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The Making of Audubon Park: Competing Ideologies for Public Space

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The Making of Audubon Park:
Competing Ideologies for Public Space

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Nels Abrams

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Abstract

The emergence of Progressivism at the beginning of the twentieth century influenced many aspects of American society. One of those aspects was urban parks. In the latter half of the nineteenth century Frederick Law Olmsted led a nationwide implementation of “Victorian” parks. These parks featured broad expanses of turf, waterways, and trees. Olmsted and the other Victorian park leaders designed the parks to cultivate Victorian values of self-restraint and independence among the citizenry. With the rise of Progressivism the ideals of the middle class changed. Led by Theodore Roosevelt, millions of Americans embraced the “strenuous life” and its emphasis on strength and leadership. Consequently, parks changed. The new Progressive park design favored athletic facilities over places for repose. Audubon Park in New Orleans was built just as this change was occurring, and therefore provides us an opportunity to study this moment in American history in detail.

Key words: Frederick Law Olmsted, John Charles Olmsted, Audubon Park, Audubon Park Commission, American Victorianism, Progressivism, Urban parks.

The Making of Audubon Park: Competing Ideologies for Public Space

Tucked away in an upscale neighborhood of New Orleans, Audubon Park, with its beautiful oak trees and meandering brook, has for over a century turned Sunday afternoons into fond memories.¹ Friends laughing on a walk, lovers laying out the blanket for a picnic, and elderly men on benches patiently feeding the ducks are typical scenes. These pleasant activities take the visitor away from the mundane for a moment, and may serve to provide some healthy perspective upon his return to the horns and lights of the city. But now look closer. Our lovers and friends are, in fact, on the periphery of a large golf course located in the center of the park. And across the street that divides the park in half are baseball diamonds, soccer fields, tennis courts, and horse stables. This part of Audubon is no place for sleepy old men or couples; no, this is the setting for sweating athletes, rosy-cheeked and running swiftly. Of course, these athletes are removed from the city as well; however, their park experience provides them less with inspiration and more with reinvigoration. The juxtaposition of possible activities reveals that there are two distinct experiences of Audubon Park: relaxation within a natural setting and outdoor athletics.

Having two different park experiences was not the original plan. In 1893, John Ward Gurley Jr., the Audubon Park Commission's first president, wrote a letter to famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in the hope of having him design a plan for Audubon Park in the

¹ Originally called "Upper City Park," park commissioners changed the name to "Audubon Park" in honor John James Audubon, the famous wildlife painter. The commissioners mistakenly thought Mr. Audubon was a native Louisianan when he was actually a West Indian Creole. Logsdon, Joseph. "After the Fair: Olmsted Artistry at Audubon Park." At the Zoo Winter 1985, 9.

“naturalistic” style typical of the Victorian era.² “Natural” parks featured meadows, hills, waterways, and trees in a design of manicured wilderness reminiscent of English gardens.³ The emphasis was on quiet contemplation of nature, and no reminders of the city or athletic intrusions were allowed. Olmsted discouraged athletic facilities not because sports were inherently bad, but because they were “inharmonious with naturalistic landscape” and it was vital to design parks with “careful regard to a comprehensive and consistent general plan.”⁴ Gurley assured Olmsted of his support for the “natural” park vision by declaring that he “would use every endeavor to push every reminder of commerce and city life as far from the park as possible.”⁵ Clearly something dramatic happened to change Audubon Park from its original Victorian design to the dual-purpose park it is today.

Due to insufficient funds, the construction of the park stretched over decades, and in the meantime a new, Progressive vision of park design emerged in New Orleans. The younger generation had become disillusioned with Victorianism, and they didn’t want to build parks designed on the Victorian principles of self restraint and sophistication—values they ridiculed as feminine and outdated, as part of the problem in the perceived decline in status among white, middle class Americans. The public began to see the aging Victorian commissioners as “old fossils” due to their insistence on preserving Audubon as a “natural” park.⁶ What the middle class demanded was a place to play sports, a place to strengthen themselves as individuals and as

² 1893 letter from J.W. Gurley to Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76. Located in the University of New Orleans archive in the “Audubon Park Commission” collection.

³ Letter from John Charles Olmsted (JCO) to Audubon Park Commission (APC). April 28, 1910. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

⁴ Letter from JCO to APC. Nov 30, 1917. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77. Letter from JCO to APC. Dec 28, 1905. Olmsted microfilm, Reel #76.

⁵ Letter from JCO to APC. Jan 8, 1898. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

⁶ JCO notes. Sep 22, 1911. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

a class through participation in organized athletics. Consequently, Audubon Park's design came to be influenced by two competing ideologies.

Confronted with this challenge to Victorian park design, the park commissioners and the Olmsted Bros. landscape architectural firm dug in their heels for a long fight. Yet it was a fight they couldn't win. Progressivism was sweeping not only New Orleans, but the nation.

Exhausted as early as 1900, Gurley wrote

“all such efforts of encroachment upon the park territory have so far been successfully combated by the Commissioners, but with great labor and annoyance.”⁷ For the next twenty years Victorian and Progressive leaders would struggle to shape the park according to their own ideology, until in 1920, after the deaths of several important Victorian leaders, the Progressive leadership finally took control of the park.

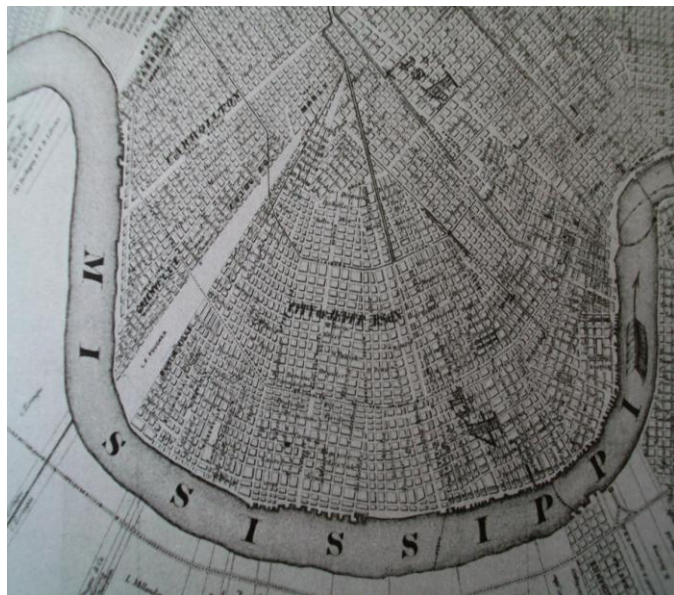


Figure 1: Map of New Orleans, 1867. The land that would become Audubon Park is visible as a blank “wedge” on the left. Logsdon Collection, University of New Orleans archives.

The study of Audubon's transition from a “natural” to an “active-use” park demonstrates the changing conceptions of American parks during this era. In addition, because of the intimate relationship between public space and public values, it is possible to use this study as a lens through which to examine the emergence of a new American identity at the turn of the twentieth

⁷ Letter from J.W Gurley to JCO. July 24, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

century. The generation of middle class Protestants raised in the late 1800s no longer viewed the Victorian values of self-restraint and independence as capable of handling the exigencies of modern America. In increasing numbers the younger generation embraced the emphasis on strength and organization espoused by Progressive leaders. John Charles Olmsted's natural parks were expressions of the Victorian ideal, and the transformation of his design for Audubon Park reflects how Victorianism faded from prominence as Progressivism emerged. Today, Audubon Park stands as a testament to that struggle, with the Victorian vision of trees and water tenuously holding onto the grounds surrounding the victorious Progressive's athletic fields.



Figure 2: 1903 Photo of John Charles Olmsted in 1903.
<http://www.seattle.gov/parks/history/>

The person who led the effort to create Audubon Park in the Victorian mold was John Charles Olmsted. Born September 14th, 1852, he is perhaps most famous today as the son of the man who designed Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted, although that distinction is somewhat unfair as he had tremendous personal success of his own.

Among John Olmsted's many accomplishments are his designs for Bryn Mawr College, Oregon State University, and the entire park system in Seattle, Washington. He also became the founder and first president of the American Society of Landscape Architects. In 1898, however, as he stood on the edge of a neglected 300-acre property in New Orleans he had yet to establish himself. In fact, his father had recently slid into senility, and this was to be his first independent project, the first attempt to step outside his father's immense shadow.

The land before him was pie-shaped, with a number of large oak trees, and located near a bend in the Mississippi River. Although Olmsted saw the flat terrain as a shortcoming—believing that undulating land and gentle ridges were more picturesque—the grand oaks and riverside location led him to believe that with the proper design the land “would as a whole stand out as one of the most beautiful parks in the country.”⁸ Like his father, Olmsted sought to create “natural” parks that celebrated pastoral beauty and eschewed the formality of European gardens. The proposal for Audubon Park featured a large lake and hundreds of thousands of trees placed intermittently on man-made hills to create an atmosphere of domesticated wilderness.

