



*Letter from Woodstock*  
Rolf Diamant

## Lincoln, Olmsted, and Yosemite: Time for a Closer Look

THIS YEAR IS THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE YOSEMITE GRANT and the act of Congress that set aside Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove for “public use, resort, and recreation ... inalienable for all time.” This “grant” of federal lands transferred Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove to the state of California, yet the 1864 Yosemite Act represents the first significant reservation of public land by the Congress of the United States—to be preserved in perpetuity for the benefit of the entire nation. As Joseph Sax affirms, “The national parks were born at that moment.”<sup>1</sup> In 1890, Congress incorporated Yosemite State Park into a much larger Yosemite National Park.

The Yosemite Conservancy is marking the 150th anniversary of the Yosemite Grant by releasing a new publication, *Seed of the Future: Yosemite and the Evolution of the National Park Idea*, authored by the writer and filmmaker Dayton Duncan.<sup>2</sup> The handsomely designed and generously illustrated book revisits the Yosemite Grant and the “evolution of the national park idea” and should attract a wide readership. This message is important, as the national significance of the Yosemite story has been obscured by time, incomplete documentation, and often-contradictory interpretations. A clearer understanding of the people and events surrounding the Yosemite Grant, in such a popular format, is particularly timely, not only for the celebration of Yosemite’s sesquicentennial, but also for the approaching 100th anniversary of the National Park Service (NPS) in 2016.

It should be pointed out that Duncan is not the first to recognize the significance of the Yosemite Grant. He is preceded most notably by Sax (“America’s National Parks: Their Principles, Purposes and Prospects,” 1976), Alfred Runte (*National Parks and the American Experience*, 1979), Ethan Carr (“Park, Forest, and Wilderness,” 2000), and Dwight Pitcaithley (*Philosophical Underpinnings of the National Park Idea*, 2001).<sup>3</sup>

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I am using this seventh Letter from Woodstock to consider a number of still-unsettled questions surrounding the Yosemite Grant and the roles of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. I don't as a rule footnote these essays, however, with this Letter I am making an exception.

### **In the midst of a terrible civil war, how did the 1864 Yosemite legislation get enacted?**

Early in 1864, Israel Ward Raymond, the Pacific Coast representative of the New York-based Central American Transit Company, wrote California's US Senator John Conness requesting his help with legislation to protect Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove from private exploitation. Unfortunately, very little information has been found as to who or what motivated Raymond to send this letter. Some people consider Raymond's intervention and Conness's subsequent introduction of legislation as largely the initiative of two those individuals, and the passage of the Yosemite Grant through a wartime Congress as a stroke of fortuitous chance.

I think it can be argued that the Civil War played an outsized role in events surrounding the Yosemite Grant, as did, in no small measure, the extraordinary accomplishments of Thomas Starr King. King, a Unitarian clergyman in San Francisco, championed Yosemite in a series of articles he wrote for the *Boston Evening Transcript* entitled "A Vacation among the Sierras: Yosemite in 1860." Enthralled by his many visits to the valley, King once described Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as the "Yosemite of music."<sup>4</sup> A gifted orator, King was an outspoken opponent of slavery and an unwavering supporter of the Union. He played a central role in the contested but ultimately successful 1861 effort to turn back the forces of succession and neutrality and secure California's loyalty to the Union.

King's efforts in California in support of Union causes won him friends and admirers on both sides of the continent. His work on behalf of the Pacific Branch of the US Sanitary Commission helped to raise over a million dollars for wounded soldiers (almost one-fifth of the total contributions from all the northern states.) Though King would die of diphtheria before President Lincoln signed the Yosemite Act in June 1864, I would suggest that the Lincoln administration was deeply beholden to King and other influential California friends of Yosemite for their steadfast allegiance to the Union, their support for emancipation, and their financial contributions to the war effort. This accumulated political capital was probably instrumental in establishing a favorable environment in Washington for the Yosemite legislation's swift passage.<sup>5</sup>

There were, of course, other factors that added to this favorable environment, including the impact of photography, painting, and the written word. Carlton Watkins first photographed Yosemite in 1861 and portfolios of his stunning mammoth plates and stereo views of Yosemite were sent back east to key people and institutions, including the Goupil Gallery in New York City, where they were exhibited in 1862.<sup>6</sup> Albert Bierstadt, who saw the exhibit, would soon paint Yosemite Valley on a trip west that was sponsored by the Union Pacific Railroad in 1863. On the way, he stopped in San Francisco to dine with the King family.<sup>7</sup>

