

FRIENDS OF OLMSTED-BEIL HOUSE, Staten Island, New York

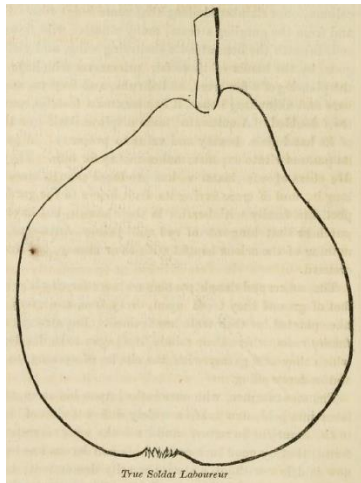
Catherine Seavitt Nordenson, City College of New York

January 6, 2023

(adapted from the *Olmsted, Public Health, and Urban Planning* presentation, September 22, 2021)

Seeds, Grafts, and Offshoots

Frederick Law Olmsted on (and off) Staten Island, 1848–1857



Sketch by F. L. Olmsted in “A Note on the True Soldat Labourer Pear,” *The Horticulturist and journal of rural art and rural taste*, ed. A. J. Downing, vol. 7, Jan.-Dec. 1852, pp. 14-15.

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) spent ten years—from the age of 25 to 35—on and off his 130-acre Tosomock Farm on Staten Island, with its extraordinary views of Raritan Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. This essay explores the seeds sown there, from 1848–1857—and the voyages that departed from and returned to this island—that were critical to his pursuit of what is now called “landscape architecture.” Olmsted explored his identity on Staten Island, as a farmer, a writer, and an editor. Yet despite this focus on the land, and the landscape, it is possible that perhaps what Olmsted most enjoyed was the farm’s proximity to the watery realm of the sea—five years earlier, he had come to New York with the dream of becoming a sailor. As a young man, Olmsted also developed his interests through various authorial guises deployed in his earliest writings. He wrote under several pen names in these texts, aliases that reflected the lenses through which he would voice his written opinions: “Wayfarer” (for his report on his walking tour of England and Liverpool’s Birkenhead Park), “Yeoman” (for his *New York Daily Times* chronicles of his tours thru the slave-holding agricultural states of the American South that would result in his book *The Cotton Kingdom*), and “An American Farmer” (for a report on a utopian farming community). He would sometimes sign

his letters to his younger brother John as “A Greek (ola),” a play on “*agricola*,” the latin word for “farmer.” Indeed, Olmsted’s point of view as an author was that of a farmer; albeit a well-heeled, gentleman farmer. And his ideas of the connection of the landscape and public health, evident in his later work, would emerge from this view.

On January 1, 1848, Frederick Law Olmsted’s father, John Olmsted (1791–1873), purchased a farm for his 26-year-old son on the southern shore of Staten Island, New York. It was the second such farm, the first being Sachem’s Head Farm (70 acres) on the southern coast of Connecticut, near the family’s home in Hartford, purchased by the elder Olmsted when his wayward son chose to try his hand as a “scientific farmer.” The much larger Staten Island farm (130 acres), purchased from Samuel Ackerly, and renamed by the Olmsteds as “Tosomock Farm,” would be the second farm abandoned along Olmsted’s path to becoming a landscape architect, a path that entailed a detour into a writing career. Both farms were located on the Atlantic coast, with views of the sea. Indeed, Olmsted’s nautical prose appears in a letter to his brother John Hull Olmsted on March 6, 1848, describing his dramatic voyage—moving both his furniture and his potatoes for the market via a 54-foot single-masted sailboat, the Juliet—from Sachem’s Head Farm to Tosomock Farm at Great Kills. “My sofa went lengthwise in her. The chests, chairs, etcetera, were in the state-rooms.”¹ The sailboat sailed west along the Long Island Sound and south on the East River through the Narrows, encountering ice floes and a snowstorm before arriving safely at Great Kills, where Olmsted’s possessions and potato harvest were unloaded.²

The foundations of the Ackerly farmhouse, which we know today as the Olmsted-Beil House, date from the seventeenth century, approximately 1685. Several early twentieth-century photographs reflect quite accurately how it would have appeared during Olmsted’s time on the island in the 1840s and 1850s. One of Olmsted’s earliest drawings is an undated sketch of the Staten Island farmhouse, probably circa 1849, but there is no context of the environs of the farm in the sketch.³ However, Olmsted has captured the distant viewshed of the steamers and sailing ships on Raritan

¹ Charles Capen McLaughlin, editor, and Charles Beveridge, associate editor. *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume 1, The Formative Years, 1822–1852* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 307.

