

## The 1918 Olmsted Brothers Report: America's First National Park Master Plan

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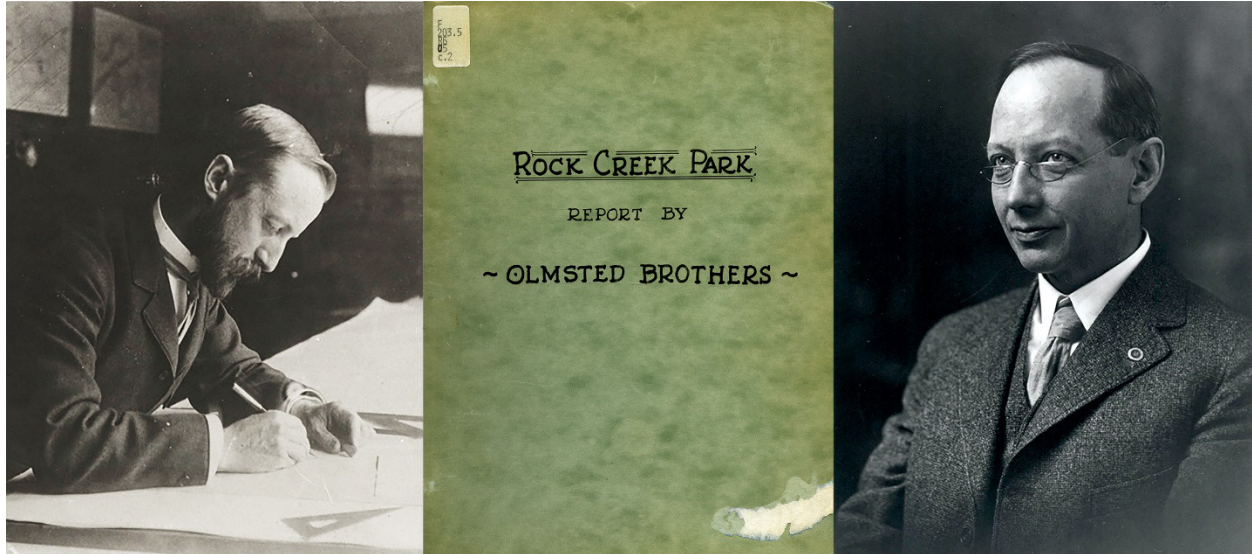


Figure 1. John C. Olmsted; 1918 Report on Rock Creek Park; Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site [portraits]; Department of the Interior Library [report])

The Olmsted Brothers 1918 report on Rock Creek Park has attracted scant notice from national park scholars and Olmsted aficionados. Not only do the works and writings of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. dominate the historical discourse, but Rock Creek Park's status as a national park is often disregarded, though its 1890 authorization coincided with the first major expansion of the nascent national park system, in which Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant also received official designation. As with these better-known examples, Congress stipulated that the underlying purpose was to create a "public park and pleasure ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of the United States." The Olmsted Brothers 1918 report was intended to ensure that the reservation would fulfill this goal in a manner that would balance the public's demand for access with the desire to improve and protect its scenic and recreational attributes. Today's park managers continue to invoke the 1918 report's recommendations in their efforts to adapt the nineteenth-century reservation to twenty-first-century concerns.

Beyond its role in shaping the development of Rock Creek Park, the 1918 Olmsted Brothers' report has broader and heretofore unacknowledged significance as the earliest comprehensive master plan for the development of a national park. As Ethan Carr and Linda McClelland have detailed, park-wide master plans did not become an integral aspect of National Park Service policy until the mid-to-late 1920s. Prior to that time, most national park improvements were addressed piecemeal, as individual projects. Park roads were the primary exception. In Yellowstone, Mount Rainier, and other parks overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, roads were conceived as components of park-wide circulation systems, whose attributes were articulated primarily in utilitarian terms, though their scenic qualities were expressed to varying degrees. Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.'s 1865 report to the Commissioners of Yosemite National Park was more wide-ranging, but its impact and implications were limited by the commissioners' decision to table the recommendations.<sup>1</sup> Technically speaking, Yosemite

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove" (1865), in Lary M. Dilsaver, ed. *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 12-27.

was not a national park at the time. Similar conditions had prevailed in terms of Rock Creek Park. While the language associated with the park's 1890 authorization celebrated its scenic qualities, the federal engineers responsible for its improvement focused on developing roads to satisfy the demand for public access. Portions of the Olmsted Brothers' 1918 report did address circulation matters, but its comprehensive scope and division of the park into administrative divisions and landscape units presaged the official master planning process, while its detailed assessment of plant communities and associated management concerns would not become common practice for decades to come.<sup>2</sup>

Rock Creek Park is located in the northwest quadrant of Washington, D.C. and encompasses 1,754 acres of woodlands, clearings, recreation areas, roads, and assorted visitor and administration facilities. The park is roughly centered on the valley carved by Rock Creek, which winds from its origins in rural Montgomery County, Maryland to the Potomac River. In the nine-mile stretch between the Potomac waterfront and the District of Columbia boundary, where Rock Creek Park and the subsequently authorized Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway are located, the creek cleaves through the rocky strata of the piedmont physiographic region to create an attractively varied stream valley that ranges from picturesque rocky ravines to broader, gently sloping woodlands interspersed with occasional grassy clearings. The movement to create a park along the valley of Rock Creek began in earnest after the Civil War. At that time the area that was to become Rock Creek Park was a largely undeveloped region of woodlands and small farms, containing a few minor mill seats and several modest country roads. Despite the limited access and private ownership, the area served as a *de facto* public park. Local residents enjoyed its shady groves and bucolic roads, while the meticulously improved and maintained grounds of mill proprietor Joshua Peirce afforded an illustration of the country place fashions propounded by Andrew Jackson Downing. Olmsted Senior made numerous excursions along Rock Creek while working for the U.S. Sanitary Commission during the Civil War and extolled the area's potential for park development.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the National Park Service's master plan policy and the influence of landscape architects on national park development, see Ethan Carr, *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) and Linda McClelland, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); for a comprehensive overview of national park road history, see Timothy Davis, *National Park Roads: A Legacy in the American Landscape* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Rock Creek Park's historical development is chronicled in Barry Mackintosh, *Rock Creek Park: An Administrative History* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, History Division, 1985); William Bushong, *Historic Resource Study: Rock Creek Park, District of Columbia* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1990); and Timothy Davis, "Rock Creek Park Road System, HAER No. DC-55," U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Historic American Engineering Record, 1996.

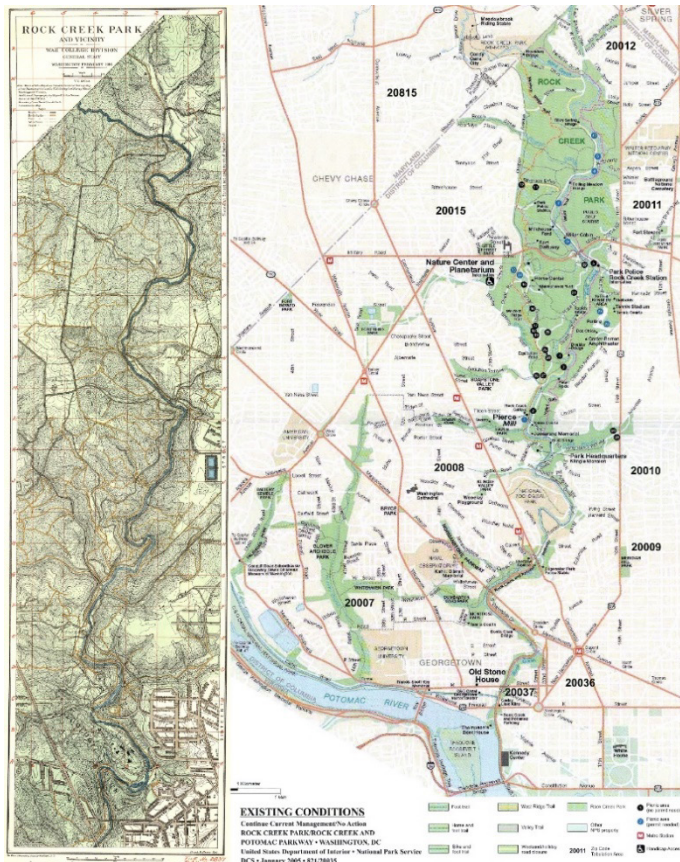


Figure 2. (L) Rock Creek Park and Vicinity, 1916 (Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site); (R) Rock Creek Park and Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, Washington, DC (US Dept. of Interior, National Park, Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway: Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, 2005)

