

# **JOHN CHARLES OLMSTED'S WRANGLE WITH THE PANAMA CALIFORNIA EXPOSITION CORPORATION**

by

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After the Chamber of Commerce in July and August 1909 decided to hold an exposition in San Diego in 1915 to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal and to call attention to San Diego, "the first port of call," it was a foregone conclusion that the City Park (renamed Balboa Park on October 27, 1910) would be the site, though architect Irving Gill, who had worked on the 1893 World Columbian Exposition held on the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago, championed the holding of the exposition on the San Diego waterfront.

San Diego businessmen incorporated the Panama California Exposition Corporation on September 4, 1909 and entered into an agreement with the San Diego Park Board on January 11, 1911 enabling the Corporation to stage the exposition in City Park. Since members of the Park Board and the Park Corporation shared similar aims, they worked in tandem.

Two major tasks to be resolved were the appointment of a team to construct and to organize the Exposition and the acquisition of funds for its construction. To resolve them the Corporation appointed an executive board, headed by a president (Ulysses S. Grant, Jr.) and a Director General (D.C. Collier). A Building and Grounds Committee, headed by George W. Marston, was given the responsibility of finding qualified people to get the project going. Talk about getting Chicago architect Daniel Burnham to lay out the grounds was farfetched. Burnham was not a landscape architect. Despite his growing reputation as a town planner, he did not lay out the grounds for the 1893 World Columbian Exposition. Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., this country's best known landscape architect in the nineteenth century, executed the design. Olmsted's firm continued in the twentieth century in the presence of his stepson, John Charles Olmsted, and his natural son, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. These men headed a firm known as the Olmsted Brothers, headquartered in Brookline, Massachusetts.

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. taught a class in landscape architecture at Harvard University and busied himself with town planning, which, due to the stimulus given to the practice by the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, was emerging as one of the responsibilities of landscape architects, along with the laying out of parks and the grounds of private estates.

John Charles Olmsted maintained the business end of the firm, assisted by James Dawson and Harold Blossom. He had worked with his stepfather on the 1893 Exposition and had laid out the grounds for the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland, Oregon and the 1909 Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition in Seattle, Washington. He had designed parks and park systems, including parks in Portland, Oregon, in Seattle, in Spokane, in Milwaukee, in Atlanta, in Charleston, and in New Orleans, and the grounds of estates including the residence of H. W. De Forest at Cold Springs Harbor, New York, and the residence of Arthur Curtis James at Newport, Rhode Island. With such a formidable reputation, it was inevitable that the San Diego Buildings and Grounds Committee would appoint Olmsted at a fee of \$15,000, to be the

landscape architect for the Panama-California Exposition though in a technical sense the Committee gave the commission to the Olmsted firm, that included Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

It was a logical step for the Building and Grounds Committee, on January 5, 1911, to appoint Frank P. Allen, Jr. the Director of Works for the Panama-California Exposition at a salary of \$20,000 a year. Allen had worked with John Olmsted on the Alaska Yukon Pacific Exposition. His job was to get the San Diego Exposition completed on time, to lower construction costs, and to follow instructions. If Olmsted did not recommend Allen for the job, he did not object when his name was presented to the Committee.

Members of the Building and Grounds Committee leaned toward appointing architect Irving Gill to be the consulting architect for the Exposition. They favored a Mission California architectural style and believed that Gill had the talent to design buildings in this style. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was, however, a close friend of architect Bertram Goodhue, who had studied the Spanish Colonial architecture of Mexico and had used this style on a church in Havana, Cuba and a hotel in Colon, Panama. Olmsted, Jr. had helped Goodhue to secure the commission for the hotel in Panama. In April 1911, while on the way to San Diego to begin work, Goodhue acted as "conductor" for Olmsted, Jr. and his bride, then on their honeymoon.

Goodhue solicited recommendations from prominent people, including architects Elmer Grey and Myron Hunt of Los Angeles. He was a member of the firm of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, designers of churches, homes and colleges in eclectic English and French Gothic Revival styles. Being overwhelmed by Goodhue's sales pitch, credentials and abilities, the Buildings and Grounds Committee consented, on January 30, 1911, to his appointment at a salary of \$12,000.

