

The Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architectural Firm

Use the topography as an underlying skeleton on which to lay other things.
Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.

The Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architectural Firm of Brookline, Massachusetts, left its mark on landscapes across the North American continent. The firm's founder, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., set the standard for America's tradition of public parks through his design, construction, and management of this country's first great park, New York City's Central Park. He went on to design Prospect Park, Franklin Park, and then Boston's "Emerald Necklace," a city-wide system of parks linked by a series of scenic drives and boulevards. Olmsted is also credited with being a major catalyst in the establishment of our National Park system. The founder of the profession of landscape architecture, he passed his passion for landscape design and environmental concern on to his sons, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and John Charles Olmsted. It was John who, between 1900 and 1913, traveled cross-country time and again, along with his assistant, James Frederick Dawson, ultimately impacting the landscape of many western cities and towns.

In the Northwest, the Olmsted firm created designs for individual parks, park systems, and public grounds, as well as subdivisions and private estates. The Portland park system, Seattle's park plan, the University of Washington Arboretum, and the site of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, today's University of Washington campus, were all Olmsted designs. In Spokane, the firm was hired in 1907 to plan the city's park system. At the request of the Park Board President, Aubrey White, the plan included substantially more than mere park plan recommendations and became, in effect, a guide for city planning. The firm was also hired to design plans for three individual parks: Corbin Park, Liberty Park (largely displaced when the right-of-way for I-90 was cut through it in the 1960s), and Cannon Hill Park. Of these, Cannon Hill Park remains the most typical representation of an Olmsted design with its irregular outline, rolling terrain and large pond. Originally intended to collect runoff from Manito Park and surrounding South Hill residential areas, the park has lost a portion of its water surfaces.

Today, the best known private landscape the firm designed in Spokane was "Waikiki," the grounds of Jay P. Graves' mansion on the bluff above the Little Spokane River. Known today as Gonzaga University's Bozarth retreat Center, it is a noteworthy example of the collaborative work of John C. Olmsted and Kirtland K. Cutter. Other important northwest landmarks they designed cooperatively include Chester Thorne's "Thornwood" and Seattle's C. D. Stimson home. The union continued after Cutter moved to southern California and many Santa Barbara examples can be found today.

The records of the Olmsted firm, now in the care of the Library of Congress and the National Park Service, indicate that the Olmsted firm was also contacted to advise Spokane's real estate investors on the design of residential subdivisions. The most immediately recognizable of these is the Rockwood subdivision, with its curvilinear streets and sensitivity to terrain and the South Hill's basalt outcroppings. Olmsted

residential plans always demonstrated recognition of the importance of neighborhood cohesiveness. As a result, Olmsted-designed communities tend to retain their livability.

--Sally R. Reynolds