

# The Campus Green

The Olmsted Firm's Designs for Vassar College

Vassar Art Library, April 11 – June 6, 2022

1858

1958



JOHN CHARLES OLNSTED



FREDERICK LAW OLNSTED



FREDERICK L. OLNSTED, JR.



HENRY SARGENT CODMAN



CHARLES ELIOT



PERCIVAL GALLAGHER



JAMES FREDERICK DAWSON



EDWARD CLARK WHITING



HENRY VINCENT HUBBARD



WILLIAM BELL MARQUIS



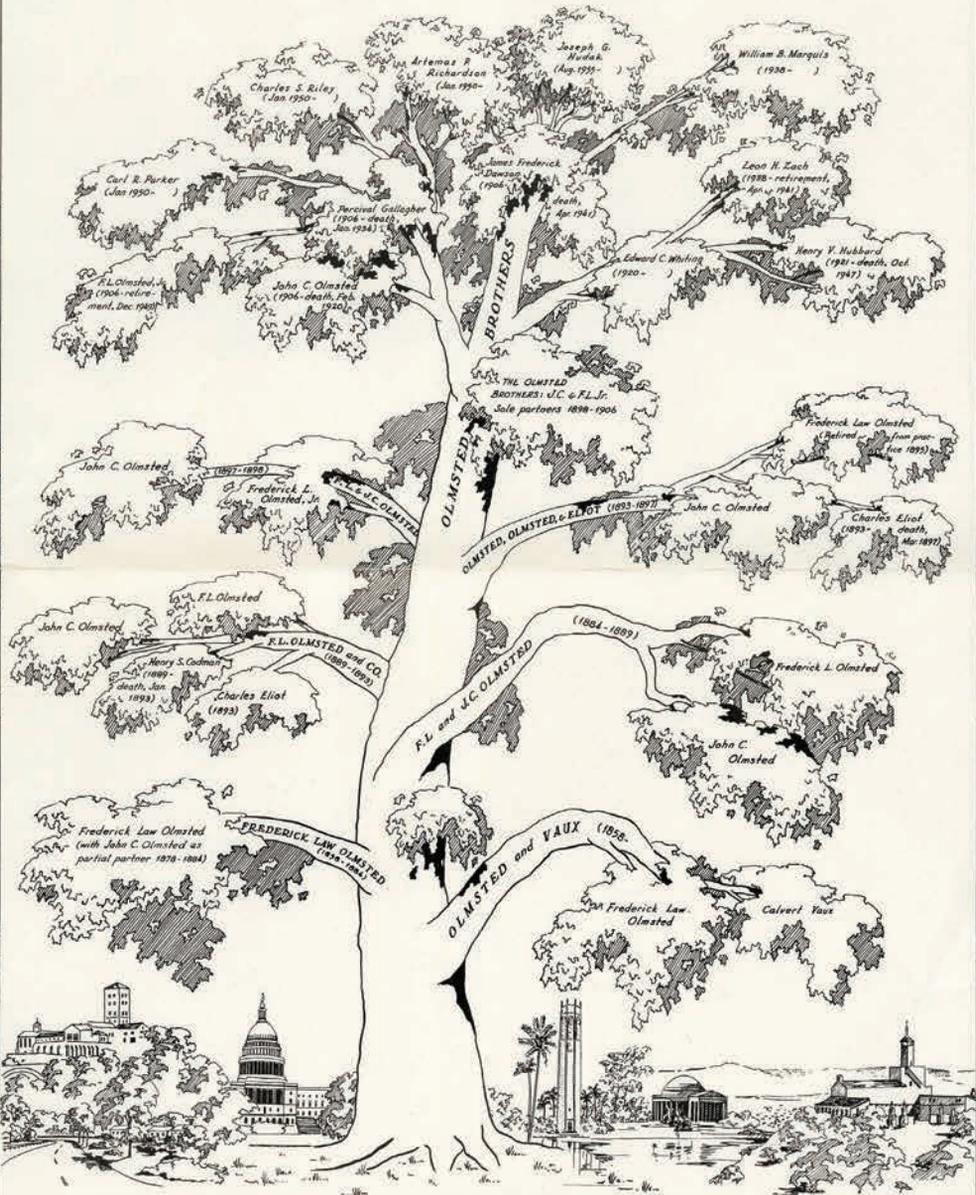
LEON H. ZACH



CARL RUST PARKER



CHARLES SCOTT RILEY



**THE FAMILY TREE OF THE OLMSTED FIRMS**  
 germinated in 1858 when Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux submitted their "Greensward" plan in the competition for the design of New York's Central Park. Since that time there has been a dynamic and dynastic succession of firms bearing the name of Olmsted, and the firm names - together with their dates of activity, are shown as branches of the tree. In the foliage are the names of the partners responsible for carrying on the work of the firms. The tree has its roots in Central Park, and at its base are the fruits of one hundred years of Olmsted Design: The National Capitol grounds,



CALVERT VAUX

The Tower at Mountain Lake in Florida; The Cloisters and Fort Tryon Park in New York; Rock Creek Park in the District of Columbia and in Montgomery County, Maryland - and the Intercounty Belt Parkway in the Maryland section of the Park; Palos Verdes in California; and the Jefferson Memorial in Washington being the few represented on this document. This Century of design in the Olmsted Offices has produced thousands of developments including private residential properties, subdivisions, cemeteries, commercial and industrial sites, parks, city plans, and institutional layouts.



