Baltimore City
Commission for Historical and
Architectural Preservation

Landmark Designation Report
January 13, 2015

Olmsted Parkways

Public right-of-way of the 2600-3200 blocks of the Alameda, public right-of-way of the 0000-1800 blocks of 33rd Street, and public right-of-way of the 1600-3900 blocks of the Gwynns Falls Parkway, Baltimore, Maryland
Significance Summary

Baltimore has been shaped immensely by the work of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and his sons, and they have left their signature on much of Baltimore’s landscape, particularly in the city’s parks and suburban neighborhoods. This designation pertains specifically to Gwynn’s Falls Parkway, 33rd Street, and the Alameda, the parkways in Baltimore City that were designed by the Olmsted Brothers to serve as park connectors between the major city parks. These parkways not only connected the major parks of the city, they ensured citizens had equitable access to green space, greatly shaped the suburban development of the city, and today still serve the citizens of Baltimore.

Contextual History

*Frederick Law Olmsted and the Olmsted Brother Landscape Architecture firm*
(This is provided by the Friends of Maryland’s Olmsted Parks and Landscapes)

America’s first landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) believed that parks and landscapes were an essential part of democratic society. His designs created some of the most beloved public landscapes in the United States – Central Park in New York City; the first park system in Buffalo, New York; the Emerald Necklace in Boston; the Capital grounds in Washington, D.C.; the World’s Columbian Exposition park system in Chicago; the preservation of Yosemite and the Niagara Falls Reservation.

Olmsted’s stepson John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920) and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (1870-1957) became leaders in the emergence of landscape architecture and city planning as professions. Upon Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.’s retirement in 1895, the firm continued as the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects through the 1950s. The Olmsted Brothers addressed the advent of the automobile with comprehensive planning of cities and the integration of active recreation facilities into older parks and park systems.

Beginning in the 1870s, Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and later, the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects (OBLA), profoundly reshaped the urban Maryland landscape. Olmsted Sr. designed the early suburb of Sudbrook Park and the four Mount Vernon Place parks; he also consulted on other Baltimore parks during the 1870s to the early 1890s.

At the behest of the Municipal Art Society, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and OBLA produced the comprehensive *1904 Report Upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore*, conceptualizing a park system for the Baltimore region. The Olmsted vision for Baltimore’s park system was second only to Boston’s in size and scope. During the next two decades FLO Jr. and OBLA staff members provided considerable assistance on specific park planning and land acquisition. An extensive report by the Olmsted Brothers in 1926 extended the 1904 recommendations, especially projections to link the Gwynns Falls, Jones Falls, and Herring Run stream valleys with a wide variety of parks, parkways, and playgrounds. In many cases, the
Olmsted firm assisted in the transformation of private estate grounds into public parks, such as in planning for Carroll, Clifton, Leakin, and Wyman Parks. Smaller Olmsted-designed neighborhood parks include Latrobe and Riverside. OBLA added major recreation and circulation improvements to Baltimore’s earliest major parks, Druid Hill and Patterson. In addition, FLO, Jr., was instrumental in planning the reconstruction of Downtown Baltimore after the 1904 Great Fire and creating the City’s planning department.

During the first decades of the twentieth century Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., also served as landscape architect for residential communities whose development was being undertaken by the Roland Park Company. Applying principles that respected the local topography and combined privacy with appropriate linkage to surroundings, the result was the creation of residential communities like Roland Park, Guilford, and Homeland, which continue to be some of the area’s most distinctive. 1

Parks Systems in Early 20th Century

Other American cities that have Olmsted park plans include Boston, with its famed “Emerald Necklace”, Seattle, Buffalo, Chicago, and Louisville. As the Park Board related in their 1904 Annual Report:

"A new era of park extension began some twenty years ago in some of the larger cities of the United States. Briefly the purpose of the movement was the beautification of cities by connecting existing parks by broad parked ways, by the acquisition of new parks and squares, and by making them, as far as practicable, connected parts of the system. The park and parked way was to be brought, as far as could be, to every section of the city...Cleveland, Chicago, Boston, and other cities have already made great progress in the accomplishment of this work. If Baltimore is to take its position in the movement, prompt action is necessary..." 2

