

# Citizens Olmsted

How two of America's most prolific planners helped transform the landscape of the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

WRITTEN BY FABIENNE MARSH

Over the years, the landscape in Palos Verdes Estates has been eerily familiar—the neighborhood cut-throughs, the parkways, the stone terraces, the dappled lawn in Farnham Martin Park with gently curving paths framed by poplars and elms. This intuition might have remained unexplored had my dog not pulled me across Malaga Cove's green toward a flagpole perilously close to a busy intersection. There, under a pink Indian Hawthorn bush, lay a modest, barely visible wood sign for Olmsted Place.

Which is precisely the way Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. might have wanted it. Even those acquainted with New York City's Central Park are awed by the epic scale of the Olmsteds' projects: more than 5,500 parks, arboretums, cities, cemeteries, college campuses, world's fairs, private estates, insane asylums and residential communities.

Unraveling the story of Malaga Cove in Palos Verdes, which landscape historian Christine Edstrom O'Hara calls "the most complete example of the Olmsted Brothers' regional approach to design in Southern California," allowed me to revisit sacred places with the newfound knowledge that they all happened to be designed by the Olmsteds—father, son and/or the firm known as the Olmsted Brothers.

**ALL IN THE FAMILY**

Hartford, Connecticut was thriving in 1822 when Frederick Law Olmsted was born to John Olmsted, a well-to-do merchant who specialized in fabrics. The family's prosperity was no solace for personal tragedy.

Frederick's mother, Charlotte Law Hull, died from an overdose of laudanum, a tincture of opiate dissolved in alcohol commonly prescribed in the 19th century for ailments ranging from menstrual cramps to tuberculosis. Almost 4 at the time, Frederick recalled walking into the tragic scene by chance: "[I] turned and fled from it, screaming in a manner adding to the horror of the household."

Frederick's father soon remarried, and his restless son bounced from one religious program to the next with an intelligence teachers found difficult to manage. "I was



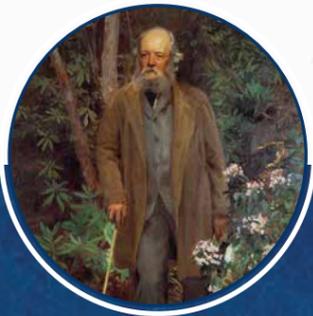
1858-76

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and Calvert Vaux collaborate on Central Park in New York.



1874

Olmsted Sr. begins work on Yale University, and the U.S. Capitol grounds in Washington D.C. the following year.



1903

Olmsted Sr. dies at an asylum he helped design in Waverly, Massachusetts.



1914

John Charles Olmsted and Fred Dawson start the Palos Verdes Project but are interrupted by World War I.



1920

After the death of John Charles, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. assumes leadership of the plan for Palos Verdes Estates and retires to the Malaga Cove home in 1925.



1931

Olmsted Jr. complete the Palos Verdes project and moves back to Massachusetts. He dies in 1957 while visiting friends in Malibu.

strangely uneducated, mis-educated,” he recalled, “I was left at the most important age to ‘run wild.’”

On holidays, family carriage rides through the Connecticut River Valley were a welcome diversion that nurtured Frederick’s reverence for nature and developed his thirst for what would become his “vagabond life.” After a case of sumac poisoning both weakened his eyes and dashed his plans to enter Yale, Frederick sailed to China as a deckhand on the Ronaldson, dabbled as a cabbage and turnip farmer on Staten Island, and hiked 300 miles through Wales and England in the 1850s, enchanted by the country he called “green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous!”

By his mid-40s, Frederick had settled into the unknown field of landscape architecture, leaving behind a distinguished body of work sufficient for any one man over several lifetimes.

As a reporter in the antebellum South for the earliest incarnation of the New York Times, Olmsted’s dispatches were critical of slavery, and 48 of them were collected in *The Cotton Kingdom*, which is still in print today.

As an environmentalist before there was such a field, Frederick played a key role in preserving public land, including

Niagara Falls and Yosemite. As secretary general of the United States Sanitary Commission, he headed a Civil War medical unit that was a forerunner of today’s Red Cross.

In 1859, Frederick married his brother’s widow, Mary Cleveland Perkins. Their son, Henry “Rick” Perkins, would later be renamed Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. This was Frederick, Sr.’s determination to both carry on the family name and establish a seamless appearance for projects within the Olmsted firm, which included Frederick, Jr.’s brother, John Charles Olmsted. By the time Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. submitted his plan in 1927 for Palos Verdes in Landscape Architecture, his brother had died, and Frederick would often drop the “Jr.” altogether.

