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# **Park Politics: Political Influences on Frederick Law Olmsted & the Creation of Central Park**

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## **Abstract**

Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (1822-1903), renowned landscape architect and journalist, was also a political activist who saw urban parks as a way to facilitate social reform. This study focuses on Olmsted's role as Superintendent of Central Park (1858-1861), evaluating the impacts of politics throughout his campaign for Superintendent and during the construction of Central Park. Politics, in this study, refers to both the interactions between Republican and Democratic parties, and the interactions between Olmsted and his constituents, in both the government and the intellectual sphere. This study will provide readers with a fuller understanding of how local political disputes, ideas about poverty and access to a public good, and arguments regarding allocation of park-funding shaped the debates surrounding the park and contributed to its final design. In the 1840s and 1850s, New York politics debated widespread poverty, unemployment, and public distrust of local government. This study will demonstrate how Olmsted's career as a landscape architect began as a result of the political climate of the time, and how politics impacted Olmsted's work as Superintendent. Through the design of Central Park, Olmsted set the precedent for landscape architecture as a practice.

## **1. Introduction: the Landscape and its Architect**

Cozily nestled in the center of Manhattan, Central Park stands in stark contrast to the city, 843 acres of green framed by towering skyscrapers. Prior to becoming one of America's largest and most developed urban environments, Manhattan was once a diverse natural landscape of hills, wetlands, streams, and forests that supported an abundant community of wildlife. The island was home to over fifty-five different ecological communities and sustained native people for thousands of years. The natives named the land Mannahatta – "island of many hills."<sup>1</sup>

When the Dutch established New Amsterdam in 1609, they saw the potential of the island's fertile landscape for settlement and trade. For the Dutch, Manhattan was an invaluable resource because of its thriving ecological diversity, its access to the Hudson and East Rivers, and, the land was unclaimed by rival European countries. By the time that the English seized control of the island in 1664, both the Dutch and English settlers had leveled

much of the rich, rugged terrain that flourished just fifty years prior in order to accommodate the island's evolution into urban center.



Figure 1: Rugged environment of Mannahatta (1609) and contemporary Manhattan aerial view (2016)

The United States took ownership of New Amsterdam in 1785 and the city was renamed Manhattan. The city grew as trade and commerce developed. As a valuable trading port, the city expanded rapidly inward from the coasts and by the 1800s, the land for Central Park remained about the only untouched spot on the island. Developers were burdened by its rocky terrain, swamps, and bluffs, fearing that the land would require more resources to develop than its return value. Only poor Irish pig farmers and German gardeners who lived in shanties on the site found it valuable.<sup>2</sup> Though most politicians and citizens at the time considered the land unusable, several individuals saw the potential of the plot. The first Central Park Board of Commissioners was established in 1857 and consisted of “well known citizens, whose public reputation, peculiar avocations and cultivated taste gave assurance that their opinions would possess the force of a clear, unbiased judgment.”<sup>3</sup> The board was comprised of seven prominent writers, historians, and journalists in New York –Washington Irving, George Bancroft, James E. Cooley, Charles F. Briggs, James Phalen, Charles A. Dana, and Stewart Brown. These men were given the



power to “employ the necessary persons to execute the repeatedly expressed wishes of the people, and [appropriate] certain funds to carry out the provisions of the ordinance.”<sup>4</sup> The Board saw the value of the plot as a future park to address the public’s interest in open spaces,<sup>5</sup> but they lacked vision for its design.

Voted Superintendent of Central Park by the Board in 1857, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) transformed this undesirable plot of land into America’s first designed public park. Olmsted, along with his partner, Architect Calvert Vaux, designed Central Park in 1858 to demonstrate the profound curative effects of nature. Their Greensward Plan (1858) featured revolutionary design elements that sought to redefine the park experience. Unlike the European landscape gardeners that preceded him, Olmsted designed Central Park as a service to people, not as a contribution to art. The plan catered to the pedestrian experience, with pathways strictly for traveling on foot, sunken transverse roads that elevated carriage throughways so they would not interfere with the footpaths underneath, and various park areas strictly meant for human enjoyment, including meadows, pavilions, and seating areas. Although the rocky, uneven plot was difficult for other developers to apprehend, Olmsted designed the park to celebrate the last authentic landscape of historic Mannahatta: he wound footpaths around the hilly terrain to form the Ramble, a playful and adventurous hiking ground; he transformed lowland marshes into large open meadows and used irrigation and drainage techniques to divert water traveling downhill from the natural depressions; and he studied the ecological history of the area in order to introduce native plant species back into the space.

Olmsted hoped that the park would use the healing powers of nature to address social problems in the urban sphere, including poverty, crime, and a lack of political control

of public. Olmsted wanted the park to be democratic – a space of unity and inclusion that would celebrate individuality, cultivate a stronger sense of culture among people, and promote social equality among classes. Given the democracy of its design, Olmsted's park also served as a political statement to New York City's municipal government, critiquing its inability to address the needs of the public. The government was extremely divided during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and lacked the cohesion to come up with solutions to poverty, unemployment, and crime in the city. As these social problems worsened, the public lost faith in government to act upon the needs of the people. Olmsted believed that Central Park, a public project spearheaded by municipality, would demonstrate the government's attention to local concerns by promoting social equality among classes, reestablish trust between the state and the people, and utilize the healing powers of nature as a remedy for the social issues plaguing the urban sphere.

Olmsted's variety of experiences, spanning from childhood, through his career as a writer, and finally to his role as Superintendent of Central Park shaped him into the first, and most influential, landscape architect in U.S. history. Central Park remains one of America's most impressive displays of landscape architectural genius, spearheading Olmsted's design career. His robust portfolio includes such popular American parks as Yosemite Valley (1865), Prospect Park in New York (1866), the U.S. Capitol Grounds and Terraces (1874), Niagara Reservation (1887), and others. As the Superintendent of Central Park, Olmsted demonstrated his ability to manage the design, construction, and implementation of the park. Central Park was the first substantiation of landscape architecture as a practice, identified in Olmsted's role in the project, the stages of design and implementation, and the role of government in public plans. Olmsted was the first to

use the term landscape architect in 1886, professionalizing the trade. He wrote Charles Wyllys Elliott, friend and member of the Board of Commissioners, that, "I prefer that we should call ourselves Landscape Architects...rather than landscape gardeners...because the former title better carries the professional idea. It makes more important the idea of design."<sup>6</sup> Olmsted's fame is a direct result of his impressive landscape designs and the organization of the field of landscape architecture.

Initially, Olmsted believed that the design of Central Park would be apolitical and that his designs would be free from the influence of others. By apolitical he meant that he would design the park objectively, as a science and an art. He and his employees would carry out their duties devoid of politics, refusing bribes, corruption, and favors from political parties. By establishing the professional field, Olmsted attempted to protect Central Park and future landscape architecture projects from the influence of politics. Though Olmsted hoped that his park design would rise above the plane of politics, conflicts between civic parties to gain public popularity, the frictions between Democratic and Republican Commissioners over who maintained control over the park project, and Olmsted's frustrations regarding the Commissioner's allocation park funding greatly hindered the timeline and the realization of the Greensward Plan. Ironically, Olmsted's design of central park was inherently political because one of its main purposes was to promote democracy. Olmsted's interest in nature, his strong administrative background, and his literary career devoted to social justice served as a strong basis for the democratic design of the park, but Olmsted was not prepared for the government's undeniable influence on the park's actual construction through its funding, approval of the plans, and affect on the management of his labor force. In fact, politics affected the materialization of

the park plan and trajectory of Olmsted's career, beginning as soon as he became Superintendent of the Central Park. As Olmsted's first foray into park design, Central Park lives on as a physical manifestation of his objectives for Landscape Architecture as a field – in theory, practice, and politics. Olmsted's work on Central Park demonstrates how public garden design cannot be detached from the influence of politics, and how Landscape Architecture, from its first substantiation in the design of Central Park to its contemporary framework, is an evidently political affair.

## **2. The Making of Frederick Law Olmsted**

For Olmsted, landscape architecture served to enhance urban environments by providing escapes into nature, primarily through public parks. Olmsted's designs demonstrate his creativity and administrative tact in equal measure because great parks require proper management of the many faculties working together to construct the park. Olmsted's design required the work of engineers, horticulturalists, and architects. By sharing his clear vision with the various teams of specialists and individuals working on separate portions of the park, Olmsted translated his designs from vision to reality. In Olmsted's own words, "What artist so noble as he who, with far reaching conception of beauty and designing power, sketches the outlines, arranges the colors, and directs the shadows of a picture upon which nature shall be employed for generations before the work he has prepared for her hand shall realize his intentions."<sup>7</sup> With a passion for the environment developed during childhood, managerial skill acquired during young adulthood, and interest in progressive social ideologies originating from England and the American South, Olmsted elegantly integrated democratic theory – such as social equality

and individual betterment for the benefit of society – into the tactfully executed design of New York’s first public park.

Olmsted gained an appreciation of nature through family, reading, and farming. Born April 26, 1822 in Hartford, Connecticut, Frederick Law Olmsted loved playing outside and learned about landscape art and aesthetics from his father’s many prints of European scenery and parks. He and his brother, John Hull, grew to love nature during long walks and weekend trips to the countryside with their parents. Every summer, the Olmsted family went on “tours in search of the picturesque” in New England and New York. His father, John, was a successful dry-goods merchant who traveled often throughout America in search of scenic nature, a fascination he and his wife, Charlotte, passed on to the children. Together, they visited various farms, gardens, and forests throughout New England, documenting their experiences in private journals that Olmsted reread often throughout his lifetime.

In his early teens, Olmsted developed an interest in reading landscape design principles in the works of late-eighteenth century English theorists, including Uvedale Price, Humphry Repton, Johann Georg von Zimmermann, John Ruskin, and Andrew Jackson Downing. Price, best known for his *Essay on the Picturesque, As Compared with the Sublime and The Beautiful* (1794), examined the pastoral – tranquil rolling meadows that fostered thoughtfulness and meditative placidity – the sublime that celebrated the grandeur, mystery, and complexity of nature, and the picturesque, which bridges the gap between the two. Repton, a famous European landscape gardener, designed the estates of wealthy aristocrats. His designs embodied Price’s picturesque, inspiring the shape of Olmsted’s designs. Similarly, Johann Georg von Zimmermann’s *Solitude*, which praised rural life and

the power of scenery to heal malaise and melancholy, inspired Olmsted's interest in nature as a cure for social ills. From John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, Olmsted learned that the role of the artist is to uncover the "truth of nature" by first observing reality, then reimagining it on canvas, free from the rules of composition. Ruskin taught Olmsted to foster an appreciation for both the concrete and the creative.