The Olmsteds, as well as the city leaders in Baltimore, looked to other great park systems for inspiration to enhance Baltimore’s fledgling park system. They particularly looked Boston’s “emerald necklace”, which was also of Olmsted design. In the 1904 meeting where the Olmsted Plan for Baltimore was unveiled, it was stated that “The initial movement for parking the environs of Boston was met with doubt and discouragement. Ten years of persistent energy has produced the most attractive system in the country.” 3 It seems clear that Baltimorleans learned from Boston, as there was very high confidence in the implementation of the plan, with Major Venable stating that, “There is no large city so far as I know in America, with the possible exception of Boston, capable of being so highly beautified.” 4

A few cities with Olmsted park plans, such as Boston, have locally designated the entirety of their Olmsted park systems as local landmarks, while other cities have partially designated
them. With this designation of the Olmsted Parkways, Baltimore will be in step with these other great cities in recognizing the significance and importance of their park systems.

History of the Olmsted Parkways

The Baltimore Municipal Art Society (MAS) and Park Board President Major Richard M. Venable were the driving forces behind the creation of a park system in Baltimore. In 1900, the MAS recommended that “the city purchase a belt of suburban property with a view of directing the city’s growth into the suburbs, certain parts of such property to be retained as parks.” In 1902 and 1903, at the urging of the MAS and Major Venable, the City purchased Gwynn’s Falls, Latrobe, Swann, and Wyman Parks. In the spring of 1902, MAS took even greater steps to create a comprehensive park plan, when the organization retained the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects (OBLA), the country’s most venerable landscape architecture firm, to “prepare comprehensive plans for the suburbs of Baltimore”. In 1903, Major Venable explained that the Olmsted Brothers had been hired “...to make a thorough examination of the vicinity of Baltimore with the purpose of extending the park system of the city and more particularly with reference to connecting all of the existing larger parks by a system of parked drives.”

In 1903, while the report was still underway, the MAS expressed their certainly that the city would see the wisdom in implementing the plans. Indeed, months before the plan was completed, it had already received the approval of Mayor McLane, who in December 1903 was already strategizing as to how to pay for the park expansion. On January 1, 1904, in his Annual Report, the City’s Chief Engineer announced that the topographic survey of the previous year had included surveys in connection with the Olmsted park plan. This shows that while the impetus for the plan was by outside organizations, the project was embraced by the City government from the start. In January 1904, at the annual meeting of the Municipal Art Society, Frederick Law Olmsted presented the park plan to the public for the first time.

The report *The Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore* was officially published in June 1904. The “Olmsted report”, as it was referred to in the Annual Report, was paid for by the Park Board for the sum of $3,500. The 1904 Report recommended ringing the core of the city with parks, with tree-lined and “parked” boulevards connecting the major parks, serving as parks themselves. The full breadth of the parkway plan was described in a *Sun* article in 1905: “A feature of the proposed plans is a continuous boulevard from Latrobe Park at Spring Gardens up through the valley of the Gwynn’s Falls, thence across to Druid Hill Park and continuing through Wyman to Clifton Park, thence to Herring run and down the valley to the water front... The project is being considered because it is believed nowhere will there be found such a continuous and picturesque driveway.” The report made clear that these parkways were not simply a convenient way to get from park to park, but that instead “parkways, whether serving as connections or merely approaches, should be treated as far as possible like extensions of the parks to bring them to the people, and place them in touch with each other.”
A 1904 article in the *Sun* announcing the publication of the plan stated that "If the suggestions of the Messrs. Olmsted are carried out Baltimore would be surrounded by a chain of beautiful pleasure grounds and parkways." A 1908 article exclaimed that when the plan was completed, the city could retire the title of “Monumental City” for the new title of “Boulevard City.”

