

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and the Improvement of Boulder, Colorado

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Figure 1. Postcard view of Boulder, Colorado ca. 1908

Imagine Boulder, Colorado in the early 1900s. There were not quite 10,000 people living in town, less than a tenth of Boulder's population today. There were no paved streets and Boulder's focus as a mining supply town was still in full force, with factories, mills, and railroads located right along Boulder Creek. While Boulder had been selected as a site for the state university in 1861, it didn't open until 1877, and graduated just 163 students in 1910.

Before there was an official city commission dealing with parks and planning (1918), and before there was city zoning (1928) there was the Boulder City Improvement Association (BCIA). This group of public-spirited citizens came together in 1903 to promote "the improvement of Boulder in health, growth, cleanliness, prosperity and attractiveness."¹

¹ Pettem, Silvia, "Improvement association resurrected after 100 years," in *Boulder Daily Camera*, September 25, 2003, page 1D.



Figure 2. Frederick Law Olmsted Junior. Courtesy of the US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

In 1907 the BCIA sought the services of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (FLO Jr. or Olmsted). Their letter to the Olmsted Brothers stated, “We are a small but ambitious little town...situated 30 miles northwest of Denver. We want advice, and the best obtainable, as to how to improve our city as to Parks, Boulevards and general plans for Civic betterment.”²

The firm submitted a report, *The Improvement of Boulder, Colorado* on November 9, 1908, about six months after a brief visit by FLO Jr. It is some 30 pages of dense text with a center-piece illustration that was also produced as a lithograph: *Plan of Improvements*, March 1910. The report covered details like proper streetlights, street trees, and the use of macadam for roads. But more broadly Olmsted called for a city of fine homes and limited manufacturing.

The plan focuses on what is under public control: streets, waterways, parks and open space, and public buildings. FLO Jr. proposed many new street connections and a street hierarchy. He also suggested new sites for parks and advocated the protection of the mountain backdrop. Olmsted also addressed the Progressive Era themes of good government, the appropriate use of the police power, and taxation to support the development of infrastructure.

Subsequent work by the Olmsted Brothers including planting plans for public schools, work on sewerage and drainage in concert with the engineering firm Metcalf and Eddy, park boundary studies, bridge design, and a grand scheme for park improvements along Boulder Creek stretching for some eight city blocks.

Looking now, in the 2020s at this work, the Olmsted Plan has been held out by some in the community as a key turning point in Boulder’s development, when elitism and racism played a role in

² Olmsted Associates. *Olmsted Associates Records: Job Files, -1971; Files; 3300; City of Boulder Improvement Association; Boulder, Colo.; 1907 to 1909. - 1909, 1907. Letter of March 15, 1907. Manuscript/Mixed Material.* <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss5257102407/>.

turning the city's direction to the exclusion of working-class people in favor of a more "refined" university town. In what ways was the Plan a reflection of local mores, and in what ways does it reflect the attitudes of FLO Jr. himself?

This paper is offered not as a trained historian interested in city planning, but as a trained and experienced city planner interested in history. The goal is to address these four questions:

1. What was going on in Boulder in the early 1900s that led a citizens group to bring Olmsted to Boulder?
2. Who were the people that brought FLO Jr. to Boulder?
3. What did FLO Jr. contribute to the effort to plan for improvements to Boulder?
4. What were the results and lasting legacy of Olmsted's planning efforts and in what ways does this planning effort reflect the best and worst of our community?

FLO Jr.'s Boulder city planning work is one of several city planning projects he undertook in the early 1900s. Susan Klaus, in her article "Efficiency, Economy, Beauty – The City Planning Reports of FLO, Jr., 1905-1915"³, shows generally where FLO Jr.'s Boulder work fits into this body of work:

- Detroit, MI, 1905, Chamber of Commerce
- Utica, NY, 1907-1908, Committee on Improving and Beautifying Utica
- Boulder, CO, 1908-1910, Boulder City Improvement Association
- Pittsburgh, PA, 1910-1911, Pittsburgh Civic Commission
- New Haven, CT, 1910, New Haven Civic Improvement Commission
- Rochester, NY, 1911, Rochester Civic Improvement Committee
- Newport, RI, 1913, Newport Improvement Association

Many of FLO Jr.'s city planning projects stretched over time and one planning effort also overlapped with others. He started his Boulder work in 1908, and the last letter in the Boulder correspondence was from 1931.

Biographers have pointed to FLO Jr.'s frustration with his city planning work because of the long timeframes required to realize his suggested improvements, and often the lack of a professional to see them through. This certainly was the case in Boulder. Note also that the clients for his city plans were usually citizen associations or committees, and not the official working of city government. This was also the case in Boulder.

³ Susan L. Klaus, "Efficiency, Economy, Beauty – The City Planning Reports of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., 1905 – 1915, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Vol. 57, No. 4, Autumn 1991.



An Arapaho Camp, ca. 1867-75. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (NAA INV 011653)

Figure 3. An Arapaho Camp ca. 1867-75 National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Library of Congress

Let's turn, however, to the people who occupied Boulder before the name Boulder was ever used. I acknowledge that my home in Boulder is on the ancestral homelands and unceded territory of the Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Pawnee, Shoshone, Sioux and Ute. I honor and respect the people of these nations and their ancestors.

Evidence of earlier inhabitants in the Boulder Valley includes the discovery of a Clovis culture stone tool cache at the base of Flagstaff Mountain dating from some 13,000 years ago. European emigration to the Boulder Valley has been very recent (less than 170 years ago) and has often been brutal, especially as to the treatment of the Native Americans. It is Boulder's original sin.

Development along the Colorado Front Range exploded in 1858 after the discovery of gold. Town builders initially sought ways in which to profit from the hard work of gold seekers, and then the more capital-intensive mines and mineral production. At the same time, colonies of emigrants such as the Union Colony in Greeley, and the Chicago-Colorado Colony in Longmont primarily attracted agriculturalists. As the fortunes of the mines and farms ebbed and flowed, communities sometimes disappeared, or reinvented themselves to develop a more sustainable economy.

When I look at Boulder's history after Europeans arrived, I think of four major phases of development, all based on changing visions of what Boulder should be. Boulder initially served as a **mining supply town** for the mining activity in the foothills of the Rockies. The 59ers flooded in and the town was developed to supply their needs, process ore, and provide transportation in and out.



Figure 4. Postcard view of Old Main and Varsity Pond, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO

As mining activity waned, Boulder began to look for ways to sustain and grow its economy. A variety of efforts were made to attract and develop institutions related to education, health, and tourism. FLO Jr.'s planning work helped guide the way to the development of the **University Town** as a city of fine homes with limited manufacturing.

This was stable until Boulder's **post-World War II expansion** when the community dramatically expanded the area of the city and encouraged the development of federal scientific labs and associated clean industry and the housing and commercial development needed for new workers.

