

# Happy birthday, Frederick Law Olmsted

By DON FOX  
Special to the Gazette

April 26 marked the bicentennial of Frederick Law Olmsted's birth. He left his mark on Mariposa County and Yosemite history ... and he lived and worked here from 1863 to 1865.

Who is Frederick Law Olmsted and why is he important?

Frederick Law Olmsted (April 26, 1822-Aug. 28, 1903) came to Mariposa in 1863, during the Civil War. He resigned from his position as head of the U.S. Sanitary Commission to become manager of Sen. John C. Fremont's gold-mining estate, located in Bear Valley, 10-miles from Mariposa.

Previously, in 1858, he and his business partner, Calvert Vaux, won the design competition and supervised the construction of New York's Central Park. In addition, he traveled extensively during the Civil War through in the Southern states as a journalist, social critic and administrator.

When I moved to Yosemite National Park in 1974, I visited the Mariposa County Museum and History Center and talked with Scott Pinkerton to learn about Frederick Law Olmsted's accomplishments during the period he lived in Mariposa County and his impact of establishing Yosemite National Park. His response was unexpected, "That scoundrel; he ran John C. Fremont's Bear Valley mining operation into bankruptcy."

Leroy Radanovich, Mariposa historian, author and public servant, provided another interpretation of Olmsted's contribution to Mariposa and Yosemite National Park history. Olmsted was a true renaissance man with a vision for protecting Yosemite Valley and saw the need for public protection of scenic and natural areas.

By coincidence, in June 1864, President Lincoln signed the bill deeding Yosemite Valley and the Giant Sequoia Grove of Big Trees to the state of California during one of the darkest hours of the Civil War. People on the Atlantic coast were informed of the sublimity of the Yo-Semite, and of the stateliness of the neighboring sequoia grove that con-

sideration was first given to the danger that such scenes might become private property and their value to posterity might be injured. The 1864 legislation emphasized the concept of segregating the Valley and Big Trees grove from the general domain of the public lands, and devoted forever to popular resort and recreation.

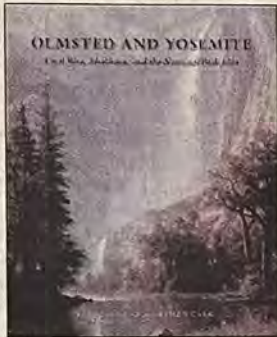
Subsequently, Governor Frederick Low appointed Olmsted to the Yosemite Commission and became chairman. He magnanimously paid expenses for Clarence King and James T. Gardine to survey and map the territory and to plan roads to and through it according to his detailed instructions, since the state had no appropriations to cover such expenditures. In a letter to his father, he expressed his feelings that Yosemite was "far the noblest park or pleasure ground in the world."

The groundbreaking report, the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove, established the need to protect Yosemite and its scenery for future generations and it underscores the importance of contact with wilderness for human well-being; the effect of scenery on human perception; and the moral responsibility of governments to preserve regions of extraordinary natural beauty for the benefit of all the people. In addition, it served to inform the idea of establishing networks of national, state and regional parks throughout this country, such as Boston's Emerald Necklace.

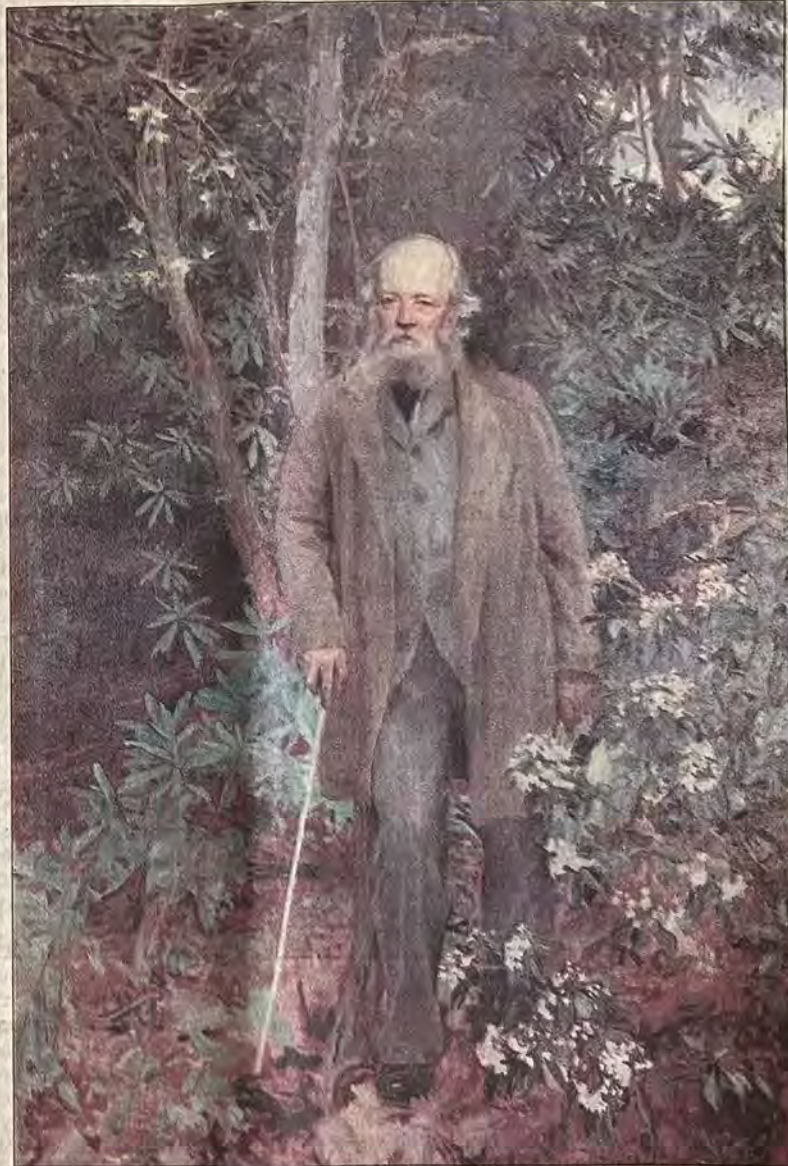
The 1864 Act granted the "Yo-Semite Valley and the nearby Mariposa Big Tree Grove" to the state of California. But there were a few important provisions, including, "that the said state shall accept this grant upon the express conditions that the premises shall be held for public use, resort, and recreation; shall be inalienable for all time."