The purpose of creating a connected park system was to allow all citizens in Baltimore equitable access to green space. Mr. Frick, the chairman of MAS’s suburban development committee, which worked most directly with Olmsted on the park plan, explained at the unveiling of the plan that “An effort has been made in planning this system of parks to meet the requirements of every section and of all classes and conditions of society, creating a connecting link for public uses which will virtually environ the city.” Truly, the Olmsted Brothers had designed an “emerald necklace” for all Baltimoreans.

There was a strong sense of urgency to implement the park plan quickly, or at the very least, purchase the properties needed to implement the proposed plan. Numerous articles in the *Sun* in 1904 practically begged the city to move forward with haste. An article in January 1904 noted the “numerous beautiful spots, which can be purchased for small sums now, in the suburbs of Baltimore, which will soon be thickly settled. The city should not delay in acquiring these grounds.” Major Venable demanded “the rapid consummation of the plan,” fearing that the land values were rising too quickly, and that the land that was recommended for acquisition would become too expensive and the park plan could not be completed.

The park plan had the support of a broad array of neighborhood improvement and business associations from across the city, who urged the Board of Estimates to adopt a $1 million loan for the park plan. The original estimate for the cost of implementing the plan was $3 million, which was to be doled out in 3 installments. These loans were ultimately voted on by citizens.

However, the implementation of the park plan was delayed by the City’s greatest calamity – the destruction of downtown Baltimore by the Great Fire on February 7th and 8th, 1904. The necessity of rebuilding the downtown as quickly as possible took precedent over the implementation of the park plan. Frederick Law Olmsted was retained by the city to advise on rebuilding downtown Baltimore.

By 1906, the City was ready to turn its sights back towards the suburbs and parks. On the two year anniversary of the Great Fire, the *Sun* boasted that the City was in better shape than it ever had been before the fire – with a new downtown, a sewer system, and a parks plan underway. This was true – in 1906, the City earnestly pursued the implementation of the park plan, adopting ordinances to open the parkways, putting parks loans before citizens to their votes, and corresponding with the Olmsted Brothers on the details of the plans. However, each of the parkways took several years to implement.
The purchase of property for the parkways and expansion of the park system did not unfold as quickly as people hoped, due to a variety of factors. The City needed to get loans for the purchases approved by citizens, it took significant amounts of time and money to condemn the parcels needed to construct the parkways, and the parameters of the project was changed due to the rising costs of property and decreasing availability of land due to the rapid speed of suburbanization in the northern portion of the City. The construction of the parkways required the oversight of the Commissioners for Opening Streets, and then the Park Board took over the greening of the parkways. While the City engaged with the Olmsted Brothers as early as 1906 to develop plans for the parkways, the construction on the parkways did not begin until 1911 for 33rd Street and the Alameda, and 1916 for Gwynn’s Falls Parkway.

Role of Partnerships in executing the Plan

The parks plan, particularly the parkways, was executed due to collaborative efforts between City agencies and boards, private organizations such as MAS, and the Olmsted Brothers. While the parks plan was not completed to exactly meet the vision put forth in the Olmsted Plan of 1904, what was constructed was designed with input from the Olmsted Brothers and various city agencies, namely the Parks Board, the Topographical Survey Commission, and the Commission for the Opening of Streets. Letters between these entities exhibit the collaborative nature of process over the course of several years.

One person who deserves tremendous credit in the adoption and implementation of the Park plan is Major Richard Venable, the President of the Park Board. From 1903 until his resignation from the Parks Board due to poor health in 1907, he was the single most enthusiastic and persuasive advocate for the implementation of the “model park system” that was the Olmsted Plan. The success of the expansion of the park system was credited to him, because everyone engaged in “hearty co-operation because everyone believed him to be honestly interested in it, and believed him capable of carrying it to completion.” Even though he did not live to see its completion, he set a firm foundation.

Another significant aspect of this project is the long-term local political and fiscal support for the parks plan. Between the first action of support in 1903 by Mayor McLane prior to the official introduction of the plan, and the completion of the Gwynn’s Falls Parkway in 1925, six Mayors had served the city, each supporting this initiative.