In 1837, Olmsted suffered from severe sumac poisoning, which injured his eyes and prevented him from attending college at the young age of sixteen. Using this time to explore his interest in nature, Olmsted spent six years in Connecticut working on a farm. There, Olmsted habitually read Andrew Jackson Downing's journal, *Horticulturist and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste*, that described how landscape design could act as a powerful force for civilizing rural America. Downing believed that natural environments reconnected individuals with their sense of morality and individual agency, which were often lost during urban industrialization. By bettering oneself, he insisted that society, as a whole, would develop a more sophisticated culture. These ideas of social reform through nature – as a remedy for urban social problems and a way to better individuals and, more importantly, society – shaped Olmsted's belief in nature to promote social and cultural change in urban environments.

On the farm, Olmsted served as a project manager, developing skills in supervision, delegation, book keeping, and managing inventory. He studied at Yale for a brief time and attended scientific lectures on agriculture, horticulture, and engineering that he believed would be useful to him as a farmer. Olmsted converted such skills as farming, gardening, and land management into practice in the design of Central Park.

When he moved to New York in 1843, Olmsted worked as a clerk in a silk importing business and traveled to China. This gave him further managerial experience, but he found himself unsatisfied by his work. Falling back on his love of nature, Olmsted traveled to the British Isles in 1850. He visited Birkenhead Park (1847) in Merseyside, England, designed by Joseph Paxton and heralded as the first publicly funded civic park in the world. After meeting the park's civil engineer, Josiah Parkes, Olmsted examined Parkes's innovative sewage drainage systems. He recognized that the park represented social reform that he had read about as a teen. Its rolling meadows proved a tranquil and restorative environment, but Olmsted believed that monarchy was holding the space back from its true social benefits. He observed the government's authority over the people and its ability to demand that public property adhere to a certain standard of uniformity. The park was surrounded by building plots that were sold for private development and the government enacted strict construction and development rules to ensure that these surrounding properties would be consistent with the aesthetic of the park. Birkenhead Park was a demonstration of the British monarchy's ability to exercise control over private property. To Olmsted, Birkenhead Park represented the struggle between monarchy and republicanism<sup>8</sup> because Britain's authority over private land challenges American rights to property. English homeowners sacrificed a right that Americans exercise freely at the will of the British monarchy and in order to maintain the image of the park. Olmsted believed that public parks should represent the people, rather than the other way around. Reflecting upon his visit to Birkenhead, Olmsted wrote, "it is a pity that every man's house cannot be really his own, and that he cannot make all that is true, beautiful, and good, in his own character, tastes, pursuits and history, manifest in it."<sup>9</sup> Olmsted insisted that within the

monarchical system, Birkenhead did not represent public interests and it enforced adherence to an imposed aesthetic, rather than using the park to unify people so they could develop a culture for themselves. Olmsted hoped that within a Democratic system, American parks would be models of social success compared to European parks and, more importantly, demonstrate that Democratic governments can better foster culture and unity.

Olmsted worked in England for two years as his thoughts about landscape architecture crystalized, and found that he was more interested in the social dynamics in the American South, particularly the dynamics between plantation owners and slaves working in the agricultural industry. In 1852, Olmsted became a correspondent for the *New York Times*, analyzing working conditions in the American South and used his writings to advocate for the free-soil movement that opposed the expansion of slavery into western territories, and for the abolition of institution as a whole. While in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1853, Olmsted met Perkins Allison, a slaveholder whose adamant support for the institution strengthened and clarified Olmsted's goal, "to make the society of the North a living demonstration of the superiority of free labor and democratic social relations. He must work to achieve the "general education of all classes".... That meant that he must become more of a democrat than he had been, he concluded – a "Socialist Democrat" or "Democrat of the European School" who would use the government to create institutions of popular education, culture, and recreation."<sup>10</sup> Olmsted sought solutions for slavery and exploitation of workers in the principles of democracy and republicanism, and received inspiration from European modes of social reform. Olmsted applied these theories to pertinent obstacles in the North, including class inequality, discrimination of immigrant populations, and unfair working conditions.



Olmsted's working experiences as a farmer, clerk, and journalist gave him inspiration for how his interests in nature, social reform, and management intersect as a career. Although farming satisfied his love of the environment, he grew tired of the repetition and simplicity of the work. With his voracious appetite for intellectual stimulation, "the farm alone could not satisfy his imagination."<sup>11</sup> Olmsted's job at the silk importing firm helped him develop management skills that would prove extremely important as Superintendent of Central Park, but he hated the petty work that he had to do as a clerk. As a journalist, Olmsted thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to express his social theories and the respect that his publications earned him. Olmsted easily could have become a writer, rather than a garden designer, if his literary career had taken flight. But at the lowest point in his career in journalism, Olmsted was presented with the opportunity to work on Central Park, a project that would prove more fulfilling than any of his past undertakings.

Determined to establish himself as prominent figure in New York City's literary elite, in 1855 Olmsted moved to Manhattan to start a publishing business, Dix, Edwards & Company, with Joshua Dix and Arthur Edwards, two friends he made during his career in journalism. Their *Putnam's Weekly Magazine* was in circulation for two years, during which Olmsted published his book, *A Journey Through Texas*. Based upon his trip to Texas in 1854, the book outlined Olmsted's disappointment with the slaveholding South, and proposed the Free-Soil Movement as a solution. Olmsted argued that northerners must settle on a line of free-soil settlements from west Texas to the south of Kansas in order to stop the westward expansion of slavery. When the publishing venture failed in 1857, Olmsted left the city to

live in New Haven and complete his second book, *A Journey to Back Country*, based upon his observations while in the slaveholding South.

At this pivotal juncture in his professional career and troubled by the debt accumulated from his failed publishing venture, Olmsted was presented with an intriguing opportunity when Charles Wyllys Elliott, a member of the new Board of Commissioners of Central Park, visited Olmsted at his home in New Haven on July 26, 1857. After hearing great things about Olmsted's strong literary career, democratic foundations, and praise for his cultural leadership among New York's social elite, Elliott believed that he would make a strong candidate for Superintendent of Central Park. With his love of nature and English parks and his passion for social justice and reform, the role of Superintendent of Central Park suited Olmsted's interests quite well. It enabled Olmsted to acquire both power over the Central Park project, and authority in the political sphere, where he might promote social change at a higher level.

Olmsted's past, especially his experiences in England and in the South, shaped his political intentions for Central Park. Olmsted intended that the park "would answer aristocratic critics who asserted that citizens of a republic were unable to provide themselves with institutions of culture that, in the Old World, flowed from the *noblesse oblige* of kings and nobility, or from despots like Napoleon III of France."<sup>12</sup> Olmsted hoped that Central Park would be a physical manifestation of republicanism and both a contrast to, and improvement upon, the parks Olmsted had observed in England.

Olmsted also hoped that Central Park would demonstrate to Americans that parks would address many of the social problems nationwide. Whether slavery in the South or the maltreatment of immigrants and the working class in the North, the nation needed to

address these social problems, rooted in hierarchy, inequality, and discrimination. Olmsted hoped that Central Park would disprove the claims of conservatives that parks and other facilities open to all citizens were ineffective implementations to raise the cultural level of all classes. In his letter to Charlie Brace, Olmsted wrote, "We need institutions that shall more directly assist the poor and degraded to elevate themselves...The poor & wicked need more than to be let alone...[the government] should have in view the encouragement of a democratic condition of society as well as government...the poor need an education to refinement and taste and the mental & moral capital of gentlemen."<sup>13</sup> The park was Olmsted's opportunity to put the theories of social reform that he developed into practice, within a Democracy. He hoped that the park would both become a symbol of "democratic development of the highest significance"<sup>14</sup> and "employ landscape design to nurture the civilizing process in the raw frontier of urban America."<sup>15</sup> For Olmsted, the park exhibited equality through design, proving to European critics, stubborn slave owners, and the general public that social change was possible.

### **3. Politics Before the Park**

In line with his democratic values, Olmsted hoped that the physical form of Central Park would bring the stratified classes of New York together and help settle the political tensions of the time. During the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, New York City became an important economic and commercial center, drawing hordes of immigrants from Europe and rural areas to the urban sphere. The city lacked cultural diversity, which made it difficult for the economy and culture to adapt to rapid migration. By 1850 almost half of the residents of New York City were foreign-born.<sup>16</sup> New York City was "incapacitated by the traditional

forms of municipal government”<sup>17</sup> and residents claimed that their city had become the “Commercial Metropolis of the New World destined to an expansion to which there really seems no limit.”<sup>18</sup> Yet the city was heavily reliant on a handful of self-interested and, often times, corrupt political powers to address social problems related to population growth. Urban expansion during the industrial revolution was unplanned, ill executed, and negligent of the needs of the working class. This haphazard expansion led to poverty, high unemployment rates, and a general distrust in municipal government. Suffering from a disorganized and discordant municipality, the city was in need of strong leadership who could bring trust and unity back to the people.

American Transcendentalism emerged as a means for unifying the public through a shared belief that nature and self-improvement could promote social reform in response to troubling civic conditions such as population density, poverty, and crime. The Transcendentalist movement in New York during the 19<sup>th</sup> century discussed nature as a way to refresh the human spirit and emphasized the need for individual awakening and development to better society. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the leader of the American Transcendentalism movement, proposed that in order to promote real social reform, the state must relinquish its power to the citizen. Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) wrote *Civil Disobedience* (1849) in response to the worsening social conditions in American cities, inspiring “polite, orderly disobedience” to resist the government, a “machine” that produces injustice. These writers, among many others, had negative opinions of the government and inspired followers to pursue social reform that begins at the individual level and infiltrates higher government. The Transcendentalism

movement invigorated the general public and inspired them to come together with the common goal of promoting change by empowering individuals.