To acquire funding, the Panama California Exposition Corporation conducted a campaign for subscriptions that reached \$1,000,000 on March 15, 1910. The Park Board on August 9, 1910 secured voter approval of a bond issue of \$1,000,000 for permanent park improvements, exclusive of temporary Exposition buildings. Depending on how the terms of the bond issue were interpreted, the Exposition Corporation had either \$1,000,000 or \$2,000,000 with which to proceed.

John Olmsted regarded \$2,000,000 as the figure he was to use in implementing his designs. Many of his troubles and problems involved getting his projects to cost less than the money available. In addition to his work on the Exposition proper, the Park Board expected Olmsted to oversee the development of other sections of Balboa Park. The wording of this section of his January 1, 1911 contract with the Park Board was ambiguous. At any rate, Olmsted's assistants, Dawson and Blossom, proposed road and plant schemes for the north, northeast and southeast sections of the park that extended recommendations made by landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr. and engineer George Cook between 1902 and 1910. They made roads more curvilinear and planting near the park's borders richer and denser, leaving interior spaces for native species. Like Parsons, they limited their choice of trees and shrubs to those that would grow in Southern California's arid climate. With help from workers employed by the Division of the Director of Works, Dawson and Blossom planted a variety of eucalyptuses, acacias and pepper trees and native species such as coast live oak, toyon, laurel sumac, and salt bush on 70 acres on the north and northeast sides of Balboa Park, some of which stand in 1997.

An aerial drawing of Olmsted's plan for the Exposition appeared in the San Diego Union on January 2, 1911 and a map of the plan on February 19. He prepared these views in November and December of the preceding year. Unlike changes that Olmsted made later, these are the only drawings that appeared in the newspapers. They were the sources for Goodhue's revisions for aesthetic reasons and Allen's revisions for economic reasons. After Allen had made deletions and Goodhue realigned juxtapositions and heightened axial views, Olmsted's plan, that looked at first glance to be complex, became easier to grasp.

To understand the first plan, it is necessary to understand the topography with which Olmsted worked. Otherwise, the straight mall, the stepped plazas, the curving roads, the bridges, and the water features do not make sense. Like his stepfather, Olmsted preferred rough irregular surfaces to smooth because the effects produced were more colorful and varied.

The Exposition was to be located in a southern site, to the north of Russ High School, because the site was close to downtown, could be seen readily, was accessible to visitors, and could be inexpensively connected to trolley lines. At the outset, no one had thought of putting the Exposition anywhere else in the park.

Because the land sloped and was split by canyons, Olmsted planned a succession of elevated plazas running south to north that opened into the main mall like section of the Exposition. Buildings with ground level arcades bordered the plazas on east and west sides Terraces and parapets opened up views of the harbor to the south that because of low construction at the time could be easily seen.

A short distance to the west of the main Exposition entrance, El Rodeo, at the entrance to Pound (now Cabrillo) Canyon, provided carnival amusements. To the north, Indians were to live in a Pueblo encampment. A bridge spanning Pound Canyon would bring pedestrians from the west to the south end of a large canyon containing water features and a formal Spanish garden. A rotary between the bridge and the canyon would allow pedestrians to proceed to a lagoon and an aviation field to the north or over another bridge on the south to the northwest edge of the main Exposition complex. In all, Olmsted's plan called for four entrances, six gates, sixteen drives, and four major bridges.

As complex as the plan seemed with its buildings, roads, plazas, bridges and gardens, Olmsted had planned the site so that it could be used after the Exposition.. An auditorium, stadium, and a few buildings would remain, but most of the land including the terraced Spanish canyon would contain trees, flowers and a lake that would be used for irrigation and recreation.

Even when he disagreed with him, Goodhue was cordial in his correspondence with Olmsted. While he may not have always understood the topographical restraints that preoccupied Olmsted, Goodhue's simplifications and improvements imposed order on Olmsted's diffuse plans. He wanted to level the plazas for visual and functional reasons and to relocate the buildings for dramatic effect. Goodhue or an associate drew a sketch, published in the [San Diego] Evening Tribune, July 19, 1911, showing how the buildings on the southern site would appear when approached over the Spanish Bridge. This view resembles the later approach to the Panama-California Exposition over Cabrillo Bridge. Goodhue was capable of drawing the idealized

Mexican town that Olmsted hoped for, though he preferred the opulent Spanish Colonial town shown in the Evening Tribune sketch.

