

SPOKANE

## Olmsteds' legacy as close as nearest city park

Jim Kershner  
Staff writer  
May 27, 2007

Drive around Spokane in 2007 and everywhere you look, you'll detect a common theme:

- Cannon Hill Park – the Olmsteds designed it.
- Finch Arboretum – the Olmsteds conceived it.
- Downriver Park – the Olmsteds suggested it.
- Manito Park – the Olmsteds improved it.
- Rockwood Boulevard – the Olmsteds plotted it.
- Gorge Park – the Olmsteds dreamed of it, 100 years early.

**Graphic:** [The Olmsteds' 1908 park plan](#)

**Video Journal:** [Legacy of the Olmsted Brothers](#)

Who were these legendary Olmsteds? And how did they come to shape so much of Spokane a century later? The Olmsted Brothers, Landscape Architects, were the most famous urban planners in America at a time when the term urban planner hadn't even been invented. Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. was responsible for New York's Central Park, the U.S. Capitol Grounds and the famous Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

He died in 1903, but his firm carried on under his son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., and his nephew, John Charles Olmsted. The cousins, who were also stepbrothers, became famous in their own right for championing the City Beautiful movement, dedicated to urban planning and beautification.

In 1907, the youthful Spokane was ripe for beautification. Aubrey White, the president of the city's new Park Board, was filled with enthusiasm for the City Beautiful movement, and he also felt a sense of urgency. Spokane was growing so fast, he felt that the city had to act immediately if it were to acquire park land cheaply and avoid the mistakes of the big cities back east.

He knew the Olmsteds were designing projects in Seattle and Portland, so he hired them to stop off in Spokane on the way to and from these projects to prepare a report for the city.

Over several visits in 1907 and 1908, White accompanied John Charles Olmsted or his associate, James Frederick Dawson, all over the city – to the river gorge, to Manito Park, to Indian Canyon, to Corbin Park. Those two men took notes for their report, but they did more than that. According to local historian John Fahey, White paid Olmsted \$50 out of his own pocket to also dispense as much verbal advice as he could give.

It is no exaggeration to say that those visits changed the look of Spokane forever.

"It set the character of Spokane's parks – and that character was unmistakable," said Taylor Bressler, manager of planning and development of the city's Parks Department. "A lot of cities would take parks where they could – but this was a planned effort."

Even today, when planners and activists seek inspiration, they "still pick up that old Olmsted report," said Sally Reynolds, a Spokane historic preservation consultant and an Olmsted authority.

"Their legacy continues to influence our urban forms," said Reynolds.

Two Olmsted themes are immediately evident today. First, they believed that every home, from humble to grand, should be within easy walking distance of a neighborhood park. A map of Spokane's current parks system shows parks dotted almost evenly, north to south, east to west.

They also believed that a great deal of park land should be left natural and undeveloped so that residents could, in the words of Bressler, "withdraw, recreate or re-create." Today, Spokane holds huge swaths of parkland that are essentially wild, including Palisades Park, on the city's western rimrocks and Hangman Park, between High Drive and Latah Creek.

The third theme is also evident today: The more parks the better.

The Olmsteds believed that "city life involves a continual strain on the nerves" and "has a decidedly depressing effect on the general health and stamina." Nothing was a better antidote than parks, and lots of them.

Olmsted and Dawson went back to their offices in Brookline, Mass., and prepared a comprehensive report (for what today seems an absurdly low price of \$1,000) which was delivered to the city in 1908.

The report had many ambitious recommendations, including four new, large parks:

- **Gorge Park** – Covering the banks of the Spokane River downstream from the falls all the way to the Natatorium Park site, at the approximate spot where Boone Street would intersect the river.

The Olmsteds recognized early that this gorge "is a tremendous feature of the landscape and one which is rarer in a large city than river, lake, bay or mountain."

- **Upriver Park** – A huge area on both banks of the Spokane River beginning at about Havana and extending east.

- **Downriver Park** – The river gorge downstream from Natatorium Park, mostly on the river's north bank.

- **Latah Park** – A huge swath of land from the mouth of Latah Creek upstream to the present Creek at Qualchan Golf Course, including the bluff between High Drive and the creek.

The Olmsted Report also called for a number of new, somewhat smaller "local parks," including:

- **Rockwood Park** – Near Rockwood Boulevard and Southeast Boulevard.

- **Queen Anne Park** – In a ravine west of Latah Creek and below Garden Springs.

- **Ravine Park** – Extending along both sides of a steep ravine high above the confluence of Latah Creek and the Spokane River.

- **West Heights Park** – On the wooded heights high above Greenwood Cemetery.

- **Eastside Park** – Along the Spokane River, from about Freya upstream to Upriver Park.

Then the report recommended a whopping 11 playfields, scattered evenly about the city, including Logan, Lidgerwood, Sinto, Underhill and Hays playfields.

"There is no question but that the land in the playfields will be worth all its cost to the present generation, who will pay for it, even if it is only graded and smoothed to enable the boys to play ball upon it," said the report.

The Olmsted Report also had detailed recommendations for improving the city's existing parks, including:

- **Manito Park** – Expand the park, put in playfields, make better aesthetic use of the dramatic rock ledges and lose (as soon as possible) the zoo.

- **Corbin Park** – Add a pretty shelter house in the center, tennis courts, playgrounds and winding walkways.

- **Adams Park (soon renamed Cannon Hill Park)** – Create a willow-shaded pond, a curved drive, a little brook, a rock footbridge and a shelter.

- **Liberty Park** – Add a lake, playfields and tennis courts.