In the preface to his 1865 report on Yosemite, written only a year after the Yosemite Act was signed, Olmsted specifically acknowledges the role that art and photography played in the park's establishment. "It was during one of the darkest hours," Olmsted writes, "before Sherman had begun the march upon Atlanta or Grant his terrible movement through the

Wilderness, when the paintings of Bierstadt and the photographs of Watkins, both productions of the war time, had given to the people on the Atlantic some idea of the sublimity of the Yosemite.”<sup>8</sup>

### **What was President Lincoln’s role?**

There is no record of Lincoln’s personal involvement in any deliberations over the Yosemite bill. However, it is worth noting that a year earlier he had filled a Supreme Court vacancy with a Californian, Stephen J. Field, a friend of King, perhaps reflecting the crucial status of California in Lincoln’s larger political calculus. John Hay, Lincoln’s personal secretary, was certainly informed about Yosemite. Hay, a friend of Bierstadt, corresponded with the artist during his 1863 trip west (which also had support from the War Department.) In a letter to Hay, Bierstadt described Yosemite as a “Garden of Eden.”<sup>9</sup>

The Yosemite Grant has been described as an unexpected precedent that was out of step with previous policies of the federal government. “Senator John Conness planted his Yosemite Bill,” writes Duncan in *Seed of the Future*, “which proposed that Congress do the exact opposite of what it had been doing for all of its existence...”<sup>10</sup> While the Yosemite Grant was indeed in many ways groundbreaking, I think it may be useful to look at Yosemite in the context of a far-reaching realignment of government policies brought about by the war.

When Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill first introduced his Land Grant College Act in 1857, Senator Clement Clay of Alabama assailed the act’s proponents as “debauched and led astray.”<sup>11</sup> Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi asserted that the national government had absolutely no authority to make such land grants and if it did the government would be “warped so far from the path it had previously followed.”<sup>12</sup> There is every reason to believe that a grant of federal land for a park, like land grants to build colleges, would never have made it through the political system before Lincoln was elected president, the Congress reconstituted (with the departure of secessionist congressmen), and the social upheaval of the war.

By early 1862, after almost a year of escalating civil war, Lincoln and a wartime Congress confronted the sobering realization that there was not going to be a negotiated reunification that would somehow turn back the clock to a pre-war status quo. With this realization, they were now prepared to move forward with a republican legislative agenda, much of which had been on hold since Lincoln took office.<sup>13</sup> In his book *Republic of Nature*, Mark Fiege observes that “Lincoln did all he could to turn the conflict to a higher end. Improvement in its various forms became the means by which he prosecuted the war and preserved the Union...”<sup>14</sup> Intervention in public education, transportation, and agriculture, coupled with a commitment to freedom and emancipation, involved a fundamental redefinition and expansion of the government’s responsibilities. In this context, the reservation of a small but spectacularly scenic piece of land, set aside out of a huge federal estate for “public use, resort and recreation,” could be considered yet another interpretation of improvements that began with the Homestead Act, Pacific Railroad Act, and Morrill Land Grant College Act, and would eventually include the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment, and the Freedman’s Bureau Act.

Similar to the 1862 Morrill Act, the Yosemite Grant to California should be viewed not as anomaly, but an action generally consistent with policies of the Lincoln Administration.

Building on emancipation, Lincoln sought to redefine and expand the rewards of American citizenship at a time when greater and greater sacrifices were being called for on the battlefield. As Olmsted wrote in his 1865 report, the Yosemite Grant did not stand apart from the Union war effort; rather, it reflected how the war was progressively changing the role and expectations of the national government.

When the bill reached Lincoln's desk there was every reason for him to sign it, which he did.

### **What was Frederick Law Olmsted's role?**

When Olmsted, well known for his work with New York's Central Park and the US Sanitary Commission, arrived in California in 1863, he immediately sought out Thomas Starr King. Olmsted would come to share King's enthusiasm for Yosemite, and soon after the Yosemite Act was passed in 1864, California Governor Frederick Low appointed him chairman of the commission tasked with preparing a plan for the newly granted Yosemite lands. Even so, Victoria Rainey, an editor at the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Project, asserts that, based on available documentation, Olmsted was not directly involved in the passage of the Yosemite legislation.<sup>15</sup> Even the relevancy of Olmsted's prescient final report on Yosemite has been questioned, as his recommendations were never adopted.