Concerns that development would engulf Washington’s natural environs, together with the growing sentiment that no major city--much less the nation’s capital--could be considered modern and complete without a first-rate public park, generated a series of proposals for a park along Rock Creek, including an elaborately detailed 1867 plan submitted by Maj. Nathaniel Michler of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and an even more ambitious 1883 proposal by the assistant engineer for the District of Columbia. Michler’s rhetoric and recommendations were rooted in the aesthetics and ideology of the first wave of the American park movement spearheaded by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. Along with being overly optimistic in terms of acreage, these efforts were stymied by Congressional reluctance to spend money on what many considered to be an elaborate amenity for the residents of Washington, DC.<sup>4</sup>

By the late 1880s, the continued growth of Washington’s northwest suburbs produced increasing concern that encroaching development would either despoil the remaining scenery or render the land too valuable for park acquisition. Following another blitz of promotion that mixed paeans to the uplifting influence of natural scenery, appeals to public health, and observations about the beneficial

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *Communication of N. Michler, Major of Engineers, to the Chairman of the Committee of Public Buildings and Grounds, relative to a suitable site for a public park and presidential mansion, Sen. Doc. No. 21 to Accompany S. 549* (39th Cong., 2nd Session, 1867); William V. Cox, “Park Improvement Papers No. 7: Notes on the Establishment of a National Park in the District of Columbia and the Acquirement and Improvement of the Valley of Rock Creek for Park Purposes,” in *Park Improvement Papers*, ed. Charles Moore (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902).

economic impacts of parks in other cities, Rock Creek Park was finally authorized in September 1890. Improvement and maintenance of the park was entrusted to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the D.C. Board of Commissioners. These authorities were to proceed “as soon as possible, to lay out and prepare roadways and bridle paths, to be used for driving and horseback riding respectively, and footways for pedestrians.” The park’s managers were also instructed to develop guidelines and regulations to ensure “the preservation from injury and spoilation of all timber, animals, or curiosities within said park, and their retention in their natural condition, as nearly as possible.”<sup>5</sup>

Comprehensive development guidelines would await the Olmsted Brother’s 1918 Report, but the park commission set about inspecting the region and drawing the park boundaries. Financial limitations forced the commission to omit several significant parcels around the edges of the park. These revisions produced an irregular boundary and left a substantial portion of the northeast corner of the proposed reservation in private hands. When the commission transferred authority over the park to the Rock Creek Park Board of Control in December 1894, the reservation totaled 1,605 acres.<sup>6</sup>

In practical terms, responsible for Rock Creek Park fell to the assistant to the chief of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The most significant figure to fill this role was Capt. Lansing Beach, who assumed the position in 1896 and oversaw a series of developments, including the improvement and extension of the critical road along the creek, which would thereafter bear his name. Throughout this process the park’s managers were hampered by low appropriations while receiving constant criticism for their failure to do more to fulfill the recreational potential of the park. Among their most well-received accomplishments were a series of attractive rustic bridges of Rock Creek and its tributaries. Several key crossings remained as fords, however, including one near the national zoo that was replaced by a bridge and tunnel arrangement in the mid-1960s.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Public No. 296, *Statutes at Large, 1889-1891*, 492-95, reproduced in Cox, “Park Improvement Papers No. 7,” 134-137.

<sup>6</sup> “Proceedings of the Rock Creek Park Commission, 1890-1898,” Records of the Rock Creek Park Commission and the Board of Control of Rock Creek Park; Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Grounds of the National Capital, RG 42, Entry 238, National Archives. Additional information on the boundary delineation and land acquisition process from Cox, “Park Improvement Papers No. 7,” 114-16 and Bushong, *Rock Creek Park Historic Resource Study*, 73-79.

<sup>7</sup> For more detailed accounts of this period see Davis, “Rock Creek Park Road System, HAER-DC-55,” 55-93 and Bushong, *Rock Creek Park Historic Resource Study*, 85-93.





Figure 3. Beach Drive ford and Pebble Dash Bridge, c. 1908 (vintage postcard: author's collection)

The prestigious 1901 Senate Park Commission weighed in briefly on the development of Rock Creek Park. While the more prominent members of the so-called McMillan Commission focused on the city's monumental core, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., was the principal author of the park system-oriented sections of the report. The commission expressed concern about the Army Corps of Engineer's construction of Beach Drive. While admitting that the roadway was, for the most part "very skillfully laid out," the report contended that there were several places where it had "very appreciably injured the scenery." The report acknowledged that "the value of the park scenery depends absolutely on making it conveniently accessible to the people," but cautioned "nothing can be gained if the means of access destroys the scenery which it was meant to exhibit." The commission's biggest concern was that the growing popularity of Beach Drive would create pressure to widen the roadway even further. The McMillan report advised that the best way to accommodate the demand for increased access without further damaging the scenery along Rock Creek was to relieve pressure on Beach Drive by constructing additional driveways through less sensitive portions of the park. The ideal location, the commission suggested, was "high enough on the valley sides to leave the wild sylvan character of the stream at the bottom of the gorge uninjured, but yet within sight and sound of the water." Neither course of action was ideal, but the commission presented the multiple driveway scheme as the lesser of two evils. The loss of additional creek side scenery, it declared "would be a pound of flesh from nearest to the heart, while the former would compare with the amputation of a leg."<sup>8</sup>

The commission's other main concern was that improvements within the park were being produced in piecemeal fashion with no evidence of a comprehensive plan. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was a firm believer in the value of comprehensive management plans based on detailed studies of a

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, *Report of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia on the Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), 88-89, 170-71. The commission's report and the impact of its proposals is discussed in Charles Moore, *Washington Past and Present* (New York: The Century Company, 1929); John Reys, *Monumental Washington: The Planning and Development of the Capital Center* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Richard Longstreth, ed., *The Mall in Washington, 1791-1991* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1991); and Jon A. Peterson, "The Nation's First Comprehensive City Plan: A Political Analysis of the McMillan Plan for Washington, D.C, 1900-1902," *American Planning Association Journal* 51 (April 1985): 134-50. For a more recent analysis, see Sue Kohler and Pamela Scott, eds., *Designing the Nation's Capital: The 1901 Plan for Washington, D.C.* (Washington, DC: U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, 2006).

park's natural features and intended uses. Olmsted was strongly influenced by his father's work and by the pioneering comprehensive landscape development reports prepared by Charles Eliot for the Boston Metropolitan Park Commission. Recommending that a similar approach be taken in Rock Creek Park, the Senate Park Commission report stated, "After the completion at its present width of the road along the creek, we would advise most urgently that no further work of development be attempted until careful studies have been made for the comprehensive treatment of the whole park." Among the issues that needed to be addressed were the construction of roads and visitor facilities, the development of vistas through selective cutting, the planting of vegetation to conceal undesirable views, and general forest management issues. The park contained a varied mixture of attractive large trees and less attractive second growth, along with large amounts of unsightly dead timber, much of which stemmed from the chestnut blight that was devastating eastern forests. The commission also recommended a number of additions to protect key aspects of the park and provide connections with other elements of the city's park system. Key among the proposed acquisitions were the valley of Piney Branch and the valley of Rock Creek between the zoo and the Potomac waterfront, which was cast as essential components of the commission's grand scheme for the development of Washington. The Senate Park Commission's report would play a key role in the development of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, but it had little immediate impact on the park itself. Despite the commission's insistence that improvements within the park be postponed until further study, the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds continued to proceed with piece meal construction projects until 1917, at one point enlisting chain gangs to make up for low appropriations.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in May 1917, the Rock Creek Park Board of Control engaged the Olmsted Brothers firm to develop a master plan for the development and maintenance of Rock Creek Park. A preliminary report was submitted in September 1917 and the final version was completed in December 1918. While the Olmsted Brothers firm was the official author of the report, John C. Olmsted was in failing health by this time. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who had developed an extensive familiarity with both the geography of Rock Creek and the general park needs of Washington through his service on the Senate Park Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts, was the dominant partner at this stage of the firm's evolution. The report's insistence that the key to park planning lay in the identification and enhancement of broadly defined landscape units, together with its emphasis on the importance of patient forestry work, owed a strong debt to Charles Eliot's late-nineteenth-century reports for the Boston metropolitan park system. The report's open-ended quality as a series of general guidelines rather than a detailed and finite design proposal bore the unmistakable stamp of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.'s belief that landscape planning was an ongoing process of continuing adjustments to changing circumstances rather than a single act of creation followed by routine maintenance. Olmsted Jr.'s pragmatic emphasis also showed through in the deference accorded to the utilitarian traffic demands of the surrounding region, a concern that would bedevil park managers for years to come.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Report of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia on the Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia*, on Rock Creek Park: 88-89, 170-71; on Rock Creek Parkway: 85-86, 137-42.

