

*New York City's Central Park:
Beautiful & Kind*

By Dale Laurin, RA

Part II

- How Central Park Began; Private and Public
- The Kindness—and Ethics—of Central Park

How Central Park Began; Private and Public

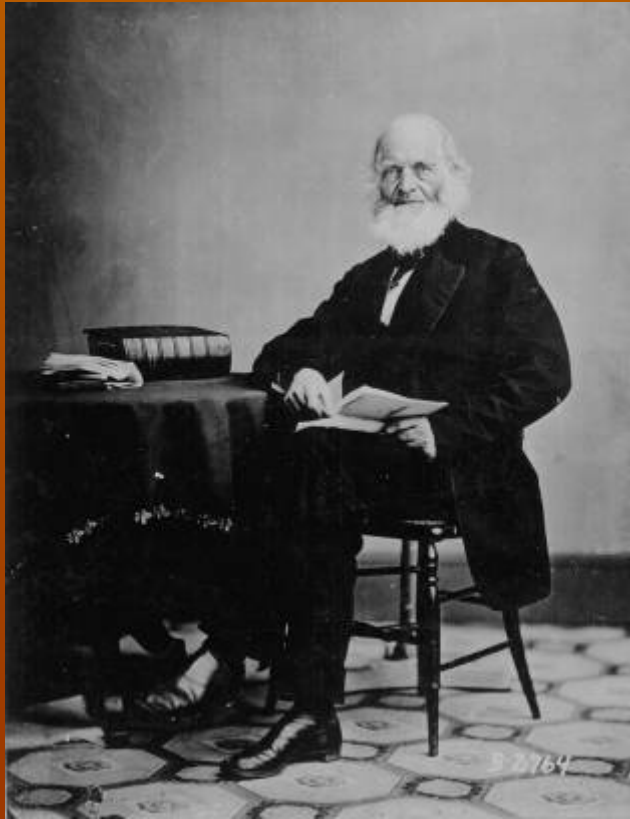
The idea of public parks originated in 18th century England, where landscaping was designed for great country estates that put together formal and informal, planned and natural elements.



In the 1840s and '50s, a group of visionary New Yorkers felt that a large green open space like these was greatly needed—not in the country for the exclusive use of a privileged few, but right here in this densely built-up, rapidly growing city, convenient for all its citizens to enjoy.



Among these advocates were William Cullen Bryant, poet and editor of the *New York Post*

