

Chapter 4

Historical Context:

The Growth of Chicago and the Birth of Riverside _____

A discussion of Frederick Law Olmsted's design at Riverside would not be complete without addressing its historical setting. As was previously discussed, Olmsted's life was clearly shaped by his own political and social beliefs and experiences in the United States and abroad. These influences become apparent in the design choices he made, not only in Riverside, but in many other designs. Author Witold Rybczynski writes, "it reflects his reading of Carlyle, Emerson, Ruskin and Downing. He is trying to combine economics, aesthetics, landscaping, nature, moral and intellectual improvement, and salvation" (80). The period following the Civil War was one of large-scale, and sometimes volatile, change throughout the United States. These changes involved societal attitudes and politics associated with reconstruction policies, ultimately impacting patterns of urban growth and suburban development. For a man as involved in and aware of societal issues as Olmsted, it would be difficult to believe that the widespread changes in society occurring at the time did not impact his designs.

Post-Civil War Society

To put the period of Riverside's inception in perspective, consider some significant issues and events of the post-Civil War era: the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; President Johnson, seen as a "serious impediment" to reconstruction, faced an impeachment trial during April and May of 1868; by 1868, seven of eleven former confederate states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina) were readmitted to the union, Texas being readmitted in 1869; Americans voted in 1868 for war hero Ulysses S. Grant as president in an effort to counteract the controversy associated with Johnson's presidency. Also during this period, people increased the time spent in recreational and leisure endeavors. The Cincinnati Red Stockings formed in 1869 as the first salaried baseball team.

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Also in 1869 the first intercollegiate football game in America took place, pitting Princeton against Rutgers (Brinkley 501).

Other significant changes came in the form of increased entrepreneurship. People were able to buy and sell their goods in new ways through the advent of widespread marketing. Smaller, local stores experienced new competition from “chain stores” such as Woolworth’s and the A & P (Brinkley 499). Also new to the American landscape was the department store—Marshall Field in Chicago created an exciting, and wholly different, experience for many during excursions to the city. The widespread use of catalog shopping with stores like Montgomery Ward significantly impacted people’s daily lives, removing the need to travel long distances in order to buy goods. The resulting increased amount of time spent on leisure activities combined with the added conveniences of travel and shopping further compartmentalized people’s lives. Distinction became clear between environments intended in which to live, work, and play (Brinkley 501).

Olmsted was a member of a class of Americans beginning to develop a large amount of influence on society and the politics of the Reconstruction Period—a group of people characterized by well-educated professionals and intellectuals. Eric Foner discusses this age of social awareness in the antebellum period—most commonly referred to as the “Gilded Age.” He describes the members of this social class as:

Mostly college graduates who resided in the urban Northeast or Western cities like Cincinnati and Chicago, these self-styled “best men” articulated a shared ideology and developed a sense of collective identity through organizations like the American Social Science Association and a network of influential journals, among them *The Nation*, *North American Review*, *Springfield Republican*, and *Chicago Tribune*. Their growing prominence reflected the coming of age of an American intelligentsia determined to make its mark on the politics of the Gilded Age. (209)

As was previously discussed, Frederick Law Olmsted was a founding publisher of *The Nation*, in which he was able to address many of his concerns about social conditions before, during, and after the war. His many writings also appeared in publications such as Putnam’s *Monthly*

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Magazine and Harper's Monthly alongside writings by Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Charles Dickens (Rybczynski 136). From these associations, it is clear that Olmsted held a firm place in intellectual society before and after the war. Olmsted's respect for other members of intellectual and literary society is reflected in his choice of street names throughout Riverside. For example Uvedale Road was named for Uvedale Price, who is credited with the development of the picturesque theory of landscape gardening.

The Condition of Cities

Olmsted recognized that cities were places that offered people many resources—culturally, economically, and intellectually. But he and many other social scientists also recognized the difficulties inherent in city life. The increase of industry in cities changed the cultural composition of their populations. Ebner's study of suburban America describes this change:

In post-Civil War America the configuration of the metropolis underwent dramatic reordering. Several factors contributed to change: economic forces such as industrialization, ever more massive influxes of European immigrants, significant new developments in communications as well as sanitary engineering, and further advances in the technology of surface transportation. (373)

Prior to the Civil War, cities were dominated by merchant economies. Following the war, industrialization contributed to the change in class structure. A greater disparity was growing between the working classes and the wealthy upper-middle class. Historian Alan Brinkley provides another perspective of the city and gives some insight into how the different classes experienced these conditions:

The increasing congestions of the city and the absence of adequate public services produced serious hazards. One was fire. ... An even greater hazard than fire was disease, especially in poor neighborhoods with inadequate sanitation facilities... Above all, perhaps, the expansion of the city spawned widespread and often desperate poverty. (495)

Olmsted's plans for providing refuge from the conditions of the city seem to be somewhat contradictory. From his past experiences as a social scientist and activist, he hoped to

