The Olmsteds at Biltmore:

Frederick Law Olmsted, Senior
by Charles E. Beveridge

Frederick Law Olmsted, Junior
by Susan L. Klaus
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Cover: View of Biltmore House from Formal Terrace.

Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University

George Washington Vanderbilt
(1862–1914)

William Amherst Vanderbilt Cecil

FOREWORD

The introduction was written to welcome the National Association for Olmsted Parks to Biltmore for the conference Balancing Nature & Culture in Historic Landscapes: A Celebration of Biltmore’s Centennial, April 20–23, 1995.

It is with great pleasure that I welcome the National Association for Olmsted Parks to my grandfather’s home, Biltmore Estate™, during this, our centennial. I would like to believe that if he were here, George Vanderbilt would be as pleased as I am to extend our utmost hospitality to such an esteemed organization, dedicated to the preservation and protection of the work of Frederick Law Olmsted.

As you know, Mr. Olmsted was instrumental in the original concept for Biltmore as a working estate. When he first visited my grandfather’s new property in North Carolina, Olmsted told him, “My advice would be to make a small park into which to look from your house; make a small pleasure ground and garden, farm your river bottom chiefly to keep and fatten livestock with a view to manure and make the rest a forest, improving the existing woods and planting the old fields.” Fortunately for us all, my grandfather knew full well that he should listen to his old family friend.

Olmsted had the great vision to see the potential of the farmland Vanderbilt had purchased and the wisdom to suggest the genesis of what would become the first scientifically managed forest in the United States. I have often thought how satisfied Mr. Olmsted would be to see his last and largest private work at its maturity. Every year—and particularly every spring when the grounds burst into bloom—thousands of us enjoy his handiwork and are grateful to him for such insight one hundred years ago.

Clearly my grandfather recognized his friend as a great genius. Hanging in the second floor of Biltmore House is a portrait of Olmsted by John Singer Sargent, a portrait my grandfather had commissioned as a way of thanking him for his contribution. When you study the portrait, it is apparent that Sargent knew the great creative talent and sensitivity for the land that was central to Olmsted’s character. Surrounded by indigenous rhododendron and mountain laurels he appears totally at home there in the woodlands on Biltmore Estate.

In 1890, Olmsted wrote to John C. Olmsted about his project in the mountains near Asheville. He termed it the “first great private work of our profession in this country” and then muses wistfully, “I should like to confine myself to it for the rest of my days.” I would like to believe that he did—and does—just that.

William A.V. Cecil, grandson of George Vanderbilt, and owner of Biltmore House.
"The First Great Private Work of Our Profession in the Country"
Frederick Law Olmsted, Senior, at Biltmore

by Charles E. Beveridge

The Biltmore Estate was Olmsted's last major project, the one that dominated the last seven years of his professional career. "I should like to give myself up to this place," he wrote his young partner Henry Sargent Codman in October 1890, and repeated the sentiment several times thereafter. It may seem unusual that a career so noted for designing great urban parks should end in planning a vast private estate, but Biltmore appealed to Olmsted in several ways. For one thing, he was intrigued by the prospect of seeing a major landscape undertaking carried out quickly and completely. Seldom, if ever, in his public parks did Olmsted have the pleasure of overseeing the final fine-tuning of a design, realizing the full effect he wished to achieve. George W. Vanderbilt had the resources to make that possible, and took keen interest in Olmsted's work from the start. The grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the "Commodore," and son of William Henry Vanderbilt, Olmsted's neighbor on Staten Island forty years earlier, young Vanderbilt possessed a fortune of thirteen million dollars by the time he began to develop the Biltmore Estate in 1888 at age twenty-five. He was an avid and judicious collector of books and works of art and intended to invest much time and money in creating his North Carolina retreat. Vanderbilt was already employing Olmsted in other places—designing the grounds of his summer place "Pointe d'Acadie" at Bar Harbor, Maine, and landscaping the Vanderbilt family mausoleum at New Dorp, Staten Island.2

Olmsted's enthusiasm for Biltmore was due to more than the prospect of a cordial and successful relationship with his patron. Early in the work he stated that "this is to be a private work of very rare public interest in many ways. Of much greater public interest—utility, industrial, political, educational and otherwise, very possibly, than we can define to ourselves. I feel a good deal of ardor about it, and it is increased by the obviously exacting yet frank, trustful, confiding and cordially friendly disposition toward all of us which Mr. Vanderbilt manifests."3

George W. Vanderbilt's intentions concerning the landscape had at first been simple and predictable. Leading Olmsted to the site he had selected for the house, he described how he had been vacationing for some time in the Asheville area, enjoying the climate and the distant