## WEST OF EDEN

Carl Moritz, the city forester for Palos Verdes Estates, meets me in City Center Park, the site of a former Texaco station, which Moritz designed with the Olmsted’s vision for “a gathering place” in mind. “When I took this job, I had no idea who Olmsted was,” he confesses.

And he is not alone. In the Palos Verdes Homes Association office, association manager Sue Van Every rolls out the blueprint for Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.’s house on Rosita Place, saying, “I grew up here and had no idea who Olmsted was.” Sue also makes sure that no electric-blue shutters, peach houses or metal sheds violate the aesthetic rules conceived by the Olmsted firm’s original art jury.

Carl and I head toward the Malaga Cove Library and its adjacent park dedicated to Farnham Martin, a former Olmsted employee and beloved superintendent of parks. The city forester walks briskly, like a minister on his way to worship. The 800-page bible under his arm is the *Sunset Western Garden Book*. His baseball cap covers the base of his long gray braid, reaching mid-back on what is perhaps the only Hawaiian shirt ever designed in earth colors.

On Via Corta, Carl tells me that the magnificent Morton Bay figs, which remind me of Saint-Exupéry’s drawings of the baobab trees in *The Little Prince*, were planted by mistake (they were supposed to be magnolias). In 2001, the city’s Parklands Committee

issued a Designated Street Tree List for the right-of-ways, which recommends more than 50 different trees for the approximately 200 streets in Palos Verdes Estates.

The National Register of Historic Places cites Farnham Martin Park as “virtually unchanged” since Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. designed it. Carrying forth his father’s principles, Frederick, Jr. made use of the existing sloped terrain and local material (Palos Verdes stone) and added the fountain as a formal feature. The stone steps and terraces lead to a pastoral landscape, which invites people to gather within Olmsted’s signature elliptical perimeter.

Carl Moritz rattles off the names of the original plantings: the elm, the juniper, the firethorn, the crepe



ROOM TO GROW Palos Verdes roads, 1925

“I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future.”

– Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.”

myrtle, the pittosporum and five Canary Island pine trees.

“Olmsted understood the big picture,” he says, pointing toward the north entrance to Palos Verdes Estates. “The trees come first. They invoke a feeling.”

Rounding the bend between the massive banks of eucalyptus at the north entrance, the views open up and surprise like a magician’s reveal. The Olmsted firm’s early attention to circuit roads, climatic studies and nurseries was largely the work of both John Charles Olmsted and Fred Dawson, whose work for the Palos Verdes Project began in 1914 but was interrupted by World War I.

The nursery they developed took root in the 1920s, when hundreds of thousands of trees and shrubs were planted by Farnham B. Martin, including 10 varieties of eucalyptus. After John Charles died of cancer in 1920, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. left Massachusetts to assume leadership of the plan for Palos Verdes Estates, retiring to the home built by Myron Hunt in 1925 on the bluffs of lower Malaga Cove.

