

Olmsted and Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea

ROLF DIAMANT AND ETHAN CARR

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.'s extensive legacy is familiar, but this book opens new avenues of appreciation and knowledge. The authors skillfully weave the story of the many people across the country who vigorously worked towards the creation of Yosemite Park, describing a surprising nexus where support for the Union and the abolition movement resulted in passage of a bill setting aside Yosemite and Mariposa Grove, paving the way for our National Parks.

When eleven states seceded from the United States, Congress and President Lincoln were suddenly freed to consider programs and laws that would provide public benefit; Southern lawmakers had opposed Federal social projects of any kind. Lincoln and remaining congressional leaders also seized on the opportunity to show that the United States was strong enough to undertake major improvements in the face of the terrible Civil War. Many ambitious programs flowed from Congress during this period and the years immediately following: establishment of the Justice Department and passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, expanding citizen rights and assuring equal protection under the law (and nullifying the Dred Scott decision), and Fifteenth Amendment, prohibiting states and the Federal Government from denying the right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

The several characters who populate the story were often in correspondence with Olmsted, or aware of his and Calvert Vaux's groundbreaking design for New York's Central Park, or were familiar with Olmsted's journalism and work as Executive Director of the U.S. Sanitation Commission (the Commission was created to provide medical aid to wounded soldiers). Olmsted's many friends and contacts influ-

enced him, as well. Some familiar names include the social reformer Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, George Perkins Marsh, Thomas Starr King, Charles Eliot, and Horace Greeley. King, in particular, was a linchpin in California. He employed his popularity and leveraged his social connections, many made at Jessie Frémont's house at Black Point (Fort Mason, San Francisco). These people joined forces with other interested parties across the country to assure that the spectacular lands of Yosemite and Mariposa Grove would not be condemned to private ownership and prob-

While Central Park was still under construction, Olmsted wrote the "Preliminary Report upon the Yosemite and Big Tree Grove," otherwise known as the "Yosemite Report," described as "one of the most profound and original philosophical statements to emerge from the American conservation movement."

able destruction of the beauty that made the landscapes ones to be treasured. Olmsted advocated for public parks available to all, appealing to our nation's democratic ideals and making the case that the United States was in a unique position to assure that "the enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country and means of recreation connected with them" should not be monopolized by the wealthiest citizens. He also foresaw that the demand to visit public landscapes would steadily increase as the country grew.

That Yosemite and Mariposa Grove had

only recently been occupied by the indigenous Southern Miwok and Mono Paiute tribes is noted; sadly, Olmsted did not consider native people in his recommendations and advocacy.

Olmsted was often in the midst of important events of the day, and this is certainly true for the creation of Yosemite Park. Once the Yosemite Grant was approved by Congress, Olmsted was appointed to head a new commission to prepare recommendations for the park. The description of his many activities leading up to this juncture is compelling.

Olmsted also laid the groundwork for the eventual creation of the National Park Service. The expansion and care of public lands was not assured and required steady attention and promotion. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the Olmsted firm continued the Olmsted legacy. They, and others influenced by Olmsted, undertook significant and lasting projects that still benefit the nation today. After Olmsted Sr.'s retirement, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. took up the role as advocate and later served as an advisor to National Park Service leadership. He was also an adviser to the Yosemite National Park Board.

Diamant and Carr provocatively propose that discomfort in the country around the country's history of slavery, lingering racism, and a newly romanticized view of the Civil War affected the National Park creation story, as promoted by the National Park Service. The chapter, titled "Campfire Tales," refers to the often-told story that the concept of a national park was hatched by a campfire in Yellowstone. Rather than reveal all here, readers are encouraged to discover this aspect of the story themselves by reading this fine book.

– Janet Gracyk



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