<sup>10</sup> The Board of Control paid Olmsted Brothers \$3,000 for this report (letter, W. F. Conklin to Daniel E. Garges, Chief Clerk, Engineering Department, D.C., 15 November 1918; letter, Olmsted Brothers to C. S. Ridley, Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds, 13 December 1918; both in Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, General Correspondence, 303; Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital, General Correspondence, Entry 97, RG 42 National Archives). For a comparison of the two Olmsteds' approaches to landscape planning, see Jon A. Peterson, "Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.: The Visionary and the Professional," in *Planning the Twentieth-Century North American City*, ed. Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 37-54. Additional insights into the younger Olmsted's approach to urban planning and landscape architecture can be found in Susan L. Klaus, "Intelligence and Comprehensive Planning of a Common Sense Kind: Frederick Law Olmsted, Junior and the

While Olmsted was nominally in charge of the project, he was preoccupied with the demands associated with his service on the Committee on Emergency Housing and the U.S. Housing Corporation. The report was largely produced by Edward C. Whiting, who had been with the firm since 1905. Whiting acquired maps depicting the park's topography, the District of Columbia street grid, and other relevant information, then conducted fieldwork during June and July 1917. Along with taking a series of photographs that would appear in the final report, he and other staff members prepared studies of administrative and landscape planning units, circulation treatments, and vegetation management priorities. Whiting also drafted the text of the report, to which Olmsted made few if any changes. The effusive landscape descriptions were toned down in the final version, which also went to greater lengths to emphasize the importance of consistent management in the implementation of park planning. While Olmsted may have delegated primary responsibility to Whiting, his influence on the 1918 report is unmistakable. Not only did the general approach embody Olmsted's outlook on urban planning and landscape design, but the associated recommendations were essentially an elaboration of the ideas he had expressed as a member of the 1901 Senate Park Commission. Olmsted literally went over the ground with Whiting during his initial inspection trip, reviewed the plans at various intervals, and took the lead in presenting the proposals, both formally, to the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G), and informally, to various influential individuals. A key result of the latter outreach was to defuse enthusiasms for the OPB&G's proposal to develop an arboretum on the northwest side of the park above Military Road, which would have injected an artificial air antithetical to the Olmstedian ethos. Unfortunately, Olmsted's divided attention caused the graphic components to be misplaced, delaying the report's official submission by almost a year.<sup>11</sup>

The 1918 Olmsted Brothers report began by stating "The dominant consideration, never to be subordinated to any other purpose in dealing with Rock Creek Park, is the permanent preservation of its wonderful natural beauty, and the making of that beauty accessible to the people without spoiling the scenery in the process."<sup>12</sup> This preamble was another indication of the degree to which the report embodied Olmsted's philosophy on park planning. In language and spirit, this statement echoed the underlying proposition of the 1916 act creating the National Park Service, which asserted that the agency's guiding principle should be "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."<sup>13</sup> It is widely known that Olmsted was primarily responsible for the key passage of park service's foundational document, though

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Emergence of Comprehensive Planning in America, 1900-1920," M.A. thesis, George Washington University, 1988; John J. Pittari, Jr., "Practical Idealism: Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and the Modern American City Planning Movement," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Washington, 1997; and Elizabeth Hope Cushing, *Beauty, Efficiency, and Economy: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Landscape Architect, Planner, and Conservationist* (Philadelphia, PA: Northern Liberties Press, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> This summary is based on correspondence in Olmsted Associates Records: Job Files, 1863-1971; File 2837, Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C. 1906-1917 and 1918-1943, Library of Congress.

<sup>12</sup> "Rock Creek Park: A Report by Olmsted Brothers, December 1918," foreword (copy with accompanying maps in U.S. Department of the Interior Library, Washington, D.C.; additional copies of the text in Rock Creek Park, Commission of Fine Arts Project Files, 1910-1952, Entry 17, RG 66, National Archives); henceforth cited as "Olmsted Brothers Report." While the original report and associated graphic material submitted to DC officials appears to have been lost, the associated design studies, final plans, photographs, and renderings are can be found in Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

<sup>13</sup> "An Act to Establish a National Park System," approved August 25, 1916 (39 Stat. 535), in Lary Dilsaver, ed. *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 1994) 46.

others had a hand in its supplementary language.<sup>14</sup> The strong parallels between these two statements underscores Rock Creek Park's integral relationship to the more conventional, non-urban reservations of the National Park System.

The inherent tension between the conflicting goals of preservation and access has continued to present a challenge to park managers both in urban reservations such as Rock Creek Park and in the larger elements of the National Park System throughout the country. The Olmsted report elaborated upon this paradox in an introductory section explicating the basic reasons for which public reservations like Rock Creek Park were created. "The essential justification for this large park is unquestionably found in the recreative values of its wild or 'undeveloped' qualities," the report declared, ". . . and no use or exploitation or development of any sort can ever be right that is not based on that fundamental conception."<sup>15</sup> Olmsted asserted that the basic goal of park management should be to preserve and enhance the beauty of the park's predominantly natural scenery. He emphasized that this was not a one-time act, but a never-ending process, both because it was impossible to predict outside influences and because the park's natural environment was not a static composition but a continually evolving entity. Proper management would entail "an unending watchful struggle to neutralize destructive forces inevitably acting on the scenery; to reinforce and supplement its natural powers of resistance and recuperation; and patiently, skillfully, and humbly restore the actual deterioration" that had resulted from decades of utilitarian use and outright neglect.<sup>16</sup> Restoring and preserving the area's natural beauty was not an end in itself, however. Olmsted underscored that "no matter how perfect the scenery of the Park may become, no matter how high its potential value, that value remains potential except insofar as it is enjoyed by a large and ever larger numbers of people, poor and rich alike."<sup>17</sup> While the Olmsted Brothers report urged caution at all times and emphasized the need for careful consideration of the potential impact of any construction, it acknowledged the necessity "for more intensive use of the Park, and for more ready accessibility."<sup>18</sup>

The report presented a three-part strategy for maximizing the park's potential: preserving, restoring, and improving that park's natural scenery through "intelligent, appreciative landscape development"; providing access for the driving, riding, and walking public while ensuring that the roads, paths, and related recreational facilities were located and constructed to impinge as little as possible on park scenery; and ensuring that there was adequate public transportation to make the park's attractions accessible to all classes of people.<sup>19</sup> The Olmsted firm's records contain a series of photographs and renderings illustrating both desirable and undesirable conditions. The renderings employed the classic Reptonian technique of a flap that could be folded back to dramatize the contrasting results. While these graphics appeared in the original version of the report, they were misplaced by the OPB&G and are not present in the surviving copy in the Department of the Interior Library.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Horace M. Albright and Robert Cahn, *The Birth of the National Park Service: The Founding Years, 1913-1933* (Salt Lake City, UT: Howe Brothers, 1985), 35-36.

<sup>15</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 1.

<sup>16</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," foreward.

<sup>17</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 10.

<sup>19</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 2.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Grant III to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., 28 June 1926 (Olmsted Associates Records: Job Files, 1863-1971; File 2837, Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C. 1906-1917, Library of Congress).



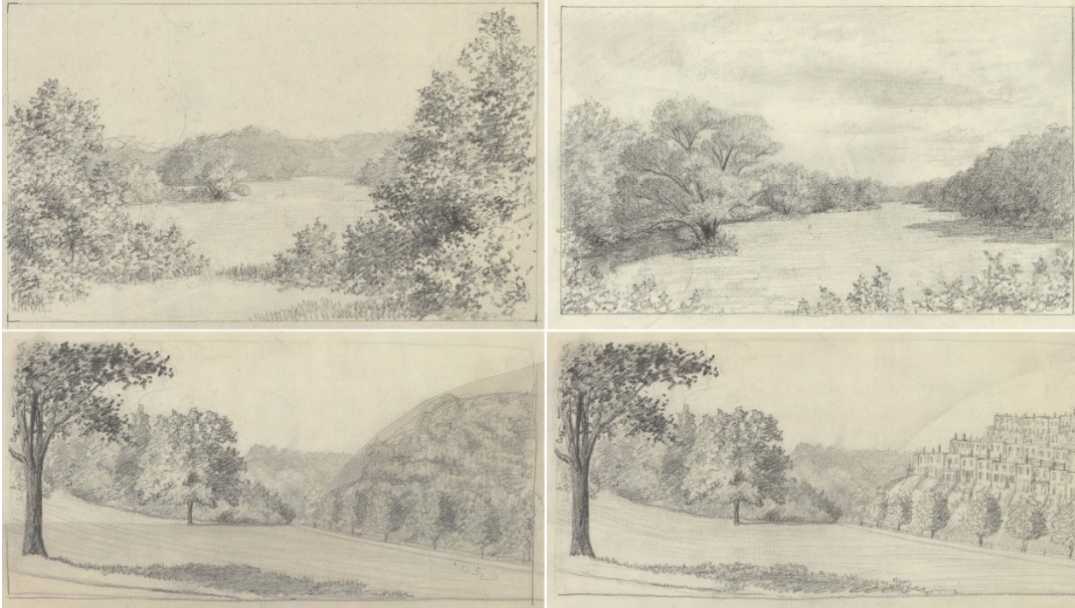


Figure 4. Before and After studies demonstrating the results of selective clearing to improve views (above) and the potential for undesirable development on a hillside adjacent to the park being recommended for acquisition (below) (Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

