

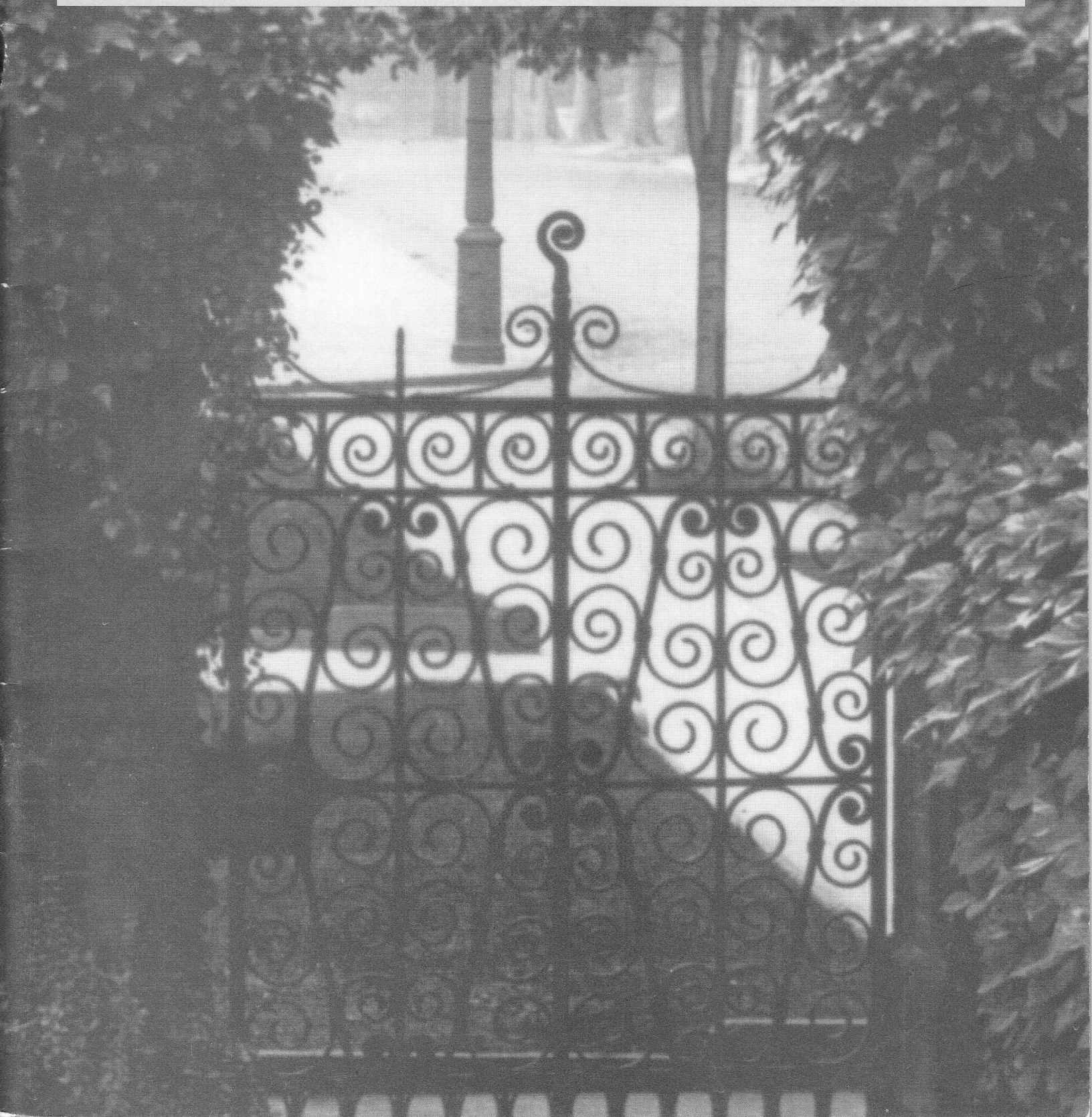
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# Rhode Island History

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## Frederick Law Olmsted and His Firm's Private Clients: An Unexamined Facet of Olmsted's Approach to Nature in the City

MARTHA L. WERENFELS

In 1893 Frederick Law Olmsted's son and successor, John C. Olmsted, wrote to John Nicholas Brown to express his displeasure at the liberties that one of Brown's gardeners had taken with an Olmsted-designed landscape in Newport. "I was very much distressed to find that your gardener has destroyed all of the natural effect of the shrubberies by clipping them into hard, rounded forms. . . . Nothing I could say would fully convey to you the impression of the pain which such an ignorant and reckless disregard of sense of fitness and natural beauty gives me."<sup>1</sup> The letter suggests the depth of conviction that the Olmsteds held about the importance of the designed natural landscapes that they created.

Frederick Law Olmsted is well known and has been extensively written about, both as a social reformer and as the preeminent landscape architect of his time. He was, in fact, the first professional to call himself a landscape architect, thereby defining the field for those whose careers followed the model that he established. Olmsted is particularly noted for his ingenious designs for Central Park in New York City, for Prospect Park in Brooklyn, and for the series of parks that he designed for Boston. Through these and numerous other public parks, Olmsted sought to provide natural escapes for those who were continuously subjected to what he and other reformers considered the unhealthy conditions of urban life.

Social reformers of the second half of the nineteenth century—and Frederick Law Olmsted was among the most prominent and vocal—were concerned that the moral and social character of urban residents was being eroded by the deleterious conditions of city life. During that time an increasingly large segment of the American population inhabited the nation's big and newly industrialized cities. A considerable proportion of these urban dwellers could be characterized as working poor, and many were immigrants. Olmsted's view of the urban condition is described by Paul Boyer in his *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*: "The moral problem of the city, he [Olmsted] contended in 1870 . . . was not one of blatant vice, crime, and mob disorder, but rather the erosion of the social bond, the deadening of human sensitivity and the loss of opportunities for reflection and repose."<sup>2</sup>

Olmsted believed that the most effective way to provide all classes of urban dwellers with the opportunity for repose and reflection was through the development of public parks where one could find relief from the unhealthy congestion and chaos that typified the city. Such parks, he wrote, would offer "the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town, those conditions which compel us to walk circumspectly, watchfully, jealously, which compel us to look closely upon others without sympathy."<sup>3</sup> At a time when urban public parks simply did not exist in this country, Olmsted promoted Central Park, and then other urban parks, as the means to bring diverse members of society together in a healthy environment. His parks were intended to be enjoyed by the young and the old, by the wealthy and the poor, by natives and immigrants alike.

### Figure 1

As in their designs for public parks, the Olmsteds strove for natural effects in designing private urban gardens. This is a view of the garden of the R. H. I. Goddard estate in Providence. Photo by Harry Perkins, 1917. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

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Along with other reformers, Olmsted believed that public parks could offer benefits beyond that of immediate relief from unhealthful conditions. Parks could also help to alleviate crime, intemperance, and many of the other social ills of urban life. "No one who has closely observed the conduct of the people who visit the Park," he wrote, "can doubt that it exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and lawless classes of the city, an influence favorable to courtesy, self-control, and temperance."<sup>4</sup>

Olmsted's writings clearly outline his philosophy regarding the morally redeeming benefits of natural havens within dense urban contexts. His designs for large-city parks, which express this philosophy in physical terms, have been the subject of much study. But Olmsted and his firm—which, led by his sons, carried on his work and, to a large extent, his mission after his death<sup>5</sup>—also designed many urban gardens for private clients, and these designs have received far less critical attention. After Olmsted moved his office from New York City to Brookline, Massachusetts, several private commissions came from clients in Rhode Island. An examination of some of these Rhode Island projects can illustrate significant similarities and differences between the firm's public and private work. More specifically, it can show how the firm's approach to private garden design reflected the same beliefs that informed Frederick Law Olmsted's large public projects, such as his design for Central Park. It can also show how different kinds of clients—public agencies on the one hand, wealthy individuals on the other—could introduce different kinds of constraints on the way the work was done.



Frederick Law Olmsted was born near Hartford, Connecticut, in 1822. Two months before his fourth birthday and shortly after the birth of his younger brother, Olmsted's mother died. His father, a prosperous merchant, subsequently married a stern, remote woman. From age seven and a half to age seventeen, Olmsted was sent away to various boarding schools, but he graduated from neither grammar school nor high school and spent just a few months at Yale. Most of his education was derived from his personal contacts and from his travels, including many trips in the countryside with his father and a walking tour of England with his brother. It would appear that it was these encounters with nature that spurred Olmsted's interest in the designed landscape, an interest that would become increasingly related to his growing concern with social problems.

After several failed attempts at establishing various careers, Olmsted was set up by his father as a scientific farmer, first in Connecticut and then on Staten Island. Although he ultimately gave up farming as a vocation, he did develop a keen appreciation both for the scientific aspects of botany and for the redeeming values to be found in nature. According to Albert Fein, the editor of many of Olmsted's writings, at this stage in Olmsted's life "nature with its power to conserve the virtues of the past was his instrument for improving the world."<sup>6</sup>

Olmsted was especially impressed with the parks and gardens he observed while traveling through England with his brother in 1850. A collection of his writings during that time was published in 1852 under the title *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*. The success of this work led to a commission for a series of articles for the *New York Daily Times*. Between 1853 and 1857 Olmsted traveled extensively in the southern states, documenting his impressions of the South for publication in that newspaper (and later in book form). Although he tried to present a balanced view of what he observed, including anecdotes

about the beauty of particular places, by the end of his travels Olmsted was convinced that the southern way of life (as compared to the northern) represented a failed social system.<sup>7</sup>

According to Fein, Olmsted “was now more dedicated than ever to finding a physical solution for the social problems of the much-criticized Northern city.”<sup>8</sup> While he recognized that northern cities did not represent a perfect solution to the urban problem, he was convinced that their social structure was to be preferred to the one that prevailed in the South. He now developed a strong conviction that the deficiencies of northern cities could be ameliorated through the introduction of public parks. When he teamed up with noted architect Calvert Vaux in 1857 to enter a design competition for Central Park, he saw an opportunity to bring to physical fruition his ideas of social reform through the introduction of nature into the city.

Central Park was Olmsted’s first landscape design. Consuming twenty years of his life, it was a project through which he developed and demonstrated his philosophy regarding the redemptive qualities of designed landscapes. The ideas that Olmsted presented in Central Park, and even the ways in which many of those ideas were translated into botanical form, were to remain central to his thinking and to his landscape design practice as he went on to design parks all across the country. Thomas Bender summarized the critical role that Central Park played in setting the stage for Olmsted’s future work:

The “Greensward” [Central Park] plan contained the fundamental principles that Olmsted would repeat and elaborate upon for forty years as America’s foremost landscape architect and city planner. The “highest ideal that can be aimed for in a park,” Olmsted and Vaux wrote, is a “most decided contrast to the confined and formal lines of the city.” This simple idea, implicit, as Olmsted often acknowledged, in the rural cemetery movement, became the basis of a sophisticated approach to environmental design.<sup>9</sup>

To understand how these ideas—so clearly expressed in Olmsted’s most magnificent urban parks—informed his designs for private urban gardens, we must first review the governing philosophies of Central Park and see how they were expressed under Olmsted’s stewardship.



