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Author(s): Harry G. Schalck

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NOTES

Mini-Revisionism in City Planning History: The Planners of Roland Park

HARRY G. SCHALCK

West Chester State College

URBAN PLANNERS have long “known” that Roland Park, Maryland, a splendid garden suburb dating from 1891, was originally laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. Indeed, people in Baltimore, generally less aware of Olmsted’s work with the Johns Hopkins University campus and the redesigning of their urban Mt. Vernon Place, have always considered this particular connection a source of civic pride, although few would put it as strongly as the Baltimore *Sun* of 4 May 1911, which declared that the Roland Park Company had “summoned” the great landscape architect from far-off Boston to plot the curvilinear streets and the placement of trees. Historians of city planning have generally accepted these assumptions. In *The Brown Decades*, Lewis Mumford noted only that F. L. Olmsted’s “respect for natural topography” was passed on to collaborators and pupils and that this approach aimed at a kind of romantic charm “achieved notably at Roland Park.”¹ But in *The City in History*, Mumford linked Olmsted directly with both Riverside, Illinois, and Roland Park.² Later, John W. Reps dated Olmsted’s connection with Roland Park from its inception,³ while in a chapter on the houses of Baltimore’s garden suburbs in their *Architecture of Baltimore*, Richard Howland and Eleanor Spencer referred to the planning of Roland Park by Olmsted and Edward H. Bouton, shortly after 1891.⁴

Quite recently the papers of the now defunct Roland Park Company were moved to the Cornell University Archives and for the first time it became possible to examine the

circumstances surrounding the early history and planning of the suburb. They reveal that Frederick L. Olmsted, Sr. was not at all responsible for any planning in Roland Park, nor was his firm involved with it until 1897, more than two years after his unfortunate breakdown and retirement.⁵

If the Olmsteds then did not originate plans for Roland Park, who did? Company papers show that by May 1891, the Kansas City management firm of Jarvis and Conklin, the Mortgage Trust Company which was developing the subdivision, had chosen George E. Kessler to be “Topographical and Landscape Engineer,” and that he visited Baltimore soon afterwards and was later sent a contour map labeled “Plat Number One.”⁶ Kessler, who was then twenty-nine, had received private training in landscape architecture in Germany before returning to work briefly for Olmsted in New York during the early 1880s. In 1891 he was living in Merriam, Kansas, where he had probably laid out his first residential development.⁷ Five years earlier he had designed part of another, Hyde Park, in Kansas City, and undoubtedly Messrs. Jarvis and Conklin, and perhaps Edward H. Bouton, the young manager of the Roland Park Company newly arrived in Baltimore from Kansas City, knew of it. Both Hyde Park

5. Knowing of Olmsted’s intensive work on the Columbian Exposition in 1891–92, Professor Reps doubted that he could have been very actively concerned with Roland Park. Olmsted himself admitted to clients at this time that his role was “chiefly that of directing and sometimes revising or amending the work of others.” (F. L. Olmsted to Mr. Jessup, 31 Jan. 1889. Olmsted Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.) In spite of local tradition, Col. John McC. Mowbray, longtime employee and last president of the Roland Park Company, has always felt that Olmsted was not the original planner. A curiously misleading letter of 2 June 1891 from Philadelphia architects R. L. and W. L. Price to E. H. Bouton mentions that “the landscape architect is to be Frederick Law Olmsted of New York,” whose charges are “very high.” The Prices had been told that “our ideas and his were alike on the same property,” and they offered to do the job more cheaply. (Roland Park Collection, Collection of Regional History and University Archives, John M. Olin Research Library, Cornell University. Hereafter cited as “Roland Park Collection.”)

6. Jarvis and Conklin to Bouton, 30 May 1891; Bouton to Kessler, 10 July 1891, Roland Park Collection.

7. See William H. Wilson’s *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City* (Columbia, Mo., 1964), *passim*. On pp. 134–135 Wilson relates that Kessler, who has been little honored in Kansas City, resented the fact that the public mistakenly believed the Olmsteds to be responsible for planning the city’s park system.

1. Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865–1895*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1955), p. 92.

2. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York, 1961), p. 497.

3. John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, 1965), p. 348.

4. Richard H. Howland and Eleanor P. Spencer, *The Architecture of Baltimore; A Pictorial History* (Baltimore, 1953), p. 113.

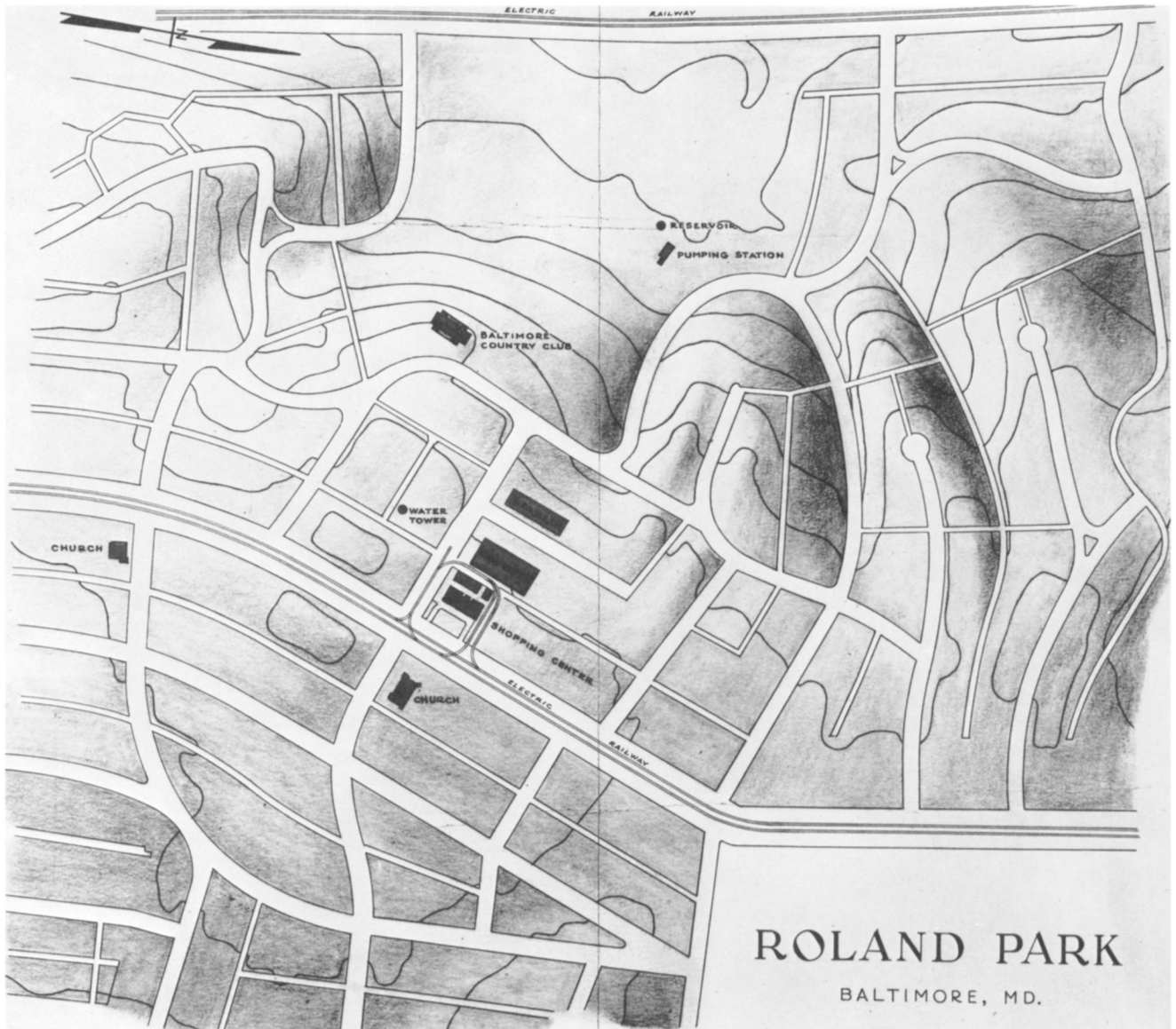


Fig. 1. Site plan of Roland Park (drawn especially for R. H. Howland, E. P. Spencer, W. H. Hunter, *The Architecture of Baltimore*, 1953, courtesy The Peale Museum).

