

**Gather Here –**  
**The Olmsted Brothers Seattle Parks & Playgrounds**  
How Seattle Parks Came to Be

by Mark Holtzen

Ever try to claim some territory for yourself to use as you want—a swing, a fort, a part of the beach or a basketball court—only to have someone elbow their way in and take it over, and probably just as you got going on your game or project?

Annoying, I know.

That’s a little like the Northwest felt back in the 1800’s. European descendants traveling from the Eastern States wanted to carve out a little land for their family, farm or business. Native Americans/First Nation peoples who’s descendants had been here for thousands of years, were trying to hold onto their own lands (after warring with other regional tribes themselves).

There was a lot of land “up for grabs” and people were trying to wrestle it away from one another to use for whatever purpose they deemed valuable.

As the city of Seattle grew denser, some suggested saving some of the land for parks, but most of the population fought back. Why not use the land for property and resources? In addition to homes, citizens also needed trees for lumber, space for hunting food, water and other resources to live. It’s tricky when people live close together, right? Rarely does everyone have the same opinion. Just like on that corner of the playground.

As the years went by and the wilderness disappeared, more people, along with some city planners, realized citizens did need places to rest and interact with the local scenery and natural surroundings.

City planners hired the Olmsteds, some of the first landscape architects in the country. John Charles and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr, inspired by their father Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., thought it important to think carefully about creating spaces for the public to enjoy. The Klondike Gold Rush brought money to Seattle and with money came freedom to choose.

The Seattle City Council approved “A Comprehensive System of Parks and Parkways” on October 19, 1903. The plan, by John Charles Olmsted, combined with a

25-mile system of bicycle paths planned by City Engineers with ideas gathered by Olmsted and his assistant, Percy Jones who surveyed the city “by horse, trolley, foot, and boat,” said the city’s “primary aim should be to secure and preserve for the use of the people as much as possible of these advantages of water and mountain views and of woodlands, well distributed and conveniently located.”

The plan also focused on another important concept – PLAYGROUNDS! John Charles Olmsted was a pioneer in this concept. "Olmsted believed that playgrounds were a necessity for a civilized society. Children would learn fairness and decency via sports in the playground." said Streatfield, a local UW professor. (and maybe have fun, too).

In the firm's 1908 report to the Park Commissioners, Olmsted recommended locating small parks and playgrounds, oriented toward young children and women with babies, within a half a mile of every home. He also supported additional playgrounds and outdoor gymnasiums for older boys.

The Olmsted firm was contracted to plan 37 parks and connecting boulevards around the city. Thank the Olmsteds for pioneering the concept that cities need playgrounds, which maybe had an influence on the playground near where you live, too.

“All agree that parks not only add to the beauty of a city and to the pleasure of living in it, but are exceedingly important factors in developing the healthfulness and business prosperity of its residents.” – Olmsted Brothers

In other words, playgrounds and parks make for happy people.



Yours very truly,

*Olmsted Brothers*

## The Olmsted Brothers Comprehensive Parks & Boulevards System

In 1903, The Olmsted Brothers were hired by the City of Seattle to devise a plan for the future of the city's park system. Today, more than 70 Olmsted-designed and influenced parks and boulevards exist in Seattle.



Some of Seattle's existing parks and boulevards designed or suggested by the Olmsted firm are:

Sunset Hill Park, Woodland Park, Green Lake Park, Ravenna Boulevard, Discovery Park, Magolda Blvd, Queen Anne Boulevard, Hawthorn Playfield, Schmitz Park, Lincoln Park, Green Park, Volunteer Park, Col Anderson Park, Interoak Park, Washington Arboretum, Lake Washington Boulevard, Leschi, Denny Park, Queen Anne Hill Parkway, Golden Gate Park, Madrona Park, Frank Park, Calman Park, Mount Baker Park and Boulevard, Jefferson Park, Seward Park, etc.

Other Olmsted designed projects in Washington:

The University of Washington campus  
Washington State Capitol grounds  
Spokane and Walla Walla parks  
Private estate grounds

This map shows that Olmsted's plan for a citywide park system, boulevards and playgrounds, first and foremost, was to create a park system that would be designed, built and maintained by the city.

*"I do not know of any place where the natural advantages for parks are better than here. They can be made very attractive, and will be, in time, one of the things that will make Seattle known all over the world."*  
 John C. Olmsted, May 1, 1903, Seattle Post-Intelligencer

**Climbing Trees and Beating Through the Brush**  
*The Olmsteds Come to Seattle*

When Seattle was founded in 1851, there was no reason for the city's forefathers to think about preserving land for parks. The area was vast with natural beauty and unspoiled landscape. But, over the next 50 years, Seattle was rapidly growing and land was taken over quickly with urban development. City leaders knew that in order for Seattle to become a great metropolis, a plan of action was needed. Parks and recreational space would be key for this development.





