To thousands who enjoy the parks, boulevards, viewpoints, and playgrounds of Seattle, the name Olmsted may mean little. But, increasingly, people are learning that our Olmsted landscape design heritage is a strong factor in the urban greenspace that makes this among the most livable of cities. It is the goal of Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks, incorporated in 1984, to promote even greater awareness, enjoyment, and care of our Olmsted parks system and to emphasize the longterm social and artistic significance of Olmsted landscape design.

In 1858, when Seattle was only a dot on the map in the Washington Territory, Frederick Law Olmsted, thirty-six, was the newly appointed superintendent of New York City's seven-hundred-acre, still undeveloped Central Park. Olmsted and architect Calvert Vaux signed their names to a design plan called Greensward and won the Central Park design competition. This began Olmsted's rise to fame in landscape architecture, the name he gave to the profession he founded. The firm of Olmsted and Vaux designed public grounds, expositions, campuses, private estates, and especially parks. By the 1870s, Olmsted had formed his own firm. His sons, John Charles and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., trained by their father, became members and, a few years before their father's death in 1903, the firm became Olmsted Brothers. By the 1890s, Olmsted landscapes were famous from Boston to Atlanta, New York to Chicago, Texas to the West Coast. Olmsted Brothers' outstanding work continued for five
Olmsted landscapes ingeniously combined practicality and aesthetics. Knowledge of traffic patterns, safety concerns, even training of park caretakers lay at the heart of their work. Beauty and harmony of nature were just as important in their design. Curves were preferable to angles, in parks or parkways, as Nature herself meanders. Soft edges to parks, created with shrubs, trees, and underplantings, let the park visitor enter and leave the city behind. Siting and choice of plantings appropriate to locale were paramount considerations, with special recognition of Seattle’s natural endowments.

History played a part in bringing these designers to Seattle. In 1902, Seattle was rich from its earnings as the gateway supply city to the Klondike gold fields. The City Beautiful movement of the Progressive Era was in full swing. Bursting with civic and regional pride, Seattleites were in a celebrating mood, which resulted in the Olmsted-designed Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909. And they were determined to have a parks system that rivaled any in the country. Why not the most eminent park designers? Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Massachusetts was chosen for the project.

John Olmsted arrived in 1903 to make a survey of the city. His 1903 report to Seattle park commissioners began: “...Seattle possesses extraordinary landscape advantages...in designing a system of parks and parkways the 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...as well as some fairly level land for field sports and the enjoyment of scenery.

There followed a remarkably detailed description of each area of the city, an analysis, and advice on what should be done. Olmsted outlined priorities to be acted on with available monies; later additions and acquisitions could be made as they became financially feasible. The total result would be a 23½ mile loop of boulevards around the city, linking parks, viewpoints, and waterfronts. The grand plan was never fully realized, but the accompanying map shows how great our Olmsted legacy is. The recommendations in his report were adopted by the park commissioners, approved by the city council, and passed by the voters in three successive bond issues: 1906, 1908, and 1910. The generosity of key landowners helped the city acquire the properties that John Olmsted insisted should be obtained for the public for all time.

Frederick Law Olmsted ingrained in his sons both social vision and a sense of social obligation. Thus the Olmsted Brothers’ 1908 report to the Seattle park commissioners emphasized playgrounds because, by then, the popularity of the playground movement — organized

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Curves were preferable to angles . . . as Nature herself meanders.

outdoor recreation for children — was at its height. Correspondence relating to their playground plans gave detailed explanations of how the designs achieved what was best for children and their caretakers in terms of safety, comfort, and aesthetics.

By the late 1970s, a renaissance of interest in Olmsted landscapes had begun. In 1980 the Junior League of Buffalo, New York, was inspired by League member Joan Bozer, of the Buffalo City Council, to help organize a meeting of a small group of Olmsted Park representatives from around the country. This led to the formation of a National Association for Olmsted Parks. Seattle Parks Superintendent Walter Hundley became a regional trustee. The following year Boston held an Olmsted conference. Olmsted’s Brookline home and office, Fairsted, became a national historic site. The firm’s archives and a busy information service are now located there. Chicago held the next Olmsted conference in 1982, and New York City was the site in 1983.

By 1982 Walter Hundley was convinced that Seattle should host the 1984 Olmsted conference as a major event of its parks centennial. Two well-attended public meetings confirmed a ground swell of interest here, and in September 1983, Friends of Seattle’s Olmsted Parks was launched.

The fifth Olmsted conference took place on the University of Washington’s Olmsted-designed campus in September 1984. There were seminars, a major “Art of the Olmsted Landscape” exhibit, park tours, and a sunset cruise. The final event was a tour of private Olmsted landscapes around the city, including estates in The Highlands. Friends of Seattle’s Olmsted Parks played an important part in this conference.

Members of the Friends include park lovers, landscape architects, architects, horticulturists, historians, urban planners, park department and park board members, and descendants of park donors. The Friends have been a catalyst for action on behalf of Seattle’s Olmsted parks system: the restoration of the Frink Boulevard bridge in 1984; the installation of Olmsted signboards at the entrances to various parks in 1985; a role in the National Trust for Historic Preservation Seattle conference in 1985; and volunteer help to consultants working on major improvements to Interlaken and Lake Washington Boulevards in 1986 are examples.

The Friends’ seasonal newsletters alert members about activities: monthly programs for the public during fall, winter, and spring offering walks through the parks and boulevards with knowledgeable guides; lectures by continued
"... Seattle possesses extraordinary landscape advantages..."

were donated to secondary school libraries. This forty-page classic, with photographs, provides an intimate picture of Seattle's landscape in that year and captures Olmsted's vision of what it could become for the benefit of future generations. A forthcoming publication is *A History of Lake Washington Boulevard* by landscape architect Jennifer Toth.

Acting as an information resource, the Friends have drawn attention to, and wish to further develop, Seattle's Olmsted archives. A treasury of their correspondence is at hand. Their language, like their landscapes, has stood the test of time — sometimes quaint, but always direct and clear.

At present the Olmsted Friends are working to support Senate Bill 194, the Olmsted Heritage Landscapes Act. The purpose of this legislation is to produce an inventory and evaluation of Olmsted heritage landscapes through the National Park Service, which has the responsibility for the federal government's historic preservation and park work.

The group values its project associations with Seattle Parks and Recreation personnel and with the Washington State chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the University of Washington, the Museum of History and Industry, and other schools, colleges, museums, libraries, community councils, and allied groups that work to preserve Seattle's parks and greenspace. Examples are the Arboretum Foundation, Center for Urban Horticulture, Friends of Volunteer Park Conservatory, Friends of Schmitz Park, Leschi Improvement Council, Seattle Garden Club, and the Junior League of Seattle.

Increased involvement in Seattle has led to broader participation. Donald Harris, the director of project development for Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation, is co-chairman of the National Association for Olmsted Parks. Catherine Joy Johnson, a Friends board member, is a regional trustee.

The Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks offer volunteer help on Olmsted-related issues and take pleasure in presenting programs for the public, all in the interest of their purpose: to promote and preserve this landscape heritage that makes Seattle such a livable city. As John Olmsted wrote in 1903, "Much can be done if public sentiment is aroused favorably."

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