Other historians, however, have suggested otherwise. Raymond's letter to Conness placed Olmsted's name at the head of a list of several prominent Californians to serve as future Yosemite commissioners. Advocating his bill on the floor of the Senate, Conness declared that "the application comes to us from various gentlemen in California, gentlemen of fortune, of taste and of refinement."<sup>16</sup> This assertion may have encouraged Kevin Starr<sup>17</sup> and Hans Huth, in particular, to conclude that the spirit if not the hand of Olmsted was clearly behind the legislation. As Huth said, "The men who were recommended as the first commissioners of the Yosemite grant are most likely those who helped to prepare the act."<sup>18</sup>

I think it is also a mistake to devalue or dismiss Olmsted's 1865 Yosemite Report because it was never acted upon or widely publicized. The report remains an extraordinary commentary on emerging perspectives and ideas shared by Olmsted and a small but influential number of his contemporaries—ideas that were to shape the future of parks for many years to come. Ethan Carr looks at the Yosemite Grant in the larger context of America's parks movement, particularly the early development of large municipal parks. Carr points out that Yosemite and New York City's Central Park share a common inspiration: "For Olmsted, public enjoyment provided the ultimate purpose and rationale for landscape preservation, whether at Central Park or Yosemite Valley. Preservation of a place, and the public's use of the place, were part of the same landscape ideal."<sup>19</sup> The Yosemite Grant represented the application of this landscape ideal on a large scale and was the first step, in Olmsted's words, for "establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people"—a prescription for our state and national park systems.

Perhaps Joseph Sax sums it up best, when he suggests that "[r]ather than merely picking over the sterile fragments of official history that have been left us, we should turn our attention to the aspirations of those who devoted their lives to persuading the American public of the efficacy and importance of parks. Within that small but influential group, one figure, Frederick Law Olmsted, stands out above all others."<sup>20</sup>

## Why is this history important to us now?

It is beyond the scope of this Letter to assess all the reasons why early NPS historical accounts have downplayed the significance of the 1864 Yosemite Act and the role of the Civil War. When these narratives were written in the early 20th century, the civil rights gains of the Civil War were being systematically rolled back and Civil War memory selectively erased. As Roger Kennedy observes, even the Lincoln Memorial, when it was dedicated in 1922, “was presented as a shrine not to emancipation but to the reconciliation of North and South. . . .”<sup>21</sup> Instead, beginning the story with Yellowstone in 1872 was perhaps viewed as safer and more politically palatable. “The belief that the national park idea,” writes Richard West Sellars in his book *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, “truly began around a wilderness campfire at the Madison Junction [during the 1870 Washburn/Doane expedition] evolved into a kind of creation myth. . . . Surely the national park concept deserved a “virgin birth”—under a night sky in the pristine American West, on a riverbank, and around a flaming campfire. . . .”<sup>22</sup>

Early establishment narratives for public agencies can have a lasting impact on how their mission and organizational values are formed and communicated to employees and the public. Reflecting on the persistence of this type of “first narrative,” the historian Ed Linenthal writes, “once a particular interpretation of an event takes root over many, many years, it is not readily identified anymore as an interpretation of an event, but THE TRUTH! Offering a different interpretation will often be met with resistance for all kinds of reasons.”<sup>23</sup> Even as late as 1972, NPS Historian Ronald Lee’s well-publicized, annotated chart of the NPS “family tree,” marking the centennial of the national park system with the establishment of Yellowstone, omits the 1864 Yosemite Act from the tree’s elaborate root system.<sup>24</sup>

While there was very little debate over the Yosemite Act in Congress, the real debate was playing out on the battlefield, where the contours of American democracy and the appropriate role and function of the federal government were being decided for decades to come. What was at stake was not only the ending of slavery in the United States and the freedom and political enfranchisement of 4 million African Americans, but also the fundamental responsibility of government for the advancement, well-being, and happiness of all its citizens. In this sense, the 150th anniversary of the Yosemite Act and the centennial of legislation establishing a National Park Service are opportunities to reaffirm the value of public institutions and public lands, from schools to parks. These commemorations can also be a reminder, that the “refinement of the republic” that Olmsted spoke of in his 1865 Report, is still bitterly contested and requires our constant attention and steadfast support.