Role in Baltimore Growth and Development

The Olmsted parkways were not the first parkways constructed in the city. The earliest examples date to the late 19th century - Eutaw Place, Park Avenue, and Broadway. But the Olmsted parkways and these earlier parkways served strikingly similar purposes. Both helped
spur development. Major Venable noted in a 1907 *Sun* article that the parkways connecting Gwynn’s Falls to Druid Hill Park, and Wyman Park to Clifton Park “will open up to improvement portions of the city now half dead.”\(^{31}\) This notion of parkway development as a driver for private real estate development is echoed by the Park Commissioners seven years later in their annual report, stating that Gwynn’s Falls Parkway “will not only add to the beauty of the city, and be a very attractive feature of our park system, but when completed will be of great utility and substantially increase the taxable basis.”\(^{32}\) The use of parkways as development incentives was a successful tool, with neighborhoods quickly being constructed following the completion of the Olmsted Parkways.

**Role of Parks for Health**

Parks and green spaces in the early 20\(^{th}\) century were considered important for their positive contribution to public health as much as for the city beautification. Health reform was a key issue during the Progressive Era. Parks were touted for the important role that they played in promoting good health. As stated in the *Sun* in 1906, "The [park] system recommended...will practically girdle the city and will be a hygienic as well as a parking project".\(^{33}\) The same article mentioned the plans for "acquisitions for public breathing spaces".\(^{34}\) The high density of housing in Baltimore, particularly in the oldest sections, with narrow rowhouses, no sewers, limited potable water, use of wood or coal for heating and cooking, and heavy industry along the waterfront led to poor air quality in much of the downtown. The lack of access to fresh air was a serious health concern in the early 20\(^{th}\) century. Communicable diseases were rampant in waterfront and downtown neighborhoods. Those who could afford it lived in the suburbs of the city, or lived on higher ground in town, with a summer estate further out. This ability to escape to clean air was a luxury that the majority of Baltimoreans could not afford. This park plan, which was intended to bring green space into easy reach of every citizen in the city, was deemed an excellent way to help alleviate the health hazards of city living.

**Parkway Design Intentions**

The Olmsteds had particular design ideals for the parkways – they were to serve as parks in and of themselves, and were to serve several types of traffic all at the same time. A design tool that the Olmsteds employed often was to follow the natural topography when designing sites and roads. To that end, their roads were largely curvilinear and took advantage of natural features, often shifting the path of the roads to take advantage of the landscape, and even to avoid destroying a particularly fine tree. The parkways were sensitively “parked”, that is, planted with trees and vegetation.

Today, roads are designed and used almost exclusively for vehicular traffic. However, this was not the case when the Olmsted Plan was developed, and the Olmsted’s designed these parkways to serve cars, bicycles, and pedestrians in a multi-modal scheme. In the early 20\(^{th}\)
century, streets were host to numerous modes of transportation, including pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists, horses, carriages, carts, and automobiles. During the early 20th century, cars were viewed as death machines by much of the public, because, more often than not, they served as such. It wasn’t until a very strong advertisement campaign by car manufacturers in the 1920s that public opinion about cars changed, and the rules of the road shifted to almost exclusively accommodate motorized vehicles.

With this context, it is interesting to note that in 1904, the members of the Park Board themselves did not universally agree on whether to allow motorized vehicles in the parks. Board member Mr. Gittings referred to motorcycles as “bicycles with infernal machines attached.” Given the rapidly changing transportation landscape in Baltimore and the U.S. at large, it was practical that the Olmsteds intended the parkway to be multi-modal. One innovative part of their design was that they built in separate spaces for each mode of transportation, thus ensuring equity and greater safety to all.

