

# Who was Frederick Law Olmsted?



**FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED** (1822- 1903), a Hartford native, is widely recognized as America's premier landscape architect and parkmaker. His accomplishments in the field of park design, conservation, town planning, and landscape architecture have national and international significance.

Prior to pioneering the field of landscape architecture, Olmsted was involved in surveying, importing, farming, sea-faring, civil service, managing of a gold mine, and journalism.

Olmsted began his primary career in 1857, when he was hired as superintendent of New York's Central Park, an experience which helped cultivate his belief that parks can play a significant role in the reform of society. He went on to create Boston's "Emerald Necklace" park system, Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and hundreds more distinguished landmarks.

In 1883, Olmsted moved to Brookline, Massachusetts, where he established the first full-scale professional office dedicated to landscape architecture in the U.S. Swampscott was to be one of Olmsted's final projects; he retired in 1895 due to failing health.

Olmsted once commented that "the comprehensive improvement of Boston suburbs" was his firm's most important work.

The Olmsted firm designed thousands of public and private landscapes from the Brookline office until 1980. The office is preserved as the Olmsted National Historic Site administered by the National Park Service.



Detail of John Singer Sargent painting, above, used with permission from The Biltmore Company, Asheville, North Carolina.

*"FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED... an artist, he paints with lakes and wooded slopes; with lawns and banks and forest-covered hills; with mountain sides and ocean views. He should stand where I do tonight..."*

**DANIEL BURNHAM, CHIEF ARCHITECT  
1893 CHICAGO WORLD'S FAIR**



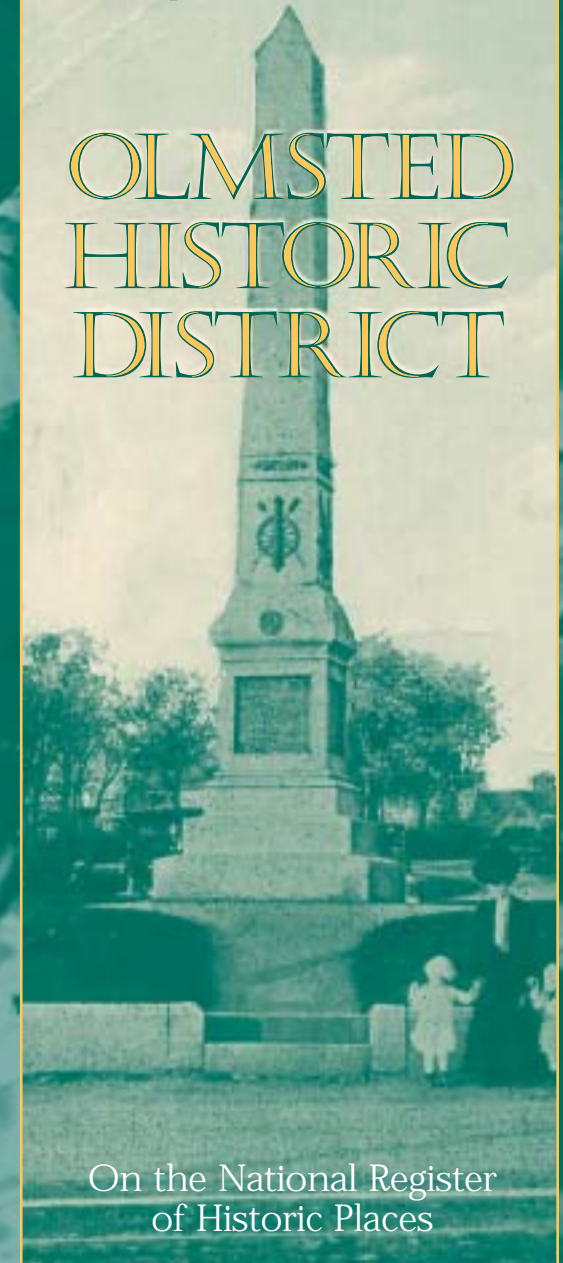
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Swampscott, Massachusetts

# OLMSTED HISTORIC DISTRICT



On the National Register  
of Historic Places

**HERITAGE TRAIL MAP INSIDE**

BROCHURE COURTESY OF  
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# Welcome to Swampscott's Olmsted Historic District

Swampscott's Olmsted Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is an exceptionally well-preserved residential area designed in 1888 by Frederick Law Olmsted, revered as the father of American landscape architecture.