### CITY BEAUTIFUL

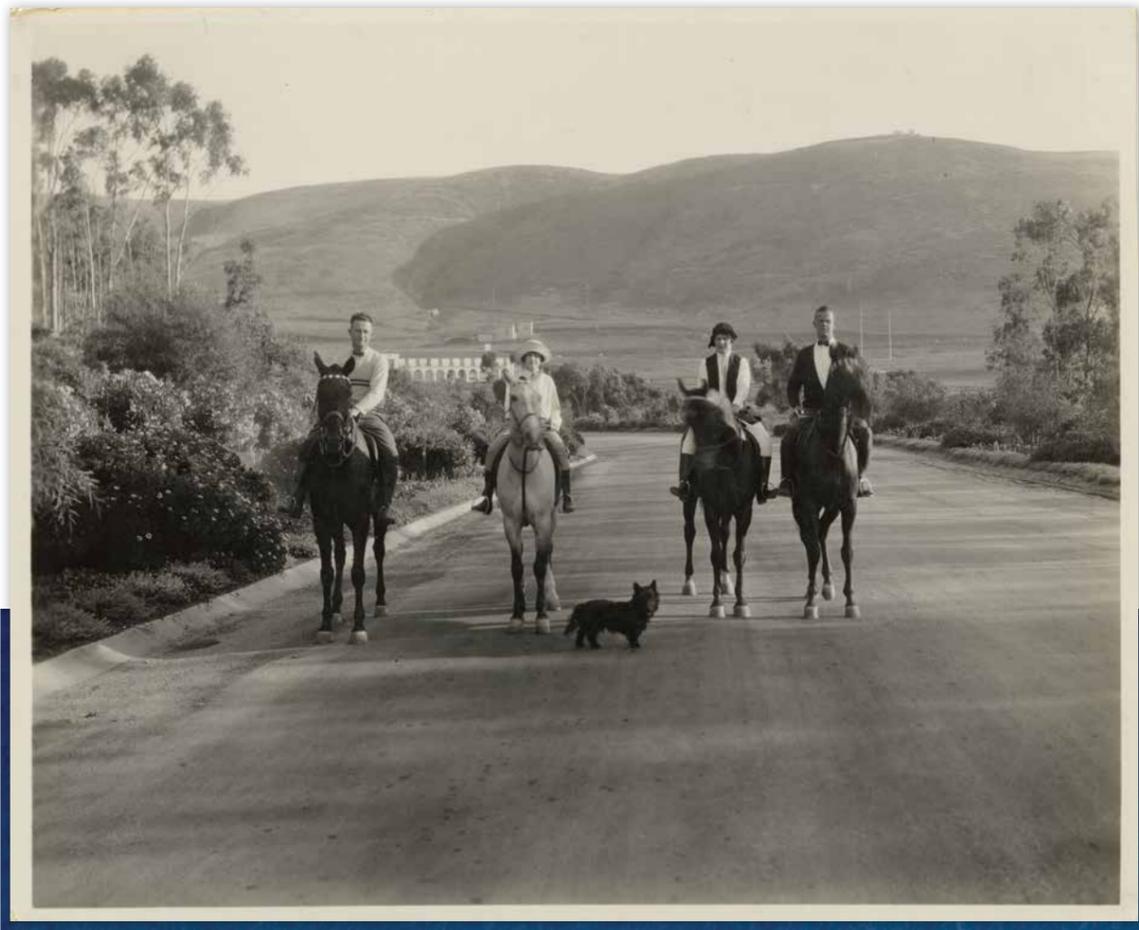
Neither Frederick Law, Sr. nor Frederick Law, Jr. was a stranger to the West Coast, though Sr.’s journeys took far longer and were fraught with difficulty. Saul Steinberg’s iconic 1976 New Yorker cover showing a barren landscape beyond the Hudson River from the point-of-view of self-absorbed New Yorkers underscores the irony that their

beloved Central Park could not have been conceived by a New Yorker inconvenienced by crossing town, let alone by traversing the world.

Before the transcontinental railroad (1869) and the opening of the Panama Canal (1914), the shortest route west was the Panama route, which took Frederick, Sr. three weeks, involving travel by steamer down the Atlantic coast, crossing the Isthmus of Panama by train, then boarding another steamer up the Pacific coast.

A partial list of Olmsted projects out west include the College of California, Berkeley; Stanford University; the Seattle parks; plans for Beverly Hills and Pasadena; the San Diego Exhibition; Yosemite; and the Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, California. The lesser-known 1930 Olmsted Bartholomew Plan was a spectacularly comprehensive vision for parks, playgrounds and beaches for the Los Angeles region, fully documented in Hise’s and Deverell’s book, *Eden by Design*.

Traces of the Hollywood to Palos Verdes Parkway and the meridians for what were to be the Pacific Electric Railway are still visible in the landscape today. The term “parkway” was coined and conceived by Frederick, Sr. and architect Calvert Vaux in 1866, with their Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, New York. Given the population explosion in the Los Angeles area from 1880 to 1930 and the advent of the automobile, the Olmsteds foresaw the need for shared



THIS PHOTO AND OLMSTED, JR. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PALOS VERDES LIBRARY.

MALAGA COVE Horse riders at the north entrance of Palos Verdes, 1926

roadways to delight pedestrians, tourists and even travelers on horseback.

The significance of the Olmsteds' work in Palos Verdes and the district of Malaga Cove in particular is that their vision for this Mediterranean "city beautiful" was secured by deed restrictions for residential design and zoning. Two management bodies oversaw the implementation: the home association, whose architects approved or rejected plans, and the art jury, which served as aesthetic police and recommended architectural styles for the original five villages of Valmonte, Lunada Bay, Margate, Miraleste and Malaga Cove. A lesser-known and now abandoned clause involving social control prohibited minorities from living in the area, except as domestic servants or laborers.

### COLOR BY NUMBER

Allan Rigg, public works and planning director for Palos Verdes Estates, leads me into the city council meeting room to show me the Olmsted Brothers' 1924 plan for the 3,200-acre tract. On the large, colored panel above the members' chairs, hunter green represents green space; baby blue is for rights-of-way; canary yellow indicates schools; and cherry red is reserved for tract numbers.

