Historic Landscapes Series

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Olmsted Research Guide Online

2001-07

National Association for Olmsted Parks
Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site

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OLMSTED RESEARCH GUIDE ONLINE (ORGO) -YEAR 2

FINAL REPORT

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TECHNOLOGY AND TRAINING (NCPTT)

Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site
National Association of Olmsted Parks

SEPTEMBER 30, 2001

ABSTRACT

In FY2001, the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site (Olmsted NHS) and the National Association for Olmsted Packs (NAOP) completed Year Two of a three-year NCPTT grant project to develop a new Internet-accessible database of information about the landscape design records for projects undertaken by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and the Olmsted firm Project objectives completed in Year Two included the following 1) evaluate requirements for the Internet interface, 2) develop the interface, including determining best host for the site, 3) update Web version database, 4) continue research and collection of data from the Library y of Congress.

Continuing a series of working meetings from year 1, the project team discussed the data input and display that would inform the development of an Internet interface Following these discussions, Re Discovery Software, Inc reconfigured the Internet interface of ANCS+, the National Park Service's national cataloging system, to meet the specific needs of this project. Utilizing a small sampling of records gathered from portions of the collections being cataloged, the working group examined a prototype interface and offered feedback to Re: Discovery. With those suggestions both aesthetic and programmatic the software company modified the interface in time for a public demonstration in May, to enthusiasm and positive reviews. Work continued throughout the fiscal year cataloging collections, fine-tuning the database search and display capabilities and strategizing in preparation for potential loss of funding. Release of the fully operational and publicly accessible database at the end of the fiscal year is highly anticipated.

The Olmsted firm shaped major portions of the urban landscape in cities across the country Interest in the study of these landscapes has accelerated over the past few years resulting in a significant increase in research requests at repositories with Olmsted related collections. The new database will include updated and more comprehensive information about project-related records held at various repositories, primarily the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site (Olmsted Archives) and Library of Congress. It will enable researchers to perform arches of information concerning design projects in collections of Olmsted firm records. As a result, researchers will be able to make mote informed research queries, thereby streamlining the overall research process Year Thee tasks will expand the current database to include additional priority collections, test the site with a group of users and publicize the website to potential researchers.

SUMMARY OF YEAR ONE PROJECT GOALS OBJECTIVES AND YEAR-END RESULTS

1. Evaluate requirements for the Internet inter face

During Year 1, the project team evaluated data-collection strategies and database structure. In meetings this year, the team examined the data that was being collected and considered options of how best to make this information accessible to the public Options for search and display were considered, based on work in progress by Re: Discovery for the National Park Service. The team continued work from the previous year on database authority tables and consistency standards for data-entry; the team considered the impact these tables had on searching and display of records.

2. Develop the interface, including determining best host for the site.

Using a template for the National Park Services web-searchable database as a model, the team examined a rough draft of the database, which contained a small set of records to test the search capability and display of records The team considered all things from search field names and display-page length to use of color and graphics Feedback was communicated to the programmers at Re: Discovery who implemented changes based on design preferences and usability issues. In considering the capabilities and resources of the parent organizations, it seemed best that Re: Discovery host the site and maintain the database.

3. Update Web version database.

During the year, records created by all catalogers were sent to the project manager for quality assurance, editing suggestions and coordination of data-entry. The project manager maintained individual databases for each cataloger to preserve the integrity of the entire database. Upon completion of a series, the records were transferred into one centralized directory. This centralized database serves as the overall collection database into which the records of all series, once cataloged, will be transferred. This original database was sent to Re: Discovery at the end of this year, with subsequent updates sent every six months thereafter.

4. Continue research and collection of data from the Library of Congress.

Midway through this year, research assistants finished cataloging a significant portion of the Library of Congress collection, the 1900-1950 correspondence files (“Series B”), comprising over 6600 records. After finishing that series, the research assistants moved onto the earlier (1885-1899) letterbooks ("Series A"). To date, nearly 5400 individual items have been cataloged at the item level from that collection, with work on the collection expected to last through February 2002. Since the letterbooks are arranged chronologically, the intellectual control that is gained from this cataloging makes the contents of these materials more accessible than ever.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Evaluate requirements for the Internet interface

Over the course of three meetings during year 2, the ORGO user interface developed at much the same rate as did the project teams understanding of the possibilities and limitations of the program. At this years initial project planning meeting, the team discussed at length the data being entered. The team examined some of the data fields and the manner in which catalogers were entering the information; there was some refinement of the authority tables and the team worked through some concerns about the richness and complexity of data. Given the vast amount of information that could be captured and entered into a database, the challenge that faced the team was to strategically choose what elements would best suit a researcher's needs.

The researchers themselves came up as a topic of discussion. The team spent a good deal of time discussing what sort of target audience-or target audiences-should be anticipated and how best to meet their needs. Clearly, it could be assumed that there would be those for whom database searching is a simple task, but there would be others who need more instruction at a rudimentary level. Similarly, the collections themselves often require a fair amount of explanation before use. How much of that introductory text would be needed or helpful was the focus of much conversation. The project team ultimately decided that some helpful text hyperlinks should be made available to researchers, but the balance of the actual search pages should assume some level of expertise both with computers and landscape design records.