JOSEPH G. HUDAK

ARTEMAS P. RICHARDSON

**“What are they doing at Vassar?”** asked *Scribner’s Monthly* in August, 1871, in a long essay reporting on the new college giving women the same education as men. The author extolled the wonders of the surrounding Hudson Valley, comparing it to the most beautiful landscapes of rural England or northern Italy, before proceeding to describe the campus itself, featuring landscape “gems of loveliness”. Strikingly, the article credited this campus landscape to Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), known as the father of American Landscape Architecture, and his partner Calvert Vaux (1824–1895), claiming that, “A third of the two hundred acres is laid out and planted with a view to ornament, after a plan from Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux; the other two-thirds are worked as farm and garden, for use by the College family.” Was this attribution fact, or urban legend?

The Olmsted firm was indeed one of the foremost creative forces in American campus planning, working with over 150 colleges, among them Stanford, Washington University in St. Louis, and American University in Washington, during the firm’s existence under various names from 1857 to 1979. Yet their renown as planners of important parks and public commissions has long overshadowed their significant work in campus design, studies of which are relatively few and fragmented. Additionally, the significant contributions of Olmsted’s sons and other members of the firm have yet to be fully distinguished.

The bicentenary of Frederick Law Olmsted’s birth on April 26, 2022 has spurred renewed attention to these and other aspects of the Olmsted firm’s projects and legacy. This study traces three generations of the Olmsted firm at Vassar, contributing a new campus case study to the Olmsted annals, and a new layer to Vassar campus history. Research in the Library of Congress, the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, and Vassar Special Collections has uncovered a trove of unpublished drawings, documents and photos, revealing what F. L. Olmsted and his associates did—and did not—contribute to Vassar’s campus.



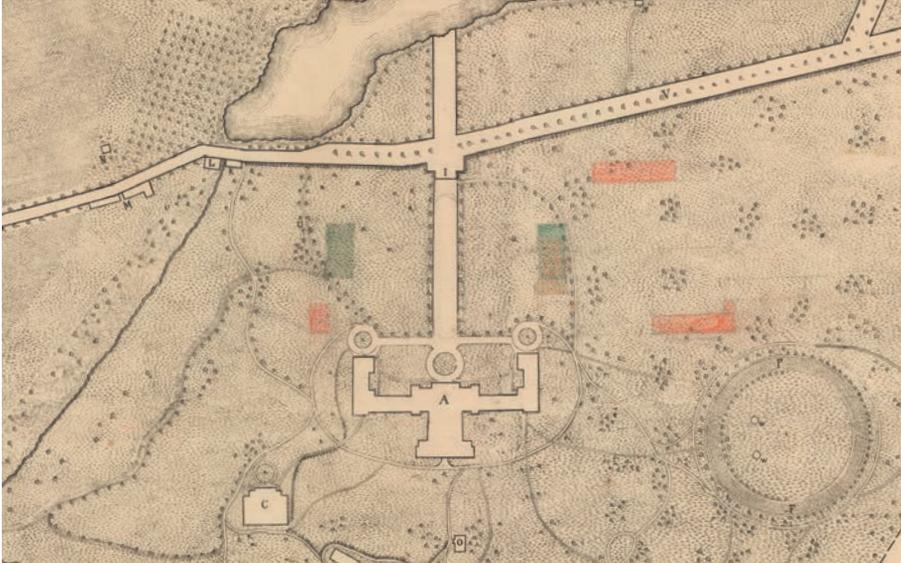
2. Egidius C. Winter, Vassar Female College, lithograph, 1862

3. William Notman, Vassar Main Building seen from the northwest, 1865

As is well known, Vassar College opened in 1865 as a single, monumental building situated in an expansive rural landscape. Occupying land once home to the Munsee Lenape peoples, the new college was located on a plain that had previously been a racetrack, and thus had been completely deforested. Matthew Vassar envisioned these open fields as a verdant park-like setting, to be planted with flower gardens, a botanical garden, and ornamental and fruit-bearing trees. Yet at the time of Vassar's unexpected death in June 1868, the campus was still a relatively bleak landscape, its lawns edged with small conifers.

In fact, it was the death of the college's founder in 1868 that prompted the Board of Trustees to write to Fredrick Law Olmsted for his professional advice. The trustees' Executive Committee sought "to employ one of the best landscapists in the community to prepare a complete plan for laying out and ornamenting the college grounds with special reference to securing the best location for a statue of the founder." F. L. Olmsted, together with Calvert Vaux, visited the Vassar campus in August of 1868. The next day, Olmsted wrote to his wife Mary, reporting his impressions of Vassar: "They have a miserable plan to be amended, that's all". Three days later, a Vassar grounds committee met and recorded that Olmsted and Vaux had made an outline sketch for improvements to roads and paths. However, no trace of the drawing has been found, despite searches from 1896 to the present; and no evidence has emerged, beyond the Scribner's encomium, that any changes were undertaken as a result. Perhaps Vassar actually owed some long-lost landscape gems to the pair's ideas; more likely, early accounts of their campus contributions were exaggerated, and developed into legend. What is certain is that the senior Olmsted did not lay out the campus.

