

Frederick Law Olmsted and His Eltingville Farm

The next time you are in Central Park, take a good look around: The lush lawns, the winding paths, the bridges, the ponds and the imposing trees had their genesis on a farm in Eltingville.

Frederick Law Olmsted lived on Staten Island for seven years “experimenting” with planting and landscape design that would ultimately be incorporated into the blueprint of Central Park, the city’s 843-acre oasis.

“When he came to Staten Island, he was growing peaches and apples and his yields of wheat were said to be very high as compared to other farmers in the area,” said Patricia Salmon, a board member of the Friends of Olmsted-Beil House and the retired curator of the Staten Island Museum. “His property reached to the Raritan Bay. It was very important to have access to the water, so he could put his produce on a boat and bring it to the markets on Staten Island, maybe in Stapleton and Tompkinsville, but also to bring it to the markets in Manhattan which were much busier and more profitable.”

The landmarked Olmsted-Beil House, which is located on Hylan Boulevard, was built as a simple one-room stone shelter in 1685 by the Rev. Dominie Petrus Tesschenmaker, who was the minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in Port Richmond -- today’s Staten Island Reformed Church.

“He kept his horses in the house with him in inclement weather,” Salmon said. “He would actually ride his horses to Port Richmond to tend his flock.”

There was a long line of prominent owners of the house -- 17 in all -- both before and after Olmsted.

Among them were:

- Jacques Poillon, the City Road Commissioner, and subsequently three generations of his family, including John Poillon, a member of the Committee of Safety for Richmond County who helped orchestrate the failed Peace Conference of 1776. The Poillon family were known slaveholders, a source of embarrassment for later occupants.
- Dr. Samuel Akerly, who moved to Staten Island when he retired and became a noted naturalist, publishing an extensive paper on the agriculture of Staten Island.
- Erastus Wiman, the president of the Staten Island Railway Company.

- Carlton and Louise Beil -- he was the curator of the Staten Island Museum and an education specialist at the American Museum of Natural History. As the last owners of the Olmsted-Beil House, they anchored its sale to the City Parks Department in 2006.

Frederick Law Olmsted left behind a legacy of parks across the United States -- and is considered the father of landscape architecture. Born in Connecticut in 1822, he attended Yale University, but dropped out because of poor eyesight. He owned a farm in Connecticut, but found it “too rocky and without good access to the water,” according to Salmon.

After Dr. Samuel Akerly died, his son-in-law met Olmsted’s father, John Olmsted, while he was vacationing in Connecticut. He said he was selling “a wonderful farm on acres and acres of land, where you could grow a lot of wheat, crops and produce.”

John Olmsted saw it as an opportunity for his son and bought him the farm for \$13,000 (this would not be the only time he financed his son’s endeavors). Frederick Olmsted moved into the 130-acre farm in 1848.

“His friends from Yale would come to Staten Island to visit him,” Salmon said. “He was a very sociable person and he loved discussing things, especially current events, politics, religion. He just loved to talk and philosophize with his friends.”

Two years after moving to Staten Island, Olmsted learned his brother, John, and another friend were heading to Europe for a walking tour of England, Scotland and Germany.

“So, when he found out, he wanted to go,” Salmon said. “He had to convince his father to loan him the money.”

The trip proved life changing. While in Liverpool, he visited Birkenhead Park, the first public park in England to be built with taxpayer money.

“He was astonished by what he saw and it changed his direction,” Salmon said. “He thought that if they could have something like this in England, why can’t we have something like this in the United States? It really drove his thinking about creating parks for all people to enjoy. He referred to these parks as democratic parks -- parks that everyone could enjoy, not just rich people.”

Olmsted would later write “the poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British queen.”

"While he was in England, he bought hundreds of root stock, shrubs and trees of various seedlings and shipped them back to Staten Island," Salmon said.

When they arrived here, Olmsted began planting the trees: Cedar of Lebanon, osage orange trees and walnut trees. Many of the trees he planted more than a 170 years ago are still standing at the Olmsted-Beil House today.

Soon after his return from Europe, he met Calvert Vaux and they learned of a plan to transform an empty plot of land in the center of Manhattan into a world-class park. Prizes of between \$400 to \$2,000 would be awarded to the four best proposals, according to the Central Park website.