In Central Park, as in his other park designs, Olmsted was particularly interested in providing an escape, both physical and mental, from the congestion of the city. Thus he instructed the gardeners carrying out his vision that “every bit of work done on the park should be done for the single purpose of making the visitor feel as if he had got far away from the town.”<sup>10</sup> By giving the working classes the opportunity to temporarily escape the deleterious conditions in which they spent most of their time (an escape previously available only to the wealthier classes through holidays away from the city), Olmsted was attempting to improve the health of the poor. In his memo “To Gardeners,” he further explained his goals in laying out the park:

The main object and justification is simply to produce a certain influence on the minds of people and through this to make life in the city healthier and happier. The character of this influence is a poetic one and it is to be produced by means of scenes through observation of which the mind may be more or less lifted out of moods and habits into which it is, under the ordinary condition of life in the city, likely to fall.<sup>11</sup>



It is noteworthy that Olmsted felt it important to convey his aims and his philosophy not just to fellow reformers but also to the gardeners who were responsible for the physical execution of his ideas.

In order to fully exclude the city from Central Park, Olmsted went to great lengths to disguise the city streets that had to traverse it. He laid out his strategy for concealing the roads in "Description of a Plan for the Improvement of Central Park, 'Greensward'" in 1858:

Each of the transverse roads is intended to be sunk so far below the general surface that the park drives may, at every necessary point of intersection, be carried entirely over it, . . . and a little judicious planting on the tops or slopes of the banks above these walls will, in most cases, entirely conceal both the roads and the vehicles moving in them, from the view of those walking or driving in the park.<sup>12</sup>

By providing an escape from the city, Olmsted seemed to believe, the park could benefit not only the mental health of its patrons but their physical health as well—particularly in the case of children. An 1872 handbill that was to be posted in Central Park was directed "To Those Having the Care of Young Children." It included the following advice:

Young children, when confined to the city during the summer generally suffer in health, and are specially liable to fall into dangerous disorders of the bowels. When it is impracticable to make a visit of some length to the country with them, great advantage will be gained by spending the greater part of a day occasionally in the open air, and under conditions otherwise favorable to health. Arrangements have been made by which this can be done easily and cheaply by great numbers in the Central Park.<sup>13</sup>

There were several key design conventions that Frederick Law Olmsted characteristically employed to meet his objectives in Central Park and, to a great extent, in the vast majority of the parks and private gardens that he and his firm subsequently designed. Six such conventions may be identified here. The significance that Olmsted attributed to each of these features is explained in his writings.

*Promenades*, or pathways, for pedestrians or carriages appear in almost all of Olmsted's designs. The promenade was the important feature that linked disparate parts of a design together and enabled the user to fully enjoy the vistas that had been arranged for his or her pleasure. Referring to the public-park visitor as the "true owner" of the landscape he was creating, in one statement Olmsted assigned such great importance to the promenade that he equated it with the mansion of a private estate:

[The promenade] should occupy the same position of relative importance in the general arrangement of the plan that a mansion should occupy in a park prepared for private occupation. The importance that is justly connected with the idea of the residence of the owner in even the most extensive private grounds, finds no parallel in a public park, however small, and we feel that the interest of the visitor, who, in the best sense is the true owner in the latter case, should concentrate on features of natural, in preference to artificial, beauty.<sup>14</sup>

Olmsted's preference for natural rather than built environments was reflected in his partiality for *rural landscapes*. His fascination with creating environments that were entirely rural in character was one of the governing factors of many of his designs. In a report proposing a design for a public park in Pawtucket, the Olmsted firm described how it intended to protect the rural character of the site: "It [the plan] proposed that on each side of the river, below certain points where wharves are now in use or likely to be needed . . . a strip of land upon the banks of the river shall be taken, of sufficient breadth to secure a permanent sylvan border, trees being planted where necessary to make the landscape com-

pletely rural in character.”<sup>15</sup> Although prepared by Olmsted’s sons, the plan reflected the ideas that the senior Olmsted developed while working on Central Park and incorporated into many of his later park and garden designs. Both the work in Central Park and the plan for the proposed park in Pawtucket demonstrated the Olmsted firm’s desire to create completely rural settings within cities. Olmsted in fact saw Central Park as a substitute for the countryside that many park visitors might never enjoy:

The Park, as a whole, is undoubtedly expected to afford to the citizens of the metropolis, day after day, and year after year, a succession of views of rural character so real and genuine as to convey very positive ideas in regard to natural scenery, even to a person who might never see anything more country-like than will ultimately be contained within its limits; and this, in connection with the opportunity it offers for a social enjoyment of fresh air and exercise, is perhaps the most important service that it is calculated to perform in a direct way.<sup>16</sup>

It should be remembered that in 1886, when this was written, it may very well have been possible to shut the city out of the park experience completely, since Central Park was not surrounded by tall buildings as it is today.

Olmsted frequently used “*green edges*” to shut out the external world from the parks and gardens he designed. Providing a fairly dense layer of plantings inside the perimeter of his landscaped spaces allowed him to create the illusion that these spaces did not have a harshly defined limit, but instead softly faded away into greenery. In creating a soft green edge, Olmsted and Vaux sought, “by planting and otherwise, to shut out of view that which would be inharmonious with and counteractive to our design.”<sup>17</sup> This shutting-out of the city often took the form of a row of plantings just inside the wall or fence that formed a park’s boundary.

Another characteristic feature of Olmsted’s designs is their inclusion of *greensward*. Once the city had been successfully excluded from the quiet domain of a park, Olmsted strove to create a “broad, open space of clean greensward” surrounded by a screen of trees.<sup>18</sup> These open, grassy areas, meant to counterbalance the overbuilt conditions of the city, were intended for quiet contemplation rather than for active recreational use, which Olmsted believed would detract from the serenity they were designed to offer. Throughout his long tenure as New York City’s park superintendent, Olmsted battled to keep his greensward meadows from being designated for such activities as ball playing and croquet.

The open green spaces that Olmsted designed often featured *specimen trees*, individually sited or in clusters. These carefully selected trees served as sculptural elements within the larger areas of greensward. In 1870 Olmsted and Vaux described the desired effect in a report to the commissioners of Prospect Park (originally Brooklyn Park) in Brooklyn:

It consists of combinations of trees, standing singly or in groups, and casting their shadows over broad stretches of turf or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools, and the predominant associations are in the highest degree tranquilizing and graceful. . . . We know of no other landscape effects that can be commanded, within the limitations fixed by the conditions of this site, which experience shows to be more desirable in a town park than these.<sup>19</sup>

The attention that Olmsted paid to the siting, choice, and strategic use of trees is also revealed in his “Instruction for Planting the South Part of the Long Meadow” of Prospect Park: “As a rule each tree should be a perfect specimen [*sic*] and well balanced and each group is to be regarded from all sides. In



respect to the composition of the groups one with another the general effect of the broad landscape . . . is of the first importance. . . . Certain special vistas . . . are next to be considered.”<sup>20</sup>

*Vistas* that were very much contrived, but that were designed to look entirely natural, were also an important element of Olmsted’s landscape designs. As suggested by the way in which he laid out his promenades, Olmsted orchestrated the experiences and views of those who visited or traveled through his parks. One example can be found in the way in which roads were planned in Prospect Park. “In addition to the circuit drive thus described,” read a planning report, “a cross-road is introduced about the middle of the park, from which will be obtained a fine open out-look towards the country beyond the southern boundary.”<sup>21</sup> By cleverly providing a perspective that focused attention beyond the city to the countryside, Olmsted fulfilled his mission of offering the public a total escape from the city.



Although Central Park was largely completed by 1861, Frederick Law Olmsted worked on the park, in varying capacities, until 1878. The twenty years of his design and supervision of the park were not entirely peaceful ones. These years were often marked by conflict with political powers that in many ways controlled and hampered his efforts. It is likely that Olmsted’s frustration with Tammany Hall politics ultimately influenced his decision to devote more time to private commissions.

Even in the early days of his work on Central Park, when Olmsted first took over as park superintendent (a position he held from 1857 to 1861), he found the workers that he inherited to be less than hardworking and less than qualified. In “Passages in the Life of an Unpractical Man,” an article so named because Olmsted had been accused of being “unpractical,” he described the political atmosphere that surrounded the hiring of workers for park construction:

Each man undoubtedly supposed that he owed the fact of his preference over others, often much abler than himself to do a good day’s work, to the fact that a member of the Common Council had asked his appointment. He also knew that the request of his patron was made, not because of his supposed special fitness to serve the City on the park, but because of service that he was expected to render at the primary meeting and otherwise with a view to the approaching election.<sup>22</sup>

Olmsted went on to describe the casual way in which he was received on the job site three days after becoming superintendent. During his routine inspection of the site, “a foreman who was reading a newspaper as I came suddenly upon him, exclaimed, ‘Hello, Fred; get round pretty often, don’t you?’”<sup>23</sup>

In another article, “The Spoils of the Park: With a Few Leaves from the Deep-laden Note-books of ‘A Wholly Unpractical Man,’” Olmsted related episodes of the political interference with which he was confronted during the years of his involvement with the City of New York. In 1862 he agreed to serve as street commissioner only after he was promised that he would not be subject to political pressure in that job. “When one of the mayor’s friends in city-hall understood that I seriously meant to be my own master, or defeated, he exclaimed, ‘Why, the man must be a fool!’”<sup>24</sup> Olmsted never actually served as street commissioner, presumably because he concluded that political pressure did, indeed, go with the job.

Two episodes during Olmsted's tenure as park superintendent indicate how inevitable it was that he and the park commissioners would eventually part company, and not necessarily on the best of terms. "I once received in six days more than seven thousand letters of advice as to appointments, nearly all from men in office, and the greater part in legislative offices upon which the Commissioners have been much dependent for the means of accomplishing anything they might wish to do," he recalled.<sup>25</sup> In another encounter with the political machine, things were put to him even more forcefully: "I have heard a candidate from a magisterial office in the city addressing from my doorsteps a crowd of such advice-bearers, telling them that I was bound to give them employment, and suggesting plainly, that, if I was slow about it, a rope round my neck might serve to lessen my reluctance to take good counsel."<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the troubled relationship that Olmsted had with the park commissioners who oversaw his work, his longtime partnership with Calvert Vaux dissolved in 1872, and Olmsted was left to fight alone in his battles against a corrupt system. Eventually he ran out of the strength and will necessary to deal with the constant challenges to his authority. For medical reasons (primarily exhaustion), he requested a leave from his position as superintendent for the winter of 1878-79. His request was granted, and the position was then abolished.