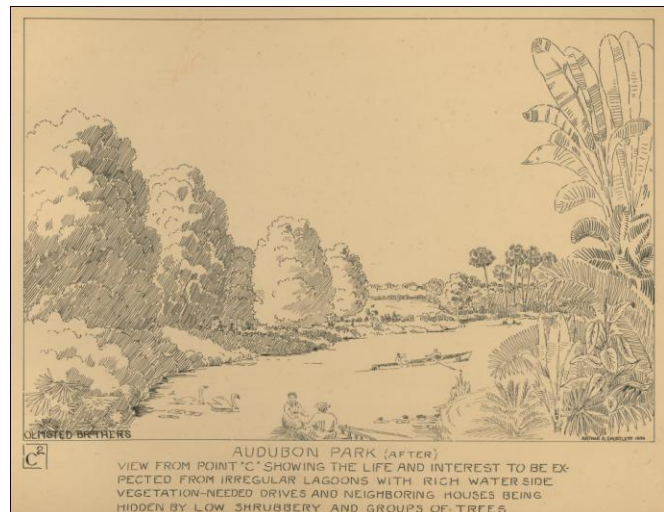
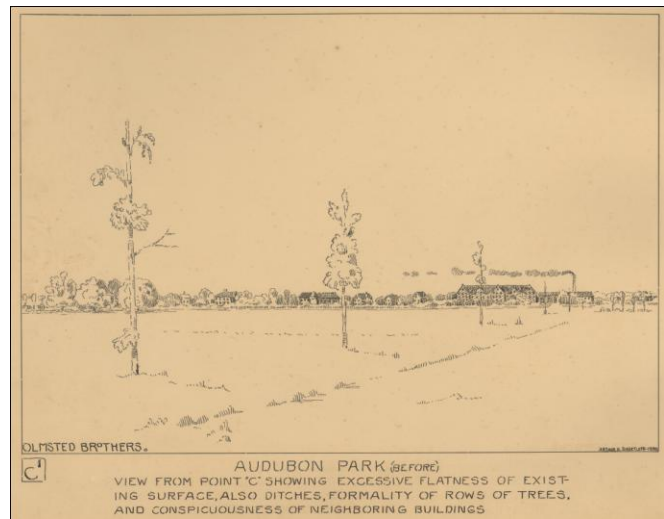


Figure 3: “Before” and “After” sketches made by Olmsted Bros. demonstrating the intended “naturalistic” landscape. Audubon Park Commission Collection, UNO archives.

A shy and gentle man, John Olmsted was nevertheless resolute in his commitment to naturalistic Victorian parks. His determination to implement Victorian parks was the result of myriad complex factors, both personal and professional. In part was the artist’s stubborn attachment to a

⁸ Audubon Park Commission. *Yearbook* (New Orleans: Audubon Park Commission, 1905), 32.

particular aesthetic. In a short article titled “What a Public Park Should Be,” he wrote that a park is “where one may stroll over hill and dale, across meadows and through woods, always amid natural surroundings.”⁹ On a more personal level, Olmsted’s attachment to natural parks can be seen as an attempt to ingratiate himself with his father, a man with whom his relationship was often strained and affection unrequited.

Frederick Law Olmsted is known as the “father” of Victorian national parks in America for the pivotal role he played in transforming the urban landscape in the latter half of the 1800s. John Charles Olmsted revered his famous father, but felt insecure about their relationship, as the senior Olmsted had never given him much respect as a man or artist. When John was in Europe and striving to become an architect, his father chastised him for his foolishness with a reminder that “[y]ou are not a man of genius in Art. A man of less artistic impulse I never knew.”¹⁰ The circumstances of their relationship probably heightened John’s anxiety, for Frederick Law Olmsted was not his biological father, but uncle. When John’s father passed away in 1857, Frederick married his brother’s widow, Mary Perkins.¹¹ A further cause of insecurity for John Olmsted was his father’s decision to rename his biological son, Henry, after himself in 1878 even though John was the eldest brother and logical successor.¹² By dedicating himself to Victorian parks and the values they stood for, John Charles Olmsted hoped, perhaps subconsciously, to strengthen a weak bond with his father.

⁹ Audubon Park Commission. *Yearbook* (New Orleans: Audubon Park Commission, 1898), 23.

¹⁰ Rybczynski, Witold. *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the 19th Century* (New York: Touchstone, 199), 335.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹² *Ibid.*, 353, 403.

Political beliefs were interwoven with the artistic and personal connections to Victorian parks.

John Charles Olmsted was a “brownstone elite” who believed in the need for sophisticated social reform to prevent the country from becoming “uncivilized” in the face of overwhelming immigration and urbanization.¹³ Not surprisingly, this perspective was championed by his father, who intended his parks to improve the lives of visitors. He hoped to achieve this, foremost, by providing a place to rest and contemplate nature for those who did not have the means to go to the countryside. In 1858, Frederick Olmsted wrote that his parks would “supply the hundreds of thousands of tired workers, who have no opportunity to spend their summers in the country, a specimen of God’s handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month or two in the White Mountains or the Adirondacks is, at great cost, to those in easier circumstances.”¹⁴ Also, to use a popular phrase from the era, urban parks served as the “lungs of the city” and were thought to provide relief from harmful gases known as miasmas.¹⁵ Olmsted took great pride in the fact that physicians in New York actually prescribed visits to Central Park to improve the health of their patients.¹⁶

Underlying Olmsted’s efforts to assist the working class was Victorian anxiety surrounding the changing nature of American society—from *gesellschaft* to *gemeinschaft*—and a desire to

¹³ Referring to the architecture that housed many of the educated elite in New York, Thomas Bender uses the term “brownstone” to refer to the culture of genteel Victorianism. Bender, Thomas. *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of our own Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988)

¹⁴ Bender, Thomas. *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth Century America* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1975), 179

¹⁵ Blodgett, Geoffrey. “Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as Conservative Reform.” The Journal of American History, Vol. 62. No. 4 (March., 1976), 878

¹⁶ Scheper L., George. “The Reformist Vision of Frederick Law Olmsted and the Poetics of Park Design.” New England Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Sep., 1989), 396.

“save” America from increasing ethnic social and political power.¹⁷ It is this anxiety, this resistance to a pluralistic society full of ethnic differences, which prompts some historians to label Olmsted a “conservative.”¹⁸ There is truth to that interpretation; Olmsted sought to preserve and expand the values of his New England youth rather than embrace the growing diversity in late nineteenth century America.¹⁹ And he certainly would have agreed with photographer/writer Jacob Riis that “it is a dreary old truth that those who would fight *for* the poor must *fight* the poor to do it.”²⁰ Similar to a missionary, Olmsted sincerely wanted to help, but felt supporting their own aspirations would be detrimental. Instead, he sought to inculcate Victorian values in those he viewed as inferior or naïve. For this reason, he often emphasized the transformative effect of his parks.

The pastoral park, despite its idyllic appearance, was “not simply a pleasure ground.”²¹ Through the medium of landscape architecture Olmsted hoped to transform the unruly working class into suitable American citizens. In 1870 he argued that Central Park “exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and lawless classes of the city,—an influence to courtesy, self-control, and temperance.”²² An observer concurred, noting that while in parks, “rude, noisy fellows...become hushed, moderate, and careful.”²³ In the minds of Olmsted and his fellow reformers, the working class, if exposed to elevating influences such as

¹⁷ Ibid., 386. Scheper borrows the terms *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* from German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies to articulate the transition from traditional communities to modern societies.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Blodgett, “Frederick Law Olmsted.” Blodgett labels Olmsted a “conservative” in the title, and supports that position throughout the essay.

¹⁹ Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, xii.

²⁰ Boyer, Paul. *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 176.

²¹ Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 202.

²² Thomas Bender, *Towards an Urban Vision*, 180.

²³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 202.

parks, museums, and libraries, would recognize the “natural order” of society and stop supporting radical labor unionism and machine politics.

Of course, the working-class recipients of Victorian largesse did not see things in the same light. Instead, they resented the attempts to interfere in their leisure time; newspapers ridiculed the numerous rules and stuffy atmosphere of pastoral parks; and millions of people expressed their disapproval by going to Coney Island and other locations.²⁴ These early amusement parks did not attempt to teach or discipline its customers. Conversely, they thrived on the burgeoning consumerism and frivolity of modern American culture. The elite response to this criticism was condescension, for Victorian Americans believed the working class was too uneducated to appreciate sophisticated pleasures. To the Victorians, the popularity of Coney Island—at its peak more than 200,000 people visited daily—indicated the barbarous state of urban culture.

Adopting either environmentalist or coercive tactics, the self-proclaimed “defenders of American culture” tried to mold the truculent masses into the Victorian mold. Institutions of cultural reform proliferated throughout the late 1800’s in the belief that “one of the best modes of driving out low tastes in the masses is to introduce higher.”²⁵ Olmsted and his lifelong friend and fellow activist, Charles Loring Brace, shared a preference for the subtle, environmentalist influence.

