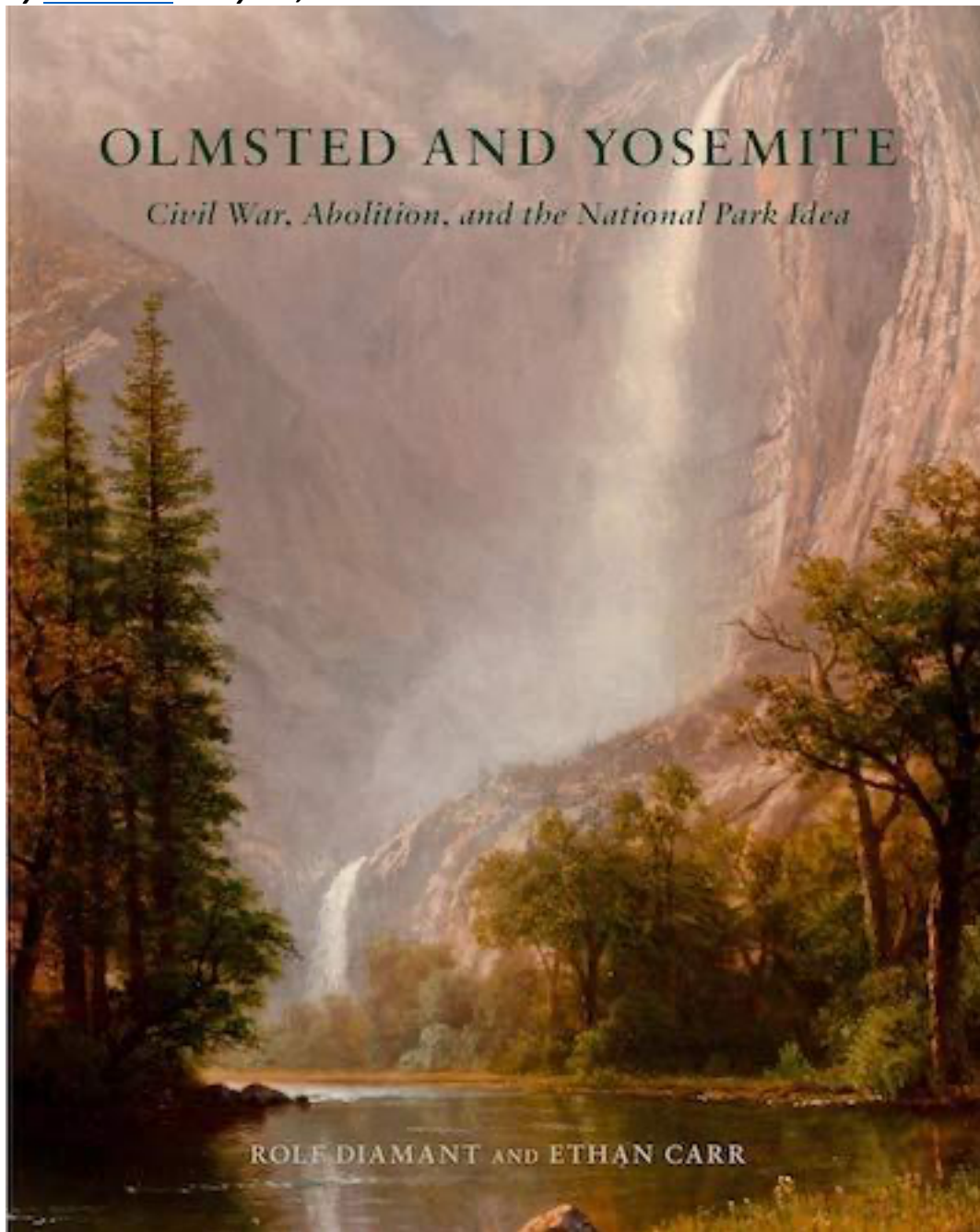


Review | Olmsted And Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, And The National Park Idea

By [John Miles](#) - May 3rd, 2022



When and why did the idea of national parks emerge in American history? Several creation myths, or “campfire tales” as Diamant and Carr call them, have been embraced by historians and government officials. Among them are the discussion around the campfire at Madison Junction on the Yellowstone Plateau during the 1870 Washburn-Langford-Doane expedition broaching the idea, which was then promoted by Nathaniel Langford on behalf of the Northern Pacific Railroad and resulted in the creation of Yellowstone as the world’s first *national* park. This story has been thoroughly debunked by historians.

Another was that John Muir and President Theodore Roosevelt came up with the idea during a famous meeting in Yosemite, which occurred well after the national park movement was underway, so it certainly could not be the origin story.

A core piece of the national park idea, landscape architecture historians Diamant and Carr argue, may be found in the 1865 Yosemite Report authored by Frederick Law Olmsted, and in their view, the importance of this has not been given the attention it deserves. They seek to rectify this in *Olmsted and Yosemite*.

Why, the authors ask, “were the origin of the national park idea and early history of the agency associated for so many years with these ‘campfire tales’?” They offer several reasons, foremost among them that the National Park Service, which embraced what the authors’ call the “virgin birth” narrative of the Washburn-Langford-Doane story, had a “perceived need to avoid the suggestion that the idea for national parks was in any way connected to the trauma and controversy of the Civil War.”

Diamant and Carr argue that, needing support from people and politicians across the country, including the South, the Park Service “publicized a national park creation narrative unencumbered by references to emancipation, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.”