As a result of the movement, the public divided into various political parties with a shared interest in representing the interests of the people, but through different means. These groups included the Democratic Whigs and Tammany Hall. The Whig party during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was grounded in Jeffersonian Democratic principles of republicanism, limited governmental interference, and capitalism. Comprised of New York City's wealthy businessmen, the Whigs insisted that conservative democratic solutions, like creating job opportunities, would strengthen the capitalist economy and empower and reorder the public. They also expressed distrust for municipal government, insisting that the government lacked the ability to unify and promote egalitarianism among classes. The Whigs made it their duty to reestablish social order within the city, given the government's lack of social agency and authority over the working class. Though the Whigs claimed to represent the working class, the lower classes were skeptical of the party's involvement in business affairs. They were wary that it was only representative of the middle and business classes. By the early 1850s, around 75 to 90 percent of the middle class participating in party politics were Whig party members.<sup>19</sup>

Tammany Hall, another Democratic powerhouse in New York during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, rose to political power and advocated for the rights and protection of immigrants and the working class. Their platform insisted that municipal government had fallen into the hands of the Democratic elite and self-interested politicians, a demographic that included the business-oriented Whigs. Though they claimed to represent the entire working-class, Tammany Hall was comprised of mainly immigrant workingmen recruited

at saloons and gang meetings. The corrupt men of Tammany Hall were known “shoulder-hitters” for political entrepreneurs, paid to hinder opposition from voting, guarding ballot boxes, or entering in extra votes.<sup>20</sup> Tammany Democrats intended to facilitate a stronger relationship with government and promote discourse regarding the needs of the underrepresented working class. The corruption of Tammany Hall members in politics, coupled with the prevalence of self-interested Whig members in power, weakened the general public’s trust in the government as a whole.

The Whigs and Tammany Hall, inspired by Transcendentalism, believed that nature would help unify the public but neither party knew how to act upon these interests. The conversation regarding the need for recreational space in New York began in 1844 when William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) published “A New Park” in the *New York Post*. Bryant, neither Tammany nor Whig though he shared democratic ideals, was the first influential advocate for a large public park in New York. He was a respected American poet, journalist, and editor and he inspired other literary elites, including famed American landscape gardener, Andrew Jackson Downing, to join the pursuit for park space. For years, intellectuals like Downing expressed the value of a public park in New York City and in 1850, the idea of a new park in the city became so popular among the public that the issue pervaded local politics.

The issue of parks came to prominence in the 1851 mayoral election. Both mayoral candidates, Ambrose Kingsland (Whig Democrat) and Fernando Wood (Tammany Democrat), were Democrats, and both saw the public’s interest in parks and advocated for the project to gain popularity. Kingsland won the mayoral election and addressed the Common Council to secure suitable land for a new park. On July 11, 1851 the New York

Legislature authorized that a park be built on Jones' Wood, 150 acres along the East River. The two mayoral candidates proposed that a park would cater to many of the public's concerns and the interests of all classes in the community.<sup>21</sup> The park would create thousands of jobs and get unemployed immigrant gang members out of the streets and put them to work. This satisfied Democratic concerns regarding high unemployment and social unrest. But looking more closely at the opinions of the municipal government and the upper class, the park held covert, poignant, and arguably classist, purposes.

Mayor Wood's administration claimed that a new park in the city would invigorate its commercial and physical health, improve and provide order to the "disorderly classes," and cultivate leadership among citizens.<sup>22</sup> In response to the growing population of immigrants in the city, the municipal government also hoped that the park would reform the character of the working class. The rise of Tammany Hall bred a thriving drinking and gang culture among the working class. Fearing a lack of control over the lower class, the municipal government recognized the American aristocracy's suggestions that the park would, as Bryant claims, "promote good morals and good order" by encouraging virtuous habits of work and play.<sup>23</sup> Bryant was also a strong advocate for the power of nature for artistic and moral inspiration. As Horace Greely, editor of the *New York Tribune*, argued, good places of public gathering would allow workers new opportunities for self-improvement. To Greely, civil improvement was the introduction of civilized manners and milder excitements to daily life, in opposition to gang affiliation and excessive drinking: "Much of the rowdyism, the brutality, and the drunkenness we see here may be owing to the want of such humanizing and elegant resorts."<sup>24</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, famed American landscape gardener, also believed that rural embellishments were a means of

taming the republic's roughness, "to soften and humanize the rude...and give continual education to the educated."<sup>25</sup> Though Downing supported the Jones' Wood location, in his accounts of parks in London's West End, Downing stressed the pleasures of wealth, appealing to the "imaginative and cultivated few" who, as social elites, "regarded parks as public institutions to benefit everyone but also as settings to exhibit their own attainments...The creation of such a leisure space was justified, in part, because ordinary people would appreciate (and hence be improved by) such public display of cultivation."<sup>26</sup> Though a strong advocate for the unifying and civilizing properties of a park, Downing recognizes the class distinctions of how the park might be used. He also demonstrated the unequal hierarchy of the park that insists that lower classes need cultural leadership from the upper class. The aristocracy also hoped that the park would disprove European criticism of American society, while assuaging American self-doubt. French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville critiqued the American government, stating, "Americans became involved in civic affairs out of self-interest and greed than from pride or a sense of duty."<sup>27</sup> Americans responded exactly as Tocqueville had predicted – the government used the park as cultural capital to prove to European cities that America was equally as refined, and the upper class hoped that the park would serve as an arena to display their wealth.<sup>28</sup> For the city's elite, the park provided the perfect stage for public promenading, especially given the popularity of the carriage as a defining feature of urban social status. Midcentury lower Manhattan could no longer facilitate public promenading by carriage, given the increased traffic, immigrant crowds, and dirty streets.

Though the municipal government and the upper class were both in favor of a large public park, not all New Yorkers welcomed the proposal because of its exorbitance, lack of



accessibility, and cost. Working class landowners, artisans, merchants, and the like were less keen on the park project. Their concerns deepened when the Commissioners proposed a much larger central site that would be more costly and in an upper class part of town.

In 1851, the Commissioners were concerned that the Jones' Wood site was too small, with 132 acres of farmland overlooking the East River between 66<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> Streets. Two city officials, Henry Shaw and Nicholas Dean, suggested an alternative site for a 778-acre park, in the middle of Manhattan. They claimed that the new location would better meet the needs of New Yorkers, compared to the site on the East river because of its larger size and more universal accessibility.<sup>29</sup> In August, Common Council appointed a committee to study the suitability of Jones' Wood and concluded that the central site was, indeed, the superior location for a park. In July 21, 1853, the New York State Legislature authorized the acquisition of the central site as well as Jones' Wood; however, the public opposed the need for two parks in New York City and the Jones' Wood Act was repealed.

Uptown gentlemen claimed the park was "a scheme to enhance the value of up-town land, and create a splendid centre for fashionable life, high rents &c, without regard to, and even dereliction of, the happiness of the multitude upon whose hearts and hands all the expenses will fall."<sup>30</sup> Land reformers, and artisans asked why there should be one large park uptown, rather than smaller parks that would be accessible to a majority of city residents. Some, particularly downtown merchants, wanted no park at all, for they believed it would increase traffic, gentrify, and impose upon the community established there.

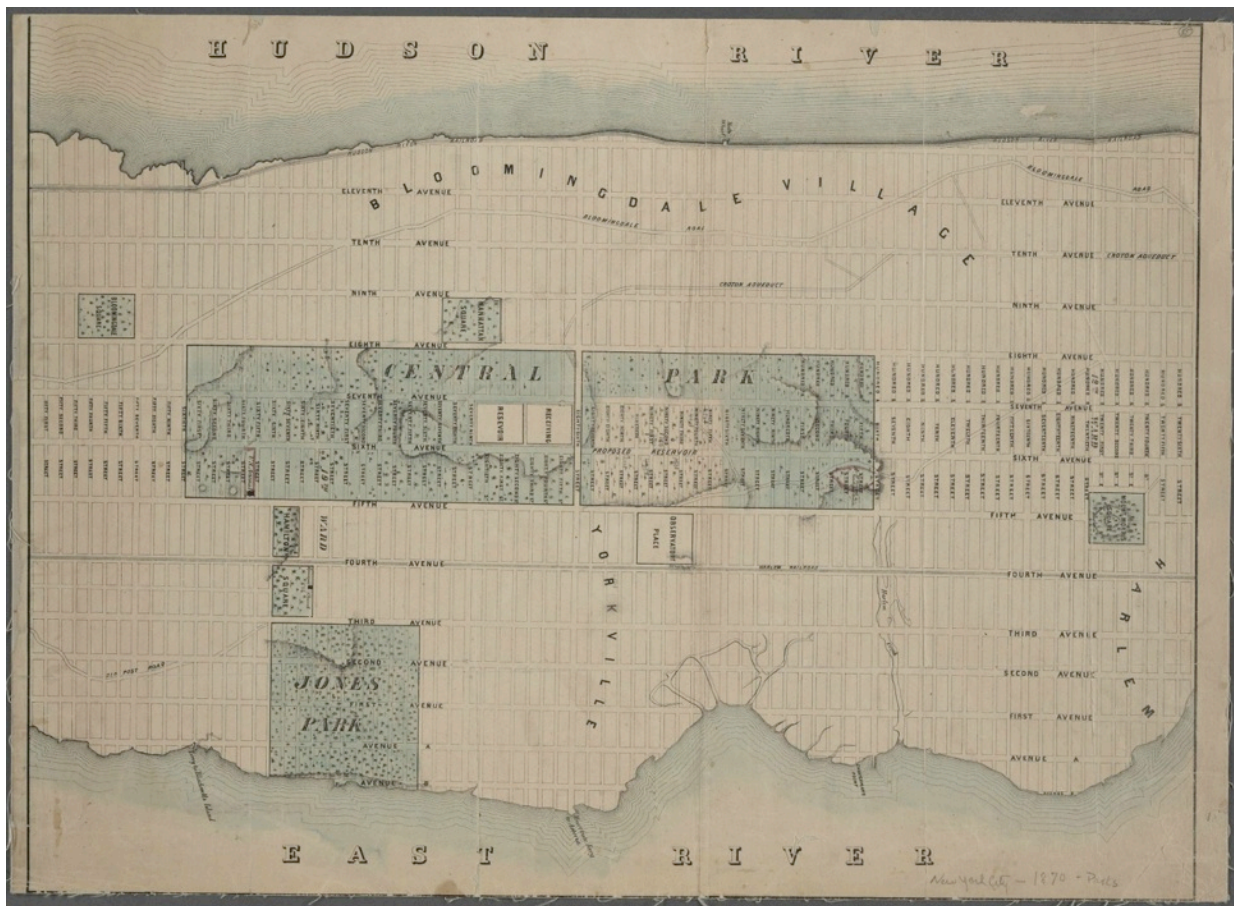


Figure 2: Proposed Central Park and Jones' Wood Park, New York City (1850)

