

Yosemite History: Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect

Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865.

Introduction



“Written in 1865 by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted when he served briefly as one of the first Commissioners appointed to manage the grant of the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove from Congress to the State of California as a park, this Report offers one of the first systematic expositions in the history of the Western world of the importance of contact with wilderness for human well-being, the effect of beautiful scenery on human perception, and the moral responsibility of democratic governments to preserve regions of extraordinary natural beauty for the benefit of the whole people. The Report also includes characteristically thoughtful suggestions for managing the Park for human access with minimal harm to the natural environment. Olmsted read the Report to his fellow Commissioners at a meeting in the Yosemite Valley on August 9, 1865; ultimately intended for presentation to the state legislature, it met with indifference or hostility from other members of the Commission, and was quietly suppressed. Olmsted himself left California for good at the end of 1865; he had arrived there just a little more than two years before to assume responsibilities as Superintendent for the Mariposa Mining Estate. Only in the twentieth century has his Preliminary Report come to be widely recognized as one of the most profound and original philosophical statements to emerge from the American conservation movement.

“The original draft of the Preliminary Report is in the hand of Henry Perkins, Olmsted’s secretary. It is accompanied here by a twentieth-century typed transcript. Pages 5 through 14 of the original document are missing; these are believed to have contained the material represented in the second typed transcript, taken from a letter to the New York Evening Post written by Olmsted in 1868. Olmsted scholar Laura Wood Roper surmised that Olmsted had removed that portion of the Report in order to incorporate it in the letter; her explanation has been generally accepted by other scholars, and a typescript of the relevant portion of the letter is accordingly included here as part of the Report’s transcription.”

—From *“The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920,” American Memory, Library of Congress*

- **Full text of Frederick Law Olmsted’s *Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865.***
- Buy a reprint of the 1865 report.
- Related Links
 - Frederick Law Olmsted’s Biography and Philosophy
 - Frederick Law Olmsted Society of Riverside (Illinois)
 - The Life of Frederick Law Olmsted (Christopher Parker)

Credits: The above note is from the Library of Congress Exhibit “The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920” as part of its American Memory Project. The production of this collection was supported by a generous gift from Laurance S. and Mary French Rockefeller.

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—Dan Anderson, www.yosemite.ca.us

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