Olmsted relocated to Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1878. Years after he had settled there, he described his precarious state of health at the time that he left New York:

However I was able to carry myself by day, it will not be thought surprising that I should have had sleepless nights, or that at last I could not keep myself from overwearing irritation and worry. . . . It has taken me four years to recover the strength which I then lost within a week. In view of this loss, I was advised by three well-known physicians to seek at once a change of air, scene, and mental occupation.<sup>27</sup>

Given Olmsted's experiences in New York, it is not surprising that he would reorient his practice of landscape architecture in Brookline to include a greater number of private clients. He did not give up his work on public parks or, it would appear, his interest in social reform, but he did take on more private commissions, perhaps with the hope of escaping the political pressures that inevitably accompanied public work.



Compared with the abundance of attention that has been given to Olmsted's public work in places such as Central Park and to such high-profile private jobs as the design of George W. Vanderbilt's Biltmore estate in North Carolina, little has been written about the work that the Olmsted firm did for lesser-known private clients. The firm in fact completed a great many designs for private gardens, and a significant number of these gardens can still be found in Providence and Newport. Given that the thrust of Olmsted's energy during his earlier years of park design was oriented toward providing escapes for the urban working poor, it is important to explore whether, and in what ways, the firm's approach to designing private gardens for the wealthy might have differed from its previous work.

The value that Olmsted attributed to the restorative effects of a natural environment permeated not just his designs for public projects but all of his other designs as well. Although his firm's private clients may not have been exposed



to what Olmsted described as “the ordinary conditions of life in the city”<sup>28</sup> to the same degree that the working class was, they were undoubtedly subjected to the ill effects of urban life also, albeit to a lesser extent. Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., and his successors were therefore just as intent on creating a totally natural environment for their private clients as they were for the public. They even used many of the same devices to accomplish this aim, as an analysis of six of the firm’s designs for private gardens in Rhode Island will show.<sup>29</sup>

#### R. H. I. GODDARD ESTATE, PROVIDENCE

In 1884 Robert H. I. Goddard of Providence contacted Frederick Law Olmsted and his son John Charles Olmsted regarding a master landscape plan for his estate at the intersection of Hope and George streets. Although both the house and the grounds have disappeared, a pictorial record of the Olmsteds’ design survives at the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, and it provides a clear indication of what was accomplished.

Figure 2

*This “green edge” along a property line of the R. H. I. Goddard estate was created by covering a masonry wall with foliage. Photo by Harry Perkins, 1917. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*



In a photo taken by the Olmsted firm after the landscape had matured (figure 1), we can see that the designers had obviously aimed at creating an escape from urban Providence. Even the way that the image is framed in this photograph suggests that one is entering a very natural and private retreat. Another photo (figure 2) shows the Olmsteds’ use of a “green edge” to provide a soft delineation between the private realm of the garden and the public city street beyond. The leaf-covered wall at the right of this photo reads more as a pleasant textured border to a pathway than as a hard definition of a property line, which is what it actually was.

In a third photo (figure 3) we can see how even the exterior of the house was softened by a covering of ivy. This photo shows the Olmsteds’ characteristic use of a promenade, here in the form of a meandering garden walkway leading to carefully planned vistas. One of these offered a view of a specimen tree prominently placed on a small greensward lawn (figure 4). In designing this private garden, the Olmsteds clearly made use of many of the devices that Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., had successfully pioneered for the benefit of the residents of New York City when he began his professional work there.

## JOHN CARTER BROWN RESIDENCE, PROVIDENCE

The philosophical approach of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., is also evident in work done at the John Carter Brown residence, located at the northeast corner of Benefit and Williams streets in Providence. While Frederick Sr. himself had only limited direct involvement with the work that was done there for Mrs. John Carter (Sophia Augusta) Brown in 1890 and 1891, his stepson, John C. Olmsted, had primary responsibility for the project. Most of the correspondence from the Olmsted firm was directed to Mrs. Brown's son John Nicholas Brown, but it is evident that the project was under Mrs. Brown's supervision.



Figure 3

*Promenades were an important element in the Olmsteds' garden designs. This was the promenade in the garden of the R. H. I. Goddard estate. The facade of the adjacent residence in softened by foliage. Photo by Harry Perkins, 1917. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*

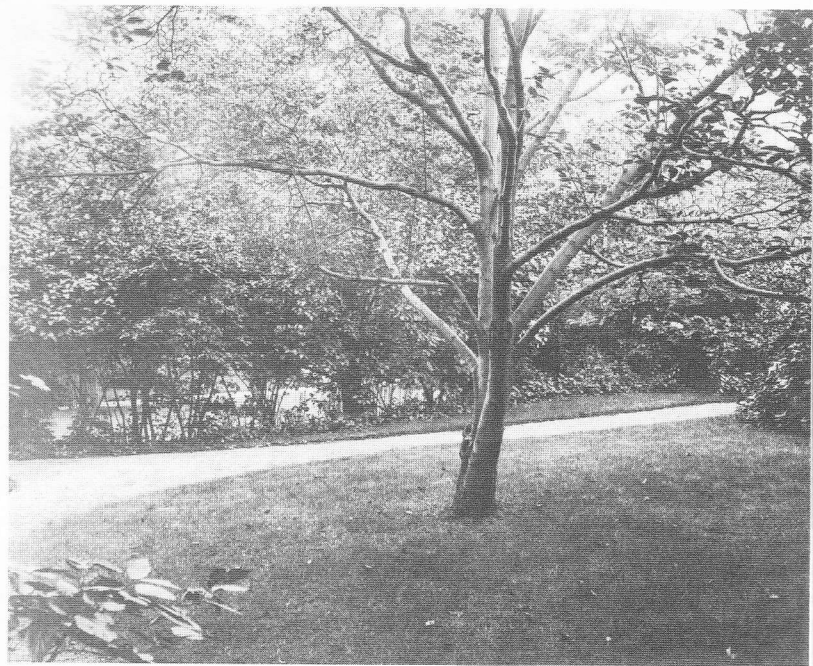


Figure 4

*A single specimen tree served as a sculptural object on the greensward lawn of the R. H. I. Goddard estate. Photo by Harry Perkins, 1917. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*

The final landscape design for the residence exhibits many of the features that the firm used in its designs for public parks. What is particularly noteworthy about this project is the process that was followed before the final design was arrived at. As we have seen, Frederick Law Olmsted experienced much frustration in dealing with the city government of New York. The Olmsted firm had no political machine interfering with its work when it designed its private gardens in Providence, but it did have to contend with clients with very strong opinions about what they did and did not want.

A review of the correspondence between the office in Brookline and the Browns reveals that there were several disagreements over design issues, and that more often than not the firm acceded to Mrs. Brown's wishes. The Olmsteds were certainly confronted with circumstances and considerations that they were unlikely to face on large public projects. In a letter of 14 June 1890 from John Nicholas Brown to Frederick Law Olmsted, Brown dictated the schedule for the project. "I hope you will be able to submit plans without any unnecessary delay," he wrote, "as we should like the work completed if possible by the middle of September, when our house is to be painted and we do not wish the air to



be full of dust."<sup>30</sup> One wonders whether filling the air with dust was ever a consideration in Manhattan, Brooklyn, or Boston.

The plans that Olmsted developed reveal a parklike setting with a greensward lawn, screened from the surrounding city streets by brick walls disguised with green, flowering shrubbery.<sup>31</sup> Olmsted's creativity may have been somewhat hampered, however, by the fact that Mrs. Brown had had a laundry yard constructed at the northeast corner of the site, adjacent to the carriage house, thus encroaching upon space for which Olmsted had other ideas. Olmsted had even made a sketch (figure 5) for a decorative pergola adjacent to the area that the laundry yard occupied.

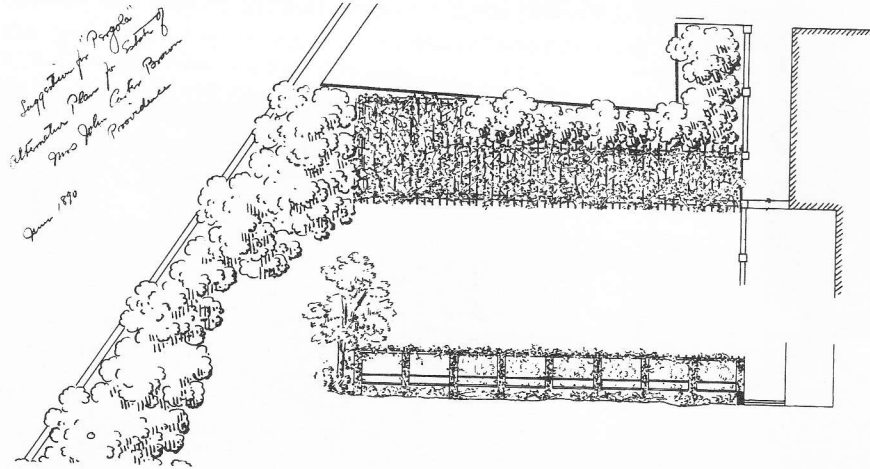


Figure 5

In its plans for the John Carter Brown residence in Providence, the Olmsted firm proposed constructing a decorative pergola, shown in this sketch. The Browns ultimately rejected the proposal. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

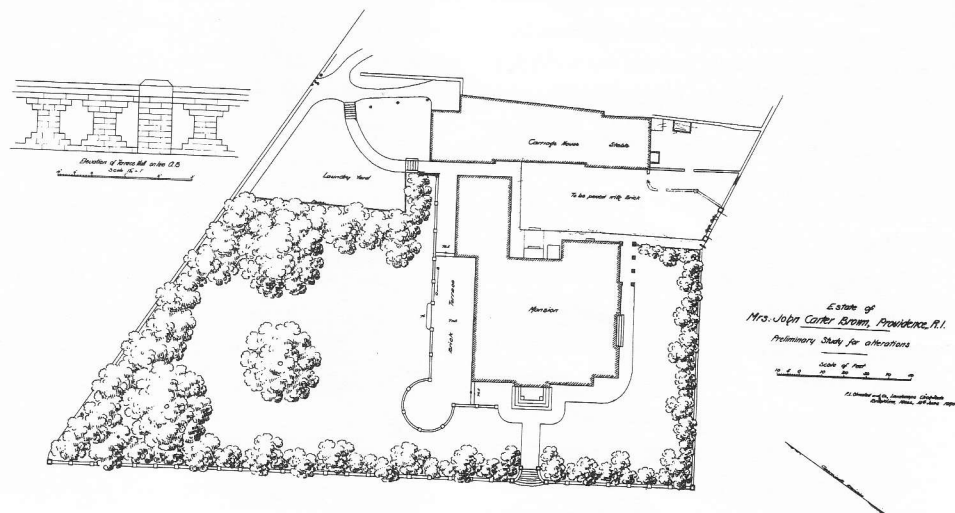
A series of letters between the Olmsteds and the Browns on the subject included a suggestion from Brookline that the yard be moved to the south end of the carriage house. Such a change would have required the servants to walk across the courtyard to the opposite end of the building from where the washing was done. As Mrs. Brown subsequently observed, this was neither a sanitary nor a convenient solution to the problem. In this particular matter the Olmsteds appear to have been less concerned about

the hardships of the working-class servants than they were about the aesthetics of the design.