Beyond these concerns, New Yorkers fervently questioned how the city planned to pay for the new park. The park was to be paid for through general tax revenues, and the general public questioned whom the true beneficiaries of the park were, and why public taxes should fund the project if those living in upper Manhattan reaped the most benefits. Uptown Manhattan, at the time, was home to the immigrant working class and much of the German immigrant population. The city's aristocratic elite lived closer to Union Square, quite far from the proposed park. Just west of the park, however, Broadway Street was establishing a rich art and theater culture, which brought some of the upper class upwards. Whether at Jones' Wood or the central site, the new park plans would bring the wealthy class upwards, gentrifying the area and pushing the working class farther north.<sup>31</sup>

The local newspapers also supported the central site, which positively influenced public opinions of the park project. . Given the absence of public opinion polls, newspapers could claim to represent the public and they gathered thousands of signatures on petitions in support of the site. Newspapers gathered signatures, many of which were forged by ardent Central Park supporters, highlighting the corruption of the process. The *Journal of Commerce* exposed this corruption on July 7, 1853, with a statement “that a strong feeling was manifested here in favor of parks...the zeal exhibited is chiefly the offspring of selfish interest and embraces but a small portion of our citizens.” The “public” represented by these corrupt newspapers, on paper, appeared in support of the central site, but the fraudulent signatures on petitions may not have reflected the true interests of the people. I don’t see proof of corruption. These park petitions were crucial to the park project because the Board, upholding obligations to the people, needed public support in order to put their plans in motion.

With the growing frustrations regarding the park’s lack of progress, Mayoral candidate Wood utilized this opportunity to secure the immigrant vote, which he needed for his election. The park would provide thousands of jobs to unskilled, politically active immigrants. When enemies of the park tried to reduce its area in 1854, the Commissioners agreed to these requests, designating that a 400-foot wide strip of land be used for residential sites. Wood vetoed the Committee’s space reduction, strengthening support for the central site, and in so doing made a stronger case for his reelection. When Wood was reelected, New York’s Democratic government officials became the park’s biggest supporters. These men bribed private landowners to sell their properties on the central park site for lower prices, easing the weight on taxpayers.

When Tammany Democrat Fernando Wood was elected mayor in 1854, his charisma and assurance of real social change charmed the general public. As a member of Tammany Hall, Mayor Wood was deemed a “civic hero” by the laboring classes because he promised to create jobs and decrease crime in the city. He promised to strengthen the police department and establish a centralized and disciplined public service that would reduce crime. Mayor Wood inspired hope in the working class, making claims for more frugal government spending, an enhanced public order, and job creation. But the public’s “Civic Hero,” did not meet his lofty goals. Wood’s police force favored business owners and institutions that catered to the wealthy, and excused men who voted the right way – the Tammany way. An avid reformer observed, “his monopolization of patronage, reputed use of strong-arm tactics at the polls, and repeated demands for an increase in his constitutional power (especially greater control over the police) seemed to...herald a turn to French-style despotism.”<sup>32</sup> Mayor Wood failed to act in public interest and distrust of the government was further exacerbated when a recession hit in 1854. Wood struggled to address the fraud, massive layoffs, and failure as a result of the economic crisis. The recession was accompanied by the highest unemployment and poverty rates the city had ever experienced. Workers rioted in the streets, calling upon the government to satisfy workers’ rights to labor. The working class expressed their exasperation given the lack of government action in a time when the city desperately needed solutions to pressing economic and social issues. In haste to protect whatever public popularity he had left, Mayor Wood immediately began plans to create a park in the city, a project that would provide thousands of job opportunities to skilled and unskilled workers. For William Magear Tweed, the “boss” of Tammany Hall, the project was particularly appealing because

it would require a large amount of land that he owned. As the third-largest landowner in New York City during the 1850s, Tweed bought specific plots of land that he knew the city would need to create the park. He obtained this information from his loyal Tammany members and in return, gave them a share of the profit or used the Tweed ring – strategically deployed power points including the courts, legislature, treasury, and ballot box – to guarantee jobs on public projects.<sup>33</sup>

While Mayor Wood's support was quickly dwindling, the Republican Party gained popularity among New York's social elite. Established in 1854, the Republican Party, which succeeded and incorporated the Whigs, was comprised of the American gentry, "the self-constituted aristocracy of the elite, in talent, taste, and cultural leadership."<sup>34</sup> The American gentry had two subdivisions: the patrician gentry had a stronger role in society and included the socioeconomic elite of birth and inherited wealth; the metropolitan gentry maintained cultural leadership, but lacked social, economic, or political power. The success of metropolitan gentry members was measured based on the degree by which they could reinforce the intentions of the patrician gentry.<sup>35</sup> The Republican Party utilized its strong presence in the intellectual sphere to circulate their theories of social reform. The Party's republican theories drew inspiration from European Romanticism, an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that began in Europe at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In reaction to the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism critiqued Western materialism and order, and celebrated the beauty of nature, put emotion over reason, and emphasized and understanding of the self. In the second phase of Romanticism from 1805 to the 1830s, writers and artists upheld a strong sense of nationalism through rebellion against social conventions, and civic empowerment. Republicans were also inspired by the Public Walks

movement in England during the 1830s. This movement held that the presence of nature in urban environments could produce social, political, and cultural change. For Republicans, a new park in the city would demonstrate these romantic notions that nature can help solve the city's social problems.

Democrats and Republicans really began to define their party policies with respect to a variety of issues during this time – how to deal with the economy, poverty, the role of the government, and so on. The Democrats, unified when Mayor Wood was elected, stressed the importance of a stable economy and thriving labor markets. The Republican Party emerged in response to Democrats, insisting that government was too focused on business and that in order to address poverty and unemployment, the government needed to strengthen the culture of New York. For Republicans, a new park in New York was a timely opportunity to demonstrate the power of nature and art to unify and repair society. These political affairs that involve the Whigs, Tammany Halls, Republicans, and Democrats exemplified the need for consolidated power prior to the design of Central Park. Once the Republican and Democratic parties were established, the government demonstrated enough order to put park plans into motion.

#### **4. The Park Takes Shape**

With support from the upper class and semblances of the general public, the government approved the central site and work on Central Park commenced preliminarily. In the beginning, the park had trouble gaining traction due to political frictions and a lack of funding for the project. The state legislature had difficulty appointing managers for the park, so on May 19, 1856, the Common Council appointed Mayor Wood and his street

commissioner, Joseph Taylor, as Commissioners of Central Park, with the right to exercise full planning authority. However, the public lacked confidence in their leadership due to their Tammany Hall affiliations. In response to public concerns, the state legislature assembled a Central Park Board of Commissioners, comprised of seven members, approved by Mayor Wood. The Board was appointed to consult and help the Common Council decide on a plan for the park. Wood's new Board of Commissioners was majority Tammany Democrat, like many of the men in Wood's employ. After one year, Head Civil Engineer Egbert Viele designed a park plan but the Board lacked sufficient funding to make headway on the project. The lack of visible progress and blatant Tammany affiliation shook public confidence and the state legislature was forced to reevaluate the park's management once again, in order to regain public support.

The public, as expressed in newspapers, public forums, and public demonstrations, was most concerned about the Board's Tammany Hall affiliation and stressed the need for a non-partisan board in order to produce a park representative of the public, rather than political agendas. The legislature, markedly Republican, withdrew Mayor Wood's authority over park management and elected a new Central Park Board of Commissioners. This board was supposedly non-partisan, independent, and willing to supervise the work for the love of parks.<sup>36</sup> The Board consisted of James E. Cooley, James Hogg, Thomas Fields, Waldo Hutchins, Charles W. Elliott, John F. Butterworth, Robert J. Dillon, Charles H. Russell, Asa C. Gray, Andrew H. Green, and William K. Strong. This board was much more homogeneous than the first. Five of the eleven members were lawyers and the rest ranged from botanists, auctioneers, writers, to publishers. Once the eleven board members were elected, Republicans maintained control of the board, generating opposition from the local

majority. The Board deflected public tensions by appointing reform Democrats James E. Cooley and Andrew H. Green as president and treasurer in order to create a board that was equally representative of the Republican and Democratic parties. The Republican board members insisted that Mayor Wood's park engineer corps be reevaluated in order to maintain control of the project. In response, the board decided to keep the current Democratic engineer corps and create the role of Superintendent of Central Park to supervise the implementation of park plans. Mayor Wood and the Democratic Party were losing the faith of the local majority because they did not follow through with their promises to the public. The Republican Party took advantage of the Democrats' moment of weakness and overcame the dominance of Tammany Hall in government. By hiring a Republican Superintendent, the party could gain control of the project. Republicans believed that Olmsted was a favorable candidate for Superintendent of Central Park because he could serve as a buffer for the political tensions between parties that emerged during the 1850s, and a tool to regain Republican power over the design of Central Park.

Olmsted proved a viable candidate for superintendent for three reasons. Firstly, he had a strong literary, business, and agricultural background, which expressed his skills in project management, literary eloquence, and social tact, and his knowledge of gardening, farming, and irrigation systems. Although he lacked "practical experience" – for example, formal education in architecture, civil engineering, and horticulture – Olmsted's working experience made him a reasonable candidate whose interests aligned with the goals of the project. Olmsted was best suited for public work, compared to the other candidates who boasted strong practical skills, but lacked social influence and management experience. Secondly, Olmsted satisfied the Board's requirement for a Republican candidate who would



not pose a threat to Democrats. The Board sought “A Republican, but not a politician; much better he should not have been a practical politician. The Republicans could do little without the cooperation of the reform Democrats and were ready to compromise, on the understanding that the park shall be managed independently of politics.”<sup>37</sup> This letter illustrates the Board’s careful consideration of which candidate would best serve their political needs. Olmsted, himself, knew his utility to the Board, and understood that the board chose him not only for his applicable experience, but also his political function. Olmsted had no official adherence to either political party, though his ideas ran Republican. Lastly, his literary career brought him in contact with many prominent journalists from the metropolitan gentry who supported Olmsted’s campaign for Superintendent. These men included George W. Curtis, Parke Godwin, Charles A. Dana, Asa Gray, and James Hamilton, to name a few. Olmsted’s campaign greatly benefitted from the recommendations from these well-known and well connected cultural figures. Most of these men were friends with, or have worked with members of the Board. Gray and Hamilton proved extremely important to Olmsted during his candidacy. Gray, a Commissioner himself, wrote a letter to the president of the Board advocating Olmsted’s value to the project, and Hamilton drew up a petition in his favor, demonstrating Olmsted’s support from influential friends including social theorists, aristocrats, and journalists. Olmsted earned the support of many members of the metropolitan gentry and his popularity among these circles convinced the Board of his capabilities.<sup>38</sup>

As Superintendent, Olmsted hoped that the design of the park would be free from the influence of politics. Olmsted remained apolitical, refusing bribes and corruption, even though this behavior was prominent in New York during the time. Olmsted states, “I hold

myself responsible to the Board as an undivided body. I have asked favors of no party and of no man, and I acknowledge obligations in which the Park can be concerned to no party and to no men.”<sup>39</sup> The park Board, on the other hand, was heavily invested in politics. Central Park was an opportunity for Republicans to gain control of a public institution that would greatly enhance its popularity and likely offer sinecures to local officials. Republicans on the board elected Olmsted as Superintendent in reaction to the tumultuous political environment of the time in order to carry out political agendas. Olmsted, upholding nominally Republican values, was elected by the Commissioners to gain Republican control over the project.

