

# Fairsted

by Cynthia Levinson



**Olmsted's home, Fairsted, was acquired by the National Park Service and is open to the public.**

**F**rederick Law Olmsted applied his beliefs about simple, natural-looking public spaces to his private life. He said that “no great town can long exist without great suburbs.” In his opinion, it was essential to develop neighborhoods where families could garden yet also easily reach work and culture in the city. So, in 1881, Olmsted moved his family and business from New York City to Brookline, Massachusetts. In this Boston suburb, he could enjoy open land, visit with friends, and work on his latest major project that was taking shape nearby (see page 28).

Olmsted had his eye on a charming 1810 farmhouse located on two fertile acres. But two sisters occupied it. So Olmsted's stepson, John Charles Olmsted, built a separate house for the women behind the old farmhouse. Olmsted's youngest son, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.,

known as “Rick,” was 13 when they moved in in 1883. Olmsted named his new home at 99 Warren Street “Fairsted.”

The house came with indoor plumbing and hot running water—unusual features at the time. Olmsted modernized it even more by switching from gas lights to electric ones. But he kept the coal furnace and chutes and all 12 fireplaces. He also added living spaces, including a gracious glass-walled conservatory that jutted into the garden. Every suburban home, he believed, should have “attractive open-air apartments.”

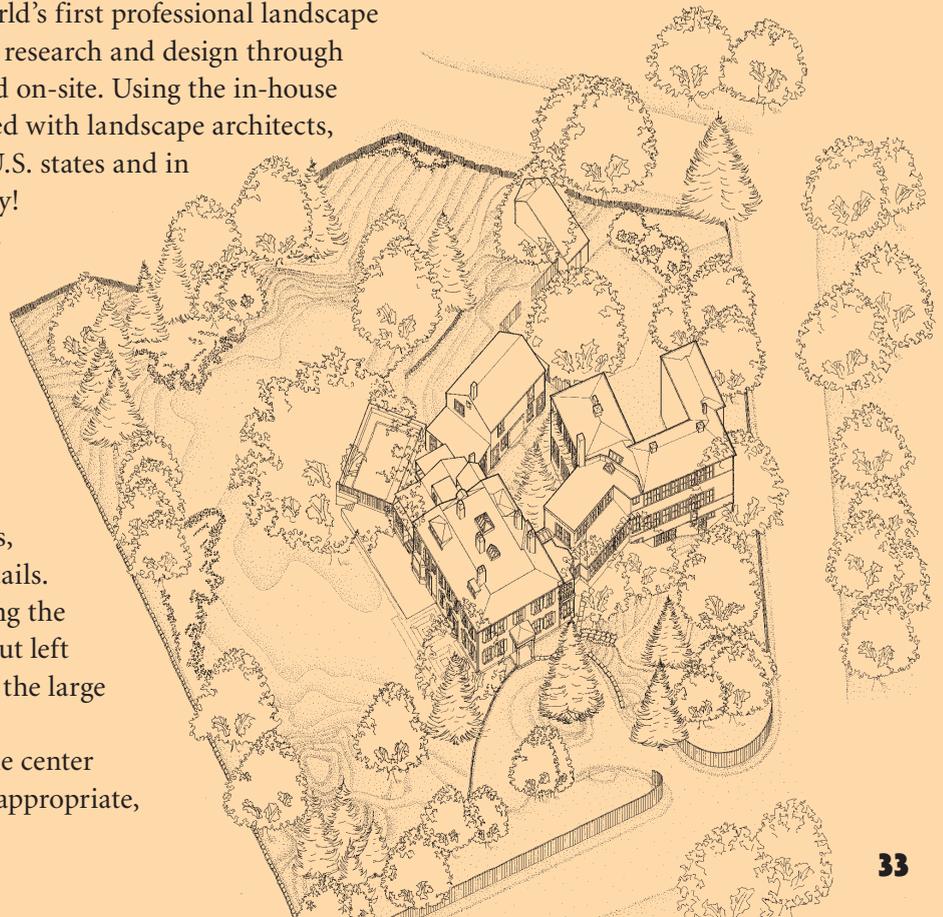
Olmsted wanted to both live and work at Fairsted. Between 1889 and 1925, he and his sons attached an office to the home and converted the barn into a model shop for their landscape work. Olmsted and his sons created the world’s first professional landscape architecture practice. All work, from research and design through drafting and printing plans, occurred on-site. Using the in-house studio and library, apprentices studied with landscape architects, who developed plans for sites in 44 U.S. states and in Canada. Fairsted buzzed with activity!

The master architect really put his ideas to work outdoors—to make his personal surroundings more pleasurable. Because he liked open spaces, Olmsted removed stands of old fruit trees. Rather than plant flowerbeds, he grouped plants irregularly. This way, he and his visitors could appreciate expansive vistas, rather than become distracted by details. He also massed trees and shrubs along the boundaries to seclude the property but left openings to “borrow” the view from the large estate next door.

A stately American elm grew in the center of the lawn. This tree was especially appropriate,



**ABOVE:** The draft room at Fairsted once bustled with as many as 70 employees.  
**BELOW:** Fairsted developed into a compound of buildings, where Olmsted lived and worked.





Weakened by Dutch elm disease, the 200-year-old Olmsted elm was removed in March 2011. The National Park Service plans to replace it with a clone.

since *Olmsted* means “place of the elms.” In creating a tamed but natural-looking environment, Olmsted said about Fairsted, “I enjoy this suburban country beyond expression.”

In 1893, a journalist praised Fairsted as a “home as beautiful, as thoroughly in accord with all of nature’s happiest little dreams . . . as the great park in the center of the Nation’s metropolis.” Olmsted’s private home was considered as beautiful as Central Park!

When Olmsted retired in 1895, his sons John Charles and Rick took over the firm, eventually calling it Olmsted Brothers. The family moved from Fairsted in the 1930s and later sold the business, which remained there until 1979. 🌳

Now there’s  
a tree worth  
climbing!



## TO THE RESCUE!

**W**hen the National Park Service (NPS) acquired Frederick Law Olmsted’s home, Fairsted, in 1980, it also assumed responsibility for a brick storage room attached to the house. In it were about 140,000 rolled-up drawings and 66,000 photographs. Some of the material dated from 1860. Over time, the artifacts had crumbled, and the room had become a mess.

Today, NPS staff help interpret Olmsted’s personal and professional life at Fairsted, which has become Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. The site recently went through several years of preservation construction. During this time, the grounds remained open for tours. Fairsted itself will reopen in the fall of 2012 with new exhibits, a book store, and the Olmsted Archives, which contains nearly a million photographs, maps, planting lists, and other landscape-related papers.

For younger visitors, the Education Center in the former barn offers Junior Rangers, ages 5 to 12, the chance to explore the home and grounds. In cooperation with local public schools, the Good Neighbors program introduces third graders to landscape design. Kids even make a 3-D model of a park! For more information about Fairsted today, check out [www.nps.gov/frla/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/frla/index.htm) and [friendsoffairsted.org](http://friendsoffairsted.org). —C.L.