

Sweet Auburn

Summer 1988

The Newsletter of the Friends of Mount Auburn

Cemetery Design and Frederick Law Olmsted: Myth and Reality

How often have I winced on hearing the misconception that Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) designed Mount Auburn Cemetery or had a hand in its subsequent redesign! Certainly by building a notable career in the design of parks, gardens, and campuses, informed by humanitarianism and environmentalism, Olmsted became the proverbial “legend in his own time”; but, unfortunately, for professional architects and landscape architects as well as for the general public, he has become a myth in OUR time. The historical record should be set straight.

Olmsted was only three in 1825 when Dr. Jacob Bigelow proposed that Bostonians create a “rural” cemetery, the first in America. Olmsted was only nine in 1831, when General Henry A. S. Dearborn, President of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, laid out the grounds of Mount Auburn. By the time Olmsted BEGAN his second career in landscape design in 1857 at age 35, shifting from writing and publishing to superintending construction of New York’s Central Park, Mount Auburn was a mature landscape over a quarter century old; and the cemetery had, by then, been redesigned under Bigelow’s guidance to become a “garden” landscape with the elimination of half of the original forest cover and the planting of ornamentals. By then, Bigelow had designed its major structures—the Egyptian gate and fence, the granite chapel, and the Norman tower. By the time Olmsted entered the field of landscape design, many other “rural” and “garden” cemeteries had been laid out in American cities and towns, large and small, by horticulturists, architects, landscape gardeners, and committees of public-spirited civic leaders. Many of these individuals established national and even international reputations for the design of cemeteries and other park-like landscapes.

Before Olmsted became involved in design, the American public park movement grew out of the “rural” cemetery movement as did the professionalization of landscape architecture. Andrew Jackson Downing, editor of *The Horticulturist* and the first to call himself a “landscape architect” rather than a “landscape gardener,” pointed to the popularity of Mount Auburn and other “rural” cemeteries as “pleasure grounds” in his crusade for state funding of a public park in New York City. Art critic Clarence Cook recalled in 1869 that “these cemeteries were all the rage.” Inevitably, the public wanted such beautiful landscapes “but without the graves.” If Downing had not died in a tragic steamboat accident on the Hudson River in 1852, he undoubtedly would have designed Central Park with his partner Calvert Vaux (1824–95), the British architect who joined him in practice in 1850.

Instead, when a design competition for the park was announced in 1857, Vaux asked Olmsted to join him in submitting an entry. In his youth, Olmsted had informally studied topographical engineering, had taken scientific farming courses at Yale, and had developed an appreciation for parks and landscape gardening while traveling through England in 1852; but until Vaux’s invitation, he had no design experience. He did, however, have important political connections and had already been appointed Superintendent or “architect in chief” for the anticipated park construction. The “Greensward” design submitted by Vaux and Olmsted won first place among about 30 entries. Fourth place went to Howard Daniels, the architect who designed Cincinnati’s Spring Grove and about a dozen other “rural” cemeteries. Based on these credentials, the City of Baltimore then hired Daniels to design Druid Hill Park, their equivalent of Central Park.

One of Olmsted’s early commissions in 1865 was to design Mountain View Cemetery on a steep, treeless site overlooking Oakland, California. Although Laura Wood Roper, his biographer, claims that Olmsted “had for some time wanted to try his hand