As a loyal adherent to his father’s beliefs, John Charles Olmsted must have seen Audubon Park as a blank slate through which to shape not only the aesthetics, but the values of New Orleans. Marshy, unkempt, and nearly devoid of improvements, photographs from his initial visit reveal a nearly barren field. The reality was much different. Since the early nineteenth century this land

²⁴ Kasson, John. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

²⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 203.

had been the scene of rich history.

Originally two separate plantations, the first mayor of New Orleans, Etienne de Boré, owned the smaller plot.²⁶ A former captain in the French military, Boré cultivated indigo on his plantation, which was at that time several miles out of the city. Due to competition from indigo producers in

Guatemala, however, in 1795 he set up a sugar mill and produced the first granulated

sugar in America.²⁷ At the time Haiti was undergoing a revolution and was unable to compete on the open market, so sugar production became profitable in the United States. As a result, because sugar plantations required heavy manual labor, slavery became further entrenched in the Southern economy.

During the Civil War both Confederate and Union forces occupied the plantation. In April of 1863, Confederate soldiers established Camp Louis on the Foucher property, the larger plantation located adjacent to Boré's sugar crops. Later that year, Union soldiers, under the command of Benjamin F. Butler, took over the camp and built Sedgwick Hospital.²⁸ Dr. John Shaw Billings, who would later design Johns Hopkins Hospital, designed Sedgwick specifically



Figure 4: Audubon Park in 1899. Photo taken by John Charles Olmsted. Logsdon Collection, UNO archives.

²⁶ Audubon Park Commission. *1917 Yearbook*, 36-38.

²⁷ Logsdon, Joseph. *Audubon Park: An Urban Eden* (Tokyo: Toppan Printing Company, 1985), 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

for the exigencies of the Civil War.²⁹ An arch of one-story wood barracks that housed the patients surrounded a central administration building. The barracks-style buildings were 150 feet long, 25 feet wide and 12-14 feet tall. The benefit to this design was its easy construction and portability. Later, in 1866, the Union military activated the ninth regiment of “Buffalo Soldiers” at this location. These men would go on to earn fame defending the Western frontier and eventually become icons in African-American history.

After the war the city of New Orleans purchased the land with the intent of creating a public park.³⁰ In 1884, president Chester A. Arthur arrived at the new park to open the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, where grandiose exhibits impressed thousands of visitors. The Main Building, which Mississippi architect Gustav M. Torgerson designed, was the largest exhibition hall ever erected. Inside this “masterpiece of construction” the head engineer amazed the crowds by starting a 630 horsepower Harris Corliss engine—a testament to America’s increasingly industrial culture.³¹ The city of Philadelphia loaned the “Liberty Bell” to New Orleans for the fair, and this iconic symbol drew large crowds. Horticulture Hall, filled with tropical and semi-tropical plants, fruits, and flowers, was another popular exhibit.³² All in all, the fair was a place where “music abounded; beer halls thrived; and shows ranging from a

²⁹ Dammann, Gordon and Alfred Jay Bollet. *Images of Civil War Medicine: A Photographic History* (New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2008), 114.

³⁰ The purchase of the park was rife with corruption. Two men purchased the park for a nominal down payment and then convinced the Louisiana state legislature to pay them \$500,000 over the appraisal price in return for lucrative parkside real estate. Galloway, Carolyn. *The Acquisition and Early Development of New Orleans’ Audubon Park 1871-1929* (UNO: unpublished M.A thesis, 1974), 7-13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² As a gift, visitors were given water hyacinths, an act of generosity that unfortunately led to the hyacinth invasion of public waterways. *Ibid.*, 22.

huge Mexican band to traveling Wild West Indian shows made a lasting impression.”³³ The only modern reminder of the Exhibition is a large chunk of iron ore that was too heavy to remove from the grounds.³⁴

So the “blank slate” that Olmsted was commissioned to improve was in fact a site of historical importance both locally and nationally. Nevertheless, for his purposes as a landscape architect, the past was simply that: the past. Like his father, Olmsted used heavy equipment and intense manual labor to transform land into an artistic vision supporting Victorian ideals. Any remaining aspects of the former grounds would be incidental to the hills and lakes he intended to create. And that was the irony of the “natural” parks; they weren’t natural at all, but a man-made replica of a pastoral ideal. When Olmsted Sr.’s mental illness removed him from the family business of landscape architecture it was John Olmsted who became the representative of the pastoral ideal in urban park design. And in the early years of Audubon’s development he had success implementing that vision. Backed by supportive leadership within the Audubon Park Commission, the Victorian park design was the official blueprint for the park.

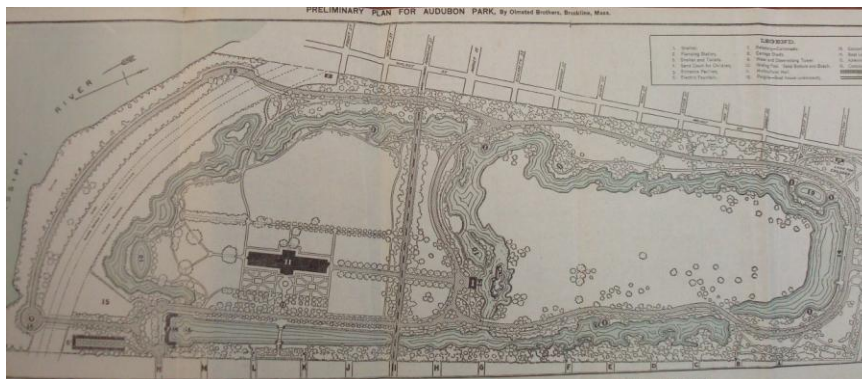


Figure 5: Olmsted plan for Audubon Park. The plan was shown to the commissioners in 1898, but not released to the public until 1902 for fear of public opposition to the extensive waterways. 1905 Audubon Park Yearbook, Tulane University Special Collections.

³³ John Logsdon, *Audubon Park*, 92.

³⁴ Carolyn Galloway, *The Acquisition and Early Development of New Orleans' Audubon Park 1871-1929*, 24. On April 1st, 1891 the Daily Picayune printed a hoax article stating that the ore was a meteorite that had dropped from the sky. The myth persists to the present day.

For the first two years park development was delayed by a lack of funds, so Olmsted spent this time preparing the grounds by having incongruous elements removed or, if necessary, moved to less conspicuous locations. In personal notes from October 30, 1899, Olmsted observed that the park office and merry-go-round should be moved. He thought “the beauty of the lawns and great live oaks south of Horticultural Hall was so great that it ought not to have buildings obtruded upon them and that the clutter of small amusement or refreshment buildings should be confined.”³⁵ President Gurley ensured that the commission carried out Olmsted’s recommendations. When the question of extending the lease for the Agricultural Experiment Station arose, he insisted that “the barns and sugar house be kept close to the west boundary of the park as before advised.”³⁶ Superintendent Baker was on board as well, arguing that it was important to conceal the railroad tracks because visitors “go (to the park) expressly to be relieved as much as possible from the strain to the nerves caused by street noises.”³⁷

The Audubon Park Commission supported Olmsted because they shared his Victorian values and deferred to him as a cultural authority. In the park’s annual yearbook publication they assured the public, “The Olmsted Brothers, of Brookline, Mass., are recognized (leaders) in their profession, and their work is well known in all parts of the United States.”³⁸ Engineers hired by the commission exclaimed “we earnestly wish to...carry out your plan both in letter and in spirit” and later humbled themselves by admitting some of Olmsted’s designs “are not yet thoroughly within our grasp.”³⁹ On one hand, this is not surprising. Olmsted, after all, was now

³⁵ JCO notes. Oct 30, 1899. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

³⁶ Gurley letter to APC. March 17, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

³⁷ Letter from superintendent Baker to APC. March 17, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

³⁸ Audubon Park Commission, *1917 Yearbook*, 10.

³⁹ Letter from APC’s contracted civil engineers to JCO. April 11, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

the leading figure in the country's most prestigious landscape architecture firm. It becomes more intriguing, however, when one takes into consideration that this profession of loyalty to Olmsted and his vision occurred as Victorianism was entering its twilight years.⁴⁰ Linked by common values and socioeconomic status, the commission and Olmsted acted as partners in the endeavor to shape Audubon Park in the Victorian mold against the rising tide of Progressivism.

By 1900, many Americans had already begun challenging Victorianism by participating in athletics or enjoying modern entertainment, but the commission represented a demographic still loyal to those values: the educated elite. J.W Gurley Jr., the commission's first president, was the New Orleans District Attorney.⁴¹ Vice-president Lewis Johnson was the owner of Johnson Iron Works, a prominent business in the area.⁴² Commissioner Isidore Newman, the founder of Maison Blanche department stores, was a philanthropist who also established a school for Jewish orphans that has become one of the leading schools in the city. In a moment of narcissistic weakness, they admit their opinion that a park commissioner was "a person who represents the highest intelligence of the community, a person having refined tastes, who has traveled enough to be familiar with the best examples of park design, a person having a full appreciation of nature in all phases, one who in every respect is a cultivated man."⁴³

To ensure the high status of its commissioners, members enacted legislation that stipulates members must have "sufficient leisure" to dedicate to the business of the park.⁴⁴ Also, new

⁴⁰ Although no specific date can be given to the end of an era, professor Daniel Walker Howe writes that Victorianism was ending in 1901. Howe, Daniel Walker. "American Victorianism as a Culture." American Quarterly Vol. 27. No. 5 (Dec., 1975), 507.

