



Walking and talking through *Walks and Talks*: traveling in the English landscape with Frederick Law Olmsted, 1850 and 2011



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Abstract

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) is one of the most important figures in the history of American landscape architecture, conservation, and planning. Before he stumbled accidentally onto a career in park design, however, Olmsted was a dilettante gentleman farmer, social critic, and reformist man of letters. This paper considers the intellectual development of the early Olmsted by following his 1850 trip to England. It draws on two reservoirs of evidence: the documentary material in Olmsted's first book, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*; and an experiment in historical geographical fieldwork undertaken by duplicating Olmsted's trip in May 2011. The essay argues that situating the 'early Olmsted' firmly within the intellectual history of antebellum social reform necessitates an interpretation of Olmsted's bourgeois republican radicalism which has been deemphasized in canonical histories of landscape architecture. It furthermore explores the category of mobility as an analytic and methodological tool, engaging with Olmsted's field practices in order to interrogate landscape as a experiential site of social and historical interpretation. Finally, it argues for the intellectual productivity of a fundamental tension between corporeality and transcendence intrinsic to the experience of landscape, a tension metaphorized within the very title 'Walks and Talks.'

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In April 1850, Frederick Law Olmsted, the dilettante son of a middle-class Connecticut dry-goods merchant, set off from New York in the passenger packet *Henry Clay*, bound for Liverpool with his brother, John, and a close friend, Charles Loring Brace. 'The idea of settling down for life without having seen England,' Olmsted wrote, 'seemed to me cowardly and unreasonable.'¹

To Olmsted's father, however, the trip was another proof of his son's moral restlessness. Olmsted had spent his adolescence darting through a series of half-completed pursuits, clerking with a city merchant, shipping to sea in the China trade, and fraternizing with his brother John's social circle at Yale College. By his middle twenties, he decided to turn his directionless ambition towards the progressive world of agricultural improvement, and in 1848 borrowed money from his father to purchase a farm on Staten Island in New York Harbor. There he took up the scientific and moral cause of farming as a way to express his restive idealism, co-founding the Richmond County Agricultural Society, and prophesying his belief in agrarian utopianism under the slogan 'with the Farmer must rise the Man.'²

After just a year on the farm, however, Olmsted abandoned it during the height of the growing season to join his brother on an English journey. He justified the trip by fancying himself as an agricultural correspondent scouring the Old World for techniques that could be imported to North America. Yet his attention often drifted from farming. He discovered in the English landscape a record of that nation's politics, class system, theology, education, culture, and aesthetics, all of which bore the stress marks of the nineteenth century's social and economic changes, and prompted him to consider the course of 'civilization' on both sides of the Atlantic.

Olmsted was again jobless seven years later. He had given up his farm in pursuit of a mildly successful career as a litterateur and travel writer, launched on the reputation of his 1852 book *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*. After his publishing firm went insolvent, Olmsted was left at a vocational impasse. While staying at an inn on the coast of Connecticut in August 1857, he happened to have tea with a commissioner for the recently-begun Central Park project in New York City. The commissioner offhandedly suggested

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¹ F.L. Olmsted, *The papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, vol. 1: The formative years, 1822–1852*, in: C.C. McLaughlin (Ed), Baltimore, 1977, 339.

² Olmsted, *The papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, vol. 1* (note 1), 333.

that Olmsted apply for the park's vacant superintendency job. He did, and in September the board gave him the job.³ From that point forwards, Olmsted's life was hitched to public parks. He rose from superintendent to designer of Central Park, and eventually became involved in hundreds of North American park projects throughout the nineteenth century, leaving a permanent impression on the discipline of landscape architecture.

This essay argues that 1850, not 1857, was the fulcrum year in Olmsted's early life. Though Olmsted's work as a landscape architect is the source of his continued fame and interest to scholars, reorienting his intellectual history around this formative year shows that, throughout his life, Olmsted was a social critic first, and a landscape designer second. From the point of view of his English journey, it is clear that the young Olmsted conceived 'landscape' not merely in pictorial terms, but as the conrescence of human life patterned through geographic conditions, and that his aesthetic sensibility was predicated on principles of social reorganization. Olmsted's accidental entry into park design in 1857 should not be portrayed, therefore, as the fortuitous birth of an artistic genius. Instead, 1857 must be seen as Olmsted's discovery of a new technical-political practice—landscape architecture—which he found useful for its ability to operationalize a set of intellectual and political commitments he had formed almost a decade earlier. Taken in this way, *Walks and Talks* is not a curious prologue to the biography of an influential designer. It is a manifesto, or at the very least a working draft, for the set of ideas which provided the motivation for Olmsted's professional activities throughout the rest of his life.

