

## The Creation and Legacy of the Florida's Mountain Lake Sanctuary and the Bok Singing Tower

Dennis Montagna, National Park Service's Monument Research & Preservation Program, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Figure 1. Mountain Lake Sanctuary and Singing Tower Souvenir Folder, Hartman Card Company, Portland, Maine & Tampa, Florida, ca. 1930, Author's collection.

From the time of its dedication in 1929, Bok Tower, a carillon near Lake Wales, Florida, has been a primary destination for residents and visitors to the state. As an object, the tower is hard to ignore. The Gothic Revival carillon is built of pink marble from Georgia and fossil-laden coquina stone quarried near Saint Augustine. Placed atop Iron Hill, one of the highest points in the state, it greets visitors long before they actually reach it.

The tower serves as the primary ornament for the Mountain Lake Sanctuary, created at the behest of Edward W. Bok, former editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the flagship publication of Philadelphia's Curtis Publishing Company. Bok had purchased land for the sanctuary in 1922 and engaged Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and his firm to design its landscape.

A closer look at the Sanctuary reveals that this project grew directly from Olmsted's work on the design of residential communities, and that it was the product of a shared vision between client and designer centered on the benefits that people derive from immersion in well-crafted natural spaces. It also suggests that the Sanctuary has been able to grow and change over the past century while reflecting the intent of its patron and designers.

During the 1910s and 20s, much of Florida's real estate development took place along the state's Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coastlines. The extension south of Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway to Palm Beach in 1894, and then on to Miami two years later, led to a burst of hotel and home

construction for both middle class and wealthy winter residents. In 1914, International Harvester's James Deering chose a Biscayne Bay site in Miami for Villa Vizcaya, his Mediterranean Revival home and formal gardens. In Sarasota, on the Gulf Coast, entrepreneur John Ringling built his Venetian Gothic-inspired mansion in 1926. A short distance south in Fort Myers, Thomas Edison had built a much more modest home in the late 1880s. Henry Ford became his next-door neighbor in 1916.

Lesser-known developments of homes and citrus groves took shape among the spring-fed lakes of the state's interior, south of Ocala. Travel guides of the period took note. John T. Faris' *Seeing the Sunny South*, of 1921, devotes a chapter to Florida's central interior. He wrote, "It is a mistake to think that when the East Coast and the West Coast of Florida are seen the state has yielded its secrets. The higher lands of the interior, the backbone of the state, as these are called, repay attention."<sup>1</sup>

Frank Parker Stockbridge and John Holliday Perry's *Florida in the Making*, published in 1926, also turned readers' eyes away from the state's two coasts to the area they termed The Florida Midlands, "...a land of level plains alternating the rolling hills sprinkled with fresh-water lakes, covered for the greater part with pine forests and citrus groves, liberally dotted with charming and rapidly growing towns and agricultural developments, crisscrossed by railroads and motor highways, and furnishing winter homes and playgrounds for a multitude of people for whom the seacoast has no irresistible lure."<sup>2</sup>