Finally, Boulder today is largely shaped by environmental sensibilities which politically erupted in the 1970s in reaction to the success of the post WWII expansion. A wide variety of growth management policies and the acquisition of a greenbelt were early indicators of a change in vision for a community concerned with sustainability and resilience in the face of climate change. I'm still looking for a better label, but let's call this **E Town**.

I've read that Boulder at its founding in 1859 had a population of 1,000, and that in the very next year it was 174 when all the surface gold had been mined. At the beginning of 1900, Boulder was a city of some 6,150 people. By 1910 the city had a population of 9,539. The town's goal seemed to be hitting the 10,000-person mark and claims to that effect were made in newspaper and promotional booklets. There was some growth prior to WWII, but in 1940 Boulder was still shy of 13,000 people.

After the emigrants arrived in 1858, the Boulder City Town Company organized, platted and sold lots in 1859. The original town was sited north of the 40th parallel, thereby placing it in the Nebraska Territory, which formed in 1854. Today's Boulder also includes land to the south of 40th parallel (Baseline Road) that was in the Kansas Territory, also formed in 1854. This land was unceded territory of the Native American tribes until the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie.

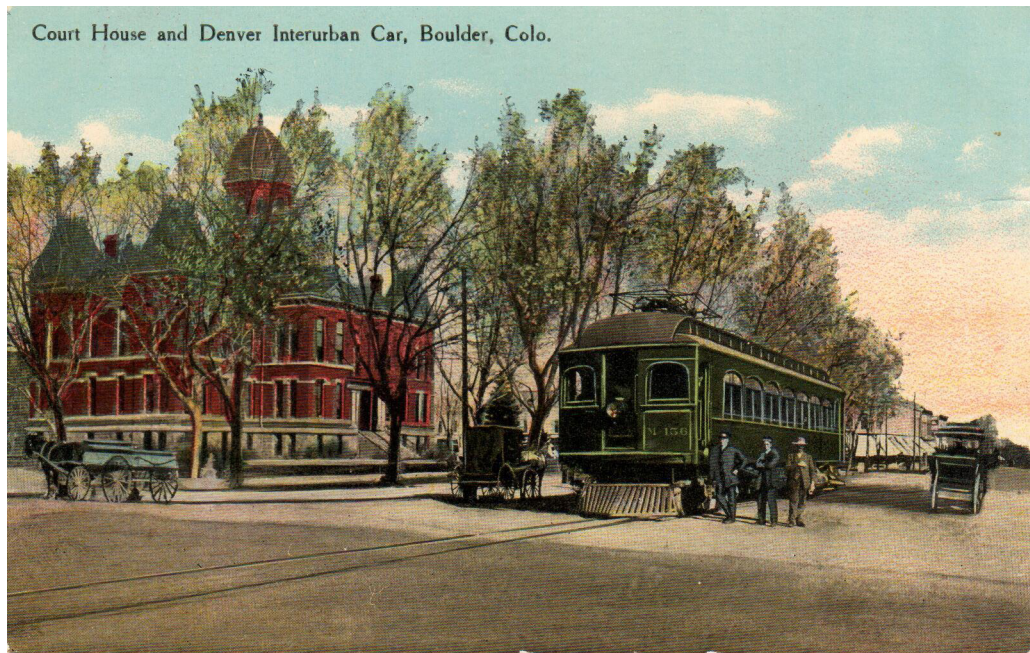


Figure 5. Postcard view of original Boulder County Courthouse and Denver Interurban Car, Boulder, CO

Colorado Territory was formed in 1861 and Boulder County was one of the original 17 counties. Boulder was named the county seat and incorporated in 1871. The State of Colorado, the Centennial State, was formed in 1876. Importantly, Colorado was the first state to enact women's suffrage by popular referendum in 1893. Votes by women played a significant role in the direction Boulder took in areas such as temperance, enforcement of laws concerning morality, and the betterment of parks and schools.

In the early 1900s most of the town seemed united over the question of growth, since both the commercial interests, the "Boosters," and those interested in improvements, beautification, and various moral causes, the "Improvers," wanted to grow. The question was "What kind of growth?" The Boulder Commercial Association, founded in 1905, wanted to add more manufacturing to the mix and led a public subscription campaign to bring a sugar factory to Boulder in 1907, a campaign that failed. Boulder has a history of taking a direct hand in encouraging development consistent with its vision by dedicating land, either privately by individual citizens as in the case of the University, or by popular vote for a bond to acquire the land for Boulder's Chautauqua. The Hotel Boulderado was built through public subscription to provide a first-class downtown hotel. During his 1908 visit, FLO Jr. stayed in the home of Dr. William Baird, just to the north of the Boulderado, when it was still a hole in the ground.

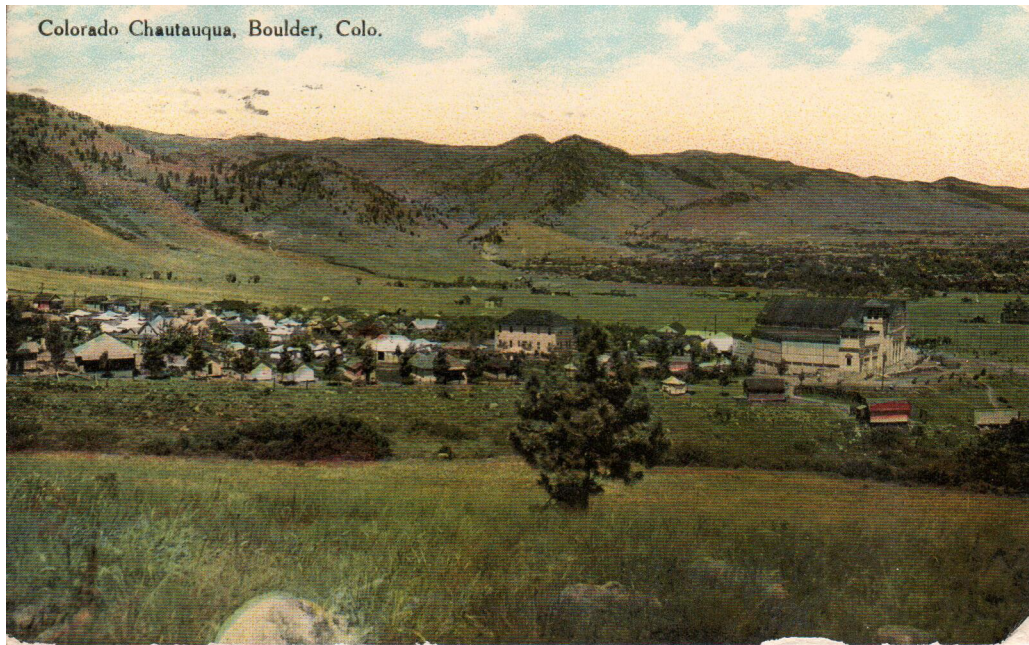


Figure 6. Postcard view of the Colorado Chautauqua, Boulder, CO



Figure 7. Postcard view of the Hotel Boulderado, Boulder, CO

The University, the Chautauqua, and the Boulderado are all treasured places in Boulder today and are emblematic of the type of development that was favored by the Boulder City Improvement Association (BCIA) at the beginning of the 1900s. The historic core of the University, the Norlin Quadrangle, and the Hotel Boulderado are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Chautauqua Park is a National Historic Landmark.