Fig. 1: Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., c. 1890.
National Park Service. Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Massachusetts
views. On one of his rambles he came upon the site and thought the prospect the finest he had seen. He gradually acquired two thousand acres in the area and then turned to Olmsted to lay out a park in the traditional manner of English estates. But Olmsted assured him that the terrain was “unsuitable for anything that can properly be called park scenery;” it was “no place for a park.” Instead he suggested that Vanderbilt should make a small park as a foreground for the distant view, build some gardens close to the house, and devote the rest of his acres to forestry. This would be a good investment of his capital. Moreover, Olmsted argued, “it would be of great value to the country to have a thoroughly well organized and systematically conducted attempt in forestry made on a large scale.”4 Vanderbilt took Olmsted’s advice. In time he acquired 120,000 acres for his venture in scientific forestry. Eighty thousand of these acres became the basis of Pisgah National Forest, encompassing the “cradle of forestry” in the United States. Olmsted prevailed on Vanderbilt to hire young Gifford Pinchot, one of the first Americans to be trained in forestry in Europe, to oversee the undertaking. After three years at Biltmore, Pinchot left to pursue a notable career in conservation and forestry that included serving as the first head of the U.S. Forest Service. The Biltmore School of Forestry, founded in 1898 by Pinchot’s successor Carl Schenck, also increased the public significance of Olmsted’s plan for the estate.

The other ambitious scheme with a public purpose that Olmsted proposed for Biltmore was a great arboretum, which he envisioned as “better and greater, more comprehensive, than any existing Arboretum in the world.”5 With Vanderbilt’s acquiescence, Olmsted planned, constructed, and began to plant a nine-mile arboretum road that wound from near the house down to the bottom lands of the French Broad River and back up again into the hills. He intended to plant all the trees and shrubs that could be expected to thrive in the region. The arboretum was to serve as a comprehensive testing-ground of the materials of landscape architecture in the American South. Olmsted intended to plant the desirable species both as scientific specimens and in groups that displayed their landscape qualities. The collection was to include two thousand species of woody plants. He wished particularly to demonstrate to the public the effectiveness in many situations of using shrubs and small trees rather than large shade trees sur-
rounded by grass. As he explained, “there are, and are to be, a hundred places where the smaller trees and large shrubs may best be planted to one where the trees best known as “Shade Trees” are desirable.” The arboretum would also display species of trees desirable for forestry. With high expectations, he declared that it “would serve much more to advance the science of dendrology; the business of forestry, and the art of landscape improvement” than anything that had been done or suggested by the national government or any public institution in the country. As work on the forest, the arboretum, and the grounds of the house progressed, he exclaimed, “It is a great work of Peace we are engaged in and one of these days we shall all be proud of our part in it.”

Selection of species for the arboretum that would make it a truly scientific collection was a continuing problem, however, and after Olmsted's forced retirement in the summer of 1895 the project languished. However, the great nursery at Biltmore, which included three hundred acres of trees and shrubs, was an important commercial source of plant materials throughout the country during the next twenty years.

It was rather in the more private parts of the estate’s planning—the Approach Road and grounds of the house—that Olmsted saw his concepts realized. Here, too, there was a public purpose to be served. In all the designing of private estates that Olmsted carried out, he was creating examples of good taste that would demonstrate the superiority of his designs to the decorative gardening and ostentatious display that he encountered on so many estates of the rich. Biltmore would be visited by many potential taste-makers; its influence would extend far and wide.

The three-mile Approach Road to the house at Biltmore was Olmsted's primary opportunity for work of this character. The road ran briefly along the Swannanoa River, crossed a stretch of open, pastoral scenery, then entered a narrow stream valley. In this valley Olmsted brought to bear all his genius for creating complex and powerful passages of scenery. Outlining his concept to Vanderbilt, he proposed that the most striking and pleasing impression of the Estate will be obtained if an approach can be made that shall have throughout a natural and comparatively wild and secluded character; its borders rich with varied forms of vegetation, with incidents growing out of the vicinity of springs and streams and pools, steep banks and rocks, all consistent with the sensation of passing through the remote depths of a natural forest.

However, Olmsted was not content to recreate the same scenery that could be experienced in other valleys nearby—valleys that his son enthusiastically described as having “great banks and hillsides of rich rhododendrons and glossy Kalmias ten and fifteen feet tall, with mats of galax leaves and tangles of leucothoe along the stream—all with dark, smooth evergreen leaves.” The Biltmore Approach Road offered Olmsted an opportunity to create the most ambitious work of his career in the “picturesque” style. It was not simply the scenery of North Carolina that he wished to evoke: it was rather the overwhelming sense of the bounteouness and mystery of nature that he had experienced in the tropics. As he instructed the estate's nurseryman Chauncey Beadle, he wanted to secure “an aspect more nearly of sub-tropical luxuriance than would occur spontaneously at Biltmore.” As always, Olmsted sought to create a landscape design that would provide an intense and
unique experience for its users.