F. L. Olmsted and Company had also proposed a terrace on the north side of the house (figure 6), an addition intended to serve as a transition from the formal Georgian architecture of the mansion to the natural landscape. The site plan showing the terrace also shows a dense grouping of plants obscuring the laundry yard. This proposal was also rejected, apparently because of the cost of construction. A letter from the Olmsted firm to Stone, Carpenter and Willson, the architects who were making modifications to the original 1792 house, might make one wonder about how much exposure Frederick Sr. had had to construction costs in his previous projects, or about the extent of his involvement in this

Figure 6

The Olmsteds' 1890 site plan for the John Carter Brown residence included a proposed terrace along the mansion's north elevation. The laundry yard and the property borders were carefully concealed by planting. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.



particular recommendation. "We have heard from Mr. Brown that he has given up the idea of building a terrace on the north side of the house, and this mainly on account of the expense which he says would be about \$5500," said the letter. "We had no idea, when we proposed it, of anything so expensive as this, and are naturally somewhat surprised."<sup>32</sup>

Apparently there was also some discord between the landscape architects and the primary architects, for the same letter requested that all plans by the architect be sent to the landscape architect before being shown to the client. "We had hoped to have received your plans before this, for we understood that you would submit them to us before they went to Mr. Brown."<sup>33</sup> Other correspondence finds Olmsted's firm complaining that the planting could not proceed because of the construction debris littering the site (a problem that also plagued the landscape architects when the house was being restored in the early 1990s).<sup>34</sup>

Working with private clients brought considerations into play that the Olmsteds probably did not have to address on their large public projects. In a letter of 25 November 1891 the Olmsteds responded to Mrs. Brown's objection to the spreading of fertilizer on her lawn. "There is no doubt, we think, that the spreading of manure upon a lawn is liable to bring in weeds, but, in our opinion, the manure does more good than harm, and there has been, as yet, no economical and practical substitute for top-dressings of manure. We therefore think that you would better manure your lawns and employ some one to take care of the weeds when they come."<sup>35</sup>

Mrs. Brown also had some very specific domestic concerns about certain types of plants that were slated to be included in her yard. In April 1891 she wrote to the firm expressing her fears that insects might accompany a certain species of plant. "I find that among the shrubs selected for my garden, there are several varieties of Spiraea, and as I have an objection to this plant I write to ask if some other shrubs cannot be substituted." The reason for her objection to the bush was that "the Buffalo Bug builds its nest among its branches—there finding its way into houses—and making havoc—not only of materials of wool—but also of linen and cotton—I have a great horror of this most destructive bug."<sup>36</sup> Surely Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., did not have to worry about the linens of park users when he designed his public parks for the nation's largest industrial cities.

All seems to have turned out well in Providence, however, as evidenced by a June 1891 letter to the Olmsted firm from John Nicholas Brown, who declared that "our place in Providence looks beautifully [*sic*]."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps in the end Olmsted found the Browns to be a more appreciative and sympathetic client than the park commissioners of New York had been.

#### JOHN NICHOLAS BROWN ESTATE, NEWPORT

About the same time that the Olmsted firm was completing work on Mrs. John Carter Brown's residence in Providence, the firm was also working for her son John Nicholas Brown in Newport. The Browns had more than one property in Newport, and the exact location of this particular property remains uncertain. While the available correspondence for the Newport property is not as extensive as that for the Providence property, it is sufficient to indicate that John Nicholas Brown had his own strong opinions about what type of designed landscape best suited his estate.

In an 1890 letter to F. L. Olmsted and Company, he went so far as to provide the landscape architects with his own sketch for the location of a manure pit. "I have further decided to alter the curved wall at my stable as shown on another page," he wrote. "This will enable me to have a manure pit inside the wall. I feel sure that I shall be best suited by this mode of disposal of my manure."<sup>38</sup>

While political interference on the part of park commissioners was a continual problem for Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., at Central Park, surely they did not send him sketches indicating where he should locate particular features in his designs. In an October 1891 letter John Nicholas Brown criticized other aspects of the proposed plan as well. "There are certain features in the plan that I do not think my brother or I will like. We fear the shrubbery will hide the effect of distance and the view of the lawn which we now have."<sup>39</sup> Given what we know about the care with which the Olmsteds decided upon the location of planting groups and the impressions they were designed to achieve, it is unlikely that the firm intended to "hide the effect of distance and the view of the lawn." It is more likely in this instance that client and landscape architect had rather different objectives: the former to create the illusion of large expanses of space, the latter to present distinct natural landscape features.

Apparently the conflict was not resolved. In 1895, after the planting had been completed, Brown complained that "the new bed of shrubs which you have placed on the slope of the knoll near the poplars interferes with the view from our windows and seems to make our place look smaller."<sup>40</sup> He then went on to extend an invitation to the firm's site supervisor to view the offending shrubs from a second-story window. It would seem that the Olmsted firm had not taken into account every possible angle from which their design might be considered.

In general, however, the client-landscape architect relationship between the Browns and the Olmsteds must have been reasonably satisfactory, for they continued to work together at various other Brown properties.

#### HAROLD BROWN ESTATE, NEWPORT

In the mid-1890s the firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot<sup>41</sup> prepared plans for the residence of Harold Brown (John Nicholas Brown's brother) on Bellevue Avenue in Newport. The correspondence related to this project indicates both that the firm was continuing to employ many of the same design conventions that the elder Olmsted had used in Central Park and that it was still concerned with the health and well-being of those who were to enjoy its designed landscapes.

In a set of circumstances similar to those that had existed at the Brown estate in Providence, the Olmsted firm proposed a terrace adjacent to the Harold Brown residence in order to provide a transition from the built environment to the natural landscape. Perhaps because its terrace proposal had been rejected in Providence, the firm carefully explained the reasons for its current proposal in an August 1894 letter to Harold Brown:

We shall send you herewith a drawing suggestive of a plan for laying out your place at Newport. . . . The only feature as to which explanations may now be desirable is that to which the word "terrace" on the drawing applies. The suggestion of adding such a spacious out of door apartment to the house proceeds from a conviction which is the result of our study of many American villas, that much is to be gained for the health and comfort of a family by making it convenient and pleasant for its members to spend in the open air much of the time that they would otherwise be driven to pass under roofs and within walls.<sup>42</sup>



The letter went on to explain the healthful benefits of such a terrace. "It will be breezy when the air within the walls of the house is stagnant. It will be cool after nightfall before the heat of the day is lost within the house." Apparently Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.'s successors were convinced that the health of wealthy private clients could be improved by exposure to a natural landscape, just as the senior Olmsted was convinced that the denizens of New York needed a Central Park.

Another letter to Harold Brown the following month indicates that the Olmsted firm intended to create a truly rural atmosphere outside the Brown house, in contrast to the atmosphere within it:

The word rural will sufficiently describe the character of those other things not to be supplied within the walls of the house, and the word villa may be used with reference to the [required?] unity between the rural and the building elements which are to be so associated. . . . The terrace we suggest may be regarded as an intermediate feature by which the house and the rural elements of the combination may be morticed together. The garden is another such feature.<sup>43</sup>

At the Harold Brown estate the firm was once again confronted with the need to disguise the utilitarian requirements of a household. The September 1894 letter explained the firm's solution to this problem: "The walls about the service and laundry yards separate, seclude and subordinate these purely utilitarian provisions." While the most demanding challenges of previous public projects like Central Park were most likely those of secluding the park from the surrounding city, the challenge of private gardens seems to have been more one of shielding the garden from various necessary service spaces.

To shield a landscape from undesirable features or to enliven it with desirable ones, the Olmsteds made use of extraordinary numbers of plants. For its later work on the Harold Brown estate, the firm drew up a number of planting lists. Its "Planting List for Flower Garden," dated 22 April 1913, called for 116 different species, with as many as 220 plants (in this case phlox) of a particular variety; its "Planting List for Area North of House," dated 25 April 1913, included 105 species, with up to 2,120 plants (English ivy) of individual species; even its "Planting List in Connection With New Driveway," dated 31 December 1926, called for more than 67 species of plants, simply to embellish that addition to the estate.<sup>44</sup>

#### HARBOUR COURT, NEWPORT

Located on a high site with a commanding view of Newport harbor, Harbour Court (figure 7) was another of the Brown estates in Newport on which the Olmsted firm worked. Although the firm's involvement in Harbour Court occurred mostly during the second decade of the twentieth century, it exhibited many of the same themes that marked the Olmsteds' earlier efforts.

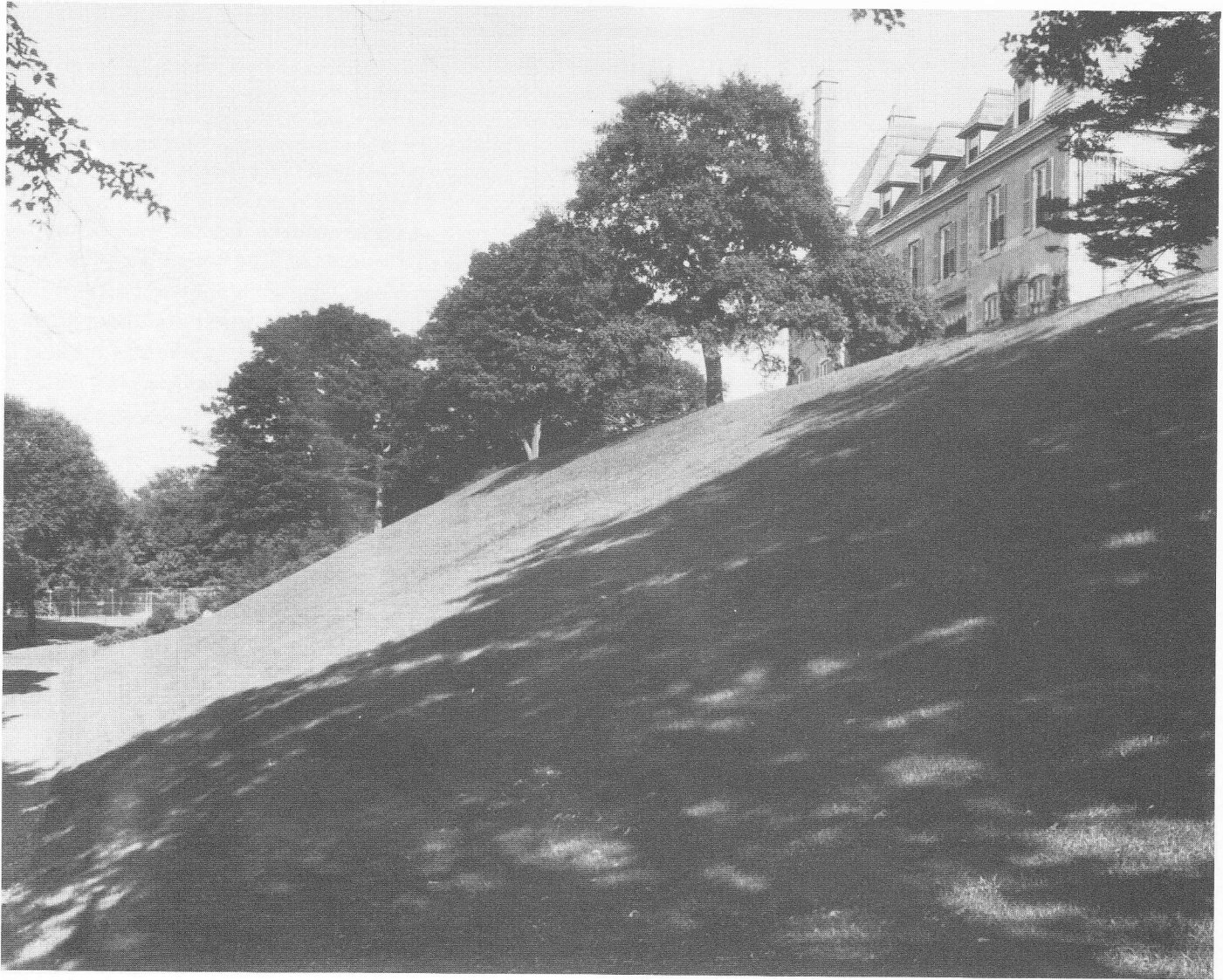
A suggestion by an employee, noted in the firm's records of the project in 1913, appears to be an application of the Olmsted practice of using individual trees to serve as focal points within a landscape: "Mr. Gallagher suggested adding one white birch here to contrast with the big pine here if it will be protected enough from salt spray."<sup>45</sup>