By the 1890s, the college had outgrown Main Building—"Vassar is Overcrowded," as the *New York Times* reported in 1895—and progressive ideas about women's housing favored smaller, cottage-style living arrangements for women. With a gift from John D. Rockefeller, the college built one such dorm in Strong House, and made plans for a new classroom building. In order to site this new building—as well as more new dorms, with an eye toward future buildings including a chapel and library—James Monroe Taylor, president of Vassar from 1886 to 1914, advocated for the creation of a master plan, and the hiring of F. L. Olmsted, once again, to create it. His memory and health declining, Olmsted had retired from practicing the previous year. The firm was then run by John Charles Olmsted (1852–1920), F. L. Olmsted's nephew-turned-adopted son, who had been a partner since 1884, and who was a talented and widely respected landscape architect in his own right; he would be the founding president of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) in 1899.



4. John Charles Olmsted (undated)
5. Vassar College and Grounds, Surveyed by the Class of 1878 (detail); with annotations for added working buildings in green, and residential buildings in red, presumably in the hand of J. C. Olmsted
6. J. C. Olmsted's central greensward, seen from over Main Building, looking west, September 2021

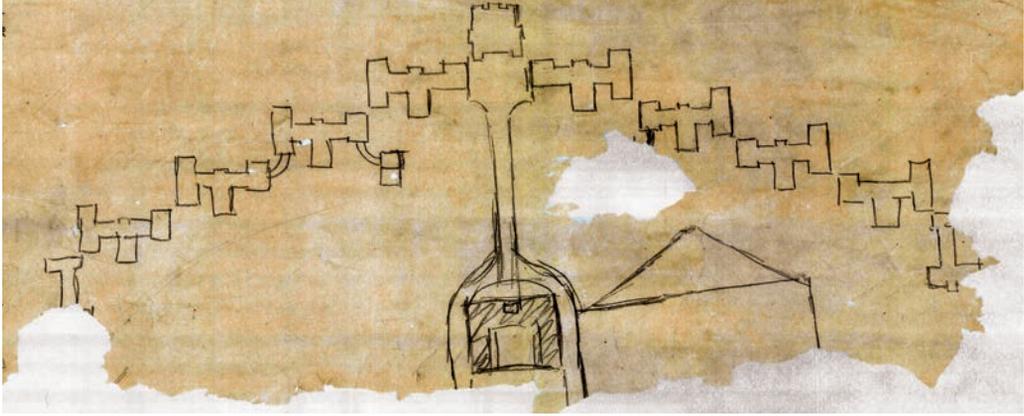
In July of 1896, J. C. Olmsted visited the Vassar campus; as was his practice, he recorded field notes for internal use, candidly assessing campus and client. (“They are proud of a circular hedge of arbor vitae about a field now used for athletics with three narrow garden beds and three walks around the outside....”) From these notes, he worked up a formal report, emphasizing the crucial importance of professional guidance in planning a college campus. Drawing on the “principles and rules governing convenience and design” championed by his father, J. C. O., as he was known, advocated for the rational allocation of land in the central campus for a growing nucleus of what he called working buildings (recitation rooms, assembly halls, laboratories), with a peripheral zone designated for residential buildings. He proposed that a large central greensward be formed by placing buildings on either side of Main Drive, starting with Rockefeller Hall, and indicating a site opposite it for a future chapel.

Although he was a talented draftsman—his works have long been confused with those of the architect H. H. Richardson—J. C. O. made no drawings for Vassar. Instead, he sketched the placement of the proposed new buildings on a topographical map provided by Vassar, using green for working buildings, and red for residential structures.

The Olmsted firm was known for its natural, park-like designs, although they often favored a central quadrangular campus space as a focal point for social and academic exchange; and at this moment, following the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, their campus designs were typically characterized by symmetrical geometric plans. The relative merits of the formal, symmetrical or the winding, picturesque modes had been a recurring issue in Vassar’s history, beginning with the decision to create an axial entrance drive to Main Building. So J. C. O.’s recommendation for the central greensward established the formal, quadrangular core of the Vassar campus. (Only the President’s House, built before J. C. O. came to campus, interrupts this geometry, screened by a line of trees that just notch one corner.) The trustees decreed that this lawn must be protected from further building to preserve the symmetry and quadrangular effect. This greensward survives to the present, bisected by Main Drive into the northern Library Lawn, and the southern Chapel Lawn. Today, however, the overgrown tree canopy and the subsequent insertion of winding paths undermine the geometric clarity of the quadrangular space.