Largely because there wasn't a real product to look at to evaluate the database's usefulness to researchers, early conservations were somewhat difficult. At the year's second meeting, a working example of a web-based user interface alleviated some portion of the difficulty. This allowed the group to respond to something more accessible than the complicated data-entry screen. Given that Re Discovery had a working template in the web version of the National Park Services ANCS+, the project team looked at that, as well as the online catalog of Tufts University archives, another Re Discovery project. It was easier to work through user issues with something concrete to critique.

Develop the interface, including determining best host for the site.

The project team closely examined the work done at Tufts and the current prototype currently being developed for the National Park Service. The team expressed strong desire for the ability to search multiple fields at once using Boolean searching, the need for controlled language searching in some fields (namely project type, document type and state, for example) and flexibility in others (such as document title and project name). There was strong concern that the display of information be clear and understandable. Moreover, there were concerns about some admittedly disconcerting color schemes and bland graphics.

With those concerns in hand, the project manager returned to Re Discovery, put forth the search-and-display feedback and submitted samples for the aesthetic improvements. Improvements were implemented including pull-down menus to choose fields to search, 'AND/OR/NOT" search options and an improved design scheme. Images of the search and display screens are attached at the end of this report and included as photographic slides.

The project team briefly discussed the choice for hosting the website. Neither of the partner organizations have the staff, network space nor expertise to host a website database. The decision to have Re Discovery host the site was one of the easiest the group made.

At the end of May 2001, the Olmsted National Historic Site celebrated its 25th anniversary. As part of the celebration, the project manager staffed a computer station to demonstrate the database and to answer questions. Many of the attendees (including landscape architects, historians or restorationists) were very.

complimentary about the project and enthusiastic about the possibility of doing their research via the Internet.

Throughout Summer and early Fall, the project manager spent a great deal of time working with Re: Discovery formalizing the web interface, fine-tuning the search and display functions and adding final touches of sort options. The project manager also worked with Re: Discovery to ensure that, although the repository field for each record would be displayed, the unique location within the repository would not. This decision was made for the sake of collection security.

Early on, the project team knew that a test group of researchers would be helpful in determining how researchers would want to use the database, strengths and limitations of the interface, and in making suggestions to improve delivery to an end-user. Given the extensive network of professionals and researchers among the project team members, a list of candidates for test users was drawn up. While, initially, user testing was to commence during July and August of 2001, technological problems, future planning issues and development of the search, sort and display functions delayed testing. Moreover, it seemed to make more sense to allow user testing only after a usefully large batch of records had been uploaded to the server. Delivery of this batch of records was not scheduled until late September; user testing is expected shortly after that.

Update Web version database

Throughout the year, catalogers created additional records from the various collections being documented. Those records were collected, reviewed for corrections and ultimately integrated into the larger framework of the database. With numerous people working on different materials in three locations, bringing those materials together conceptually as well as electronically proved to be an unexpected challenge.

Two research assistants at the Library of Congress' Manuscripts Reading Room entered data onto separate stand-alone (non-networked) laptops, documenting the collections donated to the Library by the Olmsted firm in the 1960s and 1970s. Every two weeks, these research assistants sent an updated version of their work to the project manager for spot review of work, tracking of progress and security (databases were saved to a local network in Brookline, Massachusetts and backup discs were sent offsite and kept in a fire proof cabinet). Similarly, catalogers at the Olmsted National Historic Site spent a good portion of the year documenting the collection of photograph albums and lithographs held at the site. These individual databases were also maintained separately for integrity and security and were merged later. Only after integrity and quality assurance checks were done-first at the cataloger level, then at the collection level, were those collection databases integrated into one coherent database and transferred to Re: Discovery for uploading.

It is anticipated that, as collection of data continues at the various sites, more sets of records will be sent to Re: Discovery to be added to the existing database and uploaded to the site. Already anticipated is data from the earlier set of correspondence at the Library of Congress (currently being cataloged), various smaller collections at the Olmsted site in Brookline, as well as the largest collection at the Olmsted site, the plans and drawings of the firm. Currently, work is being done to convert plans and drawings records from an older database system to the more currently accepted ANCS+.