² <https://research.mysticseaport.org/databases/ct-ships/> William L. Clancy, Juliet, sloop, 53’-8” length, Norwich CT, built 1824, New London customs district. Single-masted Dutch design.

³ Undated Ink Sketch in the Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress. Reprinted in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume I: The Formative Years, 1822–1852*, 319.

Bay as seen from his porch. In an 1848 letter to Frederick Kingsbury, he wrote: “I do exceedingly enjoy the view, sometimes it is wondrous beautiful... I’m sure you would like Staten Island.”⁴

Olmsted’s time on Staten Island is remarkable not so much for the landscape designs he initiated on the farm, which were informed by the most prominent “landscape gardener” of that time, Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852, died aged 36), but for the social connections he established there, which enabled him first to enter the literary field. These relationships in turn led him to become a foundational figure in the history of landscape architecture in the United States. His neighbors included the publisher George Palmer Putnam, poet William Cullen Bryant, and railroad tycoon William Henry Vanderbilt. Olmsted certainly worked the land, planted seeds, and grafted saplings (particularly pear trees for the nursery trade) at his Staten Island farm, but the substance of Olmsted’s time on the island is to be found in the seeds sown in Olmsted himself to pursue first writing and then what would eventually be called the discipline and practice of landscape architecture.

When Olmsted set sail for Staten Island in 1848, there was no identifiable profession called “landscape architecture.” The term itself was as embryonic as Olmsted was in his professional pursuits. One of the earliest known instances of the term “landscape architecture” in the English language appeared only seven years prior in Scottish botanist and gardener J. C. Loudon’s 1841 book *Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the late Humphry Repton, Esq.*, as follows: “These writings [of Rev. William Gilpin and Mr. Uvedale Price] are full of the most valuable instruction for the gardener, relative to the general composition of landscape scenery, and landscape architecture.”⁵ Repton was known for his *Red Books*, portfolios of the garden plans and before-and-after views of the country estates that he designed in England. There was no clearly articulated and autonomous profession of landscape architecture in the 1840s, only what was then termed “landscape gardening.” The exemplar of the profession of the “landscape gardener” (a term that Olmsted would later avoid) at that time in the United States was the aforementioned Andrew Jackson Downing.

⁴ *Frederick Law Olmsted Papers*, Correspondence, 1848, United States Library of Congress. Letter to Frederick Kingsbury from Frederick Law Olmsted.

⁵ J. C. Loudon, introduction to *Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the late Humphry Repton, Esq.*, edited by Loudon. London, 1840, vii. Digital version here: <https://archive.org/details/landscapegarden02loudgoog>.

Olmsted not only knew of Downing at that time through his writings, particularly the popular *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America* (1841)⁶ as well as Downing's journal, *The Horticulturist*, but, in fact, had met Downing at his estate and nursery farm in Newburgh, a town along the Hudson River. Olmsted's approach to farming, particularly on Staten Island, would be influenced by Downing's philosophy on landscape gardening as articulated in the *Treatise*.⁷ Downing's *Treatise* was a primer on the English landscape aesthetic, ranking the so-called "picturesque" style as the ideal, given its elegance in composition, expression, and form—a practice of smoothing.⁸ Downing's *Treatise* not only helped to popularize landscape gardening and design, but also theorized it, making it a canonical text for the future profession.⁹

The influence of Downing and his landscape theory on Olmsted is manifold. First, Downing's writings, particularly in *The Horticulturist*, informed Olmsted's "scientific approach" to farming. Second, Downing's work inspired Olmsted to write—Downing even published some of Olmsted's earliest writings in *The Horticulturist*. Downing also wrote letters of introduction for Olmsted's trip to England in 1850. Finally, in what is arguably the most significant introduction in the history of landscape architecture in the United States, Downing introduced Olmsted to Calvert Vaux, an English architect and draftsman whom Downing brought to New York to work as his "pencil" at his landscape gardening firm in Newburgh. Following Downing's death in a steamboat accident in 1852, Vaux would soon become Olmsted's most distinguished collaborator, helping develop the Greensward Plan for Central Park in 1857 and as the primary designer of Prospect Park in Brooklyn, among other numerous projects by the Olmsted/Vaux partnership. Shortly before Vaux's death in 1895, Olmsted credited his own identity and career as a landscape architect to his former partner:

⁶ New York & London: Wiley and Putnam; Boston: C.C. Little & Co., 1841. Accessed October 20, 2019: <https://archive.org/details/treatiseontheory41down/page/n7>.