For the siting of additional dormitories, J. C. Olmsted recommended two alternative locations: either southeast of Main, which he preferred, or northwest of Strong, an area the college already favored. He advocated that the layout of dormitories for women should be different from those for men, explaining “the desirability of a somewhat greater degree of domesticity and privacy in a women’s college.” In the northwest site, he further proposed that there was enough space for five dormitories and that the college might arrange them either *en échelon*—a pattern of staggered wings the firm had long favored for asylums as well as dorms, which shared functional requirements for light and ventilation— or else in a quincunx formation, akin to the center and corners of a nine-square grid. In favoring these arrangements for a women’s school, he declared: “The same motives also indicate that a less stiff and formal grouping of the dormitories than in quadrangles would be desirable.” The college overrode these recommendations, although for practical reasons rather than issues of gender, and erected Raymond House across from Strong, following up with three more residence halls to form the Dorm Quadrangle.

It is striking that J. C. Olmsted focused primarily on campus planning and architectural issues, rather than landscape per se. There was not yet a conception of architecture and landscape design as separate spheres of activity; landscape architecture, like urban planning, was just emerging as a distinct discipline at this moment, and the art of design was understood to encompass a broad range of tasks and media. The elder Olmsted had argued for the ability to hire and manage engineers, architects, and horticulturists when working at Stanford in 1890, since, he attested, the value of his services lay in the synthesis of these disciplines, thereby meriting the title of landscape architect; and it was Olmsted, Senior who gave this name to the profession.



- 7 Frederick Law Olmsted, New York State Asylum, Buffalo; sketch of buildings arranged in the echelon plan, 1872. The buildings were designed by Henry Hobson Richardson with advice from F. L. Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.
- 8 Vassar College, Dormitory Quadrangle, with Rockefeller Hall in the foreground, May 2021

