

*Three  
Landscapes*

An excerpt from  
*Olmsted and Yosemite*

**ROLF DIAMANT  
ETHAN CARR**

If we can re-make the Government, abolish Slavery & get the Central Park well under [way] for our descendants, we shall have done a work worthy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

— Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, August 1861

**In 1862, Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Boston doctor, writer, and “autocrat of the breakfast table,” visited the new Central Park in New York.** He was in the city to retrieve his son, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., recently wounded at the battle of Antietam. Holmes commented on the sinuous pathways that wound through the park, passing near shaded glacial outcrops and open meadows framed by the growing grid of city streets. “The hips and bones of Nature,” he observed, “stick out here and there in the shape of rocks which give character to the scenery.... The roads were fine, the sheets of water beautiful, the swans elegant in their deportment, the grass green and as short as a fast horse’s winter coat.” Though it was still unfinished—and the country was still gripped by its greatest and most violent crisis—that year more than two million people visited the urban landscape which had been designed and built under the direction of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.

While New York was opening Central Park to the public, almost eight hundred miles to the south the small coastal town of Port Royal, South Carolina, was a world apart. The flatness of the Carolina Lowcountry that spread out around Port Royal was unbroken except for island forests of moss-draped oaks and plain scrub pine. In 1852, Olmsted, then traveling through the antebellum South to report on conditions for *The New York Times*, had described the Lowcountry landscape as a “forest of pines ... on one side ... on the other was a continued succession of very large fields, of rich dark soil—evidently reclaimed swamp-land—cultivated ... in Sea Island cotton.... Beyond them, a flat surface of still lower land, with a silver thread of water curling through it, extended, Holland-like, to the horizon.” Large swaths of this vast wetland had been drained and diked at a terrible human cost by enslaved people who worked the network of plantations growing rice, indigo, and the lucrative sea cotton.

In November 1861, a year before Holmes recorded his impressions of Central Park, the Port Royal–Hilton

Head region and surrounding coastal islands were seized and occupied by Federal military forces. Tens of thousands of freedpeople stayed behind as plantation owners and overseers fled to the Confederate-controlled interior. The ranks of those who remained in the Union-occupied coastal enclaves were swelled by refugees from nearby plantations seeking freedom and sanctuary. Declared by Congress as “contraband” of war, their future status as Americans was yet to be determined. But it was clear that what was happening at Port Royal and the rest of the Lowcountry was nothing less than what Lincoln would later describe in his Gettysburg Address as “a new birth of freedom.”

On the other side of the continent from Central Park and Port Royal, almost three thousand miles overland and more than six thousand miles by sea and across the Isthmus of Panama, was another landscape: a deep gorge embedded in California’s Sierra Nevada. The sheer verticality of Yosemite Valley set it apart from almost anywhere else on earth. Immense walls of multi-hued granite, theatrically lit by ephemeral shafts of invading sunlight, were streaked with the timeless stains of cascading waters. Unlike the exposed openness of the southeastern coastline, the forested floor of Yosemite Valley was enclosed and verdant. In the early 1850s, white settlers invaded the territory of the valley’s Indigenous inhabitants, Southern Sierra Miwok, also known as the Ahwahneechee. Militiamen burned their villages and drove them from the region. Small numbers of Native people gradually returned to the valley to reestablish a tenuous existence that lasted into the early twentieth century. As travelers’ descriptions and photographs of this majestic

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Photographs of Yosemite Valley are from a group of 30 mammoth-plate albumen prints by Carleton Watkins, 1861.  
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landscape made their way east in the midst of the Civil War, Congress considered the unprecedented step of setting aside Yosemite out of the public domain as a park for the people of the United States for all time.

The fate of these three landscapes—Central Park, Port Royal, and Yosemite—would become linked in unexpected ways. It can be argued that the 1864 act of Congress granting Yosemite Valley and the adjacent Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias to the State of California to be held in trust for the people of the United States was in part a consequence of the creation of New York’s Central Park and in part a consequence of the social revolution taking place in Port Royal. Central Park provided the inspiration and example for public park making and scenic landscape preservation on a scale never before attempted in the nation. What was happening on the Southern Sea Islands was representative of a transformative moment in America, when the momentum for emancipation and reconstruction would trigger a broader agenda of reforms. Those reforms would redefine and extend the rights and benefits of American citizenship and would come to include guaranteed public access to places such as Yosemite. Events occurring in each of these places—New York, South Carolina, and California—would enable the idea of national parks to gain a tenuous but portentous foothold in America. One common thread running through them all was the peripatetic life of Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903).