In 1890 the Boulder Improvement Society was founded but seems to have had limited success. However, in 1903, the Improvers organized themselves under the banner of the BCIA. Their purpose was

“to cooperate with all other organizations and individuals engaged in the work of bettering and beautifying the town.”⁴ The BCIA engaged local landscape architect W.W. Parce to prepare plans for the beautification of the Chautauqua grounds, and also landscaping plans for two new schools, named for Presidents Washington and Lincoln. Who were these people? Let’s look at the leadership.

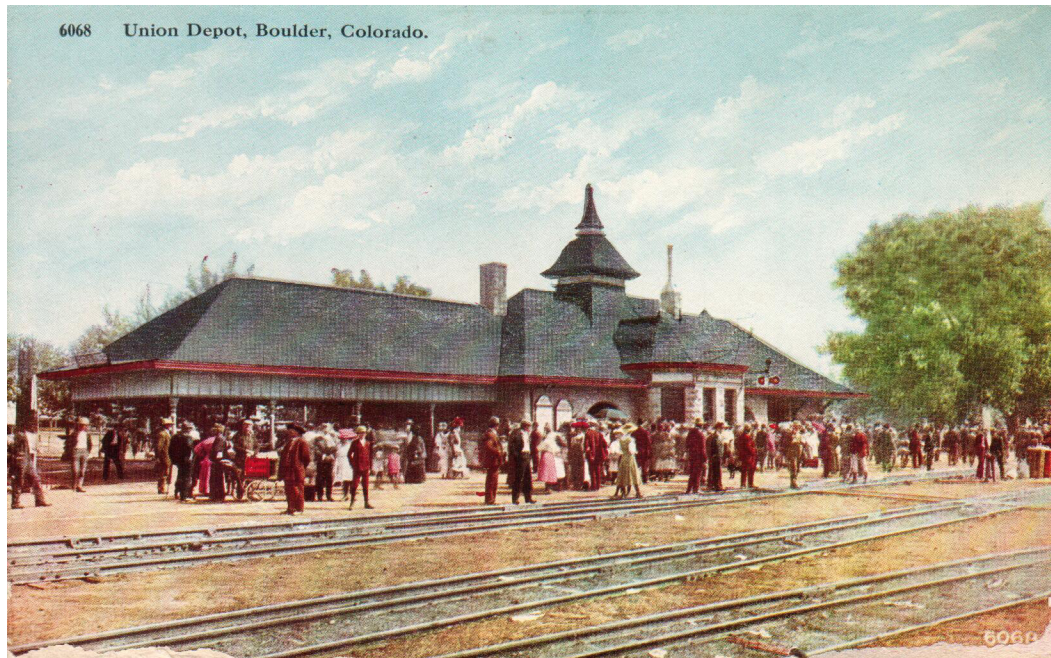


Figure 8. Postcard view of Union Depot, Boulder, CO

Junius Henderson, the president of the BCIA was a lawyer, judge, scientist, author, and curator. He lived 45 of his 72 years in Boulder. He came to Boulder in 1892 and served for seven years as county judge, resigning in 1909. Henderson was appointed curator of the University natural history collection in 1903. He earned a B.A. degree from the University in 1906 and was a professor of natural history until his retirement in 1933. He authored many articles and several books, including *Geology and Its Relation to Landscape* in 1925 and *The Practical Value of Birds* in 1927. He was twice married, the second time at the age of 64. The University museum was opened in a new building 12 days after his death and is named the Henderson Museum. He was a member of the Boulder parks and planning commission from 1921 to 1926. In the trip report of his visit to Boulder in 1908, FLO Jr. commented “Met also Judge Henderson, a comparatively young man of much force and public spirit, interested in improvement matters, in juvenile delinquency, etc. (on which he gave a talk at Methodist Church Sunday).”

Eben G. Fine, the Vice President of the BCIA, was a business leader, conservationist, mountaineer, ardent photographer, and tireless promoter of Boulder. He was known as “Mr. Boulder.” He lived for 70 years in Boulder. He came to Boulder in 1888 at age 21 to work as a pharmacist and clerk at Geo. F. Fonda’s store on Pearl Street. The next year he married Mary Fonda Coulson, his boss’ widowed sister, and became the father of Hal Coulson. Fine was secretary of the Boulder Commercial Association from 1905 to 1907. He then purchased Temple Drug and operated it until its sale in 1928.

⁴ “Beautify Beautiful Boulder,” in *Boulder Daily Camera*, February 20, 1903, Friday Evening Edition.

During the period 1927-1935, he was secretary of the Boulder Chamber of Commerce. Fine was closely associated with the Colorado Chautauqua and he served on their board for more than 50 years. He was a charter member and first president of the Boulder Mountain Club. He was part of the group that helped develop the Hotel Boulderado through public subscription. Sponsored by the railroad company, Fine traveled extensively, lecturing and extolling the virtues of Boulder. For 14 years he spent two months every year giving presentations using glass lantern slides. He presented to over 3,500 audiences. His photography was the basis for many early postcards of Boulder published as images from Fine and Coulson. Fine died at age 91 in 1957. His final bequest included funds that became the down payment on the Boulder history museum. FLO Jr. described him as a “very active and enthusiastic improver.”⁵