⁴¹ Joseph Logsdon, *Audubon Park*, 109.

⁴² Audubon Park Commission, *1896 Yearbook*, 1.

⁴³ Audubon Park Commission, *1898 Yearbook*, 31.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

members may be considered only upon the death or resignation of current members, and in those circumstances only after an anonymous vote. Perhaps because of their privileged status, the commissioners took a very paternalistic view towards the citizens of New Orleans. In an attempt to compel the lower classes to behave “properly” while on the park grounds, they published a comprehensive list of prohibited acts. For example, park rules stipulate that “no person shall use any loud, threatening, abusive, or indecent language, nor throw stones or other missiles, or exhibit any show or play any games of chance, or do any obscene or indecent or unlawful act whatsoever upon the park grounds.”⁴⁵ Violators of the many rules risked \$25 fines and up to thirty days in jail.⁴⁶

Since the formation of the park commission in 1885, the commissioners consistently voted against activities affiliated with the low or middle classes. For years working men and women had enjoyed seeing horse races at the popular half-mile track in Audubon, but in 1900 the commission had it taken down.⁴⁷ A proposed beer hall was denied amidst the development of other, more “appropriate” facilities such as an expensive restaurant and a polo club.⁴⁸ Predictably, the commission also rejected plans for a vaudeville house. The commissioner’s elitist attitude did not change even as they gradually accepted Progressive ideas about athletic leisure. Golf, which was embraced in the United States only by “the pretentiously wealthy,” was increasingly supported by the commission because many of its members were avid golfers.⁴⁹ They granted permission for the golf club to not only extend its lease, but to add an additional

⁴⁵ 1896 Park rules printed in 1907 Audubon Park Yearbook, 36.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Galloway, *The Acquisition and Early Development of New Orleans’ Audubon Park 1871-1929*, 33.

⁴⁸ Joseph Logsdon, *Audubon Park*, 118

⁴⁹ Mandell, Richard D. *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 185.

nine holes in 1905.⁵⁰ Similarly, tennis, which was another form of recreation associated with wealth, became more prominent in the park.

The discrimination against the low and middle classes drove them away from Audubon Park and the result was that the character of the park was decidedly “aristocratic.” Location had a lot to do with this as well; the surrounding neighborhood was filled with stately mansions and prominent universities.⁵¹ However, despite the commission’s active disdain for working-class activities and the required travel for many to get to the park, the commissioners were confused why the park didn’t appeal to a wider segment of the population. In 1905, Lewis Johnson exclaimed his belief that Audubon Park should not “appeal less to those classes than those who use it most.”⁵² In his opinion, “the rich have more or less elegant homes with ample air space, and often handsome, park-like grounds. They could do without parks; the poor can not.”⁵³ He was unable to understand why the contemplation of scenery and the opportunity to mimic the upper-classes was not more popular with the people.

Johnson was simply out of touch with those he regarded as his inferiors. Historian J.B Jackson attributes this disconnect to “the upper-class definition (of parks) with its emphasis on cultural enlightenment and greater refinement of manners, and a lower-class definition emphasizing fun and games.”⁵⁴ The commissioners’ inability to relate to the city at-large seriously hindered the development of the park. For, while the wealthy who regularly visited the park might have

⁵⁰ Audubon Park Commission, *1905 Yearbook*, 15.

⁵¹ Both Loyola and Tulane University moved onto property adjacent to the park in 1892. Joseph Logsdon, “After the Fair,” 10.

⁵² Audubon Park Commission, *1905 Yearbook*, 7.

⁵³ Audubon Park Commission, *1907 Yearbook*, 9.

⁵⁴ Jackson, John B. *American Space: The Centennial Years, 1865-187* (New York: W.W Norton & CO., 1972), 214-215.

enjoyed their genteel “natural” oasis, their wealth alone was not enough to develop the park and they were ultimately dependent on public funding to implement the Olmsted design. Johnson lamented that while “solicited contributions have value,” ultimately “municipal appropriations” were needed.⁵⁵ And the public was not interested in subsidizing a personal playground for the rich.

Olmsted shared Johnson’s perspective, and he appreciated the support from the board of commissioners. In fact, it appears that Olmsted developed somewhat of a professional friendship with Johnson over the years.⁵⁶ Aside from his pleasant relationship with the commission, however, Olmsted had a hard time working for a city with a decidedly different culture than his home of Connecticut. In his correspondence and personal journals Olmsted frequently expressed displeasure at what he perceived as the lack of professionalism in New Orleans. During a February, 1900 visit he complained that the person with whom he was to meet was several hours late.⁵⁷ When the local contractors continued to perform unsatisfactorily, Olmsted looked to his associates in New England for help. He wrote to an architect in Massachusetts, “We are sorry to trouble you about such a small job as this but we shall greatly value your assistance in obtaining the best possible result under the unfavorable conditions.”⁵⁸ And it seems he was not alone in his poor opinion of the working conditions in New Orleans. In the search for a superintendent,

⁵⁵ Audubon Park Commission, *1905 Yearbook*, 14.

⁵⁶ Letter from APC to Olmsted. June 10, 1910. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

⁵⁷ Olmsted notes. Feb 15, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76. This particular instance might be forgiven, as Olmsted arrived during Mardi Gras.

⁵⁸ Letter from JCO to the APC’s contracted architects. Sep 20, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

Olmsted supported one candidate by saying, “From all I hear, Mr. Neale is decidedly the best man of *those who expressed a willingness to go to New Orleans* (my italics).”⁵⁹

Olmsted believed the lack of professionalism led to a poor implementation of his plan. During a trip to New Orleans in 1902 he spoke with the park’s engineer and became convinced the “shoddy work” was the result of laziness and ignorance of botany.⁶⁰ When the park hired engineers—and not architects, as stipulated in the contract—to design a building on park grounds, Olmsted responded firmly: “Again, we ask you to employ an architect to put some style and beauty of proportion...to the very plain, ugly design.”⁶¹ After another visit years later, Olmsted concluded that “the work there from our point of view has suffered a good deal.”⁶² The poor quality Olmsted noticed was not all the result of amateur workmanship, however, for the superintendent often had to cut corners due to lack of funds.

The Audubon Park Commission was constantly starved for money, and consequently they approved a comical array of fund-raising ventures both before and during Olmsted’s collaboration with the park. In 1894 park lands were dedicated to growing hay to sell to local farmers.⁶³ An arena that was left over from the exposition was rented out to create a “good half-mile race track” for horses.⁶⁴ A one dollar deposit for clean-up was charged with the knowledge that most people would leave without picking up their mess.⁶⁵ A ten-year lease on fifty acres of land was signed by the Louisiana Science and Agricultural Association for a sugar experimental

⁵⁹ Letter from JCO to APC. Oct 25, 1917. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

⁶⁰ Letter from JCO to APC. May 14, 1902. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76. John Charles Olmsted.

⁶¹ Letter from JCO to APC. Sep 4, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

⁶² Letter from JCO to Superintendent Neale. Oct 26, 1917. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

⁶³ Audubon Park Commission. 1894 Yearbook (New Orleans: Audubon Park Commission, 1894), 26.

⁶⁴ C.G. Kern. *Development of Play Facilities in New Orleans*, 11.

⁶⁵ JCO notes. May 14, 1902. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

station. Fines were collected from people who broke one of the many rules set forth by the commission. The table of finances in the Yearbook of 1903 provides several more examples of the park's diverse sources of income: circuses, a refreshment stand lease, donations, and a children's carousel all earned profit for the park in that year.⁶⁶

The correspondence between Olmsted and the commissioners is full of references to the park's dismal finances. In a letter concerning the construction of a sand court, president Gurley apologized that the six thousand dollars necessary "is more than we feel we can afford to spend at this time."⁶⁷ Vice-president Johnson later admitted that "we are not likely for some years to come to have the means for large improvement under your plans."⁶⁸ For his part, Olmsted recognized the difficult position the commissioners were in, but he bristled at the any suggestion of lowering the quality of work. In September of 1900 he wrote, "We beg you will not use metal shingles. They are offensively an imitation and anything but agreeable to an artist. If you cannot afford Spanish tiles use split cypress with small surface to weather."⁶⁹ Hired to design a world-class park, his patience was stretched by the penny-pinching antics of the commissioners. Accustomed to dealing with projects financed through city and state taxes, Olmsted was frustrated "at the various ways they were raising money."⁷⁰ Finally, after over a decade of constant haggling, Olmsted vented that "if our instructions had been to make plans for the most

⁶⁶ Audubon Park Commission. *Yearbook* (New Orleans: Audubon Park Commission, 1903), 26-28.