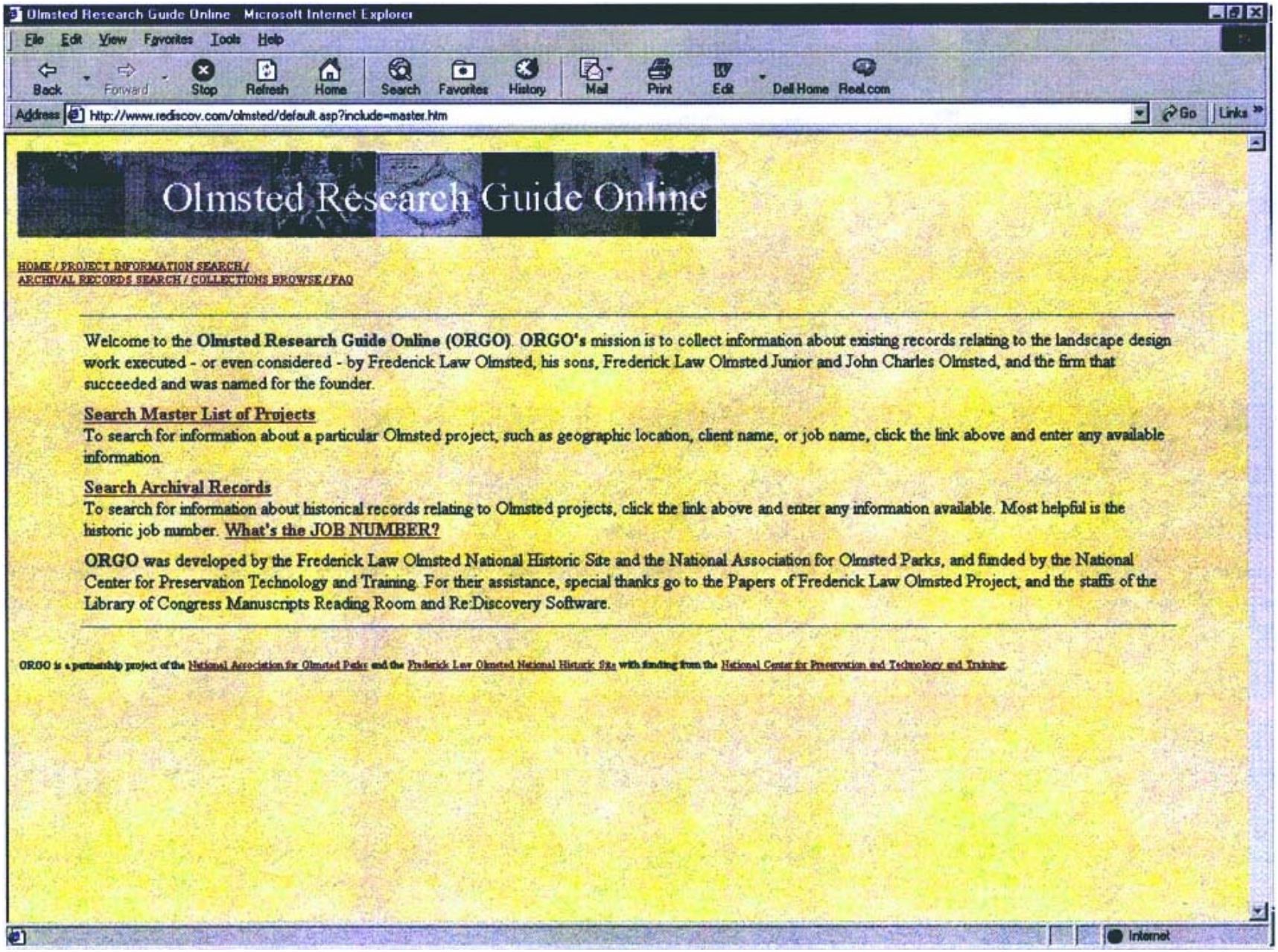
Continue research and collection of data from the Library of Congress

As mentioned above, research assistants at the Library of Congress finished cataloging correspondence files ('Series B", ca 1900-1950) midway through this year. A fairly straightforward collection with fairly straightforward structure and data-entry practices, the collection was a good introduction for the research assistants to the work of the Olmsteds. It also served as a good introduction to ANCS+, a program not necessarily known for ease-of-use. Working at the file-unit level, the research assistants merely transcribed the folder titles and recorded, broadly, contents of the folders and dates. Additionally - and possibly most helpful to distant researchers the catalogers also included microfilm reel and frame location information, simplifying the process of interlibrary loans of the film.

After completion of Series B, catalogers moved on to the earlier correspondence of the firm, the bound letterpress books ("Series A"). This series presented more serious complications to the data-collection. Given the chronological arrangement of these records (bound by year in volumes), the only method of getting useful content out of this cataloging method was to catalog the collection at the item level. Normally, item level cataloging is an extreme measure, being both staff- and time-intensive. However, given the choice of item-level cataloging and the relatively unhelpful volume-level cataloging, documenting the individual letters was clearly more important.

Also complicating the work was the change in arrangement from Series B (clearly delineated into files by historic job number of the firm, the primary ordering system of the records even today) to Series A, where the historic job number was not used consistently. For the most part in Series B, the job number was clear and present with little confusion as to how to apply the correct job number to a particular database record. With the letters in Series A, catalogers often had to extrapolate job numbers from the content and context of the letters. Catalogers are able to refer to a set of indexes compiled by the Olmsted Papers Project that identify most of the first half of the collection by job number. After that first half, the letters have not been indexed, and it is expected that there will be a sharp steepening of the learning curve.