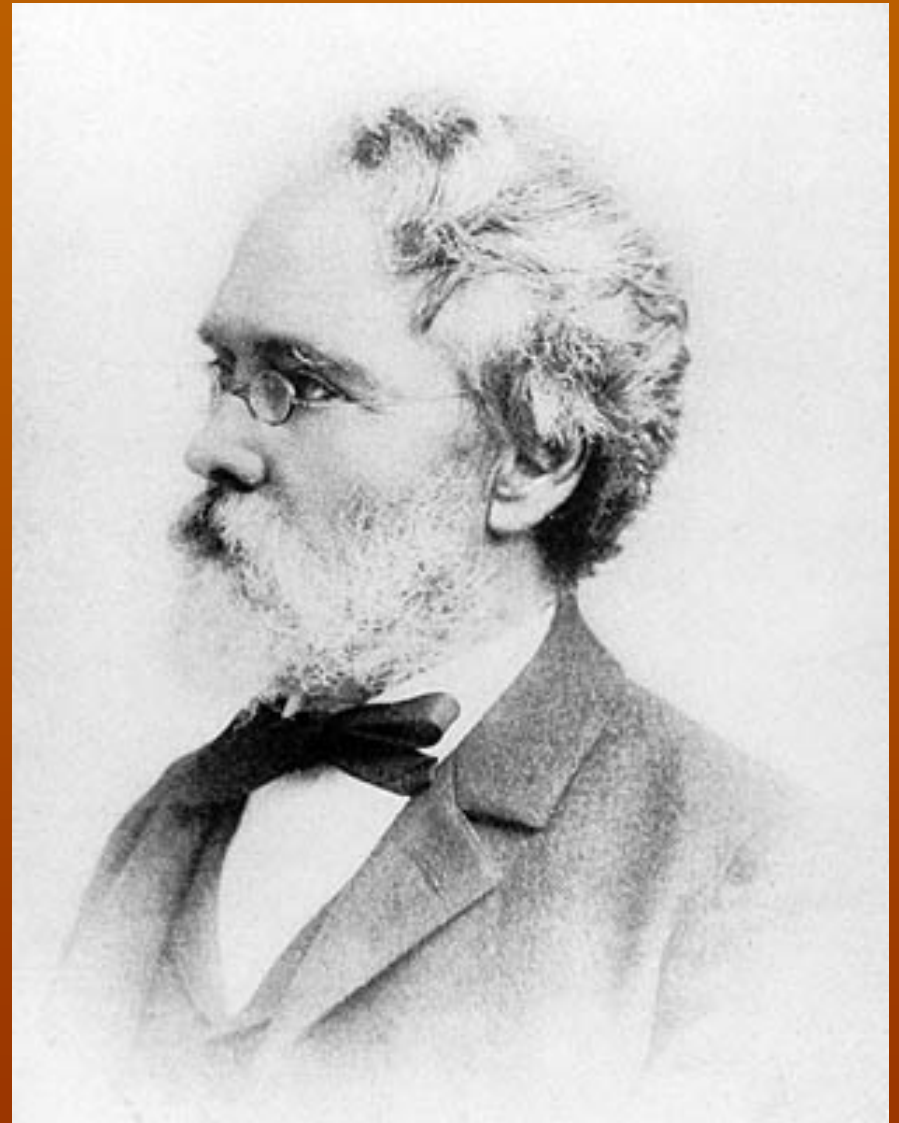


and Andrew Jackson Downing, an American landscape designer who was inspired by visits to London's extensive parks.