The basis of the plantings would be the native materials of the region: he urged Vanderbilt to collect thousands of *Rhododendron maximum* plants, raise them in a nursery for a few years, and then install ten thousand of them as the background planting of the Approach Road. In front of these rhododendrons he proposed to place a wide variety of plants, many of them evergreen, that would achieve the effect of richness, delicacy and mystery that he desired. These would include five thousand "of the most splendid hybrid Rhododendrons (such as they exhibit under tents at the horticultural Gardens of London)," supplemented by Himalayan and Alpine rhododendrons. Among them should be scattered laurel, native and Japanese andromedas, Japanese euonymus, aucubas and mahonia. Along the edge of the brook and also on the edge of the drive he planted a great variety of delicate vegetation including "the refined little *Abelia rubra* with a cloud of most delicate bloom" and numerous low evergreen plants, ivy and euonymus. As time went on, he searched increasingly for plant materials that would provide variety of color and texture in winter. He sought for hardy olives or evergreens with an olive tint, and more junipers, red cedars and yews. At the same time he increased the variety and intricacy of the scene with numerous "flowering beds of *little* waterside plants."

Such plant materials increased the effect of "complexity of light and shadow near the eye" that was an essential element of his picturesque style of planting. They also contributed to the illusion of extended space that he sought to create along the Approach Road. He wanted "low-growing, lustrous and fine-flowering plants" in the center of the valley, while on the steeper slopes on the sides he planned "dense, towering walls of foliage." In order to heighten the sense of profusion and richness throughout, he directed that deciduous trees along the road should be covered with evergreen climbers. This would "increase the complexity—the screening tropical luxuriance of the scenery," especially in winter. In the vicinity of the larger pools along the road, he proposed to have a body of foliage and deep shade with an opening "reach-
ing back for a considerable distance above, with glints of sun-lighted bits of water, with enough low foliage to make it intricate and mysterious, and to exclude the idea of there being anything artificial in what is seen.”

Throughout the three miles of the Approach Road, the visitor was to be immersed in a rich passage of scenery where the “art to conceal art” was consistently practiced. This would increase the contrast with the first view of the mansion when, as Olmsted described it, “the visitor passes with an abrupt transition into the enclosure of the trim, level, open, airy, spacious, thoroughly artificial Court, and the Residence... breaks suddenly and fully upon him.” Entering the Esplanade, the visitor sees the facade of the chateau to the right, set off by a foreground panel of grass with a circular fountain basin set low in the center. The two drives along the outer edges of the grass rectangle are flanked on the outside by rows of tulip trees that frame the building and block any distant view. To the left a high wall with foot-ramps leading from either end completes the sense of enclosure. This treatment of space is a classic example of Olmsted’s design principles. By the quick transition from the picturesque Approach Road to the formal Esplanade, he avoided the “incongruous mixture” of landscape styles that he so disliked. The Esplanade’s simplicity, combined with the way that the allée of trees blocks the distant view, creates a space where all elements are devoted to the presentation of the building. As he had done before in planning the grounds of the U.S. Capitol, Olmsted subordinated the materials of landscape architecture to heightening the effect of architecture. From the front door the visitor can look back, gaining the full effect of the Vista that extends upward beyond the wall of the rampe douce to a distant statue. Olmsted graded this hill and planned the long allée of the Esplanade and Vista so as to increase the spaciousness of the view eastward from the house.

Olmsted seldom intruded on the sphere of the architect concerning the general style and arrangement of buildings whose grounds he planned, but here he did press for constructing two structures adjoining
Biltmore house. One issue was convenient arrangement of outbuildings: he proposed a complex of stables northwest of the mansion, primarily to shelter the entrance from northerly winds. The stable is hidden from view by the row of tulip trees on the north side of the Esplanade and by a dense planting of pines adjoining it.

Secondly, Olmsted urged construction of a terrace on the south side of the mansion in order to present the panoramic view in the most impressive way. He had taken pains to screen the western view from the Approach Road, and blocked that view from the Esplanade. It was necessary to pass through the house in order to enter the loggia from which the vista could be enjoyed. In addition, he wanted a separate space of greater size, accessible without entering the house, for experiencing the view. Standing on the terrace and looking across the Deer Park and the French Broad River toward Mount Pisgah and the Great Smokies, one is not even aware of the mansion: instead, the visitor is projected into a space where nothing need be seen but the view. In this way Olmsted made special provision for the one element of the site that had led George W. Vanderbilt to select it for his residence. At the same time, he conceived the terrace as “a great out of door general apartment” for a variety of uses. He wished Biltmore to illustrate the advantages of extensive outdoor living space next to a residence, and indeed the terrace covers an area as large as the mansion. To his partner John C. Olmsted he observed, “I have seen but one house that had anything like the amount of out of door living room that I think is desirable.” As part of this conception, he proposed the “tea house” at the southwest corner. The terrace was one of several visually separate spaces that Olmsted planned adjoining the mansion.