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create a sense of equality with regard to access to open spaces and their healthful benefits. These designs took shape in the form of city parks, such as those in New York City as well as Chicago. Olmsted hoped that "...the natural simplicity of pastoral landscape would inspire communal feelings among all urban classes, muting resentments over disparities of wealth and fashion" (Blodgett 878). Conversely, he knew that it was only the members of more fortunate classes that would have the option to travel outside of the city to experience a better lifestyle. In the Preliminary Report prepared by Olmsted, Vaux & Co., he acknowledges the desire for people of "more intelligent and more fortunate classes" to remove themselves from the conditions present in the city (5). It was the wealthier classes that could afford to "compartmentalize" their lives—they benefited from the separation of work from home environments and could spend time in leisure activities. Ebner's study on the development of suburban America points to the combination of the "congestion, filth, and disease" of cities, combined with the ease of travel through new railroad systems that prompted wealthier classes to consider the possibility of removing themselves from the city—the result was the "commuter suburb" (Ebner 371).

Chicago, Riverside, and the Great West

Travel in the Chicago region was often tedious and difficult because the extensive uneven and swampy conditions proved almost impossible for wagons. Several new technologies were developed to improve these conditions, including the construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which opened in April of 1848. Also under construction was a network of rail corridors. In March of 1848, workers began the first thirty-one miles of railroad between Chicago and Galena, a mining town west of Chicago. Later that year, only ten miles had been built, but reached as far as the Des Plaines River. Wheat buyers were encouraged to do their business on the banks of the Des Plaines River in order to bring greater utilization to the Chicago and Galena Union Railroad (Cronon 66). In 1850, there were nine thousand miles of railroad in the country—in only ten years, that total reached thirty thousand miles (Cronon 68). The Chicago

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and Galena Union Railroad was a trunk line to the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, which runs through Riverside. The station located in what would become Riverside on the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy line became the first stop traveling from Chicago. This would prove to be a great “selling point” for the Riverside Improvement Company.

William Cronon offers a unique view of the urban-rural relationship. Chicago’s development with regard to its role in the evolution of cities and suburbs is significant, not to mention its place in the development of the west. On a large scale, the city of Chicago existed literally as the border between the urban (industrialized East Coast) and the rural (the “Great West”). The city experienced remarkable growth during the 1830s. Within a period of four years, population increased twenty times over, with land values increasing three thousand times (Cronon 52). Chicago was central to the economics and trade of the nation, especially with the establishment of the railroad in the 1840s and 50s. Chicago was seen as having the “natural capabilities for drawing almost the entire trade of the region between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains” (Cronon 37). The city competed with other western towns for the status of “gateway” to the plains and Rocky Mountain states. Businessmen sought to concentrate the nation’s wealth in the Chicago area by forming a market for cattle, lumber, and grain. In doing so, they hoped to economically link the frontier with an international system of cities. The nation’s railroad system relied heavily on Chicago—the majority of eastern lines converged there, with all western systems fanning across the plains from Chicago. Chicago was a necessary stop for any travel east or west. A newspaperman even compared Chicago’s status with the classic civilizations: “In ancient times, all roads led to Rome; in modern times all roads lead to Chicago” (Cronon 42).

Chicago’s rapid growth prompted the formation of the Riverside Improvement Company by a group of East Coast businessmen in the 1860s—they were able to foresee the demand of living in and near Chicago, a city that possessed much potential. Following the Riverside Improvement Company’s inception, the well-known firm of Olmsted, Vaux & Co. was contacted

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to produce a plan for a new suburb nine miles west of the city. Olmsted also recognized Chicago's potential in becoming one of the country's great cities. From his experiences in visiting Birkenhead Park in England, he knew the value of combining a pleasant suburban community with the resources of a large city. It is possible that the Riverside Improvement Company and Olmsted were able to "sell" the plan and gain wider acceptance by comparing the relationship between the proposed suburban community at Riverside to Chicago with those already existing in Paris, London, New York, and Boston—thereby supporting the vision of Chicago as being recognized in an international network of globally significant cities.

The change in lifestyle following the Civil War was reflected in Olmsted's desire to produce landscapes with a separation of uses. This technique is visible not only in Central Park with separate pathways for people and vehicles that never cross paths, but also in Riverside. Olmsted envisioned the extension of the suburb from the city as an important component to the idea of separation of uses, though he was fully aware that one could not exist without the other. Both the historian Cronon and Olmsted express the importance of considering the city and suburb as a cohesive whole. It is Olmsted's "metropolitan condition" that calls for the joining of the suburb and the city—he planned to accomplish this through the construction of a grand parkway in conjunction with the railroad existing in Riverside. Even though the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad provided a convenient connection from Riverside to Chicago, Olmsted was not convinced that the railroad alone would be sufficient to provide the appropriate level of convenience for Riverside residents. In the Preliminary Report, Olmsted writes, "A railroad, however, at the best affords a very inadequate and unsatisfactory means of communication between a rural habitation and a town, either for a family or for a man of business" (8). Olmsted's travels to Europe gave him another perspective with which to evaluate the parkway's function and relate its importance to the Riverside Improvement Company:

[The parkway should] provide, or, at least, begin to provide, another pressing desideratum of the city of Chicago, namely, a general promenade ground. The promenade is a social custom of great importance in all the large towns of