To date, the two research assistants have created 6612 records for Series B and 5388 records for Series A, totaling 12,000 records between the two series.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Welcome to the Olmsted Research Guide Online (ORGO). ORGO's mission is to collect information about existing records relating to the landscape design work executed - or even considered - by Frederick Law Olmsted, his sons, Frederick Law Olmsted Junior and John Charles Olmsted, and the firm that succeeded and was named for the founder.
Search Master List of Projects
To search for information about a particular Olmsted project, such as geographic location, client name, or job name, click the link above and enter any available information.
Search Archival Records
To search for information about historical records relating to Olmsted projects, click the link above and enter any information available. Most helpful is the historic job number. What's the JOB NUMBER?
ORGO was developed by the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site and the National Association for Olmsted Parks, and funded by the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training. For their assistance, special thanks go to the Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted Project, and the staffs of the Library of Congress Manuscripts Reading Room and Re:Discovery Software.
ORGO is a partnership project of the National Association for Olmsted Parks and the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site with funding from the National Center for Preservation and Technology and Training.
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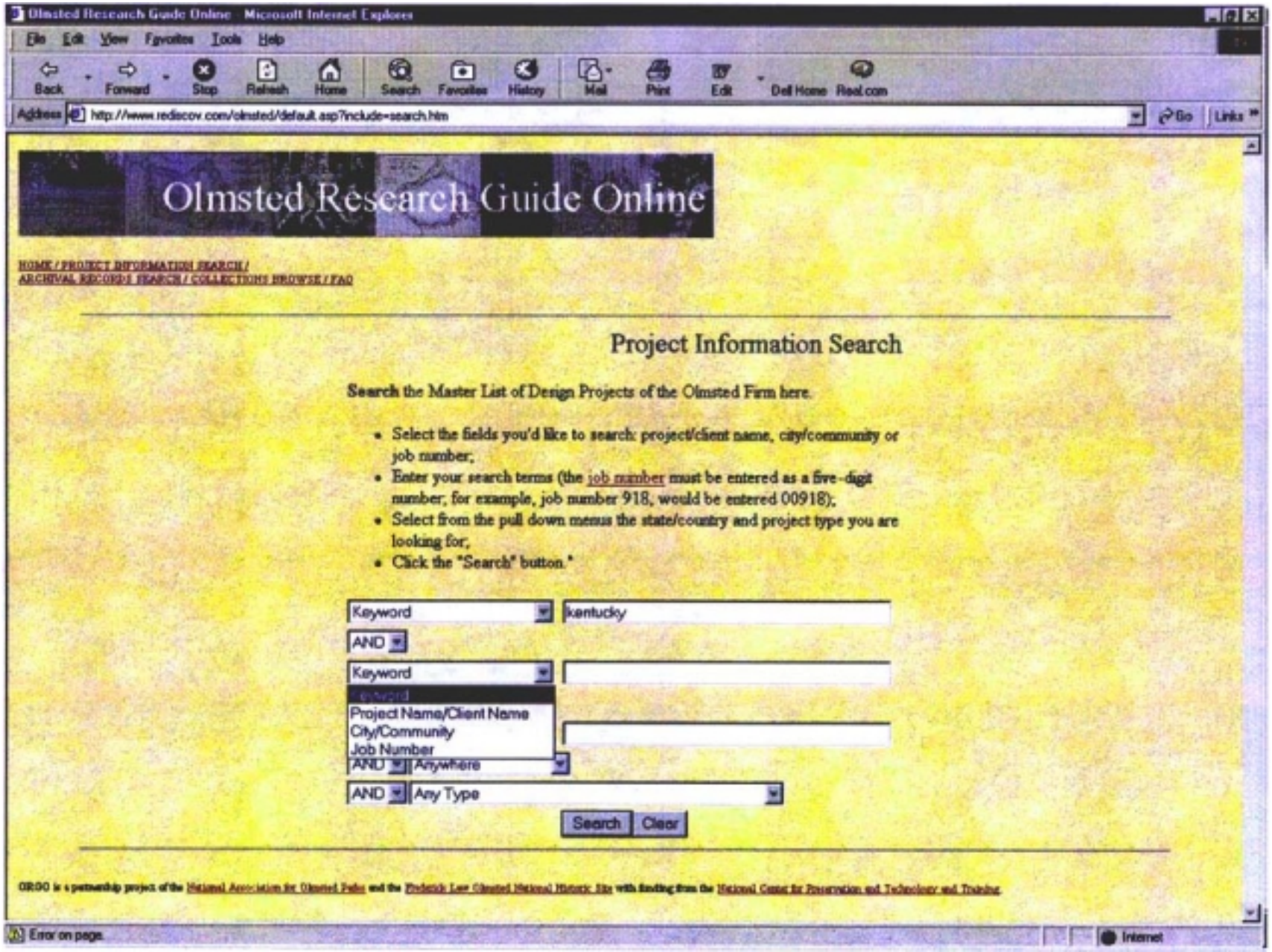
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Project Information Search
Search the Master List of Design Projects of the Olmsted Firm here.
Select the fields you'd like to search: project/client name, city/community or job number;
Enter your search terms (the job number must be entered as a five-digit number; for example, job number 918, would be entered 00918);
Select from the pull down menus the state/country and project type you are looking for;
Click the "Search" button.
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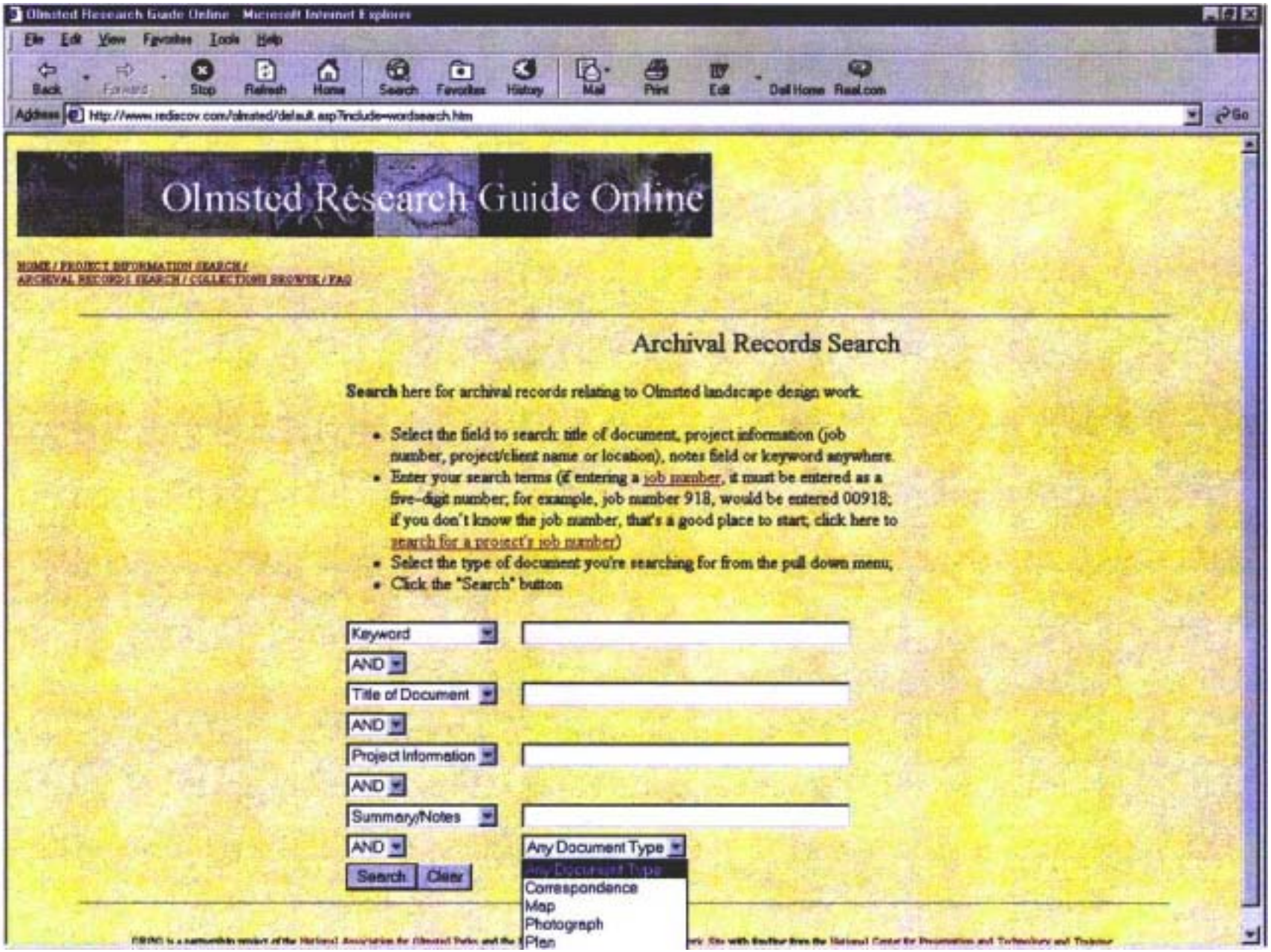
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Search here for archival records relating to Olmsted landscape design work.
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Enter your search terms (if entering a job number, it must be entered as a five-digit number; for example, job number 918, would be entered 00918; if you don't know the job number, that's a good place to start, click here to search for a project's job number)
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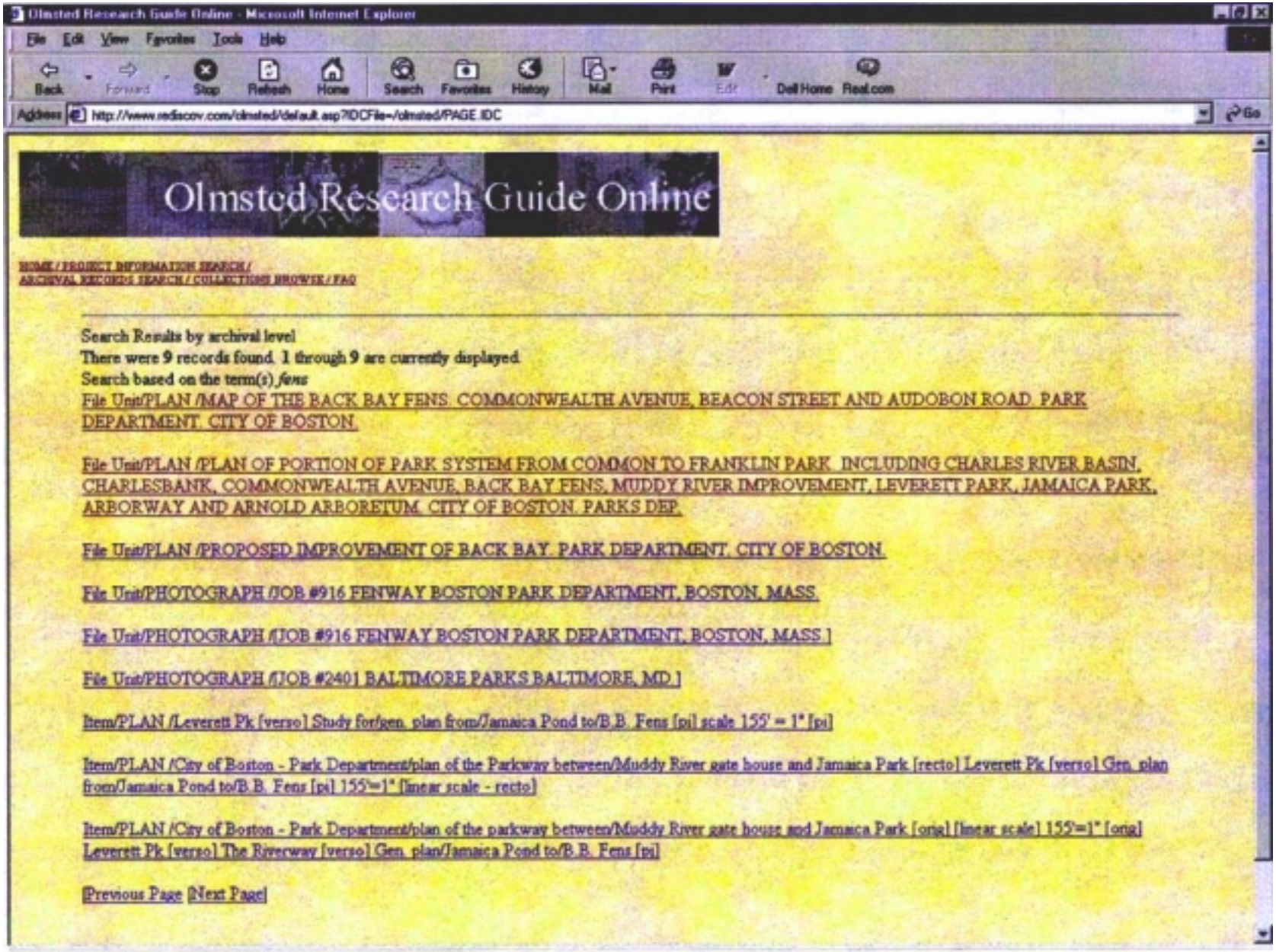
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Search Results by archival level
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Search based on the term(s) fens
File Unit/PLAN /MAP OF THE BACK BAY FENS, COMMONWEALTH AVENUE, BEACON STREET AND AUDOBON ROAD. PARK DEPARTMENT, CITY OF BOSTON.
