

The United States Capitol Grounds



FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED'S
LEGACY IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

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With its striking dome and powerful architecture, the U.S. Capitol is the world's most recognizable symbol of democracy. *What creates this sense of grandeur?* As the place where Congress meets, the building's purpose and monumental scale are key factors. But it is easy to overlook another factor—the landscape, designed specifically to accentuate the building.

The grounds were designed by **Frederick Law Olmsted** (1822-1903), known for founding the profession of landscape architecture in the United States and creating New York's Central Park. A pioneer in the development of public parks in America, Olmsted gave the grounds a dignified formality to heighten the Capitol's architectural beauty.

Designing the Grounds

The site was chosen in 1791 by Peter Charles L'Enfant who located the Capitol at the elevated east end of what would become the Mall, describing the site as "a pedestal" waiting for a monument. Construction of the building began in 1793. During the mid-1800s, House and Senate wings were added, and the iconic cast-iron dome replaced an earlier wooden one. In 1874, after expanding the grounds to the present 59 acres,

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

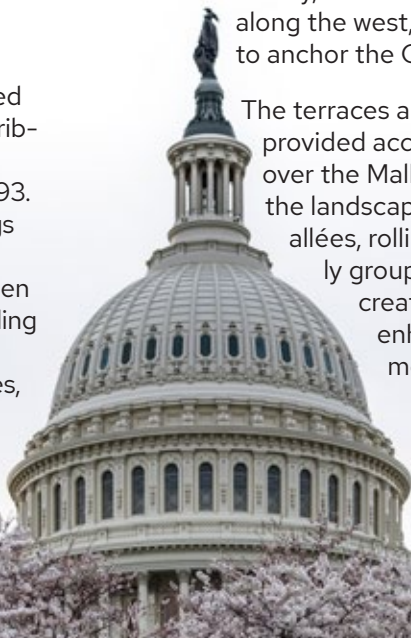


Congress commissioned Olmsted to plan and oversee landscape improvements.

The Capitol's site was small for such a large building, with a steep slope and 21 adjoining streets to be integrated. Olmsted's innovative design overcame these difficulties, displaying the building to its greatest visual effect while providing efficient circulation for pedestrians and vehicles.

Olmsted surrounded the neoclassical building with formal and informal elements, avoiding overly colorful foliage and ornamented objects. Architecturally, he designed marble terraces along the west, north and south facades to anchor the Capitol on its sloping site.

The terraces and a grand staircase provided access and expansive views over the Mall and the city beyond. In the landscape, curving paths, formal allées, rolling lawns and carefully grouped shrubs and trees created a verdant setting, enhancing yet softening the monumental building.





Olmsted's innovative design integrated 21 adjoining roads.

To accomplish this, Olmsted replaced some 300,000 cubic yards of earth with new soil before planting thousands of trees and shrubs. He installed new underground pipes for sewer, water and gas followed by roads and walkways, and on the Senate side, he placed the Summerhouse as a cool and shady resting place.

On the east front, two large ovals of grass and scattered trees give a sense of openness while avoiding direct views of the Capitol from the streets. For major events and inaugurations then held on the eastern side, Olmsted created the spacious Plaza, with water fountains and large lanterns.

Over time, as Olmsted envisioned, the plantings partially concealed the building, framing four diagonal views that show the full facade of the Capitol. For the most dramatic views, he placed two cast-iron shelters at the northeast and southeast viewing points, providing rest for visitors where they would see the Capitol's striking eastern facade.

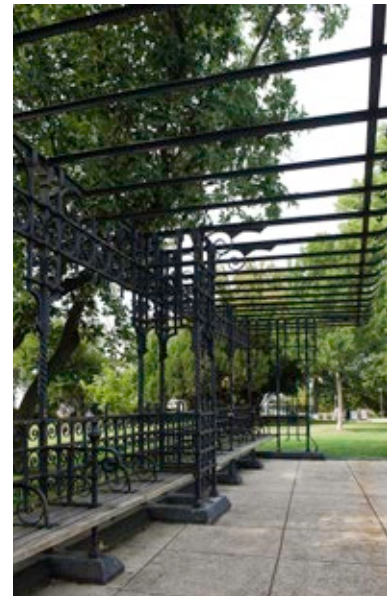


The Olmsted Landscape Today

For more than a century, the Olmsted landscape remained relatively unchanged, offering a calming transition between bustling streets and the stately Capitol.