Best known today as a landscape architect and the codesigner of Central Park, Olmsted, after extensive travels in the South, served the Union during the Civil War as executive director of the United States Sanitary Commission providing medical aid to wounded soldiers. In 1865 he wrote a report intended to guide the future management of Yosemite Valley as a public park and in the process laid the intellectual foundation for a system of national parks. During a remarkable period of national reinvention, Olmsted appears repeatedly, in the contexts of urban design, scenic preservation, and social justice. Obscured over time, these connections deserve renewed consideration today.

This book offers a fresh perspective on the creation of national parks in the United States by connecting the parks movement to the dramatic transformation of the United States brought about by the Civil War. It

places California’s Yosemite Valley, the first federally authorized park, in the larger framework of war-related legislative and constitutional reforms that significantly broadened people’s relationship to their national government and raised their expectations of government’s role improving public life. These momentous changes were contingent on extinguishing slavery and remaking the fatally fractured political system that supported it.

In this context, we examine Olmsted’s formative experience working on Central Park against the background of the approaching Civil War. When Central Park was conceived, American cities were growing into diverse, industrialized metropolises with profound environmental and social problems. This challenged the viability of the urban future that Northern states, in particular, had embraced. If cities could not be made more healthful and if their increasingly diverse populations could not be successfully assimilated, urbanization of the nation threatened to be its undoing. It was during the years leading up to the war that Central Park took shape as an embodiment of republican ideals that might bind together the nation during its greatest social and political crisis.

While Central Park was still under construction, Olmsted wrote the “Preliminary Report upon the Yosemite and Big Tree Grove,” otherwise known as the “Yosemite Report,” described as “one of the most profound and original philosophical statements to emerge from the American conservation movement.”Olmsted was called upon to write this report in 1864, after Congress granted Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove—fifteen square miles of granite domes, towering waterfalls, and giant sequoias—to the State of California “for public use, resort, and recreation ... inalienable for all time.”Olmsted used the Yosemite Report not only to apply his park design ideas, honed at Central Park, to the magnificent landscape of Yosemite but also to share his vision for a reconstructed postwar nation where great public parks were keystone institutions of a liberal democracy. He stated in the report that he hoped the country would emerge from four years of bloodshed and social upheaval with renewed dedication to the principles of “equity and benevolence.” He believed that the government had a compelling obligation to support great public parks on an equal footing with all other major duties.



In the summer of 1865, Olmsted laid out his ideas in the 7,500-word document (reprinted as part of this volume) affirming a nexus between park making and the advancement of civilization. The concept of national parks implicit in Olmsted's report would begin to gain traction once two significant developments occurred. Congress first had to set aside land taken from the public domain to establish a public reservation. Second, the government had to be prepared to assume responsibility for its permanent protection. In the Yosemite Report, Olmsted carefully chronicled the first development—the passage of the Yosemite Act one year earlier—and presaged the second—the establishment of Yellowstone National Park seven years later.

In a letter to Olmsted in the fall of 1861, Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, social reformer and abolitionist, made a remarkably prescient association between emancipation, government reform, and the creation of public parks. Shaw was the mother-in-law of Olmsted's close friend George Curtis and wife of the philanthropist Francis Shaw. When the war broke out, Sarah Shaw collected money and supplies for Union Army medical relief and corresponded with Olmsted in his newly appointed capacity as general secretary of the Sanitary Commission. Shaw's letter, however, concerned more than medical relief. She shared her anxiety about possible European intervention in the war and about the South's "treacherous abominable deceit in preparing so long & with such deeply infamous plotting to secede." She noted that she and some friends had recently visited Central Park, a "lovely place," where "we forgot for a while the war & all its horrors." She complimented Olmsted on his work there, telling him "how fortunate you are to do so much for posterity."

But Sarah Shaw was already looking beyond victory on the battlefield to a future that would justify the terrible war that was unfolding before her eyes. In her letter she framed the conflict as an opportunity to reinvent the nation and replace a political system that had long sanctioned slavery. "If we can re-make the Government, abolish Slavery & get the Central Park well under [way] for our descendants," she wrote Olmsted, "we shall have done a work worthy of the 19th century & ought to be willing to suffer." Her suffering was not rhetorical. Two years later her twenty-five-year-old son, Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts

Regiment, died alongside more than one hundred Black soldiers in an assault on Fort Wagner, on Morris Island, South Carolina.