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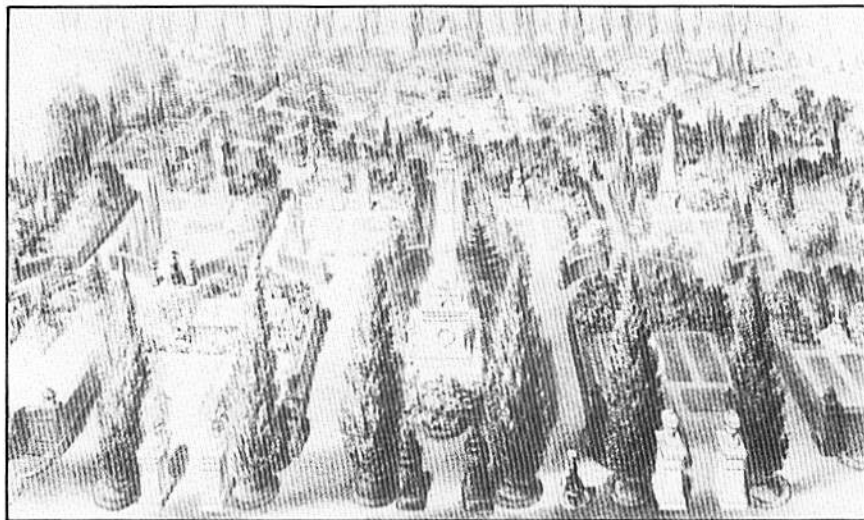
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Frederick Law Olmsted



Mountain View Cemetery, Oakland, California, 1865

at a rural cemetery on the order of Spring Grove," evidence suggests that Olmsted considered pastoralism an inappropriate style for a funerary landscape. In his design of Mountain View, Olmsted abandoned the English style which had inspired Mount Auburn and other "rural" cemeteries and which he and Vaux so successfully applied to park design. In contrast, the Oakland cemetery is a severe, linear grid of hedges and walls defining family plots in a formal manner. Olmsted's cemetery design reflected his personal conviction that cemeteries should be simply expressive of their burial functions and not resemble parks or double as "pleasure grounds." He explained to his patrons in 1865: "A part of your grounds is a plain surface, mainly level . . . as far as possible from being suggestive of picturesque treatment." In the Mountain View design, "each road is carried from one end to the other in a straight line and bordered by rows of trees forming an avenue—the simplest and most natural course." But topography did not account for Olmsted's rejection of the picturesque here. Many "rural" cemeteries had picturesque designs of winding roads, irregular massing of plants, and reflective bodies of water imposed on relatively flat terrain. Indeed, Mountain View's sponsors decided not to extend Olmsted's linear design onto sections that were later added to their cemetery and laid out in a picturesque fashion.

Olmsted used the picturesque in non-funerary landscapes. In collaboration with Vaux from 1857 until 1878 and in his private practice from 1883 to 1896, Olmsted produced parks for New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Montreal, Louisville, and Chicago, drawing upon the landscape aesthetics first seen in America at Mount Auburn. In Boston, his "Emerald Necklace" regional park system

developed after 1878 joined already existing green spaces—the Public Garden (by Boston architect George Meacham, 1859–60), the boulevard of Commonwealth Avenue (1860s–70s), and Forest Hills Cemetery (designed by Dearborn in 1845)—with his own parks—the Arnold Arboretum (1879), the Fens (1879–1895), and Franklin Park (1885). But even the plan for a chain of green parks through the metropolitan area had precedents in proposals by Robert Morris Copeland and Uriel Crocker. Crocker had been a Mount Auburn trustee from 1856 to 1865.

Olmsted took up residence in Brookline in 1883 and remained in the Boston area until his death in 1903 at the McLean Asylum, having spent his last five years in senility, living in the park-like institutional grounds he had designed in 1872.

Olmsted was cremated at Mount Auburn on August 31, 1903 after private services held in his home. Cremation was quite new and rare in the United States at that time, and Mount Auburn's crematory had just been built in 1900. Olmsted's ashes were retained at Mount Auburn until May 9, 1907, when, according to his biographer Roper, they were "deposited, without ceremony and without mourners, in the family vault in the Old North Cemetery (a graveyard dating from the colonial period) at Hartford. Olmsted had never cared for pomp, and he had thought cremation the only decent way to dispose of the dead."