⁷ Examples include the following: George B. Tatum, *Andrew Jackson Downing: Arbiter of American Taste, 1815-1852* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1949); Elisabeth Blair Macdougall and George B. Tatum, eds., *Prophet with Honor: The Career of Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852/Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture, XI* (Washington DC: Athenaeum of Philadelphia/Dumbarton Oaks, 1990); Adam W. Sweeting, *Reading Houses and Building Books: Andrew Jackson Downing and the Architecture of Popular Antebellum Literature, 1835-1855* (Lebanon, NH: University of New England Press, 1996); Judith K. Major, *To Live in the New World: A.J. Downing and American Landscape Gardening* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1997); and David Schuyler, *Apostle of Taste: Andrew Jackson Downing, 1815-1852*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37-39.

⁹ Downing's work even inspired a then fledgling short story writer, Edgar Allan Poe, to write a parody of it titled "The Domain of Arnheim" in 1842; Poe's protagonist was modeled on Downing and spoofed Downing's treatise through an extravagant landscape tale. See "The Domain of Arnheim or The Landscape Garden," *The Complete Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, 604-615.

I should have had nothing to do with the design of Central Park, or of Prospect Park, had not Vaux invited me to join him in those works. But for his invitation I should not have been a landscape architect. I should have been a farmer.¹⁰

But all of this was yet to come for Olmsted. When he set sail for Staten Island in March of 1848, he knew Downing's work and had read his writings, but he was still searching for what would become his vocation.

In terms of the physical design of Olmsted's farm on Staten Island, there are no drawings or other extant evidence of Olmsted's planning and management of the farm. He was a gentleman farmer trying to make a profitable business, but there is no indication that he was making physical drawings to lay out and operate the Staten Island farm. According to Charles Capen McLaughlin and Charles E. Beveridge, Olmsted applied Downing's theories of landscape gardening when laying out his farm on Staten Island, particularly noting that Olmsted "took to heart Downing's plea that his fellow citizens should tastefully arrange and embellish their dwellings and property for both convenience and beauty."¹¹ In terms of drawings and plans, Olmsted offered in a November 24, 1851 letter to *The Horticulturist* a one-to-one sketch of a *Soldat Labourer* pear, the crop he imported from France and harvested as his primary investment at the farm, influenced by Downing's other influential book, *The Fruits and Fruit-Trees of America*, published in 1847.¹² Even in Olmsted's circa 1849 sketch of the farmhouse, there is no context of the environs of the farm itself.¹³

To get a sense of Olmsted's landscape work at the Staten Island farm, there are two documents that provide the most detail. The first is a late-in-life reminiscence by Olmsted's wife,

¹⁰ See "Olmsted to Mariana Van Rensselaer, May 22, 1893" in *Frederick Law Olmsted: Writings on Landscape, Culture, and Society*, Charles Beveridge, ed., (New York, NY: Library of America, 2015), 709-711. In this letter, Olmsted wrote that he considered Vaux a landscape architect prior to their usage of the term because of Vaux's connection to Downing.

¹¹ McLaughlin, Charles Capen and Charles E. Beveridge, editors. *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume I: The Formative Years, 1822 to 1852*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. 8.

¹² Olmsted, "A Note on the True Soldat Labourer Pear," printed in *The Horticulturist and journal of rural art and rural taste*, edited by A. J. Downing, Volume 7 (January to December, 1852), 14-15. The Soldat Labourer pear is identified as a variety of the Beurré d'Aremberg pear by C. M. Hovey, and the first fruit featured in Hovey's extensive illustrated catalogue *The Fruits of America* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1851). Olmsted, however, claims the "True Soldat Labourer" as a unique variety. Downing featured the Beurré d'Aremberg in his *The Fruits and Fruit-Trees of America* (New York and London: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), 1.

¹³ Undated Ink Sketch in the Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress. Reprinted in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume I: The Formative Years, 1822 to 1852*. 319.