Descending the steep hillside south of the Esplanade, Olmsted
also designed three areas that were invisible from each other and had no distant view. The first, running the length of the Esplanade on its south side but set several feet below it, was a narrow terrace designed in a formal style. As first proposed, it had three geometrically shaped basins, one for fish and two for aquatic plants. These water features were set between four parterres containing plants forming geometrical patterns. The south wing of the house is visible from the garden, which echoes the formal French style of the mansion. By this arrangement, Olmsted intended to include a space that continued the formal treatment of the Esplanade, while permitting horticultural decoration that he would have considered too distracting to permit in the foreground view of the house. The southern orientation of the formal terrace with the high sheltering and sun-reflecting wall along its northern side also provided a more protected enclosure than was possible on the Esplanade. The final design consisted of three basins, with simple grass panels at each end. Historical photographs show none of the intricate parterre planting contained in Olmsted's original plan of 1892.

On the hillside below this formal terrace, Olmsted created a "Ramble" that he described as "a glen like place with narrow winding paths between steepish slopes with evergreen shrubbery." Set in the lee of the house and the view-terrace as it was, he intended this feature to serve as a protected space where one could walk in relative comfort even in stormy weather. This feature came to be called the Shrub Garden. The treatment of plantings was unusual in that it was not thickly planted with ground cover right to the edge of the paths, as was the case with the Ramble in Central Park and the Biltmore Approach Road itself. Instead, there were areas of turf between the paths and the masses of shrubs and small trees. He apparently intended it to demonstrate an

Fig. 7: To the right of the mansion is the stable, and to the left is Olmsted's Terrace.

National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site
alternative to shade trees surrounded by lawn, a treatment he thought was used too often. In this respect the Ramble has the character, and serves the educational purpose, that Olmsted planned for much of the Biltmore arboretum. He particularly wished to develop such a landscaping approach for areas of the South where turf would not stay fresh and green all summer.

A brick arch at the eastern end of the Ramble allowed the visitor to pass under the drive and into the more naturalistically planted vale at the top of the Glen. It consisted of a central lawn area with masses of shrubbery on its steep sides. This area came to be called the Spring Garden.

South of the Ramble was the one space that fits Olmsted’s definition of a garden. It is a walled enclosure visually separate from areas with broad landscape effects and devoted to growing plants without any attempt at landscape composition. Olmsted intended to devote this garden to growing choice fruits, vegetables and “decorative flowers” for use by the Vanderbilts. He was particularly anxious to make it a demonstration ground for espaliered fruit. To this end he enlisted the help of a French nursery especially noted for supplying such fruit. He thought the example would be a valuable one for Americans, who did little of that sort of gardening. A heated conservatory building was needed to grow early-ripening and delicate fruits, palms, ferns and flowering plants. Olmsted carefully sited the building at the lower end of the walled garden so that it would not interfere with the view of the lake from the Esplanade.

The fruit and vegetable garden was simply a functional space,
whatever its educative value might be, and was not part of the scenic progression leading away from the house. To follow this, visitors continued down through the Glen. Olmsted developed this area as a sheltered area picturesquely planted with a variety of shrubs. He used some of the mountain laurel and rhododendron that played so important a part in the scenery of the Approach Road, but most of the shrub planting was of other sorts. The special character intended for the Glen seems to have been an atmosphere of delicacy achieved through prolific use of ferns and low-growing, flowering plants. Because the Glen was to be used only by pedestrians, Olmsted could create an effect of greater intricacy and refinement than was possible along the Approach Road. In time, this area was transformed by head gardener Chauncey Beadle into an azalea garden, which name and character it retains today.

The final area in the succession of spaces designed in connection with the house was the Lake, today called Bass Pond. Olmsted created it at the bottom of the Glen where two streams met. He constructed two islands to add variety to views across it, increasing the apparent extent of space beyond them and creating "more effect of intricacy and mystery." The islands were also to serve as secluded nesting places for waterfowl.²¹ Olmsted directed that the islands and shallow shores of the pond were to be planted with aquatic plants gathered locally—flags, rushes, cattails and irises that would create an impression of wildness and profusion.

The shelter and stone stairs at the upper end of the pond still retain much of the rustic character and scenic beauty that Olmsted planned for them. At the far end of the lake one can still experience the dark enclosure of hemlocks, overhanging the dam and the stream below it, that Olmsted described in his written directions for planting the area.

After leaving the pond, the Glen Road descends to the flood plain of the French Broad River where it passes agricultural fields and rustic stone bridges. A major feature is the Lagoon, planned by Olmsted to produce a larger area of water in the view from Biltmore House than the river alone provided. The Lagoon also acts as a reflecting pool for the view back toward the house. In this area one also encounters the pastoral landscape of the Deer Park that Olmsted created as a foreground for the vista from the terrace.