Allen got the idea that the Exposition would be better served if it were located off Laurel Street on the west side of Balboa Park. If he drew up plans, they have been lost. He called for an art museum and an auditorium along an extension of Laurel Street to the edge of Cabrillo Canyon.

A bridge might span the canyon continuing the Exposition on a mesa that Olmsted had named after Vizcaino, a Spanish explorer who in 1602 named San Diego after Saint Didacus, a Franciscan monk and the name of his flagship. Since 6th Avenue was not then a through street, Allen may have planned to put a road through, which happened in 1913 to the consternation of residents, park lovers, and upholders of Samuel Parsons' 1905 plans for the west side of the park..

Allen registered objection after objection to Olmsted's plans for the southern site . . . the Exposition would disturb the students at Russ High School . . . the Exposition was located near the poor rather than the elite section of the city . . . there was no space on which to expand . . . grading was expensive. There was something fatuous about Allen's complaint that Olmsted's plan would cost too much and his plan would be cheaper as he had no idea how much it would cost to relocate the Exposition to the west side of Cabrillo Canyon. Olmsted took Allen's and Goodhue's objections philosophically. He pared his plan, striking out five bridges, the Spanish garden, the parade ground, the military campground, the aviation field, the tent city, the village comprised of foreign government buildings, the Canada de la Maleza, the Agricultural College, the Plaza Externa arcades, and the stadium.

Olmsted's parings were evident in Plan 3, which Goodhue subsequently modified into Plan F. In a letter to Olmsted, Goodhue contrasted Plan F for the southern site with his own formal Plan G for an Exposition on Vizcaino Mesa.

"I can't help feeling that if you bury your prejudices, the other site is better in every way. After all you are not dealing with an American town in its essence, but with what is endeavoring to be a Spanish one. Formality is the note of all Spanish architecture and I can't conceive, indeed I may as well frankly say, I don't know in any American public park of any effect that could compete with the bridge, the permanent buildings, and the mall terminated by the statue of Balboa."

Olmsted based road schemes and building locations on how the grounds would look after the Exposition was over, to Goodhue a minor matter. He predicted that changes to the central (Vizcaino) mesa to accommodate permanent buildings would never be effaced, a condition the Buildings and Grounds Committee was ultimately to endorse for it members thought that they could not spend park improvement bond money unless park changes financed by bond money were permanent... Aware that Olmsted's professional decisions were theoretically superior to his own and that he held his position because of the recommendations of John Charles and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Goodhue offered to resign.

"While I dislike to seem in any sense to quarrel or even to differ with you, I must ask you to consider my point of view equally, or next, [sic] your own in the matter of Fair buildings. As you know I have agreed to accept any site you and the committee may choose. It seems to me that in doing this I have not waived anything essentially within my own province, that is to say the selection of the site upon which the buildings should be placed should (does rest) entirely with you and the committee, but I feel that in the placing of the buildings my interest is as great as your own, perhaps even greater, for if they are placed at all, I must see that they are placed according to mass, general arrangement and design."

On or about July 12, 1911 the Buildings and Grounds Committee accepted Olmsted's plan. Abandoning his work on Plan G, the second schematic plan for El Prado in Balboa Park, Goodhue, on August 26, 1911, sent the Buildings and Grounds Committee Plan 53 C, that he had worked out with Olmsted, for the southern site. Architect and landscape architect tried to get construction costs below \$1,500,000 while maintaining essential features. They disagreed, however, over what features were essential. Olmsted wanted to delete the auditorium, delay construction of the art building, and make the California State and United States Government Buildings temporary structures. As he had indicated in the July 19 sketch published in the Evening Tribune, Goodhue expected that either the auditorium or the California State Building would be a permanent structure that he could equip with domes, tower, arcades and relief in his innovative Spanish Colonial style.

After the Building and Grounds Committee accepted Olmsted's plan for the southern site, Goodhue agreed to stop working on his plan for Vizcaino Mesa, but Frank P. Allen was not similarly constrained. Allen retained the essential features of Goodhue's plan and endorsed Olmsted's scheme to fill the lower end of Spanish Canyon with water that would be impounded at the southern edge by a dam doing duty as a bridge. (The project was abandoned in 1913 for financial and technical reasons.)

