaborators, such as architect H.H. Richardson and Charles Sprague Sargent,

Director of the Arnold Arboretum enhanced the pleasure of living at Fairsted. The neighborhood and its residents provided fertile ground for the cultivation of ideas that Olmsted had been espousing his whole career.



View from second story toward Dudley Street and rear entrance, March, 1885. Photograph by John Charles Olmsted.

Restoration

Landscapes are dynamic; left unchecked and untended, "rustic" can become dilapidated and "wild" merely unkempt. When the National Park Service acquired Fairsted in 1980, the buildings and grounds were in serious disrepair. A large swimming pool filled the rolling green of the South Lawn, while a thick forest of volunteer trees crowded perimeter plantings that had once defined a picturesque dell.

Beginning in 1991, the National Park Service and its partners assembled the critical historic plans, photographs, planting lists, and other materials needed to create a "period plan" to restore Fairsted to its circa 1930 appearance. Hundreds of non-historic trees and shrubs were removed, and replaced by massive quantities of historic trees, shrubs, vines, and herbaceous plants. Today, the National Park Service follows a preservation maintenance plan to ensure that the landscape's historic integrity is not altered and defining features are not lost.

Walking the Cultural Landscape

1 Carriage Turn Service and Separation

Enter the Fairsted grounds by way of the Warren Street arch. Encrusted in euonymus vines, this rustic spruce-pole archway — the signature feature of the Carriage Turn — visually frames Olmsted's house, while serving as a transition point, hinting at what lies ahead.

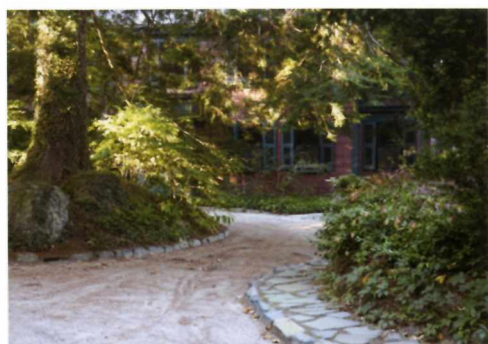
The air of mystery created by the arch is enhanced by a hillock in the center of the turn-around, planted with a Canadian hemlock, creepers, and vines. This is a miniature version of Olmsted's larger parks, which often feature formal gates followed by a promenade leading to more rustic scenery.

When Olmsted bought the property in 1883, the driveway was linear and led through what is now the South Lawn to a barn in the southwest corner of the property. To create a more practical, beautiful landscape, he moved the barn nearer to the farmhouse, removed the old driveway, and built this drive.

The "service" aspect of the circular drive is simple: horse-drawn carriages could enter and exit without backing up, and could drop passengers at the doorstep. The Carriage Turn also illustrates Olmsted's design principle of "separation" — creating a landscape element that divides the rustic and picturesque

Hollow from the gently flowing, pastoral South Lawn. This small drive is "art in the round" — allowing visitors to catch glimpses of the Hollow, Rock Garden, and South Lawn, before departing.

The same spruce pole used in the archway is repeated in the fence encircling the property. Sinuous, malleable, and made from natural materials, the fence provides what Olmsted deemed the "first and most essential element of a home...domestic seclusion." The loose-fitting poles create an airy screen that gives the yard both privacy and openness to neighbors.



The square, old house is almost entirely hidden from the street, yet far from discouraging intimacy, a sight of the place makes one long to explore its hidden beauties.

Hazel Collins, Local Garden writer, 1903

2 Hollow The Genius of Place

Bear right off the Carriage Turn, and descend the rustic steps carved from Roxbury "puddingstone."

You are entering a lush, green, and secluded area known as the Hollow or Wild Dell. Deliberately tucked in a shaded, sunken corner between the office wing and street, Fairsted's Hollow is a miniature version of the lyrical and naturalistic "secret gardens" Olmsted used in his designs for larger public parks. The Hollow is designed for contemplation — a hideaway in which to revive spirit and briefly forget the daily stress of life.

An early incarnation of the Hollow existed when Olmsted arrived in 1883. As with his park projects, Olmsted determined which natural or found aspects to respect, and which to change. It is possible he was referring to the Hollow when he wrote, "I don't object to the cutting away of certain bramble patches if bramble patches are to take their place... Less wildness and disorder I object to."