Over the past decades, increased security measures have led to the installation of barriers at vehicular entrances. Decorative plantings were added, distracting from the simplicity of the Olmsted design. Construction of the underground Visitor Center, begun in 2001 to improve visitor access, brought changes on the east side, including the addition of skylights in the Plaza and the replacement of the tulip poplar allée with two sloped lines of trees along descending stairs leading to the entrance of the Visitor Center.



The greater part of the Capitol grounds remains intact as an historic landscape which has stood the test of time. Visitors today still enjoy the work and vision of Olmsted, who made the Capitol both more impressive and accessible by deftly reshaping the space around it.

The Summerhouse

Constructed between 1879 and 1881, Olmsted conceived the Summerhouse as a “cool resting spot with drinking fountains” for visitors to the Capitol. He devoted much thought to the location of the hexagonal brick structure, avoiding an intrusion upon the landscape by setting it low into the hill and surrounding it with shrubs and trees.

In every detail, Olmsted strove to produce the effect of coolness, shelter and refreshment. The open center affords a view of overhanging trees selected for their delicate foliage to provide dappled shade.

On the inside, blue-stone benches offer seating, sheltered by projecting roofs of red Spanish mission tile. Set in the walls are large stone grilles allowing breezes to pass through. A wrought-iron grille opens into a small “rocky runlet” adding a cooling water flow and pleasing sound.

The fountain in the center, made of brick and bluestone, has metal fittings that once held chains for drinking cups or ladles. Initially,

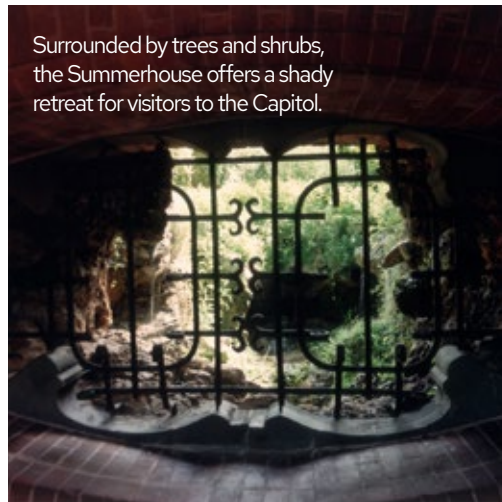


Olmsted intended the fountain

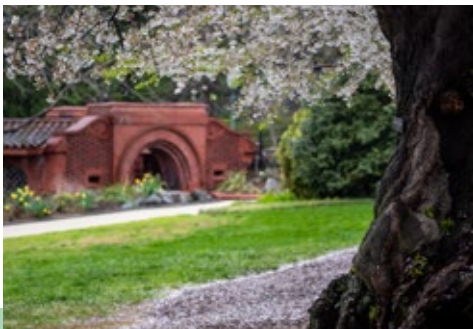
overflow to operate a small “water carillon,” producing soft musical chimes. Designed by Tiffany & Co. of New York, the device could not be made to work properly and was removed in 1891.

An added element of delicacy in this carefully contrived space is the decorative brickwork, designed by the architect of the Summerhouse, Thomas Wisedell, and built from carved red brick supplied by the Peerless Brick Company of Philadelphia.

With all these subtle touches, the Summerhouse offers a hidden surprise and delight for visitors touring the Capitol grounds as well as refreshment of body and spirit. It is a prime example of Olmsted’s attention to detail and how his imaginative conception of the many elements in a design makes it achieve its full potential.



Surrounded by trees and shrubs, the Summerhouse offers a shady retreat for visitors to the Capitol.