Mary Cleveland Perkins.¹⁴ The second document is a recollection by Mr. Frederick Kingsbury, a friend of Olmsted's, which was recorded in 1903. Each of these recollections were published in the first compilation dedicated to Olmsted, *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903*, edited by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Theodora Kimball in 1922.¹⁵ Of course, one should read such recollections with caution, particularly when offered decades after the time discussed and in such detail.

Mary Perkins offered a description of the initial visit to the Ackerly Farm by Olmsted and his father, John Olmsted, in the summer of 1847, which persuaded them to purchase the 130-acre farm for \$12,000.00, the equivalent of approximately \$433,500 today.¹⁶ She also detailed the physical conditions of the farm and noted Olmsted's approach to farming. According to Perkins, the approach to the farmhouse was through a stand of trees "of fair size,—oaks, maples, sweet and sour gum, sassafras, holly, etc."¹⁷ After crossing through this stand of trees, the land opened to a clearing atop a small rise in soil of "heavy red clay...suitable for wheat." The land sloped gently down to the beach, offering a view out to the sea and the New Jersey environs southward (Sandy Hook and Navesink) and all of the outward and inbound shipping. According to Perkins, "there were no trees on this level with the exception of one tall old pear tree at the foot of which were found from time to time the bones of the slaves who had been buried there."¹⁸ Notable here is not only the detail of a possible burial ground of enslaved people, but also the single pear tree that might have persuaded the gentleman farmer Olmsted to follow the precedent of the land in selecting pears as the primary crop of the farm's nursery. Perkins' recollection suggests as much, particularly in noting that Olmsted planted fruit trees as part of the development of a nursery, particularly pears, "in a simple inexpensive way, using the old buildings on the place and practicing rigid economy."¹⁹ Olmsted's letters from 1850 indicate that he planned to plant 5,000 imported pear trees, grafted onto quince tree stock, at the farm.^{20 21}

¹⁴ Mary Cleveland Perkins (1830-1921) was Frederick Law Olmsted's brother John Hull Olmsted's wife, whom Frederick remarried after his brother's death. Perkins grew up on a neighboring farm on Staten Island.

¹⁵ New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922. One should read such recollections with caution, particularly when offered decades after the time discussed and in such detail.

¹⁶ "Inflation Calculator." U.S. Official Inflation Data, Alioth Finance, October 7, 2022, <https://www.officialdata.org/>.

¹⁷ Perkins, as quoted by Olmsted, Jr. and Kimball. *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903*, 78.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 79.

²⁰ "Olmsted to Fred Kingsbury letter, December 21, 1850," reprinted in *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903*, 80.

²¹ Perkins, 79.

That is the extent of Perkins's recollection of the Staten Island farm. Kingsbury, for his part, provided a detailed description of Olmsted's "landscape improvements" as edited by Olmsted, Jr. Kingsbury contrasts the initial appearance of the farm with Olmsted's improvements, which suggest Downing's influence:

The house was simple yet picturesque...the barns were quite near, and in the rear of the house was a small pond, fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, used for washing wagons, watering stock, and as a swimming place for dogs, ducks, and geese. There was no turf near it. The whole place was as dirty and disorderly as the most bucolic person could desire. It was on the surroundings of the house that Olmsted first showed his genius in landscape construction. He moved the barns and all their belongings behind a knoll, he brought the road in so that it approached the house by a graceful curve, he turfed the borders of the pond and planted water plants on its edge and shielded it from all contamination. Thus, with a few strokes and at small expense he transformed the place from a very dirty, disagreeable farmyard to a gentleman's house.²²

This is the most direct evidence of Olmsted's landscape designs at the Staten Island farm; we can see similar precedents in the work of Humphry Repton with the development of picturesque ponds as part of his before-and-after country estate designs. The success of these "improvements" of Olmsted's Staten Island farm can be inferred from one of his neighbors, the eventual railroad promoter William Henry Vanderbilt, who asked Olmsted to make such improvements to his own farm at New Dorp, Staten Island.²³ Other indirect evidence of Olmsted's landscape improvements come in the form of the cylindrical drainage tiling system he installed at his farm, which removed excess water from the soil by way of a network of tile pipes laid under the fields.²⁴ This drainage

²² Kingsbury, as quoted by Olmsted, Jr. and Kimball. *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Frederick Law Olmsted, Landscape Architect, 1822-1903*, 85-86.

