

Camden Public Library Statement on Harbor Park
Supporting Information

Olmsted Comments Regarding Harbor Park: In 1928, Olmsted Brothers were hired by Mary Louise Curtis Bok to create a plan for the neglected hillside parcel of land between Camden Harbor and Camden Library. Bok likely hired Olmsted Brothers as they were currently working on subdivision and bird sanctuary in Florida for her husband. With Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. taking the lead, he was tasked with reworking the two-acres of land.

To emphasize framed views, Olmsted Jr.'s design needed to employ a strategic grading plan. Curved walking paths take visitors from the street to the shore, with lush planting beds blocking views of nearby homes and stores. Olmsted Jr wanted native plants like American juniper, blueberry and lilac shrubs to flourish, many of which still do as Olmsted Jr.'s plan was carried out.

From the National Register of Historic Place Registration Form, National Park Service, August 7, 1999: In contrast, the harbor-side park of Camden is tiny, less than two acres. Rather than being visually separate from the rest of the village, its role has been as a shared visual green space, open to views from within and without. Historically its function has been two-fold: it has provided a series of attractive views of the harbor while at the same time providing a series of views toward and over it from other areas around the harbor, including sections of the library grounds that look directly into it. The number of such visual services for surrounding areas that the park has provided is truly remarkable for so small a space.

First, it provides an almost perfectly semicircular green foreground for the view from the Palladian window in the library, the key vista from that building. Second, it provides a foreground for views from the edge of the library grounds above Atlantic Avenue. Third the principal function of the lower section of the park is to frame a vista toward the harbor from the amphitheater. Fourth, the park is a place from which to view the harbor. The plantings at the Main Street end of the park have served to block views of the unsightly backs of stores along that street. Originally, other shrub groups were planted so as to block views of the backs of houses on Sea Street. Today the plantings on the steep hillside facing the cascade of the Megunticook River as it runs into the harbor also block out the view of the barren public landing and the reflections of the chrome and windshields of the vehicles parked there. Fifth, the park is a spacious green foreground for the view of Mount Battie and Mount Megunticook from the harbor, greatly enhancing that uniquely beautiful harbor view.

Montgomery Dam and the design of Harbor Park, from National Park Service documents, Bok and Olmsted correspondence, and Olmsted drawings in the Walsh History Center at Camden Public Library: When Mary Curtis Bok envisioned a park and hired Olmsted Brothers to design it in the late 1920s, the abutting parcel containing Montgomery Dam was owned by J. Hugh Montgomery. This parcel was never purchased by Bok for inclusion in the Harbor Park property nor was it considered part of the Harbor Park

design. At that time, the dam was already experiencing damage due to water leakage behind the dam and “cloudburst” events in which the water was being forced up and over the dam and seeping down behind it. A lot of the problem was caused by the gate being too small. However, installing a larger gate was dismissed as an option because of the amount of work and expense it would entail. Instead, to fix the issues and enable creation of the newly conceived Harbor Park, work on the dam and adjoining structures was planned and overseen by Olmsted and paid for by Bok with Montgomery’s approval.

- The main part of the dam was raised and reinforced using granite blocks along the property boundary.
- The spillway of the dam was extended northward and flow from the draw-off was reoriented southeastward toward what is now the Public Landing so that raising the dam would not increase flood risk. (Today, this reorientation is the cause of much small craft swamping which occurs on the town floats in that area.)
- The sluiceway and retaining wall separating Harbor Park from Montgomery property was reinforced and grouted to keep water from leaking through.
- The existing ravine/gully was filled to provide reliable winter boat and town float storage.

Bok and Olmsted’s interest in the dam was limited to reinforcement and strengthening necessary for the creation of Harbor Park. Grading of Harbor Park and retention/planting of trees were done specifically to block the view of the dam from Harbor Park and keep the dam out of the landscape frame Olmsted Brothers sought to have their design create.