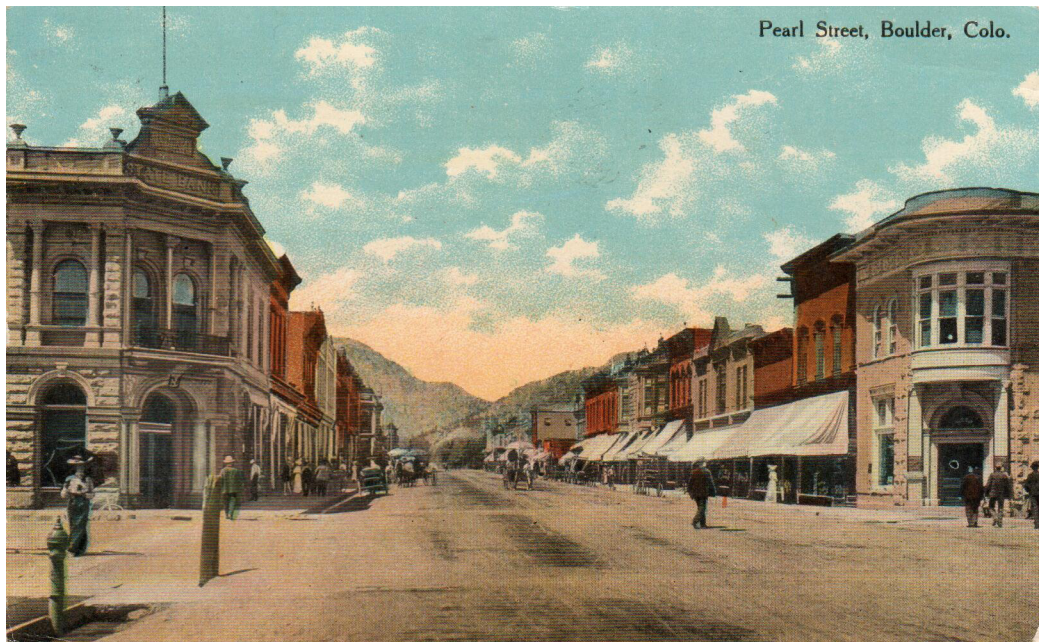


Figure 9. Postcard view of Pearl Street, Boulder, CO

As secretary of the BCIA, Dr. William J. Baird was the sole correspondent with FLO Jr. over a 24-year period. He was a physician, philanthropist, progressive reformer, and promoter of city improvement and beautification. He held tenaciously to the recommendations of Olmsted, sometimes to the consternation of others in the community. Baird was born in Alabama in 1861 and arrived in Boulder in 1893. In 1895 he became an instructor in experimental physiology. The next academic year he was named as professor of pathology. He maintained a private practice and specialized in the care of tubercular patients. Baird gave a 160-acre park to the city at the mouth of Gregory Canyon in 1908 which bears his name. In newspaper accounts he is called “the father of paving and the parks system.” He is credited with his “hands-on” approach to park improvement – weeding and watering trees. He is also credited with raising funds – the Daily Camera noted that he raised the money for nearly every tree that stands in Boulder’s Central Park. They also thought that the only improvement project that he opposed was the location of City Hall at Twelfth Street on a tract he thought too small and not in a

⁵ Olmsted Associates. *Olmsted Associates Records: Job Files, -1971; Files; 3300; City of Boulder Improvement Association; Boulder, Colo.; 1907 to 1909. - 1909, 1907. “Visit by F.L. Olmsted, Jr., 2nd May, 1908.”* Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss5257102407/>.

proper location. In 1921, at age 60, he formed the Baird Foundation. It was to be funded with \$300 to be held for 300 years at which time it would be estimated to be worth \$510,000,000. It was a victim of the Great Depression, and never filed. Upon his death in 1934, all his money was left to his wife.

Frederick "Fred" White was a businessman, involved in mines, real estate, insurance, and loans. He was an ardent prohibitionist, running several times for state office on the Prohibition ticket and serving on the Boulder city council. White was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1860 and was the only family member to immigrate to the United States. He arrived in Colorado in the spring of 1880 to look after his family's interests in mines in the Boulder foothills. He moved to Boulder in 1890 and took up business dealings in real estate. He married the year after. In 1898 he helped develop the Willard Building in downtown Boulder, named after Frances Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. He and his wife were acknowledged as early supporters of the public library and they raised funds to create the first rental library in Boulder. The *Daily Camera* noted his service in "moral and civic-betterment issues." He died in 1944.

Maud Clark Gardiner Odell was an advocate for the poor and sick, for good schools, and for parks. She served as the chair of the standing committee on education for BCIA. Born in Tennessee in 1869, Odell came west the next year as a part of a pioneer family to the Union Colony in Greeley. She came to Boulder to attend the University in 1889 and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1893. Odell married twice, first in 1891 to the first chair of the University biology department John Gardiner, and after his death from tuberculosis in 1900, to John J.P. Odell, a former Chicago banker, on New Year's Day in 1910. He died later that year on the day after Christmas at age 63. Odell was a charter member of the Boulder Parks Board in 1907 and was elected to the School Board in 1911. In 1908 Olmsted characterized her as "a widow, very active, efficient, intelligent and cultivated."

While many of us in Boulder can understand the enthusiasm of the BCIA in asking FLO Jr. to come to Boulder, it is a mystery as to why FLO Jr. wanted to come at all. Perhaps it was due to his youthful experiences in Colorado? As he reports in his Harvard class of 1894 25th Anniversary entry: "Before Class Day '94, I went off to the Rocky Mountains as a 'recorder' and instrument man on the triangulation of the 39th parallel by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey for a few months before settling down to the further study of my profession of landscape architecture as an assistant of my father's firm." Or perhaps he came with an eye to expanding the Colorado work prospects for the firm. He prepared a plan for the Denver Civic Center in 1913 (which was rejected). His significant work on the development of the Denver Mountain Parks system resulted in reports in 1912 and 1914 and he prepared a report on the development of Colorado College in Colorado Springs in the early 1920s.

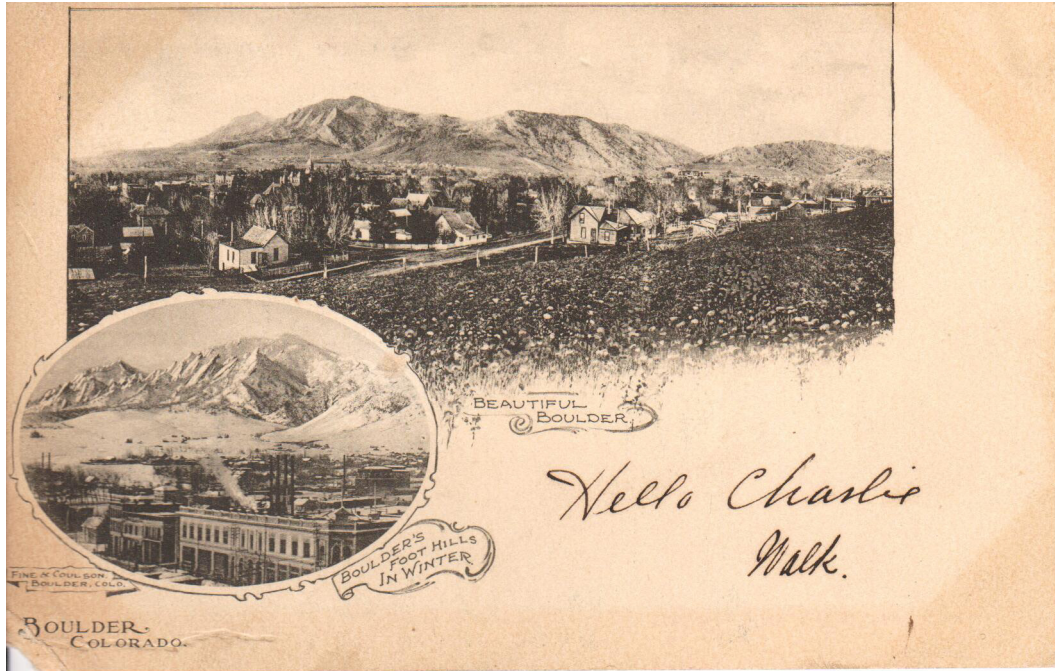


Figure 10. Postcard view of Boulder and Foothills in the Winter, Boulder, CO

But come he did. After the BCIA engaged him, FLO Jr. visited Boulder for ten days in May of 1908 and he:

- Toured Boulder by bicycle and experienced a spring snow which kept him in for a day and the next he “plodded around town in slush.”
- Met with the Boulder City Improvement Association, gave talks to the Real Estate Exchange in Boulder and Denver, met with University president Baker and other University officials.
- Hiked with Eben Fine one day and Mrs. Gardiner and her husband-to-be John J.P. Odell another. Went over the mountain “Reservation” with Dr. Baird & city engineer Fair. He found Boulder “very picturesque in detail.”
- Went over proposed “takings around town” with Dr. Baird and W.W. Parce.
- Gave a public lecture using lantern slides on “Parks Function” at the University.

It is hard to truly imagine Boulder at that time, but one measure that reminds us of just how different things were, is that the March 31, 1908, *Boulder Daily Herald* reported that there were just 66 automobiles registered with the county clerk.

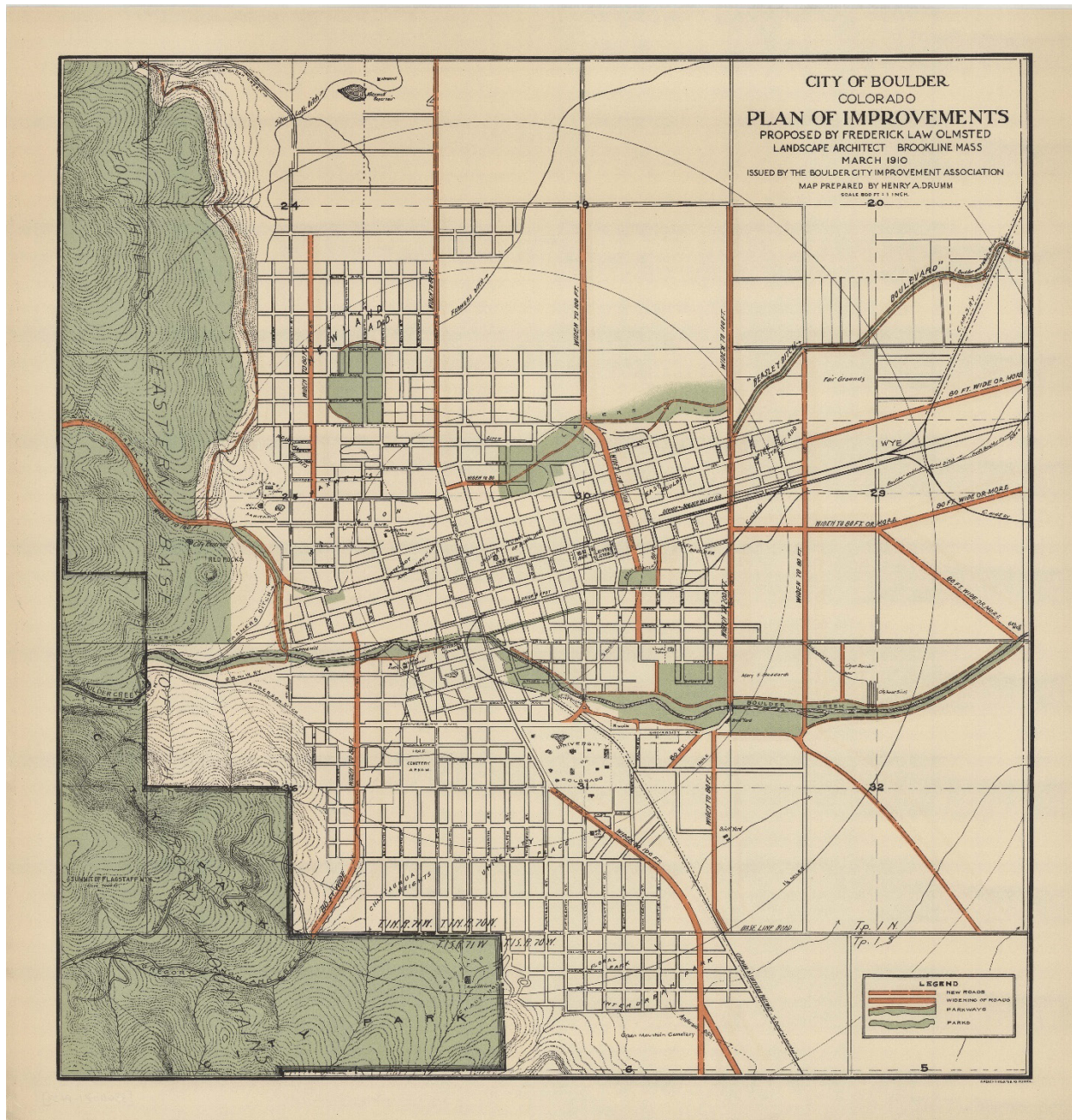


Figure 11. Plan of Improvements proposed by Frederick Law Olmsted, March 1910. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

When people in Boulder talk about the “Olmsted Plan” they are usually talking about two things:

1. A report entitled “The Improvement of Boulder, Colorado, Report to the City Improvement Association,” dated November 9, 1908. It was initially shared with the BCIA and their allies, but not published until March of 1910. And,
2. A “Plan of Improvements,” a lithograph on a base map created by local cartographer Henry Drumm, illustrating proposed parks, roads, widenings of roads, and parkways, also dated March 1910.

The writing in the report is dense and verbose, and probably overly professorial to many readers. The April 19, 1910, *Boulder Daily Camera* opined: “Like most professional men, Prof. Olmstead (sic) has evidently measured the value of his work by the prolixity of his report, though it, doubtless, contains much of value....We shall refer to the report from time to time if ever given time to read it.”

FLO Jr. stated that the purpose of the report is “to offer helpful suggestions, drawn from experience and observation in many other cities and from a brief and limited though eager study of Boulder, bearing upon one of the broad fundamental questions at the base of all municipal activities, namely: What physical improvements within the reach of the city will help it to make it increasingly convenient, agreeable and generally satisfactory as a place in which to live and work?” His primary role was to advise the BCIA on a plan of improvements that they would champion, but with an eye to changing the minds of the other townsfolk as well.