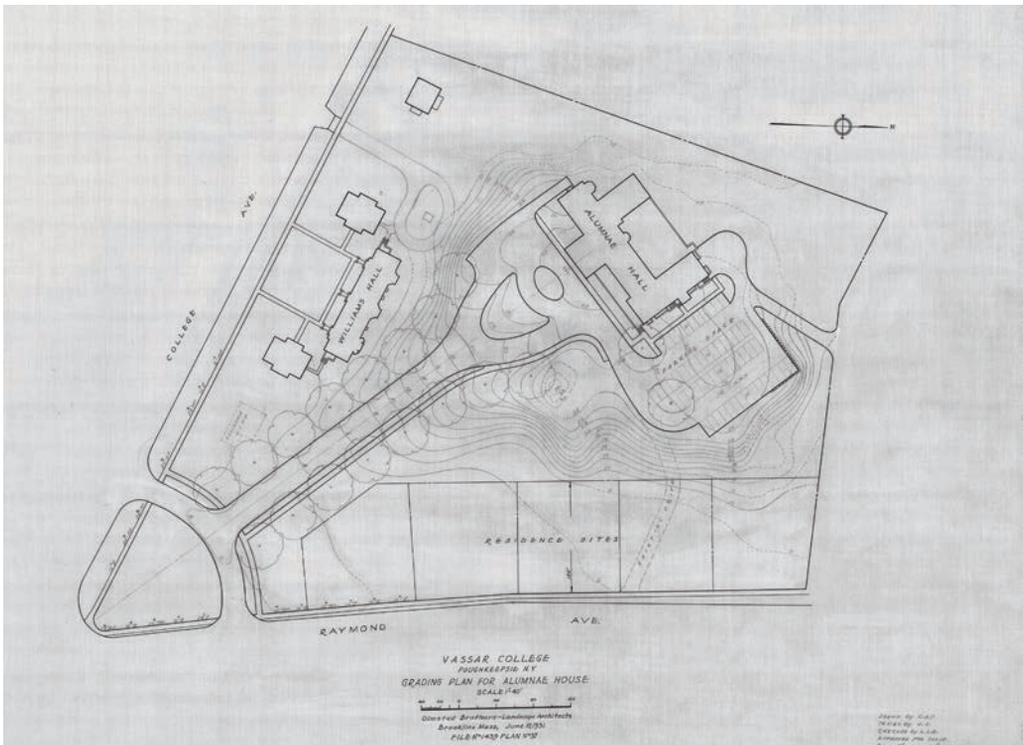
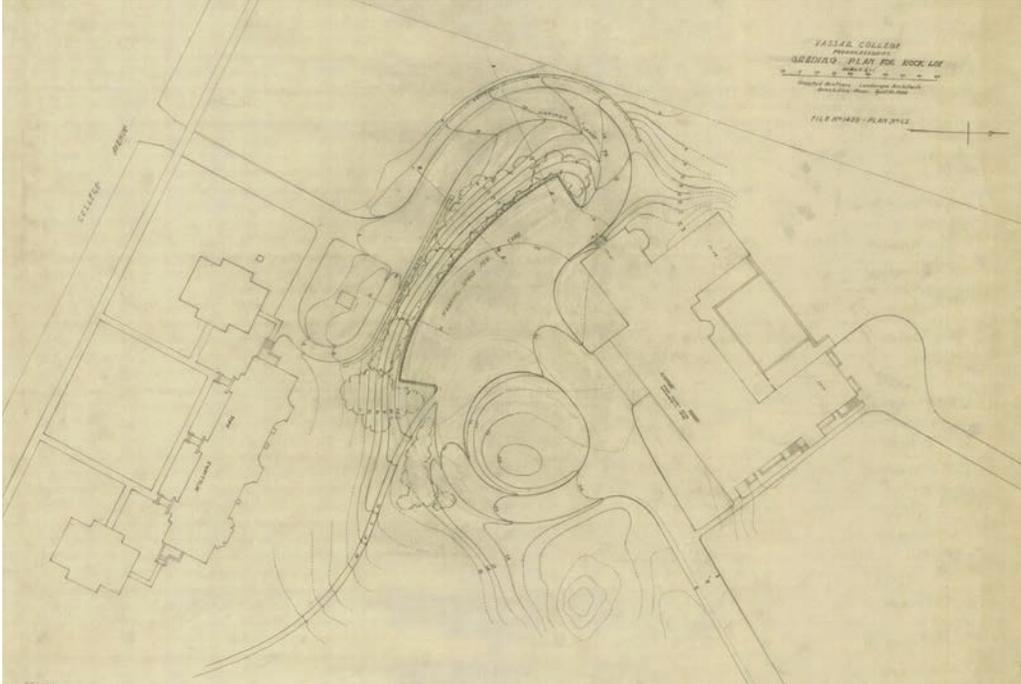
This professional situation had changed by the time that Vassar once again called upon the Olmsted firm thirty years later. By this time, the new buildings planned in the 1890s had been realized, and other designers had been consulted, among them Samuel Parsons, Jr., Loring Underwood, and Beatrix Farrand. So, with a changed campus, and a new president, Henry Noble MacCracken, the focus turned from master planning to developing several discrete areas of campus, and to planting around new buildings. MacCracken, who served as president from 1915–46, eschewed the notion of sustained work with a single designer, instead soliciting input from a revolving roster of designers, for specific projects. In the 1920s, the attention focused on a new quadrangle on the northeastern edge of campus. An unprecedented donation from Minnie Cumnock Blodgett enabled construction of the huge classroom building that would bear her name, dedicated to the study of eugenics, the application of the sciences and liberal arts to domestic and community environments (a field that was then controversial, and subsequently repudiated). Blodgett Hall was the center of the new Euthenics Quad, which also encompassed Kenyon Gym, Cushing House, and Wimpfheimer, a nursery school and childhood education center. Mrs. Blodgett favored hiring the Olmsted firm, which was then landscaping her Brookby estate in Grand Rapids, Michigan. By this time, J. C. Olmsted had died, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1870–1957), known as Rick, was the firm’s leading partner; but he was then occupied by work in California and developing the landscape architecture program at Harvard, so other members of firm took on campus work. Rick Olmsted recommended to Vassar his partner Percival Gallagher (1874–1934), who had significant experience as the landscape adviser to Bryn Mawr, among other northeastern colleges. However, in a private note to Gallagher, Olmsted cautioned him that, “My impression is that the Vassar buildings and grounds are in a good deal of a mess and if I were you I would not strain myself very hard to take a job there”. Despite this warning, Gallagher accepted the invitation to advise Vassar, in what would become a fraught four-year relationship with the college.

