



David Grayson Allen. *The Olmsted National Historic Site and the Growth of Landscape Preservation*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2007, 317 pp., photographs, plans, cloth, \$50.00, ISBN 1-5555-3679-4.

David Grayson Allen's *The Olmsted National Historic Site and the Growth of Historic Landscape Preservation* arrives at a time when best historic preservation practice finally ensures that all features of a historic property—buildings, structures, and landscapes—are considered when undertaking any study or work. There was a time, however, when historic sites almost exclusively emphasized buildings only, with little regard for their surroundings. *The Olmsted National Historic Site* documents this change of approach by showing how the National Park Service revised its policies and practices from preserving artifacts for the sake of antiquarian interest to focusing on their intrinsic value.

Allen, a historian and former NEH fellow, details the chronology of Fairsted, home and office of America's preeminent landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, and its transition to the Olmsted National Historic Site. From Fairsted, Olmsted and his successors dominated the development, practice, and style of landscape architecture in America, designing more than five thousand commissions in forty-five states between 1883 and 1979. In 1980, the NPS transformed the 1.75-acre property from its longtime domestic and office use to a public site housing the Olmsted firm's archives and a research center. With the 1992 onsite establishment of

the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, which publishes studies related to landscape preservation and offers resources and support to all federally-owned parks, the NPS cemented its commitment to developing an expertise in landscape architecture, preservation, and maintenance. Since then, the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, now relocated off site, has become an undeniable leader in the historic landscape preservation movement.

One cannot argue with the extraordinary success of the Olmsted National Historic Site; between 1987 and 1995, its annual budget increased from \$700,000 to nearly \$2.5 million, and it now retains a staff of nearly sixty-five. According to Allen, the prospect of ensuring the preservation of Olmsted's home, office, landscape, and collections presented a remarkable opportunity for the NPS to fill a void in its holdings on historic landscapes, for which it had been criticized. Beginning in the 1970s, interest in historic landscapes and their preservation grew substantially, both within the NPS and in the larger historic preservation community. By the late 1980s, the NPS commitment to historic landscapes was well established, and Allen credits this transformation almost entirely to the success of the Olmsted site. Yet, Allen contends, the development of the Olmsted property into a historic site was a nontraditional, entrepreneurial experiment, fraught with unanticipated events and enormously challenging discoveries that forever altered the NPS approach to archival collections and landscapes.

The first section of Allen's book is devoted to NPS negotiations for acquiring the property and its collections, initial planning efforts, and the development of the site's earliest General Management Plan (GMP). The second section contains a useful chronology of America's growing interest in historic landscapes and their preservation. However, the remaining third of the book overlaps and repeats some of the material described earlier. Throughout the book, Allen laboriously references the GMP to describe the intricacies of budgets, fundraising, and internal planning; this information is not essential to the general reader's understanding of the history, development, interpretation, and management of the site. Regrettably, Allen offers few specifics on how the

NPS approach to historic landscapes has influenced or informed other historic sites, either regionally or nationally.

The Olmsted National Historic Site has its genesis in the NPS administrative history of the site, an internal document meant to guide the management and interpretation of its properties. The primary audience, therefore, seems to be the NPS itself; however, museum or historic preservation professionals associated with similar or analogous historic sites will find the issues detailed by Allen to be uncomfortably familiar, especially those centering on staffing and morale, funding (or lack thereof), programming, and disappointing or failed partnerships. While those unfamiliar with historic site management and those more generally interested in historic landscapes could find Allen's chronicle overwhelming and perhaps even discouraging, nonetheless, the successes and failures he describes are well analyzed, informative, and at times even gripping.

Despite these criticisms, Allen's conclusions are insightful, and the appendices, notes, bibliography, and index testify to the depth of the research and attention given to the book. His treatment of the increasing interest in landscape architecture during the twentieth century, the various organizations that prompted (and pressured) the NPS to change its approach to landscape management, and the missed opportunities in the early years of the Olmsted site is honest and direct. As Allen notes, its extensive constellation of available resources—a historic house, offices, archives, and the landscape—allowed the Olmstead National Historic Site to become a laboratory that now tangibly demonstrates current landscape restoration practice. Allen's style is accessible and engaging, ensuring that this well-written book will have a place among the canon of historic preservation philosophy as a valuable, in-depth look at what, in the late twentieth century, justified the establishment of yet another public historic site with a landscape focus.

The *Olmsted National Historic Site* ultimately convinces the reader that by using what some saw as a less-than-desirable site to undertake such an enterprising, new, landscape-oriented initiative, the NPS was extraordinarily, if also accidentally, visionary.

It is clear that from its inception as a resource-oriented site to the groundbreaking appointment of landscape professionals in key positions, the Olmsted National Historic Site has evolved into a model for historic landscape conservation and preservation. In the end, one is left feeling, what better place for the National Park Service to answer that call than Olmsted's Fairsted?

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