I suddenly recognize the room from my first days in the South Bay, when I was channel surfing to determine which stations corresponded to those I knew back East. For a full hour, I was mesmerized by channel 3, where an exquisitely civil though numbingly boring hearing was being conducted on the subject of roof tiles. The topic of that meeting makes this early document—a 1914 report from John C. Olmsted to Frank Vanderlip—sensible:

"The most important restrictions we suggest would be, first, to require the outer walls of all buildings to be of concrete or stucco whitened, and all roofs to be either flat or covered with full sized red terra cotta Spanish rounded tiles (no imitation to be allowed)."

On Olmsted's panel, Rigg points to the green space and explains that 28% of the land in Palos Verdes Estates is open space or parkland. Add another 29% for the blue areas, or rights-of-way, and the total land in public ownership is a staggering 57%.

Malaga Cove currently accommodates art exhibitions, realty companies, disaster relief drills, police and fire department events, a gift shop, the Malaga Cove Market and summer concerts in Farnham Martin Park. More recent are the Yellow Vase and what residents might call an infestation of weekend bikers who ascend the lush hills like tropical birds in spandex.

The bikers pump up the serpentine Via Del Monte for a view of the Queen's Necklace, then wind down to sea level by way of Via Campesina, dodging peacocks near the Palos Verdes Golf Club. After one such circuit, a biker from San

Pedro stopped me (and Louie, my canine Olmsted Place devotee). "They cut down my favorite tree," he said.

And because I have grown somewhat irritated by the scores of residents and visitors who know nothing about my deserving subject, I ask, "Do you know who Frederick Olmsted is?"

"No," he says. "Well, he planted your tree," I say.

By the time a biker from Sweden pulls up to the round spot of mulch where his favorite tree once stood, they can both say "Olmsted Place" and understand that the roads were designed for their pleasure.

### PATHS END

The end of Frederick Olmsted, Sr.'s life is sadder than one hopes for such a passionate, visionary and generous servant to America's landscape. After five years of slowly succumbing to dementia, he died at the age of 81 at the McClean Hospital—an asylum in Waverly, Massachusetts—in a cottage on the very grounds he had designed for patients other than himself. When he was too frail to pose for John Singer Sargent's portrait, Frederick, Jr. stood in for his father until it was completed.

Frederick, Sr.'s greatest comfort was knowing that his son had agreed to take over the direction of Olmsted Brothers. "Nothing goes as far to lift me out of the feeling of desolation," he wrote to his son, "[than] the assurance that you are taking up what I am dropping."

Frederick, Jr. was highly regarded during his lifetime. After completing the residential community of Palos Verdes Estates in 1931, he left Malaga Cove to return to the Olmsted home in Brookline, Massachusetts. On his 83rd birthday, a portion of the vast redwood forest he had fought to save was dedicated to him and is now known as Olmsted Grove. Frederick, Jr. died in 1957 while visiting friends in Malibu, California.

The sense of belonging I feel in an Olmsted landscape, and what Frederick, Sr. called "enlarged freedom," is due to their success in pleasing, somewhat impossibly, crowds of thousands as well as individuals lost in thought. My sacred landscapes hark back to the stone walls and village greens of my childhood; the Merritt Parkway I drove to my parents' house; the Taconic State Parkway I drove to college; the rambles, copses, malls, the Great Lawn, Reservoir and the Bethesda Terrace I enjoyed for 17 years in Central Park; the terraces of the Capitol for an early assignment in journalism; my first date at The Cloisters (Fort Tryon Park) with the future father of my children; the cut-throughs in Roland Park, Baltimore, where my son and daughter were born; Williams College, which I attended; Johns Hopkins University, where I taught; and numerous trails in Palos Verdes Estates that I have no intention of revealing. ●

## An Olmsted Reading List:

**BIOGRAPHIES OF FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED, SR. (1822-1903)** by *Laura Wood Roper (F.L.O.: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted), Witold Rybczynski (A Clearing in the Distance), Lee Hall (Olmsted's America) and Justin Martin (Genius of Place)*

**THE PALOS VERDES RANCH PROJECT**  
by *Thomas P. Gates*  
*Kent State University*

**BALBOA PARK AND PALOS VERDES ESTATES: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE OLMSTED BROTHERS, WESTERN DESIGN MODEL**  
by *Christine Edstrom O'Hara, thesis*  
*University of Washington, 2002*