



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION *for*
OLMSTED
PARKS

June 1, 2021

**Statement of the National Association for Olmsted Parks
Anne Neal Petri, President and CEO**

**For the Public Roundtable on Alternatives
to Permanent Fencing at the Capitol
Convened by U.S. Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, June 1, 2021, 7 p.m.**

The January 6 attack on the Capitol has raised important questions about the security of the “Peoples House” and accessibility to the Capitol Grounds designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

The National Association for Olmsted Parks is here to oppose permanent fencing and to encourage alternatives to extensive retractable fencing and other measures that detract from the beautiful grounds designed for the use of a free and open society. We represent thousands of individuals and organizations working to protect and promote Olmsted’s legacy. By explaining Olmsted’s design intent, we seek to inform recommendations so that future actions do not sacrifice the integrity of this important and symbolic landscape.

As many know, Olmsted, with his partner Calvert Vaux, designed New York’s Central Park. It represented a new idea of public access to urban green spaces and was emulated in cities across the nation. It is not surprising that Senate Building and Grounds Committee chair Justin Morrill, called upon Olmsted in 1873 to design a landscape that would draw graceful attention to the symbol of American Government.

The country had just come through a bloody civil war and subsequent economic panic. It was experiencing intense change including rapid urbanization and growing immigrant populations. America faced challenges much like those we face today: inequity, racism, disease, and pollution.

In these deeply divided and dangerous times, Olmsted's response—and the response of other American leaders -- was NOT to build fences but to design open and accessible spaces. Olmsted was intent on using public space to unite and heal a deeply divided nation.

Relying on the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers which include a vast array of letters from Olmsted to various officials outlining his thinking and principles, we offer the following recommendations:

First, keep the Capitol Grounds open to the American people.

Olmsted viewed the grounds as a democratic space of national significance.

It was to be a shared space – open to all Americans, of every region, race and ethnicity. Olmsted had unwavering faith in the American republic and the role that public space – be it an urban park or the Capitol Grounds – could play in promoting community.

A healthy civil society brought people together and the Capitol landscape was to be a major symbol and instrument of unification, home of a government that had freed itself from slavery.

The design, said Olmsted, should “form and train the tastes of the nation.”

The grounds were not mere ornament or decoration. The grounds would heighten the grandeur of the building by subordinating all things to it, thus becoming an integral part of the Capitol's purpose and function. The principle of “subordination,” said Olmsted, must prevent the introduction ...of local ornaments or other objects that would distract the eye from the general view of the Capitol.

Second, and in furtherance of this important principle, we must be wary not only of permanent fencing but of retractable fences and other mechanical apparatus that sadly draw the public's attention away from the Capitol -- and what it symbolizes. There are no

known examples of long retractable fences that work for any period of time and there is no expectation that such a fence could be designed and remain fully operational for long. Retractable fences are never attractive or unobtrusive even when they are not elevated. We must, therefore, seek creative alternatives that will protect this designed landscape --its vistas, turf, trees and low edging – in ways that will have no long-term detrimental effect. In the spirit of this Roundtable, those alternatives must be explored by a diverse array of trained professionals including landscape architects and others at this table.

Third. We must rethink security – not as a physical design challenge – but as a challenge for HUMAN resources. Faced with persistent vandalism of plants back in 1880, Olmsted rejected barriers and instead called on constant vigilance. “Practices ... disorderly and inconsistent with the beauty and fitness of the grounds should be prevented,” he wrote. “... It is of much less importance ... that actual warnings ... be addressed to visitors than that they should be made to feel that all misuse of the grounds is watchfully guarded against and that they are liable at any moment to be observed and interrupted in any improper conduct.” ...

In this same spirit, we believe that Congressional attention must be focused on securing the Capitol building and then employing security measures with subtle restraint that do not alter enjoyment and easy accessibility outside. This will involve the thoughtful integration and training of intelligence and security forces outlined by General Schwartz as well as the subtle and more layered monitoring suggested by Ms. Harwell and Mr. Voinier-- with trained personnel sufficient to meet probable crises and to respond effectively to diverse situations. A more expansive security purview – looking at the Capital City and not just the Capitol Grounds – would be in keeping with Olmsted’s recommendation to Senator Morrill to bring all the grounds from the Capitol to Lafayette Square into a “comprehensive scheme.”

In sum: Keeping the Capitol Grounds open to all Americans is essential to our democracy.