## **5. Olmsted Democratizes the Workforce**

Consolidated into two parties with enough strength and structure to enact real social change, the municipality could finally address the public’s concerns regarding the lack of order within the labor market. As Superintendent, Olmsted established an efficient and democratic labor force, which reestablished trust between the people and government. Olmsted’s duties included the following:

The Superintendent, during the progress of active operations shall personally attend to the force employed in the Park, see that all give due attention to their duty and report to the Engineer any neglect or dereliction therefrom, which he may discover. He shall co-operate with the Engineer in the execution of the details of the work which may be laid out, and when any portion or portions of the plans agreed upon have been carried out, attend to its proper preservation as completed. He shall have charge of the general police of the Park and see that the ordinances of the Board are respected & obeyed. He shall report to the Board upon matters not pertaining to the construction of the work, monthly.<sup>40</sup>

Olmsted hoped to be responsible for the park’s design, but Egbert Viele and the Tammany Democrat engineer corps appointed by Mayor Wood to the commission hindered his

involvement. Fearing Olmsted's lack of "practical" skills, the Board gave Viele complete discretion over the design and construction of the park, while Olmsted served as manager, administrator, and park programmer. Thus, Olmsted's first politically driven juncture during his role as Superintendent proved to be his battle with Viele for control of the Park's design.

In 1857, America suffered from an economic crash – unemployment reached record highs and labor riots ensued; immigrant gang populations grew and crime increased; and the police force was ill equipped to handle this public unrest. Mayor Wood was not reelected as mayor mainly because he could not fulfill his promises to the public. After his defeat, the Board of Commissioners gave Olmsted the opportunity to hire a new workforce, based on competence rather than political affiliation.<sup>41</sup> Wood's engineer corps was, as Olmsted observed, "nearly all Democrats and all appointed by a Democrat, and a Democrat who had himself been appointed first by Wood, and as they were mostly introduced to him by Democratic members of the Common Council, the presumption that the Commission was to be managed exclusively in the interests of the Republicans as a means of defeating Wood was considerably weakened."<sup>42</sup> The workforce believed that Olmsted was voted Superintendent mainly to disrupt Wood's control of the project. Sharing this mentality, park employees did not take to Olmsted's direction. When Wood left office, Olmsted was able to hire a workforce that shared his vision and would be responsive and effective. With a new engineer corps, Olmsted could finally manage the park and promote democracy in both his labor force and the park's design.

Given the turbulent job market, his office was bombarded by applications and mobs gathered at his door demanding employment. Eager citizens shoved resumes into his office

mailbox and expressed their rights to labor. Olmsted tactfully handled this public outcry by advertising the jobs in newspapers. In doing so, he expressed that everyone had an equal chance of being hired. Though some jobs required certain skills and education, most positions were for unskilled labor. Olmsted selected his workforce based on competence and character, rather than political affiliation.

Olmsted's working order was successful because it was democratic. By holding his men accountable for completing projects and establishing trust between himself and his employ, Olmsted "got the park into a capital discipline, a perfect system, working like a machine, 1000 men at work."<sup>43</sup> Olmsted divided the workforce by practice, and civil engineers, horticulturalists, and architects worked in small teams to complete specific projects. Olmsted also established a chain of command, and all teams reported to him. As Superintendent, Olmsted was in charge of managing the entire workforce and maintaining smooth operations overall. Though Viele maintained authority over the physical design of the park, "the selection of a new labor force strengthened Olmsted's authority on the park....As a result, the park board became increasingly convinced of Olmsted's "practicality." His supporters continually requested his advice, seeking to advance him at the expense of Viele."<sup>44</sup> This opportunity allowed Olmsted to demonstrate managerial skill, given the many social problems in the city and the pressures of employing a cohesive workforce when unemployment was high. Though he was presented with the difficult task of selecting qualified men for the project, Olmsted demonstrated his poise while subject to public scrutiny.

Impressed by Olmsted's administrative tact, the Commissioners raised his pay as a sign of their satisfaction in his work. In response to Olmsted's successes, "his park

associates had no reason to suppose that the unassuming little man who was the new superintendent would quickly convert the anarchic and sometimes turbulent work force into a model of discipline and efficiency.”<sup>45</sup> This workplace efficiency transformed the flawed labor force of the time. These structural enhancements laid the foundation for Olmsted’s fight for social justice, personified in the design of Central Park.

When the park board announced a public competition for the design of Central Park in 1857, Olmsted and architect Calvert Vaux entered their Greensward Plan (1858) as a joint venture. Calvert Vaux studied Architecture in England and immigrated to America to become the architectural assistant to the founder of American “landscape gardening” as a practice, Andrew Jackson Downing. After Downing’s death in 1852, Vaux moved to New York and lobbied for the creation of a new plan for Central Park, as a replacement for Viele’s engineering-oriented design. Viele was Engineer-in-Chief of the park under Wood’s employ and he designed his Central Park plan (see Figure 3) with the eyes of a civil engineer. Viele first submitted his design in 1854, when Wood’s park plans began. Though his design was clean, direct, and logical, the Board of Commissioners thought that his plan was too simplistic. The plan demonstrated his strong engineering background, given the detailed land assessment study that laid the foundations for the placement of walkways along the land’s topography. However, the Board thought that the design too closely mirrored grid-like layout of Manhattan and lacked creativity.

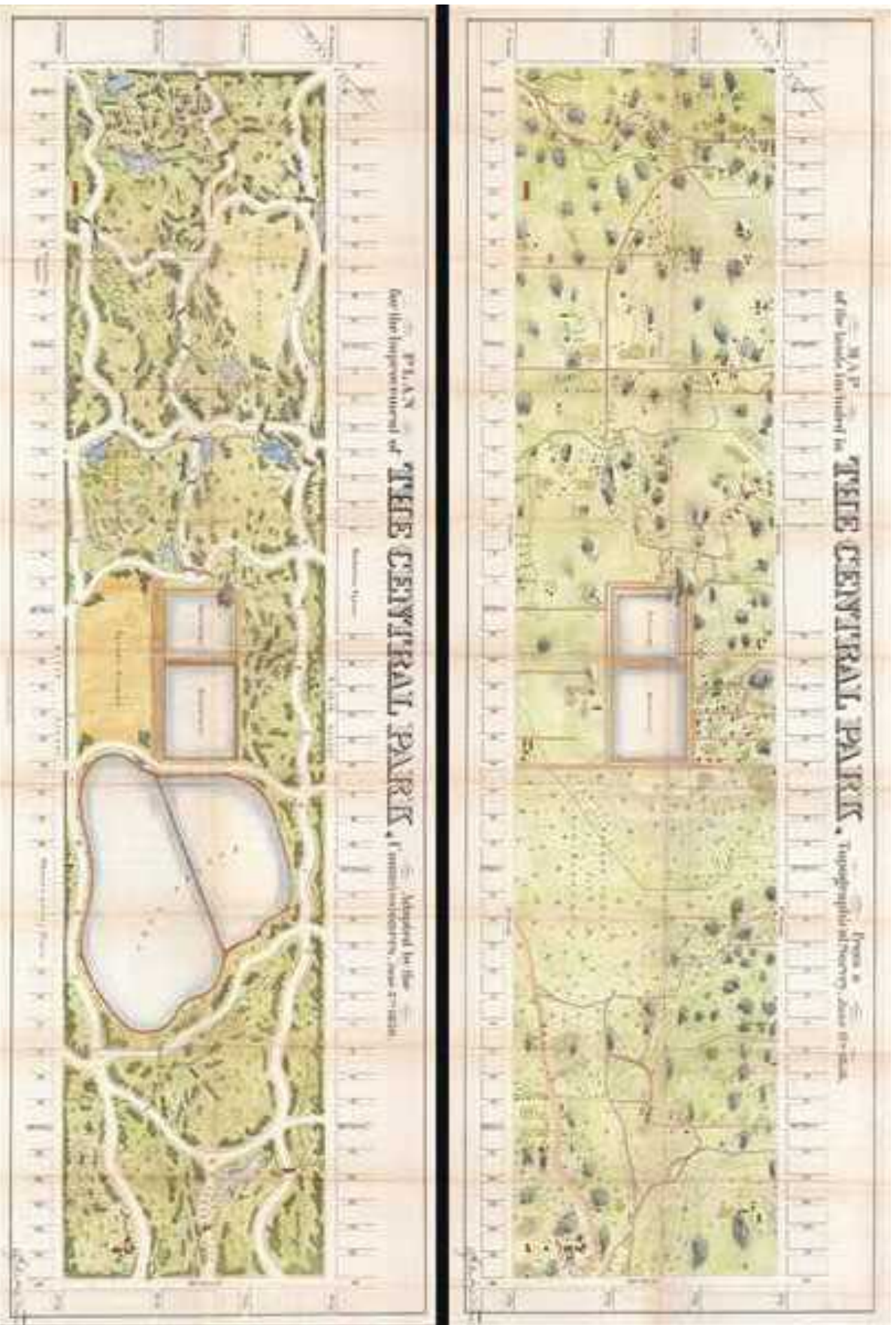


Figure 3: (Above) Land Assessment Map created by Civil Engineer Egbert Viele; (Below) Proposed Plan for the Development of Central Park (1856)