Today the landscape of Biltmore Estate provides a remarkable evocation of the scenic variety that Olmsted sought to create there. The rhododendrons of the Approach Road are still striking, however much the richness and variety of Olmsted's planting has been simplified and the delicate ground cover along the edge of the road replaced by mowed grass. In the grounds near the house, one can still experience the progression through separate spaces planted for different effects that Olmsted designed so carefully.

For Olmsted, the Biltmore project remained a crucially important commission. In the spring of 1894 he reiterated that "The public is more and more making a resort of the place and I more & more feel that it is the most permanently important public work and the most critical with reference to the future of our profession of all that we have."²² At the same time, his work there took a toll on his health. Whenever he visited the estate he was nearly prostrated by vertigo and related symptoms. In the letter quoted above, he reported: "I am feeling the elevation in increased heart action and aggravated roaring and deaf-
ness but so far have escaped sickness and blind-staggers, and hope not to be laid up as before." On other trips he had to retreat to bed for a week, unable to eat or walk, before becoming acclimatized. Such sickness was a sign of his growing frailty and a reminder that the Biltmore project was a race against time. By the fall of 1894 it was evident that his memory was no longer reliable. Increasingly he forgot what his earlier plans had been and contrived new and different solutions for design problems already solved. By November 1895, effectively removed from professional practice but still hoping for a recovery, he wrote his son concerning Biltmore:

I can only say that as the time for revision of the work draws near, and as I am drawn away from it and realize more and more the finality of this withdrawal, the intenser grows my urgency to be sure that what I have designed is to be realized. 23

Notes
1. Frederick Law Olmsted [hereafter cited as FLO] to Henry Sargent Codman, 19 October 1890, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers [hereafter cited as Olmsted Papers], Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Olmsted saw Biltmore as a critically important commission for his young partners—Codman and John Charles Olmsted. For them, he predicted, "this work will, twenty years hence, be what Central Park has been to me. The first great private work of our profession in the country." FLO to John C. Olmsted, 27 October 1890, Olmsted Papers.
2. Olmsted also planned the grounds of estates for four of George Vanderbilt's siblings: "Shelburne Farms," the estate on Lake Champlain near Burlington, Vermont, of his sister Eliza and William Seward Webb; "Florham," the estate in Madison, New Jersey, of his sister Florence Adele and Hamilton McKown Twombly; "Elm Court," the estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, of his sister Emily and William Douglas Sloane; and "Rough Point," the estate in Newport, Rhode Island, of his brother Frederick K. Vanderbilt (see John M. Bryan, Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place [New York, 1994], pp. 17-24).
4. FLO to Frederick J. Kingsbury, 20 January 1891, Olmsted Papers.
5. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., to John Charles Olmsted, 19 August 1895, Records, Series H2, Letterbook 3.
7. FLO to Messrs. Gall, Manning, Beadle, Boynton and Bottomley, 10 June 1894, Olmsted Papers.
8. FLO to George W. Vanderbilt, 12 July 1889, Olmsted Papers.
11. FLO to George W. Vanderbilt, 12 July 1889, Olmsted Papers.
12. FLO to John C. Olmsted, 31 October 1890, Olmsted Papers.
13. FLO, manuscript fragment, Olmsted Papers.
15. FLO to George W. Vanderbilt, 12 July 1889, Olmsted Papers.
17. FLO to John C. Olmsted, 5 April 1895, Records, Series H2, Letterbook 3.
18. FLO to Richard Morris Hunt, 2 March 1889, Olmsted Papers.
22. FLO to partners, 3 May 1894, Olmsted Papers.
23. FLO to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., 7 November 1895, Olmsted Papers.
“A BETTER SCHOOL COULD SCARCELY BE FOUND”
Frederick Law Olmsted, Junior, at Biltmore

by Susan L. Klaus

For one hundred years there was a Frederick Law Olmsted actively engaged in shaping the American landscape. Frederick Law Olmsted, Senior (1822–1903), the progenitor of the profession landscape architecture in America, was an influential public presence during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Frederick Law Olmsted, Junior (1870–1957), began a career which was to be equally long, wide-ranging, and illustrious.

The responsibility of inheriting both the famous name and the family profession was the leitmotif that dominated the final years of the father’s career and the formative year of the son’s professional life. Suffering from insomnia, physical ailments, and, finally, a deteriorating mental state, the elder Olmsted was consumed with the fear that his time would run out before his son was launched on his own career. A loving and proud father, Olmsted’s final wish was to ensure that his youngest child and only son was well prepared to assume his rightful place in the profession which the father had labored to create. For, he would impress upon his namesake, “the value of your patrimony is to lie in your ability to gradually qualify yourself to advance the work that I am soon to wholly drop.”