Although the site at Harbour Court was quite large, a great deal of attention was devoted to very specific features. Numerous letters between the Olmsted firm and its various supervisors and contractors relate to the construction of a set of

Figure 7

*This 1916 view of Harbour Court in Newport looks in the direction of a set of steps designed by the Olmsted firm. The steps led from the mansion at the top of the slope down to the edge of the water. Photo by Harry Perkins. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*

steps leading from the main house down to the “play house” at the water’s edge (figure 8). The correspondence indicates that local stone was dug up from various sites in Newport to complete this work, and that careful attention was paid to the type of grass that was planted between the steps. The firm ordered special grass seed, which was then grown as sod by one of the contractors, who transplanted it to the steps at Harbour Court at just the right time in the growing season. Such painstaking attention to detail enabled the firm to achieve the kind of seemingly informal and natural effects for which it was so highly regarded.



#### MARSDEN PERRY RESIDENCE, PROVIDENCE

Between 1903 and 1907 the Olmsted firm redesigned the gardens of the historic John Brown House in Providence. Originally constructed by John Brown in 1786, the house was owned at the time by the very wealthy Providence financier and utilities magnate Marsden J. Perry. Apparently in an effort to secure his prominence in Providence society, Perry spent a considerable sum of money on the building and grounds during his tenure as the property’s owner.

Figure 8

*The Olmsted-designed steps at Harbour Court were under construction when this photo was taken in 1914. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*



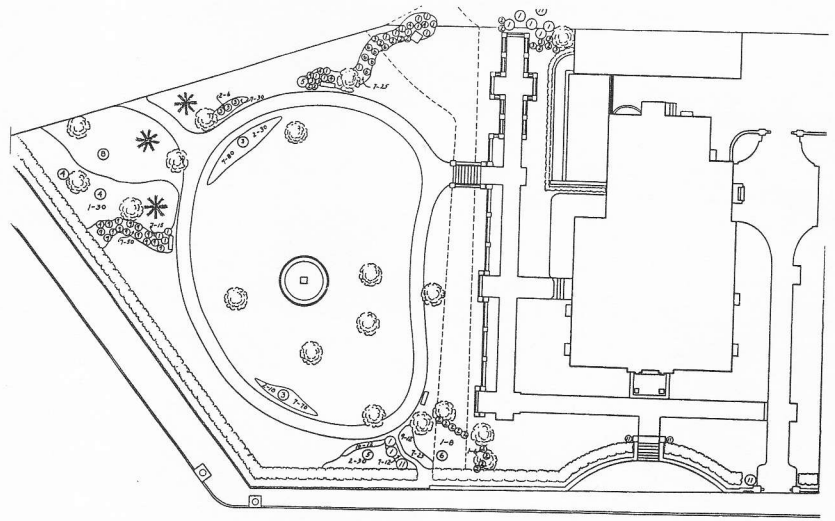


A surviving site plan (figure 9) reveals that the firm employed many of the conventions in the small garden of this property that the senior Olmsted had employed in Central Park. One of the most prominent features of the design was the promenade encircling most of the west yard. This feature, from which strollers could enjoy the entire yard and take in the different vistas that the Olmsteds provided, must have created the illusion that the garden occupied more land than it actually did (Perry would surely have considered that illusion desirable). The plan also shows that the firm disguised the property's boundaries with a "green edge," a continuous hedge located just inside the fence surrounding the garden. Within the promenade was a greensward lawn with specimen elm trees and a marble fountain as focal points.<sup>46</sup>

In designing the Marsden Perry garden, the Olmsteds also introduced a terrace, not unlike those they had proposed on previous projects, to mediate between the existing built structure with which they had to work and the landscape they were creating. In addition to providing a transition from the house to the garden, the terrace offered an opportunity for overlooking and appreciating the

Figure 9

*This site plan for the Marsden Perry residence in Providence, prepared by the Olmsted firm in 1904, includes many of the features that characterized Central Park, albeit on a much smaller scale. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*



garden. Raised above the rest of the garden on an earthen berm, the terrace was delineated by a marble balustrade with offsets, or projecting bays.<sup>47</sup> These bays (one of which included a marble bench) must have been intended to further invite leisurely appreciation of the landscape beyond.

It is interesting that at this property the Olmsteds employed a feature very similar to one that had been rejected by Mrs. John Carter Brown at her property next door. At the end of the terrace at the Marsden Perry residence was a delightful marble pergola, which in fact served as a screen for the laundry yard behind it. (The site plan shows the laundry yard also carefully surrounded by a hedge.) While providing a destination and a retreat in itself, the pergola served the additional function of masking a utilitarian area that would have been incompatible with the designed landscape.



In 1888 Frederick Law Olmsted began work on George W. Vanderbilt's enormous Biltmore estate in Asheville, North Carolina. By 1893, however, Olmsted's health—particularly his mental health—was failing. He would now have to rely increasingly on his son Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and his stepson, John

Charles Olmsted, to carry on both his immediate work at Biltmore and his general approach to landscape architecture on future projects. According to Melvin Kalfus, Olmsted had become keenly aware of the need to pass on to his sons the legacy that was his profession: "Now seventy-three, suffering physically and mentally and constantly reminded of his own mortality, Olmsted became dominated by a steadily growing obsession with the Biltmore estate in the final months before his own breakdown—an obsession in which he saw Biltmore both as a validation of his true self's principles and as a training school for his son, Rick."<sup>48</sup> As his illness progressed, Olmsted's reliance on "the assurance that you [Frederick Jr.] are taking up what I am dropping" gave him some hope.<sup>49</sup>

In 1898 Frederick Law Olmsted was committed to McLean Hospital in Massachusetts, whose grounds he had helped design many years before. By then he was no longer contributing to the Olmsted firm, which his sons had taken over from him, but his ideas remained very much alive in the firm's work. By the time of Olmsted's death in 1903, his son Frederick Jr. "had become a major force in the new respected profession of landscape architecture."<sup>50</sup>

When Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., began his work on Central Park in New York City in 1858, he was pursuing objectives that had never before been attempted. By designing the nation's first urban public park within the country's largest new industrial center, he was seeking to improve the lives of large numbers of city inhabitants by providing them with a place in which they could temporarily escape the unwholesome conditions of their environment. The park would be a refuge where they could benefit from the restorative and health-giving effects of nature.

Olmsted went on to apply his theories of design and social reform to many other public parks throughout the country. The ideas embodied in his designs came to be generally recognized as sound and conducive to the well-being of urban dwellers, particularly the poor. As we have seen, Olmsted and his firm applied these same design ideas to the work that they did for wealthy private clients, for whom they accomplished many of the same effects that they created in their public parks. On the other hand, while they employed certain characteristic conventions in both their public and their private work, it was probably only in the latter that they were subject to their clients' input on matters of design, an input that sometimes affected the way their designs were executed.

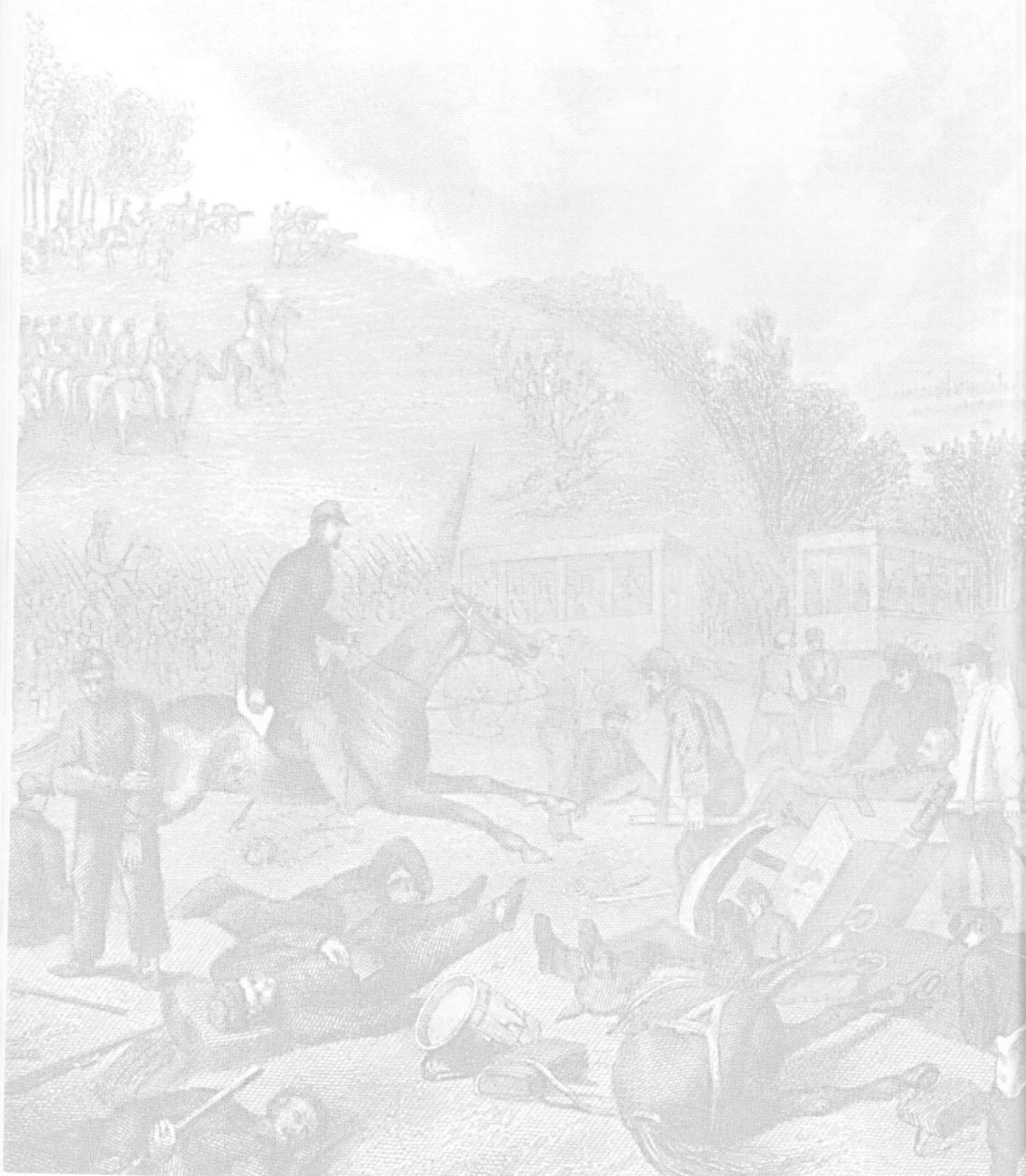
After Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., had established his landscape design theories and executed them in Central Park and public parks in other cities, he and his successors published their reform-oriented ideas less extensively than they had earlier. Once these ideas about nature in the city had become generally accepted, it was no longer necessary for the arguments to be made as often or as forcefully. It is clear, however, that these ideas and the ways in which they were realized continued well beyond the work in Central Park. Today the commonly held belief in the beneficial effects of designed landscapes—both public and private—in urban contexts is evidence that Olmsted left a design legacy that is still with us.