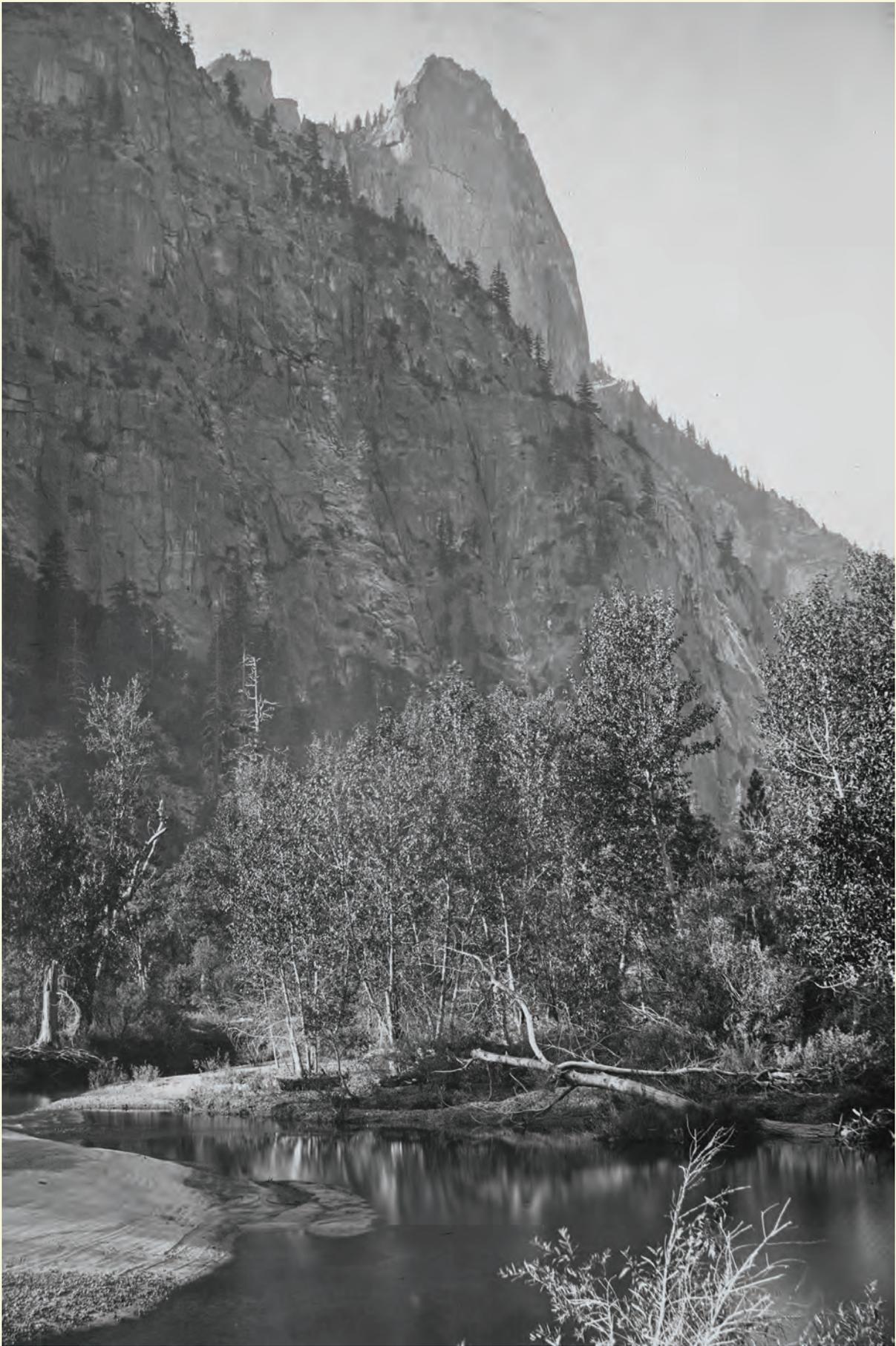
Shaw's letter was written very early in the war, when putting down the rebellion and reestablishing the Union were paramount objectives for most Northern loyalists. Her choice of words—"re-make the Government"—implied that her goal was not only the restoration of the federal union but its replacement with something better. Her vision was also associated with the creation of a great public park, an achievement representative of the kind of civic progress she wished for the country. These accomplishments were interdependent and together represented for Shaw her highest ambitions for nineteenth-century America. There is no record of Olmsted's reply, but they held the same aspirations. In his 1865 Yosemite Report, Olmsted specifically identified continued work at Central Park—along with construction of the Capitol dome in Washington and the establishment of a public park at Yosemite—as essential projects, in the midst of war, that affirmed the efficacy and value of republican government and the necessity of defending it.

This book is inspired by these words of Sarah Shaw, expressing a conviction shared by Olmsted that park making, abolition, and the reform of government would emerge out of the cauldron of civil war as foundations of a united and improved republic.