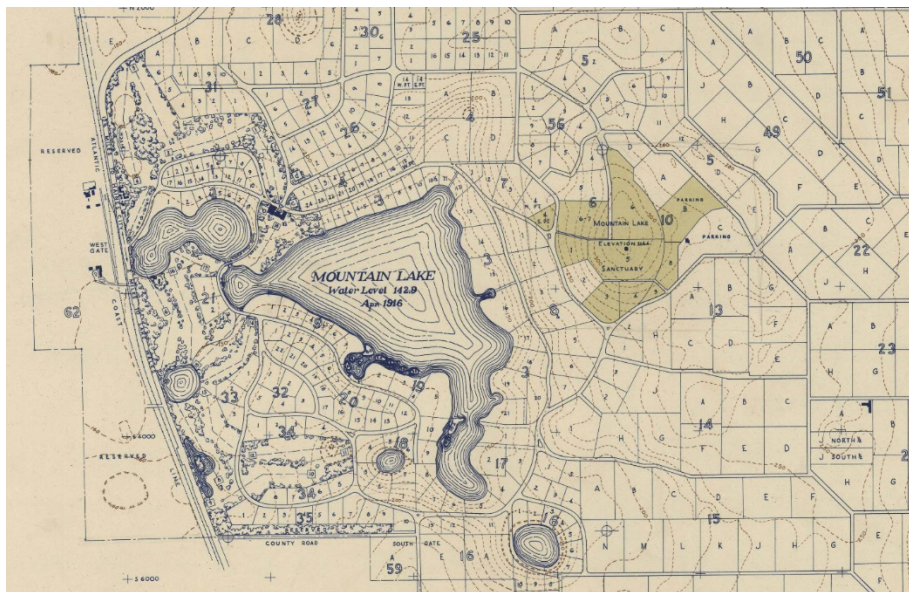


Figure 2. Olmsted Brothers, Mountain Lake Colony, Polk County, Florida, detail of preliminary plan, December 1916 (Revised to May, 1952). Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

Mountain Lake Colony, near Lake Wales, was one of these inland developments [Figure 2]. It encompassed more than 2,800 acres and featured a hotel, winter homes, a golf course and clubhouse, and citrus groves. Land developer Frederick S. Ruth engaged Olmsted Brothers at the inception of the

<sup>1</sup> John T. Faris, *Seeing the Sunny South* (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1921), 162-163.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Parker Stockbridge and John Holliday Perry, *Florida in the Making* (New York, NY, Jacksonville, FL, and Kingsport, TN: The de Bower Publishing Company, 1926), 239.



project in 1914. Ruth had lived in Baltimore's Olmsted-planned Roland Park, so he was very much aware of the firm's experience with residential developments of this kind.<sup>3</sup>

Reporting back to Ruth after his first visit to the Mountain Lake property in 1914, Olmsted noted the monotony of the unrelieved rows of orange trees already under cultivation there, but he wrote that with careful planning and preservation of land still occupied by native pines and other tall trees, and through "painstaking adjustment of the orange groves and of the roads to the naturally picturesque and irregular forms of the ground....it will be possible to create a district exceptional for its beauty as well as for its productiveness, and as such [be] exceptionally attractive to seekers for winter homes in Florida who want the very best."<sup>4</sup>

Over the next two decades, Olmsted Brothers provided the landscape design for Ruth's development project writ large, but they also designed for the owners of individual properties. By the late 1930s, the firm had worked on more than 120 residential projects at Mountain Lake Colony.



*Figure 3. C.R. Wait, Photograph of George Babcock Cottage, Mountain Lake Colony, Polk County, Florida, Spring 1921, File 6905. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*

Many of these were relatively modest landscape designs that accompanied equally modest cottages, like that carried out for George Babcock [figure 3]. Others were much more formal. The sketch plan created for Conrad Hubert in 1920 features two main approaches with one of them leading through an orange grove before reaching the home's circular forecourt. A lawn bordered by a hedge extends to a

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick S. Roth to Frederick Law Olmsted, 18 September 1914, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, File 6081, Library of Congress.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted to Frederick S. Roth, memorandum to the file, December 1914, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, File 6081, Library of Congress.

garden folly. In both plans, Olmsted kept the rigid orange groves subservient to the softer overall plan. [figure 4]

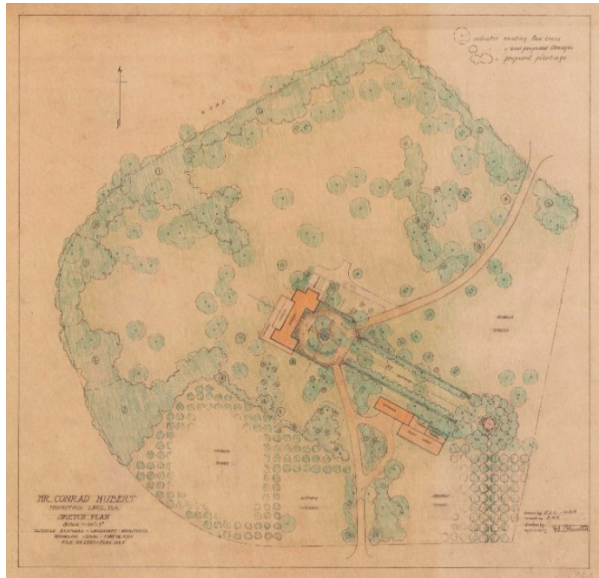


Figure 4. Olmsted Brothers, Sketch Plan for Conrad Hubert property, Mountain Lake Colony, Polk County, Florida, 15 May 1920, File 6827. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