Exaggeration of Olmsted's seminal role in the history of American landscape architecture began during his lifetime. For instance, Carl Alwin Schenck, a German forester brought to America by conservationist Gifford Pinchot, praised Olmsted in the 1890s as "not merely the great authority on all landscapism but indeed the creator of landscape architec-

ture in the U.S.A." More recently, biographers and even historians have been so zealous in their praise of Olmsted that the man has taken on the stature of an Adam in a creation myth of the profession of American landscape architecture at the expense of due recognition of the many pre-professional and early professional landscape designers who contributed to the "rural" cemetery movement as well as to nineteenth-century parks and suburbs inspired by "rural" taste. The resulting misconception has led some to mislabel Mount Auburn's founders and developers, Dearborn and Bigelow, as "amateurs," while Olmsted is dubbed "an American visionary," a "revolutionary" comparable in wide ranging expertise to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, "this lost American hero," the "acknowledged father of American landscape architecture," a designer of "heroic quality," and a "pioneer" in environmental design. The superlatives are endless. Olmsted created a heritage of finely designed landscapes of enduring importance; and his social consciousness and early advocacy of environmentalism form a legacy for the twentieth century. But exaggeration of Olmsted's place in a much longer, more complex, and very rich history of American landscape design is more than error; it is an injustice to other important contributors, including Mount Auburn's founders.

Written by historian Blanche Linden-Ward. Dr. Linden-Ward is Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the American Culture Program at Emerson College. Her book, Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery, is scheduled for publication by Ohio State University Press in the fall of 1988.

*William C. Clendaniel,
the new President of
Mount Auburn Cemetery,
introduces himself
and shares
some initial thoughts.*

Bill Clendaniel grew up in Woodstock, Vermont, attending The Choate School and Williams College, where he majored in history. An English-speaking Union Schoolboy Fellow and a Rhodes Scholar, he spent a total of three years living in England where he increased his exposure to history, horticulture and the fine arts.

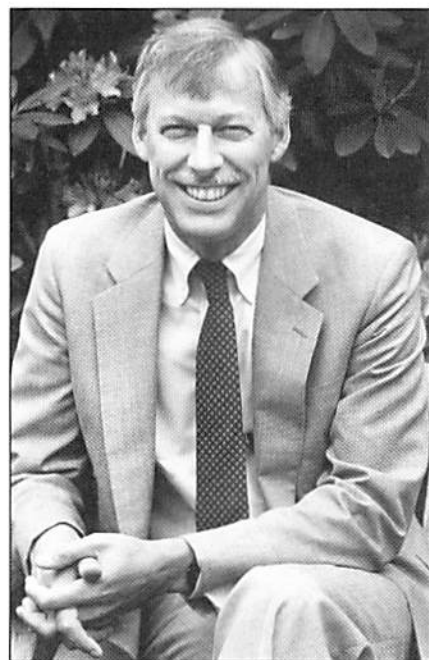
After receiving an MA from Oxford University, Bill served as an officer on a guided-missile destroyer in the Pacific fleet during the Vietnam War. Returning to New England in 1972, he received a JD degree from Harvard Law School and practiced briefly at Palmer & Dodge in Boston. After serving as Legal Counsel to the Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management Program under Environmental Secretary Evelyn Murphy, he became Deputy Director of The Trustees of Reservations, the largest private owner of conservation land in Massachusetts. As Deputy Director, he was responsible for the management of 70 properties across the state, including eight historic houses. He currently serves as a member of the statewide advisory committee for the Commonwealth's Olmsted Historic Landscape Preservation Program.

Bill has lived in Concord, Massachusetts for 12 years where he has been active in town government. He and his wife Debby have two sons, Cameron (9) and Douglas (5). They all enjoy skiing, sailing, and gardening.

As I write this in mid-June, I have been at Mount Auburn for just over three months. I am deeply honored to be the twelfth President of this very distinguished institution and to be following in Alan Chesney's able footsteps. Mount Auburn's many facets and the countless ways it serves the public make it an exciting place to work.

Over the past several months I have been struck by how many people I have met in the greater Boston area and beyond who have very special feelings about this Cemetery. Their affection is not just for the physical place; it is also for its people and the high standards they have created. While this loyalty may be no surprise to all of you, it is impressive testimony to the skill and dedication of the staff and the Trustees over many years. This sense of serving the public with the highest possible level of quality—whether it is providing burial or cremation services, maintaining a place of great beauty or preserving a precious part of our artistic and historical heritage—is the essence of this institution. I am committed to doing all I can to maintain that tradition.

