

THE APPRAISAL

Saving a Vital Patch of Olmsted's Staten Island Eden

By Matt A.V. Chaban

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After Christine Kaasmann died at 100 this year at her beloved Swiss-chalet-style home on Staten Island's South Shore, her three children decided it was time to sell.

A local real estate agent sent over a group of builders to appraise the property, an L-shaped 1.5-acre lot on Hylan Boulevard, in Eltingville. They determined that the land could be carved up into as many as seven parcels, and estimated its value at \$2 million, if not more.

The family liked the price, though the last thing it wanted to do was divide up the plot. "The builders, in their words, they're just salivating over this, but we can't let that happen," Tina Kaasmann-Dunn said, standing in the backyard last week between the gazebo and the unsurfaced tennis court her parents, former physical education teachers, had built.

It was not simply fondness for the rolling lawns and towering trees of a midcentury youth, or an antipathy toward the unmitigated subdivision of the island, that drove the family's decision. Above all, she said, the family wants to preserve a landscape that was critical in helping to shape America's urban parks.



After Christine Kaasmann died earlier this year at her beloved Swiss Chalet-style home on Staten Island's South Shore, at 100, her three children decided it was time to sell.
Yana Paskova for The New York Times

It was here that the young and peripatetic Frederick Law Olmsted began to settle down and shape his future.

In 1848, Olmsted's father, a prominent Connecticut merchant, bought 130 acres that stretched down the hill to the shoreline for the 26-year-old Frederick. He called the farm Tosomock, in honor of Petrus Tesschenmaker, the island's first ordained minister and the farm's original owner.

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The place awakened in Olmsted the expressive possibilities of horticulture, topography and irrigation, and of natural design, that would define his work.

Without this piece of land, now subdivided, suburbanized, hemmed in and overgrown, there might be no Central Park, Prospect Park, Riverside Drive or Eastern Parkway; no Emerald Necklace in Boston, Biltmore estate in North Carolina, Niagara Falls State Park, or even the quadrangles of Stanford, Yale and Berkeley. At least not as we know them.

Today, Olmsted's Edenic land is hidden, but it has not been totally lost. Like much of Staten Island, Tosomock has been carved up for tract homes and mini-mansions, but the Colonial-era farmhouse Olmsted occupied still stands, as do about a dozen trees that he planted 165 years ago. The ground is littered with black walnuts, horse chestnuts and Osage oranges from the trees, which are the tallest things around.



The Colonial-era farmhouse once occupied by Frederick Law Olmsted still stands, as do about a dozen trees that he planted. Staten Island Museum

To the Kaasmann family, this landscape was simply a part of its backyard, and the Olmsted farmstead was just the house next door, at least until the Biels, their longtime neighbors, sold their 1.6-acre property and house to the city in 2006.

The Kaasmanns hope to do the same, adding their tract to this budding Olmsted preserve.

So far, New York City's parks department has been noncommittal, and understandably so. After spending \$600,000 to acquire the Biel property, expensive emergency repairs had to be made to replace the leaky roof, repoint the 300-year-old stone walls and seal the windows and doors with plywood, a protection against the weather, and local teenagers.

And still the department has neither funds nor plans for its future. Instead of exhibits, the site is dotted with "No Trespassing" signs.

The Olmsted property may be suffering from its benefactor's success. Of the city's five boroughs, Staten Island already has the most city-owned historic homes, many of which are just as moribund, as well as the most city parkland: 7,391 acres, which cover about 30 percent of the island.

Among the contenders for limited parks funds are the new 2,200-acre Freshkills park, the repair of the remaining wreckage from Hurricane Sandy and the de Blasio administration's pursuit of expanded open space in underserved communities.



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“We always wanted to do the Olmsted house, but there always seemed to be other things pushing it to the bottom of the list,” said Adrian Benepe, the former parks commissioner who helped acquire the property, and is now the director of city park development at the Trust for Public Land.

It could take up to a decade for a public sale to go through, as was the case with the Biel property, but Ms. Kaasmann-Dunn’s two brothers have put a two-year limit on any deal.

“I’d love to see it become a park, but we have to be reasonable,” Ken Kaasmann said in a phone interview from his home in Orange County, N.Y., where he moved to find a more rural setting for his family. “The city can drag things out sometimes.”

The parks department has begun an appraisal of the property, according to a spokeswoman, though it has made no greater commitments.

The Kaasmann property, which the family bought in 1951, has a worthy history of its own, apart from Olmsted. Built in 1912, 4485 Hylan Boulevard was one of 20 homes erected by John Hales for the city’s wealthy along the South Shore. Its pedigree is not quite that of the home next door, which was built as an outbuilding by Tesschenmaker in 1685, and which served as the popular Woods of Arden Inn from the 1880s to the 1930s.



To the Kaasmann family, the Olmsted farmstead was just the house next door, at least until the Biels, their longtime neighbors, sold their 1.6 acre property and house to the city in 2006. Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Yet neither edifice is as important as the land itself, which Olmsted tilled for seven years.

Before that time he had traveled the world, a wealthy young man in search of a purpose. After Tosomock, where he forged helpful contacts with North Shore intellectuals and businessmen, he became, in 1857, the first superintendent of Central Park.

Much as he detested city life, Olmsted could no longer remain on the island. But he did return the next decade, to a home in Clifton, where he lived briefly during the construction of Prospect Park.

Parks department interest in the Kaasmann property is not simply about acquiring more of the old farm but improving access to it, since the Olmsted house is set back from the boulevard and somewhat hard to reach.

“We often thought we would need the Kaasmann house to make the rest of it work,” said Thomas Paulo, the former Staten Island borough commissioner for the parks department, who retired in 2010.

And it still may. State Senator Andrew J. Lanza, who helped finance the original Biel acquisition as a city councilman, wants to do the same with the Kaasmann property.

“We either seize this opportunity and save this land for posterity, or we lose it to development for good,” Mr. Lanza, a Republican, said.

“As a native of Staten Island,” he added, “I can see why Olmsted was inspired by this place, and other New Yorkers should be, too.”

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