NPS is planning to use the occasion of its centennial to “reintroduce” itself to a broader cross-section of the American public. The agency will present itself, with the help of the National Park Foundation, as a highly diversified, geographically dispersed system of national parks, programs, and partnerships connecting to people in communities throughout the country. This re-branding campaign is also a perfect opportunity to recognize and incorporate a more inclusive founding narrative that connects back to Lincoln and emancipation, to Olmsted and the larger American parks movement, and to the fundamental responsibility of government to advance, in Olmsted’s words, the “pursuit of happiness against all the obstacles” for *all* its people.<sup>25</sup>

President Lincoln may never have said anything about the 1864 act bearing his signature that guaranteed “public use, resort, and recreation . . . inalienable for all time.” However, he

did speak about his commitment to universal public education, an idea not unrelated to that of national parks:

Let us hope, rather, that by the best cultivation of the physical world, beneath and around us; and the intellectual and moral world within us, we shall secure an individual, social, and political prosperity and happiness, whose course shall be onward and upward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away.<sup>26</sup>



## Endnotes

1. Joseph Sax, "America's National Parks: Their Principles, Purposes and Prospects," *Natural History* (October 1976); online at [www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/editors\\_pick/1976\\_10\\_pick.html](http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/editors_pick/1976_10_pick.html).
2. Dayton Duncan, *Seed of the Future: Yosemite and the Evolution of the National Park Idea*, (San Francisco and El Portal, CA: Yosemite Conservancy, 2013).
3. Sax, "America's National Parks"; Alfred Runte, *National Parks and the American Experience*, 1st ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Ethan Carr, "Park, Forest, and Wilderness," *The George Wright Forum*, volume 17, number 2, (2000), pp. 16–30; Dwight Pitcaithley, *Philosophical Underpinnings of the National Park Idea*, online at [www.nps.gov/history/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/underpinnings.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/hisnps/NPSThinking/underpinnings.htm).
4. Arliss Ungar, "Nature Writings: Words of the Rev. Thomas Starr King,"; online at [www.sksm.edu/research/speeches/nature.pdf](http://www.sksm.edu/research/speeches/nature.pdf).
5. Richard A. Grusin, *Culture, Technology and the Creation of America's National Parks* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
6. It is not easy to track the distribution but this may be close: Oliver Wendell Holmes and Ralph Waldo Emerson received copies from Thomas Starr King (who knew Watkins through Jesse Benton Fremont, another early Yosemite enthusiast who befriended and encouraged King). Frederick Billings (a business associate of Jesse's husband, John C. Fremont), whose law practice likely paid for Watkins' trip into the Sierras, sent Louis Agassiz a portfolio. William Brewer, on behalf of Josiah Dwight Whitney, sent photographs to botanist Asa Gray. Israel Ward Raymond apparently also dispatched a portfolio to Senator Conness. The reproduction and East Coast distribution of Watkins's Yosemite portfolios required a considerable investment of time and money.
7. Thomas Starr King Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
8. Frederick Law Olmsted, "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove" (1865); online at [http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/anps/anps\\_1b.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/anps/anps_1b.htm).
9. Arnold Skolnick, *Paintings of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press; 1997), p. 10.
10. Duncan, *Seed of the Future*, p. 67.
11. US Senate, "Agricultural Colleges," 35th Congress, 2nd session, *Congressional Globe* (7 February 1859), p. 851.

12. Ibid., p. 857.
13. In the West these improvements, such as those brought about by the Pacific Railroad Act, often involved driving native tribes from their ancestral lands.
14. Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), p. 182.
15. Victoria Rainey, ed., *The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Project: Volume 5, The California Frontier, 1863–1866*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990).
16. Duncan, *Seed of the Future*, p. 64.
17. Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 182.
18. Hans Huth, *Yosemite: The Story of an Idea*, online at [www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite\\_story\\_of\\_an\\_idea.html](http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite_story_of_an_idea.html).
19. Ethan Carr, “Park, Forest, and Wilderness.”
20. Sax, “America’s National Parks.”
21. Roger G. Kennedy, *When Art Worked: The New Deal, Art, and Democracy* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), p. 316.
22. Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 8.
23. Personal correspondence, 2010.
24. Conrad Wirth, *Parks, Politics and the People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), p. 40.
25. Olmsted, “The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove.”
26. Abraham Lincoln, “Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society,” (1859), online at [www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/fair.htm](http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/fair.htm).