When Vaux first approached Olmsted to enter the competition, Olmsted declined the invitation, fearing that this would offend Egbert Viele, given that his original design was entered in the competition. However, Viele claimed impartiality and Olmsted and Vaux entered the competition as a team. The Commissioners accepted Vaux's proposal and Vaux persuaded Olmsted to join the competition with him. On April 28, 1858, Olmsted and Vaux's Greensward Plan was selected as the winning design out of 35 total entries. But Beveridge insists, "the two men operated in the area of politics as well as that of design. The political process began to work, in fact, as soon as the commissioners met to select the winning plan."<sup>46</sup> The design competition, in itself, was a demonstration of Party interests: all six of the Republican commissioners voted for the Greensward plan, while three of the four Democrats voted for a design proposed by the park's Democratic Superintendent of Planning, Samuel I. Gustin. Andrew H. Green was the only Democrat to vote in favor of the Greensward Plan.<sup>47</sup>

The Commissioners also used the competition to reward employees of the park project for their service and dedication. The first prize of \$2,000 went to Olmsted, Superintendent of Construction, the \$1,000 second prize went to Samuel Gustin, Superintendent of Planning, and third prize of \$750 went to both Lachlan H. McIntosh, the park's disbursing clerk, and Michael Miller, the park's property clerk.<sup>48</sup> Viele was dismissed of his duties, Olmsted took on the role of Architect-in-Chief and Superintendent, and Vaux was appointed Consulting Architect. Though Olmsted and Vaux hoped that the Greensward plan would allow them freedom to design Central Park free from the influence of politics, the Commissioners chose Olmsted's design because it secured Republican control over the project, and it rewarded Park employees for their service to the Board.

Olmsted's new engineer corps was free from political influences and made democratic design easier to supervise. Olmsted proved his management abilities and defined relationships between himself and his employees in a time when trust was lacking. Olmsted and Vaux were also able to design the Greensward plan free from politics, but the Board chose their plan in order to reward employees of the project for their hard work. Though the Board chose Olmsted's design partly out of favoritism, Olmsted had the opportunity to construct a democratic design with help from a reliable team to see his plans through.

## **6. Democracy of Design**

Democracy, for Olmsted, was expressed through social unity and its success was dependent upon each individual as a member of society as a whole. It involved "each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping the greater happiness of each."<sup>49</sup> Olmsted and Vaux's Greensward plan was more than just a demonstration of how nature could better the urban environment. It also represented the start of a social and natural movement that changed the urban landscape and the politics that surrounded it. Olmsted designed the park in order to provide equal access to nature. This democratic sense of equality of space, he claimed, would enhance the characters and minds of all, promoting civilized and moral behavior. Given the turbulent social environment in New York during the 1850s, Olmsted hoped that access to nature would ameliorate the exhaustion of daily routine and psychological malaise.



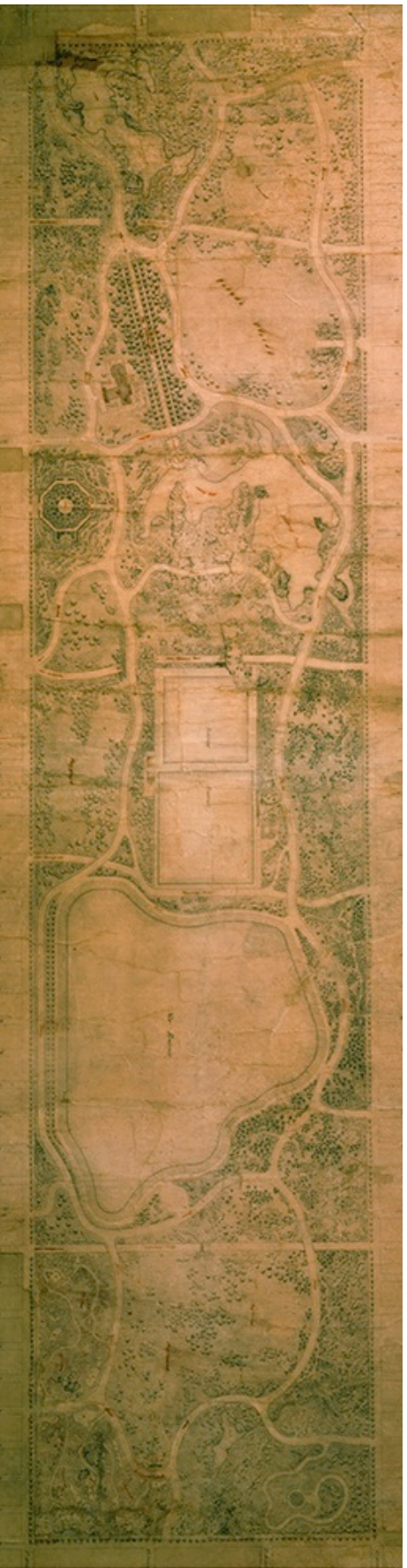


Figure 4: Greensward Plan (1858) by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux

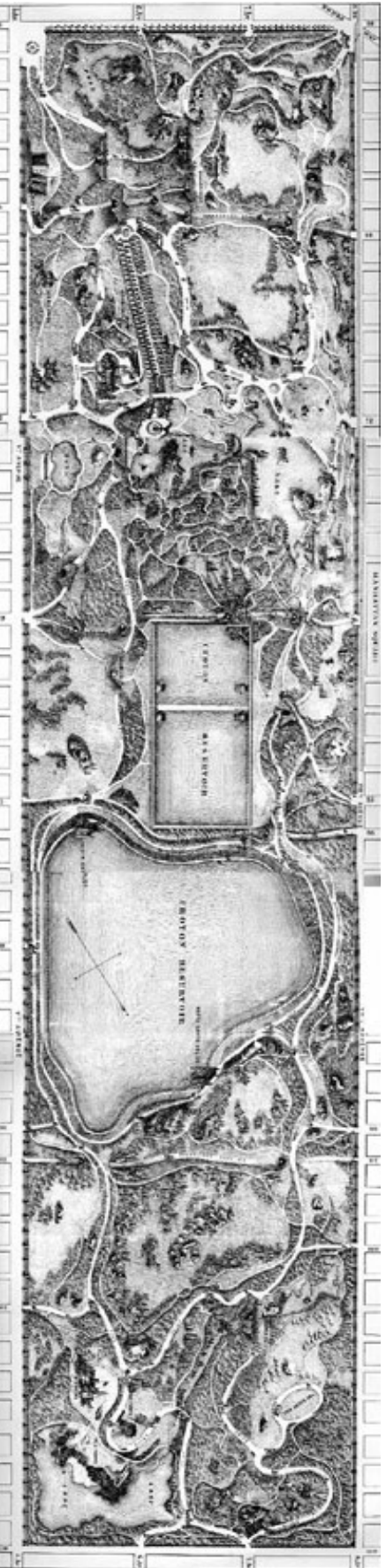


Figure 5: First study of design for the Central Park (1858) by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux; Woodcut after Greensward Plan

The original Greensward plan (see Figures 4 and 5) strove to create a pastoral oasis, excluding the sights and sounds of the city from the park space, creating a space where the public could escape completely from the harms of the city, physically, visually, and mentally. Olmsted hoped that the park would move populations uptown, reducing the population density that proved problematic in lower Manhattan. The plan “planted out” the city, creating a green barrier of trees on the perimeter of the park, making it look more extensive than it was. This created a visual and physical barrier against the densely settled area that surrounded the park. Olmsted expressed the need for sunken traverse roads, and separate roads for commercial vehicles, pleasure vehicles, and pedestrian walkways. In doing so, Olmsted hoped that pedestrians would not be disturbed or distracted from their pastoral meditations while experiencing the park. He urged that the roads be kept open, but the park be fully fenced in and closed at night in order to reduce crime on the vehicular roadways. In order to fortify this barrier between the street and the park, he lined the roadways with boundary plantings to create passages of scenery that would refresh visitors, even as they travel through the park on their way.

The design of Central Park married the pastoral, the picturesque, and the sublime. The pastoral, “the beautiful,” provided a peaceful backdrop meant for visitors to enjoy. Many of Olmsted’s designs included pastoral meadows that seemed much larger than they actually were, immersing visitors within the landscape and allowing them to move through the “graceful” landscape. These meadows were designed to counteract stress from the urban environment.<sup>50</sup> (Figures 6 and 7.) As a contrast to the smoothness and flow of the pastoral, the picturesque is defined by the ruggedness and shagginess of nature, found in steep hillsides and rocky trails. This landscape calls upon one’s curiosity, “childish

playfulness and profuse careless utterance of nature.”<sup>51</sup> But this landscape recognizes the presence of humans within nature, guiding visitors’ experience in the park. (See figures 8 and 9.) The sublime inspires a sense of awe from nature. The sublime provides complexity of light and shadow, visual lushness through dense plantings, and a humbling adoration of nature’s grandeur. It sought to represent the mysterious and unsettling parts of nature, and the visual and psychological effect of feeling inconsequential in comparison. Olmsted’s signature style unified these three spaces to reveal the cleansing and restorative aspects of the nature. (See figures 10 and 11.) The following images (Figures 6-11) demonstrate these styles. The dates are unknown but represent Olmsted’s final design.