It was at Biltmore that the younger Olmsted would “qualify” to take his place in the family firm. “Look you sharp” to the special opportunities presented at the estate, Olmsted instructed his son. “Your school for nearly all wisdom in tree and plants and planting is at Biltmore.” The younger Olmsted well appreciated the opportunity Biltmore provided to gain practical experience in plant selection, agriculture, forestry, landscape design and engineering. He agreed that “a better school could scarcely be found” for serving his final apprenticeship before entering the family firm. Biltmore also provided the stage on which father and son would play out their personal drama. At Biltmore Olmsted, Jr., was forced to come to terms with both the practical advantages and the emotional burden that accompanied his patrimony.

Youth and College

On July 24, 1870, Frederick Law Olmsted at last, at the age of forty-eight, became the father of a son. There had been two earlier disappointments: one male infant died after two months, another lived only six hours. Neither had been named for his father; nor was this baby, whose given name at birth was Henry Perkins, after his maternal grandfather. Several years would pass before this child became his father’s namesake, when Olmsted renamed his only surviving natural son Frederick Law Olmsted, Junior.

Professional and domestic life intermingled in the Olmsted household. In 1872 the family moved from Staten Island to a four-story brownstone at 209 West Forty-Sixth Street in New York City that served
both as residence and office. Soon, however, Olmsted's work began to take him for long periods to Boston, where he was advising the city's Park Department and working on the Arnold Arboretum. In 1881 he moved the family to Brookline, Massachusetts, home of his friend and favorite collaborator, architect Henry Hobson Richardson, who encouraged Olmsted to follow his example in setting up an office in the suburban community. Two years later he bought an old farmhouse at 99 Warren Street, which remained the headquarters of the Olmsted firm for nearly a century.

After graduating from the Roxbury Latin School, Rick Olmsted entered Harvard in 1890 with, he later said, "the definite expectation from the first of going into the profession of landscape architecture." During his college years he had opportunities to visit the two culminating projects of his father's career—the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition and Biltmore—and he worked parttime in the Brookline office as school permitted. In 1892 Rick spent five months traveling with his father in England and France, where the elder Olmsted combined business for the World's Fair with the opportunity to introduce his son to the public parks and great estates of England and France.4

Although Rick was twenty-four when he graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in 1894, there was no immediate invitation to join the Brookline office. That summer he worked as recorder and instrument man on a U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey plotting the 39th Parallel through the Rockies. Olmsted had questioned whether the expedition would advance his son's professional preparation; however, by summer's end he agreed that it had been a good opportunity to gain "topographical common sense... tact and skill for ready, off-hand reconnoitering and estimating by half guess work... which are invaluable in our profession."5 He was now eager for young Olmsted to proceed to Biltmore, the vast estate under construction for George Vanderbilt in Asheville, North Carolina. Here his son would serve his final apprenticeship.

"A Student of the Operations"

Olmsted considered Biltmore the most important job that he had ever undertaken for a private client. He observed to his colleagues in Brookline that Biltmore was "by far the longest, most difficult, and complicated work that we have; [and] will have the largest future importance and celebrity." He also recognized that this was to be his final great undertaking, and for both these reasons he wanted his son to be a part of it. The Olmsted firm (known as Olmsted, Olmsted, and Eliot at this date), Olmsted said, would be evaluating Rick's work at Biltmore as his "first serious professional responsibility (i.e. not simply preparatory)."6 His position in the Olmsted organization would be determined on the basis of his performance at Biltmore. Perhaps feeling the need to guard against possible complacency, Olmsted informed his son that in making the decision to take him into the firm, father and half-brother John Charles Olmsted would defer to Charles Eliot, the partner who was not a family member. "That is to say," wrote the father, "you are not to consider it in the least as a family matter."7

But, of course, a family matter it was. The inseparability of familial and professional concerns was evidenced by young Olmsted's
ambiguous position on the estate. "I am here primarily," he wrote a college friend, "as a student of the operations going on upon the estate." He was not an official representative of the Olmsted firm, indeed, was not on the firm's payroll. He received a living allowance from his father. When Rick asked for firm letterhead to use in business correspondence on Biltmore's behalf, John Olmsted declined, reminding his brother that he was at Biltmore as "a student of the work.... It is better policy for you to observe and think and then write us for an opinion ... than to put your own opinions forward." Nevertheless, for thirteen months Rick was the only Olmsted in continuous residence at Biltmore; inevitably he became involved in day-to-day decisionmaking.

