

TRENTON's CADWALADER PARK

A Masterpiece of Landscape Architecture

Cadwalader Park is an outstanding example of a park designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., known as "the father of American landscape architecture." Olmsted promoted what we think of today as the classic urban park landscape. An Olmsted park is a tranquil place, full of wide grass lawns, thoughtfully placed trees and carefully constructed walks and drives to draw visitors through the park.

THE FOUNDER

Edmund C. Hill, a businessman and politician, was the founder of Trenton's park system. As a member of Common Council, he pushed for the city to purchase the 82-acre estate property that became Cadwalader Park in 1888. Afterward, he served as chairman of the Parks Committee.

Before bringing on Olmsted to assist with the design of the park, Hill's committee furnished the park with a bandstand, prairie dog farm and a bear pit, as well as benches and picnic tables.


Despite a remarkable life, Hill was never satisfied with his accomplishments. He disliked running his family's bakery and catering business and focused his attention pursuing real estate and civic affairs. He died at the age of 80, confiding that he thought his life had been a failure.

THE PARK PLAN

The plan, reproduced here, has many elements characteristic of an Olmsted park. Chief among these is a crushed-stone circuit drive (•2). Visitors traveling along the circuit were intended to experience changing views of lawns, groves of trees, meadows, ponds and streams.

At the center of the plan is a more formal landscape around Ellarslie mansion (•5), which predated the park. Olmsted thought visitors would enjoy refreshments at the mansion and listen to music in a nearby concert grove (•4).

Olmsted wanted Cadwalader Park to feel like a natural place, within yet apart from the city. The park was to be enclosed by buffers of densely planted trees. From higher points in the park, visitors might catch glimpses of the Delaware River and distant vistas in Pennsylvania. Along the east and west sides of the park, Olmsted planned wooded ravines with cool streams and pools.



Cadwalader Park Plan by F. Olmsted & Co., September 17, 1891.

OLMSTED'S PHILOSOPHY

Olmsted believed that parks belonged to all the people and should foster a sense of community. He had very high expectations. He wanted his parks to enrich both the body and the soul.

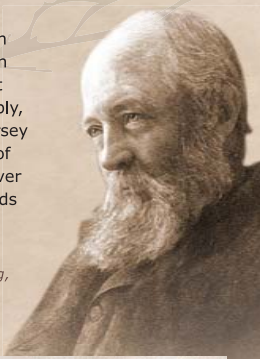
Cities in the late 1800s were crowded, noisy, smelly places, with little of the planning and zoning that we take for granted today. Olmsted thought that natural scenery could calm the nervousness he associated with urban living. He often began his designs by thinking about the drives and paths that moved people through his parks. Visitors were to be gently directed toward good views or points of natural or historic interest.

Olmsted included playgrounds and other types of recreational areas, but he did not believe in devoting entire parks to athletics. In fact, he often pushed these activities to a park's edges where they were less likely to intrude on scenery.

THE ARCHITECT

By the time Olmsted was brought on to design Cadwalader Park in 1890 at age 68, he had been planning parks in American cities for over 30 years. His first major commission and his most famous was New York's Central Park (1858-1878).

In 1884, Olmsted took on his nephew and stepson John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920) as a partner in Olmsted & Company. It was their partnership that drew up the plans for Cadwalader Park. Remarkably, Cadwalader is the oldest Olmsted park in New Jersey and the only one designed with the participation of Olmsted, Sr. He retired in 1895 having planned over 600 projects, among them the U.S. Capitol grounds (1874-1891) in Washington, D.C.



Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (1822-1903). This engraving, dated October 1893, shows how Olmsted appeared about the time he designed Cadwalader Park.

1

Western Ravine

Olmsted's plan for the western end of the park called for damming a small stream to create a series of naturalistic pools.

2

Circuit Drive

Olmsted staked out the route of a stone-paved drive that looped through the park. Trees were spaced unevenly along the drive to close and then open views.

3

The Boys Playground

Olmsted set apart a field for baseball, cricket and football. Behind a slight rise, the playground was not visible from the center of the park.

4

Music Stand

Olmsted's design included a concert grove at the park's center. The bandshell was built in 1913.

5

Ellarslie Mansion

Completed in 1848, the mansion was a central element of the Olmsted plan. Part of the house became a refreshment stand.

6

Eastern Ravine

A brook and path bordered by dense plantings ran the length of the eastern side of the park. Both passed under the stone arch at the park's main entrance.

7

Parkside Avenue Entrance Bridge

This rustic stone-arch bridge was designed by the Olmsted firm in 1891. Olmsted wanted Parkside Avenue to be the park's main entrance.

8

Parkside Avenue Tunnel

Olmsted laid out Parkside Avenue with a beautiful new underpass of the Delaware & Raritan Canal.

9

The Meadow

Olmsted envisioned a much more open feel to the central section of the park than exists today.

10

Delaware & Raritan Canal

In Olmsted's original plan, the canal and railroad were to be shielded from the park by a dense planting of trees.

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