The Hollow provided Olmsted with a place to practice landscape art in the "picturesque" mode — a wild, romantic, and rugged style that mirrors the site's natural topography and builds on what English essayist Alexander Pope called "the genius of the place." Olmsted graded and filled some of the irregular topography here, while respectfully adapting his design to the existing framework — to the mysteries and glories of nature.

The gentle slopes that surround the Hollow — from the vine entangled ledges to the banked plantings of trees, shrubs, perennials, and bulbs — teem with layers of greenery in various forms, textures, and values of color, with no single planting demanding attention. What one sees today reflects what journalist Hazel Collins observed in 1903: "the little dell...is planted with bushes, shrubs, wild flowers and ferns in picturesque confusion."

3 Rock Garden The Passage of Scenery

Retrace your steps up the Hollow stairs and across the Carriage Turn to discover a narrow path leading into a small, secluded woodland. This shady, picturesque corner of Fairsted is the Rock Garden, designed by Olmsted in the form of a miniature wilderness.

Olmsted firmly believed that public parks should provide people with momentary relief from the noise, hard pavement, and bustle of the city. To help solve this problem brought on by urbanization, he created woodland trails in his large parks, transporting the visitor out of the city and into the woods by using "passages of scenery" for a sequential experience. Two of Olmsted's most heralded successes with such trails are the 38-acre Ramble in New York City's Central Park and the 64-acre Wilderness in Boston's Franklin Park.

Olmsted crafted his Rock Garden in the manner of his woodland trails. Here, a path meanders around lush plantings and rocks, into areas speckled with shadows and light. Along the rocky way, the path moves beneath broad magnolia branches, and around a dense variety of shrubs, trees, and ground covers, revealing — then taking away — swatches of scenic mystery.

With little warning, the trail opens into a broad expanse of meadow. The shift from dark to light, from rocky wooded path to gently rolling meadow is intentional: a "brief passage of scenery" giving way to "an unexpected breadth of view" beckons and engages the imagination.

4 South Lawn The Pastoral Ideal

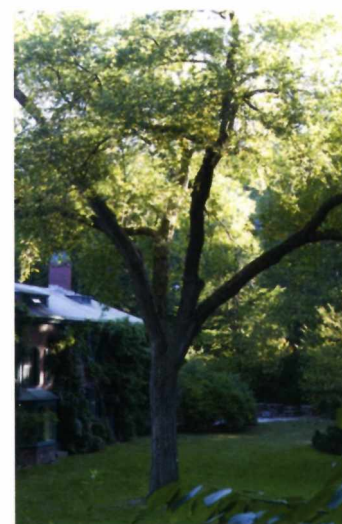
As you emerge from the Rock Garden, you are greeted by a bright, broad meadow known as the South Lawn. This is the most dramatic and unexpected vista on the Fairsted grounds, where picturesque wilderness gives way to a pastoral landscape, and shaded mystery opens into an expansive, sun-soaked green.

When Olmsted purchased this land from the previous owners — sisters Sarah and Susannah Clark — the South Lawn was a decimated apple orchard covered with rows of old fruit trees. Under Olmsted's careful guidance, most of the trees and the old driveway were removed, the barn relocated, and underground drainage systems laid. Finally, inspired by the "green, dripping,

glistening, gorgeous" scenery of the English countryside, Olmsted graded, reshaped, and replanted the space.

In many ways, the South Lawn at Fairsted is like the Long Meadow that Olmsted designed in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. Both employ the Beautiful, or Pastoral, style to soothe the soul and restore the spirit. Though the area here is fairly small, there is an appearance of spaciousness due to varied values of green, indefinite boundaries, and the delicate interplay of light and color. The lawn is bordered by dense plantings of trees and irregular waves of shrubs, where foliage, and not flowers, predominate.

Olmsted's pastoral landscapes often feature elms as a focal point for the contemplation of scenery. Olmsted kept this elm when he redesigned the property in 1883. In 2011, the National Park Service removed the elm when it showed advanced symptoms of decline and structural instability. Today, cuttings taken from the tree are being propagated with the hope that a genetic match can be replanted for future generations to enjoy.



The Olmsted family was originally from county Essex in England, where the name "Olmsted" was a variation of "Elmsted," or "place of the elms."



Roxbury conglomerate is a distinctive building block of Olmsted's Boston-area residential landscapes and public works. Popularly known as "puddingstone" from its appearance resembling rounded plums floating in thick pudding, the rough-hewn rock was plentifully available and provided the texture Olmsted sought in the architectural features of his landscapes.

