

**NEWS: THE LIBRARY RECOMMENDS: OLMSTED AND YOSEMITE: CIVIL WAR, ABOLITION, AND
THE NATIONAL PARK IDEA BY ROLF DIAMANT, ETHAN CARR**



OLMSTED AND YOSEMITE

Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea

ROLF DIAMANT AND ETHAN CARR

In *Olmsted and Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea*, Frederick Law Olmsted is presented by Rolf Diamant and Ethan Carr as a social reformer rather than as a landscape architect and artistic designer. The words of another social reformer, Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, inspired the two authors. In an 1861 letter to Olmsted, Mrs. Shaw wrote: “If we can re-make the Government, abolish Slavery & get the Central Park well underway, we shall have done a work worthy of the 19th century.” Olmsted shared her sentiments and aspirations. He believed in them passionately, and they determined many aspects of his life. *Olmsted and Yosemite* tells that story. It is a fascinating one and ultimately led to the founding of our national park system.

Before tackling the design for Central Park, Olmsted traveled as a journalist to the South where he was exposed to the violence and cruelty of slavery. He became an ardent abolitionist and an advocate for the reformation of the political system which had allowed slavery. For him, the creation of public parks was an important component of this reformation. As Olmsted eloquently explained to the Central Park commissioners, “...one of the great purposes of the Park is to supply to hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God’s handiwork...” Emulating New York, parks began to be built in cities all over the country. Olmsted’s “republican ideology” was spreading.

When war began in 1861, Olmsted hastened to contribute to the Union cause. He joined the Sanitary Commission, which provided medical relief to wounded soldiers. Olmsted worked in a senior capacity and was especially concerned with the morale and living conditions of the army. Having successfully directed the work at Central Park, he was well prepared as an administrator. He was very popular with those who worked under him though one, a fan, thought he “was born with autocratic tendencies.”

Olmsted had a family with several children to support, and in 1863 he moved to California to improve his financial situation. The following year, a bill known as the Yosemite Grant was presented to Congress. It gave the state of California, in appreciation for its support of the Union during the Civil War, the beautiful Yosemite Valley and adjoining Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias. Thirty-eight thousand acres were to be made into a public park and to be protected “for public use, resort, and recreation...inalienable for all time.” The creation of Central Park had secured Olmsted’s reputation, and, conveniently, he was in California and the obvious choice to head the planning commission. In August of 1865, he submitted his *Preliminary Report Upon the Yosemite and the Big Tree Grove* which is included in *Olmsted and Yosemite*.

This important document begins with a poetic description of the beauty and grandeur of Yosemite and the magnificence of the Mariposa Grove. (Any reader who hasn’t seen these wonders will start planning a trip!) Olmsted continues by asserting that an enlightened government’s duty is to “...provide means of protection for all its citizens in the pursuit of happiness...” In the same way, the government is bound to preserve and protect its country’s extraordinary landscapes because everyone is entitled to “the restorative power of nature.” In the aftermath of the Civil War and the South’s belief in states’ rights, aversion to homestead grants, and by extension land grants for public parks, these statements were extraordinary and “groundbreaking.” They are at the heart of the idea of a national park. However, post-war political and social “crosscurrents” hindered progress in achieving that goal and only eventually led to the creation of the National Park Service in which Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. played an important role.

In a chapter entitled “Campfire Tales,” Diamant and Rolf offer a new interpretation of the origin of our national parks and how they became so important. A national storyline developed in the twentieth century attributing the parks system to the contributions of “rugged Western pioneers” and “visionaries” such as John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt. The authors consider this narrative invalid and a sop to the white, middle-class society that prevailed at the time. Their revision gives responsibility “to those who fought for a new birth of American freedom.” Olmsted and his Yosemite Report are at the top of that list, but it also includes those African Americans who fought in the Civil War and those known as Buffalo Soldiers who patrolled the early national parks. The story of Native Americans who were driven from their lands and on whom great harm was inflicted should also be included. This more comprehensive view presented by the authors is “the rest of the story,” the true story, and deserves to be told.