Vassar hired Gallagher as Consulting Landscape Architect in the summer of 1929, initially asking him to work on the emerging Euthenics Quad (picking up from Farrand before him). The college charged him with surveying the zone, determining grading, and planning roads, path layouts, and plantings. Under his direction, the firm produced the first comprehensive survey of the eastern end of Vassar’s campus; their technical diagrams and topographical drawings served as crucial documents for the future development of this area, and evince the specialized skills that the Olmsted firm could provide. The following

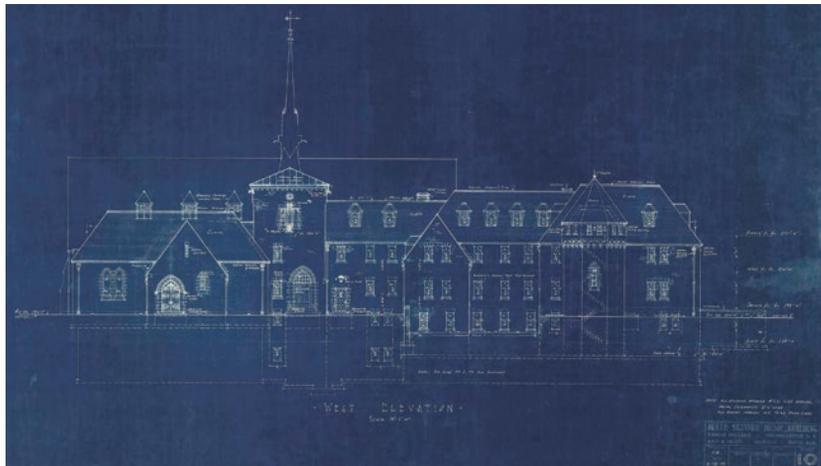
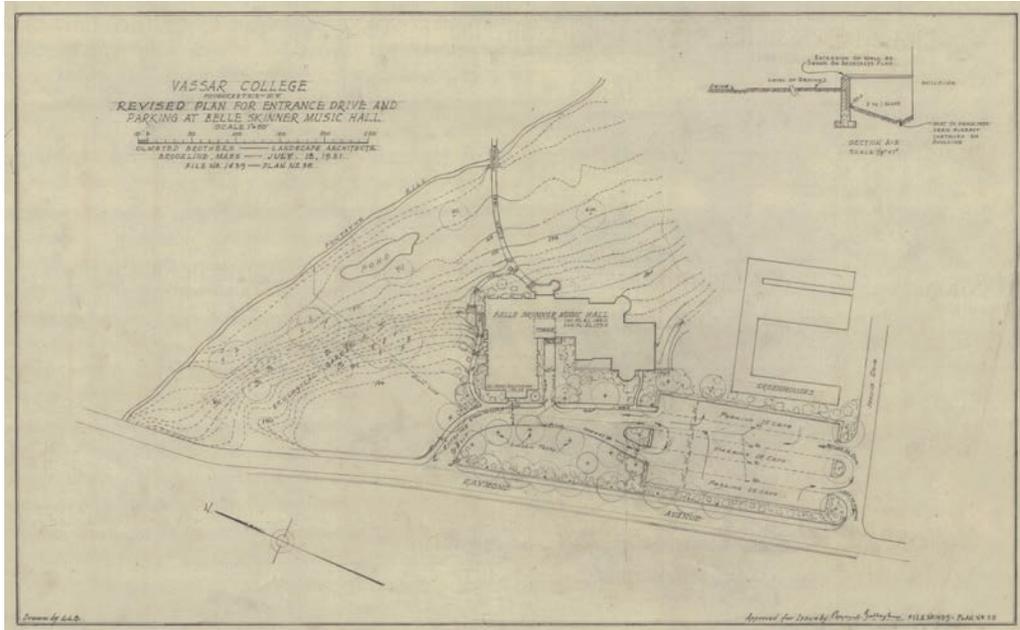


March of 1930, Gallagher began working with groundskeeper Henry E. Downer to create a planting plan for the area around Blodgett Hall. A close colleague and ally of President MacCracken, Downer was a Kew Gardens-trained horticulturist, who played a powerful role in campus development during his long tenure from 1921–52. Downer had butted heads with Farrand and engineered her ouster, but seemed to work well with Gallagher; their correspondence reveals that Downer was receptive to Gallagher's recommendations about the placement and choice of plantings, and Downer implemented the plans, with Gallagher's remote oversight.

The trustees next requested that Gallagher submit suggestions for the improvement of the Rock Lot—the plot housing Alumnae House and Williams Hall, so named for the large shale outcropping near the crest of the hill. In April 1930, Gallagher submitted a “Report Concerning Approaches to Alumnae House and Suggestions for Improvement of its Entrance Hall and Access to Basement Floor,” in which he suggested implementing a one-way traffic pattern, and building a retaining wall to allow the access road to wind around the south side of the hill (figure 10). Gallagher's report also included advice about the renovation of the main entrance to the Alumnae House itself, in order to remedy what he described as the “awkwardly arranged ‘cellarway’” that provided access to the basement. (Thus, once again, an Olmsted partner provided architectural and planning services, as well as landscape advice.) But the trustees rejected these ideas as too costly, and the following summer, asked him to revisit the site, this time to suggest locations for future residential building sites on the lot, in addition to reconsidering the road, to give safer entrance/exit, and provide more parking. This time, Gallagher conceived a strikingly bold formal plan in which the main access road cut a direct axial approach from the corner of Raymond and College Avenues, straight up the hill to the entrance of Alumnae House (figure 11). This seemingly impractical plan met with opposition from many parties, including the women faculty residents of Williams Hall, the trustees, and Alumnae House management, leading college general manager Keene Richards to propose that he could simply repave the existing road inexpensively. In January of 1931, Gallagher was surely startled to receive a letter from architect Norman Newman saying that the college had hired him to submit a plan for the road instead; Newman contacted Gallagher out of professional courtesy, and he graciously replied that there were no hurt feelings.



10. Olmsted Brothers, Grading Plan for Rock Lot, April 10, 1930. Drawn by C. A. Towne  
 11. Olmsted Brothers, Grading Plan for Alumnae House, June 10, 1931. Drawn by C. A. Towne;  
 traced by J. S.; checked by Lyle L. Blundell; approved by Percival Gallagher



12. Olmsted Brothers, Revised Plan for Entrance Drive and Parking at Belle Skinner Music Hall, July 13, 1931; drawn by Lyle L. Blundell; approved by Percival Gallagher
13. Allen & Collens, Belle Skinner Music Hall West Elevation, 1930
14. Percival Gallagher, Belle Skinner Music Hall under construction, 1931

Despite this breakdown in the professional relationship, the college continued to work with Gallagher on other projects, notably planning the roads, paths, and plantings around the newly constructed Skinner Hall of Music, in the summer and fall of 1931. This was yet another project that dealt with new issues introduced by the automobile; drawings and letters document the exchanges among Gallagher, MacCracken, and Richards about traffic circulation and parking. Moreover, Skinner had been sited so that it stepped on a significant part of the Dutchess County Ecological Laboratory, the seven-acre parcel devoted to plants native to Dutchess County, conceived and directed by the visionary plant ecologist and Chair of Botany Edith Roberts. MacCracken informed Gallagher that Downer had been given control of the grounds within a 30-foot radius of the building, thereby setting up a difficult situation, for Downer was at loggerheads with Roberts, and lost no opportunity to thwart her projects. Gallagher navigated these shoals by recommending that native plants should continue from Roberts' lab right up to the building; although he also found it necessary to remove some of the trees growing in the Ecological Laboratory in order to improve views. But documents and drawings reveal that Roberts and Gallagher cooperated, and negotiated a mutually agreeable planting plan around the new music building, which was approved by the Grounds Committee in February, 1932.