Figure 6: Pastoral Field



Figure 7: Pastoral Lake





Figure 8: Picturesque Stone Walkway



Figure 9: Picturesque Gazebo

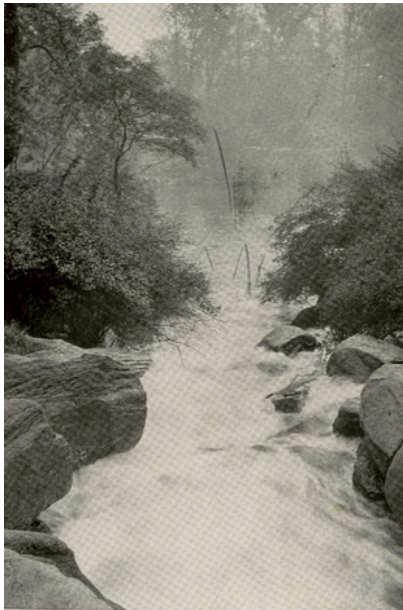


Figure 10: Sublime Gorge

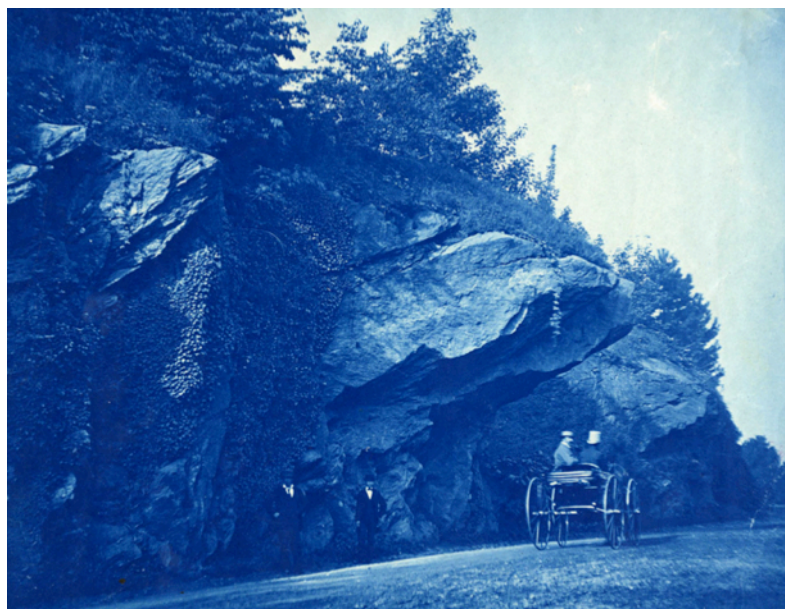


Figure 11: Sublime Cliff in Central Park

The park, in its three design elements, was meant to be a space that nurtured fraternity and solidarity. Olmsted hoped that the park would refresh and promote “wakefulness of the mind” that was dormant in business. As Guven Arif Sargin states, “the philosophy of nature was transformed into a moral struggle, having a political sphere for exploring the national identity – nature teaches the great ideals of liberty, justice, and equity, but it is in the city that these could provide the ethical principles of the true American democracy.”<sup>52</sup> Olmsted, like many of his intellectual peers, strove to promote social democracy using the power of nature as a solution to urban problems. Sargin claims that this “metropolitan urbanism, for Olmsted, was synonymous with justice as well as with participation in the democratic process...Thus, parks as a political means was a great opportunity to educate the less privileged about their collective responsibility; and in this regard they were a symbol of a united community.”<sup>53</sup>

Olmsted designed the park in order to teach its visitors how to understand and experience the landscape. Olmsted hoped that the design of the park would “present an aspect of spaciousness and tranquility with variety and intricacy of arrangement, thereby affording the most agreeable contrast to the confinement, bustle, and monotonous street-division of the city.”<sup>54</sup> Olmsted mastered the art to conceal art: “There is an “always been there” quality about much of Olmsted’s work....His landscapes often appear so “natural” that one thinks of them as something not *put there* but merely *preserved* by happenstance.”<sup>55</sup> As seen in his detailed Greensward Study No. 1 (see Figure 12) and Greensward Study No. 7 (see Figure 13), Olmsted used the original terrain as the foundation for his designs, planting trees, shrubs, and grass along the present hills and valleys to curate certain experiences within the various sections of the park. Olmsted

framed pastoral meadows with lush trees to keep viewers present within the space and unaware of the urban landscape just a few blocks away. These sketches highlight Olmsted's careful consideration of how the landscape was to be designed. He imagined landscapes that celebrated nature more than the original terrain. Arguably, the space is artificial because it was designed and constructed. By forming nature to utilize the original land, however, much of the park looks and feels organic.

Olmsted's designs aimed to have an unconscious influence on visitors, subtly directing movement through the landscape using strategically connected pathways, like those of the Ramble. Olmsted evoked in his park visitors the sensation of feeling lost, leading them up to the bell tower at the summit without realizing that they are being led. Olmsted had a vision for each tree that he planted, and a clear destination for each path that he designed. With artistic finesse, Olmsted transformed the site into an extraordinary display of creativity, nuanced effects on the individual, and meticulous execution.



GREENSWARD STUDY NO. 1: VIEW NORTH ACROSS POND FROM NEAR ENTRANCE  
AT 59TH STREET AND FIFTH AVENUE



*Present Outlines*



*Effect Proposed*

Figure 12: Greensward Study No. 1: View North Across Pond From Near Entrance at 59<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue (1858)



GREENSWARD STUDY NO. 7: VIEW SOUTH ACROSS PLAYGROUND IN UPPER PARK  
FROM BOGARDUS HILL NEAR 103RD STREET AND EIGHTH AVENUE



*Present Outlines*



*Effect Proposed*

Figure 13: Greensward Study No. 7: View South Across Playground in Upper Park from Bogardus Hill Near 103<sup>rd</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue (1858)

Throughout the park's construction, Olmsted proposed modifications to the original design. These modifications were a product of Olmsted's restless creativity and his desire to perfect his park. Though they demonstrated Olmsted's artistic genius, they significantly increased the costs of the project. This led him into conflict with the Board over the budget because the commissioners believed that with unlimited funding, Olmsted would never stop adding to the park. From 1858 to 1860, Olmsted proposed various changes to his original design plan, redirecting the courses of the walks, introducing new bridges, and reshaping the surface of the ground. Olmsted admits, "each of the improvements upon the original plan involves a larger expenditure than was contemplated in that plan, and it was for that reason, and that reason alone that most of them were not included in the original plan."<sup>56</sup> Olmsted's initial design omissions kept the estimated costs of the Greensward Plan reasonable for the design competition. However, Olmsted planned to introduce these expensive additions back into his design once his plan won the competition.

## **7. Reeling in Olmsted**

Financial restrictions set by Andrew H. Green and the Board of Commissioners interfered with the democracy of Olmsted's work force and the democracy of his design. Olmsted continued to add on expensive additions to the park, and by 1859, the government had spent \$1,765,000 on the project, \$265,000 more than the legislature had authorized for the total cost of making the park.<sup>57</sup> Exasperated by Olmsted's inability to adhere to budget constraints, the legislature investigated how much time and money would be required to complete the plan. After completing the study, the Board of Commissioners decided to cut

back construction, drastically reduce the workforce, and set a limit of \$2,500 per month for wages, beginning January 1860.<sup>58</sup> In response to these decisions, Olmsted replied, "You very plainly give me to understand that I have lost your confidence and that you can no longer take my word for the motives of my action." He concluded, "I have done my duty according to my judgment."<sup>59</sup> While implementing these changes, the Commissioners gave Olmsted six weeks leave of absence, requesting that he visit European parks to gain inspiration.

Olmsted's plans for a democratic park and the realization of his environmental and social justice objectives were disrupted when, on August 18, 1858, Andrew H. Green was appointed Treasurer and Comptroller of the Park. His job included drastically reducing the workforce, the number of structures built in the park, and cutting any nonessential construction costs. While Olmsted was abroad, Green fired many of the park employees and enforced the use of cost proposals for new additions to the project. When he returned to New York, Olmsted's authority as Superintendent was greatly diminished. He lost his discretionary power to spend up to \$200 a week on park expenditures, and Green kept a close eye on his proposals for new implementations, frequently refusing to authorize new additions.<sup>60</sup> Green's tight-reined authority proved the most frustrating obstacle for Olmsted to overcome.

Green's firing of Olmsted's employees greatly undermined the fine-tuned labor system that Olmsted established. Green reduced the workforce without adhering to Olmsted's rule of seniority, undermining the trust developed between workers and their superiors. A friend of Olmsted's, George Waring, informed him that "your successor does not know much of human nature...I am very confident that, from chief to water-boy, every

one does less work than he did under your system of placing some confidence in men's sense of honor and duty."<sup>61</sup> Green interfered with Olmsted's democratic system of management, fracturing the trust that Olmsted had earned from his employees. Green acted upon Democratic concerns regarding Olmsted's park spending, and Olmsted claimed that the influence of politics increased the cost of park construction by at least 20 percent.<sup>62</sup> Olmsted also critiqued Green's dismissal of park employees, stating, "I think I do not underrate the importance of duties of this kind. On their proper performance the popularity of the Park is greatly dependent. But their performance is hardly compatible with the proper performance of the other and even more important duties of the Architect-in-Chief."<sup>63</sup> In this letter, Olmsted faulted Green for firing men without spending time "watching, and personally directing the work." Olmsted aimed for transparency in his workforce, whereas Green made cost-effective choices without consideration as to how Olmsted was managing the project. Thus, Green and the fight against Olmsted's park design disturbed the working order of the park, shaking its Republican foundations in the process.

Although Green was once an avid supporter of Olmsted's vision (he voted for the Greensward Plan in 1857), he proved to be one of Olmsted's greatest rivals. Though Olmsted thought the Park design would be free from the influence of government, Green's fiscal restrictions greatly impacted the realization of Olmsted's design, and Olmsted's relationship with government while working on Central Park. Indeed Olmsted was deeply offended by Green's control over the project. Green, a conservative Democrat who opposed American gentry Republicanism, was satisfied when the basic construction of the park was completed; however, he had little patience for the additional expenses for plantings that Olmsted claims, "would transform the park into a work of landscape art." He states, "the

practical effect is that my hands are often tied just where it is of the highest importance that I should act with an artists freedom and spirit – namely, in the last touches, the finish of my work.”<sup>64</sup> Green’s labor force was unresponsive to Olmsted’s leadership, and Olmsted blamed the Commission for requiring him to satisfy the responsibilities of superintendent without an adequate team to assist him. Olmsted attributed the additional expenses of the project to the failure of the board to permit him to hire employees without taking politics into consideration.<sup>65</sup> Though Olmsted pleaded for a reevaluation of the park employees, the Commissioners did not hire new members of the team, but gave him free reign over the current team of engineers and draftsmen.

Olmsted was in conflict with the government throughout his work on Central Park and his interactions with Green and the Board eroded his faith in municipality to create swift social change. The park took nearly fifteen years to complete (1858-1873), from the adoption of the Greensward Plan to Olmsted’s final additions. Though he estimated that the park would open within five years, Olmsted was oblivious to the influence of political powers and their conflicting interests. Debates surrounding the funding of the park project extended the park’s timeline, and although Olmsted’s creativity grew throughout the project, implementing these artistically and culturally significant additions to the park was extremely costly. But without Olmsted’s insistence on expanding the width and length of walking paths, relocating park entrances, and smoothing rocky terrains, Central Park’s famed pastoral fields and walks would lack the evocation of thoughtless meandering for which the park is famed.