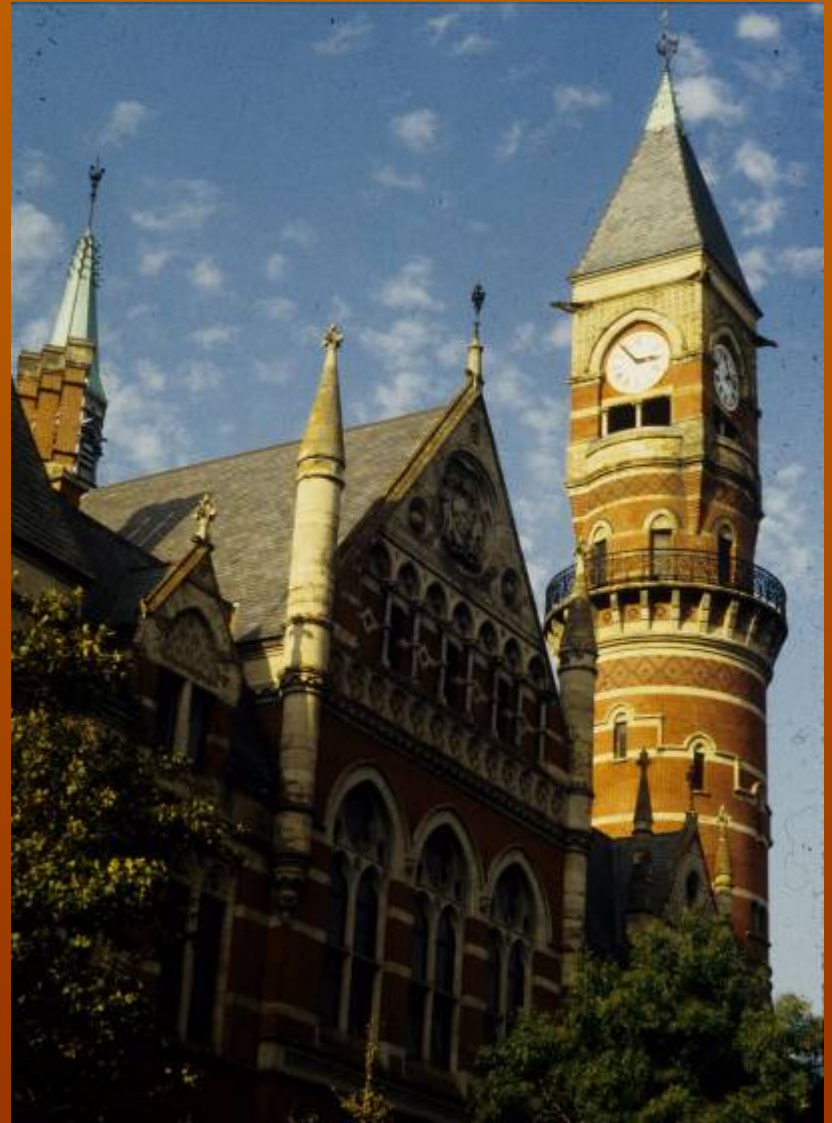


Through their work and others', the NY State Legislature in 1853 authorized the city to purchase land to develop a park.

Another early supporter of the park was to become one of its designers, Calvert Vaux. Vaux, who lived from 1824 to 1895, was a London-born architect and landscape designer who immigrated to the US. He opened an office in New York, and over the next 40 years designed for this city he loved and called home some of its most notable landmarks,



including the Jefferson Market Courthouse, now the Greenwich Village branch of the NY Public Library, designed with Frederick Withers;



the original
buildings of the
Metropolitan
Museum



and the Museum
of Natural
History designed
with Jacob
Mould;



as well as some of the city's first non-tenement apartment houses and ten homes for orphaned boys, designed with George Radford, for the Children's Aid Society.



While Vaux was pleased New York would finally get a public park, he was rightly critical of the formal design proposed by Egbert Viele, the engineer appointed to plan the park—a design in which the four transverse streets I spoke about were shown cutting through—and, in his opinion—ruining the park. With others, Vaux successfully urged officials to hold an open competition to elicit and select the best design.

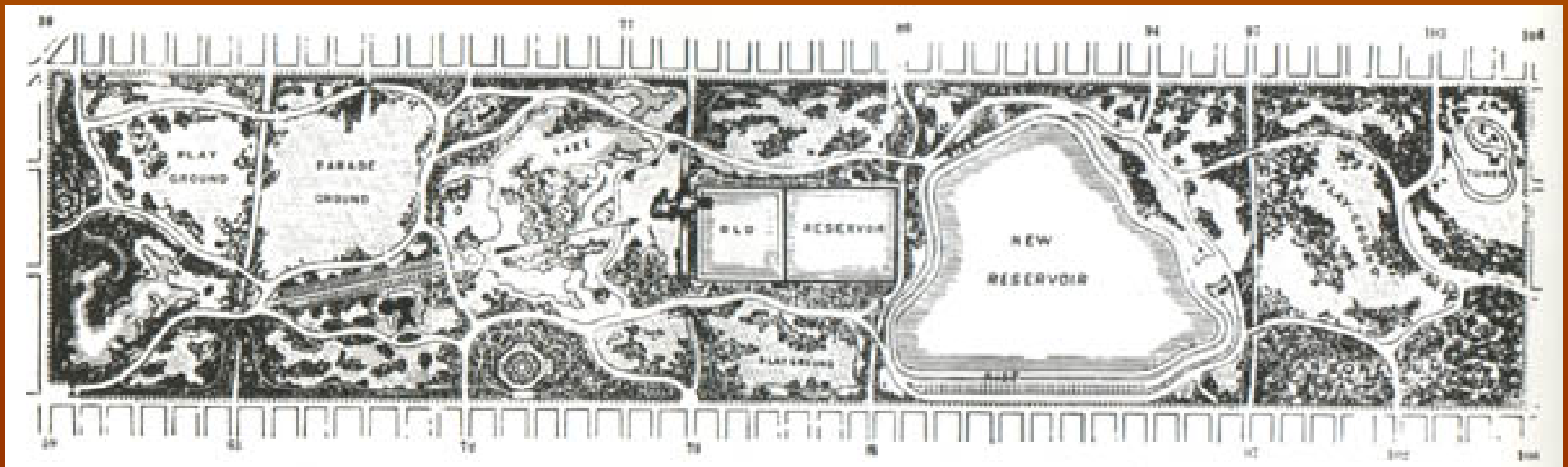
At this time, when landscape design was not even recognized as a profession, let alone taught, Vaux, who had previously worked as a landscape designer with Andrew Jackson Downing, was one of the most capable persons for this task. But rather than arrogantly feel he could do it alone, he sought out a partner to work with him, criticize him, and add to him.

