

GRACE NOTES

Far From the Great Lawn, Saving a Home Tied to Central Park

By James Barron

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It is an out-of-the-way house on Staten Island, the windows boarded up, the basement sloshing in an inch or two of water. It has been a New York City landmark longer than tall ones like the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building, busy ones like Grand Central Terminal or cultural ones like Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Its significance is that it was where important ideas hatched in one important owner's mind in the mid-19th century. The yard, bigger in those days, was where he taught himself about trees and soil — and, some of his fans say, about a newfangled concept, public parks.

The parks part matters because the owner was Frederick Law Olmsted, before he and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn and they became America's first famous landscape architects.

The city bought the house 12 years ago. It appears no closer to becoming a museum or a visitors' center than it did then. Signs in front are deliberately unwelcoming — “Historical site — no trespassing” — as if signs would deter vandals.

Now the city is negotiating to buy an adjacent house and lot that would make it easier to reach the Olmsted house, which sits far back from busy Hylan Boulevard. That purchase, too, is taking time, to the apparent frustration of a state senator, Andrew J. Lanza, a Republican who has worked to arrange funding.

By contrast, it took the National Park Service only two years to turn another Olmsted house, in Brookline, Mass., into the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, after the National Park Service took control in 1979.

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“If this were a Frank Lloyd Wright house, it would be a museum,” said Adrian Benepe, a former parks commissioner who is now a senior vice president and director of city park development for the nonprofit Trust for Public Land.

When the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission approved its designation as a landmark in 1967, early in the push to recognize and preserve places with connections to history, it described the house as “a distinguished residence” with “special character.” But, as Mr. Benepe noted, “there are some problems” now. The house is dilapidated. It was damaged by an electrical fire several years ago and has not been lived in since then. The plaster ceilings upstairs suffered damage when the roof leaked.

And then there is the wet basement. After the fire, there was no electricity, and with no electricity, the sump pump did not work, said Carlotta DeFillo, who grew up in the house and whose son lived there until the fire. Fortunately, the house escaped damage when Hurricane Sandy churned across Staten Island in 2012.

“It's a nice house,” said Alex Herrera of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, which is working to draw attention to the house in hopes of getting it stabilized before it deteriorates even more.

“Nice design, nice size, nice proportions,” he said as he walked through the yard one morning last week. “For a farmhouse, it was really grand, and if it was restored, it would be beautiful.”

Olmsted's father bought the place for him in the 1840s, when Olmsted was in his mid-20s. Olmsted raised the roof, literally, adding a story-and-a-half extension that put tiny windows under the eaves. He also grafted porches onto the first floor.

Olmsted's attempt at farming flopped financially, but his time on Staten Island paid off in other ways. For one thing, he sharpened his networking skills. Ethan Carr, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and an editor of Volume 8 of "The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted," said he made important connections with Vanderbilts who lived on Staten Island. Olmsted "went on to be the house architect for the Vanderbilt children," he said.

More important was what he learned while living on Staten Island — "the technology of farming," Mr. Carr called it, "which turned out to be the technology of park-making."

"When you're talking about large numbers of trees being purchased and transplanted, soils amended and improved and subsurface drainage, those were the technologies necessary to create Central Park," Mr. Carr said. "So his experience as a farmer was quite valuable, because he was experimenting with techniques."

There are those who say that Olmsted envisioned Central Park from Staten Island. Mr. Benepe maintained that the house was "where Central Park was conceived." In 2006, when he was the parks commissioner, he said it was where Olmsted and Vaux "put the finishing touches on the plan they developed that won the competition" for Central Park.

Maybe they did, maybe they didn't. Mr. Carr said that Olmsted left Staten Island "as his ambitions grew" — and as he figured out his identity.

"He didn't want to be a farmer, he wanted to be a literary figure," Mr. Carr said. Olmsted became the editor of a monthly magazine and a special traveling correspondent for a newspaper — this one, in dispatches signed "Yeoman" that touched on slavery. He opposed it, though an outspoken abolitionist he was not. The historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. called him "a disinterested and reliable witness of conditions in the Old South."

Later he moved to Manhattan, and he and Vaux won the Central Park competition. Later still, he moved to Massachusetts and the house in Brookline.

Last fall, the Landmarks Conservancy commissioned the architecture firm Jan Hird Pokorny Associates to do a "conditions assessment report" on the Staten Island house. "The Parks Department considers Olmsted their godfather," said Peg Breen, the president of the Landmarks Conservancy, "so to let this place disintegrate was outrageous."

The report estimated that "stabilizing" the house would cost about \$460,000. Not quite a third of that would pay for drawings of the house, a security fence and the removal of flammable material. It did not estimate what restoration would cost.

The parks department "purchased this house to ensure it wasn't demolished," Lynda Ricciardone, the agency's Staten Island commissioner, wrote in an email. "While we don't have funding at present to renovate, restore and open the house, we're working toward that goal." She added that "an important next step" was to buy the neighboring house and lot.

Mr. Lanza, the state senator, said the money for that project totaled about \$2.5 million. He said the purchase was about "beauty and history and legacy, but there's the silver lining" — the adjacent house would not be razed to make way for new development.

"It shouldn't take this long," he said. "I've been through this before when I was able to appropriate city dollars for parks to save them from development. It's always a battle with the city, and in the meantime, the owners of these properties can always say 'You took too long, and we're moving on.' The risk is, developers would love to squeeze in as many units as the city would let them squeeze in."

That is a constant concern of preservationists, of course.

The Staten Island house "was one of the earliest city landmarks," said Ms. Breen of the Landmarks Conservancy. "And, Olmsted. What else do you need?"

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 21 of the New York edition with the headline: Saving a Home Where Olmsted Toiled, Possibly on Central Park



The Olmsted-Beil House in Staten Island, the one-time home of Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed Central Park with Calvert Vaux. The city bought the house about 12 years ago but it is now in disrepair. James Estrin/The New York Times