For far too long, “all the credit for the national parks has been vested with either mythic ‘rugged Western pioneers’ or a ‘visionary’ like John Muir or Theodore Roosevelt.” Though Olmsted is primarily remembered for his work on Central Park and his contributions to the field of landscape architecture and its application across America, the authors say the time has come to recognize the importance of Olmsted’s Yosemite Report “and its enduring vision of popular government using its resources to improve people’s lives.”

Diamant and Carr here add an intriguing element to ongoing discussions of the context in which the national park idea emerged – emphasis on “idea.” The concept of such a park had been floating around, suggested by artist George Catlin and Henry David Thoreau, but the legislation that granted Yosemite Valley to California did not make it a *national* park. Olmsted, in his Report, expanded the idea of what Yosemite might be, and therein lay the real seed of the national park idea. While it was a grant, not a park, Olmsted considered it “a trust for the whole nation.”

The authors briefly review the familiar story of Olmsted’s life, emphasizing his understanding of the ante-bellum South gained from his travels there and journalistic reporting in the early 1850s, his strong support for the Union war effort, and his role in the creation of New York’s Central Park. They explain how, in late 1862, encouraged by military successes along the Southern Coast and Mississippi Valley, Congress and the Lincoln administration advanced a legislative agenda that included measures targeting slavery, the Pacific Railway Act, the Land-Grant College Act, and the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, among other measures. Their aim was “to intervene on a continental scale, on behalf of emancipation and free labor, agrarian opportunity, national improvements, and public education.” As the prospect of the North defeating the South improved, the Lincoln administration enacted sweeping social, political, and economic changes. The Yosemite grant legislation, signed by Lincoln on June 30, 1864, was part of the Congress’ and administration’s campaign to “make the Union as it should be.”

Diamant and Carr explain how the Lincoln administration needed California’s support in the war effort and got it. They argue that the grant that California was given and accepted can be

interpreted as “an acknowledgement of the political debt owed to California loyalists” and an assertion of belief that the Union would prevail. The authors write:

Many historians who have written about the Yosemite Grant have failed to recognize the context of the act as a wartime measure. Some categorized the grant as an inexplicable anomaly, a departure from established public land policy by distracted lawmakers and having nothing at all to do with the war. To the contrary, the Yosemite Grant was a direct consequence of the war and related to the political and social revolution that the conflict fueled. The grant was not an anomaly but an embodiment of the ongoing process of remaking government ... The Yosemite Grant can also be seen as another small component of the government’s public land policy in the American West ... For obvious reasons, Republicans in Congress had long supported legislation that would strengthen ties with Western states and territories and promote national unity.

In this way, Diamant and Carr convincingly make the case that the Yosemite Grant can and should be placed in the context of the Civil War, the end of slavery, and the consequent remaking of government.

After several years running the U.S. Sanitary Commission, an exhausted Olmsted resigned and moved to California to manage the Mariposa Estate mining operation, which he found in bad shape. Given his experience with Central Park, he was appointed to the Yosemite Commission that was charged with managing the grant and developing recommendations on how to do so. Diamant and Carr write that, “Circumstances placed Olmsted in California just at the moment that the future management of Yosemite was being seriously considered. He was the right person in the right place at the right time to address the new park’s larger meaning and context in relation to the outcome of the war and the country’s future.” He wrote the *Yosemite Report* between September 1864 and August 1865.

The authors detail the main recommendations Olmsted made in the report and explain why they see in it the “intellectual foundation for building a national park system.” They see his vision as extending far beyond Yosemite in space and time – to a future when millions of visitors would come to Yosemite and other parks in America.

Early in the book they describe the emergence of the public park movement, focused on urban parks and, of course, led by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux at Central Park, and argue that Olmsted expected this movement to grow. He would be instrumental in that movement after the war and his brief Yosemite experience.

Several of his fellow Yosemite commissioners did not support his recommendations, the report was shelved, and the grant was poorly managed – ironically, had the state followed his recommendations Yosemite Valley might have stayed under California management – it was ceded back to the federal government in 1905. Diamant and Carr argue that despite the report's fate in the politics of the Yosemite Commission, its ideas percolated and influenced the emerging national park movement.

“The *Report* was never discarded or forgotten. Olmsted had used it in crafting his 1887 report on Niagara Falls. Olmsted Jr. quoted from it extensively and verbatim in his 1913 analysis of the Hetch Hetchy dam controversy and drew on the ideas and language of the Yosemite Report when he drafted parts of the 1916 act creating the National Park Service,” the authors write. They trace how the ideas in the report influenced the course of national park history through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Especially important is the way Frederick Law Olmsted

Jr., himself a distinguished landscape architect, park designer and advocate, recognized the importance of his father's writing in the *Report* and built on it. The entire *Report* is appended at the end of *Olmsted and Yosemite*.

Why does an accurate understanding of the origins of national parks matter today? Diamant and Carr answer this question.

Reconnecting the idea of the national park with the broader American park movement, the end of slavery, the Civil War, the remaking of government, and Olmsted's Yosemite Report, we believe, is an appropriate and timely historical revision. It comes at a time when there is a serious effort to advance diversity, inclusion, and equity in the national parks.

Olmsted sought throughout his life to contribute to a society motivated by principles of "benevolence and equity." The authors believe that telling a "refreshed national park history" that includes all the forces that led to emergence of the national park idea, especially those at work on Frederick Law Olmsted that found expression in the Yosemite Report, is more important than ever in the 21st century.