One of the “headwinds” that Olmsted and the BCIA faced was opposition from the publisher of the *Boulder Daily Camera*, L.C. Paddock, who was promoting the purchase of a 65-acre parcel owned by pioneer Joseph Wolff for a park, rather than beautifying the land along Boulder Creek. The May 12, 1908, *Boulder Daily Camera* reports that “Prof. Olmstead (sic) opposes the acquisition of a park of large acreage and favors a rather nebulous idea of little tracts of high land and alkali basins with vistas of the mountains, angular and irregular drives, boulevards, and a drive along Boulder Creek. For his part, FLO, Jr. referred to Paddock in his trip report as “a rather disreputable looking man reported to be a cheap scoundrel...”

FLO Jr.’s report covered a wide variety of topics, presumably reflecting the specific interests of the BCIA and townspeople in general. These included:

- Streets, sidewalks, street trees, street fixtures, and the overall street network & hierarchy.
- Waterways – Boulder’s creeks & ditches; and the issue of flooding.
- Park locations – at the neighborhood, community, and city scale.
- Public buildings, sewage, and signs.
- Public administration.

Olmsted’s focus was on improvements to be made within the public realm, and not on private property. Zoning was not to come to Boulder until 1928 through the work of another planning consultant, Saco Rienk DeBoer. In the early 1900s Boulder was doing a poor job of securing rights-of-way within developments that would be necessary for establishing connections to the surrounding territory, and these links are shown quite prominently on the plan. The plan notably shows the proposed location of Newlands Park and Canyon Park, which were ultimately developed, and a park on what was then known as Lovers’ Hill, which was not. The broad green swath drawn along Boulder Creek shows the intent of developing both formal parks and also leaving land in a natural state along the whole of Boulder Creek as it flows through the city for park and flood protection purposes. The western boundary of the city is shown as solid green, as a city park. This is the precursor to Boulder’s present Open Space & Mountain Parks system. Some of the mountain park had already been dedicated to Boulder by the federal government, but much remained to be acquired. Even today with Boulder’s remarkable open space system, not all lands shown on this plan are under public ownership.

Part of the local implementation of FLO Jr.’s plan was city imposed minimum standards for street and park dedication as new development occurred. In 1907 the city passed a resolution that newly annexed areas would be required to dedicate 10 percent of land area for parks. FLO Jr. also made recommendations for acquisitions that the city could make from tax proceeds raised through a dedicated property tax for park acquisition. In order to secure the support of the landowners and

developers, he made the argument that such dedications would improve the value of their property beyond any losses of land area.

While the so-called Olmsted report and Plan of Improvements were the earliest, and most comprehensive elements of FLO Jr.'s contributions to Boulder, there were many other projects that he worked on directly or oversaw. In addition to relatively minor engagements on two residences, Olmsted provided significant input on street design and paving, the design of two bridges spanning Boulder Creek at Broadway and 17th Street, planting plans for two public schools, a boundary study for Newland Park, and engineering studies for drainage and sewerage at a time when Boulder's public works were primitive and in great need of improvement.

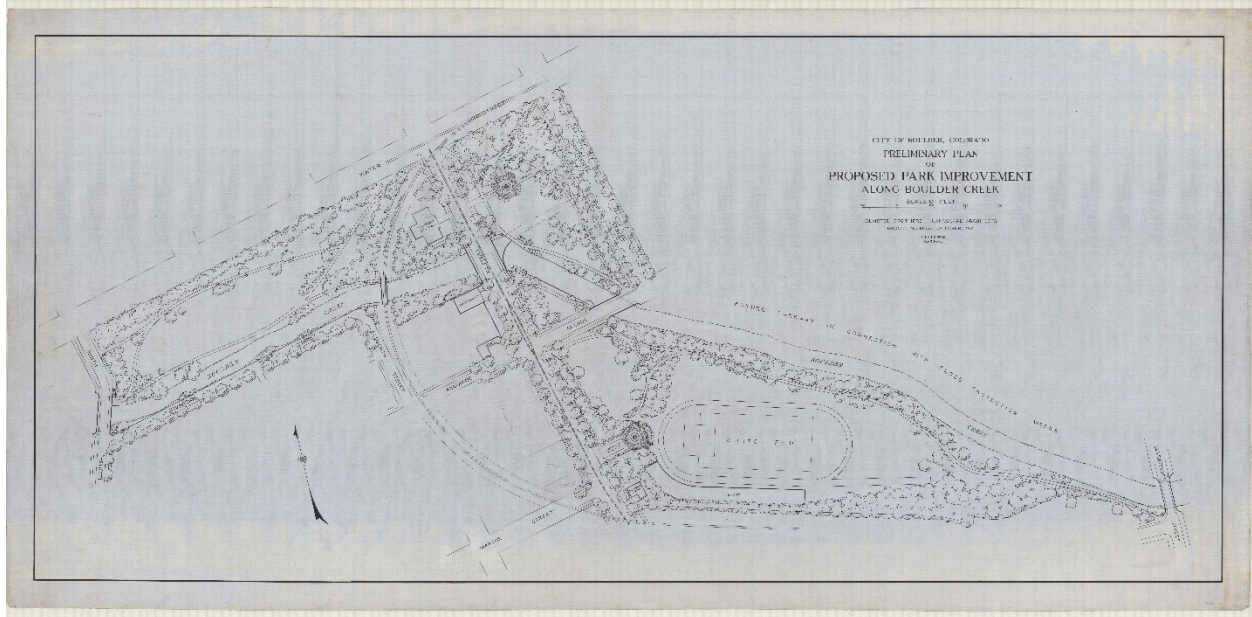


Figure 12. Preliminary Plan of Proposed Park Improvement along Boulder Creek, Olmsted Brothers, October 1923. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

He is best known locally as the inspiration for the treatment of land along Boulder Creek, in both the more formal parks near today's Civic Area and throughout the creek's run through Boulder in the form of a multipurpose greenway. In 1923 Olmsted looked at a stretch of Boulder Creek from 9th Street to 17th Street and created a unified plan for civic improvements. This larger plan envisioned a memorial to those who lost their lives in World War I, the location for a city hall, an athletic field, and park and pathway improvements. Due to the vagaries of citizen sentiment and legal judgment, a successful bond measure to fund the project was then struck down by the state courts, and then failed at the ballot box on a second try.