As we look to the future, it is clear that Mount Auburn will increasingly become a destination for those interested in its horticulture, birds, sculpture and the history represented by those buried here. Our challenge will be to respond to this interest with improved interpretive materials, programs and physical improvements without sacrificing the tranquility appropriate to a cemetery and the essential character of Mount Auburn. As we plan for that future, I welcome your thoughts and ideas. Already I have met a number of proprietors, lot owners and Friends. I hope to meet many more of you in the months to come. Together, I am confident we will turn Mount Auburn over to future generations an even stronger and more beautiful place than it is today.



Photograph by Peter Southwick

Thank You

Mount Auburn would like to honor the efforts and generous support of some special part-time employees and volunteers. We have been able to increase public awareness and appreciation of the Cemetery largely due to the conscientious work of the following people:

Kathleen Dowhan Leslie has been cataloging the Cemetery's book collection since April 1986, and it will soon be accessible by card catalog. Kathleen came to Mount Auburn with degrees in Library Science and Law as well as with experience as a librarian. In addition, her special interests in historic preservation and New England Studies have led her to organize the Cemetery's archives, and she is cataloging photographs, maps, correspondence and miscellaneous ephemera. Kathleen has provided an invaluable contribution to preserving Mount Auburn Cemetery's role as an American cultural institution.

Following a maternity leave, Kathleen has returned part-time to assist Jean Rosenberg. She will be responsible for administering the Friends education and membership programs as well as overseeing *Sweet Auburn* and other Friends' publications during Jean's maternity leave this fall.

Boston College student Elizabeth Johnson has worked for us for two years. She has put in countless hours at our computer, entering data for mailing lists and the library card catalog and assisting with Friends' membership mailings. We are most fortunate to benefit from her administrative skills.

Volunteers Agnes Starkey and Roberta McDermott have, since 1986, contributed their mornings, afternoons and evenings, rain or shine, to host many programs sponsored by the Friends. Their warm welcome to members and guests has been an essential part of our events, and we are all indebted to both gracious women for their many contributions.

Congratulations

to Walter Morrison, MAC crematory employee, and his wife Deborah. They celebrated the birth of their second son, Alex, on January 9, 1988. Alex joins his three-year-old brother Zachary.

to Paul Walker, MAC gardening crew employee and arborist, and his wife Laurie-ann. They celebrated the birth of their first child, James Paul, on April 4, 1988.

to Kathleen D. Leslie, MAC archivist and membership/program assistant, and her husband Rick. They celebrated the birth of their first child, Gregory Dowhan, on May 10, 1988.

Volunteer Opportunities

The Friends is interested in developing a concert series of musicians performing compositions by Mount Auburn's composers and music that was written to the words of Mount Auburn's writers. If you are interested in helping with such a series or have ideas about music that should be included, please contact Jean Rosenberg.

The programs sponsored by the Friends are greatly enhanced by volunteers who greet members and guests and assist with refreshments. If you are interested in helping us this fall, please contact Jean.



Welcome

to new Greenhouse employee Harry White. A native New Englander, Harry received a degree in interior design from the University of Connecticut, and has lived in the Boston area and East Hampton, New York. He has worked as an interior designer, garden designer and florist, and has pioneered his own medium of collage using plant materials. He is also an established author, having had articles published in *Smithsonian*, *American Horticulture*, *Horticulture*, *Yankee*, and Grolier Press' *Book of Knowledge*.

to new Friend and volunteer Virginia Hibbard. A 1984 graduate of the Radcliffe Seminars Landscape Design Program, Ginny is a landscape designer who lives in Weston with her husband and two sons. She has a special interest in the history of landscape design, and is developing ideas on how Mount Auburn can become more of an historical and natural history resource, as well as an outdoor classroom, to local schools. Our goal is to increase teacher and student knowledge of the cemetery's diverse assets. Members of the Friends are encouraged to contact Jean with suggestions for teacher contacts in Cambridge and Watertown schools.

