

Historic Preservation

Niagara Falls & Frederick Law Olmsted

Grade Level: 5th – 8th

Learning Objectives:

- Learn about who Frederick Law Olmsted is and the type of work he did
- Develop an understanding of preservation and conservation
- Identify factors that make conservation and preservation necessary

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be exposed to a broad overview of conservation and preservation
- Students will be introduced to important historical figures
- Students will Think about key conservation projects happening locally

Associated Activities:

- Painting a Waterfall
- Cleaning up a River

Resources for Further Reading:

- [Frederick Law Olmsted Digital Archives](#)
- [Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site](#)
- [Library of Congress: Frederick Law Olmsted Papers](#)
- [Naugatuck River Association](#)

Introduction

Throughout the 19th century, as the United States' industrial capabilities grew, more people began moving to cities to work in factories. At the end of the 19th century, the U.S. was the world's leading industrial power. Many city officials believed that cities needed to be transformed to be more hospitable to large numbers of people and to counter the immoral behavior that seemed to accompany the growth of urban centers. They believed that incorporating natural scenes and green, winding parks would make people healthier and happier, and therefore, make cities healthier and happier.

Growth of U.S. Cities at the Turn of the 20 th Century		
1880	1900	1920
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% of Americans lived in cities • 11 cities had a population over 100,00 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 38% of Americans lived in cities • 18 cities had a population over 100,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 68% of Americans lived in cities • 26 cities had a population over 100,000

Frederick Law Olmsted was born in Hartford, Connecticut in April 1822 to a wealthy family, and though he never formally attended college he did study various topics throughout the state of CT that grew his interest in nature; he studied surveying in Collinsville, farming in Waterbury, and attended lectures at Yale in New Haven. He would become a champion of the movement to beautify cities and is today through the establishment of parks and is remembered as the father of modern landscape architecture in the United States.



As a young man in his twenties, he owned a 70-acre farm in Guilford and held various jobs that allowed him to travel and publish travel books and write articles. He was eventually appointed Superintendent of Central Park and began working with Calvert Vaux, an architect. Together they designed a plan for Central Park titled "Greensward" that was selected as the winning design. Other than designing New York City's most famous park, Olmsted has worked on thousands of landscape projects including the United States Capitol Grounds, Boston Fens,

Stanford University, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and even the grounds of the 1893 Columbia Exposition.

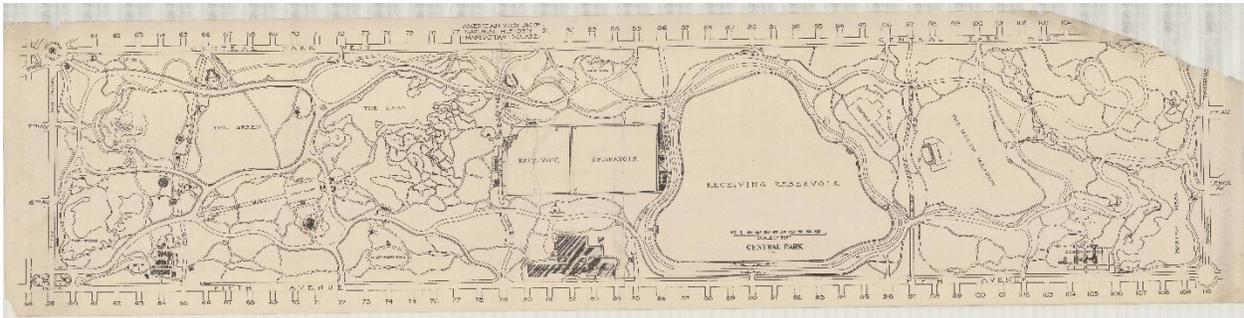


Figure 1 1928 plan of Central Park showing location of Roads & Paths / Vicinity of Lower Receiving Reservoir (P/I). Courtesy of the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

In 1883, he moved to suburban Boston and established the world’s first “full-scale professional office” for landscape design. His practice was unique because all aspects of a project, from drafting to printing plans happened in the same office. After his death in 1903, his sons and their successors continued the landscape architecture firm until 1980, when it was acquired by the National Park Service and opened as a National Historic Site.

Learn More: The Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Massachusetts has an archival collection with over 140,000 plans and 66,000 photographs along with thousands of office documents. Visit their [digitized archive](#) to browse some of Olmsted’s landscape design projects.

The Niagara Falls Preservation Project

Niagara Falls presented a unique challenge to Olmsted. His goal with this project was to protect the existing landscape from the damage that could be caused by tourism by designing a sequence of roads, paths, and other facilities that would still allow people to enjoy the area without harming it. He had been advocating for the area’s preservation beginning in the 1860s when he was working on a system of parks in Buffalo New York. Hotels and tourist attractions were popping up all around the Falls, creating crowded areas. Years later, in 1879 Olmsted was part of a team commissioned by the New York legislature that prepared a report

on the “Preservation of the Scenery of Niagara Falls”. He and his colleagues continued to advocate for the Falls and were eventually successful in 1885 when the Niagara Reservation was created. Niagara Falls was the first park to be created by a state government.

Olmsted’s plan for the Park included buying private property to expand the park, removing existing buildings and other developments, and redesigning roads and paths that guided public access through a natural landscape. He wanted to keep Niagara Falls as close to its natural state as possible to create more meaningful experiences with nature. As a landscape architect, Olmsted’s job was to change landscapes and redesign them, but preservation was always an important factor in any project he worked on.



What is Preservation?

Preservation is defined by the National Park Service as:

the act or process of applying measures necessary to sustain the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property. Work, including preliminary measures to protect and stabilize the property, generally focuses upon the ongoing

maintenance and repair of historic materials and features rather than extensive replacement and new construction. New exterior additions are not within the scope of this treatment; however, the limited and sensitive upgrading of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems and other code-required work to make properties functional is appropriate within a preservation project.

Olmsted’s project was described as “Scenic Preservation” because he wanted to sustain, or protect, the existing natural beauty of the falls from tourism.

What is Conservation? Is it different from preservation?

Conservation, like preservation, is about the protection of nature, but conservation allows for sustainable uses of nature by humans for activities, such as hunting, fishing, logging, grazing, and even recreation. Preservation, on the other hand, usually restricts human use to minimize change in the landscape and maintain specific conditions.

Local Connections

Protecting resources happens at all levels. Many people believe that conservation began in the 1800s with the protection of large expanses of land out west by wealthy individuals unhappy with the conditions of cities and the destruction of nature. These people understood the land out west as “untouched wilderness” that they could protect. However, at the same time, in New England, reformers and regular citizens, such as, farmers and fisherman, wanted to find a balance between industrialization and nature. One of the earliest examples of

conservation in New England, was efforts to protect fish populations from overfishing and harmful chemicals in the Connecticut River in the 1850s.

The first efforts to protect the Naugatuck River happened in the 1890s. As cities got bigger and more factories opened along the River, it became polluted with chemicals and sewage, especially from Waterbury. While the River is much cleaner than it was in the 1900s, efforts to clean and take care of the River are ongoing. Learn more here:



<https://naugatuckriver.net/>