## Notes

1. John C. Olmsted to John Nicholas Brown, 20 Mar. 1893, John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization, Providence (hereafter cited as JNBC).
2. Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 237-38.
3. Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns" (1870), quoted in Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 176.
4. *Ibid.*, 180.
5. Frederick Law Olmsted's philosophy and his approaches to its realization in landscape architecture were passed along to his sons, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and John Charles Olmsted. In considering the work of Frederick Law Olmsted and his firm, F. L. Olmsted and Company, it is not always possible to distinguish between the work of the father and that of the sons. The firm typically did not attribute its various projects to specific individuals, and more than one Olmsted sometimes worked on the same project at the same time. Frequently correspondence was signed with the firm name rather than with the name of an individual. After the death of Frederick Sr., Frederick Jr. presented his own work under the name Frederick Law Olmsted, a circumstance sometimes creating additional uncertainty. Nonetheless, as best as can be determined, there was nearly always philosophical continuity in the work of the three Olmsteds.
6. *Landscape into Cityscape: Frederick Law Olmsted's Plans for a Greater New York City*, ed. Albert Fein (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 9.
7. *Ibid.*, 19.
8. *Ibid.*, 25.
9. Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 175. Included is a quotation from Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, "Preliminary Report upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside, Near Chicago" (1868), which was reprinted in *Landscape Architecture* 21 (July 1931): 260.
10. Frederick Law Olmsted, "To Gardeners" (ca. April-May 1872), in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted*, vol. 6, ed. David Schuyler and Jane Turner Censer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 540.
11. *Ibid.*, 538.
12. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, "Description of a Plan for the Improvement of the Central Park, 'Greensward'" (1858), quoted in Richard Saul Wurman, Alan Levy, and Joel Katz, *The Nature of Recreation: A Handbook in Honor of Frederick Law Olmsted, Using Examples from His Work* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), 36.
13. Frederick Law Olmsted, "To Those Having the Care of Young Children" (1872), in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903*, ed. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Theodora Kimball (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1928), 417.
14. F. L. Olmsted and Vaux, "Improvement of the Central Park," quoted in *Landscape into Cityscape*, 74.
15. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and John Charles Olmsted, *Plan of Public Recreation Grounds for the City of Pawtucket* (Boston: Press of T. R. Marvin & Son, 1888), 12. This publication was made available to me by the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.
16. Frederick Law Olmsted, "Tenth Annual Report to the President of the Board of Park Commissioners" (1886), in *Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect*, 426.
17. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, "Preliminary Report to the Commissioners for Laying Out a Park in Brooklyn, New York: Being a Consideration of Circumstances of Site and Other Conditions Affecting the Design of Public Pleasure Grounds" (1886), in *Landscape into Cityscape*, 120.
18. F. L. Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," quoted in Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 238.
19. *Ibid.*, 106.
20. Frederick Law Olmsted, "Brooklyn Park: Instruction for Planting the South Part of the Long Meadow" (14 Sept. 1871), in *Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted* 6:460.
21. F. L. Olmsted and Vaux, "Preliminary Report to the Commissioners," 118.
22. Frederick Law Olmsted, "Passages in the Life of an Unpractical Man" (ca. 1877), in *Landscape into Cityscape*, 60.
23. *Ibid.*, 62.
24. Frederick Law Olmsted, "The Spoils of the Park: With a Few Leaves from the Deep-laden Note-books of 'A Wholly Unpractical Man'" (1882), in *Landscape into Cityscape*, 403.

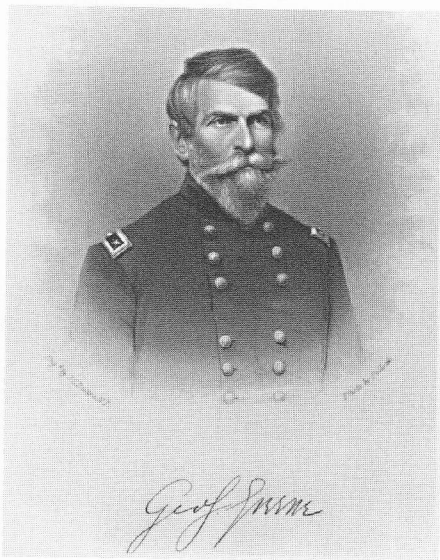


25. *Ibid.*, 416.
26. *Ibid.*, 417.
27. *Ibid.*, 418.
28. Frederick Law Olmsted, "To Gardeners," 538.
29. These six Rhode Island projects were selected on the basis of the availability of related primary material. There is no reason to believe that they were not representative of Olmsted's private commissions.
30. John Nicholas Brown to Frederick Law Olmsted, 14 June 1890, Olmsted Papers and Records, Library of Congress; also at JNBC.
31. Slides of these plans are on file at JNBC.
32. F. L. Olmsted & Co. to Messrs. Stone, Carpenter & Wilson [*sic*], 18 July 1890, Olmsted Papers and Records; also at JNBC.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Between 1987 and 1993 Irving B. Haynes and Associates, Architects, for whom the author worked from 1989 to 1994, restored the former John Carter Brown residence (now called the Nightingale-Brown House). The project included both the rehabilitation of the 1792 house and the restoration of the Olmsted-designed landscape by Searle and Searle, consulting landscape architects.
35. F. L. Olmsted & Co. to Mr. John Nicholas Brown, 25 Nov. 1891, Olmsted Papers and Records; also at JNBC.
36. Sophia Augusta Brown to F. L. Olmsted & Co., 10 Apr. 1891, Olmsted Papers and Records; also at JNBC.
37. John Nicholas Brown to Frederick Law Olmsted, 20 June 1891, Olmsted Papers and Records; also at JNBC.
38. John N. Brown to Messrs. F. L. Olmsted & Co., 1 Nov. 1890, Job no. 1220, Olmsted Papers and Records.
39. John Nicholas Brown to Messrs. F. L. Olmsted & Co., 22 Oct. 1891, Job no. 1220, Olmsted Papers and Records.
40. John Nicholas Brown to Messrs. Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, 25 Sept. 1895, Job no. 1220, Olmsted Papers and Records.
41. Charles Eliot joined the office of Frederick Law Olmsted in Brookline in 1893 and stayed with the firm for two years.
42. Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot to Harold Brown, Esq., 31 Aug. 1894, Olmsted Papers and Records; also at JNBC.
43. [Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot?] to Harold Brown, Esq., 11 Sept. 1894, Olmsted Papers and Records; also at JNBC. The last page of this handwritten letter is missing. I have assumed that the author was the firm on the basis of previous correspondence.
44. Planting lists for Job no. 1726, Harold Brown, courtesy of National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.
45. "Visit by P. B. & H. H. B." [to Harbour Court], 29 July 1913, Job no. 1220, Olmsted Papers and Records.
46. Though many of the elm trees have survived to this day, the promenade no longer exists, and the fountain has been relocated to the Swan Point Cemetery in Providence.
47. The marble balustrade, which fell into serious disrepair and lost most of its original marble balusters, was restored by the author in 1994 on the basis of the Olmsted drawings.
48. Melvin Kalfus, *Frederick Law Olmsted: The Passion of a Public Artist* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 310.
49. Frederick Law Olmsted to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., [summer 1895], quoted in Kalfus, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 314.
50. Kalfus, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 317.



## George Sears Greene: Gettysburg's Other Second-Day Hero

ERIC ETHIER



Major General George Sears Greene. Engraving by J. C. Buttre from a photograph by Thomas Pollock, in John Russell Bartlett, *Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers . . . during the Great Rebellion of the South* (Providence, 1867). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8172).

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For the Federal soldiers on the left flank of the Union lines at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the afternoon of 2 July 1863 had been a murderous one. Intense fighting at close quarters and last-second decisions with dire consequences marked the midday hours. The sun held both armies captive that day, the second of the three-day epic battle, contributing oppressive heat to the desperate fighting that raged beneath it.

Perhaps the commander of the Union's III Corps, Major General Daniel Sickles, was adversely affected by the high temperatures. Sickles had been ordered by Major General George Gordon Meade, the latest head of the Army of the Potomac, to anchor the Union's left flank. Rather than position his troops adjacent to Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps on Cemetery Ridge, Sickles stationed them far out ahead of the main Federal line. This mistake rendered his men and the Round Top hills, which formed the geographic anchor of the left end of the Union position, dangerously vulnerable. He would later pay for his blunder with his leg, and he put his comrades in a position to lose much more.

Sickles's poor tactics helped necessitate the heroic actions of Brigadier General Strong Vincent's four regiments on Little Round Top that afternoon. Under Vincent (who did not survive the fight) was the Twentieth Maine Infantry, led by Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Positioned only moments before a surge of butternut-clad Alabamians moved up Little Round Top, Chamberlain's tiny force of just over three hundred men was handed the responsibility of holding its position at all costs. To the Federals the loss of the hill would mean disaster, for if the Confederates captured it, they would have an ideal base for shelling the exposed Union lines. In desperation Chamberlain launched an all-out bayonet charge at the oncoming Rebels, and his line held.