**Hope for a quick Union victory or a negotiated settlement with the rebellious states faded after a year of escalating civil war.** A sobering realization set in as casualties mounted: there would be no return to the antebellum status quo. "I would rather go through the farce of acknowledging Southern independence," Olmsted remarked in a letter, "than have the Union ever again as it was."

Early that spring, a war-hardened president and Congress, encouraged by military successes along the Southern coast and in the Mississippi Valley, were ready to advance a sweeping Republican legislative agenda that had been delayed by the outbreak of war. A war that was begun on the premise of "saving the union" was evolving inexorably into the "violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle" that Lincoln



had once hoped to avoid. This Republican agenda expanded the purposes of the war, enacting a vision of a “more perfect union” that eventually extended to a far-reaching national program of emancipation—what the historians David Blight and James McPherson described as “our second revolution.” The war represented, in Blight’s words, “the destruction and death of that first American Republic and the invention and beginning of the second Republic.” The withdrawal of Southern legislators from Congress removed a roadblock that had long held Republican initiatives in check. The eleven Southern states that left the Union no longer stood in the way of a Republican Party that believed, according to Blight, in “energetic, interventionist government” and was prepared to become “an agent of change ... of the economy and ... the maximization of human equality.” Lincoln and his congressional allies were ready to intervene on a continental scale, on behalf of emancipation and free labor, agrarian opportunity, national improvements, and public education.

... Land grants proved a pivotal mechanism for advancing this broader agenda of wartime Republican legislative reform. In the spring of 1864, a relatively modest land-grant bill was introduced in Congress to protect California’s Yosemite Valley as a public reservation in the spirit of Central Park. There was little debate. The Lincoln administration was beholden to Thomas Starr King and other influential friends of Yosemite, including Olmsted, for their steadfast allegiance to the Union, support of emancipation, and financial contributions to the war effort. This accumulated political capital created a favorable environment for the Yosemite proposal in Washington. The difficult reelection campaign Lincoln was facing in fall 1864, for which he needed the support of California’s Republicans, was another compelling reason to endorse the Yosemite legislation.

Similar to the Land-Grant College and Homestead Acts that preceded it, the Yosemite Act achieved a desired civic improvement by the granting of public land. Olmsted later explained the Yosemite Grant as more than a land grant to a state, or as [California] Senator [John] Conness had awkwardly described it, a legislative accommodation for “various gentlemen in California.” Olmsted more accurately labeled the grant “a trust from the whole nation,” explicitly preserving Yosemite for all the people of the United States. The California state geologist

and future Yosemite commissioner, Josiah Whitney, emphasized the singularity of the transfer. “This was not an ordinary gift of land,” Whitney pointed out, “to be sold and the proceeds used as desired; but a trust imposed on the State, of the nature of a solemn compact, forever binding after having been once accepted.” If California had declined to accept the trust, the reservation would have remained with the federal government. Less than two months after the bill was introduced, it was passed by Congress and was signed into law by President Lincoln on June 30, 1864.

Many historians who have written about the Yosemite Grant have failed to recognize the context of the act as a wartime measure. Some categorized the grant as an inexplicable anomaly, a departure from established public land policy by distracted lawmakers and having nothing at all to do with the war. To the contrary, the Yosemite Grant was a direct consequence of the war and related to the political and social revolution that the conflict fueled. The grant was not an anomaly but an embodiment of the ongoing process of remaking government. Nor was the measure passed by an inattentive Congress distracted by wartime crises. The late spring and early summer of 1864 were indeed a perilous time for the United States as it entered the fourth year of civil war. Military offensives in Virginia and Georgia had incurred staggering battlefield losses.

Lincoln’s confidence in his own chances in the coming fall elections was badly shaken. But Congress’s action on Yosemite can be interpreted as an intentional assertion of a steadfast belief in the eventual Union victory and an acknowledgment of the political debt owed to California loyalists, including the recently deceased King. Like other pieces of reform legislation moving through Congress, the Yosemite bill affirmed the government’s capacity to function and entertain new ideas and initiatives even while operating under great duress. The Yosemite Grant can also be seen as another small component of the government’s public land policy in the American West—one of a series of legislative actions that included the Homestead, Land-Grant College, and Pacific Railway Acts. For obvious reasons, Republicans in Congress had long supported legislation that would strengthen ties with Western states and territories and promote national unity.

These policies facilitated the westward migration during the war of nearly one million new settlers.