Edward Bok first became an Olmsted client in 1921 when the firm began planning the landscape for the winter home that he was about to build at Mountain Lake. Working with a model of the house that architect E. M. Parsons provided, Olmsted first advised his client on the placement of the house. As with other home sites at Mountain Lake Colony, existing pine trees, oaks, and palmetto stands were preserved and augmented by the introduction of other plant materials. [Figure 5]



Figure 5. H.J. Koehler, Photograph of Edward W. Bok Home, Mountain Lake Colony, Polk County, Florida, February 1923, File 6936. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

Within a year of building his winter home, Bok had also purchased 61 acres on Iron Mountain, the adjacent hilltop, for the construction of his Mountain Lake Sanctuary. It was a short climb from his new home, and it had become a favorite haunt for him. Olmsted had observed Iron Mountain on his first visit to Lake Wales in 1914. He noted at the time, “I was first inclined to smile at the idea of calling a hill about three hundred feet high ‘Iron Mountain.’ It seemed a sort of Floridian joke upon the prevailing flatness of the rest of the State.”<sup>5</sup>

The landscape Olmsted designed there in the early 1920s featured a broad assortment of flowering trees and shrubs; camellias, magnolias, and azaleas, reflected in the water features he introduced. All of it is seen against a rich green background, with palms, ferns, oaks and pines predominating. To provide food and cover as an enticement to migrating birds, he introduced bushes with edible berries, among them blueberries, gallberries and Suriname Cherries.<sup>6</sup> [Figure 6]



Figure 6. *The Singing Tower*, souvenir photo folder, Florida Postcard Company, Jacksonville, Florida, ca. 1930. Author's collection.

Work on the Sanctuary began in earnest by 1923 with site grading, trenching, the delivery of topsoil, and consideration of plant materials, but it is likely that the project had been percolating in Bok's mind for several years. In *The Americanization of Edward Bok*, the autobiography he published in

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Edward W. Bok, *America's Taj Mahal: The Singing Tower of Florida*, Second Edition, Preface by Johnathan A. Shaw (Lake Wales: The Bok tower Gardens Foundation, Inc., 1989) 1-2. Originally published by the Georgia Marble Company, Tate, Georgia, 1929.



1920, and for which he won a Pulitzer Prize, Bok provided veiled notice of his intent to create a naturalistic landscape for the benefit of visitors and wildlife.<sup>7</sup> [Figure 7]



Figure 7. H.J. Koehler, Mountain Lake Sanctuary property, Polk County, Florida, February 1923, File 7029. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

Bok's narrative of his family's emigration from the Netherlands in 1869 and the development of his career in publishing begins with the story of his grandfather's efforts in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to enhance the landscape on Texel Island, one of a string of barrier islands in the North Sea. At the opening of his narrative, Bok called Texel "... a grim place, barren of tree or living green of any kind." He wrote that his forebear was determined to beautify the island, planting 100 trees the first year, replacing ones that didn't survive, and continuing to nurture the landscape for 50 years by continuously introducing shrubs and other plantings.<sup>8</sup> Writing about his own beautification project in 1929, a few months after the formal dedication of the Sanctuary and Tower, Bok looked back on its gestation. He wrote, "It is nothing short of a marvel...when it is remembered that six years ago, when the work of irrigating and planting was begun, it was simply a barren sand hill with nothing to help the landscape architect except the two or three hundred native pine trees and its eminence as the highest spot of land in Florida."<sup>9</sup> Bok wrote that once his grandfather's new trees on Texel had matured, "birds came and rested in their leafy shelter," and that over time the growing population of songbirds drew visitors from the mainland and ornithologists from around the world.<sup>10</sup>

Whether Bok's story of his ancestor's role at Texel Island is true, apocryphal, or somewhere in between, it serves as the evocative origin tale that underpins his effort to create the Mountain Lake Sanctuary in Central Florida, and he wanted the story to be widely known. Not only did he begin his 1920 memoir with an accounting of the tale, but two years later, in 1922, Bok repackaged the story as the first chapter of his book, *Two Persons, an Incident and an Epilogue*, a slim publication that concludes with a reflection on the landscape he and Olmsted had begun to plan. In the epilogue, he wrote that he

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<sup>7</sup> H.J. Koehler to Edward W. Bok, Monthly Report from Olmsted Brothers, 12 May 1924, FLO Papers, General Correspondence, Library of Congress. Edward W. Bok, *The Americanization of Edward Bok: An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1920).

