



U.S. CAPITOL
Visitor Center

Reviving the Historic Frederick Law Olmsted Landscape

Frederick Law Olmsted was charged in 1874 with developing a comprehensive landscape scheme for the U.S. Capitol. Olmsted’s major concern was the visual presentation of the Capitol and the support of its daily functions. In his submission for the Architect of the Capitol’s annual report, he wrote that “The ground is in design part of the Capitol, but in all respects subsidiary to the central structure. The primary motives are therefore that, first, of convenience of business of and with the Congress and, second, that of supporting and presenting to advantage a great national monument.”

The Capitol Visitor Center landscape design preserves to a great extent the intentions of the original Olmsted plan and revives the grounds as a pedestrian-friendly environment that once again accentuates the focus upon the Capitol and its majestic dome.

Two allees of Tulip Poplar trees have been planted along the center promenade (East Capitol Street Extension) to re-establish a character-defining element of the Olmsted plan – a tree-lined central view of the Capitol.

In addition, the park-like setting, defined by curving approaches to the Capitol, has been revived. Historic lanterns, lamp-posts and seat walls were carefully disassembled prior to excavation and have now been reinstalled in their original locations. Two large historic oval fountains (1876), dormant for years, will be revived as misting fountains.

Granite paving stones have replaced the asphalt parking lot that dominated the East Capitol Grounds before construction began. Gently sloping approaches to the Capitol Visitor Center entrances restore the sense of procession to the Capitol.



Original Olmsted fountains, installed first in the 1870s, were removed prior to construction and restored to their original glory.

While some changes to the original Olmsted landscape were necessary, including accommodations for persons with disabilities, the modifications overall revitalize the historic landscape, reestablish the grand views intended in the original plan, and create a more gracious and respectful entrance to our nation’s Capitol. In addition, the new entrance approaches improve accessibility into the building for persons with disabilities and enhance the security of the building, its occupants, and the millions of people who visit the Capitol each year.



Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted imposed curving pathways on the Capitol Grounds to break “the tyranny of the grid” and to create a park-like setting that would not compete with the formality of the Capitol. Those pathways, which had become parking lots in the 20th century, have been restored as pedestrian only approaches to the Capitol with the construction of the Capitol Visitor Center.



Historic lanterns designed by Olmsted in the 1870s have been restored and reinstalled in their original locations.