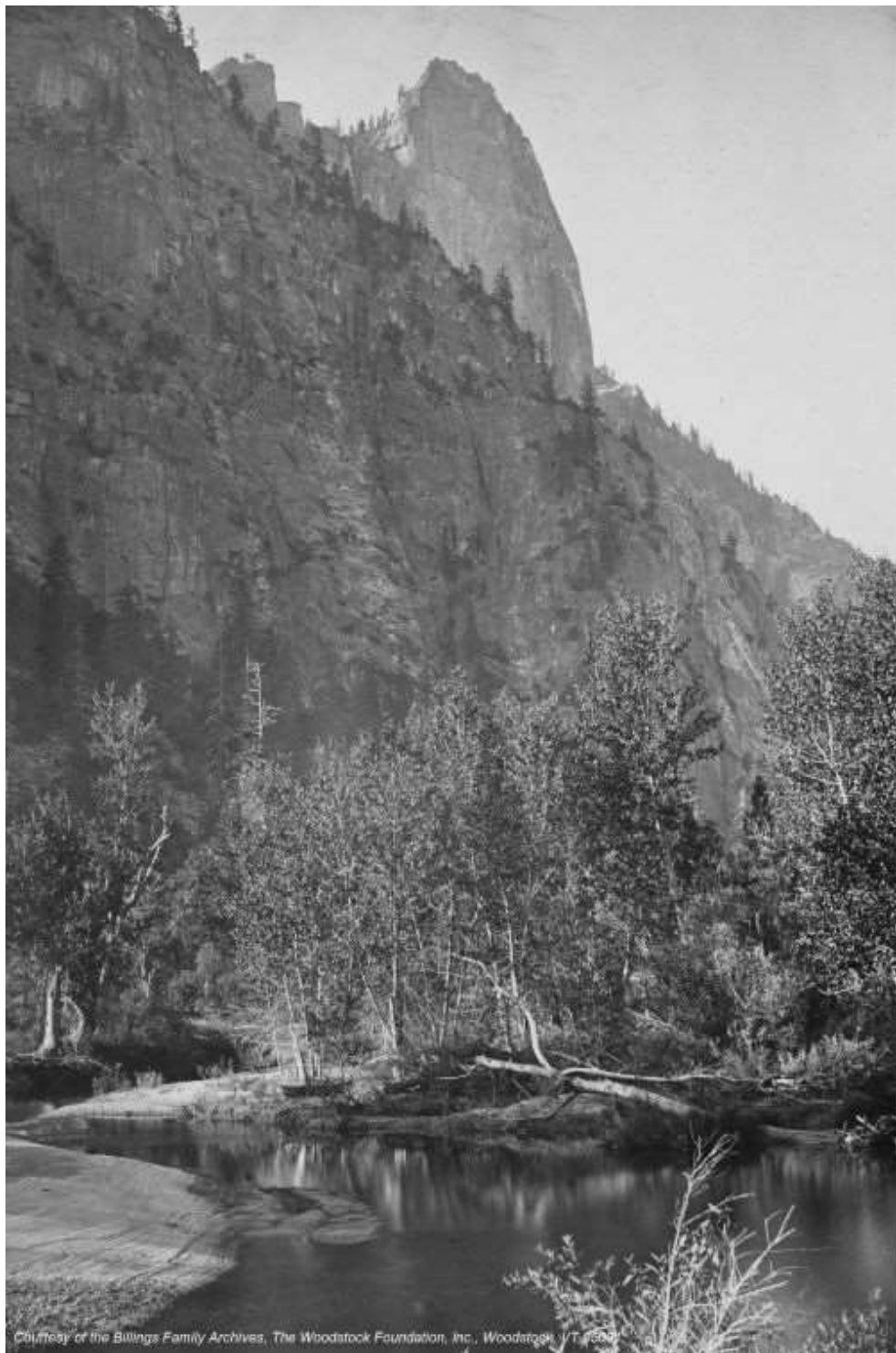
Diamant and Rolf are renowned for their knowledge of Olmsted and the period in which he lived. Their revision of popular history is compelling and should certainly be considered, as their research is comprehensive and persuasive. Their “Notes” are extensive, and numerous quotations are provided which add interest and authenticity. *Olmsted and Yosemite* is very scholarly; it is not an “easy read” but one well worth your time. It will make you think about history – who writes it and what influenced its telling. Was it hindsight, an emotional response to contemporary events, an objective gathering of hard, cold facts, or a combination thereof? A book club discussion is in order and bound to be spirited! In any case, you will learn a lot from *Olmsted & Yosemite* – about American history, politics, and of course, about the extraordinary Frederick Law Olmsted!

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Photo credits: All photographs of Yosemite Valley are from a group of thirty mammoth-plate albumen prints by Carleton Watkins (1829–1916), 1861. Courtesy of the Billings Family Archives, The Woodstock Foundation, Inc., Woodstock, VT 05091.



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