<sup>8</sup> Bok, *Americanization*, 1973 Edition (Philadelphia: The American Foundation Incorporated, 1973) xi-xii.

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Bok, *The Most Beautiful Spot in America*, *The Ladies Home Journal* 46 (May 1929): 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

felt restored by his visits to the summit of Florida’s Iron Mountain. He also wrote of his admiration for Olmsted’s work, “So it became ‘the Sanctuary’ and the grandson called to the man (Olmsted) who loved the land...and said to him: ‘Here are these acres on the mountain top already beautiful by God’s hand. Complete them as you will. No one shall suggest. No one shall hinder or obstruct. Let your talent express itself to the full. Make it the most beautiful spot on earth where the birds and the human can rest and find themselves.’”<sup>11</sup>

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In January 1930, less than a year after the Sanctuary’s formal dedication, Bok died and was buried at the base of his carillon tower.<sup>13</sup> That he chose to be interred there, at the heart of the landscape he and Olmsted created, rather than at the Bok Family Lot at Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill Cemetery, suggests his satisfaction with the project’s outcome.

The carillon tower that became Bok’s grave memorial was the work of a team of artists, designers and craftspeople, nearly all drawn from the Philadelphia area. Architect Milton Medary designed the tower and coordinated a creative team that provided an ornamental program that expressed through other media Bok’s desire to create a peaceful restorative place for the enjoyment of visitors and visiting songbirds. [Figure 8]



Figure 8. Photograph of Bok Singing Tower, Rear Facade, Bok Tower Gardens, Polk County, Florida, February 2020. Photographed by the author.

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<sup>11</sup> Edward W. Bok, *Two Persons, an Incident and an Epilogue* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923) 19-24.

<sup>12</sup> Edward W. Bok, *The Most Beautiful Spot in America*, *The Ladies Home Journal* 46 (May 1929): 12.

<sup>13</sup> Bok, *Two Persons*, 24-25.

Lee Lawrie designed a sculptural program that features stylized representations of birds, plants and mankind supporting the natural world through activities that include feeding cranes and watering a garden. The ceramic tilework that forms the open latticework that forms the carillon's floor and encloses the bell chamber is the work of J.H. Dulles Allen, chief designer at the Enfield Pottery and Tile Works based in Enfield, Pennsylvania. As with the work Lawrie carried out, his representations present a harmonious balance between the worlds of plants and animals.

In his workshop in West Philadelphia, metalworker Samuel Yellin designed and fabricated the tower's wrought iron interior elements and the metal gates at the two bridges that cross the moat that surrounds it. He also created the brass panels that cover the tower's front door and presented scenes from the Book of Genesis. Even the contractors who built the tower, Horace Burrell and his son, Edward, came from Philadelphia to direct the two-year construction project.

The carillon's music making apparatus was no less impressive. Cast in England and installed in 1928, the carillon's 60 bells ranged in size from almost 12 tons to 11 pounds and were able to cover nearly five octaves.

While the Olmsted-designed landscape was taking shape in the 1920s, but before the tower appeared, authors of books promoting Florida's growth took note of the work. In 1926, Stockbridge and Perry's *Florida in the Making*, quoted earlier, noted the creation of the Mountain Lake Sanctuary, still in its early stages. They observed the goings on at the top of Iron Mountain, "where original forest is preserved in its wild state, and every variety of bird known to Florida finds unmolested, nesting and resting place."<sup>14</sup>