File Unit/PLAN /PLAN OF PORTION OF PARK SYSTEM FROM COMMON TO FRANKLIN PARK, INCLUDING CHARLES RIVER BASIN, CHARLESBANK, COMMONWEALTH AVENUE, BACK BAY FENS, MUDDY RIVER IMPROVEMENT, LEVERETT PARK, JAMAICA PARK, ARBORWAY AND ARNOLD ARBORETUM. CITY OF BOSTON. PARKS DEP.
File Unit/PLAN /PROPOSED IMPROVEMENT OF BACK BAY. PARK DEPARTMENT, CITY OF BOSTON.
File Unit/PHOTOGRAPH /JOB #916 FENWAY BOSTON PARK DEPARTMENT, BOSTON, MASS.
File Unit/PHOTOGRAPH /[JOB #916 FENWAY BOSTON PARK DEPARTMENT, BOSTON, MASS.]
File Unit/PHOTOGRAPH /[JOB #2401 BALTIMORE PARKS BALTIMORE, MD.]
Item/PLAN /Leverett Pk [verso] Study for/gen. plan from/Jamaica Pond to/B.B. Fens [pi] scale 155' = 1" [pi]
Item/PLAN /City of Boston - Park Department/plan of the Parkway between/Muddy River gate house and Jamaica Park [recto] Leverett Pk [verso] Gen. plan from/Jamaica Pond to/B.B. Fens [pi] 155'=1" [linear scale - recto]
Item/PLAN /City of Boston - Park Department/plan of the parkway between/Muddy River gate house and Jamaica Park [orig] [linear scale] 155'=1" [orig] Leverett Pk [verso] The Riverway [verso] Gen. plan/Jamaica Pond to/B.B. Fens [pi]
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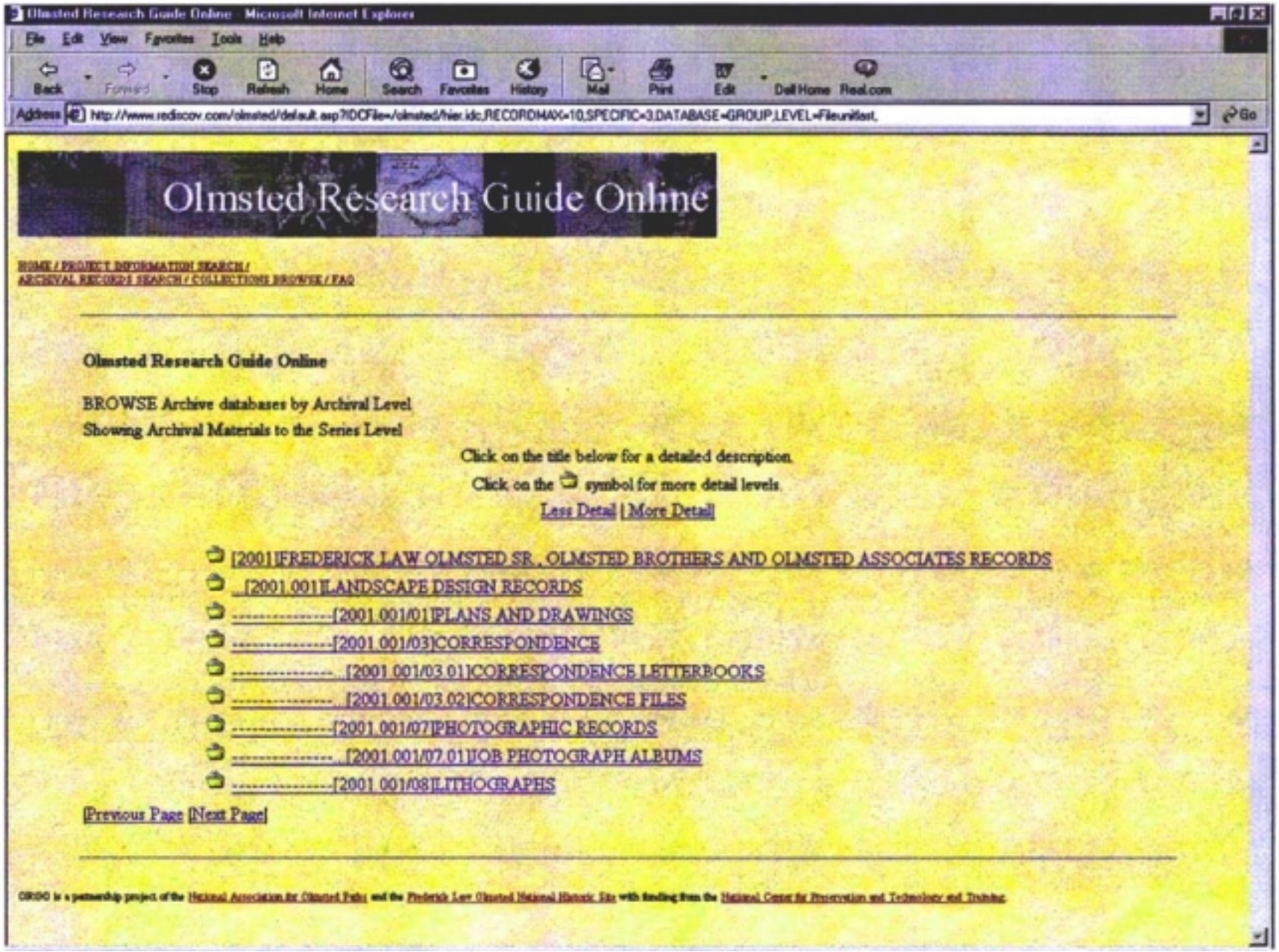
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Less Detail | More Detail
[2001]FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED SR., OLMSTED BROTHERS AND OLMSTED ASSOCIATES RECORDS
..[2001.001]LANDSCAPE DESIGN RECORDS
.....[2001.001/01]PLANS AND DRAWINGS
.....[2001.001/03]CORRESPONDENCE
..... [2001.001/03.01]CORRESPONDENCE LETTERBOOKS
..... [2001.001/03.02]CORRESPONDENCE FILES
.....[2001.001/07]PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDS
..... [2001.001/07.01]JOB PHOTOGRAPH ALBUMS