Notice

The listing of Friends that members received in May was a listing of Charter and New Members for calendar 1987. Members joining since January 1, 1988, will be recognized in a forthcoming issue of *Sweet Auburn*. If any 1987 member was incorrectly listed, please accept our sincere apologies, and let us know so we can correct our records.



**Charles
Mason
Hovey**
1810-1887

One of the pleasures of our New England summer centers around the enjoyment of native fruits. Fresh, firm strawberries add interest to garden parties, buffets and family desserts. The horticulturist who made possible this

important contribution to our palate was Charles Mason Hovey, who spent his life in Cambridge introducing the public to new plants and shrubs.

The son of a West Indies goods merchant in Central Square, Cambridge, his early love of flowers was encouraged by his mother, Sarah Stone Hovey, whose family owned the farm which now comprises part of Mount Auburn Cemetery. As a teenager he experimented with hybridizing plants, developing a list of over thirty strawberry varieties as early as 1830. The most reliable of these, the Hovey Seedling Strawberry, was introduced in 1838 at an exhibition of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society and was recognized by judges as a "perfect



strawberry." The fruits were "larger, better colored, firmer in the flesh, and the plants more productive than those of any variety that had been grown in America." It became the foundation for a local market-garden trade which offered the average person an opportunity to enjoy fresh produce at an affordable price. Through his pioneering efforts, many New England cultivators were inspired to develop new varieties of berries, peaches, pears and plums.

With his brother Phineas, he established the Hovey Nursery in Cambridge, and for over fifty years it was an experimental showplace for useful as well as ornamental native plants. The Nursery included the cultivation of forty acres and twenty greenhouses, and several strains of Hovey's unique camellias, lilies, azaleas and evergreens are still offered today.

Because he realized that the exchange of horticultural information would be the most productive way of stimulating intelligent gardening, Hovey edited "The Magazine of Horticulture" for over thirty-four years. This magazine was "the most popular periodical of its kind in America."

An Invitation to Join The Friends of Mount Auburn

Please enroll me as a member of the Friends of Mount Auburn.

- Individual \$10
- Household \$20
- Senior Citizens and Students \$5

In addition to my membership dues, I would also like to contribute \$_____ to help defray the costs of the Friends.

Contributions over membership dues are deductible from income taxes to the extent provided by law.

Enclosed is my check for \$_____ payable to
Mount Auburn Cemetery.

M

Name(s)

Address

Telephone

If you would like this to be a gift membership, please enclose your name and address so that we may notify the recipient.

Friends of Mount Auburn
Mount Auburn Cemetery
580 Mount Auburn Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
617/547-7105