Best known as the designer of Boston's "Emerald Necklace" park system and New York's Central Park, Olmsted came to Swampscott at the behest of the Swampscott Land Trust to create one of the North Shore's first residential subdivisions.

Olmsted's distinctive signature is evident throughout the district: a dramatic entrance parkway, picturesque thoroughfares winding gently along rolling hills, beautiful plantings, an ideal balance between privacy and community for the neighborhood.

Today, Frederick Law Olmsted's vision for Swampscott is as fresh as it was in 1888. We invite you to tour the Olmsted District — and the rest of our historic town. Imagine how Swampscott appeared back then. Discover how much (or how little) the town has changed since Olmsted made his mark. Use this heritage trail map as your guide. Happy exploring!



MUDGE ESTATE, SWAMPSCOTT, MASS.

Mudge Estate, circa 1850.  
Current site of First Church in Swampscott.



EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SWAMPSCOTT, MASS.



MONUMENT SQUARE, SWAMPSCOTT, MASS.

## Olmsted & Swampscott

In the late 19th century, Swampscott was an esteemed seaside resort community. Thousands of visitors arrived each summer from all points of New England and beyond, thirsting for the town's tonic of ocean air, picture-book scenery, and indulgent hospitality.

Many of these visitors liked Swampscott so well they desired to live here year-round. With the Eastern Railroad in place, the town was perceived as a perfect bedroom community for business professionals commuting to nearby Lynn, Salem, and Boston. The stage was set for an unprecedented building boom that would complete Swampscott's transformation into the residential community it is today.

The heirs of Enoch Redington Mudge recognized the opportunities in this situation. Mudge, a wealthy merchant and financier, died in 1881, leaving an oceanfront, 130-acre estate in the heart of Swampscott. His heirs and other investors formed the Swampscott Land Trust in 1887 to develop the property into residential lots. The Trust contracted Frederick Law Olmsted, by then the nation's most celebrated landscape architect, to draw up the plans.

## Olmsted's Vision for Swampscott

When Olmsted arrived in Swampscott, he had already pioneered the development of suburban planning and formulated an original set of design principals, which included "gracefully-curved lines [in street layouts], generous spaces, and the absence of sharp corners... The idea being to suggest and imply leisure, contemplativeness and happy tranquility." Olmsted's designs were meant to counteract the rapidly industrialized 19th-century landscape with natural, greener living environments.

This philosophy is readily apparent in Olmsted's plan for Swampscott. He envisioned 191 house lots of varying sizes, smaller ones generally on the subdivision's borders and larger lots on the rocky hillsides of the estate's interior, to attract a wide range of buyers. Connecting the lots were streets which meandered through the hills and valleys like rural pathways. At the main entrance, Olmsted planned a grand public boulevard dotted with civic monuments, flowering trees, and sculpted shrubbery.

With Olmsted's plan in hand, the Swampscott Land Trust began selling the lots with the intent of creating an exclusive, middle class neighborhood. Deeds carried the restriction that no building was to be used for the purposes of mercantile, manufacturing, livery, or the sale of liquor. Swampscott contractor Hendricks Tuttle laid down gravel sidewalks and roads (many of which were named for Civil War notables), bronze electric street lights were installed, and the sales push commenced. By 1917 the subdivision was largely complete, with homes, churches, community buildings, and the lush landscaping of Olmsted's imagining.

Through the years, the neighborhood has remained strikingly true to Olmsted's original vision. Aside from a few newer houses constructed on subdivided lots, paved streets, and the auto traffic they convey, the area today continues to be a place, as Olmsted would approve, of "happy tranquility."

Photo of Frederick Law Olmsted, above, courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted Historic Site.

## The Professor's Observatory

Professor Elihu Thomson constructed an observatory on his front lawn (currently Town Hall lawn). He personally assembled the optically-precise 10-inch telescope and used it for 35 years.

## Road Trips

The original streets in the Olmsted District were crushed gravel, sufficient for the carriage and foot traffic of Olmsted's day. With the advent of the automobile, though, paved surfaces often resulted in mishaps on Olmsted's curving thoroughfares.

## Other Projects

Before its closure in 1980, the Olmsted firm worked on a total of 12 projects in Swampscott, including work for Tedesco Country Club and the Swampscott Park Commission. The Swampscott Land Trust development, though, was the only project on which Frederick Law Olmsted himself worked.