Though the push for Little Round Top had stalled, the Confederates' Major General John Bell Hood and Brigadier General George Anderson sought to keep the pressure on the Union's left flank. General Meade now made a key decision. Aware of the importance of holding the Round Tops, he ordered immediate reinforcements from the Union right. From units heretofore held in reserve came remnants of Major General John Sedgwick's VI Corps, followed by brigades from Meade's old V Corps and the battered remains of I Corps from the rear of Cemetery Hill. Most significantly, Meade called for the entire XII Corps, then on Culp's Hill at the right end of the Union lines. Transferring the latter unit, right-wing commander Major General Henry Slocum left just one shrunken brigade, under Brigadier General George Sears Greene, to hold the hill.<sup>1</sup>

Its position thus safeguarded by only a small force, the Army of the Potomac was once again dangerously assailable. As with Little Round Top, the army that controlled Culp's Hill would have an enormous advantage. With upwards of 85,000 men and the high ground, the Federals could overcome the 71,000-man



Confederate forces through attrition; but if the Southerners took the hill, the Union army could be encircled and trapped. With a mere brigade defending such a strategic position, the skill of its commanding officer would be crucial. Fortunately for the Army of the Potomac, that commanding officer was General Greene.



A more distinguished fighting family than that of George Sears Greene never emerged from Rhode Island, or perhaps, indeed, from any other state. The grizzled brigade commander was a descendant of Rhode Island's celebrated Revolutionary War hero Nathanael Greene. One of George's sons, Samuel Dana Greene, assumed command of the USS *Monitor* when his superior was wounded during its duel with the CSS *Merrimac* in 1862.

George Sears Greene was born in the village of Apponaug in Warwick, Rhode Island, in 1801. In 1823 he graduated from West Point and received an army commission as a second lieutenant. Remaining at the academy, he spent the next four years as an instructor in mathematics and engineering, and then he joined his regiment in the field. There he remained until 1836, when he resigned his commission to pursue a civilian career in engineering.

Working in this profession for the next twenty-five years, he became one of the foremost engineers in the country. During that time he developed the Croton Water Works in New York, the reservoir in Central Park, and other major engineering projects. He served as the head of construction of the Providence, Warren, and Bristol Railroad in Rhode Island and as that railroad's superintendent in 1855 and 1856. As the Confederates would learn when they faced him on Culp's Hill at the Battle of Gettysburg, George Sears Greene was a man who intimately knew engineering and construction.<sup>2</sup>

After the attack on Fort Sumter, Greene, then employed by the State of New York, offered his services as a soldier to the Union's General in Chief Winfield Scott, and in January 1862 the gray-bearded, sixty-year-old Greene was given the colonelcy of New York's Sixtieth Infantry Regiment. He at once moved vigorously to whip his unit into shape. Richard Eddy, the regiment's chaplain, was greatly impressed with his new commander: "My first impression of him, as I at the time recorded it, was most favorable," he later wrote, "and subsequent observation and intercourse has increased my admiration of his qualities as a man, and as a soldier."<sup>3</sup> Greene quickly established himself as a strict but fair disciplinarian. In a memoir for a 1903 genealogy of the family, his son Francis Vinton Greene noted that while his father took care to provide for his soldiers' every need, "his manner was at times severe and even harsh, and he insisted upon the same unquestioning obedience to his orders that he himself rendered to his own superiors."<sup>4</sup>

An incident recalled by the surgeon of the 137th New York Volunteers, John Farrington, illustrates Greene's demeanor as an officer. Some of the men had rounded up a number of cows from which they planned to extract their dinner. Unfortunately for the troops, but luckily for the cows, Greene did not approve of such appropriation of civilian property, and he quashed their plans. "The general was a West-pointer, and a severe disciplinarian," Farrington noted. "Mortified and indignant at our action, he ordered the animals liberated."<sup>5</sup> Greene's fierce glare added weight to his words. He was a man who gained the instant respect of his men, and their gradual affection.



Brigadier General George Sears Greene. From a ferrotype taken at Cedar Mountain, Virginia, 9 August 1862. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1875).

Greene did not remain a colonel for long. On 28 April 1862 President Lincoln promoted him to brigadier general, and in May Greene reported to Major General Nathaniel Banks, the commander of the II Corps of the Army of Virginia. According to Eddy, when Greene left the Sixtieth Regiment the men drafted a letter in which they “expressed their high regard for him” and “their appreciation of his ability.”<sup>6</sup> The chaplain immediately petitioned to have the regiment assigned to its former leader’s new command, and within months the Sixtieth became one-fifth of Greene’s Third New York Brigade.

During the next year Greene distinguished himself in one engagement after another. After the Battle of Winchester in late May 1862, General Banks noted that his subordinate had “rendered most valuable service.” In August, after assuming command of Major General Christopher Auger’s Second Division at the Battle of Cedar Mountain, Greene was praised by Major General John Pope as having “behaved with distinguished gallantry.” General Auger also lauded Greene, “who, with his little command, so persistently held in check the enemy on our left.”<sup>7</sup> As subsequent battles proved, Greene was adept at repulsing forces much larger than his own. At Antietam in September 1862 and at Chancellorsville in May 1863, troops under Greene fought with persistence and valor.



After the withdrawal of the rest of the XII Corps, Greene was left with perhaps 1,350 men—the depleted Sixtieth, Seventy-eighth, 102nd, 137th, and 149th regiments of his Third New York Brigade—with which to defend Culp’s Hill. In transferring troops to the Round Tops, General Meade was confident that the thinly defended Culp’s Hill, at the extreme right of the Federal lines, would not be attacked that day, since it was already after six o’clock in the evening. He was mistaken. Having frittered away most of the day, Confederate lieutenant general Richard Ewell decided to make up for lost time with an assault on the hill. If he could capture it, that accomplishment would open up the rear of the Federal lines and probably spell victory for the Confederate forces at Gettysburg.

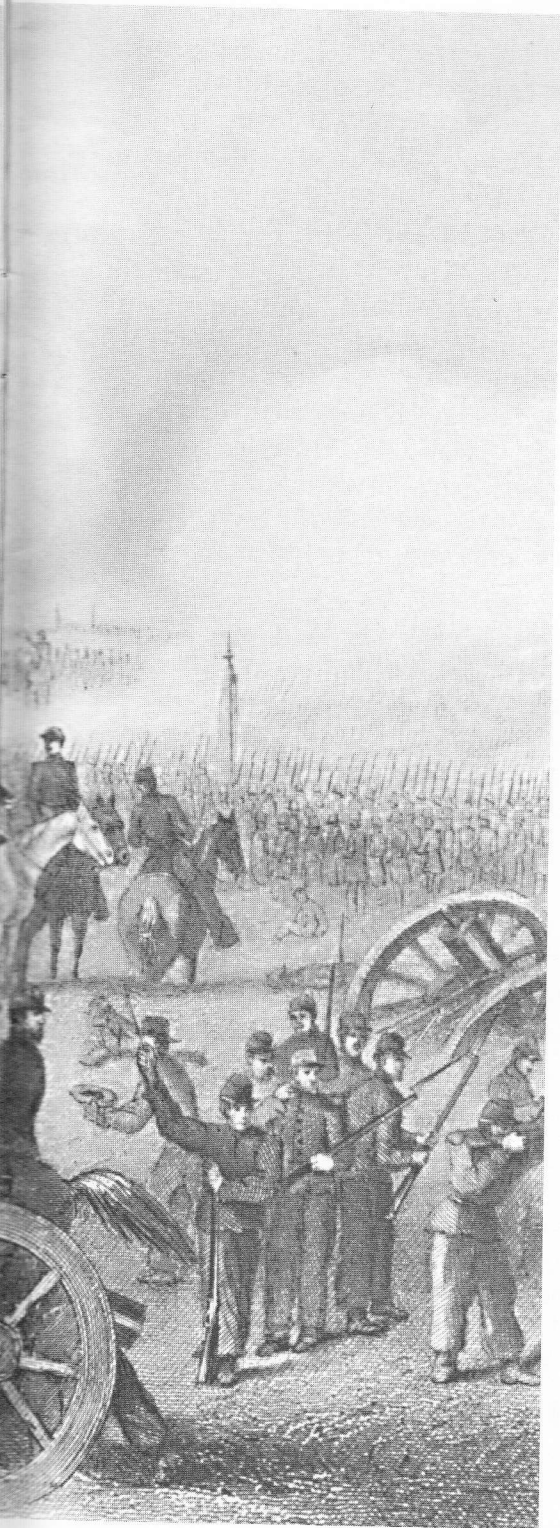
Miscommunication and vacillation had plagued the Confederates along their left front all that day. General Robert E. Lee, overall commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, had originally hoped to coordinate an attack on the Federal left by Lieutenant General James Longstreet with a strike on the Federal right by Ewell. That plan had been amended to consist of a mass assault by Longstreet preceded by a staged diversion by Ewell, with Ewell’s feint to be expanded into an all-out attack if practicable. This scheme was to unfold in the morning, but it was postponed until the late afternoon when Longstreet failed to move.

While Ewell’s men had spent much of the day inactive, the Union forces in front of them had used the long hours to their immense advantage. Greene had ordered the immediate construction of breastworks when his brigade arrived at Culp’s Hill at about six o’clock that morning. His soldiers—most of whom had been farmers and laborers before the war—felled trees on the densely wooded slopes and stacked them (together with cordwood they found conveniently piled nearby) into barricades. The men “fell to work to construct log breastworks with unaccustomed heartiness,” reported Captain Jesse H. Jones of the Sixtieth New York. “All instinctively felt that a life and death struggle was impending, and that every help should be used.”<sup>8</sup> After most of the XII Corps was withdrawn,



*The Battle of Gettysburg. From Bartlett, Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8174).*





Greene extended his thin line out into the vacant trenches to create as long a front as possible.

The importance of Greene's decision to construct breastworks cannot be overemphasized. Midway through the war there were many officers on both sides who opposed their use.<sup>9</sup> Confederate general John Bell Hood felt they "would imperil that spirit of devil-me-care independence and self-reliance" which helped make the Confederate fighting man effective. Charles Wainwright of the First New York Artillery believed that their use did "not speak well for the morale of the men."<sup>10</sup>

The advisability of constructing breastworks was discussed by Greene and Second Division commander John Geary in the early hours of the day. Geary "was opposed to doing so because he believed that it unfitted men for fighting without them," but he left the decision to his brigade commanders. Understanding the defensive value that barricades would have for his small force, Greene decided "that the saving of lives was more important than such theories and that his men would build them if they had time to do so."<sup>11</sup> Thanks to the inactivity of Ewell's forces, they had ample time for their work. Though the job was essentially done by late morning, the Federals had all day to improve their position.

Action finally opened on the Federal right wing in the late afternoon, with Union artillery exchanging fire with Confederate batteries on Seminary Ridge to the west and Benner's Hill to the northeast. Greene (whose original commission had been in the Third Regiment of United States Artillery) oversaw a Federal cannonade that silenced the Rebel guns.

At about seven o'clock Ewell threw an entire division, under Major General Edward Johnson, at Greene's men. A total of seventeen regiments, from Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Louisiana, stormed up the rocky, junglelike rise through the near darkness.<sup>12</sup> Approaching the breastworks of Greene's single brigade, the Southerners must have felt as if they were assaulting a castle. With the New Yorkers pouring fire into the charging Confederates, Greene's position behind the fortifications was formidable, and the initial onslaught was repelled. Regrouping, the Confederates prepared to resume the assault.