Both John Charles Olmsted and his assistant, Perry B. Jones, traveled across the country from their office in Boston to Seattle to study the region. For one month, they traveled the entire city conducting site surveys. They traveled the area by foot, buggy, mule, and horse. Their work teams identified what their plan and photographed the area as shown. Their work teams identified

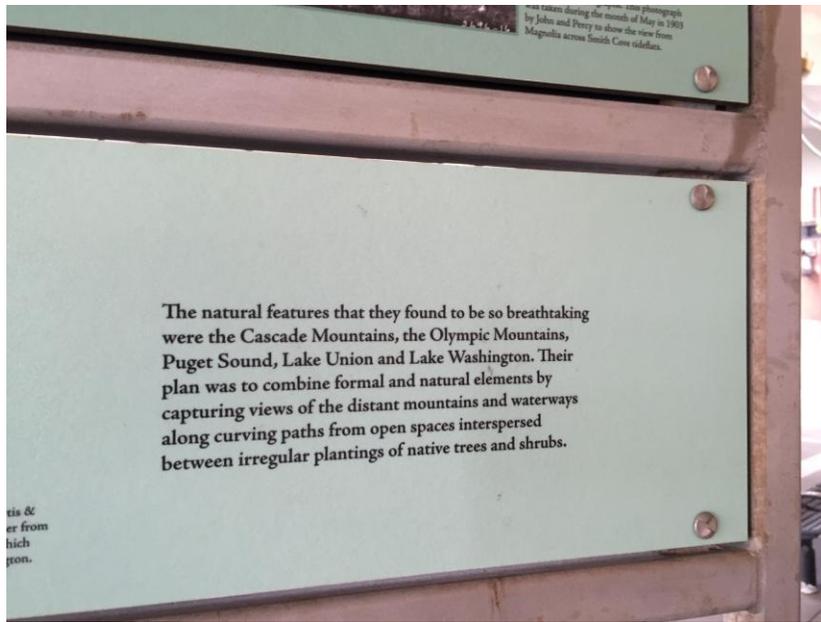
**The Olmsted plan proposed:**

- Parks within a 1/2 mile of every residence, which would include playgrounds, playfields (ball fields and tennis courts) and recreational buildings (such as field houses)
- A 50-mile chain of drives along lakeshores and ridges that would connect the parks including a 20-mile boulevard system that would run from Seward Park at the south end of Lake Washington to Discovery Park at Fort Lawton on the Puget Sound with a connection to the Jefferson park on Beacon Hill from the shoreline at Mt. Baker Park
- Park and boulevard designs that would highlight the environment by creating vistas points with placement of trees and shrubs to frame these natural surroundings

1908 postcard of a Model  
 ed along Lake Washington  
 in low Seattle's boulevard  
 the views and vistas of the  
 reading natural beauty.



*The Seward Park House Culture  
 Photo courtesy of the Seattle Heritage*



All photos ©Mark Holtzen 2016 Mt. Baker Railway Station Display on the Olmsteds

### Questions for Discussion

- *Is there a public space near where you live that had to be preserved for everyone to enjoy? Do you see a place that could be used as a park that isn't currently?*
- *I went onto the City of Seattle website and counted over 400 current parks in 2015. (<http://www.seattle.gov/parks/listall.asp>) Do you think the Olmsted's Plan helped the city continue to open new parks, even today? Why? How many parks are in your community?*
- *What kind of activities do you see taking place in your local parks? Do you notice how often do you use your own parks? When Seattle citizens were surveyed about Seattle Parks, many people hadn't realized how often they actually used parks, which showed how integral they were to their daily life. What parks do you use and what ways might you use them that you, or your families, might not even realize?*

- *Often parks are named after people. What do you think the criteria should be for a park to be named after a particular person? Find what your local park is called and research how it was named. Discovering the history around you can tie you even closer to your neighborhood.*

***Further reading and exploration***

<http://www.seattle.gov/friendsofolmstedparks/FSOP/history.htm>

*Timeline created by the Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks:*

<http://www.seattle.gov/friendsofolmstedparks/FSOP/timeline.htm>

*Here is a cyber tour presented by historylink.org*

[http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=cybertour.cfm&file\\_id=7054](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=cybertour.cfm&file_id=7054)

*Links on the Seattle Parks site with more information on the parks:*

<http://www.seattle.gov/parks/parkspaces/olmsted.htm>

*A video on the Centennial celebration of Seattle parks:*

<http://www.seattlechannel.org/misc-video?videoid=x30794>

*An article on how Olmsted planned parks in other cities and college campuses in Washington and Oregon:*

<http://www.pbs.org/wned/frederick-law-olmsted/learn-more/john-charles-olmsted-the-pacific-northwest/>