Moving on to a general description of the park's scenic qualities of the sort common to park planning documents created by the Olmsted firm and its contemporaries, the report provided a broad-brush appraisal of the larger landscape effects produced by the park's topography, the overall massing of fields and forest, and the picturesque environs of the creek itself. Next came an elucidation of the finer details apprehended through more intimate encounters with the park's natural features, again expressed primarily in the aestheticizing language of romantic landscape appreciation. Transitioning to a more pragmatic line of reasoning, Olmsted emphasized that Rock Creek Park constituted "a very large public investment" and then listed the principal obstacles to be overcome to maximize its scenic potential.<sup>21</sup> These were lumbering, plant diseases and insect pests, fires, and the growth of undesirable species of trees and shrubs. Lumbering was not a present danger but clearing the original forest had replaced attractive mature forests with quick-growing and unattractive species. On the disease front, the chestnut blight had had a devastating effect on this attractive and formerly abundant species, creating a need to both remove the dead trunks and adopt a judicious reforestation program. Typical of the times, the report advocated the immediate suppression of fires, noting that they destroyed not only mature trees, but rich organic soils, seedlings, and attractive understory vegetation. Given that much of the park consisted of former farmland and logged-over tracts, the suppression and removal of weedy growth – trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants – was a top priority, along with the removal of otherwise attractive specimens that were "in the wrong place" or present in undesirable numbers.<sup>22</sup>

While these sorts of assessments were the norm for contemporary park reports on the municipal and metropolitan levels, and the Army Corps of Engineers' national park superintendents occasionally discussed forestry-related matters in their missives to the Secretary of the Interior, the next two sections of the Olmsted Brothers' report broke new ground, for the latter, if not the former. As with the subsequent road recommendations, Olmsted had introduced most of these concerns in his contributions to the Senate Park Commission report.

<sup>21</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 5.

<sup>22</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 2-9, quoted, p.9; plans and photographs associated with the 1918 Rock Creek Park report can be found in the Olmsted Archives files for Job # 2837, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

First, the report divided the park into six “Primary Landscape and Administrative Divisions.” Designated A through F and outlined on an accompanying map, these management units were based on analysis of the relationships between the park’s natural features, the recreational imperatives underlying its creation, and the need to balance the competing demands of preservation and access. Acknowledging that the exact boundaries and associated treatments of the different units might need to be adjusted in light of ongoing experience, the report emphasized that what was essential was the identification of their general character, the determination of their intended use, and the establishment of “general policies of development and maintenance.” Together with its wide-ranging scope, this elevation of general goals and guidelines over precisely articulated design solutions underscored the document’s status as a pioneer national park master plan. The clear articulation of such a “general plan and controlling policy,” along with a commitment to adhering to its goals and policies was cast as essential to avoid the waste of resources and destruction of landscape character associated with the all-too-frequent hazards of uncoordinated developments and shifting priorities.<sup>23</sup>

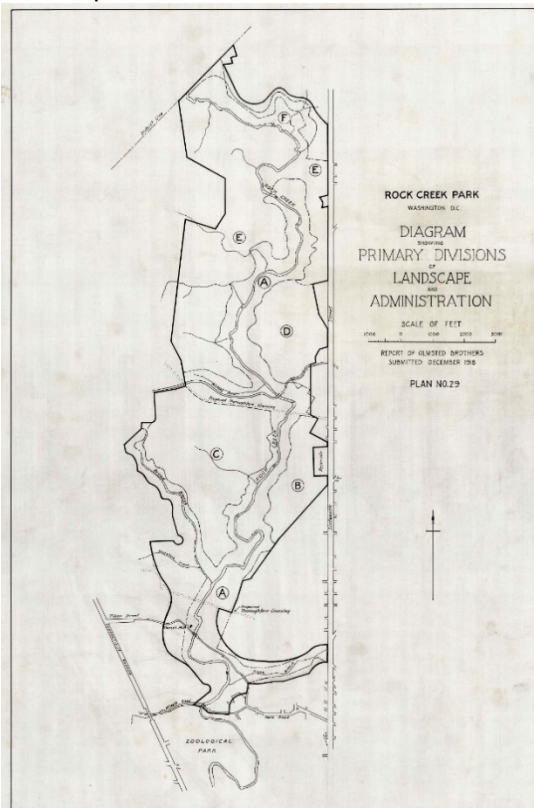


Figure 5. Diagram Showing Primary Divisions of Landscape and Administration (Olmsted Brothers Report on Rock Creek Park, 1918; original plan in Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

Division A encompassed the immediate environs of Rock Creek. The report characterized this as “topographically and psychologically the backbone, as it were, of the Park” and extolled the varied and picturesque scenery encountered along the creek. Preserving the natural beauty and self-contained aspect of the stream and its surroundings was the primary management goal, though picnic groves were considered permissible. Beach Drive was clearly deemed to be not just a *fait accompli* but a desirable amenity, given the report’s paeans to the sequential unfolding of scenery as one progressed along the

<sup>23</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 10.



creek and admonitions against constructing facilities that would impinge upon the view from the road.

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Figure 6. Scenes along Rock Creek (Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

Division B was situated on a plateau separated topographically from the rest of the park and easily accessible from the surrounding residential area, and by street streetcar or automobile from other parts of the city. This made it ideally suited for the most intensive forms of recreational activities—tennis, baseball, basketball, football, band concerts and the like. This development had already been contemplated and a preliminary plan for what was known as the Brightwood Reservoir Playground was included in the report. The reservoir itself had been constructed several years previously and lent an already-developed air to this part of the park.

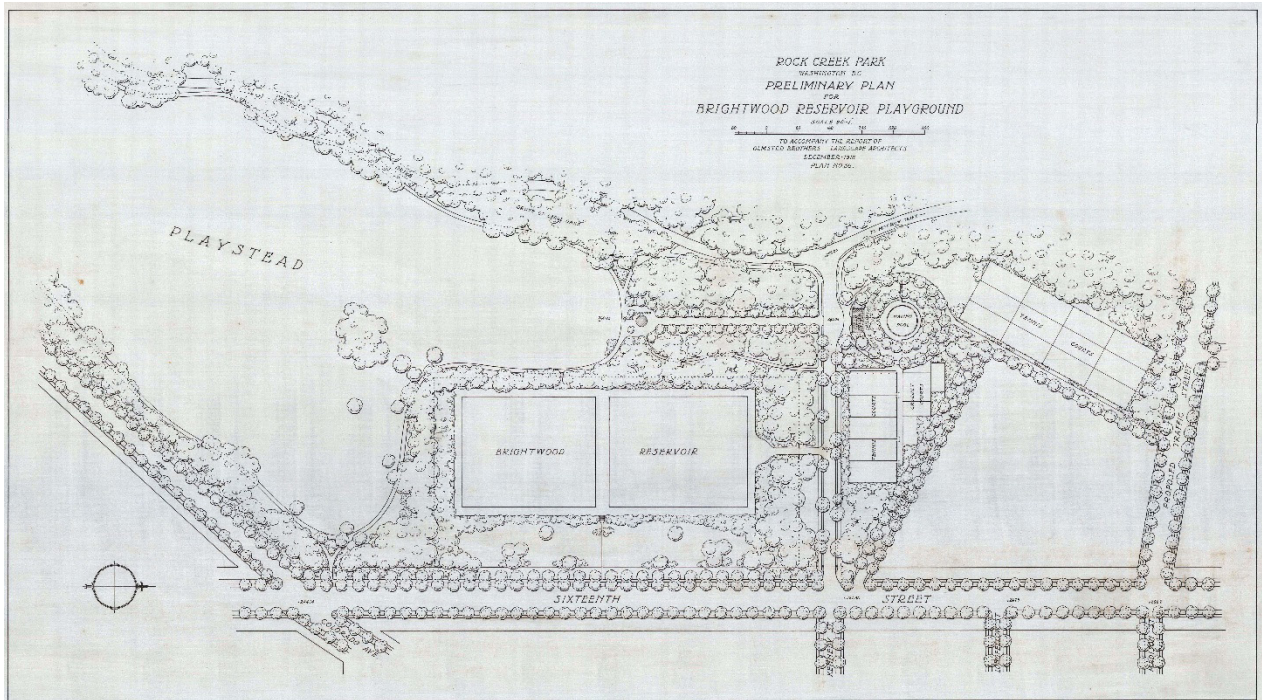


Figure 7. Preliminary Plan for Brightwood Reservoir Playground (Olmsted Brothers Report on Rock Creek Park, 1918; original plan in Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

Division C was a tract of mixed woodlands and clearings on the west side of the park, bounded on the north by Military Road, the primary cross-park thoroughfare. Topographically it was a rolling

<sup>24</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 10-11.



plateau intersected with several sharp ravines leading down to Rock Creek. Due to its forested but gentle terrain, this area should be developed for leisurely strolling by pedestrians disinclined to explore the more rugged regions of the park. Without stipulating their exact locations and details, the report called for the construction of a limited number of roads and bridle paths, along with “picnic groves, springs, unobtrusive seats, summer houses, and other local objects of interest.” Vegetation-wise, there should be larger and more frequent grassy openings than other regions of the park, along with more open woodlands geared toward facilitating access rather than presenting or preserving sylvan scenery.