⁶⁷ Letter from Gurley to JCO. Jan 31, 1901. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

⁶⁸ Letter from Johnson to JCO. Nov 17, 1904. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

⁶⁹ Letter from JCO to APC. Sep 4, 1900. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

⁷⁰ JCO notes. May 14, 1902. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

economical possible scheme, we should, of course, have done so, but that was certainly not the idea at the time.”⁷¹

Unfortunately, money would remain a perennial concern for Audubon Park. In 1890 the commissions’ attempt to establish a park levy failed. Aware that public support was vital to procuring taxpayer dollars, the Audubon Park Commission began publishing an annual yearbook in 1894 for the purpose of “raising interest” in the park.⁷² Lewis Johnson, who was then vice-president, was careful to point out that they were “not complaining” about the lack of public funds, but rather that they believed better education about the park would result in more support.⁷³ The elitist park commissioners felt that insufficient knowledge prevented the appropriate appreciation; because the general public had not seen other great parks they “don’t know what they want.”⁷⁴ The yearbook would rectify that failing by providing excerpts from park leaders around the country and data on the tax dollars spent to develop other cities’ parks.

In the 1898 yearbook comparisons were made to other great parks around the country, including New York’s Central Park. The statistics demonstrated that all other cities supported their parks with large amounts of public money.⁷⁵ Even cities with smaller populations and smaller parks spent more on their parks than New Orleans. The commission’s appeal to boosterism paid off; later that year the city awarded an annual \$15,000 stipend to both Audubon and City Park.

Although this was a tremendous victory for the commissioners, they soon realized maintenance alone would require most of that amount. To demonstrate the pitiable state of their financial

⁷¹ Letter from JCO to APC. June 12, 1911. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

⁷² Audubon Park Commission. *Yearbook* (New Orleans: Audubon Park Commission, 1896), 5.

⁷³ Audubon Park Commission, 1896 *Yearbook*, 6.

⁷⁴ Audubon Park Commission. 1894 *Yearbook*, 6

⁷⁵ Audubon Park Commission, 1898 *Yearbook*, 38.

condition, the 1898 yearbook lists among its major donations a laughable six squirrels. Any optimism for sufficient public funds had drained by 1905, when Lewis Johnson admonished the public that the poor quality of the park was directly related to the lack of tax money.⁷⁶ He resigned himself to the fact that there is little hope for future development, stating “we might as well admit, in all candor, that the prospects of Audubon park receiving such an income in the near future as will permit of taking advantage of all the possibilities of that incomparable location are not particularly bright.”⁷⁷ The financial strain would finally ease in 1915, when commissioner Jacob K. Newman helped push an act through state legislation designating \$100,000 for Audubon Park.⁷⁸

The chronic lack of municipal funds forced Olmsted to implement his plan in sections. This patch-work approach prevented him from overseeing the project as a single work of art, which is how he preferred to work. Olmsted was presumably unaware of the city’s financial difficulties when he agreed to design the park. In fact, the commissioners, who were optimistic about future funding, told his father they had a budget of one million dollars to finance the park—an amount that exceeded their actual funding by, well, close to a million dollars.⁷⁹ The commissioner’s optimism seems misplaced when considering the political atmosphere of New Orleans at the time.

The Democratic-Conservative Party, known colloquially as the “Ring,” dominated municipal politics from the mid 1870s through the early 1920s. The Ring was a “tightly knit, well-

⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁷ Audubon Park Commission, *1905 Yearbook*, 9.

⁷⁸ Galloway, Carolyn. *The Acquisition and Early Development of New Orleans’ Audubon Park, 1871-1929*, 64.

⁷⁹ Audubon Park Commission, *1897 Yearbook*, 27.

organized hierarchy with power firmly entrenched at the ward level.”⁸⁰ In other words, a “machine.”⁸¹ The Ring depended upon patronage and ethnic loyalty to maintain power, but did not shy away from corruption or violence if thought necessary to win an election. This is because Ring politicians saw politics as a means to concrete personal gains and not the manifestation of abstract principles such as “democracy.” Politics was a dog fight, and you did what had to be done to win.

Throwing away opponents’ ballots and adding fraudulent voters were standard procedures for the Ring. Six thousand votes were “lost” in 1882. In 1884, an estimated fifteen thousand votes for the reformer candidate were “thrown into a wash kettle under the table.”⁸² During this same election a famous deceased evangelist also somehow managed to vote for the Democratic-Conservatives. When reformers challenged the Ring’s corrupt practices, violence erupted. In addition to fighting at the polls, the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported “stories of a coroner who bit off the tip of his opponent’s nose in a street fight, a deputy sheriff who fatally gouged out the eye of an enemy with an umbrella, and a keeper of the Parish Prison arrested for petty larceny and attempted murder.”⁸³ The culture of violence began at the top: John Fitzpatrick, Ring mayor from 1892 through 1896, had his brother shoot a rival, and mayor Guillotte had someone murder the Commissioner of Police, Patrick Mealey, on New Year’s Day in 1888.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Arnesen, Eric. *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 75.

⁸¹ “Machines” began to dominate municipal politics in large cities across the country by the 1870s. Chudacoff P., Howard and Judith E. Smith. *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2005), 153.

⁸² Jackson, Joy. *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and the Urban Progress, 1880-1896*. 2nd edition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Historical Association, 1997), 20.

⁸³ New Orleans Daily Picayune. January 6, 1881 and July 7, 1881.

⁸⁴ Joy Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 27 and 168.

In New Orleans, Progressive reformers repeatedly tried to take power from the Ring. Between 1880 and 1920 they managed to succeed only twice, with the elections of Shakspeare (1880), Flower (1896). For the most part, reformers represented the city's Protestant middle and upper classes. They hoped to not only wrest control from what they saw as incompetent and immoral leadership, but to restructure the government in such a way that crass "machine" politics would no longer win elections.⁸⁵ The Australian ballot, which maintained the privacy of an individual's vote, was an important goal because it was seen as a way to neutralize election-day intimidation. When reformers managed to implement the secret ballot in 1896, Progressives enjoyed a brief era of leadership. Another important goal was to centralize power in the hands of the mayor. The Ring had solid control over many wards, so a single, city-wide election provided the best opportunity for decisive control. In the end, it was unable to implement a charter that accomplished mayoral control, but the reformers were able to undermine patronage to an extent by implementing civil service requirements.

Public services were a major casualty of the Ring's inefficient governance. As a public space, Audubon Park was largely dependent on city taxes for revenue, and the Ring consistently left the park without adequate funding. This is not surprising upon examination of other, more essential, public services at the time. In 1884 New Orleans "had no sewerage system and no adequate garbage collection. Drinking water was secured from cisterns...The streets were mainly unpaved, littered with stinking debris, and pock-marked ruts. Drainage pumping machines were outmoded and ...flooding of the streets was frequent."⁸⁶ Garbage frequently gathered in smelly heaps on the sides of roads and, when taken away, often dumped in the middle of the river.

⁸⁵ Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 80.

⁸⁶ Joy Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 95.

Streets were so poor that the fire department refused to respond to calls in some parts of town.⁸⁷

In 1899 a sanitation expert informed New Orleans that “You are dirty. Nature has not been kind to you in topography, and you have returned the compliment, and with interest.”⁸⁸ Education suffered perhaps the worst. Consider that between 1860 and 1893 no schools were built with city funds. None. Cash-strapped administrators slashed teachers’ salaries and schools did not even open for the Fall semester in 1883. Predictably, the illiteracy rate in New Orleans was twice the national average.⁸⁹

To be fair, the blame for the city’s horrible infrastructure cannot be laid completely at the feet of Ring politicians. The city struggled under the weight of debt incurred by “carpetbag” regimes during Reconstruction.⁹⁰ Governor Warmouth, for example, increased the state’s bonded debt from six to one hundred million dollars during his term in office. Further, the ideology of laissez-faire governance dominated the local political perspective; many felt the private market could do a better job and for less money than the government. Even though the city was unsanitary, “the public was hostile to any improvements that meant raising taxes.”⁹¹ New Orleans was at or near the bottom of the list in per capita expenditures for the following services: education, police, sanitation, fire, sewers, and streets.⁹²

Olmsted spent the majority of his tenure with Audubon Park struggling to implement his Victorian design amidst the challenges of poor funding. For the Progressives in New Orleans the situation was clear: Victorian leadership was unable to get funding for the park they desired

⁸⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁸⁸ New Orleans *Daily States*. March 9, 1899.

⁸⁹ Joy Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 142.

⁹⁰ Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 3.

⁹¹ Ibid., 96.