The two acts enshrined in the title of Olmsted's narrative—'walks' and 'talks'—suggest a historical interpretation which conjoins historical geography and intellectual history. The choice of pedestrianism as a mobility practice had consequences for the descriptive and ideological content of Olmsted's narrative, so it is therefore necessary to take seriously the reality of historically emplaced bodies, enacted through the travelers' muddy boots and sore feet. Attending to Olmsted's journey in this way demands a historical geography of landscape-architectural thinking which 'trace[s] these genealogies of sensibilities to movement and embodied practices in the landscape.'⁴

Still, while Olmsted's trip was self-consciously transacted through physicality of his 'walks,' the journey was ultimately undertaken in service of 'talks'—rhetorically universalized claims about the nature of landscape and social progress—which require explanation in terms of the intellectual currents running between Europe and the United States in the middle nineteenth century. Olmsted's young, enthusiastic mind was experimenting with concepts borrowed from New England republicanism, English romanticism, German idealism, and other sources. Using Daniels and Nash's metaphor of the 'lifepath' as a uniting principle for geography and biography, we can depict Olmsted's 1850 trip as a segment of a lifepath traced out in the English countryside, one

which links both inwardly to his subsequent principles and projects, and also outwardly to his intellectual creditors and debtors.⁵

To amplify the productive tensions found in the discursive space between 'walks' and 'talks,' I have superimposed an additional layer of historical embodiment by personally duplicating a segment of Olmsted's English journey in May 2011. This trip was not undertaken with an archaeological intent, since the material evidence of Olmsted's journey in the modern landscape is scant. Rather, it was carried out under the assumption that 'walking through' history is a necessary complement to 'talking through' history, following Lorimer's invocation of 'landscape' as 'the arena where pasts seem to pass through the present, and where forms of fieldwork are entwined with archival inquiry.'⁶ Playing creatively with the idea of writing through what Dewsbury and co-authors call 'processual registers of experience,' this enactment was an exercise in mitigating the detached distanciation of the purely textual fiction of narration, serving as a reminder to the author—another American in England—of the porosity between authorial subjectivity and the historical subject.⁷ Throughout the essay, therefore, I have included fragments of moments where reading Olmsted *in situ* yielded a creative transgression between walks and talks, past and present, in a manner following Daniels's call to 'materialise the geographical imagination.'⁸

An American farmer in England: landscape, society, and the nineteenth-century Atlantic

Contemporary scholarship on Olmsted has not ignored his 1850 trip, but it has subordinated Olmsted's experiences in England to his later work as a park designer. England was the 'touchstone for Olmsted's ideas about rural scenery,' Rybczynski argues, while Kalfus highlights the importance of Olmsted's foreign reportage on Birkenhead Park in securing him a job on the Central Park project.⁹ Meanwhile, scholars like Rosenzweig and Blackmar who have put Olmsted's park-making work under the scrutiny of social criticism have paid relatively less attention to the development of his thinking at the time of his English journey.¹⁰

Armed with the totalizing hindsight of history, such portrayals depict Olmsted's later career as a landscape architect as somehow immanently prefigured in these young vignettes, and the English journey is thereby transformed into a backstory. In fact, the Olmsted who set out for England in 1850 had no idea that he had a future in park-making, and so the trip could not possibly have been configured by this ambition. Instead, Olmsted traveled with a far more naïve eye, searching broadly and without discipline for clues about the past and future course of 'civilization' on both sides of the Atlantic. By treating the 1850 trip 'agnostically' regarding his park-making career—that is, without scripting it as the inevitable prologue to the familiar later Olmsted—it is possible to produce a self-contained investigation of Olmsted as a young social critic. Doing so liberates Olmsted from the scholarly limitations of design

³ L.W. Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted*, Baltimore, 1973.

⁴ P. Merriman, 'A new look at the English landscape': Landscape architecture, movement and the aesthetics of motorways in early postwar Britain, *Cultural Geographies* 13 (no. 78, 2006). A broader discussion on the usefulness of thinking kinetically about landscape is now familiar stock to historical geographers, especially those working on histories of environmental design. See also C. Dival and G. Revill, Cultures of transport: representation, practice and technology, *Journal of Transport History* 26 (1), 2005; M. Rose and J. Wylie, Animating landscape, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006); and P. Merriman et al., Landscape, mobility, practice, *Social & Cultural Geography* 9 (no. 2, 2008).

⁵ S. Daniels and C. Nash, Lifepaths: geography and biography, *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (no. 3, July 2004).

⁶ H. Lorimer, Caught in the nick of time: archives and fieldwork, in: D. DeLyser et al., (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Human Geography*, London, 2010, 257.

⁷ Dewsbury, J.D., et al., Enacting geographies, *Geoforum* 33 (no. 4, 2002).

⁸ S. Daniels, Geographical imagination, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (2011) 185.

⁹ Witold Rybczynski, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1999, 87; Melvin Kalfus, *Frederick Law Olmsted: The Passion of a Public Artist*, New York, 42.

¹⁰ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, Ithaca, 1992.

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