In 1938, twelve years later, the same two writers returned to the Mountain Lake Sanctuary as they prepared their new book, *So This is Florida*. But by this time, it was the Tower rather than the landscape that captivated them. They effused, "...there is one spot in Florida to which all others generously and sincerely yield homage; that is Lake Wales and its Bok Singing Tower. This monument which the late Edward Bok raised to the memory of his grandparents on the summit of Iron Mountain is the central milestone from which all distances in southern and central Florida are measured...throughout the season from November to April, [highways are crowded] with tourists making pilgrimages to see the tower itself, possibly America's most beautiful structure, and to listen to the heart-lifting, soul-stirring music of its bells."<sup>15</sup>

To some extent, the Tower's fame seemed to have come at the expense of a popular appreciation of the designed landscape that surrounded it. However, if we take stock of the legacy of Edward Bok's Mountain Lake Sanctuary and Singing Tower as it nears its centennial, we find that in recent decades its leaders have been able to develop a more prominent niche for the designed landscape. Likely aided by the growth of garden visitation and the Environmental Movement in the last quarter of the 20th century, the site became a National Historic Landmark in 1993 and has now been rebranded as Bok Tower Gardens. It has also seen the development of additional managed acreage well beyond that which Bok and Olmsted had first planned.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, change was always an expected element of the site's design. Writing about the garden's development in 1992, Director of Horticulture

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<sup>14</sup> Stockbridge and Perry, *Florida in the Making*, 242.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Parker Stockbridge and John Holliday Perry, *So This is Florida* (Jacksonville: John H. Perry Publishing Company, 1938) 160.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Spain Schwarz, *Mountain Lake Sanctuary and Singing Tower*, National Historic Landmark Nomination (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993). The original 61 acres planned by Bok and Olmsted have now expanded to more than 130.



David M. Price noted that Bok and Olmsted had been well aware that the landscape would be a living, changing thing. He wrote, “The gardens began as a sunny garden and have matured to a woodland garden; therefore, some of the original plant types can no longer be grown here. This transformation was planned by Olmsted for he understood the eventual evolution of the shade tree canopy.”<sup>17</sup>

New programming places front and center both the landscape and its carillon tower. During the early months of 2022, the Gardens hosted events that included outdoor yoga sessions, themed garden walks and lectures on integrating healthy herbs into cooking. All of these activities are in keeping with the restorative and contemplative uses that Bok and Olmsted had imagined for this space.<sup>18</sup>

Carillon concerts continue to be a major focus at Bok Tower Gardens as they have been since 1929, but with a broadened repertoire that includes new compositions, regional and international carillon festivals, and the creation of audio content that listeners can access virtually. Through YouTube, one can listen to the Bok carillonneurs’ renditions of Queen’s Bohemian Rhapsody and the theme music from *The Simpsons*. The site also serves as an outdoor concert venue, helping to introduce new audiences to the landscape and its mission.

The legacy of Olmsted’s work with Edward Bok goes beyond the landscapes created for his home at Mountain Lake Colony and at the hilltop Mountain Lake Sanctuary. Olmsted also helped Bok to plan another land preservation project, one he called *Texel Jungle*, about 11 miles south of Mountain Lake. Centered on Tiger Creek between Lake Leonore and Lake Walk-in-the-Water, Bok named *Texel Jungle* after the Dutch island that Bok’s grandfather had transformed.

In early 1925, while landscape work at Mountain Lake was in full swing, Bok asked Olmsted and a team under his direction to visit the area and report back with recommendations for the purchase of land and the setting of project boundaries. Olmsted responded with an illustrated eleven-page report that addressed Bok’s desire to preserve the *Jungle* for public visitation and emphasized the establishment of trails, picnic grounds at the end of those trails, and parking at key locations [figure 9].



Figure 9. Olmsted Brothers, Photograph of Tiger Creek in “*Texel Jungle*,” Polk County, Florida, 1925. File 7426. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

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<sup>17</sup> David M. Price, “Managing an Historic Public Garden,” *The Bok Tower Gardens Newsletter* 9 (June 1992): 1, 2. Price spent twenty years as Bok Tower Gardens’ Director of Horticulture. He became its President in 2007.

