



Frederick Law Olmsted on the Landscape Design for the Capitol Grounds, 1874

Editor's note: In the fall of 1874, the removal of trees and other disruptions necessary to create the Capitol Grounds landscape caused enough public concern that Olmsted wrote this description of the intentions and progress of the project for the *New-York Daily Tribune*. The result is a succinct summary of the designer's intentions, written for a general audience. This letter, and many other documents relating to the history of the Capitol Grounds, are published in Volume 7 of the *Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Parks, Politics, and Patronage, 1874-1882* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

—*Editor: Ethan Carr, NAOP Trustee*

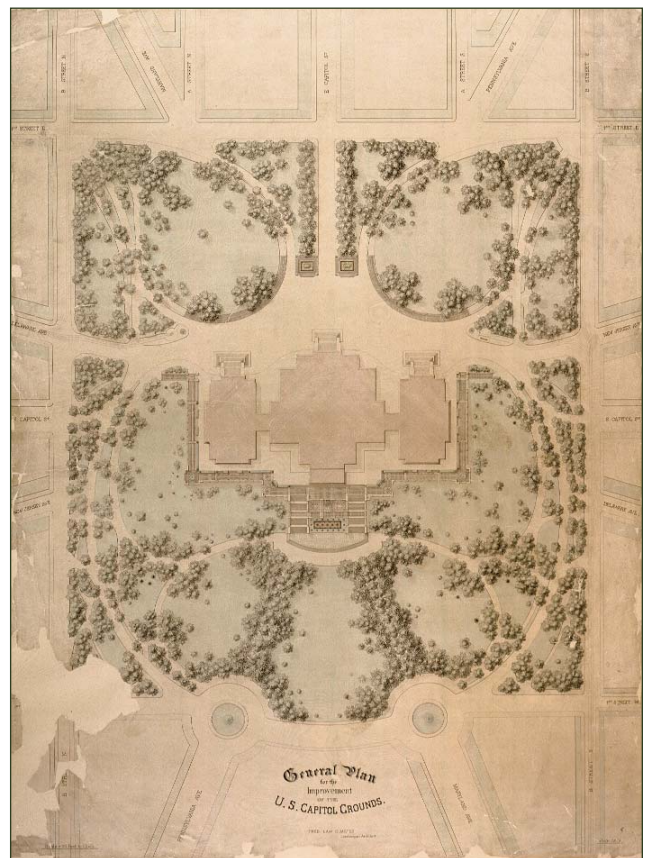
*New York, Nov. 27, 1874.
To the Editor of the Tribune.*

SIR:

I cheerfully comply with your request for the means of laying before your readers a more complete and detailed explanation than that supplied by the report of the Secretary of the Interior, of the operations in progress on the ground east of the National Capitol. The need for it I presume to lie in the fact that, while much destruction is evident and a large force is at work, nothing is approaching completion, no improvement is found, and no intelligible plan can yet be recognized.

The place was originally a flat table, slightly inclined toward the west, where a straight street, crossing it from north to south, formed the only approach for carriages to the Capitol from any direction. East of this street there

was a rectangular grass-plot bounded by straight walks; other trees appear to have been planted, at an early day, in imperfect rows alongside these walks, most of which died young. At various periods since then trees have been planted in and adjoining the first rows, some to take the place of those dying; some because of unwise haste to secure shade; some because they were of species newly arrived in the country and fashionable, and some with no intelligent purpose. A great number of rank upstarts were allowed to crowd and distort and starve the more permanent and valuable sort. The original thin soil had probably been worn out and washed away under colonial tobacco cul-



Frederick Law Olmsted's 1874 plan for the U.S. Capitol Grounds



Olmsted's innovative design has remained largely intact.

ture, and left little but a sterile and exceedingly stiff brick clay, over which street-sweepings from the old dirt roads of Washington, with some Tiber mud, have from time to time been laid. A careful forester's survey made this Summer indicated that the trees must have been generally taken from the woods, poorly lifted and poorly planted, and that their roots had rarely attempted to penetrate the clay but had sought food by running far and wide close to the surface. Three-fourths of them were in unsound condition, many far gone with decay, and the foliage of nearly all began to wilt after lacking rain but two weeks. With two exceptions the largest and best stood near the east boundary, their roots breaking out on a bank eight feet in height formed by the recent grading down of First-st., which bank barred both approach and vision toward the Capitol. Shrubs and flower beds were dropped about here and there, many of the shrubs being of late sick or dead, and the flower beds overgrown by grass and weeds.

THE OLD GROUNDS NOT IN HARMONY WITH THE CAPITOL.