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Figure 8. Rolling topography and mixed woodlands and clearings typical of Divisions C and D, Ross Drive on right (Photographs by E.C. Whiting, 1917; Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

Division D, on the east side of the park above Military Road, consisted primarily of open rolling hills: former farmland that was overgrown with scrubby pines in some places but could be rehabilitated to enhance its appealing and unique for Rock Creek Park grassy slopes and open quality, which could be augmented by judicious plantings. Since it was also readily accessible from Sixteenth Street, it was well-suited for more intensive public use, though not in as developed a fashion as Section B. A few tasteful plantings were all that was needed, along with a limited quantity of roads, bridle paths, and walkways to facilitate access and seats and terraces at commanding outlooks. The report came down forcefully against existing plans to transform the area into an arboretum, the artificiality of which was considered incompatible with the preferred naturalistic development of the park. This area became the site of the Rock Creek Park golf course.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 9. Scenery typical of more rugged and heavily wooded Division E (Photographs by E.C. Whiting, 1917; Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

<sup>25</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 12-14, quoted, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 12-14, quoted, p. 13.

Division E was the most heavily forested, rugged, and least accessible portion of the park, comprised of natural woodlands and occasional clearings sprawling across a region of small hills and ridges separated by steep ravines. A few paths and roads were necessary to provide access, but the primary management objective should be to ensure that its “wild, natural character” be retained to the highest degree. Given the considerable area devoted to more intensive uses, the report justified the minimalistic development in this section as a means of providing a different sort of park experience, preserving “some of the elements of wildness which now contribute and always should contribute so largely to the beauty and charm and value of this Park.”<sup>27</sup>

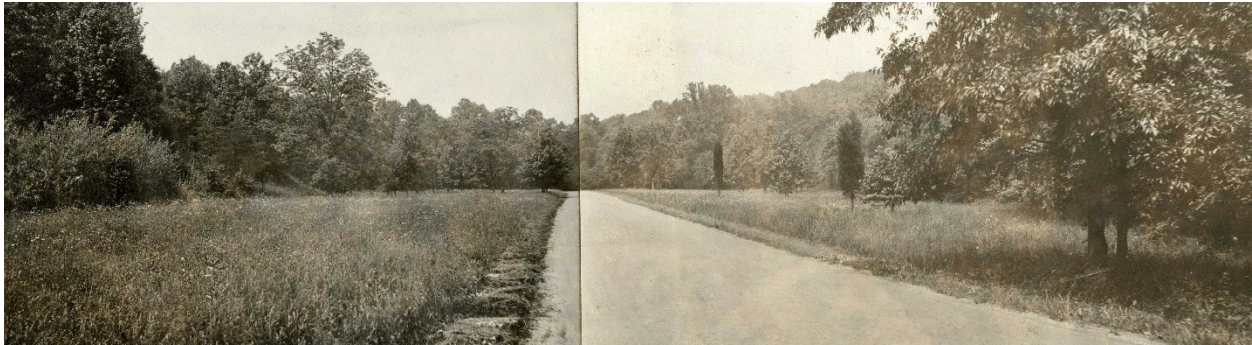


Figure 10. Meadow flanking Beach Drive at north end of park (Photograph by E.C. Whiting, 1971; Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

Division F, the northernmost tier, was essentially an extension of Division A in that it encompassed the upper reaches of the creek, but the surrounding terrain was gentler and more open, dominated by a 4,000'-long expanse of meadow enclosed by an irregular border of trees forming a self-contained greensward. As with section D, the report insisted that preservation rather than recreational development should be the dominant motive.<sup>28</sup>

The next section of the report provided a more detailed breakdown of the park's vegetative character and associated treatment guidelines. Without going into the specifics, it identified four general types: “natural forest,” “open woodlands,” an association of cedars, sassafras, locust, and occasional pines, and “open grasslands.” The constituent species were listed along with their scenic attributes, biological requisites, and recreational potential. Again, this approach had appeared in urban and metropolitan park plans but had yet to make inroads in national park management. The treatment recommendations underscored the report's status as a long-term general management plan rather than a static design document. General suggestions were provided, but the report cautioned: “It is out of the question to depend upon written directions for detailed guidance in landscape forestry work of this sort, for after general aims and methods have been determined comes the delicate and very important work of fitting these methods to the local detailed conditions as they exist.” The report also emphasized that proper park management was an ongoing process that called for “careful, intelligent, appreciative and above all consistent maintenance of the landscape details.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 15-16, quoted, p.16.

<sup>28</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 15-16, quoted, p.16.

<sup>29</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 20-32, quoted, pp.25-26.



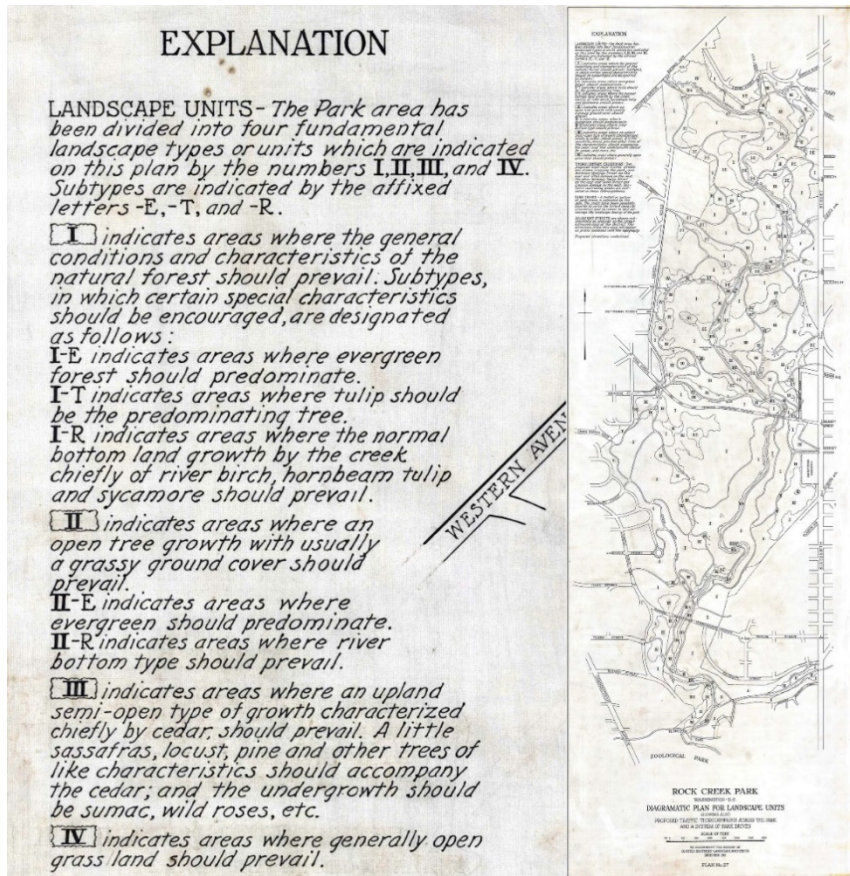


Figure 11. Diagrammatic Plan for Landscape Units, Rock Creek Park (Olmsted Brothers Report on Rock Creek Park, 1918; original plan in Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

Pivoting now to questions of road development and visitor facilities, the report again enunciated general principles before considering specific solutions. While the report asserted that “the Park must be opened up to the driving, riding, and walking public,” it cautioned “the roads, paths, and other accompaniments of intensive use must be so located and so built that the essential qualities of the Park are impaired in the least possible degree.”<sup>30</sup> To a large degree, the Olmsted Brother’s Report mirrored the maxims expressed in the celebrated 1918 “Lane Letter” outlining the naturalistic design philosophy for National Park Development. Cautioning against “inharmonious, self-assertive design” elements, the report asserted that roads and other structures “should be so designed and located as to fall naturally into place as part and parcel of the scenery and should never stand out as objects complete themselves with the surrounding landscape becoming merely a background.”<sup>31</sup> Roads and paths were indispensable aspects of park development, but they “should always fit into the landscape as harmonious and subordinate parts of the scenery through which they pass.”<sup>32</sup> More extensive instructions on designing travelways so that they maximized scenic enjoyment while minimizing visual disruptions echoed the Senior Olmsted’s pronouncements along similar lines and underscored the direct linkage between nineteenth-century park development and twentieth-century National Park Service policies.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 2.