Rick prepared design studies and technical reports at the request of his father and other principals on site as the construction of the estate grounds proceeded. He made scale drawings for the entrance to the Arboretum and the proposed drive around it that he sent back to Brookline for critique. At the request of the estate manager, young Olmsted corresponded with several firms for prices and specifications for the deer park fence. He conferred with James Gall, Jr., (the Olmsted firm's resident representative) and Warren Manning (the firm's horticultural expert, who made periodic site visits) as they discussed plans for gardens, lines for paths and roads, and boundaries for the Arboretum. Many evenings Rick spent an hour or more writing business letters, responding to questions from the Brookline office or requesting instructions from them. When his father was in residence at Biltmore, Rick acted as personal assistant and secretary, taking notes and transcribing his letters.
Olmsted was particularly eager to have Rick involved with the proposed Biltmore Arboretum, which he believed would prove to be the most significant aspect of the whole enterprise. "The time may come," Olmsted observed, "when the fact of your having been engaged from the start in the planting of it ... will give you some prestige." Moreover, as Olmsted was keenly aware, it would be during Rick's lifetime, not his own, that the Arboretum would "become celebrated and the planting of it be regarded as a historical event."10

Rick spent many hours in the Biltmore nursery, where he worked with Chauncey D. Beadle, who served as the estate's head nurseryman for over fifty years. Here Rick worked on a catalogue of plants categorized by their properties for use in the landscape and in garden planting; and, at his father's insistence, labored to improve his general botanical knowledge. For Olmsted was determined that his son not be handicapped by what the father still considered a major hindrance to his own career—the lack of formal study of the basic tools of his trade, plant materials. Rick's most important task at Biltmore, Olmsted impressed upon him, was to act as "school-master to yourself."11 "Establish the names of plants in your memory and attach ideas, figures, pictures to these names," he exhorted his son. "Review! and train yourself. No one here [at Brookline] has done half enough of this."12

"I believe I would better enter upon another career": Conflict and Resolution

A stream of letters written by an increasingly distraught Olmsted descended upon Rick at Biltmore. They provide a poignant record of the deteriorating condition of the great man—his growing mental confusion, despair, and paranoia. In these rambling epistles, the aging father is by turn loving and stern, affectionate and threatening. Olmsted's many successes over his long career had not overcome a painful sense of how much more he might have accomplished with proper training. If it was in his power to do so, he would see that his son would not experience the same feelings of inadequacy or unfulfilled potential because of insufficient grounding in his profession. His namesake and professional heir, therefore, would have the double distinction and advantage of both the Olmsted name and excellent training.

Olmsted believed, as he confided to his first biographer, journalist and garden enthusiast Mariana Van Rensselaer, that his own lack of formal botanical study and technical training had forced him to rely too much upon others in the execution of his work. Olmsted particularly was determined that his son master plant nomenclature or, he threatened, "I shall not take you into this office." "If you think it is impracticable, the sooner you give up the profession the better," Olmsted flatly decreed. "But I know it is not impracticable and I insist on your making yourself an expert nurseryman."13

The fond father was trying to spare his son the regret that Olmsted himself still felt, nearing the end of a celebrated career, over "my failure to have studied expressly for my profession at your age."14 Rick Olmsted, however, could only see his father demanding more of him than had been required of any other current member of the firm. He responded to his father's highly charged letter with equal emotion:

[If you say that more ready knowledge of plants than is
possessed by you or John [Charles Olmsted] or [Charles] Eliot is essential to my thorough success as a Landscape Architect, and that the lack of it will quite or nearly neutralize my advantages from your reputation... then I am compelled to answer, with pain and regret, after the most serious and thorough thought, that I believe I would better enter upon another career....

His father's threat not to take him into the office had "pulled the ground" from under his feet, the wounded son exclaimed. Up to this point Rick Olmsted had accepted that following in his father's footsteps was the wisest course to follow. He believed that he had dutifully done all that had been asked to prepare to carry on the family business. Now his father threatened to deny Rick the position that he had been brought up to consider his by right of birth. Under the weight of this emotional barrage, Rick began to bend. He confronted his father with doubts and anxieties about assuming the responsibility of his father’s name as well as his profession that Rick had "been repressing... ever since I entered college and began choosing my studies with a view to following your profession." He had "lain awake at night many times in the past year," he confessed, trying to "thrust aside or outgrow" his doubts about becoming a landscape architect. But he found them "still assailing me. I fear that I was wrong in not mentioning them before."

Finally able to admit his reservations to his father, Rick proceeded to spin out other options for his life, as if trying on different careers for fit and suitability. He told Olmsted that since his college days he had had leanings "more or less strong, first toward teaching, especially in Mathematics and Physics, and also in most other scientific subjects...; second and less strong toward Engineering, and third, more recent and stronger toward Architecture...." Up to this point, Rick said, he been able to suppress "these inclinations by common sense and judgment."

During this volatile period Olmsted displayed more than an understandable parental identification with his namesake. Acutely aware of his own mortality, Olmsted was seeking solace in the knowledge that he would live on in the work of his namesake and professional heir. Although he insisted that he was trying "and I think I succeed in recognizing your individuality," Olmsted tellingly emphasized the bond between father and son. "You seem to me to have very much of my character," he told Rick; "you are weak where I am weak, you are strong where I am strong."

