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February 6, 2021

The Hon. Patrick Leahy &
The Hon. Richard Shelby
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Rose DeLauro &
The Hon. Kay Granger
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Hon. Amy Klobuchar &
The Hon. Roy Blount
Senate Committee on Rules & Administration
301 Russell HOB
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Zoe Lofgren &
The Hon. Rodney Davis
House Administration Committee
1309 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Via Email

Dear Committee Leaders and Members:

In the face of recent violence at the Capitol, we understand that Congress is exploring permanent fencing and barriers around the Capitol Grounds.

We urge you to reject any blunt security measures that will destroy the fundamental openness of this unique American landscape. Such measures would undermine the important symbolic role that the Capitol Grounds play and the express intent of their designer, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

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In 1873, Olmsted was asked by Senator Justin Morrill, then chairman of the Senate Committee on Buildings and Grounds, to devise a plan for the recently expanded Capitol Grounds. Barely a decade after the Civil War, Congress was interested in creating a setting that would draw graceful attention to this symbol of American Government.

Morrill and Olmsted had first met during the Civil War when Olmsted served as the first Executive Secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the precursor to the Red Cross. By this time, Olmsted was the most prominent and highly regarded landscape architect in the country. His parks and designs literally were shaping the face of America.

It was a time when America faced deep divisions. The country had just come through a civil war and an economic panic, amid growing immigration and rapid urbanization. In so many ways, America faced social and environmental challenges similar to those today: racism, disease, pollution, and inequality.

In the face of these challenges, city leaders – in New York, Buffalo, Chicago and Hartford—had turned to Olmsted to design healthful public spaces. They embraced his unique vision of parks for all people, dedicated to connecting city residents to nature and enhancing their physical and mental well-being. They hoped, as Olmsted did, that thoughtful design could advance social justice and equity, bringing people together, as well as addressing toxic environmental impacts.

Given these values, it was no wonder that Morrill reached out to Olmsted to serve as the landscape architect of the Capitol. It is also no wonder that Olmsted was ready to accept the assignment.

Designing the Capitol Grounds offered the opportunity to make a statement. For Olmsted, the Capitol and its surrounding landscape should be a symbol of the NEW United States of America that had triumphed over deep divisions in the Civil War and freed itself from the institution of slavery.

Because of personal experience, Olmsted was supremely focused on ways public spaces could unite and heal a deeply divided country. Between 1856 and 1860, he had published regular posts as an undercover reporter for the *New York Times*, opposing slavery and its expansion. In 1865, he also released the Yosemite Report, arguing that the Government had an obligation to reserve and protect public spaces and scenic reservations for all people as part of America's patrimony.

Olmsted believed that open spaces could give Americans from all walks of life a place to connect. They could offer a setting for diverse individuals and groups to find common ground.


Informed by these beliefs, [Olmsted spent 18 years overseeing the development of](#) the Capitol Grounds, focusing on ensuring easy and convenient access to the Building as well as creating a series of tiered terraces that anchored the building aesthetically to the landscape. He created paths that would invite citizens to experience the People's House without distraction or concern for safety. Visitors could enjoy a shady spot in the Summer House or rest on seats offering views of the Capitol, framed by trees.

In good times and bad, the Capitol Grounds are America's public square. If we are going to address the issues that divide us, we need to listen to Olmsted. If we are to be a free and democratic people, the prescription is not more fences, but more open and democratic spaces.

Keeping the Capitol Grounds open to all Americans is not a luxury. It is essential to democracy. Security measures should be employed that do not alter enjoyment and easy accessibility.

We urgently ask you to preserve and protect Olmsted's vision by ensuring the Capitol Grounds remain a free, open and democratic space, representative of what is best in America.

Sincerely,



Anne Neal Petri
President and CEO

The National Association for Olmsted Parks is the only national organization dedicated to protecting and preserving the life, work and legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted. We are the managing partner of Olmsted 200, the national bicentennial celebration of Olmsted's birth in 2022 along with the American Society of Landscape Architects, City Parks Alliance, The Trust for Public Land, The Garden Club of America, The Cultural Landscape Foundation, National Recreation and Park Association, Landscape Architecture Foundation, American Public Health Association and the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

www.olmsted200.org