<sup>31</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 32.

<sup>32</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 33.

<sup>33</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 32-35. “Secretary Lane’s Letter on National Park Management (May 13, 1918),” in Dilsaver, *America’s National Park System: The Critical Documents*, 48-52. The “Lane Letter” and its influence on

The Olmsted report assumed that the number of roads and paths would have to increase as the population of Washington expanded and the park continued to grow in popularity. Observing that “the present roads are already becoming crowded,” it advised that the best solution to overcrowding was to spread traffic more evenly throughout the park by building additional roadways rather than attempting to widen existing roads, which would have disastrous consequences for the park’s most prized scenery.<sup>34</sup> Attempting to widen Beach Drive would cause “unreasonably serious injury to those very landscape beauties for the appreciation of which the roads are primarily built.”<sup>35</sup> While the ultimate solution to the problem of increased traffic was to construct “narrow roads and more of them,” the report advised that the institution of one-way traffic regulations could prove useful in helping to move a greater volume of cars through the park more safely and efficiently.<sup>36</sup> The map accompanying the report depicted an elaborate network of additional park drives, most of which might seem excessive and needlessly destructive of park scenery to later eyes, though they were justified in part as means of exhibiting the landscape beauties of some of the more inaccessible parts of the park. The most striking proposed addition south of Military Road was a driveway along the east side of the valley located midway between Beach Drive and the park border. North of Military Road, both sides of the valley were laced with serpentine drives, most of which followed ridges and minor stream valleys or provided access to hilltops that could be opened up to provide scenic vistas. Two of the longest proposed drives traced winding courses from Military Road to the north end of the park on either side of the valley. These were intended to relieve traffic on Beach Drive as a means of warding off future threats to widen the road at the expense of the scenery along Rock Creek. Since this elaborate road network appeared to contradict the report’s insistence that the preservation of park scenery should be the dominant concern, it is important to point out that the plan was prepared at a transitional period when the impact of the automobile was not fully apparent. Such an intricate and extensive road system was in keeping with the design principles of nineteenth-century parks, where narrow, winding roadways could be constructed with minimal disruption and the labyrinthine quality of the circuitous routes enhanced the perceived extent of the park. By the early 1920s, however, the proliferation of automobile traffic, together with the growing size and speed of motor vehicles required wider, straighter, more substantially constructed roadways, so that park managers reversed the Olmsted Brothers’ 1918 formula and began to construct wider roads, but fewer of them.<sup>37</sup>

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NPS design practices is discussed in numerous sources, including Carr, *Wilderness by Design*, McClelland, *Building the National Parks*, and Davis, *National Park Roads*.

<sup>34</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 35.

<sup>35</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 35.

<sup>36</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 35.

<sup>37</sup> “Olmsted Brothers Report,” 34-37.



Figure 12. Studies for Rock Creek Park Road System, with landscape units (top) and one- and two-way traffic designations (Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site).

The 1918 report embraced the prevailing view that the construction of one or more streetcar lines through the park was both necessary and desirable to ensure that as many people as possible could enjoy the scenery of Rock Creek.<sup>38</sup> Public transit lines could be combined with additional general-purpose roadways intended to accommodate the utilitarian traffic that was prohibited from park roads. From a transportation standpoint, a major problem with large urban parks was that they disrupted utilitarian traffic patterns. Rock Creek Park was favorably situated in that its radial orientation posed little problem for the heavier traffic moving into and out of the city, but the park presented a formidable obstacle to cross-town traffic in the city's northwest quadrant. With the growth of the neighborhoods on either side of the park and the general advancement of commerce and transportation in the Washington area, it seemed prudent to consider additional east-west thoroughfares to supplement Military Road, which provided the only public highway across the park. Since these thoroughfares would have to be relatively wide, straight, and evenly graded to accommodate trucks and large volumes of traffic, they would provide the most logical location for streetcar lines. The main consideration in developing these cross-park routes was to provide maximum public access "in that manner and that location which will intrude least into the natural landscape."<sup>39</sup> The report proposed two potential routes based on the park's topography, the surrounding street system, and the location of existing trolley lines. The preferred option followed the ridge that lay just south of Military Road. Another line might cross the park further south, providing an intermediate route between the existing Calvert Street bridge and the proposed mid-park line. The report rejected the idea of constructing either of these cross-park thoroughfares at grade level. While this approach would better serve the purpose of providing direct access to the park, it was unacceptable on both practical and aesthetic grounds. The report also objected to the intrusion of noisy trucks and trolleys into the "very heart of the park." Cross-

<sup>38</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 2.

<sup>39</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 2.



park utilitarian traffic would be accommodated by two or three massive viaducts. While these would have dramatically impacted the surrounding scenery, there was ample precedent in the towering bridges spanning Rock Creek Valley south of the National Zoo.<sup>40</sup>

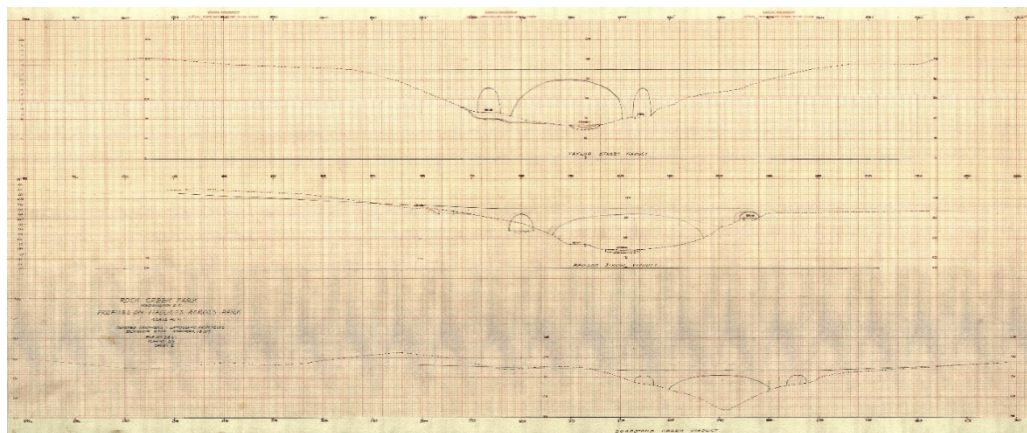


Figure 13. Profiles for proposed viaducts at Taylor Street, Madison Street, and Soapstone Valley (Olmsted Brothers Report on Rock Creek Park, 1918; original plan in Rock Creek Park, Job # 2837, Olmsted Archives Collection, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)

While the Olmsted report's general development guidelines and recommendations on road improvements would exert a strong influence on subsequent park management policies, the section on thoroughfare crossings and streetcar lines was soon forgotten, as the rapid growth of automobile ownership enabled a much larger portion of the Washington public to access the park. Military Road continued to function as the primary cross-park thoroughfare, supplemented to a minor degree by Klinge Road (since closed and converted to a multi-use trail), Porter Street, Tilden Street, and Park Road, which remained open to general purpose traffic as official city streets, and Wise Road, which was maintained by park forces but was opened to utilitarian traffic to provide a route across the north end of the park.<sup>41</sup>

In its closing pages, the report recommended rectifying the park's boundaries to address the irregular borders of the original reservation, the rapid pursuit of forestry efforts aimed at eliminating dead wood and undesirable species, and the establishment of a permanent staff of experienced maintenance personnel directed by a well-trained landscape professional – and, of course, larger and more consistent appropriations. Above all, it underscored that the preeminent goal was to preserve the naturalistic, undeveloped qualities of the site.<sup>42</sup>

While the Olmsted Brothers were preparing their report, Rock Creek Park was absorbed into the general park system of the District of Columbia, though it retained its official "national park" status. The park's management was entrusted to the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, which was then headed by Col. Clarence Ridley of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.<sup>43</sup> Despite this change in administration, the Olmsted Brothers report was quickly adopted as the official policy document governing the park's management and development. Ridley circulated a memorandum declaring "nothing will be done hereafter in this park which is contrary to the letter or spirit of this report without

<sup>40</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 43.

<sup>41</sup> Memo, Office of the Engineer Commissioner of the District of Columbia to Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds, 27 September 1918 (Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, General Correspondence, 303; Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital, General Correspondence, Entry 97, RG 42 National Archives).

<sup>42</sup> "Olmsted Brothers Report," 47-52.