D. C. Collier supported Allen's modifications of Goodhue's plan as he wanted a trolley line through the middle of the park that Olmsted's configuration for the southern site made virtually impossible. Collier's reasons had nothing to do with the Exposition but a lot to do with his and other people's real estate holdings to the north and northeast of Balboa Park. Being a booster, Collier began to believe his own propaganda. He was convinced that the southern states, the countries of Latin and South America, and even some European countries would put up buildings and mount exhibits at San Diego. He also thought a grand congress of Indians from North and South America would convene in Balboa Park during the Exposition. Goodhue thought these fantastic dreams would never see the light of day.

While Olmsted, Allen, Goodhue, and Collier were wrangling, James Wadham, a new mayor, was elected in San Diego with the support of Union leaders and job seekers who were annoyed at the way the Exposition was developing. The mayor appointed a new slate to the Park Board, who were not willing to work in concert with the Panama-California Exposition Corporation.

The disagreement focused on the employment of Frank P. Allen, the \$20,000 a year salary he received, his authority to construct the Exposition without subletting to private contractors, and

his hiring of non Union labor. Local architects were not happy with the privileges given to Goodhue. San Diego Floral Association members were uncertain how they felt about the appointment of John Olmsted.

Wadham was unable to keep his park board. After its members resigned, June 24, 1911, he replaced them with members of the Panama California Exposition Corporation, but not before the old board entered into a revised contract with the Panama California Exposition Corporation, June 20, that gave the Corporation authority "to prepare architectural and engineering plans of every description." In some inexplicable way, Allen, a director of work crews, interpreted this open ended clause and later directives from the Exposition's Buildings and Grounds Committee as giving him authority to "design" buildings. This "laying on of hands" may have been the "San Diego Way," but it was not the way Expositions had been built in Chicago, Buffalo, St. Louis, Portland and Seattle.

Writing to Christian Brinton, Goodhue, August 11, 1915, described Allen's anomalous situation:

"While it is true that, wholly unauthorized and in violation of both his [Frank P. Allen's] and my contract, he did design three of the temporary buildings, the rest were designed by my local representative, Carleton Monroe Winslow, submitted to and approved by me."

The new board finessed the technical question of how the \$1,000,000 in bond money for park improvements were to be spent.

D. C Collier's and Frank P. Allen's objections to the southern site and the covert influence of John D. Spreckels, owner of the proposed trolley line through the park, were enough to dissuade the Building and Grounds Committee and the newly appointed Park Board. . On August 31, 1911, the two bodies voted to relocate the Exposition. R. C. Allen and H. M. Kutchin of the Buildings and Grounds Committee and John F. Forward, Jr. and Frank J. Belcher, Jr. of the Park Board supported the relocation while Moses A Luce, Thomas O'Hallaran, and George W. Marston of the Building and Grounds Committee and Julius Wangenheim, president of the Park Board, dissented. Upon receiving the news, Olmsted wired his resignation:

"We regret that our professional responsibility as park designers will not permit us to assist in ruining Balboa Park. We therefore tender our resignation to take place at once. We have wired Blossom to do no more work on the exposition or park plan and for him to leave San Diego at once."

Allen and Goodhue were appalled that their advocacy of the central mesa as an exposition site had led to such an outcome. Well they might be, for they had promoted their plans behind Olmsted's back. The effects of their actions could be dire to Balboa Park and to their careers. Allen wrote to Olmsted asking him to withdraw his resignation:

"Although to you the Park is of greater importance than the Exposition yet I think the Exposition needs you much more than the Park does. The only way by which this Exposition can achieve success is by having grounds and buildings of unusual and very

exceptional artistic merit and I do not think that this can be done without your assistance." (Underlining in original.)

Goodhue wrote to his friend, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., asking him to get his half-brother to rescind his resignation:

"Cannot you make your brother reconsider, cannot tell how grieved I and everyone is at present turn of affairs. It appears Collier's efforts have so increased size that new site became unavoidable even your brother's staunchest supporters so voting."

Both men were unsuccessful.

