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Library Research Entry Reflection

My submission was completed as a part of the History Department's Senior Seminar class. The project required near to a semester's worth of research including the examination of both primary and secondary sources. Throughout the process, Bethel's library databases as well as CLICnet and Iliad were invaluable resources.

In view of the limited time frame in which I had to work, I was ultimately surprised by the number of books that I used for this project. A number of biographies have been written about Frederick Law Olmsted as well as multiple surveys about his work and I was able to track several of each genre through CLICnet. The fact that so many results appeared on the first pages after my query of simply "Frederick Law Olmsted" made me realize that much indeed has been written about him and I needed only to take a sampling of what was available.

One of the first major assignments of the course intended to stimulate our research findings was a historiographical assessment of our topic. At the time, I was not yet certain of my paper's direction. It was as a result of studying this historiography, of tracing historians' treatment of Olmsted and his work, that I discovered my focus. One of the most exciting and arguably unique experiences of this research project was engaging in research to the point where I began to discern a conversation that historians were having with one another. One area of debate that piqued my interest concerned the social motivations with which Olmsted approached the park. My paper ultimately explored whether a spirit of inclusive democracy or elitist aristocracy characterized his vision for Central Park's design.

The bulk of my secondary research occurred during these initial months. In addition to using CLICnet for gaining access to my biographies and monographs, I also made use of several of the library's databases, including JSTOR and Expanded Academic ASAP, in order to find the scholarly articles that gave me other, more general discussions of Olmsted's life and the philosophy behind his works. One of the techniques that I learned to employ more effectively during this research project was making use of footnotes to find further sources. When the search words that I used failed to yield new links, I turned to the footnotes in books and articles already in my possession and looked for the sources listed. By the end of my research, I was familiar with many of the titles these authors used.

The library was also helpful in providing me access to my primary sources and reading them proved to be the most rewarding part of my research. CLICnet and Iliad were marvelous in providing me with all seven volumes of the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, two of which were especially important in the letters that they contained; in ordering these, the reference desk was also exceedingly helpful. Another book from the Hamline library contained a valuable set of speeches. These writings enabled me to look at the continuity as well as the subtle changes in Olmsted's thinking regarding parks and landscapes over the course of his career. Periodicals Archive Online also provided with a number of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* articles through which I was able to read the voices of New Yorkers who attended Central Park after it opened.

This project has given me a newfound respect for the amount of time and persistence that it requires to truly gain a thorough, comprehensive understanding of a specific topic, even one that is narrowly defined. It is the most interpretative paper that I have written and because I was responsible for drawing a new conclusion from the information before me, I felt a keen sense of duty to read as exhaustively as my time-frame would allow in order that my research base was

wide and accurate. The fact that the project was interpretive, however, helped me to realize that I was in search of a reasonably supported argument instead of indefatigable fact. While indeed my conclusions were supported by my research findings, I ultimately applied my own reflections and understanding to form a new interpretation. My conclusion was different from those that I had read about. All of them, however, reveal careful consideration of Olmsted and his life and each merely adds to the nuances that characterize our cultural understanding of this subject. This project has given me new insight into the interpretive nature of history but also an appreciation for the degree of diligence that a careful treatment of historical sources requires.