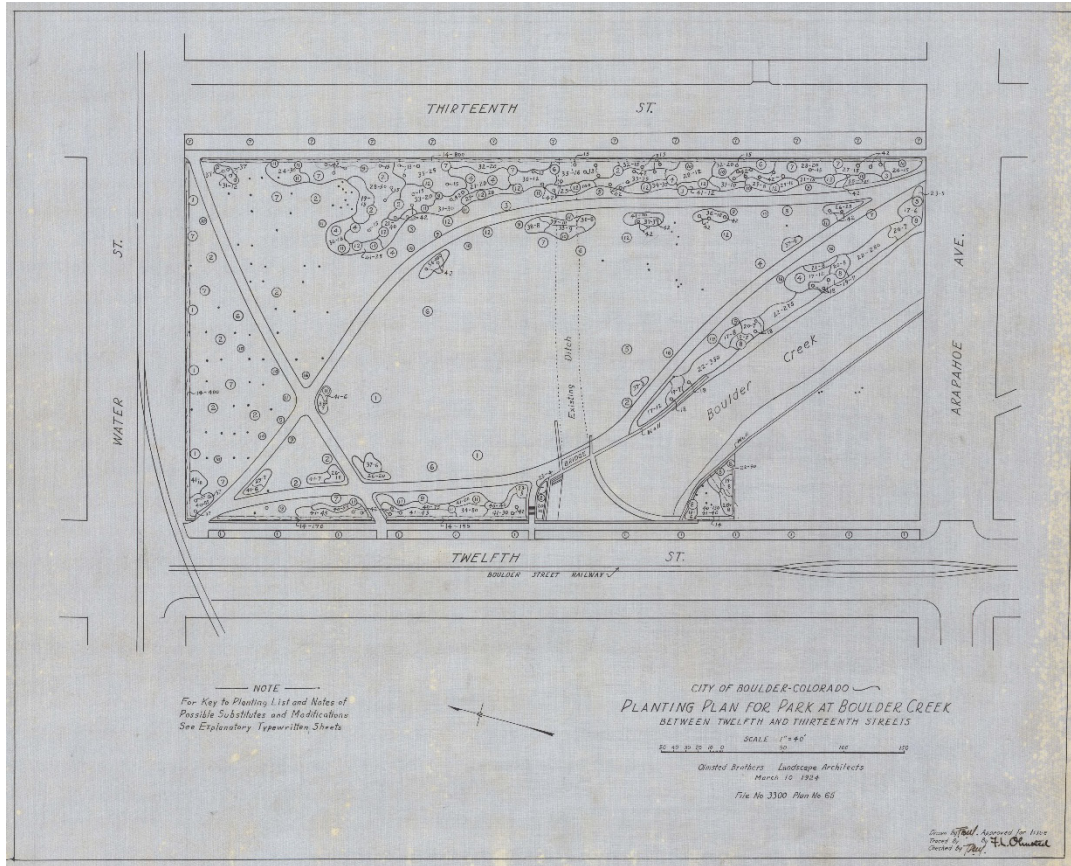


Figure 13. Planting Plan for Park at Boulder Creek, March 10, 1924, Olmsted Brothers, Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

This lack of funding led to a much smaller park in the area bounded by present day Broadway, Canyon, 13th and Arapahoe known as Central Park. The land had been owned by the railroad and was leased by the city in 1921, and then acquired by the city in 1933. Olmsted’s design shows plantings concentrated along its perimeter, and a greensward created within the park.

Photographs of Boulder’s Central Park taken in 1929 have the characteristic starkness of newly minted parks. Today Central Park has become one of the most valuable pieces of greenspace in Boulder because of its proximity to downtown’s buildings and hard surfaces, its location along the Boulder Creek, (sometimes referred to as Boulder’s beach), and its role as the prime location of public events and gatherings.

One of the legacies of the Olmsted plan was its inspiration for the advocates of Boulder’s greenbelt, its open space system. In 1967 greenbelt proponents reprinted the 1910 Olmsted report as part of their campaign. In his forward to the reprint, James Bowers, Boulder’s planning director during the 1960s, wrote:

“Discussion is still taking place on such matters as placing utility wires underground; developing a major park along the length of Boulder Creek; providing adequate roadway widths for major roadways; development of a street tree planting program; and protection of the flood plains and foothills from building encroachments. It is regretful that many of the recommendations in the report were not carried out. If they had been, Boulder would be an even more desirable community today.”

Bowers himself was no longer the planning director when he wrote those words in March 1967, having resigned in frustration with what he considered as a lack of leadership by the city manager. A new manager, Ted Tedesco, helped fashion a one cent sales tax measure that included 4/10 of a cent for open space and 6/10 of a cent for transportation improvements. This skillfully brought together the environmental and business communities in common cause and Boulder became the first community in the country to pass a tax measure for the purchase of open space in 1967.

In 1894 Boulder experienced major flooding, so it is not a surprise that the 1910 report dwells on that topic. In the spring of 1894 flood waters washed out the railroad bridge at 4th Street and bridges at 6th, 9th, 12th (now Broadway) and 17th Streets. Olmsted's plans for Boulder Creek were addressed under the heading, "Waterways and Related Parks Opportunities." He counseled that where land values were high, hard channels should be considered, otherwise, he advocated using parks as spillways for flood waters.

He identified specific parcels of land, "public holdings," he thought should be acquired to create the Boulder Creek park and specific alignments for paths and roads. He anticipated the placement of these paths under bridges to make a continuous path.

As with open space and mountain parks, city leaders and planners found inspiration in Olmsted's vision and a new plan for Boulder Creek was developed in 1984. True to Olmsted's vision of a landscape that served multiple purposes, funding came from multiple city departments including parks, transportation, and public works. Public access along the creek was blocked by private developments, and also by city infrastructure that impeded pedestrian and bicycle crossings under bridges. By taking a deliberate, opportunistic and incremental approach to securing rights of access and creating safe passage, the Boulder Creek Path was initially completed in 1987. Today the overall system consists of multi-use paths along all 14 of Boulder Creek's tributaries as well.

In September 2013, Boulder experienced the impact of severe flooding on Boulder Creek and many of its tributaries. Eight days of rain led to a 1000-year-rain event which led to a 100-year flood. The performance of the Boulder Creek improvements and the greenway system was evident. No bridges were lost, and property damage was minimal. The investment made by the community in a more natural creek environment paid dividends in protection of life and property.

In the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, and the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement, the city of Boulder convened a working group to address Boulder's lack of racial equity. The community adopted its first Racial Equity Plan in 2021. A part of the Racial Equity Plan includes a racial history of the city of Boulder. It points to a history of deliberate discrimination against Native Americans and immigrant people of color, including Asian railroad workers, African Americans, and Mexicans. The history states that "the height limit, the green belt that limited outward expansion of housing, and the fact that a significant portion of the city is zoned exclusively for single-family development, all directly contribute to the high cost of housing in Boulder." Connecting the dots, they point out that high housing costs continue to impact who can afford to live in Boulder, thereby decreasing diversity.

The building height limit was passed as a charter amendment in 1971, and the greenbelt purchase program was initiated in 1967, both by public vote. The 1910 Olmsted Plan explicitly calls for a city of fine homes and Boulder's 1928 zoning reflects that. The post-World War II expansion of Boulder resulted in many multi-family buildings so that today there are more renters than owners of dwelling units. Housing affordability is an acute problem in Boulder today with the pressures of a growing university, a surplus of jobs to resident workers, and the overall attractiveness of the community.

