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## GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

I feel sure that almost all of us have seen and appreciated the work of an American visionary, and yet are probably unaware of his name. The fruits of his work can be found in all parts of our country – north, south, east, and west, as well as in Canada. His name is Frederick Law Olmsted.

I recently attended a conference at Old Salem, North Carolina, that was celebrating his life; he died 100 years ago this year.

This extraordinary genius was an innovator and a pioneer in his field of landscape architecture. In fact, he is the one who coined that phrase and he is the very first professional architect in our country. Among the sites he is responsible for are parks, college campuses, residential communities, parkways, hospitals and asylums, cemeteries, arboretums, world fairs, and expositions. His work can be seen in 24 of our states, Washington, D.C., and Montreal, Canada – so along the way most of us have encountered and enjoyed it.

He was born in 1822 in Hartford, Connecticut. His middle name, Law, was given to him in honor of his scholarly uncle, John Law, who was a friend of the poet John Greenleaf Whittier. His early years were somewhat unhappy. His mother died from an overdose of laudanum, which she had taken for a toothache, when he was only three. His father remarried, giving Frederick a stepbrother and stepmother. His father was a successful, self-made businessman who operated a prosperous dry goods establishment. It was to his father, a shy, modest, amiable man who loved to read, that Frederick attributed his love and appreciation of nature and scenic beauty. Frederick summed up his early childhood when he later wrote, "I was strongly uneducated... when at school, mostly a private pupil in families of country parsons of small, poor parishes, it seemed to me that I was chiefly taught how not to study – how not to think for myself." He was, however, exposed to good books and his father had instilled in him a love of reading and he benefited from that. He was a self-invented man who chose a different avenue of education. He acquired his education through life experiences, adventures, and travel. At fifteen he served an apprenticeship as a land surveyor in Andover, Massachusetts, but after two years lost interest in the trade. There he gained a business education and valuable organizational skills, but the business life did not appeal to him. In the fall of 1842 he entered Yale. At the age of 21 he took a trip to China for the adventure. He was an apprentice sailor. It proved to be an unpleasant adventure. He contracted scurvy and became ill-nourished. He did, however, survive his year as a seaman, but saw very little of China. He then decided to become a farmer. The majority of Americans were farmers and due to commercialization and specialization, farming by the 1840s was based on applied science, not traditional practice. It also required the business skills he had already acquired. The classes he had attended at Yale provided the formal training which qualified him in all areas. His health forced him to leave Yale

eventually, as he suffered from fainting spells. He returned to his father's home in Hartford, Connecticut.

In Newburgh, New York, he met Andrew Jackson Downing, a celebrity similar to Martha Stewart in today's world. Downing was the foremost authority of landscape and gardening in America at the time. He had written a *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America*. Frederick read his book, along with a lot of reading he was doing at the time. He read Downing's farm journals, the anti-slavery newspaper called *Trial America*, a peace reform journal, and Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. These reading materials formed his irregular educational background.

He bought a farm at Sachems Head, near New Haven, Connecticut, in 1847, where he grew fruit trees and made improvements upon it and then sold it to his father. He then bought another farm on Staten Island, New York. It had upon it a nine-bedroom home which was pleasing to his social side because it could accommodate his many visitors. One of his neighbors was William Henry Vanderbilt. He transformed his plain farmland into a picturesque site by creating scenic affects on the landscape. He stayed there seven years. This was the beginning of what was to become an amazing career.

In 1850 he took a trip to England with his brother, John, and a friend, Charles Brace, whom he referred to as "Two of the very greatest and best men in the world." There he researched scientific agriculture and began to understand how to manipulate natural elements to create the picturesque effects he desired to achieve on a site. Much of what he was to do in his future in America was reproduced from the visual delights that he witnessed in England on that trip. Upon his return in October 1850, his career was taking form. He had achieved his goal in taking that trip for an education and not for recreation. He knew he was capable of using his knowledge gained there on a larger scale than just farming.

He began his writing career with an article in the *Horticulturalist* about the landscape design in Birkenhead Park, outside of Liverpool. He was not only impressed by the way the park was planned, the ponds and hills built by man to serve the needs of the people, but that the people intended as users included all social classes. In America at that time there were no public parks. This article was the first of a great many articles to be published by him as well as books.

He began to explore other parts of the U.S. and publish journals about those trips. Those books gained him a reputation as a full-fledged writer in America. American writers were emerging at this time, among them Thoreau, Longfellow, Melville, Fenimore Cooper, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. He was among very impressive company! He was an innovator in writing about the conditions of American society, as well as commenting on the quality of the land itself. He became a recognized expert in landscape and gardening through his writings in Europe, as well as America.

In *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, the first of his southern trilogy, he wrote about the conditions of slavery he was witness to. Up until then he was opposed to slavery, but was what was termed a gradualist. However, after his travels through the southern slave states, he did a complete turn around in his views and became an active abolitionist. I believe anyone studying or teaching about slavery must acquaint himself with Olmsted's writing on that subject!

He began to be hired to create landscapes throughout our country. He designed New York's Central Park and this year we celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> birthday of the park. He collaborated with Calvert Vaux in the creation of Central Park and together they designed arbors, shelters, a skating pond, and included such elements as walls, bridges, and benches. The aim was to offer to the less-fortunate people a specimen of God's handiwork and a park for their pleasure. He believed parks were more than scenery, they were social spaces, public pleasure grounds for amusements. He also designed Prospect Park in Brooklyn. It is probably one of his most beautiful parks in which he included bridle paths for horseback riders and promenades for pedestrians. Prospect Park offered beauty, but more importantly, it offered unity for the people.

His definition of civilization was, "The best condition of mankind" and, he added, "The steps by which mankind have arrived at civilization do not need to be retread to find morality, respectability, or happiness." He believed the opposite of civil is barbarism. The New York parks were designed for passive pleasure, whereas South Park in Chicago was designed by him for active recreation. He also designed Grant Park in Atlanta, Georgia, and began being hired to spread his talents all over this land, stretching all the way to Yosemite Valley. Colleges throughout the land sought his skills to create their campuses from places like Williams College in Massachusetts to Berea in Kentucky. He was eventually hired to create the setting for the home of George Washington Vanderbilt, the son of his former neighbor back in Staten Island. The home, known today as the Biltmore Estate, was being built in Ashville, North Carolina, in 1888. This became his last work and what many consider his masterpiece. Biltmore became the Pisgah National Forest.

He became ill after that and was diagnosed with melancholia, a form of dementia. He died in August of 1903, ironically, in an asylum that he had landscaped in his early life. His sons carried on his work. The Olmsted brothers, joined by other associates, established Olmsted Brothers, a firm which participated in 5,500 landscape design projects from 1857-1950. They made a significant contribution to the cultural history of our country. Frederick Law Olmsted's philosophy of peace and tranquility is with us today.

This is my final issue of the Geddy Garden News. I will begin my retirement in January after 23 years with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Writing the newsletter was one of my favorite parts of my job. I have really enjoyed writing this monthly newsletter for you, my colleagues, and also for you many donors who are on my mailing list. It has been a pleasure to have had this special contact with you. My association with Colonial Williamsburg has been a wonderful experience of great dimensions and richness.

I now look forward to spending more time with my family and friends. I intend to pursue my interests in landscape and garden history through reading and writing and traveling and seeing some of those places that Frederick Law Olmsted designed for us.

*May peace and plenty be the  
first to lift the latch on your door,  
And happiness be guided to your  
home by the candle of Christmas.*

*Janet Guthrie*