<sup>43</sup> Mackintosh, *Rock Creek Park Administrative History*, 20.

specific approval in writing of the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds.” He also created an advisory board of landscape experts to ensure that the report’s recommendations were carried out in a “logical, continuous, and artistic manner.” Ridley appointed James G. Langdon and Irving Payne to serve in this role. Langdon was a longtime Olmsted associate who had worked on the Boston park system and was brought to Washington in 1915 to help prepare plans for the development of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway.<sup>44</sup> Payne had graduated from Harvard University’s School of Landscape Architecture in 1917, where he would have been strongly influenced by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.<sup>45</sup> Payne and Langdon were instructed to study the 1918 report, conduct detailed inspections of the park landscape, and prepare specific work plans in light of the report’s recommendations. Their ability to follow through on these directives appears to have been limited by competing priorities such as the completion of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway and other more prominent aspects of the Senate Park Commission’s plan.<sup>46</sup>

The Commission of Fine Arts, which had been formed in 1910 to safeguard the legacy of the Senate Park Commission plan, embraced the Olmsted Brothers report and praised it as a masterful explication of park management. John Greenleaf, who succeeded Olmsted as the commission’s landscape architecture expert, maintained that it should be “abstracted in printed form and read daily as their bible by those immediately in responsible charge of maintenance of woodland and meadow” so that the report’s recommendations would “exert their influence inevitably on every daily decision and action.” Greenleaf concluded his encomium by expressing his hope that the Olmsted Report would not be “buried in the files,” as was all too often the case with such general planning documents.<sup>47</sup>

Greenleaf’s concern was well-placed, due both to budget limitations and administrative turnover. Ridley’s successor Lieut. Col. C.O. Sherrill remained committed to report’s aims, though the Commission of Fine Arts asserted that the park continued to suffer from unwarranted neglect. When Olmsted alluded to the report’s recommendations in a 1926 discussion with Ulysses S. Grant III of the newly formed Office of Public Buildings and Parks of the National Capital, Grant expressed surprise at the report’s existence. Upon resurrecting it from the files, Grant praised the report as “a valuable contribution to our problems at hand,” though at that point the focus was on resolving traffic issues raised by the prospective completion of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway rather than the broader management concerns outlined in 1918.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The Office of Public Buildings and Grounds hired Langdon in April 1915 as a “Landscape Architectural Designer.” Langdon had worked for the Olmsted firm for decades, serving as one of the senior Olmsted’s chief designers during the development of the Riverway and other elements of the Boston park system. In October 1916, he was assigned as landscape architect and engineer to the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Commission. (Letter, John Livers, President, Charlottesville and Albermarle Railway Company, to Sherrill, 17 September 1921; Letter, Sherrill to Livers 30 September 1921, Office of the Engineers Document File, 1894-1923, RG 77, National Archives; Cynthia Zaitzevsky, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Boston Park System* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982], 152).

<sup>45</sup> Payne was hired as a landscape architect at the salary of \$200 a month (Letter, Ridley to Chief of Engineers, 26 August 1918; memorandum, Sherrill to Chief of Engineers, 21 June 1921; Office of the Chief of Engineers Document File, 1894-1923, Record Group 77, National Archives).

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum, Col. C. S. Ridley, 1 February 1919 (Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, General Correspondence, 303; Records of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital, General Correspondence, Entry 97, RG 42, National Archives).

<sup>47</sup> Letter, Greenleaf to Charles Moore, 27 January 1919 (Rock Creek Park, Commission of Fine Arts Project Files, 1910-1952, Entry 17, RG 66, National Archives).

<sup>48</sup> Charles Moore to Olmsted, 24 December 1922; Olmsted to Grant, 23 June 1926; Grant to Olmsted, 28 June 1926 (Olmsted Associates Records: Job Files, 1863-1971; File 2837, Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C., 1918-1943, Library of Congress).



When the National Park Service assumed control of the Rock Creek Park as part of the major reorganization of federal bureaus in 1933, it was clear that not only had few of the Olmsted Brothers' recommendations been enacted, but conditions in much of the park had deteriorated in the interim. The agency assigned landscape architect Malcolm Kirkpatrick and plant pathologist E. P. Meinecke to survey the situation and address the most pressing management concerns. Both men were appalled with the condition of the park's road system, woodlands, streams, and structures, which they attributed to poor management, inadequate appropriations, and confusion caused by the park's status as a combination urban park and nature reserve. Meinecke and Kirkpatrick related their findings in two unpublished reports prepared for National Park Service Branch of Plans and Designs Chief Thomas Vint in 1934.<sup>49</sup>

Meinecke's remarks were confined primarily to technical landscape improvement matters, but his general comments underscored the cumulative results of the haphazard manner in which the park had continued to develop. "The strongest impression I get is that of disappointment," Meinecke lamented. Instead of a well-managed park embodying the recommendations of the Olmsted Report, he contended, "I find instead a curious mixture of more or less futile attempts at landscaping and at wild or rather unkempt growth, haphazardly developed, of amateurish attempts at embellishment side by side with crudest neglect." Meinecke was also troubled by the hodge-podge of public thoroughfares and park drives, and by the lack of any attempt to segregate recreational traffic from motorists using the park as a short cut from one part of town to the other. Despite the comprehensive management strategy outlined in the Olmsted Brothers report, he maintained, Rock Creek Park had continued to evolve in an uncoordinated manner with minimal evidence of professional landscape management.<sup>50</sup>

Kirkpatrick echoed many of Meinecke's criticisms. Like Meinecke, he pointed to the deterioration of the park woodlands, the problem of unchecked weed-tree growth choking out more desirable species, and the failure to remove dead timber. Citing the continuing value of the Olmsted Brothers report as a statement of general management principles, Kirkpatrick offered additional recommendations based on subsequent developments. The most notable of these was the rapid proliferation of automobile traffic. "The automobile," he declared, "can be designated as one of the greatest detriments to the enjoyment of Rock Creek Park today." While Olmsted had viewed the automobile as an extension of the horse-and-carriage that could be integrated into Rock Creek Park in harmonious fashion, Kirkpatrick recognized that motoring had changed over the intervening years. Given the evolving nature of automobile traffic, Kirkpatrick observed, "It is very unlikely that any competent person selecting land for the construction of a modern roadway, adequate for the pleasure driving needs of an urban area, would regard Rock Creek Valley as preferable to other possibilities."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> E. P. Meinecke, "Memorandum for Mr. Vint, re: Rock Creek Park, 20 June 1934"; Malcolm Kirkpatrick, "What is Wrong with Rock Creek Park?" unpublished report ca. 1934 (both in Rock Creek Park file, Commission of Fine Arts Project Files, 1910-52, Record Group 66, National Archives).

<sup>50</sup> Meinecke, "Memorandum for Mr. Vint, re: Rock Creek Park."

<sup>51</sup> Kirkpatrick, "What is Wrong with Rock Creek Park?" 1, 10.

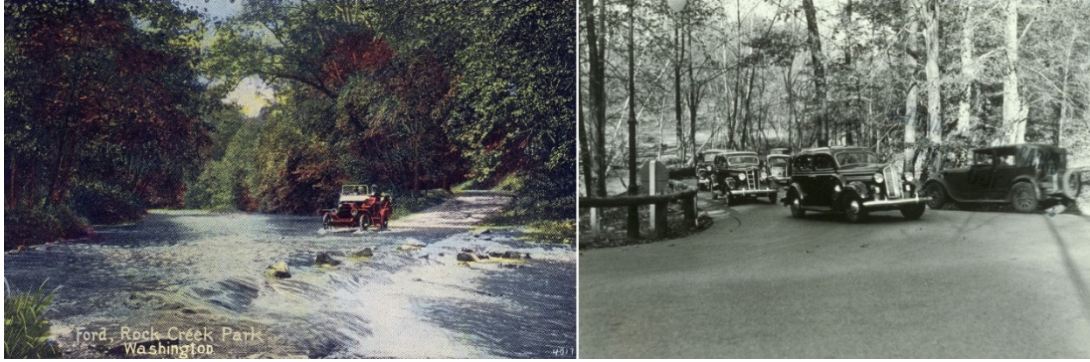


Figure 14. Automobiles on Beach Drive; c. 1918 (vintage postcard, author's collection) and 1930s (Washingtoniana Collection, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, DC)

NPS landscape architect Thomas Jeffers was also asked to weigh in on the challenges associated with the development and preservation of Rock Creek Park. Like Kirkpatrick, Jeffers was particularly concerned with traffic matters. Jeffers pointed to the Olmsted Brothers Report's paraphrasing of the NPS Organic Act as the basis for addressing the increase in utilitarian traffic expected to accompany the imminent completion of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, which would funnel commuters from downtown Washington to the southern end of Beach Drive. Proclaiming "this basic principle should not be subordinated in any future plans for the park," Jeffers asserted that the best way to maintain the desired balance between preservation and access was to modestly improve Beach Drive between the zoo boundary and Piney Branch Parkway to accommodate the growing volume of commuter traffic while leaving the upper reaches of the drive essentially unchanged to preserve the intimate and picturesque character lauded in the 1918 report. Quoting directly from the Olmsted Brother's report, he reiterated its conclusion that the majority of the park's circulation system "cannot be widened without unreasonably serious injury to those very landscape beauties for the appreciation of which the roads are primarily built." When asked to comment on Jeffers' report, Olmsted expressed his approval, though he noted that it might be necessary to construct one or more additional high-speed routes along the margins of the park at some point to alleviate the "tension" between preservation imperatives and practical concerns. The sacrifice of peripheral woodland would be preferable to "the sacrifice of park values by a butcherly widening and straightening of Beach Drive." The National Capital Planning Park and Planning Commission endorsed Jeffers' recommendation, establishing a policy of treating the section of Beach Drive south of Piney Branch Parkway as a transition zone that remains essentially in force today.<sup>52</sup>