<sup>18</sup> <https://boktowergardens.org>

A follow up aerial survey led Olmsted to suggest that Texel Jungle should encompass about 4300 acres. He also encouraged Bok to acquire enough land to protect the Jungle from undesirable residential development.<sup>19</sup> He cautioned his client to guard against “ugly and tawdry houses or shabby and slatternly uses of the land on the high sand hills overlooking the Jungle” and “speculative, small-lot, low grade real estate development on the shores of Lake Leonore.”<sup>20</sup>

But within a matter of months, Bok had shelved his Texel Jungle project. He wrote to Olmsted that he was abandoning the effort because he was unable to ensure that roads would not be cut through the reservation. In addition, he feared commercialization of the lands that surrounded it.<sup>21</sup> He later confided to Olmsted that he was irritated, “... at the constant evidence of selfish interests taking advantage of an idealistic proposition.”<sup>22</sup>

Bok’s aborted effort to preserve Tiger Creek and its surroundings were forgotten until Mountain Lake Sanctuary Director Ken Morrison found references to the Texel Jungle project among Bok’s papers in 1966 and launched an effort to secure the needed land, which, despite Bok’s fears, had changed remarkably little in the 40 years since he had targeted it for preservation. By 1971, The Nature Conservancy began acquiring the needed land. Today, Tiger Creek Preserve covers nearly 5,000 acres and is home to a variety of plant, animal, and insect life. Much as Bok and Olmsted had envisioned, the landscape has been only minimally manipulated and provides day hikers with more than 10 miles of trails to explore.<sup>23</sup>

As we consider the legacy of Bok and Olmsted’s work in Central Florida, the preservation of archival resources looms large. The preserved record stands at the heart of the 1960s rediscovery of Bok’s efforts to preserve Tiger Creek in 1925, and it inspired the plan’s successful rebirth nearly a half century after it was first conceived.

Digital versions of the hundreds of photographs, postcards, letters and other primary documents housed in the archive within the stone walls of the carillon tower are now accessible via the Bok Tower Gardens website, encouraging people to make their own discoveries about the site and its past. The institution has also added new collections to its holdings. A few years ago, the descendants of the carillon’s builders, Horace and Edward Burrell, donated the company journals and photographs that document the tower’s two years of construction. These materials then served as the focus of the 2018 traveling exhibit, *Creating an Icon: The Way We Worked on the Singing Tower*.<sup>24</sup>

By providing online access to digitized archival materials, institutions like Bok Tower Gardens and Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site have enabled historians to continue their research during the pandemic years, when physical archives and libraries have remained closed. But in the long term, this kind of institutional commitment and online access will help to facilitate, and democratize, primary research that has traditionally required a significant amount of travel time and financial wherewithal.

Providing greater access to more of the historical record will also encourage the work of historians who are asking questions beyond those that primarily involve the aesthetic desires of clients

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<sup>19</sup> FLO, to EWB, 18 May 1925.

<sup>20</sup> FLO to EWB, 1 March 1925.

<sup>21</sup> EWB to FLO, 5 June 1925.

<sup>22</sup> EWB to FLO, 8 July 1925.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth D. Morrison to Olmsted Brothers, 14 December 1966.

<sup>24</sup> Florida Humanities Council, “Uncovered treasure: Behind the scenes at the creation of Bok Tower Gardens,” *Forum*, (Spring 2018): 6.

and the designers they engage. It will help us to better explore the complex social and labor histories of residential developments like Mountain Lake colony and public spaces like Bok's Sanctuary. We'll learn about the lives and work of the legions of stone cutters, masons, steel fabricators, nurserymen, and the work crews who labored to create and sustain these places but have remained largely invisible.

Also, yet to be examined to a significant degree, are the audiences for these places. Who was welcomed, who was not, and what mechanisms were put in place to structure the uses of these spaces? Olmsted Brothers' drawings that detail the segregated toilet facilities they designed for the Mountain Lake Sanctuary in 1928 invite questions such as these.

Finally, along with increased access to traditional archives, we should look to indigenous people, like members of Florida's Seminole and Miccosukee Tribes who possess knowledge and perspectives on events not available anywhere else. While forming a truly complete view of the past is likely beyond anyone's grasp, pursuing these and other lines of inquiry will lead us to a much fuller understanding of our history.



*Figure 10. Photograph of workers planting a palm tree while Edward W. Bok looks on, Mountain Lake Sanctuary, Polk County, Florida, ca. 1924, File 7029. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.*