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Europe. It is an open-air gathering for the purpose of easy, friendly, unceremonious greetings, for the enjoyment of change of scene, of cheerful and exhilarating sights and sounds, and of various good cheer. (12)

Riverside: The Early Years

The Great Fire of 1871 greatly impacted the city of Chicago and unfortunately destroyed a large number of Olmsted Vaux & Co documents, including many associated with his work at Riverside. Other fires also occurred in both Wisconsin and Michigan during the same time, possibly related to a regional drought. Olmsted visited Chicago following the fire, and reported his experience in a November 1871 issue of *The Nation*. He was greatly impressed by the damage and was “able but slightly to appreciate the magnitude of its calamity” (302). According to his writings, the fire affected an area approximately one mile in width and four in length. Olmsted estimated that the area was “as large as the half of New York City from the Battery to Central Park, or as the whole of the peninsula of Boston...I judge that more than a third of the roof space and fully half the floor space of the city, the population of which was 330,000 was destroyed” (302). Construction slowed in Riverside as many were instead involved in the process of rebuilding the city. But, people did flock to the hotels of Riverside as a refuge from the chaos of the charred Chicago landscape. Until this time, many wealthy people had only been in Riverside as a summer retreat. Its opportunities for outdoor recreation were very attractive, and provided a welcome change to the summer conditions of the city. The Preliminary Report indicated that the area adjacent to the Des Plaines River offered respite from swampy, and consequently mosquito-ridden, conditions. High demand following the fire kept Riverside hotels open all winter, and people began to consider the real possibility of year-round residence in the rural suburban community.

In the early 1870s, many of the nation’s banks had overextended themselves in the selling of bonds to fund the construction of the railroads, resulting in what became known as the Panic of 1873 (Foner 217). Many ventures, including banks, failed resulting in layoffs across the country.

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Wealth in the country was restructured as business tycoons such as Rockefeller and Carnegie developed monopolies on the oil and steel industries, respectively (Foner 218). The failure and restructuring of industry and business drove the wealthy and working classes further apart, resulting in the development of many laborer's and farmer's organizations. The Riverside Improvement Company failed in 1873 as well. Land values dropped approximately 87% (from \$300 to \$40 a front-foot) and building continued at a much slower pace. (The Riverside Historical Commission 104).

However slowly, Riverside continued to grow as a result of the strong foundation Olmsted created in its roads, walks, and infrastructure. *Riverside: Then and Now* provides a detailed description of the purchase and development of its five "divisions" beginning in 1875 after the organization of the village government (116). Olmsted had actually designated this system of divisions in his 1869 plan. Almost fifty years later the village government enacted one of the first zoning ordinances in Illinois, in which the "character, type, and intensity of use of every parcel of land" was defined (118). A study written by professors Malcolm Cairns and Gary Kesler includes a series of maps graphically representing Riverside's growth patterns from 1895 to 1967. Apparent in these maps is the increased density of houses, beginning in the 1890s and continuing through the 1930s. The increased housing density is a result the subdivision of the original 100' by 200' lots, specified by Olmsted and Vaux, into smaller lots.

In Menhinick's article "Riverside Sixty Years Later," written in 1932, the community's function as a refuge from the city was still apparent. He writes, "if a stranger were blindfolded, whisked to the heart of Riverside, Illinois, he would probably never suspect...that just beyond the confines of his vision lay gangster-ridden Cicero and all the endless gridiron and monotony of the western Chicago region" (109). Menhinick's writing reflects that Riverside had become home to the wealthier classes of society. "Undesirable encroachments" such as apartment buildings at Riverside's boundaries and through traffic were reduced by the large forest preserves at the south and east of the village as well as development of the Chicago Zoological Gardens (116).

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Menhinick points out two features of the original design that, by the 1930s, had not developed as Olmsted had envisioned: the parkway and the Des Plaines River. The parkway was never fully realized; this was seen as “unfortunate,” leaving many of the Riverside residents to commute to Chicago by a twenty-minute train ride with no leisurely alternative. The conditions of the Des Plaines River had deteriorated since Olmsted had first visited it. In the 1930s, according to Menhinick the “less said about the Des Plaines River, the better” (116). Pollution came to Riverside from upstream villages and unsanitary building practices in other real estate ventures (The Riverside Historical Commission 108). Aside from these two factors, Riverside was viewed as a success in the 1930s, having sustained its character for sixty years.

Rybczynski describes Olmsted as “long-headed.” Many of Olmsted’s designs and ideas took years or decades to reach the desired outcome, and he had the unique ability to envision the long-term function of his landscapes. Guided by his social consciousness, Olmsted developed his designs and ideas to address the needs of the American people and their environments; even in an unpredictable political environment, Olmsted was able to use his “long-headedness” to sell his designs. Issues related to politics in terms of the social condition were often controversial and Olmsted’s “critique of these habits was so often clothed in an aesthetic rather than political vocabulary” that it was “less vulnerable to public scorn.” (Blodgett 877). It is through the strength of Olmsted’s planning and vision that the structure of Riverside’s design has been able to endure through various development stages and the advent of modern conveniences; it even transcends the influences of other designers who have left their mark on Riverside.