The Olmsteds supplemented these suggestions with elegant drawings of several parks, notably Corbin, Cannon Hill and Liberty parks. The drawings are works of art in themselves.

They also suggested a system of parkways, such as Upriver Parkway, Manito Boulevard and Rockwood Boulevard (the Olmsteds had been privately retained to design the entire Rockwood neighborhood).

The Olmsteds also made suggestions about Spokane's street design – they were highly in favor of diagonal boulevards such as Northwest Boulevard and Southeast Boulevard.

The report was submitted to the Park Board in 1908, with absolutely zero fanfare. White kept it quiet because he was worried that landowners would jack up their prices if they knew about the report.

White proceeded to quietly acquire as much land as he could.

"He did things you could never do today," said Reynolds. "He would put his own money down to hold land and hope to get repaid. And he cajoled all of his influential friends to donate land as well."

Yet to acquire the amount of land recommended by the Olmsteds – an impressive 1,953 acres – would require serious money in the form of a bond issue. White and the other board members immediately floated a \$1 million bond issue, which eventually passed in 1910

by a margin of only 18 votes.

By 1913, when the Park Board finally released the Olmsted Report to the public, White proudly wrote that the board had already "carried out the recommendations of the Olmsted Bros., and by purchase and donation, have increased the public park area of Spokane from 173 acres to 1,934 acres."

Not every recommendation was carried out exactly. Some compromises were necessary due to the difficulty of land acquisition and to the fact that the \$1 million bond issue was reduced to \$888,982 because of litigation. Many other changes took place later as the city evolved over the decades.

Yet a large proportion of Spokane's parks can be traced back to the Olmsteds' recommendations, although now they are often known by different names. Here's what some of those Olmsted-recommended parks are today:

•**Gorge Park** – This area now consists of the 200-acre High Bridge Park and the Herbert M. Hamblen Conservation Area.

The railroad-choked riverfront above the falls was not part of the Olmsted plan, but only because, as the Olmsteds dryly noted, it had "already been partially 'improved,' as one might ironically say."

But they predicted that the city would come to its senses some day.

"They said, 'You've missed it right now, but you'll discover it before you can destroy it,' " said Bressler.

In the 1970s, the city did discover it. The area was reclaimed as part of Expo '74 to become Riverfront Park.

•**Upriver Park** – The area south of the river was briefly made into Spokane's first public golf course, Upriver Golf Course, but in 1916 was converted into Spokane's first airfield, now Felts Field.

The part north of the river now includes the 147-acre Upriver Park Conservation Land, Camp Sekani Park and Minnehaha Rocks.

•**Downriver Park** – This is now the 95-acre Downriver Park Conservation Land and Downriver Golf Course.

"Some people cringe when you say it is now a golf course, but our golf courses are fabulous," said Reynolds. "They retain a lot of the natural area."

•**Latah Park** – Qualchan Hills Park and the Creek at Qualchan Golf Course now occupy large areas along the creek. High Drive Parkway and the 292-acre undeveloped Hangman Park occupy the bluff areas above.

•**Rockwood Park** – Is today the 51-acre Lincoln Park.

•**Queen Anne Park** – Is today the 56-acre Finch Arboretum

•**Ravine Park** – Is today Indian Canyon Golf Course, the undeveloped 155-acre Indian Canyon Park and part of High Bridge Park.

•**West Heights Park** – Is now the 464-acre Palisades Park, on rimrocks on the city's west side.

•**Eastside Park** – It was never acquired, and Spokane Community College sits on part of that land. However, land on or near the recommended site is now Upriver Drive Parkway, Minnehaha Park, Esmeralda Golf Course and part of the Centennial Trail.

Many of the playfields recommended by the report are still in existence today. Those include Hays, Logan Peace and Underhill parks. The two Lidgerwood playfields became Byrne Park and Glass Park. Sinto Park is now Chief Garry Park.

Many of the parks that already existed in 1907 still retain evidence of the improvements suggested by the Olmsteds:

•**Cannon Hill Park** – Now home to ducks, thanks to the pond designed by the Olmsteds. The rock bridge over a second small wading pond now spans only grass. Yet, according to both Bressler and Reynolds, this is the Spokane park that continues to most clearly reflect the Olmsted aesthetic.

•**Liberty Park** – Became one of Spokane's prettiest parks but was altered by Interstate 90.

•**Corbin Park** – The original recommendation – playfields, tennis courts, a bandstand – was shot down by neighbors who wanted a small, quiet "beauty spot." Olmsted drew a revised design with curved paths and a never-installed central fountain and "mirror basin." The rest of the park retains a few Olmsted touches.

•**Manito Park** – While not designed by the Olmsteds, today's park incorporates many of their verbal suggestions, including the curved drives and walkways. The Olmsted touch is also evident in the park's stone buildings and gardens. Spokane's first park superintendent, John Duncan (of Duncan Garden fame), gave Manito a distinct Olmsted-like flavor after he was hired in 1910. He was an Olmsted devotee from Boston.

A century later, Spokane is still filled with Olmsted devotees. A group calling itself the Olmsted Centennial Celebration 2008 is already busy planning a number of tours, projects and festivities for next year.

Then, in October, the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture will open a major exhibit devoted to the firm's legacy in Spokane, according to curator of history Marsha Rooney. The title: "Olmsted Brothers: Designing Spokane's Landscapes."

Meanwhile, if you can't wait until October, take a stroll through Cannon Hill Park or hike the trails of Hangman Park. The legacy surrounds you.