

## *A Lab, a Home, a Memory*

By C. J. Hughes

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LIKE the rest of her family, Carlotta DeFillo prefers to live in the past.

A librarian and reenactor at Staten Island's Historic Richmond Town, she often goes to work dressed in 1820s garb and bakes corn bread in a fireplace.

Ms. DeFillo, 62, learned to appreciate history as a girl, because she was always surrounded by so much of it.

"Daddy's study was in here," she said on a recent afternoon, as she led a reporter through her childhood home.

An American Indian headdress hung on a wall. Books about the Dead Sea Scrolls crammed shelves. There were plaster casts of plants. What looked like a card catalog. Old Life magazines. A fishing net.

Ms. DeFillo stepped into slanting sunlight. "We used to roll down that hill in the summers and sled down it in the winter," she said. "Every time anybody asks me about this house, I'm kind of overcome."

While a sloping lawn might be a New York luxury in itself, the yard can make a more remarkable claim. It was landscaped by none other than Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the designers of Central Park. And the gardens were not created for some wealthy industrialist client, but for his own enjoyment. This is where Olmsted, newly arrived on Staten Island from Connecticut, logged nine years running a fruit farm before dreaming up his signature urban wildernesses.

Now, the rooms of the house are dim; plaster chunks litter a corner. Water-stained wallpaper curls. Dust fills the air.

During Ms. DeFillo's childhood, though, the house brimmed with life, she said.

Her father, Carlton Beil, was employed by the American Museum of Natural History and later led tours of Staten Island's woods. He seemed happy bringing his work home with him. Rock collecting was encouraged. Television was banned. Egyptian civilization could dominate conversations.

Ms. DeFillo sold the centuries-old stone-and-wood farmhouse to the city's Parks and Recreation Department in 2006. The idea is to some day open it to the public, though keep-out signs line the property; the department says it does not yet have a plan about how to renovate the farmhouse, or how that work might be financed.



**IN LIMBO** The centuries-old stone-and-wood farmhouse is now overseen by the Parks and Recreation Department. There is no money available for renovations. Courtesy of

In the interim, the department has let Ms. DeFillo stash most of her family's belongings in a warren of rooms — until recently, that is, when officials began nudging her toward the exit.

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WHILE the yard is so thick with vegetation today that a neighboring ranch house is nearly invisible, there was even more green to go around when Olmsted arrived in 1848, at the age of 26. The wealthy Hartford native, who had dropped out of Yale, seemed aimless. A first attempt at a commercial farm in Guilford, Conn., failed, and Olmsted found the Connecticut coast too sleepy, according to historical accounts.

So, with the help of his father, Olmsted purchased this farm on Staten Island, then a setting favored by well-off Manhattanites as a summer retreat.

The property originally stretched 130 acres from the present-day Amboy Road to New York Harbor. Though wheat had grown there, Olmsted preferred cabbages, potatoes and turnips, and ordered 5,000 pear trees from France for new orchards, said Charles Beveridge, the editor of a 12-volume set of Olmsted's papers.

Olmsted gave the place a new name, Tosomock, a tribute to Petrus Tesschenmakr, the Dutch minister who put up the home's chunky stone walls in 1685.

Tosomock let Olmsted hone design skills that would later earn him fame, and commissions to create parks in Buffalo, San Francisco and Boston.

He discovered that a curved driveway created a more dramatic approach than a straight one, and so realigned his to sweep in from the west. To increase usable acreage, Olmsted drained marshes with pipes, which taught him wetlands could be reclaimed. "This was crucially important for the rest of his career," Mr. Beveridge said.

And he mixed exotic species, like flat-topped cedars of Lebanon with stony-bark ginkgoes, both of which grow in Central Park today. And, as Ms. DeFillo pointed out, he liked to call attention to trees, like the black walnut that rises from a lawn like an exclamation point.

But the farm was a commercial flop, so he abandoned it for Manhattan and then in 1858, with Calvert Vaux, won the competition to design Central Park.

The property was developed over the next hundred years, first as an elegant resort — the Woods of Arden — and later subdivided into residential lots. But the house and its small envelope of greenery survived.

WHEN Mr. Beil, his wife, Louise, and their family arrived, the farmhouse had been empty for years. In the 1960s, the Beils' yard flourished as a classroom. Logs were flipped over to reveal salamanders, Ms. DeFillo said. Felicity Beil, a sister, remembers a lesson about how a patch of sweet grass on the house's south side was most likely transported there by American Indians. " 'We're not going to mow that section of the lawn until it's gone to seed,' " Ms. Beil said, echoing her father's words.

Without television, Ms. Beil could plow through Dickens, Twain, Alcott and "Nancy Drew, end to end," she said. Dinner talk might turn to the difference between classical and Biblical Greek, said Ms. DeFillo, though "when you wanted a simple answer for your early science homework," her father would "go off into some 109-minute discussion — it could make you want to tear your hair out."

In the 1960s, Robert Moses attempted to extend the Richmond Parkway across the spine of Staten Island. Mr. Beil helped organize a group to halt it. The route later became part of the park known as the Greenbelt, an idea first sketched out by Olmsted in 1870.

At some point, Mr. Beil decided that the best way to preserve the house would be to sell it to the city, which the family finally did decades later, after Mr. Beil had a stroke and his medical bills mounted.

Today, history still holds the entire Beil family in its grip. Felicity Beil works with Ms. DeFillo at Richmond Town, where she teaches soap-, candle- and basket-making. Eloise Beil, another sister, is a director at the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum in Vermont.

Ms. DeFillo's daughter, Carli, works for the South Street Seaport Museum, and her son, Mark, is a self-taught linguist focused on tongues like Sanskrit, Gaelic and Hebrew and working on book proposals, he said.

For the last few years, in a volunteer job, Mark DeFillo has also been the home's informal caretaker with the blessing of the parks department, which wanted someone to keep an eye on its new acquisition.

That arrangement ended last year when an ice storm snapped power lines, sparking a fire that also damaged walls, so the house had to be mothballed.

For its part, the city, which paid \$600,000 for the house and has repaired the roof and repointed bricks, said the house likely would not be renovated until a nonprofit group could be formed to raise money. Eventually, the house, landmarked in 1967, could end up with the Historic House Trust, which maintains 23 old homes throughout the city.

In early July, pieces of paper scrawled with "Dumpster" were taped to some chairs. With pressure building from the parks department, Ms. DeFillo had to empty the house. She did save a rocking chair, a stuffed peacock and a coffin-sized 1732 chest. An era was clearly ending.

"I was drawn to history because I grew up in this house," Ms. DeFillo said, standing in her childhood bedroom. "To find out that I could actually get paid to talk about it?" And then she trailed off.

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**FADING** Carlotta DeFillo grew up on the Staten Island property where Frederick Law Olmsted developed his ideas on landscape design. Its future is in question. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times