



Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks: Our History & Mission

BY SHAUNA REVELLO WILSON AND DONALD HARRIS

As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the founder of America's landscape architectural profession, Frederick Law Olmsted, it's hard to fathom how lucky we are in Seattle to have a nationally recognized system of interconnected parks and boulevards known as one of the best-preserved Olmsted designed park systems outside of New York and Boston.

In the late 1970s, the Buffalo Friends of Olmsted Parks (now the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy), in New York, recognized that their city was facing a crisis in their park system. They saw parallels between the park systems of Buffalo and Seattle and, as a result, reached out to Seattle in 1978 as a part of their effort to build a network of people interested in stewarding Olmsted parks across the country.

In 1980, Seattle Parks Superintendent Walter Hundley and Seattle Parks Department Development Director Donald Harris traveled to Buffalo for an Olmsted Conference. There, they learned about the larger context and the historical significance of the Olmsted park system

in Seattle. At this same meeting, attendees formed the National Association for Olmsted Parks (known as the "NAOP") to increase the awareness of the Olmsted firm and its work across the United States and Canada. (See www.olmsted.org.)

Hundley and Harris understood that, moving forward, Seattle needed to invest in restoring, preserving and protecting its park system's unique and historic character. They recognized that the elements of the system that made it astonishing when it was originally designed and built also made it a priceless resource for Seattle's future generations. Realizing they wouldn't be able to do it alone, they engaged the community to develop an awareness of Seattle's remarkable park system and an appreciation of its history—and to find others interested in joining in this educational and advocacy effort. In 1981, a core group of volunteers came together to form the Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks (known as "FSOP").

The Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving

Seattle's unique Olmsted landscape heritage and raising awareness of the Olmsted philosophy of providing open space for all people. FSOP volunteers work closely with Seattle Parks and Recreation and other public agencies and community groups to provide independent review of projects in Seattle's interconnected system of Olmsted designed and inspired parks and boulevards.

FSOP has worked a lot with Washington Park Arboretum over the years. For instance, we partnered with the Arboretum to advocate for Master Plan project funding from the State 520 mitigation process, and also worked with the Arboretum partners on the development of the Loop Trail. The Loop Trail work included daylighting large sections of a degraded urban creek channel and providing extensive native plant restoration. When the lamp posts along Lake Washington Boulevard needed to be replaced in 2012, we helped the Arboretum secure historically appropriate lighting to preserve the Olmsted character of the parkway. Most recently, we helped fund an Olmsted Legacy

project scoping study re-envisioning Crabapple Meadow as a welcoming, year-round event and celebration space. A concept drawing produced by Seattle Parks and Recreation during the study will help the Arboretum in its plans to revitalize this area—designated as part of the old nursery in the original 1936 Olmsted Brothers design—into a functional, ecologically sound, and aesthetically pleasing garden.

As the FSOP moves into 2022, the group continues to advocate for and provide education about the nearly 80 Olmsted legacy parks and boulevards in Seattle, as well as landscapes throughout the Pacific Northwest—including the grounds of our Washington State Capitol in Olympia. This work is guided by Olmsted's principle of using plants—especially native species—in an environmentally sustainable way, as well as continuing to ensure that maintenance and expansion are done in a way that takes into consideration the equitable distribution of, and access to, Seattle's Olmsted envisioned park and boulevard system. We will continue our collaborative efforts to restore and protect these amazing landscapes and the beautiful vistas of our natural surroundings that they reveal. 🌿

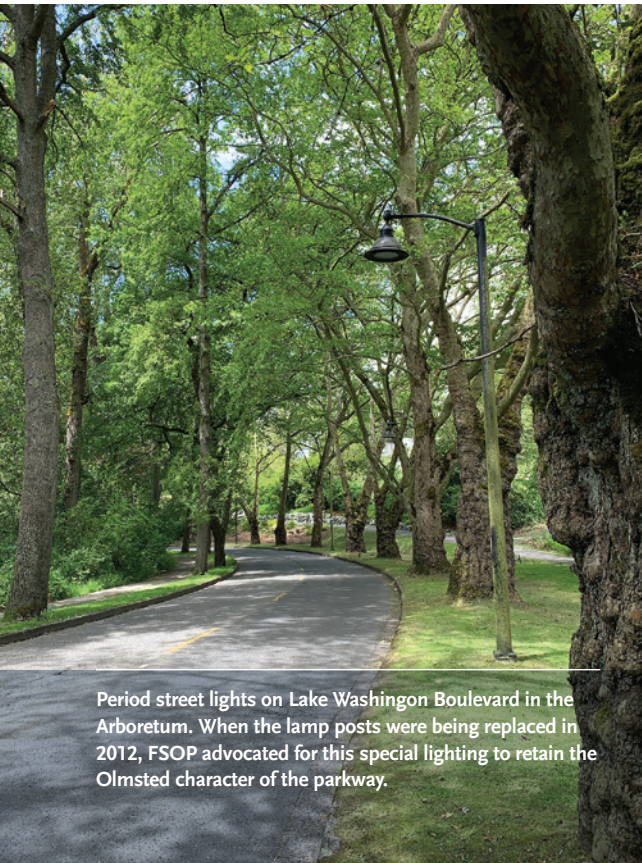
More Information

To learn more about the Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks, take a tour of an Olmsted park or boulevard, or get involved in helping others learn about, advocate for, and experience Seattle's Olmsted legacy, please visit SeattleOlmsted.org.

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Sources

- Ott, Jennifer. "Olmsted in Seattle." Seattle: HistoryLink and Documentary Media, 2019.
- Andy Mitton, Project Lead / Landscape Architect at Berger Partnership
- SeattleOlmsted.org
- OlmstedOnline.org (to find Olmsted landscapes locally and across the country)



Period street lights on Lake Washington Boulevard in the Arboretum. When the lamp posts were being replaced in 2012, FSOP advocated for this special lighting to retain the Olmsted character of the parkway.