Lincoln was charging California with taking care of Yosemite — already a burgeoning tourist destination — as well as developing it by putting roads so more people could come to view its dramatic vistas and towering sequoias.

As a mine manager for Senator Fremont, however, the bankruptcy of the Mariposa mines was a commercial flop



Shown is the cover of a new book about Olmsted and his influence on Yosemite.



Submitted photos

This is a portrait of Olmsted on display at Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate in Ashville, N.C. It was Olmsted's vision, in 1888, at the age of 66, that helped Biltmore take root and flourish.

and Olmsted was considered a failure. But that failure was the fulcrum that put him back on track as a public works and public service dynamo. Absent the plunging productivity of Fremont's Mariposa mines, there might have been no Yosemite National Park, or other national, state, regional or local parks.

This moment has been heralded as an

important precedent for the national park system. But, sadly, creating Yosemite was also an act of erasure. American Indians were the main residents of the Yosemite Valley until the 1849 gold rush brought thousands of non-Indian miners and settlers to the region.

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Tragically, the Southern Sierra Miwuk people, who had made Yosemite Valley their home for thousands of years, suffered violence and dispossession starting in 1851, when the Valley was invaded by California militia and, then, with the passing of the 1864 legislation, the Valley and Mariposa Grove were incorporated into the public domain more than a decade prior to the park's creation.

As we acknowledge Olmsted's outsized contribution to American conservation and parks, we should continue to acknowledge the enduring connection Southern Sierra Miwuk people have with Yosemite, and recognize the importance of presenting all aspects of this complex history.

Olmsted foresaw that visitor use of the park might swell to a level where it was impossible to balance preservation with recreation — and it did. By 1885, writes *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “some 3,000 visitors were visiting the park annually.” Concerns over this influx of traffic led to the establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890.

“In its scope and in its avowed preservation purpose the Yosemite Valley undertaking was truly precedent-setting,” writes author Ney C. Landrum in “The State Park Movement in America: A Critical Review.” “Not only were there no real state parks in 1864, there were no national parks, either. California's experiment pioneered a new field of public land management and provided valuable lessons — positive as well as negative — for other park advocates who would soon follow.”

How the movement first arose to make Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove a public reservation is not entirely clear. California Sen. John Conness said the scheme had been presented to him by several California gentlemen “of fortune, of taste and of refinement,” but did not identify them. He introduced the bill to the Senate on March 28, 1864, ceding the valley and the grove to California for use as a public park.

Olmsted later commented, “Only the most urgent considerations could have diverted Congress, in the midst of the Civil War, from other pressing duties to dedicate forever to public enjoyment Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees.”

No doubt Olmsted and other backers of the legislation considered the obvious financial benefit to the commonwealth derived from possessing celebrated scenic attractions. He stated in the report, “As the Alps lured tourist and wealth to Switzerland, as the English Garden, create at vast expense, attracted them to Munich,

so the valley and the giant sequoias, when accessible, would draw them to California.”

A more important consideration, however, was his idea “that there is a political duty to which seldom if ever before has proper respect been paid by any government in the world. ... It is the main duty of government, if it is not the sole duty of government, to provide means of protection for all its citizens in the pursuit of happiness against the obstacles, otherwise insurmountable, which the selfishness of individuals or combinations of individuals is liable to interpose to that pursuit.”