⁹² Ibid., 97.

because they were incapable of preventing “machine” politics from taking power in the city. Victorianism was no longer a capable social model, and Progressivism better represented the ambitions and values of a new generation.⁹³ The Progressive hope was to restore white, Protestant leadership through efficient organization and developing more vigorous individuals. Spurred on by Theodore Roosevelt’s exhortation of the “strenuous life,” the American middle class began to prefer active recreation over the quiet contemplation intended in natural parks.⁹⁴ Park commissioners across the country responded by constructing facilities for athletics to satisfy the new public demand. In 1917, the mayor of Worcester, Massachusetts, George Wright, demonstrated the new perspective on public space by renaming his city’s “Parks Commission” the “Parks and Recreation Commission.”⁹⁵

Olmsted’s pastoral parks, which were always islands of Victorian values in heterogeneous cities, eventually became too incongruent with the diverse perspectives of the urban populace to attract sufficient public support and funding. After decades of immigration the cultural diversity of cities made any attempts to recreate the idealized homogeneity of early America an impossibility. More significant, however, were changes within white, Protestant society—a

⁹³ For a closer look at the transition from Victorianism to Progressivism in the United States read Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), George Cotkin’s *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (Oxford: First Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), and T.J. Jackson Lears’s *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

⁹⁴ For an in-depth examination of the “strenuous life” and its impact on the masculine ideal read Gail Bederman’s *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) Clifford Putney’s *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. 2nd edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), and Anthony Rotundo’s *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

⁹⁵ Rosenzweig, Roy. *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers & Leisure in an Industrial City, 1970-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. 14.

demographic that continued to exercise a disproportionate influence in public affairs. Legions of middle to upper class Protestants abandoned Victorianism in favor of the more vigorous Progressivism. This switch was largely generational, with members of the younger generation believing their parents' emphasis on refined restraint was an impotent approach towards the challenges of modern America.

Parks built during the Progressive Era reflected the new, post-Victorian reality of American society. Smaller and more "efficient," Progressive parks featured supervision, athletics, and organized leisure activities. Of course, there was no clean break. Many people still believed in the civilizing influence of Olmsted's pastoral parks. Others simply preferred the aesthetics of Victorian parks. The divergence in opinion led to tension between the advocates of competing visions for public space. For example, a Progressive park enthusiast caustically commented that Victorian parks were called breathing spaces "because breathing was about all that was permitted to do in them."⁹⁶ Victorians saw Progressive parks as "a group of swings, slides, and all the other forms of violent exercise, disregarding almost entirely the value of natural beauty."⁹⁷ Regardless of the rift, the writing was on the wall: Victorian parks no longer expressed the dominant cultural values of the time.

In New Orleans, the landscape of Audubon Park began to change, began to be shaped not solely by the original Victorian plan, but by Progressive demands for active recreation. Of course, the change in design was not overnight, nor was it absolute. In fact, from the beginning of Olmsted's tenure with Audubon Park he was confronted with encroachments on his artistic

⁹⁶ Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*, 244.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

vision of a park. However, the Audubon Park Commission's early leadership shared Olmsted's natural park ideology and had cooperated with him to preserve the original plan as best as they could under increasing public pressure for sports and entertainment. In 1902 they rejected a proposal to build an "aquarama" and a speedway in 1904, although both facilities would have provided much needed income to the cash-strapped park.⁹⁸ On Olmsted's end, when the local art society attempted to arrange for a museum to be built on park grounds, he subtly undermined the effort by remarking that "we learn with great satisfaction that the cultivated people...want a museum, (but) we advise you that Audubon Park is not the appropriate place."⁹⁹

Some developments were allowed to occur that were contrary to the Olmsted vision, but these were seen as temporary money-making ventures or necessary tributes to large donors. The Victorian design was still in place, it was just that, as park administrators the commission felt the need to make practical concessions. Land in the northern half of the park, for example, was leased out to serve as a golf course in 1898, the same year Olmsted submitted his plans. In 1901, entrepreneurs introduced a carousel and Shetland ponies as entertainment for wealthy children. In 1902, Olmsted accepted the recent inclusion of a refreshment stand, carousel, and ponies, but urged the commission to locate the new additions in a corner of the park.¹⁰⁰ As the decade wound down, public interest in the park built up, and wealthy families began to donate money for improvements—often with the condition that a suitable memorial was included in the plans.¹⁰¹ The result was the Tilton memorial and Popp Gardens, two iconic structures within the

⁹⁸ Correspondence between JCO and APC on Dec 23, 1902 and June 27, 1904. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

⁹⁹ Letter from JCO APC. June 4, 1909. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from JCO to APC. May 14, 1902. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Johnson to JCO. May 3, 1909. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 76.

park.¹⁰² Although frustrated by the need to make concessions, Olmsted felt confident that with the support of Gurley and Johnson, Audubon would remain a “natural” park despite the minor intrusions.

After the leadership of the Audubon Park Commission changed, however, the future of the park became very uncertain. A disgruntled client murdered Gurley in 1903, and as Johnson’s health began to deteriorate, Olmsted admitted his fear that “if your illness should continue so that you would have to relinquish the active management of park affairs to another member of the Association there is not a very good chance that our plans and ideals will be followed.”¹⁰³ When Johnson died in 1910, the commission elected H. Gibbs Morgan as president. Gibbs was the eldest member of the board and another Olmsted supporter, but it was vice president Jacob K. Newman who emerged as the de facto leader of the board. Newman respected Olmsted, but also echoed the sentiments of the younger generation by denigrating the older commissioners as “silk stockings” and “old dinosaurs.”¹⁰⁴ A capable leader, in 1915 he was able to push through legislation a taxpayer bond with which to develop the park. Newman was pragmatic and recognized that Olmsted would have to compromise on some aspects of the park design in order to move forward in construction with public support. Consequently, the long, circular lagoon that featured so prominently in Olmsted’s original design was significantly shortened.

The new lagoon would be only in the northeast section of the park instead of winding throughout the entire area. In addition to compromising on the size of the lake, the character changed, as

¹⁰² Built with donations from Mrs. Caroline S. Tilton and John F. Popp. Audubon Park Commission, *1917 Yearbook*, 12, 50.

¹⁰³ Letter from JCO to Johnson. March 15, 1910. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

¹⁰⁴ JCO notes. Sep 22, 1911. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

almost immediately upon its completion the local youth began using it for swimming rather than its intended use as scenery.¹⁰⁵ Olmsted and the commissioners attempted to solve this dilemma by designating a corner of the lake to serve as the official swimming area, thus preserving the majority of the lake for tranquil contemplation while also providing greater supervision.

Although it was difficult to relinquish his original vision of a serpentine lake, Olmsted benefited



Figure 6: Swimming area in Audubon Park. Unknown photographer. Audubon Park Commission Collection, UNO archives.

from the compromise by gaining funds to dig the lake, build a road, and shape the flat terrain into the rolling hills necessary for his vision.¹⁰⁶ Hoping to achieve more through cooperation, in the 1910's Olmsted oversaw the construction of a formal entrance at St. Charles, Gumbel fountain, Newman bandstand, and Popp gardens.

In 1917, the commissioners allowed lawn tennis in the park. Reflecting the emphasis on compromise during Morgan's presidency, the tennis courts pleased both the public and the park purists by ensuring that "these courts are of grass so as in no way to mar the lawn effect of this portion of the park."¹⁰⁷ The era of compromise would soon end, however. That same year Dr. Scheppegrell became the Chairman of the Grounds, and he emerged as a forceful critic.

¹⁰⁵ Superintendent's report. Jan 14, 1919. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 78.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Logsdon, "After the Fair: Olmsted Artistry at Audubon Park," 14.

¹⁰⁷ Audubon Park Commission. *Glimpses of Audubon Park* (New Orleans: Audubon Park Commission, 1917), 46.

Correspondence between Scheppegrell and the Olmsted Bros. quickly turned sour, although both parties tried at first to maintain civility.

In an early instance of disagreement Olmsted noted “I have written to Dr. Scheppegrell suggesting (as mildly as I could) that the moving of two hundred large trees...” is not in accordance with the Victorian design.¹⁰⁸ The doctor, however, was critical of Olmsted’s design, prompting Olmsted to complain that “yet another feature of our plan has drawn Dr. Scheppegrell’s criticism.”¹⁰⁹ By the next year, Olmsted had dropped the gloves. When Scheppegrell sent him a plan for a boat house on the lagoon, he vented, “It seems to me, as I look the plan over in detail, that it is rather absurd. As an artistic achievement and as fitting the site it seems to me that he has fallen far short.”¹¹⁰

As the disagreements continued and Olmsted began to believe the doctor was undermining his efforts, Olmsted attempted to bring other, more supportive, park leaders into the decision-making process. In 1918 he wrote, “Until Dr. Scheppegrell objects, it will be advisable to send copies of any letters on matters of design which I may write to him to Mr. Morgan as the official head of the commission.”¹¹¹ Olmsted requested in February of 1919 that his letter to the commission “not to go in the park files” because he didn’t trust Scheppegrell.¹¹² And in a letter to Superintendent Neale he suggests that, “By being thus posted as to our ideas in the matter of

¹⁰⁸ Letter from JCO to Superintendent Neale. Nov 23, 1917. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

¹⁰⁹ Letter from JCO to Neale. Feb 24, 1917. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

¹¹⁰ JCO notes. April 17, 1918. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

¹¹¹ Letter from JCO to Hussey, and Olmsted Bros. employee. Jan 18, 1918. Olmsted Microfilm, Reel 77.