Looked at by itself, without reference to the Capitol; looked at in comparison with what is now to be seen in the early building stage of a designed improvement, or with any of the desert tracts which lie at short distances in all directions about it, it might be regarded as a beautiful place, and it tolerably served the purpose of a local playground for residents of the neighborhood. Its devastation could not therefore be projected without some pathetic

feeling, nor without giving occasion for honest, earnest, and rational remonstrance. The beauty of the trees and old associations connected with them have been feelingly described, and it has been urged that once removed they could not be replaced in fifty years.

On the other hand, it was to be said that the Capitol could not be replaced at a cost of less than \$20,000,000, of which sum but a small part represents the body of conveniences provided for the transaction of the business of Congress, the remainder and larger part standing for the means of a suitably dignified, beautiful, and imposing effect in the vestment of these conveniences; that the ground, as it was, contributed not in the slightest degree to the conveniences for business of the Capitol, while, because of the inclination of the surface toward the building and the position of the trees, not half its due architectural effect could be enjoyed; that scarcely one of the larger trees had 50 or even 20 years' life in it; and the Capitol, being a permanent and monumental structure, the ground about it should be managed with reference not merely to present but to future effect.

THE OLD PARK SWEEPED AWAY.

This view has prevailed, and the old park has accordingly been swept away. Congress, at the close of its last session, having provided means for the purpose, the work began under contract on the 17th of August, since when there has been not yet quite time, with all the men who could be employed economically, to accomplish the grading, the amount of earth to be removed being about 150,000 cubic yards. Other operations seen in progress on ground where the grading is complete are the tillage and tempering of the newly exposed subsoil to the depth of two feet; the return to it of the old soil with additions to the depth of a foot; the taking up of the old sewer, drainage, water, and gas pipes, and the laying of new and much better and more elaborate systems of each; the transplanting of some of the more thrifty of the old trees which have been preserved, to new places; and some laying of curb, gutters, gratings, and road and walk foundations, with a little pavement. These operations have seemed detached and purposeless because divided by those of grading, but the missing links are expected to be for the most part inserted before Winter stops work, when the plan will be more intelligible.

MAIN PURPOSE OF THE DESIGN.

The general design is very simple, and will be easily understood. It has two purposes: First, to provide convenient approaches to and standing room about the Capitol; second, to allow its imposing dimensions and the beauty of its architecture to have due effect, and so far as possible, to aid and heighten that effect.

The idea of a park, flower-garden and play-ground is discarded, and the whole meager area of the little lot in which the Capitol is placed is to be treated as a court-yard and dependency of the building. A paved carriage-court is to extend all along its east front, giving access to each door. Walks and carriage-ways are to be formed between it and each of the fifteen streets leading from all sides toward the Capitol; the course of these approaches, with one exception, will be curved, but each curve is to be governed by reference to a purpose of convenience. Where two purposes of convenience come in competition, that one is to be allowed the advantage by yielding to which greater breadth for turf surface will be gained; and by humoring this secondary purpose as much as possible, without an essential sacrifice of convenience on the whole, two elliptical spaces are to be obtained, measuring each from 400 to 600 feet across, in which a field of slightly undulating surface may be formed, unbroken, except by a few groups of trees.

SUBORDINATION OF THE GROUNDS TO THE BUILDING.

As the trees to be planted grow, the larger part of the road and walk space will be shaded, but the object of happy compositions of the foliage with the Capitol, and of pleasant views from important points of the Capitol is not to be sacrificed to the object of making its court-yard, in all its parts and in all seasons, a perfectly comfortable lounging place or exercise ground.

The same principle of subordination to the building will prevent the introduction in any part of the ground of local ornaments, whether in flowers, leaf-plants, or other objects simply curious or beautiful in themselves. Those matters only will be decorated which by their position and form carry out, repeat, and support the architectural design, nor will any decoration be such as to hold the eye of an observer when in a position to take a general view of the Capitol.

The carriage-court will be bounded opposite the building by a walk or esplanade, laid with colored tile, and this will be separated from the broad turf spaces beyond it by a structure combining the purposes of a parapet or barrier, and a seat, so curved in plan, that unobstructed views of the Capitol may be obtained from it at various distances from 100 to 300 feet from the nearest point of its front, and at every practicable angle of vision. The parapet is to be formed of blue and red stone, and is to



View of the Capitol's east façade from the Olmsted-designed viewing shelter at the southeast corner of the grounds.

be also divided by piers, supporting bronze gas-posts. This work is under contract, and, if the weather is favorable, sections of it are expected to be complete before Congress meets.

FURTHER PLANS IN PROGRESS.

The roads are designed to be of concrete, but only the base of gravel will be laid this year.

Other details can hardly be explained without drawings, and what has been said will sufficiently indicate the general intention.

No work has been done on the ground west of the Capitol, except in the deposit for storage of material taken from the east side. Designs for important improvements are, however, advanced, and are soon to be submitted to the Committee of Congress. Your obedient servant,

—Fred. Law Olmsted