In these and many other areas of campus, Gallagher worked closely with Downer from 1930–32 to consult on plantings, develop the tree canopy, and expand the arboretum that Farrand had established. He advised on the selection and siting of particular species, including the linden trees in front of Skinner Hall, and the Japanese maples at the center of the Dorm Quad: both stands of trees are extant today. Documents summarize the planting decisions made during Gallagher's campus walks with Downer and MacCracken, making it difficult to know whose ideas were whose. This collaborative approach was also at work in Gallagher's report on his proposed "Arboretum of Ornamental Woody Plants," advising—contrary to the ideas of Farrand and Roberts—that plants should be selected primarily for their decorative effect, rather than botanical interest: "The disposition of the plants should first of all be such as will enhance the landscape charm of the campus, and secondly afford horticultural and botanical interest to warrant its designation."

By the fall of 1933, Gallagher's health had deteriorated and he was unable to work. In his stead, Olmsted partner James Frederick Dawson (1874–1941) took over the remaining Vassar projects, advising on drainage issues around Sunset Lake, and serving briefly as the final consultant of the Olmsted firm to the college.

The Olmsted firm's recommendations for the Vassar campus, offered at three different moments in the college's history, encompassed strikingly varied approaches to campus planning and landscape design. Vassar could be a stubborn client, selectively implementing, adapting, or disregarding altogether their recommendations; Percival Gallagher's proposals, especially, were met with resistance. Beyond the Olmsteds, and the designers that preceded them—Samuel Parsons, Jr., Loring Underwood, Beatrix Farrand—Vassar has continued to hire a succession of distinguished landscape architects and campus planners, including Eero Saarinen, Hideo Sasaki, Diana Balmori, Michael Van Valkenburgh, and currently Reed Hilderbrand, reflecting the iterative nature of campus planning. New layers have been added: buildings inserted, circulation revised, and plantings replaced, recasting connections among buildings and campus sectors. Yet, we can still see the fruits of the Olmsted firm's recommendations, notably in the formal character of central campus established by J. C. Olmsted; the greensward ringed by working buildings and the residential quadrangle remain virtually unchanged, their simple and clearly-defined form and functions reflecting the Olmsteds' principles of convenience and design he so forcefully espoused over a century ago. And Gallagher's meticulous studies laid the groundwork for the northeastern campus, and some of his planting recommendations have survived, and are still part of the campus arbo-retum today.

These stories remind us that complex processes, and varied voices and visions have configured the campus, from the placement of buildings, quadrangles, and trees, to the paths between them that shape our everyday experience. Plans and drawings show us contested ideas; the archives yield vivid testimony of dialogue and conflict among people who have had strikingly different ideas and agendas. The focus of this exhibition on the development of the campus and its landscape over time underscores the importance of landscape design and stewardship to create a sense of place—a quality we have come to value all the more keenly after being banished to the virtual sphere imposed by the pandemic. This series of exhibitions aims to reveal how the campus came to be, and bring to light alternate visions of a Vassar that might have been—histories that help us make informed plans for the future.

## Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that Vassar stands upon the homelands of the Munsee Lenape, Indigenous peoples who have an enduring connection to this place despite being forcibly displaced by European colonization. Munsee Lenape peoples continue today as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community in Wisconsin, the Delaware Tribe and the Delaware Nation in Oklahoma, and the Munsee Delaware Nation in Ontario. This acknowledgment, however, is insufficient without our reckoning with the reality that every member of the Vassar community since 1861 has benefited from these Native peoples' displacement, and it is hollow without our efforts to counter the effects of structures that have long enabled—and that still perpetuate—injustice against Indigenous Americans. To that end, we commit to build and sustain relationships with Native communities; to expand opportunities at Vassar for Native students, as well as Native faculty and other employees; and to collaborate with Native nations to know better the Indigenous peoples, past and present, who care for this land.

## Sources for further reading

Mardges Bacon, *John McAndrew's Modernist Vision: from the Vassar College Art Library to the Museum of Modern Art in New York* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2018).

Yvonne Elet, "Échelon, Quincunx, Quadrangle: The Olmsted Firm and Campus Planning in the Early Decades of Vassar College," *Journal of Planning History*, March, 2022.

Yvonne Elet and Virginia Duncan (VC '16), "Beatrice Farrand and Campus Landscape at Vassar: Pedagogy and Practice, 1925-29," *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 39 (2019): 105-136.