Distressed by the Building and Grounds Committee decision to go with Allen's and Goodhue's plans, George W. Marston resigned as Chairman of the Committee, giving as his ostensible reason his preoccupation with his business. In a private letter to Olmsted, he expressed his real feelings:

"I may say to you confidentially that the withdrawal of Olmstead [sic] Brothers from participation in the park and exposition work, and the changes contemplated by Allen and adopted by the exposition has [sic] also a great deal to do with my own withdrawal from active service. It wouldn't do to have this known in San Diego, but I wish to assure you of my belief in the value of your advice and to say it will be a life long regret to me that San Diego lost the service of you and your firm, by the action taken on the part of the building and grounds committee."

The construction of Highway 5 in the 1960's wiped out the area that Olmsted had planned for the Panama-California Exposition as well as a large portion of the land Samuel Parsons had graded and planted in the southwest corner of Balboa Park. If the Exposition had been built there, there might be nothing left to remind people of its presence. Except for some oak and eucalyptus trees on the east side of Balboa Park and the name of Cabrillo Canyon, today there is little to show of Olmsted's work.

Some of Olmsted's predictions about the fate of the center of Balboa Park have come true. Since the Exposition, the citizens of San Diego have experienced complications and contradictions in this section more overwhelming than any Olmsted had foreseen. Unlike his half brother, John Olmsted was not a town planner, but even town planners in the 1900's did not visualize the damages that the automobile and an escalating population would bring about.

Goodhue brooded over his disagreement with John Olmsted. He kept him informed of his difficulties with Frank P. Allen, who had taken credit for the ground plan for the central site and for designing all the temporary Exposition buildings, and he defended his idea of tearing down the temporary buildings and replacing them with formal gardens . . . an idea that went part way toward meeting Olmsted's objections but an idea that Olmsted, steeped in the naturalistic and picturesque traditions of his stepfather, could never have supported.

"I am certain," Goodhue was quoted as saying in the Architectural Record, August 1922, "that were the temporary work to be removed, the various sites properly parked and planted with formal parkways, allees, fountains and pools, the resulting garden would in time be one of the finest, perhaps, on this side of the water."

In a letter to John Olmsted, May 18, 1915, venting his displeasure with Frank P. Allen, Goodhue admitted that he transferred "bodily" to the new site many of the features for the southern site, :which in the old site crossed the canyon at an angle to the main axis, [sic] in the new site became merely its continuation." This acknowledgment should correct the mistaken impression that Goodhue's designs for the Panama-California Exposition sprang spontaneously from his head at the time the present site was selected.

Worried that his friend, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., would turn against him, Goodhue wrote a letter asking for forgiveness.

"You and I have been friends for a great many years. I have enjoyed the friendship and we have worked together in perfect harmony. I cannot help feeling that your brother, and even possibly you, will feel me responsible for what has happened. Looking at the matter from a purely selfish standpoint, this is the one thing that counts. If I had known, or even suspected, that the thing would have come to such a pass, believe me, I would never have had anything to do with it, and I would resign now if I thought such a course could be of any value to your brother or to anyone else."

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. replied:

"I don't see why the San Diego episode should interfere with our friendship; because for all we regret your attitude, both I and my brother absolve you of any unfriendliness or unfairness in the matter. Even from the standpoint of professional things the fact is not altered that you and I are very much in accord in our sympathies in certain directions, in spite of this unfortunate increase in the things about which we know ourselves to be out of accord. You are perfectly at liberty to regard my views upon these matters as one of the more or less amiable vagaries of an otherwise intelligent person, just as I shall certainly regard your failure to appreciate my point of view as due to one of those unfortunate limitations of mind to which the best of people are subject."

There can be no conclusion to John Olmsted's philosophical quarrel with the Panama California Exposition Corporation. He lost but, as is the way with losers, he may have won. Lacking a neat resolution, perhaps Bertram Goodhue's words to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. thanking him for his friendship are a salutary reminder of the respect we should have for those with whom we do not agree:

"I was frightfully afraid that you and your brother would be led to believe that I had some hand in the course of events at San Diego. As for the point upon which we differ, it seems strange and rather disgusting that we should take such different views but I am delighted to let it stand in precisely the way you put it and now that I know we can do it without bitterness would like to go over the whole thing with you sometime face to face."



NOTE: Letters by Goodhue are in the Avery Architectural Library of Columbia University, New York City. Letters by John Charles Olmsted are part of the Olmsted Collection in the Library of Congress, Washington, and D. C. or in the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. The Allen and Marston letters are part of the Olmsted Collection in the Library of Congress. Maps and drawings are in the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Mass.

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