As we approach the bicentennial of Olmsted's birth in 2022, we urgently ask Congress to protect Olmsted's vision by ensuring the Capitol Grounds remain a free, open and democratic space, representative of what is best in America. Thank you!

Appendix

All quotations are from *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Volume VII, Parks, Politics and Patronage, 1874-1882*. Editors Charles E. Beveridge, Carolyn F. Hoffman, Kenneth Hawkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

Letter from FLO To Justin Smith Morrill, January 22, 1874, pp. 36-43. “For convenience sake, I will consider this question first with reference to the whole body of open ground from the Capitol to Lafayette Square... . Beyond the cost of all necessary accommodations for the business to be done in them, they represent an investment by the Nation of Millions of dollars... As it is, the effect produced is admitted to be a broken, confused and unsatisfactory one and unhappily often alluded to as a standing reproach against the system of government which has been able to secure no better adaption of means to such an end.”

“Each building and other object of interest instead of appearing as one in the National assemblage will have its own little separate domain and seem more distinctly set apart from all the others even.... And no matter how pretty each of these might be in itself by no aggregation of such prettiness can any great beauty or any fine impression of unity throughout all be produced.”

“... the first step necessary to be taken toward a comprehensive improvement would be the most difficult one, that is, to place control of all these grounds under one body so constituted that it would be likely to pursue a sustained policy year after year and not be led off by regard for temporary or special interests. The cost of carrying out such a plan as I suggest would probably be less -- acre per acre—than of pursuing the project now entertained.”

Letter from FLO to William Hammond Hall, March 28, 1874. Pp. 53-55

“They are managed in an absurd and wasteful way under advice and control of nearly a dozen independent Committees of Congress, assisted by nearly as many heads of bureaus and other officials, architects, surveyors, and gardeners.”

“I have strongly urged that before anything more is done in regard to any particular ground an effort should be made to simplify and consolidate the present organizations and bring all these grounds into subordination to a comprehensive scheme and have requested that the question of policy involved in this proposition should be submitted to a representative board of American Landscape Architects; it being one which in my judgement concerns the credit of the profession and the honor and dignity of the country.”

Letter to Justin Smith Morrill, June 9, 1874, pp. 64-68

“The chief object of the study is to determine the best means of sustaining and supporting the Capitol building consistently with convenient approach to it.”

Letter to Whitelaw Reid, editor of *The New York Daily Tribune*, November 26, 1874, pp. 92-99

“Consider, then, the importance the Capitol has betokening and as tending to form and train the tastes of the nation... few people seem even to imagine that designing grounds is a natural process of adapting means to ends --- to a series of well considered and carefully ordained ends – as much so as the planning of a ship or a factory or a newspaper, and that the same methods of design are not applicable for all kinds of grounds in all sorts of places.”

New York Daily Tribune, December 5, 1874

“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 highten (sic) that effect.”

“The same principle of subordination to the building will prevent the introduction in any part of the ground of local ornaments.”....

Notice to Watchmen for the Capitol Grounds, July 7, 1878, pp. 369-371

“The greatest practicable order and neatness is to be maintained in the Capitol Grounds & their turf, plants and other fittings and decorations are to be preservd from all unnecessary wear & ill usage.”

“To this end it is chiefly required that practices which if generally indulged in would be inconvenient, disorderly and inconsistent with the beauty and fitness of the grounds should be *prevented* and that no one should at any time do what all cannot do at any time without obvious misuse and damage of the premises.”

“... It is of much less importance for this purpose that actual warnings or remonstrances should be addressed to visitors than that they should be made to feel that all misuse of the grounds is watchfully guarded against and that they are liable at any moment to be observed and interrupted in any improper conduct.” ...

Letter to Edward Clark, Architect of the Capitol, Nov. 18, 1880, pp. 512-514

“When I last went on the ground ... I noticed that some plants which I had seen before had disappeared; asking him about them he said they had been stolen, and immediately pointed out several plants that had apparently been pulled up by the roots & left on the ground within a few hours. He said that this was of daily occurrence and that at least 3000 plants had been pulled up and most of them taken away since last spring. Afterwards he begged that I would not have the temporary rail about the rockwork of the summer house taken down and urged that additional barriers should be made. I then spoke to the watchman of the beat....”

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. Here is our letter to the editor that appeared in the [Washington Post](#). Here is our [letter](#) to the House and Senate Administration and Appropriation Committees. NAOP is the managing partner of Olmsted 200, the coordinated local and national celebration of the 200th birthday in 2022 of Frederick Law Olmsted. www.olmsted200.org