¹¹² Letter from JCO to Superintendent Neale. Feb 24, 1919. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

drives, you will be able to discuss the subject with Dr. Scheppegrell and others more effectively, I hope, than we can by correspondence with him.”¹¹³

By this time H. Gibbs Morgan, the president of the Audubon Park Commission, was aging and nearly alone in his continued support of Olmsted. Seeing the writing on the wall, he retired and ceded his position to the board member most determined to make Audubon a Progressive park, Dr. Scheppegrell. The new president wrote a passive-aggressive letter to Olmsted informing him of the new situation: “Your letter of 26th inst. Addressed to ‘Chairman of Grounds Committee, Audubon Park, New Orleans’ was delivered to me to-day, after a delay of three days. I will receive such letters promptly if addressed as follows: Dr. W. Scheppegrell, President, Audubon Park Commission.”¹¹⁴ Eight months later Scheppegrell wrote the landscape architects to suggest that their fee be reduced to the insultingly low amount of \$100 per year.¹¹⁵ Then, just as the relationship between Olmsted and the commission reached the nadir, Olmsted died. His death removed the driving force in the effort to continue building parks according to the natural park ideology. Although the Olmsted landscape architecture firm continued to advise development, John’s brother Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. wasn’t attached to their father’s ideology. Together he and Frederick Olmsted Jr. would make drastic changes to the landscape of Audubon Park.

Scheppegrell began the 1923 Audubon Park yearbook with the proud remark that “Audubon Park has made great strides in popularity and attendance (because) opportunities for outdoor recreation and entertainment in the park have been greatly advanced during the past four

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Scheppegrell to JCO. March, 15. 1919. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

¹¹⁵ Letter from Scheppegrell to JCO. Jan 19, 1920. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

years.”¹¹⁶ In an excerpt titled “The Athletics of the Park,” board member Frank Beier acknowledged, “In former years it has been the policy of the Audubon Park Commission to have the grass green and flower beds looking beautiful, and to appeal to the esthetic side of man, but the demands of the times have caused a recognition of the necessity of developing the physical side also.”¹¹⁷ Tennis, swimming, boating, and baseball were all very popular activities in the park by this time.



Figure 7 : Postcard of swimming pool at Audubon Park, 1924. www.ashleighaustin.com/audubon.pc2.html

For some, the reinterpretation of the park after Olmsted’s death was a mistake. Another member of the board, architect Francis MacDonnell, wrote a letter to Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. in which he strongly objected to the “unnecessary disturbance of the park quietness.”¹¹⁸ When the Olmsted Bros. firm approved the changes despite MacDonnell’s complaints, the disgruntled

¹¹⁶ Audubon Park Commission. *1923 Yearbook*, 5.

¹¹⁷ Audubon Park Commission, *1919 Yearbook*, 43.

¹¹⁸ Letter from Francis MacDonnell to Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. April 23, 1923. Olmsted microfilm. Reel 77.

commissioner chastised the younger Olmsted by reminding him that “infinite pains have been taken to bring landscape to a high degree of excellence thro (sic) the carrying out of the plans made by the elder Olmsted.”¹¹⁹ Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. responded weakly to the criticism, claiming “the question as it was put to us was not whether a shelter should be erected, but rather “where” and “how.”¹²⁰ Later, feeling compelled to justify his firm’s new, Progressive perspective, he argued against an “arbitrary adherence to any simple formula or general rule.”¹²¹

Mr. MacDonnell, however, was the lone dissenting voice on the board, and the rise in popularity of the park indicates the general population preferred the new Audubon. In 1922, a natatorium was built with donated funds. Thousands of swimmers flocked to the pool in the hot New Orleans summers. That same year the Sugar Experiment Station was closed and the land used for baseball diamonds and tennis courts.¹²² Because there was no longer the need to protect the integrity of a Victorian aesthetic, the new courts were not grass but paved. Over 17,000 permits were issued to play at these popular facilities.¹²³ Perhaps most important was the

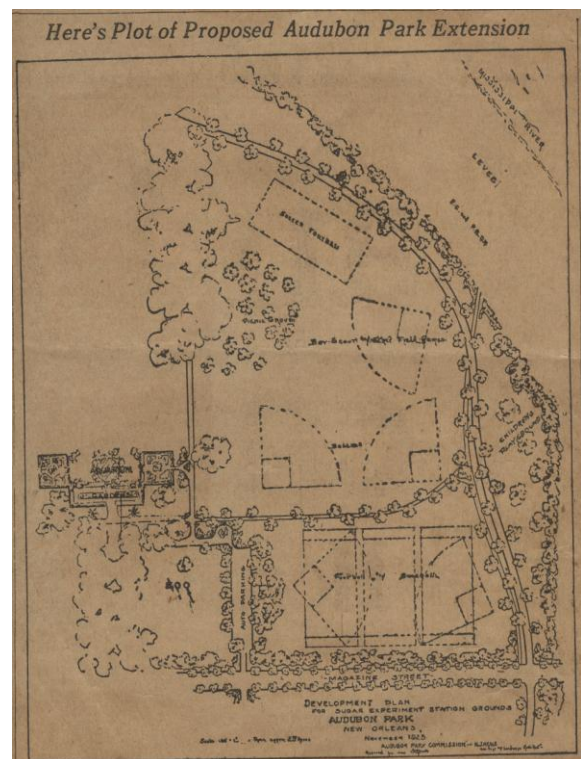


Figure 8: Plan for development of athletic facilities in Audubon Park. Audubon Park Collection, UNO archives.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., July 7, 1923. Olmsted microfilm. Reel 77.

¹²⁰ Letter from Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to Francis MacDonnell. July 26, 1923. Olmsted microfilm. Reel 77.

¹²¹ Joseph Logsdon, *Audubon Park*, 25.

¹²² Audubon Park Commission, *1923 Yearbook*,

¹²³ Ibid., 17.

development of the zoo and the construction of the Odenheimer Aquarium in 1924. Sigmund Odenheimer was a wealthy philanthropist who donated the funds for the aquarium and many of the animals for the zoo. Clearly the natural park ideology was no longer influential at this point in the park's history.

Audubon Park's transformation paralleled the changes taking place in cultural institutions across America. Museums and libraries, for example, played a significant part in Victorian cultural reform efforts and both institutions sought, like Olmsted's parks, to "civilize" the working class into Victorian respectability. At first, museums attempted to instill religious obedience by closing on Sunday.¹²⁴ They also prohibited canes in order to protect the art from vandalism¹²⁵. The general public, however, had to work six days a week. If the museum was closed Sunday, their only day off, the very people the museum intended to civilize would not be able to visit. Museums eventually recognized the need to accommodate the working class and opened on Sundays. Similarly, the genteel guardians of public libraries originally tried to instill Victorian morality by banning a number of popular books deemed improper due to their portrayal of women as a powerful and often sexual protagonist.¹²⁶ The public responded to this attempt to control their reading choices by not going to the library and eventually the libraries, like the museums, decided it was necessary to loosen their grip. By 1900, "public library leaders had all but given up an attempt to discredit best-selling fiction."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect*, 170.

¹²⁵ When told he had to leave his cane in the cloakroom Mark Twain humorously ridiculed the rule by exclaiming "Leave my cane! Leave my cane! Then how do you expect me to poke holes through the oil paintings?" Rosenzweig, *Park and the People*. 359.

¹²⁶ George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism*, 108.

¹²⁷ Howe, Daniel Walker. *Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1976), 159.

The changes occurring in the various public institutions exemplified a reformation of American identity occurring at the turn of the century. American society was undergoing profound changes, as immigration, urbanization, the women's movement, intellectual developments, and an emerging corporate economy all undermined the dominant Victorian culture of the mid to late 1800s.¹²⁸ Values such as self-restraint and personal independence no longer resonated with individuals confronting the complex realities of modern America. Contemporaries "sensed that a different order was slowly arising" and historians have described the era as a "watershed of American history."¹²⁹

Progressive reformers perceived endemic weakness among Victorians as the primary cause for their weakened hold on prestige and power, regardless of extenuating circumstances.

Neurasthenia, a "disease" characteristic of the wealthy and indolent, was the most conspicuous example of the Victorians' inability to function in the rough-and-tumble world. To respond, they attempted to strengthen the Victorian community into capable leaders through a Progressive agenda that emphasized strenuous living and pragmatic Christianity.¹³⁰ A leading advocate of the "strenuous life" among former Victorians, Theodore Roosevelt remarked, "We don't want to see the virtuous young man always have shoulders that slope like those of a champagne bottle, while the young man who is not virtuous is allowed to monopolize the burly strength which must be possessed by every great and masterful nation."¹³¹ Therefore, although the reformers

¹²⁸ Wiebe, Robert. *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*. 3rd ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968)

¹²⁹ Hofstadter, Richard. *Social Darwinism in America Thought*, 5th edition (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1962), 118. Commager, Henry Steele. *The American Mind: An interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), chap. 2 title.