and Roland Park took advantage of natural features; in the latter they were incorporated into a plan with gently curving streets which followed natural contours. The same kind of planning was employed by Kessler in developing the public parks and boulevards of Kansas City. How much he was directly inspired by Olmsted's public and private planning—in Central and Prospect Parks, New York; at Riverside, Illinois, and Brookline, Massachusetts, for example—it would be impossible to tell. The street plans produced by Kessler for Plat One of Roland Park were not especially dramatic, but the topography of that particular area, which slopes easily eastward to a stream, was not very exciting. And the work compares favorably with Olmsted's known plans for an-

other, coeval Baltimore County subdivision, Sudbrook Park.

The occasion for the Olmsted's first connection with Roland Park came when the firm was asked if it would "take up" the planning of Plat Number Two.⁸ One cannot help but infer from examining the Company's correspondence that while the task of planning additional plats of the subdivision lay with the Olmsted partners, it was young Frederick L. Olmsted, Jr. who was most directly responsible for giving the suburb the romantic aspects so admired later by planners and even hardheaded real estate men. These features

8. Bouton to Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot, 20 Nov. 1897. Olmsted Associates, Brookline, Mass.

were mainly the result of much cutting and very little filling of land on steep hillsides, the reservation of stream valleys as common park land, and the lavish use of land for a multi-level parkway and trolley car line connecting Roland Park with Baltimore City. The topography of these sections of the development closely resembles that of the Olmsted's own section of Brookline.

More important than Kessler's and perhaps equally as noteworthy as Frederick Olmsted, Jr.'s contribution was the work of Edward H. Bouton. Sometime Colorado sheep raiser, Curator of the Kansas City Law Library, and peddler of real estate in Kansas and western Virginia, in 1891 Bouton had had no previous experience in the development of high-class suburbs. His early correspondence with Colonel George E. Waring, Jr., who laid out Roland Park's sewage system, and the extensive exchange of letters with the Olmsteds after 1897 reveal how rapidly he grasped the essential elements of residential planning as conceived by the best professionals of the time. Bouton devoted great attention to both large plans and small details: how to supply electricity and water to residents, what sort of street signs would be ornamental and practical, whether alleys might be eliminated, to name a few. A true visionary, he could never bring himself to cut corners in developing the land or in constructing houses. This partially explains why, contrary to popular belief, Roland Park was never a financial success. But long before he went on to develop much of the area north of Baltimore

into garden suburbs his role was acknowledged by some. Impressed by a visit to Roland Park in 1910, J. H. McFarland, president of the American Civic Association, wrote a personal letter to Frederick Olmsted, Jr., congratulating him upon "a high grade of civic achievement."⁹ The latter characteristically replied that credit must go to Bouton: "He has been 'the whole thing' at Roland Park . . . daily successful[ly] handling . . . the situation on the spot."¹⁰ On the fiftieth anniversary of the Company, after Bouton had retired, Olmsted, J. C. Nichols,¹¹ and others gave testimony to his work. By and large, however, Bouton remains as neglected in Baltimore as is Kessler in Kansas City.

To remove Frederick L. Olmsted, Sr. from any connection with Roland Park, of course, is not to debunk him. The great *Geotech*—the name is Mumford's—has other and more substantial achievements aplenty. But it should suggest to historians of landscape architecture and urban planning that the work of other, if perhaps lesser, men may be of interest. Too, it is obvious that even first-rate historians of city planning are hampered by a lack of monographic material of the kind so available to historians of most other aspects of American life.

9. McFarland to Olmsted, 7 Oct. 1910, *Ibid.*

10. Olmsted to McFarland, 10 Oct. 1910, *Ibid.*

11. Nichols was responsible for developing the Country Club District of Kansas City.