A recent documentary, *This is [Not] Who We Are*, which has the tagline: “The happiest place in America is Boulder, Colorado – said no Black person ever,” tackles the issue of discrimination against Black people in particular and points to the Olmsted Plan as having set exclusivity in motion, as well as displacing both Black and White poor people from Boulder Creek in favor of Olmsted’s plan to improve it.



Figure 14. Postcard view of the homes along 6th Street, Boulder, CO

FLO Jr. starts off his 1910 report with a section entitled, “The Net Practical Result to Be Aimed At.” In planning practice today, this is akin to a vision statement, a declaration of what is it we wish our community to become. Restating his words, his proposed vision for Boulder was:

- To create a “perfect city of homes”
- To meet “the needs of these people”
- Continue to serve as a “local distributing center” to a “tributary area” of farming and mining
- Permit only manufacturing without “noise, dirt, disorder, annoyance.”
- Allow manufacturing required to meet the needs of a city of homes. And,
- To provide for “Suburban farming” at the edge of the city.

It generally excludes manufacturing and industry as a prime use of land, and in this he was in sync with his clients: the Improvers. They wanted growth, but not industrial growth, wishing instead to grow the university enterprise and associated institutions like Chautauqua.

For Black workers, however, this transition meant fewer job opportunities. Historian Dan Corson notes that for the period 1870-1950, while the Black population reached a high population mark of 166 in 1910, but the jobs that they held were in decline, especially in railroads, hotels, and a decision was

made to not expand the industrial base. Corson writes that this shift to being an important educational center meant that there was “less tolerance for the working man, Black or White.”⁶



Figure 15. *Photo of the Jungle, Boulder, CO, Ed Tangen, 1919. Courtesy Boulder Historical Society Collection, Carnegie Branch Library for Local History, Boulder, CO.*

The area from 10th Street to 11th Street, north of Boulder Creek and south of Water Street was colloquially referred to as the Jungle. It was home to some of Boulder’s brothels in the 1880’s to around 1900, and also a district where the poor, both Black and White, could find shelter.

FLO Jr.’s 1910 plan for the improvement of Boulder included a detailed description of park improvements along Boulder Creek, including for this stretch. He wrote that “Very likely people in Boulder have got so accustomed to thinking of the creek and its banks as a place to throw tin cans and rubbish that it may require too great a feat of imagination to conceive of it as a pretty, shady spot with a clean, well-kept park path running beside the murmuring waters...” In the report he suggested screening “the rather unattractive class of occupancy” of the creek area with trees so that views from the bridges crossing the creek would be enhanced.

⁶ Dan W. Corson, *The Black Community in Boulder, Colorado*, 1996, a paper written as a class project, surveying the Black residents of Boulder through time. Gives names, addresses, and sociological overview. Includes maps. Can be retrieved at localhistory.boulderlibrary.org - Carnegie Branch Library for Local History, Boulder, CO

However, when it came to the alignment of the Boulder Creek park at the Jungle, he excluded the lots along Water Street from his proposed taking. “On the north side of the creek from 11th to 9th Street the taking line would be about parallel with the creek, starting from 11th Street on the line of the alley as laid out and meeting 9th Street just north of the angle where the latter turns to go over the bridge. A row of lots would be left between this taking line and the railroad and they would have frontage on the embankment roadway.”

But the Jungle and the people who lived there faced other issues. The forces of the temperance movement joined with the Improvers and others to elect a new city council in 1907. They campaigned on the notion that the future of the university was at risk if Boulder had a reputation as a saloon town. The council ordered saloons closed and passed an ordinance forbidding the sale of liquor in the town or within one mile of city limits. 1907 is often pointed to as the official end of prostitution, gambling, and saloons in Boulder. Local attitudes about the poor folks who made their home in the Jungle were uniformly negative.

With the passage of a local option law in the state legislature in 1907, Boulder citizens voted 2,495 to 1,124 in 1909 to officially make Boulder dry. This was reaffirmed in elections in 1911, 1912, 1914, 1916, and 1918. Even with the end of prohibition in the United States in 1933, the City of Boulder remained dry until 1967.

And so, we return to FLO Jr.’s Preliminary Plan of Proposed Park Improvements along Boulder Creek, produced in support of the failed city bond election in 1923. His plan shows a continuous park from 9th Street to 12th Street, from Water Street to Boulder Creek with a proposed location for a city hall facing 12th Street.

Clearance of most of the buildings in the Jungle occurred in 1919, and in 1921 the *Boulder Daily Camera* reported that the city purchased all the land except three lots lying between 11th and 9th Streets, the railroad tracks and Boulder Creek. And even after the failure of the bonds for the Boulder Creek plan, it was reported in 1928 that the city had purchased the remaining property between 10th and 11th Streets, two frame houses and outhouses.

More research is needed, but clearly the community vision for the development of the park along Boulder Creek had evolved from the more limited improvement suggested in the 1910 report to the active clearance of a much larger area including all of the land north of the Creek and south of Water Street.

We have been reminded in Elizabeth Hope Cushing’s new biography of FLO Jr. of his own racism as exhibited by his advice to developers on the use of restrictive covenants to exclude “non-Caucasians” in master planned communities, including in two communities within which he resided. This has been hard to square with his father’s values concerning social justice.⁷

Olmsted’s writing in the Boulder report calls out “gypsies or other campers,” those who present a “rather unattractive class of occupancy,” and contrasts “tramps” with “decent people.” But the Gypsy camp was a real thing, and he uses their practice of “gathering and turning loose their animals to graze” as a positive example of ways in which land along the Creek could be managed without the cost of “an artificial clipped lawn.” No overt racial language is used in the report and he speaks to the need for public parks to provide their benefits to “the great body of citizens” using “a co-operative, democratic method of attaining these ends.”

⁷ Elizabeth Hope Cushing, *Beauty, Efficiency, and Economy – A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., - Landscape Architect, Planner, and Conservationist*, Northern Liberties Press, Old City Publishing Inc., Philadelphia, PA, 2021

One thing we have learned through the recent discussions of race and equity is the systemic nature of racism. It is hard to separate the worthy ends sought by the Boulder City Improvement Association and their advisor Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. from their “built in” notions of just who should be the proper beneficiaries of those improvements. Full development of this stretch of Boulder Creek area as a park and civic center was to happen quite a bit later. The city hall, known locally as the Municipal Building, in the location Olmsted suggested, was dedicated in 1952, and a new library was later developed due west near 10th Street in 1961.

Looking at the Boulder Creek area included in FLO Jr.’s. 1923 plan today, one is struck by the similarities to the actual park improvements made. While the 1923 bond issue would have created the park in one move, and the particulars of the executed improvements sometimes vary significantly from FLO Jr.’s vision, they are remarkably similar. The improvement of Boulder Creek occurred in fits and starts, but the essence of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.’s continuous greenway has been realized.