



## CHAngemaker Jeffrey T. Keiter, RLA

### Happy Birthday to the “Father” of Landscape Architecture in the U.S.

#### Introduction

Established by the American Society of Landscape Architects, World Landscape Architecture Month is celebrated every April by landscape architects around the world, including those at CHA. This annual event commemorates landscape architects for their diligent work creating beautiful, resilient places by nurturing the built and natural environments. This year’s celebration also marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Frederick Law Olmsted, the “father” of landscape architecture in the United States. Though Olmsted is likely best known for designing Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City, his influence can be seen within the built environment and social movements worldwide.

#### Beginnings and Correspondence

Frederick Law Olmsted was born on April 26, 1822, in Hartford, Connecticut. The son of a merchant who was fond of the outdoors, Olmsted regularly journeyed across the countryside with his father. He gained a lifelong love for travel and scenery from these childhood trips—the fortuitous beginning that would shape his eventual foray into the practice that defined his legacy. In the early 1850s, his affinity for natural sightseeing brought him to England. He toured the country’s public gardens, documenting his voyage in his first publication, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*.

Olmsted’s professional interests and geographic footprint represent an era of change in the United States that included the abolition of slavery and the transition to a more fully industrialized national economy. Before his career as a founding practitioner of the profession of landscape architecture, Olmsted continued his journalistic pursuits as a correspondent for the *New York Daily Times*, chronicling his experience journeying the American South in the 1850s. His journalistic work on the moral decay and faulty economics of slavery is a unique contribution to the voices calling for its abolition. These experiences influenced how Olmsted shaped the practice of landscape architecture in North America.

#### Central Park – Olmsted’s First Landscape Design

There are aspects of Central Park’s significance that are less altruistic but connect it to the further expansion of Olmsted’s practice and the field of landscape architecture. However, his initial involvement with Central Park had little to do with landscape design. Following his work for the *New York Daily Times* and as managing editor of *Putnam’s Magazine*, Olmsted, through business connections, was hired as superintendent tasked with overseeing drainage and clearing of the 770-acre site for the Central Park initiative.

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In this role, he would befriend English architect Calvert Vaux, who asked Olmsted to collaborate with him on an entry into the Central Park Commission's landscape design contest. In April 1858, the commissioners selected Olmsted and Vaux's "Greensward Plan" as the winning design.

The park prefigured luxury real estate and subway line construction around its perimeter. In this regard, it was an early model for public-private partnership and transit-oriented, mixed-use urban development. The park also created a groundbreaking model for integrating centralized, large-scale public recreational space with traffic infrastructure—particularly the transverse streets that spanned the park from east to west that were depressed into the surrounding park landscape to lessen their visual impact.

### Perspective and Practice by Civil War

In 1861, at the onset of the American Civil War, Olmsted took a position in Washington, D.C. as the first Executive Secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the organization predating the American Red Cross. His experience directing the U.S. Sanitary Commission during the Civil War can also be linked to his approach to urban landscape architecture. In continuing the English pastoral landscape tradition in dense urban contexts, he also explored how to create systems of public parks that would serve not only as restorative public spaces but also as frameworks for managing urban stormwater runoff and drainage – an early exponent of what we'd call green infrastructure today.

### Post-War Profession – Universities and Estates

Toward the end of the Civil War, Olmsted managed the Mariposa Estate and gold mine, which led to his early involvement as a leader in the conservation movement. Here again, Olmsted's connections to wealthy business interests and government initiatives at the national level uniquely positioned him to advocate for large-scale civic investment in creating public access to recreational experiences in natural settings. His subsequent work on campus planning, urban park systems, and estates parallel the emergence of wealthy industrialists, their philanthropical pursuits, and their private properties: the endowment of public and private universities, The City Beautiful Movement, and The Country Place Era.

The reach of his practice to the Stanford University campus in California, the 1892 Columbian Expo in Chicago, and the Vanderbilt family's Biltmore Estate helped reinforce the reunification of the nation after the Civil War under a post-slavery, pro-industry, urban-based economy connected by railroads.

### Defining the Practice of Landscape Architecture

The heroic achievements of Olmsted's public projects are well documented, and his great parks are well-loved. These end products set a high standard for the aspirations of landscape architects and set apart the profession from architecture and civil engineering. Olmsted's career and personal journey also set the tone and established a culture for the practice of landscape architecture. His legacy of activism, writing on social issues, and even his entry into practice later in life all lend a certain original legitimacy to common trends and themes in landscape architecture today and the complex perspectives that practitioners develop over time. These qualities are why he is still so singularly revered in the field to this day.

You can read more about his life and career at National Association for Olmsted Parks' Olmsted 200: <https://olmsted200.org/frederick-law-olmsted/legacy/>.



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<https://www.chacompanies.com/news/changemakers/happy-birthday-to-the-father-of-landscape-architecture-in-the-u-s/>



### Upholding a Legacy – CHA’s Practice of Landscape Architecture

Olmsted’s legacy lives through the work of landscape architects found across the world as they craft natural, environmentally resilient landscapes and features. CHA’s team of landscape architects is proud to build on the legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted in the planning and design of large community parks such as the Crossings at Colonie (Albany, NY) or community connections such as the Indianapolis Cultural Trail (Indianapolis, IN). Our team is dedicated to providing thoughtful and sustainable outdoor spaces to meet the evolving needs of the communities we live and work in.

*About the Author:* Jeffrey T. Keiter, RLA, has more than 15 years of experience as a Landscape Architect, including site planning, design, and master planning for public and private clients. You can reach Jeffrey at [jkeiter@chacompanies.com](mailto:jkeiter@chacompanies.com).



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