For those who had recently emigrated to America or desired a fresh start, these policies were welcome. But Indigenous people were never included among the beneficiaries of this “new birth of freedom.” In Yosemite Valley and across the United States, tribes were forced out of ancestral lands repurposed to expedite Republican land policies that the Lincoln administration championed. The creation of parks such as Yosemite came at the expense of Native people’s exile and suffering. Early writers who described Yosemite Valley as untrammelled wild nature willfully overlooked generations of human occupation. Despite expressions of humanitarian concern for Indians found in Olmsted’s writings, for him, like other nineteenth-century conservationists, Native Americans remained largely invisible. As time went on, Indigenous tribes across the West would endure further displacement and dispossession tied to other landscape preservation efforts.

The intended beneficiaries of land grants, mostly white farming families whose husbands and sons were fighting for the Union in large numbers, were given new opportunities consistent with overall Republican efforts to redefine and expand rewards of American citizenship. These rewards were closely identified with Union victory, explicitly repudiating the antebellum American republic that assiduously protected the economic interests of a small slave-holding elite. Lincoln advanced a new, expansive vision of a republic based on emancipation and the establishment of a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” When the Department of Agriculture was established in 1862, he declared that the new agency had been created “for the more immediate benefit of a large class of our most valuable citizens.” Lincoln and the Republicans offered a deal that the historian Ari Kelman described as “fight for Lincoln and later for liberty, and as fair recompense for ... patriotic sacrifices receive an education, access to expertise, and land connected by transportation to markets.” There were other strong incentives to embrace this deal. Voting for Lincoln and, however reluctantly, for emancipation, introduced Black troops onto the battlefield to help shoulder the burden of fighting and hasten the day the rebellion would be put down and the war would be won.

The government’s reservation of Yosemite’s spectacular landscape for “public use, resort and recreation”

was another part of this bargain. It was a modest but consequential component of a much broader program of national improvements that together with the ending of slavery was at the core of the Republican argument for fighting on to victory.



**In the twentieth century, historians and officials obscured the links between municipal and national parks, favoring separate origins and inventors of a “national park idea.”** But Central Park and

Yosemite Valley were both products of the practice of park making that Olmsted, Vaux, and others were pioneering. Both epitomized the new institution of the public park in the United States. Both embodied the midcentury Republican ideology of improvement, progress, and union so important before, during, and after the Civil War. The public figures involved in popularizing Yosemite in California, such as King, [Horace] Greeley, [Frederick] Billings, [Carleton] Watkins, and Olmsted, were from the East and at the very least knew Central Park well and approved of everything it represented. Circumstances placed Olmsted in California just at the moment that the future management of Yosemite was being seriously considered. He was the right person in the right place at the right time to address the new park’s larger meaning and context in relation to the outcome of the war and the country’s future.

Olmsted seized the opportunity to address much more than design suggestions for the new park, using the Yosemite Report to place before the American people his particular vision for parks in postwar America at a pivotal moment in the nation’s history. The historian and former National Park Service director Roger Kennedy marveled at the report’s “breadth of comprehension,” which could “unite discussion of the Statue of Liberty atop the Capitol dome, the emancipation of the slaves, the destruction of the earth of the South by the plantation system, the prospect of equally disastrous destruction of the Yosemite Valley and the giant sequoias, public education through the Morrill Act, and homestead legislation.” The Yosemite Report established the basic scaffolding for further development of the American park movement and an emerging idea for national parks. The report affirmed for the first time every citizen’s entitlement to enjoy the nation’s most spectacular landscapes—and the responsibility of government to make it possible.

Olmsted was also keenly interested in looking at the larger context of Yosemite, beyond the particular circumstances of the grant itself, establishing Congress's responsibility for the protection of future parks in other scenic areas of America. A war was just concluding which reaffirmed the legitimacy of national sovereignty. The federal government was becoming the guarantor of individual rights that had previously been the responsibility of state governments to interpret and protect as they saw fit. Among those rights, asserted Olmsted, was the right of unfettered access to the scenery of great landscapes such as Yosemite. He made clear that it

was the duty of the national government, not a local or state government, to ensure that the "enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country and the means of recreation associated with them" be "laid open to the use of the body of the people." This was a uniquely federal charge, comparable in many ways to the nation's responsibility for maintaining military installations. "Like certain defensive points upon our coast," he contended in the report, Yosemite Valley "shall be held solely for public purposes." Here was the intellectual foundation for building a national park system. ✱



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#### On the cover of this issue

Climate change creates conditions conducive to larger, more frequent fires, particularly in the American West. As a result, historic structures and artifacts are at greater risk of fire damage. The Bent's Fort Fire started on the morning of April 12, 2022. Approximately 85% of the national historic site's 800 acres burned. Thanks to the efforts of fire crews, the reconstructed adobe fort was undamaged. | [NATIONAL PARK SERVICE](#)