The Parkways

The plans that the Olmsted Brothers designed for Baltimore were not completed exactly to the original designs. This is typical in design work, as finances, opportunities, and needs change over the course of a project. However, these parkways are still Olmsted designs, albeit with the input and collaboration of several Baltimoreans, namely Major Richard Venable, Chairman of the Parks Board, William Manning, Superintendent of Parks, George Weems Williams, President of the Board of Park Commissioners, Henry Baetjer, on the Board of Park Commissioners, and Major Joseph Shirley, Chief Engineer of the Topographical Survey Commission. They all worked closely with the Olmsted Brothers, namely P.R. Jones and Frederick Law Olmsted, on the plans for the parkways. Their correspondence shows that the location, design, paths and even names of the parkways was a joint (though sometimes trying) collaboration between the Olmsted Brothers and several city agencies and boards.

33rd Street and The Alameda

The Olmsted Brothers intended for a parkway to run east from Wyman Park to Clifton Park and Lake Montebello. As originally conceived, it was to run along the path of what today is 30th Street. However, by the time the City was ready to move forward on the condemnation of land for the parkway, there was already rapid development in the area. Therefore, the parkway was shifted several blocks north. The parkway is referred to as “Garrett Parkway” in the Olmsted’s papers, which was their suggested name for what became 33rd St. and the Alameda.

In 1907, following a consultation with Frederick Law Olmsted, Major Venable purchased a large tract of land along the path of 33rd Street, which he gave to the city for use as a city park.
27 acre estate, named “Hollywood”, had been the home of Kate F. Taylor, widow of Henry Taylor. It was located to the west of Old York Road. Venable’s thought was that the area was already developing rapidly, and the creation of both the park and the parkway would further spur development. He stated that “Not only will the proposed park prove a breathing place for this rapidly growing section, but it will also be attractive to those using the boulevard.”

Thanks in part to this purchase, the path of 33rd Street was designed to cut through the middle of the parcel, with the northern portion becoming known as “Venable Park”, and later being the site of Memorial Stadium, and now, the Stadium Place development. The southern portion became the site of Eastern High School.

The 1904 Olmsted Report recommended that parkway linking Wyman and Clifton Parks “should be so distinctly park-like in character as to bind them firmly together and maintain a continuity of park feeling, and this cannot well be done unless the main drive and promenade be generally flanked by a reasonable width of parking and the adjoining buildings be kept back to a frontage on separate bordering roads. This would call for a width of not less than 250 feet between building lines instead of a meager 100 feet” as the City was proposing at the time. Ultimately, the parkway as built was more straight and narrow than the original plan.

Called a “magnificent driveway”, 33rd Street was described in this way: “The new street is to have a width of 120 feet, measured from building line to building line. There will be two driveways, each with a width of 24 feet, and a parkway in the centre.” Due to changes in the plan, 33rd Street ran almost straight to Lake Montebello. The Alameda was then created as a comparable 120-foot wide spur that set off southeast from 33rd St to connect to Clifton Park.

The construction of 33rd Street began in 1911, following several years of negotiations with property owners whose homes had to be condemned because they were in the path of the parkway. It was stated that the cost of condemnation would quickly be repaid to the city in a few years time, with the increase in the taxable basis that came from development along 33rd Street. 33rd Street was paved and opened to traffic in late 1914. The “parking”, or planting of 33rd Street was completed in 1916. Since no mention is made of the Alameda separately, it is likely that the Alameda followed the same paving and parking schedule as 33rd Street.

Sketch drawing of 33rd Street plan by P.R. Jones, from his site visit notes on March 15, 1913. (“33rd St. & Alameda – Baltimore” Job # 02422, Garrett Parkway, Item 21. Friends of Maryland’s Olmsted Parks and Landscapes files, Baltimore City Archives.)
Gwynn’s Falls Parkway