Frederick Law Olmsted



Born in Hartford, Connecticut, **Frederick Law Olmsted** (1822–1903) was the leading landscape architect of the post-Civil War era and principal founder of the profession of landscape architecture in America.

His remarkable design legacy includes Central Park and Prospect Park in New York, Boston’s “Emerald Necklace,” Biltmore Estate in Asheville, Mount Royal in Montreal, and Washington Park, Jackson Park and the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. For each project, Olmsted developed a comprehensive vision, working with professionals in architecture, horticulture and engineering. This multi-disciplined master planning approach was well ahead of its time.

Olmsted was a social reformer and abolitionist whose values played an important role in landscape design. He envisioned public parks as essential to democracy and Americans’ pursuit of happiness—places where people of all backgrounds could come together on common ground. He felt strongly about the nurturing, restorative power of landscape to promote mental and physical well-being. The Capitol Grounds offered an ideal landscape to embody this vision.

The Legacy of the Olmsted Firm in Washington D.C.



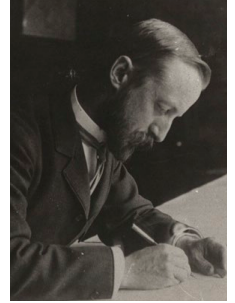
Olmsted oversaw the development of the Capitol grounds for nearly 20 years, making it one of his most successful landscape designs. His vision for the Capitol was augmented by his son’s ambitious ideas for the Washington region as a whole. In 1901, Congress appointed **Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.** (1870–1957) to the

McMillan Commission which produced the McMillan Plan, the United States’ first comprehensive city plan. Inspired by L’Enfant’s 1791 design, the McMillan Plan emphasized restoration of the city’s ceremonial core, including the Mall and Capitol grounds. It called for designing a governmental office complex in the trian-

gle formed by Pennsylvania Avenue, 15th Street and the Mall (today’s Federal Triangle), and established a comprehensive system of urban and suburban parks, including Rock Creek Park.

Olmsted Jr. not only helped develop the McMillan Plan but was instrumental in guiding its execution. Between 1910 and 1932, he served on the two federal oversight bodies for planning Washington: the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Park Planning Commission. As a result, the city today, with its landscaped parks, grand radial avenues and ceremonial spaces, is largely true to L’Enfant’s original intent.

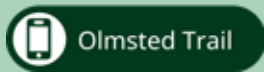
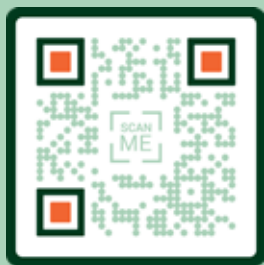
The McMillan Plan galvanized the country, and Olmsted Brothers – the firm then led by Olmsted Jr. and his step-brother **John Charles Olmsted** (1852–1920)–found itself in great demand. By 1920, it was the largest office of landscape architecture in the world, and a leading force in both landscape architecture and city planning.



The two brothers also were founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects and played an influential role in the creation of the National Park Service, advising on park management and preservation.

Through its existence, from 1857 to 1979, the firm worked on more than 6,000 projects, leaving cities across the country with a profound legacy of well-planned urban parks and park systems, residential communities, institutional grounds and entire metropolitan areas. Notable commissions include the California State Parks system, Yosemite Valley, Niagara Reservation, the Florida Everglades, Atlanta’s Druid Hills, Chicago’s Riverside, and complete park systems in Essex County, NJ, Portland, Seattle, Louisville, Buffalo, Rochester, Boston and Baltimore.

In Washington, DC, the work of the Olmsted firm extended far beyond the Mall and Capitol grounds, including many prominent landmarks: the grounds of the White House, Washington Monument and National Cathedral; the National Zoo; Rock Creek Park; Roosevelt Island; Jefferson Memorial; and the McMillan Reservoir, among others.



The Olmsted Network is the national organization dedicated to championing Olmsted parks, places and principles through advocacy, education and stewardship.

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