

Book illuminates Olmsted parks' origins

By Steve Wiser

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Louisvillians love our Olmsted parks. And Sam Thomas loved Louisville. This love affair has produced a wonderful new book: "The Origins of Louisville's Olmsted Parks & Parkways." Everyone who enjoys our beautiful landscaped oases will appreciate Thomas' account of how they were achieved.

This book is also the culmination of a 50-year career that established Sam Thomas as Louisville's most distinguished historian.

With a degree in chemistry from the University of Louisville, Thomas put his meticulous research training to excellent use, seeking hard-to-find facts throughout the city's attics and archives. This pursuit resulted in over 20 books documenting all facets of local history, from George Rogers Clark and Old Louisville to architectural design and Crescent Hill. Thomas excelled at detailing the personalities and events that have shaped today's Louisville.

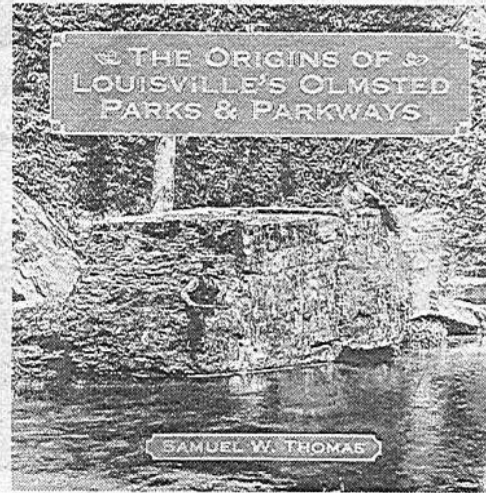
It is fitting that Thomas, who passed away one year ago,

used all of his expertise to create his final major book on our landmark Olmsted park system.

While planning of the Olmsted parks is the main focus, the key word in the book title is "Origins." Beginning with the initial land surveyors in the early 1870s, Thomas chronicles all of the efforts to provide local "pleasure grounds." Elm Tree Garden, Preston's Woods, Woodland Gardens and Baxter Square were several outdoor gathering spots prior to 1890.

Joseph Paxton's layout for Birkenhead Park in Liverpool, England, which opened in 1847, is referenced throughout as the prototype park used by Frederick Law Olmsted, Andrew Jackson Downing, Calvert Vaux and other notable designers of the period. Most Louisvillians believe Olmsted just waved his magic wand and the parks appeared. Thomas, however, carefully documents the many park efforts that preceded Olmsted's arrival in 1891.

There has always been debate as to how much Olmsted actually designed the parks as opposed to his stepson John C. Olmsted, or which local civic leader had the most influence.



The Origins of Louisville's Olmsted Parks & Parkways

By Samuel W. Thomas, Holland Brown Books, 253 pp./\$50

Thomas does clarify who did what and probably stirs the pot a bit more with such findings. Several surprising twists involve how the park commissioners came very close to not hiring Olmsted, and why they almost located Cherokee Park west of Bardstown Road. How the parks were named is detailed along with the Olmsted firm's insistence that the parks be only "passive" environments without "ball and golf grounds." Thomas notes how museums, a zoo, and even sculptures were proposed for the parks.

There are some aspects to the park planning that Thomas didn't expand upon.

One such missing area is the fascinating backgrounds of the strategic civic leaders like Andrew Cowan, John Castleman and Charles Jacob. Thomas hints at their distinctive personalities, but doesn't provide context to these complex relationships. It's amazing the parks were even built due to the histories of the primary participants.

Thomas concludes the book with a review of the Olmsted firm's extensive non-park work locally along with how urban planning eventually resulted in today's acclaimed Waterfront Park.

Sam Thomas was an extremely talented historian whose life's work provided our community an invaluable resource of reference material. "The Origins of Louisville's Olmsted Parks & Parkways" is a crowning achievement. It is a book all Louisvillians will love.

Steve Wiser is a local architect and historian. His latest book, "Historic Houses of Louisville," has just been released.