¹³⁰ Rodgers, Daniel. *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 15.

¹³¹ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 11.

respected the “gentlemanly” attributes of their predecessors, they began to advocate values of dominance and vigor.

The new, more masculine values were not a total rejection of their Victorian upbringing; reformers continued to denigrate the ethnic working class culture, and activities such as gambling and drinking were discouraged. Instead of adopting the lifestyle of the masses, they hoped to inculcate the virtuous, yet feeble, white Protestant middle class with the strength to withstand the immoral and powerful forces of modern America. The new Christian gentleman was guided by the tenets of “The Strenuous Life.”¹³² Theodore Roosevelt succinctly articulated this philosophy with his advice to “speak softly, and carry a big stick.” Roosevelt attributed this proverb to West African literature and it demonstrates both his commitment to being a gentlemen (speak softly), and his hope to incorporate “barbaric” vitality into the Victorian ethos (carry a big stick).

Sports, largely because they embodied the prevailing ethos of competition and exertion, exploded in popularity at the turn of the twentieth century. Although middle class men had more leisure in the new economy, they still did not wish to “waste” their time, and Progressives saw saloons and pool-halls as immoral and unproductive. Sports, on the other hand, served to instill the values and skills necessary for corporate citizens. A blend of individual initiative and discipline was paramount to success in both sports and work. Clear rules to the game required

¹³² Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*. Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity*.

discipline—a necessary trait for an employee. And team sports compelled athletes to think beyond individual gain and put the team first.¹³³

In New Orleans, sporting clubs proliferated to accommodate the new demand. The League of American Wheelmen (1889), Southern Amateur Rowing Association (1893), West End Tennis Club (1890), and Audubon Golf Club (1898) all catered to a clientele interested in an athletic experience that also reinforced their status as gentlemen. Tulane University, which served as the “finishing school” for local leaders, built its own track in 1895, and in 1898 held its first intercollegiate baseball game against Louisiana State University.¹³⁴ Sports were no longer seen as the wasteful leisure of the poor, but as an integral component of an individual’s development. The acceptance of athletics as acceptable leisure also opened the doors for other challenges to Victorian norms.

Women in New Orleans created new opportunities for exercise and self-expression in athletics with the decline of Victorianism. Victorian roles for women were shaped by economic changes. Industrialization and urbanization created separate spheres for work and family and, as men went to work in the city's factories and wharves, the home became increasingly feminized and women came to be regarded as primarily “domestic.”¹³⁵ Early leaders of the natural park movement envisioned similar gender dynamics in their parks. Women were “expected to serve

¹³³ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 71.

¹³⁴ Somers, Dale A. *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans, 1850-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1972), 210.

¹³⁵ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 48.

play a pacifying role" on men and to be an integral element of the civilizing effect of the parks.¹³⁶

Many women supported the natural parks and saw the defined female role as natural. Lucretia Horner expressed the Victorian perspective in her 1907 essay, "Woman's Influence on Parks." She believed it was women's duty "to train the children of our city into the intelligent use of public use of public utilities."¹³⁷ And that "the great problem is to lead the public impulse into the demand for the crystallization of this high ideal; and it is particularly in this work of education that the women of our city may give invaluable service."¹³⁸ A growing number of women, however, did not "share the vision of tranquil, sexually stratified domesticity" as an ideal framework for American society, and slowly the strict decorum for women would begin to unravel.¹³⁹ Progressivism, although intended to be merely a reform of traditional values, opened new possibilities of self-expression for millions of middle-class women.

Women at this time eagerly sought to escape the domestic confines of the Victorian era, and in increasing numbers they shed their corsets to go play in the outdoors. By the mid-nineties "hundreds of women could be seen riding (bicycles) daily" in the streets of New Orleans.¹⁴⁰ Tennis was another popular game for women. The New Orleans Tennis Club, faced with unrelenting demand for access to courts, reluctantly allowed women to play on certain days. In an effort to frame the success of women's efforts in patriarchal terms, members of the club

¹³⁶ Wills, John and Karen Jones. *The Invention of the Park* (London: Polity Press, 2005), 54.

¹³⁷ Audubon Park Commission, *1907 Yearbook*, 19.

¹³⁸ Audubon Park Commission, *1907 Yearbook*, 21.

¹³⁹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 52.

¹⁴⁰ Dale Somers, *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans*, 234.

described “Ladies’ Days” as a “generous sacrifice.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, when women successfully lobbied for access to the swimming hole in Audubon Park, the park commissioners announced that, due to their generous “progressive spirit” they would *let* women swim on certain days.¹⁴² Confronted with growing women’s power, the commissioners attempted to maintain the facade of benevolent white male control. Women in New Orleans, however, were not content with these small tokens of equality, and by 1905 had gained membership on the Audubon Park Commission.¹⁴³

African-Americans in New Orleans had less success in challenging their marginalization. They would have to wait until 1915 to have full access to a park, and this only through the heroic efforts of the African-American social activist Sylvania Williams.¹⁴⁴ In a study on play facilities in New Orleans during this era, author C.G Kern concludes that “blacks were not permitted to play in the general recreation.”¹⁴⁵ Segregation in the new sport of cycling provides a clear example of the racism in New Orleans at this time. Although cycling is without physical contact and can be enjoyed alone, in 1892 the local branch of the League of American Wheelmen quit the league when the national organization allowed black men to join.¹⁴⁶

Evidence for segregation in the park itself is less explicit. The commissioners’ racism hides in the shadows because they were careful to not openly discriminate with public funds. *De facto*

¹⁴¹ New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, December 1, 1896.

¹⁴² Audubon Park Commission, *1907 Yearbook*, 24.

¹⁴³ *Times Picayune*. February 13, 1905. 5.

¹⁴⁴ Kern, C.G. *Development of Play facilities in New Orleans* (Tulane: unpublished thesis, 1929), 53. This park, located at sixth and Magnolia, would become a pillar in the black community along with the pool and community center Williams helped establish.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

segregation was so prevalent they “didn’t need to mention it.”¹⁴⁷ However, some indications of racism do sneak in the documents. In October of 1899 Olmsted wrote that although “the negroes are allowed the use of the great live oak avenue north of Magazine St., Baker said it was not desirable to put up any conveniences or special attractions as they were not to be encouraged to come to the park.”¹⁴⁸ Eight years later, in a 1907 amendment to commission by-laws, honorary membership was limited to only whites.¹⁴⁹ And again, in 1915, Olmsted noted that “I suggested twice during my visit that a place might be assigned for colored people but those I talked to were very positive that it was not advisable.”¹⁵⁰ Segregation of parks would go unchallenged by politicians across the country until after World War II, with the devastating result that in 1919 only three percent of playgrounds in the country were accessible to black children.¹⁵¹

The experiences of African-Americans and women in Audubon Park were part of the larger, collective experience of New Orleans’s transition from Victorian to Progressive values and identity. In the early years of the park, Victorian social reform was accepted as the purpose of Audubon. Through a landscape of tranquil, domesticated wilderness, park planners and administrators hoped to cultivate restraint and self-reliance among a population beset by the barbarism and greed of the emerging ethnic working class and industrial tycoons. John Charles Olmsted, motivated in part by deep personal insecurity, worked closely with the conservative leadership of the park commission to establish Audubon as a Victorian park. Unfortunately for

¹⁴⁷ Cranz, Galen. *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 196.

¹⁴⁸ JCO notes. Oct, 31. 1899. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

¹⁴⁹ Audubon Park Commission, *1907 Yearbook*, 31.

¹⁵⁰ JCO notes. Nov, 27. 1915. Olmsted microfilm, Reel 77.

¹⁵¹ John Wills and Karen Jones, *The Invention of the Park*, 59.

them, the city's poor funding of public services delayed development of Audubon Park and the door was left open for the Progressive alternative to natural park design to gain strength.

Prompted by the changes occurring within American society, Progressivism grew out of the desire to maintain leadership and uphold traditional values under novel circumstances, for many Protestant Americans believed the powerful new forces in society were tearing apart the moral fabric of society. The changing landscape of Audubon Park can be seen as a microcosm for this national transformation. As elsewhere, Victorian ideals did not simply go away; the advocates for Olmsted's plan resisted change for many years until the deaths of prominent leaders finally allowed Progressivism to reign unchallenged. The new leadership left their mark by filling the park with athletic fields that supported the vigorous ideals of the "strenuous life." A visitor to the park today has the opportunity to play a number of sports, including tennis, golf, soccer, baseball, and horseback riding. However, with an historical eye it is possible to see Olmsted's unfinished vision on the periphery of the park grounds. In these areas, picnics and naps outnumber scores and competition. At times, an errant ball will careen through a once-serene setting, and it is still undecided who is intruding on whose space.

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