Karen Van Lengen, "Pedagogy and Place. The Legacy of the Landscape at Vassar College," in *Landscape and the Academy*, ed. John Beardsley (Harvard University Press/Dumbarton Oaks: 2019), 147-75.

Karen Van Lengen and Lisa Reilly, *Vassar College: An Architectural Tour (The Campus Guide)* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

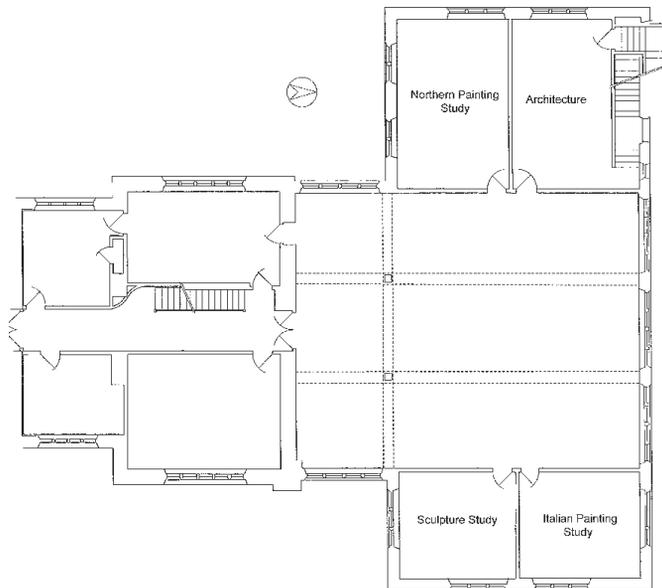
*Vassar Campus History*: an online forum for the history of Vassar campus architecture, landscape, and soundscape. (<http://vassarcampushistory.vassarspaces.net/>)

## The Campus Green: The Olmsted Firm's Designs for Vassar College

Vassar Art Library

April 11 – June 6, 2022

Organized by Yvonne Elet, Associate Professor of Art, and Caleb P. Mitchell, VC '22



15. Vassar students studying in the Art Library, Northern Painting Study Room, c.1938

16. John McAndrew (with Theodore Muller), Plan of the second floor of the Art Library and Taylor Hall, 1937, redrawn by Antoine Robinson

Cover: Detail of figure 5, adapted by Caleb P. Mitchell

This brochure was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *The Campus Green: The Olmsted Firm's Designs for Vassar College*, installed in the Vassar Art Library. This architecturally significant space—the first modernist interior in an American college—was designed by John McAndrew, who taught architectural design and history at Vassar from 1932 to 1937, before going on to be the curator of architecture at MoMA (where he designed the sculpture garden). He designed the Art Library in 1935–37, just a few short years after Olmsted partner Percival Gallagher made the drawings for Vassar College that we display in McAndrew's building. The present working exhibition activates this important space conceived for the study of word and image. Rather than a museum exhibition of original drawings, we chose to present reproductions that can be viewed in these rooms dedicated to art and architecture. A reading shelf of publications on the Olmsted firm and campus landscape design accompanies the display.

The survival of documentary materials served as an organizing principle for our research, and this display. For the early years, and the campus visits by F. L. Olmsted, Vaux, and J. C. Olmsted, the extant material comprises mostly documents, which we present in the case in the central room of the Art Library, and which Yvonne Elet has analyzed in the article “Échelon, Quincunx, Quadrangle: The Olmsted Firm and Campus Planning in the Early Decades of Vassar College,” *Journal of Planning History*, 2022. By contrast, dozens of Olmsted firm drawings survive from the period when Percival Gallagher was Consulting Landscape Architect to the college, as well as Gallagher's photos of campus, and correspondence; Caleb P. Mitchell researched and analyzed the Gallagher phase beginning as a 2021 Ford Fellow, and we present this material in Reading Room AL2 of the Art Library, originally designated by McAndrew as the Architecture Study Room.

This is the inaugural exhibition in a series about the history, preservation, and planning of the Vassar campus, organized by the Vassar Department of Art.

Research and writing by Yvonne Elet and Caleb P. Mitchell.

Exhibition and graphic design by Caleb P. Mitchell, with guidance from Tobias Armbrorst.

This exhibition is the culmination of several years of faculty and student research, and we are grateful to the many people who have contributed to this collaborative, iterative project. Our thanks to students in Yvonne Elet's Vassar campus course in 2020 who contributed preliminary research: Nicholas Gorman, Colin Croghan, Julia Noonan, Sienna Ropert, and Chloe Williams-Searle. We are indebted to the Ford Scholars Program, and to Christine Howlett and Alexandra Hoffman, for enabling a summer of research in 2021. We extend special thanks to Nicholas Adams, Gary Hilderbrand, Arleyn Levee, Dede Petri, and Meg Ronsheim for stimulating conversations; to Chad Fust for undertaking drone photography of the greensward; and to Thomas Hill for facilitating our use of this library space. Our deepest gratitude goes to Michele Clark of the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Edith A. Sandler of the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Steve Merrill at the National Association of Olmsted Parks, and Ron Patkus and Dean Rogers of the Vassar College Archives and Special Collections Library for their assistance in locating and accessing source materials, and creatively overcoming library access limitations during the pandemic.

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