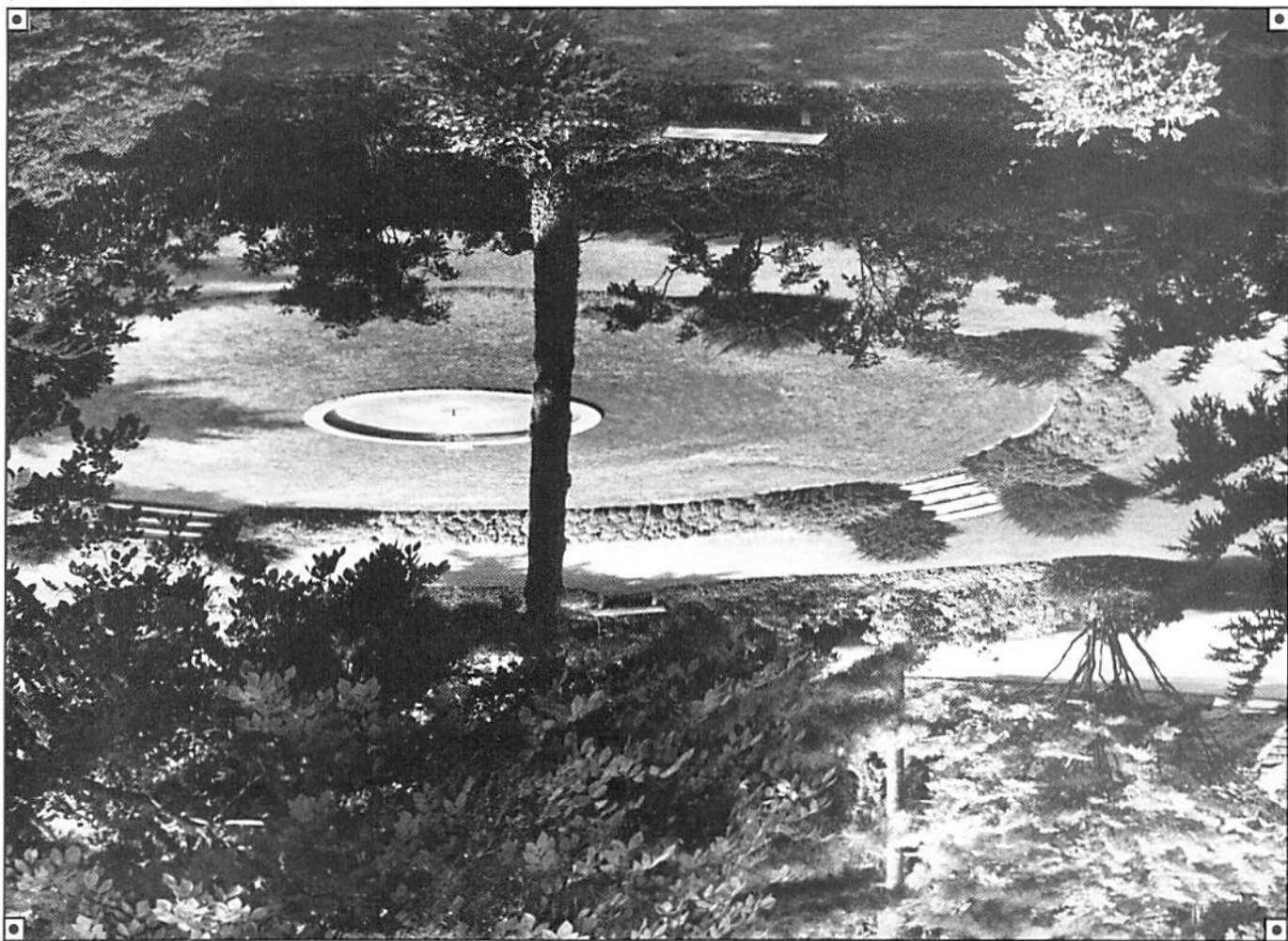
One of his fondest hopes was to raise the level of American horticulture to the art form practiced by European cultivators.

While managing the Nursery and magazine, he operated a seed store in Quincy Market, Boston, which supplied quality merchandise to growers across the country. The Hovey seed, bulb and flower catalogs presented an amazing array of hundreds of plant varieties. In a more formal vein, he authored the two-volume *Fruits of America*, which contained over one hundred colored plates and itemized native American plants.

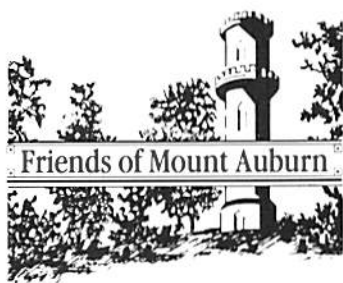
With unflagging interest he worked for the expansion of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. During the mid-1860s, as President of the Society, he was instrumental in constructing a horticultural hall in Boston which became a focus for exhibitions, lectures and the dissemination of floral knowledge. The testimonial of the Society, taken from its October 1887 *Transactions*, best summarizes Charles Hovey's spirit: "A man of ceaseless activity, untiring energy, keen observation, retentive memory, countless enthusiasm, he brought to his work qualities which ensured progress."

Charles Mason Hovey is buried at the corner of Mound and Spruce Avenues, Lot 4205, F4 on the map.

Written by Deirdre Morris, a Friend of Mount Auburn and a Cambridge resident who studies local history and is active in community gardening.



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