He found that person in Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), a farmer and journalist who had been appointed superintendent of construction for the park some months before.



While Olmsted had visited England and was impressed by the public parks there, he had no experience in landscape design. But Vaux recognized his potential, and he respected Olmsted's passion about the land and about what people deserved—expressed in two books he wrote about his travels through the South, including firsthand accounts of the horrors of slavery, which he abhorred.

Working evenings in Vaux's home, the two men created what they called the Greensward Plan that won the competition and gave birth to a whole new art form that Vaux would later call "landscape architecture."



The Kindness—and Ethics—of Central Park

From today's perspective, it's hard to conceive how revolutionary Central Park was. In the 1850s, there were virtually no large public parks in American cities.

The very idea!—that in the middle of this fast-growing city of banking and commerce, a huge parcel of prime real estate the size of 153 city blocks, was to be owned, not by individuals to build tenements and factories for their personal profit, but by and for the use of every New Yorker, including the poorest, was astounding to most people and infuriating to many. For it profoundly challenged what some saw as the cherished right of private ownership at a time when profit economics—epitomized by entrepreneurs such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and John Jacob Astor was approaching its zenith.



Central Park: Beautiful & Kind

I believe Central Park, and every public park to follow, is part of what Eli Siegel explained in 1970, is the force of ethics in the world that was bringing to an end what he called “the much touted mode of American industry,” “that toughest, most inconsiderate of activities”—in which the majority of people work to make money for a few. He showed that an economy based on profit is inherently unjust because it encourages people’s contemptuous desire to own the world, rather than to know it. As Mr. Siegel explains in his book, *Self and World*:

The possessor has felt it was more important to feel that a tree was owned by him than to feel that he knew what the tree was and what it could mean. And he has let the ownership of a tree, or grass, or a field, take the place of being fully affected by these things in nature. The artist has been forced to possess...forced to compete, but as artist he was not after possession...or competition. He did not feel that his own strength...depended on his having what he did not want other people to have...He has come to power by undergoing the might of things and giving them form through his personality.

Olmsted and Vaux's desire to know and be affected by the land of this tract of Manhattan earth and by what the people of New York deserved, inspired them to give this tract of land a new, beautiful and kind form.

They wrote in an 1866 report that Frances Kowsky, in her fine biography of Vaux, *Town and Country*, calls “a landmark in the literature of the American park movement”:

The purpose of a public park is to provide a place where towns people can regain the energy they had expended in labor, for without the recuperation of force, the power of each individual to add to the wealth of the community is also soon lost.

And for an effective “recuperation” from the backbreaking sweatshop labor and 12-hour days that were common at that time,

A park must offer the visitor strongly
contrasting impressions to those of the city



[with] pastoral scenery [consisting] of combinations of trees, standing singly or in groups, and



casting their shadows over
broad stretches of turf,



or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools...the predominant associations are in the highest degree tranquilizing and grateful, as expressed by the Hebrew poet: “He maketh me lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.”



This is beautiful. The designers' conviction that hard-working people would be strengthened—both rested and energized—by experiencing trees “standing singly” and “in groups”, solid turf and reflective waters, points to the opposites of repose and energy, one and many, heaviness and lightness, and to what Aesthetic Realism would explain 100 years later: that seeing opposites together in the world can have these same opposites more composed in ourselves, making us stronger and happier.



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