Following a 1943 inspection trip at the behest of NPS associate director Arthur Demaray, Olmsted expressed disappointment at the failure to follow through on the more general landscape management and recreational development aspects of the 1918 report. The Olmsted Brothers' recommendations about vista clearing, weed-tree removal, and other aspects of selective forestry had been so neglected that the park's scenic quality was in many ways less appealing than it had been twenty-five years earlier and of the report's proposals were no longer practicable. The attractive mix of abandoned pastures, diverse tree species, and woodlands free of undergrowth on the west side of the park had become so choked with dense growth that the original vision of an open park-like landscape for contemplative strolling could not be realized without inordinate effort and expense. The tranquil meadow at the north end of the park was also too overgrown for reclamation. The proposed pastoral

<sup>52</sup> "Future Development of Rock Creek Park from Taft Bridge to and Including Piney Branch Parkway" Report by Thomas C. Jeffers, Landscape Architect, National Capital Park and Planning Commission," February 16, 1934; Olmsted to Cammerer, 12 June 1934 (Olmsted Associates Records: Job Files, 1863-1971; File 2837, Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C., 1918-1943, Library of Congress).

effect had given way to a heavily wooded second-growth wilderness noted for its forest wildlife, which Olmsted acknowledged was a compelling, if unintended, resolution. While Olmsted approved of the golf course on the northeast side of the park as an appropriate interpretation of the 1918 recommendations, the plans for a more intensively developed recreational area at the Brentwood Reservoir had not been followed, resulting in inadequate facilities that required significant revision. Budget limitations were again cited as the primary reason for the failure to enact the 1918 plan's recommendations, though it was also clear that previous exhortations about keeping the report front and center had produced little effect. Olmsted noted that his visit was prompted by the fact that Demaray had "resurrected" the plan from the old files of the OPB&G. The few associated plans his staff was able to find were so faded that they were barely legible. Olmsted promised to send replacement copies from the Olmsted firm's archives, though the results of these communications are unclear.<sup>53</sup>

A more detailed chronicle of the subsequent management of Rock Creek Park is beyond the scope of this presentation, as is a more exhaustive account of the tendency of park administrators to periodically invoke the 1918 report with limited follow-through. In transportation terms, this was probably a good thing, as the multiple-drive recommendations would have caused irreparable damage to the natural environment and recreational appeal of the park. During the 1930s and 1940s, Olmsted himself continued to present the construction of additional roadways higher on the sides of the valley as a means of accommodating utilitarian traffic without compromising the intimate scenery along Beach Drive. Olmsted's pragmatic perspective combined with his faith in the ability of landscape architects to reconcile competing demands led him to express support for a major arterial along the west side of the park, a proposal that surfaced in the 1940s and was finally defeated by concerted opposition in the 1950s. When the Capital Beltway became a fait accompli, highway authorities attempted to ameliorate criticism by hiring the Olmsted Brothers firm to prepare a design for the portion cutting through the Maryland extension of Rock Creek Park, which was euphemistically labeled the "Beltline Parkway." A brochure outlining the proposal emphasized the Olmsteds' national reputation and litany of accomplishments in the Washington region. The Olmsted Brothers firm of 1954 bore little resemblance to that of 1918, however. John Olmsted passed away in 1920. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was 84 years old and living in Palo Alto, where he had more or less retired from active design work. Edward Whiting was the senior Olmsted Brothers landscape architect in charge of the project. As noted earlier, Whiting had played a leading role in the preparation of the 1918 report. While he presumably remained committed to the goals articulated in the original document, ameliorating the impact of a multi-lane high-speed motorway was a far cry from composing networks of sylvan pleasure drives. Olmsted himself had virtually nothing to do with the Beltline Parkway study. Internal office correspondence suggests that he opposed the project on general principles and was unhappy that his namesake firm had been put in the position of accommodating the highway engineers' intrusions. In a terse letter to the Olmsted Brothers' secretary that was circulated among the firm's high-level employees, Olmsted declared, "I want to say that I am strongly opposed to a freeway or general traffic route through Rock Creek Park, especially along or near the Creek. It would divert the Park from recreational purposes to grossly conflicting purposes."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "Rock Creek Park: Report of a visit by F.L. Olmsted. June 3 & 4, 1943(Olmsted Associates Records: Job Files, 1863-1971; File 2837, Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C., 1918-1943, Library of Congress).

<sup>54</sup> Letter, Olmsted to Hubbard, 5 August 1942, NCP&PC Parks and Reservations Planning File, RG 328, National Archives; "Development Plans for Rock Creek Park Units 2 and 3, Montgomery County, Maryland," prepared by Olmsted Brothers for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and the State Roads Commission of Maryland," (1954), brochure in Rock Creek Park File, Washingtoniana Collection, D.C. Public Library; Letter, Olmsted to Obst, 30 March 1954 (Olmsted Post-1949 Correspondence Collection, Job #9970 Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission; National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National

When the NPS finally got around to doing another Rock Creek Park general management plan at the turn of the twenty-first century, the study's authors began their 2005 treatise by invoking the 1918 report's iconic injunction mirroring the language of the NPS Organic Act: "The dominant consideration, never to be subordinated to any other purpose in dealing with Rock Creek Park, is the permanent preservation of its wonderful natural beauty and the making of this beauty accessible to the people without spoiling the park scenery in the process." Underscoring the evolving nature of the park planning process, the combined General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement took over a decade to complete and ran to almost 400 pages, with a second volume compiling public comments. While most of the report addressed various scenarios for reconciling the tension between commuters and non-motorized recreationalists, there were echoes of the Olmsted Report's landscape categorization and administrative zones. The 1918 report's injunction against allowing utilitarian traffic demands to compromise the scenic and recreational value of the Rock Creek corridor was cited as justification for the preferred alternative of barring daytime automobile traffic on Beach Drive, through Olmsted's proposal for parallel drives was conveniently elided.<sup>55</sup>

While the 1918 report may not have had as great an impact on Rock Creek Park as its authors intended, and its status as the first national park master plan could be said to rest on a classification technicality, its comprehensive sweep and emphasis on general goals and principles is incontestable. In broader terms, the Olmsted Brothers report stands as a unique and compelling testament to the personal, professional, and philosophical bonds between National Park Service history and the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urban park movement.

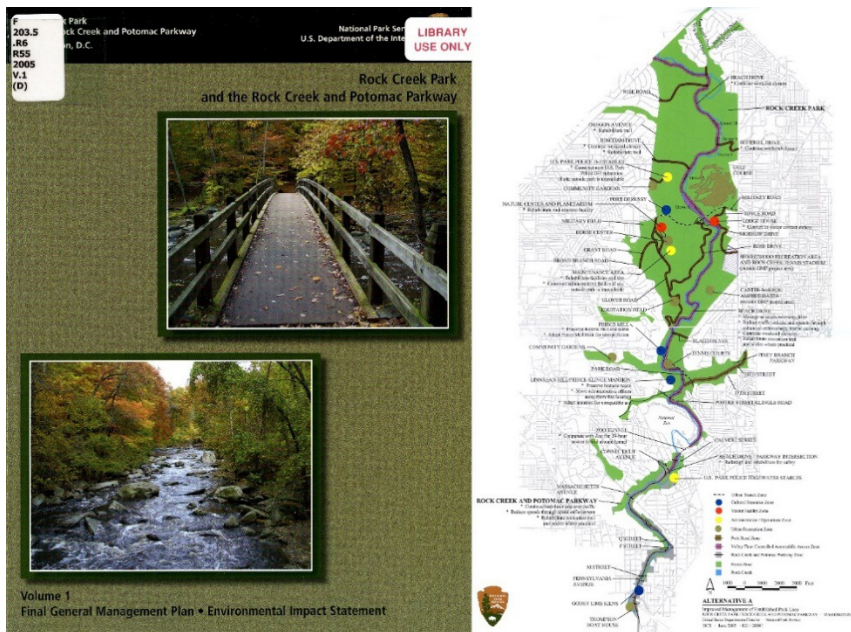


Figure 15. Final General Management Plan and preferred alternative (US Dept. of Interior, National Park Service, Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway: Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, 2005)

Historic Site). For a more detailed chronicle of road-related concerns, see Davis, "Rock Creek Park Road System, HAER DC-55," 130-239.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway: Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2005), quoted, p. 4.