Greene had called for reinforcements at the first sign of an impending attack, and these began to trickle in after his men had thrown back the first Confederate wave. Elements of four other New York regiments, as well as parts of Wisconsin, Ohio, and Illinois units, were sent from Cemetery Hill. But some of these reinforcements, the Eighty-second Illinois and the Forty-fifth New York among them, were slowed in the darkness by entangling brush and poor communication between officers, and they did not arrive until most of the bloody work was done.

During the next three hours the Confederates tried three more times to take the hill. Including the reinforcements that did arrive in time to participate in the engagement, Greene's effective force amounted to about 3,100 men. No more than 1,300 of these were ever on the line at one time, facing three to four times that number of Rebels.<sup>13</sup> Putting his limited resources to good use, Greene rotated his troops to and from the line, giving them time to restock their ammunition pouches and clean their weapons. This procedure allowed him to maintain a bristling, aggressive defense of the hill. Running back and forth, his adrenaline-charged troops cheered each other on to greater fervor and determination. Greene himself remained on the line, showing little regard for his own safety.

At one point in the battle the right flank of Greene's lines was pushed back by the swarming Confederates, but Greene called up two reserve regiments and the thrust was repulsed. Although sporadic rifle fire continued to rattle for some time, the Confederate attacks ceased at about ten o'clock. For the second time that day the Union lines had bent but refused to break. Earlier, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's sheer courage had stopped the Confederates on the left flank; now George Sears Greene's abilities as an engineer and an officer had stymied them on the right.

During the night the bulk of the desperately missed XII Corps returned, tightening the Union grip on Culp's Hill. The following morning the reinforced Federals thwarted the final Confederate assaults on the right flank of the Union lines. It was then possible to survey the effects of the Third Brigade's concentrated firepower. According to an account by Colonel Lewis R. Stegman of the 102nd New York Volunteers, "General Greene, in his brigade report of the battle, states that 596 [Confederate] dead were on this side of Rock Creek, and 2400 stands of arms were secured. It was a tale of disaster for [the attacking Confederate forces]."<sup>14</sup>

The role that Greene and his men played at Culp's Hill was described in a December 1863 letter to General Meade from Major General Slocum, the commander of the XII Corps. Slocum noted that the victors "remained in the entrenchments, and the failure of the enemy to gain possession of our works was due entirely to the skill of General Greene and the heroic valor of his troops."<sup>15</sup> In his own battle report, Greene modestly credited Slocum with "having saved the army from a great and perhaps fatal disaster."<sup>16</sup>

From Gettysburg, Greene fought on until a bullet crashed through his face at the Battle of Wauhatchie in October 1863. Although he briefly returned to the field in 1865, his duty had been served. In March 1865 he received a brevet to major general of volunteers before marching in the grand review in Washington. His last act as an officer was as a member of a courts-martial panel, on which he served until he put his sword away for good early in 1866.

During the ensuing years Greene divided his time between New York and Rhode Island, working diligently to compile the genealogy of his family (published, in accordance with his wishes, after his death). He was active in both the Rhode Island and New York historical societies, and he served as president of the New York Genealogical Society and of the American Society of Civil Engineers. For a time he was also the chief engineer of Washington, D.C.'s public works department. In 1883 he moved to Morristown, New Jersey, where he died sixteen years later at the age of ninety-seven.



Whereas Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain deservedly received instant fame as a Union hero, glory did not immediately come to George Sears Greene. The New Yorkers who served under Greene were certainly well aware of their accomplishments. "It may not be inappropriate to speak of the Third Brigade, of which the Sixtieth forms a part, commanded by George S. Greene, and the honorable part it performed at the battle of Gettysburg," Richard Eddy later wrote. "The universal praise awarded it is justly due."<sup>17</sup>

"With the possible exception of Colonel Strong Vincent on Little Round Top," writes Harry W. Pfanz, perhaps the leading authority on the second-day Gettys-

*Major General Henry W. Slocum. Engraving by J. C. Buttre from a photograph by Mathew B. Brady. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8173).*



burg fighting, "no Brigade Commander at Gettysburg rendered more decisive service than Brigadier General George Sears Greene."<sup>18</sup> Yet, unlike Colonel Chamberlain and his Twentieth Maine, Greene and his gallant New Yorkers are rarely mentioned in histories of the Civil War, even those focusing on the Battle of Gettysburg.

Although it is hard to understand why this is so, some partial explanation may be suggested. To an extent the fight for Culp's Hill lacked the theatrics of the Little Round Top struggle. Greene's victory was won in dense smoke and darkness, lit only by the fire of spitting rifles, and it was difficult for units to know whom they were encountering. Generals Ewell and Johnson were certainly unaware that Culp's Hill was defended by a mere brigade; if they had known, their tactics would undoubtedly have been different. The Alabamians who were shocked into surrender by Maine bayonets on Little Round Top met their conqueror, Chamberlain, face-to-face under the sun.

Evidently the Southern high command later realized who had stopped their assault on Culp's Hill. At the dedication of the Third Brigade's monument at Gettysburg twenty-five years later, former Confederate general James Longstreet had high praise for his former foe. As reported by William Fox, Longstreet gave a brief address in which "he conceded to Greene's Brigade the credit of having successfully prevented the Confederates from turning General Meade's right flank. He spoke pleasantly of General Greene, saying that he knew him in the old army before the war and that there was no better officer in either army."<sup>19</sup>

In the months after Gettysburg, General Slocum waged a lively campaign to insure that the Union's XII Corps received just recognition of its work there. He noted that Meade's official battle report, among its other shortcomings, did not properly credit Greene's brigade for its defense of Culp's Hill; "That errors of this nature exist in your official report is an indisputable fact," he told Meade.<sup>20</sup> Meade blamed these errors on miscommunication and the faulty reports of subordinates, and he tried to make amends later. According to Pfanz, he "talked with Greene, and expressed much regret for his oversights. He told Greene that he had not read Williams' report when he made his own."<sup>21</sup> But Meade's report unfortunately went unchanged, leaving the story of Greene's work perpetually overlooked.



Greene has received little more recognition in his home state of Rhode Island than he has nationally. Each day hundreds of Rhode Islanders pass through the village of Apponaug unaware that an American hero lies buried there. The Greene Memorial House on Route 117 remains in excellent condition, but the same cannot be said for Greene's final resting place, located in the Greene family cemetery just a short distance from his birthplace.

The grave of George Sears Greene is marked by a boulder taken from Culp's Hill. Despite the repeated attempts of vandals to pry it loose, a bronze tablet briefly describing Greene's exploits continues to adorn it. A replica of the general's sword sat atop the memorial until it was stolen during the early 1950s; recovered in 1956, it is now part of the collection at the Varum House in East Greenwich. Greene's second wife, Martha Barrett Dana Greene, lies next to her husband. Her grave marker, a three-hundred-pound granite cross, has been





*The Greene Memorial House, Route 117, Apponaug, Warwick. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8176).*

knocked over. The cemetery is frequently littered with broken bottles, beer cans, and other kinds of trash.

The decay and neglect to which the gravesites have been subjected corresponds to the lack of respect that Greene has received locally. His obscurity in Rhode Island may be partly due to his association with another state; unlike the renowned Ambrose Burnside, he did not march off to war with other Rhode Islanders. By the time fighting erupted in 1861, he had become well known as an engineer in New York, and he was therefore offered the colonelcy of the Empire State's Sixtieth Infantry Regiment by the governor of that state. Greene's most glorious moment as a Civil War officer came at Gettysburg with five New York regiments under his command. Today Greene is better remembered in New York than in his home state.

Efforts to remedy that situation are currently being made by such nonprofit groups as the Rhode Island Department of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. Preliminary plans call for a local bridge to be named in Greene's honor. Reconstruction of Apponaug's roadways during the next two to three years will improve access to the cemetery and, it is hoped, thereby spur interest

in Greene and his accomplishments. Fund-raisers are being held to finance the restoration of the desecrated gravesite. Perhaps visitors to Greene's memorial will one day leave with a memory not of broken gravestones but of the words on the old general's monument: "A FAITHFUL SOLDIER, A TRUE CHRISTIAN, A NOBLE AND LOVABLE MAN."

Geo. S. Greene

W. C. Brown

## Notes

1. See battle reports of General George Sears Greene and Captain Jesse H. Jones, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1956), 316-17.
2. For Greene's skill as an engineer, see the chapter on Greene in John Russell Bartlett, *Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers Who Were Engaged in the Service of Their Country during the Great Rebellion of the South* (Providence: Sidney S. Rider and Brother, 1867), and Francis Vinton Greene's foreword to *The Greenes of Rhode Island*, by Louise Brownell Clarke (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1903).
3. Richard Eddy, *History of 60th Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (Philadelphia: Richard Eddy, 1864), 75.
4. Clarke, *Greenes of Rhode Island*, xiv.
5. William F. Fox, *New York at Gettysburg*, in *New York Monuments Commission for the Battlefields of Gettysburg and Chattanooga: Final Report on the Battlefield of Gettysburg*, ed. William F. Fox (Albany: J. B. Lyon Co., 1900), 938.
6. Eddy, *History of 60th Regiment*, 99.
7. Bartlett, *Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers*, 141.
8. Jones, Battle Report, *Battles and Leaders*, 316.
9. See Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage* (New York: Free Press, 1987), chap. 7, and Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 144.
10. Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 144.
11. Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 114.
12. Johnson's other five regiments, making up Brigadier General James Walker's "Stonewall" Brigade, had orders to join the assault as soon as possible. Walker deemed it prudent to guard the division's rear and flank, however, and returned too late to aid in the night attack.
13. See Greene's battle report, p. 7, George Sears Greene Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society. The Confederate forces are estimated at 8,000 to 10,000 in Bartlett, *Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers*, 143, and at 8,000 by Francis Vinton Greene in Clarke, *Greenes of Rhode Island*, xvii. These estimates include Walker's brigade in the Confederate force. In *Gettysburg*, 209, Pfanz notes that Walker's brigade missed the 2 July evening battle, though it did join the fight the following morning. Pfanz estimates Johnson's strength at 4,000. Even with Walker's brigade, Johnson's numbers would not have approached 8,000. But whatever the size of the attacking Confederate forces, it is clear that they vastly outnumbered Greene's brigade.
14. Quoted in Fox, *New York at Gettysburg*, 1015.
15. Henry W. Slocum to General Mead, 30 Dec. 1863, Greene Papers.
16. Greene, Battle Report, *Battles and Leaders*, 317.
17. Eddy, *History of 60th Regiment*, 262.
18. Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 211.
19. Fox, *New York at Gettysburg*, 449.
20. Slocum to Mead, 30 Dec. 1863.
21. Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 382.



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*Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and his firm, the landscape of the R. H. I. Goddard estate was intended to provide a natural refuge from the conditions of urban Providence. This view looks out from the estate onto a Providence street. Detail from a 1917 photo by Harry Perkins, courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*