Beginning at the western entrance of Druid Hill Park and winding a sinuous path west to Gwynn’s Falls/Leaking Park, Gwynn’s Falls Parkway is the single longest parkway of the Olmsted Plan. It was originally referred to as “Mondawmin Parkway” after the large private estate owned by banker Alexander Brown, which comprised a large portion of the parkway. This parkway is 2 miles long and was the most expensive and complicated parkway (both legally and topographically) to complete. It required the condemnation of many parcels of land. For these reasons, it was unsurprisingly the final parkway completed, almost ten years after the completion of 33rd Street and the Alameda. In 1916, the land for the parkway was condemned and construction began, and the project was completed in 1925.
As conceived in 1906, the Olmsted Brothers designed Gwynn’s Falls Parkway as 200 feet wide, with a central fifty foot-wide main road, flanked by tree-lined green spaces, followed by a riding lane and walking promenade on either side of that, separated with more green space, and bookended both 20 foot wide roads with attached “paths”, or sidewalks. While the riding lane could refer to horses, it likely referred to bicycles, as Olmsted designed the first bicycle path in 1894 on the Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, in a design almost identical to this. In its final design, Gwynn’s Falls Parkway was 120 feet wide and only able to accommodate vehicles in separate traffic lanes divided by a wide central parked median, with pedestrian traffic on the sidewalks.

![The original design of Gwynn’s Falls Parkway, from a letter of April 13, 1906. (From Correspondence for Job # 02421, Gwynns Falls Parkway, Item 12, Friends of Maryland’s Olmsted Parks and Landscapes files, Baltimore City Archives.](image)

**Staff Recommendation:**

**Boundaries of Designation**

1. Because this landmark only consists of the public right-of-way, any proposed work is exempt from obtaining a building permit (Art. 6 section 4-1 of CHAP ordinance).
2. Because this landmark is a public right-of-way, CHAP must accommodate any traffic safety and engineering concerns when reviewing proposed changes to this landmark.
3. CHAP considers the following maintenance and repair; therefore, no Notice-to-proceed is required:
   a. Repair or replacement of street surfaces, curbs, or sidewalks if done using the same paving material; work conducted below ground that will not cause above-ground visual changes such as tree removal; replacement or repair of individual street lights, traffic lights, traffic signs, and temporary signs; installation of traffic lights or signs; and care and maintenance of the greenery of the public right-of-way.
The parkways meet the following CHAP Landmark Designation Standards:
B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:
1. Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history;
3. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction;

Baltimore has been shaped immensely by the work of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and his sons, and they have left their signature on much of Baltimore’s landscape, particularly in the city’s parks and suburban neighborhoods. This designation pertains specifically to Gwynn’s Falls Parkway, 33rd Street, and the Alameda, the parkways in Baltimore City that were designed by the Olmsted Brothers to serve as park connectors between the major city parks. These parkways not only connected the major parks of the city, they ensured citizens had equitable access to green space, greatly shaped the suburban development of the city, and today still serve the citizens of Baltimore.
Maps

1904 Park Plan.
Location of designated parkways

33rd and the Alameda

Gwynn’s Falls Parkway

1 “History” Friends of Maryland’s Olmsted Parks and Landscapes, http://www.olmstedmaryland.org/history/
2 “44th and 45th Annual Reports of the Board of Park Commissioners to the Mayor and City Council of Baltimore for the Fiscal Years Ending December 31, 1903, 1904.” In the Mayor’s Message and Reports of the City Officers, Vol. 2 (Baltimore: Wm. J.C. Dulaney Company, City Printers, 1905), pg. 177-178. Accessible at: https://archive.org/stream/mayorsmessage19042balt#page/n175/mode/2up
3 “MORE PARKS IS THE CRY: Municipal Art Society Holds Annual Meeting MR. ...”
4 “American Killed Loading Bombs”
5 “Linking Our Great Park System By Boulevards: Completing The Boulevard ...” The Sun (1837-1988); Jul 26, 1914; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. SO1
6 “Linking Our Great Park System By Boulevards: Completing The Boulevard ...”
7 “AIMS TO BEAUTY CITY: Municipal Art Society Holds Annual Meeting ...”, The Sun (1837-1988); Jan 15, 1903; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. 1
8 “American Killed Loading Bombs”, The Sun (1837-1988); Sep 16, 1903; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. 8
9 “AIMS TO BEAUTY CITY: Municipal Art Society Holds Annual Meeting...”
10 “TO CONNECT CITY PARKS: Art Society Members Confer With Mayor On Boulevard” The Sun (1837-1988); Dec 6, 1903; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. 14