Olmsted eloquently describes and justifies protecting Yosemite's scenic and natural resources in the following statement: “There are falls of water elsewhere finer, there are more stupendous rocks, more beetling cliffs, there are deeper and more awful chasms, there may be as beautiful streams, as lovely meadows, there are larger trees.

“It is in no scene or scenes the charm consists, but in the miles of scenery where cliffs of awful height and rocks of vast magnitude and of varied and exquisite coloring, and banks and fringed and draped and shadowed by the tender foliage of noble and lovely trees and bushes, reflected from the most placid pools, and associated with the most tranquil meadows, the most playful streams, and every variety of soft and peaceful pastoral beauty.”

This union of the deepest sublimity with the deepest beauty of nature, not in one feature or another, not in one part or one scene or another, not any landscape that can be framed by itself, but all around and where the visitor goes, constitutes the Yosemite the greatest glory of nature.”

We learn from a recently published book titled “Olmsted and Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea,” by Ethan Carr and Rolf Diamont, there is more to the story on issues and circumstances that informed Olmsted's thinking about protecting Yosemite and the role that a system of parks could shape the country following the war.

In his travels throughout the Civil War Southern states, prior to coming to Mariposa in 1863, he published firsthand accounts of the inhumane conditions he found there, arguing that slavery had become an insurmountable obstacle to national progress. With slavery abolished and governments remade, the public park emerged as a product of these dramatic changes. New York's Central Park and Yosemite in California both embodied the “new birth of freedom” that had inspired the Union during its greatest crisis, epitomizing the duty of republican government to enhance the lives and wellbeing of all its citizens.

The authors, Diamant and Carr, subsequently say the groundbreaking in 1865, “is one of the founding documents of the U.S. conservation movement, and of what would later be known as the national park idea.” It effectively created an intellectual framework for a national park system. Here, Olmsted expressed the core tenet of the national park idea and park making generally, “that the republic should provide its citizenry access to the restorative benefits of nature.”

The 1865 Yosemite Report provided Frederick Law Olmsted with a singular opportunity to share his aspirational vision for a reconstructed post-Civil War nation, where great public parks could become keystone institutions of an emancipated and renewed American Republic.

The report affirmed every person's entitlement to enjoy the nation's most spectacular landscapes, and in the process, he framed the intellectual foundation for a system of national parks — declaring, “The establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people ... is thus justified as a political duty.”

His vision was realized with the passage, in 1916, of legislation that created the National Park Service, drafted in large measure by his son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and based on the ideas and aspirations fully expressed 50 years earlier in his father's report.

The authors also say that, “The National Park Service has been slow to embrace the senior Olmsted's role in this history. In the early 20th century, a period of ‘reconciliation’ between North and South, National Park Service administrators preferred more anodyne narratives of pristine Western landscapes discovered by rugged explorers and spontaneously reimagined as national parks.”

The Park Service wanted a history disassociated from urban parks and the problems of industrializing cities and unburdened by the legacies of slavery and Native American dispossession. Marking the bicentennial of Olmsted's birth, the book sets the historical record straight as it offers a new interpretation of how the American park — urban and national — came to figure so prominently in our cultural identity, and why this more complex and inclusive story deserves to be told.

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Frederick Law Olmsted, center, middle row, is shown following the reading the 1865 report to the Yosemite Commission, with Lower Yosemite Fall in the background.

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Nearly two centuries ago, Olmsted tackled social and environmental challenges analogous to those we face today: racism, disease, pollution, inequality and deep social divisions. These were profound concerns in late 19th century just as they are profound concerns in our time.

Frederick Law Olmsted understood the powerful interface between thoughtful design and social justice, and his prescriptions — democratic spaces, community, healthful connections to nature and sustainable landscapes — are vital to address racism, inequality and climate change today.

In the face of the current pandemic, Olmsted's parks and places have proven more important than ever. These places did not appear by accident. They took generations of dedicated stewardship and will require generations going forward.

Olmsted was a multifaceted visionary and social reformer who contributed to the fields of public health, conservation, urban planning and landscape design. The coincidence of Olmsted's arrival in California at the very moment when he was most needed has only recently been noticed. For once it seems that the right person was in the right place at the right time! Olmsted's legacy is incalculable.

Frederick Law Olmsted believed that everyone should be able to visit and enjoy parks.

Olmsted changed how America thought about parks, and today, we can still learn from those important ideals and innovate upon them.

Happy birthday Frederick Law Olmsted, and thank you for your contributions to Mariposa County/Yosemite history — and to our nation.

*Don Fox worked at Yosemite National Park as Park Landscape Architect for 32 years and was involved with numerous strategic planning, public engagement, design, natural and cultural resources compliance projects, and the park's long-term management plan.*