As both a landscape architect and a lover of the Washington Park Arboretum, I’ve spent more than a little time exploring the official Olmsted Brothers archives. Of the hundreds of Olmsted letters, plans and sketches related to the Arboretum that can be found online, one particular document, entitled “Notes on Ground by Dawson,” always captures my notice. James Frederick Dawson (1874–1941) was the lead landscape architect for the Arboretum Master Plan project in the mid-1930s. Dawson walked the entire site at the beginning of the master-planning process with a set of blank site plans, a clipboard, and a series of pens, pencils, and what looks to have been a burnt-orange crayon. His hand-written notes are there for all of us to see, scrawled out across the massive set of plan sheets—the first impressions of the genius who was about to design our Arboretum.
His notes address soil conditions, topography and hydrologic features, and include a detailed accounting of existing vegetation—from the smattering of conifers that remained on the site after logging, right down to the quality of the shrubs, ferns, and other groundcovers in the undergrowth layer. In the area where the lower Woodland Garden pond now sits, Dawson notes the presence of a “good lot of 18–24 [inch] firs” (referring to trunk diameter) and makes several notes about tree cover and understory plants. He also records his early thoughts about how each of these areas might be improved in the upcoming Master Plan. On the map, near the mouth of the ravine that forms today’s Woodland Garden, he writes: “This valley should be cleared of bushes and just trees and ferns left.”

Dawson’s site analysis contains a high density of notes near the location of today’s Woodland Garden. In emphasizing this area, he may have been keying in intuitively to what science is now proving: that humans draw tangible mental-health benefits by being near both vegetation and water. The reasons these kind of environments flood our brains with happy chemicals can probably be traced back to hunter-gatherer times, when humans looked for shady ravines like this as sources of water, firewood and shelter. Medieval European aristocrats favored these landscapes as locations for walking paths through the game parks that surrounded their estates. As landscape designs for these spaces become more intentional, they would evolve into the romantic woodland gardens we might today associate with English estates.

The Olmsteds and others would later incorporate this kind of naturalism into their recipe for a uniquely American garden design aesthetic, which placed high value on providing experiences in urban environments that would emulate natural landscapes found in the countryside. For these reasons, I imagine that Dawson was very excited to discover several lightly wooded, well-watered ravines in Washington Park. The two most notable (the Woodland Garden and Rhododendron Glen) have evolved into distinct and beloved gardens within the Arboretum.

Both ponds in the Woodland Garden (lower and upper) were shown in the finished Master Plan. A closer look at the plan for the area reveals some other features that were not built, and probably for good reason! A rock garden—wisely relocated to another part of the Arboretum—was shown on one of the upper side slopes of the ravine. And, in the area
(The maples weren’t installed in the Woodland Garden right away, but rather nurtured in the nursery until they reached a plantable size.)

Today’s Woodland Garden contains one of the largest Japanese maple (Acer palmatum) collections in North America, with over 70 cultivars represented. It’s one of the best places in the Pacific Northwest to experience dazzling fall color—not only from maples, but from Oxydendrum, Lindera, Disanthus and Enkianthus, among others. The best time to see the full display changes each year, depending on the weather, but usually occurs between mid-October and early November.

James F. Dawson and his colleagues would leave a hugely significant legacy in parks and gardens around Seattle, the Pacific Northwest and, indeed, the country. Thinking about how Dawson first encountered this ravine, examined its features, incorporated it into a master plan—and passed his ideas on to future generations for reinterpretation and improvement—is truly inspiring. It also reminds us about the level of thought behind the design of a space that was intended to look like it was not designed at all.

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