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Frederick Law Olmsted, Yosemite Pioneer

Twenty-five years before Yosemite National Park was established, Frederick Law Olmsted, camping in the Valley, read to the first Yosemite Commission an extraordinary report he had written on the nature of the place and principles that should guide its use.

Olmsted moved to California to manage a gold-mining operation shortly before Congress deeded the Valley and the Mariposa Grove to the state. Appointed head of the Commission, which administered the grant, he explored Yosemite thoroughly. His description of it remains one of the best we have.

He believed no individual feature lent Yosemite its distinctive charm. Instead, he thought the profound effect of Yosemite arose from its union of two types of landscape, where “cliffs of awful height and rocks of vast magnitude” were “banked and fringed and draped and shadowed by the tender foliage of noble and lovely trees and bushes, reflected from the most placid pools and associated with the most tranquil meadows, the most playful streams and every variety of soft and peaceful pastoral beauty.” This combination of what he called the sublime and the beautiful made Yosemite “the greatest glory of nature.”

Olmsted’s scheme of management was based on the fundamental question that he was pondering during his years in California: How is civilization to be fostered in a democracy?

He set forth a rationale explaining why democratic government has a duty to save its most special scenic areas for the use

of all people. He believed the enjoyment of natural scenery relaxes and enlivens the mind, providing “refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system.” Aristocrats could restore themselves with visits to private parks, but Yosemite was to be for all people. Therefore it was important for government to save the site from exclusive use and preserve it for future generations.

To accommodate visitors he called for five small cabins and roads around the base of the Valley, but he cautioned against artificial construction that would “unnecessarily obscure, distort, or detract from the dignity of the scenery.”

Olmsted believed the ability to appreciate natural scenery was a measure of civilization and could be learned. To promote the proper appreciation of Yosemite, he enlisted the help of people who had carefully studied its natural and scenic features. Four of the eight Yosemite commissioners, he recommended, should be “students of Natural Science or Landscape Artists.”

Finally, Yosemite could not serve the mass of the people unless it were accessible to them. Olmsted proposed the majority of the Commission’s budget be spent on carriage roads leading to the Grove and Valley and ordered a surveyor to lay out scenic routes. He proposed so large an appropriation for roads that three Yosemite commissioners, meeting informally after he returned to New York, decided it was “inexpedient” to submit the report to the legislature, effectively suppressing it.

But Olmsted’s ideas did not go unheeded. A party of public officials and journalists who had traveled across the country were camping in the Valley with the Yosemite Commission on the day Olmsted read his report and subsequently returned home to publicize the Yosemite Grant and the Commission’s work.



Frederick Law Olmsted
(front row, second from left)
and members of the first
Yosemite Commission in the
Valley with U.S. Speaker of the
House Schuyler Colfax and a
party of journalists.
Photo by Carleton Watkins.
Courtesy the Bancroft Library,
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