“This notice for the first important landscape design competition in the United States elicited thirty-three varied proposals, which revealed the influence of English and continental traditions of landscape design as well as more eclectic vernacular ideas about what would make this public place appealing,” the website noted.

Olmsted and Vaux submitted what they called the Greensward Plan, which was the last entry in the competition.

“They actually won,” Salmon said. “It was kind of to their surprise. They didn’t exactly follow the Greensward Plan, but it was very close. The paths, the trees, they even put roadways in the park that were not intrusive to the wetlands. It’s not much different than what we have today. The layout was just altered.”

Central Park would be the first of many in Olmsted’s career with his sons working at his side: He designed Prospect Park in Brooklyn, the Buffalo Park System, college campuses, the layout for George Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C., among so many others. Olmsted also designed the grounds of the Vanderbilt Mausoleum in Moravian Cemetery in New Dorp.

“The list is endless,” Salmon said.

A man of many hats, Olmsted also pursued a career in journalism: “He was not enchanted with the idea of being a farmer for the rest of his life.”

He wrote books about his tours of Europe and became a partner in Putnam Publishing, again with financing from his father. He was employed by the New York Times -- then called the New York Daily Times -- to write dispatches during his tours of the South. Writing under the pseudonym, Yeoman, his stories took an abolitionist's stance against slavery.

Olmsted lived in Staten Island until 1855. His son, John, would then live in the house until 1866.

Over the years, the property was subdivided as new owners moved in. The last owners were Carlton and Louise Beil who purchased the house in 1955 and raised their three daughters there. At that point, the property was less than two-acres.

“My mother was from New England and she really had a fondness for old houses,” said Carlotta Beil De Fillo, the oldest of the three daughters who is a research librarian at the Staten Island Historical Society.

De Fillo admits to being afraid of the house at first.

“It was so big and dark inside at night,” she said. “I wouldn't go upstairs without my sister.”

But, it soon became a playground for the three Beil sisters, along with their neighbor, Tina Kaasman Dunn.

“It was absolute woods from behind our house, all the way up to Amboy Road,” De Fillo said. “We really were never forbidden to go anywhere. We climbed the osage trees, we picked blackberries and strawberries in season. We walked in the steps of Olmsted. It was free and easy. Tina's family had a bell they would ring and my father had a seashell that you could blow into that made a foghorn sound. Those were our signals to come home.”

De Fillo did enjoy Saturday morning visits to her friend's home.

“In our family, we had no TV,” she said. “It was a very old-fashioned childhood. When we were invited over to Tina's house on Saturday mornings, we could watch ‘I Love Lucy.’ I was fascinated by it.”

Her parents made it their mission to ensure the land and the house were forever saved, pushing the Parks Department to purchase the property. The deal finally

went through in 2006 while Carlton Beil was living with his daughter, Eloise Beil, in Vermont after he suffered a stroke.

But, the house quickly fell into disrepair. Enter the Friends of Olmsted-Beil House (FOBH), a nonprofit established in 2018 to restore the house and grounds in a way that would recognize its dignified past.

“This house has 300-plus years of stories to tell, not only the story of Staten Island, but the story of the country,” said Eileen Monreale, President of the FOBH. “It’s a miracle that it’s still there. It doesn’t look the same, but it has strong bones and a strong foundation.”

The FOBH have received small grants, hold fundraising drives, host cleanups and offer lectures about the history of the site. They are also committed to having the adjacent property owned by Tina Kaasmann Dunn incorporated into the site by the Parks Department.

“Once we get those doors open, we will tell the story from 1685 forward and all the significant people who lived there -- they were all very fascinating, each and every one of them,” said Monreale. “We want it to be a place where people can go to, instead of reading about it in a book. We want to see school trips with generations of children walking through a house that could really ignite their appetite for history and make them very connected to where they live. I think we all need that connection.”

For De Fillo, it would fulfill her father’s dream.

“We grew up knowing it was special,” she said. “To me, there were times I did not like living in a special house. I wanted to live in a nice, modern house with a TV, but you know, looking back on it, I am so thankful for the sense of peace it gave me. I didn’t know when I was 15-years-old to appreciate exactly how good it was in that environment of peace and quiet -- and it still sort of feels that way when I go up there.”