²³ McLaughlin and Beveridge, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume I: The Formative Years, 1822 to 1852*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. 8.

²⁴ In his autobiographical sketch "Hints Aidful to Elementary Self-Education," written ca. 1890, Olmsted notes that he established the first cylindrical drainage tile works in America with a friend; he hoped local farmers would adopt this English drainage method of removing excess water from soil by laying a network of pipes under their fields. Olmsted had written about this English technique of thorough under-drainage in his *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* (New York: Putnam, 1852). Olmsted's biographer Laura Wood Roper notes that an owner of Olmsted's farm 100 years later (ca. 1950?) plowed up some of the drainage tile. See Charles Capen McLaughlin, ed., *The Papers of*

tiling technique, which he had learned about in England, would be developed as part of his later work in Central Park with the sanitary and drainage engineer George E. Waring (who would also rent lodging at the Staten Island farmhouse). Both men connected farming techniques to so-called “sanitary” strategies for achieving public health in an urban context.

In many ways, Olmsted’s social connections on Staten Island proved to be more constructive than his agricultural endeavors on the farm. As noted, two of his neighbors were distinguished publishers and writers: the publisher George Palmer Putnam, who would encourage Olmsted to travel to England and compile his writings into a full book; and the newspaper editor and poet William Cullen Bryant, who, along with Downing, was one of the first to call for a large-scale urban park for the city of New York. When Olmsted’s brother, John Hull Olmsted, and his friend, Charles Loring Brace, who were also part of Olmsted’s social circle on Staten Island during this time, planned to embark upon a trip to England in 1850, Olmsted, envious of their wanderlust, wrote to his father and pleaded that he be allowed to abandon the Staten Island farm for most of that growing season.²⁵ Olmsted suggested that his father “reckon up the money lost by absence, and compare it with the money value of [my] experience among English & Scottish farmers,” thereby implying that he would learn from the trip and eventually apply such experience to the Staten Island farm.²⁶

Olmsted’s father granted his permission and Olmsted set off for England, a trip that would produce several of Olmsted’s “social” writings such as the “The People’s Park at Birkenhead, Near Liverpool,” published under Olmsted’s penname “Wayfarer” by Downing in *The Horticulturist* in May 1851. Here, Olmsted reflects on his impressions of this 120-acre public park designed by Joseph Paxton. The park had also impressed his future partner Calvert Vaux, and would influence their designs for both Central Park and later, Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Upon his return stateside, Olmsted found support for his writing in none other than his neighbor, George Putnam, who encouraged Olmsted to develop his writings from the English trip into the two volume *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, published in 1852. In that work, Olmsted again displays his interest in the nautical world with his detailed descriptions of ships, but he also describes various farming techniques, including the effectiveness of drainage tiles in an agricultural context. With the

Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume I: The Formative Years, 1822 to 1852 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977,) note 26, p. 47. This note also refers to a mention of the drainage tiles in a letter from Olmsted to Frederick Kingsbury, dated December 21, 1850.

²⁵ “FLO to John Olmsted, March 1, 1850,” reprinted in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume I: The Formative Years, 1822 to 1852* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977,) 337-343.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 340.

success of that publication, Olmsted would embark that same year upon a literary journey that took him to the south and west of the United States, producing three major books in the span of five years (1852–1857). His attention during those five years was on writing, not farming. But it was through the lens of his early years of farming—and wayfaring to and from—the Staten Island Tosomock Farm that we find the origins of Olmsted’s interconnected and complex ideas of public space and public health later manifest (and drawn, likely by Vaux) in the Greensward Plan for Central Park.



Author information:

At the time of this presentation and report, Catherine Seavitt Nordenson was Professor and Director of the Master of Landscape Architecture Program, Spitzer School of Architecture, The City College of New York. She is currently Tenured Professor and Chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture, Weitzman School of Design, the University of Pennsylvania.

Correspondence: cseavitt@seavitt.com

© 2023 Friends of Olmsted-Beil House. *Seeds, Grafts, and Offshoots: Frederick Law Olmsted on (and off) Staten Island, 1848–1857*, by Catherine Seavitt Nordenson (2023), is distributed under the terms of [the Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). This work may be downloaded and shared, provided that the copyright owner is credited. This work may not be changed in any way or used commercially.