.....[2001.001/08]LITHOGRAPHS
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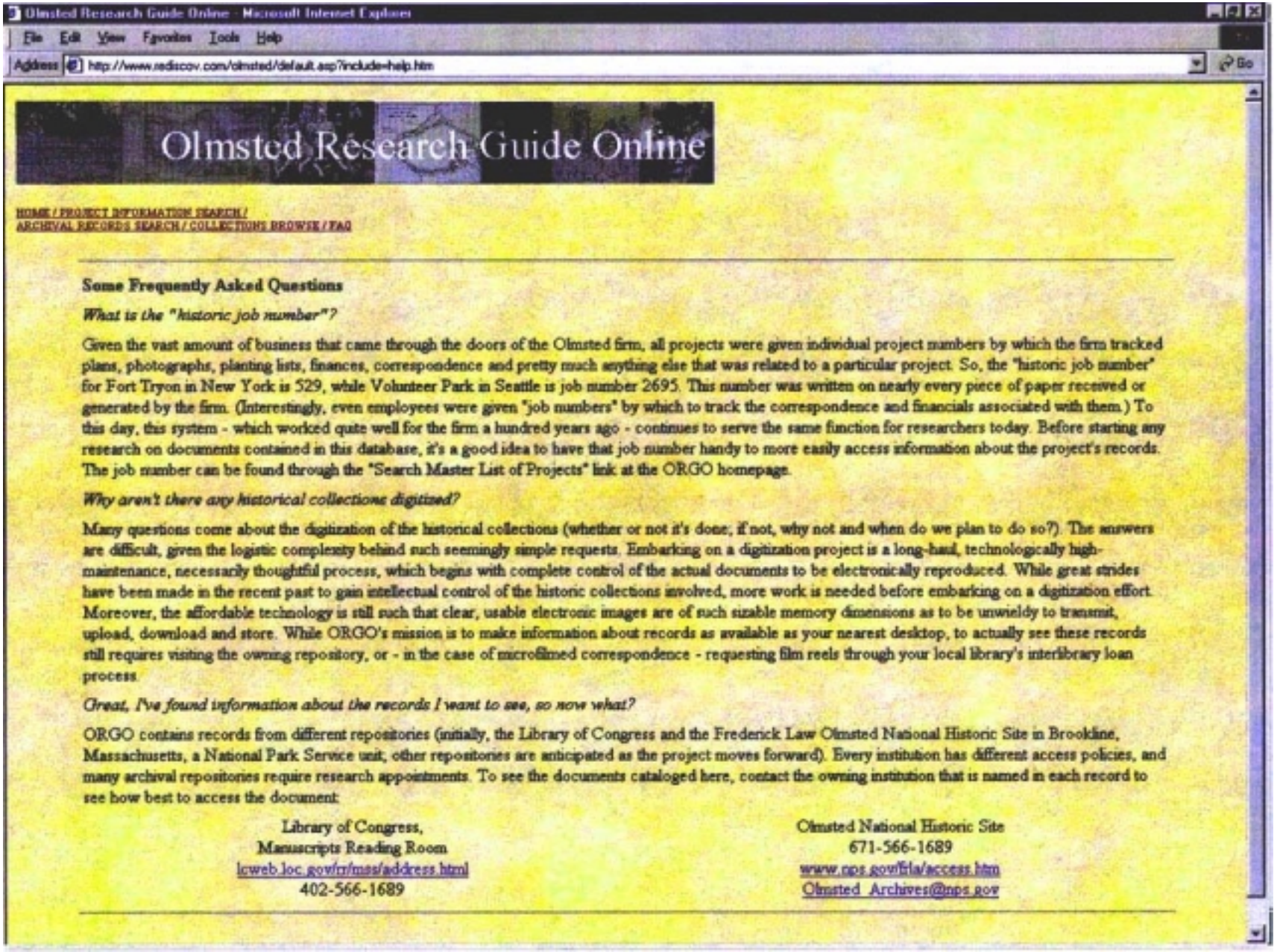
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Some Frequently Asked Questions
What is the "historic job number"?
Given the vast amount of business that came through the doors of the Olmsted firm, all projects were given individual project numbers by which the firm tracked plans, photographs, planting lists, finances, correspondence and pretty much anything else that was related to a particular project. So, the "historic job number" for Fort Tryon in New York is 529, while Volunteer Park in Seattle is job number 2695. This number was written on nearly every piece of paper received or generated by the firm. (Interestingly, even employees were given "job numbers" by which to track the correspondence and financials associated with them.) To this day, this system - which worked quite well for the firm a hundred years ago - continues to serve the same function for researchers today. Before starting any research on documents contained in this database, it's a good idea to have that job number handy to more easily access information about the project's records. The job number can be found through the "Search Master List of Projects" link at the ORGO homepage.
Why aren't there any historical collections digitized?
Many questions come about the digitization of the historical collections (whether or not it's done; if not, why not and when do we plan to do so?). The answers are difficult, given the logistic complexity behind such seemingly simple requests. Embarking on a digitization project is a long-haul, technologically high-maintenance, necessarily thoughtful process, which begins with complete control of the actual documents to be electronically reproduced. While great strides have been made in the recent past to gain intellectual control of the historic collections involved, more work is needed before embarking on a digitization effort. Moreover, the affordable technology is still such that clear, usable electronic images are of such sizable memory dimensions as to be unwieldy to transmit, upload, download and store. While ORGO's mission is to make information about records as available as your nearest desktop, to actually see these records still requires visiting the owning repository, or - in the case of microfilmed correspondence - requesting film reels through your local library's interlibrary loan process.
Great, I've found information about the records I want to see, so now what?
ORGO contains records from different repositories (initially, the Library of Congress and the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site in Brookline, Massachusetts, a National Park Service unit; other repositories are anticipated as the project moves forward). Every institution has different access policies, and many archival repositories require research appointments. To see the documents cataloged here, contact the owning institution that is named in each record to see how best to access the document:
Library of Congress,
Manuscripts Reading Room
lcweb.loc.gov/rr/mss/address.html
402-566-1689
Olmsted National Historic Site
671-566-1689
www.nps.gov/frla/access.htm
Olmsted_Archives@nps.gov