With the parent-child roles beginning their inevitable reversal in the face of Olmsted's physical and mental decline, Rick's long adolescence came to an end. He had taken time to speculate about possible directions that his own life might take, and perhaps the mere realization that he could choose another career was enough to obviate the need for actual rebellion. The younger Olmsted accepted, with pain and a sense of helplessness, the senility that would claim his father's last eight years.

By the spring of 1895, the Olmsted brothers had agreed that their father was no longer able to direct work on the estate; in November, John and Charles Eliot officially welcomed Rick into the office informing George Vanderbilt that Olmsted, Jr. was now the firm's representative on the grounds.
Epilogue

With Biltmore's house and grounds nearing completion, George Vanderbilt brought John Singer Sargent to the estate to paint its owner and two creators, Olmsted and architect Richard Morris Hunt. Olmsted departed Biltmore for the final time before his portrait was complete, and Sargent took advantage of the physical resemblance between father and son in "presence, build, and shape of head and hands" to ask Rick to stand in while the artist finished.20 Olmsted, Jr., donned his father's clothes and posed for Sargent on three or four occasions. This event provides an apt symbol both of Rick Olmsted's resolution of his personal and professional conflict with his father and of the transition of leadership within the family firm to the Olmsted sons. At Biltmore, Rick Olmsted confirmed his career choice and reconciled himself to the inevitable identification and comparisons with his father. Indeed, for the rest of his life he took pride in acknowledging his professional legacy, fondly quoting his father and often citing Olmsted's influence on his own work.

A half century later, nearing the end of his own career, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., reflected on his time at Biltmore. He understood that his father had pushed him so relentlessly because "he himself, and most of his partners in landscape architecture had been less personally expert than he could have wished." The younger Olmsted also acknowledged that his father had been correct in his assessment that his son had inherited "from him certain traits of mind that had made it difficult or impossible for him—and made it so for me—to become highly expert" in the same areas." Most especially, this failing was "in the field of taxonomic botany, and of plant-growing... symbolized by the 'green thumb' of born gardeners."21

Like his father, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.'s artistic gifts, visionary outlook, and administrative skills enabled him to overcome any technical deficiency. Clearly he did achieve what his father had so devoutly desired. With his appointment in 1901 to the McMillan Commission, which established the design for Washington, D.C.'s monumental core, the younger Olmsted began a half-century of leadership in the fields of planning and landscape design. Olmsted, Jr.'s unique combination of talent, preparation, and family legacy provided the cornerstone for a career which continues to offer both inspiration and practical guidance for today's planners, designers, and environmentalists.
Notes
1. Frederick Law Olmsted to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., 1 August 1895 [sic], Frederick Law Olmsted Papers [hereafter cited as Olmsted Papers], Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. This letter is misdated on the first page; a postscript is correctly dated 1894.
2. FLO to FLO, Jr., 23 December 1894, Olmsted Papers; FLO, Jr., to Philip Sharpeles, 4 January 1894 [sic, actually 1895], Olmsted Associate Records (hereafter cited as Records), Series H2, Letterbook 3, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
5. FLO to FLO, Jr., 1 August 1894, Olmsted Papers.
6. FLO to John Charles Olmsted (hereafter cited as JCO) 25 February 1894; FLO to FLO, Jr., 29 July 1895, Olmsted Papers.
7. Olmsted to Olmsted, Jr., 29 July 1895, Olmsted Papers.
8. FLO, Jr., to Philip Sharpeles, 4 January 1895, Records, Series H3, Letterbook 3.
9. JCO to FLO, Jr., 2 December 1894, Records, Series H6.
10. FLO to FLO, Jr., 1 August 1894, Olmsted Papers. The Arboretum was the one significant part of Olmsted’s plan for Biltmore Estate that was not realized.
11. FLO to FLO, Jr., 23 December 1894, Olmsted Papers.
12. FLO to FLO, Jr., ibid. Emphasis in the original.
13. FLO to FLO, Jr., undated [1895], Olmsted Papers.
14. FLO to FLO, Jr., 23 December 1894, Olmsted Papers.
15. FLO, Jr., to FLO, 1 January 1895, Records, Series H6.
16. Ibid.
17. FLO, Jr., to FLO, 31 January 1895, Records, Series H2, Letterbook 3.
18. FLO to FLO, Jr., undated [1895], Olmsted Papers. One of their shared “weaknesses” was colorblindness. Both Olmsteds had a “subnormal sensitiveness to red.” See Olmsted, Jr. to Laura Wood Roper, 10 October 1948, Records, Series B. Job File #2964.
19. JCO to FLO, Jr., 6 November 1895, Olmsted Papers. Olmsted’s salary was $1200 a year.
21. FLO, Jr., to Laura Wood Roper, 10 October 1951, Job File #2964, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Massachusetts.
Founded in 1980, the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP) is a national network of volunteers and professionals, working to promote and protect the Olmsted legacy. NAOP is a non-profit membership organization.

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