Though Olmsted fought for many important design elements that enhanced the culture of the park, the Commissioners greatly intervened in the realization of the

democracy of his design. On May 10, 1858, Commissioner Robert Dillon proposed three alterations: the creation of two carriage entrances on 59<sup>th</sup> street, at both 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> avenues; the abolition of the portcullis-gate entrance to the Parade Ground at 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, permitting carriage drives to relocate closer to the avenue perimeter, providing a larger open area for the Parade ground; and decreasing the width of the carriage drives by 60 feet.



Figure 14: First Study of Design for the Central Park; Woodcut made in 1858 (Above); Map of the Central Park, 1868 (Below). Note changes from initial plan to actual design below: (blue) The two entrances along 59<sup>th</sup> Street are widened to accommodate carriages; (green) lack of Parade Ground entrance at intersection of 69<sup>th</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue; and (red) paths appear thinner.

Olmsted ultimately agreed to these changes, but he saw no need for more. Unsurprisingly, the committee suggesting these changes included Commissioners Andrew H. Green and Charles H. Russell, who, prior to his thirteen years as a Central Park Commissioner, served



as a member of the New York Chamber of Commerce and was one of the original projectors of the New York Bank of Commerce.

Dillon's most obstructive proposals suggested a wire suspension bridge extending from Cathedral Avenue at 59<sup>th</sup> Street to the Croton Reservoir, crossing the lake and running directly to Vista Rock. This addition would drastically alter Olmsted's plans, transforming the park into a spectacle rather than a pedestrian experience. Olmsted was able to exemplify the undesirability of Dillon's suspension bridge, arguing that it was not cost effective and would ruin views from the Ramble, located just west of the reservoir.

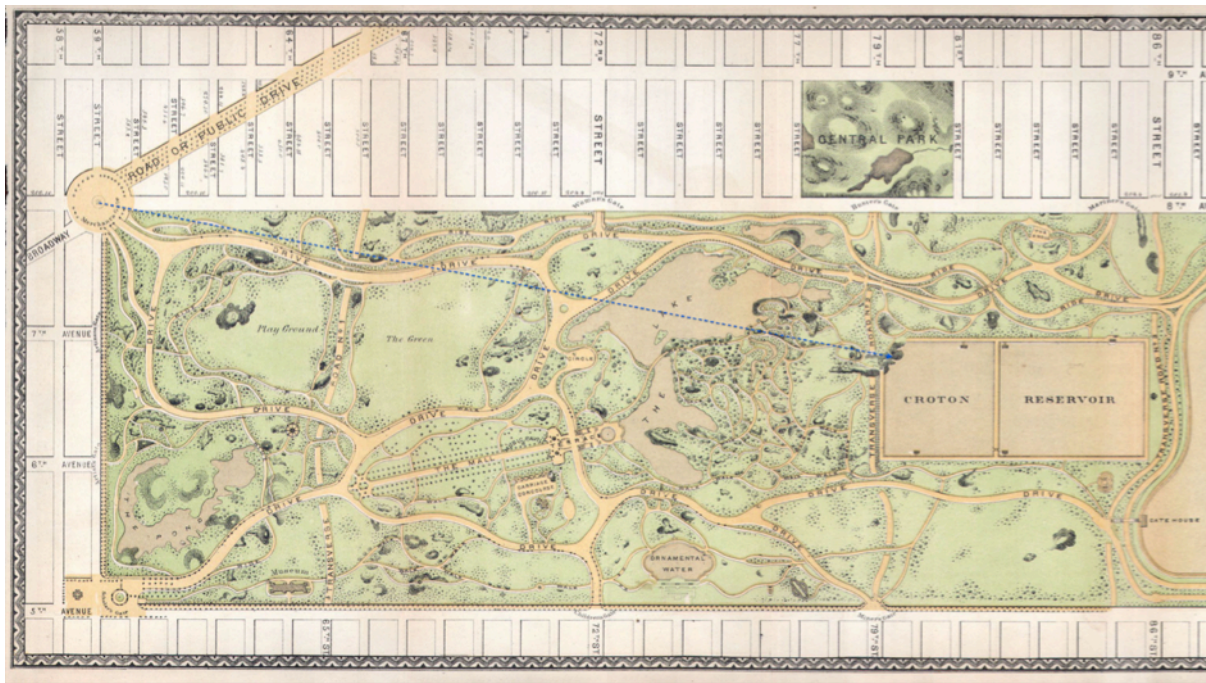


Figure 15: Western portion of Central Park (1868); blue line indicates path of proposed suspension bridge from 59<sup>th</sup> Street entrance, over the Lake and the Ramble, to Vista Rock at the edge of the Croton Reservoir.

Although Olmsted was able to fend off the suspension bridge obstruction, he had much more difficulty fending off Dillon's suggestion that the transverse roads that run across the park be at ground level, rather than sunken. At the time, all transverse roads were at ground level. But Olmsted's original plan contained sunken roads as a fundamental

demonstration of democratic design, since the sunken roads would allow carts and carriages to pass through the park, without obstructing the tranquility of the surrounding area. To Olmsted, the roads served the key function of disassociating the park from the city and carriages as a disturbance to pedestrians, in particular. However, the board rejected this design, and even his friend, Board member Charles Wyllys Elliott, agreed that sunken traverse roads were an impractical use of park funding. Although no longer underground, Central Park's transverse roads are considered revolutionary, allowing carriage traffic to cut through the park without disturbing pedestrians or detracting from the park experience.

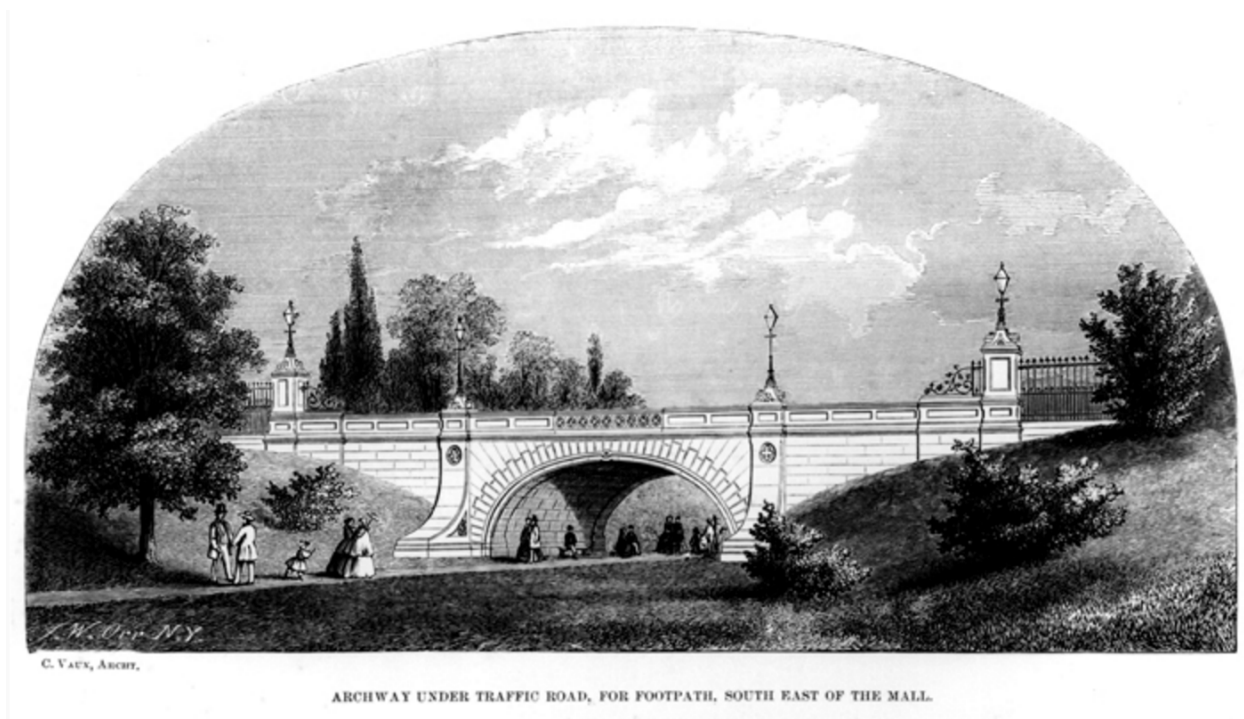


Figure 13: Ground-level transverse road with carriage traffic above, and pedestrian traffic below.

Even with these many alterations – whether large or small, accepted or rejected – Olmsted maintained his strong resolve and made sure that the democracy of his design was



realized. He created a masterpiece, respected worldwide, for its innovative transformation of the natural landscape and the democratic principles that the park upholds.

## **8. Conclusion: Foundations for Landscape Architecture**

Olmsted was a visionary who used European and American values to Create Central Park and navigated political waters to protect the democracy of his design. Throughout his work on Central Park, Olmsted defended his Greensward Plan wholeheartedly, fending off many of the Board's design proposals in order to protect the artistic, cultural, and social functions of the park. Central Park remains one of the most influential parks in American history and Olmsted succeeded in making Central Park an enduring and unparalleled exemplification of democracy, social consciousness, and egalitarianism in design. Olmsted wanted to design the park free from Party politics and the influence government powers, in particular Andrew Green's tight reigns over fiscal park matters. However, Olmsted was subject to many political impacts throughout his work on Central Park and functioned as a Republican tool as soon as Charles Wyllys Elliott convinced Olmsted to campaign for Superintendent. Throughout the design and implementation of the park, Olmsted had to keep Democratic financial concerns at bay and at the same time, combine art and nature to embody Republican principles.

Central Park was Olmsted's first and most famous public garden design. Olmsted's duties as Superintendent are quintessentially the responsibility of landscape architects in public projects today. Landscape architects around the world draw inspiration from Olmsted's work and parks are now considered integral to the health and success of cities.

Like Olmsted, landscape architects practice both pragmatism and imagination to design natural environments that unify, refresh, and inspire the public. Central Park also modeled the design process of public parks, from the proposal to implementation. For public projects, the government decides upon a design by calling for proposals from various landscape architecture firms. Once a plan is chosen, the client, in this case the government, exercises full discretion over the final design and funding of the park. Like Olmsted, modern landscape architects, especially those working in the public sector, are challenged by budget restrictions, conflicting interests, and public concerns regarding the contents of the park. Olmsted's work on Central Park defined the role of modern landscape architects, set the standard for public garden design in America, and proved that parks are fundamental to the health of cities.

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